

crossing idea was like some siren song, beckoning the commanders on, teasing them to dare and reach for the prize.⁹¹

The IDF, driven in some measure by overweening pride, underestimated its thrice-defeated foe, and many officers assumed a quick and easy victory would ensue from their cavalry-like counterattacks. The subsequent rude awakening jarred the Israeli military, as evidenced by Gonen's terse comment at day's end: "It's not the Egyptian Army of 1967."⁹²

For the Egyptians, the eighth of October, in sharp contrast to the Israeli experience, proved "the decisive day of the crossing operation."⁹³ The Egyptian Armed Forces had defeated a division-size Israeli counterattack, thereby ensuring the success of the first phase of Operation Badr. Euphoria spread throughout the Egyptian High Command. Despite clear tactical successes, however, not all had worked perfectly for the Egyptians. During the morning and afternoon of 8 October, Shazli, the chief of the General Staff, had personally visited the 2d and 7th Infantry Divisions on the east bank to gather a firsthand assessment of the tactical situation and to congratulate the troops on their accomplishments. Two concerns surfaced that day. First, Israeli air strikes had damaged so many bridge sections that the Egyptians had lost the equivalent of three heavy bridges of the original twelve. These losses left only four heavy bridges in reserve and one operating for each division, raising some concern for supply in the weeks ahead, should losses continue at the same rate.⁹⁴ Second, in a few sectors, the infantry divisions had failed to reach their tactical objectives, falling short by several kilometers. As a result of these failures, both field army commanders, Major General Sa'ad Ma'mun for Second Army and Major General 'Abd al-Mun'im Wassel for Third Army, pressed for the implementation of an operational pause to consolidate their bridgeheads and to reorganize their forces before contemplating an offensive to the passes.⁹⁵

Shazli's counterpart in Israel also journeyed to the front. To gain a firsthand appreciation of the extent of reverses in the Sinai, Elazar visited Southern Command. Just after midnight on 9 October, he and Dayan met with senior field commanders at Gebel Umm Hashiba to assess the military situation. Now, a modicum of realism and reassessment descended upon the military leadership, brought about by the harsh realities of the battlefield. Elazar wanted to suspend offensive operations in the Sinai for at least twenty-four hours while the IDF focused their effort on finishing off the Syrians. With only 400 tanks left in the Sinai, Israel could ill afford to wage major offensives on two fronts simultaneously, and the chief of the General Staff instructed his subordinates to avoid any battles of attrition. Reorganization and conservation were the top priorities; the countercrossing to the west bank would take place at a later date.⁹⁶ Now, a heightened concern for casualties began to emerge within the Israeli senior command.

TURNING THE TIDE. Meanwhile, the magnitude of success achieved by the Egyptian Armed Forces during the first three days of the war had pleasantly surprised senior officials in Egypt, and confidence soared among the political and military elite. Pressures from various sources mounted on Sadat to exploit the favorable tactical situation by moving immediately to the Sinai passes. More concerned about political ends than military means, Sadat remained unyielding and refused to countenance a quick expansion of the war.

At 0130 on 9 October, Heikal broached the subject of the passes with Sadat, who dismissed the notion out of hand: "As I told Hafez Asad, territory isn't important; what is important is to exhaust the enemy. I don't want to make the mistake of pushing too fast just for the sake of

occupying more territory. We must make the enemy bleed.” Nonetheless, Sadat gave Heikal permission to call Ahmad Ismail. At 0300, Heikal telephoned Center Ten and spoke with Shazli, who declined to wake the war minister from his sleep and politely stated his own opposition to the idea. Finally, at 0715 that same morning, Heikal talked with Ahmad Ismail, who unequivocally supported Shazli’s position.⁹⁷

The issue failed to die there, however. Later that morning, on 9 October, the fourth day of the war, a group of senior officers also approached Ahmad Ismail, advocating an immediate offensive to the passes without an operational pause. These officers believed that stopping military operations would result in the transfer of the initiative to the Israelis, who could then attack at their leisure. Dismissing their arguments, the cautious war minister underscored his desire to continue inflicting heavy damage on the Israelis. Fighting on the defense, he felt, best achieved that objective. Going to the passes was thus out of the question—for the time being.⁹⁸

The most important voice in the debate among senior Egyptian commanders was that of Anwar Sadat, and on 8 October, a day earlier than the above meeting, Ahmad Ismail had already received marching orders from the president—implement an operational pause.⁹⁹ Sadat wanted time to conduct secret diplomacy with the United States and also sought to inflict heavy casualties on the Israelis, making the war a costly one for them. In this, Sadat remained constant.

