**THE MOSSAD DIARIES:**

**“Operation: Defensive Shield” (2002)**

**Episode 4 of 6, of Mossad missions, as**

**told to photojournalist Dennis F. Stevens**

**by Rachel Mordechai, a recently retired**

**Mossad and Sayeret Matkal commando.**

**A 120-minute TV Miniseries Episode**

**Story by:**

**Dennis F. Stevens & Rachel Mordechai**

**Screenplay by:**

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**SYNOPSIS**

**Memo to Christine R. Graham:**

**In reading Rachel Mordechai’s six recently declassified diaries consisting of Mossad missions in which she participated, I’ve chosen for episode four her diary entitled *Operation Defensive Shield a*bout the large-scale operation in the West Bank, targeting terrorist organizations.**

**Background:**

**In 1993, Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords, hoping to reach a peace solution. Unfortunately, the accords fail and a new wave of terrorism sweeps Israel. After a stunning increase in suicide bombings by Palestinians, Prime Minister Sharon and Defense Minister Benyamin Ben Eliezer launch Operation Defensive Shield.**

**As with Operation Cast Lead, Rachel Mordechai’s role in the operation began more than a month before the actual launch. She and other Mossad agents entered the West Bank for the purpose of infiltrating the PLO, finding and identifying weapons stashes, anticipating further terrorist attacks and reporting this information to the IDF. The information dealing with this part of Operation Defensive Shield was only declassified in 2018.**

**So, exactly what was Operation “Defensive Shield?” It was a large-scale military operation conducted by the Israel Defense Forces in 2002 during the course of the Second Intifada. It was the largest military operation in the West Bank since the 1967 Six-Day War. The stated goal of the operation was to stop terrorist attacks. The spark that gave rise to the action was the March 27 suicide bombing during Passover Seder at the Park Hotel in the Israeli resort city of Netanya where a Palestinian suicide bomber killed 30 mostly elderly vacationers.**

**“*Defensive Shield*” began on March 29, 2002, with an incursion into Ramallah placing Yasser Arafat under siege in his Ramallah compound, followed by incursions into the six largest cities in the West Bank, and their surrounding localities. The Israel Defense Forces invaded Tulkarm and Qalgilya on April 1 and Bethlehem the next day; Jenin and Nablus the next.**

**Additional Background**

**It’s well known that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated during the Second Intifada. In January and February 2002, 71 people were killed on all sides during attacks from Palestinian terrorists and the Israeli army. March and April 2002 saw a dramatic increase in attacks against Israelis by Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Fatah-affiliated Al-Agsa Martyrs’ Brigades. In addition to numerous shooting and grenade attacks, fifteen suicide bombings were carried out in March, an average of one suicide bombing every two days. March 2002 became known in Israel as "Black March." The high rate of attacks severely disrupted daily life throughout Israel.**

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**Following nine attacks by Palestinian terrorists, between March 2–5, the Israel cabinet decided to massively expand its military activity against these groups. On March 5, while talking with reporters in the Knesset cafeteria, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, pointing to the bloodiest week against Israelis since the start of the Second Intifada, explained the cabinet's decision: "The Palestinians must be hit, and it must be very painful. ... We must cause them losses, victims, so that they feel a heavy price.”**

**Palestinian attacks continued, with suicide bombings on 9 March, 20 March, and 21 March. Shooting and grenade attacks also continued to occur in Israel and Israeli settlements. On 27 March, a suicide attack occurred in Netanya, where 30 people were killed in the Park Hotel while celebrating Passover. The event became known as the Passover massacre. The following day, a Palestinian gunman infiltrated the Israeli settlement of Elon Moreh and killed four members of the same family.**

**On March 29, the Israeli government announced Operation "Defensive Shield," terming it a large-scale counter-terrorist offensive. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) issued emergency call-up notices for 30,000 reserve soldiers, the largest call-up since the 1982 Lebanon War. The same day, two Israelis were stabbed in the Gaza settlement of Netzarim. Two suicide bombings occurred the next day, and another one took place the day after that.**

**Overall, in March 2002, some 130 Israelis including approximately 100 noncombatants were killed in Palestinian attacks.**

**The stated goals of the operation (as conveyed to the Israeli Knesset by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on April 8, 2002) were "to catch and arrest terrorists and, primarily, their dispatchers and those who finance and support them; to confiscate weapons intended to be used against Israeli citizens; to expose and destroy facilities and explosives, laboratories, weapons production factories and secret installations. The orders are clear: target and paralyze anyone who takes up weapons and tries to oppose our troops, resists them or endangers them—and to avoid harming the civilian population." IDF officers also noted that incursions would force Palestinian militants "to exert their energy by defending their homes in the camps instead of by plotting attacks on Israelis."**

