

THREE DECADES LATER, NEW REPORTS SHED LIGHT ON IDF'S ICONIC BATTLE IN LEBANON

By Shay Fogelman May.31, 2012

The IDF conquest of the Beaufort in 1982 lasted just hours but the battle over the legitimacy of the attack, which left 6 soldiers dead, still rages.



Sharon, left, with Begin. Beaufort's historic importance and the lofty status accorded it by the Palestinians made it a desirable target for them. Photo by IDF Spokesman's Office

"You can feel fresh mountain air here. Divine," then Prime Minister Menachem Begin poeticized to his defense minister, Ariel Sharon, just after he stepped out of the helicopter that took him to the foot of the Beaufort fortress in southern Lebanon.

It was the morning of June 7, 1982, the second day of the first Lebanon war and a few hours after the end of one of the bitterest and most controversial battles of that war. The bodies of the six soldiers who were killed in the assault on Beaufort had already been removed, and all of the wounded had been evacuated. Only a few blood-soaked dressings skittered around in the wind, until they were caught on the barbed-wire fences that encircled the area. Some of those present at the time remember that the smell of gunpowder still lingered in the air.

"Begin was euphoric, he was radiant with joy," television reporter Amos Carmeli, who covered the premier's visit, recently told Haaretz. "Begin saw the event as a historic moment and was very emotional."

Carmeli remembers that during the entire visit, he did not hear Begin or anyone in his entourage say a word about the casualties of the battle. "Begin was very inquisitive and had a lot of questions, but that subject did not come up, not during the flight and not while we were on Beaufort. Toward the end of the visit he asked to observe the Galilee Panhandle. He admired the view and especially the topographic dominance of the place."

In the wake of Carmeli's report, which was broadcast that evening (Israel only had state television at the time), the first questions about the necessity of the war and its conduct were raised. The report was imprinted in the public memory mainly because of Begin's question to commando officer Tamir Massad: "Did they have machine guns?" The young second lieutenant replied, "They had pretty big machine guns here." Sharon is seen standing between the two, scarcely able to conceal a smile at the bizarre dialogue, which went on for a few more minutes.

The next day's newspapers speculated that there seemed to be a disconnect between the prime minister, the army and the defense minister. Two days later, when the human cost of taking Beaufort became known, the suspicions became accusations. The struggle by the parents to find out the truth about those killed in the battle was one of the principal begetters of the protest movement which later formed against both the war and the 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon.

"The conquest of Beaufort was assigned to the Golani Brigade's reconnaissance unit long before the war," former deputy chief of staff Moshe Kaplinsky recently told Haaretz. He was appointed commander of the unit a few weeks earlier, in 1982, replacing Goni Harnik, who had completed his army service. "The unit operated permanently in Northern Command and knew the terrain and the target well."

In the months leading up to the war, the unit's soldiers practiced a large number of scenarios for capturing the fortress. Nadav Palti, who was the unit's deputy commander in the period of the preparations for the war, recalls. "I don't think there was a plan we didn't examine and try out. We practiced the conquest of the site by night and by day, from the north and from the

south, by air, by climbing on foot from the Litani River and also by means of mechanized assault with armored personnel carriers. We were ready to conquer Beaufort in every situation."

Palti was on discharge leave in Eilat when the battle was fought. As soon as he heard that the war had begun, he rushed to Lebanon. On the day after the battle, he took over as the unit's commander.

According to the prewar plan, the Golani Brigade's reconnaissance unit was to operate in the sector of Avigdor Kahalani's armored division. As such, the unit – together with the Golani engineering company under the command of Zvika Barkai, and a tank unit – would capture Beaufort and the outposts close to it in a daylight attack. After fording the Litani and before reaching the fortress area, the reconnaissance unit was delayed almost until dark, as it waited for the tank columns which were making slow progress on the steep, crowded roads. Subsequently, the armored personnel carriers had a hard time crossing terrain which looked easily passable on the maps.

