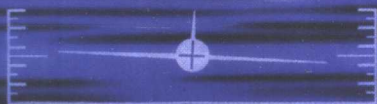


# JAMES FOLLETT

Unstoppable. Nerve-tautening. And true



# MIRAGE

# *MIRAGE*

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JAMES FOLLETT

Mandarin

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## *PART ONE*



## *ISRAEL 9 June 1967. The Six Day War*

After six days of flying almost non-stop sorties, Daniel Kalen's mind and body were as one with his Mirage-5. The diminutive fighter, wheeling in the early summer sky over the Golan Heights, was an extension of his senses. So accurate was his flying that the Syrian tank, having been out of sight for some seconds, was swinging centrally towards his sights as he completed his roll.

Suddenly Ben Patterson's Texan accent was yelling in his helmet: 'SAM missile! Break right! Break right!'

Even as Daniel levelled out to concentrate on the tank, he saw the U-shaped huddle of vehicles of a Syrian mobile SAM missile battery. He barrel-rolled the Mirage with a violence that would have torn a smaller aircraft apart, but the sudden manoeuvre was too late. A blinding flash of light in his mirror. A series of quick-fire jolts ripped through the Mirage's airframe. The artificial horizon was the first of the instruments to die, followed in quick succession by the entire instrument panel. The hiss of white noise in Daniel's helmet told him that his radios were finished and yet there was some response from the control column, and the continuing harsh whine suggested that his Atar jet engine was still functioning. Not for the first time did he marvel at the Mirage's fantastic ability to take damage and still fly. But the aircraft's nose was dropping. If he had a working airspeed indicator, it would have shown a rapidly increasing speed as the fighter lost height. Of all the instruments, only the magnetic compass was still working. Gentle pressure on the rudder bar brought the fighter on to a southerly heading without it losing too much height.

A shadow flitted across his mirror. It was the reassuring silvery presence of Ben Patterson's Mirage covering his tail. His legendary commanding officer waved and gave the upwards jabbing gesture that told Daniel to eject. It was the only logical course of action; Daniel realized that he stood no chance of nursing the stricken Mirage back to his base at Haifa. But after five days' fighting – five days in which the Israeli Air Force had wiped out the air forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan – Daniel knew that his own air force was in a bad way after suffering unexpected losses from the new and deadly

menace of the SAM missile batteries. The tiny surface-to-air missiles – launched by well-trained Egyptian teams – could pick aircraft off the sky with devastating accuracy. Two of Daniel's comrades had already been killed during that eventful week. Only that morning Ben Patterson had warned that everything depended on the United Nations securing a cease-fire, otherwise the air battle could be lost on the ground due to lack of spares for the Mirages.

'So please, gentlemen,' Patterson had pleaded at that morning's briefing, 'if a SAM gets you, try to bring your aircraft down in one piece. And if you bring it down in several pieces, please make sure they are large ones.'

The laughter that had followed had in no way undermined the seriousness of the spares situation; all the men present were flying Mirages that had been kept in the air by cannibalizing spares from crashed aircraft. The trouble was that the Dassault factory in Paris where the Mirages were built required six weeks to meet orders for spares – six weeks in an age when wars lasted six days.

Patterson's Mirage streaked past him and sheered away, almost spinning on its wingtip. Daniel saw the heat-seeking missile arrowing after him. He realized that his commanding officer had deliberately flown into the missile's path in order to entice it away from him. He watched the Mirage's brilliant evasive aerobatics succeed in shaking off the missile. Ben Patterson was the oldest and most experienced flying officer in the *Chel Ha'Avir*; few other pilots could equal his amazing flying skills.

Daniel cautiously eased the nose of his Mirage towards the south and the patchwork of cultivated fields across the border. The manoeuvre increased his rate of descent towards the volcanic broken hills of the Golan Heights. He tried lifting the nose but that only increased his sinking speed. Damn! There was nothing for it but to sit tight, try to keep the Mirage heading south, and hope for a reasonably flat field. He estimated his height as ten thousand feet and his rate of descent as fifteen hundred feet per minute. Obviously there was still some lift from his engine and wings.

Six minutes to the inevitable crash.

For the first time in six days of continuous duty, Daniel was aware of himself. During the months of training he had wondered about this moment and had harboured a nagging doubt as to whether or not he would be scared. Now the dreaded moment had arrived. Instead of fear there was a sensation of curious detachment. For five minutes he had worried about the safety of his aircraft and not himself. They say war teaches a man about himself; Daniel was surprised by the lesson. As a child he had worried incessantly about

any project – both in planning and execution. He had a vivid memory from the age of nine when he had finally mustered the courage to climb the steep steps of an adventure slide which his father had erected for the benefit of the children of the workers on his moshav only to have his nerve fail him in the little covered hut at the top of the slide. Nearly twenty years on, he still died an agony of embarrassment at the recollection of the humiliation and the taunting of other kids who had to push past him before hurling themselves down the silvery slope to what looked to Daniel like certain oblivion. Worse – his mother had to rescue him.

