

Intelligence in Public Media

Sayeret Matkal: The Greatest Operations of Israel's Elite Commandos

Avner Shur and Aviram Halevi (Skyhorse Publishing, 2023), 247 pages, photos.

Reviewed by Alissa M.

The stories of Israeli spies and special operations have been told so many times in books (*Rise and Kill First*; *Mossad: The Greatest Missions of the Israeli Secret Service*) and on film (*Raid on Entebbe* and *Munich*) that they often seem like the stuff of legend. A new book by two veterans of Sayeret Matkal—the commando force behind the hostage rescue mission at Entebbe and many other famous operations—tells the stories from a new and sometimes touching perspective. It shows the exhilaration, the agony, the grief, and sometimes the boredom of participating in some of the most famous Israeli commando operations.

Sayeret Matkal's original mandate was reconnaissance, with commando raids a side job that eventually became its primary remit. When Sayeret Matkal—commonly known simply as “the unit”—was founded in 1958, Israeli independence was only a decade old and memories of pre-independence paramilitary groups organizing prison breaks and nighttime raids against the British Mandate were fresh. Sayeret Matkal inherited much of the can-do spirit and courageousness of the young men and women of the Palmach and Hagana. And these are the stories of very, very young men indeed. Even the “old” men—there are no women playing operational roles in this book—are in their early thirties. (9)

The introduction sets the tone for the book as a set of stories in which the authors took part and whose other participants are personal friends, or sometimes even relatives. The narrative is crisp and compelling, with stories that move along apace. In many regards it reads like a series of spy novels in short-story form, with just the action scenes and little time spent on policy or historical context.

The operations recounted in this volume span 1969 to 1994, corresponding to the time when Sayeret Matkal was primarily engaged in commando operations and had mostly abandoned its reconnaissance mission. The unit

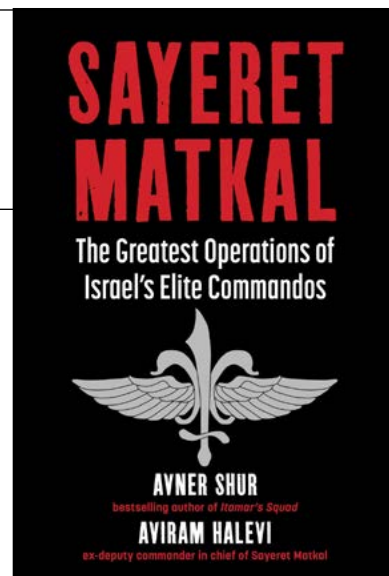
a. Yaakov Katz (St. Martin's Press, 2019).

subsequently shifted focus back to reconnaissance, and the commando role now largely belongs to the counterterrorism-focused Yamam. In that regard, this book is like a greatest-hits album for a band that no longer tours. Sayeret may have

returned to its original reconnaissance focus, but it still undertakes some daring missions like the one described in *Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power*.^a

In those busy years of counterhijacking and counterterror operations, the soldiers of Sayeret Matkal experienced exhilaratingly high highs and profoundly low lows. But even the highs were tempered by nearly every mission experiencing a loss. Many of the missions were impossible and therefore they often failed, but nonetheless the men of Sayeret Matkal saved many lives in the process. A chapter on the attempted rescue of paratroopers from the Peak of Hermon is devastating, with operational misstep after operational misstep culminating in a mission that is both tragic and embarrassing in its overconfidence.

At the same time it is a marvel that Sayeret Matkal operators were consistently able to differentiate friend from foe and identify hostage-takers from hostages (194, for example) and that there are so few instances of friendly fire resulting in collateral deaths. Few, but not none. The deep pain felt by the operators at their losses is evident in their narrative. Such stories are told in such a plain and frank tone that it is gut-wrenching to read but extremely compelling.



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The voice of the authors is unexpectedly likable, in contrast to the faux humility common in many other commando memoirs (e.g., *No Easy Day*^a). Wry humor shines through, as when the authors poke fun at the stature of typical Sayeret Matkal commanders by describing them as having “superb mental faculties, at the apparent expense of physical size.” (185) Or when they convey the commitment of the team to conduct a planned raid on a target in southern Lebanon on schedule by noting it was the man’s birthday and “nobody in the force want[ed] to ruin the surprise party that they ha[d] been working on for months.” (222)

This book would be extremely useful to the understanding of a generation of Israeli political and security leadership, but its value as a research tool is undercut by the absence of an index. An organizational chart would also have been useful—I kept losing track of where in the hierarchy each position fell, which is only compounded by the normal turnover of leadership in a book spanning four decades of operations.

Many of Sayeret Matkal’s members have gone on to have prominent careers in Israeli government and

politics—most notably Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak—and most of them are cast in a flattering light, but none more so than Barak. Barak is portrayed as a leader of real integrity while Netanyahu is treated with much less reverence. But during a time when Netanyahu is moving further to the right on the Israeli political spectrum and facing tremendous public protests, it’s almost quaint to return to an era when he was part of a team willing to risk his life in relative anonymity to protect any one of his fellow citizens.

In any event, there’s very little policy commentary or criticism of political decision-makers. The authors are operators and not policymakers and that is clearly the view from which they are telling these stories. There is, however, occasional criticism of leadership. “The chief of staff is upfront about the price the IDF is willing to pay for the extra deterrence from a physical invasion as opposed to plain old airstrikes: ten men.” (45)

This book fills a gap in the literature on Israeli commando operations by telling riveting stories of derring-do from a personal perspective with very little credit taken, and much given.



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a. Mark Owen with Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy SEAL: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama bin Laden* (New American Library, 2014).