

A Journal of My First Experiences in the Israeli Army

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Basic Training: 13 June to 7 July 1983

Monday, 13 June 1983

The bus took us from Tel HaShomer Hospital to the induction center. There we received our yellow cards, were photographed (front and profile), had our mouths x-rayed (deep throat), were vaccinated (both arms), issued uniforms, fed, and got dental checkups. We waited around for several hours until we were told to board a bus. Nobody knew where we would be sent. On the way, it became apparent that we were going to Beer Sheva. We arrived at our base after dark, stowed our baggage in one tent, and went to the mess hall. On the way, a red-haired kid asked us whether we felt we were on a holiday or the Exodus from Egypt. Somebody answered that it felt more like a holiday, so far. The Gingie ("redhead" in Hebrew, pronounced "Jinjie") swore he would make sure it would be no holiday for us. I was stuck on KP duty with Barry, a vegetarian Goliath from South Africa. We finished around 9 p.m. and rejoined our group to get our duffle bags, mattresses, and sleeping bags. We had to carry it all back to our tents. After we set up our living quarters, we stood formation and met our drill sergeants. That night I slept poorly – not more than a couple of hours.

Tuesday, 14 June 1983

We got up at 5:15 a.m. to make formation at 5:30. We had to shine our boots and shave (except for those of us who had beards) before the breakfast formation at 6:25, and we had to be dressed in full battle gear for the 7:30 formation ("mishtar hashkama"). Today we received M-16 rifles. In military life, the M-16 is our wife as it was in the US Army.

Thursday, 16 June 1983

We had evening exercises with Riki, a robust and not entirely unattractive young girl. We ran after her to the Eilat – Beer Sheva road and back, did sit-ups and push-ups, and ran relay races. I fell in one of the races and cut my right hand pretty badly. I had to wear a bandage for the following week. No KP.

Things I took with me:

Backpack

Underwear and cotton socks

Shoeshine kit

Soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, baby powder, skin cream, mirror, aspirin, sewing kit, wet naps, and tissue

Rope, clothespins, laundry soap

Flashlight

Thongs (I think they're called "flip-flops" elsewhere)

Radio

Stationary and envelopes

Diary and two books

Insect repellent

Swiss army knife

Two locks

Shorts

Money

Friday, 17 June 1983

I am stuck on base over the weekend. We drew lots to see which of us would get a pass. I lost and so did 17 others.

Tuesday, 21 June 1983

We were bussed to some base Lod for two days of participation in an officer training session. We had to dress up like Syrian commandos and take up positions in the hills so that the officer candidates could try to spot us from a distant hill. I carried a Kalashnikov (a Soviet rifle) with Arab and Russian markings. It had been captured during one of the previous wars. The Galil (an Israeli rifle) is based on the Kalashnikov. Our group was in a forward position. I had to run to the road to lay a "mine", actually a decent-sized rock. I wonder whether they spotted us. The colonel in charge of the exercise said it was a success. The day was exceedingly hot and I could feel my brains boiling under my steel piss-pot. The colonel held us over, between the morning rehearsal and "the real thing", to organize an exhibit of our captured weapons and uniforms after the exercise. We drove back to the mess hall, a pretty hungry busload. Some "rasal" (sergeant major) told us we had arrived too late for lunch and would not be served. We sat on the bus a half hour and our moods turned from irony to mutiny. Shaul, our captain, argued with the rasal, but to no avail. Finally, he ordered the strongest among us to enter the kitchen by force and take all the food we could. We filled our stomachs and left, early that evening.

On the way back to our base, we stopped in Beer Sheva for ice cream. It was the most heavenly ice cream I ever ate. It was also the first time the army had shown a human face. This small gesture won our loyalty for Shaul and Yoram, one of our drill sergeants.

Thursday, 23 June 1983

We went into Beer Sheva again, in the evening, just to walk around. I got back to the base an hour and a half late for my guard duty, but Alex filled in for me. Beer Sheva was definitely not worth jeopardizing my weekend pass.

