

Asael Lubotzky

**FROM THE
WILDERNESS
AND LEBANON**

**AN ISRAELI SOLDIER'S STORY
OF WAR AND RECOVERY**

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Introduction

This book was not planned. It grew out of personal notes jotted down while I was confined in various hospital wards. As I wrote, however, the words formed sentences, the sentences grew into paragraphs, and soon a journal began to emerge. I had originally intended the resulting journal to remain a private diary of these wartime events – one day, perhaps, I would share its contents with my children, but I had not intended it for publication. Some weeks after the war ended, I realized that certain details and events were beginning to fade from my memory, even though the associated sounds, sensations, and images remained intensely vivid. I felt compelled to organize the impressions in my mind and, as it were, lock each away in a separate drawer, isolated from my consciousness, ready to be extracted when required. The act of recording those experiences may well have helped me cope with them, for even after the war had ended, there remained my own private battle – the long period of rehabilitation. This, too, was a battle though it was vastly different fighting the enemy.

I was born in 1983, a few moments before my twin brother, Boaz, during the early months of the First Lebanon War, and grew up in the Judean town of Efrat as the eldest of six children. At the

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age of eighteen, after completing my studies at the local yeshiva high school Neve Shmuel, I enrolled at the Ma'ale Adumim Hesder yeshiva in the northern Judean Desert, in a program that combined religious studies with military service. In 2003, I enlisted in the Fifty-First Battalion of the Golani Brigade, a unit composed of yeshiva students. By November 2005, I had completed officers' course, and, after seven months of training with my platoon, we were mobilized to fight in the Second Lebanon War.

This book is a personal testimony, based primarily on memory. I have attempted to check facts by consulting fellow combatants from my battalion, as well as many others. However, this account makes no claim to being an objective description of my company's experiences in the Second Lebanon War, and certainly not of the entire campaign. I have tried to be faithful to the events as I experienced them, while being fully aware that it is impossible to be entirely objective, as we are all enclosed in a world of our own values, and subjective perception must necessarily leave its imprint on one's memory. This book, therefore, describes my personal perspective, the way I remember the events.

Much has been written about the Second Lebanon War. It was covered by the media in an unprecedented manner, with journalists reporting the news at dizzying speed. Though many books and articles have been published on the events of the war, I feel this book can contribute something by describing them from the point of view of a junior commander in the field. Historians with whom I have discussed the matter confirm that there exist numerous documentary records provided by senior officers, but very little documentation from soldiers and junior officers on the ground. My contribution may serve to balance the record.

Toward the end of the war, I was severely wounded. The entire book was written while I was in the process of recovery from the injuries I sustained, and I have included a description of my experiences during the many months of rehabilitation. That section was especially difficult for me to write because I could not present the events in strict order, as I did in the chapters on the fighting itself. In warfare events are terrifying and the pace is fast, whereas the rehabilitation process

is mostly routine, tedious, and slow. I have tried to avoid tiresome medical descriptions, preferring to focus on the challenges of recovery. Here, perhaps even more than in the battle chapters, everything is written from my subjective point of view.

My personal acquaintance with the many fighters who fell in battle, including close friends, has created in me an urge to perpetuate their memory. Subsequent contact with the bereaved families and with the wounded has increased my desire to record the events. I hope that this book will help preserve the memory of their heroism.

Gaza

Sunday, June 25, 2006–Tuesday, July 18, 2006

Chapter One

The Assignment: Gaza

Third Platoon, silence!” Avshalom, the platoon sergeant, called to the soldiers. “No talking – Asael has an important message.” The soldiers stood, listening quietly. “You’ve probably heard what happened this morning in Gaza. These, briefly, are the facts as far as they are known: Terrorists attacked IDF positions in southern Gaza. Some soldiers were wounded in the attack, and apparently one soldier was kidnapped and taken into the Gaza Strip. As a result of the new situation, our battalion is moving into Gaza!”

A commotion broke out among the soldiers. Most were excited at the idea: “Finally, real action – no more guard duty and patrols,” “Lets bring those terrorists down,” or “It’s time we went there and imposed some order, the terrorism’s out of control.”

But there were also other voices: “Gaza? What for? What are we supposed to do – knock on the door of each house asking, ‘Is there a kidnapped soldier here?’” or “What’s happened to Army Intelligence? Where is the Air Force? Why should the Infantry be involved?”

