

“Hold At All Cost”

24 hours on the Golan Front during the October War of 1973

by Major Michael D. Wickman

At 1400 hours on 6 October 1973, Syrian and Egyptian forces surged across their borders with Israel. The massive surprise attack found Israel outnumbered in vehicles, equipment, and personnel, in some instances, by 50 to 1. Israel's vaunted air force was held at bay by a wall of surface to air missiles and anti-aircraft guns, and Israeli armored columns were made vulnerable by the Syrians' excellent use of anti-tank missiles. During the first days of the battle, it appeared that Israel's defenses would be overrun, but due to the heroic efforts of Israeli soldiers, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was able to turn apparent defeat into a sudden rout of the armies of Syria and Egypt. Nowhere was the situation more critical than on the Golan Heights.

The purpose of this article is to focus on the bravery and achievements of a few soldiers fighting on the Golan Heights and their effect on the outcome of the Yom Kippur War. Of particular note are the actions of one Israeli armor officer, Lieutenant Zvika Greengold.

The primary objective of Syrian forces was the recapture of the 480 square miles of the Golan Heights lost to the IDF during the 1967 Six Day War. Syria planned to mount a major breakthrough attempt in the north with the 7th Infantry Division, supported by elements of the 3rd Armored Division. The main thrust, however, was to be farther south in the vicinity of Rafid. This attack was to be carried out by the 5th Infantry Division, the 9th Infantry Division, the 1st Armored Division, and elements of the 3rd Armored Division, all concentrated against Israel's 188th Brigade, which could field only around 60 tanks. The Syrian plan called for the occupation of the whole of the Golan Heights by the evening of Sunday, 7 October, followed by a reorganization in the area along the River Jor-



Some Israeli tankers fought in M51 modified Shermans.

dan on Israeli soil in preparation for a further breakthrough into Galilee. Major-General Yitzhak Hofi, head of Israel's Northern Command, had been concerned for some time over the growing concentration of Syrian armored forces. He had expressed his concerns to Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan, who authorized units of the 7th Armored Brigade, which were being held in General Headquarters Reserve in the southern part of Israel, to move up to the Golan Heights. This move increased the number of Israeli tanks on the Golan Heights from an initial number of some 60 to 170.

The Syrian forces arrayed along the Golan Heights consisted of the 7th Infantry Division, the 9th Infantry Division, and the 5th Infantry Division. Each was organized along Soviet lines, with an armored brigade totaling some 130-200 tanks per division. Behind these first echelon divisions were concentrated the 1st and 3rd Armored Divisions, each with approximately 250 tanks, along with several independent brigades. The total Syrian force facing Israel numbered approximately 1,500 Russian T-54/55 and T-62 tanks supported by 1,000 artillery pieces, including heavy mortars.

The IDF's plan for defending the Golan Heights was based on two points.

First, topography afforded the Israelis well thought-out superior defensive positions. Second, Syrian devotion to the prevailing Soviet operational level doctrine limited available openings for the massive assaults prescribed by that doctrine. An anti-tank barrier was constructed to limit a Syrian armored attack over the 1967 cease fire or Purple Line. The purpose of the barrier was to delay the Syrians sufficiently until reserve forces could be committed to reinforce units on the line. Time was the primary issue for both the Israelis and the Syrians. The IDF needed

time to deploy reserves before a Syrian breakthrough or, “if politically possible, to mount spoiling attack” as a pre-emptive measure. The Syrians needed to quickly penetrate the IDF defenses and reach the edge of the plateau overlooking the bridges of the River Jordan before the arrival of IDF reserve forces. This would force the IDF to move their reserves across choke points and up steep narrow winding roads, making a successful counterattack nearly impossible.

The Israeli forces defending the Golan Heights were composed of two Israeli armored brigades, the 7th in the northern sector and 188th (Barak) Brigade in the southern sector, consisting of approximately 170 tanks and some 60 artillery pieces. Israeli armored forces were composed of British Centurions and M51 Shermans.

