

The Honda and the Shield of David

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It was a British citizen who, at the beginning, would model how to wage war in Israel. In the 1930s, when tension between the Arab people and the Jewish-Zionist community became a full-fledged civil war in Palestine - which had been under British rule since World War I - the fierce British officer Zionist Orde Wingate helped the Jews create a commando unit called Special Night Squads (SNS).

Operating in small assault units, the SNS specialized in reconnaissance missions, incursions and sabotage operations in the Arab territories. According to Wingate's maxim "the offensive is the best defense", night attacks deep within enemy territory became the hallmark of the SNS. Although the unit was only active for one year, many soldiers, who would later become key figures in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), began their military career in the SNS - the most famous was Moshe Dayan—.

He himself would later describe Wingate as a "military genius and a wonderful person." Therefore, the unorthodox strategic legacy of Wingate has remained a fundamental element of Israel's military doctrine to this day - a strong tendency towards non-conventional offensive actions aimed at catching the enemy by surprise.

In August of 1953, Ariel Sharon created the infamous Unit 101 based on the doctrine of the SNS. Israeli leaders entrusted the IDF's first commando unit with risky attack missions in the territories of the neighboring Arab states that constituted safe havens for terrorist groups and Palestinian guerrillas.

Although the operations of Unit 101 were considered successful in terms of reducing cross-border attacks against Israel, some resulted in multiple civilian casualties. So the unit was integrated into the newly founded Israeli paratrooper unit in January 1954.

However, Unit 101 became the prototype of Israel's special operations forces. It was the first unit to skip the usual chain of command, since it was directly subordinated to the General Staff. Unit 101 introduced innovative infiltration and attack tactics and until today has been considered an example to follow for the operations of Israeli commandos.

In 1957 the Sayeret Matkal, the equivalent of Israel to the Delta Force or the British SAS, was founded. Originally the unit was created to obtain intelligence far behind the enemy lines. However, since the 1970s, the tasks of the unit include hostage rescue missions and anti-terrorist missions.

At first the Sayeret Matkal was a totally secret unit. Its members were carefully selected, usually based on personal recommendations. To this day the soldiers of the Sayeret Matkal can not publicly reveal their identity or wear any insignia. The aspirants surpass a two-year training period that focuses on close combat (CQB), navigation, camouflage, reconnaissance and survival in enemy territory.



In the head, hostages after their rescue in Entebbe in 1976. Photo of the Israeli Government. On these lines, commandos of the Israeli army during their training. Photograph of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)

Many times the veterans of the Sayeret Matkal reach influential positions in the military field or in Israeli politics. Ehud Barak, for example, is the most decorated soldier in Israel. He was Chief of Staff of the IDF between 1991 and 1995 and Prime Minister of Israel between 1999 and 2001. Benjamin Netanyahu, current Prime Minister of Israel, is also a veteran of the Sayeret Matkal.

Some of its operations are practically legendary in the history of command missions. One of them is the Operation Primavera de Juventud. After the dramatic hostage taking of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists during the Munich Olympic Games, Israel began a hunt for terrorists and responsible instigators.

On April 9, 1973 fourteen fighters of the Sayeret Matkal under the command of Ehud Barak went directly into the wolf burrow —desembarcaron by inflatable boats on the beach of Beirut undetected, where the PLO had its headquarters at the time — Mossad agents, who had arrived earlier to recognize the city, picked them up in rented cars and took them to an apartment building. Meanwhile, paratrooper units and Shayetet 13 attacked several targets in Beirut to generate confusion.

To mingle among the people, the soldiers of the Sayeret disguised themselves as couples. Ehud Barak put on a tight black dress and stuffed the bra with hand grenades. Around 01:30 in the morning, the teams of the Sayeret blew up the door of their three white apartments and neutralized them. Just 30 minutes later, the Israeli commandos were going to the beach back to their boats to leave the Lebanese coast.

Another famous operation took the Sayeret Matkal far from her native land. On June 27, 1976, Palestinian and German terrorists hijacked Air France's 139 flight from Tel Aviv to Paris. Finally, they diverted the plane to the airport in Entebbe, where Idi Amin - the infamous dictator of Uganda - welcomed the terrorists.

Once the Gentile occupants - not Jews - were released, 105 Jewish hostages and the French crew of the plane remained in the hands of the kidnappers. They demanded the release of terrorists imprisoned in Israel, Germany and other countries. After several days of heated deliberations, the Israeli leaders decided to launch a risky rescue operation. Of course, the Sayeret Matkal was the spearhead of the operation. The unit was under the command of Yoni Netanyahu, the brother of the current Prime Minister of Israel.