He peered over the rim of the cockpit. His pulse quickened. At five thousand feet the ground details were sharp and well defined. He could see with awful clarity the sharp crags that would tear him and his Mirage apart. There seemed little hope of bringing his fighter down in even salvageable pieces. There was no alternative but to eject. He reached up, grasped the ejector seat handle and pulled the safety blind over his flying helmet. The Plexiglass canopy was snatched free. The cockpit came alive with the screaming slipstream. He braced himself for the spine-shortening jolt of the explosive charges that fired his seat clear of the aircraft.

Nothing happened.

Daniel pulled again. Still nothing. He released the safety blind. The force of the wind against his helmet rammed his head back. The deafening scream of the slipstream made it difficult for him to think clearly. A thousand-to-one chance fragment from the SAM's warhead had damaged the ejector seat's firing charge. Another, sharper yank. Still nothing.

His hand dropped to the seat harness release lever. At two thousand feet he stood a chance of bailing out manually provided he could jump clear of the tailplane. But with the airspeed nudging what had to be at least four hundred knots, the chances of avoiding the tailplane were remote. It was then that he saw the fields of a settlement almost directly ahead, through a gap in the hills. The howling slipstream made rational thought almost impossible but he resolved to bring the Mirage down in salvageable pieces in that field.

Gently ... very gently, he drew the control column into his stomach and extended the flaps. The aircraft bucked wildly but the airspeed dropped. The field was about four kilometres distant. Only when he knew what the crops were would he decide whether to land with his main gear up or down.

One thousand feet ... ease the nose up ... a little more ... not too much. Airspeed still dropping. Steady ... steady ...

The field was racing towards him. Two kilometres. He could see



groups of figures watching him. Soldiers? Farm workers? Was it a Jordanian settlement, Syrian or what? Israeli armoured units had penetrated Transjordan in the lightning war which had been raging for six days now. But the tanks had left the settlements alone, concentrating their firepower instead on Syrian and Jordanian fortified positions. Even if he survived the crash, if the workers were Syrians they would almost certainly kill him out of hand. Daniel was convinced that the need to observe the protocols of war did not rest heavily on Arab consciences.

Seven hundred feet ... six hundred ... Mercifully the crippled Mirage was still flying reasonably level. Some of the figures in his target field started running towards the truck that they were loading. Melons! About four hectares of melons! The field would be flat beneath the foliage. The realization made it easier to think rationally. Go for a gear-down landing. There was a chance – a faint, impossible chance – that he could bring the Mirage 5 down in one piece. He groped for the main gear lever and had the satisfaction of feeling the grating rumble of the undercarriage locking into place. Three green lights winked at him. Some systems were still working.

Three hundred feet. Daniel tried opening the fuel dump valves but the solenoids refused to operate. The workers in the field were now scattering in all directions. Some were carrying rifles. Daniel checked the Luger strapped to his thigh; if the Syrians played dirty, they were going to find him a difficult customer to deal with.

Two hundred feet. No more time to weigh anything up. A bit more flap ... keep the nose up and let gravity do the rest. The wind-break line of casuarina trees at the far end of the field was racing towards him. The rich green blur immediately below contained fleeting blobs of bloated ripeness. Daniel remembered that it was a good season for melons. Two weeks earlier his father had been pacing up and down complaining to his mother about the low prices they would be fetching. An army general worrying about melons.

One hundred feet. Daniel suddenly remembered to get rid of his helmet so that its mass did not add to his head's inertia on impact. The harness would stop him being thrown forward. More from a sense of tradition rather than any religious conviction, Daniel offered a brief prayer in Hebrew and cut power. The Atar engine flamed-out at fifty feet. A second later the Mirage's wheels struck the field. What happened next Daniel later recalled as a pattern of disconnected images like a movie projected with a flickering lamp. The fighter slewed sideways the instant the wheels touched the ground. The port undercarriage leg was sheared away like a matchstick struck with a machete. The wingtip swathed into the soft

soil, spinning the aircraft through one complete turn as it ploughed across the field. Daniel was hurled forward against his restraint harness with a force that would have broken a smaller man's neck. There was a confusion of noise and gut-wrenching lurches that finished off what little sense of orientation he had left. His body was jerked off the seat and rammed against the webbing straps. A strange force tore his hands from the control column and tumbled the scenery right over as if he were performing a low level barrel roll. The sun was abruptly extinguished.

