

THE CROSSING OF THE SUEZ

Lt. General Saad el Shazly

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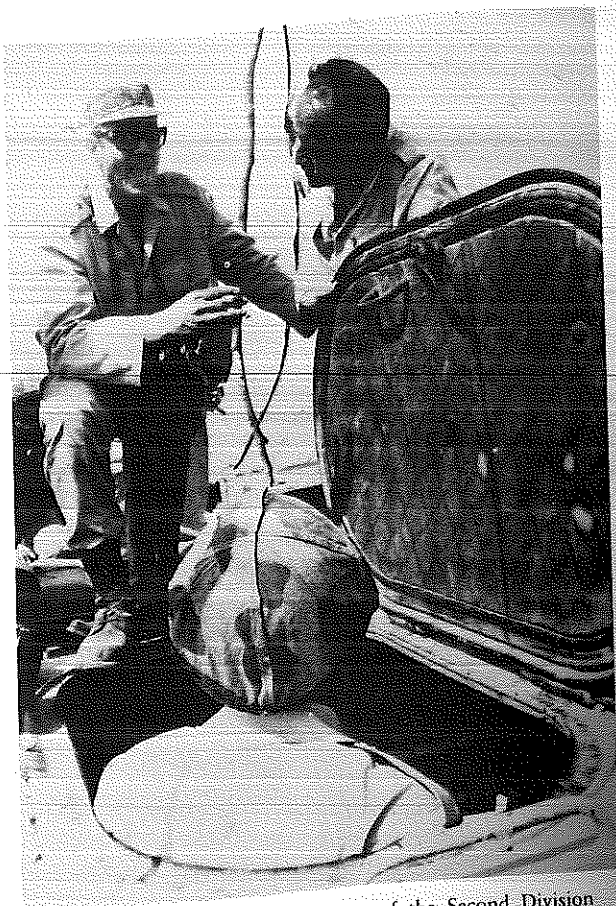
American Mideast Research
Suite 712
55 Sutter Street
San Francisco, California 94104

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General Shazly at the command post of the Second Division Commander, Brigadier Abu Seeda, October 8, 1973

CHAPTER SIX: WAR

Saturday, October 6

At 1300 HOURS President Sadat, accompanied by General Ahmed Ismail, arrived at Center Ten and went directly to the Operations Room. We had been at our places since early morning. The seats of the Supreme Command were on a low dais. The commands of each of the armed forces were stationed by their communications consoles and operations maps around the hall. Dominating us all was the map wall, its glass screen updated minute by minute to show at a glance every detail of the situation on both fronts. The background noise was a buzz of telephones, clatter of telexes, and quiet voices trying to mask their tension.

H-Hour, the time when the first wave of infantry would rise over our sand ramparts, scramble to the water's edge with their rubber dinghies and land on the other side—perhaps the longest journey of their lives—was set for 1430 hours. But even as we waited, willing

ourselves to remain calm, so much was already in train. Naval, artillery, ranger units, engineer reconnaissance parties: all were adjusting their last minute preparations.

Methodically the pilots of our fighter-bombers were strapping themselves in, connecting their life-support systems, running through cockpit checks, while the armorers wheeled empty trolleys from under their loaded wings. The clocks high on the Operations Room wall registered 1350 hours. The telephones on the air force command desk buzzed as bases reported: "Preparing for take-off." I suddenly pictured them up there in the sunlight. Sliding out of the gloom of the blast hangars into the white of the sun, silhouettes black against the glare, the clean lines of their wings broken by the armaments hanging from them, then the noise, the dust, exhausts shimmering the baking landscape as they rolled in glinting lines to the ends of the runways, slowly pivoted on their nose wheels and, the noise opening to a roar, accelerated to take-off. . . .

At precisely 1400 hours, 200 of our aircraft skimmed low over the canal, their shadows flicking across enemy lines as they headed deep into Sinai. For the fourth time in my career, we were at war with Israel.

Their passing was all our artillery had been waiting for. We had massed more than 2,000 guns behind our lines. Now our high-trajectory pieces, the howitzers and heavy mortars, began to pour shells up and over onto the Bar-Lev forts and minefields and barbed-wire entanglements. It was 1405 hours. Under cover of the barrage our first men set off across the canal.

Engineer reconnaissance teams paddled over to check that the outlets for the inflammable liquid had been blocked by last night's raids. At the same moment, our

first men scrambled over the enemy ramparts—commando groups heading beyond the enemy's front line. Half-a-mile or so behind the sand barrier, the enemy had heaped individual sand ramps as firing platforms from which tanks could sweep those who had clambered over the first barrier. Our commandos, laden with portable anti-tank weapons, raced to get to the ramps first.

Along the western shores of the Bitter Lakes and Lake Timsah, it was quieter. The noise of the barrage could be heard in the distance. Our amphibious brigade—20 tanks, 80 armored personnel carriers, a thousand men—splashed into Bitter Lake and set off for the eastern shore. At almost the same moment, a company of infantry set off on the shorter voyage across Lake Timsah in a smaller fleet of ten amphibious vehicles.

While our howitzer and mortar barrage kept the enemy infantry pinned in their shelters, the rest of our artillery—the flat-trajectory pieces—deployed into firing position. At 1420 hours, they opened direct fire against the Bar-Lev strongpoints. The 4,000 men of Wave One poured over ramparts and slithered in disciplined lines down to the water's edge. The dinghies were readied, 720 of them, and a few minutes after 1420 hours, as the canisters began to belch clouds of covering smoke, our first assault wave was paddling furiously across the canal, their strokes falling into the rhythm of their chant "*Allahu Akbar. . . . Allahu Akbar. . . .*"

Down at Lake Timsah, the amphibious infantry company had just landed in Sinai. In the desert ahead of our assault, the first commando groups had seized their ramps and were setting up their anti-tank weapons. They were just in time. The enemy tanks were moving up.

The enemy, at last, was activating their plan Schovach Yonim.

* * *

We knew the details of the enemy plan to defend the canal. Schovach Yonim was staff-college stuff, very traditional. They had divided the Suez front into three sectors—northern, central, southern—each sector encompassing one of the three possible routes of attack across Sinai.

—The northern sector defended the direction of Kantara-El Arish.

—The central sector defended Ismailia-Abu Ageila.

—The southern sector defended against a thrust from Suez to the passes of Mitla and Gedy.

—Within each sector, defense was based on two lines plus a reserve:

FRONT LINE: Along the canal. The 35 Bar-Lev forts and strongpoints. Between the forts at hundred-meter (110-yard) intervals, firing positions had been built for tanks.

SECOND LINE: Three to five miles behind the canal. Three battalions, 40 tanks to a battalion. One battalion to each sector.

RESERVE: Held 12-20 miles behind the canal. Three brigades of tanks, 120 tanks to a brigade minus the battalions forward in the second line. In effect, each brigade—one to each sector—was divided: 40 of its tanks forward, the remaining 80 held in reserve.

ALERT: The second line moved up to its firing positions at the water's edge or the ramps just behind it. The reserves moved up to the second line. The front-line defense would then comprise the brigade of infantry in the Bar-Lev forts, plus 120 tanks in three tank battalions.

The second line would be the remaining 240 tanks of three armored brigades. Any further reinforcements would have to come across Sinai.

SPEED OF RESPONSE: We estimated the enemy could counter-attack with sub-units the size of tank companies or battalions within 15-30 minutes of H-Hour. Major counter-attacks of brigade strength could be launched about two hours from H-Hour.

To neutralize this force we were putting across the canal five infantry divisions. They were crossing on the widest possible front, virtually the length of the canal. But our assault would concentrate in five sectors, each sector the responsibility of a division. From north to south:

—18th Division to attack and then defend along the Kantara-El Arish axis.

—2nd Division to do the same on the Ismailia-El Tasa axis.

—16th Division along the Deversoir-El Tasa axis.

—7th Division along the Shaloufa-Gedy Pass axis.

—19th Division along the Suez-Mitla Pass axis.

Moreover, across the Bitter Lakes and Lake Timsah we were sending the amphibious brigade and an amphibious company.

The three northern divisions constituted the Second Army. The two southern ones were the Third Army. To think of them simply as infantry divisions would be misleading, however. Each division had to be prepared to hold its bridgehead against powerful enemy armor. We had therefore reinforced each one with a brigade of tanks (three battalions); one battalion of self-propelled SU-100 anti-tank guns; and an anti-tank guided-weapon (ATGW) battalion. On top of which the infantrymen

themselves had every portable or draggable anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapon they could manage.

* * *

It would be an historic encounter: the first combat between the essentially World War Two concept of armor and the infantry weapons of the next generation. As the reports now began to flood into our Operations Room, we learned minute by minute how the combat was going.

