

Military Education of Israel's Junior Officers

From 'a Platoon Commander-General' to a Professional Officer

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Introduction

The special nature of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its missions entail a far more comprehensive examination of Israeli military education than space permits here. Therefore this article will focus primarily on the education of junior officers who, at the completion of their regular service, make up the bulk of the officer cadre in the reserve forces.

Only a few of them remain in the military as career officers. In this paper the rationale behind the training of junior officers in the early years of the IDF, after the 1948 War of Independence, will be compared with the guiding principles of their training fifty years later.

The construction of the army

The decision to create the IDF was made on May 26, 1948, twelve days after the establishment of the State of Israel. During this period the Hagana, the pre-state, underground, paramilitary organization, was in the midst of a full-scale offensive against a number of invading Arab regular armies. Despite Israel's victory, it was incapable of building an effective defensive force for protecting borders that were determined by the signed armistice agreements.

The responsibility and duty of a commander is to shape the IDF's (Israel Defense Forces) image. A successful commander does this not because he is disciplined or ordered to – but because he intuitively sets a personal example and serves as a role model. His personality and exemplary conduct instill trust, dedication, courage, and sacrifice in his subordinates. Only this type of commander will carry out his missions loyally and successfully.

(David Ben-Gurion, October 27, 1960)

The balance-of-power between Israel and its Arab neighbors was extremely asymmetric. Israel lacked sufficient strategic depth, and was delineated by long and often ambiguous, intersecting borders with four Arab countries. Moreover, the Arabs enjoyed a clear advantage in most of the basic military resources needed for another round of fighting, such as population size, economic stability, and international status.

Quality of military personnel

Israel's only advantage lied that time in the quality of its military personnel whose 'esprit de corps' and know-how could influence developments on the battlefield by means of:

- Counterbalancing the Arabs' quantitative advantage.
- Serving as a deterrent against another war, and winning it if forced to fight.

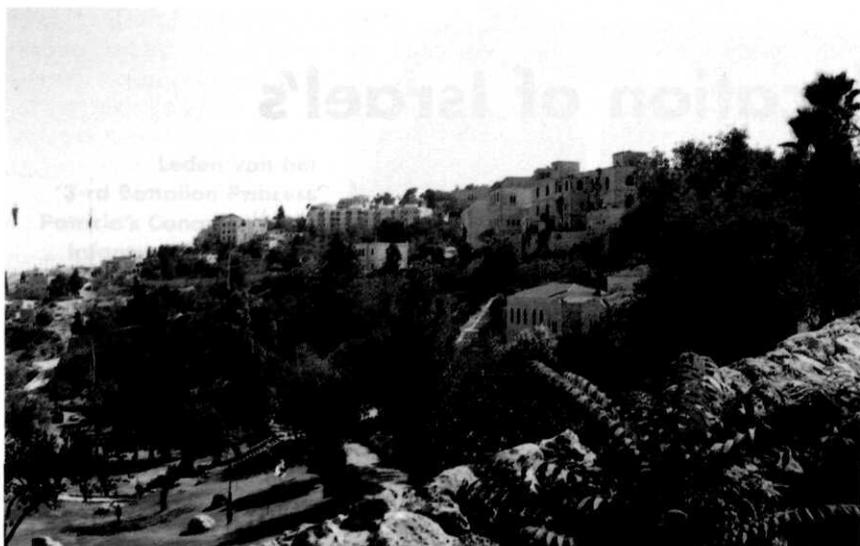
Creative thinking was required for both the construction and operational concept of the army. It had to possess a qualitative edge to overcome its enemies' quantitative superiority in order to win the wars in the future.

Unlike its Arab neighbors, Israel could not afford to lose even one war.

Moreover, strategic conditions dictated that a military victory would have to be quick and decisive, that is, not gained by attrition of the other side's forces and resources.

Training of junior officers

A major factor in such thinking was the training of junior officers who would become the IDF's professional backbone. Most of the IDF's combat strength is based on reserve units and



Zicht op Jeruzalem (Foto: A. Kool)

compulsory conscription. 'The Defense Service Law', one of the first laws passed by the Israeli Knesset (parliament), established a volunteer professional core for training the defense force to execute its missions, including non-military ones carried out mainly by junior officers.

Immigration waves

Ben-Gurion, who functioned as both prime minister and defense minister in Israel's formative years, played a major role in determining the army's tasks. He viewed the army as the nation's melting pot. After the War of Independence, he devoted most of his time to 'molding' the new Jewish state. During this period the country was still recuperating from the long period of fighting that had exacted a high toll of casualties. It was also a time of dealing with the post-war economic crisis and the absorption of large waves of immigration.