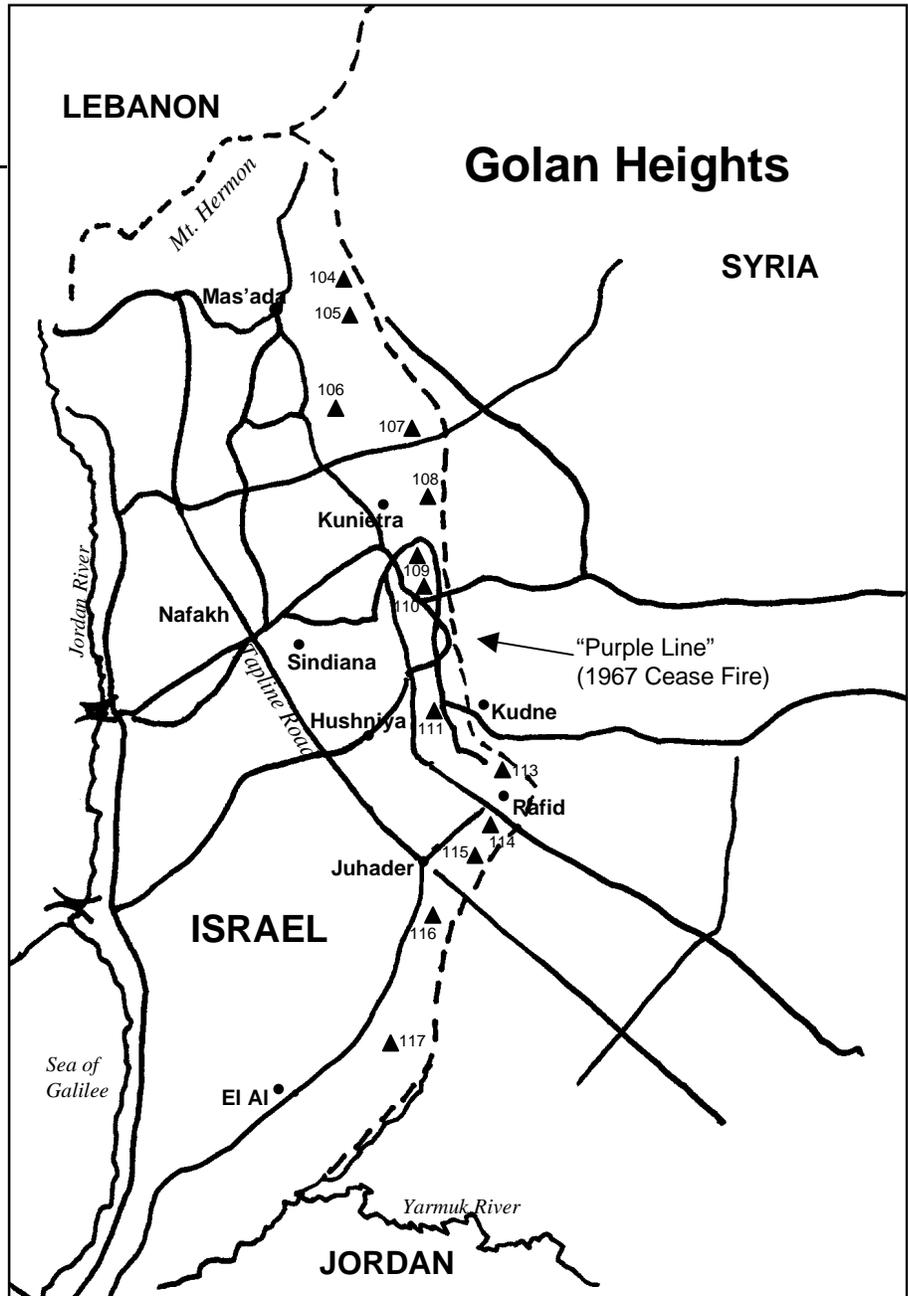
The massive Syrian air and artillery strike against Israeli positions on the Golan Heights achieved tactical surprise. The Syrian 7th, 9th, and 5th Infantry Divisions attacked across the Purple Line, while in the north, the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade repulsed the Syrian 7th Infantry Division. The Syrian 3rd Armored Division, committed to pass through Israel's 7th Infantry Division, also suffered heavily and gained little ground. In the south, the

