12

Elite Units

The Mass Production of Military Excellence

Historically, large and well-organized armed forces have had little use for “special” or “commando” units. During the twentieth century when long wars were fought by large conscript forces, in which even a small country like Israel fielded more than 200,000 soldiers (in 1973), the major armies had to raise, train, equip, and deploy thousands of company-sized combat units of around a hundred soldiers, each unit needing some hard-fighting men to lead the rest in battle. Hence almost all senior military officers opposed the skimming of the best men to form elite units.

Political leaders in pursuit of military glamor to relieve the gloom of long wars might press for the establishment of “commando” or special units—Winston Churchill was a notable enthusiast—but army chiefs were typically reluctant to devote attention or resources to establishing a few small “commando” or otherwise special units, which would always be too small to win battles on their own, too valuable to be wasted on mere skirmishes, and too hard to integrate usefully in large-scale operations. Enthusiasts would argue against this by offering variants of the Trojan War ruse, in which a small number of heroes finally made the victory of the Greeks possible by jumping out of the horse to open the gates of the walled city, still today the most famous of history’s “force multipliers.”

But most twentieth-century army chiefs were unimpressed, because they saw great obstacles to brilliant Trojan horse operations in real life, including the difficulty of coordinating the actions of small special units with the movements of large regular forces; had the Greek army crept up to the gates and Helen detected the ruse, they would have been massacred by the Trojans above them on the walls. Classically trained or not, American, British, Soviet, and German army chiefs all preferred to do without special units. Their priority was to keep the best fighters in regular line units, so that the few could energize the many. It was only the end of large-scale wars that allowed the present proliferation of “special” forces of all kinds.

The founding father of the IDF and Israel’s first prime-minister, David Ben Gurion, had been the first to realize that the new state would need an army just to survive from its very first day, and it would have to be a large army. For exactly the same reason as the professionally trained generals, he therefore opposed elite forces that would deprive units of essential leaders. He would have wanted to abolish the elite force of the War of Independence, the *Palmach*, in spite of its epic achievements, even if it had not been politicized by its leaders as it was. And once victory was secure, he did abolish the *Palmach’*s headquarters. Hence the postwar IDF started off in 1949 with no elite forces but for a single and small British-style paratrooper battalion of very modest attainments, and a small if highly effective unit of sea commandos who had sunk Egypt’s flagship the year before. As minister of defense Ben Gurion was content that it should be so: he wanted good brigades of thousands, not exceptional platoons of thirty.

At present, by contrast, the IDF has a wide variety of special operations units, a transformation that started in a small way when Ben Gurion was still minister of defense, not because of any change in policy but as an urgent response to an immediate problem. Eventually, other specific threats emerged against which large-scale responses were inappropriate and induced the establishment of more special operations units, a process favored by the country’s strategic circumstances: the last major war against regular forces occurred in 1982 in Lebanon, whereas fighting against irregular enemies has continued unabated, waxing and waning in intensity, the type of war that suits special units.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As of now the IDF has an entire array of different elite units that are territorially specialized, for the verdant north, arid south, the Red Sea Eilat area, and the highly urbanized center of the country. They are also functionally specialized, for intelligence infiltration, long-range reconnaissance, long-range strike and undercover operations, tunnel warfare, and more, in addition to three larger top-tier units that are more versatile while retaining different core specializations.

It all started with Unit 101. In the aftermath of the War of Independence the newly victorious IDF was in dissolution as veterans returned to their homes, when infiltrators started crossing the undemarcated and unfenced Armistice Lines into Israeli territory, sometimes only to harvest their own lost fields, but sometimes to steal, rob, and kill. Sizable gangs came for both plunder and revenge – from summer 1949 to the end of 1956 there were approximately 11,500 such attacks on Israeli civilians and their property.

None of Israel’s Arab neighbors policed their side of the “Green Line” (named for the color of the 1949 armistice lines on IDF military maps), and neither could the IDF disperse its few soldiers all along the border, where they could not train for war. The inordinate length of the armistice lines as compared to the country’s exiguous total territory, the result of Israel’s long and narrow shape, made it impossible to outpost and patrol the borders usefully.[[2]](#endnote-2) The War of Independence had ended in the spring of 1949 with armistices, not peace treaties, because in the politics of the defeated neighbors it was axiomatic that war would be resumed as soon as there was any chance of success, with cross-border infiltration attacks welcomed as a token of what was to come on a much larger scale – most conducted by Palestinians, but many also by various state armies.

This meant that Israel’s military leaders had to confront two very different military threats: the first was clearly the threat to fundamental security (*Bitachon Yesodi*) with major offensives intended to defeat the IDF then physically annihilate the Israeli state and its Jewish population. To repel that threat Israel would of course need a modern army, with artillery, tanks, an air force, and more. The second was the threat to routine security (*Bitachon Shotef*), with sniping, small ambushes, mines, raids to kill Israelis, and thefts, whose overall aim was to wear down the resolve of the Jewish population to live in Israel.