**The Palestinian attachment to the UN report on Operation "Defensive Shield" challenged the validity of the Israeli claim that it was targeting "terrorists," noting that, “The record shows clearly that the nature of the actions taken, the amount of harm inflicted on the population and the practical results prove completely different political goals [...] the Israeli occupying forces have consistently targeted the Palestinian police and security forces, instead of 'terrorists', and have consistently tried to destroy the Palestinian Authority and declared it an 'enemy', instead of groups hostile to peace in the Middle East."**

**The Battle of Jenin.**

**According to Israeli authorities, Jenin became a central base for terror groups and terror attacks mounted by several organizations, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and Hamas.**

**003**

**The IDF spokesman attributed 23 of the 60 suicide bombers that attacked Israel in 2002 to Palestinians from Jenin.**

**On April 2, more than 1,000 IDF soldiers entered the camp, calling civilians and non-combatants to leave. An estimated 13,000 Palestinians were housed in Jenin prior to the operation.**

**The operation was led by the 5th Infantry Brigade, which had not yet been trained in close-quarters combat. During a series of sweeps, the Israeli military claimed the entire camp was booby-trapped. At least 2,000 bombs and booby traps were planted throughout the camp. In response to the discovery, the Israelis dispatched combat bulldozers to detonate any bombs that were placed in the streets.**

**Israeli commanders were still not confident that soldiers would be safe from booby traps and IEDs. A rapid ground attack would clearly be costly in IDF lives, but political pressure from the United States and elsewhere required a rapid end to the fighting. Former defense minister Shaul Mofaz promised combat-operations would be over by April 6, but that was clearly impossible. The IDF slowly advanced into the city, encountering fierce resistance. Most of the fighting was conducted by infantry fighting house-to-house, while armored bulldozers were used to clear away booby traps and IEDs. Air support was limited to helicopter gunships firing wire-guided missiles. Palestinian commander Mahmoud Tawalbe was killed during the battle. According to a British military expert, he was killed by an Israeli bulldozer, while the Palestinians claimed that blew himself up to collapse a house on Israeli soldiers.**

**On the third day of operations, an IDF unit accidentally wandered into a Palestinian ambush. Thirteen Israeli soldiers were killed and three of the bodies were captured before a Shayetet 13 naval commando unit could retrieve them.**

**According to Rachel’s diary, after the ambush, the Israeli military developed a tactic that allowed units to advance further and more safely into the camps. Israeli commanders would send an armored bulldozer to ram the corner of a house, creating a hole. An IDF Achzarit would then enter the hole, allowing troops to clear the house without going through booby-trapped doors. Palestinian resistance was halted following the adoption of the bulldozer method, and most residents of the Hawashin neighborhood surrendered before it was leveled. Palestinian commander Hazem Qabha refused to surrender and was killed.**

**Throughout the Battle of Jenin, and for a few days afterwards, the city and its refugee camp were under total closure. There was much concern at the time about possible human rights violations occurring in the camp. Allegations of a massacre in Jenin were spread by Palestinians in order to create pressure on Israel to halt the operation. Claims of complete destruction of the Jenin refugee camp, a massacre of 500 civilians, and mass graves being dug by Israeli soldiers were proven false after a United Nations investigation. Reports of a large-scale massacre were found to be untrue, a result of confusion resulting from the Israeli refusal to allow entry to outside observers.**

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**Similar battles were fought in the cities of Nablus, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Tulkarm, and Hebron**

**European Union reaction**

**EU states were discussing the possibility of sanctions. The Belgian Foreign Minister said that the EU could rethink its trade relations with Israel. The European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution calling for economic sanctions on Israel, an arms embargo on both parties, and for the European Union to "suspend immediately" its trade and cooperation agreement with Israel. It condemned the "military escalation pursued by the Sharon government" and the "oppression of the Palestinian civilian population by the Israeli army," while also condemning suicide bombings.**

**Casualties**

**During the fighting, 30 Israeli soldiers were killed and 127 were wounded, while 497 Palestinians were killed and 1,447 were wounded according to a United Nations investigation. However, B’Tselem only registered 240 Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces during the period in which the operation took place. Approximately 7,000 Palestinians were detained by Israel, including 396 wanted suspects.**

**The World Bank estimated that over $361 million worth of damage was caused to Palestinian infrastructure and institutions, $158 million of which came from the aerial bombardment and destruction of houses in Nablus and Jenin.**

