

# "Still Unfinished Business"

A report of a mega game of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war by **Michael Dollin**

## Part 1: The Fighting

First off, I'll start with my little role in it all. I was 2ic at 162 Division HQ, an Israeli reserve Armoured division, marching to the front via Khatmia pass to the Northern sector of the Sinai fighting.

There were reports that the Egyptians had landed paratroopers in the pass, but these reports were sketchy, and ranged from the enemy being in brigade strength to no paras at all. The dis-believers were our divisional neighbours-252 div holding the Bar Lev line at start of campaign and with their HQ at Bir Gifgafa at the centre of the pass. Our lead recon elements confirmed there were paras, and in brigade strength. Our lead brigade then swung into the attack and bounced them out of the pass before they had had a chance to dig in properly (they had also taken heavy losses during their landing- or so the prisoners said). Perhaps those boys at 252 were too busy with their maps to notice the enemy descending near by? Too busy trying to work out which of the Bar Lev garrisons were still holding out perhaps ?

The Egyptian paras, once dislodged, retreated down the pass, and were overrun by our two lead brigades and... well kapputskied really. We had 1000 prisoners in the bag and wasn't Southern Front HQ glad to have the media pay us a visit to see the captured paras and have the confirmation that the pass was most assuredly in Israeli hands. Prior to that the media had been reporting confused fighting, but 1000+ prisoners tends to clarify matters. My divisional commander was very happy to get interviewed by the man from the Beeb, alongside a beaming Front Commander. Of course I was filling out the orders for next turn like a good staff officer. Actually I was offering quips from the side line, rather like people who hang around behind TV camera interviews waving and saying "Hi Mum !" and to about as much effect.

Following this success we then did a foolish thing. Acting on our own initiative (I must take large measure of responsibility for this ) we detached one of our brigades to cover the coast road (as front HQ had allocated nothing to this flank... With the remaining two brigades we were to link up with 252, consolidating on the Northern half of the front near the village of Tasa securing the Khatmia pass, while the southern portion of the map (the Gidi and Mitla passes) were being held by 143 Div.

Having done that Front very kindly attached that brigade to 252 division, and we were left to hold the central portion of the front with just two brigades ! Worse, 252 div, (now with 5 brigades under command (some ex Bar Lev and greatly reduced or just infantry), threw this reinforcement into a solidly dug in Egyptian infantry division and the Sagger Anti tank missiles wrote off the Brigade (20-30% strength thereafter!). So I had shot our team in the foot and to no strategic gain ! This is why sub commanders husband every resource huh ?

Our remaining forces moved onto occupy Tasa, and then bumped into lead elements of two Egyptian divisions (21 and 23d) with another (16th) slugging it out with 14 Armoured brigade

of 252 div to our North...) Front never allocated this brigade to our command (sods!!!) and in the heavy fighting it put in with 16 Egyptian, 14th was cut down to no more than a dozen runners...but your should have seen the other guy etc.

At about this time, Jordan declared war following repeated incursions by our planes (mistakes surely !!!) and this had an adverse affect on our front as reserves for the Sinai were diverted to stopping those sneaky Jordanians...

Not that we were without our own problems... We had launched a counterattack at the Southernmost Egyptian division and thrown it back a bit. We had been operating under information that these enemy formations were infantry units but they were subsequently confirmed as armoured units. No sooner had they been properly identified, than both 21st and 23rd divisions hurled themselves into a desperate assault to capture Tasa, this (very) insignificant town... We had been ordered by Front to hold the line at all costs (!) and our troops behaved brilliantly. They threw back both Egyptian formations to their start lines, with bayonet fighting at some points...



To our North, 14th Armoured Brigade's duel to the death with the Egyptian 16th Division meant that the frontline to our North was swaying to and fro. At one point, just after the big push by the enemy to our front it looked as though there would be a breakthrough to our North, and the possibility of our being cut off. A Kampfgruppe was quickly cobbled together and thrown into the breach, but fortunately the enemy was spent.

