

Operation "Grass Widow"

As the twilight of dawn began rising, a cat appeared suddenly on the windowsill. After creeping out of a pile of junk, it was looking for a ray of sun to rid it of the night's chill. An alley cat, shabby and filthy. It had once been white but now it was wearing the same gray shade as the alley itself. It was 4:30 a.m. on April 15 2004, at the corner of Salah Al-Din Street and Cinderblock Alley, in the heart of the casbah of Nablus, the largest city in the West Bank. The early peddlers were dragging their carts piled with vegetables and fruit and the smell of baking pita bread was in the air.

The cat, with all of its feline instincts, does not notice that a minute distance away, less than an arm's length, on the other side of the closed iron shutter, someone is watching it through the sights of a sniper's rifle.

The awakening street shared the cat's ignorance.

Inside the apartment overlooking the street is a team of elite Israeli soldiers, men of Viper Company of paratroop Battalion 202, heavily armed and daubed with warpaint, waiting for the start of Operation "Swamp King." The objective: to kill wanted, armed terrorists of Hamas and the Iranian backed Islamic Jihad based in the casbah. The method: creation of an artificial provocation which will irresistibly tempt them out of their hiding places to attack Israeli troops operating in the streets, thus exposing themselves to the waiting ambush, of the kind codenamed "Grass Widow."

In April 2004, as part of the research for this book, I managed to persuade the IDF's land forces command to allow me to join a special commando operation, one of a series, that the army had been staging since early in 2003.

The American military in Iraq has been conducting similar actions since the end of 2005. At the beginning of that year, 23 senior and middle-level U.S. officers had been in Israel studying the "Grass Widow" technique. They watched videotape footage that had been filmed during operations, heard lectures, and participated in training sessions for the special forces of the IDF's counter-terror unit, as well as "dress rehearsals" for the real thing.

They could not join actual raids, because of the political repercussions if one of them were to be killed in an attack on Palestinians in the occupied territories. They

learned the method, and passed it on to their troops, first at training bases in the United States and later to the forces in Iraq, who began to make frequent use of it.

The operation that I observed was planned for a number of days and based on aerial photographs of the densely populated casbah. Two “widows” were to be placed in the dead of night in the very heart of the locality in the West Bank most hostile to the Israelis. “The objective,” explains Captain Omer, the commander of the company and of the operation on the ground, “is to place the widows at places that give the snipers as great a ‘killing ground’ as possible.” The positions were decided upon in the light of past experience, overlooking long stretches of narrow alleys from which the gunmen generally appear to open fire at the Israeli soldiers.

After the two days of planning and discussion groups, the combat orders are drawn up, providing for a large force, including tanks to be at the ready outside the casbah in case a widow is discovered and there’s an urgent need for the troops to be extricated. “After all, its only a group of eight men, and the last thing we want is a case of ‘Blackhawk Down,’” says one of the officers, immediately reassuring his guest, who cannot hide his apprehension, that the chances of our being stranded in the hostile zone are very small, “really zero.”

The regional Shin Bet intelligence coordinator reports to the final orders group on the up to date situation in the target zone and on the most recent information obtained on a Hamas weapons laboratory/workshop the destruction of which is one of the objectives. It is concealed in a secret room in one of the casbah buildings, and it is guarded by an aide to the Hamas commander and number one on Israel’s wanted list in Nablus.

After the rehearsal comes the real thing. The troops who are to take positions near the windows and do the killing smear black and green paint on the faces. At 2 a.m. there is a last inspection parade at the Samaria Brigade HQ. Company commander Omer reminds his men that “there may be many opportunities to kill gunmen in operations like this one, but we can’t afford to miss even one, so focus on your sights, and don’t blink too much. Fire at the center of the body and a little higher, That’s the best. We can assume that the gunmen have fewer ceramic bulletproof vests than we do. If one falls, take another shot to confirm the kill. Don’t forget, we want him to come out of this dead.”

