

OPERATION CAST LEAD

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Several months have passed since the end of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, and many Israelis are still not aware of what really happened there. For lack of basic facts, we are forced to accept unconditionally the positions of the official bodies, which assure us that in spite of any doubts, the IDF's conduct was flawless and public accountability is uncalled for. This publication includes the testimonies of around thirty combatants who took part in the operation in early 2009. The testimonies that appear here were gathered over the past few months from soldiers who served in all sectors of the operation. The majority of the soldiers who spoke with us are still serving in their regular military units and turned to us in deep distress at the moral deterioration of the IDF. Although this publication does not claim to provide a broad, comprehensive review of all the soldiers and the units who carried out the operation, these narratives are enough to bring into question the credibility of the official IDF versions.

There are many significant gaps between the testimonies we gathered. These testimonies describe use of the 'Neighbor Procedure' and of white phosphorus ammunition in densely inhabited neighborhoods, massive destruction of buildings unrelated to any direct threat to Israeli forces, and permissive rules of engagement that led to the killing of innocents. We also hear from the soldiers about the general atmosphere that accompanied the fighting, and of harsh statements made by junior and senior officers that attest to the ongoing moral deterioration of the society and the army. During the operation, the military rabbinate made its own contribution to these expressions when it introduced controversial religious and political interpretation under the auspices of the IDF and with its blessing.

Although certain features characterized this operation as a whole, significant differences can be found among the various geographic areas and units. Such variation is also addressed in this publication.

In the past few months, the IDF spokesperson has gone to great lengths to prove that if there were any moral problems with the war at all, they were merely on the level of the 'delinquent soldier,' rather than a widespread, systemic issue. The stories of this publication prove that we are not dealing with the failures of individual soldiers, and attest instead to failures in the application of values primarily on a systemic level. The IDF's depiction of such phenomena as 'rotten apple' soldiers is a tactic used to place the responsibility solely on individual soldiers on the ground and to evade taking responsibility for the system's serious value and command failures. The testimonies of the soldiers in this collection expose that the massive and unprecedented blow to the infrastructure and civilians of the Gaza strip were a direct result of IDF policy, and especially of the rules of engagement, and a

cultivation of the notion among soldiers that the reality of war requires them to shoot and not to ask questions.

This collection of testimonies offers a brief glance at Operation Cast Lead, and what occurred during the operation at the hands of the IDF on behalf of Israeli society. We believe that the existence of a moral society clearly requires a profound, honest discussion, of which the voice of soldiers on the ground is an inseparable part.

That this voice was missing from public discourse around the fighting in Gaza obliged us to hasten publication of these testimonies. Because of time pressure and the complex process of verifying the testimonies, we are not able to publish here all the materials in our possession. The testimonies in this book are categorized by subject and appear in the exact language of the soldier speaking. Military terminology is explained in parentheses.

Those who break their silence in this publication describe in their testimonies how actions defined as anomalous yesterday become the norms of tomorrow, and how the emissaries of Israeli society continue, along with entire the military system, to slide together down the moral slippery slope. This is an urgent call to Israeli society and its leaders to sober up and investigate anew the results of our actions.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our many volunteers and supporters who enabled the publication of this booklet on such short notice. Without their extensive assistance and support, this publication would not have reached your hands.

TESTIMONY 1 - HUMAN SHEILD

It was the first week of the war, fighting was intense, there were explosive charges to expose, tunnels in open spaces and armed men inside houses. Combat was slow and basically a very small area was occupied. Every unit, every force had a small designated area of responsibility several dozen houses only, which they had to take over, and that took a whole week. That is combat and it took a whole week. They really moved slowly. Close in on each house. The method used has a new name now – no longer 'neighbor procedure.' Now people are called 'Johnnie.' They're Palestinian civilians, and they're called Johnnies and there were civilians there who stayed in spite of the flyers the army distributed before it went in. Most people did leave, but some civilians stayed to watch over the houses. Perhaps they had nowhere else to go. Later we saw people there who could not walk, some simply stayed to keep watch. To every house we close in on, we send the neighbor in, 'the Johnnie,' and if there are armed men inside, we start, like working the 'pressure cooker' in the West Bank.

Every unit is familiar with a different kind of 'pressure cooker' practice. What do you mean by it?

I'm not sure either about the 'pressure cooker' procedures there, they could be different. Essentially the point was to get them out alive, go in, to catch the armed men. There weren't many encounters. Just a few. In one case, our men tried to get them to come out, then they opened fire, fired some anti-tank missiles at the house and at some point brought in a D-9, bulldozer, and combat helicopters. There were three armed men inside. The helicopters fired anti-tank missiles and again the neighbor was sent in. At first he told them that nothing had happened to them yet, they were still in there. Again helicopters were summoned and fired, I don't know at what stage of escalation (in the use of force). The neighbor was sent in once again. He said that two were dead and one was still alive, so a D-9 was brought in and started demolishing the house over him until the neighbor went in, the last armed man came out and was caught and passed on to the Shabak... The commanders tell what they saw and make sure we know how things work on the inside. They also talked about things that bothered them. They said that civilians were used to a greater extent than just sending them into houses. For example, some of them were made to smash walls with 5 kilo sledgehammers. There was a wall around a yard where the force didn't want to use the gate, it needed an alternative opening for fear of booby-traps or any other device. So the "Johnnies" themselves were required to bang open another hole with a sledgehammer. Talking of such things, by the way, there was a story published by Amira Hass in Haaretz daily newspaper, about Jebalya where a

guy tells exactly the same thing. It's the guy who was sent. I saw him afterwards, the guy who was made to go into that house three times. He also told us about being given sledgehammers to break walls.

So you say that, from your own experience, there's truth in these publications.

Yes. It was ludicrous to read it and then hear the response of the army spokesperson that the matter was investigated and there are no testimonies on the ground and that the Israeli army is a moral army. It raises doubts about the army spokesperson's responses in general when you know for a fact that these things actually did take place... Sometimes the force would enter while placing rifle barrels on a civilian's shoulder, advancing into a house and using him as a human shield. Commanders said these were the instructions and we had to do it... Anyway, at the concluding debriefing, he (the unit commander) said he didn't know about these things, and the guys, commanders who had been there the first week, said they saw civilians being assigned to break walls and enter with rifle barrels on their shoulders. He said he didn't know this and would look into it. I think nothing substantial had been done about it, I'm also in touch with one of the officers there at present and I don't know if an investigation was made and nothing was found or that nothing was cleared up. Several weeks later, the story came out in the paper about these exact incidents, where they were given sledgehammers to break walls, in our area, this I can say with certainty.

TESTIMONY 2 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

What in fact happened was that we were on the road between Karni and Netzarim, the old route. We were there for six, seven days, more or less. A week, almost. We went in.

What was the purpose?

We were not told. I don't know what the objective of the war was. Different things were said, aimed more at what needs to be done concretely – they were said in retrospect, that's how I feel.

Were you not told what the objective was, at your briefing?

No way, what do you mean? The same way the broader Israeli public was not informed. Our specific goal was to fragment the Gaza Strip. This was the

responsibility of our brigade. Fragmentation was carried out just like in the good old days of Gush Katif prior to the disengagement. Fragmentation is total, absolute – complete separation of the northern Gaza Strip, the north-central section, from the south-central part of the Strip. A separation of Gaza City from the refugee camps and the prevention of weapons, ammunition and reinforcements from reaching Gaza City, which – at the time – I think the army planned to occupy. In fact this did not take place. It was the responsibility of our battalion. We were under command of Armored Corps Brigade ***... We went in, replaced the Rotem Battalion (Giv'ati Infantry Brigade). We were briefed on the method, the reserves actually replacing the regulars so that the latter would continue occupying or taking charge of the city, that's already a terminology issue. So our greatest fear was that we were defensive rather than on the offensive. The regulars were more engaged in an offensive because they're the ones who came and charged, they were the first to break through the front line, they kept advancing further and further towards the designated targets and we actually replaced them and were supposed to control the area and deepen our hold of it, as the army calls it. In actual fact this is done by means of defense posts: residential buildings situated at strategic locations are taken over, whether at high points, or overlooking roads or whatever. Every such house is held by a force, according to the size of the building and the needs at hand. It may be a platoon, a squadron, a company, a battalion – not the whole battalion, of course, just battalion headquarters and some more men, or just the headquarters staff... We're sitting in a building that was a brick or marble workshop belonging to a pretty respectable-looking man. Obviously Hamas, from the pictures and inscriptions we found there. We actually created a pretty big setup there that was gradually reduced as time went by, control was intended to intensify inward, paradoxically meaning towards Israel. We come in from the north-west and wanted to deepen our control towards Israel, in the north-east. Towards Hoovers Road, as it is called, the border with Israel. This was the method: we did not actually see an enemy, nor civilians – we saw absolutely no one. But we were not being used in the field.

Were the buildings empty?

We came in at night, but the next morning we saw a ruined house with holes blasted through the walls to make a passage, but we also saw a whole wing of the building simply destroyed.

What did you see around you, the neighborhood, what was its condition? What went on there?

The neighborhood – first of all we saw lots of destroyed houses. This does not mean there were no houses still standing. There were, but next to them were

ruins, and with time more and more ruins, and even the houses still standing, most of them kept getting shelled here and there. The explanation we got was that when the regular soldiers went in, they knew which houses were belonged to Hamas activists and which did not. A Hamas activist's house usually got shelled once or twice just to make sure...

Tank shells?

Yes. I don't know which kind, and I wasn't there. The reasoning was that Hamas houses posed much more of a threat because of potential booby-trapping, tunnels, combinations thereof, etc. That is why they were shelled, to prevent a whole arena of explosive charges, mortars and the like.

The idea is that because we know in advance that a house belongs to a Hamas activist, we blow it up to make sure there are no explosive charges.

We have to differentiate here between blasting a house and shelling it, let's put it this way. Blasting a house is blowing it up in the air. This is something that a tank shell just cannot do, you'd need explosives for that, all kinds of units dealing with explosives do this. And they did. You fire some shells, and whether intentionally or not, a whole wing is taken down. A whole wing of a house was tipped on its side. When morning came, we saw the destruction of the house and began to realize where we were, somewhat. We saw the Zaytoun neighborhood in front of us, where Giv'ati (infantry brigade) had already begun to engage, and the destruction of the neighborhood we were in. One must constantly keep in mind that we were under enormous threat. All possible dangers – whether anti-tank fire, light arms fire, explosive charges, kidnapping, mortar shells – any scenario was definitely possible. Luckily, but for a few exceptions we didn't witness or experience such things ourselves.

About shelling the activists, when you were briefed which house to destroy and which not to, who did the briefing and when?

Hard to tell, but I think it was my talking with Giv'ati guys when we replaced them there and they explained that this was the procedure. It's hard to say whether this was an authorized source or not. But this repeated itself later in rumors. However I can't tell you that someone was officially authorized to say this: an intelligence officer, battalion commander or someone else. What I can say is that it was already mentioned in the preliminary briefing, that the idea of demolishing houses or razing the neighborhood is twofold: on the one hand there's the operational necessity, that's what we heard all the time. I recall having constantly

heard this over our radio. The idea that we are not to jeopardize Israeli soldiers by entering a house where we don't know what's in it, or entering areas with the risk of explosive charges, and therefore from experience that many of the houses, whether every second or fifth house, various things were said – anyway a significant part of the houses were booby-trapped, some of them had tunnels, others mortars fired by remote control, such stuff, those were things we saw. That was one reason to demolish a house, and that could entail a more massive shelling.

To such an extent that a whole wing would collapse?

Worse. Or that it's a house that a D-9 bulldozer would take care of, and if not – possibly artillery and even Corps of Engineers, in other words blast it to high heaven. If not, it could be shelled, but more thoroughly... So the first reason, as I said, was to protect our forces, let's put it that way, aiming to risk our men as little as possible. We'd demolish suspect houses – that was one thing. The other reason was already brought up at the preliminary briefing at Tze'elim, in fact: part of the concept of razing was what the Israeli army calls 'the day after' consideration. Obviously this campaign would end at some point, clearly there was no intention to come back and take over the Gaza Strip, it was obvious we'd leave eventually. The question was in what condition we'd leave the area, whether more exposed, a state that would afford us better firing and observation conditions, and far greater control. This was the principle behind all that razing, namely razing for our benefit.

What was the exact wording at the preliminary briefing?

"The day after." Razing was done with the day after our leaving in mind, that we would want this ability, outright, this field of vision and range of fire. The expression "the day after" was repeated time and again, even as we were still in action.

When you were on the ground, did you get to demolish houses? Order D-9s and direct them?

Sure, these things actually took place, for two reasons. These two lines of destruction existed in fact, not just planned.

But you went in behind the regulars, the neighborhood was already empty. The regulars had already left, and you were actually taking over in a 'straw

widow' procedure.

Not precise. The regulars began what the army calls offensive combat. They fragmented my area, that's what I know. They fragmented the Gaza Strip and deepened control a bit, and took over centrally located houses and did not control the entire area. To that end deeper control was needed. They did not reach all the houses that we did, we deepened control over the area, took over more houses, climbed ranges, hills in the area took over new houses and that split the force.

During the week you were inside, you were still continuing demolitions, I mean continuing to receive intelligence information about all suspect houses.

Sure. And also demolishing as part of the concept of our own security, for if it's an orange grove, there could be fear of sniping from inside, so the orchard would be razed for our own safety, not to leave a piece of ground over which we do not have total control, to avoid its threatening us, and also with the future in mind.

Can you estimate how many houses? Many, a few?

Not sure. I can say that as someone who stood guard duty at posts like any other guard posts, the soldier has a certain area over which he is supposed to keep watch. Quite often the boundaries of such areas were made unclear, for as we know them, the boundaries are from one house to another, so if one of the houses was no longer standing you had to consider another house, which we also didn't see later. The boundaries were made unclear by the house demolitions, I mean house demolition continued. That's for sure.

During the week you were inside, you would still be shelling houses with explosive charges, or would you demolish them with D-9s or would the Corps of Engineers be working on them?

All of the above, I think.

TESTIMONY 3 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Something happened with a commander of mine who's a good guy and I think he didn't violate the orders in this case. We entered a yard and out of sheer fear the family was waiting in an exposed spot - a father, grandfather, young mother and babies. As we were coming in, the commander was firing a volley, and mistakenly killed an innocent.

What exactly happened?

We got to the house. It was surrounded by a yard, a fence. After the gate is broken in, he goes in with live fire. Several bullets, not a full burst.

And then what happens?

We go in, there's a break-in and search squad. Several stories to the building. We didn't enter every room with live fire, but dry.

And the family?

The family was hiding from the bombings. They were under the stairs and that happened to be just in front of the door and when he went in and fired, he didn't see who he was firing at. So he happened to kill an elderly guy.

You followed him and what did you see?

The house itself was empty. We broke tiles and created shooting positions. The family must have been chased out of the yard – I don't know. I didn't notice. The dead body remained.

He died on the spot?

I don't know. When I think back, it really seems insane that I don't know. It hurts to admit it, but... not that I didn't care. I did keep this in my mind and intended to write the battalion commander about it but I just didn't have the time. Too bad I didn't, come to think of it.

What did you intend to write?

That things are happening in his battalion of which he has no idea. Without actually naming anyone. I'm against informing on people. But if I look at it from the side, there are people who deserve to go to jail.

You don't remember the sight of the family.

From the grandfather down to the grandchildren. They hid and must have been ordered to go away. We didn't stay in that house. We moved on a few hours later.

TESTIMONY 4 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT & HOME OCCUPATION

After the Second Lebanon War the army began to prepare to enter Gaza, at least as far as I know. We had special maneuvers for such an operation twice, a battalion maneuver according to previous planning. The battalion was assigned to separate Rafah and Khan Yunis, isolate Rafah so that another force would be able to search Rafah and locate tunnels. I was called up on Sunday.

As soon as the ground offensive began.

Yes. The ground offensive started Saturday night. We reported on Sunday, we had already trained... Finally what we did was to enter Friday night, which was already two weeks after getting called up, as replacements for the Golani (infantry brigade) company's positions. Like us, they had been under command of a regular tank brigade. Their brigade commander was commander of the area and we were under his command... We took over the houses that Golani had taken, one by one. I didn't hear in our battalion of anyone who shifted position in the short time we were there. I think that Golani too stayed in the same positions or houses. I think that tanks did shift, but not too much.

You entered a house – what did this look like? What condition was the house in?

Essentially all the maneuvers we had in recent years were to execute 'dry' entry, 'wet' entry, and after we were deployed and we began to get lessons learned from the fighting in Gaza, we realized there's no such thing as a 'dry' entry. All entries were 'wet,' depending on the situation, naturally. There was no such thing any more as a, 'dry' entry.

So how does 'wet' entry work?

Missiles, tank fire, machine gun fire into the house, grenades. Shoot as we enter a room. The idea was that when we enter a house, no one there could fire at us.

Naturally by combat reasoning we would not take a house that the Hamas would expect us to take, for it would be highly likely for the Hamas to booby-trap it.

So 'wet' entry means closing in on the house and firing Lau missiles?

Yes. RPG, LAU. That's what we were prepared for. In fact, when we arrived at a house, it was intact, no one had fired at it, no one fired at Golani when they went in, they had no one to fire at. Just like the houses I saw where we'd been, which had not been fired at, and nothing was broken. No walls were broken to get in. The men must have taken the house 'dry.'

What was the state of the house, its contents?

We were in a house with very little furniture. There were some plastic chairs and mattresses and the bedroom contained a bed, a closet and a kind of commode. I think Golani had searched the closet, taken it apart and thrown the clothes out to search, to make sure there was no explosive charge inside.

You didn't see any destruction beyond that? Just a normal military search.

Yes, there was no intentional destruction beyond the normal military search. Very little. Only some cooking utensils were in the kitchen, a refrigerator, gas stove, all that. There was a bowl with pitta bread that people had prepared before they ran out and no one had touched the bread, no one ate it, neither Golani, nor we. According to combat logic, you don't eat anything that might contain some sort of poison. And they really didn't touch it. We used their mattresses and blankets for sitting and sleeping. As for other houses where guys from my company stayed, one house was still only at the skeletal stage so nothing there was destroyed, there was no equipment inside. Another house, if I understood correctly, I am not sure, but that's what I was told and I believe it – there were civilians held up in their own home, true to the army's normal procedure, when they're caught, cleared and confirmed that they're not carrying any weapons or explosives. When we were still preparing we were told this would include women and the elderly. We'd have to clear them, meaning they have to lift their garments, take off whatever was necessary, including women, including unveiling themselves, because some Hamas men dress as women and there are also women suicide bombers. That's procedure. Anyway, in the second or third house the company took there were four people, the owner's family. We came there to take food and I saw the house. It was elegantly furnished and nicely built. It too was being looked after the way we did in ours. Men did not vandalize it intentionally. They made feasible military use of it only.

TESTIMONY 5 - ATMOSPHERE

What bothered you most about this operation?

Bothered me? Many things. Firstly, all that destruction. All that fire at innocents. This shock of realizing with whom I'm in this together. My mates, really, and that's how they're behaving. It was simply amazing. Inconceivable. The price of all the draft dodging. You have all the radical lefties who don't enlist for some reason or another, or stay close to home, and this is what your combat units look like.

What disappointed you in the guys who were there with you? They're still your pals.

They're my pals, because there's no other way, I have to be friends with them. I don't have much choice. I live with them. But the hatred, and the joy of killing, no... "I killed a terrorist, whoa... We blew his head off..."

So the atmosphere there was laid back, no pressure, no reservations? There was nothing to hold the men back?

When your company commander and battalion commander tell you, "Go on, fire!" the soldiers will not hold back. They are waiting for this day, the fun of shooting and feeling all that power in your hands.

You were feeling it?

The way you feel with your finger on the trigger, where in one slight pull you can take down half a building. So yes, you feel it.

So you come back very disappointed?

Very. But I didn't have any other expectations. I don't kid myself. It's your army, after all. At the end of the day it's 60 nineteen-twenty year olds for whom vulgarity and violence is a way of life. It's not... There's nothing to hold you back. I wasn't too surprised.

TESTIMONY 6 - BOMBARDMENT

The 120mm Mortar (a type of mortar shell fired by the IDF in Gaza) is a relatively new system which Giv'ati does not yet possess.

What was the old one like?

The old one had wheels to turn. It takes half an hour to get a shell out. In the new system the computer does the whole calibration process. I have a map, an aerial photo. A code map. I am given a reference point. I click it into the computer. It's a touch screen. I have a keyboard. I click the reference point. It shows me where it is on the map. I press, the mortar is aimed and my subordinate simply fires.

How accurate is it?

Highly accurate. 95-100%.

What's a hit?

I don't remember the hit radius, if it's 30m over 50m, or 50m over 75m for two bombs. Don't recall it.

Do you remember what the killing or wounding ranges are of this thing?

Several dozen meters. It's a very targeted thing. There's chances of shrapnel but...

The question is what you mean by targeted.

If it hits it can create a hole the size of a dish and scatter shrapnel all around.

What are the targets?

