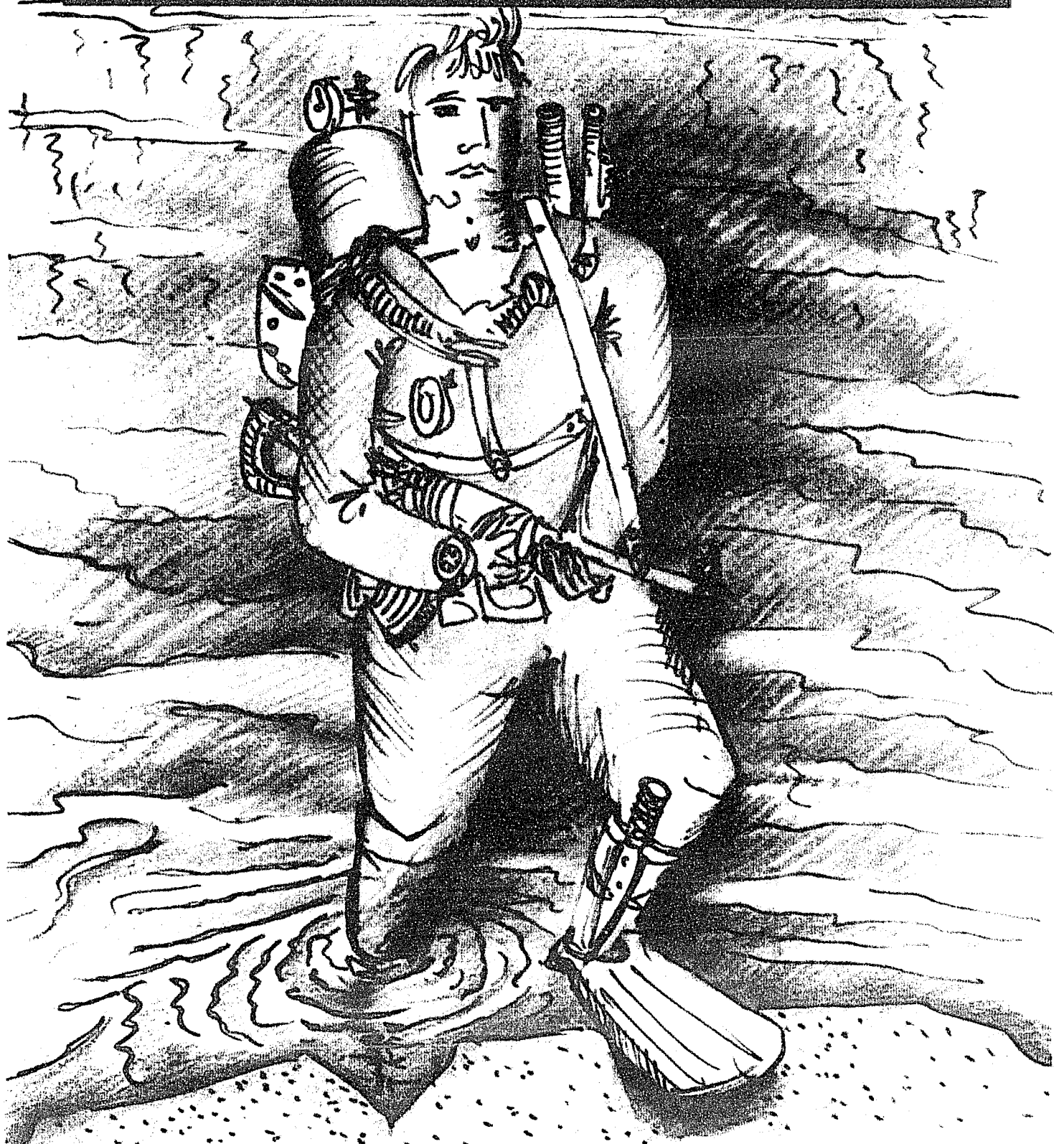


Coming up for Air

In the wake of the worst disaster in Shayetet 13's history, can the elite IDF sea commandos successfully rise from the depths?



