

The Wars as Seen by Paratroopers in One Graduation Picture

We were drafted as paratroopers in August 1963, in the far-off days before the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, when tiny triangular Israel reached only from the Dan to Eilat, and Jerusalem was a divided city.

We were eighteen-year old youngsters when we decided to volunteer for the paratroopers' unit. Not all of us did so out of idealism but out of eagerness for the parachuting, the special high shoes, the red berets and the wings gleaming on one's chest.

We went through basic training, a parachuting course, practice sessions and manoeuvres together. We spent long nights lying in ambushes along the borders, at a time when the "Fatah" was in its infancy. Our company was called the "Skyscrapers" because everyone in it was so tall, erect and strong. (Company "5" of the Paratroopers was our official name.)

In the practice drills a careful selection was made of the best members of the company. Out of 200 soldiers who began serving in August 1963, only 70 remained at the end of the course in September 1964. We had grown close to one another as if we were one big family, but at this point we were split up. The company's close bond was dissolved. The majority of graduates went on to an officer's course, while the rest took part in training the new recruits or took a course for parachuting instructors.

At the graduation party for the company commanders' course, Rafael Eitan (now head of the Northern Command but at the time a reserve general and commander of our brigade) addressed us. He praised the company and the high quality of its soldiers, and suggested that many more undertakings still lay before us. We were happy, young and carefree, not yet wrinkled or grey-haired.

By now almost ten years have passed, and as I look through our scrapbook, I see the wars of Israel. Many of the smiling youths in the graduation picture who would have been twenty-nine today are no longer with us. They

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fell in the Six-Day War, in the penetrations and expeditions, in accidents, in the Yom Kippur War and in other ways.

In the photograph are boyish smiles, the beginnings of moustaches, shyness: Naim Lousian, Aviku Peled, Natan Shechter, Menachem Ben-Ari, and Yitzchak Gross, who fell in Jerusalem and in Gaza in the Six-Day War. And there is a fantastic story to be told about each of them.

For example, Natan Shechter ... He had been studying medicine in Bologna, but came back as soon as he heard that the Straits of Tiran had been blocked. He joined his paratrooper buddies in Jerusalem as a medic. Amidst shelling and sniper fire he performed great rescue work. The wounded of the bloody battle were cared for on the bridge over the Kidron Stream, and Natan volunteered to look after the wounded by the Rockefeller Museum. It was there that he met his death.

After losing five of our comrades then, we lost more in the penetration raids in the Jordan Valley, and in incidents in which we took part as reservists.

Oded Shachnai was killed when he stepped on a mine. Eli Oded the dark-haired kibbutznik was taken from us as was Uzi Getzer who died under tragic circumstances, and Gabi Yahalom, the singer and joker who was the life of the graduation party, was also killed.

In the Yom Kippur War, blond, tall Barry Chazak of Kibbutz Afikim was killed on the western side of the canal. He had been promoted to the rank of Captain. I remember how he represented us in a military delegation for a parade in Holland in the sixties when we were in the regular army. We had chosen him without a moment's hesitation, since he was tall, handsome and talented.

It is significant that our four training officers were killed in the wars of Israel. Two platoon commanders, Ofer Pniger (of Kibbutz Givat Haim) and Yoram Elishiv (of Kibbutz Beit Oren) were killed in the Six-Day War in Jerusalem, and a third, Yochanan Miller (of Kibbutz Givat Haim) was killed in the Yom Kippur War. Neither is Yossi Kaplan, the second-in-command of the company, with us any longer. He was killed in the raids in the Jordan Valley.



On every Remembrance Day for the fallen of Israel's wars, I will visit the large cemetery surrounded by tall cypress trees. Every year I will feel the wounds as if they were fresh. I will stand beside the crumbling dust of these men, beside their shiny marble gravestones and the names carved in stone ... and before my eyes there will be those friends who can never smile again.

Each year as I visit the friends who lie buried in my city, I long to tell them that we are still here, though reduced in numbers. That when we meet in the reserves we remember them and talk about them. I long to tell them who got married and who had children and who finished school. For they should know that they are in all of our minds and hearts, and that they will abide there forever; for their laughter still rings out to us, and their silence chokes us with pain.

*(Hebrew article by Gideon Allon, published in the Hebrew press)*