1430-1445 hours: Our first assault wave has landed. 4,000 men are astride the sand barrier between the strongpoints. The boats, each manned by two men of the engineers' boat battalions, are returning. For five minutes or so, clouds of dust have been sighted as the first enemy tanks race toward the canal. In many cases our commandos are already at their sand ramps before them. And our men perched on the sand barrier can begin to fire down on the approaching vehicles. But the main burden of repelling this first armor lies with our own tanks and heavy anti-tank weapons and anti-tank guided weapons firing over the Bar-Lev line from our ramparts on the west bank.

Under cover of the fire, which also continues against the strongpoints, engineer platoons begin to ferry their pumps to the far bank to begin the task of scouring the 70 passages through the sand barrier. Our plan allows them only five to seven hours.

At the Bitter Lakes, our amphibious brigade has begun to land on the east bank.

Our aircraft are returning from the first strike. Because of their short range all the targets were in Sinai: enemy airfields, SAM sites, electronic jamming stations and military headquarters. The strike has cost us five

aircraft. (Those were to be our total losses up to 0800 hours on October 7.) Our pilots fly home through our SAM belt along corridors.

On the west bank, Wave Two of the infantry is preparing. The next ten minutes will reveal whether the tensions of battle will destroy the intricate scaffolding of the crossing operation. One man in each boat in the first wave carried a sign with a luminous number on it—the number of his boat—which he stuck in the enemy bank as a landing marker. Beside the sign, others in the boat unrolled rope-ladders from the summit of the rampart. It is vital the boats ply precise routes—partly so each wave is not parted from its predecessors, but also because our engineers have to work undisturbed in gaps between the ferrying. Between each boat within a company we left a 25-yard gap. Between companies we have 200 yards; between battalions 400 yards; between brigades 800 yards. Between divisions, in effect between each bridgehead, there is as much as nine miles. In these gaps within each division our engineers have to open passages, assemble ferries, light bridges and heavy bridges; string them across the canal and then operate them. The spacings are tight.

But Wave One is across. In the wave of jubilation that sweeps the Operations Room, the President leaves with General Ismail to take a rest.

1445 hours: Our system works. Wave Two has reached the enemy bank to the minute at 1445 hours. Successive waves are now scheduled to arrive every 15 minutes.

1500 hours: The first strongpoint of the Bar-Lev line is taken. The first enemy prisoners fall into our hands. The first wave of enemy air strikes arrives. Our SAM batteries shoot down four aircraft in the first minutes.

1515 hours: Wave Four has landed. Wave Five is ready. Our bridgeheads are still barely 200 yards deep. But with Wave Four we have put 20 infantry battalions—800 officers and 13,500 men complete with portable and hand-dragged support weapons—into Sinai. The artillery duel continues between enemy forces and our guns on the west bank ramparts, but increasingly the assault infantry are sharing the burden of repelling the enemy attacks.

1530 hours: Unperturbed by the din, our engineers report such progress with the scouring of passages that our bridge battalions are given notice to prepare to move from their concentration areas to the canal assembly sites.

1600 hours: Further waves of enemy air strikes. Another toll by our SAMs. More of the Bar-Lev strongpoints fall.

1615 hours: Wave Eight has landed. We now have ten infantry brigades across—1,500 officers and 22,000 men with all their weapons. The five divisional bridgeheads are organizing behind the lines of steadily advancing infantry. Each bridgehead now stretches five miles along the canal and penetrates rather more than a mile into Sinai. Covering fire from the west bank continues, but the main burden of repelling enemy armor has been taken by our assault forces. Our artillery switches its fire to targets deeper in Sinai. Our forward assault infantry can act as target spotters. Our long-range patrol groups, infiltrated into Sinai last night, are preparing to disrupt the arrival of enemy reinforcements.

1630 hours: Ten engineer bridge battalions drive in long columns to the canal edge and begin to splash their bridge sections into the water. Simultaneously the engineer units responsible for assembling 35 ferries move

to the water with their prefabricated components.

1645 hours: As soon as the bridge sections are bobbing in the water, the engineer battalions begin preliminary assembly of two or three sections at a time. Some bridges will be ready much faster than others.⁵

1700 hours: The engineers start to assemble the ferries. More Bar-Lev strongpoints have fallen to us.

1715 hours: Preparations begin on the east bank for marshalling of tanks and vehicles. Military police have crossed in the dinghies with the latest waves of infantry laden with signs coded by number and by color. They start to lay these out to signpost the routes for vehicles coming off the ferries or bridges. We are coming to the end of this phase of the crossing.

1730 hours: Wave Twelve of the initial assault, the final wave, is across and over the barrier. In three hours we have shipped over the canal five reinforced infantry divisions—2,000 officers and 30,000 men—with all the weapons they can handle; plus the men and equipment of five anti-tank guided weapons battalions.

The opening phase of our assault has been a total success. Each division now holds a semi-circular bridgehead, five miles along the canal and from two to two-and-a-half miles deep into Sinai. Now everything depends on how soon our engineers can open the way for tanks and heavy artillery to join those embattled infantry.

1750 hours: Taking advantage of the onset of dusk, our helicopters drop four commando battalions deep inside Sinai. The units will assemble and move into battle under cover of darkness.

1800 hours: Our tanks, anti-tank guns and all other vehicles in Priority One crossing category begin to move from the concentration areas to their assigned crossing points.

1815 hours: The engineers have virtually completed assembly of the ferries. They should be able to start shipping our tanks across the moment the breaches are open.

1830 hours: A triumph. The first breach is open. An exhausted engineer platoon has managed it in four hours. A magnificent achievement. At the bridgeheads, our infantry can match it. Each bridgehead is now just over three miles deep. Almost every Bar-Lev strongpoint still holding out is now cut off from hope of rescue through the coming night.

1830-2030 hours: All passages through the sand barrier have been opened, except along the sector in the far south of the canal where the sand turns to mud, impossible to clear. So we have 60 passages instead of 70. That means we will also lose the use in that sector of the four ferries and three bridges—two heavy, one light—which would have pushed equipment through the breaches. But, everywhere else, what feats our engineers have achieved.

The 31 ferries are working at their maximum. Our tanks and Priority One vehicles snake in long lines back from the crossing points. Our bridges are fully assembled and span the canal. The engineers are embarked on the final phase, jockeying them into position, securing them and laying the ramps up and through the breaches. Liaison officers of the Crossing Command take up station on the east bank to guide the streams of vehicles to their assigned routes. At 2030 hours, the precisely scheduled two hours after the breach had been cleared to receive it, the first bridge is open. The first of that division's 200 tanks dip down to the water's edge and grind their way across, the empty pontoons of the bridge reverberating to the screech and clatter of their tracks until the water-

way resounds to the din. When the news came through the Operations Room telephones, I recall I told myself firmly that I stuck to my original estimate: we could judge the success of the crossing only after 18 hours. But a part of my mind whispered to me we had won the first round.

2030-2230 hours: Over the next two hours all bridges are opened (except for the three balked by mud in the southern sector). In eight hours our engineers have managed a staggering achievement:

- blasting 60 breaches in the sand barrier, scouring out more than 117,000 cubic yards of sand;
- building eight heavy-duty bridges;
- building four light bridges;
- assembling and operating 31 ferries.

The visible climax of that achievement comes at 2230 hours, when traffic at last flows over the canal by every one of those paths. By now the artillery duel between the two sides is spasmodic. But the enemy air strikes continue—by now concentrating on our bridges. Foreseeing this, we have positioned our SAM batteries accordingly. By 2230 hours our air defenses have shot down 27 enemy aircraft.

2230 hours, October 6—0800 hours, October 7: By 0100 hours on Sunday morning, October 7, 800 tanks and 3,000 other pieces of equipment—all Priority One vehicles in four of our five divisional bridgeheads—have crossed the canal. Only the far southern sector remains a problem. The crossing in the southern sector was not at a standstill but was moving very slowly. The passages were opened, but the slippery ground was causing the trouble.

Supported at last by armor, our infantry advance

through the early hours, pushing the bridgeheads out to five miles east of the canal. It is no picnic. The enemy's armored formations are disorganized, reduced to disarray. But we note through the night hours that commanders of sub-units, even individual tanks, fight on. They are evidently made of better stuff than their senior commanders. Twice, groups of enemy tanks managed to break through our infantry lines to reach the water's edge and bombed our bridges and ferries, inflicting significant damage. But it was a hopeless struggle. With RPG-7 portable anti-tank missiles and RPG-43 anti-tank grenades, our infantry fight back. Before sunrise the few surviving tanks are in retreat.

