Six-Day War The student's view

It was the start of a human disaster

BY NORMAN LEBRECHT

▶ A HAND is shaking me roughly awake.

"What's the time?"

"Ten past eight," says my roommate. "It's begun."

No need to ask what. We had been waiting for this moment for three nail-bitten weeks. In five minutes I am washed, dressed and running through the orange groves, on my way to the hospital.

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The first we knew anything was wrong came in an evening news bulletin on Independence Day, 1967, crackling out of a car radio as we drove home from a picnic in the Galilee.

The Egyptians had closed the straits of Tiran, said the newsreader, blocking Israel's route to oil supplies. The next bulletin was preceded by a recitation of code words — "iron kettle", and the like. When I got back to the university campus, my friends were packing up to go to the army.

Bulletin by bulletin, the news got worse. Moshe Hovav, a radio announcer with a particularly grave voice, seemed to be on all the time. The United Nations pulled its buffer force out of Sinai. The United States urged restraint. Jordan signed a defence pact with Egypt. There was going to be a war.

Lectures were cancelled. Our campus was deserted but for a few elderly academics and a gaggle of foreign students, left at a loose end.

A dozen of us tramped up the road to volunteer our services at Tel Hashomer hospital. We were taken in to a teaching room and given a basic life-saving course. The Hebrew handbook was dated 1948. I learned how to perform a tracheotomy — cutting a hole in the windpipe to help a person breathe — using whatever was in my pocket. A door key would do. These skills would be called upon, I was assured, only if all doctors and nurses were otherwise occupied.

Tel Hashomer was Israel's largest hospital, geared to take casualties from the southern front. Assigned as an assistant to the anaesthetists, I was taught the names of different drugs, how to break open a phial and how to watch a breathing monitor if the anaesthetist was called away mid-operation. I was 18-years-old and had never held another life in my hands.

The training completed, we waited. Hours after hour, day after day. The political skies darkened. The radio played songs of 1948. I memorised the drugs cabinet in Hebrew and Latin, left to right.

The night before the war I went for a walk with an on-off girlfriend. We both knew the relationship was going nowhere but neither wanted to be alone on the eve of war. The landscape felt eerily deserted. I got to bed just before dawn.

PHOTO: AP

A score of seriously wounded Egyptian soldiers were flown out of Kydda

When I was shaken awake, the relief was instantaneous.

The lane to Tel Hashomer ran through an orange grove. It was blocked by two cars that had smashed into each other, so eager were their drivers to get to war. I took a lift to the hospital in an ambulance with my first casualty, a young driver with multiple fractures. "We're going to put you in traction until the war is over," said an A&E doctor. "We need all the theatres for frontline wounded."

On the first night, some of our students got rowdy and were sent home by the sister in charge of the operating suite, a woman of vast age and implacable authority. She must have been all of 35, with a husband at the front. For her, there was no messing about. This was an existential conflict, a point of no return. Others felt the same.

A friend was summoned by her parents, both Holocaust survivors, on the first morning of war. They gathered round the piano. Her father ceremonially opened the lid. On each of the middle keys lay a blue pill. "Cyanide," her father said, "to be taken the moment the enemy enters Tel Aviv."

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That night, not one casualty arrived. Likewise, on my second shift. We drank coffee after coffee and ran out of things to say. The surgeons stayed in their common room and the head sister came out occasionally with bandages for us to fold. Michael Elkins on the BBC reported that the Egyptian air force had been destroyed. Arab stations continued to declare victory.

On the third night of war, helicopters whirred in wounded from the central front and I was finally able to put my minimal skills into practice. Most of the casualties had chest and abdominal injuries. I don't remember head wounds; maybe they hadn't survived. There were Arabs among them. The intensive care room was soon packed and post-op patients were left in the corridor with me and other students to watch them coming round.

At two in the morning, everything stopped. Chief of staff Itzhak Rabin was on the radio announcing the conquest of Bethlehem, Hebron and the eastern half of Jerusalem. We looked about us, unable to express emotion. The first to speak was the sister in charge. "If we give back one inch of this land," she said, "I am leaving the country."

I was dumbstruck. Young as I was, I knew enough history to be aware of the consequences of occupation, whether imperial or European. I could not imagine the Israel I knew as an occupying power, but I was too cowed by the sister to utter a word.

The next night, we were sent home. The war was won and casualties from the Syrian front were being treated in the north.

Students trickled back onto campus the following Monday, some gung-ho, others muted by horrors they had seen. Some of our year did not return. A demobbed soldier offered me a lift to Jerusalem in a jeep he had "forgotten" to return to his unit. It was the day before Shavuot, so I put on a white shirt. We drove through newly-cleared minefields at Latrun and approached Jerusalem on dirt tracks. My shirt turned a darker shade of khaki.