The silence and stillness were as unreal as they were sudden. As Daniel's eyes adjusted to semi-darkness he realized that his Mirage had flipped right over and that he was hanging upside down from his seat harness. There was an acrid smell of burning PVC – some electrical insulation was on fire. Something was trickling down his chin. At first he thought it was blood. The liquid had a sweet, bland flavour: melon juice. Daniel decided that he hated melons. He was unfastening his seat and parachute harnesses when he heard a sound that froze his fingers and his blood: the obscene glug of fuel leaking from a ruptured tank. He frantically twisted the quick-release toggles and allowed his body weight to drop on to the tangle of foliage beneath his head. Pain seared through his ankle. His left foot was trapped beneath the rudder bar. He rammed his hands against the yielding soil to ease his weight on his foot but the move proved useless: no matter how hard he tried to twist his leg to the right and left, it refused to come free. The burning smell was stronger. Daniel swore bitterly and groped desperately around his trapped foot. The rudder bar seemed to be twisted out of shape. All it needed was one sharp wrench . . . . Daniel took a deep breath and twisted his whole weight sideways. His ankle broke with a dull crack. The pain became a hammer-action drill boring and pounding with agonizing ferocity into his foot. He fell into a heap on the ground and began clawing at the soft earth like a demented dog. The inverted cockpit was filling with smoke by the time he had dug an opening under the rim that was large enough for him to wriggle through. His head was in the sun and fresh air. A melon rolled briefly under his convulsing body before his weight squashed it flat – spewing immature seeds into his face. And then he was crawling through the coarse foliage – his elbows working frantically like steam locomotive pistons. The excruciating pain in his ankle as his foot dragged over the ground was forgotten. All that mattered was to put distance between himself and the wrecked Mirage.

Later Daniel would be unable to recall just how far he dragged his pain-racked body across the melon field. All he would be able to

remember was that when the aircraft suddenly blew up with a terrible WHUMPPFF, the explosion was enough to lift him into the air and hurl him to the ground with sufficient force to end his tenuous hold on what little consciousness he had managed to cling to.

## GOLAN HEIGHTS 11 June

The United Nations cease-fire that brought an end to what would become known as the Six Day War was four hours old.

After thirty hours of non-stop artillery warfare between Israel and Syria in the mountainous Golan terrain, an exhausted Major Sam Aradd was slumped in a canvas chair in his tent, writing his report. Northern Command required such reports to be written as quickly as possible while details were still fresh in the mind. It was details that military intelligence fed upon. With the war over on all three fronts, Aradd was still on a nerve-tingling 'high' and could not focus his mind on mere details. In the light of the momentous events that had just taken place, details were an irksome irrelevance.

Writing was virtually impossible in the heat. The paper kept sticking annoyingly to Aradd's hand and the heat made the ink in his Bic flow in globs. He opened the flap on his tent to increase the breeze and gazed down at Qala village – the scene of a pitched tank battle the previous day. The incredible had happened: every hilltop was now under Israeli control. The Israeli army had always been uneasy about a Syrian campaign; of all Israel's enemies, the Syrians had the most active support from the Soviets. From their commanding positions in the Golan Heights, where they could shell settlements with impunity, the Syrians had embraced the Soviet battle tactics of 'Sword and Shield' – mobile guns to the fore backed up with formidable armour on their flanks. Their western frontier was reinforced with a chain of massive fortifications which rose in a series of steps up the precipitous slopes of the Golan Heights. And yet the Israeli armoured units, facing seemingly impossible odds of an enemy in superior numbers occupying superior positions, had scaled the Heights and imposed a crushing defeat on the Syrians. Even the Golani Brigade – an untried unit made up of misfits and unruly conscripts drawn from the poorer sections of the Israeli community – had acquitted itself with remarkable courage and skill.

Aradd's thoughts were interrupted by the uneven beat of an approaching helicopter.

'*Samal!*' he barked.

The unshaven face of *Samal* (Sergeant) Eli Laski appeared in the

tent's opening. He was wearing an S. G. Brown communications headset. 'Sir?'

'Who's that?'

'The helicopter, sir? I've no idea. It hasn't given a recognition signal.'