Most of the time, they were open spaces. Once I was allowed to fire and I realized it was really inside a neighborhood. Houses. Then I finally understood. Most of the time we were firing at launcher crews in open spaces, but it didn't take much to aim at schools, hospitals and such. So I see I'm firing literally into a built-up area. I don't know to what degree it was still inhabited because the army made considerable attempts to get people to leave, but I understand that...

Did you hesitate while pulling the trigger, or did you ask again?

I don't know about hesitating... It feels terrible that we fired there. But we'd always get a phone call about the results of our hits. We were not told we had killed innocents, but we were told we hit three launcher crews. I don't know how many men are in each crew. But we killed the bad guys and the head of the Hamas high-arc [high - trajectory] ballistics section, so yes, you're proud of yourself and

your abilities. You feel like a Defense Force. We are hitting innocents and our artillery fire there was insane, but on the other hand you hear about shooting out of Gaza and you return fire immediately.

What's an insane amount of artillery?

Ten of our bombs for every one of theirs.

Every time they fire, you fire ten rounds at the same launch spot. Isn't one enough?

Scattering.

What do you mean?

They fall next to each other, that's also part of the calculation – two shells falling together expand the hit radius. Also, I suppose part of the consideration in both open and built up areas is the tunnels. The first shell hits the floor, the third might penetrate.

But what do you mean by scattering? Do you never fire a single shell alone?

No. About three at a time. It is, after all, a large grenade, and you need to launch several in order to hit.

And they don't all hit the same spot, is that the scattering effect?

Exactly.

... All the targets you fired at, was that strictly in response to their firing at Israel?

Or to bombard places before entry.

In general, they fire into Israel, their launch spot is located, you return fire, and usually into open spaces?

There were days we fired only into built-up areas, inside Gaza City itself.

How is open space defined?

According to what I saw on the map, no houses. Empty.

You see aerial photos?

We saw aerial photos only some of the time. The computers were updated. Part was on maps, part on aerial photos. I don't remember exactly.

... You said you do a 'safe area' check?

Yes.

What is that, a safe area?

It means our forces are not present in the area. Our computers are not really updated about every IDF action. So the check was made for us before we received our reference point.

So what is a safe area for our own forces?

300 meters under fire. Something like that. A scattering and a last bomb. Then the area is approachable.

Were such safe areas also considered for Palestinians, or was that not relevant?

Civilians? If it's open spaces, I suppose there were not many Palestinians at that time. As for identification of areas, that's already about the instructions they received to evacuate their homes.

So how much do you estimate you fired altogether?

Upwards of 620 shells. It's written somewhere in the briefing. We evaluated all our hits, all the good things and bad things as well as the number of shells fired.

All explosive?

Yes. I can send you pictures, some of them funny.

... When did you fire for softening the resistance?

Most of the time firing was for softening resistance I think. I don't know quite how to distinguish it. We simply received orders. If we hit terrorists, then I guess that was the purpose. But if we are told that IDF is supposed to go in at night – we take this to mean firing to soften resistance. But we are not told prior to opening fire each time.

TESTIMONY 7 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Before the first time we went in, the battalion commander had us all stand in formation on Friday evening and said: "We cannot surprise them with our timing, they know when. We cannot surprise them with our location, they know exactly where we're coming in. What we do have... is fire power." And in fact all that fire power, what with air force, artillery, armored corps and the quantity of infantry that went in, the awareness of each soldier going in is simply... a light finger on the trigger. You see something and you're not quite sure? You shoot.

Is this something you were told?

It's something that was said: he (the battalion commander) said it and at the moment I was quite sure of what he meant. I pretty much agreed with him. He said: "Not a hair will fall off a soldier of mine, and I am not willing to allow a soldier of mine to risk himself by hesitating. If you are not sure – shoot. If there is doubt then there is no doubt". We understood this and said that it's not because people wanted to kill, to collect hits or glory. It's because they wanted to preserve human lives at any cost. We all know, we're all living in this country and know that the soft belly is casualties in all of the wars, and they simply wanted to stick to this, completely. Let alone abduction procedure and such things, where the instruction was explicit – if you're not sure, kill. Fire power was insane. We went in and the booms were just mad. The minute we got to our starting line, we simply began to fire at suspect places. Also, it was still dark when we went in, we got there just before dawn. You see a house, a window, shoot at the window. You don't see a terrorist there? Fire at the window. It was real urban warfare. This is the difference between urban warfare and a limited confrontation. In urban warfare, anyone is your enemy. No innocents. It was simply urban warfare in every way. We went in there house after house, going around each other every time. 99% of the houses were empty.

You enter houses with live fire?

No. The instruction was to get everyone out of the house or concentrate them in one room. Announce it through loudspeakers. Give it a few minutes, and if the person is not out after 2-5 minutes, whoever is left inside is a dead man. Whoever comes out – assemble them outside or in one of the lower rooms, and then go upstairs with live fire. This was the instruction, and it was not always followed because often the houses were empty. So why waste ammunition? Just shooting for fun? Some people did but this was not always the case. Eventually there were no confrontations at all and people were disappointed and began to let off steam and simply shoot. In general people (Palestinians) came downstairs, we'd

order them to go over there, point in some direction and tell them to go there. They'd protest, 'But this is our home. We have nowhere to go,' and we... These were the orders, if not on the battalion level, then from the brigade or a general army instruction. I don't know. But it's not something the platoon or company commander decided on the spot. It was obvious when we went in that the people are not allowed to stay inside the houses. We directed them towards a certain area hoping they wouldn't be hit there. In our designated area we directed them southwards in the Gaza Strip towards where our forces were not present. We sent them south. We did not abuse them. But it hurts when five mothers, an old woman and little children look at you and the woman says "I have nowhere to go" and there's nothing you can do. It has to happen. You toughen up. You look her in the eye and say: "Over there." And they walk away. As soon as someone comes out, you announce that these are innocents moving south and usually it also happens in daytime, not nighttime. The houses are taken over and we set ourselves inside according to plan.

TESTIMONY 8 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT & USE OF WHITE PHOSPHORUS

What are the instructions, the objective, the goal – when you go in? Who briefs you, the battalion commander? The brigade commander?

The company commander, battalion commander and brigade commander. The higher up the ranks you go, the more general it becomes. Except for the company commander – we were two platoons, and another company commander of a platoon that belongs to an infantry company – no one was clear on what we were going to be doing there.

And the rules of engagement?

If we detect anything that should not be there – we shoot. We're told the air force distributed flyers telling everyone to go to Gaza City. If beyond this line any people are detected – they are not supposed to be there. I heard stories from other crews who shot at people two kilometers away. I remember I would change places with the gunman and take a look. You see people more or less running their life routine, taking a walk, stuff like that. Definitely not terrorists. I hear from other crews that they fired at people there. Tried to kill them. The younger guys,

eager to raise their score. They seem to think it's cool to wield such power with no one wanting to rein them in. They gave permission to open fire.

You had it, too, was it a general permission to open fire?

Within the boundaries of our designated area.

It's a city, you know. Flyers were distributed, but people are bound to be on the move, obviously there would be civilian traffic. It's not a military area. People live there. No one addressed this in briefings? Commanders, anyone? No distinction was to be made between people and civilians, such as would escape in your directions? There are plenty of possible scenarios.

That's right. No special mention was made of innocents.

You said that from the moment he detected the vehicle with insurgents (the interviewer is referring to identification and initial fire of another tank that the witness described earlier in his testimony), the first shell was fired and you didn't hold your fire after that. What does that mean?

For most of this operation we were using the sighting devices we had inside the tank within our designated area as it was defined for us, and firing machine guns, cannons, whatever we had.

Firing at what?

Everything: houses – if the deputy battalion commander thought a house looked suspect, we'd blow it away. If the infantrymen didn't like the looks of that house – we'd shoot. Everything. We fired... This wasn't non-stop. Our ammo supply was not endless.

You were told that eventually the forces would be combined, infantry would come from here and then everyone would be helping out to level everything ahead?

It was less this way. I occupy a certain area and 'cleanse' it, take up positions and go out at night into the neighborhood you occupied to take over houses and various targeted sites you demolished.

You began to speak about ammo quantity?

Our tank fired. Shall I tell you how much?

Yes, to give us an idea.

35 crates of machine gun rounds, something like that. 40 shells, 30 shells, two crates of heavy machine gun rounds, 20 mortar rounds. I know of other crews who even fired white phosphorus.

You have that in your supply?

Yes. Our battalion mortars were also using phosphorus. I know of an officer's tank that fired phosphorus, too.

You're speaking in general, try to be specific. A 60 mm. mortar is not precise at all.

That's right. The ones that were used were aimed at places we wanted to cleanse, gardens and such. Where we were certain no one was at the time. I know there are storage structures there and that kind of stuff, at a range of 200-300 meters. This range is more or less precise.

What was the story of using white phosphorus mortar shells?

The company commander gives the mortar platoon commander a target and orders him to fire.

What was there, do you know?

A target. They define targets. I can't really say what there was. Sometimes you'd hear on radio "Permitted, phosphorus in the air." That's it. I don't recall if this was ever confirmed by the company commander, but I know of an officer that also fired without requesting permission.

Why fire phosphorus?

Because it's fun. Cool.

Professionally do you have phosphorus for use against such threats?

I don't know what it's used for. I was just talking about this yesterday. I don't understand what it's even doing in our supplies if we're not supposed to use such ammo. It's ridiculous.

TESTIMONY 9 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT & HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

From the onset, he and the brigade commander and other officers made it very clear to us that any movement must entail gunfire.

No matter what kind of movement.

You don't need to be shot at. Suffice it that you suspect there's movement, and this was before we entered our own designated area. I don't remember if the brigade commander said this or someone else. I'm not sure: no one is supposed to be there, if you see any signs of movement at all, you shoot. These, essentially, were the rules of engagement. Shoot if you like. If you're afraid, or you see someone, shoot.

Even if there's no danger?

That's the meaning of this, yes. You don't only shoot when threatened. The assumption is that you constantly feel threatened, so anything there threatens you, and you shoot. No one actually said "shoot regardless" or "shoot anything that moves." But we were not ordered to open fire only if there was real threat.

Did you feel threatened coming in?

Yes. We got alerts the whole time. The sense of threat was literally being built up in us. I can say this about ourselves, we were very frightened. In actual fact there was no reason to be, but we felt threatened. Not that anything happened to justify this, but from the outset, we entered Gaza in fear. It's important to reiterate that as reservists, we want to get back home as safely as possible. It's different. Listen, I have been a regular. It's a different kind of feeling. You're afraid even to get into a tank on maneuvers. You don't want to get hurt, you don't want anything to happen to you. Consequently we're also more cautious with opening fire, we don't want to start off something that would get us stuck there. In general reservists are more careful, they don't run unnecessary risks. As for the rules of engagement, we did not get instructions to shoot at anything that moved, but we were generally instructed: if you feel threatened, shoot. They kept repeating to us that this is war and in war opening fire is not restricted.

... After getting in positions, were you watching the houses all day or at night?

We watched them all the time.

You reported any suspect movement?

There was nothing there. Ghost towns. Except for some livestock, nothing moved. One tank of our company had a run-in, identified an anti-tank missile that was about to be fired at it, so it fired and that was that. Rumors ran that our tank was shelled by a mortar. Three hours later someone said to us, "Didn't you hear you'd been fired at?" We had no idea we were fired at. Alerts kept coming in all the time about a woman suicide bomber about to reach us in twenty minutes. None of these alerts ever materialized.

How was she going to reach you?

We got no information on that on radio, they just told us which direction she was supposed to come from and to keep on the lookout in that direction. Beyond that, we didn't hear much.

She was supposed to come on foot?

Yes. The alert was "Woman suicide bomber on her way to the position." Something along that line, not too many details. "Within an hour or two." We kept getting alerts about a sniper in our area, about a group of five observed inside a house that could be an anti-tank missile crew. We constantly got all these alerts and none of them materialized as far as our company was concerned. That does not mean they were empty alerts. The rest of the time we sat in the tank and were on lookout and ambushes, and kept seeing fire all around us, constant artillery fire, navy, air force, and regular units that were activated continuing from where we had been situated.

Our designated area was so narrow because beyond those 500 meters, Israeli army units were in action, paratroopers and battalion ***, and we were not allowed to fire outside our area. Occasionally another area was opened to us. We heard that company L opened fire a lot, there were rumors around the battalion, can't tell you how true they were, but rumor had it that they had expended large amounts of ammo together with the infantrymen. Beyond these rumors I don't know what happened or didn't.

I can only talk about what our company did which is not much... There were really absurd incidents during our stay there. One day we sat and had our afternoon coffee. Suddenly the battalion commander's tank, five meters away from us, fired a shell into a building. Why did he shoot? I don't know why. Perhaps he received an alert, maybe not. I wasn't on radio. It looked groundless to me, more of a "wakeup call" for the company. There were cases where a terrorist was suspected to be hanging around the tanks. I think that someone simply came out of one of the tanks and a lookout detected him and thought this was a terrorist

climbing onto a tank, so the whole area was alerted and there was this moment of hysteria, panic, and the next day an area near the battalion headquarters was razed, and a yard that had been there – just disappeared. The D-9 expanded the position. Such things happened all the time, but I can't testify about this beyond my own personal recollection.

Were there house demolitions in your area?

All the time. Houses were demolished everywhere. You see clearly that these houses had been fired at with tremendous power. We didn't see a single house that remained intact, beginning with such scenes as you saw photographed – a house totally shattered or a house with a huge hole in it or many bullet hits on it. We didn't see a single house that was not hit. The entire infrastructure, tracks, fields, roads – was in total ruin. The D-9 had gone over everything, building up the tank positions and preparing the routes. Nothing much was left in our designated area. It looked awful, like in those World War II films where nothing remained. A totally destroyed city. The few houses that were still inhabitable were taken by the army. The less a house was damaged, all the more chance that it would be entered by soldiers to spend the day or night. As I said, there were lots of abandoned, miserable animals.

During your week inside the tank position were there still D-9s demolishing houses around and entering neighborhoods across from you?

All the time. Definitely. During the week we were there, almost daily, armored infantry would go into a house, this was not D-9s. It was armored infantry since they suspected the houses to be booby-trapped – they blasted the houses. They would open a hole in order to enter the house not through the regular entry door. There were constant blasts, and the D-9s would expand the tank positions and routes. Corps of Engineers was engaged there nonstop, with houses containing no one. It was funny because at some point someone said – I don't quite remember who, I think our deputy commander or the company commander himself – that our company is supposed to be more active, assigned to do more. So, really, houses were entered where no one was present, and anyway those houses were monitored and I, personally, never saw anyone in there, perhaps the commanders did find a reason to enter them. I didn't see the reason to enter houses in an empty area where we were monitoring the houses nonstop. Still houses were entered and damage was done to property, for we only saw property, not one person. No obvious reason whatsoever. Perhaps they thought there were weapons inside. I didn't see any reason for this activity, but it was ongoing, all the time.

TESTIMONY 10 - BRIEFINGS

What are you told at the briefings before entering?

That's a complex question. In official, formal briefings, there was no talk about what we were about to do. We didn't know what we were going to do. Until the evening before our entry into the Gaza Strip, we didn't know what the action in our area would be like. But it's important to say that everyone who talked to us, whether our own brigade commander – who didn't take an integral part in the action, but joined because a battalion from his brigade did – or officers we somehow got to meet, all sounded extremely militant, used very fierce language.

What language was that?

Let's say that the general approach was 'we're going off to war' and I can swear I heard our brigade commander at least once, when sitting with us during maneuvers for a combatants' talk around the campfire at Tze'elim at night – he happened to join us and we asked him what was going on in Gaza and what was to be expected, stuff like that, and he went so far as to say this was war and in war as in war, no consideration of civilians was to be taken. You shoot anyone you see. I'm paraphrasing here, not literally quoting, but the gist of the matter was very clear.

How did people take this?

Look, we're a pretty old company. We're a founding battalion, all of us are 33 years old, and we took this very skeptically, a bit fearful of the army's approach. I know for myself, I don't know what every single guy that night felt about it. I know personally that this pretty much disgusted me. There was a clear feeling, and this was repeated whenever others spoke to us, that no humanitarian consideration played any role in the army at present. The goal was to carry out an operation with the least possible casualties for the army, without its even asking itself what the price would be for the other side. This was the thrust of things that we heard from more than one officer.

What officers?

Can't tell you. Who spoke to us? Except for our own brigade commander – who's a regular officer – there were officers from that base. I don't remember who talked to us, I can't name their official title, I really don't remember.

In official talks this tone was repeated?

There weren't too many official talks. We were training most of the time. A part of the company perhaps did have official talks, but we didn't attend too many of those. In general, we were in maneuvers and couldn't get too many details about our unit's activity. So we didn't talk to any intelligence NCO or senior officer, at least not our company, except for officers from our own battalion: our own battalion commander, our own brigade commander. Beyond that, we didn't run into too many senior officers. When our brigade commander spoke, the tone was very obvious.

You mentioned you had a talk with the brigade commander.

Yes. Improvised.

Where was this?

At Tze'elim (training base).

You were conducting maneuvers on how it was all going to look inside (the Strip)?

Yes. Getting used to the appearance of a protective secondary position. The tanks are stationed there after practice, it's night, the tanks are parked around the position and we organize our tent where we eat, and tank maneuvers – that's the operation staff. The rest all wait. So we happened to sit there around a campfire and the brigade commander joined us. He described to us exactly what was taking place in Gaza. Precisely.

What?

He described the incidents of friendly fire. I think this was a day after a tank fired at a Golani battalion commander. I don't recall the exact details. He explained what happened, why it happened, how it happened. He told us about some more incidents in the area, about an attempted abduction of a Golani (infantry) soldier and how he got out of that. He told us stories from the area and then questions came up on what we'd be doing there and what everyday life will be like. He said, "You will stay inside the tanks the whole time." We talked about practical matters, but the basic approach to war was very brutal, that was my impression. Perhaps others felt differently. He said something along the lines of "Don't let morality become an issue. That will come up later." He had this strange language: "Leave the nightmares and horrors that will come up for later, now just shoot." This was the spirit of things, more or less. Then we were in this city built up for practice in Tze'elim, we exercised there a bit and patrolled inside, where tanks cannot

enter. There was an officer with us, can't tell you what his duty was, who talked to us about lessons learned and conclusions drawn from the fighting in Gaza. That was being done the whole time, there were booklets coming out on this constantly. I don't know what was in them.

In this war?

During the first days of the campaign. It kept coming all the time. Whole booklets on lessons learned in the war on Gaza, and they were being constantly updated. So he (brigade commander) took us for a patrol to see what urban combat would look like in a tank, and there too, the basic approach, the lesson he tried to get across to us, was that there were no chances taken. If you face an area that is hidden by a building – you take down the building. Questions such as "who lives in that building" are not asked. Whatever gets in your way, you do everything to prevent its getting in your way, regardless of the humanitarian implications of such an action. This was the spirit of things with anyone we happened to talk to. Let's say that the issue of 'purity of arms' did not come up at all in these talks.

TESTIMONY 11 - USE OF WHITE PHOSPHORUS & RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Then we went back north, about 500 meters from the fence, and stayed there all night as look-outs. We saw nothing special. The next day we got back to base to get new mission orders and were once again assigned to a force from Battalion *** with whom we went in. We walked with them on the beach and saw all the white phosphorus bombs I've told you about, we saw glazing on the sand.

Can you describe it? What did you see?

You're walking along the sand and hear this crunch of something being crushed. We looked down and saw what looked like the shards of thousands of broken glass bottles.

What color did it have?

A dirty brown.

Did you see remains of this elsewhere nearby?

There was an area of about 200-300 square meters of glazed sand like that. We understood this resulted from white phosphorus, and it was upsetting.

Why?

Because in training you learn that white phosphorus is not used, and you're taught that it's not humane. You watch films and see what it does to people who are hit, and you say, "There, we're doing it too." That's not what I expected to see. Until that moment I had thought I belonged to the most humane army in the world, I knew that even in the West Bank, when we go into a neighborhood, we do it quietly so that people won't see us, but also in order not to disturb them, no less. We're not... Even when Molotov cocktails were thrown at us in the West Bank, we wouldn't shoot, the rules are very explicit. If your own life is at risk, you shoot. But under no other circumstances. Practically speaking, how often are you really in a life-threatening situation in the West Bank? Until that moment I had never fired a shot except at cardboard targets, just at the shooting range and maneuvers, and I also understood why. An IDF soldier does not shoot for the sake of shooting nor does he apply excessive force beyond the call of the mission he is to perform. We saw the planes flying out and you see from which building the rocket is launched against Israel and you see the four houses surrounding that building collapsing as soon as the air force bombs. I don't know if it was white phosphorus or not, and I don't really care that much, but whole neighborhoods were simply razed because four houses in the area served to launch Qassam rockets. I don't know what else can be done, but it does seem somewhat unfair.

What, the proportions?

Yes. It's disproportionate.

When you went in, the airforce was still in action and the heavy equipment – not rifles, but artillery, armor and auxiliary fire. You were watching what was being fired there, and how the tanks and mortars were used?

From what I saw in our missions, tanks were often sent in, platoons from Battalion ***, to secure close cover, stand together with several tanks on a range, the tanks waited for something to move in order to return fire effectively. I didn't go in with the heavy equipment, we were attached to special units who did not work with the heavy equipment.

