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THE FALSE LESSONS OF MODERN WAR: WHY IGNORANCE IS NOT INSIGHT

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“The fool believes that the tallest mountain in the world will be equal to the tallest one he has observed.” – Nassim Taleb

THE aim and purpose of this article is to highlight the problematic phenomena of journalists, academics and even soldiers who seek to identify lessons from current or recent conflicts when few, if any, of these things should be noteworthy given a professional land warfare community that is sufficiently informed.

If the British Army were knowledgeable about land warfare, almost none of these lessons would qualify as insight. Lessons should be a product of analysis, not observation. Observations have often been wrong. The very word lesson implies a certainty that is often unsafe or overstated. The word insight is preferable. A real lesson should suggest a non-discretionary changing of training, doctrine, organisation or capability beyond the currently recognised understanding. While called “lessons”, today’s use of the word strongly implies novelty and revelation of previously

unknown things, thus dramatic and revelatory.

Warfare in the Russo-Ukraine War is two to three generations behind the standard competent, well-trained armies should aspire to operate. There should be few lessons for the well-informed student of land warfare. Most claimed lessons are about equipment capabilities couched in terms the general public can understand because of the desire for internet traffic and clicks. The widely cited opinion does not equate to useful or correct. The desire for public traction means discussing main battle tanks occupies far more text than fuel handling or road and track surface maintenance. The errors creep in when British Army officers, policy makers and civil servants believe that something is new when it is not because it leans against evidence-based analysis and understanding. An Iranian Shahed 136 drone is conceptually not much different from a Second World War V1 and easier to kill.

THE LESSONS OF 1973

In 1990 Anthony Cordesman and Abraham

Wagner produced a three-volume work entitled *The Lessons of Modern War*, to which was added a fourth volume in 1996 to account for the Gulf War of 1991. The previous volumes covered the Iran-Iraq, Arab-Israeli, Falklands and Soviet War in Afghanistan. Given the near-legendary levels of insight and revelation the world gained from Israel's 1973 War and the subject of the first volume, it would seem fair to suggest that some 17 years later, in 1990, the lessons would have been well understood. Much was less than certain, yet paradoxically, a book written in 1978, Trevor N Dupy's *Elusive Victory*, had got far more right than later writers were to get wrong.

The significance of Israel's wars in 1967, 1973, and, to some extent, 1982 cannot be understated in the literature of modern warfare because, almost uniquely among 'Western nations', Israel implemented lessons from conflicts it fought. Therefore the 'lessons' of these wars became extant in decisions Israel took and funded. In contrast, much of the literature defaulted to narratives such as the end of the tank and how shocked the Israel Defense Forces had been by the Egyptian AT-3 Sagger missiles. Yet within two years of the end of war, an Israeli general let slip that their analysis showed that anti-tank guided missiles accounted for only some 25 per cent of main battle tank losses.¹ There was also the fact that Israel had a more advanced anti-tank guided missile in service in the shape of the Nord SS-11, which it held in a corps level anti-tank reserve unit mounted on M3 half-tracks. The idea that the anti-tank guided missile was

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a conceptual surprise to the Israel Defense Forces has to be seen against the context that they had purchased such weapons before Egypt had.

The idea that the tank was dead was especially fallacious. Post-war, Israel procured more tanks, not less, but also increased the size of its army. The story that in 1973, the Israel Defense Forces were tank-heavy with not enough infantry and artillery is a myth. In 1973 they had 50 tanks battalions, 50 infantry battalions and 55 artillery battalions. In 1982, they had 90, 80 and 80, respectively, albeit in total numbers, and the artillery tubes were close to 120 unit equivalents.² Thus the idea that Russia is a 'fires-led army' has to be considered against the fact that as of 1982, the Israelis certainly were and that fires lead manoeuvre in contrast to the opinions of the 'manoeuvrist approach'. Lots of 'lessons' from 1973 continue to be either wrong or the Israelis learned different lessons from those the rest of the world saw.

Another enduring aspect of 1973 was the supposed shock and surprise at attrition and personnel loss rates, but general analysis undermines this idea. In 1967 in Sinai alone, Israel lost about 300 killed in action, 1,000 wounded in action and 61 tanks.³ Assuming six days of fighting, that is 50 killed in action, 166 wounded in action and ten tanks per day.

Across all fronts
1967 was
bloody,

with 176 killed per day and 407 wounded. In context, the United States Marine Corps averagely suffered 174 killed in action per day at Iwo Jima. In 1973 the total loss was 2,222 killed in action and 5,600 wounded in action, but the loss rate was 117 killed in action per day. Notably, 40 per cent of all Israel Defense Forces losses occurred within the first four days of fighting. In terms of equipment, Israel started the war with 2,100 main battle tanks. It lost about 1,100 but recovered and repaired all but 410. The Israel Defense Forces also lost 102 combat aircraft (a loss rate of five per day), with the overwhelming majority falling to surface-to-air missile systems.