Following these lunges the Egyptians seemed spent. We detached recce elements to the south, and got as far as the southern shore of the Great Bitter lake without encountering strong resistance or major enemy formations. However, with two extant Egyptian armoured formations to our front we did not feel able to detach anything stronger to investigate further.

Meanwhile 252 Division were asking us to attack North of Tasa and try and smash into the Egyptian artillery park on the East bank of the canal... Smash through with what thought I as I tried to talk the CO out of it ??

But Front had come up with something even worse- a politically driven attack to get some forces on the canal, as a cease fire was imminent. So they ordered us to ignore all considerations of defence or supply and concentrate our two brigades (in action for a week without rest and now at 50% strength each to punch through at least one Egyptian division (and whatever else in reserve). But Front in their generosity had allocated the best strength brigade from 143 division (fighting in the passes to our South). We were told that it was on the right side of the passes to move to our immediate support. In actual fact it was at 30-40%, on the wrong side of the passes and a day's march away....

I tried to persuade my superior that such an attack would not work, but Front was adamant, and the CO was only too keen to comply (and at the end of the day an order is an order). But seems Front had got their timings wrong on the ceasefire (which the sneak attack Arabs had offered after securing their gains). It was scheduled to come into effect before we were to roll forward at dawn. Front had got the timings wrong, and details had not reached our HQ.

So the first we learnt of the situation was when our brigade commanders rang back and asked what the story was with these orders to attack when there was a ceasefire at midnight. There was a frantic visit from Front commander and he ordered that our recon units should try and push through to the canal, avoiding contact with the enemy. This was so that we (i.e. he) had the opportunity of saying that at the ceasefire we were at the canal, or at least muddy the waters to be able to claim that we were. In the event our men were stopped short by sizeable dug in Egyptian formations. So Front did not get their snap shots by the canal. Fortunately we were not required to launch our forces into the teeth of these dug in troops.

After the cease fire came into effect, the fighting never flared up again, though should it have done so our reforming division was slated to be the spearhead to breakthrough to the canal. This was not withstanding that we were now only back up to nominal full strength of 3 brigades and that those were much reduced (though the period of rest and repairs was helping). The politicians had stopped the fighting, and it was just left for the debriefing...

## **Peace and the debriefing**

This is the bit where you start to get an idea of what was going on behind the scenes, at Front HQ, and afterwards on the big maps where the military umpires ran the whole show. At last a chance to see how close the fighting really was and what was going on beyond our ken with the political teams...

The game organiser Terry Martin began by feeding back on the general course of events. All the major Arab states had wound up recognising the state of Israel. King Hussein was now an Arab hero for his timely intervention (saving Syria). Assad stayed in power by brutally repressing all those who opposed the cease-fire (with massive Soviet aid and the use of the KGB). Sadat got everything he wanted (which wasn't a lot). On our side it was interesting to see how close the senior Israeli commanders came to launching a coup against Golda Meir's government. They were only talked out of it by the interventions of Israel's CinC, who was most unhappy with the politicians' decisions himself... but not prepared to depose his political masters.

In fact to hear our side talk, especially the military, you'd think we hadn't achieved much at all. The CinC said he was bitterly disappointed by the cease fire, and that 5 more days would have seen Israel able to decisively defeat the Arabs in a further campaign !!! This after it had emerged that the Americans had promised to turn off the tap for all military supplies should Israel not agree to the Arab offer...

Added to this that if my division was to be the one to push onto the canal and over it, then that was very unlikely (thought the small cog in the wheel). Perhaps after 5 days more the other fronts would have been victorious enabling us to get reserves down South to do the

business ? But why pursue further victories in the field when recognition had been gained ??  
With losses severe already, why expend more blood in such exercises ???

