



Egyptian soldiers wielding antitank weapons as they prepare to ambush tanks

2. Establish bridgeheads of ten to fifteen kilometers depth on the east bank,
3. Inflict as much damage as possible in men, weapons, and equipment,
4. Repel and destroy Israeli counterattacks,
5. And be prepared for further missions depending on the situation.

Egyptian planners allotted four to five days for crossing the Suez Canal, capturing the Bar-Lev Line, and establishing bridgeheads twelve to fifteen kilometers in depth. Each field army would have one continuous bridgehead, with the Bitter Lakes serving as a natural barrier between the Second and Third Field Armies.

Then, on the fourth or fifth day of the war, a decision would have to be made either to proceed with an offensive eastward, most likely to capture the passes, or wait for further developments before making that decision. Sadat's strategic directive on 5 October clearly left the question of a second phase dependent on an assessment of the overall situation. Senior Egyptian commanders knew the follow-on missions would almost certainly involve seizing the three strategic passes of Bir Gifgafa, Giddi, and Mitla, some fifty to fifty-five kilometers from the Suez Canal. Therefore, the Egyptian Armed Forces planned and trained as if they would seize the Israeli

passes, with or without an operational pause. The Egyptians expected to transfer some SAM assets to the east bank for that offensive.

While the Egyptians planned for and expected to attack toward the passes, with timing being the variable, the top political and military leadership apparently lacked serious commitment to implement this second phase of Operation Badr. This tiny circle of leaders included Sadat, Ahmad Ismail, and Shazli, each of whom had his own reasons for reticence. Sadat was more inclined to make bold political moves, not military ones. Establishing bridgeheads on the east bank would suffice to break the diplomatic stalemate; anything that risked these military gains would jeopardize his bargaining position after the war. Shazli, as chief of the General Staff, vigorously opposed the second phase, believing such an attempt would prove suicidal: the Egyptian Air Force lacked the capability to challenge the Israeli Air Force for control of the skies, and a move to the strategic passes lay outside the Egyptians' air defense umbrella. Ahmad Ismail, the war minister, held a similar evaluation to that of Shazli; for him, a drive to the passes appeared an unnecessary gamble given the history of the Egyptian Army in fighting the Israelis.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, an inherent tension or ambiguity existed between Egypt's political and military objectives. The passes acted as a magnet for senior Egyptian commanders, who, like Sadiq earlier, thought in terms of waging war by either decisively defeating an opponent or capturing strategic terrain. Sadat, however, was mainly concerned with breaking the diplomatic stalemate, not so much in capturing land per se. In Arabic parlance, he envisioned more a war of political movement (*al-tahrik*) through limited military action than a war of liberation (*al-tahrir*) by a major seizure of land. A military assault on the Bar-Lev Line and the capture of land on the east bank would, in his view, suffice to force the superpowers, in particular the United States, to become involved in the Arab-Israeli problem. A limited but successful military operation would enhance Egypt's strategic importance and thus provide Sadat with diplomatic leverage. While Sadat sought psychological effects that would strengthen his diplomatic position—for which any seizure of territory in a major operation might suffice—the Egyptian Armed Forces, for their part, prepared for a war designed to capture the passes.

Though not primarily interested in seizing territory, Sadat did, however, need some terrain on the east bank. Thus, his attention focused on the rapid capture of Qantara East. Located on the east bank of the Suez Canal, this virtual ghost town had been, before the Six Day War, the second most important city in the Sinai after al-Arish. Its recapture would carry immense propaganda value, being the first instance of Arab forces capturing a city held by Israeli troops. To facilitate the swift occupation of the town, as demanded by Sadat, Ahmad Ismail decided to reinforce the 18th Infantry Division, into whose zone of operations Qantara East fell, with an armored brigade. Sadat also directed General Command to take Ismailia and Suez City (outside the range of Israeli artillery) as quickly as possible to avoid the embarrassment of having these two Egyptian cities bombed by Israeli ground fire. Again, the war minister solved the tactical problem by attaching a tank brigade each to the 2d and 19th Infantry Divisions. Finally, the commanders of the 7th and 16th Infantry Divisions, the last two remaining divisions involved in the crossing operation, clamored for their own tank brigades, and Ahmad Ismail yielded to their requests. Operation Badr thus ended up with five divisions crossing the Suez Canal on a broad front, each augmented by an armored brigade.<sup>37</sup> (See map 2.)

