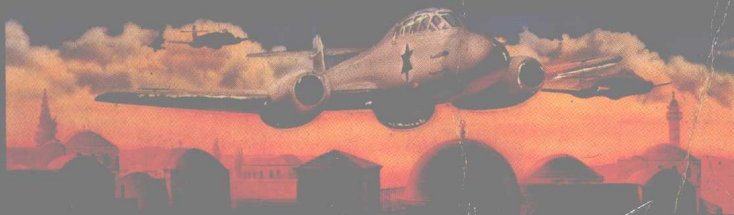


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LEON CURTIS

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MITLA PASS

Leon Uris



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"I want to go out with the troops," I said.

"It's been arranged," Natasha said. "The Old Man himself gave approval. You're going to make a drop in the Sinai."

"Mother of God, are you sure?"

"Yes, it's the Sinai. All this rumbling and the threats against Jordan have been a decoy. Egypt has been the real target all along."

"French and British involved in this?"

"Draw your own conclusions."

The ramifications were staggering. This was the whole ball of wax . . . major, major.

"Where are we going to be dropped?"

"A place called Mitla Pass."

I sat in the sand and with my finger drew a map. The Sinai was fairly clear in my mind. "Mitla . . . Mitla . . ." It was somewhere quite close to the Canal and, I think, near the Gulf of Suez as well. Something else occurred to me.

"Damn! I've never jumped out of an airplane."

Her white teeth showed. "That's very funny. No matter. A lot of people here are convinced that nothing is too tough for you. Oh, I don't worry about you, *cheri*. You'll bounce right up like a ball. Shlomo says he'll be right in back of you to push you out of the plane."

"Jesus," I said and dropped my head into my knees. "It isn't funny." Natasha stood over me—back to bitch again, the master of Hungarian mood swings.

"You wouldn't back out, Gideon," she said sarcastically. "After all, war is where little boys go to prove they are big boys. You wouldn't miss this for the world."

She was right. I realized my posturing had convinced the Israelis that I was rattlesnake-mean. Out of an airplane, huh? Well, I hoped I wouldn't make an ass of myself. I didn't make an ass of myself that one time, long ago . . . I almost did . . . I almost broke with fear, but I held on—barely.

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*This book is dedicated
to my beloved sister
ESSIE*

Acknowledgment

This book required extraordinary research, and an extraordinary researcher. Clarifying confusing military history and accounts of battles plus running down a thousand and one little sticklers was a gigantic job, beautifully done. I would like to thank and acknowledge Priscilla Higham for her tremendous skill and ingenuity, for her complete devotion to this project, and mainly for her friendship, particularly when the waters got rough.

And to my wife Jill. God bless the writer's wife.

Part
One

GERONIMO!

Tel Aviv

October 20, 1956—D Day minus nine

The Prime Minister's cottage, a remnant of the former German colony, sat unobtrusively in the midst of the outsized defense complex on the northern end of Tel Aviv. Midnight had come and gone. The stream of callers faded to a trickle, then halted.

For the moment David Ben-Gurion sat alone, his first opportunity all day for solitary contemplation. He was behind a desk that looked down a long conference table which was covered with green felt. Dead cigarette butts spilled over their ashtrays. The fruit baskets held spoiling apple and pear cores, grape seeds, banana skins, and peach pits, their fruit devoured. Half-empty soda bottles had lost their fizz and others, tipped over in disarray, appeared like a platoon of soldiers caught in a cross fire.

The cleanup crew of soldiers, two young men and two young women wearing top-security clearance badges, tiptoed in and attacked the mess.

"Can I get you anything—some tea?" one of the girls asked.

Ben-Gurion shook his head. It was a great head that seemed even greater perched on his short dumpling body. It was bald on top with an angry white mane

flaring out in every which direction. The cherub face remained deceptively peaceful.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Morocco," one of the girls said.

"Romania. I live at Moshav Mikhmoret."

"South Africa. My family is in Haifa," the second girl said.

"I am a sabra, Kibbutz Ginnosar."

"Yigal Allon's kibbutz," Ben-Gurion said.

"Yes," the soldier boy answered proudly.