Aradd stormed out of his tent and stood gazing at the big Super Frelon transport helicopter as it kicked up a miniature dust storm a hundred metres from his encampment. Sand filters on the helicopter's air intakes gave the whine of its three gas turbines a curious muffled quality. As soon as the machine's wheels touched the ground and the whine of the turbines dropped, he strode purposefully towards the door and stood hands on hips like a headmaster awaiting an explanation from a wayward pupil. He ignored the choking dust and mentally composed a blistering tirade for the machine's lunatic crew. He would have been within his rights to have ordered the helicopter to be fired upon, but not even Aradd, despite his anger and arrogance, had the courage to order his men to open fire on a machine bearing the blue Star of David insignia of the *Chel Ha'Avir* on its fuselage. For the past three days it seemed that half the signals traffic had been *Chel Ha'Avir* gripes about the army's enthusiasm for shooting at anything that flew – friend or foe.

The large door of the helicopter's assault bay opened and so did Aradd's mouth. He promptly shut it again: through a break in the clouds of blinding dust kicked up by the helicopter's rotors he saw that the man standing in the assault bay was wearing on his sweat-stained blouse the crossed sword and ear of wheat shoulder-mark of a general. Aradd's bowels turned to water. Who the hell was this? Brigadier-General David Elazar – GOC Northern Command? Hardly – the new arrival was too stocky. Aradd gave a clumsy salute which obviously went unseen. The general waved aside the assistance of an NCO who was accompanying him and sprang lightly to the ground. Instinctively ducking his head, the senior officer ran towards Aradd and returned his second salute.

'Who's in charge here?' the general demanded.

'I am, sir.'

'You're Major Aradd?'

'Yes, sir.'

The general removed his dark glasses. The eyes that regarded Aradd possessed a steely grey strength. They were the eyes of a man used to getting his way. In the stranger's face Aradd saw fatigue even greater than his own.

The general's face relaxed suddenly into the creases of good humour that habit had etched around his eyes. He held out his hand.

'I'm Major-General Emil Kalen.'

The name meant nothing to Aradd. For a moment he was tempted to challenge the senior officer to produce an identification but the hard grey eyes were an effective deterrent. 'You've done a fine job out here, major,' the general continued. 'But I'm not here to give out medals - there'll be time for that later. I need a favour. This is an unofficial visit. If you're busy - tell me to fuck off and I'll understand.'

Aradd gave an involuntary smile at the unexpected expletive. 'I'm not too busy for a coffee, general. If you would like to step into my tent -'

'Thank you, major - but it can wait. Yesterday you reported a Mirage that had been brought down in this area?'

'That's correct, sir. A Syrian surface-to-air missile battery.' Aradd paused and grinned proudly. 'The battery doesn't exist any more - nor does the Syrian army, of course.'

'Did the pilot eject?'

Aradd looked curiously at his guest. 'No, sir.'

'Where did it crash?'

Aradd pointed. 'On the plain, sir. About six kilometres west. It looked as if the pilot tried to make a belly landing in a field but he didn't have enough control. It caught fire and burned out.'

'Show me, please.'

The two men followed a steeply rising goat track that wound past the blackened remains of a Syrian mortar position. Shattered slabs of wire-reinforced concrete lay scattered around like discarded headstones from the pounding that the emplacement had received from Israeli tanks. Some of the tangled remains were splattered with blood. Under the watchful eyes of battle-weary Israeli soldiers, a team of Syrian Red Cross men were picking over the scene - slowly and methodically filling Soviet Army-issue human remains plastic bags. The two officers were sweating in the hot sun by the time they reached a precarious crag that overlooked the plains.

Aradd pointed to a distant smudge of blackness that disfigured a melon field. 'That's it, sir. I've got two snipers posted on that hill to keep souvenir-hunters away. Goddamn Syrians'll steal anything.'

General Kalen trained his binoculars on the mangled, burnt-out remains of the fighter without speaking. The sun beat down on his muscular bare arms but he stood quite still - seeming to take in every detail of the scene. Eventually he spoke to Aradd: 'Did you send anyone to investigate?'

Aradd felt uneasy. He began to understand why he was being honoured with this visit. 'You mean immediately after it crashed, sir?'

General Kalen lowered his binoculars and stared at Aradd. The grey eyes seemed to be probing the innermost recesses of his mind – turning over all his dark secrets; dispassionately cataloguing them for future reference. ‘Of course, major.’

‘No, sir. And with respect, sir – a rescue attempt was out of the question. Firstly – we were under fire from this position; secondly – there was no time to get to the aircraft even if it had been safe. If there’s to be an investigation I shall say —’

‘No one’s gunning for you, major,’ General Kalen interrupted. ‘You’ve done a first-class job here.’ He paused and allowed his gaze to return to the black smudge. ‘If I fix up a wrecker, could you spare the men to get that Mirage loaded? I’ll understand if it’ll give you problems.’