Meanwhile our engineers hasten repairs. Modern military bridges are built of interlocking sections, so it is usually just a question of removing damaged segments and slotting in new ones—exhausting work, but taking no more than an hour. Through the night, to foil the enemy air strikes we anticipate at first light, we move our bridges. It is to give us the freedom to do this that we have scoured 60 holes in the sand barrier, while assembling only eight heavy and four light bridges. Each bridge can be located at any one of five spots. The 31 ferries, being mobile, merely switch routes to accommodate the shifts.

Sunday, October 7

By 0800 hours the battle of the crossing had been won. The three armored brigades and one infantry brigade defending the Bar-Lev line had been virtually annihilated: 300 of the enemy's 360 tanks destroyed; thousands of men killed. Our losses were five aircraft, 20 tanks, 280

killed—2.5 percent of the aircraft we deployed, two percent of the tanks, 0.3 percent of the combat troops. In 18 hours we had put across the canal 90,000 men, 850 tanks and 11,000 vehicles.

The enemy forces were in chaos, effectively without armor in the tactical zone. That, paradoxically, was now the issue which faced us. The Defense Intelligence Department estimate had forecast the main blows of the enemy's mobilized reserves within H + 6 to H + 8 hours. This morning, 18 hours after our assault, there was no sign that the enemy's reserves had yet joined the battle. So the question confronting us was: "When will the enemy deliver their main counter-attack, the 8th or the 9th?"

For both sides, Sunday was a race to prepare for that big battle. The very success of our deception operations had handed the enemy some advantages in this race. The principal benefit was that our deployments were fully revealed: the five fronts; the heavily-reinforced infantry division in each; our tactics at the perimeters; the caution of our steady moves forward; the nature, density and effectiveness of our SAM and anti-tank guided weapons. The enemy could plan their counter-attack on fairly full knowledge. Had their reserves been available in the later stages of our initial assault, by contrast, they would have attacked in considerable ignorance of our plans and of what our infantrymen could achieve.

To be fair, the relative lull that Sunday enabled us to do three things. We all but abandoned the attempt to operate bridges in the far southern sector. Instead, we used Sunday to send the tanks and heavy weapons destined for the 19th Division in that sector across the

bridges of 7th Division to the north. Meanwhile, the divisions within each army group widened their bridgeheads to narrow the nine-mile gaps we had left between them in the initial assault. (And I snatched a few hours to go home for a hot bath and change of clothes, my first night at home since October 1, my last till December 12.)

In 24 hours we had put across the canal 100,000 men, 1,020 tanks, and 13,500 vehicles—the largest first day crossing in world military history. For the record, here are the details:

- 32,000 men in rubber boats,
- 1,000 men in amphibious tanks and carriers over the Bitter Lakes and Lake Timsah,
- 4,500 men in tanks and vehicles over ferries,
- 1,500 men over light bridges,
- 61,000 men over heavy bridges.

	SAILING	ON FERRIES	OVER HEAVY BRIDGES	OVER LIGHT BRIDGES	TOTAL
TANKS	20	200	800	-	1,020
VEHICLES	100	750	12,150	500	13,500

Our other task through Sunday was to organize our administration on the battlefield. Our men had crossed with no more than 24-hours food, a little over four pints of water, and all the weapons and ammunition they could carry or drag. Now those 100,000 men and their 1,020 tanks and 13,500 vehicles had to be fed, replenished, re-equipped. But the administrative machine to do this was disorganized. Virtually all administrative units down to Priority Five had crossed. But casualties and the problems in the southern sector had led to confusion. Units were living from hand to mouth.

Sunday may have been a relative lull in the battle zone, but enemy air strikes continued and elsewhere in Sinai our special units were in action. Our amphibious brigade had headed east from the Bitter Lakes and divided to push simultaneously through the Mitla and Gedy Passes. Its mission was to disrupt the enemy's southern sector command and communications system. Their southern sector HQ was at the entrance of the Mitla Pass. At 0810 hours on Sunday it was surrounded and under heavy fire, while other elements of our brigade were raiding nearby radar and electronics stations. The Gedy force pushed through the pass and drove eastward into Sinai. The ranger groups landed by helicopter just before last-light the day before were also in action, ambushing enemy convoys rolling westward and in the process apparently causing some panic among their reservists who had been told nothing of our successes. The climax came in the early hours next morning, when our Gedy force launched a daring raid on the enemy air base at Bir-el-Thamada before returning successfully to our own lines.

Monday, October 8

I made my way to the front to discuss the operational and administrative situation with the field commanders. Our bridgeheads were consolidating. Five division strength bridgeheads were coordinating into two of army strength. Second Army bridgehead, incorporating the 18th, 2nd and 16th Divisions, stretched from Kantara in the north to take in Deversoir in the south. Third Army bridgehead, incorporating the 7th and 19th Divisions, ran from the Bitter Lakes to a point east of Port Tewfik at the extreme southern end of the canal.

Each was now more than six miles deep. And we now held all the forts of the Bar-Lev line except two, the furthest north and the furthest south, though the latter was encircled and certain to fall soon. The weak point in our lines was the 20-25 mile gap (roughly corresponding to the eastern shores of the Bitter Lakes) which remained between the two army bridgeheads. Moving sideways to bridge this and link the the two armed would have to be carefully done. Most of the gap was outside the protection of our SAM batteries.

The enemy had used Sunday to equal purpose. Hundreds of tanks had moved into Sinai. The 300 destroyed in his three forward armored brigades had been replaced, though the brigades' casualties had been such that it would take some days to restore them as fighting units. Five wholly fresh armored brigades had also poured into Sinai. By this Monday morning, the enemy had reorganized into three groups:

—Three armored brigades under General Bren Adan covering the northern sector.

—Three armored brigades under General Arik Sharon in the central sector.

—Two armored brigades in the southern sector under General Albert Mendler.

In number our forces looked equal enough. The enemy's eight armored brigades had 960 tanks: Centurion, M-48 and M-60, all with the 105mm gun as main armament. We had 1,000 tanks: 200 T-62s with 115mm guns; 500 T-54s and T-55s with 100mm, 280 T-34s with 85mm, 20 T-76 amphibious tanks with 76mm. The truth behind these figures was that the enemy now had considerable superiority.

There were three reasons. The first was that in open

country none of our tanks except the T-62 could match the enemy's 105mm gun. The second was our continuing weakness in the air. Tanks without air-cover are sitting ducks. The third reason was that to bolster our infantry in the initial assault our armored formations had been dispersed among them. Half our tanks were organized in battalions of 31 tanks apiece and permanently attached to infantry brigades. The other half were in brigades of 100 tanks and temporarily attached to infantry divisions until they were able to make their own defenses impenetrable to armored counter-attack. Our armor had little chance to maneuver. The enemy could use their tanks as tanks; ours were self-propelled anti-tank guns. This was in no way due to ignorance on our part. It was deliberate policy to cover our own weaknesses and deny the enemy benefit of their strengths.

Over the next two days this paid even more handsomely than we had expected, thanks to the enemy's slowness to learn. We had assumed they would swiftly realize our tactics. We had also foreseen their best response: to take advantage of their mobility to concentrate against one of our sectors an armored force big enough to break through a single bridgehead. (We had worked our responses we thought would defeat that strategy, of course; but it remained the enemy's best policy.) To our amazement, as Monday morning wore on, it became clear the enemy was instead making the cardinal error of frittering their resources.

That morning an armored brigade attacked 18th Division lines, while another brigade attacked 2nd Division. Both attacks were broken. On Monday afternoon, the same futile pattern. Two armored brigades launched a concerted attack against 2nd Division in the

direction of El-Ferdan. Another brigade moved against 16th Division in the direction of Deversoir. The attack against 2nd Division was totally annihilated. Their losses against 16th Division were only slightly less heavy.

As I drove to the front early that morning, however, those attacks had not begun and we were anticipating something altogether more serious and concentrated. I drove first to Second Army HQ, thence to 2nd Division, then on down to Third Army HQ, ending my tour by visiting 7th Division. I was heartened to see the morale of the men. Many had not slept for two nights but, as ever, victory was a tonic. As I drove by, many of them, referring to my orders for the crossing, waved and shouted: "Directive 41, we did it" and "Directive 41, marvelous guide."