What do you mean by "waiting for something to move"? What were your rules of engagement? What were you told at the briefings?

"Anything looks suspicious to you, open fire."

What is suspicious? Arms and intent are both valid there, too?

Yes. You have to detect weapons, verify that person is not one of ours. If he has something on him, that is grounds enough to...

No intent, even without intent.

They were assuming that anyone present in a bombed zone, carrying a Kalashnikov, is no weapons collector.

You go into Al Atatra, and you see buildings, houses?

Ruins. I entered Al Atatra after seeing aerial photos and didn't identify anything, and my photographic memory is not that bad. I remembered that 200 meters further on down the track there should be a junction, with two large houses at the corners, and there wasn't. I remembered there was supposed to be a square with a Hamas memorial monument, and there wasn't. There was rubble, broken blocks.

How did the destruction affect your ability to communicate, to navigate?

It got to the point where we would try to report to field intelligence about a figure sticking out its head or a rocket being launched, and the girl (at field intelligence) would ask, "Is it near this or that house"? We'd look at the aerial photo and say, "Yes, but the house is no longer there." "Wait, is it facing a square?" "No more square." She would ask us if this was the third or fourth junction, and we'd tell her the houses are all crushed over the junction and you don't see a single junction. It got to the point where we could hardly see our way. Later I went in to the lookout war-room and asked how things worked, and the girl-soldiers there, the lookouts, resented the fact that they had no way to direct the planes, because all of their reference points were razed. So they would direct them in general terms or rely solely on coordinates. They found their reference points on aerial photos shared by the pilots and the war-room, and very approximate, which also annoys me. What is this, approximation? It's highly possible that now the pilot will bomb the wrong house.

Were you told of this approximation, or is this your own take on things?

It was my own take on things. She tells him, "Take some 800 meters east of the sea and so and so meters at such and such an azimuth from this or that line," and you say, "Wait, if he does not use the compass and other instruments in his cockpit for these measurements, then possibly he'll miss targets, it's not so far-fetched. This is not the 'smart bomb' we had been working on so hard. Could be he's using such a bomb, but aiming at the wrong target."

TESTIMONY 12 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

When you go in, what is your objective?

We were still waiting to receive orders to enter, we hadn't heard anything yet, even our commanders hadn't heard much. We were simply told to "hold the junction, control it." Apparently the higher echelons were clear about not going further into Phase 3 and only entering in order to create pressure and perhaps just put their foot on the first rung of the ladder, just in case we do eventually climb it. But we went in knowing it was for a few days because we're doing this Phase. Although we did hear that a political move was forming, let's say.

So in fact there was no objective.

Right. We had to take over a military area. We had no main line of vision onto Tancher road. Another platoon from our company held that. My own platoon and another formed the northernmost line, the most forward, the furthest from the fence... They received an instruction not to allow any movement along Tancher road.

What does that mean?

It means that if a vehicle moves along this road, orders are to shoot just ahead of the vehicle so that the driver would realize he is being targeted and mustn't travel there so he'd turn back. There was one case where – until they did realize this – a truck was shot at, but it turned around and I don't know whether anyone in it was injured.

This was in effect both day and night time?

Especially at night. No vehicle. First of all, Palestinians weren't moving around there at night, and secondly, in the day time there was traffic and it was stopped by gunfire. Our distance from the road was about 200-300 meters. That was more or less the range... We controlled the road and prevented movement as we were instructed. There was one case there of a motorcycle riding around, I don't know where and what the rules of engagement were for the armored corps, but anyway the tank fired a shell at the motorcycle and hit it. I don't know what happened to it but I believe nothing much was left of the guy.

I want to back up some. You mentioned a truck that was targeted. What happened there, what was the story as far as you know?

We had instructions not to allow passage. Whoever was on duty at the time the truck arrived did not notice what was happening and it may have surprised him.

It advanced further than the instructions allowed, so he fired in order to stop it, firing at the spot that was usually targeted. The truck had already reached that spot and he simply fired at it.

This took place in day- or night-time?

Daytime.

The instruction to shoot in front of a moving vehicle applies to machine gun fire or shelling?

Not shells, light gunfire, machine gun or M16 rifle. One can easily aim in front of the vehicle, there are also marksmen, no problem.

Okay, what about pedestrian traffic?

For pedestrian traffic, the entrance was on the road coming out at Sufa Crossing. The whole road was open when the ground offensive began. They bulldozed the track parallel to the road, so it was open for movement.

And civilians?

None there. As soon as the operation started, they all escaped into the towns.

So all the villages around there actually...

Were almost totally abandoned. I'm sure there were civilians here and there, but not many.

You didn't see even one through your binoculars?

None. I'm telling you, I saw none, and the guys in my company were telling me and I couldn't figure out if they were pulling my leg. I assume it was the truth.

When you enter a house, you're given certain instructions – not administrative, operational?

The Israeli army runs its outpost procedure by the book... One of the things in this procedure is setting red lines. It means that whoever crosses this limit is shot, no questions asked.

Shoot to kill?

Shoot to kill, yes. In our case, in the house where we were, the western exit, our operation front was the northern one, this house opened to the west, its yard surrounded by a cement block wall, about 15 meters from the house door. We were instructed to shoot to kill anyone entering the yard. Same was true for other

directions as well. Anyone who showed up in back of the house was shot – to kill. We were to shoot to kill anyone within our lines, no second thoughts.

In the daytime?

Nighttime too. At night these red lines were more flexible. They were set further from the house assuming that civilians don't roam around at night and whoever does is out to do us harm.

He need not be armed?

The red-line framework stipulates that if anyone is detected far from the red line and is unarmed, he has to be cleared. I didn't hear it in so many words, but that's what we did. We had done a reserve tour of duty just before being called up for the special deployment: it's not exactly the same, but we were at Kerem Shalom and whoever approached the fence, had to be cleared by us. That's what I understood I had to do. Whoever did not cross the red line, had to be cleared by us unless he was armed and with intent, as they say, and then you shoot to kill.

I'd like to understand: by rules of engagement at night, what happens to anyone seen out on the street in your vicinity?

If he does not cross a red line, you want to clear him and get him back indoors. Again, these were not the orders I received. This was what we heard in our training.

What were your orders?

I didn't really have any. I don't know if it's me specifically. I believe this was the general line because I don't believe they'd do anything differently than what we'd been trained to do. Essentially if someone is outdoors and can be cleared and moved indoors that's better. In order not to just kill, as well as not to expose us. If shots are fired from our house then obviously it's a house held by the Israeli army and draws fire.

Meaning that the whole time you're in that house, there are no external signs of your presence.

Essentially, that's right – unless we, or Golani before us, were detected. But from the outside you couldn't tell there were soldiers inside a certain house.

I'm trying to understand how this works. You never had anyone just

moving out in the street.

No. No movement whatsoever. Animals were moving around freely, but no humans. I didn't see nor hear anyone there.

What did you see when you came in?

As I said, tracks were cleared. Movement took place along the tracks cleared by the bulldozers, depending on operational necessity of course, and not in the field or hothouse there. I saw lots of demolished houses. Some from shelling, some as a result of bombing from the air, others destroyed by D-9 bulldozers or Corps of Engineers demolition units. Blasting. Mainly I saw a lot of ruined houses. I can't specify a number, but along our route approximately half of the houses were hit one way or another.

Half of the houses you saw upon entry into the area were ruined?

Not totally ruined. Either shelled or demolished by bulldozers, or bombed from the air.

Were you told why they were destroyed?

In our own preparations, there were houses taken down where in every case a commander had decided to do so because they were suspect, there had been information about the house, and the commander would say he would not go by it before it was 'taken care of' one way or another. This was also how we planned our route before we went in – we wanted to take down this or that house in order for it not to jeopardize us because it is suspected to contain explosives.

Because you had intelligence information about it?

Yes. There was this house that Golani entered but it was our own battalion that did the field analysis for it and wanted to take it down. This is something I heard incidentally, that it was Golani sitting in the house we wanted to take down.

TESTIMONY 13 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

What was it like inside the houses?

Well, you know. Routine. For our first two days there, we were hungry, then we got food and everything fell into place, supplies would arrive every day or two. Once in a while we'd break the routine – fire in some direction, at one house or another. There was a company from the battalion stationed west of us that had some engagement. There was no fighting in the houses.

Was there any fighting to begin with? How was your interaction with the civilians?

They were inside the houses. I didn't see any with my own eyes but I do think there was one civilian killed in the first house, when the house was taken over. When it was entered with gunfire, then the procedure changed and there were more searches. There was a family inside the second house so we didn't go in with gunfire. We yelled at them to get out, banged on the door. As soon as that first one was killed, I think he was an elderly man, the policy was changed and it was more searching and less opening fire.

So, at first, there was immediate fire? Meaning you shot at those houses?

Yes.

They didn't realize they had to get out?

I guess they were afraid to.

What were your assignments inside the houses? Occupying or only taking up the line to protect a road?

We'd take over houses, keep changing, securing the road. Generally, our mission was to isolate the area. Not to let any vehicles drive on the road.

Were there vehicles moving there at all?

No. Occasionally there were people, usually we opened deterrent fire.

So what was different for you, or difficult, in this particular war?

Most of the time it was boring. There were not really too many events. There was one pretty difficult incident where we had to... A man suddenly appeared at a distance, something like 150-200 meters, at night. We detected him carrying a flickering torch. We detect from rather far away, we request confirmation to open

deterrent fire. He approached on a zigzag, advancing towards the house. We ask for confirmation. At the time we couldn't tell whether he was suspect or carrying anything. We thought that with that torch he may be gathering information about our placement. We had all kinds of ideas. We did not get the OK for deterrent fire. Our commander went up to the roof with other soldiers, and all that while the guy was advancing north until the commander placed himself on the roof with the others. The man disappeared from sight behind some tree. The next time we detected him, he was 15-20 meters from the house, which by all our instructions, safety measures, is considered zero range as far as we are concerned – if someone is carrying explosives. There were lots of suicide bomber alerts at the time, all the time, incessantly. So we had to take down this guy. If he is carrying an explosive charge it takes exactly one second for him to run to the house. At that moment the soldiers on the roof shoot him, another soldier too opens fire. Later it turned out this was an old man with a flickering torch and a white shirt.

Did you yell out?

We did not.

Opened fire right away?

Eventually it turned out to be a mistake.

What were the rules of engagement?

In a state of war, the rules of engagement are that people on the ground must exercise their own judgment, the commander's judgment at the moment.

Did the man even know you were in that house?

Listen, I have no way of knowing. On the one hand, those houses – I don't know how anyone could not be aware of our presence, there were heavy APCs constantly coming and going. You could know we were there. I have no idea from where that man came. He was close to the house and I don't know if he knew we were there. As far as we're concerned he just popped up.

Why do you tell me this particular story?

You asked about a difficult experience.

But it was a mistake.

Yes, but as soon as we heard a voice I felt it would linger on in my mind for a while, the man down there was crying out. So I recall it as a difficult moment. I know he lay there for two days until he was removed.

TESTIMONY 14 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

One night, I don't know whether it was the first or second week, but it was certainly after about 5-6 days we had already been inside. I think this was already the second week. There was an outpost briefing. Everyone assembled in the main hallway. The company commander spoke, the platoon commander spoke. We spoke, and *** asked me if I, too, see something blinking on the road? We observe it for a few seconds and see a light blinking far away and after another few seconds realize it's a person. Someone is walking down the road in our direction. As time goes by we can identify more. He's walking, holding a torch, wearing a white shirt, has a long beard, an old man walking down the middle of the road. We inform about the detection, and as he approaches he is apparently unarmed. Then the company commander arrives, all worked up, looks around, identifies it and says "All snipers up to the roof." We ask, "Why all snipers up to the roof? What's the matter?" He only said, "All the snipers up to the roof, you can rely on me." It takes a while for them to get there. The man comes closer, about 150 meters from us, then the commander goes on saying, "Don't worry, it'll be all right." At a distance of 100 meters we can tell for sure that he's not holding anything. The only thing he might be carrying is an explosive belt, or he is an information gatherer for the Hamas. I can't tell. As for any present threat, however, there was nothing. We knew that. We report to the company commander that the guy is holding nothing and ask him to allow deterrent fire. This was nighttime. The rules were "gray." On the one hand at night if you see someone you take him down. On the other hand you're looking at a person walking down the middle of the road holding a torch, looking more as though he is searching for shelter or food or he's drugged. He doesn't seem to be on his way to kill us. But you know, at the end of the day it's the operational considerations that count. We ask for permission to open deterrent fire. The commander refuses and says they'll be ready soon. The Palestinian is already 70-80 meters from us and we ask again about deterrent fire. It's getting touchy because at a distance of 50 meters an explosive belt can take down everyone in the room. He approaches and everyone's already on to him and I hear guys

from other houses telling us to take him down already. The man is 50 meters from us and there's yelling on our radio. At this point it's fire proper, not deterrent fire. The man reached about 20-25 meters from the house. Another second and we're pulling the trigger. Suddenly a burst of fire is heard from upstairs, making us all jump. The old man gave such a scream as I'll never forget as long as I live. Everyone is shooting and shooting and the guy's screaming. The commander comes downstairs, glowing. "Here's an opener for tonight." He was asked why he wouldn't confirm deterrent fire. He said, "It's nighttime and this is a terrorist." When we said he knew the guy had nothing on him and only holding a torch, he said, "That doesn't matter. It's nighttime, etc., etc." There was a feeling that people were out to kill there, and no one felt bad about it. Later someone brought it up again with the company commander when we got out, and asked him again why he didn't approve of opening deterrent fire. After all it had been a man walking on the road with a torch and a white shirt. The next morning we sent out the explosive-detector dog to sniff him out. The guy was clean, nothing on him. Except for a torch in his hand, a white shirt and a long beard. A 50-60 year-old man lying on the road. I felt uneasy about the whole thing, but knew that it wouldn't do any good to bring it up right there and confront the company commander in the middle of Gaza.

What was the talk with him about after you came out?

Someone asked him why, and he said again it was because of nighttime and such. Guys told him the man was an innocent and we must remember there's civilian population in there as well, not just terrorists, and the fact the terrorists wear civilian clothes doesn't mean any civilian must be killed etc... He didn't agree and couldn't give a damn, and finally the guys felt that even if they would take this up with higher echelons, it would be ineffective. So this is where matters stayed.

TESTIMONY 15 - RABBINATE UNIT

One day prior to the entry into Gaza, a mobile unit arrived from the military rabbinate unit. They approached me and said they belonged to an organization called "Jewish Awareness," they came to talk with the soldiers and give out material – copies of The Book of Psalms and some brochures. I don't have the stuff they gave out. One was a major, the other was not in uniform so I don't know what his rank was. I can't tell whether he was on reserve duty or not. They

had nice long beards, side curls. They had come to talk with the soldiers, which was ordinary procedure, not only prior to a significant operation. The rabbi would summon the religious guys in our unit, whoever wanted to would get together on the side and they would hold a study session together or discuss Sabbath do's and don'ts. The brigade rabbi, for example, would take anyone interested and explain to them what Jewish religious law allowed or forbade when men prepare for combat. That was one thing.

The rabbi of your reserves brigade?

Yes. Another thing was to "catch" or gather all the soldiers for a discussion.

You were on maneuvers at the time?

Yes, various exercises. There were certain stations for different kinds of practice. So they came and there were soldiers who were really against this. I mean, they were using such images as 'what are we, crusaders being prepared for the battle with Salah al Din?' They really disliked the religious tone of war. On the other hand, there were others who loved it and easily connected to it, coming up and hungrily swallowing this sort of talk. I didn't listen to the entire talk that lasted about 15 to 25 minutes.

Wasn't attendance compulsory?

No. It wasn't an assembly with everyone. It meant showing up where everybody was anyway and whoever didn't want to stay could get up and leave. Sort of a half-captive audience. I remember that one of the things I resented – I am sorry I didn't use this point to break up the discussion and throw this guy out even if he was authorized by someone or other – was that he said the war is against four enemies. Whereas the army defined the aim of this war to weaken and topple the Hamas, with the more or less usual army formulations, this fellow extended his frame of reference and opened it: "We have four enemies," he said. He started with Iran. Now Iran is a sovereign state elsewhere, it is not our enemy in this war, but usually in Israeli discourse it is perceived as an enemy, and regardless of what you do, it's the enemy. So let's assume this enters the discourse – that's pretty much the norm. Then he went on to mention the Hamas, which was defined as the enemy anyway, and proceeded to speak of the Palestinian Authority. If I remember correctly, that is a bit more complex. The PA does not reign in Gaza and is a partner to negotiations even if merely virtual, and the fourth enemy is the Arab citizens of Israel. It was said explicitly. I don't recall the exact term, whether he used 'the Arabs of Israel' or 'Israeli Arabs,' but said they undermine us. He didn't qualify all or some who... He explicitly spoke of them as an enemy, while

addressing this specific operation. This is, of course, a false and problematic statement.

What else came up in this talk?

Lots of pathos, the kind of religious discourse I'm a bit familiar with: war of choice, holy war – differing rules. He spoke less in religious terminology, even of the kind I know, and was much more into militant faith. He aimed at inspiring the men with courage, cruelty, aggressiveness, expressions such as 'no pity, God protects you, everything you do is sanctified.' The gist of these statements was perhaps to bring things into agreement with religion, with God and whoever this man was supposed to represent, that everything or nearly everything is permissible. There were no specific scenarios discussed, for example – whether everything goes if there's a pregnant woman standing there. But from the context it was pretty obvious he came to tell us how aggressive and determined we needed to be, that we must win because this is a holy war.

He spoke about the Palestinians?

I can't recall. Often these surreal analogies are made, equating the Palestinians with the Amalekites, for example. The Palestinians are the enemy, whether they are Israeli citizens or subjects of the Palestinian Authority makes no difference. This covers everyone.

Some soldiers were saying they were being treated like 'crusaders.' What was that?

Yes, secular guys, or those who are distant from (Jewish) tradition and religion, stood there rather amused or horrified at this talk. What is this thing? Here comes a guy we don't know, with some rank or other, and explains to us about holy war and the enemy which is the Arabs in Israel and that we mustn't show any mercy, and have to attack in proper fighting spirit. What has all this to do with me? You can imagine, even in films you don't see that any more, it's out, like heroes. You can imagine a priest preaching on fighting spirit and explaining the importance of reaching the Via Dolorosa or the Holy Sites. As far as I know these were not holy sites.

How did the officers regard this? Was it discussed at the command level, did you bring it up further? Was it accepted? Did it go unnoticed?

I am trying to recall. First of all, only after I saw this in Haaretz (the witness is referring to publication in Haaretz daily newspaper of January 26th 2009 about pamphlets distributed by the Army Rabbinate to soldiers who took part in the Gaza campaign), I realized this was a widespread phenomenon. If you're in your

unit and someone comes along and talks, okay. There are weirdoes everywhere and here was one talking to us and it's out of line, and then later in very closed circles we talked about how out of line this was. But one mustn't make such a big deal of every such individual. Many really saw him as deranged. That's how I got to you, I saw the newspaper story and realized this reached not only our own area, it was much more serious and needed more thorough looking into. There was also need on the part of the army rabbinate to examine its own role, no less important than everything that is not its role. These are extremely sensitive interfaces between the religious and the secular, Jewish settlers and leftist activists – who are called radical even though they serve in the reserves, for various reasons... I don't remember exactly, but I'm almost sure there was talk about this being a result of the 'disengagement' and the backing off which some feel about all of this, and that here's an opportunity to win, and not 'smudge things up.' I think all these things are out of place there.

TESTIMONY 16 - RABBINATE UNIT

We were in Tze'elim and began maneuvers to prepare for our entry into the Gaza Strip. We were actually going through various exercises for our specific assignments. In this framework, regarding what we're talking about – the army rabbinate – two things happened in our contact with them at the time. The first was the distribution of pamphlets, an indirect sort of contact. It's the kind of pamphlet that is distributed in military synagogues, or pages of the weekly reading that is also distributed at military synagogues, containing rather explicit political contents. Like writing, for example, that the Palestinians are like the Philistines of old, newcomers who do not belong in the land, aliens planted on our soil which should clearly return to us. There were also these acronyms of the name of the Jewish settlement Netzarim that should be rebuilt.

What were these pages, exactly?

There are flyers containing the weekly religious reading that are very similar to all kinds of military pamphlets you see in the synagogues, but they have the IDF stamp on them and that of the military rabbinate. In the military rabbinate there is a department called 'Jewish Awareness for a Winning IDF' which is in fact the department in charge of motivation issues and solving problems of morality and fighting and the like, for soldiers.

What problem did you have with that?

Personally, I think that as a citizen of a democratic state what bothers me is actually the distribution of political pamphlets with the stamp of the IDF on them – a body that is supposed to be apolitical. I think there is no room for political views in the army, regardless of whether I agree with them or not. I think they are out of place in an army framework. There's no way a battalion commander can come to his soldiers and say: we now have to go back and resettle Netzarim. That is our mission. This is what we should do, rebuild Netzarim. Clearly, a battalion commander who would say this would at least be reprimanded, and he is likely to be penalized even more severely. And here an official institution tightly connected to the army, acting in the name of the army, comes and disseminates the same messages, and no one says anything. This is what bothers me here.