These decisions underscored the great emphasis Sadat and Ahmad Ismail placed on the crossing operation, each showing reticence for follow-on missions. To commit five tank brigades to the crossing phase, however, required stripping armor assets from each field army's operational reserves, those very forces that would be used in a move to the passes. Each infantry division gained additional forces—one armored brigade of ninety-six tanks, one commando battalion, and one SU-100 battalion of tank destroyers. Operation Badr committed 1,020 tanks to the crossing operation, leaving 580 on the west bank, 330 in the operational reserve, and 250 in the strategic reserve.<sup>38</sup> Egyptian war planners expected to defeat Israeli counterattacks by throwing in all available weapons and employing a combined arms doctrine hinging on air defense and leg infantry.

It was natural to employ the bulk of resources to the risky mission of assaulting the fortified positions of the Bar-Lev Line. An Egyptian failure would result in heavy human and materiel losses, and the Egyptian Armed Forces would then require several years of rebuilding before making another such attempt. Most likely, Sadat would not have survived politically such a major military defeat.

**FINAL PREPARATIONS.** By the end of September 1973, the Egyptian Armed Forces and their Syrian allies were prepared for war and awaited the green light from their civilian leadership. Once the order was given, all that remained was to mask the Egyptian intent for war, thereby undermining Israeli war plans, which expected a forty-eight-hour advance warning. To achieve strategic surprise, the Egyptians implemented an elaborate deception plan and hoped for Israeli miscalculations and fortuitous events.

On 13 September, an unexpected incident occurred that would cloud the Israelis' judgment over the next several weeks. A routine Israeli reconnaissance overflight of Syria and Lebanon turned into a major dogfight as Syrian fighters challenged the Israeli planes. At the end of the air combat, Israeli pilots had downed twelve Syrian MiGs while losing only one Mirage. This incident formed an important backdrop to the outbreak of war.

Israeli leaders now expected Arab retaliation as revenge for the Syrian humiliation suffered in the aerial encounter. Within two weeks, the IDF noted unusual military activity across their northern border. On 26 September, at 0815, Lieutenant General David Elazar, the chief of the General Staff, convened a high-level meeting with senior officers and staff to evaluate intelligence reports indicating possible military action by Syria. Syria's General Command had canceled leaves, activated numbers of reserve officers and soldiers, and mobilized civilian vehicles. Despite these disconcerting moves, Israeli Military Intelligence confidently insisted that Syria would not go to war on her own and that Egypt was too preoccupied with internal matters to contemplate any military adventurism. Instead, Syria might opt for a show of force or, in a worst-case scenario, try to snatch part of the Golan Heights. Despite assurances from Israeli Military Intelligence of a low probability for war, Elazar ordered the transfer of the 77th Tank Battalion from the Sinai to Golan as a precautionary step.

Reports of increased Syrian military activity continued over the next few days, heightening concern in Tel Aviv. By 30 September, virtually the entire Syrian Army had deployed to positions from which it could assume an offensive. Su-7 planes, for instance, had moved to forward air bases, and reports of Syrian armor units moving from northern Syria to the front reached The

Pit, the command center for the IDF located in Tel Aviv. Each day brought new information challenging the general Israeli assessment of a low probability of war.

Meanwhile, developments along the Sinai front caused far less concern for the Israeli General Staff than those in the north, even though the events occurred simultaneously and should have aroused more anxiety. While Syrian forces were moving into place, the Egyptians ingeniously used their annual peacetime maneuvers, announced far in advance, to mask their intent for war. Consequently, initial Egyptian military movements near the Suez Canal failed to appear out of the ordinary. This peacetime training exercise began on 26 September, the day before the Israelis began celebrating Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which somewhat distracted the IDF.

