Near tragedy on guard

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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 5: Night Guard Duty on the Kibbutz

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or the banana boss, was in his early 30s and a miracle worker. He was back on the kibbutz and smiling toward me. He had talked the army into releasing him so he could save his banana fields. I was not surprised he had pulled it off. Lev was originally from the United States and a dedicated Zionist. He had long ago concluded that the only proper place for a Jew was in Israel and so he immigrated. Always determined in what he wanted, he bulldozed his way through kibbutz apprehensions to single-handedly create the banana crop as a major branch of our agricultural sector. And he was fearless to a fault.

"Fearless to a fault" may sound like a contradiction in terms. It's not. The right amount of fearlessness is courage. The wrong amount is stupidity. In my opinion, Lev was sometimes at the wrong end of that equation. Here's an example.

Before the war, Lev was fed up with the theft from our banana fields and had no confidence that the village police from the nearby Arab town would take any action. The culprits were likely from the town and might even have been relatives of the cops. I had to agree with Lev – the only time I had seen any action from these police was when they drove up to the kibbutz to escort chickens for their next village wedding.

One day, Lev had six of us arm ourselves with clubs and do a stakeout in the banana fields. We had a German Shepherd named Lebo to help take down anyone we caught. Before long, two Arab teenagers appeared, checking for ripe bananas. They came toward us, not realizing we were set up but I had moved too early and they raced for their village. Only Lev, the dog and I were near enough to give chase. It was a face-off. The teens were lean and fast. Lev smoked two packs a day. Our dog was never the dog and I were near enough to give chase. It was a farce. The teens were caught by surprise and then Lev's pure chutzpah had won the day.

Walking out in one piece was a win for me, while Lev was angry at not catching anybody. Surviving was not one of his concerns.

Now you know what I mean by "Fearless to a fault." And now, here was fearless-to-a-fault Lev walking up to me.

"Shalom, Victor. I'm back so I'll be taking over the irrigation. I wanted to keep you on it, but Galion says he needs you for guard duty. You see better than me. And thanks for look- ing after the bananas. I expected half of them to be dead but they are all good. Nice job."

I high-fived Lev, who rarely expressed gratitude to anybody. The bananas were like children to him.

"Gidon told me to tell the kibbutz from dusk to dawn for the next week at least. He gave me an ammunition belt, a flashlight and a first-aid kit with pressure bandages to patch up anybody I shot inappropriately. He also gave me Chauncy, the English guy. Chauncy was one of those hopeless tourist volunteers who came to expe- rience kibbutz life and was experienc- ing more than he bargained for. Though he wasn't Jewish, he genuinely agreed to be my assistant on patrol.

Our first patrol had a slow start. Chauncy begged me to let him hold the Uzi long enough to get his picture taken. I didn't want to, but figured it would be better to get it out of his sys- tem. I removed the ammunition clip and handed him the Uzi. He gave me his camera and I took a half-dozen pic- tures of him, empty gun at the ready, looking steady-eyed and staring into the dark. I was thinking he was an idiot but then remembered the photos I had made from the same window when I first got my weapon. She thought I was an id- iot. Israelis would never think of get- ting this kind of snapshot, as Canadi- ans wouldn't think of getting their pic- tures taken in their kitchen holding a spatula. Why record it? In this country, everybody has a spatula.

We walked the perimeter for about a week. Early evening was the best, as kibbutz members stopped to chat and the time went quickly. Adding to our duties was the require- ment that we join other checkpoints that were coming up the drive and watching for saboteurs. We only had lunch in the cemetery that one time.

I never had to shoot anybody dur- ing my stint as night guard but I did come close once. Chauncy and I were in the area of the mechanical shop at around two in the morning when we heard noises coming from the shop and saw the lights were on. The kibbutz was generally very quiet at night. There was no shift for side guards and everyone should have been in bed.

I told Chauncy to stay behind as we entered the shop to investigate. For the first time in all my guard duty, I did the thumbs-up of my Uzi from safety to automatic.

"Chaanuy, don't do that!"

We got as close to the noise as we could and then I stopped a corner with my Uzi leveled. It was a kibbutz teenager named Uri. Apparently, Uri had a bout of inso- mmnia and decided he might as well go to the shop to keep working on his project. He was trying to make a go-kart out of discarded tractor parts. Uri had almost gotten a permanent cure for his depthlessness. I had almost shot a 15-year-old kid.

(Next Time: The War Comes Home)