Even the Soviets encountered a stubborn Sadat on the issue of a wider war. Colonel General Mahmut Gareev, a former senior Russian military adviser in Egypt, noted how Sadat had consistently told Soviet advisers that he wanted to gain land east of Suez, even as little as “ten centimeters,” in order to draw world attention to the Arab-Israeli problem. Vladimir Vinogradov, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo from 1970 to 1974, recalled that when in the middle of the war he raised the issue of more Russian military support for Syria, Sadat curtly responded: “Let it [Syria] go on the defensive and wage guerrilla warfare. Our main goal is to knock out as many enemy force[s] as possible.”¹⁰⁰ As Sadat had outlined in his strategic directive of 5 October, inflicting heavy casualties on the Israelis constituted a key military objective of the war, and the Egyptian leader remained firmly wedded to that goal. Still, despite his political goals, Sadat would learn that he could not ignore the dynamic of the battlefield in the Sinai and on the Golan.

The ninth of October, nonetheless, still fit nicely into Sadat’s war strategy of inflicting maximum casualties. All along the front, the Egyptians conducted probing attacks to expand their bridgeheads, and Israeli commanders often responded with costly counterattacks. In Sharon’s sector, for example, the 16th Infantry Division attempted on 9 October to seize some important ridges; in consequence, Brigadier General Shafik Mirti Sedrak, commander of the 3d Mechanized Infantry Brigade, lost his life while attacking with his right battalion. Sharon, who opposed Elazar’s decision to move onto the defensive and reconstitute, decided to retaliate and ordered a number of counterattacks throughout the day in clear violation of Elazar’s intent to avoid battles of attrition. In response to Sharon’s moves, Mu’nim, the commander of the Egyptian Second Army, released a tank battalion from the 14th Armored Brigade to help Brigadier General ‘Abd Rab al-Nabi Hafiz, the commander of the 16th Infantry Division, thwart penetrations. Meanwhile, Colonels Amnon Reshef’s Armored Brigade and Tuvia Raviv’s Armored Brigade led several attacks to gain control of positions at Hamutal, Televiza, and Machshir, but to no avail. Lieutenant Colonel Shaul Shalev, a battalion commander from Reshef’s brigade, lost his life that day. By nightfall, Sharon had lost some fifty tanks, a number comparable to that of Adan’s

losses the previous day, and without any gains, although Reshef did extricate the garrison from the Purkan strongpoint.¹⁰¹

Upon learning of Sharon's brash action, Elazar became livid. But rather than remove Sharon, a controversial but innovative commander with political connections to the opposition party, Elazar opted to replace Gonen. Though a hero in the Six Day War, Gonen lacked the character and temperament to be a theater commander. Furthermore, his two subordinates, Adan and Sharon, had once been his superiors, which further complicated matters. Gonen's worst flaw, however, was that he remained preoccupied with current tactical events. As Elazar remarked later: "I think about tomorrow . . . That's my job. Whoever's shooting now, neither the front commander nor I can help anymore. That's a divisional commander's problem. I'm constantly telling him: Shmulik [Gonen], let's talk about what will happen tomorrow."¹⁰² Gonen had failed to transition from being a tactical to an operational commander.

