

**T**hree times during the first 25 years of its existence, Israel had soundly beaten the armed forces of the neighboring Arab states, who wanted to wipe Israel off the map. In the Six Day War of 1967, the Israelis had greatly expanded their defensive depth by capturing the Sinai peninsula, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank of the Jordan River.

By 1973, the Israelis had grown dangerously overconfident. Israeli military intelligence rated the probability

**It has become popular to discount the value of Operation Nickel Grass, but its importance to Israel was clear enough in 1973.**

of war as “very low.” The deployment of Israeli Defense Forces in the Sinai and on the Golan Heights was thin.

In an article published in July 1973, Yitzhak Rabin, former IDF chief of staff and a future prime minister, cited a “widening gap of military power in Israel’s favor” and said that “Israel’s military strength is sufficient to prevent the other side from gaining any military objective.”

Israel ignored warning signals that Egypt and Syria were preparing to reopen the conflict. In March 1973, Egyptian Premier Anwar Sadat told *Newsweek* that “everything in this country is now being mobilized in earnest for the resumption of the battle, which is now inevitable.” As late as the evening of Oct. 5, Israeli intelligence had raised no alarm.

When Egypt and Syria attacked Oct. 6—on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year in Israel—the IDF was not mobilized and was caught by surprise.

In a reversal of the experience in previous wars, the Israelis were thrown back on both fronts with heavy losses. Within the week, the Israeli Air Force projected a “red line,” only three or four days away, beyond which it could no longer conduct combat operations.

Thus the ensuing Israeli comeback was regarded as little short of a miracle. The Arabs faltered and fell back. When the fighting ended Oct. 26, the IDF was inside Egypt, 60 miles from Cairo, and within artillery range of the Syrian capital, Damascus.

The cease-fire lines imposed by the United Nations took away some of the Israeli gains, but the Arab offensive had failed and Israel had won again.



# The Yom Kippur





At the time, it was widely acknowledged that a US Air Force resupply airlift, Operation Nickel Grass, had been a significant factor in the outcome. It was not until later that it became popular to discount the importance of Nickel Grass.

## THE STRIKE ON YOM KIPPUR

After the 1967 war, Israel had been willing to return most of its captured territory in exchange for a guarantee of peace. Among the Arab states, only Jordan agreed. The others held to a manifesto adopted at an Arab summit in Khartoum: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no deal with Israel.

Sporadic shelling and commando raids continued for several years, but there was no major conflict until 1973 when Egypt and Syria decided to strike. Both of them were equipped with current Soviet weapon systems, including MiG-21 fighters, Su-7 fighter-bombers, T-62 tanks, and SA-2 surface-to-air missiles.

Egypt was the stronger partner but Sadat did not tell President Hafez al-Assad of Syria—father of today's Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad—everything. Assad's own intentions were simple: He wanted to regain the territory lost in the Golan Heights and hoped to do so in a combined, all-out attack on Israel.

Sadat's strategy was convoluted. He needed the Syrians to tie down the IDF in the north while Egypt invaded the Sinai, so he did not disclose to Assad that his actual objectives were limited. Sadat planned for his army to cross the Suez Canal, advance for about 10 kilometers, and occupy a small section of the Sinai desert.

In Sadat's mind, this would achieve two things. It would restore the self-respect of the Egyptian armed forces, and it would compel the superpowers to pressure Israel to return more of the Sinai to Egypt without any concessions by Sadat.

Between them, Egypt and Syria had about 800,000 combat troops, 700 combat aircraft, and 3,800 tanks. Israel had 375,000 troops, 360 combat aircraft, and 2,100 tanks. However, less than half of the Israeli forces were mobilized. The frontiers were defended mostly by short-term conscripts who were supposed to hang on until the experienced reservists got there.

Vastly outnumbered in population, Israel could not afford a protracted war of attrition. By necessity, the strategy was to strike swiftly, with emphasis on airpower and armor. There was no real plan for defensive war. Owing partly to the perception of Israeli invincibility, stocks of ammunition and war materiel were low.

Sadat chose Yom Kippur as the date for the attack for several reasons. Everything, including the government offices and the



# Airlift

By John T. Correll



*A C-5 takes off from Lajes Field, Azores, en route to Lod Arpt., Israel, during Operation Nickel Grass.*

Harry Heist via Air Mobility Command Museum



*Israeli tanks cross the sands of the southern Sinai headed toward the Suez Canal on Oct. 10, 1973.*



Photo by Ben Jan, Israeli Government Press Office

radio stations would be closed. Key facilities would be running with minimum staff. In actuality, this did not hamper mobilization as much as Sadat expected.