M. Rosenshine

By Robby Berman

When Shayetet 13's former junior commander, Col. Danny, enters a Tel Aviv restaurant for an interview, every head turns. A muscular 45-year-old, with hoary hair cut close to his scalp, he looks straight ahead with piercing blue eyes as he answers questions; his extreme good looks are not diminished by the long horizontal scar bisecting his face at the nose.

"The high-level training in both sea and land operations makes for a very powerful dynamic," says Danny. "We can do what every other unit does, but they can't do what we do."

The Shayetet 13 naval commando unit is the most combat-active in the Israeli military. The words "frogman commando" or "seal" usually conjure up the image of a Rambo-like warrior slowly emerging, in the dead of night, from the black ocean surface, with a knife between his teeth. Trained to use a multitude of explosives, weapons and small craft, these soldiers are capable of quietly penetrating deep into the heart of enemy territory and swiftly striking a target.

"Sea commandos can set out for an operation with 16 men ... while regular infantry [for the same mission] would need more men, which magnifies their chance of detection, complications and the number of potential casualties," says David Sheek, a colonel (res.) who served more than 20 years in Shayetet.

What is the quintessential quality that distinguishes the Israeli underwater commando as one of the most feared warriors around the world? "Inner peace," says Danny, oblivious to the irony of his answer.

Although one of the most active units in the army, Shayetet - known to its members as Shin 13 - had enjoyed the lowest combat unit fatality rate in the IDF. In total, they had lost nine men in operations and 20 in operational training, with no deaths during operations in the past 15 years.

That enviable record remained intact until September 4, when 12 commandos were killed on a mission in Lebanon. The disaster was magnified by the failure to bring home the body of one, Third Petty Officer Itamar Ilya.

The Ofir Committee set up to investigate the incident concluded this week that the unit was caught in an incidental ambush set up by Hizbullah. Militiamen set off the explosive charges, fell back and opened fire, the investigators believe. The reports discounted earlier rumors that Hizbullah had advance information of the Shayetet raid.

Such a large tragedy in a small family is certain to have a devastating effect operationally and psychologically.

"Shin 13 is a very well-oiled war machine," says Channel 2 News political correspondent Gadi Sukenik, one of the best-known veterans of the unit. "The nature of the beast doesn't allow room for introspection, and the unit doesn't encourage it. The men aren't built for that."

Some military brass are suggesting that new missions should be "found" quickly so the Shayetet can get back on the horse. "The military doesn't need to find new missions," Sukenik responds. "Shayetet has enough work as it is."

Most Shayetet activities are not reported, and if they are, they're usually the failures. In recent years, two trainees drowned during scuba-diving maneuvers. And not all missions in the past have ended successfully.

In 1988, a joint operation to simultaneously attack three terrorist bases in Nuweima, Lebanon, was led by the elite Golani Reconnaissance Unit but included Shayetet members, regular Golani Brigade soldiers and an explosive-carrying dog unit. The mission was a quasi-failure due to the ineptness of the Golani soldiers. Even though the naval commandos took control of the situation and extricated the troops, they were labeled as being part of a botched operation.