A long convoy heads for the casbah. 2:30 a.m. The Israelis make as much noise as possible. Very soon, the other side is awake. The vehicles begin to take

scattered hits from small arms and molotov cocktails, and a large explosive device that is tossed from somewhere goes off with a huge bang. The force that I am attached to identifies itself in code on the radio. The vehicles stop for a few seconds at one particularly dark corner. The force jumps out and the convoy moves on, as if it had not left anyone behind. We enter the apartment that had been marked off on the aerial photograph.

Two women are woken up. An old widow and her daughter, who had arrived from Jordan on a visit. The two are panicked, especially the visitor who is not used to the harsh reality and suffers a slight asthma attack brought on by anxiety. The two are shut into the kitchen, cut off from the world. Their cell phones are taken. "Please let us go to the neighbors, we are frightened," they plead. The soldiers are compelled to refuse.

The snipers begin setting up the ambush. We are in House No. 2280 in the casbah, and another four hours must pass before the action begins. During this time, the snipers have to settle in prepare themselves firing slits. This is no easy task, because of the large iron shutters covering the windows. Removing them will reveal our presence, because of the noise. Opening them would expose us from a certain angle. For lack of other options, the snipers use small tools to make holes in the shutters and bend the iron back slowly with infinite patience so as not to wake the neighbors. They create two openings, one for the telescopic sights and the other for the muzzle of their rifles. The hours go by with nerve wracking slowness. An orange streetlight outside leaves stripes on the ceiling. The men take turns to sleep and to smoke in the toilet, the only place where the commander has permitted them to do so. Gradually, the casbah begins to wake up. When the snipers finish their work and have hung their rifle barrels from cords slung over the tops of the blinds, the company commander whispers into his radio, "The widow is ready. The moon [vehicle] can be sent."

The overall principle of Grass Widow is very similar in most operations. It was born mainly out of the tremendous difficulty of securing freedom of movement in heavily populated zones, freedom that is critically important in the prevention of terror attacks on civilians inside Israel or in the settlements and against military forces. Before the Grass Widow method for stimulating a response was devised, every Israeli incursion into a Palestinian refugee camp or city became a real war. Lt. Col. Amir, who is given credit for developing and streamlining the Grass Widow tactic

calls it “Giving guerrilla to the guerrillas.” The commander of Paratroop Battalion 890 during most of the confrontation with the Palestinians, Amir used a sabbatical period at the IDF’s Command and Staff College to compose a paper on the principles of such warfare. A translation of this document into English serves as a basis for the U.S. military’s operational plans as they endeavor to apply “Grass Widow” techniques in Iraq.

According to the IDF’s “open fire procedures” in terrorist infested areas like Nablus, soldiers must shoot to kill at anyone holding any kind of firearm, molotov cocktail or explosive device, without any warning, and then confirm the kill.

Almost every day, new variations of the Grass Widow technique are tried, tempting gunmen out of their hiding places and exposing them to fire from a concealed sniping position: an object “falls” from a truck; someone is arrested and the gunmen attack the force carrying out the arrest; an armored car drives up and down a street, sometimes with a loudspeaker broadcasting a tape prepared by the Shin Bet in Arabic with someone chanting challenges like “So where are all the big heroes of Izz a-Din al-Qassam [the military wing of Hamas]? Why don’t you come out and fight? Let’s see if you are men.” Or more provocatively: “All the Jihad are homos” or “ Hamas are sons of whores, your mothers work in the streets and give it out free to anyone who wants it.” Some of the more refined remarks – the others are even less printable. Surprisingly, it has worked, with the gunmen coming out to spray the offending vehicle and getting picked off by a sniper from a Grass Widow concealed in a nearby apartment the night before.

Lt. Col. Amir: “The idea is to make the gunmen think twice before coming out to fire at IDF forces in the alleys. The terrorists have learned that all of sudden a price tag has been fixed to this whole story of firing sporadically or throwing a bomb at our forces, that it’s suddenly become risky, that suddenly you can take a bullet in the back.

“What we set out to do was cancel out the built in asymmetry of a big, heavy, clumsy, predictable army with routine procedures, and guerrilla forces which are generally seen as shapeless, amorphous. By studying the characteristics of the guerrillas I can force them into a certain pattern of behavior, I give them a shape, I make them respond where I want them to, and then I hit them.”

