

# THE JERUSALEM POST

## **Morag's Run: Why a small desert road was a key pivot in the Yom Kippur War**

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The dirt road plainly knew where it was going – southwest, mostly straight as an arrow, without bumps or sharp turns, to the very edge of the Suez Canal, just north of the Bitter Lake.

But where was it coming from?

Its eastern end sprouted, seemingly at random, from the fringe of the Sinai desert, offering no hint of what impelled it westward so purposefully. On Israeli military maps it merited its own code name – Tirtur – even though it was only five miles long, carried no traffic and connected no military installations. However, it was of major strategic importance.

IN THE event of war, Israel intended to put tanks across the canal to threaten Cairo. To discourage a preemptive Israeli strike, like the one that destroyed the Egyptian Air Force at the start of the Six Day War, the US and other Western countries refused to supply it with modern assault bridges such as the Soviet Union was supplying to Egypt. Israel could assemble a conventional pontoon bridge in the water if it chose, but it would take hours and probably involve heavy casualties from artillery.

A fresh approach was proposed by Col. David Lascov, an engineering officer who at 66 was the oldest soldier in the Israeli

army. (He would remain on active service into his eighties.) The Siberian-born architect was an innovation wizard, commanding a secret unit that developed weapons and equipment for special operations. He proposed construction of a 200-meter-long bridge that could be towed intact to the canal on iron rollers attached to its underside, somewhat like a skateboard. The rollers would be filled with polystyrene to provide buoyancy. The Roller Bridge, as it was called, could be launched into the canal at night and pushed from the Israeli-held bank by tanks till it grounded on the opposite side. It would be anchored there by engineers and guarded by troops crossing the waterway in rubber boats. Tanks would rapidly cross to establish a bridgehead on the Egyptian side of the 160-kilometer-long canal, perhaps even before Cairo was aware of it.

The bridge was duly built and then disassembled and hidden in a storage area dubbed Yukon, 25 km. from the canal, a few months before Yom Kippur 1973. When war came, the sections were to be towed to an assembly area – the desert site where Tirtur began – and put together like a giant Lego construction. Five miles from the canal left the site safely out of view of the Egyptians, but close enough for the bridge to be towed to the water's edge before dawn. The plan was knocked askew when the Egyptian army crossed the canal on Yom Kippur afternoon and captured the intended assembly area.

It took a week for the Israeli army, stunned by the surprise attack by Egypt and Syria, to lift itself off the floor and prepare a counter-blow on the southern front. The bridge was put together at Yukon itself, 15 km. from the intended assembly point. Taken under tow by 16 tanks, it undulated across the uneven desert floor like an enormous caterpillar. At one point, the 450-ton span snapped in two going over a high dune and had to be welded together.

But Tirtur Road was no longer accessible in any case. It now constituted the southern perimeter of the Egyptian Second Army and was more heavily defended than Israeli intelligence realized. The road's dual role – Egyptian defense line and would-be Israeli artery – would turn the nondescript desert road into a major strategic pivot.

Morning fog limited visibility to a few yards as Maj. Ami Morag approached the desert end of Tirtur at the head of his tank battalion. It had been escorting the Roller Bridge all night, guarding it against commando attack.

Morag's assignment now was to proceed down the length of Tirtur and clear any pockets of resistance encountered. He knew little of the fierce battles that had raged all night near the western end of the road. A brigade of 100 tanks, commanded by Col. Amnon Reshef, had slipped over the dunes and penetrated the Egyptian deployment after dark. It engaged units from two Egyptian divisions in a bloody all-night brawl aimed at carving out a corridor for the canal crossing. Morag was told that he would encounter tank hunters along Tirtur wielding the formidable Sagger anti-tank missile which the Soviets had provided Egypt in profusion. Reshef asked him to also look out for survivors of an Israeli paratroop company, which had attempted during the night to clear Tirtur from the canal end and had been ambushed.

As Morag moved forward cautiously, two men emerged on foot from the fog – Maj. Natan Shunari, commander of the missing paratroop unit, and one of his officers. As they conversed with Morag, the fog lifted like a theater curtain. On the vast stage that revealed itself was the so-called Chinese Farm, a half-finished agricultural development area dating from before the 1967 Six Day War. (Farm equipment labeled in Japanese was mistaken by Israeli troops for Chinese, hence the name.) It was veined with irrigation ditches, serving now as trenches for an Egyptian division.

Out of the pastoral landscape, red lights began to waft in Morag's direction.