To counter the everyday threat, a particular kind of military strength would be needed, best suited for “small wars.” That immediately posed a dilemma for Israeli military planning, because the requirements of large-scale war are qualitatively different.[[3]](#endnote-3) The dilemma became more acute as the “routine security” situation continued to deteriorate: in 1950, 67 Israeli citizens were killed by infiltrators; in 1951, the number rose to 137 killed or wounded; and in 1952 casualties rose to a combined total of 182. All the victims were civilians, mostly women and children, with a total of 1,751 incidents in 1952.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The initial Israeli response was defensive, including more border patrols and more ambushes, but there was no possibility of protecting even thinly the disproportionately long and meandering armistice lines. Protests to the Mixed Armistice Commission were to avail. The 50-odd UN observers compiled reports but could do little else. Clearly, the government had to protect its citizens. After failing to achieve any results with diplomatic means, it decided to use force to compel the neighboring states to control their side of the border, but this had to be force well short of all-out war. First came a classic public warning from Prime Minister David Ben Gurion that “if the armistice lines along the border are open to terrorists and murderers …. we reserve our freedom of action….”[[5]](#endnote-5) Internally, Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan explained the reasoning: “we must determine the rules of what is and is not allowed in our relations with the Arab Countries, and we must be careful not to be submissive and acceptant of [attacks] against us, even if their [effect is small].”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Dayan was an expert when it came to reprisal raids. As a youngster he had learned the trade from a master of the craft as a prized recruit in British Captain Orde Wingate’s Special Night Squads, raiding offending Arab villages during the 1936-1939 uprising. In World War II Dayan became a scout for the British Army leading raids into Vichy French Lebanon, leading the way for a British force on 7 June 1941 that penetrated Lebanon, losing an eye in the fighting.

As chief of staff, Dayan logically opted for commando operations: raids to attack targets behind enemy lines that would rely on surprise and guile instead of numbers or heavy firepower, and that would clearly be understood as reactions to attacks within Israel. In so doing, Dayan formulated a policy and security concept that Ben Gurion accepted, thereby institutionalizing such retaliatory actions within enemy territory. At first, however, an attempt was made to use airpower: on April 5, 1951, eight fighters attacked Syrian army outposts in the southern Golan at El Hama in the Yarmuq valley. The government was surprised by the vehement reactions of British, French, and US diplomats (these days ground actions evoke stronger protests than air strikes), and Ben Gurion decided then and there to stop relying on air power.[[7]](#endnote-7)

But when it came to ground attacks, Dayan and the general staff soon discovered that the troops they had just could not fight. After the 1947-1949 war most of the best fighting officers had left the IDF to pursue their civilian lives. Ready as they were to return in uniform if the country had to be defended in another big war, they were unwilling to serve in peacetime as career officers. The best forces, the *Palmach* brigades, had been disbanded by Ben Gurion and not replaced, while the line units were filled with new immigrants who rarely knew enough Hebrew to understand their orders and whose basic training had been hurried. Morale and discipline were so low that in 1951 not a single battalion was deemed truly ready for combat.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In 1950, Dayan, as head of Southern Command, had been sorely disappointed by the performance of the 7th Armored Brigade under his command. After the Jordanians suddenly claimed that the road to Eilat infringed on their territory, they blocked passage for several days. Dayan had immediately given orders to the brigade to clear the road forcibly, but was very displeased by the “dithering, indecisive way” in which his orders were implemented.[[9]](#endnote-9) The next year, as the new head of the General Staff Branch, he oversaw a much worse failure: on May 2, 1951, a force of Syrian village militia and regular infantry entered the Israeli side of the demilitarized zone along the border and occupied Tel Mutilla, a small rocky hill just north of Lake Tiberias. The IDF Northern Command reacted immediately by sending an infantry unit to repel the Syrians. But repeated Israeli attacks were inept and easily repulsed. More troops had to be sent, and it took five days of fighting to finally drive out the Syrians, which required the participation of the Druze battalion.[[10]](#endnote-10) By the end, 40 IDF soldiers had been killed and 72 wounded. The duration of the fighting and the casualties were out of all proportion to the small size of the Syrian force, which according to Syrian press reports suffered some 200 killed – the majority of the force. It was a clear sign something was badly amiss with the infantry's training and morale, a message reinforced by a string of failed reprisal raids at Wadi Fukin, Beit Sira, Beit Awwa, and Idna, where on January 25, 1953, two companies of the nominally elite 890th Paratrooper battalion were repelled by enemy fire, failed to mount enough suppressive fire, and retreated without completing the mission.

But the most humiliating failure occurred on January 23, 1953, when an infantry battalion of the once famed *Givati* brigade was ordered to launch a night raid against the central Jordanian village of Falame, a notorious nest of transborder marauders. Built on a hilltop, the village was not the easiest of targets, but it was only defended by a dozen riflemen of the Jordanian National Guard with no heavy weapons. The Israelis repeatedly lost their way in the dark; when the advance unit finally reached the edge of the village it was met by scattered rifle fire. When six Israeli soldiers were wounded, the battalion commander ordered a retreat back into Israeli territory. Three senior officers, including Moshe Dayan, were waiting for the return of the battalion just across the armistice line to hear the raid’s results. Dayan's first reaction was to discharge the commander on the spot, but then he realized that other officers and other units would not have fought any better.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In 1953, out of 85 military operations, 46 were outright failures and only 15 were deemed successful. It often happened that would-be raiders turned back because they could not find their objective in the night. On some occasions they were repulsed, and officers greatly exaggerated enemy strength in their reports.[[12]](#endnote-12) Successive failures further reduced the already low morale of the troops. It was obvious that the night-fighting skills and sharp combat edge of the War of Independence had been lost. In one incident, a platoon sent to blow up a well in the Gaza Strip lost its way and failed to locate its objective in the darkness. When morning came, the Israelis discovered that they had wandered in circles without even having crossed the armistice line.[[13]](#endnote-13) Deeply frustrated, Dayan noted in his diary that “even our elite units that were trained for special actions such as the parachute brigade, exhibited shameful negligence resulting in many of our actions ending up as failures.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

It was a vicious cycle: because the policy of retaliatory raids was undermined by the army’s inadequacies, Arab infiltration increased, as did the death toll of civilians and soldiers alike. That in turn demoralized the civilian population, already enduring severe economic hardships because Israel's thin economy had been overwhelmed by the mass arrival of destitute immigrants. Food rationing and low incomes were all the harder to bear when the new Jewish state could not even protect its population from daily attacks. Under great pressure, Dayan bitterly evoked the disgraceful failure at Falame to rule that no officer would be permitted to suspend an attack once it had commenced unless it had suffered a casualty rate in excess of fifty per cent. That was exceedingly harsh in an army whose guiding principle was to reduce casualties to the absolute minimum.