Just before we went into town that evening, an officer came to interview us regarding what we wanted to do in the army after basic training. I said I would be interested in communications. I thought I would be fixing broken radios and things like that. It sure beat guard duty. Little did I know.

Friday, 24 June 1983

Weekend pass: short and sweet.

Sunday, 26 June 1983

I left home early Sunday morning, dressed in my uniform and carrying my M-16 loosely from my shoulder. On the way to the bus stop, I passed an Arab gardener in our neighborhood. He had seen me many times before, but never in uniform. We had always exchanged pleasantries. "Manishma?" ("How are you?"). "Manishma" back to him. "Be healthy," he said to me. I wonder whether it was said in irony while thinking of his young son. I think of mine.

I returned to the base around 11:30 a.m. and learned to take apart a Galil.

Monday, 27 June 1983

While waiting for the commander to come and lecture us on grenades, one of the soldiers in my group gave an extemporaneous talk on genetic engineering, his civilian work. Then we learned the theory of grenade throwing. No lobbing. I flashed back to my days in the US Army when I really screwed that part up.

Tuesday, 28 June 1983

I fired the Galil. We were supposed to fire the Uzi and throw some inert grenades today, but that did not come to pass. Those who performed well with the M-16 and the Galil said they scarcely hit anything with the Uzi.

I became sick with stomach pains and nausea. I skipped lunch completely and ate only a plum for supper. It was a day of fasting for the religiously observant, from sun-up to sun-down, but also for the

sick. Sartre would have been proud of me.

Wednesday, 29 June 1983

I relaxed in bed all day and felt kind of guilty about being sick. By evening I felt ok and was able to eat supper. Afterwards, I did guard duty. Yoram walked up the road towards the gate with a pretty girl soldier at his side. I said "good evening" and he asked me how I felt. When I finished my duty I called Talma. It was good to hear her voice. She sounded so close, as though she were in the next room.

Thursday, 30 June 1983

This morning on the way to breakfast, Yoram leaned out of his doorway and asked me to bring him a sandwich, yogurt, and a canteen filled with tea. I heard a girl's laugh behind him so I brought two sandwiches and two yogurts.

At 5:15 p.m. Shaul organized those of us who had only had one weekend at home and issued us passes. The truck waited for us. The only thing lacking was permission from the Tel Aviv command for us to leave the base. At 8:00 p.m. we were turned down.

Friday, 1 July 1983

We waited until 8 a.m. for the elusive permit to leave the base, which never came. Neither did any of our commanders. Elephant, our group leader and also a trainee like us, told us to leave one by one. It was a command I should have followed with only gladness in my heart; instead, there was uneasiness. Even that passed, by the time I arrived home. "Papa" had to stay on base and asked me to call his kibbutz and leave a message for his wife: "I miss you and love you, and I'll miss you for Shabbat ("Sabbath")". Papa, Yitzhak, is a strange guy. He cannot (or will not) speak a word of Hebrew, even though he wears a kippa (skull cap) and "tallit" (prayer shawl). He was born in Alexandria, raised in Greece, and speaks French and English fluently.

Sunday, 3 July 1983

I caught an army bus, on its way to Mitzpeh Ramon, back to my base. The bus that was supposed to pick us up at the North Tel Aviv train station never showed up. No mention was made of our leaving base without permission from Tel Aviv.

Monday, 4 July 1983

Today was not too exciting; just a lot of work: guard duty from 4:00 a.m to 7 a.m. and from 9 to 11. After lunch we were ordered to the chapel for afternoon services and a lecture on moral introspection. I understood nothing of the service¹ but the lecture went at my speed. Afterward, I had kitchen duty from 1:30 p.m. to 9:00.

