

THE “LESSONS LEARNED” TRAP AND HOW TO AVOID IT: DRAWING FROM THE ISRAELI ARMOURED EXPERIENCE, 1948-1973¹

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ABSTRACT The following essay explores some of the problems with “lessons learned.” It offers a few tentative observations on the limitations and dangers of lessons. To illustrate these (but not necessarily prove them), it then looks at the experiences of the Israel Defence Forces, particularly its armoured forces, from 1948 to 1973. Finally, three recommendations discuss how military organizations might reduce the danger of lessons leading them astray.

Introduction

In the last 30 or so years, Western militaries have invested significant resources to capture, maintain, and disseminate all manners of “lessons learned.”² And yet, the danger of misunderstanding or misusing these experiences remains as high as

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² For the purposes of this paper, “lessons learned” refer to practical generalizations, advice, and prescriptions distilled from particular experiences.

ever. On the one hand, this should not surprise us – the problem is an old one, presenting itself again and again throughout history. These “self-inflicted” wounds often result from military leaders failing to actually study that historical record, missing in the process some seemingly obvious truths about lessons learned. But for those who have studied the past carefully, what then? Perhaps in some instances, we should be surprised. In either case, as warnings to those who will listen, this author offers here five tentative observations, based on his own reading of military history thus far, on the limitations and dangers of lessons learned.

1) Lessons come from human observation. And humans often misperceive things – sometimes terribly so.

2) Lessons based on past success may, when applied to the future, result in failure.

3) Therefore, lessons may not transfer to other battles, campaigns, theatres, or wars.

4) Lessons regarding the enemy – particularly those in a tactical sense – generally have a short “shelf-life.” As you adapt to him, he adapts to you, and so what you learned from past encounters often becomes irrelevant or obsolete.

5) Only in combat can an armed force truly validate new ideas based on lessons learned. The results of all other “tests,” (i.e. exercises, models, simulations, etc.) therefore, should remain tentative and inconclusive. By the same token, even if an idea does prove valid, there is no telling how long it will remain so (see points 2 and 3).

To illustrate – but not necessarily prove – these observations (trying to do so would require a great deal more space and discussion of many other cases), a brief examination of the experiences of the Israel Defence Forces, particularly with its armoured forces, from 1948 to 1973, will suffice. Such an

examination should prove particularly useful to the Baltic States, since, at least from a military point of view, these countries share a great deal in common with Israel. Each is a relatively small entity geographically; each borders a much larger, historically hostile neighbour; and each receives significant military aid.

The Queen's Reign

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) drew its first breath during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Consisting chiefly of infantry units – organizations of men who, whether marching or riding into battle, had the task of killing the enemy (often in close combat) and occupying his position – the nascent IDF relied almost entirely on its “Queen of Battle” (the traditional description for the infantry) to achieve its operational goals. There were at least five reasons for this. The first (and most obvious) came down to simple necessity. The IDF lacked sufficient numbers of equipment for other types of ground forces, namely armoured vehicles, and, even more particularly, tanks. The Israeli armoured force started the war as a collection of ‘poor man’s’ armoured cars – trucks jerry-rigged with concrete and steel plates – and ended as a motley crew of tanks, half-tracks, and other armoured vehicles. While growing during the course of the fighting, it remained, comparatively speaking, incredibly small, especially in tanks. (Indeed, when the guns fell silent, just four could still take to the field, with the rest damaged, destroyed, or under repairs) (van Creveld 2002, pp. 157-158).

The performance and reliability of tanks during the war (and for years beyond) provided a second reason. In contrast to their motorized and mechanized brethren, armour forces gave poor showings for a variety of reasons. The most troublesome of all appears to have been their tendency to break down or suffer other mechanical failures. This proved the case so often that it caused IDF commanders to cancel numerous operations, which certainly

did little to engender any trust in, or affection for, the armoured forces (Horowitz and Luttwak 1983, pp. 126-7).

A third reason centred on the view, held by many Israeli senior commanders, that highly-trained, well-led infantry units (closely supported by its sister arms whenever possible, of course) formed the decisive arm (English and Gudmundsson 1994, pp. 167-171, and Horowitz and Luttwak 1983, pp. 118, 126, and 131). Thanks to this belief, armoured forces in the 1948 War served as a handmaiden to the infantry, providing support in the form of machine gun fire and main gun rounds.