By then it was clear that the army’s melancholy state could not be remedied by exhortations or regulations. Officers lacked confidence in their men, many of whom were unmilitary new immigrants, while the men were demoralized by their officers' visible reluctance to rely on them in battle. And each new failure caused a further decline in the Army's self-confidence.[[15]](#endnote-15) It was Col. Michael Shaham, commander of the Jerusalem brigade, who came up with a possible remedy: the formation of a small force of skilled and dedicated fighters who could be counted upon to carry out reprisal raids with determination.[[16]](#endnote-16) Shaham’s preferred recruits were junior officers who had done well in the war but had resigned in 1949 rather than stay in the peacetime army. And he argued that the unit he advocated would have to remain outside the army’s formal structure with all its rules, because “the right kind of man” would not volunteer to return in uniform if it meant accepting the discipline of a peacetime army.

In August 1953, Chief of Staff Mordechai Makleff decided to accept Shaham's scheme, overruling Dayan’s objection to the idea that the army would rely on small special units to do what he believed every combat unit should be able to do.[[17]](#endnote-17) Makleff chose Ariel Sharon, a 25-year-old civilian student in the School of Oriental Studies at Hebrew University, to lead the special unit. He had fought well in the War of Independence and held the rank of major in a reserve battalion.[[18]](#endnote-18) Dayan already knew and respected Sharon; they had served together under Northern Command in 1952, when Sharon was a military-intelligence officer while Dayan was head of the operational branch. One day Dayan asked Sharon to look into the possibility of capturing two Jordanian soldiers to be used as bargaining chips for two Israeli soldiers who had strayed into Jordanian territory and were held by the Arab Legion. Sharon was noncommittal but with another officer he drove straight up to the border where he saw and captured two legionnaires at pistol-point whom he brought back to Dayan, who later said: “I asked him if it was possible, and he returned with two Arab Legion soldiers as if he had gone to pick fruit in the garden.”

Upon receiving the go ahead for the creation of his “Unit 101,” Sharon handpicked his men one by one, traveling around the country to persuade aggressive and intelligent fighters he knew personally or by reputation to abandon civilian life and join him in hard combat.[[19]](#endnote-19) Unit 101 never included more than forty-five men at any one time, but they were all excellent fighters—fighters rather than soldiers, for they wore neither uniforms nor badges of rank, and their weapons were not standard issue. Some of Sharon’s men proved excellent tacticians who would later advance to high rank; one who did not, Meir Har-Zion, soon became a legendary figure, “the best soldier Israel ever had,” Dayan once said. When Har-Zion’s sister was murdered by Bedouin tribesmen while illegally hiking across Jordanian-controlled territory with her boyfriend to visit the Petra monuments, Har-Zion crossed the border with some friends, tracked down the Bedouins responsible, raided their village, and killed four in revenge, as is customary among the Bedouins themselves.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Not yet chief of staff, Dayan was initially opposed to the elite-unit solution, but became an enthusiastic advocate after meeting Har-Zion and his comrades. He could see that they would revive the dormant skills of the Army of Independence: superior field-craft to infiltrate enemy territory and night fighting. He therefore hoped they would both devise new tactics and uplift the IDF’s morale by successful actions. The five months of its existence, from August 1953 to January 1954, proved sufficient for the aims of Unit 101. Its last operation was also the largest and most controversial. On 14 October 1953, after the murder of a woman and her two children in a village near Lod Airport in the heart of Israel, the unit was sent to attack the strongly held Jordanian village of Qybia.[[21]](#endnote-21) Sixty-three men of the army’s paratrooper battalion were sent as a covering force for Unit 101’s forty. The latter fought their way into the village, rounded up the inhabitants, and blew up forty-five houses in retaliation. But not all the houses had been fully evacuated beforehand, and some forty villagers still hiding within were buried under the rubble, resulting in a total of sixty-six dead and seventy-five wounded civilians, including those hit during the battle. The brutality of the raid led to sharp protests in Israel and abroad, and the result was a sharp policy change: future retaliation raids would be aimed at military units, not villages. “Israel has learned,” Dayan declared, “that even when the Arabs hit civilian population, we must aim at military targets.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

From 1953 the overall strategic situation was changing because Egypt’s new dictator, Gamal Abdel Nasser, decided to start a confrontation with Israel using Palestinians to do the actual fighting. By early 1954, the Egyptian army was raising units of fedayeen (Islamic self-sacrificers) in Gaza to infiltrate Israeli lines to attack civilians. That put pressure on King Hussein of Jordan to show that his army also supported fedayeen raids. In response, the Israeli government decided to attack military bases providing training and support to fedayeen units. Attacking military installations obviously increased escalation risks, but in 1953 the decision seemed inevitable because neither passivity nor continued attacks against border villages were feasible options.