The Egyptians continued to implement a carefully orchestrated deception plan designed to delude the Israelis into believing that the Egyptian Armed Forces were unprepared for war and were merely conducting a routine training exercise.<sup>39</sup> Egyptian accounts tend to present a story of meticulous and deliberate planning and cleverly designed deception. However, the overconfidence and serious misconceptions of the Israelis played a major role in allowing Egypt and Syria to achieve such surprise.

The Egyptians took numerous steps to prevent Israeli intelligence from getting wind of the war. A key element in the strategic surprise was to limit severely the number of Egyptians and Syrians privy to the date of the attack. On 22 September 1973, Sadat and Asad ordered their war ministers and chiefs of the general staffs to begin hostilities on 6 October, thus providing them fourteen days' advance warning.<sup>40</sup> Slowly word filtered down to subordinate commands. On 1 October, Ahmad Ismail informed the two Egyptian field army commanders of the date. Division commanders were notified on 3 October, brigade commanders on 4 October, and battalion and company commanders on 5 October. Platoon commanders learned of the war only six hours before the attack.<sup>41</sup> On the civilian side of the house, only a few key individuals learned of the approach of war, and virtually all senior ministers were kept in the dark so that they could perform their official duties in a routine fashion. By 1 October, a number of senior officials understood that war loomed but had no knowledge of the exact date or time until war broke out.

A number of other steps were taken to deceive Israel's Military Intelligence. In September, Sadat attended the Nonaligned Conference in Algeria, ostensibly returning to Egypt near exhaustion and ill. For several days before 6 October, Sadat remained out of the public limelight while Egyptian intelligence carefully planted false stories about his illness and even initiated a search for a home in Europe for him, purportedly for his medical treatment, adding further credibility to the floating rumor. To paint a picture of normalcy in the armed forces, Egyptian newspapers announced the holding of sailboat races that would involve the commander of the Egyptian Navy and other naval officers. Business on the diplomatic front included a routine invitation to the Rumanian defense minister to visit Cairo on 8 October, two days after the scheduled attack. In addition, the foreign, economic, commerce, and information ministers were all out of the country, conducting their normal business activities. The Egyptian military also planted stories in Arab newspapers of serious problems with Soviet equipment, thereby hinting at the unpreparedness of the armed forces. To lull the Israelis into further complacency, the government announced on 4 October 1973 a demobilization of 20,000 troops and ostentatiously granted leaves for men to perform the Pilgrimage to Mecca. Finally, as a last touch, on the

morning of the attack, Egyptian soldiers were positioned as innocent fishermen along the Suez Canal, giving an ordinary, peaceful appearance to things. The Egyptian deception plan was thus comprehensive, covering both political and military spheres, and integrating strategic, operational, and tactical movements from the president to the individual soldier—all designed to fool the Israelis until they discovered the Egyptians' intent too late.

The timing of the attack coincided with the final phase of the annual autumn maneuvers on the west bank, scheduled to end on 7 October. On 27 September, Cairo Radio announced the mobilization of reservists. General Command used this training exercise to bring combat units to their staging areas near the canal, and the forty-meter sand rampart along the canal permitted field commanders to conceal a portion of their troops near the water's edge. A unit would move to the canal rampart for training and then withdraw, leaving part of the unit behind with orders to remain concealed until further orders. These maneuvers, which commenced on 1 October according to schedule, proved a brilliant cover for final war preparations. Although Israeli Military Intelligence noted an unusual level of Egyptian communications for a peacetime maneuver and an exceptional level of troop deployment near the canal, no senior Israeli military official seriously questioned Military Intelligence's estimate of a very low probability for war. Everything appeared normal precisely because the general feeling was that the Egyptian Armed Forces would not dare fight the Israelis from a position of weakness.

