



Operation Dogman-5: The Israeli Phantom Massacre of 1973 & Lessons for the Joint Force Today

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Figure 1: IAF A-4 Skyhawk

An Illusion of Invulnerability

By the start of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) was one of the most feared and professional Air Forces in the Middle East, but it would be humbled by hubris and a breakdown of confidence in pre-war objectives which were rehearsed and developed for years. The IAF was the primary blunt instrument for Tel Aviv to buy time for the Israeli reserves to be called up and sent to the fronts. Like a coiled spring, the IAF was trained to preemptively strike out against its hostile neighbors to take away the enemy's first strike advantage against the tiny IDF regular forces stationed along the thin frontiers along the Suez Canal and Golan Heights. This coiled spring, that had trained to shape the momentum of battle, was only released after the Arab Air Forces had taken off and the artillery batteries opened fire. The shock of 1967 Arab defeat would be no more with the Egyptian and Syrian Air Defense

Forces fully alerted in anticipation of the precious Phantoms and Skyhawks sure to arrive from beyond the horizon.

Simplicity and the comprehension of strategic intent from the bottom up are fundamental in the success of any military operation. Making military objectives and concentration of effort clearly defined and obtainable are essential to victory. To utilize one's military assets, such as the finely tuned IAF, piecemeal and in a panicked, reactionary, or uncoordinated manner is to invite disaster. If a complex operation, especially an air campaign, is designed in accordance with a specific master air attack plan (MAAP) then it is inherently dangerous to seriously deviate from a pre-war concept of operations (CONOP) without understanding the implications or consequences of such a deviation.

Days of Desperation



Figure 2: F-4E Phantom IIs taking off

October 7th, 1973, proved to be a disastrous date in the history of the Israeli Air Force (IAF). After the surprise combined Egyptian and Syrian attack against the Jewish State the day prior, the IAF was called upon to perform its critical role of holding off the hordes of Arab armor and mechanized forces while the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) reserves were organized. A pre-planned IAF operation, codenamed *Tagar*, was practiced for three years to strike Egyptian air bases and Soviet influenced air defense sites on the Western side of the Suez Canal. *Tagar* launched early on October 7th with a full package of over 80 aircraft including, stand-off electronic warfare (EW) helicopter

jammers, Kc-97 tankers, and a powerful mix of A-4 Skyhawks, F-4E Phantom IIs, Mirage IIIs, and Nesheers. The strike was not effective in suppressing the Egyptian Air Defense Command and failed in effectively knocking out the primary Egyptian air bases.ⁱ As the first wave of strike crews returned to their bases, they were shocked to find the Defense Minister, Moshe Dayan, had called off *Tagar* and ordered the Chief of the Air Force, General Benny Peled, to “send the air force north”, instead of continuing their planned campaign against Egypt.ⁱⁱ Although Peled and his staff attempted to argue and counter the order, Dayan was adamant, and the strike on the Syrian Front was carried out.



Figure 3 F-4E Phantom IIs taxi

Approaching the Red Line

The operation against Syria codenamed, “Model-5” a.k.a “Dogman-5” was intended to destroy the primary Syrian air defense umbrella covering the sector opposite the Golan Heights.ⁱⁱⁱ The Egyptian penetration into the Sinai was a mere 10 Kilometers with a large buffer between the pre-war Suez Front and the pre-1967 Israeli southern border. In contrast, the Golan Front was blown wide open by 5 Syrian mechanized and armored divisions.^{iv} Beyond the Golan and the bridges spanning the Jordan River lay the heart of the State of Israel. This immediate threat by the Syrians to overrun the North, panicked Israeli Command, recalling the Air Force from their current operation against Egypt and sending them North to execute Dogman. After the Syrian Air Defense threat was sufficiently suppressed, it was thought that the IAF could execute

their other objective, providing effective close air support to the thinly stretched IDF units attempting to hold off the Syrian onslaught while reserves were scrambling towards the front. The IAF ground crews worked tirelessly to rearm and refuel the strike force for the Northern operation and launched immediately.