...The second thing, the more immediate measure we witnessed about this was when we were training at one of the Tze'elim zones. We had just concluded an exercise and we were preparing for the next one, and then this Army Rabbinate officer came along with his ranks, uniform and all, and asked us if we were willing to listen to a rabbi who was with him, in civilian dress. We agreed. Up came a man who introduced himself as Rabbi Chen, that was his name, who came as a civilian to speak to us. The whole talk was presented in points: the first point throughout his speech – later you see it in the pamphlets as well – is the sanctity of the People of Israel. He put it this way: he said that while going in there, we should know there is no accounting for sins in this case. The meaning of this, I'm getting into some interpretation here which is inevitable, otherwise one does not realize how problematic such a statement is. When a rabbi says 'there's no accounting,' the meaning is that when a person enters a zone that is naturally very dangerous and everyone is afraid to enter and no one knows what will happen, what the future has in store for us, of course there are fears. Such fears are intensified by each person's own past and deeds he must confront, and naturally there is always that primal fear that this is the place where all my sins will be paid for. So in view of this, that rabbi up and says: don't worry – there's no accountability. On the most basic level this is how I understand his meaning. I don't see any other way to interpret it. Furthermore, this statement contains a statement about the future: if there really is no accountability for what I have done in the past, then naturally there is none for what I am about to do in the immediate or distant future. In other words, we should know that whatever we do is fine.

Was there any mention of the Palestinians? What did he say about them?

Another point that came up was when that rabbi said we are actually conducting the war of 'the sons of light' against 'the sons of darkness.' This is in fact a statement with highly messianic language. This is war that prepares the way for final redemption. This is outrageous in itself. Again, we witness a language that is not acceptable to all present, definitely a legitimate view and as such I have no problem with it. But it must not receive any kind of official stamp, it must not be used within any military framework. It is just like a political view. But the more disturbing point even, than this theological point, is its demonization of the other side. It turns the other side as a generality into 'sons of darkness' while we become 'sons of light.' There is no differentiation which we would expect to find between civilians and others. Namely, here is one people fighting another people, with all the messianic implications. But that's the point: this is also religious propaganda. In other words, the army is not a revival meeting. This is not the reason people enlist. They do not put on a uniform in order to be Judaized and be reborn in the faith.

TESTIMONY 17 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS & RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

When we got there, the main demolitions were in warfare, 'pressure cookers.' From the point we got there, infrastructure work began. D-9s were brought in and they worked nonstop to raze orchards and take down houses suspected of containing tunnels. Occasionally there was sniper fire inside the refugee camps and there were attempts to detect their source, and at times we directed combat helicopters and tank fire at the house that was supposedly the source of fire. You have to be extremely professional to detect the source of fire and direct exactly towards it. The range was over a kilometer in a very crowded area.

Detecting sniper fire over a kilometer away inside a refugee camp is nearly impossible.

Tank fire was directed in response.

Tanks firing heavy ammunition, shells?

Yes. After detecting sniper fire.

Who directed the D-9s?

The unit commander.

He would decide which house was to be taken down?

Yes. After consulting the company commander. The company commander would request confirmation of the Brigade Headquarters and the unit commander would work directly with them.

In all of that house razing activity, were there cases of explosive charges blowing up?

Not while I was there.

And in the orchards around?

Not while I was there. But I was told there were during the first week.

You're saying there was plenty of infrastructure work during your week there.

Yes.

How many D-9s in action?

Two or three.

Working nonstop?

Yes... It wasn't a dense block of crowded buildings with houses razed in the middle. These were scattered buildings. It is a farming area, there are plenty of fruit groves between houses. There's sort of a street, several streets, not well-ordered infrastructure, so after taking down houses there was this bare feeling, but you had a fruit tree grove or orchard which was totally razed and houses taken down – and the overall sense might be that everything was empty. It's not like that. There was a house taken down here and there. The feeling is it's all sand dunes, all the streets were destroyed and there were shell pits from the bombings before the ground offensive. At least this is the logical explanation. We were there for a week, not doing too much – basically holding our positions, being on the lookout, sending out an occasional search, taking another house over to search it. At some point our officer decided he'd hold a grenade-launching practice because we hadn't managed that before we entered. So we went to a house next door, took an inner room, and each person came along and threw a grenade inside. The house was totally devastated. At some point a grenade flew out a window and hit a gas pipe, gas started leaking and we stopped the practice.

Went back. Occasionally some civilians would show up. Another force searched a house nearby and found civilians inside. They assembled them, I don't know what they did with them. One day some refugees, civilians, came in and were searched and taken away, or assembled in the house next door. I think they had been there the whole time. There was not much control over this. They were used as 'Johnnies' (at a different point in the interview the witness described the 'Johnnie' procedure, using Palestinian civilians as human shields during house searches), and then released, and we're finding them in later searches.

TESTIMONY 18 - BRIEFINGS & RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

In general, we had quick combat procedure. Interestingly, 24 hours before the operation began, a general briefing was held about how long we were going in for. The battalion commander said he estimates about 3-4 weeks. You couldn't know for sure. This battalion commander is a good speaker, knows how to motivate us. One of the things that stood out was a subjective sense, something very permissive about the whole thing. He said we were going to exercise insane fire power with artillery and air force. We were given the feeling that we were not just being sent out there, but with enormous security and cover. He did restrain it and say, "It's not that you're out to carry out a massacre, but..." – this was the restraint to everything he had said before, and in between his own jokes which made me laugh, too. Like, "We have an Arabic-speaking grenade launcher, and a heavy machine-gun that speaks Arabic." This was the spirit of things.

Was anything said about rules of engagement?

My impression about rules of engagement was that, at least at our level, they were not clear. There were no clear red lines. In urban areas it's very much at the commanders' own discretion. As for the fire-power actually used, the feeling was of war against a regular army. On the one hand, we were told to enter every house under live fire. A grenade or two, shooting, and only then we enter. Things were said that in a way made us confident that our own lives were top priority.

TESTIMONY 19 - BOMBARDMENT

What was the objective of this operation?

It was very clearly defined: to gain control of the area, there would be no Qassam fire while we were on the ground; aiming to strike a real blow at Hamas, to the terrorist organizations in general.

How are you situated to begin with, are there secondary defense positions? Houses?

My own company, of our battalion, goes in first. We wait for two of the battalions to occupy their objectives, they finish, then we follow.

The targets are fields?

No. A neighborhood. Not quite a kasbah, but residential.

Is it a rural area?

Yes. City outskirts. We're situated facing a main road. The whole cover thing starts, massive fire, auxiliary fire, and then my company goes in. We hold the line of houses across the road, following heavy fire. In the first phase, we open fire in every zone.

What do you see in front of you? What does this zone contain?

The company's designated area includes a strip adjacent to the houses. There's no resistance to speak of. Some explosives are found in a house, weapons, significant stuff like that, but no real resistance. Behind there's another strip of gardens and small orchards, fields.

You go into every house?

Yes.

...You go in, reinforced by mortar fire, heavy equipment, machine guns and all?

First of all, going in we have artillery and air force cover, combat helicopters, everything. And mortars too.

So you position yourselves and then what? Begin a sleep cycle and move on?

Begin setting up defenses. Sand bags, drill shooting holes in the walls, build up outposts, plan the defense of the house. At the end of the day the platoons are

set up in the houses. Each house becomes a small army outpost with positions, and we rotate.

What missions are sent out?

No significant missions came out of the house. Days afterwards, for example, every time we'd move houses, we'd fire on the houses around, on every zone we'd enter. We'd move houses and set up anew, platoons would change around, it's not such an insane change. I happened to stay in two or three houses in our ten days there.

Did you see any people in the neighborhood, at all?

Yes. These are the outskirts of Gaza City, not a village. At first there were civilians in the houses we entered. In the first house that was taken, there was a family which we assembled in one room, and after an hour or two, that same morning, we were instructed to make them leave and walk into the city.

TESTIMONY 20 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Our objective was to split the Gaza Strip, fragment it. Netzarim is the mid-point and our objective was to split the Strip from the terminal. We open the area, that's our mission. We reach the first house and even at a distance, simply because that's the instruction, we shoot because it is an area that no one was supposed to be in. Flyers were distributed two days earlier and they were informed we were coming. From a distance the house is taken down and there is lots of gunfire. A D-9 bulldozer makes the rounds to verify that the house is not booby-trapped. Suddenly the D-9 jumps in the air and the entire ground floor collapses as well as part of the second floor.

Did the bulldozer hit an explosive charge?

Yes, nothing happened to it. We moved to an alternate site and again, fired like crazy.

What did you fire with?

Heavy machine guns we had on an APC, launchers.

Your light arms?

Yes. There wasn't too much equipment to demolish the house for we had to stay in it. The idea is that if there is anyone in the house who would inform of our coming, he would be taken down. We hold our fire and approach the house entrance. We have some fellows from a special unit of the Corps of Engineers who would blast the door open. Suddenly we see an old man, about 60-70 years old. He comes out with a white kerchief and says in Arabic, "Don't shoot, don't shoot". About 30 more people follow the old man, all of them in one piece, no one wounded or hit.

At what range did you target the house?

30 meters.

And they came out of the house?

Yes. And no one was hurt. Amazing. We were in shock, too. Especially after entering the house and seeing what went on inside. No one was hurt. About thirty people come out of there, including children, women and elderly. They get inspected just like in the West Bank, women hold their garments tight against their bodies, men take off shirt and pants, turn around, and they're checked to make sure they're not carrying anything.

You separate them?

Yes. Women and men. You process them one by one. You strip and inspect them one by one. It took place outside the house. According to the briefing we had, if we encountered such civilians, we were to chase them away to the south. Remembering we're splitting the Strip and to the south of us there are no forces, and indeed we're exposed to fire from the south, but if there are civilians, we should chase them away to the south. There were three families, so the head of each family, and only he entered their home for five minutes, took whatever he needed and they had to proceed south.

On foot?

Yes. They have no vehicles...

TESTIMONY 21 - BRIEFINGS & RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

He (the battalion commander) also spoke about having to remain alert and not be afraid, he stressed that this was not a limited confrontation such as in Hebron, and not to hesitate to shoot if we suspect someone, nor feel bad about destruction because it is all done for the safety of our own soldiers.

But you had light arms, you were not in tanks. And destruction, I mean how much of that could you inflict?

It was a combined operation. There's a D-9 bulldozer and 'Matador' (missile) that can perforate a building. He said that whatever was destroyed can be rebuilt, but the life of a soldier once killed cannot be restored.

Did he make any distinction between civilians and terrorists?

That, too, was mentioned later, not at the same talk, that if we see something suspect and shoot, better hit an innocent than hesitate to target an enemy. You exercise judgment. The first house we entered contained not a single enemy. We fired at windows and fire was not returned. So we went in and opened it the way we usually go at a house in Hebron: we go in, call out to the owner to open, gather all the males, shackle them, gather the entire family in one room and begin to search the house. This is not something that is usually done in war.

When you entered a house, did you know what you were supposed to do differently from other areas in the West Bank? How is this different?

When you enter a house, the idea is that it contains an enemy. You're supposed to shoot your way in. We didn't do this in the first house because we had opened fire and no fire was returned. So we assumed there was no one there. Then we knocked on the door and told them to call everyone downstairs, gathered them in a room and combed the place securely, looking for incriminating materials: weapons, posters, propaganda stuff.

Whom did you find in the house?

Men, women and children. This was our first objective in the operation plan. We walked in, reached the neighborhood and began the offensive advance. While you're attacking you shoot a lot even while encountering no one. You make sure you're not being surprised. Say we entered a hothouse and are securing it: you cut a hole and enter the hothouse, shooting at the plant rows. You're not on automatic fire, but you do give a few bursts to make sure you won't be surprised.

You fired at the house too, and there was an innocent family inside. The battalion commander spoke about this before or after this happened, that such a situation might arise, or that you should avoid this in the future – shooting at a house that, rather than being empty, contained innocents?

I don't remember if he specifically addressed this, but in houses we approached later, with heavy APCs, first we went in and called out on loudspeakers without shooting at windows from the outside. At first no one came down, so we combed room after room until we detected some suspect movement. We yelled for people to get out – I wasn't there myself but it was my own company – they yelled again and then began to shoot inside the apartment building. That's how the battle actually started. So yes, there was a change. In the first houses we said "these are our objectives and we're firing at them." Then we shot at windows and the roof.

In the battalion commander's talk about the goals of this operation, did he not say there were civilians there who should be dealt with?

Sure he did. He said it's complicated, because the enemy was hiding behind civilian population. But he added that if we suspect someone, we should not give him the benefit of the doubt. Eventually this could be an enemy, even if it's some old woman approaching the house. It could be an old woman carrying an explosive charge.

Did you inquire how to verify this? That's what rules of engagement are for. Did anyone ask about this?

Rules of engagement are different here because no permission to shoot is necessary. You see something you suspect – you open fire because you don't want it to get away. That's why you have to make sure you don't hit just for the sake of hitting. He warned that we were going into a complex situation and if anything arouses our suspicion, we mustn't hesitate because the enemy hides among civilians. We must be more alert and if we detect with certainty that this will not jeopardize us, there's no sense in opening fire. On the other hand, if we have the slightest suspicion and are under time pressure – we should shoot. If not, we can report about it. We had constant reports about suspect women or pairs, stuff like that.

Meaning, if it doesn't jeopardize me and it's far away, I don't automatically open fire or aim to fire.

There are two phases: there's the primary phase of taking objectives. There, whatever is suspect is targeted for fire, and there are houses on the road, like

in an ambush. As soon as someone passes them – you shoot. The 'red line' procedure is to report, request permission to open fire.

Is there suspect-arrest procedure like warning fire or calling out to whoever's there? I assume you didn't mark lines. It's the unit's private language.

Yes, it's a private code.

If someone approaches, how do you inform him? Do you have megaphones?

No. We don't. I don't know how you inform him. Before we entered, the air force dropped flyers and people were supposed to get out of there. As for those who didn't get out, we were to shoot in the air or near their feet. But if someone would cross the red line, you were supposed to shoot him. Unless there's a special announcement, for there were humanitarian ceasefires all the time, when we were not shooting.

What was the distance between the house and such a red line?

100 meters. At light arms range. There are also snipers there with us in the house who sight further away and detect approaches.

How did people come out of that talk with the battalion commander?

I didn't feel that great, personally. This was because of the way he expressed himself about certain things. The general feeling was that we were entering this operation with zeal, people were preparing themselves and revving themselves up before going in, and then going ahead.

What did he say that troubled you?

"My best Arabic translator is my grenade launcher." I don't remember the context, just the gist of things.

People raised an eyebrow at this?

Some. But that's what troubled me most. One of the soldiers compared the ground units to a dog who's beaten up a lot. The dog gets all worked up and then it's directed at someone and ordered to 'go get him.' It's true. Infantry battalions eat a lot of shit in routine service, it's like this in any army. Youngsters are out for action and most of them have pretty racist views anyway, some of them say "I don't want wars, but what can we do, this is how things are and we'll never have peace with the Arabs." That's the general picture. On the other hand there are some people with leftist views, but they're the minority.

Everything is probably tagged as 'operational.'

Yes. I think that was the context of going in with so much force. We knew we were going in and that the surprise factor would be in our intense fire-power, destruction and as much damage as possible to terrorist infrastructure. It's like saying "We're sick and tired of your Qassam rockets." In this sense the best way to speak Arabic is through the grenade launcher, as if Arabs understand only force. I think that such things are said in heat before going to battle, to fire up soldiers. For when you go into such an operation, there are two possibilities: either you're terribly scared or terribly 'gung-ho.' Better 'gung-ho' than frightened, for this way you can do a better job of it.

TESTIMONY 22 - BOMBARDMENT

There was an alert about a woman suicide bomber, and as a result of this alert the instructions were stricter: not to let civilians get close to soldiers. If one does, he is taken down. We're not to take risks in this respect.

Was suspect-arrest procedure practiced before taking them down?

In the clear situation then yes, and if the person would still approach, he would be taken down, regardless whether armed or not. The point was the close approach. Usually we tried not to be in any contact with civilians. If there were people in the house, we had no choice. But the point was not to come in any contact with them. Because we had capacities, the point was to concentrate on our things and disconnect as quickly as possible. On the morning of the third day, there was a certain house about 300 meters from our own line – which would be an unstable range both day and night. At night, it's the houses where our forces go in and out – so 300 meters from our house people were detected moving. In the morning we detected four men, ages 25 to 40, with keffiyehs, standing outside and talking. It was suspect. We reported to intelligence, specifying the house they were about to enter. Intelligence passed this on to the Shabak who answered that this was known as a Hamas activist's house. This automatically gets acted upon. I don't remember what was used, whether helicopter or ***, but the house was bombed while these guys were inside. A woman came out, holding a child, and escaped southward. In other words, there had been people inside, but as for the procedures, I think things went according to the rules: there was identification along the standard definitions, it was close range from our own

forces, within which anyone detected as suspect gets acted upon as soon as the Shabak okayed it.

Were they armed?

No. The report specified that they were unarmed. But that's not the point. The point is that four men standing outside that house conferring look suspect.

And that takes place 300 meters from our forces?

200-300 meters. And it's on a hill. Our forces are downhill, and they're standing above, say two-thirds of the way up.

TESTIMONY 23 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT & HOME SEARCHES

In routine work there are outposts, windows, observation posts and stairs – you watch out and rotate, and if, say, you know that you have an incursion at night, you might go for twelve hours or more, but twelve hours was the average time of an incursion: you go out, take the house, spend two-three inside, then go back to the same house or to another one. You stand in your post, in the evening, you realize that at midnight you're already going out, you see the fighter planes bomb your targets, you walk, lay right next to the tanks that are shelling the houses which you will be entering, then you go into urban fighting, with live gunfire. If anyone was there before, there's no chance he is still there. I did not see one single Arab the whole time we were there, that whole week. You do see trenches in the garden with blankets or small gas burners. Whether they dug the trenches because they waited for you or because that's safer during the shelling. You see there were people there until recently. Inside the houses, as we arrived, we entered through a hole broken in the wall by a tank shell. You try to fire a RPG or Lau missile. But the tank is the one eventually making that hole. You're also told to wreck the floor tiles to check for tunnels. Television sets, closets – you don't know what's waiting there. Many explosive charges were found, they also blew up, no one was hurt. Tank Corps or Corps of Engineers units blew them up. Usually they did not explode because most of the ones we found were wired and had to be detonated, but whoever was supposed to detonate them had run off. It was live, however, ready...

You talk about tanks firing while moving. Was there massive fire?

Yes, shelling, machine guns on tanks, ours too. Before you enter a house, you shoot...I can't deny there's this aspect of soldiers wanting to let go, dying to launch the Lau missile they're shouldering, or that their commander wants this. Yes. I can't quote anyone, but it was in the air. Personally I think it's there, I'd be lying if I said it was at any price. Still where I was, in this respect, the tone was not over-zealous. I think some forces were more zealous than ours, perhaps the regulars. But among reservists you feel people want to get done with it as quickly as possible and get back home. It was this way in guard duty shifts as well. The commanders too, very much so, in fact. Even if the soldier wanted to shoot, he didn't. But when he had a chance, then he did. Professionally he didn't really need to shoot after the tank had wrecked the house, but that's my own personal feeling. We did fire a Lau missile once. So that's more or less what we did there for a week. Physically the houses were ruined.

In one house we entered I saw guys had defecated in drawers. There were drawings and graffiti on the walls. I don't even remember what. I remember a filthy drawing in a children's nursery. There were Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse stickers there, and someone had drawn a huge dick on Minnie Mouse. I really felt ashamed at that, and so do guys who were with me. It was funny because it was drawn really well, but you feel filthy. Even to tell about it.

Where was this?

In Beit Lahiya, a house where we had replaced regular soldiers. We saw such things in two houses. In one there were few drawings on the walls, some of them even made with lipstick, and the closets were all trashed. It sounds retarded. You come out of a wrecked house and still we cleaned up after ourselves. We had lots of food left which we left for them (the family). We piled up all their mattresses. In Operation 'Defensive Shield' I was platoon sergeant. People slept on the floor, we locked up the living room in another room and slept on the floor. In Gaza it was different. We used people's mattresses and blankets, but we didn't sleep in their beds. We took down the mattresses, there were plenty of mattresses in each house, and slept on them. We didn't use their water. We didn't have to. That's it, I think. That's more or less what it was like.

Is there anything beside the shit in the drawers that seemed 'uncalled for' to you?

No, you can say one didn't have to smash a television set or shoot a closet through, but saying that would be putting on airs. I didn't go into a house and kick a television set and I didn't see any of my reservists do that. On the other

hand, you go into a house and turn it all inside out. You see places with explosive charges and there's a lot of tension, you come knowing that half your guys are going to get killed, there was always this talk about how dangerous Gaza is – that very much fires things up.

TESTIMONY 24 - BRIEFINGS & HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

I was a D-9 operator, and was called up for reserve duty on Saturday, January 3rd, I think, got there on January 4th.

Which is just when the ground-offensive began, right?

Yes.

So you arrive and get briefed, what were the briefings you had?