The number of new immigrants was larger than the veteran population. One of the tasks placed upon the army between 1949-1953 was immigrant absorption. The army was ordered to educate the new immigrants, due to the fact that the Ingathering of Exiles was the foundation on which the nation will build its strength and safeguard the independence of the state.

A 'people's army'

Ben-Gurion perceived the army as Israel's largest educational system, the melting pot of immigration that tore down the 'walls' between tribes and communities.

The army was the only recognized establishment without barriers or disputes that was expected to unify all of the national sectors by serving as a 'people's army'. That was the only capacity, and not as an aloof professional force, could the state's security be genuinely established at that time.

Ben-Gurion ordered the army to undertake national tasks because he believed it the only institution where:

...the youth of all classes meet. This offers us a golden opportunity to heal the breaches, close the deep rifts, and bring the community together under equal and equalizing living conditions. This is how we will create Jewish unity and brotherhood, not only in words and ideologies but mainly through

deeds by eliminating illiteracy, raising the educational level, and strengthening human and Jewish values...

(Ben-Gurion, 1949 : 21)

A symbol for the nation

In Ben-Gurion's eyes, the IDF was the only national institution in the first years of statehood that 'with advanced education could be transformed into a symbol and model for the nation... This must be one of the IDF's objectives since no other power [in the state] can serve as such a symbol to the people.' (Ben-Gurion, 1959)

The army's junior officers, in addition to their regular military assignments, bore the lion's share of this heavy national undertaking. This dualism aptly illustrated the ongoing debate in the IDF over the question of military service as a calling or a profession. In the past

it was admissible to regard connection with the army as a calling and not a profession, as though a contradiction existed between the two...[therefore] the realization of the calling on a high level - requires a continuous effort at improving professionalism, without precluding calling as a condition for [professionalism].

(Amidror, 2002 : 53)

For years the debate over turning the officer cadre into a profession elite impeded improvement of the IDF officers' professional level, beginning in the first stages of their training. Although the junior officers bear the brunt of Israel's daily security tasks and their actions have strategic implications, they remain the weak link in the chain of command from the point of view of training.

This sad condition exists despite the impressive list of reforms that helped raise the quality of middle and upper level officers.

In recent years a number of changes have been introduced into the junior officers' training program, but there must be a comprehensive re-examination of the entire training course and its relevance to future challenges.

This article will analyze the rationale of the previous IDF junior officers' training program vis-à-vis the recently introduced changes whose goal is to improve the training process by adopting certain features of the professional model similar to the one currently in use in European countries.

An efficient organization and...

Many experienced junior officers who participated in the War of Independence left the service at the end of their compulsory service, though the army faced both military and civilian tasks that demanded a large cadre of junior officers. Ben-Gurion, who closely followed the army's development, understood that junior officers had to receive training not only as professional commanders and instructors but also as officers who understood, first and foremost, the larger national requirements of their role.

Ben-Gurion wanted to inculcate awareness that the army's strength is determined not by military training and 'esprit de corps' alone, but by good administration, efficient procedures, and concern with a thousand and one details. Omission of these details would sap the army's strength and destroy the nation's ability to maintain an effective military force. Victory is not achieved by self-sacrifice alone.

The secret of victory
is perhaps three-quarters
efficient organization.

As for national tasks, junior officers were required to devote their time and

energy to assisting the poorer levels of the population, raising their self-respect, helping them develop good habits and cultural goals, and instructing them in the values of pioneering youth.

This will not come about through philanthropy or 'charity,' but through the comradeship of arms and sharing of common danger.

...spiritual qualities

Therefore, 'the commander must bear the responsibility not only for the military training of the soldier, but also for the molding his character... In the final analysis war is not waged by cannon or plane but by the person who uses them, who puts them in action.' (Ben-Gurion, 1949 : 21-22)

The warrior's key qualities are not physical strength or technical skill – though their importance should not be underestimated – but his *spirit*, his intellectual and spiritual strength, his knowledge and intelligence, his mental resources, perseverance, devotion, courage in the face of danger, creative initiative, and that noble, sublime element hidden in the depths of his soul which can 'overcome death'.

This is the heart of the officer's responsibility. A real officer can serve as a role model by dint of his own personality; he can educate others by his own nature. Only the living example of the officer's dedication to the supreme values we are fighting for will induce love and obedience in his soldiers and awaken in them the wellsprings of the highest heroism lying dormant in every person's soul.