There was another important reason why no senior Israeli officer seriously questioned Military Intelligence's assessment. Back in May 1973, a similar situation of heightened Arab military activity had raised anxieties in Tel Aviv. Despite Military Intelligence's assurances of a very low probability for war, the government, at the request of the chief of the General Staff, had mobilized some reservists at great cost to the treasury. In this case, the intelligence community proved right, and now, in September and early October, as a result of this previous experience, the assessments by Military Intelligence received little critical cross-examination from senior commanders.

**FINAL STEPS.** Proper coordination between the two fronts loomed as a last major item for Arab consideration. On 3 October, General Ahmad Ismail Ali, who as Egyptian war minister also served as general commander for the Egyptian and Syrian Armed Forces, and Major General Baha al-Din Nofal, his chief of operations for the two fronts, flew to Damascus to meet with senior Syrian commanders to inspect last-minute preparations and determine the time for the attack. A surprise awaited these Egyptians. The Syrians apparently wanted a twenty-four to forty-eight-hour delay, and a disagreement surfaced over the timing of the offensives. The Syrians pushed for a dawn attack so that the sun would be in the eyes of the Israeli defenders on the Golan, whereas the Egyptians argued for an assault at 1800 so that darkness could cover their canal crossing. To resolve the matter expeditiously, Ahmad Ismail appealed to Asad, who agreed to an attack on 6 October and compromised on 1405 for a combined offensive.<sup>42</sup> This compromise proved fortuitous, for Israeli Military Intelligence later reported the combined Egyptian-Syrian attack as commencing at 1800.

The Egyptians and Syrians almost inadvertently divulged the secret of their combined offensive. Because the conduct of the war depended on Soviet assistance, Sadat and Asad decided to provide the Soviets with advance warning of their intention. As a result, on 3 October, Sadat informed the Soviet ambassador in Cairo of Egypt's and Syria's intent to go to war against Israel

and requested assurances of Soviet assistance. Asad, for his part, did the same on the next day, revealing to the Soviets the exact date of hostilities. The Kremlin surprisingly responded to this information by requesting permission to evacuate its embassy families from Egypt and Syria. Both Sadat and Asad reluctantly granted this request.<sup>43</sup> Late in the evening of 4 October, Israeli intelligence learned of the move of Soviet planes to both countries to evacuate the families of Russian officials; the departure took place on 5 October. By taking this unusual step, the Kremlin most likely sought to convey an appearance of noninvolvement in the Arab decision for war, thereby assuring the continuance of détente with the United States.<sup>44</sup>

Word of the unexpected departure of Soviet families from Cairo and Damascus caught the Israeli leadership completely by surprise. At 0825 on 5 October, Elazar held a conference with senior commanders to discuss the latest development. No one could find an adequate explanation for such an unusual move. Even Ze'ira, the director of Military Intelligence, found his self-confidence shaken, but he quickly found comfort in the prewar conception that Syria would not dare fight alone and that Egypt would not fight a major war without a capable air force. That third-dimension capability, as Arabs themselves admitted, would not materialize for a couple years.

Despite assurances from Military Intelligence of a low probability for war, Elazar took some precautionary measures on both fronts that proved critical for the approaching armed conflict. He canceled all military leaves, placed the armed forces on C (the highest-level) alert, and ordered the air force to assume a full-alert posture. In addition, he ordered the immediate dispatch of the remainder of the 7th Armored Brigade to the Golan Heights to join its 77th Tank Battalion (which had been there since 26 September). By noon on 6 October, the Israeli force on the Golan numbered 177 tanks and forty-four artillery pieces.<sup>45</sup> These additional reinforcements would save the Golan from certain Syrian capture. To replace the departed 7th Armored Brigade in the Sinai, the Armor School, under the command of Colonel Gabi Amir, received word to activate its tank brigade (minus one tank battalion earmarked for the Golan) for immediate airlift to Bir Gifgafa in the Sinai, less its tanks. Amir's brigade was in place when war began the next day.

