September 8, 2015 Tuesday 24 Elul 5775
8:49 IST

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THE JERUSALEM POST

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Gilad Schalit's capture: In his own words

By BEN CASPIT
03/28/2013

Former soldier gives military investigators an account of the attack that led to his capture and the deaths of two of his comrades.

In conversations with a psychologist after his return to Israel from five years in captivity, Gilad Schalit expressed fears over the IDF investigation he would undergo. Schalit knew exactly what he was worried about – he knew all too well the circumstances that led to his captivity. He knew that there was no military glory in what had happened there, on that night. He knew that he did not do his duty as an IDF combat soldier and did not even do the minimum to prevent his own capture.

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Schalit knew that he had effectively given himself up on June 25, 2006, been taken captive without firing even one bullet, despite the fact that he could have prevented the entire situation with relative ease. He was very concerned indeed over his meeting with the military investigators.

But in contrast to other cases of soldiers being taken prisoner or abducted, the IDF was handling Schalit with kid gloves.

The soldier had become "the child of us all," whose years of absence were etched on the national consciousness – and it was a sentiment that had infected the IDF as well.

There weren't real investigations; there were neither interrogation rooms nor investigative tricks. Schalit was not subjected to the same treatment as former Hezbollah captive Elhanan Tannenbaum, for example. He was treated as the nation's sweetheart.

The experts who examined Schalit identified his fears and alerted the investigators to possible trauma. He continued his military service. He became a superstar, with a life of privilege.

He delighted in the massive wave of warmth that washed over him, all the benefits that were showered upon him. He had given years of his life to his country; it may not have been a voluntary act, but even so it was one that was duly noted.

The day of his release, October 18, 2011, became a kind of national holiday. Traffic of streets was at a standstill, the collective tears of happiness flowed freely and even IDF Chief of Staff Lt.- Gen. Benny Gantz branded him a "hero."

Watching Schalit's return, it was impossible not to have been teary-eyed. It happened to me, too, despite my years of writing opinion pieces against the deal-in-the-making, and even presenting a list of arguments as to why a rational country could not take such a step of capitulation. It seemed to me to be a national failure.

But ultimately, and after changing his own stance and betraying his own ideological principles, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu decided to pay the high price for Schalit's freedom. Even today, I still don't know if he did the right thing.

In the meantime, another intifada hasn't broken out, and Israel has survived Schalit's release. True, some of the prisoners who were freed have since been re-arrested, and launched a hunger strike that threatens to ignite the Palestinian territories, but the bottom line is that the soldier came home and started a new life, and Israeli society held firm to the solidarity for which is it famous. Only history can judge who was right, if it is at all appropriate to say if anyone in this whole affair was in the right.

This story is the story of Gilad Schalit. This is his version, as told to the IDF investigators who questioned him. As stated, he feared his encounters with them; he was ashamed of what he had to tell them, yet he did so with an honesty that truly inspires respect. He didn't try to conceal the truth; he told them he'd failed and acknowledged that he had not done his duty. He said this willingly, without any coercion or pressure.

Schalit has a phenomenal memory, he knows exactly what happened on each day of his captivity, when he was moved from place to place, what he ate, what was done and what happened.

And thus, for his interrogators, Gilad Schalit went over the details of the attack that led to his capture. Here is Schalit's version, almost in its entirety (which the exception of the details that were redacted by the censor).

The attack took place in the pre-dawn darkness. Schalit's tank crew was on guard duty outside the Gaza Strip. During the night, the crew took it in turns to rest – two keeping watch and two sleeping.

With the dawn, everyone was supposed to be awake, in his place and battle ready. At this stage, there is a communications check with the rest of the troops in the field, as well as with the operations room, and everyone reports that they are ready. This is what Schalit's tank team should have been doing.

In reality, just one of the four-man team was awake – the rest were sleeping the sleep of the just. The driver was in the driver's seat, the gunner (Schalit) was in his place, the comms guy in his and the commander in the commander's turret.

Schalit was what is known in the army as "*rosh katan*" (literally, small head, and meaning someone with little or no initiative).

He was assigned for operational duty without knowing what was going on around him, the makeup of the area, or where the enemy lay. He had attended meetings and briefings before setting out on the mission, but had not immersed himself in the details. He was, after all, a member of a team, and trusted in his commander.

If he had listened to the company commander of the sector, who had issued detailed briefings, he would have known that there had been an explicit warning from the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) about a possible Hamas infiltration from Gaza, perhaps via a tunnel, and an attempt to

kidnap a soldier. If he had been aware that in his vicinity – and just a few minutes away – there were reinforcements, perhaps it could have changed the face of the battle and even prevented the abduction.