Part of Gonen's problem was that the Egyptians maintained the initiative—something the Israelis found unfamiliar and unsettling. But Elazar could not avoid the critical issue of competent command, and he decided to replace Gonen with former chief of the General Staff, Haim Bar-Lev. Although beset with his own share of problems in controlling Sharon, Bar-Lev brought a firmer hand to the Sinai theater. To avoid the appearance of firing Gonen, Elazar retained the general as a deputy to the front commander when Bar-Lev assumed command on 10 October. The next major round in the struggle would come in less than four days.

By 10 October, both the Egyptians and the Israelis had settled into their own version of an operational pause. During this phase in the war, Egyptian forces conducted probing attacks designed to expand their bridgeheads to at least the Artillery Road, while the Israelis, for the most part, proceeded to foil these efforts. Elazar suspended offensive operations based on military necessity—the IDF could ill afford launching simultaneous offensives on two fronts, and the Israelis were not yet finished with the Syrians. Although Northern Command had pushed the Syrian Army off the Golan Heights by 10 October, the Israelis wished to finish off the Syrian Armed Forces before turning to the Sinai front. Consequently, on 10 October, the Israeli cabinet approved an offensive into Syria with the goal of moving within artillery range of Damascus by capturing Sasa. With this drive, the Israelis hoped to take Syria effectively out of the war by forcing Asad to accept a cease-fire. The attack began at 1100 on 11 October.

Despite the Egyptians' strong position, Sadat could not, for political reasons, ignore the military situation on the Golan. The Syrian inability to capture the Golan Heights and their forced retreat back into Syria had complicated matters for the Egyptian president. At the beginning of the war, Syria threatened Israel directly, forcing the IDF to focus their main effort on the northern front. By 9 October, however, the military situation was becoming desperate for the Syrian Armed Forces, and pleas for help from Damascus were becoming more pronounced, eventually compelling Sadat to make a tough decision.

On 11 October, a special emissary from Asad arrived in Cairo appealing to the Egyptians to launch a major attack toward the passes to relieve Israeli pressure on the Golan front. Sadat was pressed to respond positively. To abandon Syria would have undermined his credibility in the Arab world after the war, and Egypt relied heavily on financial assistance from oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Sadat was therefore compelled, out of political and economic necessity, to demonstrate solidarity with the Arab cause against Israel.



Israeli Tank Battles

Israeli Centurion tank from Nir's Brigade moving on Egyptian commandos, 12 October

Whatever the exact set of motivations, Sadat decided to heed Asad's plea for help, a decision that significantly altered the course of the war in the Sinai. In the early hours of 12 October, Sadat ordered an offensive toward the passes for the next day with the purpose of deflecting Israeli attention from the Syrian front. No forces from the five infantry divisions would participate in the attack; their mission remained to consolidate their bridgeheads on the east bank. At 0630 on 13 October, the attack forces would come from the mechanized infantry and armored divisions. Ahmad Ismail directed his two field army commanders to commence an offensive employing armored and mechanized brigades (taken from the Egyptians' operational reserves).¹⁰³

Sadat's order sparked serious opposition at Center Ten and at both field army headquarters. Shazli and both field army commanders led the argument against the attack, attempting to convince Ahmad Ismail that the time had passed for moving outside the air defense umbrella. But the war minister had no choice but to obey his supreme commander. Ahmad Ismail did agree to postpone the offensive twenty-four hours to 0630 on 14 October, thereby hoping to obtain the additional time necessary to enhance the plan's chance of success.¹⁰⁴

As anticipated by many senior Egyptian officers, the attack on the morning of 14 October proved an unmitigated disaster—a drive attempted too late and with insufficient forces (see map 5). Using four axes of advance, Egyptian forces composed of one mechanized infantry and four armored brigades attacked the Israelis over open terrain with the sun in their eyes. IDF forces waited in defensive positions, armed with an undisclosed number of recently arrived sophisticated antitank TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles from the United States. On 11 October, the IDF had established a special course for rapidly training instructors on the use of the TOWs.¹⁰⁵ This gave them ample time to train units for action by 14 October.