There were also some disgruntled soldiers: “Just when we were due for a week’s leave they push us into Gaza. Typical of the army – anything to stop us having a good time!”

Our Golani company had just completed its training course and the soldiers had received the coveted brown beret, becoming full-fledged fighters. The soldiers and officers had been expecting to enjoy a week of vacation at the army resort in Ashkelon, after which they would undergo a week’s special training for battle, and take up positions on the Gaza border.

I had been sitting with Maru Gete and Achikam, the commanders of the First and Second Platoons, reviewing the course and making plans for the coming week. We had hoped to be able to relax at the resort after the pressures of the training period and, after that, to become acquainted with the other companies in the battalion. Moreover, we intended to speak personally with each of the soldiers under our command as we moved from training to operational activities, beginning Sunday, June 25, 2006.

On that Sunday morning, before leaving for the meeting point in Jerusalem, I was sitting in my parents’ kitchen having breakfast, with my uniform on, my packed bag beside me, and my weapon lying on top. The radio was on in the living room but I was not listening. Suddenly, my parents entered the kitchen, my father asking in a worried voice, “Asael, have you heard what’s happened?”

“No,” I replied, and we turned up the volume on the radio.

The narrator announced: “Early this morning, terrorists crossed the fence in the southern Gaza Strip, attacking several targets. At least six soldiers were wounded. One has been declared missing.” At the word “missing” we shuddered. “According to IDF officials, large forces are in search of the terrorists, and the incident is at present under investigation. The name of the missing soldier, who was apparently kidnapped, has not been released at this time. A number of Palestinian groups have claimed responsibility for the incident.”

A soldier abducted! The doomsday scenario was upon us. For every soldier and commander, kidnapping is the most serious of events. And all this had happened in the southern Gaza Strip – the sector of which we were due to take command in a few weeks.

I recalled that the battalion was scheduled to have taken over that sector at an earlier date, but the takeover had been postponed. What would have happened had it been a member of our battalion who was kidnapped? Or one of my platoon? I tried not to think about it. My parents exchanged glances. I told them I had a feeling that my week's leave was likely to be canceled, and indeed, within a few minutes, our company commander Gal Karabaki telephoned me with the brief message: "We've been assigned to Gaza!"

The entire battalion was now moved from Jerusalem to the resort facility in Ashkelon. In the evening, an initial officers' meeting was held. Gal, who lived in the village of Ofer in the Carmel, handed out a printed summary of the incident's investigation. While waiting for the meeting to begin, I studied the text. The IDF investigation revealed that, at about 5:00 a.m., a group of seven terrorists from Gaza had infiltrated Israel via a tunnel. The terrorists had attacked three military targets near Kibbutz Kerem Shalom: an observation tower, an armored personnel carrier, and a tank. In the attack, Lieutenant Hanan Barak and Staff Sergeant Pavel Slutsker were killed, four soldiers wounded, and another soldier, Corporal Gilad Shalit, had been abducted and taken to a terrorist hideout in the Gaza Strip.

Gal opened the meeting with routine procedure, each platoon commander stating which of his men were present, who had failed to appear, and the reasons for their absence. That was normal practice, to ensure that everything was in order. However, on the day when Gilad Shalit had been abducted, the procedure carried added significance. I went through my list of soldiers, imagining that it was crying out: "Check again! Make sure everyone is here, that there's no one missing!"

Gal's voice interrupted my thoughts: "At the meeting of the company commanders, the battalion commander summarized the situation as far as it was then known. You can read the account of the abduction on your own. As regards battalion orders, nothing is yet known, but we are preparing to participate in a large-scale operation. According to the guidelines, the operation has four goals." Gal glanced down at his notebook and read them out:

- Rescuing Gilad Shalit or obtaining information of his whereabouts;
- Ending the firing of rockets at Sderot and the western Negev, as well as preventing further attacks;
- Ensuring that the terrorist organizations pay a price for having fired the rockets;
- Changing the rules of the game; namely, sending a message to the terrorist organizations that we are capable of conducting extensive operations deep inside Gaza.

Gal looked up at us, adding firmly: “It is vital to convey to your men that the basic training period is over and we are now engaged in fighting. There’s no time to mess around – they must prepare themselves for going into battle. We have reached the moment of truth that we’ve been talking about for the last seven months.”