In the briefing before the operation, it was clearly stated where everyone was located in the field, the deployment layout and more. A unit from the Engineering Corps had been situated 200 meters from Schalit's tank, next to the border fence, throughout the night. Col. Avi Peled, the senior commander in the sector, who was suffering from a manpower shortage, had wanted to give back-up to the tanks in the field, and had brought in the team from the Engineering Corps, assigned as a personal favor.

It would have been possible for Schalit to call on this backup, had he known that they were there, but he had not been paying attention when the information was imparted.

"I didn't listen," he admitted to the investigators. "The commander was listening, and that was enough. I trusted him."

When the attack began, he was sleeping in his gunner's seat, deep inside the tank. His personal weapon was on the floor underneath him; he wasn't wearing his helmet, his bullet- proof vest was hanging on the back of the chair, and maybe his flak jacket was on. Maybe not.

As it turns out, the vest and the flak jacket saved his life. Schalit went to sleep at 4:35 a.m. Until then, he had been on guard in the commander's post, and had been relieved by a team member. Twenty-five minutes later, he was awoken by the impact of a rocket-propelled grenade striking the tank. He looked up to see the tank commander, Lt. Hanan Barak, and the driver, St.-Sgt. Pavel Slutzker, climbing out of the tank at speed.

"Gilad, get out of the tank!" Barak yelled at him. From beneath him, he could hear the voice of Cpl. Roi Amitai, calling "Hanan, Hanan," but Barak and Slutzker were already out.

The command to leave the tank contravened operational orders. An RPG cannot do significant damage to a Merkava 3 tank, and this was a light strike on the side. Yes, it caused shock and agitation, but even so, this was no reason to abandon the tank – it wasn't on fire, the grenade had caused minimal damage, the electronic systems were working, and no one on the team had been wounded.

Following the attack, after it was all over, an army technician went to the tank, turned on the engine and drove it away. The tank that Schalit had been in was capable of continuing to fight. A tank like this is a powerful war machine, with an effective, precise and swift cannon; it has three machine guns, primed and ready at the touch of the trigger, not to mention all the other advanced weaponry on board.

And yet the crew fled. I'm not here to place blame. Under fire and in the heat of battle, people make mistakes, people don't always stick to their orders; it has happened, does happen and will happen in every Israeli war. It was a judgment call at that moment, and ultimately, that call cost Hanan Barak and Pavel Slutzker their lives. Two people died in the tank attack, and their names far less familiar to Israelis than that of the captive for whose protection they made the ultimate sacrifice.

The officers questioning the post-captivity Schalit asked him if he had left the tank.

"No, I didn't leave," he replied.

"Why?" "Because the tank seemed safer than there, outside," he said. "Outside is dangerous. Inside was protected."

With the departure of Barak and Slutzker, Schalit heard the rattle of light weapons being fired. It was this gunfire that killed the two crew members, and they fell from the tank onto the ground. Schalit heard them fall, then quiet, and realized that the two, one of whom was his commander, were either dead or seriously wounded.

Cpl. Roi Amitai, who had been fast asleep at the time of the attack, was trapped in his spot in the tank. Schalit understood that he was alone. He decided to stay in the tank, and not get out and fight.

He had options, however, from inside. There was the machine gun, set up to be operated by the gunner without any need to stick his head out of the vehicle; he could have let off a few rounds and let the world know that the Merkava was still operational and in the fight. Yet he stayed put, in his seat, and hoped for the best.

Outside, at the same time, there were a total of two militants. The cell which had infiltrated from Gaza was seven strong. Two struck at an IDF post, wounded several soldiers and tried to flee. Both died.

Three more attacked an empty IDF armored personnel carrier some distance away, and the other two hit the tank. If the tank crew had remained inside the tank, it would have been easy to take out their attackers.

Even Schalit, alone as he was, should have been able to manage it. At this point Schalit was sitting in the gunner's seat, praying for it to just be over. Then one of militants approached and threw two or three grenades into the turret. Schalit doesn't recall the explosion of the grenades, but he does remember the smoke very well.

His bullet-proof vest and his flak jacket, hanging on the back of the chair, absorbed most of the impact. The chair was completely shredded.

Schalit, miraculously, was lightly wounded with shrapnel in his elbow and rear. He was scared, shocked. He stayed in the tank for a minute or two until the smoke spread throughout the turret and he found it hard to breathe. Then he decided, finally, to leave. He left unarmed. His gun, a deadly M-16, he left on the floor of the turret. In military terms, this is called abandoning your weapon.

If only Schalit had taken his gun with him when he left the tank; if only he had seen the militant approach the tank and start to climb up it. He could have taken him out easily, but he was not in battle mode. This is what Schalit himself told the investigators. Schalit's tank did not fire a single bullet.

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Translated by Sara Miller.

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