There followed a general military debriefing. The fighting had been very heavy, and Israel's losses likewise. Perhaps not in absolute terms, but most assuredly in the percentage racked up against the size of the Jewish state. Our own bloodbath at Tasa came in for a mention, as part of the Israelis' tendency to get stuck into the Arabs, when fighting withdrawal might have been a better option. The Tasa fighting was referred to as Verdun like and suddenly our compliance with orders seemed like less of a good idea... The Syrian Front was a solid Israeli victory, exploitation of which was only hampered by Jordan's declaration of war. Though our aircraft were hampered in their ground attack efforts against the Jordanians, as both sides were using Centurions (ouch), our forces were in the ascendant. However, dislodging the enemy from around Jericho would be tough and time consuming (i.e. involve still more casualties). On the Egyptian Front we had held all the passes, but without reserves we had been unable to counterattack effectively.

I had tried to play the game in the right spirit. Though it would have been fairly easy to wander around the hall and see other's maps, I had by and large resisted the temptation. So as 2ic of a division you get communications from your brigade commanders (played by the liaison umpire for your division), and requests for info from Front as well as orders (of course) but you don't see what they see, can't know what they know. So when I went round to Front's map I was very impressed by the almost complete lack of information about our positions, and that of the other divisions on the front. This had come out when they released 114 brigade to us just before the cease fire, claiming it was at point X, when it was actually at Point Y (as the umpires confirmed). Before the pack up of the maps Southern Front were updating their maps, and the positions of our constituent brigades were still mis-marked.

From the small cog's perspective, the best bit was seeing the very pretty maps and counters that the military umpires used to resolve all the action, especially as I am an old board gamer at heart. Focussed as I was on my own little part of the world, I had kinda assumed that 143 Division were holding our Southern Flank. On our map there was a big green line marking what we thought was the front line. Recce sent South did not detect anything offensive coming from that direction. But looking at the master map revealed that had we been able to muster up enough strength (say that spare brigade I had suggested detaching Northwards) then we could have driven all the way to Suez it seemed without meeting a significant defensive formation ! Egyptian 3rd Army had all its troops in attacking mode pressing our troops at the gates of the Gidi and Mitla passes, but had nothing of any substance screening their Northern Flank.

Having said that, the reverse also applied. For while we were fighting off the Egyptian hordes to our front, and worrying about those to the North, those to the South could have walked into the pass behind our lines and advanced to Israel for all we could do about it... Interestingly they didn't see their options and neither did we, and despite both being worried about gaps in the front leading to their downfall, both sides had left a huge gap in the centre of the front, as if by mutual consent !

I had further cause to rue suggesting that one of our brigades be detached, as, in the pub

afterwards, I had a lengthy discussion with my Egyptian equivalent (2d Army 2ic) who reported that they had never considered the coast road as an avenue of advance and after seeing off the Israeli brigade attack, just dug in a bit more there!!!

## **What it was like- reality**

I turned up half an hour late (Thankyou Connex you bastards!) and walked through deepest darkest Streatham in the rain to reach the School where the whole event was taking place. There were no signs up and an open door was found with some difficulty, but in the end I was in a hall with loads of small tables, a hive of activity, and loads of phone and intercom cables. I was running late but so were plenty of others and so, most importantly were the game organisers...

After paying out my tenner, I stood around like a lost soul waiting for a place to be found for me. I had not had one sent with the briefing pack, which I have to say did not include a map for finding the school either- though I hasten to add that this is apparently not a common occurrence. One of the central front commanders (i.e. in reserve for the first day or two) asked for an assistant for his two brigade division. Southern Front commander rather curtly informed him that there were front line divisions with one player and so he would have to wait ! So I was whisked off to a little table with a map of the Sinai (the important bits) where sat a Scottish fellow, who, as he was there first and had played before, was to be the CO of 162 Division. Interestingly, or not as the case may be, the Central front reserve force I was almost attached to, swelled to 5 brigades when Jordan joined the war, but of course he never got an extra staff member and fought his war under pressure and alone... While of course 162 Div was pretty quickly down to 2 brigades and was under much less pressure...