"Missiles," he shouted. He led his tanks into the shelter of a shallow quarry. Slow-moving Saggars passed overhead, some appearing to dip as if searching out the tanks in the quarry. Morag had his men lower their antennas and the firing momentarily ceased.

Remounting the road, he led his tanks forward again but a torrent of missiles sent them scurrying back. A second tank battalion requested by Col. Reshef moved into position a mile to the north to provide covering fire for Morag's unit. Concerned about friendly fire, Morag asked the lieutenant commanding the tank behind him to keep his eye on the nearest tank in the covering force. As Morag's tank moved onto the road, the lieutenant shouted, "He's swiveling his gun." Morag ordered his driver to pull back. As he did, a shell exploded where they had just been. Morag asked Reshef to have the other battalion withdrawn.

"I have troubles enough with the Egyptians," he said.

A WEEK earlier, the 27-year-old Morag, a regular army officer, had had his baptism of fire as a battalion commander when he was ordered to drive a large Egyptian force off a dominant ridge called Hamutal. Of his 24 tanks that began the battle, three were destroyed and 14 damaged before they withdrew from the ridge, mission unaccomplished. Of the men Morag had led into battle barely an hour before, more than a quarter were casualties, including almost all his officers.

“Send the best doctors you have,” he pleaded by radio with brigade command as he looked at the men lying on stretchers by the roadside. “They fought too well to die.”

Morag turned to Maj. Yehuda Tal, an older reservist attached to the novice battalion commander as his deputy. “What do we do?” Morag asked. Tal suggested that the distraught officer go off by himself while the wounded were being tended to.

Recovering his composure, Morag assembled his men, all shaken by the violence of the encounter.

“We took a beating,” he said. “We didn’t expect that infantry, especially Egyptian infantry, would stand their ground against charging tanks and that they would fire back with anti-tank weapons. But we have no alternative. This is a battle for our existence. We’ll screw them yet.”

Now, a week later, Morag was blocked on Tirtur by missile fire that did not slacken. Raising Reshef, he said it was suicide to proceed.

“We’re not up against some tank-hunters,” said Morag. “There’s an army out there.”

With the planned Israeli crossing of the canal dependent on the Roller Bridge, Reshef was unyielding. If Morag did not proceed down the road, the brigade commander warned, he would face charges of disobeying orders. This time, he promised, Morag would have artillery support.

Maj. Tal, who heard Reshef’s order, could see from the high ground on which he was deployed multitudes of Egyptian infantrymen carrying Saggars moving into the ditches paralleling Tirtur as if preparing for target practice. He told Morag to refuse Reshef’s order.

It was madness for them to try to force Tirtur, he said. Morag, however, understood now that his mission was do or die. He would carry out the order but try to save what he could of his battered battalion.

He told Tal to remain where he was with one company to provide covering fire. Of the eight tanks remaining to Morag, three commanded by sergeants would remain at the edge of the quarry to provide covering fire in relative safety. The remaining tanks, all commanded by officers, would follow him down Tirtur. Morag told them that they would move fast, firing everything they had, and advance "at all costs."

Unaware of the fighting that had raged around Tirtur and the Chinese Farm through the night, Morag's officers believed that Reshef was sending them on a doomed mission because they were not part of his organic brigade.

As soon as Morag's force emerged into the open, a tank was hit by a missile but managed to limp back to the quarry. Morag led the remainder forward under an astonishing barrage. From the heart of the Chinese Farm, Sagers were lifting off like fireworks. To one officer, it seemed as if a giant-sized machine gun was spraying missiles, rather than bullets.

Ditches near Tirtur were dark with infantrymen. The tank commanders with their heads out the turrets were ready-made targets but the Egyptians in the trenches were too stunned by the armor thundering past them to shoot straight. The tank gunners fired into the trenches, the commanders in the turrets raked the Egyptians with machine gun fire. The loaders worked like railroad firemen, feeding shells into the tank guns as fast as they could, pausing only to hand up machine gun ammunition boxes to the commanders in the turrets. There was no time to throw casings of the expended shells out of the loader's hatch so the hot metal tubes began to pile up inside the tanks.

The drivers weaved at speed along the road to throw off the aim of the missile operators. Sagger guide wires from near-misses wrapped themselves around tank antennas like tinsel. Morag had given up any thought of staying alive. He called for artillery to be directed at the moving tanks so that shells straddling them would impact the adjacent enemy infantry. In less than three kilometers, the gunner in

his tank fired 30 shells. Morag himself, flinging grenades and firing his machine gun, went through three ammunition belts and resorted finally to his Uzi. "Wherever we fired, we hit," he would report. "There was infantry everywhere."