Somewhat ironically, Israel's enemies provided a fourth reason for the IDF's approach of "armour supports, infantry conquers". The Jordanians, Syrians, and Egyptians employed their tanks in exactly the same manner. Thus, with few situations for Israeli tanks to fight their Arab counterparts (taking for granted the debatable idea that tanks provide the best means of killing other tanks), the IDF thought its use of tanks as a supporting arm a natural one.

The fifth reason – and probably the most important – concerned the almost total lack of understanding on the part of IDF officers (again, particularly those in the senior ranks) on what tanks could do. Indeed, the vast majority of these men (exceptions did exist) appear to have possessed only the most basic grasp of the nature, capabilities, and limitations of these steel war machines (Morris 2009, p. 85, and Luttwak and Horowitz 1983, pp. 126-27, 131-132, and 148-153). Israeli commanders so lacked an understanding of armour that, even if they had begun the war with a respectable number of tanks, they likely would have used them in exactly the same way they did historically. (The few exceptions to this probably would have taken the form of employing tanks to patrol stretches of road, escort convoys, and engage in the occasional tank-on-tank duel, which, it stands to reason, would have occurred more by accident than design).

The senior officer who perhaps most personified this view was the famous (and infamous) Moshe Dayan, who served in various military positions during the War for Independence, and, beginning in 1953, became the IDF's Chief of the General Staff. Dayan, like many of his contemporaries, distrusted the mechanical reliability of tanks, thinking they would break down early and often in the fighting. Furthermore, he found tanks too slow to keep up with the infantry, which, following the 1948 War, the IDF equipped with trucks and, to a lesser degree, American-built M-3 half-tracks (Hecht 2015, pp. 5-6). In the next war, Dayan and most of the IDF high command hoped to use speed to defeat its enemies. That next war, known to the Israelis as Operation Kadesh, would come in 1956. Of Dayan's views on tanks just before and during the first days of the conflict, Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld notes:

At Kalkiliya in October 1956 [during the Suez Campaign], he had ruled out the use of armor, thereby leading to unnecessary casualties; when the first plans for the Sinai Campaign were being drawn up he even raised the absurd proposal that the tanks should be made to follow the infantry on transporters. Indeed, the IDF's regard for the armored corps was so low that when Dayan offered [Chaim] Laskov the commanding job [of the corps] in July 1956, the latter considered it a calculated insult (which it may well have been) and came close to tendering his resignation (van Creveld 2002, p. 158).

Prior to the 1956 War, therefore, the Israeli armoured force remained an ill-regarded and ill-understood arm. That started to change after the campaign, however, thanks mostly to the brilliant (and initially unplanned) successes of the 7th Armoured Brigade. According to the brigade's commander Uri Ben Ari, these victories had been momentous, even transformative. Tanks, in his view, had

become the new decisive arm, thus displacing the ‘Queen of the Battle’ – the infantry. Most IDF officers – including those who once looked down upon armour – seemed to agree. Even Dayan, now having seen the ability of tanks, changed his mind and became a firm supporter. The IDF subsequently (and significantly) increased funding to the armoured corps, and transferred a number of first-rate officers to its ranks. One of these soldiers included Israel Tal, a man who, along with other bright officers, would work to enshrine the tank’s position as master of the killing grounds – or so he thought (van Creveld 2002, p. 159).

Behold the New Monarch

By 1964, despite the great shift in attitude toward tanks, the latest Israeli doctrinal publications still maintained a more or less balanced view of the employment of the various arms, asserting that infantry would do most of the fighting (Hecht 2015, pp. 6-7). This view, however, was soon shown the door when Israel Tal, soon to be the most influential armour officer in the 1960s and early 1970s, took over the armoured corps that same year. Building upon and then going far beyond the work of his predecessors, he promulgated an approach to fighting that might best be described as an inversion of the previously existing tank-infantry relationship in the IDF: “infantry supports, tanks conquer.” In this vision, the infantry would follow in the wake of armour, which would pierce enemy defences in all-tank battalions (supported directly by comparatively paltry amounts of mechanized infantry and towed artillery), and perform the often very dangerous, but always necessary, service of ‘mopping up’ cut off or bypassed enemy forces.