Striding around his advanced HQ, the Commander of 2nd Division, Brigadier Hassan Abu Saada, shared his men's spirits. He was confident that, elated by what they had already achieved, they could beat off any attack the enemy might mount. Buoyed by his optimism, I spared myself the luxury of a few minutes to redeem a private promise. Peering across at the enemy fort we called Ismailia East the previous Friday—seventy hours, a lifetime ago—I had promised myself I would visit it when it was in our hands. Brigadier Saada's men had taken it a few hours before I arrived. What a strange feeling it gave to enter it at last. "*Alhamdu Lillah, Allahu Akbar*"—"Thanks be to God, God is the Greatest"—I said as I stepped through its gates.

Only a few hundred yards to the south lay four tragic reminders of the price of such victories. Four of our tanks destroyed in error by our own forces. The incident had happened only a few hours before. The 2nd Division and 16th Division had been closing the last gap between

them. A platoon of three tanks from 2nd Division was nosing south; a similar force from 16th Division was heading north. Cresting a ridge, they came face to face at 500 yards. Their reflexes were so heightened that all six opened fire instantaneously. Two of the three tanks on each side got direct hits. It was a tragic tribute to their battle skills. The survivors, alas, were shattered. (The survivors in such cases very often need psychiatric help. The sense of guilt is too great to be borne.)

As I drove south past the Lakes, the roads steadily clogged as we approached 7th Division's main bridge until, 300 yards back, the jam was solid. I got out and walked, to find the 7th Division Commander, Brigadier Badawy, at the bridge. We carried on in his car. It was soon apparent that in this southern sector, despite Sunday's lull, things had not yet stabilized. We came upon a lieutenant with his platoon of tanks, quite alone and with no idea where the rest of his unit was. We found infantrymen out of food and water, some even walking back to the west bank to fill their flasks. Most of the trouble could be traced back to our inability to operate bridges (due to mud and water current problems) in 19th Division's sector further south. The result was that 7th Division's already crowded bridges were overloaded with 19th Division's traffic as well.

This could be sorted out. But the state of our bridges became of real concern, indeed, after I spoke with the chief engineers of the Second and Third Armies. In the assault we had laid ten heavy bridges (the two in the southern sector were laid but not operating) and kept only two in reserve. After the crossing was complete we had withdrawn one heavy bridge from each division and put it into reserve. I now learned, however, that

enemy air strikes had damaged so many of our bridge sections that we had lost the equivalent of three complete bridges. We were reduced to four bridges in reserve.

There was no immediate crisis. But we had to think of weeks, even months, of battle ahead. If the enemy should fly wave after wave against our bridges that would undoubtedly cost their air force dearly. But equally undoubtedly some would get through.

It suddenly occurred to me that we could lay three virtually impregnable bridges over the canal if we just tipped rock and sand into the water. The chief engineer of the Third Army, the first expert I saw after having the idea, was positive it could be done. When I asked how long it would take I was amazed when he said, given enough bulldozers, a week. It was late afternoon as I drove back to Center Ten, cheered by what I had seen, confident our strategy was working, but certain we needed those causeways as soon as possible.⁶

Tuesday, October 9

The enemy has persisted in throwing away the lives of their tank crews. They have assaulted in "penny packet" groupings and their sole tactic remains the cavalry charge. In the latest manifestation, two brigades have driven against 16th Division. Once again, the attack has been stopped with heavy losses. In the past two days the enemy has lost another 260 tanks. Our strategy always has been to force the enemy to fight on our terms; but we never expected them to cooperate.

Wednesday, October 10

Our troops continued to improve their positions. Elements of the 1st Infantry Brigade, attached to 19th Division, captured Ayoun Mousa south of Suez, first step in a calculated series of moves down the Sinai coast.

But there was no room for complacency. At 1645 hours 2nd Division reported an attack on its left flank by an enemy tank battalion backed by mechanized infantry. The enemy has at last switched tactics. Their tanks have split into small groups, making good use of the terrain and following the strict rules of minor tactics. With some success: the force has penetrated a mile inside the bridgehead. Darkness fell before the enemy was finally driven back.

The underlying vulnerability of our position was disagreeably confirmed by the other news which reached us late that evening. Our 1st Infantry Brigade had lost 90 percent of its men and equipment. I was incredulous. I simply could not understand how it had happened. Not until I sent a liaison officer to the scene did I learn: having captured Ayoun Mousa, the brigade had been ordered to advance through the night of 10/11 to capture Sudr, the next stepping stone down the coast. The brigade commander had taken it upon himself to set out a few hours before sunset. The inevitable followed. In open country, outside the protection of our SAMs, the brigade was routed by the enemy air force. Not a single enemy tank or field-piece fired a shot. The decisiveness of the encounter was a reminder, if we needed one, of how open our ground forces were to air attack the moment they left our SAM umbrella. We picked up the pieces: fortunately, the

brigade's casualties proved much smaller than the first panicky reports had suggested. But the mauling had destroyed it as a fighting unit for several days.

Thursday, October 11

My second visit to the front. It was by now clear that the main enemy pressure was against our central sector. I wanted to discuss this with the Second Army Commander, Mamoun, and the Commander of the 2nd Division, Saada. Neither, I found, saw reason to budge from their confidence of Monday. Second Army could hold its ground against the most concentrated thrust the enemy could mount. As an insurance policy in the light of yesterday's new tactics, wheeling to roll up the whole army from the flank. I phoned the order to our engineers to supply Second Army with 10,000 anti-tank mines at once.

What did worry us was the continuing confusion at the bridges. Our Crossing Command had functioned admirably through the crucial hours of our assault. Its subsequent failures stemmed from the fact that the Command's authority in each division had been vested in that division's Chief of Staff. But as each Chief of Staff and his senior officers had moved forward inside the bridgeheads, crossing control had been progressively delegated to junior or even non-commissioned officers. The result was a series of traffic jams with everyone arguing priority. The remedy, I resolved, was to put all crossings under an independent command, answerable directly to me. I gave General Saleh Amin a group of very senior officers and set him to organizing Second Army crossings. Brigadier Munir Sameh was given the staff and task for Third Army.

I was back in Center Ten by 1630 hours, calmer than I had been since our assault began. The objective of The High Minarets—the President's reiterated objective at so many Armed Forces Supreme Council meetings—had been achieved. We had a foothold in Sinai. It was not impregnable. No position is impregnable against a sufficiently determined assault, as our own crossing had just proved. But ours was so defended that, to dislodge us, Israel would have to pay a price they would almost certainly find unacceptable.

I got to the Operations Room to learn General Ismail wanted to see me. His question was the one I had feared. Could we not build on our success to develop our attack to the passes?

* * *

So began the first catastrophic blunder by GHQ from which all other blunders followed. First some theory, then some figures.

For planning purposes, we had always assumed that the enemy would penetrate our bridgehead and try to roll up our positions from the rear. It is, after all, the classic tactic. So is the defense to the maneuver: powerful reserves held in readiness to counter the enemy thrust, while the front-line forces re-deploy to meet the new threat. Invariably, the main reason why defensive lines collapse after penetration—the Maginot line in 1940, the Siegfried line in 1945—is an absence of mobile reserves. It is impossible to be strong everywhere. It is reserves—tactical, operational, in the last resort, strategic—that a commander counts on to halt an enemy penetration. A cautious commander might keep as many as a third of his forces in reserve. A commander taking risks

might content himself with holding back only one-fifth. But accepted doctrine would be that reserves of less than that are acceptable only in special circumstances and for short periods.

The fact underlying everything which followed was that, in order to repel enemy counter-attacks on the scale and with the speed that our worst estimates had forecast, the bulk of our armor had been sent to the front, at the expense of our strategic reserve.

Egypt began the war with 1,700 tanks. We massed 1,350 on the Suez front, dispersed 100 to guard our Red Sea coast and various targets in the interior, and kept only 250 as our strategic reserve. Moreover, that 250 included the 120 tanks of the Presidential Guard, which as ultimate guardians of the regime could only be used in an absolute emergency. Not all the 1,350 tanks allocated to the Suez front had gone into Sinai. The commanders of our two field armies had been authorized to cross with 1,020 of them. The other 330 were to be kept as our operational reserve west of the canal, ready to destroy any enemy penetration. They could not be committed to battle without the prior permission of GHQ. So our armored forces were:

- Front line: 1,020 tanks.
- Second line: 330 tanks.
- Reserve: 250 tanks.

The picture was now somewhat worse. The week of war up to and including October 13 had cost 240 of our tanks. Our front-line strength was down to 780. The same battles had cost the enemy 610 tanks; 300 under our first assault, 260 from their *kamikaze* charges of October 8–9, and then a final 50 lost over October 10–13. (Their losses fell sharply due to a switch to more

cautious tactics on October 10). The difference was that the enemy had the reserves to restore their forces not once but twice. They had replaced the 300 lost in our first assault and the 260 lost over October 8–9. So against our 780 tanks the enemy now deployed about 900. That ratio was ample for our defensive purposes, so long as we still had our reserves. But we had nowhere near the superiority needed for attack.