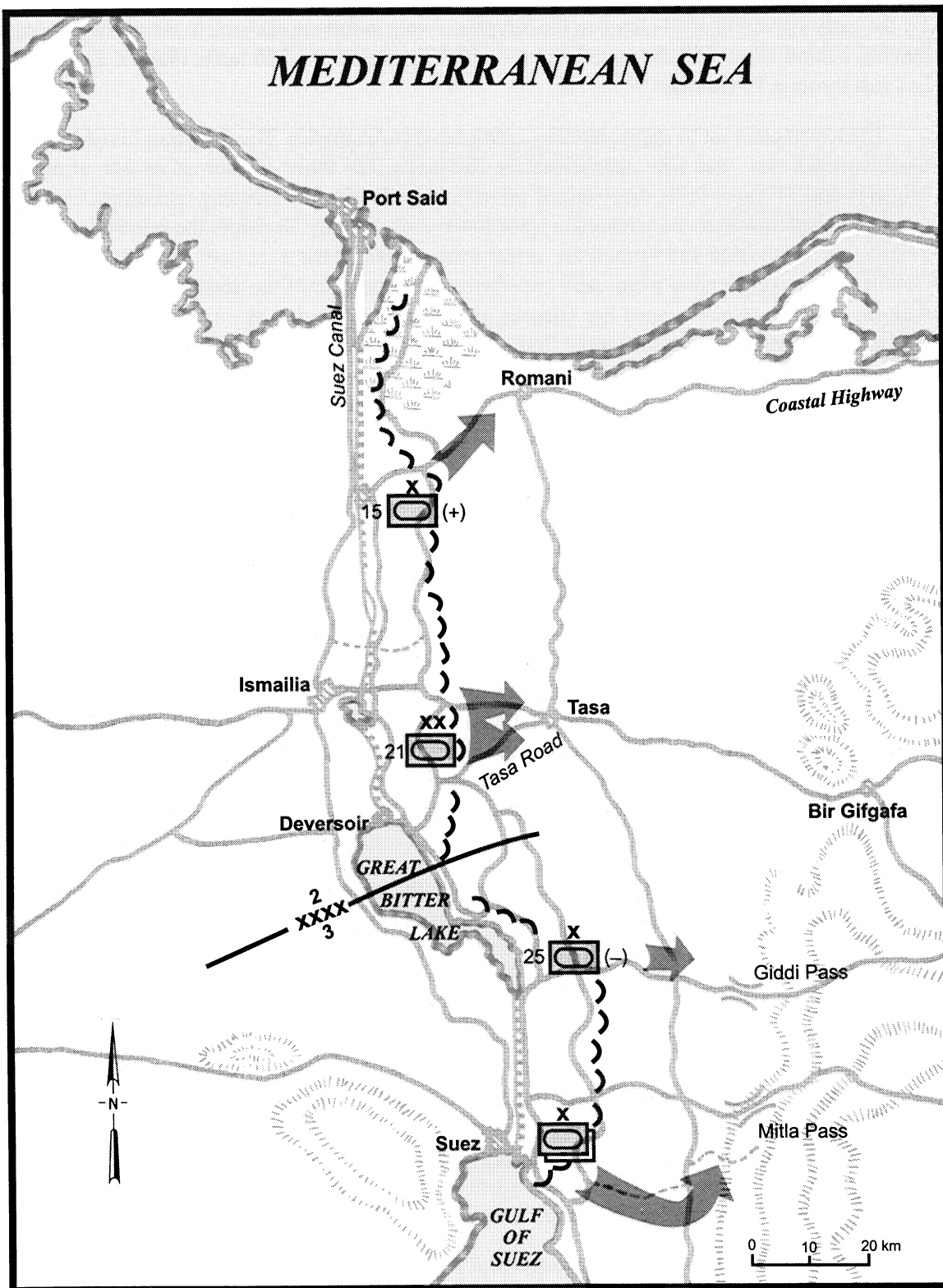
By the early afternoon of 14 October, the Egyptians were in full retreat back to their bridgeheads, leaving behind some 250 destroyed tanks—which surpassed the 240 tanks that the Egyptians had lost through 13 October!¹⁰⁶