Yes. Standard things, signing forms for getting our weapons.

Getting outfitted, uniforms, gear, the works?

Yes. Target practice, a drill here, a drill there. The infantry really trained hard, but we had nothing to train with, there was no equipment. In short, what shocked me was a talk we had with the commander of ***, he's a colonel, and he gave our whole battalion a talk. The tone of it was really, first of all he started out with something like "Unfortunately we're a democracy, so we can't demolish Gaza to the extent that we'd really like." Perhaps he didn't actually say "unfortunately," but he repeated, twice, that "the fact that we're a democracy works against us, for the army cannot act as aggressively as it would like." Then he said once again that we're going into this operation aggressively, without... Usually in such talks the army, the commanders mention the lives of civilians and showing consideration to civilians. Here he didn't even mention this. Just the brutality, go in there brutally.

Those are the words he used?

Yes. He said, "In case of any doubt, take down houses. You don't need confirmation for anything, if you want." Perhaps it's legitimate, but if you suspect the presence of an explosive charge, you should get confirmation for a tank to fire. In short, a tank would fire a shell on the basis of a suspected charge. This is perhaps legitimate, but he also said: "Fortunately the hospitals are full to capacity already, so people are dying more quickly." Then someone answered him, one

of the soldiers replied cynically: "So kill the doctors." The commander replied dismissively, not understanding his cynical intent, twice: "We're a democracy, we can't do things the way we would like to do them." He didn't leave any time for questions, either.

How did the guys react at this briefing?

Many guys were not shocked. I was. Many were surprised, but he didn't leave any time for questions, if anyone wanted to ask about the civilian population. Because, again, he didn't even mention civilians.

You mean that normally civilians are talked about.

Yes. There was a discussion at the end of our term of duty, led by the brigade-commander, a colonel, who said that the army did show consideration. He did mention the civilians. But that was after it was all over.

Usually the issue of civilian population is brought up?

Yes.

As a D-9 operator, the issue of civilian population is nearly technical in your line because of your field of vision and the size of your equipment and all. In your regular service, is that something that is especially emphasized?

The D-9 operator is not the one who can show consideration to the civilian population. I mean, he can only do more damage than he already must, but he cannot show consideration. If he's ordered to "demolish a house," he demolishes a house. On the other hand, he could be the type of operator who became famous in (the army's invasion of) Jenin, who – when instructed to demolish a certain house – looked for the route that would inevitably demolish the largest number of houses on the way to the targeted house.

So commanding officers were sitting in on this talk?

Yes, the entire company, as well as the battalion-commander, company-commanders.

...They actually designated targets on the map?

Yes.

You are usually assigned to a force on the ground; you are not directly subordinate to the Corps of Engineers.

That's the usual order of things. We're assigned to other forces. But what we did, two tanks led an armored convoy, two D-9s led an armored convoy. What

we did, our objective was to demolish houses. We were secured by heavy APCs and tanks. In this case the tanks were assigned to us rather than the other way around. There were five or six D-9s active on the ground all of the time. And heavy APCs and tanks that secured us.

So when did you actually go in?

If I'm not mistaken, the ground forces began to enter on Thursday.

This is after the infantry had been throughout this area?

Yes. The area was completely empty. Everything was empty.

Ghost town, not a soul in sight?

Yes.

So you go in, who commands the operation, this mission?

Armored Corps, I guess.

So how did you get your orders? You sat with a location map?

First there was a briefing before entry, and then inside Gaza, and we got our instructions over radio.

You're simply told, "See that house on the left? Go for it"?

Yes.

You were doing mainly houses there?

Yes, houses, and agricultural areas as well, orchards and hothouses.

Those areas where you destroyed hothouses and fields, were there any explosive charges there?

The battalion got two explosive charges as well as anti-tank missiles.

Against the D-9s?

Yes. And I think the main concern was that tunnels were being built from within those houses.

To abduct soldiers?

Yes.

So why demolish one house and not the other, because of intelligence on

the tunnel?

Yes, intelligence information.

And in the agricultural areas, do you recall explosive charges against you?

Yes.

How much was actually demolished there? Anything the likes of which you had seen as a regular soldier?

This was rare. Usually house demolition is not something you do a lot. If I remember correctly, from the battalion commander's talk at the end, he said "We demolished 900 houses." This might not be absolutely precise, but it was a really huge number. We demolished a lot. There were people who had been in Gaza for two days constantly demolishing one house after the other, and we're talking about a whole battalion, so it could be. There were a lot of houses, that's for sure. The battalion was activated both in the north and in the south, but only adjacent to the fence.

In your briefing you were told you would be clearing explosive charges because infantry would be following you?

No.

Did anyone come in after you?

No.

So in fact you were the closing force. The area had already been 'cleansed.' Infantry had already been there, was already inside.

Yes.

You guys come to deal with all the areas where intelligence reports tunnels and such.

Yes, or houses that were used to shoot out of, stuff like that.

And when you wrap things up, you were there at the end?

By the time the operation ended we had been inside for three weeks. The first week there were briefings, the second week mostly operations, and the third week was already under ceasefire, but we were still going in, this time closer to the fence and not demolishing houses, just orchards and stuff like that. Only

things that interfere with ground conditions. We'd level the ground near the fence to expand visibility from Israel.

How far from the fence?

200 meters. I didn't go in at that point, but it was 200 meters.

TESTIMONY 25 - BRIEFINGS & RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The battalion commander said there would be lots and lots of terrorists and we should really watch out but don't worry, everyone will have taken plenty of people down. At the briefing, I think it was the day we were about to go on to another mission, he was talking about our going into Gaza, and there will be plenty of terrorists for everyone.

Everyone was disappointed about not engaging anyone. You go crazy and are dying for something to happen already. Some soldiers from Sderot and the southern Israeli localities also want to take revenge (for the rocket shelling on their hometown) on terrorists. So the company commander said, "Don't worry, once we go in you'll have no space left on your rifle butt, you'll have to mark your X-s on your shirt sleeves..." When the battalion commander spoke, his personal message was that he was not willing for any of us to get hurt or risk himself because of suspects, and if there's need – we take down anyone. He would do everything in his power so that none of the soldiers would get hurt. This was the general attitude in the army: go in with insane fire power because this is our only advantage over them.

And was there really such serious fire power?

There were rockets, Lau, whole containers of Negev machine-gun ammo flying around there, and I'm still talking to you just about the infantry, let alone combat helicopters and tanks and all that.

Where did all of this fly around?

Suspect places. There were plenty of launchers. You know you're going to enter a house and usually pretty sure it's either empty, or just terrorists inside. So you launch at all the windows, the walls, here and there a Matador. Tanks take down houses if they're not sure about them. One night they saw a terrorist and he disappeared so they decided he'd gone into a tunnel, so they brought a D-9 and razed the whole orchard.

Okay, I realize this is operational consideration and what can you do, even if it hurts to see it. No one spared ammunition or weapons.

...What about the tank taking down a house?

Sometimes you know the house is empty. You know as far as you can know. Now if the house disrupts your defense line, you take it down with a tank or a bulldozer. We took an eight-story house and the instruction was not to enter any doorway because it would be booby-trapped. That's what we have the Matador for, to take down a wall and enter through there. But the Matador proved itself somewhat less effective, so a tank shelled out a hole in the wall and that's how we got in.

What is a Matador?

It's a missile for urban warfare. It's very effective. But when we went in with it we didn't really use it so much. There were places where we fired at a house and then discovered there were people inside.

...Was there a notion of deterrent fire, show of presence?

Sure. Every other day we'd initiate a blast of fire. Not towards people. Just at windows which we'd observe for a while and know that the house is empty. No one would stay in houses close to the ones the IDF was staying in. They could live further away.

At what level were the fire blasts? Light arms? Tanks?

As for fire power, it was light arms and Negev machine-guns. Tanks fire only under instructions. There were cases where tanks were under the command of the company. There was also a case where a helicopter arrived and the company commander told him what to take down.

What happened there?

As we began the offensive, there was a house there close to the one we occupied, so we took it down. The grounds for this was operational, it was a house that had strategic advantage over the one we were sitting in. We saw no one there and there were no weapons inside but we took it down because it controlled our own position.

TESTIMONY 26 - BRIEFINGS & RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The night the infantry went in we maneuvered in ***. We had to get to that base earlier, before dark – about half an hour to an hour earlier. We were at the rendezvous in ***, assembled in one of the assembly halls and the battalion commander held a speech for the whole battalion. He said it was not going to be simple. He defined the operation goals: 2000 dead terrorists, not just stopping the missiles launched at (Israeli) communities around the Gaza Strip. He claimed this would bring the Hamas down to its knees. This number would be a success for the army. As for rules of engagement, the army's working assumption was that the whole area would be devoid of civilians. As soon as the army would go in, from the north, since these are all open farming spaces until you get to Al Atatra, open spaces, there would no longer be people there, so as far as we were concerned anyone there is suspect and the working assumption was that no civilians would still be around. They would escape southbound into Gaza City. Anyone there, as far as the army was concerned, was to be killed.

Shoot to kill?

These words were not used, more like military expressions such as 'take him down.'

No one said 'kill innocents.' But the instruction was that for the army, anyone there is suspect and should be taken down.

Was there any mention of innocents? Do you recall such discourse?

Don't take me at my word, but it was obvious, the battalion commander made it very clear that obviously if someone's innocent, they're not to be touched. Clearly the objective was to get terrorists, but I think that mainly panic was the rule of the game. Everyone was certain we were going to face massive fire as soon as we go into the Strip. The issue of civilians became irrelevant as soon as you'd enter combat – the rules change. You shoot. It's war. In war no questions are asked. In war those anti-tank missiles are blowing up people all around you – that's the situation that was anticipated there, and that's what defined the rules of engagement. In this story, civilians were less relevant.

TESTIMONY 27 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

Often a house that was suspect because of tunnels or explosive charges was a house that was targeted with various phosphorus shells, thinking this would activate all the charges. In other words, phosphorus was to serve as an igniter, simply make it all go up in flames, which then ignited the explosive charges. And the tunnels. Everything was ignited.

Is that what you were told at the preliminary briefing?

No, I say it now as a comment. This was one line of reasoning.

When did you hear about the use of phosphorus, and from whom?

I ran into it, there were all sorts of rumors but I saw it with my own eyes in one of the houses in our immediate area.

What's the story?

The story was that a house was seriously suspected of containing explosive charges. There was also intelligence information about tunnels and the like. Naturally a shell was fired, that didn't do too much. We didn't get the indication we wanted, so the artillery forces decided to target this house, and they were the ones using phosphorus. That's what actually happened. I don't remember whether they fired just one shell or more, I think there were several used. This house went up in flames. Later there were secondary blasts and shelling into Israeli area and so that house was rightly suspect. But 'exploding smoke' was definitely used there.

Did the phosphorus hit just the house?

I don't know for sure. I saw it because I was on guard duty that night. It creates a kind of umbrella. It explodes several dozen meters above the house and forms an umbrella of fire on the house. To tell you that it was pinpoint precision? Artillery never achieves pinpoint precision. But I know that the artillery officer said the hit was on target.

And that is the only use you recall of artillery in your area?

We kept hearing artillery. We were close enough to the border to hear both the firing and the impact. There was also mortar fire from our own outpost. Targeting a house.

Massive use of mortars?

I don't know what you mean by massive. But I think it happened dozens of times during the week we were there.

Precision mortars? Do you remember?

A mortar is not a precision weapon. It is usually more precise than a 52mm caliber mortar, but to say it's precise? I don't think anyone considers it a precision weapon. Again, I'd like to reiterate that this is a neighborhood that we know with certainty is empty of people, or at least there are not supposed to be people there. Whoever is there is considered an insurgent. This is the approach. Obviously. Therefore, the main fear is for the lives of soldiers. The risk of friendly fire. That's the story here. But mortars were definitely used.

TESTIMONY 28 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

...So you take positions that first day inside, and then what's the routine like?

At first we took positions, in the two-three-four first days all the tanks were in positions. The gunner and the commander rotate every two hours, at some point the driver and loader-signaler also rotate, monitoring the area near the tank. Several days later the guy from battalion *** was killed by a sniper bullet to his head, and instructions came out forbidding us to expose our heads out of the tanks. Once every few nights we'd go out on initiated actions.

What does that mean?

At first we were in our own zone, here. We took positions in this area. We cleaned this neighborhood.

What does 'cleaning neighborhoods' actually mean? How was it done in Gaza?

There are houses where infantry had not yet entered. We come along. Fire a shell into a house that appears in the alerts, and enter.

You knock a shell only into that specific house?

Depending on the instructions we receive. Once we fired twelve shells at a house. Someone was reported to be shooting automatic fire there at the infantry guys. So first it was really in the area we left behind, and then slowly we entered here, actually going into Al Atatra a lot. The next nights, towards the end of the first week. The following Saturday night we already went into Al Atatra, detected three terrorists, killed them. Then, getting out of there we were with paratroopers, they came in from here. We were on this track here with some two-three tanks. We cleared the area, shooting at whatever the infantry identified for us, we also detected some Hamas troops there, probably. Armed. Killed three of them. The company commander's tank killed another two. Coming out, our tank closed behind and we were hit from the east by three RPGs. Then you put up a smoke screen and fire a shell as well.

There was a lot of engagement, relatively.

No, this was the most severe we had... Our tank killed ten people, I think... I can say with certainty that seven of them were armed. There was this thing that the guys really liked, with the lookouts. You work with infantrymen, they detect a lookout about two kilometers from you, and you fire a shell.

What's a lookout?

I don't know the exact definition, someone who gives the coordinates to their mortars or snipers, whatever.

He's two kilometers away, how do you know he's a lookout?

I have, you know, this thermal sighting device, and it picks up weapons and stuff. But who knows, it could be a camera, or binoculars, it could be a cup of coffee, you can't tell.

So there were many cases where infantry told you, go for this and that house?

At the second positions. This was our first advance, then there was another. It was Sunday night, and we did the third phase of the operation. So we took up positions over there, really on top of Shatti. You see it from one and a half kilometers away. They have these sky-scrapers there, there were lots of detections. We kept working with snipers, infantry 'straw widows,' where they identify targets for you and you fire shells.

Into Shatti?

Yes, I think this was already the northern part of Gaza City. Their residences.

So in fact infantry tells you, "That building over there, lookout on the ... floor."

Seventh window from the top, right, it's there. Watch out, and boom.

So you identify the lookout or the window?

The window. You shoot even if it's not identified. Let's put it this way. If the infantry identify, chances are you will too.

TESTIMONY 29 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS & BOMBARDMENT

So for that same mission of fragmenting the Gaza Strip, we actually received orders to control some high point, and that while we were there – we didn't know how long – we were to raze as much as possible of the area. Such razing is a euphemism for intentional, systematic destruction, enabling total visibility. Razing was meant to give us the advantage of full control over fire and field of view, to see exactly what was happening throughout the zone. So that no one could hide anything from us. Two reasons were actually mentioned for this destruction. I'll talk now more about the destruction of houses because that is the main problem here. One reason may be termed operational. Meaning a house is suspected to be booby-trapped, contains tunnel openings, is wired in all sorts of directions, or has signs of digging. Or we have some outside intelligence information about it, making it suspect of all these things. Stemming from this operational line of thinking, is a house from which fire is opened, whether light arms or mortars or missiles, Grad rockets, all those things. These are houses we demolish. You could say this is a pretty natural extension of the normal army procedure I know at least in the Gaza Strip. A house that has often been a source of fire has sustained a shelling, or even been demolished entirely. But then we were told there are houses to be demolished for the sake of "the day after." The day after is actually a thought that obviously we're going in for a limited period of time which could be a week and it might also be a few months. But it's not a longer span of time without defining what it is. And the rationale was that we want to come out with the area remaining sterile as far as we're concerned. And the best way to do this is by razing. That way we have good firing capacity, good visibility for

observation, we can see anything, we control a very large part of the area and very effectively. This was the meaning of demolition for the sake of the day after. In practical terms this meant taking a house that is not implicated in any way, that it's single sin is the fact that it is situated on top of a hill in the Gaza Strip.

Close to the fence or inside?

It could be either. I mean, this hill could be, I think, between half a kilometer to over one kilometer. I don't remember precisely so I don't want to say, but it's at a reasonable distance. This hill, this point that is strategic, the reason it is so important is that anyone occupying it can easily fire at Israel, as well as controlling the westward direction towards Gaza City. Anyone on the top of that hill sees both the sea on one side and the Israeli border on the other. So that is how strategic this spot is.

...Each company was assigned a certain designated area. With time, I mean every two days, or three days, it would be moved up. Meaning we came from below and began to climb that hill I mentioned. Every time there would be some advance made. We wanted to control the area, too, while advancing. We kept wanting to move because we were threatened, but there was also constant destruction. In my own experience, having spent over two years in the Gaza Strip in the days of Gush Katif before the disengagement, during the Second Intifada, I never knew such fire power. They were using every weapon I know, at least. This means they were demolishing houses with bulldozers of course, who were working very hard, but also with artillery, helicopters, tanks, air planes, mortars. And naturally special units of the Corps of Engineers, who perform controlled blasting of houses as it were. There were constant explosions and we could no longer differentiate between tanks and artillery that we heard from the border, for we were relatively close to the border. We heard the firing from the border and the explosions in the Strip. There was constant destruction. I can't say whether every house I saw was ruined for the first reason I mentioned, namely on operational grounds, some incrimination or another, or for the sake of 'the day after.' What I do know is that a soldier who took a position and was designated a certain area, let's say 130 degrees for which he was answerable, the way this area was defined was usually from this house, let's say, the house with the red roof to that house with the arches. These boundaries were changed on a daily basis, at times even in shorter intervals. In other words, I get off my position and the boundaries are fixed one way, then when I got up again those boundaries are no longer relevant, for the house no longer stands. The right boundary of my designated area no longer exists. It's gone. So now my designated area has changed. It's deeper, or less deep. It's different. A tree was there, now it's no

longer seen. The boundaries keep changing and that's what kept happening, not once, not twice, not three times. It was actually routine.

When your company occupied houses, there was no fighting going on in your area, right?

No, usually we did not see a living soul. Except for our soldiers of course. Not a soul. The first time we saw Palestinians was several hours after the ceasefire. After the ceasefire was declared. Then, at a distance of about one kilometer, we saw several people moving around in an orchard. But besides them we saw no one. There were cases of mortar shelling in our direction. There were occasions when snipers took shots at us, but visually there was nothing. It is important to stress that on the other hand, it was obvious to us that there were terrorists in the area. That is clear, too.

While your company is present, there are demolitions going on in your designated area?

Sure... I was talking about what took place in our own area. I remember a house that was shelled by an 81mm mortar which is something I had never witnessed before. Except for maneuvers at Tze'elim (training base), and that too was 'dry.' I never saw any use, certainly not operational, in urban warfare, of 81mm mortars. I never realized there was such an intention. 81mm mortar has a high arching trajectory, meaning it fires indirectly. When I fire my weapon I am aiming directly at a target. I mark my target and shoot. I mean, I can fire over a hill, hit something indirectly. The great disadvantage of this kind of fire, however, is that it is less precise. The mortar is a weapon that wreaks great damage and is imprecise. The smaller mortars are still very harmful and less precise than artillery, let's say, which I think, from what I've heard, is a bit more precise. But they cause a lot more damage. Much greater damage. In fact, the 81mm mortar is a rather primitive weapon. A mortar is not much more than a pipe that fires a shell that is fed into it. This is rather primitive. And it's best aiming means is by correcting its fall of shot. In other words, you see where it hit and say, okay, correct 2 cm. to the right, 3 cm. to the left. Eventually you hit the target. I was so surprised, we know it's so imprecise and still make operational use of it.

Was there much use made of 81mm mortars in your area?

At least twice or three times out of my own outpost, and a series of bursts each time. In other words, not a single shell but several. I'll say, even if prematurely, that I have the feeling the army was trying out something for real here. There was no need for such intense fire, no need to use mortars, phosphorus ammunition. Others as well as myself have a certain feeling that the army was looking for the

opportunity to hold a spectacular maneuver in order to show its muscle. This is the only reasoning I can see for using mortars operationally in urban warfare. Nothing else to my mind can justify this. Nor is this any justification, naturally.

...The day after?

That's something we didn't really understand, we didn't quite know the meaning of it. In a way, we got the rationale. I explained this – the army wants us to have that advantage when we leave. But it created certain confusion, it blurred things. I mean, you see a house, so what do you do? How? I felt the orders here were somewhat amorphous. I could say that in a personal talk with my battalion commander he mentioned this and said in a sort of sad half-smile, I think, that this is something that will eventually be added to 'my war crimes.' Meaning that he realized there was a certain problem about this. I know that this order was carried out in practice, for some of the houses that were demolished had not been incriminated. There was even a certain barn there that was blasted. Houses that stood there, harmless, and were demolished in various ways and modes. This was a general framework for destruction. That was my own feeling, but again – it's a feeling. I only know with certainty that destruction took place, in different ways and by various means.

You had served in Gaza for years, was this destruction in any way similar to what you'd known before?