* * *

After the war the international media wrote what they evidently thought were complimentary things about me: tough, aggressive, dashing and so forth—even, so help me, professional. I suppose I might have been flattered had the epithets not been adduced as the reason why, it was alleged, I was in favor of a “quick thrust” to the passes even before October 14. The logic escapes me. One may be aggressive; one may have risked one’s life for one’s country. But why should that predispose one to gamble with the future of the armed forces and the fate of one’s country? (I would dearly like to know who briefed the media. That there were briefings I am tolerably certain: the reports followed rumors circulated inside Egypt.)

The truth is quite to the contrary. From the moment Ismail broached the idea of developing our attack to the passes, I opposed the idea passionately, continuously, and in front of many people. The argument began in Ismail’s office in Center Ten that Thursday afternoon, October 11. I opposed the idea for all the reasons I had advanced to Ismail’s predecessor through the summer of 1971 when I had fought and won the case for a limited assault. I repeated to Ismail what I had said to Sadek and then to Ismail himself when he took over as Minister

of War on October 26, 1972: "The enemy air force is still too strong to be challenged by our own. And we do not have sufficient mobile SAM units to provide air cover." To Ismail now I added: "Let us learn the lesson from what happened to the First Infantry Brigade when it was caught for even a couple of hours without air cover. It was routed by air attack alone."

Friday, October 12

First thing in the morning, Ismail returned to the topic. Now he gave a reason: to reduce enemy pressure on Syria. Again, I opposed him. Our attack would neither succeed nor significantly relieve the pressure on the Syrians.

"Look," I said, "despite their losses the enemy still has eight armored brigades out there in front of us. The enemy air force can still cripple our ground forces as soon as they poke their noses beyond our SAM umbrella. We have proof of that. We don't have enough QUADRATS (SAM-6) to give mobile protection to our forces in the open. Advance and we destroy our troops without offering any significant relief to our brothers the Syrians."

At midday, the Minister returned. "It is a political decision," he said. "We must develop our attack by tomorrow morning."

1330 hours: Orders to advance had been prepared. They were taken to the army commanders by GHQ liaison officers: General Goneim to Second Army, General Taha el Magdoub to Third.

1530 hours: Saad Mamoun, Second Army Commander, phoned me from his advanced HQ. "General, I resign," he said. "I cannot operate under such conditions. It is impossible to fulfil the orders you have just

sent." A few minutes later, Wasel called from Third Army; his objections stopped short of resignation, but only just. I made no secret of my own objections, or of the fact that I had been overruled. Then I went back to Ismail, arguing that to ask field commanders to do something they had both now told us, in advance, they could not do was to risk disaster. We decided they should come to Center Ten immediately for consultation.

1800 hours: The conference began. Myself and the two field commanders pressed our objections. Ismail overruled us. It was a political decision. We had to obey. His only concession, just before we broke up at 2300 hours, was that our attack could be postponed from tomorrow, October 13, to first light on October 14. But Ismail then ordered that, in mounting the attack, our bridgeheads were not to be weakened. Instead, our operational reserves were to be committed.

Our operational reserves consisted of 330 tanks which comprised the bulk of two units: the 4th and 21st Armored Divisions. The 4th Armored Division had been deployed behind Third Army; the 21st behind Second Army. Each division comprised two armored brigades—100 tanks to a brigade—and one mechanized infantry brigade. The 21st Division had already been stripped of half of its tanks: one brigade had been sent to the front line to give armored support to the infantry assault of 16th Division. Now, through the night of October 12—completing the process the next night, October 13—we were ordered to send the rest of 21st Division to the front and all but a brigade of 4th Division too. Our total reserves in the operational area behind our two armies were thus being stripped to that single brigade of 100 tanks from 4th Division. It was a grave error.

Saturday, October 13

So was the plan, devised by Ismail, we were ordered to adopt. Four armored brigades and one mechanized infantry brigade were to make four independent thrusts.

Southern sector: One armored brigade in the direction of the Mitla Pass. One mechanized infantry brigade in the direction of Gedy Pass.

Central sector: Two armored brigades in the direction of Tasa.

Northern sector: One armored brigade in the direction of Baluza.

Barring a miracle, the attack had no chance of success whatever. The enemy had 900 tanks in their operational zone. We were attacking with 400. We were doing so, against well-prepared positions, in precisely the "penny packets" which had cost the enemy so dearly over October 8-9. And we were condemning our tank crews to attack over open terrain dominated by enemy air power.

Sunday, October 14

The outcome was predictable. Our attack started at first light. Concentrated enemy fire from well-concealed tanks supported by a high density of anti-tank guided weapons and close air support halted all four thrusts within ten miles. By midday, our forces were ordered to return to the bridgeheads. We had lost 250 tanks more than we had lost in the whole war so far. The enemy had lost 50.

1100 hours: When it was clear our attack was bogged beyond redemption, I phoned Second Army HQ and asked for General Mamoun. His Chief of Staff said he

was having a rest. Now commanders snatch sleep when they can, but not usually when their troops are engaged in battle; and they tend to come when GHQ phones. But however surprised, I did not insist on rousing him.

1300 hours: The President arrived at Center Ten. Having been told the fate of the attack, he ordered me to the front to raise the morale of the men. Within the hour I was on my way to the canal for the third time.

1600 hours: I reached Second Army advanced HQ and asked for Mamoun. I was told the truth. He was in bed with a breakdown. As news had come all morning of the repelling of the attack and the mounting losses among his men, he had found each report harder to bear. Suddenly he had fainted. He had been in bed ever since, conscious but quite unable to discharge his responsibilities.

I went to see him. Mamoun wanted to sit up but the doctor beside his bed prevented him. In a few private words, the doctor said Mamoun should be evacuated; he needed specialist treatment. But when I suggested to Mamoun that he go to Maadi Hospital for rest, he begged to stay with his men: he would be fine in the morning and could go back to work at once. That I refused to allow; but at his entreaty I did postpone evacuation until we had seen his condition the next day. (His condition did not improve; he was in the hospital until after the ceasefire.)

Then I set about picking up the pieces. I called a hasty meeting of Mamoun's general staff, discussed the operational position and conveyed the President's greetings and encouragement. I phoned the divisional commanders in the field and passed the same to them. And I told General Oraby, Commander of the 21st Armored Division,

that I wanted to drive over into Sinai to see him at once. (Oraby advised against it, saying it would be dark soon, my driver could lose his way, and a battlefield by night was no place for a Chief of Staff. But I insisted. The reconstruction of resources and morale was an urgent task.)

1700 hours: I left Second Army HQ heading south to the nearest bridge. I arrived to find an enemy artillery barrage in progress and the bridge destroyed. I drove on to the second—to find it taken up to avoid destruction in the same barrage. There was no way I could cross in the central sector.

I decided to return to Second Army HQ. By now it was dark, and we made slow progress through endless identity and password checks. No sooner were we back at the destroyed bridge than the enemy barrage resumed. We sped through the shellbursts. My vehicle was unscratched, but the car behind me, carrying my squad of guards, was hit and one of the guards injured.

2000 hours: Finally back at Second Army HQ, I phoned Oraby again, to explain why I could not see him and to wish him luck. Then I set off for Cairo.

2300 hours: Back at Center Ten. A full report to Ismail.

Midnight: The President phoned to ask about my trip. I gave him a full report on our most calamitous day.

* * *

Even now, six years later, I have no idea why that attack was mounted. It was, of course, President Sadat's decision. He has since claimed he did it to relieve Israeli pressure on the Syrian front. That has to be nonsense.

Egypt could have forced Israel to switch resources from Golan to Sinai only by posing a significant threat to the security of Israel. At no point did our forces have that

capacity. Well over 100 miles of open desert stretched between our bridgehead and the frontiers of Israel. Israeli air superiority rendered them impassable. This fact was so fundamental that I had made it forcefully at my first meeting with the Arab Collective Defense Council in November 1971. It was so obvious that the Council had accepted my point. It is a severe limitation of Egyptian power; but it will remain the case so long as Sinai is occupied or demilitarized and the Israelis retain air superiority.

But could we not have forced Israel to transfer armor from Golan to Sinai? No. Israel had eight armored brigades in Sinai, more than enough to contain any Egyptian attack.

Nor does the timing of the attack fit Sadat's explanation. By October 12 the Syrian front was already stabilizing. From October 11 two Iraqi divisions—one armored, one mechanized—had begun to share in the battle. The arrival of a Jordanian armored brigade on October 13 (to be followed later by a second armored brigade) provided additional support.