The losses can best be appreciated by citing concrete examples. The Egyptian 21st Armored Division began the war with approximately 280 tanks, 124 tanks in each of its two armored brigades and 31 tanks in its mechanized infantry brigade. For the crossing operation, General Command had attached one armored brigade to the 16th Infantry Division; the remainder of the 21st Armored Division had formed the operational reserve on the west bank. To conduct the 14 October offensive, General Command transferred the remainder of the division to the east bank with the order to attack toward Bir Gifgafa. By the end of the day, the 1st Armored Brigade, which had experienced combat for the first time, had only sixty-six tanks (47 percent of its tanks having been lost), whereas the 14th Armored Brigade, already combat seasoned from the crossing operation, possessed only thirty-nine tanks (with 69 percent of its force now lost). Fortunately for the division, the 18th Mechanized Infantry Brigade saw no action that day and as a result maintained its full complement of thirty-one tanks.¹⁰⁷ The 21st Armored Division had thus lost over 50 percent of its tank force by the end of 14 October (down to 136 from a prewar figure of 280 tanks).

The Egyptian 3d Armored Brigade from the elite 4th Armored Division illustrates another example of the lethality of the Sinai battlefield. Assigned to the Third Army's operational reserve, the brigade spent the first week of the war in relative calm on the west bank. Then, it crossed the Suez Canal during the night of 12–13 October and launched its fateful attack toward Mitla Pass on the 14th into the waiting arms of the Israeli forces. Starting with 124 T-55 tanks, the Egyptian brigade lost sixty tanks, nine armored personnel carriers, and virtually all of its artillery pieces in less than eight hours. By midafternoon, the brigade had retreated back into the 19th Infantry Division's bridgehead with its combat power essentially down to that of two tank battalions.¹⁰⁸ Overall, the Egyptians never recovered from this major military setback, and it remained for the IDF to exploit this sudden turn of events.

With this Egyptian defeat, Israeli commanders quickly grasped that the tide of war had shifted in their favor. That night, Elazar called Meir with the good news and gave his assessment of the new strategic situation facing Israel in the Sinai. “Golda, it will be all right. We are back to ourselves and they [the Egyptians] are back to themselves.”¹⁰⁹ Egyptian losses supported Elazar's optimistic appraisal, for Israeli intelligence estimates placed the number of Egyptian tanks destroyed at 280—a loss that shifted the balance of combat power to Israel.¹¹⁰ Events would prove that the initiative had clearly passed to the IDF, and, as a result, the Egyptian Armed Forces would display some of the weaknesses that they had exhibited in their poor performance in the Six Day War. Yet, despite much reason for optimism, the Israeli political and military leadership would learn, *again*, that the Egyptians had not completely reverted to their old selves. Rather, the Egyptian Armed Forces would once again demonstrate their new-found combat mettle, thereby creating more surprises for Israel in the latter part of the war.

The 14th of October, though an unequivocal Israeli military success, carried with it a painful side for Israel. After some procrastination, partly out of a desire not to alarm the public, Elazar finally authorized the first official release to the media of casualty figures: 656 known dead Israeli soldiers in the first eight days of fighting, among them Major General Avraham Mandler, the



Map 5. Sinai front, Egyptian attack, 14 October 1973



Mid-East Wars: The Yom Kippur War

A tank's-eye view during an Israeli holding action in north Sinai

commander of the 252d Armored Division, killed by an artillery shell the day before. By now, many Israelis on the home front had realized that all was not well in the war, but this first public acknowledgment of the numbers killed gave concrete form to the extent of the human tragedy so far. In the 1956 and 1967 wars, both of less than a week's duration, newspapers had published the names of those killed in battle after the end of hostilities. This time, however, military censors had instructions to prevent the publication of any obituaries submitted by bereaved families until the end of the war. Citing the need for secrecy at a news conference, Dayan admonished the nation to delay its mourning until the resolution of the armed struggle: "We are in the midst of war, and we can't give public expression at this time to our deep grief for the fallen."¹¹ His words underscored the seriousness of the war, and Israel's national will focused on winning the conflict before confronting its tragic dimensions.