One tank was stopped by a Sagger. Maj. Tal could see the commander – who happened to be Col. Reshef's brother-in-law – emerge from the smoking vehicle and carry a wounded crewman on his back. The other two crewmen followed. A personnel carrier manned by paratroopers dashed in from the south. It too was hit and its commander seriously wounded, but it managed to bring the tankers to safety.

Further ahead, the road was blocked by two burned-out Israeli tanks that had tried to penetrate from the western end of Tirtur the previous night. Near them were the skeletons of half-tracks that had carried Shunari's paratroopers. Deep trenches barred the way around the blockage.

"Left," shouted Morag. The tankers veered south and found themselves racing alongside a ditch filled with Egyptian soldiers. Morag could see the frightened faces a few feet away. He also saw their RPGs (rocket-propelled grenade launchers, capable of penetrating a tank). The tank gun fired point blank into the trench and the machine guns did not stop firing. They were so close that some Egyptians were felled by the flare from the tank gun which was almost touching them. Morag kept using an override device to take control of the gun to fire at RPG holders in the trench ahead. The gunner, feeling naked, kept calling for him to give it back.

To his front, Morag suddenly saw a trench cutting across their path.

"Stop," he barked. His driver, however, had from his seat lower in the tank been looking straight into the faces of the infantrymen they were passing. "I'm not stopping for anything," he shouted back. He hit the lip of the trench at top speed and the tank spanned the void. Morag could hear the treads trying to grip the ground on the other side of the ditch and then find purchase. The other tanks all managed to get across or around.

After a few hundred yards, there was no enemy visible and, for the first time since they started out, no Saggers. To their front was a low sand hill. Morag halted and the other tanks pulled abreast of him in a swirl of dust. Silence descended. From their turrets, the tank

commanders looked at one another. It made absolutely no sense but they were all still alive. Everyone's shirt was soaked with sweat. Someone let out a whoop and then all began to cheer. The crews descended to urinate and to let their frayed nerves settle.

As they luxuriated in a long pee, Morag heard voices speaking Arabic on the other side of the hill but it made little impression on him. As he would later describe his feeling, he was "beyond reality."

Climbing back onto his tank, Morag was contacted by Tal.

"I see your tanks," said his deputy. "Don't get off them. There are Arabs near you."

Tal guided Morag towards the closest Israeli units, steering him away from scattered Egyptian forces. The route took them through a cutting wide enough for tanks. They had not proceeded far when they came on 20 soldiers. Morag recognized them immediately as remnants of Shunari's force. The exhausted paratroopers climbed on the tanks and within moments had drunk dry the jerry cans of water secured to the outside of the turrets.

Reaching safety, Morag radioed the commander of his organic brigade. He did not want to get any more orders from Reshef, he said. He did not want to talk to him, he did not want to see him. If he saw him, he said, he would shoot him. (The two men would in the future work together amicably when Reshef became commander of the armored corps and Morag his deputy.)

The tanks had penetrated almost the length of Tirtur, moving in line like ducks in a shooting gallery past masses of infantry armed with the latest anti-tank weaponry. They had rescued the remnants of Shunari's force and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. And they had survived.

The battle for Tirtur would continue for another day before the tenacious Egyptians finally pulled back under incessant pounding. Meanwhile, the fury of the battle had distracted the Egyptian command and enabled an Israeli force under Gen. Ariel Sharon to build a pontoon bridge a mile south of Tirtur without being detected. The Roller Bridge, surrounded by the wrecks of seven Egyptian planes downed by Israeli aircraft, was now summoned forward again. Led by bulldozers that cleared away destroyed vehicles, it traversed Tirtur unhindered at the center of a 90-meter wide protective cocoon

made up of tanks and personnel carriers. Reshef's 14th Brigade, which had lost more men than any other brigade in the war, more than 300, was the first to cross it.

With two bridges up, Israeli armor and supplies poured across into "Africa," as Israelis were now calling the territory west of the canal. The final battles of the Yom Kippur War would be fought, as envisaged, across the canal, on the road to Cairo.

The writer is author of *The Yom Kippur War* (Schocken), *The Battle for Jerusalem* and *The Boats of Cherbourg* (US Naval Institute Press).  
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