Return of the King: Israeli style

By MG Peter M. Vangjel, Chief of FA

I came across an interesting article about Israeli accounts of the battles in Gaza, Operation Cast Lead. The article outlines insights on lessons learned from the Lebanon conflict and provides us some additional thoughts on the use of scalable lethality—precision, obscuration and suppressive/shock fires in support of maneuver commanders. One thing is key: the fire supporter's relationship to his maneuver commander is absolutely critical—in combat and in peacetime training.

I think the article opens the door for further discussion with our Israeli counterparts at this year's Fire Support Seminar, and it is *very appropriate* to include in the Fire Support Seminar edition of our *Fires* Bulletin, addressing hybrid threats. Written by Sergeant Shachar Helwing, a staff writer for *Ba Yabasha* Magazine (the Israeli Defense Force [IDF] ground forces command magazine), the article is a direct translation from our Training and Doctrine Command liaison officers, and they have permission from the Israelis for Fires to release and reprint.

As always, the Field Artillery will *anticipate* the actions of any enemy we face and *integrate* all assets available to the maneuver commander—both lethal and nonlethal—enabling him to *dominate*, anytime, anywhere. Enjoy the article.

The Return of the Israeli Artillery

Soldiers and armored vehicles entering into the Gaza Strip averted casualties among our troops, mainly due to the proper use of Artillery. By echelon, starting with the Givati Brigade's Operations Center down to Battery C of the Dragon [pronounced draKon] Battalion, soldiers made sure each shell had a clear target and accurate location. In the wake of the second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, we can safely declare that the Artillery is back.

The many years that separated the First and Second Lebanon Wars and the infrequent use of artillery resulted in the depreciation of the prestige of the artillery corps, and a feeling among soldiers that the [artillery] was "combat-lite." Since the Second Lebanon War, however, [this perception] has changed. [In addition to] … exercises held since the summer of 2006, in collaboration with other ground forces, Operation Cast Lead in Gaza proved again that artillery is a power to be reckoned with, and that the artillery corps has its finger on the trigger of fire power.

The Cannons Roared. Indeed the cannons roared. Ground operation[s] commenced after massive preparatory fires on the Gaza Strip that consisted of 1,500 shells, of which 500 were fired in direct support of the Givati Brigade. "The estimate of the situation … before the ground invasion compelled … [an intense] fire plan on the main roads our forces were going to use … to strike antitank positions as well as houses and tunnels that had been prepared in advance for the purpose of kidnapping soldiers," the commander of Givati's Brigade Center, Major [Maj.] Aviv, explained. "The artillery onslaught that struck booby-trapped houses and explosive charges accounts for the secondary explosions in the Gaza Strip. The enemy had not anticipated such intense fire. We struck the enemy and its munitions, but more importantly—we demoralized it, causing it to flee its positions."

Further proof of damage to morale was observed when a force headed by Givati's brigade commander arrived at a well-fortified, concrete-[reinforced] tunnel underneath a plantation. It had everything you can think of—[bullet proof] vests, rifles, RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades], an outpost for kidnapping soldiers and an electric trip wire to activate other booby-trapped houses. The only thing it didn't have was terrorists, who had fled … [due to] the artillery fire that preceded the [ground attack].

One of the most significant events for the Givati Brigade was when one of the soldiers unearthed an electric wire attached to an explosive device that surrounded a school where dozens of IDF soldiers were sleeping. Luckily for the force, the explosive charge was not activated. "There was a plan to kill the soldiers, but there was no one to execute it. This has been the most important effects of the fire [support]—making the terrorists relinquish their original plan and flee. We [renewed the old adage] … that wherever a 155-mm shell lands, nobody fires [at our troops]."

Emergency Lighting. Hamas was poised to meet an IDF invasion consisting of a division made up of several battalions. Givati Brigade forces fought against the enemy's southern Gaza brigade. During the first week, battles ensued against a battalion in the *Zeitun* neighborhood and later against a battalion in Tel Awah. Givati [Brigade] noted that the *Zeitun* battalion collapsed and did not have enough time to stage resistance as a result of the joint fire support dealt by fighter jets and the artillery.

Captain (ret.) Guy, the fire support … officer [FSO], who [returned to active duty] from Ben Gurion University to join the fighting in Gaza, conducted operation[s] from a house in which the forward war room [tactical command post] and the brigade commander were located. "We slept on the floor with the battle gear, intelligence aides and radio communications, while machinegun

gunners were deployed at the windows. During the day, the main activity was to build fortified positions, and at night raids were conducted. Together with the brigade commander, I prepared the fire plan before each operation," he relates. "Many times our basic premise was that an artillery attack, which lasts ten minutes and creates quiet, would serve us better than air support that is accurate but ends quickly."

Despite the planning, we were still talking about fighting. Givati forces, which occasionally met an ambush, [often required immediate artillery support]. In one of those incidents, the [FSO] and the brigade commander came under fire. The force had deployed in a house and continued to [receive] RPG fire during the night. "Although we did [not] identify the terrorists, we did identify the general direction the fire was coming from," the [FSO] related. "I immediately put the battery into action to fire [illumination] and smoke to mask the house; the fire stopped. When the [projectile functioned and illuminated the area], a force from Battalion *Tsabar* identified the terrorists and charged."