No, no way. This was on a totally different scale. This was fire-power such as I had never known. I can't say that when I had been in Gaza the airforce wasn't used. But no, the ground was not constantly shaking. I mean, there were blasts all the time. Whether distant or near, that's already semantics. But our basic feeling was that the earth was constantly shaking. Explosions were heard all day long, the night was filled with flashes, an intensity we had never experienced before. Several D-9 bulldozers were operating around the clock, constantly busy. This was a very different scale of intensity than we had known. Much greater... Look, when we were fired at, we did not actually see the enemy with our own eyes. On the other hand, we were fired at and we fired back towards suspect spots. What is a suspect spot? It means you decided it was suspect and could take out all your rage at it.

TESTIMONY 30 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS & BOMBARDMENT

There was a mosque, and we won't go into all those traditional reports about why was there still a mosque, those are for internal discussion. But on the whole, most of the mosques were demolished. That too, earlier – in Tze'elim (army base) – that brigade commander I mentioned explicitly told us we should not hesitate to target mosques. Nothing is immune, nothing and no area. He explicitly mentioned mosques. This specific mosque was one of several in our designated area, which wasn't too wide.

It contained several mosques, most of which were hit. At some point, during the regular searches, we heard and saw – not I, personally, but the deputy commander who kept his head out and said, "Did you see that? They blasted a mosque." Then I was told it was probably targeted by a helicopter. Not sure who fired. They blasted the whole minaret, that top part of the mosque, where the muezzin stands.

Why? Had it been a source of fire?

No. Not that I know of.

Your tank is supposed to be monitoring that area from a range of 500 meters.

We saw no fire. I repeat, from my own personal point of view I saw no reason whatsoever. Could be that an alert was on about some anti-tank fire source at the top of that minaret. I don't know. I know that as far as I see, there was no fire originating there, and at some point the minaret was taken down.

This happened in daytime?

Yes.

You were there for a week, and on some days the air force would bomb?

No, the air force bombed all the time, not necessarily the neighborhood facing us, but we would hear bombing constantly, not just a burst of machine gunfire here and there, but massive bombings by the navy and air force. They would constantly shell various areas in the Strip. Not necessarily in our designated area, but you constantly heard them firing.

That's why I ask you specifically about your own designated area, if you could know what they were doing and why. We don't know the reasons for

fire all around, that's why I'd like to focus on what you actually see.

Occasionally in our designated area there was longer-range fire. Not within the specific area which we were monitoring but rather a kilometer to a kilometer-and-a-half away. You don't hear any fire before the Israeli army fires. We saw no resistance there except for that one incident with the anti-tank crew and the rumor about mortar shells being fired at us once. Assuming it was correct; besides these two incidents we faced absolutely no fire, and did see our own side firing at the other side.

There was this concept of deterrence, deterrent fire?

It was talked about in our maneuvers, that there's nothing to prevent us from firing for deterrence. There was nothing to deter so we didn't need to do that, but it was certainly discussed in the briefings, deterrent fire. Fire to keep heads down. You see a position which you cannot monitor and you suspect there's something there, shoot without finding out what's there first.

What's a position?

If you see sand bags, you shoot without the shadow of a doubt.

How do you define it?

You run into a curve in the road and know there's an angle from which you cannot monitor a certain area, first you shoot, see if anything happens, then you proceed... When we say 'dead area' we mean a building. If you don't know what's in that building, you fire at it. Such were the general instructions, in fact we weren't in these situations so I don't know what happened there, but instructions were definitely that if you get to a T-junction and have to make a right turn and behind you is a building and you have no idea what's in it, you fire at the building and then turn right. This kind of thing. No doubt, preventive fire was allowed.

TESTIMONY 31 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Did you have preliminary briefings regarding innocents? You enter a neighborhood and you have to be careful and not fire at our own men and not remove your helmets.

At briefings on places I entered, we were told that if we engage at close range, we should know that normally, at night the Arab is asleep in his bed and has no business outdoors at this time, so we should really be careful. We weren't told outright to shoot anything we saw moving but that was the implication. I asked, "What if I see a girl outside?" She has no business being outside. "So what do I do?" Check if she's armed – then shoot her. I should shoot anyone who's armed, but if I engage at close range then I understood from that briefing that it's better to shoot first and ask questions later.

Were there such cases?

I wasn't involved in any.

...Did the rules of engagement get very slack at any point?

There was a point in the briefings when we got there, and still before the ground offensive began, where rules of engagement were distancing fire from 500 meters on.

What's distancing fire?

That's 30 degrees up, 30 degrees to the left and open fire.

What we know as deterrent fire, signaling a person to keep away from us.

"Go away, man."

500 meters range with light arms...

No hit. There are grenade launchers and machine guns. We put up positions there along the reporting lines. There are also anti-tank guided missiles and various ambushes with mortars. At some point distancing fire was limited to one kilometer. I mean, what's limited? 700 meters from us there were already houses. If anyone moves in the house, I'm supposed to open fire to distance them? I was answered in the affirmative. This house is not supposed to be inhabited right now. They know what they're doing and I'm to open distancing fire.

And when you're inside, not outside the fence?

At that point, too, the regulations were not changed: if he's holding any kind of arms, shoot him.

At a range of 700 meters? That's the combatants' safety radius?

At that point, no. Even if you see something two kilometers away, if you can hit him, hit him. The fact that my light machine-gun doesn't hit anything two kilometers away is another story.

Were there people who opened fire without detecting anything? On their own initiative?

I think so. I think that there was such a case in the force parallel to us. There was sniper fire. The bullet scratched a soldier's helmet and they began to fire in all directions. We were 200 meters behind, and began to inquire on the radio and we were told there was sniper fire against the force.

Were there cases of grenade-launcher fire or heavy machine guns there?

Yes. From the ambushes, countless cases. First of all, every morning at dawn you've got proof firing as routine standby procedure, which means 20 shots of 0.5 heavy machine guns, zeroing fire for openers, after firing ten shots you calibrate and then shoot another ten. With the grenade launcher, you get five grenades and try to 'thread' them into some house so as not to waste ammo. A house that is supposedly empty.

How can you tell?

You sit facing it all night. You also inquire at the observation command post if there's anyone there, or anything, and the lookout tells you she hasn't detected any movement for – say – the last 48 or 72 hours.

Was there destruction of property, buildings, just for kicks?

That's what we saw the airforce doing.

And you, with the guns you helped aim?

I know that on one of our lookouts with this crew we helped aim a mortar platoon. But when you fire a 120mm mortar, if you've ever had the chance to do this, then you know. He fires and then you tell him left or right according to how he hit.

Do you remember what the range is of each type of mortar - hitting,

wounding, killing?

For a 120 mm mortar shell, I think at 10 meter range it kills, and at 25m it wounds.

And a 80 mm mortar?

That's 7 meters for killing and 15 for wounding, whereas a 60 mm mortar is 5 meters for killing, and 15 for wounding.

Is it a precision weapon?

Very precise. But if with light arms you've got an 80% chance of hitting with your first shot, with mortars it is much less.

What targets do you aim for with these mortars?

Houses, open spaces where all sorts of suspect movements have been detected.

Why houses, because you detect something there?

If you'd see a rocket launched out of that house, you'd fire. But again, the first shell will hit next to the house. Some 30 meters away, if it's an outstanding mortar man.

He could also happen to sneeze just as he was loading the shell, causing it to lower a bit and then he could hit a kilometer off target.

And when you directed, did the mortars achieve precision right away?

No. The shell would hit the road, the house would be filled with shrapnel, windows would be smashed, and then the next round would hit. The mortar shell already hit.

At the time, was there any mortar fire for deterrence or to make your presence felt, was there such a thing?

Areas that were a source of mortar fire were fired at just as often. Not every shot got a retaliation shelling and not every rocket brought on an aerial attack. From this neighborhood such and such a number of rockets was launched today? Let's raze the neighborhood. It seems to work this way. I don't recall anyone saying it, but we saw such and such a number of rockets fired and said this neighborhood will not be standing long, and indeed it didn't.

How long?

Six hours.

What happened?

After six hours, about 20 mortar shells fell there, and that does not leave too many buildings intact.

TESTIMONY 32 - BRIEFINGS

You mentioned the atmosphere a lot. I'm trying to imagine this as a soldier and consider the chain of command. I wonder about a company commander and the officers. Say a soldier follows your company commander, his conduct, what kind of "follow me!" spirit gets across?

I ended up with two types. But after the incident with the Palestinian who was killed (the witness spoke about a shooting at a person moving around one of the soldiers' positions who, eventually, turned out to be an innocent passer-by), one thing that etched itself in my mind was that immediately after he was taken down I heard the company commander on radio saying, 'we opened the evening' or something in that vein. I can't tell you he was thirsting for blood, but he wasn't exactly interested in controlling what was happening. There was another type of commander which I'd like to mention, my deputy company commander who quarreled with the guys so they wouldn't sit on the sofas, stuff like that. He was an outstanding model.

What did people say to him?

People argued with him and later there was talk about this. They resented him and eventually we had a company discussion and they mentioned this specifically. He wouldn't let them break things in the house.

So what did they say about the company commander?

There was less talk of values, more of professionalism, not a moral issue. The difficult thing about the atmosphere was the negligible value placed on human life. People didn't seem to be to upset about taking human lives. For some of the guys this wasn't the first time, they had taken part in many army operations. I was upset at the talk I heard. Not the deeds I saw done. "Armed or not, incriminated or not – what difference does it make?" That's the impression I had from what I heard. It didn't surprise me, it was no shock because I had known these guys

before, but unlike previous assignments we'd had, their finger was lighter on the trigger and that brings things out. It also transforms the discussion.

People let themselves go more?

Yes. The commanders, too, were more permissive. Unlike routine security assignments, this was a different kind of risk altogether. Again, with all the alerts we got there – either we were being lied to the whole time, or it was a miracle that we came out without significant casualties.

TESTIMONY 33 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Generally we were there over 24 hours, say around 30 hours. Around two o'clock the ceasefire was declared and we folded up and by six or seven a.m. the whole battalion was already out of Gaza. I think that area was vacated the fastest because there was nothing to hold on to. A little while before the ceasefire, about a quarter of an hour or half an hour before, we were instructed to shoot into suspect places. We didn't know, at least I didn't know there was a ceasefire. I'm a Negev machine-gunner and I went up with my weapon, another guy went up with his standard machine gun. We fired rounds at houses in front of us which we didn't see movement during the two nights and day we had been there. We saw no movement. But these were houses that we identified as looking out over us. We fired into windows, before the ceasefire. The second platoon with us ran the same procedure. On the other hand, the tanks next to us even shelled the mosque there.

During that same quarter of an hour?

Yes. They shot a lot before, too. But their heavy fire was just before the ceasefire, and they really let out series of shells. One house there had a secondary blast from a tank shell, but it's hard to tell. There may have been a cooking gas tank there that blew up. I can't say. In general, everything that could fire, did. They fired more or less as we did, at whatever they considered suspect, not on the base of intelligence information but by analyzing the picture on the ground. At least that's what I was told.

Who gave this order on radio?

It wasn't on radio, but probably the brigade commander. Really, all at once everyone starting shooting. I heard this happened in other areas as well.

TESTIMONY 34 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

...Go ahead and ask soldiers how often they encountered combatants in Gaza – nothing.

When you entered the Gaza Strip there was no resistance?

Next to none at all.

What were the rules of engagement? You're carrying light arms?

Yes. First of all – wherever there are none of our forces, you're exposed to fire. Everything is a threat. There is no such thing as suspect arrest procedure. If I detect a suspect, if he is a threat to me – I shoot.

No deterrent fire? Calling out? After all, a bullet is a bullet and there's no turning it back.

No. Everyone, but everyone knew we were entering. Even those we caught knew we were there. That's why they came out with white flags, so they would not be shot.

Was there a white flag procedure?

No. I saw and heard and posters were being distributed, Israeli air force helicopters dropped flyers and passed overhead with giant banners. Just think how risky it is for us to be so humanitarian.

Were guys resentful about this?

Sure. Even I was. I think it's stupid to warn them in advance. You know how many terrorists we missed this way? Lots. Lots. We know for certain that there were 250 men underneath the hospital. With certainty.

Who briefed you before you went in?

Our commander spoke with all the crews together, and the same battalion commander who was in charge of the whole force briefed us before entry. The briefing was about how the entry should take place. The goal was to keep everyone unharmed while entering. They spoke about aggressive action, they were very wary of abductions and emphasized it in a big way. I remember that my buddy and I stuck together, I even went with him to take a crap. Literally. Even going up for night watch. I went with him, and then when my turn came he stuck with me. We always were reported in what direction we were open and closed. We had it relatively easy because we knew we were open to the south.

What does that mean, open and closed?

Open and closed to fire. When you detect danger, you know whether there are IDF forces there or not.

What incriminates people to be shot? Someone approaches you and he's armed...

I'm supposed to know whether someone there is armed. If he's IDF I'll know it by his dress and weapon. You can tell. True, they sometimes wear uniforms.

I heard there were instructions not to go up to the roofs.

True.

What was the point?

In Gaza there were bursts of fire from above and as soon as you detect movement on a roof you know that it's not your own forces. That way you can take down guys who're directing others from very close up.

But if these were civilians?

The closest force goes to check out if these are civilians.

You're the 'eyes' on the ground?

Yes.

You direct the forces?

If need be, yes.

You said that you hardly encountered combatants but you did, some. Where did you detect targets if the whole neighborhood was empty?

Eventually, staying at the defense positions all day, you'd sit there with the sighting device on, searching. Suddenly you see some movement in a window. You focus and wait another half-hour, another hour or hour-and-a-half. Suddenly you see a spark, hear some booms... But you verify it's that, and direct our forces.

What kind?

Usually combat helicopters. Mortars did the job too, but helicopters were easiest.

What distance were those windows from you?

Al Bureij was the nearest neighborhood. We sat close to the sea and there were high rises.

You detect a spark in some window of a high rise building. How do you direct a mortar to hit a window?

Not necessarily for precise fire. I know it can hit a nearby window and that's good enough.

You directed tanks, too?

Yes. A tank is easier. You usually tell the tanks, "Turn 180 degrees and shell the black house." It's much easier. The point was to spare the soldiers and avoid the threat to us – obliterate it the moment it appears. I think that arrest procedure was less strict exactly for this reason, and in order to be with a 'lighter finger on the trigger' – I don't like to call it this way, but it's true. We're there and we're not willing to lose men, neither wounded nor killed. Later we can worry about humanitarianism.

There are standard procedures for lookouts, or people with cell phones?

There's no such thing. If I detect a lookout, someone holding binoculars or a cell phone – he's an accomplice. I must direct fire and take him down. Dress is important, appearance, suspect signs... If he stands on a roof holding a cell phone, that's suspect. No reason for him to stand there, he knows the IDF is in Gaza.

It's written on the flyers?

No. The flyers say they mustn't be outdoors, and should rush south, anyone from Netzarim down. The first days, it wasn't easy to get out of the house. Then the aim was to have as much movement as possible southbound. The first two days it wasn't easy to get out, then move south as far as possible.

You saw civilian movement?

No. It was empty.

Did the briefings address such events, to show consideration for civilians?

Less. The most significant point made in the briefings I attended was about soldiers' lives. There was hardly any mention of civilians. Essentially no one was supposed to be there. There was supposed to be a tiny resistance force upon entry, but there just wasn't.

TESTIMONY 35 - VANDALISM

... He (one of the soldiers) was in the room, I was in the position, and looked through the window, sitting. He opened a child's bag. The family was not there, they had run away. He took out notebooks and text books and ripped them. One guy smashed cupboards for kicks, out of boredom. There were guys arguing with the platoon commander before we left the house a week later, over why he wouldn't let them smash the picture hanging there. They think he was being petty with them. It should be noted that the deputy company commander at the debriefing yelled at them that they're dealing with non essential issues and we've got a humanitarian issue here.

Do you recall anything else related to vandalism?

The deputy company commander's staff wrote "Death to Arabs" on their wall.

You said earlier they wondered why they weren't being allowed to smash another picture, too.

This "too" is due to an atmosphere of... After getting out of there, I heard about the letter that reservists wrote (to the Palestinian family that lived in the house they occupied), saying they were sorry. I thought it was a different world, because of the atmosphere on the ground. I didn't regard this house either as a house that I should respect and leave neat behind me. For example, once I shat on the roof because I had nowhere else to do it. Leaving this house clean was just not the first thing on my mind. There was simply this atmosphere. But about stealing: the company commander, apparently under orders of the battalion commander, held a shame parade to check if stuff was stolen. How did he do it? He didn't tell the commanders to check each individual soldier. He said: "You (soldiers) pair up, everyone checks his mate for stuff taken. Then you don't have to yell out if you find anything, just come to me discretely, or to the platoon commander and sort

it out." Obviously either this company commander is a total idiot or he just didn't want such stuff to be found out.

So there was a shame parade where everyone checked his buddy?

It was bullshit. And I'm sure there was looting. I can't tell you anything more specific.

TESTIMONY 36 - RABBINATE UNIT

There were army rabbis coming around and praying, and they gave a lot of moral support... Inside the area, rabbis come to talk to you. A rabbi was brought into a house and he was all fired up about being out in the field with the combatants, and wore a ceramic protective vest for the first time in 30 years and he sat with the men for talks. We also had these army-rabbinate-issued booklets with essays.

What was in them?

Essays about the operation, the importance of serving the People of Israel who have been persecuted all these years and is now back in its own homeland and needs to fight for it. All the well-known clichés, connecting it to the Holocaust and defending God and also because it's Gaza, and the link to the evacuated Katif settlements, and here we are going back to the Katif area, to Netzarim. After I got out I saw a newspaper article about someone who was evacuated from there and had flown the Israeli flag again from a rooftop at Netzarim. These are opinion articles and contents that shift the main focus away from the actual idea of battling a terrorist organization that's present amongst civilians. The battalion commander said in the beginning that we're going in there to stop the Qassams. But the pamphlets spoke of going back to the source, of historic justice, things like that.

People actually read this?

Yes. That's the reading material we got. This, the Book of Psalms, and a newspaper...

The commander of the Gaza Division forbade having newspapers in the field. There was one newspaper smuggled in with the supplies in a heavy APC. It was a Monday newspaper and that's what we read all week. Whoever could read Arabic could also read the books we found there.

Except for the pamphlets, did the rabbi have talks with the individual soldiers?

Not with me, but I heard from my friends. The houses were defense posts and we couldn't go outside, so we would usually be eating, cleaning our weapons or gear, or doing lookout shifts. So all of a sudden the rabbi would appear and all of us would be assembled and seated in the living room of this house and the rabbi would speak.

TESTIMONY 37 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS & VANDALISM

Were there any humanitarian convoys in your area?

No. I remember hearing once that a Red Cross truck would be passing, but it didn't, or at least I don't recall it did or that someone told me it did. Every time they'd announce a humanitarian ceasefire.

What did that mean?

Basically that we were to hold our fire. Categorically. Can I tell you it was quiet? It wasn't. The Giv'ati forces made a lot of noise even during humanitarian ceasefires. That was my sense of things. I can't say this about a specific incident on a certain date or at a certain time. But it was not quiet.

They were positioned mostly inside the Zaytoun neighborhood?

Yes. They did some hard work there... I see Giv'ati forces through my binoculars, from a distance. And phosphorus rounds were used there too. I saw this through the binoculars, it was a kilometer away. Having seen it once, you can't go wrong. I remember there were several incidents. I can't tell you the background for their use, but use was made there of phosphorus.

So what do you see around you there?

You see increasing devastation. Houses that disappear with time, farm land plowed over time.

You served in Gaza as a regular soldier, meaning you have a sense of the

scale of military operations in Gaza.

This is different altogether. There's no comparison. No way, it is not at all similar to what we knew as operations in our conscript term of duty. Things were localized back then. Even the large, brigade-scale operations were combined with tanks. Not artillery, choppers or combat helicopters. Not this whole bedlam.

What is the difference on the ground?

On the ground you hear these thunderous blasts all day long. I mean, not just tank shelling which was a tune we'd long gotten used to, but blasts that actually rock the outpost, to the extent that some of us were ordered out of the house we were quartered in for fear it would collapse, that engineering-wise it would not last. These were the blasts closer to us.

By the Corps of Engineers unit?

Yes. Usually. But even when artillery hits not too far away, the blast would be enormous.

How does the area look then?

I'll describe for you the house we took over: You enter a house which had obviously been a workshop, probably a rather large building, certainly compared to others. You enter the house which had been entered with live gunfire, in urban warfare, including the use of grenades, which you see from the shrapnel that obviously hit the plaster on the walls. Then of course you see that some of the walls have been partially ruined, the concrete fence around the house, as well as all kinds of holes broken in the walls between rooms. I can imagine this was done with a 5 kg sledgehammer, or with explosive charges. These two things were around all the time. One of the guys told me it had been a 5 kg sledgehammer. That's what the house would look like.

Every house was taken with live gunfire?

I can't tell you that every single one was, but I see no reason that the house I was in would be different from others. I suppose they were, and I know that more houses were. I know for certain that grenades were used.

Your guys or Giv'ati?

Both.

Your guys also entered houses with live gunfire?