Our secret weapon is
the exalted spirit of man.

And we will have recourse to this weapon as long as we face the threat of war. The ideal officer's own way of life sets an example for others to follow; it is his secret weapon.

The 'infantry model'

The question before us is: how could such a complex system of expectations be applied to a junior officers' training program? It should be noted that most of candidates are drafted for relatively short terms of compulsory service because of the



Het plein voor de klaagmuur. Het deel van de muur waar vrouwen mogen bidden (rechts) is afgesloten met een hek (Foto: A. Kool)

social principle that the people's army is based on compulsory service and the reserve corps drawn from the civilian population... and the deployment of officer potential exists at all class levels.

(Pa'il, 2002 : 39)

This outlook has influenced the training of junior officers for command positions in IDF combat units, and emphasizes the basic concept that the 'infantry model' is the optimal one for junior leadership training.

The training of junior officers according to infantry standards derives from a principle dating back to the pre-state, Hagana period when a combat soldier had to pass an NCO course. Only after acquiring NCO skills could he enter the IDF Officers' Candidate School (Bahd 1).

According to Gabriel & Gal, it was assumed that officers should serve as enlisted men for at least one year, a perspective that is obviously predicated on a value system regarding the officer's role that is different from the British and American systems. The authors claim that this requirement is one of two key points unique to the IDF. (Gabriel & Gal, 1984 : 43).

Experience as an NCO

The second major point in the professional training of the junior officer relates to his prior experience as an NCO or squad leader in a combat unit where he can demonstrate skills and allow his superiors the opportunity to evaluate his officer potential.

After three to five months in operational units, junior leaders are technically eligible to attend officer candidate school in order to become full-fledged officers of the IDF... [The junior leadership program's success rate] at producing potential officer material can be assessed from the fact that almost 80 per cent of the junior leaders do well enough to qualify as potential officer candidates

(Ibid pp. 44-45)

Academic studies

The officer candidate academic studies program is another channel, although a less common one, for junior officer training. The program is based on the American Reserved Officers' Training Course (ROTC). The original idea was to 'enable physically and intellectually able 18-20 year olds, with leadership potential, to obtain an education and broaden their horizons before becoming officers and taking command of IDF soldiers'.

Due to the program the recruitment of these young men is postponed by 3-5 years, allowing them to acquire a high level of technological and academic education at a relatively young age. This is in line with the demands of managing the complexities of modern warfare that increasingly depends on scientific, technological advances. (Pa'il, 2003 : 78-79) These officers undergo regular combat training at the IDF's officer candidate school.

The officers' course is designed to train junior officers in a relatively short time span within the framework of their compulsory service. The objective is to furnish officers with sufficient practical experience as field commanders before they enter the reserves.

While there are advantages to a short, intensive training course that prepares NCO's for combat duties as officers, the model is not without its shortcomings. The problem lies in producing a cadre of officers who view combat command as a career profession. (Gal, 1996 : 22)

The junior officers

The junior officers' contribution was widely recognized during the early years of statehood as well as in subsequent episodes (with an average of one major war per decade). The junior officers displayed outstanding capability, resourcefulness, and sacrifice - characteristics that overshadowed their lack of a broad professional basis.

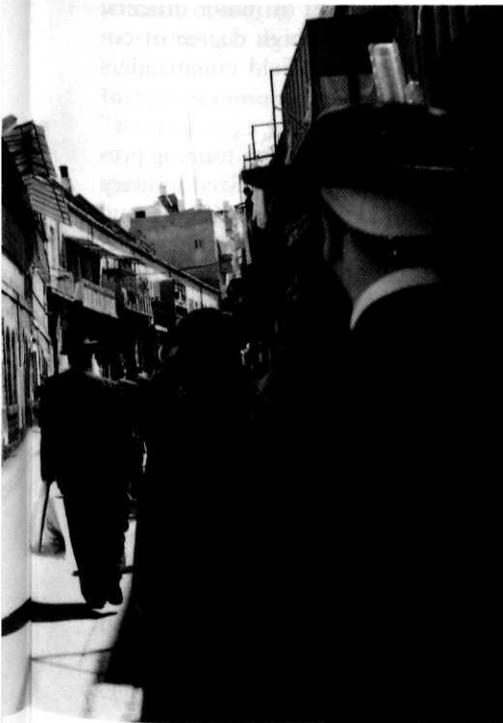


The officer candidate school developed an independent and self-disciplined officer with an aptitude for decision-making.