Tuesday, 5 July 1983

At breakfast, Sidney read the names, which he had copied into English, of those of us who had been accepted for the communications course. I felt a bit surprised and disappointed when my name was not called, but I figured it was all for the best. Later in the morning, Elephant saw me and told me that I was on the Hebrew list of those to go, after all. Now our commanders are attempting to compress the remaining training into the next day and a half. We learned drill and marching, fired the Uzi and the "mag" (machine gun), and threw hand grenades.

In the Negev desert, a couple of hours before sunrise, the fog rolls in so thick with dew that you can hear the plop-plop of heavy dew drops from the tree branches and roof eaves. If you stand under the tree with your mouth wide open, you will catch their taste on your tongue. It is ironic that most people stand under trees to escape the rain; not in the desert.

Wednesday, 6 July 1983

We turned in most of our gear today. After lunch we were given gamma globulin shots in the buttocks, to prevent hepatitis. In the evening we participated in the traditional swearing-in ceremony at the end of basic training. We marched 2.5 kilometers and carried two of the fattest soldiers in our "plugah" (company) on stretchers. When we arrived at the site of our swearing-in, impressively outlined in fiery torches, we handed our rifles to our commander. We were formed around the commander in a Het (a Hebrew letter:) and shouted in unison "ani nishbah" ("I swear..."). The very religious soldiers, who are forbidden from swearing before anyone but God, said instead "ani matziah" ("I propose..."). The commander gave us back our rifles and a Bible. A bus brought us back to the base, where we had a party to celebrate the last day. Victor played accordion and some of the guys persuaded girl-soldiers, who just happened to be walking nearby, onto the dance floor. We joked around and played games. Our commanders also participated in our party and were so relaxed and friendly that it was difficult to recognize them. I pulled guard duty after the party from 1:00 a.m. to 4:00.

Thursday, 7 July 1983

We turned in the remainder of our equipment, which we had received the first night we arrived, so long ago. We were processed out of basic training and into the communications course by two officers from our next base near Tzrifin. We exchanged warm good-byes and boarded buses for home. Most of the guys who did not make the course were sent down the road to an artillery course. I felt very lucky to avoid that.

Communications Course: July 10 – 22, 1983

Friday, 22 July 1983 2

I finished my course on being a telephone lineman. It was fairly uneventful, except for the comical relief of Eli Aleli, Roberto, and the tragicomic outbursts from Notkin. I passed my final examination. Today I was assigned to the Central Command in Jerusalem. It sounded like a safe distance from Lebanon.

Sunday, 24 July 1983

We showed up in Tzrifin to be bussed up to Tzfat (Safed). On the way we stopped at Roberto's kibbutz, Mishmar HaSharon, to eat lunch. I ate a goulash of hearts and kidneys. I could not tell which was which and anyway it all tasted a bit like liver. We continued on our odyssey. At one point our bus driver took a wrong turn towards Tulkarm, an Arab-Israeli town. We arrived at the Tzfat base, where we were sent into town to stay overnight at a hotel. The hotel owner removed his towels and linens before we came. Barry guided us through the old Jewish quarter and the artist quarter. We visited a 500-year old Sephardic synagogue and were treated to an interesting lecture by the ancient "gabai" (the guy with the keys to the synagogue, who opens the doors in the morning and closes them at night, and carries out all the thankless mundane daily tasks needed to operate a place of worship).

Monday, 25 July 1983

I was assigned to a battalion in Aley Lebanon until the 5th of August. We were divided into three groups to be dispersed in Lebanon, except for Notkin. He was assigned to the Golan, within Israeli borders, probably because he made such a fuss about being an only son and not wanting to go to a combat zone. I do not believe any of us, except for Roberto, wanted to go to Lebanon, but we kept our feelings inside. They say that the landscape is beautiful in Lebanon. We climbed into the bus and drove down from Tzfat. We dropped off some girl-soldiers in Tiberius and continued on to Haifa to receive our duffle bags and rifles. We will sleep overnight on the grass in our sleeping bags. In the remaining light, I have time to be alone with my thoughts. I do not know what will be. I am quietly

apprehensive, but not yet afraid. I will deal with that later. I do not want my sons to go through what I am going through³. I feel sorry for Talma, who must be far more anxious than I. I look around me. Eli, always the funny one, has not told a single joke since we got on the bus this morning.