Once the fighting got under way, it was a very pleasant mix of tension and activity. Each half hour period represented a day, and for each day there was a "Media Team" broadcast, then reports were received from subordinate commands, maps changed to reflect this info and orders issued. Orders were a pro forma, basically the unit was indicated, an option from a broad range were selected (all out attack, attack, hold etc) and any modifications or clarifications to the broad scope of the order indicated (such as where to advance to etc). After reports had been received maps were again updated (we had wipe off pens for this and that produced "staff officers' fingers", though other used post it notes, and others made up their own counters. Then front was updated (most of the time...), air units offered by front HQ, orders written, and then it was pretty much time once again to listen to the BBC world service, and wait for the phone to ring with the front line formations reporting in.

Someone once said that there are no small roles just small actors, and though just a 2ic on a divisional team, there was more than enough to do (occasionally a little too much down time, but we were light on formations as noted earlier). Working in a consumer focussed part of the Civil Service it was nice when answering the phone to say "162 Division here- Go ahead", rather than "Secretariat- how can I help you" (which is civil service speak for why are you bothering me ?). When Front got involved, and they were worrying about allocation of air assets, or calling the CO in for conference, then time did press much more so...

But the whole experience was fairly easily enough to manage, and there is a certain anal retentive pride in a well ordered map, well kept feedback reports and neatly arranged pens....

On a social note there were many opportunities to have a chit chat with the 2ic at 252 division (our neighbours in the hall and on the map), about the nature of the game, how things were going etc. As he was sat at a low table just a few feet away this was easily achieved without leaving my chair.

I think the structure of our teams reflected the flexibility of the Israeli military well. We had three front line divisions, each with two players, and each division responsible for three brigades or so (with detachment of recce's only a few units to order at any one time). On the other side of the fence Egyptian command was at Army level, and that meant 2 players commanding over a dozen significant formations, and even more should they choose to meddle with constituent brigades of their divisions. It meant that we were able to devote much more thought to each action (bearing in mind the half hour game turn for each day), whereas Egyptian HQ were pressed just to get orders ready in time. I spoke with both Egyptian 2d Army players, and one of 3d Army team, over the pretty maps in the kindergarten play room (aka the umpire control room) after the game. When they were offered tactical advice from Israelis like myself, they replied that they were busy enough with sorting out their army, without worrying about fiddly complex enveloping manoeuvres and the like.

As for interaction with the higher ups, it seemed that Egyptian HQ knew more about what they were trying to do than our fellows, and communicated it well. The Egyptians were making sure they held onto their bridgehead and that was it. Israeli Southern Front was trying to re-cross the canal, and it seemed that this was purely on the basis that we're Israelis and can do this anytime we feel like it ! Absence of reserves and density of defenders be damned ! This feeling of invincibility was shared by my CO. There was a nice little argument when talking with a 2d Army opponent after the game when discussing the likelihood of success of our final pre ceasefire order to blast our way to the canal. It went something like this:

162 CO- "We were getting ready to smash our way to the canal had you not called a ceasefire !"

Egyptian 2d Army- "Well we had dug in an Engineer Brigade, in reserve since the beginning of the game, and you'd not have got through there !"

162 Co- "Oh yes we would have !"

Egyptian- "Oh no you wouldn't" etc

I feel that the general feeling of disappointment amongst Israelis was a reflection of the military nature of almost all Israeli teams. With but one political team, and Military HQ, two front commands, and then another six divisional commands, that's a lot of players with a vested interest in doing well on the battlefield. More to the point that is a lot players who felt frustrated at the war being fore shortened by the politicos.... (cries of a stab in the back etc). Especially as we didn't get a chance to really hammer the Arabs- no crossing the canal, no march on Damascus and the like.