Syrian 5th and 9th Infantry Divisions, taking advantage of the less restrictive terrain, broke through the defenses of the Barak Brigade. In two days of fighting, the Barak Brigade was virtually destroyed, and the command post at Nafakh surrounded. The Syrian 9th Infantry Division "had split the Israeli defensive forces, and now threatened the command center at Nafakh."¹ The remnants of the Barak Brigade were barely hanging on and were in desperate need of reinforcements. The collapse of the northern sector could have forced the IDF to fall back to the Jordan River and therefore changed the outcome of the war. The original plan of reinforcing with reserve brigades was falling apart. "As Israeli reserves arrived on the shore of Lake Tiberius and the west bank of the River Jordan, they were immediately sent forward in small groups into battle."²

"At this time, something just short of a miracle was underway at Nafakh. Frantically trying to reach the Golan by any means possible was [Lieutenant] Tzvi 'Zvika' Greengold, who had been on a fortnight's leave."³ Lieutenant Greengold had been safely at home, near Haifa, only seven hours earlier. He had just been released from service with the Barak Brigade and was on leave for two weeks prior to attending a company commander's course. He was one of the first soldiers to make his own way back to the battlefield.

At the Nafakh headquarters of the Barak Brigade, the commander, Colonel Ben-Shoham, was analyzing spot reports coming in from his battalion commanders on the size of the Syrian attack. While he was deciding his next moves, he was approached by Lieutenant Greengold, who arrived to find Nafakh in chaos. Greengold, having no troops nor tanks to command, assisted with the removal of the dead and wounded from disabled vehicles. He soon learned that four tanks, three of which had been battle-damaged, were about to arrive. Zvika requested and received command of the four tanks. He was delighted.

Lieutenant Greengold was ordered to take the four tanks and move towards the Tapline Route, a major Syrian avenue of approach. Lieutenant Greengold and his four tanks were to be known on the brigade communications network as Force Tzvika.⁴



By that time, Colonel Ben-Shoham was greatly concerned by the Syrian advances in the southern sector, where the 51st Tank Brigade had broken through and was bypassing the Israeli fortifications in the vicinity of the Hushniya-Tapline crossroads. Savage nighttime firefights were taking place across the southern Golan Heights, and Israeli troops were cut off in their front-line fortifications. Transmissions to their headquarters at Nafakh finally produced authorization to withdraw, but this was easier said than done, with Syrian forces to their rear. At Kudne, a relieving tank force broke through to Bunker 111, despite strong Syrian forces in the immediate vicinity, and succeeded in evacuating all the men.

Along the southern flank, where the battle was then heaviest, the fight was more difficult. Israeli tanks fought through and relieved Bunker 114 and Bunker 115, but Bunker 116 was completely surrounded.

Unable to get out, the Israelis sat tight in their defenses and called for artillery support. The only available artillery was a single battery of 155mm guns, which was ordered to concentrate on Bunker 116's position. The fire mission was extremely effective and provided temporary relief to the troops inside.

Because of the penetration in his sector along the Tapline Road, Colonel Ben-Shoham attempted to move the forward headquarters (one tank and one

halftrack) of his brigade from Nafakh to Juhader, where he believed he could better control the battle. He moved carefully along in the dark, avoiding Syrian formations, and his staff was relieved to reach Juhader. By then, they were under constant heavy shelling, due to poor IDF communications discipline and successful Syrian SIGINT operations. The Syrians obtained radio fixes every time a communications officer tried to contact his subordinate commanders.