**Strategic outcome**

**The effects of Operation "Defensive Shield," as recorded by the Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, were an initial drop by half (46 percent) in the number of suicide bombings – from 22 in February–March to 12 in April–May – and a 70 percent drop in executed attacks between the first half of 2002 and the second half (43 January–June, 13 July–December). While 2003 had a total of 25 executed suicide bombings in comparison to 56 in 2002, the main difference was the number of attacks which did not come to realization (184) either due to Israeli interception or problems in the execution. 2003 also saw a 35 percent drop in the number of fatalities from 220 deaths in 2002 to 142 deaths resulting from suicide bombings.**

**Initially Israel welcomed an investigation, announcing that it would cooperate fully with the Secretary General's fact-finding effort. According to the United Jewish Communities, Israel made a number of points regarding the team's methodology, in order to "safeguard the impartiality of its work." However, Israeli government receptivity to cooperating with the UN fact-finding mission decreased when the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, did not appoint a predominantly technical team with specialized military and forensic expertise, but rather political-administrative figures without such specialized skills.**

**Palestinian officials reduced the casualty toll in Jenin on May 1, 2002, to be between 50-60 deaths while Israel maintained there were only seven or eight civilian casualties. The charges of a massacre which had sparked demands for a U.N. investigation had now**

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**been dropped. Kofi Annan disbanded the UN fact-finding team in Jenin (supposed to determine whether a massacre had taken place) with the comment that "clearly the full cooperation of both sides was a precondition for this, as was a visit to the area itself to see the Jenin refugee camp at first hand and to gather information.**

**In 2002, Mohammed Bakri, a prominent Arab actor and Israeli citizen, directed and produced a documentary *Jenin, Jenin*, to portray "the Palestinian truth" about the "Battle of Jenin." In the documentary Bakri propagates that indeed a massacre of civilians occurred in Jenin. A French Jewish film maker, Pierre Rehov, also directed a documentary on what happened in Jenin during "Defensive Shield." His film, *The Road* *to Jenin*, was produced to counter the claims of a massacre, and to counter the narrative of Mohammed Bakri. After a review of the two documentaries, Bakri shortened his film by 25 minutes in the wake of criticism.**

**Typical of the hundreds of news story exaggerations is the following: Jenin's population recounted "vivid accounts" of fighting and homes being demolished. But, first-hand accounts of massacres were scarce. One such rumor was a grocery store owner near Jenin who spoke of seeing Israeli troops using a refrigerated truck to hold the bodies of massacred Palestinians, which he said was still parked on a nearby hill. He refused to elaborate out of fear from "collaborators." A National Post reporter inspected the truck and found that it contained apples and other food for the Israeli soldiers.**

**The Production**

**As with episode three of the Mossad Diaries (*Operation Cast Lead*), without IDF cooperation and assistance this episode could be very expensive to film. But with IDF cooperation and assistance comes access to actual film footage of practically the whole operation. Other stock footage can be purchased from photojournalists and media sources covering the operation from inside the cities where the battles took place. No actual filming inside the West Bank will occur. Instead, those scenes featuring Rachel and her Mossad team, will be filmed in Jordan. Filmed in a documentary style, in Israel and Jordan, using an Israeli film crew, I estimate the budget for this 120 minute truly exciting episode to be (approximately) between $1.8 and $3 million, depending upon the cast.**

**Christine:**

**Rachel’s diary marked *Operation Defensive Shield* is filled with detailed facts such as indicated above; including her role in the operation. As with *Cast Lead*, she relates finding weapons stored in mosques, hospitals and schools. She also carefully points out world opinion against the operation and attempts to answer why the media unfairly called the Battle of Jenin a massacre.**

**Of course, what ties the episodes together is the serious injury Rachel suffered from the rockets Hamas launched from Gaza in Episode One. You’ll recall that while hospitalized in a coma, her brother David Mordechai, an IAF air ops officer, fulfils his sister’s wishes by handing over six of Rachel’s diaries to filmmaker and photojournalist Dennis F. Stevens. The diaries represent detailed accounts of Rachel’s participation in six of many Mossad operations in which she participated. She knew that Stevens would know what to do with the information contained in the diaries.**

**The thing that ties the episodes together as a miniseries, of course, is the concern over Rachel’s recovery from her coma and reestablishment of a relationship between Rachel and Stevens that occurred in late 1990 and early 1991, when photojournalist Stevens was covering the Gulf War for the Reuters News Service – from Israel.**

**END**