Gete, Achikam, and I gazed at each other and knew that we could rely on the men in our company. It was true that, as in every company in the Golani brigade, there were a few soldiers with disciplinary problems, lack of motivation, or social issues, but we believed that when called upon, the soldiers would rise to the occasion and prove themselves worthy.

Thus began a month-long period of military operations and training in northern Gaza, as part of what was called “Operation Summer Rains.” In the early days, orders were frequently changed. One day, Gete, Achikam, and I were studying the maps of the area. Achikam, from the town of Meholá in the Jordan Valley, was concentrating on a map when the telephone rang. One of the squad commanders was on the line: “Achikam, is it true the operation has been postponed?”

Then came another call: “Gete, they’re saying we aren’t going in tonight.”

This was followed by a spate of calls, all inquiring whether there had been a change of plans. Rumors were quickly spreading throughout the battalion.

Sometimes updates did not come directly to us, the officers, but filtered through from the soldiers. I called Amichai Merchavia,

the commander of the Lead Platoon of the Third Rifles, who said, “Hakima, my company commander, just informed me that there is a cancellation. That’s how it is in this battalion – the soldiers get to know before the officers whether the rumors are true or not.”

For the first few days we stayed in the resort facility in Ashkelon (as the IDF had already paid for the week, it was decided that preparations would take place there). Later, we transferred to makeshift tents near Zikim, a permanent base. It was an area well within range of enemy rockets, and we often heard the “Red Dawn” siren (later changed to “Color Red”). Sometimes, one could even see the rockets in flight, generally toward Ashkelon.

The soldiers had brought swimwear and civilian clothes from home to wear at the resort, and were unprepared for a long period in field conditions. Avshalom, my platoon sergeant, explained to me how serious the problem was: “They were so thrilled at the prospect of a vacation that many failed to bring even a spare uniform – seems we’ll be going into Gaza in our swimsuits!”

We were informed that in a few days we would be receiving assistance from the Army’s Logistics Department, and indeed, one day, with sweltering heat outside and the soldiers resting in their tents, a truck turned up loaded with uniforms. As soon as the news circulated, the sleepy soldiers, in a sudden burst of energy, fell upon the goods in the truck. The soldier in charge of the truck began yelling, “Stand in two lines, each with a set of uniforms ready to exchange!” but his cries were lost in the confusion, as the men were already on the truck searching for the right-size pants and shirts. He called out, “Don’t take them! Hand in the old set and you’ll receive one in exchange!” but no one took any notice. Then the Master Sergeant arrived. He didn’t need to raise his voice. The men immediately jumped down from the truck and stood in line: one stern glance from him and order was restored.

Living conditions were not easy in the new base camp, Zikim. The tents were crowded, the heat oppressive. Instead of being granted home leave, we remained on permanent alert at the base. However, the soldiers’ motivation was high. They had been training for months, and now everyone wanted “the real experience” – action in the heart

of Gaza. For many the desire for action was intertwined with the ideological motivation to defend the State.

In preparation for the operation, I called together the platoon's troops and the commanders. We sat in a small tent with maps spread out on the floor. I gave them a summary of the Intelligence reports, an analysis of the layout of the area, the goals assigned for our mission, and other classified information. The men listened intently, but what everyone was really waiting for was the moment when I would list those selected to take part in the operation. The soldiers were keen on being chosen for the fighting unit, but not all could be. The selection had to be determined by operational considerations, such as the need for a driver, a machine gunner to remain in the armored vehicle, and a medic. I read out the names of the soldiers, seeing a glint in the eye of each soldier chosen for participation while those due to stay behind showed their disappointment at missing the action, perhaps also at having had others preferred over them. Those who were assigned felt proud of being chosen because of their professional ability, and justifiably so.

My previous acquaintance with the Gaza Strip had included minor operations. Two years earlier, the battalion had been assigned responsibility for the central area, but I realized that the nature of the forthcoming operation would be different. It was not to be a matter of protecting the border fence or taking limited action, but a large-scale operation. I was a little anxious about the unknown, but hoped I would stand firm. Added to my knowledge of the territory was my familiarity with Gush Katif, the group of towns that had been destroyed a year earlier in Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. During the last year of its existence, I had often visited there and had grown to love the wind and waves of its picturesque beach. I had worked as a volunteer in the greenhouses together with its members, and later helped the evicted families transfer their belongings to temporary accommodations. I knew that in the operation before us we would come very close to the ruins of the village Dugit which had, after the evacuation, been taken over by the enemy to be used as a rocket-launching site. But that knowledge did not prepare me for the sad sight of dozens of ruined buildings and debris without a single living

soul (except perhaps for terrorists), a silent witness to the flourishing community that had until recently been there.