Because the aim was to influence leaders, the operations had to be larger in scope and intensity than the earlier village attacks.[[23]](#endnote-23) That in turn meant that the original 101 format was much too small, while a larger force could not possibly remain so informal; it would need a proper organization. Dayan decided to merge 101 with the paratroop battalion instead of disbanding it, which was duly done one month after he became chief of staff on 7 December 1953. Thus by January 1954 Sharon became commander of the combined Unit 101-890th paratroop battalion, a force ten times larger than the original 101. Intensively trained commando forces in the modern style have existed since 1916 (for example, the *Sturmtruppen* of Imperial Germany) but Israel’s innovation was to use them to raise fighting standards across the entire army, first by direct expansion as the 101 inspired the much larger paratrooper battalion, then the battalion into the still larger paratrooper brigade, more than a fifty-fold increase. That took care of Dayan’s original reservation (shared by army chiefs everywhere) that “special” forces would weaken much larger regular forces by taking away their best men –the precious handful of really good fighters who can energize entire units. Moreover, young officers formed in the expanding elite force were distributed to lead units throughout the IDF.

At the start of this process, Sharon faced the challenge of combining the most informal IDF unit with the paratroopers, the IDF’s best parade-ground performers. To start with, most paratroop officers requested and obtained transfers to other units rather than serve under Sharon, who promptly appointed an officer who remained as his deputy, a fortunate choice, because Aharon Davidi would himself earn fame as a fighter and leader. (He rose to chief officer of infantry and paratroopers.) As adaptation and bonding proceeded, the paratroopers learned to scout and fight in small groups while former 101 men learned to operate on a larger scale and use heavier weapons. The old paratroopers soon lost their spic-and-span appearance even as they were becoming warriors in the relentless 101 style. It was characteristic of the times that the battalion’s “field exercises” were actually guerrilla-style raids into enemy territory.[[24]](#endnote-24)

The 202nd paratrooper battalion, as it was called, demonstrated its new skills in a March 28, 1954, night raid against the fortified Jordanian village of Nahalin, some ten kilometers west of Bethlehem, in response to a massacre in the Negev in which 11 Israeli bus passengers were killed and others wounded. After brushing aside the local National Guard defenders, the Israelis blew up a set number of houses, but, mindful of the Qibya deaths, they carefully inspected the buildings to ensure they were empty. There were eight more raids by the end of 1954, all successful.[[25]](#endnote-25)

With that the IDF acquired a reliable military instrument, one that could keep growing in size even while setting undiminished standards for the rest of the army. The process was facilitated by the role of parachute jump training in the battalion: it was treated more or less as a sport to uphold its distinctive esprit de corps but unlikely to be used in war on a large scale. As it expanded, new recruits would only require a few qualification jumps, not an expensive program of multiple day and night air drops.

The 202 soon started innovating tactically. Its new technique for attacks against fortified positions replaced the IDF's version of the British “fire and movement” two step, whereby one-unit acts as a stationary “fire” team shooting at the enemy to keep their heads down, while another acts as the “assault” team that advances, before the two switch roles for the next move forward.[[26]](#endnote-26) In July 1954 Sharon was wounded while leading a raid against an Egyptian stronghold facing the border kibbutz of Kissufim.[[27]](#endnote-27) Like many others along the armistice line, it consisted of concentric trench lines linked by narrow communication trenches, with barbed wire fences and mines all around the perimeter. While lying in his hospital bed, Sharon worked out a new tactical method to replace the old British tactics.[[28]](#endnote-28) Instead of relying on heavy covering fire, the men were to approach the trench system without firing at all. Walking slowly and in absolute silence until fired upon, the men were then to run forward as quickly as possible, firing on the move, while the barbed wire fences were breached by Bangalore torpedoes, long metal tubes filled with high explosives. Once they reached the trench line, the men were to form small assault groups. Without pausing to clear the fire-trenches, they were to jump into the communication trenches, running and shooting all the way to the center of the stronghold and then out again. This way the force would sweep trench line after trench line. Under this method, the assault teams were to keep moving and shooting until all the defenders were killed or captured.

The essence of Sharon’s new tactic was to exploit the shock effect of sudden attack followed by relentless advance, intended to first surprise the enemy and then to break his will to resist, rather than to win by killing as many as possible. But his method was especially vulnerable to enemy counterattacks: while the paratroopers were fighting inside the stronghold, but not yet in full control, the arrival of enemy forces on the scene could catch them mid-stride and easily disrupt a tactic that relied so heavily on morale effects, by rallying the defenders and overwhelming the scattered teams of attackers.

Because the 202 Battalion frequently fought at night and its men were trained to fire on the move, the paratroopers were mostly armed with 9mm submachineguns firing pistol ammunition. The Israeli-made *Uzi* was a good weapon that had been adopted by several foreign armies, but no submachine gun is accurate beyond a hundred yards, and only a few men can hit even large targets while firing from the hip. Instead, because the Uzi with its rapid fire is deadly at close quarters, Sharon's men were taught to close the distance as quickly as possible and go for hand-to-hand combat distances. Egyptian and the Jordanian soldiers tended to fight poorly at close quarters though they were often good riflemen, and quite a few Jordanian legionnaires were real marksmen. By attacking at night, when accurate long-range fire was hindered if not impossible, the paratroopers deprived the Arabs of their advantage, while benefiting from their discomfort in night fighting.

Few of Sharon’s original officers survived unscathed the reprisal operations of the mid-1950s. First, the actions were of course perilous for everybody, and second, “follow-me” leadership increased unit effectiveness but also put commanders at higher risk than their men. Sharon himself was wounded, as were almost all his officers, some repeatedly, and others were killed. (Among the small number of survivors were three future generals: Mordechai Gur, Yitzhak Hoffi, and Rafael Eitan).

