

TAC NEWS

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THE YOM KIPPUR WAR October 1973

Gamel Abdel Nasser's death in 1970 brought his successor Anwar el-Sadat to international prominence. By 1972, there were a total of forty-four Jewish settlements in Sinai. It had become clear to all parties that Israel was never going to return this conquered territory, no matter how long negotiations dragged on. By the end of June 1973, Sadat and President Hafiz al-Assad of Syria completed plans for a coordinated surprise attack, supported by six other Arab states. Actual fighting started on both the Syrian and Egyptian fronts on October 6th of that year. This date was significant for both Jews and Muslims. For the Jews it was *Yom Kippur*, the “Day of Atonement” and holiest day in the Jewish calendar. For Muslims, the 10th day of Ramadan was the anniversary of a crucial battle fought by the Prophet Muhammad.

Sadat was determined not to make the same mistakes that had cost the Arabs—and particularly the Egyptians—so many lives and caused so much humiliation in past conflicts with the Israelis. To begin with, the wars of 1956 and 1967 had opened with smashing preemptive Israeli air attacks. These had destroyed the bulk of Arab air forces on the tarmac, leaving their ground forces helpless against Israeli tactical air support. This situation would have to be turned around! Next was the pronounced Israeli tactical superiority, especially in tank warfare. This would have to be negated as well! With these priorities in mind, the Egyptian General Staff went to work and came up with a solution that was both simple and imaginative.

The Soviets balked when presented with the Egyptian plan. They would have none of it. They believed their



position within the Egyptian army and government was now secure. Any drastic change in the existing equation would only destabilize their slow, methodical absorption of the Egyptian body politic. Their reaction made Sadat furious! He complained that the Soviet weapons supplied to him were second rate, and rejected the constant interference in Egyptian affairs by an army of over 20,000 Soviet military advisors. So, he expelled the lot of them—which dried up his supply of spare parts! In spite of this falling-out, he secured Syria's continued support and convinced the Soviets that even without the “help” of their advisors, an Arab victory in the Middle East would serve their purposes.

The Plan

Sadat's plan was based on several correct assumptions concerning the Israelis. He knew, for instance, that Israel was well aware of the massive buildup of Egyptian forces along the canal so he never bothered to conceal these actions. He maintained his troops at a high level of readiness, constantly maneuvering them

and running large-scale training exercises throughout the summer of 1973. As time passed, Israeli observers became accustomed to this level of activity and were lulled into a false sense of normalcy. Thus, when the Egyptians made their move, it came as a surprise—in spite of the fact that all preparations had been made in full view.

Next, the enormous power of the Israeli Air Force had to be neutralized. The solution to this problem came to the Egyptians from lessons learned in the "War of Attrition". American ECM technology had made Israeli planes nearly invulnerable to normal AA tactics. By turning the sky over their combat units into "killing zones" saturated with SAM and AA artillery fire, they believed the resulting shotgun effect would overwhelm Israel's defensive advantage.

The third Israeli advantage to be overcome was their legendary superiority in armored tactics. Sadat's staff came up with an imaginative solution to this problem as well. Egypt's inferior tank forces would not spearhead the initial attack in Sinai. Instead, they would be held back as an exploitation force. The inevitable Israeli armored counterattack would be met with infantry armed with enormous numbers of ATGMs, particularly the man-packed AT-3 "Sagger". Protected from air attack by the SAM umbrella and dug in against Israeli tank fire, Egyptian infantry was expected to break up this counterattack, allowing Egyptian armor to be set loose among the now exposed Israeli infantry and logistic elements.

To all this must be added the limited nature of Egyptian and Syrian war aims. Egypt's sole intent was to cross the canal in force, grab as much of the territory lost in 1967 as possible, and repel the expected Israeli 182 counterattack. Syria intended to retake the crest of the Golan Heights, especially around Mount Hermon. The main limiting factor in both countries' calculations was to be the effective limit of their anti-aircraft "umbrella".

Crossing the Canal

As planned, the Egyptian attack in Sinai and the Syrian attack in Golan commenced simultaneously at 1400, on October 6th. The Egyptian cross-canal assault was a masterpiece of pre-planning. Egyptian frogmen were the first to cross and were undetected. They planted explosives, both to assist in the crossing, and to block the Israeli oil pipeline running along the sand wall. Part of the Israeli defensive plan had been to open the valves on this pipeline in the event of just such an attack, turning the sand wall into a flaming inferno! Next, giant water cannons mounted on barges hosed

down the sand wall, tearing gaps in it. Fifty pontoon ferries were swiftly converted into ten bridges, providing the equivalent of a multi-lane highway for Egyptian troops and supplies to cross the canal. Across this "highway" poured three Egyptian mechanized infantry divisions carrying thousands of Sagger ATGMs and SA-7 SAM launchers.

