

Israhel CHARIOTS OF THE DESERT

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About the Author

Lieutenant Colonel David Eshel IDF (Retd) was born in Dresden, Germany, in 1928 and emigrated to Israel when he was ten years old. He joined the Jewish Settlement Police for National Service in 1946 and saw action for the first time on convoy escort duty in the Negev in the early battles for control of the roads before the 1948 war.

During the War of Independence, he commanded a machine-gun section and, later, a platoon in a reconnaissance battalion. After the war, he was assigned to the newly formed Armoured School at Ramle as an instructor. He was amongst the first contingent of officers selected to attend courses with the French Army and graduated from the French Cavalry School at Saumur as a tank platoon commander in 1951.

On his return, he was posted as operations officer of the First Tank Battalion. During the First Sinai Campaign in 1956, he served under Colonel Uri Ben Ari as commander of the 7th Armoured Brigade Signal Company in the rank of major. Shortly after the campaign, he became Chief of Signals of the Armoured Corps. A two year spell as Commander of Signals in the Northern Command then followed, after which he returned to the Armoured Corps – now under the command of General Tal. Here he served in a number of command and staff appointments including the command of the Signal Battalion in Tal's armoured division in the Six Day War.

In 1969 he went to the Staff and Command College as a tactical instructor and was responsible there for inter-arm war games. These included a study of the Egyptian threat which was to become a rehearsal for the real thing three years later. Retiring from active service in 1971, he was recalled for duty in the Yom Kippur War and served throughout with the reserves. On his retirement, he founded his own military publishing company and launched *Defence Update*, a monthly magazine with a world-wide circulation. His previous published work includes two books for the American house ARCO – *Elite Fighting Units* and *US Rapid Deployment Forces* – and a number of books on the Israeli Defence Forces published in Israel. Married with two children, he lives in Israel and devotes most of his time to military writing and lecturing.

* * *

Brigadier (Retd) Bryan Watkins served with the Royal Tank Regiment from

1940 to 1965 and on the General Staff until 1974, when he retired to become Editor of *The British Army Review* and *Army Training News*.

He served in North West Europe as a troop commander with 1st Royal Tank Regiment in 1944–45 and commanded 4th Royal Tank Regiment in South Arabia on operations in 1963–64, including the Radfan Campaign. After commanding the Royal Armoured Corps Centre at Bovington, he was Brigadier General Staff, Army Strategic Command. For nine years a Council Member of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, he is a former Chairman of its Studies and Publications Committee. He is now the House Editor at Brassey's.

Foreword

David Eshel's opening words to this book remind us that the Israeli Defence Forces were 'born in battle' in 1948. At first sight this may seem so far fetched a statement that the reader is inclined to dismiss it as a throw-away line. In truth, it says in five words, that a beleaguered, newly born state was faced with a war on its hands even before it existed as a constitutional fact. Never before in history has any nation had to face up to that situation, yet, thanks to the experience gained by a number of gallant and resolute Israelis over some years of desperate, clandestine warfare and to the foresight of their leaders, Israel was indeed able to take on her enemies and, somehow, to throw them back from her frontiers which thereafter she was able to secure. Lieutenant Colonel David Eshel was involved in that struggle from its earliest days, serving first with the Jewish Settlement Police under the aegis of the British Palestine Police and in the Negev Brigade of the Haganah. He joined the Israeli Armoured Corps when it had only a handful of vehicles with which to bless itself and was amongst the first of its officers to be trained at the French Cavalry School at Saumur on the tanks which France was soon to supply. From then on he fought with the Armoured Corps in every war up to and including what President Chaim Herzog has described as the War of Atonement – more popularly known as the Yom Kippur War. Thus his qualifications to write the story of that unique organisation are beyond challenge.

It is not necessary to have been an armoured soldier to understand the nature of the task which faced the Armoured Corps in its earliest days. How they managed to scratch together a heterogeneous collection of armoured vehicles, both tracked and wheeled, and form them into a fighting entity which was able to put the fear of God into their numerous but badly co-ordinated foes, is one of the wonders of military history. From that moment on, though their equipment improved in quality and quantity, they were at a constant numerical disadvantage yet, despite one or two desperate moments, they never lost a campaign and their record of kills to losses is a truly remarkable one. How this was achieved, David Eshel has told us in a story which is often breathtaking and never, for one moment, lacking in fascination.