In the meantime, TF Zvika, which had left Nafakh several hours before, was moving cautiously along the Tapline Route. Zvika had been intent on joining Colonel Ben-Shoham, but instead had run into a Syrian tank company. Zvika promptly sent a contact report to Colonel Ben-Shoham and first engaged the enemy at 2100 hours on 6 October. Zvika took advantage of the terrain and limited visibility, moving his force into hull-down positions and letting the enemy come to him. Zvika's force waited only a short time until one of his tank commanders reported contact with an approaching Syrian column consisting mostly of T-55s. Zvika peered into the gloom and saw them by the dim glow of their "formation lamps and infra-red 'cats eyes'."⁵

"At about 2120 hours, Zvika spotted a solitary Syrian tank on the road about four kilometers outside Nafakh and only ten meters from his own Centurion. Zvika tapped his gunner, and the Syrian burst into flames. Fearful of being seen or set ablaze in the horrendous flash of burning fuel and munitions, Zvika ordered his driver to back up fast. He then found that he had no way of communicating with the other tank or of even speaking with his own crew. The shock of the explosion of the Syrian tank had jolted out the radio and intercom circuits. Zvika jumped down to the roadway and stalked over to the other Centurion, ejecting its commander and motioning him to climb aboard the defective tank. "Watch me," he cautioned the other man, "and do as I do, if possible."⁶

Zvika then continued to work his way south along the Tapline Road, the two tanks moving slowly forward, using the terrain to mask their movement. Zvika soon realized that he was alone, the other tank having lost its position in the dark. Moving over the crest of a hill, Zvika was confronted by three Syrian tanks moving towards them with their driving lights on. Three rapid shots

from the Centurion's 105mm gun left the enemy tanks blazing brightly, and the illumination of the area from the fire greatly aided Zvika's movement. "The intruders belonged to the 51st Independent Tank Brigade, and they were feeling their way into the Israeli rear, seeking to exploit the breakthrough. Apparently they had turned on their sidelights to see better, to gain speed."⁷

Zvika shifted into a new position and within minutes destroyed three more T55s. Zvika realized that the Tapline Road was a major avenue of approach, that he was frequently outnumbered and he was facing tanks with superior night fighting capabilities.⁸ Zvika chose to hold in his current position, take advantage of the defensible terrain, and wait for Syrian forces. Thirty minutes passed until they were alerted by the sound of heavy engines. A long column of T-55s appeared out of the darkness, followed by a procession of trucks. "It was as if the main body of Major Ismail's 452nd Tank Battalion was on parade, so perfectly aligned and spaced was the column.

Zvika waited until the lead tank was only twenty meters from where he was hunkered down. The first shot stopped the first target and stalled the entire column"⁹ Zvika was up against terrible odds, but he had the enemy fixed and was in position to destroy the entire column. Zvika withdrew into the darkness, taking advantage of the scrub and rocky outcrops, only to appear and fire before disappearing again. He kept this uneven match going for over an hour. The Syrians' sole warning was a crash and a long jet of white flame shooting through the night to destroy another of their vehicles. The Syrians were extremely bewildered by the single shots that kept hitting their tanks from all along the roadway. Frustrated, several Syrian tankers switched on searchlights to try and locate what they thought was a sizeable enemy force. The illumination gave Zvika and his gunner more clear targets to engage. Ten armored vehicles were either destroyed or damaged before Major Ismail ordered the remnants of his battalion to withdraw. What the Syrians believed was a sizeable force was actually the work of a single tank crew.¹⁰