Ben-Gurion's head tilted and his eyes blinked. He was a past master at grabbing forty winks, a skill honed at a hundred Zionist conferences. When the crew departed it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

The Old Man's eyes fluttered open and became fixed on a single paged document awaiting his signature, the approval of a plan, Operation Kadesh, that would commit his young nation to war. Only eight years earlier he had signed another document, a proud document that declared statehood. Would there even be a ninth birthday, or would it all end in horror like a biblical siege with a final ghastly scene of a national massacre?

The past three weeks had been nightmarish in the speed and intensity of events: the secret meetings in Paris with the French and later the British and the clandestine agreement to go to war together . . . the return of Israeli officers who had been training in military academies and army specialty schools around the world . . . the call-up of reserves . . . the near-disastrous raid on Kalkilia to make the world believe that Jordan, not Egypt, was the enemy of record . . . French equipment arriving without spare parts . . . pressure from Eisenhower and the Americans mounting daily . . . dire threats from the Russians . . .

Operation Kadesh. How esoteric, Ben-Gurion thought. The biblical site in the Sinai where the Jews dwelled for a time during their wanderings with Moses.

Operation Kadesh needed a series of miracles to succeed. Every assessment was frightfully the same:

Israel must win the war in the first four days. A prolonged conflict in which every Arab nation would join would be disastrous.

No small country goes to war without the support of a major power, yet David Ben-Gurion felt, in the depths of his being, that Israel's partners, England and France, would falter, leaving her alone, outmanned and outgunned.

Israel must win the war in the first four days!

All sorts of things were going wrong as D day approached. The ordinance reports all but crushed the spirit: no spare steel matting to roll vehicles over the sucking sands of the desert . . . aged tanks being cannibalized, further reducing their already inferior armored force . . . rifles from Belgium not up to spec . . . no filters for the tracked vehicles to keep them from choking in the desert . . . a shortage of tank tracks, chains, pulleys, winches, flatbeds, four-wheel-drive trucks, repair stations, batteries, belts . . . an obsolete air force of World War II piston planes to face double the number of the latest MiGs owned by the Egyptians . . . no aircraft batteries to defend the cities against Egyptian bombers flown by "volunteers" from Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The orders to the brigade commanders were desperately simple. They said, in effect, "You have an objective. You must reach the Suez Canal in three days despite the resistance. You will not ask for reinforcements or further supplies for there are none available."

Worse was the constant gnawing conviction that the British and French would quit. This would release divisions of fresh Egyptian troops to reinforce the Sinai. If France and England failed to bomb out the Egyptian airfields, Nasser could put his Russian-made bombers to work on Israel's cities.

We must win the war in four days!

Two of the brigades must traverse over a hundred miles of semi-charted wilderness . . .

. . . and the 7th Battalion, the Lion's Battalion, must be dropped deep into the Sinai behind enemy

lines, exposed to a disaster, a sacrificial force. The Old Man had argued for hours with the Defense Chief of Staff, Moshe Dayan, to try to dissuade him from parachuting the Lion's Battalion near Mitla Pass. Dayan was adamant. It was the linchpin of the entire operation, a maneuver to initially confuse the enemy, then stop Egyptian reinforcements. When the brigade linked up with the battalion, the combined force would wheel south to free the blockaded passage to the Red Sea. Yes, there was great risk—but try to engage in a war without risk.

Jacob Herzog, B.G.'s confidant and closest adviser on the campaign, entered the room with Natasha Solomon. Herzog was pale, in a scholarly way; an Irish Jew, the son of the chief Ashkenazi rabbi, with a magnificent religious and legal mind. He put all the late communications and a day's summary before the Old Man.

Natasha Solomon set a batch of papers on the desk, translations of messages from the French. Even at this hour Natasha was a warming sight. She was one of those women who gained an extra dimension of beauty through weariness, a certain sensuality in the black rings of fatigue forming beneath her eyes, as if from exhaustion at the end of a day of lovemaking. She was softness itself, different from many of the roughhewn sabra and kibbutz women, groomed in a Middle European way that made the silk of her blouse float over her terrain and shout "female!" even at two in the morning. An all but forgotten memory flitted through the Old Man's mind . . . a girl, long ago. Such a thing to remember at a time like this.

Ben-Gurion picked up the summary but his eyes were fatigued. He handed the papers to Natasha and waved her into a seat, then took up a pad and pen to jot notes as she read.

The British were being very cautious, very cagey, deepening B.G.'s distrust. Herzog tried to tidy up the day's events, but new events were already overtaking them.