In a number of simple response provocation actions, an armored jeep was positioned on the outskirts of the Balata refugee camp near Nablus. Lt. Col Guy: “An

armed man came out into one of the alleys and opened inaccurate fire, while running, at the jeep. The jeep did not fire back. The gunman felt safe and came a little closer, shortening the range and getting braver. Every now and again he'd let loose a burst of fire, standing in the middle of the alley for a longer spell each time. The jeep didn't respond. The guy apparently thought that he had found some idiots, and in the end he just stood there, in the middle of the ally, like he was in some American action movie, firing bursts into the window of the jeep, just to impress his buddies. Seconds later, he took a round in his forehead.

“After that, the gunmen learned the trick with the jeep, and they were careful of it. We moved the jeep away, about 500 meters from the camp. They felt more secure again to walk around and show themselves in the alleys of the camp, knowing that the M16 isn't accurate at a range of more than about 150 meters. But this time we had a sniper in the jeep with a more powerful rifle and we hit them again.”

The use of Grass Widow proved itself again and again in the war against Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Dozens of wanted terrorists were killed and the others began showing a lot more caution combined with fear of the IDF's snipers. This significantly reduced their freedom of movement and the time that they had to prepare terror attacks. The “widow” that I joined was not so successful.

It seems that one of the neighbors has reported to the armed organizations that some suspicious movement had taken place during the night. They send people to go around knocking on doors to check if there are soldiers in the nearby buildings. They knock on the door of the apartment we are hiding in. We do not respond and they go away, but we have left the shutters closed and this arouses suspicion. More and more people in the street are staring at the windows that the snipers are hiding behind. A large stone hits one of the shutters. The soldiers fear that a grenade or an explosive charge may be tossed at the window, and they close the shutters as tightly as possible. Capt. Omer reports over the radio: “Fear that widow is exposed. Repeat. Fear that widow is exposed” and some code words which indicate that the large forces should be prepared in case a catastrophe occurs and we have to be extricated urgently.

Then we see that the locals below are now looking at the side of the building where we are hiding on the second floor. It is clear that something is going on but in the absence of a lookout outside, we can only guess at what it is. The onlookers appear to be really interested, but they also are moving away from the building. The

batallion intelligence officer reports over the radio that the Shin Bet has just warned that a Hamas detachment is laying demolition charges.

Minutes later, it turns out that they were right. A mighty blast shakes the building and deafens us. Window panes shatter and we are covered with glass fragments. Dust fills our mouths and nostrils.

There is no longer any doubt. "We have been discovered," Omer reports. Soon a large rescue force reaches the house. It finds that the entrances have been booby trapped and its fire detonates the charges that could have led to a completely different end to Operation Swamp King than that which was planned for. The force discharges large quantities of teargas, through which the eight soldiers and the journalist stumble to a jeep, weeping and coughing and are driven off.

The next day a woman sets out to execute a suicide mission in the Jewish city of Ariel. She is carrying 25 kilos of explosives from the laboratory that was supposed to have been destroyed in the operation. By sheer luck, she is stopped on the way, but what better illustration could there be of the price of failure?

The most astonishing thing about Operation Swamp King was that in the street below, life continued more or less as normal. The incidents did draw the attention of the casbah residents, but they are so accustomed to this sort of thing that some of the peddlers, although they knew that explosives had been readied and a full scale battle was about to take place, never even bothered to move their wagons of oranges and tomatoes. Even the cat, which survived the explosion and appeared from somewhere a few minutes later, didn't seem to be too upset.

Today, Grass Widow and various refinements added by special forces of the American military (such as scattering explosive items that terrorists are likely to be interested in) are a leading element in the warfare against the "subversives" in Iraq. According to data conveyed to Israel by the Americans, with expressions of gratitude, 146 terrorists were killed in 2006 using this technique. Impressive, but no more than a drop in ocean in against the tidal wave of terrorism that are sweeping that country with the support of Iran and al-Qaeda.