Most of the Bar Lev strong points were overrun in the first few hours. Israeli artillery attempted to engage the bridgehead but was smothered by ferocious Egyptian counter-battery fire. But it was when the Israelis sent in their air force, that they met their first serious setback. Although the SA-7 proved to be somewhat ineffective, other Egyptian SAMs and the Soviet radar guided ZSU-23/4 self-propelled anti-aircraft gun system caused heavy losses among attacking Israeli fighter-bombers. In the first twenty-four hours the bridgehead was three kilometers deep and over five hundred tanks had safely crossed the canal.

Israeli armor now confidently swept forward to crush the Egyptians in their accustomed manner, but instead ran straight into swarms of Egyptian infantry "tank-killer" teams. The Israelis had forgotten a cardinal rule of combined arms warfare! They had allowed their tanks to advance without adequate infantry or artillery support. Dug-in Egyptian infantry made poor targets for Israeli tankers, and without infantry or artillery to assist them, Egyptian ATGMs shot the Israeli tanks to pieces. The Israelis suffered crippling losses while causing few casualties among their opponents. Israeli tank losses on October 6th *alone* came to over 50% of their total tank losses for the entire campaign! But the slaughter didn't stop there. At Qantara and other places over the next several days, unsupported Israeli tank assaults were torn to shreds.

By October 8th, Egyptians and Israelis had attacked and counterattacked all along the bridgehead. The front had now stabilized at approximately eight kilometers deep everywhere but in the center. Here, a dangerous gap had been left in the Egyptian lines east of the Great Bitter Lake, which was to be of immense significance later. The IDF staff now decided that the Syrian threat in the north was of greater consequence than the threat in Sinai and transferred most of their reserves to the Golan front.

The Golan Heights

Israeli positions along the Golan Heights included two weak points at Quneitra and Rafid. These would be where the Syrians would strike on October 6th. The attack began with a massive artillery bombardment and

a series of air strikes. The object of these attacks was to cover the advance of their engineers. The engineers quickly cut through Israeli barbed wire, cleared Israeli minefields, and threw temporary bridges across Israeli anti-tank ditches. Next came two Syrian infantry divisions who pinned down Israeli defenders and held open the gaps created by the engineers. Through these troops rushed two Syrian armored divisions to widen the gap and create havoc in the Israeli rear—a total of 1,300 tanks in all! At the same time, a Syrian helicopter-borne commando raid seized the Israeli observation post on Mount Hermon, capturing sixty prisoners.

The Israelis inflicted heavy casualties on the Syrians despite being taken by surprise and heavily outnumbered. Nevertheless the Syrians advanced with courage and determination regardless of casualties, and soon broke through the Israelis, hammering on toward the southwest. The Israelis countered by a tenacious holding action all along the line and calling for reinforcements. The 7th Armored Brigade was concentrated against the Quneitra thrust, and the “Barak” Armored Brigade against the Rafid breakthrough. Here too, as in Sinai, concentrated Arab anti-aircraft fire caused severe losses among Israeli supporting aircraft. And, as in Sinai, the fact that the Syrians had attacked by surprise prevented the Israelis from taking out Syrian anti-aircraft assets with preemptive air strikes.

Tank battles raged up and down the line with a fierceness not seen before in the Middle East. Tank fought tank at ranges of less than two hundred meters! Israeli tanks were simply overwhelmed by waves of determined Syrians and Israel’s traditional tactical superiority and sophisticated weaponry could not prevail in such a maelstrom. In just a few short hours, the “Barak Brigade” went down in a welter of blood and iron! The Syrian advance continued unabated. Soon, they began to encounter Israeli reserve units, which had

been thrown into the battle piecemeal in a desperate effort to slow the Syrian “steamroller”. By now, the Israelis had abandoned their strongholds in the southern Golan and the Syrians were less than a mile from the Sea of Galilee.