Despite the above measures, no decision was taken to mobilize the reserves, and there was good reason for that. Elazar and other senior commanders still expected at least a day or two warning of an impending Arab attack, as had been promised by Military Intelligence.<sup>46</sup> Such an advance alert would provide ample time for the mobilization of the reserves and for the air force to destroy the Arab air defense systems. Nothing of the sort occurred, however; the Israelis' plans were founded on the shifting sands of a best-case scenario.

The religious factor also complicated the Israeli decision-making cycle. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the most solemn day in Judaism, fell on 6 October, the day of the Egyptian and Syrian offensives. To call-up the reserves on the eve of this holy period without a clear warning from Military Intelligence was not an easy decision. Moreover, on the Arab side, both Egypt and Syria were observing the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, with 5 October falling on the ninth of the Islamic calendar. For Muslims to wage war during Ramadan was not without precedent but still appeared as an unlikely course of action.

The Arabs' intention to make war finally became revealed. Definite word from Ze'ira reached Meir, Dayan, and Elazar shortly after 0430 on 6 October.<sup>47</sup> An "indisputable" source indicated a joint Egyptian-Syrian attack scheduled for 1800 that day. Israeli Military Intelligence

had failed to deliver on its tacit contract and now provided a wake-up call of only nine and a half hours before the outbreak of hostilities. Compounding this failure, Ze'ira erred further in identifying the time of the Arab attack as 1800 when, in fact, the Egyptians and Syrians actually planned their assault for 1400. These two failings created confusion for the IDF, and combined Egyptian and Syrian offensives caught Israeli reservists in the first stages of their mobilization. Regular units were still making final preparations for the onslaught expected in the early evening. After the Six Day War, the Israelis were rightfully confident in possessing a first-class intelligence community. The political and military leadership, however, had depended too much on Military Intelligence, and the Arabs had, in fact, won the first phase of the information war.

As soon as word arrived of the impending Arab offensives, the Israeli political and military leadership immediately went into action. Elazar telephoned his air force chief, Major General Benyamin Peled, who promised to be ready for a preemptive air strike by 1200. The chief of the General Staff also held a series of high-level meetings with his staff, senior commanders, and Dayan, where steps were taken to prepare the armed forces for war. But the most important decisions awaited the political leadership.

At 0805, Elazar met with Prime Minister Golda Meir and her kitchen cabinet, a meeting that lasted until 0920. Two key issues received serious attention. To ensure a favorable military situation at the onset of hostilities, Elazar recommended a preemptive air strike against Syria, but Dayan, the defense minister, counseled against one, citing the adverse American and international reaction that would result and mark Israel as the aggressor. Meir supported her defense minister on this issue. With the strategic depth gained from the 1967 War, Israel could take advantage of its geographical position and accept a first strike. Failing on the first issue, Elazar pressed for the mobilization of the entire air force and four armored divisions, a total of 100,000 to 120,000 troops. Dayan, however, favored only two armored divisions or 70,000 men, the minimum required for defense against full-scale attacks on two fronts. Meir, on this issue, sided with Elazar.

Seven years after the Six Day War, the IDF was once again confronted with another major conflict. This time, however, the initiative lay squarely with the Arabs, as the outbreak of war found Israeli reservists scrambling to reach their mobilization centers. Because the Egyptians and Syrians had won the opening round, the intelligence struggle, they would dictate the first phase of the war. As a result, numerous failings and mistakes would beleaguer the IDF and beg for accountability after the war. All this would play directly into Sadat's war strategy.

**THE EGYPTIAN ASSAULT.** The surprise achieved by Egypt and Syria was complete, stunning virtually everyone in Israel. This success allowed the Egyptians to dictate the tempo of the battlefield during the first phase of the war, as the crossing operation generally went according to plan.