Kaplinsky was seriously wounded by a bullet even before the various forces reached Beaufort, and Harnik, who was summoned to replace him, was lightly wounded when an APC overturned while trying to join the unit. Afterward, the tank platoon, which was manned by young soldiers from a training course, got bogged down and did not reach their target, along with some of the APCs. The fortress itself turned out to be more difficult to take than had been anticipated, and the trenches surrounding it deeper and narrower than the soldiers expected. In the end, the site was conquered by a small force on foot and in the dark.

Harnik, the former commander of the reconnaissance unit, returned from his discharge leave and took command in the midst of battle, after Kaplinsky was wounded. Harnik was killed while mopping up the trenches on the north side of the fort. "The good old Land of Israel died with him," according to a few of his buddies from the unit. He was posthumously awarded the division commander's citation.

The deputy commander of the reconnaissance force in the battle, Mordechai Goldman, was awarded the medal of valor. He says there "were many more who should have been decorated for that battle. A few of the soldiers charged into the range of fire in the most literal way possible."

According to most of the testimonies over the years, there were a number of cases of friendly fire during the battle. An officer was wounded in at least one such exchange. The soldiers who were there remained silent for 30 years about the circumstances of the death of one of their buddies, for fear of the effect on his parents if they knew the details.

'Forget that nonsense'

Beaufort, in which there were three main positions spread across 500 meters, was conquered in a little more than two hours. The Kastel Force of the Palestine Liberation Organization was well dug in and heavily armed there. Contrary to expectations, its men fought fiercely, some of them to the last bullet. Apparently only a few fled after the battle started. According to some testimonies, 15 bodies were found afterward, though others say there were 24.

"I heard about it in an incidental conversation with my driver a few weeks after the war," Kahalani says now – referring to the first time he heard there was a controversy about whether the conquest of Beaufort had been necessary. "He told me that someone had said to him that there was no need to take Beaufort at all, or something like that. I shrugged it off. I told him, 'Forget that nonsense, it's just idle talk.' It was only after the war that I realized how deeply that libel had penetrated." Kahalani also hints that because of the allegations raised against him in connection with the battle for Beaufort, he was denied a promotion to the rank of major general.

In the operational circumstances that developed on the ground, "there was no special urgency to neutralizing Beaufort," Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari write in their 1985 book "Israel's Lebanon War" (translation: Ina Friedman). They maintain that with all the changes that occurred on the battlefield as the fighting developed, the tank divisions charging ahead left the Beaufort far behind: "Within a day, the mighty Beaufort would at any rate be reduced to a small pocket of futile resistance far to the rear of the Israeli juggernaut."

According to Schiff and Ya'ari, this was understood in Northern Command's war room while the fighting raged. The GOC Northern Command, Amir Drori, "tried to postpone the Golani

attack. The chief of staff [Rafael Eitan] happened to be in the command's war room when the subject came up, and he personally confirmed the postponement. Drori issued an order not to go through with the Beaufort operation that night, but for some reason it never reached the Golani commando [unit]. The order was simply swallowed up, misplaced or forgotten somewhere down the line." An investigation was conducted after the war to find out why the order never reached its destination, Schiff and Ya'ari note, "but the results were inconclusive." Kahalani and some of his officers were a few kilometers from Beaufort but were involved in the entire operation. They claim they received no order to change plans. They say that the plans to conquer Beaufort were presented several times to the commanding general and his staff officers, including during the stage at which final approval was given of the plans for the war. It is inconceivable, they say, that the units' radio reports about the progress being made by the forces did not reach high command.

Backing up this account, Kahalani shows a letter he received in 1989 from the head of the Israel Defense Forces' history department, Col. Benny Michelson. Based on the investigative material that was available to him, Michelson confirms that it was not until the middle of the battle that Kahalani learned that the high command wanted to wait and change the plans. That means that the order actually reached the forces on the ground two and a half hours after the start of the battle – in fact, when it was already in its final stages.

Israel's current ambassador to Bulgaria, Shaul Kamisa, was the Golani Brigade's intelligence officer during the war and he supports this account. "All the plans were presented in an orderly fashion to high command, and at no stage did we receive a change-of-mission order," he told Haaretz.

For his part Mordechai Goldman also remembers that "the plans were approved long before the war by the GOC Northern Command, the chief of staff and the political echelon. Kahalani did not deviate from the plan he was given. It was a plan for the first 24 hours of the war, and it was clear to everyone that it's not the kind of thing you change at the last minute. In any event, at no stage did I receive an order changing the plans."