In another incident, an intelligence report was received that a terrorist with an improved RPG was on the lookout for Israeli tanks, waiting for the right opportunity to fire. CPT Guy [recounts], "The *Massua* system [Torch 100, a targeting system which unifies sensors, security forces and command centers into the regional security command and control system] [was utilized] for the first time, allowing us to record [and disseminate] all the potential targets around us, so I was able to immediately execute a masking plan and instruct the tanks to use their own [obscuration] devices. Shortly thereafter, the terrorist folded. [As a result of these continuous, effective fires], peoples' lives were spared."

Caution—Population in the Area. Throughout the 33 days of the Second Lebanon War, the IDF fired some 170,000 [artillery rounds]. [After Action Reports or AARs] revealed that many targets were [engaged with unobserved fires]. [In this case,] according to Maj. Aviv, there was a feeling that the mission would not start until all the forces were 100 percent ready [and observation in place]. "The fighting in Gaza is different [than that] in Lebanon, [in ground force techniques and] in terms of the artillery," Maj. Aviv continues. "[An FSO] would rather fight in Lebanon, because in a mountainous area it [is] easier to observe fires and make corrections. It is much harder to lay the battery in an urban setting where we need to watch out for the population and when the view is obstructed. The gap was compensated for by aerial video devices."

Hamas terrorists protected themselves by hiding behind civilians. The IAF [Israeli Air Force] [dropped leaflets, the IDF used verbal warnings] by Arabic-speaking infantry soldiers with bullhorns, and half a million phone calls were made to civilians in Gaza during the operation … to give them a three-hour warning….All these measures were only part of IDF attempts to avoid inflicting casualties to civilians.

For its part, the artillery corps was extremely careful, often changing the type [or numbers] of ammunition. "Before [striking] each target, [no fire areas (NFAs) were established] for buildings, with an especially large [NFAs] for medical clinics, hospitals and schools," says Maj. Aviv. "We were instructed by the division to be extra careful and pay attention to each shell before it is fired. When there was concern that civilians were in the area, we used smoke shells instead of high-explosive ones. While they wouldn't kill the enemy, at least they would block its view and ability to fire."

The combination of [illumination] and smoke is one such example. The intensity of one [round] is equal to the light produced by one million candles for two minutes. If a smoke shell is fired close by, [the reflected light] creates a blinding effect that prevents the enemy from shooting at us. "The point of impact of such a shell is important," says Captain Guy. "If the illumination [is fired] too close to our forces, it will create the reverse effect, exposing our own troops."

When the fighting ended, Captain Guy was promoted [due to the chain-of-command's] satisfaction with the artillery [support he provided]. Even before [lessons learned] from Operation Cast Lead [were written], the outstanding [FSO] remarked that "this time the artillery was much more effective, [evidenced by the fact] there were no fatalities among Givati Brigade soldiers. Much credit is [due to] *Rochev Shamayim* [Sky Rider is an unmanned aerial vehicle which is an invaluable observation platform in dense or urban areas].

Fire Dragon. Charlie Battery of the Dragon Battalion was in [direct support to] the Givati Brigade throughout the operation. [At face value, it would seem] its soldiers enjoyed [less stressful] fighting conditions, [because] they fired from within Israel. [However,] the battery commander, Captain Idan [asserts] that this kind of situation creates an additional challenge for the soldiers. "In less than [18] hours, we fired almost 500 rounds in support of the brigade [which is quite physically challenging]. [Additionally] because our soldiers do not see the enemy [directly], it [is] sometimes harder. I always made sure they knew exactly what [the purpose of each fire] mission was. I informed [my platoon leaders] on the radio where they were [firing], who they were assisting, and how many lives they would be saving if they performed well."

Givati brigade commander Colonel Ilan Malka made sure to stay in direct [communication] with the battery, and during the fighting the [FSO] tried to visit the battery frequently to give the soldiers an updated view of the fighting in the Gaza Strip. "As a commander in the battalion even before the Second Lebanon War, for me it was like coming a full circle to see the shelling and to know that Dragon soldiers were behind them. Because I knew that they oftentimes felt out of the loop, I made sure to update them."

"Being made to feel involved in the battle, the soldiers unequivocally realized that if they were not accurate, they would compromise IDF soldiers," says Captain Idan. "One of our soldiers was injured when a [round] fell on his foot [and had to be evacuated]. When he arrived at the hospital, he met two wounded soldiers who thanked him on behalf of the forward forces for saving their lives time after time."

Revving Up the Engines. Although the current operation did not require us to follow the maneuvering forces, the battery is confident that it can meet more difficult challenges if called to conventional war. Captain Idan remarked, "We [are] more than just continuous fire. In case of an all-out war, we will also have to deal with [position defense and directly engaging the enemy], while [simultaneously] managing [direct support to ground forces]. As far as this operation is concerned, we were just revving up the engines."

The forward war room [tactical command post] did not remain indifferent in view of the battery's operational capability. "After many years of service in the IDF, I can say that there are hardly any operational points in which you know for a fact that you saved the lives of other soldiers," says Maj. Aviv. "This time, thanks to the quick and perfect performance of this battery, it was literally that. Anyone who was there was moved [by their performance]."