Figure 4: F-4E Phantom II flight

The specific objective for the strike force was to destroy the Syrian SA-2 and SA-3 surface to air missile (SAM) batteries along with their associated Fire Can, Long-Track, Low Blow, Flat Face, and Fan-Song target acquisition radars.^v The Arab pre-war preparations and Israeli post-1967 hubris combined to create a deadly day for the IAF. The IAF strike package lacked many of the entities that were required to make a successful suppression of the Syrian air defenders including No. 200 Squadron's decoy drones, intended to deceive the SAM battery commanders and draw fire. The IAF's intelligence also failed to utilize effective Image intelligence (IMINT) and electronic intelligence-electronic support measures (ELINT-ESM) to provide their flight crews with up-to-date information on the location and status of the Syrian defense. The high-altitude coverage by the SA-2 and SA-3s forced the IAF strikers to go in low, directly into the envelope of conventional anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) sites, mobile radar-guided ZSU-23-4 "Shilka" AAA, and the Soviet-made man-portable air defense system (MANPADS) SA-7 "Grail".^{vi} The low-altitude air defense

weapons would take their toll against the IAF. 6 of the 99 available F-4E Phantom IIs were shot down with a further 6 strike aircraft returning to Ramat David Air Base heavily damaged. 2 aircrew were killed with 9 pilots and weapon systems officers/navigators taken as prisoners of war (POW).^{vii} In return, the strike force managed to destroy 1 SAM battery and 0 radars. For the IAF, this was a disaster. Combined with the losses suffered on the 6th of October, General Peled, reported to the Chief of Staff, David Elazar, that the Air Force was nearing its “red line” status of available combat aircraft. After only one week of fighting, the IAF had lost 80 combat aircraft. These losses amounted to 24 percent of Israel’s inventory in October 1973.^{viii}



Figure 5: SA-2 "Guideline" with Fan Song fire control and tracking radar

Bad news also came from the ground forces as 8 October resulted in a similar defeat for the IDF’s armored corps in the Sinai. The Egyptian light infantry and commandos, lying in wait on the Eastern side of the canal, were armed with Soviet-made anti-tank weapons such as the AT-3 “Sagger” anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) and rocket propelled grenades (RPG-7), which inflicted devastating losses on General Avraham Adan and General Ariel Sharon’s armored divisions attacking the Egyptian 2nd and 3rd Armies.^{ix} The effective Egyptian and Syrian defenses against the IDF’s counterattacks in the early days of the war illustrated the importance of stamping out hubris from one’s military preparations. The IDF/AF would eventually snatch victory from the jaws of defeat and reverse their military setbacks from the first days of the Yom Kippur War by routing the Syrians to the gates of Damascus and crossing the Suez Canal with three armored divisions, but the cost to achieve this victory was too high a price to accept.