The junior officer was taught to think 'like a general' who had to make critical decisions.

The training program instilled basic values such as honesty, reliability, quick thinking, morality, leadership, and conduct that inspired his troops' emulation. These skills enabled the junior officer to carry out a wide variety of military and civilian assignments after graduation.

The IDF's senior command was fully aware of the need to train as well professional officers and that longer training periods were required. The idea of military training at the high school was not intended to solve the shortage of junior officers during the IDF's early years, rather, it was meant to set in motion a process of preparing army



In Mea Shearim, de ultra-orthodoxe wijk van Jeruzalem

(Foto: A. Kool)

the military boarding school had to prepare its graduates for service in the permanent army, which it did [by ingraining] personal values necessary for men in positions of responsibility in the IDF based on love of the country and readiness to carry out an assignment.

(Aviad, 1963 : 49)

The Military Boarding School achieved its goal, and its graduates' contribution to the IDF senior command and state security has been invaluable. In recent years, the Military Boarding School, like the rest of the army, has had to adjust to changing needs and challenges. The idea has been broached of transforming the school into a paramilitary command academy. At the same time, the IDF has considered as well reforming the officer candidate school program.

Criticism of the IDF

The changes demanded at the various levels of training, especially at the junior officer level, stem from the glaring need to improve the professional standard of officers at all levels. Criticism of the IDF's professional level began after the Yom Kippur War (1973) and continued through the War in Lebanon (1982-2000) and the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories that erupted in 1987.

In each of these wars the IDF was perceived as having failed to achieve a lightning victory as it did in the Six-Day War (1967). Strategic developments, such as the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and the elimination of the Iraqi military threat, along with severe economic cutbacks in the military budget and changes in Israeli society appear to be leading toward a decision for transforming the IDF into a full-fledged professional army.

Towards a new, technology-oriented army

For all practical purposes the IDF will cease to be a people's army in the near future. Almost 50 per cent of the population of conscript age is either granted a waiver or serves only part of the time required by law. Even the army reserve, the IDF's main force, is no longer considered a universal obligation in Israeli society since only a minority (30 per cent) is called up for reservist duty.

Although the IDF, and especially the national leadership, shun decisions related to a new model army, it seems that the combination of strategic developments and budget restraints that weigh heavily on the army and security establishment will enable a transition to a professional army even if formal decisions are delayed.

The people's army, where military service is still seen as a calling (at least on the rhetorical level), will gradually be relieved of the national and social tasks it has carried out since its founding.

In contrast, the professional army will enable the rapid and effective implementation of the kinds of changes needed in the IDF's structure. (Cohen, Eisenstadt, & Bacevich, 1998 : 99-100)

The technological advances in military hardware that were conspicuously demonstrated in the US's two wars in Iraq illustrate the requirements of the future battlefield. The IDF understood the significance of these changes at an early stage, and acquired and developed a long list of special fighting materiel that will facilitate the transfer to the new, technology-oriented army.

Furthermore, there is a continuous need to prepare the army for dealing

officers and civilian leaders through academic studies, military science, discipline, leadership, and practical training that would influence the student and educate him to be 'a servant of the people' in any role he was presented with, especially during his military service.

The Military Boarding School

The first step taken in meeting this challenge was the decision to open a military boarding school next to the Reali High School in Haifa. The school was inaugurated in 1954 on the basis of a trial period. Its aim was to provide high school education, train the students for positions in the defense command structure, and educate them toward fulfilling any role of responsibility in the state.

In other words, the boarding school was designed to prepare qualified youth for command positions in the IDF, by giving them a high level of studies, moral instruction, and military skills. (Vilian, 1988 : 38) In addition,

with the complexities of limited conflict – whether on the Lebanese border or with the Palestinian population and terrorist organizations in the occupied territories. Developments in the nature of combat place a new set of challenges before the junior officer cadre, and require different methods of training. The fifty-year old officer training model needs a thorough overhaul.

Deficiencies of the old model

One of the deficiencies of this model is its emphasis on the technical level rather than a broader base of military knowledge. Cadets were technically prepared to be platoon leaders; but the officer image and the way military command is regarded as a profession are far different from that in other armies.

Despite the long-acknowledged need for changes in the IDF's officer training course, reform has been slow. Some observers claim that this is because the IDF, as a militia-like peoples' army, avoids the concept of war as a field of science. (Shelach, 2003 :

85) In recent years the IDF's senior command has recognized the need for a comprehensive rethinking of the professional training of junior officers, even if this is completely unrelated to the transition of the IDF into a professional army.