Several miles further along the Tapline Road at Nafakh, Colonel Ben-Shoham realized he was surrounded. His brigade intelligence officer suggested that as it was impossible to get

back to the Nafakh headquarters by the Tapline Road, they had better cut across country. Colonel Ben-Shoham directed his tank and the headquarters' half-track to head west toward the ridge of the Golan Heights near Ramat Magshimim. At approximately 0200 on October 7, they reached the Gamla Rise overlooking the Sea of Galilee, a primary objective of the Syrian forces. They were dismayed to observe new Syrian T-62 tanks not far away along the escarpment, and in full view of Galilee. At that rate, Syrian forces would soon cross into Israel proper. The Israeli tank and its accompanying half-track continued to move along in dim moonlight, keeping among the boulders on the slopes to screen themselves from the large Syrian force moving parallel to their position. Colonel Ben-Shoham tried to determine the status of his brigade, and feared that very little remained. Meanwhile back in Nafakh, a reserve battalion commander named Lieutenant Colonel Uzi More received permission from the CinC of Northern Command to leave the base and take command of the tanks along the Tapline Route. He was to fight a delaying action along the Tapline Route to slow the Syrian advance towards Nafakh Camp. This force included Zvika's small group and two reserve tank platoons of the Northern Command Reserve, which were the only reserves available in the southern sector. Lieutenant Colonel More received the order from Colonel Ben-Shoham to mount a counterattack, and proceeded southwards along the Tapline Route, while Zvika and a platoon of tanks drove parallel along the road's wire fences.

Almost immediately, the first tank in Zvika's column was set ablaze by a rocket-propelled grenade. Zvika saw Syrian tanks equipped with searchlights blocking the road ahead, and Zvika ordered one of the remaining tanks forward to rescue the crew of the burning Centurion. He positioned his own tank to cover in the flank, and both tanks were hit. Zvika's gunner was injured, while Zvika himself reeled from the shock of the blast and searing pain. Zvika and his crew scrambled from their blazing Centurion, falling to the ground in flames and screaming as flames seared their faces and hands. Zvika's shirt and trousers were burning, but he rolled into a ditch and somehow smothered the flames. He was fearful that at any moment his tank, still carrying fuel and ammunition, would blow

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up. Not realizing the extent of his wounds, he ran towards another tank, shouted garbled instructions, and took command of the vehicle. He then activated the communications system, announcing to all that TF Zvika was still in existence.¹¹ Even as Colonel Ben-Shoham's relieved acknowledgment faded on the radio, Zvika realized the extent of his wounds, and the terrible burns on his face and hands began to throb and blister. Only Colonel Ben-Shoham's calm but insistent voice brought him back to reality. Moving straight for him were two Syrian tanks, bearing down with their guns firing. Zvika fired and screamed for his driver to reverse. The tank shuddered as its tracks tore around on the bare rocks, then raced backward into the inferno of the night, its crew still battling against the heavy odds.

The remainder of Colonel Ben-Shoham's counterattack force also made contact with the mechanized infantry that had been accompanying the tanks that Zvika encountered. More's tanks were hit and disabled, one at a time. When More saw a Syrian soldier aim an antitank rocket at his command tank, he grabbed hold of his free machine gun and opened fire. However, his machine gun jammed and the Syrian grenadier let fly. More was thrown from his tank and lost an arm and an eye in the blast.¹²

Colonel Ben-Shoham reported up the chain of command the failure of his counterattack and did his best to stabilize the situation. With minimal resources he calmed the nerves of his commanders, called for artillery support, and attempted to maintain situational awareness of the battle that surrounded. In order to improve command and control, Colonel Ben-Shoham requested the command of all forces in the southern Golan from the regional commander. It was apparent that the Syrians were swarming all over the southern sector of the Golan Heights.

In the north, the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade was defending positions in and around Booster Ridge against the Syrian 7th Infantry Division, elements of

the 3rd Armored Division, and a brigade of Moroccan troops. Fighting from prepared positions, the Centurion-equipped 7th Armored Brigade held out against odds sometimes as high as 15 to 1. Under constant artillery and air attack, Colonel Ben Gal, the 7th Armored Brigade commander, calmly directed his dwindling forces, maintaining a reserve which he moved from ambush to blocking position to battle position during 72 hours of continuous fighting.