To many observers, both contemporary to that time and present-day, this line of thought ran counter to the experiences of a number of recent major wars, starting with the Korean War and

World War II, going back even to World War I. These conflicts had evidently shown that tanks rarely carried the day alone. Received wisdom, in fact, said that they should always work hand-in-hand with the other arms, particularly the infantry, so that one could supplement the strengths, and protect against the weaknesses, of the other. While this held true in most instances, some examples, such as the World War II battles in North Africa or those on the steppes of the Soviet Union, seemed to suggest otherwise. In contrast to the terrain of France or Germany, these vast open areas much more resembled large parts of Israel's borders, where, at least initially, most of any future fighting would probably occur (Hecht 2015, p. 7). Tal, who agreed that well-balanced formations were appropriate in Europe, argued that tank brigades fighting in the desert – an arena providing generally excellent visibility and little natural cover – had little reason to work closely with the other arms. If fighting from unimproved positions in the open, enemy troops using short-range anti-tank weapons would not last long. To counter anti-tank guns – the greater threat in Tal's mind – Tal trained his tank crews to engage targets at long ranges. The thinking went that this would cause enemy anti-tank guns to respond in kind, but given their shorter range, opening fire would only serve to reveal their positions, allowing Israeli tanks to dispatch them with impunity (Horowitz and Luttwak 1983, pp. 186-189).

Despite the sometimes-contradictory historical evidence and resistance from within the IDF (to include some from his fellow armour officers), Tal's vision took root. In a cruel twist of irony, the infantry soon found itself the misunderstood and neglected arm, with the armoured forces generally holding them in contempt and even calling them less than collegial nicknames (van Creveld 2002, p. 193). Tal even prevented the mechanized infantry (which fell under the purview of the armoured corps) from getting modern vehicles, since this would prevent purchasing more tanks. He thus condemned these men to ride into the next war in their

WW II-era half-tracks, pathetically armoured vehicles in an age of jet-aircraft, tanks armed with large-calibre, high velocity cannon, and ominously, a new generation of powerful anti-tank weapons (Horowitz and Luttwak 1983, p. 188).

When war came again in 1967, armour (after the air force) took centre stage – giving in breath-taking form a masterful performance, particularly in the Sinai. In six days and spearheaded by a cosmopolitan cast of British, French, and American tanks, the IDF defeated the Soviet-equipped Egyptians, all in the face of overwhelming odds. From this extraordinary victory, the IDF drew a number of lessons. For lack of space, we will concern ourselves with just two. The first held that Tal's ideas, having stood the ultimate test of combat, proved valid. Sending all-tank battalions to smash through enemy forces and run amok in their rear, with the infantry and artillery playing supporting roles, had worked. The second lesson stated that Arab infantrymen, when facing serious fighting, would not hold their ground but instead flee or surrender. This, IDF leaders reasoned, would likely happen again in a future conflict. Engagements such as the Egyptian defence at Um Katef in the Sinai (which stopped two Israeli attacks but fell to a third launched at night) struck Israeli leaders as the exception that proves the rule (English and Gudmundsson 1994, p. 171).

Armed with these lessons, the IDF prepared for the next war by embarking on what seemed like a logical course: greatly increasing the size of its armoured forces. And that it did. Armoured battalions grew, roughly from 20 to 50, resulting by 1973 in a total of 14 armoured brigades and three independent battalions. As for the infantry, some units converted to armour, but, generally speaking, it (along with the artillery) appears to have grown slightly. The blow to the infantry came more in further “status deprivation” thanks to the roles assigned to it. Rather than having a central part to play in a future war, it continued to serve merely

as a supporting arm, taking the lead only in certain kinds of terrain, such as mountains or urban areas. Adding insult to injury, most infantry units received low priority when it came to personnel and equipment. (IDF leaders made exceptions for crack and elite outfits.) The “Queen of Battle” had thus met its nadir, the “steel king” its apogee (Hecht 2015, p. 9 and English and Gudmundsson 1994, p. 171).