The Egyptians assaulted the Bar-Lev Line with two field armies and forces from Port Sa'id and the Red Sea Military District. The Second Field Army covered the area from north of Qantara to south of Deversoir, while the Third Field Army received responsibility from Bitter Lakes to south of Port Tawfiq. The Bitter Lakes separated the two field armies by forty kilometers. The initial phase of the war involved five infantry divisions, each reinforced by an armored brigade and additional antitank and anti-air assets. These units crossed the Suez Canal and established bridgeheads to a depth of twelve to fifteen kilometers over a period of four days (from 6 to 9

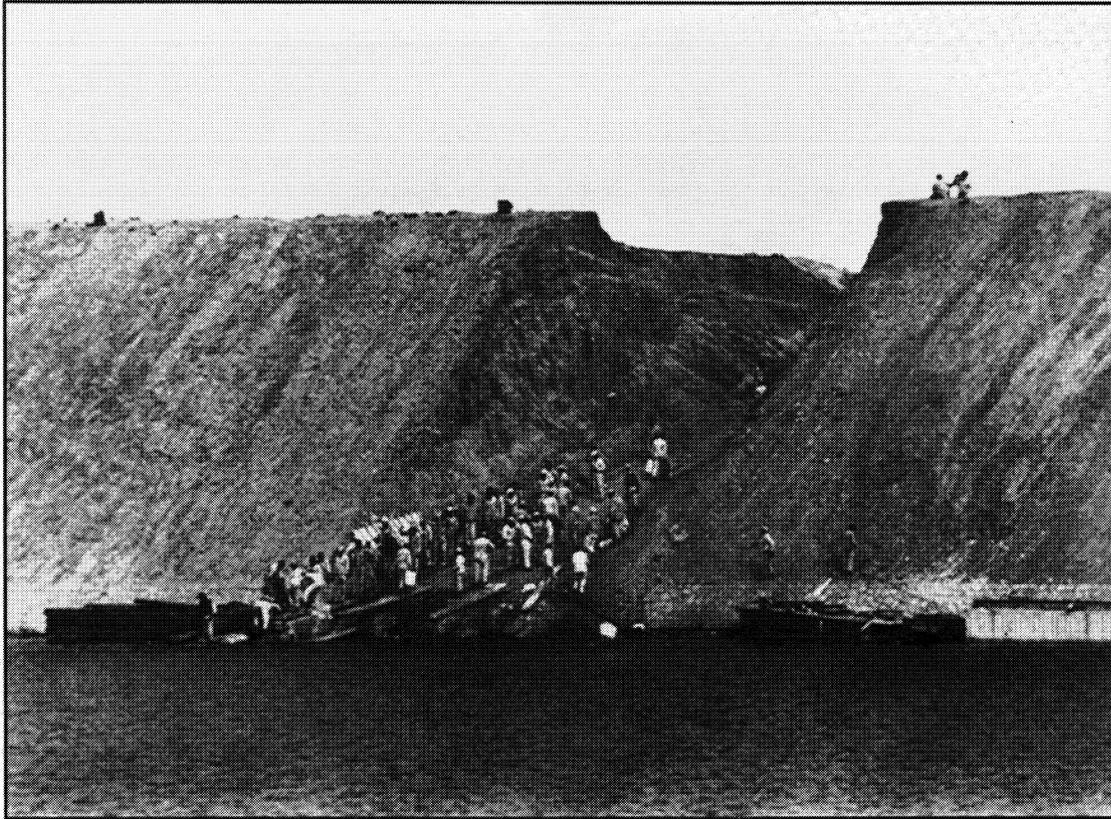
October). This assault force, containing over 100,000 combat troops and 1,020 tanks, accomplished most of its mission over a period of forty-eight to seventy-two hours.

At precisely 1405, the Egyptians and Syrians began their simultaneous air and artillery attacks. On the southern front, 250 Egyptian planes—MiG-21s, MiG-19s, and MiG-17s—attacked their assigned targets in the Sinai: three Israeli air bases, ten Hawk missile sites, three major command posts, and electronic and jamming centers. Meanwhile, 2,000 artillery pieces opened fire against all the strongpoints along the Bar-Lev Line, a barrage that lasted fifty-three minutes and dropped 10,500 shells in the first minute alone (or 175 shells per second). The first wave of troops, 8,000 commandos and infantrymen in 1,000 rubber assault rafts, crossed the Suez Canal at 1420. Special engineer battalions provided two engineers for each rubber boat. Once across, the two engineers returned to the west bank with their boats while the disembarked infantry scaled the ramparts. The first units reached the east bank at 1430, raising their flag to signal the Egyptians return to the Sinai.

