



A project of the Combat Studies Institute, the Operational Leadership Experiences interview collection archives firsthand, multi-service accounts from military personnel who planned, participated in and supported operations in the Global War on Terrorism.

Interview with BG (Ret.) Shimon Naveh



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Abstract

As part of his research for a Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper on the so-called Second Lebanon War of 2006 – a 34-day conflict fought principally between Israel and the paramilitary forces of Hezbollah – historian Matt Matthews of Fort Leavenworth’s Combat Studies Institute interviewed Brigadier General (Ret.) Shimon Naveh, the founder and former head of the Israel Defense Forces’ (IDF) Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI). Moreover, Naveh is the man most associated, often controversially so, with what has been described as a major intellectual transformation of the IDF in terms of how it thinks about, prepares for and ultimately wages war. “I read a comment made by an analyst that it was very hard to learn,” said Naveh, who also holds a PhD in war studies from King’s College, London. “You know,” he added, “wars are very hard to fight and yet we go and fight them. If indeed this is crucial and important, it is not an option. We should go and do it.... All you need is some intellectual stamina, some energy. If you’re serious about your profession, then you’ll go through it.” Indeed, Naveh singles out the IDF Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, for significant criticism for his alleged lack of understanding of the doctrine he signed which, as Naveh contends, contributed mightily to what is widely considered a defeat of the IDF by Hezbollah, as did a similar ignorance among the vast majority of the IDF General Staff. One of the leaders actually removed from his position, though, as a result of the defeat – the Division 91 commander, Brigadier General Gal Hirsch, also a former OTRI student – was singled out for praise from Naveh as “the most creative thinker, the most subversive thinker and the victim of this entire affair.” More broadly, Naveh discusses the “asymmetric dual” that was the Second Lebanon War from both the Israeli and Hezbollah perspectives, explaining why he feels the IDF was “totally unprepared for this kind of operation”; why its post-2000 intifada struggles against the Palestinians had the effect of “corrupting” the force; and why only understanding, embracing and then executing what he calls the “operational art” of war can prevent an army from becoming harmfully “addicted to the present fight.” Herein, too, he says, lies a warning for the US military that finds itself at present waging a primarily counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the time of the interview, in fact, Naveh was at Fort Leavenworth in his capacity as a part-time consultant to the US Army’s School of Advanced Military Studies.

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MM: My name is Matt Matthews (MM), a historian with the Combat Studies Institute, and I'm writing a small paper on the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War. I'm interviewing Brigadier General (Ret.) Shimon Naveh (SN). It's my understanding that in April 2006 the Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, signs this new doctrine and I was trying to figure out if some of that is coming from systemic operational design (SOD), is some coming from effects-based operations (EBO), or is it shades of both those?

SN: What he signed in April - and where did you get this information, by the way?

MM: I've been touch with some people in Israel, some former officers who were involved with EBO campaign plans and stuff like that.

SN: This document was a result of a unique process that started sometime in 2003. The process, of course, was a result of a whole change in culture, in the way of thinking, that very much started with the Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI); it started in 1995, 1996. And yet, the guy who drove this process was the joint staff operations officer (J3) at the time, Major General Ze'ev. What's remarkable about this enterprise - actually it was not a process because it lacked structure. What led to the emergence, the advent of this enterprise were many changes that basically occurred in Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM was the home of the operational artist in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) because, accidentally - in fact I'll give you my study and you can read a lot of details. By the way, this enterprise is mentioned also. The IDF was, generally speaking, innocent of operational art. Now, by accident, a certain guy was at a certain time in the right place, and bang! A breakthrough occurred. There was a guy named Uzi Dayan who was CENTCOM commander in 1996, and he managed to interact with three of our graduates of the Advanced Operational Command and Staff Course. He, being the kind of general he was, possessed all the qualities of a general: being skeptic, being heretic in a sense, being an idealist in another aspect and a modest guy in the intellectual sense. He really got interested in that. He was curious and a skeptic. So he invited us and it all started. Then after a short time, another guy came and took over from him. He was from the same cultural school, the armor and the Special Forces, he engaged us, and for about four or five years we worked intensely with CENTCOM. So the theory of the design was basically developed and introduced into CENTCOM. Other commands in the IDF, there were differences. In some commands it was applied in various levels. In others it did not. You see, we have a different culture. In the US, once the chief decides that this is the right way, nobody has the option of refusing or taking another course. It's different in the IDF; and by the way, the guy, Moshe Ya'alon, who has been the CENTCOM commander and was the patron of all three and the patron of design, became Chief of General Staff. He left it optional. Whoever wanted it, applied it. And yet when Ze'ev came and became his J3, he directed him to go into a project of development and a new strategy of learning for the IDF. He was trying to do the best. There were many political, institutional, cultural problems and impediments that he had to overcome. Some of them he did, some of them didn't. If you ask me, this document, which has some good rules, is full of paradoxes and

full of holes, but still it was a first attempt and it could have been if the IDF would have possessed this culture of reframing, of going into the base and learning and reframing. This could have been improved. But the IDF is not such an institute; it's totally deprived of this kind of...

