



## *At the Decisive Point in the Sinai: Generalship in the Yom Kippur War*

by Jacob Even and Simcha B. Maoz.

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A retired Israeli major general, Jacob Even (and his coauthor and translator Simcha B. Maoz) have waited nearly forty years for some epic score-settling over one of the most difficult campaigns conducted by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). At the start of the Yom Kippur War (6–25 Oct. 1973), (then) Colonel Even was deputy commander of the 143rd Reserve Armored Division, led by the charismatic Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon—the most competent battlefield commander in the IDF’s history—yet a controversial figure since the first Sinai campaign in 1956.

The book proceeds chronologically; chapters 1–3 concern the mobilization and movement of Sharon’s division to the Sinai front, with a summary of the disasters of the war’s first three days. Chapters 4–5 treat the hiatus of several days leading up to an Egyptian armored assault, which the IDF repulsed, inflicting heavy losses and restoring its own self-confidence. Chapters 6–10 get to the heart of Even’s story: the planning and execution of Operation Stouthearted Men, the crossing of the Suez Canal, the subsequent incursion into Egypt, and the final ceasefire on 23 October. Even argues that a virulent bias against Sharon and the poor generalship of many other senior officers plagued the IDF on the Sinai front. His chief villains—Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. David Elazar and commanding general of Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Shmuel Gonen—were excoriated by the postwar Agranat Commission. He also faults Lt. Gen. Chaim Bar-Lev, who came out of retirement to replace Gonen at Southern Command, and Maj. Gen. Avraham “Bren” Adan, commanding the 162nd Reserve Armored Division.

IDF failures during the first three days of the war have been treated in other books. The Southern Command’s counterattack on 8 October was an unmitigated disaster. While adding little new information, Even labels it “not designed, planned, or instructed to achieve a specific decisive goal. It was a kind of division-sized fishing expedition” (62). The Egyptians easily shattered the piecemeal, battalion-scale tank attacks by Adan’s division, while Sharon’s division achieved little by following General Gonen’s senseless orders. The only useful result was the unnoticed advance of Sharon’s divisional reconnaissance battalion to the Suez Canal, which found the right flank of the Egyptian Second Army bridgehead to be “in the air.”

During several days of relative inactivity, former IDF Chief of Staff Chaim Bar-Lev arrived to oversee operations, and the alert and reinforced IDF divisions drove back an Egyptian armored attack. The Israelis now focused on a canal crossing, but, as Even makes clear, the planning for Operation “Stouthearted Men” was rife with ambiguity and inexplicable omissions. Most of Sharon’s division was to advance toward the crossing site, while a second armored division moved across the rear of the battle area and took a position behind Sharon to reinforce the cross-canal attack. Given that there was only one paved road—Akavish—in the entire battle area, traffic control in Southern Command’s tactical rear should have been a high-priority planning issue. How-

ever, “The Stouthearted Men order not only failed to deal with the Southern Command’s control of this strategic resource, it ignored it and completely abandoned it” (92).

The handling of the bridging equipment—essential to operational success—was ill-planned as well. Finally, the assault crossing force, the 247th Parachute Brigade, was allocated too few transport vehicles. An enterprising brigade staff officer managed to secure enough armored personnel carriers to move two of the 247th’s three battalions and their rafts to the crossing site. Even attributes these complications to Southern Command “washing their hands of responsibility for any part of the operation” (107).

Although Even gives the matter little attention, IDF intelligence failed to grasp the strength of the Egyptian infantry anchoring the south flank of the Second Army in and around the “Chinese Farm,” a few kilometers northeast of the crossing site. This misnamed agricultural research station<sup>1</sup> consisted of a cluster of concrete buildings with a large array of irrigation ditches extending to the south and east, affording the defenders both cover and the ability to move rapidly across the battlefield without being observed. The Tirtur road (specially graded to support the ponderous IDF “roller bridge”) ran parallel to Akavish but right through the Chinese Farm. Pushing back the Egyptian infantry and clearing these two roads cost the IDF dearly. Stouthearted Men succeeded chiefly because of Sharon’s determination to cross the canal and exploit the breakthrough, but Even himself and a handful of other officers sorted out the confusion in the rear and moved additional troops, the bridging material, artillery, and logistical support forward toward the canal.