The 7th Armored Brigade, although down to a handful of operational tanks, never gave up their primary positions.¹³

In the southern sector, the crisis continued to develop. Sunrise on the 7th of October revealed that the Syrians had achieved a major breakthrough in the southern sector of the Golan Heights. The 132nd Mechanized Brigade and 47th Independent Tank Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division had made a major penetration along the Rafid El-Al road. The Syrians exploited this penetration with the 43rd, 51st, and 91st Armored Brigade, a force of more than 500 tanks.

Colonel Ben-Shoham identified the advancing second-echelon Syrian columns, and chose to regroup his forces and attempt to delay the Syrian penetration. His tank and half-track sped back towards Nafakh, dodging tank and RPG fire along the entire route. Colonel Ben-Shoham realized all that remained of his brigade were a handful of tanks fighting for their lives along the Tapline Route. He decided his best course of action would be to rally his meager forces and join his deputy, Colonel Yisraeli, and the 679th Reserve Armored Brigade (now reaching the front in small numbers).

“Every three tanks now reaching the front were assembled into make-shift platoons, patched into the communications network and rushed towards Ben-Shoham's position. All in all, two companies were pieced together, and the newly formed units reached Nafakh and re-established the Barak Brigade's headquarters.”¹⁴

At approximately 1145, Major Baruch Lenschner identified a lead element

from the Syrian 1st Armored Division as the 91st Armored Brigade. Major Lenschner, Deputy Commander of an independent Northern Command battalion, was commanding a hastily assembled force of initially 14 Centurions. That was now down to two operable tanks. He reported sighting the T-62s of the 91st Armored Brigade and stated that his position was untenable. Colonel Ben-Shoham urged the young major to hold at any cost. Major Lenschner and his small force were not heard from again. It was later determined that Major Lenschner perished when the warhead of a Sagger missile punched through the Centurion's turret armor and his force was overrun.¹⁵ Outflanked, the brigade headquarters at Nafakh was now under attack. Ben-Shoham was ordered to return to Nafakh for the base's defense, and ordered his deputy Lieutenant-Colonel Yisraeli to set out and cover his force.

Unknown to Colonel Ben-Shoham, Zvika had met up with Colonel Yisraeli's force at dawn and fought in the battle that delayed the Syrian 51st Tank Brigade's attack along the Tapline Route. Just when Zvika had thought they were gaining the upper hand, Yisraeli frantically ordered his force back to Nafakh to escape the Syrians' outflanking movement.

Throughout the retreat, Colonel Ben-Shoham's tank came under heavy Syrian artillery and tank fire. Both he and Yisraeli succeeded in destroying more than twenty Syrian tanks and vehicles. As the battle raged and Syrian tanks approached to close range, Yisraeli's gunner announced that the tank was out of ammunition. Yisraeli ordered his driver to charge an oncoming T-62 with machine guns blazing. Within moments, his tank in flames, Lieutenant-Colonel Yisraeli was dead. Ben-Shoham, unaware of the fate of his deputy, continued to issue orders. Standing upright in the turret, Ben-Shoham observed the battle, firing at Syrian crewmen fleeing their burning vehicles. As he searched the hills for Syrian commandos, a sudden 7.62mm volley killed Colonel Ben-Shoham. Losing radio con-



Israeli Centurions move up on the Golan front.

tact with his commanders, Zvika left the roadway and approached Nafakh cross-country from the southeast without encountering Syrian forces, but just missing a Syrian ambush.

The 91st Armored Brigade continued its push towards Nafakh. Lieutenant-Colonel Menachem (Pinie) Cooperman, deputy commander of the District (administrative) Brigade, organized Nafakh's defenses and issued anti-tank weapons to soldiers manning the perimeter. Standing at the southern perimeter fence, he watched the advance of approximately two Syrian tank companies, and ordered the advanced headquarters group to withdraw from Nafakh. As this force left the base, hundreds of Syrian shells rained down on the camp. Syrian tanks were now entering Nafakh unhindered, firing point-blank at the base's evacuated buildings, raking the Israeli defenders with coaxial and turret-mounted machine guns. Lieutenant-Colonel Cooperman grabbed the division's deputy intelligence and operations officers, a bazooka and six shells, and rushed to try and stop the Syrians from taking Nafakh.