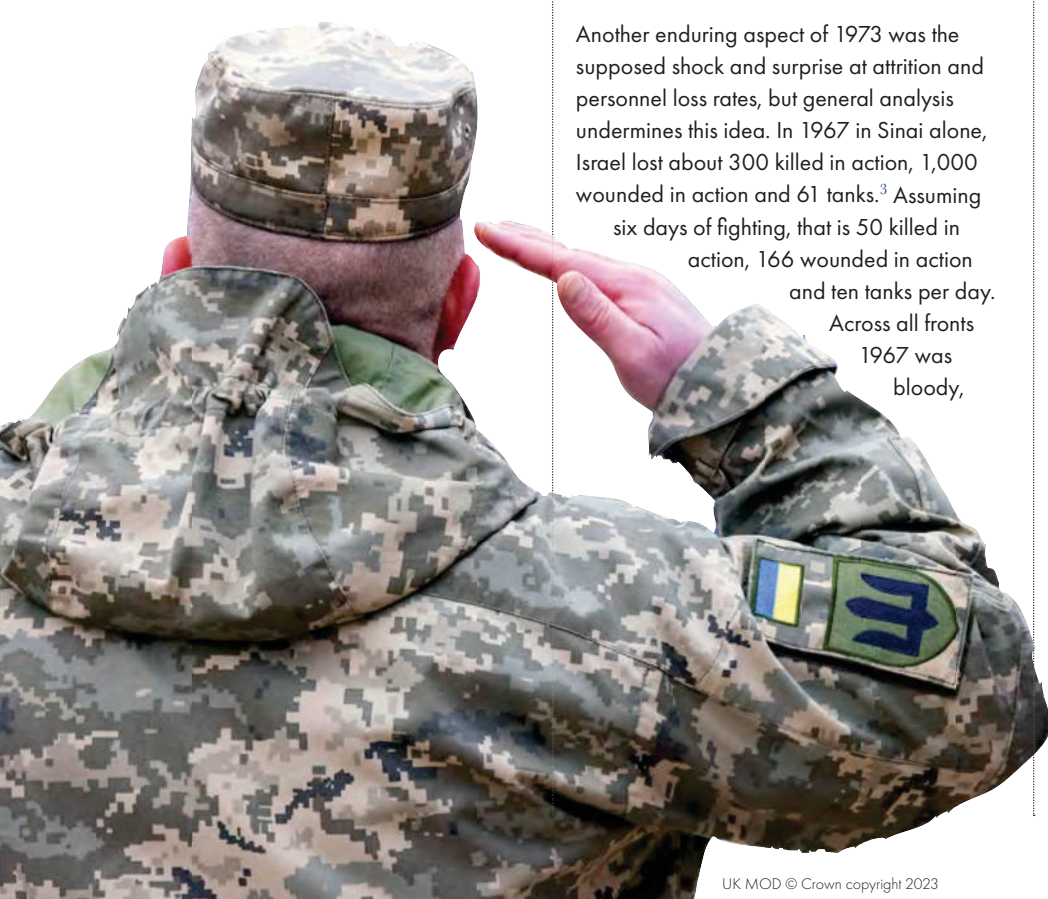
Simply put, no conflict today comes even close to these types of losses, yet the myth persists that war and warfare are becoming 'more lethal'. They are not, and a large body of literature proves it.⁴

If you take those as lessons, then the development of the NATO AirLand battle concept can be argued as an outcome of the lessons of 1973, yet NATO did not sow minefields or dig anti-tank ditches along the inner-German border. On the Golan Heights, the Israelis did. Nor did NATO pursue the development of long-range indirect fire anti-armour systems. Israel did. Nor did NATO focus the same amount of attention towards unmanned air systems and the air and land forces' suppression of enemy air defence. The Israelis did. In some sense, NATO and the US decided on the lessons and learnt them regardless of what the Israelis did. NATO applied lessons in a NATO context. Context trumps lessons and insights. As the lessons of 1973 make clear, the idea of 'lessons' is less than clear-cut.

UKRAINE

Fast forward to today and the war in Ukraine; there is far less to be learned than in 1973. Why should the lessons from Ukraine be removed from the specific context of the participant's differing training and equipment levels and be relevant to the British Army? Is something that is a lesson for the Ukrainians a lesson for everyone else?

In 1973, most Israeli units were as well trained



¹Herzog, Haim. *War of Atonement 1975*.

²“War without End” – Lt Col Eado Hecht, IDF .ppt presentation used on numerous British Army Battlefield Studies.