Ours too. Definitely. I think there's a very significant difference in what I hear from guys and what I know personally about my own unit. Big difference between the way we treated the contents of the house and the way the regulars did. The regulars wouldn't take care of even the simplest most basic sanitary stuff like going to the toilet, basic hygiene. I mean you could see they had defecated anywhere and left the stuff lying around. There's something called "shit bags" then they left them in some room or threw it away not too far around the house. The house was filthy when we got there. Really... The first thing we did was to clean up. But regarding property, too. Whether someone actually picked up a picture, took stuff – I don't know many people who came away with souvenirs. I mean, the only thing I recall is that one of the Giv'ati men showed me a picture he had picked up. I don't even know whether he put it back or not. I don't know whether he finally took it with him or not.

A picture of what?

I think it was of the owner of the house. I don't know for sure, a bearded man in his thirties or forties, with a little child clutching a Kalachnikov. Naturally this was while talking about... This picture served that soldier as a justification for everything we did there. "Look at this cruel enemy we have here, who lets his five-year old son hold his gun." That's it. When we arrived we did try to clean up. I can say about my own platoon that the deeper moral discussion went about as far as whether to use the guy's olive oil or not.

And the television set and everything was intact when you went in?

The television set came out with us. At least one of them. One was ruined by the shelling. Furniture. Guys tried to preserve the furniture, whatever was not used for operational purposes, like blacking out the room and stuff like that.

TESTIMONY 38 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT & HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

When we spoke about what really took place in Gaza, you said it was insane or something. Why, what was it?

The amount of destruction there was incredible. You drive around those neighborhoods, and can't identify a thing. Not one stone left standing over another. You see plenty of fields, hothouses, orchards, everything devastated. Totally ruined. It's terrible. It's surreal. You see a pink room with a Barbie poster, a shell that had gone through about a meter and a half below.

Really went through?

Yes. People live in these places. There were many incidents of people, towards the third or fourth day, where you'd be informed on radio or just simply suddenly see in front of you a group of about twenty people walking south with white flags. It's so insane.

So when there's information of people with such flags, what do you do?

You're told not to open fire. If you get this information, or if there's a report of something humanitarian supposed to pass.

Ambulances passed, for instance?

No.

So what is this humanitarian thing?

Humanitarian aid, I don't know what they call it. Maybe a donkey and a cart and who knows what it's carrying. Maybe rice or something.

Were there cases that you knew of, that you were told of civilians or someone wounded, or wounded persons who had had no medical care. Did you run into such cases?

The matter with tanks is... Our range is huge, you don't really feel the enemy. So our own incidents, things that happened once or twice, were at a range of over a kilometer, or 800 meters. So you don't really feel it. I don't know, in my own company there were plenty of people who fired just for the hell of it, at houses, water tanks. They loved targeting water tanks.

But you don't do it with shells. You do it with machine guns.

Machine guns. Fire at windows too. If there's information requiring us to demolish that house.

Did you happen to escort D-9s demolishing houses, do you know what they destroyed, why, how many?

The way we worked was in secondary protective positions. After they realized we'd be inside over 72 hours, and that we couldn't stay in our positions, all of us, all of the time, these rear positions were prepared. If they didn't like the looks of some house, if it disturbed or threatened them, then it would be taken down.

But that was for operational needs.

Operational needs. I don't know, maybe half of them. Sometimes the company commander would give the D-9s something to demolish just to make them happy.

Why, were they resentful?

No, but D-9s, you know... They have a hard time. They're your gofers. They do what they're told. So they love to demolish, and when the commander sends them off, "Go take down that house," they're happy.

Were there lots of explosive charges? Booby-trapped houses, cases where you fired at a house and heard a secondary explosion? How many such cases were there?

There was once someone we detected and fired at, and then heard a secondary explosion. From a house at a window, 800 meter range. Nothing else that I know of.

Although the infantry say they had a lot of that. According to them there were plenty of booby-trapped houses. In our second advance there was some field where we'd nearly hit charges any minute, and eventually the paratrooper officer close by did hit a charge, it was hard. He and another two soldiers were wounded. The infantry who were more inside the houses felt this more than we did.

Did you see civilians?

I saw the folks who were walking south... There was this one time when two old women were right behind us with a little kid and a suitcase, all confused.

Behind you, meaning north of you, between you and the border.

Yes, behind us. They got too close to the infantry formation, and deterrent fire was opened at them. I also heard that the company commander asked the guys, 'Why didn't you shoot them?' I talked with some of the guys at the position over there. I saw the infantrymen in the rear positions.

TESTIMONY 39 - VANDALISM

We came in on heavy APCs, got to the house we were to occupy, and assembled its residents downstairs. Since we had an interrogator we didn't let them go right away. Only the women and children, and told them to go in a certain direction. Naturally we reported on radio that they were passing through so they wouldn't be killed. We searched all the floors, one by one, the battalion commander was with us, too. We blasted every door with an explosive charge. There were many doors. We were already used to this, assuming there were no terrorists. So we sat quiet. There was no one there and we went in and the soldiers were indifferent. You go in with live fire after breaking in the door, the soldiers are looking to smash television and computer screens, looking for interesting stuff in drawers: Hamas shawls and flags, knives, looking for loot. After a while we realized there was nothing to loot, as people knew we were coming and took their stuff away with them.

Did the soldiers take things?

There was no money, but there were Hamas shawls. It's not a nice or moral act, not ethical, but worse things happened. Even if a soldier was found out to have taken something, what could be done with him, would he be charged? At the end of the day, I realized, when you go into battle, the only thing that keeps soldiers together is trust. You have to choose your battles. If you 'rat' on someone – you'll lose their trust. Sometimes it's just not worth it.

You said there were worse things, morally.

As far as I'm concerned, shooting was worse. The fact that people looked for terrorists, and sought to annoy captives, and the way they look at people there. It was terrible. The way they're brought up. I cannot understand this at all. If someone picked up a Hamas shawl, I don't really feel guilty towards the Hamas man. I mean, it is property, but after all, it's Hamas.

What was the attitude to people's property in houses you occupied?

The guys would simply break stuff. Some were out to destroy and trash the whole time. They drew a disgusting drawing on the wall. They threw out sofas. They took down a picture from the wall just to shatter it. They really couldn't see why they shouldn't.

...So why did this happen in Gaza (and not in other places)?

When you enter a house on a mapping action, the family looks at you. But here you didn't know if this was a terrorist's house at all. So the assumption is that

everyone is a terrorist, and then it's legitimate to do just anything we please. And also because Gaza is more dangerous, so there the guys have free rein. We carried out a drill near the house. On the way down soldiers took their time because they ran into an easy chair or mattress so the decision was to clean it out. What does that mean? Take the large cupboard and break it, throw it into the hall as trash, do this with any piece of furniture. The hall was also full of holes from tank shells, so we threw all the furniture into one hallway.

How were you feeling, coming out of Gaza?

That at the end of the day, the war was justified. We did what we had to do. The actual doing was a bit thoughtless. We were allowed to do anything we wanted. Who's to tell us not to?

TESTIMONY 40 - BOMBARDMENT

Did you also enter houses?

There was this one house I entered because we had to clean it out. It was sprayed regardless of air force attacks. The walls looked like Swiss cheese.

What do you mean by cleaning it out?

We've just been shot at from this house, so we have to go in and neutralize the threat. This used to be called "confirm the kill."

You didn't stay in houses?

No. We stayed in open areas north of the built-up area.

What did it feel like, being on that operation?

I felt that the power... You know what? You feel like a child playing around with a magnifying glass, burning up ants. Really. A 20-year-old kid should not be doing such things to people.

What do you mean?

I mean that I was very lucky being assigned to a unit with people older than myself, who'd already gone through one Intifada and half a war in Lebanon and are mentally mature enough to go through such things again and they're not trigger-happy. I think I was lucky to work within this framework and not with my

own battalion. Because I know that there, the guys were running a 'Wild West' scene: draw, cock, kill.

You know this because you've talked to people?

I've talked to people as much as I could hear. I understood that conduct there had been somewhat savage. "If you sight it, shoot it."

There were objectives to this campaign, and everything seemed quite calculated over television and in the media.

It may have been very calculated at the Chief of Staff's office in the Tel Aviv-based army headquarters, and he also came out to see what was happening on the ground and was very happy with what he saw. Could be that it's not something that is supposed to look very orderly. I thought I was going to break in doors and see terrorists and shoot them. But while you're breaking in a door you might suddenly get shot at from the corner or get an RPG or a Qassam rocket will be launched from the roof above you and you're calling 911 to the air force to bomb them. Sometimes they'd bomb the house you were reporting, and sometimes not.

How are you feeling, as you come out of this?

Look, after having directed planes twice – not personally – you see him drop a bomb and you say "not there, it's one location further north-west" and you don't see him coming back, perhaps tomorrow he'll drop his bomb over the location I meant, or perhaps there was something else at the location he just bombed, but I got out of there feeling in total lack of control over things I said. There were many things I chose not to report, I did eventually report but said, "It's wrong to report this." And you're debriefed in the war-room, someone seeks information and you don't know what to tell him and you've seen someone running from one location to another. Is he armed? I didn't see. Is he this or that? I didn't see. What was he wearing? I didn't really see. I saw just a silhouette. Leave me alone. And they shoot.

On suspicion alone?

Yes. And I don't know who was in that house.

And that's what happened?

Yes... I felt that now the Israeli army seeks culprits and one should keep out of its sight.

TESTIMONY 41 - BOMBARDMENT

Nearly no one ran into the enemy. I know of two encounters during the whole operation. The soldiers, too, were disappointed for not having had any encounters with terrorists. The defined situation was that sparing our forces was of primary importance. This means that if we detect anyone, we disconnect, summon a helicopter and take down the house. That was the clear definition and that is how it was done. As soon as we detect anyone, our forces improve their position and get into defense layout, and a helicopter takes down the house. No direct contact unless it happens at the first moment of the encounter. At least in the paratroopers' designated area, there were hardly any encounters at all.

Were there definitions for identifying things?

Not as far as we were concerned. I don't know whether things were clearly defined, but as for the language, it was "suspects, lookouts, people standing on roofs and looking towards our forces, making suspect movements on the roof, bending down, looking out beyond the rim" – such were definitions of suspects that were enough to call a UAV or helicopter.

You said there were orders to take down people seen on a roof.

As far as I know, I'm not certain what is considered suspect and what proper rules of engagement are. We responded to anything that seemed suspect to us. A helicopter or a firing *** was activated passed on detailed reports of what we see. A *** would arrive, connect to the command post and then the people at the central command post could see what was going on and if it looked suspect to them, they would activate it.

Were there many such cases?

Yes. Around ten – during the fighting. I think the air force was working the hardest. Especially in the routine daily warfare.

Were there more cases of identification that you recall?

As soon as forces entered the area at night, everything became suspect. You can't identify too much at night and anything that moves you engage in order not to take risks. It was not defined this way officially, but it was obvious. Any movement on the ground at night was doomed. That's how things ran.

Do you recall identification of specific houses?

There was a house from which six people came out after it was bombed. That house was bombed by a different unit and there were escapees.

What was done with escapees?

I don't know. They were within range of the UAV. The higher commanders decide.

Tell some of the stories of houses you took down.

The day before our advance, so our forces were already rather far from us. About 300 meters. We identified movement in a window of a house about 400 meters from us, clearly visible. It took a while until the UAV arrived, 3-4 hours. It was strange, seeing movement so near. A helicopter arrived, it too detected movement. We didn't speak about suspects, but two missiles were fired at the whole house.

How many people had been inside?

I don't know, but at least three ambulances arrived eventually.

What happens after the bombing?

A hole in the wall, bursts of fire inside, and demolition of the whole house.

You spoke about a house that was bombed before the ground unit went in. What happened there?

It was dark. Movement was detected inside a house above their entry route. They entered the previous evening and claimed they had been targeted with anti-tank fire from one of the houses. So all the houses were fired on. There was massive fire. This was also shown on the news. People were shown lying on the beach and the houses from the west eastward, and in the next entry there was movement identified that entailed aircraft fire on that house. 5-6 escapees came out of the house. I don't know what happened to them. Perhaps they're no longer with us.

TESTIMONY 42 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS & USE OF WHITE PHOSPHORUS

... Another case we had in our designated area was some house that according to intelligence information was said to be booby-trapped, that it contained a tunnel and the like. In other words, it was said to be highly dangerous. Troops did not enter it because it could be mined and if there were tunnels then there was the risk of soldiers being kidnapped etc. So several shells were fired at it and no explosions were heard on the scale that would have indicated that it did contain whatever it was suspected to contain. Then some order arrived to ignite it. The way to do that was to actually fire phosphorus shells from above. What the phosphorus does is to let out an umbrella of fire over the target and naturally that ignites the whole house. Finally we also saw all kinds of secondary blasts going, and two Qassam rockets flew out of there towards Israel, probably aimed and charged. There were lots of other things there and more secondary blasts, but that was the only time in our own area when phosphorus was used. But in this case there was definitely use of phosphorus ammunition. I do recall, though, that looking north we saw Giv'ati infantry troops in Zaytoun, and witnessed quite a lot of phosphorus being used. I can't tell to what extent that use was actually necessary operationally, and whether it was done inside the inhabited area. It looked that way, but it could also have been... Phosphorus was definitely used there, I saw this and you cannot go wrong, you actually see the flaming umbrellas.

TESTIMONY 43 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

One guy said he just couldn't finish this operation without killing someone. So he killed someone, apparently some sort of lookout. There was an order that if you see someone on the lookout at our building, he should be taken down.

What does that mean?

During the bombings, people either ran away or hid, so it was said that if anyone is out on a street where the IDF is currently present, and he's holding a cell phone – he must be a lookout. What's important here is the fact that he said he wasn't willing to go home empty-handed, without having marked an X on his rifle butt.

You recall at what distance you may or may not open fire? I suppose the guy also got some okay...

I think the okay was the instruction given for the future. I mean, say a terrorist is running and crossing the line, you may act at your discretion according to the general instructions.

But here, for example, it's someone holding a cell phone, not someone running towards you, armed.

That's right. But he is considered incriminated. We're not on routine security duty here, suspect arrest procedures. This is a type of war.

So what was the story with that Palestinian, in this case?

The soldier was lying in his position, he has a shooting crack. The kind snipers have.

And he detected the guy with the cell phone?

I don't remember exactly whether it was a cell phone. Could be. I can definitely say he was not armed. I can definitely say the soldier regarded this as some children's game and was delighted and laughing after this. I think that a normal person, even having killed an armed terrorist, would not be amused. Too bad there are people for whom the army is a way to work out their aggressions.

I want to get the picture: a soldier in a position shot someone, hit him, he's glad he scored. What's the reaction?

More things happen at the same time. There's a tank company around us and more things are happening.

But inside the house?

There are several positions that must be manned, and the rest are relaxing. I think that if this platoon commander had thought just anyone had been shot, he would really not like this. But listen, the lines are pretty blurred... In general, in the West Bank the battalion commander could order us to tell apart civilian population from terrorists. He could tell us, "You're not in a war zone, but this could turn into a war zone."

But Gaza is war.

TESTIMONY 44 - VANDALISM

We got there in the morning, in daylight. Tanks ride ahead and behind us, and parallel to us, covering us constantly. As we enter the city itself it is already full of noise. We squeeze in there in our heavy APCs, and when we reach our objective and have to unload, our hands are tied and we can no longer move. We unload. If before then we had been on the outskirts, now we are in the center, about as central as you can get. High-rises, buildings. We unload next to the house, next to a building. We are under a building in a small entry porch, another platoon is inside, begins to clean out the house. They bring down the families. Women, children – everyone is taken out of the building downstairs while another platoon begins to clear it.

With live gunfire?

Yes. They sent the women and children away. Around all the time, in all directions tanks are shelling. It's not quite Kasbah, it's a kind of residential block with some open space. We surround the block and park near a corner building and all around us are tanks, firing. I don't know at whom, just that they were shooting.

Where did you send the people who had been in the building?

I have no idea. We sent them out of that block and I have no idea where they went. The tanks shelled the houses that overlooked us.

So you don't know what happened to those people? How many were there?

Fifteen, thereabouts. They went off as a group. I hope they were not shot at. The women and children went off and the men remained for questioning inside the building.

How many were they?

About the same number. Fifteen. They stayed downstairs with the interrogators. Later as we left, they stayed.

What ages?

All ages. From early teens to old men.

Every male had to stay? How was it decided who goes with the women and who stays?

I don't know. Some were older boys, not toddlers.

How large was the building?

About eight or nine floors. Every floor was a hall with two doors on each side, four doors in all. Stairs on each side. This is one side, and there are staircases on both sides. The apartments are built identically, nicely decorated, different styles. They seem to be pretty wealthy there. In some of the apartments we find weapons, documents. Someone said there were suspects with explosive charges. At the same time, the men are assembled downstairs in a room. Two or three soldiers were watching over them. All the doors in the building were steel with safety bolts, and we broke every door in with a blast, as far as we could. At some point everything slowed down. The platoon commander stayed with some three or four men, going up one floor, blowing up a door or two at the same time. We were at least one floor below, closing our ears, and your heart just drops from the blasts. The platoon commander and some other soldiers go up another floor again, clear the apartments with live fire, and there was less control of the men who went around and did whatever they felt like doing. I remember a different atmosphere taking over while the upper floors were being cleared. We went crazy from going up and down all those stairs between the floors. I recall people (soldiers) going around downstairs and doing as they pleased. There were cases of unnecessary damage to property. From sheer nerves soldiers broke or smashed stuff, a guy sees a picture and gives it a rifle butt blow. The soldiers there were less in control. But they didn't go totally wild, in a big way. It's a huge building and lots of soldiers were roaming free inside, so there was less control of them. More vandalism.

Looting?

I think there was, according to what I heard.

How long did it take to blow up doors?

A long time.

How long were you in this building?

It took quite a while to clear it. Five-six hours.

Was there any resistance while you were inside?

A company was fighting in the next building. They were involved, all the tanks were shelling around us. I know in retrospect that my building took a few RPG hits while we were inside. It was a large structure and must have taken some more hits but we didn't notice. There were all those blasts from our tanks shelling

buildings close by, and I wasn't aware of RPG hits we took because of our own fire.

What happened in the building? Do you recall specific incidents? Did you notice things were getting out of hand?

Yes. Not an outright urge to destroy things, but lack of control over the soldiers.

To what extent?

A soldier could walk around and pick up anything he pleased from the apartments. Soldiers sat on couches, it's a pretty weird sight. Eventually there wasn't real fighting inside the building, only some weapons found in some of the apartments and even the risk of explosive charges. But while some guys were upstairs clearing apartments, others were relaxing on the sofas downstairs. They took out stuff from a cupboard and threw it on the floor, broke pictures and all kinds of things. I don't remember anything extraordinary. What bothers me especially is stuff I didn't see.

Why?

Because of this general lack of control.

Was there talk?

Yes, talk of looting.

What do you mean?

It was all hush-hush. People are not dumb. After we got out there was a 'shame parade' (a company check for stolen items) that was actually whitewashed. Didn't look as though whoever held it really wanted to find things.

Why?

Staff came to check the soldiers, the room was crowded and guys knew this was going to take place.

Did the commanders care that people took stuff?

I don't know. The company commander didn't want to deal with it and confront the soldiers.

Did he take other things lightly in this operation? Punishments, for example? Did he tighten discipline or loosen it up?

A bit of both. I don't know how to describe it. On the one hand, he really held us on a short leash, and on the other, I told you, in Gaza there is nothing extraordinarily severe to talk about. Let's say that there were small things in regards to looting, things in the houses: breaking, throwing around. As for looting I can say I heard but didn't actually see anything. I can't really prove anything. I'm saying there was a feeling of lack of control, throughout the operation. Most of the commanding ranks wanted to maintain moral values, but soldiers... Again, I wasn't witness to such cases but I heard people talking, that soldiers shot at people here and there. Again, these are things I cannot prove. I don't want to say because I cannot prove them with any certainty.

At the 'shame parade' they knew it was going to be held.

Secretly. We felt it was staged.

The company commander comes around, inspects them for two seconds and that's it?

Yes. I am trying to give you the feel of it. None of the commanders actually set an immoral approach, there simply was no emphatic confrontation with the soldiers.

You had the feeling that if they search thoroughly, they would find something they wouldn't want to find?

I had the feeling that if someone looted then he should be found out. It's as though they were afraid to find something they did not want to see.

TESTIMONY 45 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS & VANDALISM

We entered a house there, searched it, found stuff that hadn't been found earlier. We found a Kalachnikov and some grenades, under a bed in one of the rooms. It was the home of a Fatah activist. He had pictures of himself with Arafat in the living room. There was an old man in this house, a diabetic who could hardly walk. His family was gone and he stayed. He was with us the whole week.

You left him inside?

Yes. He was locked up in his home for three weeks. He lives with his wife on the ground floor, his son-in-law lives upstairs with his daughter. No one but him was left there. There was a guard post at the entrance and at first he had a mattress laid out for him by the door. I kept seeing him lying there all week. At some point he really had difficulty getting up so he asked for a bed to rise more easily. There wasn't too much talk with him. At some point we brought him food and began to cook with materials from his pantry. We did get supplies but that was sausage sandwiches, and one of our guys began to cook and we brought the old man some of the food we prepared.