MM: Would you say there was a lot of SOD in this document or none at all?

SN: The core of this document is the theory of SOD, but it was never really linked to the other elements. We have a saying in Hebrew, which means "a pig in the wedding." It was never synthesized both socially, conceptually; it was a simple piece of this entire issue. In fact, it was the most powerful one, the most coherent one, but it was never linked to the other elements.

MM: What did most of the officers think about this? It's my understanding that some of them liked it, some of them didn't like it and some of them thought it was too hard to understand.

SN: Oh yeah. I read a comment made by an analyst that it was very hard to learn. You know, wars are very hard to fight and yet we go and fight them. If indeed this is crucial and important, it is not an option. We should go and do it. I think, from what I've learned from both in my home country and here, is that you don't need to be a genius to be able to study. All you need is some intellectual stamina, some energy. If you're serious about your profession, then you'll go through it.

MM: What do you think about the Chief of the General Staff, Halutz? What's your personal opinion? Does all the blame fall on him?

SN: Halutz is a victim of subculture. He might have been a good fighter pilot, he was probably even a good base commander in the Air Force, but he's totally innocent of any education that could have prepared him for the challenge that awaited him as a general. Being both arrogant and ignorant, he never bothered, like so many generals, to really study. I think that he could have studied if there was an educational process. Moreover, if he would have had some skepticism, some heresy, some modesty, he could have learned things. He's the kind of man that, if you can't really comprise your words into two lines, he'll never go through it.

MM: Did you think he understood his own doctrine that he signed?

SN: He's an idiot. In this sense he's an idiot, as I said in the interview. He's really a fool; he's a clown. He signed something that he really has never bothered to learn, and I was trying to tell him to wait a minute. He signed something that he has never really bothered to learn and understand. One of the bad things that happened to us was that - actually, the opposition never bothered me. As being the mentor or the force behind all this, the opposition never bothered me because I look at opposition as a good thing, as a source of tension that yields changes. It forces not only the oppositioners but also us. We regard ourselves as the good guys - to change, to transform, to produce better learning methods. What really worried me were the blind followers, and the IDF was full of them. They were just mumbling the words without really appreciating what lay in the base of these words - and Halutz was such a guy. He was just using the right words but he never really bothered to understand. Understanding implies learning, and learning is painful.

MM: He gave a speech apparently in 2001 where he said that, "We need to do away with the concept of a land battle." Do you think he actually believed that?

SN: If you look at the way he approached the last campaign – this guy, when I'm telling you that he hasn't learned, I mean that he really hasn't changed. All his education is in the Air Force; and as an Air Force guy, he looked at the world through the cockpit, through the peephole. One day he becomes Chief of the General Staff, which means jointness, really thinking beyond the box of your service and all this crap. He has never gone beyond that. In fact, the way he approached the war, in a sense the war was a trap. He had an opportunity to bypass the trap but he fell into the trap because he was a victim of his prejudices or his biases.

MM: Now this trap you're talking about, the way I understand this is that Hezbollah basically set up a situation where you could either come at them with an effects-based campaign with air, but they'll continue to fire the rockets, or you could do a land campaign and take your casualties. Is that your understanding of that?