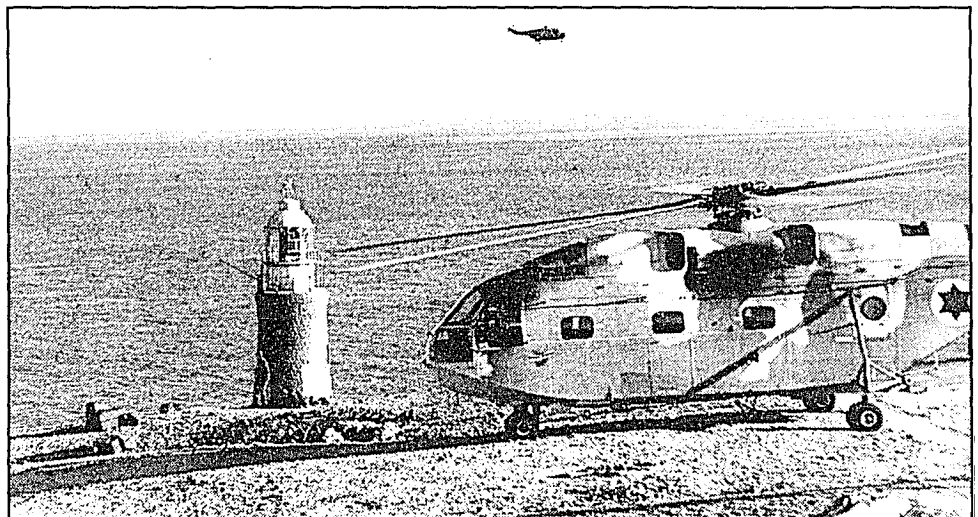
Every year, Israeli "seals" go on hundreds of missions and, according to foreign press reports, almost always when there is no moon. One Shayetet officer explains: "It makes it harder to reach the target, but it's even harder on the enemy. I feel very secure in the pitch blackness of the night."

For the past 50 years, details of Shayetet's operations remained dark and murky - exactly the conditions they are trained to operate in. The interview with Col. Danny is allowed only in the presence of an army spokesman, as well



(Above) In 1973, the Shayetet helped bring other IDF units ashore on the beaches of Beirut to wipe out the Black September leadership.

(Below) The 1968 mission to Egyptian-controlled Green Island in Suez Bay was a watershed for the Shayetet



as a senior intelligence officer. The current commander is known only as Col. G.; the size of the unit and its members' faces may not be published, and articles about them are often bowdlerized by the IDF censor.

"The original purpose of Shin 13," explains former commander Shaul Ziv, "was first and foremost to operate against enemy targets on the sea... a ship or a port, via swimming, diving or small underwater craft called 'pigs,' which are fast and filled with explosives. The frogmen were meant to speed toward enemy targets, kamikaze style, tie a rope to the steering wheel to steady the craft and eject right before impact. "And, of course, Shin 13's main task was to transfer ground forces across or below the water," Ziv says. There are multiple theories as to the meaning of the number 13 in its name, but none is convincing or authoritative:

Former member Mike Adler writes in his well-researched book on Shayetet 13: "The model they were based on was the Italian sea commandos that blew up enemy targets at sea [during World War II]." During the war, four Italian sea commandos were captured in an Egyptian port riding live torpedoes toward British ships. The Italian founder of that unit helped Israel organize its own naval commando unit after the establishment of the state.

From its inception, Shayetet 13 was limited to sea operations, but on March 15, 1962, it was given a land target to attack for the first time. They were meant to cross the Kinneret and destroy the Syrian position opposite Kibbutz

Ein Gev in Kursi. The task was to kill as many enemy troops as possible, as well as to obliterate Syrian fishing boats. They were spotted, however, before reaching the target and were forced to retreat under heavy fire, reinforcing the perception that sea commandos, like fish, should stick to the sea.

During the Six Day War, another mission ended in fiasco: a risky raid was attempted on Alexandria's seaport, and six Shayetet fighters were captured. The war, however, extended Israeli control from the Jordan River to the Suez Canal. This new geographic reality opened the door for multiple Shayetet missions in tandem with ground-force commandos.