In the years leading up to 1973, the cult of the tank only continued to grow. The IDF placed so much faith in the arm that it even devised plans to create an armoured division lacking an organic artillery regiment (van Creveld 2002, p. 291). While the scheme never saw fruition, the consensus was clear: tanks, by and large, could carry the day on their own. The Israelis would have a chance to demonstrate this apparent truth yet again when war came again. As it turns out, when it did come, the results would disappoint them sorely.

Royal Folly

The next Arab-Israeli war broke out in October 1973. This time around, the IDF in general, and its tank forces in particular, met with disaster, especially in the early days of the war in the Sinai. While many (if not most) members of the IDF leadership saw an Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal as inevitable, the actual attack caught the Israelis by surprise, thanks to the paltry number of infantry manning positions along the banks. This aside, the Israelis remained confident that an armored counterattack would reverse their fortunes. Indeed, one soldier later commented that the IDF thought its steel thrust would cut through Egyptian forces like “knife through butter” (van Creveld 1974, p. 14).

This did not happen. In fact, the Israeli tank brigades attacking on the first three days of the war were mauled or all but destroyed. This resulted from at least three reasons. First, the units lacked

adequate mortars, artillery, and – especially – infantry. Second, they went into battle piecemeal and against much larger enemy forces (due, in part, to Israeli hubris born of past victories). Third, and putting the lie to the misplaced confidence in “king tank,” whenever the Israeli tanks approached enemy lines, they met not just fire from enemy tanks and anti-tank guns, but a hail of RPG-7s, RPG-43 Grenades, and AT-3 “Sagger” anti-tank missiles. In each instance, the troops operating these weapons were the very men whom the IDF had so confidently discounted – the Arab (and in particular, Egyptian) infantrymen. Military historians Bruce Gudmundsson and John English noted that “...at least a portion of the Egyptian infantry had developed the particular blend of patience and courage needed to hold their fire until the charging tanks got within the effective range of the rocket propelled grenade” (English and Gudmundsson 1994, p. 171).

Despite these problems, the IDF managed to pull through. Tanks continued to bear the brunt of the fighting for the rest of the war, but the IDF discarded their now bankrupt “tank as king” doctrine, replacing it with an approach that combined new tank battle drills with the use of more infantry and artillery (Hecht 2015, p. 11 and van Creveld 2002, p. 241). The cost, however, came a terrible price in both men and equipment. Among other things, the 1973 War seemed to illustrate a simple, yet powerful, point: that “lessons learned” could, in fact, prove quite dangerous.

Conclusion: Three Ways to Avoid the Lessons Learned Trap

In closing, how might today’s militaries avoid their own “lessons learned” traps? We offer three suggestions.

* Encourage or mandate the serious study of cases in which lessons learned had a clear, tangible, and negative effect on military organizations. Among other things, analysing how such

institutions ignore, distort, misinterpret, etc. past experiences and apply them to present and future problems may help members of your organization avoid similar behaviour, or, failing that, at least raise awareness of such dangers.

* Strive to inculcate adaptability and flexibility of mind in your members. For institutions that embody these traits will more likely gain an edge over their opponents, particularly at the outset of a war. The great military historian Sir Michael Howard said as much when he wrote: “I am tempted indeed to declare dogmatically that whatever doctrine the Armed Forces are working on now, that they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter that they have got it wrong. What matters is their capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives” (Howard 1974, p. 7). On this point, the IDF in the 1973 War performed quite well, changing its approach to fit new circumstances.

* Finally, and perhaps the most important point: periodically and rigorously challenge the validity of historical lessons in present day circumstances. You can do this through wargames, ‘what-if scenarios,’ and other related exercises. These tools, while imperfect and unable to prove anything definitively, can at least reveal hidden your own assumptions, biases, fallacies, and the like. Had the Israelis, for instance, seriously considered (say, in a series of wargames) the possibility that the Egyptian infantry would fight, and, further, perform reasonably well in certain circumstances, they might have suffered fewer disasters early on in the war. Received wisdom ought to be questioned. After all, it forms the very basis upon which our forces operate and, to a large degree, perform.

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