Leading from the front persisted in spite of the loss of officers in minor operations. The wisdom of allowing officers with general staff potential to fight and die in minor skirmishes has been repeatedly debated in the IDF, but it remains official doctrine. In theory, there is a cost/benefit calculation whereby the loss of much-valued officers is offset by the overall gain in combat morale in general and combat momentum especially. But in truth the “follow-me” ethos has such a strong grip on the mentality of the IDF that it has been very difficult to restrain even the most senior officers from placing themselves in the line of fire, even if they cannot actually take away combat leadership from their juniors.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Dayan kept his eye on the paratroopers even after his appointment as chief of staff in December 1953 and was often at the sendoff point when they went into action. He wanted—and got—officers who were fighting men rather than managers in uniform. Moreover he wanted “teeth” with an absolute minimum of logistic “tail”–overdoing it more than once–and his reorganized paratroopers provided an exemplary model. To spread the “paratrooper spirit” in the army as a whole, Dayan insisted that every officer, including himself, undergo paratrooper jump training. He also enlarged the paratrooper unit so that by 1956 it was the size of a brigade. The other brigades responded to the paratroopers’ prestige by trying to compete with them, which they could do more easily when they fought alongside each other, which the *Golani* 1st Infantry Brigade and *Nahal* infantry units started doing more and more. Ever since Unit 101 was raised, Sharon’s men had monopolized combat missions. But when combat missions were assigned to ordinary infantry forces, they performed much better than before.

When Israel went to war in the 1956 Sinai Campaign the transformation was complete: in less than four years since the shameful Falame debacle, Dayan’s adage “better to be engaged in restraining the noble stallion than in prodding the reluctant ox” applied in full, as soldiers in thinly armored half-tracks charged Egyptian positions as if they were riding in well-armored battle tanks.

The Unit 101 ethos persists in today’s top-tier special operations battalions and the specialized elite units that are set up as needed and readily disbanded when no longer needed, a process obscured by the persistence of their evocative names in entirely new units established later on.[[30]](#endnote-30) The overall idea is to pursue the advantages of specialization without organizational rigidity: if a unit no longer fits current needs, it is simply abolished. IDF special units differ from each other, but overall, while they superficially resemble the “commando” forces of other armed forces, the similarity is deceptive.

Elite “special operations” units around the world that achieve high standards are manned by experienced career soldiers who first serve in line units. The IDF, by contrast, relies on young conscripts for all its combat forces, including its special operations units. Competition to serve in elite units upon enlistment is fierce among young high school students – only admission to air force flight training is equal in prestige. To improve their selection chances, many young Israelis join special pre-army preparation programs to upgrade their physical fitness and learn army ways, with the more affluent even hiring veterans as personal trainers in some cases, an interesting variation on the pastimes of wealthy youths elsewhere.

Once future conscripts inform the IDF of their desire to volunteer for a special unit and are found to have the minimum physical and mental requirements, they are summoned to an army base for a “*Yom Sayarot,*”a *Special* *Forces* (testing) *Day*. It amounts to a series of physical and mental tests to determine who among thousands of seventeen-year-olds qualifies for the further admission tests of the IDF’s top tier elite units: the *Sayeret Matkal* of the Intelligence Corps; the naval commando and frogmen unit *Shayetet 13;* the air force Sayeret *Shaldag* Unit 5101; and the Airborne Rescue and Evacuation Unit 669. Those who pass are sent for another week of physical and mental tests *(Gibush* – tryout), with the highest scorers sent to the *Gibbush Matkal* for the top-tier units. Psychological character and stability tests are integral to the process because soldiers in special-operations elite units not only face severe challenges, as do all soldiers, but are also much more likely to be on their own, or near enough.

The initial training of the conscripts admitted to one of the top-tier elite units lasts roughly twenty-two months, and it is the longest initial training course in the IDF, except for air force pilots and naval officers (whose training includes higher education for an academic degree). The training contents include infantry staples: fieldcraft, individual weapon training, physical hardening by unarmed combat, and simple combat simulations, diverging from the US/British/French norm only in omitting parading and saluting, while adding a particular IDF emphasis on very long marches in the Wingate tradition. Advanced individual training varies with each unit but invariably includes field navigation in different terrains, counterinsurgency basics, air to ground cooperation, airborne operations, intelligence gathering, sharpshooter instruction, medic training, and more.

The constant inflow of high quality, enthusiastic youths from all parts of society energizes the IDF in general and the special units especially. But one obvious disadvantage of manning special forces with young recruits, no more than twenty years old when fully trained, is their lack of experience as compared to their counterparts in other armies, notably the British SAS; the US Army’s airborne detachment Delta; the US Navy SEALs; the US Special Forces “Green Berets”; or the French RIPMA, who almost invariably start training in those units only after several years of prior service in line units.

It seems, however, that the lack of prior experience is offset by the sheer frequency with which IDF special units are sent into action, so what remains are the advantages of the young volunteers in their intellect, personality, and even leadership charisma. They are, after all, not self-selected for military careers as noncommissioned officers, as is the case for non-officers in US and other special forces elsewhere. On the contrary, they expect to emerge as the future business, professional, academic, and political leaders of the country. (As of 2021 both the outgoing and the incoming prime ministers served as junior officers in very demanding special units, committing to additional years of service beyond the compulsory three years in order to do so).