Also contributing to this development has been the awareness that basic challenges, stemming from the nature of the confrontation, have forced the IDF to focus its attention on the junior command. Thus, a sergeant-majors' course was opened at the tactical command school in 1999, and the officer training course program was completely revamped in 2001.

Changes in the training program

The change in the officer training course was made by combining basic training of all branches of the ground forces. Assuming that this change will upgrade the level of junior officers because of its emphasis on the fundamentals of command and will provide a broader basis of military thinking during officer training, instead of the stress on technical skills as it used to be. The suggestion for dealing with the professional challenge of command calls for the delegation of au-

thority to the level of junior officers, and emphasizes a high degree of coordination so that field commanders can respond quickly.

This approach requires a training program based on a crystallized military doctrine where similar thinking and trust are implanted at all command levels, and authority is delegated down to the lowest ranks.

Professional thinking

According to this rationale, the junior officer will be required to adapt himself to professional thinking from the start of his training. This is characterized by curiosity and questioning (as well as the qualities mentioned previous). The cadet will be taught to develop the ability to see the 'total picture' and apply good judgment, bold decision-making, and mental flexibility.

As a junior officer he will have to assume the responsibility for his decisions and the willingness to accept mistakes of his subordinates, while he exhibits self-confidence, restraint, and courage. The ground forces officers' course has been designed to inculcate these qualities in the trainee,



**Een van de
- zwaar bewaakte -
toegangswegen
tot de oude stad
van Jeruzalem.
Op de achtergrond
de koepel van de
Al Aqsa-moskee
(Foto: A. Kool)**

without changing the length of training time (six months).

Tactical command college

The next stage was the establishment of the tactical command college aimed at officers who would remain in the standing army and become professional officers for a lengthy military career. The new program includes the introduction to technology, a broad survey of military history, and the fundamentals of management, command, decisionmaking, military law and ethics.

The tactical command college that opened in the summer of 1999 offers its carefully chosen participants a two-year program combining military science with academic studies. Stress is placed on military history and a multi-disciplinary program of management, law, and security.

In addition, the academy's lessons are designed to broaden the students' knowledge of military science and deepen their understanding of military life in order to strengthen command as a profession:

to impart to the young officer cadre with the basic skills needed for fulfilling command roles at the tactical level and as the basis for the officer's continuing development, stressing IDF service as a profession and way of life.

The academy's goals:

- **Knowledge** – inculcating a broad theoretical background in military science and a high degree of proficiency in tactics.
- **Command and Leadership** – grooming officers with a moral and professional commitment, and the ability to make correct decisions and carry them out under changing circumstances.
- **Thinking and Learning Talents** – enhancing thinking and study skills, self-criticism, inquisitiveness, and

scientific criticism as the basis for personal development and learning throughout the military service.

- **Professional Identity** – the building of a professional identity and view of military service as a way of life.

The short-term experience of integrating academy graduates of the IDF into the command structure points to the success of most of the reform's objectives and the qualitative advantage of academy graduates who return to active service with more experience, foresightedness, and learning skills than their fellow officers who did not attend the academy.

While the higher level of professionalism among the academy graduates poses a challenge for their superior commanders, it also has a positive influence on the immediate environment and has proven to the top brass that a new breed of commander has entered the IDF.

The Israeli Air Force

The Israeli Air Force has also recently adopted this form of instruction (2002) in its flight school. The cadets' program now includes academic as well as technical studies, and grants the pilots a university baccalaureate degree at their graduation. The air force sees the expanded (and lengthier) course as highly suited to the training of its cadets.

Sparta versus Athens

This article has dealt with the trend in the IDF to upgrade its officer training course, irrespective of the IDF's transformation into a professional, all-volunteer army. The senior command is aware that an improved officers' training program could significantly raise the IDF's professional standard. Senior officers responsible for training junior and middle-ranking commanders claim that recognizing military science as a bona fide academic field will facilitate the establishment of a military academy.

Zigdon and Raviv recently published a detailed plan (2003) on the benefits of an Israeli military academy for training junior officers, as well as middle-level and senior-ranking commanders. Although the academy is still far from realization, it indicates a trend in the IDF that resembles the Spartan model still in vogue in a number of professional armies in Europe.

Paradoxically, while in Israel this trend is considered as genuine progress in military education, some European armies are inclining toward civilian educational standards, that is, they are 'moving away from Sparta and approaching Athens.' (Haltiner, 2003 : 190)

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