But here the Syrian advance ground to a halt. Israeli reserve units were arriving in strength now, and the exhausted, decimated Syrians could do no more. Their forward elements were driven back. The tide had turned. Two Israeli armored divisions arrived at the apex of the Syrian advance near Galilee late on October 7th and began to prepare a counter-offensive. This counter offensive reached the 1967 cease-fire line by October 10th but could advance no farther. The Syrians evacuated Quneitra, and the Israelis began to advance into Syria the next day.

The Syrians were spent. Their SAM umbrella had simply shot off most of its ammunition, and the Israeli air force began to shut it down. The Syrian defense system, built since the 1967 War, ran from Mount Hermon in the north to Roked Canyon in the south. It was well built, well sighted, and constructed in depth, but it was only partially manned. Syrian units, falling back to occupy it, suffered heavily in the Golan battles. On October 11th, the Israelis pierced this line at both its north and south ends, and advanced through heavy opposition. On October 12th, they encountered two Iraqi mechanized brigades, turned to face them, and bloodied them severely on October 13th. Except for the Israelis retaking the Mount Hermon position, and various inconclusive Arab counterattacks (Arab forces at this stage included Iraqis, Jordanians, Saudis, and Moroccans) between October 13th and 24th, the Golan Front had stabilized.

To be concluded in the next issue of Tac News.



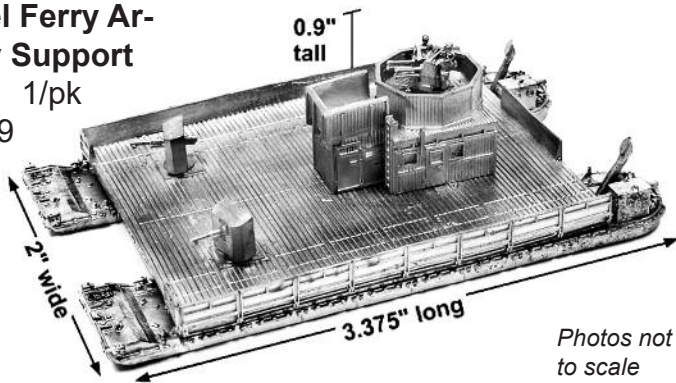
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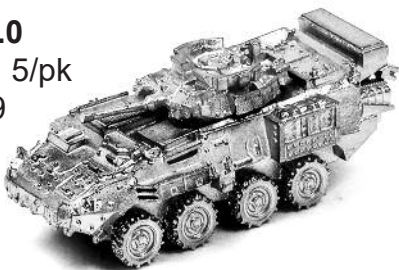
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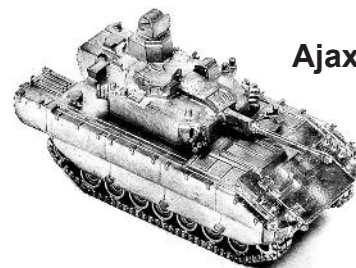


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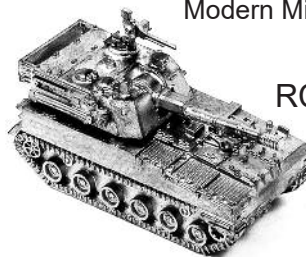


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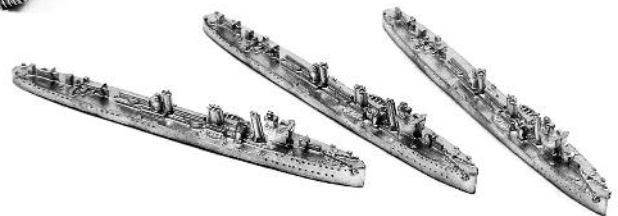
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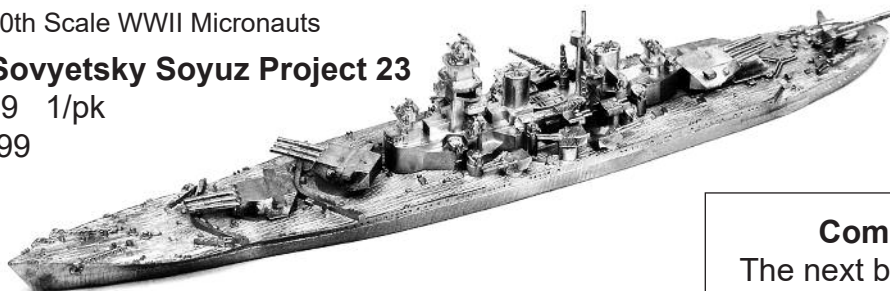
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