The decision to direct the IAF to strike north rather than continue the operational plan and pre-briefed concept of operations against the Egyptians has been a highly debated and a controversial legacy within the IAF post-1973. In *A War of Its Own* by Professor Uri-Bar Joseph, newly examined archive documents have highlighted details and analysis on the Israeli Air Force's inability to "stick to the plan". In the United States Air Force, it is common in de-briefs for combat crews to be berated by instructors for "not doing what you briefed" if the crew performs sub-standard. A similar critique can be attributed to the IAF high command in the opening days of the war. The panic inspired by the shock of the combined Arab assault sent the IAF into a spiral of indecision. The shock forced attention to one theatre while pausing and shifting to another without a coherent intent. This leapfrogging course of action resulted in concentrating on little while achieving nothing to influence the overall battle until Israeli armor could destroy SAM sites at point blank range with their main guns to clear the way for the IAF to break through the "SAM wall". This stood in sharp contrast to the experience in 1967, when the tiny Israeli air component concentrated their attacks on one Arab air arm at a time, destroying one air force in detail and re-directing to another. In the *Times of Israel* article, "Newly Opened Archives Show Israel's Air Force Was A Weak Link During the Yom Kippur War", Abraham Rabinovich further illustrates the comparison between the IAF in 1967 and 1973 by stating, "Veteran officers on Peled's staff believed that his much-admired predecessor, Gen. Motti Hod, who had carried out the preemptive strike in 1967, would have found a way to keep Tagar alive, either by explaining the situation to Dayan more persuasively or otherwise. Two years before, Hod had witnessed an Egyptian division deployed along the Suez Canal as if preparing to cross. The Egyptian force was lined up densely for miles on a narrow road leading to the waterway — tanks, personnel carriers, fuel trucks and the myriad of other vehicles an army requires to go into battle. Hod ordered his staff to draw up a detailed plan to attack any such formation at the beginning of a future war. The plan's code name was "Srita," Hebrew for "Scratch." When the Yom Kippur War broke out, Hod expected Peled to unleash the attack on one or more crossing points of the canal to throw the Egyptians off balance. But rather it was the IAF that was off balance. Expressing his deep disappointment in Peled later, Hod said, "He had only to say [into the radio] 'Srita. Execute.' The air force knew what to do."^x The lessons learned from the 1973 Arab Israeli War would inspire innovation and development of new methods championed by both the IAF and the United States to defeat the SAM. The setting of military momentum against your enemy early and retaining it is also a concept that 21st century war planners must consider as a key take away from the IAF's 1973 experience.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Hubris in any professional military force is inherently dangerous. The current military adventure by Vladimir Putin's Russia in the Russo-

Ukrainian War of 2022 presents us with an opportunity to evaluate performance and weigh pre-war conceptions of effectiveness of an adversary. We should be careful in our conclusions regarding the preparations we make for contingencies in Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific. The Russian Air Force's failure to win air supremacy over Ukraine and its high loss rates produce valuable lessons to be learned by future war planners, but an even more studious evaluator is closely counting the costs, Beijing. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) will watch the outcome of this war and its vicarious lessons in armor, anti-tank weapons, public relations, troop morale, amphibious assaults, artillery, modern missiles, and air power. In 1973, the missile had bent the wing of the aircraft and from 1982-1991, the aircraft had bent the missile. This is a cycle of technological innovation that swings a pendulum back and forth, war after war. The Pacific Alliance should consider this pendulum and examine it carefully to ensure that the United State Air Force and our Naval Aviation elements do not find themselves at the receiving end of the next deadly swing. The suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) will continue to plague war planners for years to come and the innovation of unmanned systems integrated with all other elements of modern air power will be required for winning the battle for the skies in any future near-peer contest.

Another key learning point from the first few days of the IAF's 1973 experience reside in a vital principle of warfare, simplicity. Of course, striking an IADS is anything but simple, but the orders to immediately execute coordinated combat operations against the enemy can either be simple and easily relayed or complicated and filled with hesitation and indecision. General Hod's "Srita Execute" OPLAN is a fundamental take away from this work. In the Pacific, the vast expanse of the combat area and the complications of modern command and control (C2) interference must be expected. This will require a level of simplicity in the execution of a defensive war plan that requires years of training and unit development with the intent of being able to effectively respond to a PLA amphibious assault with no more than a one-line command from headquarters, "Execute". Any air campaign, with assets responding to the battlespace from many islands, aircraft carriers, and continental bases spread over thousands of miles must be able to begin the cycle of response in a timely and efficient manner with little misunderstanding involved. This concept cuts down on hesitation which can derail any modern force operating in an environment containing hypersonic weapons, cyber weapons, and anti-satellite technology. Understanding the value of context behind the development of modern warfare through the ages to our modern day is an essential tool in building the fundamentals upon which we can develop our doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that future leaders

must employ to deter and defeat our foes of tomorrow. With this context, like the bloody history of the IAF in 1973, we can avoid such dilemmas, out preparing and out planning our enemies.

“*Courage is useless in the face of educated bullets*”- Gen. George S. Patton, Jr.

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