As Foreign Minister Abba Eban explained, “The call-up of Israeli reserves faces two logistic difficulties: delay in locating reservists and congestion of communications. On Yom Kippur, an Israeli reservist can be found either in his home or in a synagogue, and the roads are open and free.”

The Syrians would have preferred to attack in the morning, with the sun at their backs and in the faces of the Israelis. The Egyptians, looking east, wanted an afternoon attack for similar reasons. The strike was set for 2 p.m.

At 4 a.m. on Yom Kippur, Prime Minister Golda Meir received the late-breaking but definite intelligence that Israel would be attacked that afternoon. Mobilization orders went out but it was

too late for reinforcements to reach the front. IDF chief David Elazar proposed a preemptive strike, but was overruled by Meir and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan.

Meir notified the United States of Israel’s predicament. Accounts differ on what exactly was said in several exchanges that day, but the understanding was clear that if Israel hoped for US aid, it must not strike first.

### ISRAEL IN DIRE STRAITS

At 2 p.m. on Oct. 6, a Saturday, hundreds of Egyptian fighters and fighter-bombers streamed across the Suez Canal, followed by 100,000 soldiers and 1,350 tanks. They promptly overran the string of small, isolated Israeli fortifications manned by fewer than 500 troops. Most of the Israeli tanks were posted well back into the Sinai.



Photo by Ron Frenkel, Israeli Government Office



Photo by Yigal Tomarkin, Israeli Government Office



*An Egyptian MiG burns during the battle for the West Bank of the Suez Canal on Oct. 19.*