Launched on the evening of 15 October, the operation was almost immediately beset with delays. Sharon’s leading tank brigade, sent to secure the area north and east of the crossing site, met strong resistance and took heavy casualties. Even criticizes Sharon for putting too much pressure, bordering on “moral blackmail” (131), on the brigade commander, Col. Amnon Reshev. The Tirtur road remained blocked by the enemy and the two main bridging units could not be brought forward to the canal, but a third engineer detachment arrived with obsolescent but reliable Gillois amphibious tank carriers. These, linked together in threes, ferried armored vehicles across to reinforce the paratroopers on the west bank. Despite everything,

All the operational factors were in the IDF’s favor on the morning of October 16: the enemy had been completely caught by surprise, the Egyptian command was unaware of the IDF’s plans and what had happened, and the IDF’s freedom of action on the western bank was practically absolute. (153)

Even denounces generals Bar-Lev and Gonen at Southern Command and IDF Chief of Staff General Elazar, for trying to undermine and marginalize Ariel Sharon. He stresses that Sharon deserves most of credit for the successful crossing of the Suez Canal. Also instrumental were the IDF’s ability to improvise solutions to its own planning oversights and the curious failure of the Egyptian high command to recognize that the operation was something more than a push against the Second Army’s right flank.

Since he was personally involved with resolving delays in bringing the bridging equipment forward, Even is more informative than others who have addressed the topic. We learn that the IDF had constructed a huge “roller bridge” to facilitate a canal crossing by armored forces, but was astonishingly casual about actually moving this indispensable asset forward to the canal; moreover, it was prone to breakdowns and, of course, the carefully graded Tirtur road was blocked by strong Egyptian forces. In the first twenty-four hours of the operation, enemy fire pre-

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1. Built by a Japanese firm prior to the 1967 war.

vented the other bridging unit, the towed “Unifloat” pontoon rafts, from moving down the Akavish road.

Operation Stouthearted Men, though in the end successful, was in Even’s telling a story of confusion, acrimony, and bad tactical decisions—all well documented elsewhere in histories of the war.<sup>2</sup> Adan’s armored division had, by the late morning of 16 October, passed through the congestion in the rear area, and his two understrength tank brigades had failed to clear the Tirtur road, with no preliminary reconnaissance and minimal artillery support. Then, the elite 35th Parachute Brigade was brought up from the southern Sinai and, after a series of inexplicable delays, a reinforced battalion undertook a nighttime assault to clear the road, without any intelligence preparation or fire support. Even states that Bar-Lev personally briefed the brigade commander by phone, telling him that Sharon had “screwed up,” and that the 35th would have to “save Israel” (158). The paratroopers were quickly pinned down and sustained serious casualties. Adan’s two armored brigades, reinforced by one of Sharon’s, managed to rescue the paratroopers on 17 October. In the predawn hours that day, the IDF had finally brought the Unifloat rafts down Akavish Road to the crossing site; by late afternoon, the Israelis at last had a bridge suitable for armored forces to cross.

Received opinion notwithstanding, Even dismisses the significance of the impromptu conference at Kishuf on 17 October, where several generals at Adan’s command post gave Sharon no credit for getting across the canal and roundly blamed him for falling so far behind schedule and failing to open the roads to the crossing site. It was decided that Adan’s division should cross the canal as soon as the Unifloat bridge was in place—even though Sharon already had a strong force of all arms on the west bank, actively engaged in destroying Egyptian antitank and surface-to-air missile sites. Most of Sharon’s division stayed on the east bank to clear the Egyptians from the Chinese Farm and assault the right flank of their bridgehead—tasks Sharon rightly regarded as costly and wasteful.

In chapter 11, the authors explain how the badly managed operations across the canal squandered much of the surprise Sharon had achieved. Southern Command’s haphazard task organization attested to an army unprepared for operations above the division echelon. The authors’ unbridled criticism of IDF commanders is not merely partisan sniping—a “war of the generals” did erupt in the Israeli press after the Yom Kippur War. The IDF erred badly by not allowing Sharon to take full advantage of the breakthrough across the canal. And Southern Command’s abysmal handling of the logistical situation in the operational rear was inexcusable. Jacob Even was present at the “decisive point in the Sinai” and his firsthand account, drawing, too, on relevant primary and secondary sources, has ensured that generalship in the Yom Kippur War will continue to be a subject of intense interest among students of military history who have some prior knowledge of the subject.<sup>3</sup>

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2. See, e.g., Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947–1974* (NY: Harper and Row, 1978).

3. This is not a book for beginners, who should read it in conjunction with Dupuy’s book (*ibid.*), Hanoch Bartov, *Dado: 48 Years and 20 Days* (Tel Aviv: Ma’ariv Book Guild, 1981), Ariel Sharon, *Warrior: An Autobiography* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989), and Avraham Adan, *On the Banks of the Suez: An Israeli General’s Personal Account of the Yom Kippur War* (NY: Presidio Pr, 1991).