Lebanon: 26 July – 4 August 1983

Tuesday, 26 July 1983

Last night I heard that Aley was in the Shouf mountains where the Druse and Christians were constantly shooting at each other with the Israelis playing monkey in the middle. Moshe came back from the Shouf visibly shaken; shelling every night – impossible to sleep. But why write about it now, when I still know nothing about it? Soon I'll be able to experience it for myself in the first person singular. People around me are starting to wake up after sleeping the night on the grass of the Haifa camp. Some are still sprawled on the ground, not having been bothered about the amenities of a sleeping bag stuffed in the bottom of their duffle bags. I had lain my sleeping bag over five duffle bags rolled together like a motel water-bed caught in mid-wave. Those who are up, look around at the others, many of whom they had never seen before yesterday afternoon. They are sizing up the people around them. Will this one crack up? Will I be able to depend on him? This one looks like a sissy. Why is he smiling in his sleep? Probably someone is also looking at me and wondering what I am writing and what kind of person keeps a journal. Will he break? My God, I honestly don't know.

I woke up this morning with the warm sunlight on my eyelids around 4:30 a.m. I showered and began the characteristic military behavior of waiting around. At 8:00 a.m. we left the base by bus and drove to a target range north of Akko (Acre) to check our rifles. I emptied a magazine in the general direction of the target. Then we drove to the Haifa airport to wait for our flight to Lebanon. Around noon we were bussed to Kibbutz Usha near Kiryat Ata for a very nice lunch. Afterward, we returned to the airport to wait. We finally took off in a C-130 prop at about 4 p.m. and landed in Damour at 4:30. As we ran out of the back of the plane the heat around the propellers scorched my skin and eyes. We road in a convoy of "safaris" (2.5 ton trucks – I think we called them duce-and-a-halves in the US Army) to Aley arriving just before 7:00 p.m. On the way we saw Lebanese soldiers and a Phalange base. As we made the final turn up the winding road between Beirut and Damascus into the Israeli encampment, the guy sitting next to me said we were home now and we didn't have to be afraid anymore. His name was Shalom and he had been here four times already. I guess I had been too dumb to be afraid along the way. We will be eating and sleeping overnight at an impressive villa taken over by the Israelis for headquarters.

Wednesday, 27 July 1983

I am writing this entry in the remaining light. Today was a day of getting to know our surroundings, getting used to things, and getting acquainted with people. Nothing much happened, thank God. We were assigned our rooms. I am next to a window with a beautiful view of Beirut and the surrounding mountains. I sat at the telephone switchboard awhile, watching the talking spaghetti. I went to the "sometimes" kiosk just outside the gate to get a Pepsi. Luckily, somebody who spoke both Hebrew and Arabic was there to translate. The price in shekels (the owner accepted Israeli money) was cheaper than at an Israeli PX. The area around our camp is totally Druse. Yesterday evening a Druse came up our steps to talk to us. He told us about the former owner of our villa, a Kuwaiti prince. Unfortunately, the Druse fellow only spoke Arabic. He was a funny character dressed in white, the loose pants with a low crotch, and a hat which was a cross between a skull cap and a fez.

Thursday, 28 July 1983

So far, today has also been rather uneventful. Several people left for a weekend at home. I called Talma. We heard some katyushas fired down the mountains. The day has been a bit cloudy and pretty cool temperature-wise. I worked on the switchboard alone for the first time. It's not so difficult but there is a lot of pressure. In another two hours, I will have guard duty on the mag (machine gun). It is true that one becomes acclimated to any situation, even on the Shouf mountains. My existence here is surreal. One can live under tension only so long and then the tension disperses. Sitting on the over-stuffed easy chair behind the mag, I watch a young shepherd boy climb up a tree to pull down pine sprigs for his sheep to eat. He could have been an enemy for all his suspicious behavior; he could have been my son. The sunset spilled a golden path over the waters igniting Beirut in a soft glow.