It could have been worse. In the pub afterwards "Nixon" and "Brezhnev" were discussing the aborted UN resolution 242 (effectively offering the eventual political settlement just three days in to the conflict) which was vetoed by the Americans for their own reasons. But this

would have had to have been vetoed by someone to ensure that all those military players were not left with nowt to do for the afternoon (having shelled out at least a tenner for the day).

As it was there was almost a coup d'etat by the military to allow us to continue the war to a successful conclusion. That and gain for Israel the defensive boundaries which would be recognised as both reasonable and just- presumably the Nile and the Euphrates !

## **In conclusion**

Like many wargamers I have had a range of experiences, from commanding armies on the table top to whole countries in board games. But on that Saturday I was 2ic to a divisional commander with nothing more than 2 brigades to play with- no more than 5 units at one time to order about- and I had a ball. This was because the decisions we made were taken on the basis of information, and player/human interaction rather than on watching our opponent's every move. It is one thing to count up an attack in a board wargame, calculate the odds, fly the air support and then roll the dice, quite another to plan, write orders, allocate the air support Front has released to you, and wait for the reports (and hear of the casualties).

It is no exaggeration to say that there was real tension when we suspected that that we were in danger of being cut off from our North. And the relief was very genuine when all held and we were OK. Later we suspected that we had been lulled into attritional fighting around the town of Tasa, but at the time we were ensuring that we didn't lose contact with our Northern neighbour, and preserving the front line. Front were not exactly suggesting a neat tactical withdrawal followed by a Manstein like backhand stroke... What they did suggest at one point was moving the bridging equipment from Tasa should we be overrun ("not that we are defeatist 162 but...").

How many games have you played in recently, where you were actually part of a human Chain of command? A chain of command such that your decisions are based not on objective reality (what you see on the map of a boardgame or on the tabletop) but on what those below you have reported. Where those above you are only acting on what they have been told themselves. Where the whole perception of the success or otherwise of your entire war effort is built on such shaky foundations ?

Or how often have you played in games where you can walk away with your own perceptions, and probably be contradicted by everyone else who had anything to do with it ? Not just in what would have happened had time not run out and you had to pack up ? I have, in the first part of this article, set out my impressions of the fighting, as I saw it. But my CO would have had a different perspective on the affair (of my own performance especially\*), while the much maligned Front HQ would have their view too. This is exactly the sort of thing that follows real wars- the battle of the memoirs, the missed recollections, the whole muddle that is reality. By way of example, in my first draft of the fighting I had completely forgotten the counterattack ordered by the CO which temporarily drove back the Egyptians.

\* I am sure the Divisional Co will note that for a staff officer I was far from perfect, for example at one point we ran out of air orders sheets... (moral equivalent of running out of paper clips at General HQ ???)

As for the fighting, even on the other portions of our front, to me it is a blur and the only way it would be resolved would be for someone to go through the orders and after action reports kept by each HQ and piece it all together, in a history. Even then the welter of information and mistaken information may well see conflicting accounts, again just like reality...

How many games have you played in where the central portion of a key front was effectively a forgotten no-mans land ? Wargamers would have had that gap either sown up in a flash, or exploited into it in the same amount of time ! But because each command was worried about the problems on its own side of the fence, and threats from other quarters, this sector was completely overlooked!

How many wargame experiences do you get where you have a superior command that has forgotten you ? Or doesn't really know where you are ? Where you don't know exactly where your sub units are ? Where you don't know who the guys you are fighting against until you meet them after the game (none of this across the table chit chat)? Where sub units can disappear without trace ? (Egyptian 2d Army lost contact with their paras after they dropped and only found out what had happened to them when they heard it on the BBC !) Where communications are patchy, information even more so, and hanging over all are the actions of your political masters, not as some game mechanic in the rules, but as flesh and blood decision makers.

All in all it was a superb day, though it started late and finished early. I t was exactly what I had hoped for in a game of its kind, and I have only scratched the surface of the thing. I look forward to more mega game opportunities and heartily recommend them to all.



John Messina / PNI

Israeli tanks storm on