That virtue, however, is also a potential problem, and a familiar one: the concentration of talented youths in small special units deprives the IDF line forces of good squad leaders and good sergeants, and also deprives the IDF as a whole of good candidates for officers’ school. That follows from the fact that the IDF has no military academy—all officers rise from the ranks. To safeguard the leadership potential of special-unit recruits, many are sent to officers’ school upon finishing their unit training program, or else later on; when they graduate from officers’ school, few return to their original elite units, with most sent to mechanized infantry, armor, or other line units to command platoons at first or to take up other staff and command slots. Those who do remain in the IDF after both their compulsory and signed-on added service to become career officers, must usually add to their special operations training by going through armor or artillery or signals or some other branch training, and then also learn how to command and control such forces.[[31]](#endnote-31)

A noted example of such a career path is the late Lt. Col. Yonatan Netanyahu, who famously commanded the top-tier *Sayeret Matkal* commandos during the July 1976 Entebbe hostage rescue (in which he was the only IDF soldier killed). At one point, he had commanded a tank battalion, after going through armor training, starting with gunnery, driving and maintenance skills. Another example is Ehud Barak, who also started his service in the *Sayeret Matkal*, and also went through armor training and became a tank-battalion commander, before going on to staff and command courses, eventually becoming IDF chief of staff, and later prime minister.[[32]](#endnote-32) The movement of officers in and out of the special units extends across the regular “line” forces – it is not unusual for special units to have officers from the *Golani* infantry *Nahal,* 35th Paratroopers, and *Givati* infantry brigades, and line officers can even serve as the unit’s commander. One example is Moshe “Boogie” Ya’alon, who became IDF Chief of Staff (2002-2005) and afterwards Defense Minister (2013-2016) after starting as a recruit in the 50th paratrooper battalion before eventually becoming the commander of the *Sayeret Matkal*, with more training for further promotions including command of an armored division.

Conscripts who volunteer and are accepted by one of the elite units are required to sign up for extra time on top of their mandatory service. Service in the four top tier units, *Sayeret Matkal*, *Shaldag, Shayetet* 13, and the Airborne Combat Rescue and Evacuation Unit 669, requires an added 36 months of paid career service in addition to the 32 months of compulsory service, amounting to five years and eight months in uniform, which can become eight years to complete a university degree while still in uniform. Even service in second-tier elite units requires at least an extra year of paid career service, sometimes two, which means that their intake can only start studying or working post-army at age 23 or 24, years behind their American or European counterparts. That should have severe consequences for Israel’s economy as well as society, but it seems that the all-round competence acquired during military service, and the leisure to pursue private studies, seem to go a long way.

The top-tier special operations units have the privilege of being first in picking new recruits from the conscript intake. Recruits not selected by any of the top-tier units can go on to try their luck with other special units, but in practice many conscripts prefer to join a “tier two” unit, for any number of reasons: they have a brother or a father who served in it before them; have friends serving there; have heard of a unit’s accomplishments in a recent operation; or they believe the specific character of the unit fits their personality. One such unit, the undercover *Duvdevan* counterinsurgency specialists who operate in Arab disguise, has the acquired glamor of the internationally successful *Fauda* TV series, no doubt attracting more recruits. Another, *Maglan* Unit 212 for deep rear intrusions and actions in distant places, appeals to would-be explorers, while the current *Egoz*, specializing in operations in the wooded terrain of the north, has the acquired importance of opposing Hezbollah, Israel’s most active antagonist.

Until recently these diverse units were also very independent, under the loose supervision of the Chief Infantry Officer and the operational control of one of the three regional commands for the North, Center, and South. But in 2015 they were all placed under the single headquarters of the newly formed 89th Commando Brigade.[[33]](#endnote-33) It was hoped that the brigade could function as a cohesive combat force when required, while still retaining the special expertise and ethos of each of its different units.

Certain larger formations not officially considered special operations forces nevertheless have elite status in popular opinion, but also in the effectiveness calculations of war planners. Among them are the 35th Paratrooper Brigade, which is actually a light infantry brigade not really meant for airborne assault by parachute, though it treasures its red caps and boots; the *Golani* 1st Infantry brigade, which dates back to the birth of the IDF having started in 1948 as a *Haganah* light infantry brigade of foot soldiers but is now equipped with the heaviest armored infantry fighting vehicle in the world; the 60-metric-tonne *Namer*; the revived post-1984 *Givati* brigade originally trained for amphibious warfare; and the 933rd *Nahal* brigade, the Hebrew acronym for “pioneer fighting youth,” originally manned by conscripts from collective farms (kibbutzim and moshavim) and youth movements, who were to combine combatant service with agricultural work. Its 50th airborne battalion has a famous combat record. Finally there are the elite special-purpose forces that also attract volunteers, such as the *Yahalom* of the Engineering Corps, which focuses on high-tech tunnel warfare in addition to its tense IED and ordnance disposal duties, alongside more prosaic obstacle breaching and demolitions; and the top-tier Air Force 669 Combat Search and Rescue unit, which is continuously active because in peacetime it conducts urgent civilian medical transfers.

The IDF also has a number of even more specialized, or rather localized, reserve units that come into existence only when mobilized for combat operations or when recalled for refresher training. One is the Alpinist Unit, the 7810th Reconnaissance Battalion trained for the snowy slopes and ice peaks of Mount Hermon; when local snow is insufficient, the unit is sent to train in the Alps. Another is *Lotar* Eilat, recruited in that Red Sea town as a quick-reaction, local counter-infiltration and hostage-rescue force.

In the special forces even more than in the line forces, the reserve units are kept together by small numbers of the highly committed, who have been training together for years and tend to socialize with each other in between their duty stints. While their in-group mentality can be a problem in cooperating with other units, they do offer high levels of commitment and proficiency, with performance standards almost as high as those of the active-duty forces, and in some things even higher, while the budgetary cost of maintaining such units is of course much lower.