Friday, 29 July 1983

Boredom sets in. Soldiers look for any way to kill time. Boredom is the flip-side of anxiety. I heard that this villa had been taken over by the PLO before we got it. Many of their victims are buried in the grounds here. In the morning it was sunny and hot. Now in the afternoon, the clouds roll in low and it is a bit cool.

We are forbidden from sitting at any of the kiosks near our encampment or talking to any of the local people. We are allowed to buy what we want (Soap, soft drinks, etc.) quickly and get the hell out of there. Obviously, it is hard to formulate any accurate impression of these people – all Druse on our part of the mountain at least. What I can say is that they seem quite indifferent about us. Young children walk under my gun emplacement on their way to school, satchels and cream-blue jackets,

without looking up. Just down the hill, a girl and her younger brothers are throwing pine cones and washing laundry with a water hose. Smiles for each other, absorbed in their play, and oblivious to me. They just don't seem to care that we are here or maybe they feel secure.

The villa we occupy has three floors and a flat roof for sunning and taking in the view of Beirut and the sea. There are lots of rooms, each with its own toilet and bath facilities, although most of them don't work properly. We have a corner room on the third floor with a tall ceiling and a magnificent view through the trees and down the mountain. One is impressed, not so much by what the villa is today, but what it once was: columns and porticos. Today it is filthy and run-down. Garbage piles up and overflows down the steps. The stench from the bathroom persuades us to keep its door closed. The walls and ceiling are peeling and covered with graffiti and sexy pictures. In another six weeks, we will pull back to the Alwali River. I wonder who will take over our quarters? Druse, Christians, PLO, or Syrians – certainly not the Lebanese army or the Americans. Blood will fill the vacuum which we will leave. I think of those children I watched this afternoon and wonder whether they will also be indifferent to the new occupation army or whether they will survive at all.

Saturday, 30 July 1983

How easy boredom dissipates and fear becomes naked. Last night we were placed on high alert as the Syrians had begun shelling Israeli positions along the front. Our villa is about two miles from the Syrian army. We were told to sleep with our protective vests, steel helmets, and ammo pouches beside us. I was able to sleep, in spite of the heavy shelling during the night, and woke up in the morning. Today there was some light arms fire down the hill, a few canons talking to each other. Some children waved to me and smiled big smiles.

Sunday, 31 July 1983

Today I went on escort duty to help provide fire cover and protection for the regular army linesmen while they searched for the source of a problem on a phone line near the Israeli-Syrian cease-fire line. I could see the Syrian-occupied villas across the valley on the other side of the Beirut River. Our forward position didn't look very impressive, but if it impressed the Syrians it was good enough for me. After a while it became clear that the search for the problem would take too long, so the regulars decided to lay down new line instead. On the way back, a long cavalcade of local cars passed us and turned sharply up the hill. The cars were covered with flowers and honking constantly. Fifteen minutes later, we heard shots very close to us. I jumped for cover and took up position with my rifle pointing in the direction of the fired shots. The regulars had a good laugh at my expense. "They're shooting! They're shooting!" they shouted and laughed. Later I read that it is customary at Lebanese weddings to fire their weapons into the air.

Monday, 1 August 1983

We started a six-man chess tournament among the linesmen today. I traced a map of Beirut and our area in Lebanon in order to orient myself. Tonight Hanan Yuval came to our compound to sing to us. It was very nice. Three kids who belonged to the kiosk owner were standing near the improvised stage listening. One of the children asked a soldier who happened to be standing beside him whether they might be permitted to sit on one of the benches among the soldiers. The soldier nodded yes. Another soldier lifted the smallest of the children onto his lap. Later on, one of the older kids ran back to the kiosk and brought back pita-bread and Pepsi for some of the soldiers.

