

SHADOWS OF THE M-16

by Marc Yablonka

Telno Air Force Base, Israel — "I wish I had known the soldier who used this gun in Vietnam," said a young Israeli Defense Force rifle instructor, clutching her M-16, the strap draped about her.

She said those words two years ago when I had come to Israel to write on the Sar-El program for *Stars and Stripes*. The program is such that people, young and old, Jew and non-Jew alike, pay their own way, volunteering on IDF bases to repaint tanks, mend fences, garden, even do KP.

I had been stationed then at Ashdod Naval Base repairing parts for the very same PBRs (patrol boats) that had been used in Vietnam.

One year later, after coming back for a second tour, this time to Telno Air Force Base outside Rehovot, the words of that strikingly beautiful 21-year-old still haunted.

The duty I drew at Telno was in the "Neshekiya" (weapons arsenal in English), where, among the Uzis, Galils and RPGs, I was surrounded by M-16s, all of which had seen action in Vietnam.

Vietnam to me remains a country that, fortunately or unfortunately, I have only seen since the war as a freelance correspondent for the *Jakarta Post*, *National Catholic Register*, *Japan Times* as well as *Stars and Stripes*.

The strife of the Indochinese notwithstanding, it is nonetheless a region whose people, culture and history I have come to study and attempt to understand since the fall of Saigon in April, 1975.

Vietnam is always imbedded in this writer's thoughts, as it is on minded and souls of a generation of Americans. It became even more so as, for two weeks, these hands grew tired and sore from loading and reloading hundreds of M-16 magazines, cleaning and re-oiling their barrels. Cradling these weapons, I began to reflect:

"Had this gun been a friend to a grunt at the Valley of Ia Drang?"

Taking another one down from the rack in the arsenal, I asked myself "How about this one? Had it produced many NVA KIAs at the infamous battle for Hamburger Hill in the Ashau Valley?"

"I wonder if a G.I. used this one in Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968."

But the most haunting of all thoughts came over and over again: "Had the soldier who used this M-16 made it home alive?"

It was not just the M-16s that spoke of Vietnam at Telno. It too was the majestic sight and the continuously deafening sounds of the Phantoms and the F-15s rising quickly into the Israeli sky. A sky that, one air traffic controller reported, takes the secretive, elite, revered and (Israelis themselves acknowledge) somewhat pompous pilots only 30 minutes to traverse from Eilat in the south to Lebanon in their American built/Israeli modified aircraft.

It was the occasional sight of the fabled Bell UH-1 ("Huey") helicopters, almost synonymous with Vietnam, and the gigantic, ever-present Sikorsky CH-53 (Chinook) two ton transport choppers.

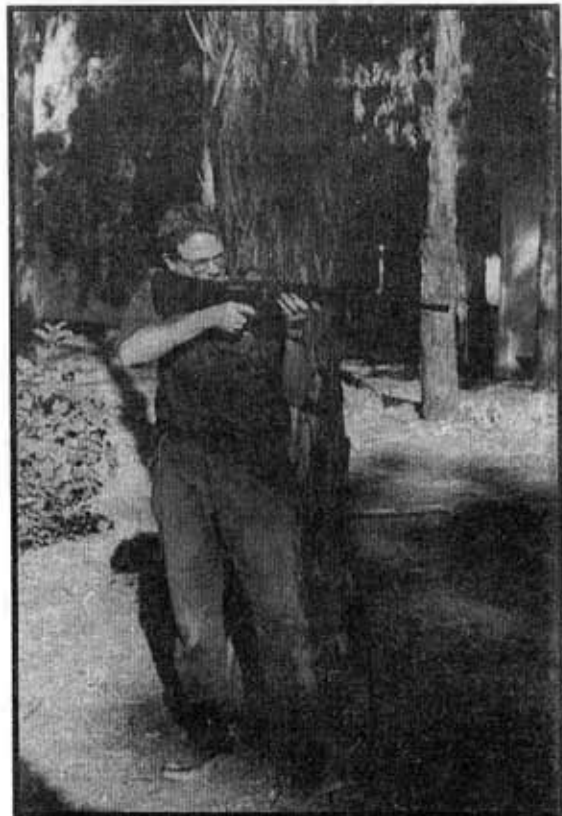
All of this conjured up images of a war that shaped and often burdened American military response, or lack thereof, until the Persian Gulf War.

At Telno, when the subject of Vietnam came up, IDF troopers expressed utmost respect for their soldier brethren of an earlier era who fought in that far off evergreen land. More so, certainly, than was afforded them until the erecting of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. in the early 1980s.

When that happened, as Americans we opened our hearts, battled old wounds, shed our tears and, finally showed our appreciation to the veterans of Vietnam.

One sees quickly that this has always been done in Israel, from the Latrun Memorial for the fallen tank commandos to that of the fallen paratroopers nearby Rehovot. America, then, has a lot to learn from the Jewish state when it comes to revering its fighting men and women.

Not so ironically, former Green Beret Major Jim Morris (U.S. Army, ret.), now a well-known American writer and authority on Special Operations (Morris "humped" as a correspondent along with the IDF and Lebanese Christians during the 1981 war in Lebanon and is responsible for the original story of the Walt Disney production of *Operation Dumbo Drop*), tells a story about a fellow Special Forces veteran:



Author with M-16 at AFB, Israel

After his tour of duty in Vietnam was up, this Green Beret came to Israel to qualify as an IDF paratrooper, according to Morris.

"Why do you want to jump for us?" questioned the commander. "You are not even Jewish!"

"I just want to fight for a country that appreciates what I do," Morris replied.

In Vietnam, the duty I performed at Telno would have classified this writer as a REMF.

While the Iranian-backed Hizbullah carries on its Jihad to the north, even exploding buses in Tel Aviv, and the Phantoms that usually fly practice sorties and dog fights dropped real payloads over Lebanon recently, most non-Israeli acquaintances think one must be a touch loony to be here now.

Some of the soldiers might agree. However, most admire us. After all, even a REMF wants to fight for a country that appreciates him. ★