Puzzled, Aradd nodded. Standing orders required war matériel wreckage, particularly aircraft, to be recovered as soon as possible. What was unheard of was for a high-ranking officer such as a general to concern himself with such details. ‘May I ask a question, sir?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘What’s so special about that Mirage?’

General Kalen turned his stocky frame away from Aradd and levelled his binoculars once again at the scene of the distant crash. ‘The pilot was my son,’ he remarked over his shoulder.

The melons were Syrian therefore Sergeant Eli Laski, singing lustily at the top of his voice, took a perverse pleasure in aiming the pounding tyres of the battered General Motors wrecker at the plumpest and ripest fruits as he hurled the savagely bucking vehicle across the uneven field. *Rav Turai* (Corporal) Rudi Kal clung to the power winch mounted on the wrecker's front bumper, busily warding off the slashing leaves of the melon plants while wishing he had thought of a safer place to ride in his search for a breeze. The size of the vicious leaves, and the fruits that were being pulped under the wrecker's tyres, were a credit to the centuries-old irrigation techniques of the Middle East: few Syrian growers had modern water-pumping equipment and yet the fruits were plump and healthy. A particularly large melon burst obscenely and splattered Rudi with its flesh. Melon seeds slithered into his unkempt beard like disturbed woodlice. His yell at Laski to slow down died on his lips when he saw the buckled tailplane of the Mirage. The wrecker slowed its mad progress. Eli at the wheel had also seen the tailplane.

Like many soldiers during the past six days, Rudi and Eli had seen a lot of death, but six days was not long enough to become hardened to it, if, indeed, there was a definable period for such a process. When he and the others had come upon a shattered Syrian position and seen dead men for the first time, they had fallen silent. By the second and third encounters they had laughed and made jokes in passing. But the laughs had been hollow and the jokes shallow; a bravura born out of an unwillingness to appear anything other than callous in the eyes of their comrades that deceived only themselves and the jackal-like news teams that followed in the wake of Israel's lightning conquests. Previously the two men had come upon death by chance; this time, as they approached the Mirage, they were deliberately seeking it out and they were frightened at what they knew they would find.

Eli swung the wrecker in a tight circle and reversed it towards the blackened patch of field that marked the Mirage's funeral pyre. He jumped down from the cab and stumbled through the waist-high melon foliage. Rudi joined him. The two men stood in silence as they



contemplated the wraiths of smoke still curling from the burnt-out wreckage. The only intact parts of the fighter were its wingtips – gleaming in their unpainted aluminium nakedness. As Eli studied the barely recognizable remains, he realized that the tailplane had broken away from the airframe and was upright while the fighter itself was inverted.

‘We’d better get the bag,’ Rudi muttered.

Eli shook his head. ‘It’s upside down,’ he pointed out. ‘No point in recovering any remains until we’ve lifted her clear of the ground.’

With frequent anxious glances at the nearby hills that could easily conceal Syrian snipers who hadn’t accepted the United Nations cease-fire, Eli and Rudi set to work with the wrecker’s crane. It took them thirty minutes of sweated labour under the scorching sun to secure hoisting straps around the half-melted airframe. On a word from Eli, Rudi worked the hydraulic controls on the wrecker’s crane. Black debris showered from the inverted cockpit as the Mirage lifted. Rudi stopped the crane when the wreckage was suspended a metre clear of the ground. Miraculously the lump of distorted hardware that had been the Atar jet engine remained secured to the airframe.

‘Who’s volunteering?’ Rudi asked uneasily.

Eli took a heavy-duty plastic bag from the driver’s cab. It bore a Star of David emblem. ‘We’ll both do it,’ he replied curtly.

‘Funny that nothing fell out the cockpit when we lifted.’

‘Because he was strapped in. Come on – let’s get it over with.’

The two men reluctantly approached the suspended Mirage. It was swaying gently in the breeze – a slave to the aerodynamic forces it had defied the previous day. Dreading what they were about to find and what they had to do, they ducked under the rim of the cockpit and looked up. Hanging by a blackened thread that had once been part of the seat harness were the remains of a five-point harness buckle. Eli touched it. The strand parted and the buckle clinked to the ground where the rest of the heat-blackened harness hardware had already dropped. As Eli stared up, he realized that he was looking at the partially melted aluminium frame of what had been an ejector seat.

There were no hanging remains of a skeleton.

No grinning skull cooked into a flying helmet.

The men were silent for a few seconds. Rudi was the first to speak: ‘Goddamn Syrians!’ he spat. ‘They took him last night. Animals!’

Eli knelt and picked the buckle out of the dust. ‘I don’t think even they would do that, Rudi.’

Rudi sneered in contempt. ‘Both of us saw the crash. He didn’t