In contrast, according to Drori and several of his officers, the plan to conquer Beaufort was never approved, and until the end of the battle they had no idea about the course of events. "In the operational planning there was no force that was supposed to deal with Beaufort in the first stages of the war. No such force was ever presented to us in the process of approving the plans, either," says the then-intelligence officer of Northern Command, Moshe Zur .

The operations officer of Northern Command at the time, David Agmon, backs this up: "In practice, from the moment Kahalani's movement northward via Akiye Bridge was planned, there was no need to conquer Beaufort in the first stage of the war. I remember that in the briefing to Kahalani when the plans were approved, the GOC said explicitly that Beaufort would now lose its primary importance."

This argument is further reinforced, according to Northern Command officers at the time, by the directives that were issued by Sharon and Eitan before the war. They both emphasized, several times, that in the first stage the forces would have to advance as rapidly as possible and avoid skirmishes with pockets or with outposts which had no influence on the general course of events.

Queries about loved ones

A few months after the battle, some of the families of fallen soldiers asked the IDF to investigate the circumstances in which their loved ones had died. They had begun to hear rumors about the controversy surrounding the battle. The families received letters of reply stating that the investigation was in full swing and that when it was completed, they would be apprised of the results. Similar promises were made during the course of nearly 25 years.

It was not until 1998 that for the first time the IDF provided the families with a short, censored report of the investigation which was carried out by the IDF's history department. A letter appended to the three-page report concluded with the following words: "This is military material which has been provided for your personal perusal and that no public use must be made of it." The letter ended with the phrase, "May you know no more sorrow."

In any event, the families had no intention – nor any ability – to make public use of the document. All the information in it had already appeared in dozens of books and articles, and in interviews with those involved over the years. The investigation turned up only two findings.

One referred to the width and depth of the trenches at the site; the other noted the flaws in the performance of the tank platoon that was seconded to the force. The question of whether high command had ordered Beaufort to be conquered or not, and whether that order reached the fighting forces, was not even mentioned.

For years, the families repeatedly pressed the army for a more detailed report. Finally, in 2006 the history department sent them a 120-page booklet about the battle for the Beaufort. "My assignment was to conduct an investigation," the historian who wrote the pamphlet, Brig. Gen. Dr. Dani Asher, recently told Haaretz. The booklet puts forward various claims and presents facts from military documents which are not accessible to the public. It contains maps, detailed charts and quotations from books. What it does not contain is an answer to the question of where communications between high command and the division broke down, and why, in fact, the Beaufort was even captured at all.

Puzzling lack of clarity

The first Lebanon War was one of the most scrupulously planned military campaigns in Israel's history. It was also the most documented of all the wars until then. All the battle plans, maps, operations logs and orders were photocopied and preserved in archives. All the reports on the radio communications systems were recorded. Photographers shot the goings-on in the war rooms and on the front for hours on end. Some of the books and studies published about the war quote senior officers as complaining that personnel from the history department were running endlessly "between their legs" and interfering. This effort renders the army's inability to decide about the controversy even more puzzling.

The first rationale presented by the IDF for conquering the Beaufort can be gleaned from the short exchange between Prime Minister Begin and Defense Minister Sharon at the foot of the fortress, as captured by journalist Carmeli. "This is one of the greatest achievements," Sharon told Begin. "This place constituted ...," Sharon continued but was cut off by Begin. "... An open wound. We had an open wound," the prime minister said. Sharon nodded and added, "A nuisance, a danger for years upon years."

The Beaufort fortress was indeed a nuisance – and a danger. But the main threat it posed was to the Christian enclave in southern Lebanon and less to the Israeli north. The assessment of most of the intelligence officers who were interviewed for this article is that no missiles were ever fired from the Beaufort at Israel, in contrast to the view generally held by the public.

At times there were Palestinian officers at the Beaufort who provided information to their forces about launching missiles. But their field of vision and their ability to direct missiles into the Galilee Panhandle were very limited – certainly as compared with other PLO sites in Lebanon. According to most assessments, the Beaufort played a small part in the mounting security tension that preceded the war. Once the Israeli forces crossed the border it played no part in the course of events, and not a single Katyusha rocket was fired from it before its capture.