The special units also function as experimental, or “beta” organizations, for the IDF as a whole by being the first to try new weapons and tactics, which they can do more easily on their small scale instead of waiting for more resources for larger line formations. Hence the special units act as the spearhead of IDF innovation, both technological and tactical. Their informality and particular culture of continuous learning facilitates innovation and generates tech-savvy entrepreneurial types who now play a large role in the country’s technology-driven economy.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Recent examples are the tactics developed by the Yahalom unit of the engineering corps to penetrate and crack Hezbollah “Nature Reserves,” IDF slang for the underground strongholds of bunkers and tunnels found in rural areas of southern Lebanon.[[35]](#endnote-35) Using a variety of location, penetration, and attack techniques, this “nature reserve” package has been disseminated from Yahalom to the line brigades that would be sent into action in the event of a full-scale fight. Likewise, during the 2014 “Protective Edge” operation in Gaza, *Yahalom* had to learn—in the heat of battle—how to locate and destroy Hamas offensive tunnels, before the advent of today’s high-tech equipment. Again, those techniques were quickly disseminated to other units.[[36]](#endnote-36)

As with any large organization, the IDF can miss optimization opportunities because of obstacles to communication between specialized units, especially because many operate under secrecy rules. In response to this, the latest addition to the long list of IDF special units was established with the mission of overcoming those barriers. This “Ghost Unit” was formed by Chief of Staff LTG Aviv Kochavi in 2020 to function as an elite but nonspecialized combat unit whose personnel are collectively familiar with the capabilities and limitations of all IDF components, and whose mission is to select and integrate the most relevant capabilities for any given combat task at hand. In other words, unlike the others this elite unit cannot be self-absorbed but must instead keep scanning the military horizon within the IDF in order to perform its mission. Operating in every Area Command, north, center, and south, and in every dimension, land, sea, air and also underground, the unit’s mission is to bring to bear everything the IDF has to offer at any one point in time to execute the mission at hand.

Kochavi realized that the IDF has a wealth of advanced capabilities but no effective counter to the age-old problem of organizational suboptimization. An IDF infantry squad in the field that finds itself in a skirmish with a similar enemy force would have to fight on equal terms, gun versus gun, obtaining no benefit from the altogether larger capabilities of the IDF as a whole, tantalizingly present in theory, absent in practice.[[37]](#endnote-37) That is the challenge the “ghost” unit is to address: how to bring to bear the full might of the IDF to magnify the strength of whatever units are engaged in combat at any one time. Because of its mission, the unit does not recruit and train its own, instead receiving seasoned teams from different units with different specializations such as the undercover *Duvdevan*, *Yahalom* elite combat engineers, canine *Oketz,* and more. The basic requirement is a combination of good fighting skills with technology savvy.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Each combat team is matched as needed with support staff from intelligence, cyber, and air units and also with civilian professionals such as engineers and computer experts. By definition the unit is multiservice and multidimensional. For the Ghost Unit the challenge is to overcome organizational, inter-unit and inter-service procedural barriers when striving to integrate and optimize “fire” i.e., air and land firepower, with the maneuver elements. A first remedy was to form so-called *Sufa* (storm) teams with the varied skills and capabilities needed to process large amounts of data, in order to precisely orchestrate strikes from various ranges from land, sea, and air platform. The *Golani* brigade that serves in the north facing Hezbollah forces that can attack at any time was the first to include *Sufa* teams within its forces. Another initiative advanced by the Ghost Unit is the use of drones and micro-UAVs in urban terrain, always difficult for any kind of combat operation anywhere, but especially so for the IDF because of its double casualty constraint (enemy casualties being politically costly) and the prevalence of high-density housing in hostile areas.[[39]](#endnote-39)

It is not yet clear if the Ghost Unit will persist and mature or if it will reach a culminating point in its development to be replaced by another attempt at optimization, because the IDF need not prioritize the upkeep of hallowed traditions over optimization, having other sources of motivation, chiefly the recurrence of immediate danger. The use of functioning combat units as—in effect—experimental laboratories can be traced back to Unit 101, Israel’s first commando unit that was both small and ephemeral and yet widely and enduringly influential.