SN: Talking about Hezbollah is a different issue, and I've been studying them very carefully. I've been doing some reading and experimenting with ideas. Hezbollah, over the seven months that preceded this event, made several attempts to ambush an Israeli patrol and kidnap some soldiers. This had to do with the fact that Hezbollah went two times through, I would say, a kind of shock. The first time was when the Israelis withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. All of a sudden they got victory, they won the war, they won the campaign, but this implied that they may need to reframe their entire concepts, ideas and modes of behavior because their old way of thinking, learning, living and operating was very much embedded in the fight against the Israelis, in forcing the Israelis out of southern Lebanon. Once this occurred, all of a sudden the entire world fell upon them because this implied that they may need to change their rationale, their *raison d'être*. The second time was when the Syrians withdrew. When the Syrians were forced to withdraw from Lebanon by the new dynamics taking place inside Lebanon, Hezbollah went through their second shock. Their whole existence very much depended on this symbiosis. It's not an alliance, a formal alliance; it's a very unique kind of infraction between a state that is intervening in its neighbor's state – I mean, taking over – and a group of Lebanese patriots. Look, Hezbollah are Lebanese patriots. I don't know if you are aware of it. There are many tensions within the theory. They are Shi'a but they are Lebanese patriots. They pursue their own political and military agenda and yet they are Lebanese patriots. In fact, their entire fight against the Israelis very much served several purposes. One was regaining Lebanese sovereignty over the south, but the other one was to really boost up this duality between being a social-political entity and a militant entity. They're not compatible within sovereign states. As long as the Syrians remained in Lebanon, Hezbollah, after the withdrawal of Israel, realized that they couldn't maintain this duality. This duality is an anomaly in terms of statecraft. Now once the Syrians pulled out, they could feel that the world was falling upon them because the justification or the conditions that allowed them to maintain this duality were removed. So this is, by the way, the mere logic, the rationale behind their operation against Israel. They don't want to destroy Israel, they know they cannot destroy Israel, and people are often much taken by the rhetoric. "Liberating Jerusalem" – well, this is nonsense. Their whole idea is to continue this fight against Israel deliberately in order to enable themselves to maintain this duality within the Lebanese state, which enables them to maintain their own sovereignty within the Lebanese state of the south, to pursue other avenues of political and strategic potential, etc. So

when they initiated it, they had a pretty good operational concept, which basically argued that if the Israelis would dare to come by ground, they know how they'd do it. They come from the south...

MM: Do you think they purposefully prepared for an effects-based campaign?

NS: I'm not sure I understand what you really mean by "effects-based campaign." I don't think Hezbollah really bothered to read the articles or pamphlets on effects-based campaign. Hezbollah were very much considering that this may go out of control. They built up several options, in their mind. One was that the Israelis would retaliate without really intervening. Retaliate by air fire, by base strikes, etc. Another option was that the Israelis might really go crazy and invade, like they did. But here they were more cautious. They thought the Israelis would be very much restrained by the memories of their own experience. Another issue was that the Israelis may intervene by air power and will conduct a very painful operation. In this case, they very much thought that, first of all, they have their Air Force, we have our Air Force. They'll come with their airplanes; we'll come with our Katyushas. Secondly, they thought that the longer this campaign will go, the better it will become for them. It was a realist way of thinking. The worse it will get, the better it will become. When you start bombing like madmen, people are being killed and Hezbollah are very sensitive about losing Shi'a lives and Arab lives in general. It's a part of their ethos; it's a part of their faith. And yet, they thought that if the Israelis would come, at a certain time something would go wrong. You know, a bomb will just either miss or hit the wrong target like in 1995, 1996 when a shell hit, 100 civilians were killed and the operation was stopped immediately. I do think they really have never expected such a resolution, such a stupid resolution on the Israeli side, and they were, in a sense, surprised.

MM: I want to get back to the land campaign for a little bit. What do you think was in Halutz's mind? Obviously this wasn't a giant blitzkrieg operation to the Litani River. It appears that these were little probes and raids of some kind. Was that meant to have some sort of effect? In 2000, Halutz apparently had a plan into Bint Jubayl that, according to him, was supposed to be a "spectacle of victory."

SN: First of all, I cannot get into Halutz's mind; it's too tough. But I know what really went on. Other people may tell you different things, but I think that when this all started, Halutz - by the way, the first impact of the ambush, and the following events, was devastating on the IDF's high command. It was the ambush and then when the tank went rushing in it hit a huge demolition charge and was almost totally destroyed. Most of the people at the General Staff were really suffering some kind of trauma. Halutz, by the way, was the first to recover because for him all this was something abstract. He's never really seen bodies of infantrymen being torn to pieces. For him it's something that he read in a book. That's one of the problems that airmen suffer from. For them, it was something quite abstract. It's very much like fighting one of these computer games; there's not much difference. Then when he recovered, all of a sudden he looked at the world from his own box and came up with this idea of really striking hard for several days and then Hezbollah will just give up. There were several people, among them the division commander in the north, Gal Hirsch...

MM: The Division 91 commander?