³Dupy, Trevor. *Elusive Victory* page 279.

⁴See the collected work of Trevor N Dupy and Christopher Lawrence. *Understanding War, War by Numbers and Attrition*

as NATO and with more direct combat experience in armoured warfare. Secondly, almost everything used by Israel was in front-line NATO service at the time and most relatively new and state-of-the-art.

In sharp contrast, the current war in Ukraine sees much-outdated equipment in ad-hoc combat formations, not seemingly underpinned by NATO equivalent training, doctrine and organisation levels.

As of June 2023, no main battle tank in Ukraine has a fully integrated sensor and active self-protection system, which needs to be contrasted against the number of times Israeli active protection systems have defeated modern Russian rocket-propelled grenades and anti-tank guided missiles. There is no reported use of modern high-altitude long-endurance or medium capability unmanned aerial systems with high-performance payloads able to generate CAT-III/IV target data at greater than 50 kilometres. Except for Brimstone, there is no reported use of long-range non-line-of-sight anti-armour systems. Neither side seems to be fielding modern IP-based battle management systems using multiple bearers and self-forming networks. What does exist seems improvised, but if not, where are the insights? All these things have been common in the modern Israel Defence Forces for more than a decade and machine learning and staff automation tools are already being fielded.

Likewise, the integrated defensive aid suites on Israeli AH-64s have consistently defeated man-portable air-defense systems, making helicopter losses in Ukraine far less relevant as an observation. The Russians have had an equivalent system offered for export for more than a decade. Notably, this has attracted very little comment.

Interest in the combat performance of individual platforms such as the Leopard 2A6 would carry very little in the way of insights if it weren't operated by crews with the training expected of the observer. Notably, 'training' and 'command competence' feature very little in the claimed Ukraine lesson literature. In sharp contrast, the US Army's National Training Center cites its existence as 'lessons learned' from 1973 and Israel Defence Forces combat training.⁵

DRONES AND THE TRANSPARENT BATTLEFIELD

As most admit, drones are nothing new but the 'transparent battlefield' has been with us for a long time dating back to at least World War I and observation balloons directing long-range

"Why the impact of drones is so over-emphasised compared to the impact of far older technologies such as battlefield surveillance radar or unattended ground sensors is not clear."

artillery. In terms of a more direct comparison to the Bayraktar TB-2 drone, Israelis made widespread use of similar though smaller and less detectable unmanned aerial systems to locate and target Syrian surface-to-air missile sites in 1982. The Israeli unmanned aerial systems could stay aloft at 15,000 feet for more than seven hours, broadcasting real-time images of the missile locations. They also performed electronic intelligence missions. In widespread use since Vietnam, drones were a well-accepted, well used and well-employed system by Israel in 1982, yet the Falklands War was fought with no such systems so where was the lesson?

The claim that the war in Ukraine marks a step change in mass employment of small drones misses an element of 'so what' rigour. The average DJI Mavic Drone can transmit 5.1K video and can operate for 45 minutes out to 15 kilometres, so it has about 15 minutes on station at maximum range and is limited to 21 knots of wind. It uses 2.4 and 5.8 Ghz control channels. The military equivalent works out to only about 10 kilometres but spends 45 minutes on station. The critical difference is that the electro-optical/infra-red payload can detect NATO standard targets in darkness at 15 kilometres and humans at 10-12 kilometres and generate target data sets. It also uses military communications with a far lower probability of detection, jamming or intercept. They can also operate with no control link, recording footage and returning to a safe area to downlink it. This is just quad-copter-type unmanned aerial systems.

In Ukraine, what is being reported as 'lessons' are capabilities over a decade or more in the past. Simply put, the most advanced and capable small military drones currently in common use are not present in Ukraine in any way that has impacted current battlefield observations. Why the impact of drones is

⁵*How to train an Army Podcast – Peter Roberts.*

⁶*The author of this article worked on Strike Tactical Doctrine.*

⁷*Brigadier James Martin, RUSI Land Warfare Conference 2019 – Session Five.*

so over-emphasised compared to the impact of far older technologies such as battlefield surveillance radar or unattended ground sensors is not clear. It seems likely that since many civilians can purchase the same drones, there is a vicarious attachment to commenting on a capability with which they feel familiar. Battlefield video also reinforces that perception.

Good camouflage and concealment defeat most of the current civilian drone capability, so a standard of training that would mitigate low and slow flying Fiesler Storch in 1940 would substantially be simple and easy to implement and was routine in the British Army of the Rhine from 1945 to until the early 1990s. As most soldiers know, simple countermeasures can render thermal imagery far less effective than commonly supposed.