The watershed for Shayetet came in June 1968, the beginning of the War of Attrition. The IDF decided to destroy the fortified, Egyptian-controlled Green Island in Suez Bay. The General Staff Reconnaissance Unit was assigned the mission, but because the noise of transport helicopters would eliminate the advantage of surprise, Israeli generals decided to have the naval commandos ferry the reconnaissance fighters over the water. There weren't, however, enough dinghies to carry all the men. The Shayetet commander jumped at the opportunity, and convinced the chief of staff to let his unit make up most of the task force. The denouement was that three soldiers were killed from the General Staff unit and three from Shayetet. Militarily, the mission was considered a great success.

In 1971, Shayetet was given another mission on the Egyptian front, which to this day remains classified. It is

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known as the most daring successful military operation ever executed by Israel. It was this mission that earned the elite frogmen the reputation as the IDF's best.

In 1973's "Spring of Youth" joint operation with other IDF units and the Mossad, the Shayetet helped wipe out the leaders of Black September in Beirut. According to foreign sources, in 1988, it was Shayetet that led a hit team onto the shores of Tunisia where they gunned down Abu Jihad, Yasser Arafat's PLO deputy.

In the early 1980s, Sukenik found himself in the awkward position of participating in a special rescue operation for Ethiopian Jews bringing them over the Red Sea to Israel, as well as being interviewed by his colleagues in the news media about it.

The *gibush* – entrance exam – for the unit has varied over the years but remains one of the hardest to pass. At one point during the exam, in the middle of the night, candidates for induction are blindfolded and driven in a truck to a small deep pool filled with cold water. They are pulled off the truck and dropped in one by one. Blindfolded, freezing and scared, they are meant to tread water for an unspecified period in cramped quarters, without pushing down on anyone else.

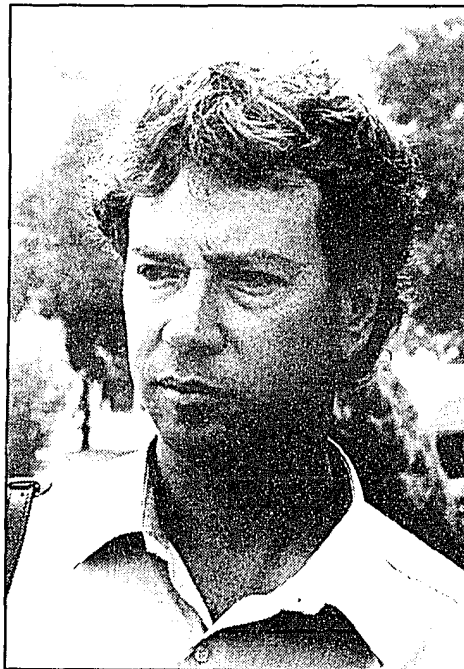
Col. Danny explains the difficulties would-be inductees face when they are not told when a particular exercise is supposed to end. "You don't know how to allocate your energy efficiently throughout the week of testing." The intense psychological pressure during the screening process is meant to weed out those who might not be able to cope with future tasks the unit might be given.

"Someone who's the type to analyze every nuance of the difficulty he faces will never make it through the test or the training period, because you face an endless amount of difficulties," Sukenik says.

Danny says the unit wants each inductee to reach "his fullest potential and, when reaching that point he goes beyond it, even sacrifices himself, to help a comrade. We're not looking for Superman. You can always acquire physical strength."

Passing the *gibush* doesn't guarantee graduation from the strenuous, 21-month training course. Many, in fact, don't. It is so difficult and dangerous that "there is no one in Shayetet who doesn't have disabilities," says Sukenik, "including myself. Shrapnel wounds, compressed disks, impaired hearing, damaged lungs.... They made us endure physical tasks that no human body was meant to bear."

Cmdr. Yosef Kurakin, the leader of the unit caught in the September 4 Hizbullah ambush who was also killed, was interviewed on Army Radio shortly before that mission, and spoke frankly about the qualities needed to serve in Shayetet 13. Although frogmen need to be aggressive, he said, "one of the most important qualities that we look for is



ISAAC HARARI

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an openness that allows the soldier to create an emotional bond with his other unit members. When I say openness I mean honesty.

