

The Kidnapped Men

This is how Prime Minister Olmert learn from Dr. Bergman that the IDF is holding back information about the true condition of the two abducted soldiers

The kidnapping of Israel Defense Forces Sergeants Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev on the morning of July 12, Israel's casus belli for war, illustrates the wide preparation gap between the two sides, and the lamentable state of the IDF's intelligence and combat readiness against Iran and its proxies on the northern front.

On July 12, it was the Yoav Battalion's penultimate day of a month of reserves duty. In the evening, they had a double celebration, marking the end of their stint and the appointment of a new battalion commander. Everyone was smiling.

Soon after the party ended, at 03:05 a.m., the electronic alarm system on the border fence signalled interference at "point 105." Lights flashed at divisional HQ, but because of the fear of abduction, it was decided not to investigate.

On the back slope of the rocky hill which abuts point 105 on the Lebanese side, under cover of night, militiamen had spent weeks constructing a spacious bunker and communicating trenches, ready to shelter dozens of fighters and their weapons. It was connected by a fiber-optic cable network to Hizballah command HQ in Beirut. It is far more difficult to tap into fiber-optic cables than regular copper cable.

In September 2006, as part of the research for this book, a reconstruction of the abduction and the preparations for it as seen through Hizballah's eyes, was held. A close look at the bunker revealed how it had been built literally under the nose of the Israelis, and had been perfectly camouflaged by the thick bushes that cover the rocky

hill, so perfectly that it was not discovered throughout the entire war, although Israeli troops controlled the area from the first day. It was a miracle that Hizballah guerrillas never took advantage of it to strike at Israeli troops after the abduction. Only on the last day of the war was it discovered by a paratroops reconnaissance man, looking for a place to relieve himself.

In the two months before the abduction, the guerrillas had quietly laboured at strengthening their hideouts at spots dominating the sole road on the Israeli side of the border, and stocking them with weapons and ammunition. On top of the hill overlooking the road, more weaponry had been placed, including a Browning heavy machinegun in an emplacement, ready for action and covered in plastic sheeting to protect it from the damp. After the soldiers had been seized, the militiamen moved them as quickly as possible from the scene, abandoning all of the arms. When Israeli troops came to collect the weapons left behind by the special Hizballah force, they were shocked to discover that the machinegun had IDF markings on it.

A check of the serial number revealed that this Browning heavy machinegun had been part of the arms shipments delivered to the Iranians in Operation Seashell in the early 1980s and later reshipped to Lebanese militia. Army sources believe that it was no coincidence that Hizballah left this weapon behind, to rub salt into the Israelis' wounds.

At about 3 a.m., in complete radio silence, a Hizballah special unit arrived and divided into two forces, one manning the camouflaged positions overlooking the road, and the others spread out over the hill, waiting for an Israeli patrol, fingers on triggers. One word over the network would indicate the operation had begun; as soon as firing from point 105 was heard, everyone would join in.

All of Hizballah's preparations for the kidnapping at point 105, all the scouting activity, the positioning of weaponry and forces, the coordination of the operation, the communications procedures, the codes and the plans, had been entirely missed by Israeli intelligence.

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The patrol that was ambushed had not been scheduled. It set out at 08:45 as one of the random patrols initiated by the commanders in the area, in contradiction of standing procedures. It consisted of two armor-plated Humvees. The men were in high spirits. The tapes of the battalion's communications on that morning reveal a general laxity in discipline and preparedness. Some of the men in the patrol never even wore their bulletproof vests.

What happened next has been described in classified military investigation reports:

The lead Humvee was driven by a regular army NCO. In the seat next to him sat the patrol commander, Ehud Goldwasser. Behind them were Eldad Regev and another soldier, with a pile of equipment between them that included maps, aerial photographs, communications codes, and more. In the second vehicle were the driver, Wassim Nazal, and two other men. They were traveling east on the road between the farming communities of Zara'it and Shtula. The Hizballah units knew there were two vehicles in the patrol. They allowed the first one to pass a bend in the road and continue driving forward, facing their positions. They waited patiently until the second Humvee was also in their field of vision and had advanced a few meters, entirely exposed. At 09:03, a codeword was transmitted, and the whole sector erupted.

The last thing documented by a video camera on the fence at Zara'it was an RPG rocket coming out of the bushes, straight at it. Then it blacked out. At the same minute all the cameras in the sector were similarly neutralized.