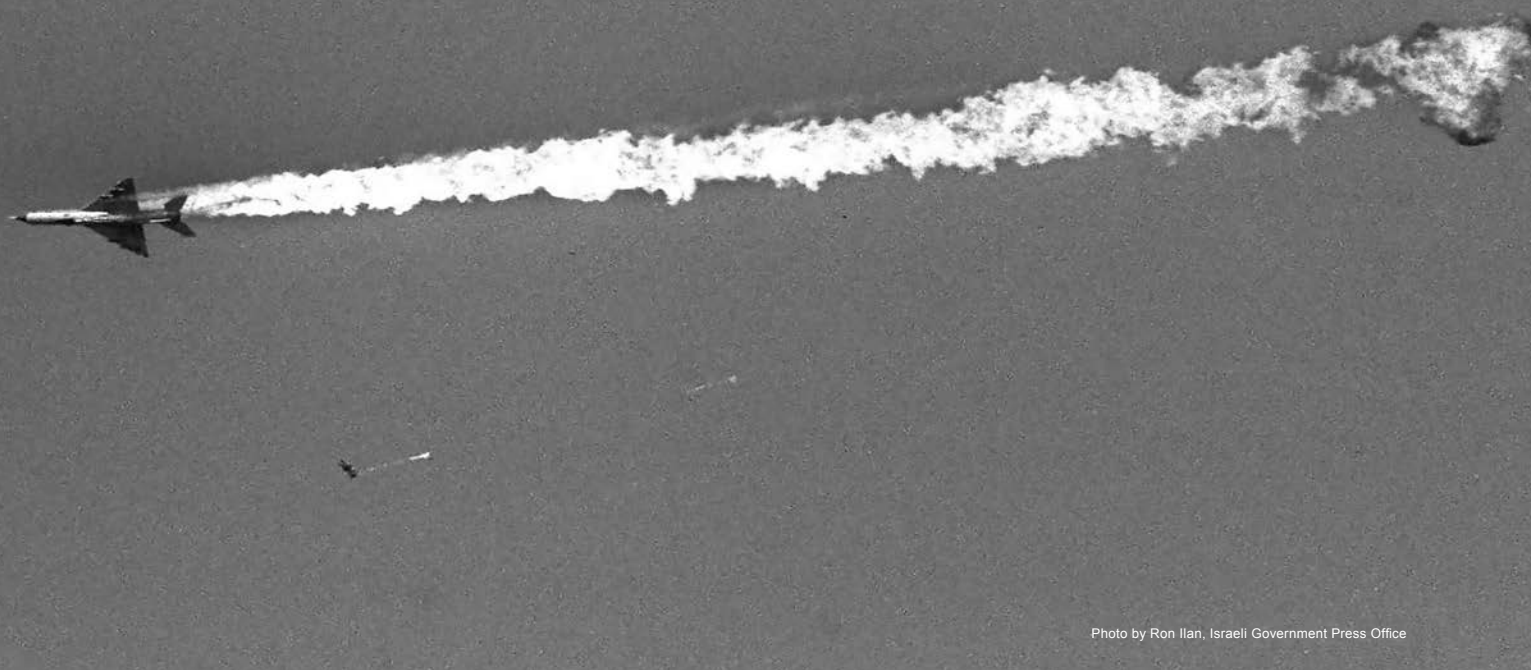


Photo by Ron Ilan, Israeli Government Press Office

In the north, Syria had an eight-to-one advantage in tanks and even greater superiority in numbers of infantry and artillery. By the middle of the day on Sunday, the Syrians held half of the Golan Heights and were a few kilometers from the Jordan River and the Israeli population centers in Galilee. All of Israel's defensive positions along the Suez Canal had been captured or abandoned.

By Monday, the Israelis were reeling as missiles supplied by the Soviet Union took a heavy toll on aircraft and tanks. The IDF was running out of artillery shells and the Israeli Air Force warned that its capability to sustain combat would be exhausted within the week.

Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, optimistic when he spoke to the press on Saturday, had turned to despair. He said that the IDF should form a fallback line in anticipation that the Sinai

front would crumble. On Wednesday, Elazar told Dayan the goal should be "to reach a cease-fire in place. Things won't get any better than they are now." The Egyptians, exuberant in their success, rejected the suggestion of Soviet advisors that they accept a cease-fire.

According to some reports—disputed by others—Dayan persuaded Meir to authorize the assembly of 13 tactical nuclear weapons for delivery by Jericho missiles and F-4 aircraft if needed for the last-ditch defense of Israel. It is also reported—and denied by senior US decisionmakers—that American aid was prompted by fear that without it, the Israelis might resort to the nuclear option.

Coincidence or otherwise, the US decision to resupply Israel came at about the time Israel was supposedly considering nuclear weapons, and once the resupply promise was made, there was no more talk of nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union initiated a resupply airlift to Egypt and Syria and the other Arab states sent forces to join the war, as did Cuba, North Korea, and Pakistan.

## THE AIRLIFT FORMS UP

As the situation deteriorated, Meir, having duly refrained from a pre-emptive attack, bombarded the United States with appeals for help. At her insistence, the Israeli ambassador in Washington called Henry Kissinger every few hours.

Kissinger had been Secretary of State for less than a month but he had kept his old job as national security advisor as well. Responsibility for response to the Yom Kippur War would fall largely on Kissinger because President Richard M. Nixon was engulfed in a political crisis.

The Watergate scandal and calls for Nixon's impeachment were at their peak. This was also the week that Vice President



*Far left: Defense Minister Moshe Dayan (l) and Northern Command Gen. Yitzhak Hafi share a drink with Israeli soldiers on the Golan Heights on Oct. 21. Left: Israeli soldiers inspect an Egyptian army SA-2 missile on the West Bank on Oct. 26.*



Syrian tanks, armored vehicles, and engineering equipment littered the countryside, abandoned by the retreating Syrian troops on the Golan Heights on Oct. 13.



**Spiro** T. Agnew resigned following charges of bribery, tax fraud, and other crimes committed while he was governor of Maryland.

Kissinger notified the Israelis Oct. 9 that Nixon had agreed to replace all of Israel's losses, including aircraft and tanks and to fully resupply all of the expended ammunition, equipment, and consumables.

The question was how to get it there. El Al, the Israeli airline, could and did pick up some of the cargo, but was woefully inadequate for the entire job. US commercial carriers, wary of Arab reprisal, refused to participate unless the US declared an emergency and activated the Civil Reserve Air Fleet.

That left Military Airlift Command, which was now expected to produce an instant airlift, even though its aircraft and crews were committed to other purposes. It would have taken longer except Gen. George S. Brown, the Air Force Chief of Staff, and Gen. P. K. Carlton, the MAC commander, saw the requirement coming and began preparations on Oct. 7, the day the war started. Brown also had Air Force Logistics Command move munitions, spare parts, and equipment for Israel from its warehouses to MAC pickup points around the country.