1. Boaz Zalmanovitz. “Establishing Special Forces Units in Low Intensity Conflict,” *Ma’arachot* no. 369, (Feb. 2000), 32-35. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a practitioner’s study of Israel’s military geography see Yigal Allon, *A Curtain of Sand* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1959), 52-82. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Shimon Peres, *The Next Phase* (Tel Aviv: Am Hasefer, 1965), 9-15 (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Yehuda Wallach, ed., *Atlas Carta of Israel: The First Years 1948 – 1960* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1978), 113. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ze’ev Drory, *Israel’s Reprisal Policy, 1953-1956: The Dynamic of Military Retaliation,* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 2005), 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Drory, *Israel’s Reprisal Policy*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Shimon Golan, Hot Border- Cold War, (Tel Aviv: Ma'arachot Publisher, 2008), 308. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Drory, *Israel’s Reprisal Policy,* 96-101. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Moshe Dayan, *Avney Derech* (Tel Aviv: Idanim & Dvir 1976, 159). (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The IDF had a “minorities unit” of Druze and Circassian volunteers. But in 1956, the Druze leaders opted for (male) conscription on an equal footing with the Jews. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. A second attempt to attack the village on January 28-29 also failed; see Drory, *Israel’s Reprisal Policy,* 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Drory, *Israel’s Reprisal Policy,* 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Michael Bar Zohar & Eitan Haver*, The Paratroopers Book* (Tel Aviv: 1969), 60.(H) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cited in Shabtai Tevet, *Moshe Dayan – A Biography* (Jerusalem: Shocken, 1971), 384. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In 1951, 62.1% of the conscripts were post-1948 immigrants. Drory, *Israel’s Reprisal Policy,* 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Bar Zohar & Haver, *Paratroopers Book,* 63. [needs Hebrew translit. title] [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Dayan had tried to establish a special unit in 1952 when head of Southern Command, *Sayeret 30,* which did not do well and was soon disbanded. Uri Milstein, *The Paratrooper Wars* (Tel Aviv: Ramdor, 1968), 13. (H) [needs Hebrew translit. title] [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ariel Sharon was subsequently Paratroop Brigade commander and head of Southern Command before retiring in July 1973. Recalled to duty that October he commanded the 143rd Armored Division that crossed the Suez Canal. He was minister of defense during the 1982 Lebanon War, and later served as prime minister. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. On Unit 101: Mission 101 was Charles Orde Wingate’s guerrilla unit during his Ethiopian campaign. Simon Anglim, *Orde Wingate and the British Army: 1922-1944* (London: Routledge, 2015), 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Benny Morris, *Israel’s Border Wars 1949-1956: Arab Infiltrators, Israeli Retaliation and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved/Afikim Library, 1996), 411-413. (H) [should cite English language book from OUP, check page numbers] [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Mivtza* *Shoshana* was named after Shoshana Kanias, murdered with her brother and mother two days earlier on October 12, 1953. Efraim Lapid, “The ‘Shoshana’ they’d Rather Forget – the Qibya Operation,” *IsraelDefense* (Oct. 14, 2014). (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Dayan, *Avney Derech,* 115. [needs Hebrew translit. title] [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Morris, *Israel’s Border Wars,* 291 and 448. [check page numbers in OUP edition] [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The future Gen. Mordechai Gur published an account of his days as a young captain in *Company D: The Story of a Paratroopers Company* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1977). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. April 7, 1954, against Husan; May 9 at Khirbet Ilin; May 27, Khirbet Jimba, June 28, Azzoun; August 1 near Jenin; August 13 at Shiekh Madhkur (all in Jordan); April 3 1954 near Gaza; and August 15, Bi res Saka (in the Gaza Strip). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See Milstein, *Paratrooper Wars;* Arie Avnery, *The Reprisal Attacks* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Hamachon, 1966) (H); and Bar Zohar and Haver, *Paratroopers Book*. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *Operation Eye for an Eye*. On July 10,1954, against an Egyptian fort in Gaza. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Bar Zohar and Haver, *Paratroopers Book,* 89-90. [needs Hebrew translit. title] [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. In June 1982 MGs A. Ben-Gal and Uri Simchoni, BG Yossi Ben Hanan, and Major Meir Dagan (future head of Mossad) together with Edward Luttwak and two sergeants drove north to Byblos (Jbeil) 50 km beyond Israeli lines in Lebanon, and then another 30 km east just to observe, coming within pistol range of Syrian troops. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Thus, the *Shimshon* (Samson) Unit 367 of Southern Command that operated in Arab disguise in the Gaza strip was disbanded while its sister unit *Duvdevan* (Cherry)Unit 217 in the West Bank persists, now with TV fame via its *Fauda* evocation. Likewise *Egoz* (Walnut*),* Northern Command’s counter-infiltration unit active in 1963-1973, and the *Rimon* (Pomegranate) counter-insurgency unit were disbanded the late 1970s, but a new *Egoz* Unit 621 serves in Northern Command, and a new *Rimon* was established in 2010 as a desert-warfare scout unit within the *Maglan* (Ibis) long-range scouting unit, itself part of the Oz special-operations Brigade. Also the *Shaked* (Almond) and *Haruv* (Carob) reconnaissance battalions were dismantled in the mid-1970s and reincarnated as ordinary infantry battalions in the Givati and Lion Brigades respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Yotam Amitai & Tamar Barash, “Special Units in the IDF: Past and Present,” *Ma’arachot* no. 411 (Feb. 2007), 15-22. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ilan Kfir & Ben Kaspit, *Ehud Barak: Soldier Number 1* (*Tel* Aviv: Alpaha Tikshoret, 1998), 39-47, 147-152, 246. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. “IDF’s Commando Brigade is on Its Way,” *Mako* (December 27, 2015). (H) At: <https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security-q4_2015/Article-42880b14824e151004.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Keren Hellerman, “What is Special about Special Forces?” *Between the Arenas*, 3, 2007, 21-29. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Idan Sonsino. “A Glimpse beneath the Earth's Surface: IDF Trains Underground,” (H) at: <http://www.idf.il/1283-16586-en/Dover.aspx> [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Amos Harel & Gili Cohen, “Without Plans, Training [or] Equipment: This is how the IDF Dealt with the Tunnels,” *Ha’aretz*, 17 October, 2014. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Yoav Limor, “Ghost People”, Israel *Today*, August 20, 2020 (H) at: <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/793027> [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Arnon Schwartzman, “Change in Locating the Fighters of the New IDF Unit: It is Here to Stay,” *Mako News*, May 05, 2021 (H) at: https://www.mako.co.il/pzm-soldiers/Article-64cc39064bb2971027.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Tal Ram Lev, “A Drone to Each Platoon Commander and Employing Quickly Fire Support: This is How the Future of the Ground Forces is Going to Look,” *Ma'ariv Online*, 18 March 2021 (H) at: <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-828550>. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)