Finally, if our object was to help the Syrians, why did we not withdraw the 21st and 4th Armored Divisions to their assigned west bank reserve positions as soon as our attack had been broken?

There has to be another explanation for President Sadat's decision. Only he knows what it is.

Monday, October 15

Worse was to come. This morning a dot appeared on our air defense screens in Center Ten, moving swiftly north over the canal zone and out over the Nile delta.

We knew what it was. We had seen it before. At approximately 1330 hours on October 13, as we prepared the last details of our doomed attack, a dot had appeared following the same route. I had watched its track for a few minutes, then called General Fahmy to ask why his SAM crews were letting this thing promenade over us. He replied giving me the speed and altitude of the dot: Mach Three plus and 20 miles plus. Then of course we realized what it was: an SR-71A, the American reconnaissance counterpart of the MIG-25.

On that first flight, its cameras would have noted enough to tell skilled analysts of our tank divisions' move across the canal. This second pass would reveal that the west bank was now virtually denuded of armor. We could assume the Israelis would learn this within a few hours. It added urgency to my request to Ismail this morning that we immediately withdraw the 4th and 21st Armored Divisions to the west bank once more—including the 21st's brigade which had been attached to 16th Division. We could strengthen our bridgeheads with anti-tank mines; but the priority, as I saw it, was to return those two divisions to the second line to restore defenses which were now wholly unbalanced.

Ismail replied that withdrawal might panic our troops. I disagreed. The operation need not be panicky. It could be carefully undertaken under cover of Second and Third Armies. Ismail retorted that the enemy might interpret it as a sign of weakness. It seemed foolish to me to bluff. War is rarely determined by gestures, and in this case Israel would soon have the facts at its disposal. But I saw it was useless to argue. Ismail's unspoken reason was that he was to accompany the President to the People's Assembly next morning and wanted no suspicion of

weakness to tarnish his triumph. So began Blunder Number Two.

Tuesday, October 16

Mid-morning: First news of the enemy penetration. Second Army HQ phoned to report that small parties of enemy tanks had succeeded in crossing to the west bank in the vicinity of Deversoir. Second Army was taking steps to destroy them.

Our planning, as I have said, had assumed the enemy would try to take our bridgeheads from the rear. We had figured out the enemy's three likeliest crossing points—that is to say, the points where a determined enemy thrust was likeliest to pierce our bridgehead. One point was Deversoir. (That was where 16th Division in the north met 7th Division in the south, a classic target for an enemy thrust.) We had even assigned units to deal with our predictions. To deal with a breach at Deversoir we had briefed and exercised the 4th Armored Division and 25th Independent Armored Brigade, both of which were now of course, on the other side of the Canal. Even so, those first reports gave no reason to panic. Second Army said it was coping. We still had the 250 tanks of our strategic reserve. Of those, the 130 or so not part of the Presidential Guard could be deployed. I alerted the reserve units we had in the Cairo area to be ready to move if Second Army lost control of the situation.

Midday: News was still confused. Some of our rear SAM units, stationed almost ten miles behind the canal, began to report attacks by enemy tanks. Nobody seemed to know where the tanks had come from. They would

appear in the vicinity of a SAM battery, shell it from around 2,000 yards (these rear batteries had no long-range anti-tank weapons) and then disappear unhindered, to appear again who knew where. The reports spoke of 7-10 tanks in each party.

Afternoon: After Ismail's return from the People's Assembly, we held a conference to decide how to deal with the enemy penetration. We decided to take concerted action against the penetration by next morning, October 17. But what?

Second Army's reserve, the 21st Armored Division, was now in contact with the enemy and could not be immediately withdrawn. I proposed instead we withdraw units from Third Army, which was under no pressure: specifically our other reserve formation, 4th Division, plus the 25th Independent Armored Brigade which, armed with those T-62s, had been reinforcing the 7th Division bridgehead. That would give us ample troops on the west bank to cope with the penetration. It had the added advantage that 4th Division and the 25th Independent Armored Brigade had been trained to counter just this penetration. Our counter-attack could be launched from the southwest, driving directly northeast for the enemy crossing point. Simultaneously, 21st Division would thrust south down the Sinai bank to close the enemy's corridor to the crossing.

Ismail rejected the plan. He was still against the transfer of any forces from Sinai. We agreed that 21st Division should thrust south. But he wanted 25th Brigade to attack north from its existing positions in the Third Army bridgehead. Meanwhile, one of our infantry units held in reserve on the west bank, the 116th Infantry Brigade, should attack due east towards the crossing. It was a

reckless plan. Even when I explained the details to him, Ismail seemed incapable of grasping the danger of asking an armored brigade, the 25th, to advance about 25 miles with its left flank trapped against water and its right flank open to enemy attack. I phoned Third Army HQ. Wasel said he and the Commander of the 25th Brigade both agreed with me. It was too dangerous to attack along the eastern shore. They proposed their attack be launched from the west bank. We were vetoed by the Minister.

Evening: A few hours later, the President arrived at Center Ten and joined us in the Operations Room. Ismail explained tomorrow's plan. I regarded it as so ill-conceived and dangerous that I pressed my counter-proposal to the President in the hope he would overrule Ismail. Suddenly Sadat lost his temper. "Why do you always propose withdrawing out troops from the east bank," he shouted. "You ought to be court-martialled. If you persist in these proposals I will court-martial you. I do not want to hear another word."

I was deeply hurt. I tried to explain why such maneuvers were forced on us by our weakness on the west bank, but Sadat was in such a temper he would not even listen. I debated whether to resign on the spot. But I could not in all conscience abandon our armed forces now the tide had begun to turn. So I swallowed my pride and telling myself it was for my country's sake, I held my tongue.

Midnight: The orders had been issued for the Ismail counter-attack. Secretly, I had taken one step that might help our position on the west bank after its inevitable failure.

The crucial reserves of any army are its armor. But as our own crossing had proved, infantry with enough anti-

tank guided weapons are a formidable anti-tank force. We had good numbers of infantry still in reserve on the west bank, the principal units being three parachute brigades and the 3rd Mechanized Infantry Division. The problem was that we had stripped each of its anti-tank guided weapons battalion. The battalions had gone over in the crossing. Our plan had been to return them to their proper units as soon as possible; but Ismail's refusal, echoing the President, to move a man or a weapon out of Sinai had prevented even this "withdrawal." So while the battalions sat idle in Sinai—the enemy presenting no targets—their own units now faced the prospect of confronting enemy armor in a drastically weakened state.

I had a quiet word with the director of artillery, General Said el Mahy. On my own responsibility, and without telling Ismail, I ordered the steady withdrawal of those anti-tank guided weapons battalions from Sinai to their parent units on the west bank. Then I went to snatch a few hours sleep.

Wednesday, October 17

0300 hours: The chief operations duty officer woke me. General Wasel was on the line, wanting me urgently. I took the phone. Wasel said that because of technical problems the 25th Armored Brigade could not launch its attack at first light after all.

Privately, I appreciated Wasel's motives. But I told him it was an attack concerted with other formations; it was impossible to stop or postpone; 25th Brigade would have to play its part. Wasel pleaded with me to cancel

or at least postpone the assault. I was adamant. Finally, he muttered the desperate words: "*La hawla wala qowata illa billah.*" ("Man has strength for nothing without the strength of God," the old Moslem prayer of those who find themselves powerless under superior force, in effect a prayer of resignation.) Then he said: "Very well, I will carry out the orders. But I know, and I am telling you, that this brigade is going to be destroyed. I put down the phone sick at heart. Wasel's views were mine. But in any command at any level the distinction between discussion and decision must be absolute. The decision had been made. I did not believe it was right. But it was now my job, and Wasel's, to carry it out.

First light: The enemy bridgehead now stretched about three miles north from Deversoir. Their dispositions to protect and enlarge it were those one would expect:

—One armored division secured the bridgehead. Its forces straddled the canal. Front-line: one armored brigade and one infantry brigade on the west bank defending the crossing. Second line: one armored brigade on the east bank.

—One armored brigade and one infantry brigade on the east bank were holding and countering the assaults of our nearest armored force, 21st Division.

—One division with three armored brigades was waiting just over ten miles to the east for the bridge the enemy were building. Immediately when it was laid the division would cross.

—Meanwhile, one armored brigade was pinning Second Army bridgehead.

—One armored brigade was pinning Third Army bridgehead.

In all, the enemy had massed around their crossing

six armored brigades and two infantry brigades while holding the rest of their front with only two armored brigades. In other words, 80 percent of the enemy's available forces were concentrated along the axis of their main thrust.