I began to study the sector and prepare the platoon for the coming operation, receiving considerable assistance from Intelligence, including coded maps and aerial photographs of various sizes, as well as more specific aids. They were of remarkably high standard, accurate and up-to-date. I studied the maps closely to learn details of the territory, and consulted the battalion officers to determine what was to be their final route and in which buildings they intended to base themselves. The valuable support I received from them relieved me of some concerns about the operation. Many small changes needed to be made due to the input of new intelligence information, and I wanted to be sure I would set out on the mission with the latest facts. On the aerial photos, I marked in different colors the routes to be taken by the various forces, indicated the buildings due to be occupied by each platoon in the battalion, and drew on the maps the boundaries between the various battalions and companies to avoid the danger of friendly fire. Would we be able to keep strictly within these boundaries? At the planning stage, everything looks clear, but would it be possible to identify the boundaries in the dark, and under pressure?

I remembered a story concerning the boundaries of Jerusalem that I once heard from my grandfather, Iser Lubotzky, who had fought in the Golani Brigade in the War of Independence. Sitting together were Moshe Dayan (the commander of the Jerusalem district, who later became chief of the general staff and subsequently defense minister) and his Jordanian counterpart, Abdullah el-Tell. The two officers penciled in the positions of their forces. In the course of time, those lines served as the basis for dividing Jerusalem, but their inaccuracies, including the thickness of some of the penciled lines, caused numerous disputes. Who imagined that those lines would be used to define the border for a period of nineteen years, until the Six Day War? I continued marking the lines on my map, but with extra care.

During the period of our stay at Zikim, we traveled to Lachish, the Central Command training base, for training in urban warfare. On the base there, a series of buildings had been set up to simulate houses in a Palestinian street. The training involved breaking down

doors. An engineering team specializing in the use of hydraulic equipment for that purpose had been assigned to teach us the technique, as the ability to break down doors quickly in order to enter a building was of major importance, since time is critical when the attacking unit is exposed to enemy fire. Unfortunately, the engineering team failed to arrive and the training was canceled.

While we were waiting for its arrival, I sat in the shade of a tree, reading a document that summarized the methods of dealing with an urban ambush, and Amichai joined me.

“What are you studying?” he asked. “Gemara or military papers?”

I smiled, remembering the period when we were soldiers in the Hesder unit, spending many hours studying together in the synagogue on Shabbat or, during the week, using texts that we carried around in our pockets.

“Guess!” I said.

Amichai continued my thoughts: “It is a time to act for God; they have made void your Torah,” he quoted from the Book of Psalms. “There is a time for religious study and a time for action.” Amichai looked over my documents, adding some helpful tips. I then gave my men a talk on the principles of urban ambush, teaching them the various stages of entry, taking up positions, waiting, and exiting, in which I stressed the tactics relevant to Gaza. The soldiers had been trained primarily to fight in the open. Now we tried to integrate rules of combat relevant to urban terrain, for example, the principle of “upward checks.” In built-up territory one must not only gaze ahead down the road, but must also watch windows and roofs.

The company commanders then held a concluding exercise. The reconnaissance team advanced toward the building, while others lay undercover searching for cardboard targets. The team broke down the door and began searching the various rooms like professional counter-terrorists. The soldiers broke down door after door, shouting aloud as they did so. After careful inspection, they all entered the house and began taking up positions, stretching blankets and sheets over the windows. A group of soldiers playing the enemy suddenly launched an attack on the house. Triggers were pulled,

accompanied by shouts of “Fire, fire, fire!” One of the advancing soldiers was exposed as he passed an open window. “Lie down as if wounded!” I shouted. He lay down and called, “Medic, medic!” Kobi, the medic, dragged him to shelter and bandaged his hand. Soldiers loaded him onto a stretcher. I gave the order for immediate evacuation of the house. The men swiftly left their positions, exited and began a rapid retreat, holding the stretcher aloft, to a distant point in the forest.