BIGGER PROBLEMS

For two reasons, seeing lessons in Ukraine, or 'signposts for the future of war', is substantially problematic for the British Army. The first is that the British Army had a useful and valid understanding of contemporary warfare long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This understanding informed the Strike Tactical Doctrine in 2017 and built on a wider body of work that dates back to the early 1960s when tactical nuclear weapons drove the need for dispersion.⁶ The strike brigade concept proves that the British Army was across the problem long before February 2022. That said, much good work was limited by extant platform choices, lack of funding and failures of previous programmes. A speech made by the current General Officer Commanding 3rd (UK) Division at the RUSI Land Warfare Conference 2019 stated that the British Army was on the right track.⁷ Notably, the core observation confirmed the need to train to fight dispersed and the training challenge it presented. As yet, few, if any, observer in the Ukraine conflict has talked about training or methods of operations, yet it is central to a British Army warfighting approach. The war in Ukraine validates the controversial strike brigade dispersion and signature reduction issue. It is not a lesson from it. The strike brigade was conceptually and doctrinally well prepared to fight the war that had occurred.

The second problem is that of equipment and budget. The claim that the war in Ukraine demonstrates X or Y capability need for the UK is mostly reputational or obvious to informed observers. Some claims may also be wrong. This creates the inference of a pressing evidence-based case when such a case is either already well understood or wrong. The



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public's desire to talk about tanks when air defence and electromagnetic warfare may be more pressing further skews the debate. The risk is that the 'lessons of the Ukraine war' become a Trojan Horse for bad ideas and a poor understanding of combat power. Why would the war in Ukraine produce any more insights than the six-week-long second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, where it could well be argued that both sides were better equipped and trained than the combatants in Ukraine? Nagorno-Karabakh saw the widespread use of loitering munitions. Still, these have existed for more than 35 years, have been used in multiple conflicts, and have generally been more advanced in capability than those used in Ukraine, so their employment holds little insight.⁸

BAD IDEAS

The conception that current conflicts somehow provide insights into future conflict regarding things that an army can prepare for today is neither as safe nor historically valid as many assume. For example, the British Army's choice to mechanise completely in 1927/28 was not a direct lesson of any conflict.⁹ The British Army had experimented with mechanisation well before World War I. Likewise, it is extremely debatable to suggest that the defeat of the British Expeditionary Force, once the French Army collapsed in May 1940, resulted from a failure to learn the lessons of World War I or even the Spanish Civil War. In terms of capability, far more British Army equipment proved either adequate or ideal in terms of what was designed before the war as was

found wanting. Many of the problematic ideas about tanks were extant well before the war and based mostly on the personal opinions of men such as JFC Fuller and other members of the armoured 'avant garde'.

The future is unknowable. The idea that things happening in wars today provide some insight into what war will be like tomorrow is sound and logical but only valid and useful if subjected to analytical rigour and placed in the organisational, cultural and practical context, often reducing the relevance of insights. For example, little is written about the British Army's lessons from the US experience in Vietnam compared to the Israelis in 1967 and 1973.

The primary insight to be gained from observing contemporary conflicts is that of preparedness for war. Can you do the things that are needed to win battles and engagements? The fact that Russia or Ukraine is firing an X-amount of 155/152mm shells per day is not a lesson. It may be irrelevant to the British Army if those forces are not as well trained as the British Army or able to leverage the intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance and command, control, communications and intelligence integration, which the British Army should have in service, meaning each round fired is substantially more effective. The British Army has fought and trained to fight wars where high artillery ammunition expenditure was and is a fact. It cannot, therefore, be 'a lesson of modern war'. Observations from Ukraine or any other conflict need to be placed in regard to the

context of your force's training and overall education. If it's something you know or did, it is not a lesson.

CONCLUSIONS

There is considerable danger in seeking to see and write about lessons from ongoing conflicts in the belief that, axiomatically, there must be lessons from all on-going conflicts. This view is contestable. Many find that idea surprising or even ludicrous because they are unfamiliar with the corpus of the British Army expertise apparent in the recent past. The British Army has a strong corporate memory of preparing to fight major European land wars. That is not trivial.

The British Army's inability to deliver land equipment programmes and control its own budgets does not detract from the fact that well before both the Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Russo-Ukraine War, the Service had a largely correct and validated understanding of modern warfare based almost entirely on basic professional rigour which observations of the war in Ukraine validates rather than challenges. While not without problems, that model has little to learn from the war in Ukraine, given that at least five years before the Russian invasion, the British Army was preparing to fight a Russian Army substantially more competent than the Russian Army apparent today.

⁸The IAI Harop entered service in the IDF in the mid 1980s and was briefed to the UK as a potential UOR in the 1990s.

⁹JP Harris, *Men Ideas and Tanks*.