SN: Yes. The most creative thinker, the most subversive thinker and the victim of this entire affair. He told Halutz to rethink what he's doing and mobilize reserves. For about four years, we were initiating and experimenting. We developed some very interesting ideas of a joint campaign, which was basically conducted and driven by light infantry, Special Forces, Air Force and intelligence, to assault them and then infest the area. Not just attack from the east and from the south, which were the expected directions of advance, but assault from all over and isolate the Shi'a militant component - listen to what I tell you now - from the political. Our idea was not to kill Nasrallah or destroy his organization. This was stupid. Our idea was basically to create conditions which will force him to give up the militant, to stop this duality. Think of it. To become a political party, which he already was, but our idea was to help him make up his mind and give up one option - and we made an appeal to one option: a political party, a legitimate party. Now, the other idea was to really assault by about 90 company-sized columns from all directions. Some elements airborne, some coming from the sea and others infiltrating almost without armor. The idea was to move in small teams and identify, feed the intelligence circles, exploit our advantage in the air in remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), fixed-wing and helicopters. When we introduced this idea, after certain experiments in CENTCOM in 2003, I remember it was a special meeting of the General Staff, presided by Chief Ya'alon, and I didn't say much then because the whole idea to develop was presented by the Northern Command (NORTHCOM) commander at that time, Beni Ganz, who was against it then - and of course he was against it now. So when Gal Hirsch tells him to mobilize, let's review the plans and see what our options are because we've been running out of time, he totally brushed this aside. "Halutz, we don't need that. It's a waste of time. We can do whatever you say in a much speedier and shorter time, more effective, more decisive," all this bullshit. Immediately, once the Air Force started bombing, the Katyushas started firing back at us. Now you see, after a week, everybody became aware that we were going nowhere. This asymmetric dual in which we destroyed southern Lebanon and they - they're are not capable of destroying but they very much damaged the way of life in the north. Half of the country was paralyzed and people were in a state of...

MM: Now, let's go back to that briefly. Did Halutz think then that by hitting some of these symbolic targets and some of these infrastructure targets that that was going to compel the Lebanese government to do something?

SN: His idea was that, first of all, if we hit all these targets, Hezbollah will collapse as a military organization. No one really believed that the Lebanese government was in position to really pressure Hezbollah. The idea was that Hezbollah would give up and then everybody would go home happily. We regained our deterrence, we beat them and that was it. Again, our idea was to change something in the equation, to change the conditions by forcing them to become political and abandon the military option. That was the idea, and this is why we went for a joint campaign dominated by Special Forces. I can show you some material the next time I come here, if you like. The idea was to conduct three weeks or a month of protracted campaign in which we will either capture or kill them all. Our major idea was to discriminate between combatants and noncombatants in the south because, again, our idea was not to destroy the ecology, the humanity. After several days, everybody became aware that we're going nowhere and, being hesitant and unfocused, they started making compromises, partial decisions. Then they started all these moves that had no logic or rationale behind them. Moreover, in the course of the operation and after the operation we discovered two things when operating with teams

of Special Forces. One was that, at a certain time, we were capable of identifying the pattern of deployment and operation of Katyushas. We did a lot of work and identified the exact pattern. The second thing we identified was that once this pattern was identified – in 91 Division, Gal infiltrated several teams of Special Forces...

MM: Is that the Maglans?

SN: Right, and some others, too. Maglans and Shadat (ph). Ah, you really know the material?

MM: Yeah, I've been digging around.

SN: He achieved some tremendous success. These guys hid in the area and identified, in real time, and they managed to intercept launchings by guiding fixed-wings. In most cases, by guiding armed RPVs capable of really shooting very quickly. In fact the whole idea of this joint team was Special Forces, very effective intelligence circles, and he assigned all these RPVs to these teams. They were capable and he maintained, in each region, certain levels – 12 or 15 RPVs. They were able to really identify and kill, and they managed to kill about 50 launchings. We got positive results, and even then he didn't get the message. You know, the guy, in fact he didn't operate the entire General Staff, the headquarters. He kept on working as if he was commanding the Air Force, sitting in his office and some other guys were doing the work. He was totally detached.

MM: Do you think maybe the whole war effort managed to throw him into a state of shock or something, or was it just his personality?

SN: I have indications that very much point out that he was in a state of shock. All of a sudden he became sick two or three times. Healthy people don't become sick all of a sudden. I think he got sick because all of a sudden the entire world was collapsing on him. He pushed himself to such a situation and being surrounded by the type of people that he was and being unable to communicate with them, there was no appreciation of the emerging logic and no concentrations of any effort. This was not a land campaign; these were pieces that occurred by accident. A patrol was going into Bint Jubayl, it was engaged, a battle developed, troops were pouring in and then a big battle took place. Then, "Oh, we gained victory in Bint Jubayl." It was never intended from the beginning. Things were occurring by themselves.

MM: Somebody told me he was trying to get this "spectacle of victory"? Was that for the press?

SN: If you ask me, it was basically to boost himself.

MM: You had mentioned the Division 91 commander. I heard from some people, and I'd love to hear your take on this, at some point he issues a division operations order that apparently – and this is what I've been told – his brigade commanders don't understand it. They have no idea what he's talking about and they claimed that's why everything...