The guerrillas stationed at the high point of the hill rained RPG fire on the second Humvee. Nine rockets penetrated its armor. One man was killed on the spot. The others managed to escape from the burning vehicle, only to be cut down by a hail of fire from the Browning that Israel had sold to Iran. IDF investigators concluded that Hizballah never intended to reach the second vehicle. They only wanted to ensure that none of its crew escaped alive.

As soon as he saw that the Humvee following him had been hit, Goldwasser grabbed the radio handset and managed to shout "They're firing." The signal was picked up only by chance by a soldier of the company, who informed his commanders by cell phone. The driver of Goldwasser's Humvee disobeyed standing orders which call for driving on in the case of a missile attack. Instead he stopped and jumped out, and hid in the bushes.

Hizballah fighters came out of their camouflaged positions and took aim at the lead vehicle. An RPG missile penetrated the passenger side door, starting a fire. Goldwasser and Regev were wounded. The man sitting next to Regev, Tomer Weinberg, managed to get out, but was hit by the hail of fire outside before he could hide in the bushes.

The guerrillas nearest the road then blew open a gate in the border fence and charged at the burning vehicle. The wounded and bleeding Regev managed to get out, but the Hizballah men were already on top of him. He tried to lift his weapon and fire at them (and may even have succeeded) but he was hit again in the shoulder and thrown back toward the Humvee. They opened the passenger-side door and pulled

Goldwasser out. They dragged the two wounded men 35 meters, leaving a trail of blood. They removed their flak jackets and put them into a carrier made of sleeping bags, which was shouldered by two hefty Hizballah fighters who moved as quickly as they could back into Lebanese territory. A few hundred meters across the border, an escape vehicle was waiting in the cover of an orchard. Once the Israeli soldiers were loaded, it tore away at top speed.

Hizballah's bombardment continued and Israeli artillery shelled targets along the border. IDF forces reached point 105 soon after radio contact with Goldwasser was lost. The outgoing Yoav Battalion commander and his replacement were among the first to arrive. The reservists who had been due to be discharged that day were kept on for another 24 hours of combat.

Shortly after the soldiers were abducted, the Northern Command section of the IDF's special MIA Location Unit went into action. The initial aim was to obtain as much information as possible on the condition of the men and where in Lebanon they were being kept.

As long as the fighting went on, Hizballah kept up a steady barrage of fire at point 105, which the unit repeatedly tried to reach in order to gather vital data at the scene of the kidnapping. In vain, they requested support, from the air force or artillery, to silence the fire and let them do their job. Shortly afterward, they discovered that the Hizballah that had made off with the Israelis had left large quantities of arms and ammunition behind. They began to understand that this was a different war. "Send in a unit of sappers to clear this stuff away," Eli Sanderowitz, commander of the unit, demanded of everyone at Northern Command HQ, "they may yet send in another unit and hit us again from the same spot." Again, no one listened.

They continued working under fire, trying to understand how the attack was carried out and what the immediate results had been. Fragments of metal and samples of ash, dirt and blood were collected. The remains of the two Humvees of the patrol were closely examined and the survivors of the attack and other soldiers who were in the vicinity were interrogated. Among the experts brought to the site or asked to study the findings were police crime scene officers, members of the IDF's missile testing unit, and experts in metallurgy, small-scale combat, and forensic medicine. The investigators used a large room in the unit's headquarters in the General Staff base in Tel Aviv to set up a sand table with a scale model of the scene of the attack, with all the details, the men, the vehicles, the fences. After long days of weighing the evidence, the MIA Location Unit reached an interim conclusion: One of the abducted men was not alive. The second man, according to the final report, was "very badly wounded, if not worse than that."

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No one in the army considered it necessary to inform Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of these findings, or possibly someone decided that he should not be informed. The war went on without the man in charge knowing about the existence of a report concluding one or both abductees were dead, despite the fact that they were the actual reason for the war. The findings were also withheld from some of the IDF's top brass.

The prime minister learned of the report and its contents only a day after agreeing to the ceasefire, on August 13, 2006, at exactly 12:15 from a reporter.

I happen to know this, because I was that reporter.

In a conversation with very senior officials of the Prime Minister's Office (whose names I agreed not to publish), I was trying again and again to get an answer

to the question of why the war had continued after it was clear from the classified reports that the chances that the kidnapped men were still alive were slim to non-existent. I met only blank looks. After I told them about the reports, the prime minister summoned his military secretary, Gen. Gadi Shamni, asking him: “Do you know anything about reports on the conditions of Regev and Goldwasser?” The reply was in the negative. To Olmert’s credit, he immediately ordered, by means of a scrambler cell phone network, that the Regev and Goldwasser families be informed of the main points in the report.