I am ashamed to reveal our deployment on October 17. In all, we had 20 infantry brigades and light armored brigades grouped into five infantry divisions and two armored divisions. Each infantry division has the following units as organic: four tank battalions; one BMP battalion; one anti-tank guided weapon battalion; one anti-tank battalion; nine artillery battalions (124 tanks; 36 MALOTKAs; 40 PMPs; 36 anti-tank guns, 85mm; 90 recoilless guns, 82 and 107mm; 535 RPGs; and 108 field artillery pieces that could also be used as anti-tank weapons). When well-trenched with these weapons, an infantry division could repel an armored attack of up to three armored brigades. Nevertheless, we reinforced each infantry division with 36 extra anti-tank guided weapons; 21 pieces of self-propelled SU-100 anti-tank guns; and an entire armored brigade. The armored brigade and anti-tank guided weapon supplementing each division had been added solely to raise the infantry's anti-tank capabilities during the crossing. Our plan had always been to return those reinforcements to their mother units. I was now pulling back the anti-tank guided weapons. But the political decision to withdraw not a man or weapon from Sinai kept those tanks over there. On the morning of October 17, then, the eight armored brigades which, somewhat depleted by battle, we had at the front were deployed as follows:

—Four armored brigades virtually idle, dispersed

among our bridgeheads of 18th Division, 2nd Division, 7th Division and 19th Division.

—One armored brigade attacking northward from Third Army bridgehead.

—The two tank brigades of 21st Division, battered and bone-weary from three days of virtually ceaseless combat, attacking southward.

—More than ten miles west of the canal, one single armored brigade ranged along more than 40 miles of front to prevent further infiltration.

Less than 40 percent of our resources were massed in the combat zone. For the Battle of Deversoir we were pitting three armored brigades and one infantry brigade against an enemy force of six armored brigades and two infantry brigades—an enemy superiority of two-to-one. And our plan of attack was calculated to further worsen our chances.

That was Blunder Number Three. Through October 17 the Battle of Deversoir ran to its appointed conclusion.

Phase One: The three prongs of our attack were supposed to hit simultaneously. But as usually happens in such cases—technical approaches on external lines—synchronization was lost. Each attacking force was left to fight its own battle. Our 116th Infantry Brigade advanced east into the enemy bridgehead. It succeeded in destroying several enemy tanks. But when our troops were barely a mile from the waterway the brigade came under heavy fire. With casualties mounting, it was forced to pull back.

Phase Two: Pushing south on the opposite bank, 21st Division succeeded in cutting the enemy's main route to Deversoir from the east. But it could get no further.

Phase Three: Advancing north, 25th Brigade was wiped out. The enemy division of three armored brigades waiting ten miles to the east for their bridge to open moved against our lone brigade and caught it in a classic ambush. One brigade moved to block our line of advance. A second took up position on our right. The third swung in a flanking maneuver to take our brigade in the rear. When our tanks rolled north in the killing ground, they were attacked from three sides and trapped against the lakes on the fourth. Our crews fought desperately against the odds. But when night came there were only a few survivors to pull back to Third Army bridgehead. It was an utter waste.

Thursday, October 18

Morning: Through the night the enemy's first bridge had been laid. By dawn the enemy had on the west bank three armored brigades and an infantry brigade. Against this considerable presence we now sent the 23rd Armored Brigade, one of the two brigades of our ultimate, strategic reserve. It was repelled with heavy losses.

Midday: By now another armored brigade had crossed, swelling the enemy force to four armored brigades and one infantry brigade. With the virtual destruction of 23rd Brigade, we had on the west bank just two armored brigades that held back when 4th Division had been sent into Sinai for our doomed attack, and the Presidential Guard still in its peacetime barracks in Cairo. That was all.

The enemy had won the Battle of Deversoir. Their next step must be to pour across more armor, split it

and thrust north and south simultaneously behind both our armies.

Drastic action would be needed to stop this. But would the President and his Minister of War have the courage to take it? Already the regime was falling victim to its own lies. With cynical irresponsibility Ismail was announcing and our media were reporting that the enemy penetration still amounted to seven tanks hiding in the thickets around Deversoir. Our own armed forces were by now the principal victims of this nonsense. Convoys found themselves ambushed. Rear headquarters, guard units, and most damagingly, SAM batteries found themselves under sudden fire without the faintest idea what was going on. A general alert to all units had been forbidden as "likely to induce panic." All these men knew were the lies they read. Not that they could have taken many precautions. Their personal anti-tank weapons were all lying in Sinai, victims of the "no withdrawal" decree.

At least yesterday and today had brought back to the west bank some of the sub-units of the anti-tank guided weapon battalions we had split up and sent over the canal as reinforcements in the initial assault. (We had sent over two such anti-tank guided weapon battalions, split into six companies. These I now withdrew. Each division of course, also had its own anti-tank guided weapon battalion integrated into its structure. There was no question of withdrawing those, merely the reinforcements.) But so few even of our senior field commanders knew the position that the move brought vehement protest. Even among our divisional commanders, in other words, only the commanders of 16th Division and 2nd Division appreciated the magnitude of the threat.

One divisional commander in Sinai within the Third Army bridgehead phoned me to say that removal of the reinforcement anti-tank guided weapon company he had would "endanger the stability of my defensive position." I gave him the alibi he wanted. "Yes, yes, I appreciate that," I said. "I bear sole responsibility. Just send them quickly."

Yet on the west bank hundreds of people were being killed and thousands taken prisoner. Swift armored thrusts with close air-support against unprepared men was the sort of war at which the Israelis excelled. Faced with a real fight east of the canal they had been unable to take a single prisoner. Now they were picking up hundreds to provide the propaganda at which they also excelled. And all the time the steady destruction of SAM sites was tearing a hole in our air defenses through which the Israeli air force could pass at will.

1400 hours: The President arrived in the Operations Room. Ismail described the situation. At last the pair were driven to adopt my own plan to withdraw armor from the east bank. They proceeded to sabotage even this. They decided we would withdraw only a single armored brigade from Third Army bridgehead, the brigade from 4th Division which had gone across for the attack. What good could that do now?

I was not asked to speak and I volunteered no opinion. It would have been a waste of breath. The President and his Minister of War, neither particularly competent military men, seemed unable to grasp that the job of a commander is to think ahead. A GHQ must be dealing with events foreseen two and preferably three or more days away. The imagination and foresight with which he

manages that is one of the inescapable tests of a commander: because if there is one rule about a battle it is: "What is possible today may not be possible tomorrow." Sadat and Ismail responded only to the present or the past: their decision lagged hopelessly behind events. This latest edict was a prime instance. They could not see that what might have sufficed two or three days ago was wholly inadequate now. Even as they deliberated, a fifth enemy armored brigade was starting across. Withdrawing one armored brigade over the coming night of 18/19 was not going to contain, let alone roll back, an enemy bridgehead now two divisions in strength.

Finally, the President turned to me. I was to move to Second Army to raise its morale and to do my best to stop its position from deteriorating further. The army must not be encircled. At 1445 hours I set off from Center Ten. Before I left the Operations Room, it was made clear that the tanks of 4th Division, which now had to cover the rear of both Second and Third Armies, would take orders directly from Center Ten. Second Army would not have a single tank under its own command west of the canal.

1730 hours: I arrived at Second Army HQ. This was the situation we faced:

—The crossing of yet another armored brigade in the course of the afternoon had given the enemy five tank brigades and one infantry brigade on the west bank.

—They had, exactly as predicted, split into two divisions. General Sharon, with two armored brigades and one infantry brigade, prepared to move north. General Bren Adan, with three armored brigades, prepared to head west and south.

—On the Sinai side, the enemy's crossing was finally secure. Fire from the west bank onto 21st Division's flank had forced them to pull back. In effect, the right or southern flank of the Second Army had been driven north to a line opposite Serabeum on the west bank—and the enemy's corridor correspondingly widened.

—If Sharon's division did thrust north, all we had on the west bank guarding the rear of Second Army was the 150th Parachute Brigade, positioned to stem an attack towards Ismailia.

When I discussed all this with General Abdel Moneim Khalil, who had replaced Saad Mamoun as Commander of Second Army, his plan was:

—Whatever anyone said, withdraw the 15th Independent Armored Brigade with its T-62 to the west bank to guard the army's rear north of the fresh-water canal which cut across from Ismailia west to Cairo.

—Destroy all the bridges over that canal.

—Defend the west bank south of canal with the 150th Parachute Brigade.

—Meanwhile harass the Deversoir crossing points with artillery fire and commando raids.

I approved the plan. Given the limitations imposed upon us, there was little more we could do. For the next 24 hours, Khalil and I stayed together, save only when one of us would nap for an hour or two.

