**Menachem Ansbacher:** To Pitz, who was beside me during the most crucial part of our military training, and who - together with me - wrote the first chapter of what was meant to be a wildly funny book, before the sky fell on us. To Pitz, my soul-brother who tried to break through hundreds of Syrian soldiers in order to reach me. Who is still trying to reach me.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** To my dearest Ilana - mother of our four children - who agreed to marry me after I returned from prison, and who has put up with my many breakdowns all these years. To you, I am eternally grateful.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** To Benny, who’s voice calling out to me on the comms before going silent forever, still rings in my ear. To Ronnie, who took my place on the machine gun for one short minute that stretched to eternity.

**Aviram Barkai:** My thanks is given to each of the hundreds of interviewees for this book, for some it was a cleansing experience. For others, a real trauma.

**Hallie Lerman:** Jacob, are you there? My words break into Hebrew letters as they are tossed and carried...

**Menachem Ansbacher:** To all the families who put their sons' lives in my hands, and I still do not have the courage to face them. To my Dvora, who - for many years - is paying the price for a battle she did not take part in.

**Robby Rijkmans:** In memory of our friends those who died in the battle and those who died trying to save us. Friends don't forget friends.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. Those were all dedications of books written about a specific battle in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. And we played them because today we’re going to embark on a two-episode journey back to that war, and more precisely back to one small hill - a dormant volcanic tell - in the southern Golan Heights. But before we begin, a word of warning - this is a war story, a very difficult war story, and as such there are descriptions that may be hard for some people, especially children, to hear. With that, let’s dive in. Here’s Yochai Maital with **Tell Saki - Part I**.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Most probably every story, every event, has his incubation time. Required to… to be ready to go out.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** With most stories, there is no absolute beginning or end. Life’s narratives are usually just not that tidy. Our story today is different. It takes place in a very specific time, and lasts exactly thirty-six hours. But as Menachem Ansbacher, one of the heroes of this tale, just said - every event has its “incubation time.” For sixty-seven-year-old Menachem - a tall, blue-eyed, former commander in the paratroopers - that incubation time was nearly a quarter-of-a-century. In 1996, he and his wife Devora went out on a date to see a Hollywood war flick called *Courage Under Fire*, set during the Gulf War.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Iraq War, the first. An American helicopter crashed in a small hill. A female pilot...

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Played by Meg Ryan.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And about five warriors. And all around them there is a big plateau, full of Iraqis that are trying to climb the small hill and kill them.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Anyway, on their way home, Menachem’s wife innocently asked a question.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** If that film does not remind me my battle in ‘73. And thenit happened suddenly for me. I didn't expect it, I just broke into a cry. And it was loud, it was bizarre to me because I never cried. I didn't recognize the voice, the sound, of my cry. And I couldn't see the road because of my tears. And then I had to… to stop very dramatically and put myself aside to free the way.

**Dan Almagor:** My name is Dan Almagor. I live now in the US, in Florida.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** For Dan, one of Menachem’s soldiers, it was a different ‘90s Hollywood war movie that did it - Spielberg’s epic *Saving Private Ryan*.

**Dan Almagor:** AndI remember like shaking through the entire movie, to a point that my wife got scared, she didn't know what happened to me. She thought I was getting like seizure. My wife thought that I completely lost it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Over the past year-and-a-half, I’ve spoken to dozens of soldiers, all of them survivors of one specific battle in the southern Golan Heights. A place that left such a profound impact on their lives, that many of them refer to it as their second birth place. Yet after the war, as they all dispersed..

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Either to hospital, either to the graveyard.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** They didn't stay in touch.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We just... as a bomb - everyone of us was fragmented to another direction.

**Dan Almagor:** Everything that... on a street, every time you meet a friend, brings you back into very dark place. I made a decision that I have to get away from these pictures as far as I can.

**Robby Rijkmans:** I never went to see anyone or meet anyone. *Klum.* I mean, nothing.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We tried very politely not to meet each other.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** At home as well they preferred not to share their experiences.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** To lock it. To lock it. Not to touch it because it will hurt you. Don't touch. Don’t... Keep away.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But for most of them, the demons of the past refused to go away.

**Robby Rijkmans:** You can get away from the war, but the war will never get away from you.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Even today, I have some white nights.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As any first year psychology student will tell you - all these descriptions are classic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Wars are usually talked about in broad terms: Forces mobilized, land grabbed, alliances and stratagem. But the description given by novelist James Jones, a simple frontline soldier during some of the Second World War’s most harrowing battles, sounds much more like what I was hearing.

**James Jones:** Even those of us who hated it, found it exciting, sometimes. That is what the civilian people never understand about their returned soldiers in any war - they cannot understand how we can hate it and still like it. And they do not realize that they have a lot of dead men around them. Dead men who are walking around and breathing. Some men find it hard to come back, some never come back at all. Not completely. End quote.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Growing up in Israel, you hear a ton of war stories. I went through a period, between third and fifth grade, when all I read were accounts of the antics of the *Palmach* and the IDF’s special units. For obvious reasons, the focus is usually on success stories. But what about the battles that we did not win? What about the survivors, who didn’t get to come home to a hero’s welcome? Whose bravery and sacrifice went unrecognized?

This story is about them.

It's a story about what war does to friendship, and how - ultimately - camaraderie may be the only cure to the emotional wounds inflicted by war.