On the afternoon of July 3, four Israeli Hercules planes carrying 180 commandos, several vehicles and an air command and emergency health center began their 4,000-kilometer trip to Entebbe. Near midnight, the first Israeli plane landed inadvertently for the Ugandan control tower, taking advantage of the concealment provided by the darkness and a British plane that was landing at that very moment.

The fighters of the Sayeret surprised the kidnappers, while Israeli paratroopers took control of the airport. The entire operation lasted less than an hour. Afterwards, the hostages were already flying back to Israel. Although the mission was a success, the death of three hostages who fell in the crossfire and Yoni Netanyahu, who was seriously injured, overshadowed the operation called "Yonatan" in memory of the fallen commander of the Sayeret Matkal.

The Shayetet 13 is a naval unit of special forces that is dedicated to naval infiltrations, reconnaissance, sabotage, hostage rescue and attack operations. The Israeli equivalent of the US Navy SEALs participated in most of Israel's major military actions. In the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the forces of the Shayetet 13 infiltrated Egyptian ports and sank five warships.



Commands of the Shayetet 13 during his training. Photograph of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)

Since the early 1980s, naval commandos have operated mainly in Lebanon, fighting against Hezbollah. Typical missions are the interception of ships that transport supplies for the terrorist organization, the destruction of enemy installations and the explosive blasting.

During the second intifada, the Shayetet commandos intercepted several ships carrying weapons for the Palestinians, such as the cargo ship *Karine A* on January 3, 2002. The Mossad of Israel had located the freighter and was convinced that they were carrying a large cargo of weapons for the Palestinians from Iran. Suspiciously, 80 containers had been loaded onto the ship on the Iranian coast in the middle of the night.

Now I was on my way to the Suez Canal. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ordered the Shayetet 13 to capture the ship in the Red Sea to prevent Iranian weapons from reaching the Palestinians. 500 kilometers from its base port, Eilat, Israel's Navy was acting at the limit of its range.

Literally at the last moment before the small flotilla and helicopters and support aircraft had to turn back due to lack of fuel, a Shayetet officer spotted the *Karine A*. By helicopter and inflatable boats, the members of the Shayetet boarded the ship and took it in just seven minutes without firing a single shot. "Do you see anything?" Asked Shaul Mofaz, IDF Chief of Staff, who supervised the operation from his air command center.

However, the soldiers only found sacks of rice and toys. Was the information incorrect? Only the interrogation of the ship's captain provided the desired information. Hidden in the bow, the commandos found what they were looking for: a huge cargo of weapons. In total, 64 tons of

weapons worth 15 million dollars were on board, including more than 300 surface-to-surface missiles, almost 400 counter-rockets, grenades, mortars, rifles and 500 landmines.

In the 1970s, Muki Betser, an official of the Sayeret Matkal, founded the Shaldag, command unit of the Israeli Air Force, as an operational lesson of the Yom Kippur War. The Air Force had suffered significant losses due to the batteries of Soviet missiles on Egyptian soil. An adequate recognition and a timely neutralization of these sites would have saved the air weapon many problems.

The first litmus test for the Shaldag occurred during the first Lebanon War in 1982. The Air Force commandos managed to destroy the Syrian air defenses in Lebanon. In the next battle against the Syrian Air Force, the Israeli Air Force claimed an impressive victory by shooting down more than 80 enemy aircraft. In the mid-1990s, the Shaldag became a multipurpose airborne special forces unit, increasingly focused on hostage rescue missions and anti-terrorist missions.

Since December 2015, the IDF Oz command brigade has combined several special forces units. The Duvdevan specializes in covert missions and is part of Israel's Mista'arvim forces, that is, soldiers who operate undercover in the Palestinian territories.

In their meticulous training, members of the Duvdevan learn to speak Arabic in the Palestinian dialect, as well as local Islamic and Arab traditions and their typical behavior. In addition, the Oz brigade integrates the counter-guerrilla unit Egoz, the desert war specialists of the Rimon and the Maglan, the long-range reconnaissance unit.

Of course, Israel's special forces enjoy high prestige in the IDF and have access to the best candidates. While at the beginning the command units were kept so secret that their members were recruited by personal recommendations, today they are open to recruits, who have to successfully pass a selection process of several days. Unlike the special forces of many other armies, the soldiers of the Israeli commandos are mostly replacement.

Since the 1970s, all units of Israel's special forces have been increasingly involved in anti-terrorist operations. Although operational demands have become more complex, Israel's Special Forces remain true to the basic principles of the SNS and Unit 101. Offensive, tactically elegant, audacious and usually unconventional operations.

Translated by Jorge Tierno Rey, author of [The Tactical Shooting Blog](#).

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