Tuesday, 2 August 1983

At breakfast, I sat at a table between two reservists. Each one silently reached over my plate to get the salt or the tomatoes, never asking for the object of desire. I noticed the guy to my left take bread and look over at the margarine to my right, so I handed it to him quickly. To my surprise and consternation when he finished spreading the margarine he reached back over my plate to return it to its former place, his hand carelessly grazing the food on my plate.

I heard in the morning that the Phalangists are infiltrating our area in preparation for our departure. Today one of the soldiers in our area was wounded by Syrian shelling. We went to sleep on high alert tonight.

Wednesday, 3 August 1983

We received a debriefing from our commanding officer. Barring a real state of emergency, we should be homeward bound tomorrow. The Aley Linesmen Chess Championship ended in the following order: Alex, Vio, me, Roberto, Steve, and Natan. I made a gold cup out of an empty Lebanese pineapple juice can. The CO told us that our homebound odyssey will be an exact reverse of our Aley-bound odyssey.

Thursday, 4 August 1983

A little after nine in the morning, my group left Aley on the convoy for Damour. We turned slowly onto the twisting shell-pocked Beirut-Damascus road. At every point at which the road curved, an Israeli tank stood guard. Other than one explosion along the way, the trip was uneventful although silently tense. I was smart enough to be afraid this time. We rode around the outskirts of Beirut to the south. As we were passing the Beirut International Airport, I saw an American flag and the US Marine barricades across the long field. A strange feeling came over me. I wanted to stand up and shout across the field, in my most exaggerated American accent, "Hey! It's me, a fellow American!" but they

were too far away to hear and probably were watching our convoy with a mixture of suspicion and indifference. This was where the US Marine captain had run across the railroad tracks and single-handedly, with only his service pistol, stopped three Israeli tanks on patrol. I tried to look as tough as I could until we arrived at Damour for the benefit of the locals who were watching us, but if someone waved, I always smiled and waved back. We were on the fifth flight out of Damour, on a Hercules again. This time I unrolled my sleeves and put on glasses to protect my skin and eyes from the super-heated air at the rear of the plane. A half hour later we landed in Haifa and some kind people handed us popsicles as we passed through the gates. I changed my filthy sweaty uniform on the bus going back to the base in Haifa. After turning in our rifles and equipment we each boarded buses, our separate ways, home.

Friday, 5 August 1983

We had to return to Tzrifin to be released from reserve duty. We received certificates for National Insurance and were paid one shekel for each day of service. I donated my shekels to the army fund.

Saturday, 13 August 1983

My father-in-law held a Kiddush (a meal after prayer services) in honor of my safe return from Lebanon. The rabbi recited a prayer thanking God for my safe return from a dangerous trip abroad, an ancient but timely formula.

Afterword

I was drafted into the Israeli Army Reserves from 1983 until 1996. I was sent to Lebanon one more time. Most of the time I drew border observation duty. In 1990 the army asked me whether I would be willing to take care of families of soldiers who had been killed in action or had died during their military service. I guess I was asked because of my BA in Psychology. I agreed and that is what I did during my reserve duty several weeks a year until I was released from the army in 1996. I continued to volunteer another two years in the same capacity.

I am sure there are as many Israeli Armies as there are Israeli soldiers. Still, having been in the fairly unique position of being in the US Army and the Israeli Army, I would say that the IDF is the most ethical army in the world, in so far as it is possible to be concerned with ethics while ducking bullets and protecting your buddies. War is not a Sunday school picnic.

Notes:

1. My Hebrew was pretty basic back in 1983.

2. There was nothing of journalistic interest during the course. I learned a lot about military field telephone equipment but nothing more than that. That is why the first entry in this chapter starts with the end of the course.

3. My middle son, Ari, did time in Lebanon as a tank driver and my youngest son, Ayal, was an officer in the Combat Engineering Corps in the territories. So much for a parent's wishes...