By contrast, exchanges of fire between the PLO forces on the mountain and the forces led by Gen. Saad Haddad, Israel's ally, in the Christian villages below, were an almost routine affair for months before the war. Haddad was the leader of a Christian and Shiite militia which was supported and trained by Israel and frequently clashed with the Sunni fighters of the PLO. In time, the militia became part of the South Lebanon Army, whose members played a central part in the massacre in the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps, some 10 days after the capture of the Beaufort.

There are hardly any references to the Beaufort in the Israeli press during the period between Operation Litani (1978) and the Lebanon War in 1982. However, it is mentioned dozens of times in the Lebanese and international press, mostly in connection with the threat posed to the Christian villages below the site.

For example, an AP reporter who visited the Beaufort in August 1980 related that official PLO sources organized that visit to demonstrate their control of the fortress, from which they used to aim artillery fire at the Christian enclave controlled by Haddad. A New York Times reporter who visited the site a year later wrote that it was not known how many Palestinian fighters were in the fortress, but they used it as a lookout.

From its heights, he noted, the Palestinians dominated not only the border with Israel but mainly the area of Lebanon controlled by Haddad and his Israeli-backed militia.

The second justification given by the army for capturing the Beaufort can be derived from the war plan of Northern Command. The Beaufort is situated in the center of a ridge that overlooks the Litani River from about 800 meters, which is why the Crusaders built the fortress and why it has seen so many battles throughout the years. The order of battle given to Kahalani's division stated that after the capture of the Beaufort and the nearby outposts, additional Israeli forces would be able to enter the region via the Hardele Bridge, which spans the Litani River about 2.5 kilometers north of the Beaufort.

Someone seems to have exaggerated the importance of the fortress. A perusal of the intelligence files about the site which were prepared in Northern Command before the war indicates that the Palestinian fighters in that area were incapable of doing damage to the tank division that was moving toward them, even if the former had the topographical advantage. According to the intelligence files and the post-battle findings, the PLO personnel at the site did not have antitank missiles or any other weapon that could have jeopardized an armored force at such a long range.

This viewpoint is bolstered by the fact that even before the capture of the Beaufort, and concurrent with the battle, the 769th Armored Brigade, under the command of Shaul Mofaz, tried to reach the Nabatiya Plateau, which lies north of the Beaufort, via Hardele Bridge. The forces were delayed due to mines along the way and did not capture the targets assigned to them. However, according to the testimonies of several officers from the force, the Beaufort had no influence on the troops' movement.

Symbolic rationales

The weakness of the military justifications for capturing the Beaufort raises the possibility that there were other rationales for the campaign, which the army is not inclined to talk about. First, there were considerations of a political nature. In the act of launching the war, Begin and Sharon wanted to bring the government at least one winning card, and the Beaufort was perfectly suited for that role. Its historic importance, its massive presence and the lofty status accorded the fortress by the Palestinian forces made it a very desirable target for Begin and Sharon.

That symbolism trickled down to the military. "The force commanders at all levels wanted their names associated with the capture of the site," Northern Command intelligence officer Zur says today. Another staff officer in Northern Command maintains that "every division or brigade commander who had the Beaufort in his sector would have been tempted to execute that act, even if it had no military significance. It would not be the first or the last time that soldiers are sent to carry out such dangerous missions only for a picture in the paper showing the Israeli flag flying over the target."

A few other officers believe that the ultra-high motivation of the fighters in the Golani reconnaissance unit also played a part. Yaron Merhav, one of the young team of soldiers that conquered the Beaufort, recalled, "That was our default. At the level of the fighters no one ever questioned the necessity of the battle. We went to war with the consciousness that the Beaufort had to be captured, and by us." Similarly, the other soldiers and reconnaissance unit officers who were interviewed for this article describe the Beaufort primarily as a target possessing symbolic significance. And there were of course other factors as well.

Two days after the capture of the Beaufort, a convoy of Israeli APCs set out from the Christian village of Marjayoun toward the site. The first APC carried senior Israeli officers and General Haddad. The convoy rolled through the local villages, attracting great attention. Villagers threw rice at the soldiers as a token of good luck.