Our first concern was to strengthen and encourage the 182nd Parachute Brigade, which was now bearing the first brunt of Sharon's drive north. Every yard the enemy gained would widen the threat to the rears of 16th Division and 21st Division, forcing them to pull back north. Our other concern was to throw everything we

had at the enemy crossing points. Through the night of October 18–19 the enemy tried to build their second bridge. But our artillery fire—well directed by our forward observation posts—disrupted the work. From intercepted radio traffic we knew we were causing heavy losses. But it was not enough.

Friday, October 19

Morning: The enemy tanks kept up the battering of our paratroopers. In the early hours, our troops forward positions were pushed back and we lost sight of the bridge area. Our artillery continued to pound away, according to data we received about the enemy bridge sites. The enemy got their second bridge across. Our paratroopers inflicted a heavy toll but in the end some of their positions were stormed. The rest could be only a question of time.

Late afternoon: I drove back to Center Ten and gave the Minister a full report on the position of Second Army. I was told of the situation facing Third Army. It was not good—and for the same reason as ever. We still had more troops on the east bank than we needed, but too few on the west bank to counter what was now a very real threat to encircle both our armies. What we needed was tanks. I proposed we withdraw the four armored brigades that were still on the east bank (two with 16th Division, one with 2nd Division, and one with 19th Division). Ismail refused. No unit would be withdrawn from Sinai.

I went to confer with my assistants. I did not hide from them my conviction that unless we withdrew armor from the east to save the west, the outcome now looked grave. But what could we do? One of them suggested I call the

President and put the situation to him. I agreed.

I went back to Ismail and told him that myself and my senior staff wanted the President to come to Center Ten to learn the situation for himself. Ismail was reluctant. It was a bit late, he said. (It was about 2200 hours.) I insisted he call the President and left the room only after receiving an affirmative answer. Minutes later Ismail came out to tell me the President was on his way. We need not make this a public meeting, he said; we should limit it to a minimum. I agreed and called only five commanders to attend: Mubarak (Air Force); Fahmy (Air Defense); Mahy (Artillery); Gamassy (Chief of Operations); Nassar (Defense Intelligence Department); plus the Minister and myself.

2230 hours: The President arrived, accompanied by the Minister for Presidential Affairs, Abdel Fatah Abdullah. They went directly to Ismail's office where they remained closeted for more than half-an-hour while the rest of us cooled our heels in the conference room off the Operations Room.

2310 hours: The trio emerged. The meeting began. In turn, Sadat asked each commander except myself to make his report. I was not asked to speak. The reports were truthful, detailed, frank. As the last one finished, the President said simply: "We will not withdraw a single soldier from the east to the west." Still I made no comment. "Say something," Abdullah whispered. I ignored him. What was there to say? Ismail would have told him my considered judgment that the withdrawal of four armored brigades was our only hope; yet here was this man saying not a soldier must move. I had wanted the President to know the facts. Now he did. He could not now claim that he had been kept in ignorance. The fate

of the country was in his hands. (In his memoirs, Sadat says I wanted to withdraw *all* our forces to the west bank, but that the other commanders at the meeting said "there was nothing to worry about." Nonsense.)

After the withdrawal of the four armored brigades I was suggesting, we would have still had in our bridge-heads 18 infantry brigades reinforced with 22 tank battalions, 5 BMP battalions, 5 anti-tank guided weapon battalions, 5 ATK gun battalions, 60 field artillery battalions, and 15 heavy mortar battalions. This force in figures, after excluding casualties, was as follows:

- 90,000 officers and men
- 3,500 ATK pieces (consisting of 500 tanks, 350 anti-tank guided weapons, 150 85mm guns, 400 82mm and 107mm recoilless, 2,100 RPG)
- 700 field artillery pieces that also could be used as ATK guns in cases of armored attack
- 250 heavy mortars (120 mm and 160 mm)

The enemy on the other hand had only about 300 tanks, and in the worst case could raise their number to 500, but only at the expense of the Syrian front or at the expense of the penetrating troops west of the canal. To suggest the withdrawal of all our troops from the east under such a situation is madness. To refuse to withdraw the suggested four armored brigades is a combination of madness, ignorance and treason. This was our fourth and fatal blunder.

Saturday, October 20—Monday, October 22

Our situation on the west bank steadily deteriorated, but less than we had feared or the enemy hoped. The battle was fluid, without a continuous front. The triangle

between the Bitter Lakes and the Cairo-Suez road was ideal tank country, and the enemy reverted to their traditional tactics of using small groups of armor with close air-support. Even so, the enemy's gains were surprisingly limited. The resistance of our infantry and paratroopers was tenacious beyond praise. And by now the enemy had learned healthy respect for our anti-tank guided weapons. So despite their air cover and unchallengeable superiority in armor—six brigades against our two—their progress was slow and cautious.

By 1852 hours on Monday, October 22, the time of the first ceasefire, they had in fact gained little significant ground. The northern thrust of Sharon's brigades had been more or less halted. To the south, Adan's divisions had made more ground, reaching the area of Geneifa from where their artillery could shell the Cairo-Suez road. But their casualties were heavy and would have grown heavier. A few minutes before the ceasefire, we launched three R-17E missiles (SCUDs) into their Deversoir concentrations. (The barrage which the President promptly claimed had been by our own fictitious missile, *Al Kahir*.)

Tuesday, October 23

Determined to improve their bargaining position, the Israelis promptly breached the ceasefire to complete their encirclement of our Third Army. They launched a concerted assault by four armored brigades. We had only two armored brigades west of the canal: one blocking any thrust westward by Sharon; the other blocking a similar thrust in the southern sector. The enemy, having concentrated four brigades in that southern sector used

one to pin down ours, so allowing the other three enemy brigades to drive south without question.

To excuse this, the enemy adopted their usual expedient of claiming we had started it—as if a concerted attack by four armored brigades is whistled up in minutes. And ever since, their propagandists have depicted the drive south as a dashing and gallant action. Driving unopposed past administrative bases and rest camps full of wounded men, through checkpoints manned by weary soldiers relaxing in the knowledge of a ceasefire, does not strike me as particularly gallant, but perhaps I am old fashioned.

Still unopposed, the Israelis encircled the town of Suez and continued south to reach Adabia on the coast some ten miles below Suez. They were driving in a convoy, line astern with their lights on, while our scattered outposts gawked at them. Sporadically on the road south from Suez, a few shots were fired at them, usually on the initiative of some junior officer with the wit to be suspicious of this strange procession. But the naval garrison at Adabia was surprised and, after a savage little struggle, overwhelmed.

Wednesday, October 24

The only gallantry discernible in the episode came next morning. Reasoning that the enemy had broken the ceasefire, the commander of our Adabia sector launched a counterattack with the forces at his disposal. They consisted of one infantry company and seven ancient T-34 tanks. In corners of the Adabia naval base, isolated pockets of our men were fighting on. This little force set out to relieve them. The enemy's dash and swagger did

not extend as far as combat. To deal with seven obsolete tanks they summoned their air force, which arrived with napalm and missiles. The seven tanks were destroyed, the infantry company wiped out. A few days later I went to see the blackened hulls. I was very proud—and very sick of the weakness and vanity and lying which had brought such a sacrifice.

By October 24 our military position was as bad as it could be. The Third Army—two reinforced divisions, about 45,000 men and 250 tanks—was completely cut off. They had four days' food and water. They were dominated by enemy armor on top of our own west bank ramparts. Out of range of our surviving SAM units, they were open prey to enemy air attacks. They could not fight their way west: air strikes had already destroyed most of Third Army's limited stock of crossing equipment. They could not be relieved: enemy air and armor superiority was such that we could not break through. And after the enemy air force started systematic work, the Third Army soon had 600 casualties needing evacuation. Hopeless.

CHAPTER SEVEN: HELPING HANDS

THE PRESIDENT had thrown away the greatest army Egypt had ever assembled. He had thrown away the biggest airlift the Soviet Union had ever mounted. He had thrown away the greatest collaborative effort the Arabs had achieved in a generation. So many lies have since been told about each of those aspects of the war that, before recounting the denouement of our disaster, it is right I set the record straight. On the eve of the October War, Egypt had the following:

Combat Forces

- 19 infantry brigades
- 8 mechanized brigades
- 10 armored brigades
- 3 airborne brigades
- 1 amphibious brigade
- 1 R-17E SSM brigade

They deployed about 1,700 tanks; 2,500 armored vehicles; 2,000 artillery pieces; 1,500 anti-tank guns; 700 anti-tank guided weapons; several thousand RPG-7