



The fire-like impacts of war

VICTOR NEUMAN

In this eight-part series, the author recounts his life in Israel around the time of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The events and people described are real but, for reasons of privacy, the names are fictitious.

Part 7: The Ceasefire

The ceasefire came on Oct. 25, 19 days after the war had begun. It was a short war, if you look at it one way. In another way, it was a short episode in a long war going back to 1948 and stretching forward to a distant and indiscernible point. With the Yom Kippur War, we came to realize that Israel's enemies could fight and lose many wars and still exist, while Israel could not afford to lose even one.

Still, we were grateful for the end of hostilities and longed for the return of all of those who had gone to fight from the kibbutz. Remarkably, they all survived to return. Remarkable because kibbutz soldiers had a reputation for aggressive leadership and devotion to duty. At that time, the statistic most often referenced was that only five percent of the population of Israel lived on kibbutzim but 20% of the officers in the Israeli military were kibbutz

members. Correspondingly, they routinely made up a high percentage of war casualties.

But, just because no one was dead did not mean that nothing had died.

Tzvie and Ari seemed unfazed by the experience. They were back in the bananas with me and back to their joking ways. We were all sitting around having lunch, heads down in our plates when Tzvie popped up, threw a banana peel at Ari and then pretended to be eating like everybody else. Ari first faked a return throw and then threw it in earnest, hitting Tzvie on the side of the head.

"Hey! Why do you think it was me?" said Tzvie.

"I didn't know at first so I just pretended to throw back. Only you ducked. The one who ducks is the guilty party."

When they weren't pranking each other, they were happily preparing for their return to Europe. The kibbutz had voted to give them another vacation to replace the one they had cut short to help in the war.

Others who returned were not the same. Yossi, a quiet youth, was a medic in the war. I had never worked with him nor had a close friendship

with him, though, as I did everybody on the kibbutz, I saw him around a lot. Now, I was not seeing him around much. Not in the dining hall, not in the recreation room, not in any of the places kibbutzniks normally gathered. I passed by his flat and noticed a tray of food outside his door. When I asked a friend of his what was going on, he told me that Yossi hadn't come out of his room since coming back. His friends decided that, if they couldn't coax him out, at least they could make sure he didn't starve to death. They would leave a food tray and he'd retrieve it when no one was around, and then put the empty tray out to be picked up. This went on for two weeks before Yossi finally began to appear and made the attempt to begin living again.

Yossi on the one hand, Tzvie and Ari on the other. I suppose war is a fire that can melt some metals and harden others.

Then there was Aryeh, one of our youngest who went to fight. He was still undergoing the three-year service requirement when the war broke out.

Aryeh drove an armoured personnel carrier and had been patrolling in his vehicle near the ceasefire lines in the



Life for many kibbutz members changed after they served in the war.

Golan. Night-driving conditions on the border required that headlights be cut or suppressed to reduce the vehicle's visibility to the enemy. A member of Aryeh's crew pestered him to let him drive the vehicle. The man was not an experienced driver but Aryeh let him take over the wheel. In a short time, the new driver lost control of the carrier and rolled it off the side of the road – Aryeh's neck was broken and he was rendered a quadriplegic.

Aryeh was released from the hospital when they had done all they could for him. He required ongoing care but his doctors felt he needed to be home, where his family and friends were. They equipped his bed and room with every gizmo known to mankind and left him to make what he could of his life.

We all were horrified by what had happened to him and it became a kind of required pilgrimage to visit Aryeh and pass some time with him. Tamar was particularly determined to be at his side as much as she could. When we visited him, we were all so damned cheerful.

"Try to keep his spirits up," we told ourselves. So, we joked, we gossiped, we kibbitzed, we pretended. Tamar was better at it than I was. She was naturally talkative, inherently upbeat and she carried on beautifully.

Aryeh was like Tamar – relentlessly cheerful. He never complained about his condition, never even talked about it. Those were conversations that were kept in his own head and I could only imagine the price he paid for what he couldn't say.

Thinking about it later, I came to realize I'd do the same in Aryeh's situation. Here you are, 20 years old, with no working arms or legs, no future to speak of. Perhaps no wedding or kids or life. All you have are your friends. Do you really want to drag them into your abyss to the point where they start avoiding you? Lose the last thing that gives you any semblance of contentment? And so, you let the tears flow when you are alone and the jokes flow when you have company. As I said, relentlessly cheerful.

Our next door neighbour, Shmuel, came home to his wife and two kids. I was incredibly glad to see him. When

Shmuel was called up, he was in the middle of a birthday party for one of his two daughters, the 9-year-old. He finished the party, got into his uniform, grabbed his gun and then stopped in to see me before he headed north.

"I have a favour to ask, Kanadi." I knew that, in two hours, he would be on the front lines in the Golan. And that, three hours after his daughter's birthday party, he could be dead. I was ready to give him any damn thing he wanted.

"I understand your parents in Canada shipped you a crate with a stereo system – the one you have on Tamar's bookshelf. I was wondering if I could get the wood crate from you. I want to make a wagon for my kids." "Yes, take it," I said. "And take the stereo, too."

He treated it as a joke but I was only half-kidding. In that moment, there wasn't enough I could do.

But Shmuel came back. I wanted to give him a bear hug when I spotted him walking up the path but his family called dibs.

The war was over. Or, to put it more accurately, this war was over.

(Next Time: Epilogue) ■

Victor Neuman was born in the former Soviet Union, where his family sought refuge after fleeing Poland during the Second World War. The family immigrated to Canada in 1948 and Neuman grew up in the Greater Vancouver area. He attended the University of British Columbia and obtained a BA and MA with majors in English literature and creative writing. Between 1968 and 1974, he made two trips to Israel, one of which landed him on a kibbutz at the time of the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Upon his return to Canada, he studied Survey Technology at BCIT and went on to a career of designing highways for the Province of British Columbia and the firm of Binnie Civil Engineering Consultants. When he retired, he reconnected with his roots in creative writing and began writing scripts for Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir concerts and articles for the Jewish Independent. Neuman and his wife, Tammy, live in southeast Vancouver and enjoy the company of friends, their extensive extended family and their four sons.

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