Two flags flew atop the APCs: Israeli and Lebanese. Haddad had another flag in his pocket. After the journey to the Beaufort that flag was hoisted above the fortress, to the cheers of his militiamen. The flag had been given to him half a year earlier by senior Israeli officers who had come to wish him and his troops a happy New Year.

Ephraim Sneh, who was then the head of the liaison unit with southern Lebanon, was one of them. He remembers that his predecessor in the post, Meir Dagan, later the head of the Mossad, was there, and so was the outgoing GOC Northern Command, Yanosh Ben Gal, and his successor, Amir Drori. "On that occasion we autographed the flag for him and we promised that next time it would fly atop the Beaufort," Sneh related. Sneh was also there at the ceremony in which the promise was fulfilled, on the third day of the war for peace.

The day before that, even before the world learned about the capture of the Beaufort, The Washington Post published an article which tried to examine the war's goals. The writers claimed that Begin's stated ambition – to push the Palestinian forces dozens of kilometers to the north, taking Israel out of their range – would not be so simple to achieve.

Israel, the Post wrote, would have to forge alliances and find partners who would secure the area for it, otherwise the Palestinians would return. By the same token, the article continued, it has long been the assessment of military experts that if Israel were to capture the Beaufort, it would entrust the site to its agent in the border zone, General Haddad.

Sneh rejects vehemently the theory that one reason Israel captured the Beaufort was to improve relations with Haddad and his militia. However, other officers who were interviewed for this article do not rule this out so vigorously. The relationship between Haddad and the IDF was critical for the future of the security zone in that period.

The ties with the Christians in Beirut were overseen by the Mossad, while the ties with the Christians in the southern part of the country were in the hands of army officers. Within this framework, the IDF supported Haddad's militia unreservedly. In order to assist him and his forces, the Beaufort was bombed by the Israel Air Force and shelled by the Artillery Corps frequently after battles were fought between the Christians in the area and the PLO personnel in the fortress. There were two cases in the year that preceded the war when IDF soldiers raided the area of the fortress and fought battles with the PLO.

In the ceremony at which the Lebanese flag was hoisted above the Beaufort, Haddad said, "The Lebanese nation was in a state of distress and wanted to be rid of the occupying forces [i.e., the Palestinians] but was unable to do this alone. I always said that Lebanon needs a miracle to be saved, and now that miracle is happening."

The New York Times noted in the wake of the ceremony that Israel was trying to create a buffer zone under the control of Haddad's militia. Prime Minister Begin had marked the start of that process by giving Haddad a prize in the form of the Beaufort, the paper said. Haddad's men soon abandoned the site, which was manned again in 1985, by Israel, when the IDF withdrew into the security zone.

"On the flight back to Safed, Begin talked enthusiastically about the Beaufort nonstop," journalist Carmeli recalls. "He asked us to hurry, because he wanted to get to the cabinet meeting which had been planned for him in Jerusalem and tell the ministers what he had seen personally. We landed in Safed. I asked Begin's staff to get the films to the television studios in Jerusalem and sat down to record a voice-over for the report. In the meantime, the security guards and the members of the entourage went to pick up their bags, and Begin remained alone at the helipad. I looked at him. It was a very sad moment. He sat on a wobbly, shaky, maybe even rusty chair, holding his cane loosely and nodding off, his head tilted back. He was very tired. Suddenly he also looked very old. Inappropriate for the image of prime minister leading a whole nation and army into war."

In later years, Rafael Eitan, chief of staff during the war, related that Begin was so eager to capture the Beaufort that at times this seemed to bother him more than the fear that the IDF was close to engaging with Syrian forces.

According to the testimony of officers in Northern Command, before Begin left the war room on the night before his visit to the Beaufort, he ordered his aides to wake him at any hour of the Beaufort were captured. The next day, the Newsweek reporter who covered the war from Israel wrote that at 2 A.M. one of the premier's aides woke Begin up to say the Beaufort was in Israeli hands. Begin apparently said, "Go to Sharon, give him a hug for me and tell him that from now on I will finally be able to sleep peacefully."