In 1973, MAC had two strategic airlifters, the C-141 StarLifter and the huge C-5A Galaxy. Configured for the Middle East run, the C-141 could carry about 25 tons, but the forthcoming airlift would depend critically on the C-5, carrying 80 tons and capable of handling outsize cargo such as main battle tanks.

The Air Force liked the C-5 but it was constantly assailed by defense critics and whistleblowers for cost overruns and technical deficiencies. "The C-5A is a joke," said an article in the *New York Times*.

The C-141 could not be refueled in flight. The C-5A was equipped for refueling but the capability was not used in 1973 because of concerns about the effect on the aircraft's wing. The C-5 could fly nonstop to Israel, but with a much-diminished load. A midway refueling point would be essential.

**Right:** Israeli soldiers guard a USAF C-5 at Lod airport. **Far right:** A 155 mm artillery piece is unloaded at Lod during Operation Nickel Grass. C-5s were needed to carry outsize cargo, such as this self-propelled howitzer.

There is no official explanation for naming the airlift "Nickel Grass," but it was most likely the work of an airman in the planning chain who whimsically borrowed the words from a bawdy World War II fighter pilot ballad that began, "Throw a nickel in the grass. ..."

## NICKEL GRASS

The European members of NATO, intimidated by Arab threats to cut off oil supplies, would not allow the airlifters to fly over their territory or use their bases. There was one exception. With some arm-twisting by Kissinger, Portugal agreed to let the airlifters refuel at Lajes Field in the Azores islands, some 800 miles west of Europe and 3,163 miles from Lod airport near Tel Aviv.



Air Mobility Command Museum photos



The first US airlifter into Lod was a C-5 on Oct. 14. It arrived ahead of its support equipment, still on the ground at Lajes aboard an airplane that had aborted on takeoff. Without the 40K loaders—akin to super forklifts and able to hydraulically extract 40,000 pounds of cargo—the first C-5 had to be unloaded manually. Everybody pitched in and got it done in three-and-a-half hours.

Because of the missile threat, only one C-5 was on the ground at Lod at any one time. A rhythm soon developed. The crews turned around the C-141s in 55 minutes, the C-5s in just under two hours. Ninety minutes after an airlifter landed, the first cargo trucks were on their way, reaching the Golan Heights in three hours and the Sinai in 10 hours. Some of the airlifters landed at an additional field at El Arish in the Sinai.

One of the main limiting factors was the bottleneck at Lajes. During a 24-hour period, no more than six C-5s and 36 C-141s could pass through in each direction, a total of 84 flights.

Departing from Lajes toward Israel, the airlifters flew precisely down the centerline of the Mediterranean, a zigzag course that avoided violating European airspace to the north or Arab airspace to the south. They were supported by US Navy ships en route, including carriers posted at 600-mile intervals and providing air cover to within 200 miles of the Israeli coast, where IAF fighters took over.

In addition to the airlift, the United States sent replacement F-4 Phantom fighters, taken from the Air Force wing at Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina and from the Navy's Sixth Fleet. Training at the Navy's fighter weapons school at Miramar, Calif., was almost halted when A-4 Skyhawks were provided to Israel.

## TURNAROUND

When the initial C-5 landed at Lod, Israel had already seized control of the fighting as reinforcements poured into

the battlefronts. The Israelis, knowing that resupply was on the way, were not constrained to conserve bombs and bullets.

The Syrian forces were first to founder, held on the far side of the Jordan by Israeli airpower and then pushed back to the 1967 cease-fire line by the strengthened Israeli ground forces. By the morning of Oct. 10, the Syrians had been completely ejected from the Golan Heights and the IDF was advancing toward Damascus.

The Egyptians were across the Suez Canal on a broad front but only about nine miles deep into the Sinai. Assad clamored for Sadat to push on and relieve the pressure on Syria. Sadat felt an obligation to do so and besides, he had not yet inflicted as many casualties on Israel as he thought he must to ensure credible bargaining power.

The Egyptian army did not want to proceed beyond coverage from their SAM sites along the canal, but Sadat insisted on an attempt to take the strategic Mitla and Gidi passes in the Sinai. That was a big mistake.

In the ensuing battle, Egypt lost more than 260 tanks, compared to 10 lost by the Israelis, who were no longer worried about a shortage of ammunition and artillery shells and who made good use of antitank missiles brought from the United States by El Al a few days earlier.