At the Wailing Wall, Judaism's holiest relic, building rubble was being carted away in skips.

"What was here before?" I asked a soldier.

"Houses."

"And the people who lived in them?"

"They left."

The Jewish rule on seeing the Wall for the first time, or after a long absence, is to rend one's shirt in mourning. I was unable to perform that rite, thinking

of the people who had been driven from their homes, not in the heat of battle but to make space for thousands of worshippers. Many religious Israelis, inspired by Yeshayahu Leibowitz, would soon recoil from the iconisation of the Wailing Wall.

My own reservations stem from having been there at the start of a human disaster.

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Half a century on, I look back on my first war as one does on a first love, with the glare of passion tinted by the passage of time. I am unfailingly shocked when the liberal Left depicts the Six-Day War as an act of Israeli aggression, and equally horrified when the settler Right claims it as a divine right for land grabs. I think back to the fear before the conflict began, and the slow dawning of relief as it rushed to conclusion. Maimonides defines two categories of war, permissible (*reshut*) and compulsory (*hovah*). The Six-Day War was obligatory. It was fight, or be wiped out.

With the benefit of documentary evidence — much of it gathered by my friends Gidon Remez and Isabella Ginor in their new book *The Six Year War** — we now know the war was a Russian chess move that went wrong. With America bogged down in Vietnam, the Kremlin tried to win brownie points among the Arabs by telling Egypt that Israel planned an attack. The reactions went wildly out of control. Hebrew did not yet have a word for "escalation" (or, come to think of it, for "occupation".)

We who lived in Israel through May and June 1967 knew nothing of any geopolitical dimension. The threat to our lives was not hypothetical. The stress we felt can be heard on a *Kol Israel* archive album assembled by Haim Herzog for CBS Records, and in *Siach Lochamim*, a colloquium of soldiers recorded 10 days after the war. By then, I was sitting my end-of-year exams.

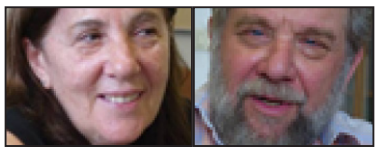
The past is another country that does not need revisiting too often. But at this jubilee moment, when two contrary narratives are struggling for control of history, all who were there have a duty to tell it as it was. History is not only written by victors. History is the sum of human experience in many shades, unheroic and auxiliary like mine, filtered through a distorting mirror of fading memory. You want to know what happened? We survived.

Norman Lebrecht is an author and broadcaster

The Russian navy cruises the Mediterranean

US warned Israel off action

BY ISABELLA GINOR AND GIDEON REMEZ



► ON MAY 25 1967, Mossad Director Meir Amit met the CIA station chief in Tel Aviv, John Hadden. Many years later, the late Gen. Amit gave us the startling transcript. Despite Amit's warning that a major Soviet move into the Middle East was in the offing, the American was adamant: Israel must not pre-empt a Soviet-instigated and armed Egyptian onslaught. Hadden then added a threat: "if you attack, the United States will land forces on Egypt's side, in order to defend it."

Recently declassified US documents confirmed that such an American contingency plan was dusted off in mid-May 1967. But no forces had been allocated, nor operational orders issued, by the time Israel did strike first on June 5. So no GI Joes found themselves fighting against Israeli soldiers, alongside the Soviet landing forces that were poised aboard some 30 ships of the USSR's Mediterranean Eskadra, or the Soviet paratroops who spent the war on the runways of forward airbases.

Needless to say, Moscow would never have contemplated defending Israel, had the Arabs struck first, which the Soviets urged them not to do, but rather to provoke an Israeli first strike that would legitimize USSR support for the victims of aggression. This planned Soviet intervention was obviated only by the unexpectedly devastating effect of Israel's opening air strike and the resulting rout of Arab ground forces, not by any US counteraction. Indeed, when Egypt falsely accused the United States (and Britain) of taking part in the air offensive, the US Sixth Fleet was ordered away from the combat zone, and Washington declared itself "neutral in thought and deed."

> The USSR's response to its setback in June 1967 was proactive, decisive, aggressive

Discovering the abortive Soviet intervention in Russian veterans' memoirs illustrated the risk historians take if they project the superpower alignment of later periods onto pre-'67 years. It was a lot more asymmetric then; Israel's triumph in the Six-Day War did push the Americans farther into a corner, but by default after Egypt broke off relations. The USSR did the same toward Israel.