SN: That's bullshit. This guy, as I told you, is the most creative guy and he had some huge successes in the months preceding the war. Moreover, I've seen him in many operations and many other experiments. He has a problem being too creative sometimes and he's being over-

carried by his use of language. But I know one brigade commander who I think should be executed for cowardice. First of all, remember, there was no coherence in what he was doing. He was told to move troops in, then pull out, move in and then pull out. Sometimes plans would change five times a day. Yet when he gave this command to a specific guy whom I referred to – the commander of 7th Tank Brigade – he was given the mission to go in and he was afraid, simply afraid. He used this as excuse. Gal was doing some miracles with a reserve infantry brigade – the Alexandroni Brigade. This guy understood what he wanted. This is an excuse for either cowardice or ignorance.

MM: My understanding is that only one brigade commander out of 11 brigade commanders...

SN: If you're really interested, I can give you Gal Hirsch. His story is amazing. Either you come to Israel and meet him or you can bring him here for two days. You can hear his story in the most detailed manner. It is an amazing story, so you can invite him. I can make the linkage.

MM: Maybe I'll be able to work something out there if I get an extension on this. I read somewhere that only one of 11 brigade commanders crossed the border, though.

SN: No, no, later on several crossed. Okay, we're going into a different level of discussion. Basically I think that the IDF was totally unprepared for this kind of operation, both conceptually, operationally and tactically – mainly conceptually and practically. The point is that the IDF fell in love with what it was doing with the Palestinians. In fact, it became addictive. When you fight a war against a rival who's by all means inferior to you, you may lose a guy here or there, but you're in total control. It's nice. You can pretend that you fight the war and yet it's not really a dangerous war. This kind of thing served as an instrument corrupting the IDF. I remember talking to five brigade commanders in my office. This is recorded. In fact, in my study this is recorded. I asked them if they had an idea, in their minds, what it meant to go into battle against a Syrian division. Did they have in mind what a barrage of 10 Syrian artillery battalions looks like? I remember in 1973, counting the battalions, the fire – it's indescribable. I remember counting salvos of anti-tanks – Schmels and Sagers. We were counting at one salvo 95 or 96, because we could see the tracers. A salvo of 100. Here in Lebanon, a tank column was hit by two rockets – good rockets, these Russian-made Cornets – two tanks are exploding and everybody loses their minds! A salvo of 81 millimeter mortars is hitting a team and everybody goes crazy! So the IDF corrupted itself. This is a different issue. Most of the tactical commanders were unable to adapt the Golani Brigade. The paras were better. Special Forces were extremely good. There was an incident of Fatillah (ph) 13 going into Tyre to get that guy. It's an amazing story, being ambushed and suffering casualties, and yet they fought a big battle and got out. Most of the IDF troops, especially the armor, have lost contact with reality. They've been corrupted. I'm telling you, this is a very dangerous...

MM: Now, is this something where years of counterinsurgency operations have...

SN: Yes. This may happen to you, remember that.

MM: That's one of the points in my...

SN: Well, you're fighting a more serious rival than we are fighting. The rivals you're fighting are not Palestinians. They're real hooligans; they're tough guys. But still there's a danger. Becoming addicted to the present fight may corrupt you as an army. This is what operational art is all about: maintaining elements that will be looking beyond...

MM: Keeping an eye on the future.

SN: Yes, well, the future is a metaphor. Actually you're looking at alternatives. You're not looking at the future because you can't look there. You're building up alternatives that enable you to look critically at what you're doing, seeing that you're too much unbalanced, too engaged and we're forgetting other things that have a potential of occurring.

MM: Well, this is good because this meets with my conclusion, then, because I point out...

SN: I'll give you my paper. In fact, I can give it to you personally off my computer. But otherwise Tim Challans has it. I emailed it to him.

MM: Okay, somebody here has it?

SN: Yes. The initial part gives you the ideas of what really happened.

MM: Do you know if it's possible to get an actual order of battle for the entire campaign? Is that classified? Because nobody seems to have one.

SN: The IDF is hiding it, of course.

MM: Yeah, no one could give me anything. But is it possible to get a real order of battle on where specific units were?

SN: If by order of battle you mean all the units that were involved, no problem. You can get one. If you're really interested to understand the details of the operation and to really get some good lessons regarding how the fighting was done...

MM: Yeah, that's what I'd really like to get my hands on.

SN: Bring Gal Hirsch. I'm telling you, all you have to do is buy him a ticket. He's hungry to talk to people.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Colette Kiszka