The Israeli counterattack crossed the Suez Canal into Egypt Oct. 16. By Oct. 24, the Israelis on the Egyptian side had encircled the Egyptian Third Army on the Sinai side. Now it was the Arabs who were in desperate need of a cease-fire. The Israelis were rolling and did not want to stop.

Meir complained that UN cease-fire resolutions on Oct. 22 and 23 were passed with "indecent speed to avert the total destruction of the Egyptian and Syrian forces by us." The United States supported the resolutions because, Kissinger said, "if Sadat fell, the odds were that he would be replaced by a radical, pro-Soviet leader."





CIA photo



Photo by Marion S. Trikosko, *US News & World Report Magazine*, photo collection, Library of Congress

In Israel there was considerable opposition to a cease-fire but the Israelis, dependent on resupply from the airlift, could not ignore pressure from the United States. “Every morning we shoot off what arrived the previous night,” said IDF chief Elazar.

The Arabs took their revenge by declaring an embargo on oil shipments to the United States and any European country that supported Israel.

### DEFCON 3

Sadat, on the verge of losing his entire Third Army, called on the United States and the Soviet Union to send in their own armed forces to stop the Israelis.

Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, apparently oblivious to the unintended effect, dispatched a hotline message to Nixon Oct. 24 proposing a joint US-USSR force. If Nixon did not agree, the Soviet Union would “consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally.”

The United States could not let the threat of unilateral Soviet intervention in the Middle East go unchallenged and responded by increasing the readiness level of US armed forces from the peacetime normal Defcon (Defense Condition) 4 to Defcon 3.

This angered West European leaders, especially British Prime Minister Edward Heath and German Chancellor Willy Brandt, who accused the United States of raising the risk of war without consulting them. Brezhnev, however, backed down and on Oct. 25 sent another message talking only about “dispatch of observers.” US forces resumed Defcon 4.

On Oct. 25, the United Nations adopted its third and final cease-fire resolution, which demanded that the belligerents return to the positions they held on Oct. 22. This time the cease-fire held and active combat stopped on Oct. 26.

Israel withdrew its forces from Egypt and Syria. Egypt kept the foothold on the east bank of the Suez Canal, enabling Sadat to save face and claim a degree of victory. Syria did not regain any part of the Golan Heights.

The Nickel Grass airlift continued until Nov. 14 to fulfill Nixon’s promise to completely make up for Israel’s losses. It lasted for 32 days, with the C-5s delivering 48 percent of the tonnage although flying only 25 percent of the missions.

**Above left: Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (l) and Deputy Minister of Defense Hosni Mubarak, commander of the Egyptian air force, study war plans on Oct. 1. Above: Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir (l) with President Richard Nixon (c) and Henry Kissinger (r) outside the White House in November 1973. Meir spoke of the planes filled with materiel for Operation Nickel Grass as a miracle.**

“It is ironical but it is a fact that the job really could not have been done without the huge C-5A transports—the very airplanes that have been somehow transformed into a scandal by the hyperactive anti-defense lobby,” Joseph Alsop said in the *Washington Post*.

### CHANGING INTERPRETATION

A *Reader’s Digest* article in July 1974 proclaimed Nickel Grass “the airlift that saved Israel,” and the designation stuck. With the passage of time, though, memories dimmed of the days when Israel was running out of ammunition and supplies and looking at an uncertain outcome of the conflict.

“The popular belief of Americans is that this airlift saved Israel,” said Uri Bar-Joseph of Haifa University in 2009. “Israeli experts, on the other hand, claim that although Operation ‘Nickel Grass’ contributed a major morale boost, it had little significant impact on the IDF’s fighting capabilities during the war.”

“Overall, American arms transfers made a rather modest contribution to Israel’s military victory in the Yom Kippur War,” said David Rodman in the *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* in 2013. He added that “the US prevented an overwhelming Israeli victory in the Yom Kippur War.”

Meir, who experienced the stark reality of the war from a position of critical responsibility, saw it from an altogether different perspective.

Speaking in Washington three weeks after the cease-fire, she said that, “For generations to come, all will be told of the miracle of the immense planes from the United States bringing in the material that meant life to our people.” ★

*John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, “Operation Barbarossa Stalls Out,” appeared in the June issue.*