The USSR's response to its setback in June 1967 was, by contrast, proactive, decisive and aggressive. The Moscow leadership quickly determined that in order to retain its Middle Eastern influence, reassure its anxious clients elsewhere, and redeem the reputation of Soviet weaponry, it had to help the Arabs prepare for a rematch.

Within hours of the ceasefire on the Suez Canal front, a massive sea- and air-lift replenished Egypt's losses of materiel. Soviet marines and air-defence crews took up positions opposite Israel until Egyptian forces could regroup, a combat presence of Soviet regulars that would be expanded to a full SAM division and fighter-jet regiments during the ensuing War of Attrition in 1969-1970. The toll they took on Israel compelled them to accept a disadvantageous ceasefire. This created the preconditions for Egypt's cross-canal offensive on Yom Kippur in 1973.

The blueprint for this operation, the list of requisite weapons, and the training plan for Egyptian forces were drawn up by a top-level contingent of Soviet military advisers as early as summer 1967. The payback for Moscow was to turn Egyptian ports and airfields into de facto Soviet bases, fulfilling a centuries-old Russian aspiration to project power into the Mediterranean (do you see an analogy with Syrian bases today? We do, too).

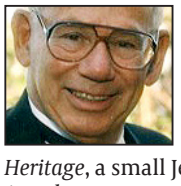
Where were the Americans? Both the administrations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon subordinated the Middle East to their prime objective — extrication from Vietnam. Henry Kissinger considered that in favour of this and other benefits of his Détente policy, he could manipulate the Soviets to restrain their Arab clients. He cut secret deals with Moscow at Israel's expense. But the Soviets blindsided him and the Yom Kippur surprise was only the worst instance.

The United States did finally come through with its own emergency airlift, but only after Israel suffered a lasting national trauma with over 2,200 fatalities. Egypt ultimately switched to the American camp as it needed America for the peace as much as the USSR for the war. Arguably, it was the demands of brokering this deal, rather than the previous competition with Moscow, that raised and fixed the level of American political, military and economic commitment to Israel and Egypt alike.

Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez are associate fellows of the Truman Institute, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. 'The Six-Year War: How Israel's 1967 Victory Became the Hottest Clash of the Cold War' is published by Hurst

Headlines were quickly out of date in Los Angeles

BY TOM TUGEND



► "FIGHT FOR Victory, Pray for Victory" was the fervent banner headline I splashed across the front page of *Heritage*, a small Jewish weekly in Los Angeles.

It was Monday, June 5, 1967 and the time was 8pm in the Middle East, but only 10am in LA. As I was driving to the paper's printing plant, the car radio blasted news of Arab boasts that their forces were about to take Tel Aviv and throw the Zionists into the sea.

Normally, I would have been at my regular work as a science writer at UCLA, but Herb Brin, editor, circulation manager, advertising director and everything else at *Heritage*, was on an overseas trip and had asked me to read the page proofs of the week's edition, his regular chore on Monday mornings.

I threw out whatever Bar Mitzvah extravaganza was gracing the front page and wrote about the catastrophe again facing the Jewish people, a scant 22 years after the end of the Holocaust.

The paper was delivered to its readers on Friday, June 9. By that time, of course, the world knew that Israeli forces had won a stunning victory. So fast had events moved that my stirring headline of four days earlier already had the feel of ancient history.

Fortunately, there was one prescient reporter whose reaction time was considerably faster. He was Michael Elkins, at various times a Hollywood script writer, Office of Strategic Services operator during the Second World War, and labour union organiser.

I met Mike in 1948, when I was attending the University of California in Berkeley and looking for some way to get to the newly established State of Israel and join the fighting.

Someone advised me to contact Elkins, then a business agent for the butchers' union in San Francisco. I walked into his office unannounced and told him I wanted him to get me to Israel to participate in the War of Independence.

Elkins blanched, told me he had set up an elaborate vetting and security system to keep American authorities from discovering his then highly illegal activity, and I had just walked in.

In any case, he found it prudent to leave the United States for Israel later in 1948 and after a year on a kibbutz found a job as a stringer for the BBC.

On June 5 1967, Elkins went to the Knesset and ran into a knot of excited politicians, from whom he gathered that Israeli fighter planes had aleady wiped out the air forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. He immediately phoned his BBC editor in London and announced, "Israel has won the war."

The editor thought Elkins had lost his mind. Cairo, Damascus and Amman were transmitting a string of bulletins previewing the utter defeat of the Zionist entity.

Elkins, however, stuck to his guns. and the editor finally gave in but warned Elkins that if he were proven wrong, this would be his last day as a BBC correspondent.

Elkins kept his job and died in Jerusalem at 84 in 2001.