THE ISRAELI RESURGENCE. The sheer magnitude of the military defeat shocked, stunned, and demoralized the Egyptian High Command and energized the IDF. While Egyptian field officers attempted to regain their composure and regroup their battered forces, senior Israeli commanders prepared to take advantage of the new strategic situation in the Sinai. Late in the evening on 14 October, Elazar approached the cabinet, seeking approval for a crossing to the west bank—an operation called Stouthearted Men. Confirmation came at approximately 0030 on 15 October. The operation began with high hopes of achieving a quick victory on the battlefield.

Stouthearted Men called for three Israeli armored divisions to cross at Deversoir on the northern tip of the Great Bitter Lakes and encircle the Egyptian Third Army by surrounding Suez City, thereby cutting off the Egyptian troops on the east bank from their supply bases.¹¹² Israeli intelligence had estimated that the Egyptians had lost between 250 and 280 tanks on 14 October, which left them with only 700 tanks operational on both banks of the Suez. Southern Command possessed roughly the same number of tanks divided into four divisions: Sharon 240, Adan 200, Magen 140, and Sasson 125. Despite a roughly equal number of tanks on both sides, the Israelis could concentrate their armor at the crossing site of Deversoir, where the Egyptians had positioned the southern flank of the 16th Infantry Brigade. To meet the Israeli effort, Brigadier General Abd Rab al-Nabi Hafiz, the Egyptian commander of the 16th Infantry Division, could rely only on his divisional reserve and elements from the battered 21st Armored Division.

For the crossing operation, Sharon's 143d Armored Division would secure both sides of the Suez Canal and the two roads, Akavish and Tirtur, that led to the crossing site on the east bank (see map 6). Adan would then cross over with his 162d Armored Division to destroy the Egyptian air defense system, thus allowing the Israeli Air Force to provide needed ground support as well as threaten Cairo. If all went according to plan, the 252d Armored Division, now under the command of Brigadier General Kalman Magen (who replaced the fallen Mandler on 13 October), would cross over and relieve Sharon on the west bank. Adan would then race south to capture Suez City, thereby surrounding Third Army. Sharon, meanwhile, would provide flank protection for the dash south. To support the effort, Elazar planned to insert a paratroop force by helicopter to secure the key position of Gebel Ataka.

Based on the assumption that the Egyptians had returned to their form of 1967, Operation Stouthearted Men optimistically planned for a one-day crossing of the Suez Canal and for another day to conduct a lightning dash to Suez City to encircle Third Army. This forty-eight-hour timetable was completely unrealistic. Again, the Egyptians exhibited unexpected resilience, even when confronted with Israeli units in their operational rear. Again, the Israelis discovered that this was not the Egyptian Army of 1967.

Sharon, as noted, had received the mission of securing the access routes and crossing site. To draw Egyptian attention away from Deversoir, Raviv's Armored Brigade would launch a diversionary attack toward Televizia and Hamutal. Meanwhile, Reshef's Armored Brigade, with the mission of securing the crossing site and the route to it, would embark on a southwesterly route south of Tirtur and Akavish Roads. Once on Lexicon Road and heading north, Reshef planned to secure Deversoir with one force, push another force north and northeast to widen the crossing site, and send a third force eastward to open Tirtur and Akavish Roads. To facilitate the movement of troops and equipment across the Suez Canal, Southern Command hoped to capture some Egyptian bridges intact and to bring forward its own heavy bridge, pulled by a tank company. After Reshef secured Deversoir, Colonel Danni Matt's 600 paratroopers would cross over to the west bank during the night of 15–16 October, supported by a tank company from Haim Erez' Armored Brigade. The remainder of Erez' brigade would tow a preconstructed bridge to Deversoir, using Akavish Road. Once in place, the remainder of Erez' brigade would cross in rapid fashion to secure the bridgehead on the west bank. Sharon's command and control would stretch from Raviv, east of Artillery Road, to Matt, west of Deversoir.