After scaling the ramparts, the Egyptian commandos and infantry, armed with Sagers, bypassed the Israeli strongpoints and deployed one kilometer in depth, establishing ambush positions for the anticipated armored counterattacks. Subsequent waves of Egyptians brought additional infantry and combat engineers, the latter to clear minefields around the strongpoints. Operation Badr called for twelve waves, crossing at fifteen-minute intervals, for a total of 2,000 officers and 30,000 troops deployed to a depth of three to four kilometers by dusk. The first eight waves brought the infantry brigades across; waves nine to twelve ushered in the mechanized infantry brigades.

Within the first hour of the war, the Egyptian Corps of Engineers tackled the sand barrier. Seventy engineer groups, each one responsible for opening a single passage, worked from wooden boats. With hoses attached to water pumps, they began attacking the sand obstacle. Many breaches occurred within two to three hours of the onset of operations—according to schedule; engineers at several places, however, experienced unexpected problems. Breached openings in the sand barrier created mud—one meter deep in some areas. This problem required that engineers emplace floors of wood, rails, stone, sandbags, steel plates, or metal nets for the passage of heavy vehicles. The Third Army, in particular, had difficulty in its sector. There, the clay proved resistant to high-water pressure and, consequently, the engineers experienced delays in their breaching. Engineers in the Second Army completed the erection of their bridges and ferries within nine hours, whereas Third Army needed more than sixteen hours.

Two hours after the initial landings on the east bank, ten bridging battalions on the west bank began placing bridge sections into the water. The Soviet-made PMP heavy folding pontoon bridges allowed the Egyptians to shorten the construction time of bridges by a few hours and to repair damaged bridges more rapidly by simple unit replacement. The PMP bridges caught the Israelis (and many Western armies) by surprise. Unfortunately for the Egyptians, they possessed only three such state-of-the-art structures; the remainder were older types of bridges. Concomitant with the construction of real bridges, other bridge battalions constructed decoy bridges. These dummies proved effective in diverting Israeli pilots from their attacks on the real bridges. Meanwhile, engineers worked frantically to build the landing sites for fifty or so ferries. By the next day, all ten heavy bridges (two for each of the five crossing infantry divisions) were operational, although some already required repair from damage inflicted by Israeli air strikes.



