It was during what Israelis call the War of Attrition, a name denoting a rather vague period of regular but low-intensity conflict between Israel and the several Arab states it had fought in 1967.

Peer’s role in the conflict had mainly to do with Egypt.

“The idea,” he says, “was to not allow the Egyptians to bring forces and surface-to-air missiles to the Suez Canal area. The Russians were on the Egyptian side and they were doing a lot of stuff in Egypt. We would try to stop the missiles from being set up or blown by bombing them.”

On the day in question, one of those surface-to-air missiles — Peer is sure it was aimed and fired by Soviet forces — struck the aircraft he was piloting.

On impact, the F4 was engulfed in flames.

Peer activated the jet’s ejection system, which at first did as it was designed to do — hurl the navigator safely out of the aircraft. (Months later, Peer would learn that the navigator was rescued by Israeli troops in a daring commando raid.)

It failed, however, in its second task, which was to eject the pilot himself.

Peer — whose face, hands and arms were already severely burned — had to get out of the burning aircraft “manually.” He unstrapped his arms, which were already severely burned, and his side. Although it was a chilly and rainy Colorado afternoon, it was warm and cozy inside their Aurora home.

The story of his years as a prisoner of war, however, is anything but comfortable.

Peer, now 76, begins by explaining that he is not a sore, or native-born Israeli. He was born in Columbus, Ohio and raised there until the age of 11 when he, his single mother and brother moved alloyed to Israel in 1957. What began as a visit to relatives, he says, ended up becoming the family’s new home.

Peer — who went by the name of Yitzhak Fish in Israel — and his brother grew up on kibbutz a few miles from Nazareth and the Jordan border while their mother raised and worked in Tel Aviv. Like most Israeli youths, he was drafted into the Israeli Defense Forces when he finished high school. He qualified for the Air Force and spent two years training to be a pilot, earning his wings in 1968.

His early service involved patrolling the border with Lebanon from one of the rudimental aircraft Israel had at the time — “flying out and wing airplanes,” he calls them — mostly WWII-era French and British fighters. His first set was a Gannao- ter Meteor, war surplus from the Royal Air Force, which briefly flew these early jet aircraft against the Naza. He was later assigned to a squadron that flew French Mirage fighters.

“What’s that he flying during the Six Day War?” Peer’s single mother and sister asked him.


“A Mirages?” they exclaimed. “That’s a formidable combat, primarily bomb-airfields in all of that conflict’s theaters, primarily Egypt.”

In 1968, he was selected to be part of the first group of 10 Israeli air- men to fly the US-made F4 Phantom, the most advanced fighter at that time. They went to the US for a training course that lasted near- by a year.

Peer’s comrades had learned English as well, and were sent to a language course at a military facil- ity in Texas. Their fellow students were aviators from several nations, including several from Arab states — Israeli’s sworn enemies — which created awkward encounters, he recalls.

“They saw our uniforms, we saw theirs, we looked at the grades on the board, and they looked at our grades,” he says, noting the irony of the situation. “It was interesting how the US was teaching all these nations to make war against each other.”

The Israelis finished their training in late 1969, right about the time the first Phantoms arrived in Israel. They were immediately put to oper- ational use. Peer was assigned to very tall. There was a very narrow opening at the top which had bars on it, but I could see the sky.”

Years later, Peer was interviewed by an Israeli author about his experience as a POW. The author asked him what he’d see when he looked at the high window of his cell.

“Nothing,” he replied, “except for birds.” She made that the title of the Hebrew edition of her book about the prisoners.

The purpose of his presence at the Cairo facility was interrogation. His captors used torture, sleep depriv- ation and starvation to extract the information they wanted from Peer and the nine other Israeli prisoners whose cries of pain he could hear coming from adjoining cells.

“It was very bad,” he says. “I spent almost a year in solitary confinement, interrogated and абшебутное. They wanted technical data on the aircraft.”

The Israelis developed their training in late 1969, right about the time the first Phantoms arrived in Israel. They were immediately put to operational use. Peer was assigned to the first squadron to fly them.

“They was the most modern fighter at the time,” he says. “It was very capable. It carried more bombs than a B-17 bomber from WW II, had air-to-air missiles and radar. It was a much more complex air- plane than the Israeli Air Force had ever flown before.”

But the F4, like any other aircraft, is vulnerable to attack, as Peer found out the hard way a few months later.

Shortly after his capture, Peer found himself in a prison cell. The building was crowded with an Egyptian military intelligence organization.

“We were in a dungeon type of cell with no food or facilities,” he says. “It was a dungeon cell with about four or five meters high, about four or five meters high, of things.”

Despair was a constant companion.

“Being a prisoner of war is a situation where you have absolutely no control over what’s going to happen to you. That’s the feeling. It doesn’t matter if you talk to them or don’t talk to them; you’re still going to get beaten up. You’re still not going to get food. You’re still going to sleep in your urine and so forth.”

“People who come out of this in a reasonable manner have learned how to play the game. You can’t think about the present because the pres- enl’s not going to be good. You can’t think about the future because there’s no reason to think about it. It’s just a lot of living in the past.”

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It’s easy to feel that you’re a failure — that you failed your country, your service, your friends. You got caught — if you were better you wouldn’t have been caught.” Peer said. “That is something I couldn’t get over.”

Peer’s experiences in prison were not totally wasted. In a remarkable example of making the best of a bad situation, the Israelis managed an unlikely but amazing literary feat.

T he POWs’ years of confinement were not totally wasted. In a remarkable example of making the best of a bad situation, the Israelis managed an unlikely but amazing literary feat.

It began when Peer’s brother sent him an English edition of J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy saga _The Lord of the Rings_, which in the early 1970s was enjoying a huge wave of popularity. “I read it and thought, ‘That’s an interesting decision — they would translate the novel from English into Hebrew and publish it as an unknown author.’”

Peer managed to get a copy of _The Hobbit_ and _The Lord of the Rings_ in translation. “We were going to do the translation, keeping the Hebrew words sounding like English, which gave him a slight edge over his interrogators, whose English was not that good, although they believed themselves to be native speakers. He also made up words to confuse them. In one instance, Peer told his interrogator that he would answer no further questions until the Egyptians promised to give him a glass of milk every day. To his amazement, and to the consternation of his interrogators, they complied with his demand.

Collectively, the Israelis did a prob- ament were not totally wasted. In a remarkable example of making the best of a bad situation, the Israelis managed an unlikely but amazing literary feat.

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