History unquestionably repeats itself, which is why it is so vital for us to study it and learn its lessons. Those who are familiar with the story of the birth of the tank will recognise in some of the birth pangs of the Israeli Armoured Corps the doubts, antagonism and temporary failures experienced by the Heavy Branch of

the Machine-Gun Corps and, later, the Tank Corps, in the grim years of 1916–17. But they will also know of the imperishable spirit which was born then and lives on today. And so it was in Israel. David Eshel leaves us in no doubt about the scepticism shown towards the Corps by the infantry between 1949 and 1956 and their doubts about the ability of the Corps to do other than follow them into battle, providing such fire support as was needed – though their views on the prevailing standards of tank gunnery were hardly complimentary! However, 1956 and the first Sinai Campaign changed all that. As Eshel writes: ‘In those few days the IDF Armoured Corps had earned its coveted spurs and the Israeli combat doctrine would change completely – the armour becoming thereafter “king” of the battlefield’.

But, as he also emphasises, much remained to be done before the Corps was to achieve its legendary reputation for professionalism and unrivalled expertise in gunnery. As so often is the case, the needs of the moment produced the man – albeit eight years later. In 1964 the now legendary Israel Tal took over as Commander of the Corps and at once made his presence felt by the imposition of new and rigorous standards of discipline and professionalism – standards that were to apply to all, regardless of rank. He it was who saw that, faced by the inevitability of numerical inferiority in any future conflict with the Arab states, the gap must be closed by quality – superlative leadership, reliable and effective equipment and a quick kill by superior shooting. Like Guderian in the German Army, Hobart in Britain and Patton in America, he had the gift for getting a vital message across to all ranks and the strength of character to see that the portent of that message was brought home. Tal’s brilliant performance on the northern flank of the Israeli sweep forward to the Canal in the Six Day War showed him to be a tactician and commander of the first rank. That performance was matched by his entire Corps and was the product of those three precious years of training under his aegis. But it was not General Tal alone who shone as a commander. In every paragraph of David Eshel’s story of that campaign new names emerge, names which were to re-appear in the most senior positions of the IDF in the next great conflict – the Yom Kippur War, in which they earned further glory.

The strength of the Israeli Armoured Corps lies not only in its professionalism but especially in its tradition of fearless and selfless leadership – nowhere better demonstrated than in the great battle with the Syrians on the Golan Heights from 6–10 October 1973, now one of the imperishable legends of defensive warfare. This emphasis on leadership at every level emerges throughout the whole of this remarkable saga and is a matter upon which all soldiers would do well to ponder. Such heights are not achieved by mere emphasis during training but from an unquenchable sense of patriotic duty bolstered by the knowledge that the very existence of one’s nation is at stake. The existence of a never absent threat to Israel’s security and the inherent courage born of long years of the most appalling racial persecution constitute special ingredients in the make-up of the Israeli soldier and airman – for we must never forget the great sacrifices made by the

Israeli Air Force, often in support of the Armoured Corps, which, time and again, turned the tide of battle.

David Eshel has rightly devoted some space to the equipment problems of the Armoured Corps and here again his story carries invaluable lessons for those in other armies. Not for Israel the 'gold plated' solution but the thoroughly down to earth and practical approach to equipment policy. 'Will it serve in battle?' has been the only question to be answered. If the answer was 'No' then equipment was modified to give the essential performance needed. There is no better example of this than the way in which, as the Chapter Notes to Chapter 5 explain, the British Centurion was extensively re-built to give the IDF a workhorse that was to stand them in wonderful stead in countless engagements.

Like Guderian and Hobart, Tal had a special touch of genius when it came to identifying the technological needs of his corps – a touch he has never lost and which was to lead to the design and development of the great Israeli Merkava main battle tank with which the Armoured Corps is now equipped and which proved itself so convincingly in 1982, in 'Operation Peace for Galilee' against the Syrians. It has been a great privilege and an enormous pleasure to have been associated with the publication of this book and to work with its Author, in whom no one could have asked for an easier or more generous colleague.

BRYAN WATKINS

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