The War of Atonement: October, 1973

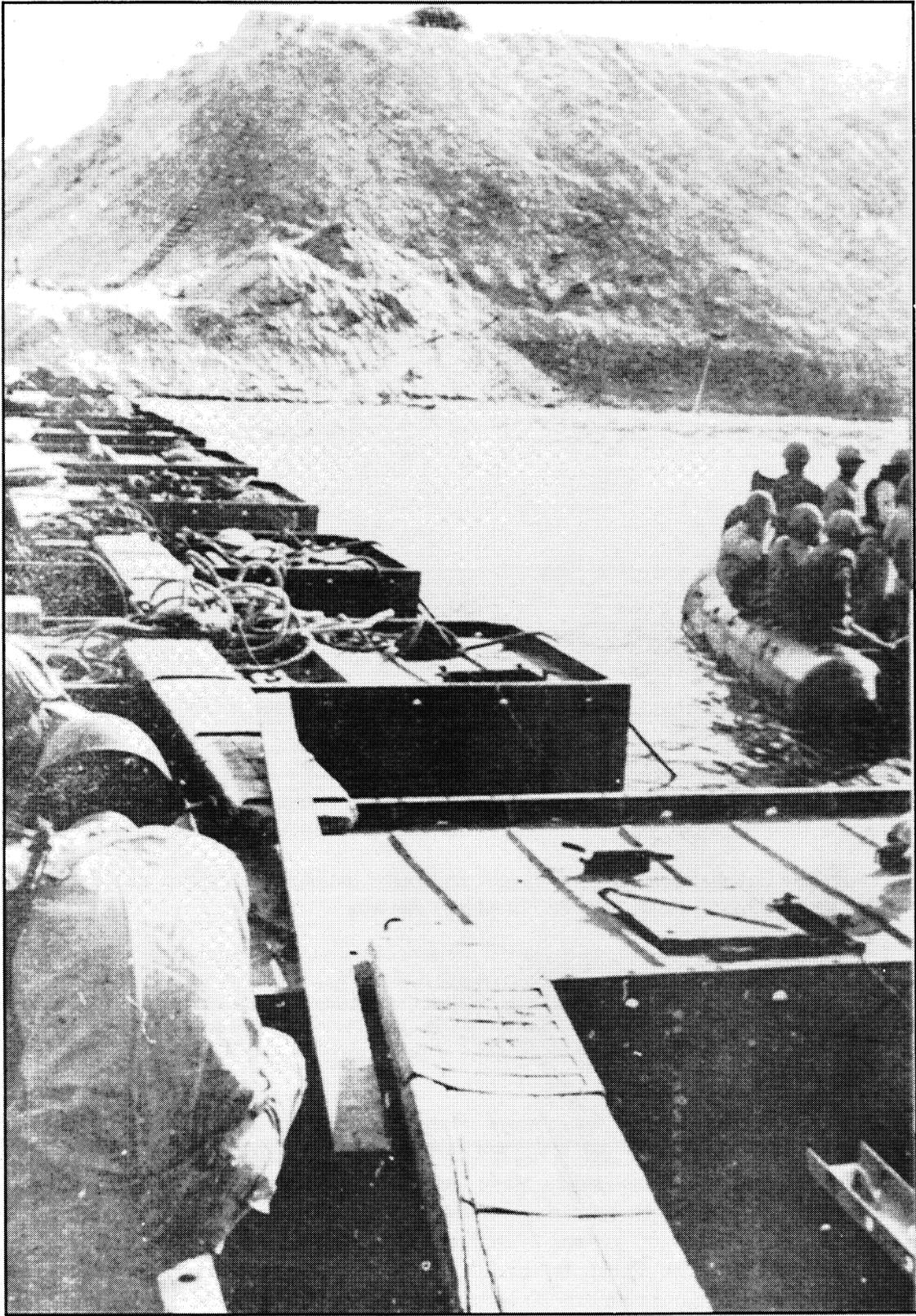
One of the breaches in the Israeli rampart as seen from the Egyptian side of the canal

The bridges and ferries together allowed the Egyptians to transport heavy equipment to the east bank at a pace faster than that anticipated by the Israelis before the war. Ten hours into the operation, the first tanks began crossing under the cover of darkness to reinforce the bridgeheads.

All these Egyptian achievements caught the Israelis completely off guard. Israeli reactions varied. Prime Minister Golda Meir described hers this way:

The shock wasn't only over the way that the war started, but also the fact that [a] number of our basic assumptions were proved wrong: the low probability of an attack in October, the certainty that we would get sufficient warning before any attack took place and the belief that we would be able to prevent the Egyptians from crossing the Suez Canal. The circumstance could not possibly have been worse. In the first two or three days of the war, only a thin line of brave young men stood between us and disaster.<sup>48</sup>

Defense Minister Moshe Dayan noted wryly, "the Egyptian and Syrian attack on Yom Kippur came as a surprise, though it was not unexpected."<sup>49</sup> Regular officers were as hard hit by the surprise as the political leaders. Major General Avraham Adan, commander of the 162d Armored (Reserve) Division earmarked for the Sinai, left his morning meeting with Elazar puzzled by the prospect of war and even skeptical of its outbreak that evening: "That the Egyptians and Syrians would dare to launch a war against Israel seemed incredible. I couldn't believe that they were unaware that the Israel Defense Forces were far superior to theirs, and they would be risking a painful defeat."<sup>50</sup> Such Israeli reactions were widespread.



*The Heroism of the Egyptian Soldier*

Egyptians crossing the canal