Both the Soviet Union and America were bogged

down in their own problems. An American presidential election was to take place in a few days, and traditionally it was a good time to catch Washington off guard.

Revolts against the Russians were brewing in Poland and Hungary. The students in Budapest had rioted and the unrest was growing. Israeli intelligence estimated a Russian tank force would enter Budapest in a matter of days.

Herzog reckoned these events could give Israel a slight advantage. Russia and America might be slow to react to the Israeli attack on Egypt. If Israel could stall diplomatically for three days, her forces might reach the Canal and Israel's part of the war would be over.

But America was certain to be outraged that her two closest allies, England and France, would initiate military action without advising them. As for the Soviets, they had to put on a barking show for their Egyptian clients.

"Is there anything at all we haven't covered, Yakov? Anything . . . anything . . ."

Herzog pointed to the document setting Operation Kadesh into motion.

"Your signature," he said.

Ben-Gurion would not quit, gleaning for the stray, minute detail that might have been overlooked. It all boiled down to the same thing. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president, was on a heady binge. He had seized the Suez Canal and evicted the British and French. He had closed the Strait of Tiran, at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula, to Israeli shipping. He had turned the Gaza Strip into one enormous terrorist base which violated the Israeli border hourly. He had massed a huge army in the Sinai armed with a larder filled with Russian weapons. The bottom line was that Israel had no choice other than military action—with or without the British and French.

He scribbled his name on the paper. His nation was at war!

"Anything else?" he asked.

Herzog put before him a memo requiring initialing.

"What is this?"

"A small piece of business. Permission for Gideon Zadok to go into the Sinai with a forward unit. He has had a standing request that if there was ever to be a major action, to be allowed to join it as an observer. Research for his book."

"Am I mistaken, or didn't he go on the Kalkilia raid?"

"He did," Herzog answered. "Both Zechariah and Ben Asher told me he conducted himself very well under fire."

"How is his intelligence clearance?" B.G. asked.

"Early during his trip here, we realized he was in a position to gain very valuable information to pass to the Americans. Both Beham and Pearlman fed him false intelligence on the Ramon Rocket and the atomic project at the Haifa North Plant. The kind of data we gave him would be easy to trace if he had turned it over to the Americans. Our boys have no qualms about him as a security risk and I personally give him my vote, but I believe Natasha is in the best position to judge."

"Natasha?"

"Gideon Zadok is family," she said. "He's been on five or six border and desert patrols with units of the Lion's Battalion. They swear by him, as well."

"So, why not," Ben-Gurion said. "He's a good boy. I like him. He has funny ideas about not settling in Israel. I'll change his mind about that. But . . . who knows, he might write us an important book." The Old Man scribbled his initials on the memo. "Who are you assigning him to?"

"I believe," Natasha said, "if Gideon knew about the plans, he'd choose to be dropped with the Lions at Mitla Pass."

"That's one part of this I don't like," Herzog interjected. "He is an American, after all. If we sent him back to Eisenhower in a wooden box it could create an ugly incident."

B.G. pondered. "We are entitled to a poor man's Hemingway. Send him with the Lions. He's a writer. He should be in the action. God knows he doesn't write like Hemingway, but I hear he drinks as well."

"I can vouch for that," Natasha said.

"Don't get yourself broken up with this boy," the Old Man said.

"I already have," she answered.

Gideon

*Herzlia, Israel—October 29, 1956—D Day, H Hour
minus nine*

I could not move. My feet felt as though they were encased in cement. My brain was whirling with a mish-mash of bloated, horrifying images. Weird-shaped airplanes fell out of the sky . . . distorted, terrorized faces of my daughters screamed for help . . . Valerie was humping some faceless bastard and screeching venomously and laughing at me . . . a band of headless musicians played a military march. . . . Shit, what was all this about? Baby waves breaking on a beach . . . hush . . . hush . . . hush . . .

I blinked my eyes open.

Hush . . . hush . . . hush . . .

Where the hell am I? My mouth was filled with sand. I strained to move. Trapped! Dammit! I can't move!

I jerked hard and inched up on my elbows. The beach was empty. My face dropped to the sand again. Get it together, Gideon. Think, man. All right, I know. I . . . I . . . left the hotel and . . . uh . . . I left the hotel and took a walk on the beach to clear my head. Let me think, now. I must have stopped at the water's edge and . . . I guess I passed out from exhaustion.