"In Shayetet, that's one of our most important behavioral codes. The moment they stick their heads underwater there is no chance of establishing contact with them. There's no real way of knowing where they were and the only way to gather information about their performance is from the reports they give on themselves."

Reserve officer Effy (not his real name) notes that most of the time in underwater operations "you can't see your hand in front of your face. What you do down there is between you and God."

What type of personality is attracted, and accepted, to this unit? Interviews with ex-commandos paint an interesting, but often highly contrasting, impressionistic picture. Up close, some brush strokes reveal them to be mavericks – wild, beer-guzzling, motorcycle-riding loners, always looking to push the limits – while other strokes show them to be reserved, serious, motivated and responsible. But when in training or on a mission, they consistently come off as team players, well-disciplined, focused and highly professional.

"My men," said Kurakin, "experience unique training and go on special missions that no one else in the army goes on. As a result, from these experiences they acquire a certain amount of self-confidence which is sometimes, wrongly, interpreted as being haughty."

Danny says the unit never felt invincible, "but there is a feeling that anything is possible ... especially after doing things they never dreamed they could do." For men who have accomplished so much, and feel that anything is possible, those interviewed – and many declined – come off as strikingly modest, almost antiheroes. "The more experienced you become, the more you realize how small and fragile you are," says Danny.

In addition, the men don't like to talk to reporters for a more practical reason. "The media, both domestic and foreign, have over the years exposed more and more of our methods, which has had a cumulative, harmful effect," he says ruefully. "The silence about Shayetet's activities and procedures is its beauty."

"On some underwater missions, the water is so black your eyes don't see anything, your ears can barely hear anything, and so you're left with nothing but your mind. That kind of work demands inner peace," says Effy, who has seen his share of missions in enemy waters. "Unfortunately, the sea commando entrance exam cannot adequately replicate those kinds of conditions."

Shayetet soldiers are extremely professional. In other combat units, after a training exercise or an operation, the commanding officer summarizes what happened for the unit. In contrast, the men in Shayetet go through a much longer, painfully exacting postmortem of the operation in which everyone speaks, reporting on his own and other members' performances. Even though they are like brothers, they don't hold back criticism, not if it can make them a more effective fighting family.

The interview with Danny takes place in a cafe next door to the Beit Lessin Theater where *Fog* is being staged. It's the play about the aftermath of the 1992 Tze'elim-2 disaster in which five members of General Staff Reconnaissance Unit were killed during a training exercise. The playbill screams: "They take adolescents, practically children, give them an assignment that is beyond human capability – and drop the responsibility in their lap."

Is that really an accurate description of the burden placed on soldiers serving in the IDF's most elite units, including Shayetet? "First of all, they're not children," Danny responds. "When they finish training, they're 20 years old. Young maybe, but not children. The tasks are not impossible, and yes, we do place the responsibility on them. Who else should take the responsibility?"

"Don't judge every command or operation by the results."

Danny says the death of Kurakin and 11 others "is an unprecedented tragedy for our small unit. The whole 'family' is in mourning. But the will of the dead is to continue fighting. This tragedy just makes the unit more determined. From a crisis you get stronger. There is no psychologist in Shayetet. They don't need one. Their commanders are the best psychologists. The best treatment is to go back out on a mission."

They use the word "distance" to refer to the respect accorded superior officers. In Shayetet, says Danny, "there is no 'distance' of superiority, only of honor for past accomplishments. I don't need 'distance' to rule."

When Shayetet resumes operations in Lebanon, will it be looking to get back at Hizbullah for the blow the unit suffered?

"We do not take revenge. We're not looking to bring home 12 heads," Danny asserts, perhaps referring to the graphic photo, printed in European and Arabic newspapers, of Hizbullah proudly displaying one of the Israeli dead.

"The best revenge," insists Danny, "is to get the unit back on its feet and operational as soon as possible." □