Suddenly, the 679th Reserve Armored Brigade arrived to save the day. Firing at long range, the 679th managed to hold the Syrians and push them out of Nafakh. Yet Syrian tanks were still inside the base, and Lieutenant Colonel Cooperman's determined antitank unit, now out of ammunition, was cornered by a T-62. As the T-62's 115mm gun turned towards them, the tank went up in a ball of flame. Approaching the rescued officers was a battered tank moving at a slow speed. It was Zvika! Zvika had arrived at Nafakh camp just as the Syrians were breaking in, he had joined forces with a reserve tank, and with more enthusiasm than good sense his exhausted crew attacked the Syrians. "Zvika fired wildly at everything in sight — at the hills and the fences and at the Syrian tanks that had already flattened the perimeter fence. The truth was that his tank driver was in the

shock of exhaustion and could no longer react to orders after twenty hours of continuous, nerve-twisting battle."¹⁶ During the pandemonium, Zvika attached himself to the 679th Armored Brigade and with them forced the Syrians out of the ruined camp and back onto the Tapline Road.

The Syrian advance had been stopped at Nafakh and the blackened, smoking wreckage of their tanks, personnel carriers, and trucks lay everywhere, in the camp and on the dun-colored hills. "When the battle around Zvika ceased, he found himself standing in the turret of his fifth or sixth Centurion, suddenly unable to make a decision as to what to do next. The Barak Brigade intelligence officer — now the nominal brigade commander — rushed up to greet the lieutenant. As he fought an overwhelming lethargy, Zvika painfully climbed from the turret and carefully dropped to the ground, where he leveled his eyes on the intelligence officer and apologetically murmured, 'I can't anymore.' The intelligence officer said not a word; he hugged Zvika close and led him to the medical evacuation center. There is no way to calculate the damage that that iron-willed redheaded youth inflicted upon the best plan with which Syria has ever entered a conflict."¹⁷

To say that the actions of Lieutenant Zvika Greengold directly affected the outcome of the Yom Kippur war would be an overstatement. But it goes without saying that his actions greatly aided the successful defense of the Golan Heights.

"For his incredible 24 hours on the Golan, Lieutenant Greengold was awarded the Ot Havgvura (Order of Bravery), the IDF's medal for supreme valor."¹⁸

Notes

¹Jerry Asher with Eric Hammel, *Duel for the Golan: The 100 Hour Battle that Saved Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987), p. 123.

²Edgar O'Ballance, *No Victor No Vanquished: The Arab-Israeli War 1973* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 132.

³Samuel Katz, *Israeli Tank Battles: Yom Kippur to Lebanon* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1988), p. 18.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵David Eshel, *Chariots of the Desert: The Story of the Israeli Armoured Corps* (New York: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1989), p. 101.

⁶Asher and Hammel, p. 96.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁸Anthony Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War Volume I: The Arab-Israeli Conflicts, 1973-1989* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 72.

⁹Asher and Hammel, p. 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97

¹¹Samuel Katz, *Israeli Tank Battles: Yom Kippur to Lebanon* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1988), p. 20.

¹²Asher and Hammel, p. 105.

¹³Peter Allen, *The Yom Kippur War: The Politics, Tactics and Individual Actions By Which Israel Repelled the Arab Invasions of 1973* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982), p. 31.

¹⁴Katz, p. 21.

¹⁵Asher and Hammel, p. 137.

¹⁶Allen, p. 91.

¹⁷Asher and Hammel, p. 146.

¹⁸ Katz, p. 25.

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