I was pleased with the platoon’s operational level and the high motivation they revealed during these drills. I summarized the exercise: “Third Platoon, in these urban warfare drills you have demonstrated a high operational level and shown that you have grasped the basic rules. Reports from all your commanders confirm that throughout the day you worked with motivation and with determination to succeed.”

We did not imagine then how much our training would help us when fighting in the North.

“Onto the buses,” called Avshalom, after making sure that all the equipment had been returned in good order. In fact, to the soldiers’ disappointment, we did not make use of the house-to-house tactics, as throughout our time in Gaza we were in armored vehicles.

Foot patrol or entering houses from armored vehicles is particularly dangerous and hence regarded as more exciting. Combat troops, especially early in their careers, are eager for battle, and want to mark their weapons with an “X” to indicate that they have killed a terrorist. In preparation for battle, we needed to train both soldiers and officers to fight from armored vehicles. We practiced many times equipping the vehicles, carrying over to them two stretchers loaded with gear. The first few times it took a long while for the soldiers to find where to place each item, how to insert the periscopes, where to put the cables, and how to install the observation items and the machine gun. After a few practice sessions, including changing the technique, the task became simpler and faster. We went over the printed manuals, rehearsed a series of rescue drills, and ensured that the various crew members – the drivers, gunners, and commanders – all knew their jobs.

Equally important was practicing integration with units from other corps. In the parking lot near Zikim, there were vehicles belonging to the armored corps and to the engineers. I asked their officers to provide a short practical lesson on their vehicles. The soldiers stood in a semicircle around the tank while an officer explained its capabilities and the nature of its interaction with the infantry. It was very hot, with the sun beating down. Suddenly there was a “Red Dawn” siren. “Take cover!”

Men ran for cover, sheltering beside the tanks in the vicinity. We heard the rocket explode in the distance, learning later that it had fallen near another group of soldiers, without hurting anyone, fortunately. That incident made the exercise especially meaningful.

After studying the resources of the tank, we moved across to the bulldozer. I made sure that the men knew how to force entry into the vehicles, and we practiced how to remove a casualty from them, as well as, if possible, to insert a stretcher. Inserting a stretcher into a tank or other armored vehicle full of equipment is particularly difficult. Each group practiced with its officer. Avshalom and I went around supervising the various groups and testing them, notably for speed. The objective was to perform the task as quickly as possible while ensuring no harm was caused to the wounded soldier. When the soldier acting the part of a casualty cried out that he was being hurt, those handling him were rebuked by their commanders: “Imagine if it were a real casualty! We’re supposed to rescue him, not worsen his condition.” How relevant these exercises were to prove during the war in the North!

The training involved wearing battle equipment in the intense heat, including the ceramic flak jacket. On firing ranges, we drilled the men in shooting under various conditions. It was important for them to become accustomed to shooting while wearing flak jackets. Sometimes, they resented the exercises, especially as the operation’s objectives kept being changed.

My platoon was first assigned to the force headed by Itamar Katz, a former company commander. We formed part of the brigade’s Rescue Unit, which included both heavy and light armored vehicles. The entire rescue force was under the command of Roi Klein.

I was in the tent area when Klein suddenly called me: “Asael, this is Klein! Come in five minutes to a meeting at Range Eight.”

“I’m in the camp, it will take me some time to get there.”

“OK, I’ll pick you up,” and he hung up. Although he was busy, Klein knew how to be considerate to his men. He wanted to save me the walk in the heat. As I left the tent, I could see the dust cloud raised by the jeep approaching.

Klein spoke firmly at the officers’ meeting. He wanted to know the status of all forces in terms of equipment and training. However, when he pointed on a map to the location we were to take up at the beginning of the operation, he sensed a general disappointment. Like their soldiers, officers want to be deep in the field, to lead their men in a significant operation, and to have a real impact on events. Officers dislike disappointing their troops. An officer assigned a mission that is considered difficult and dangerous can inspire and motivate his men.

“I suppose you expected to be further into Gaza. I must remind you, however, that we are a rescue unit. I hope we won’t be called upon, but if we are, we will perform the task to the full. You must acquaint yourselves with all operations and all routes. Who knows where we will be needed?”

Klein gave us confidence. On the one hand, I wanted to join him on the mission, but on the other hand, I preferred to be with my own men, with Company B, undertaking its own mission. In fact, the plans were changed and we were assigned a different task, my platoon being attached to the original group under Gal Karabaki.