In retrospect, there was no justification for our using the family's food stores, since we did get army supplies. But it's hard to judge when you've been out there for a week and army food is disgusting. We brought him our unit doctor to take a look at him. There was talk of removing him but the Shabak didn't want him, didn't know what to do with him. The doctor said his condition was not immediately life-threatening, but in the long run, if we kept this up for several weeks more, it certainly wouldn't be healthy for him, and could endanger his life. I don't know what eventually happened to him because we were out of there by Saturday night, late, and he was asleep, or pretended to be.

So how many days was he in there alone with the soldiers?

Two weeks. He had no idea what was going on outside. He said, "Come on, take me out into the street so I can be transported to the hospital." We'd tell him "there is no street left," the D-9s wrecked everything. At some point we ran out of water and he said there's a main pipe in the house next door which can be turned on. Apparently he meant it was connected to another tanker. We would tell him, "What house?"

"Right here, next door." We'd tell him, "That house has been demolished." He was in shock, I guess he went out to take a look and saw a ruined neighborhood. Some of the houses had been demolished because that they had sheltered armed combatants, other houses were suspected of having tunnels, yet others

blocked our line of vision. That was also grounds to take them down. Houses in our line of vision were taken down, whole orchards were razed.

I'd like to ask about houses blocking your line of vision?

You have detections, the company that held a designated area observed a certain patch, and the house facing their post blocked their direct line of vision, so there were some houses taken down.

What do you mean when you mention a house suspected of having tunnels?

I don't quite know how these suspicions were validated, but a lot of this came from intelligence.

But houses were searched.

Yes. But they (the tunnels) were not always found.

TESTIMONY 46 - VANDALISM

In primary searches for weapons, we go in and then suddenly a guy opens a cupboard, sees china and begins to throw it all on the floor. There are such cases, people who did this sort of thing. It's the kind of guys who talk about having to really show it to the Arabs, that they have less of a regard for family belongings. Little things, but not as extreme as burning things or throwing stuff out the windows. Little things.

Did this stop?

It stopped and then began again. Writing on the walls.

What would be written there?

"How long yet?" or stuff about the platoon, or "We'll show those terrorists."

What causes this, do you think? After all, it wasn't just one soldier in every battalion.

Writing on walls doesn't stem from hating Arabs that much, but from the fact that you're a soldier – you write in the outpost, or the outhouse, it's a natural thing for soldiers to do.

But you're still inside someone's home.

That's right. You need to think about that in order not to do it. But you don't feel it. Take for example the house we were in – it was abandoned and you go about it as if you own it. You break floor tiles to make sand bags, you break stuff to prepare an outpost. It becomes... You don't think about this at all. You don't consider this a home of a family that will be back.

Did you use their belongings? Are there rules for entering such a house?

There's a general instruction not to touch the family's gear, not to sit on their sofas and so on. But one disregards this. You're in a house and you enter without a sleeping bag, at most you have a warmer shirt and neck warmer, and it's cold at night. So you use mattresses and blankets that are there.

Where do you think this all originates? You find it wrong to smash china, but you talked about people eager to do this, or to leave inscriptions on the walls. What do you think motivates this?

It's the heat of operation, as well as racism. Those who smashed stuff did it because it belonged to Arabs, as well as because of the general army atmosphere. You're in your own shit and writing on a wall doesn't seem so terrible to you. If I was the guy who came back to his own house and saw the wall with the writing, I would be a lot more upset about the fact that my whole orchard was gone. This was an operational need – to raze the area and prevent infiltration of Qassam launching crews. In the midst of all of this, the other stuff doesn't look that bad.

Was there a lot of destruction around? What was destroyed?

Mainly orchards. Houses – some were demolished by D-9s, like the part in (the film) Waltz with Bashir where the tank moves backwards and crashes into a house? Same thing happened to 'our' house with a D-9 bulldozer. It made a hole in the first floor, and you also saw results of the previous shelling.

The D-9s were working around the clock?

Yes, nearly.

What did they raze?

First of all, the orchards. Then houses too, nearby, to open routes, to prevent shelter in the whole immediate area of the house we were in. The D-9 clears a path for the heavy APCs, a path that did not exist before. There were orchards and hothouses there once. Next to our house, at the edge of the neighborhood,

the bulldozer created an earth mound so that when you came out, you couldn't be fired at from the distant houses. They actually kept changing the terrain.

TESTIMONY 47 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

There was a point where D-9s were razing areas. It was amazing. At first you go in and see lots of houses. A week later, after the razing, you see the horizon further away, almost to the sea. They simply took down all the houses around so the terrorists would have nowhere else to hide. Among other things, whole chicken coops were taken down, on top of the chickens.

... The D-9s were there the whole week you were waiting?

Yes. It was during that week, a day or two. There's a Corps of Engineers company. I don't know how many D-9s belong to such a platoon or company.

The houses that were taken down – were they sources of fire?

Not necessarily.

So why take them down?

I have no doubt it was for operational purposes. You can argue about how necessary that really is, or how moral, but it was entirely operational, so as not to enable them to take positions that jeopardize us.

How many houses were taken down?

A radius of about several hundred meters. It wasn't a very crowded area. It's the outskirts of town. Still a rural area.

All the houses were demolished?

Nearly. Not just by D-9s. Some places were bombed. In one of these there was an engagement.

What's the size of the area after the razing you saw?

I see rubble.

TESTIMONY 48 - BRIEFINGS

What was the purpose of this campaign, incidentally? What were you told?

That we're going in to create appropriate conditions for the negotiation to bring Gilad Shalit home, this came up. We were told we were going in to enable the residents of (Israel's) southern region to live in safety again, and to topple the Hamas regime...

This whole campaign was about going in there and getting things back in order.

That was the official expression? How did your battalion-commander put it? Do you recall expressions such as "This is not the IDF I know"?

Yes. There was an attempted infiltration while we held the fence zone and replaced the auxiliary company. There was an attempt made and we were supposed to catch anyone infiltrating Israeli territory. We went in and were stopped by the company-commander's vehicle at the camp gate. He told us, "Guys, there's an infiltration, there are terrorists and we're going to screw them, we're going to fuck them to hell." I didn't expect to hear such language from my company-commander. I didn't expect him to express himself that way. Tell us, "There's an infiltration going on, we're going..." Even wiping out sounds to me a bit... These are expressions I hadn't heard.

Were there other cases that sounded wrong to you?

There was this paratrooper platoon commander I heard talking in retrospect about an incident they had, "How we took them apart, trashed their house, didn't leave one stone in place." Okay, why did you do it, were they firing from that house? "No, not from that house, from nearby. We killed the terrorist and went in to trash the house."

And when you hear this, how do you react?

I turn around and leave. I don't like this stuff. Forget the fact that it's inhumane, it's unprofessional, that you're dealing with bullshit. Okay, you're a hell of a man, you've trashed a house. So? Just like those soldiers who slap Palestinians around at the checkpoint. He swore at you so you slapped him around, great. It's beneath us. An army that does these things, that takes apart houses because there was sporadic shooting nearby, is an unprofessional army. Really bullshitting around.

TESTIMONY 49 - BOMBARDMENT

When we actually entered the Gaza Strip, we were motorized. As soon as we were inside we were all assembled, and the company commander in charge of that position gave all of us a briefing about how we were to conduct ourselves inside. It was late at night, dark, and we were all expected to show very strict discipline about this briefing specifically and all its practical implications. He specified all sorts of operational procedures, where we may move and where we're not supposed to be on our own for fear of kidnapping, etc. Among other things, he strictly forbade us to climb up to roofs. He explained in fact that the airforce has the 'go ahead' to fire at anyone seen on a roof. The airforce would not always distinguish. It doesn't always have the ability to establish at such short notice whether someone seen there is a civilian, a soldier or a terrorist. As far as it is concerned, a person seen on a roof is incriminated. It was made very clear to us that being on a roof is incriminating as such. Namely, no one, including Israeli soldiers, has any business being on a rooftop, and anyone seen there is perceived as an enemy. He even gave us the example of some Givati commander whose force we had replaced, who was simply sent back to Israel because he went up to the roof to defecate. So he was thrown out of there. This was seen as an extremely serious incident as far as the higher command was concerned. We were told that this was in effect throughout the army, for all forces on the ground – unequivocally forbidden, no exceptions. No Israeli soldier has any business being on a roof. Going up to a roof equals suicide.

Because our own forces would take him down?

Yes. Which means that there are in fact airplanes and other means that simply fire at persons detected on rooftops. We knew there were all kinds of helicopters and various other flying objects up there. We heard them all the time. We saw them all the time. And they have fire-power, they're not playing around. Whoever climbed to the roof was doomed. This was put to us in the strictest sense possible. It was also made very clear that it is in effect for all the force, namely everyone on the ground knew about this.

TESTIMONY 50 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

... I can tell you about a specific case, where a man passed by our house: our instructions were to take down anyone going by, a lookout. There was a case of a man speaking on his cell phone while he held a white flag. Again, you should realize we kept receiving these specific alerts down to the details of a man on a motorcycle arriving at this or that trail at a certain speed. There were alerts about people with explosive charges and white flags. There was a case of a man speaking on a cell phone close to our house and he also held something white. I didn't see him. I was further back inside the house. I know for certain that this guy was shot in the leg. In hindsight, I cannot prove or verify this, but I heard he died. He was not removed by us and I cannot prove it.

He was not removed?

He limped along and got out of our sight.

But there are rules of engagement, aren't there?

When we hold an outpost on normal security duty, there are rules of engagement. But when we got in there, the feeling was you're going to war and such and such numbers of casualties are expected in the battalion. While we were outside, at the beginning of the operation, there was this atmosphere, something really strong, everyone's eyes shining. It felt like being in a movie, I didn't anticipate what we'd get into. I was expecting combat. We had aerial photos and were told that here's an explosive charge, there's a tunnel. What rules of engagement? We were under the impression we were going into battle, not some outpost routine procedure. While we began to enter we realized this is not what we had expected. You said you heard this from someone else, it felt very much like maneuvers meaning there was all this spectacular fire, a Lau missile here and there, all sorts of things.

In your official briefing by the battalion commander before you went out, what were you told?

We were told soldiers were to be secured by fire-power. The soldiers were made to understand that their lives were the most important, and that there was no way our soldiers would get killed for the sake of leaving civilians the benefit of the doubt. We were allowed to fire in order to spare our lives.

Even when it comes to the individual soldier?

Yes. And that means very aggressive entry. Fire power. It means that as we go in, if people are outdoors, the soldiers shoot them. Again, these are cases where

I wasn't present myself so I don't want to discuss them. But yes, there were cases of people, civilians who were killed by our own fire.

Light arms?

Also.

Did you talk about it? Telling civilians apart from terrorists, and by which criteria?

What are incriminating signs? There is no suspect arrest procedure in wartime. There's exercise of judgment. People were not instructed to shoot at everyone they see but they were told that from a certain distance when they approach a house, no matter who it is – even an old woman – take them down.

What distance are we talking about here?

That depends. Could be a situation where a guy is 40 meters away, entering an area that is out of your sight, where you can't do a thing, as he reaches a house.

There were no official definitions as to who is considered innocent?

The definitions were that an armed person must be shot dead, anyone talking on a cell phone – that's incriminating. People walking around with white rags were not to be shot. But if they would approach a house then deterrent fire was to be shot overhead or beside them, and then just shoot.

Was this clarified? Say the battalion goes in, lots of fire, civilians getting killed as well in other cases, weren't things made clearer?

There was not much friction with the civilian population and I don't recall a clarification to the point of actual rules of engagement.

But because this was left up to the judgment of the individual soldier, wouldn't a commander say that if such and such happens, exercise discretion because there are civilians here.

There was a bit 'do whatever you want' but those were the definitions... Not specific definitions but exercise of judgment. No clarifying beyond that into something resembling ordered procedures.

No one asked about this?

The atmosphere wasn't right to start looking for that. The soldiers were eager and not exactly looking for limits. It wasn't crucial.

Did they feel safe? If you're afraid, you shoot at anything. Was it like this?

The atmosphere was not one of fear but rather people too eager to shoot other people.

Did you see other cases of non-combatant population, such as the one with the cell phone and the white flag, people who...

Again, I can't say whether he died or whether he was passing on information. It's a case that shows how lax the rules of engagement were.

What incriminates a person? People walking towards you from a certain distance? A cell phone that might be used to report things? Someone with a notebook, binoculars?

Binoculars is the same as a cell phone.

So what do you do?

Same thing. Exercise your own judgment, and the definition is straight fire. When the guy was shot in the leg, it's because he was holding a white flag, but the atmosphere was not such as to believe that anyone carrying a white flag is all right, because there were alerts.

But you said, for example, that people walking along holding white flags were clearly not to be shot?

Yes. But white flag and cell phone, you notice that. If he really approaches the house, you shoot him.

If they raise their hands up in the air, is that like a white flag?

Yes.

You're saying you saw civilians...

No, don't confuse this. There was hardly any encounter with the civilian population. In general, the city was a ghost town. Once in a while you saw a person, during ceasefires when people walked around.

And then?

We held our fire for a few hours. The Red Crescent came around, picked up bodies.

They passed by us too, under the house, I mean closer than they were meant to be.

Do you recall the distance which had to be kept from the house?

20-30 meters, something like that.

Wounded were evacuated only during humanitarian ceasefires?

Technically yes, but there was not much evacuation of wounded but mostly there was of fatalities.

TESTIMONY 51 - HUMAN SHIELD

After we got out of there, we had a talk with our unit commander. All kinds of things came up and professional issues were also addressed. Some people said that the crew was not sufficiently prepared, and they also brought up moral issues that troubled them such as using civilians. He denied this, but I don't believe him when he says he's not aware of this happening on the ground. This procedure of using civilians exists, he knows about this. 'Neighbor procedure' is an official army procedure; it's just not called that any longer. The brigade commander was on the ground the whole time. He even came to visit us one day. An official army procedure means army instructions.

How do you feel about what went on there?

Personally I'm unhappy about it. I do my own thinking. I don't think I'd be willing to go again, I certainly don't intend to serve in the Occupied Territories any longer, for several reasons. I don't know what I'd do in a similar situation in the future. I'm certain I won't hurry out there again.

What kind of feeling do you have?

Personally, I'm not feeling good, I'm not identifying with it. There's a general atmosphere of mobilization behind these things that I find extremely dangerous. My personal feeling about having been there and taken part in it is very uneasy. There's a general feeling, there was some talk about it when we were inside, but I also think outside, talk of us not having a choice. Anything we did there, we'd answer ourselves: there's no other choice, but this is how we shirk our responsibility. You bring yourself to this kind of deterministic situation, a moment that not I have chosen, where I no longer have any responsibility for my own actions. Even if eventually your choice is the right one, you must admit you chose it. You had another option. You always have another option. You have to admit you chose to go into Gaza. As soon as you did, you've brought people into

a moral twilight zone, you've forced them to handle dilemmas and part of that confrontation failed. About things I know and have witnessed myself, too, I know they're a 'gray area' morally. You can insist on saying they are wrong and you could also say that there were certainly more extreme events, and these were bad choices, and that people were forced to make those bad choices by having to face such situations. As soon as you say "there is no other choice," you're immediately shirking your responsibility. Then you don't need to investigate, to look into things. That was my feeling about it then, and still is today.

TESTIMONY 52 - HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

When you go out, what do you talk about? You fold up, like all of the Israeli army forces leaving Gaza, so what it is being said to you? Are you praised, learning lessons, what is the dynamic like?

There was a company of ours that stayed behind. Saturday night, midnight, the battalion commander told us. We get on radio with him. He was told, "we're folding up" and no one knew about this. He was surprised too. At 2 we began to move, then we were told, "You stay here in position, don't know how long yet." We stayed there another four days. Finally on Wednesday, at dawn, our company got out. But by then all the high was gone, and there was still a talk with the battalion commander before we went home.

What did he say at that talk?

The night before, there was a talk with the paratrooper brigade commander, to whom we had been subordinated. He told us not to talk about the destruction we saw when we get home, no need to brag about it. It's important for you to know that everything you did there we had to do. That's what the brigade commander says.

What did you think of that?

You know... It's nice they even had this view. Obviously it's – I don't want to say it's an utter lie – but most of the destruction that went on there was not necessary. There was even one time when a brigade commander got on our tank, we had to drive him to a press conference inside Gaza. They brought an APC with some reporters, so we were about to take off, and we already see the press, and he gets on and orders us to drive through the ruined tracks. So the

press won't see us driving through the fields. We had to cross a field. There are those cones where a track had already been formed, so you know, drive over there... It was ludicrous. That's it, at the talk, the battalion commander said that as far as we were concerned this was war.

As far as we're concerned? Meaning, the Israeli side?

No. He means that even if his superiors call it an operation because at the end of the day no military branch used all the force it could have unleashed there, and they don't want to name it a war, still we should realize that as far as we are concerned, as soldiers, as a company – what we did, that's what it would be like in war.

What does that mean? Why is it important to note that?

I don't know why he made such a note of it, that we should feel we had taken part in a war, it sounds more...

Why, was there a letdown?

At some point everyone had already had enough of being in there. They were so exhausted. To be there for two weeks not knowing what is going on with you, your commanders have no idea.

Was there boredom at any point during these two weeks?

Much boredom.

So what does one do to relieve this boredom?

I told you, fire at water tanks, I don't know, out of boredom. When there's nothing else to shoot at, you fire at water tanks. You wouldn't if you had targeted persons.

TESTIMONY 53 - RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

I don't remember shooting at suspects. There were not many incidents in my own platoon. There is something called deterrent fire – at a certain time soldiers climb up to the roof, with a machine gun, rifle and grenade launcher, take a house, it's always the same house in the immediate area, and target it for a blast of deterrent fire. The idea is to sow confusion, keep shifting the direction of warfare. Same with the D-9. These are fire blasts, and towards the end there was a point where a woman came from some houses that were held by the IDF, no one detected her and she came up quite close to our house. The soldier didn't shoot her although he was supposed to. She got quite close and then APCs came up to unload equipment, saw her and shot her not with the APC's machine gun but with light arms. This was the only incident in which my platoon fired at anyone.

What happened to her?

She lay there dying for some time, and after a while, she was killed. She was carrying some sack which we thought contained an explosive charge so we threw a grenade down in order to try and blow it up. It didn't. But let's say a woman walks around in army territory heading up to an APC and doesn't stop. It was really weird how calmly she walked there, with that sack.

Young or old?

Old. An old woman. She didn't react. Lights were turned on her and she just continued walking. She may have carried an explosive charge and meant to reach the window and blow herself up.

No one ended up checking inside that sack?

No. We were busy leaving. That's why we were more cautious. Because on radio you have to clarify somehow that you are coming out of the house so you say "Get ready to move to objectives so and so..." which is a code for shifting our designated area. Anyway, if someone is listening in, he knows we're leaving the houses and at this point you have to take more precautions. So you also fire a lot harder and open another outpost and that was just the moment when this woman popped up. There was nothing else we could do, you can't take risks.

Did anyone yell a warning at her?

The Arabic-speaking soldier yelled at her to stop. Later we called her the 'terrorist-ladies'-auxiliary auntie.'

TESTIMONY 54 - ATMOSPHERE

What was it like, coming out of there?

What was it like? Going in, the atmosphere was 'gung-ho' and the whole country was behind us. While inside, all of that disappeared... Listen, coming out of there I did not feel any heroic elation or sacrifice, just that it was sickening and unglamorous and boring and stupid. People suffered. I didn't feel I had done anything significant. I still convinced myself that "Okay, I was in Gaza, I can tell the guys and I'm done."

And erase some of it.

Yes. There are all kinds of situations like the removal of families (from their homes), things that have to be done but are not comfortable to live with. During other patrols in the territories too, I had some difficult situations on the ground: arrests, checkpoints, searches. In that respect, Gaza was no different than many other places. It was not different. But again, I'm leaving there with the echoes of all that talk about how human life just becomes nothing.

So what are you left with?

How people are able to watch others die or suffer, how terribly easily you can grow indifferent to this.

Were you indifferent?

Yes, it's like you can turn yourself off. The guy's dead, let's move on.

Did this indifference scare you?

It didn't scare me, it was more of a 'warning signal.' What I saw and how I took it.

It sobered me a bit.

You're saying it gave you new insights.

It taught me that even I can see such things and accept them. That I would not be haunted by nightmares. When I think about the whole situation logically, whether this is just or not, people are suffering.

But their suffering was far from you. Except for some specific cases.

Well, you just can't contain all the suffering that was there. Again, I'm not saying the operation was unjustified. I thought it was justified, I wanted to restore peace

and quiet to the inhabitants of the South (of Israel). It is impossible to conceive of such an extent of suffering as that which we inflicted on Gaza, but...

Did you see this as you actually entered the city?

Yes. Imagine you're seeing, like you said, "downtown Afula," that's an excellent description. You see tanks shelling, a hole here, a hole there, a tank shell entering the wall of a building and the whole floor goes up in flames. It's kind of like WAR. I can't say it crazed me or anything but you know... I saw people suffering, I saw others responding to it and observed myself responding to it – and that is what I take with me in particular, how people can be indifferent to suffering or see it as trivial.