The Yom Kippur War famously caught Israel by surprise. Most of its regular soldiers were at home, many in synagogue, praying. Despite various different warning signs, the IDF hadn't called up the reserves, which formed the bulk of its force. So on Saturday, October 6th, 1973, the IDF’s outposts were primarily manned by young conscripted officers like twenty-year-old Menachem.

Menachem, a First Lieutenant in the paratroopers, was stationed in El-Al - the regional headquarters of the southern Golan. His regiment had arrived just a few days earlier and taken command of the area. That morning, he was praying *shacharit* with some of his men when he was called out for an emergency debriefing.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Andthey told me that maybe some clashes expected with the Syrian, and I should take five guys and go to Tell Saki.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem’s mission was to head to a lookout spot close to the Syrian border in order to be able to direct Israeli artillery in case a small skirmish developed.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I'm not comfortable to say it, but at that age - twenty - it's a kind of fun.

**Yochai Maital**: Like excitement?

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Yeah.

**Robby Rijkmans:** When you are soldiers, you want to do something. Not to kill, but you want to do something.

**Mordechai Aviam:** I was a little bit happy, because since I came to the Golan there was no fighting. And when you are nineteen, that's what you want to do. Not to shoot from your tank on barrels, but shooting at Syrian tanks.

**Nir Atir:** Hallelujah. On each tank… Syrian tank that we explode, blown up, we used to get a bottle of champagne. A bottle of champagne! The whole company is happy. The whole platoon is! We are the best platoon in the army.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Here it comes, here. Now I’m going to show them what I can do with my tank.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Those were Nir Atir.

**Nir Atir**: You can call me an outlaw if you want. It’s OK.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Moti Aviam.

**Mordechai Aviam:** I was nineteen. I was one of the youngest tank commanders in the brigade.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And Rob Reikmans.

**Robby Rijkmans:** I'm a Dutchman. I was born in Amsterdam. I'm not Jewish. Not a believer, I'll say, OK? Especially after the war.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** All tank soldiers deployed in the area. Here’s Menachem again.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We were raised with album from Six Day War.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** This generation of soldiers had been teenagers when Israel experienced the stunning victory of the Six Day War and the ensuing euphoria.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We are super power. A local super power. No one can beat us.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Most had never been in active combat and were looking forward to their turn at glory, their case of champagne. Menachem himself had spent the Six Day War cowering in a bomb shelter in Jerusalem with his parents. He swore to himself, then and there, that next time it will be different. He'll be out there fighting, not stuck in some bunker.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** *[In Hebrew]* And you know the end.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** “And, well, you know the end,” he told me.

But back to the southern Golan, to the regional command at El-Al, where Menachem had just been ordered to take four of his men and head *immediately* to the Tell Saki lookout post.

**Leizi Agasi**: He pointed at me.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** This is Leizi Agasi, one of those four soldiers.

**Leizi Agasi**: And at Shlomo, and Shaike and Ronnie.

**Dan Almagor**: I was in a bunker with one of my best friend, Ronnie Herzenstein. When Menachem came in, he called Ronnie Herzenstein to go with him. And I remember me asking “Menachem, can I join you also?” And Menachem said “no, I have enough.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As far as Menachem, the commander, was concerned, it was just one of those quick decisions.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: That doesn't have any deep meaning. Just, you know... When you take a cookie. Turned out that these choices was so important.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem’s random selection would end up haunting Dan for the rest of his life.

**Dan Almagor**: Maybe if I was more determined to stand up and insist to join, maybe Ronnie will still be alive. It's not logical but it comes back all the time. It does follow me through life.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** So while Dan was ordered to stay behind at HQ, the soldiers Menachem chose for the mission quickly gathered their equipment.

**Leizi Agasi**: I quickly finished praying, and stashed my prayerbook right here, my left breast pocket.

**Dan Almagor**: And they left in this cloud of dust towards Tell Saki.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem, Shlomo, Shaike, Leizi and Ronnie, along with a driver - Moshe Levi - climbed onto an APC, an armored personnel carrier, left El-Al, and headed northeast.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I was alone on the road. That Shabbat, that Yom Kippur, no one is traveling.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And after about ten-fifteen minutes they arrived at their destination - Tell Saki - a small, unimpressive hill.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Not very high, ninety feets above the surrounding plateau. But because it's plateau, you can look three-hundred-sixty degree all around.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It was an unmanned position, not protected by barbed wire or mindfields. Only by its natural covering of dry thorns and jagged volcanic rock. The only substantial shelter on the hill was a small concrete bunker.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** I call it a bunker, people imagine a fortress. We’re talking about a pathetic little room. Very small.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** That’s Ya’akov Seh Lavan, a former major in the188 Armored Brigade and sort of their unofficial historian.

**Robby Rijkmans:** Two point six on three point seven meters.

**Mordechai Aviam:** With two corridors, one on each side, but no doors.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** Just to allow six soldiers to go to sleep.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** This concrete room wasn't buried in the ground. It was just sort of sitting there, slightly below the peak.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Which a place to take shelter from light shooting but not heavy battle.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As Menachem’s crew drove to the top of the hill, the serene view of the plateau opened up in all directions.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We climb up the small hill. I gave a short instruction about the location around, about our mission, and there was nothing, there was silence. Silence. Because nothing is happen, me and another soldier called Leizi - which is observant as well - we continue to pray... that we have a long pray in Yom Kippur. Suddenly I heard the low frequency boom of the shells that are going into the air.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Back at HQ, Dan could hear them too.

**Dan Almagor:** Like thunders. One of those thunder storms that really shakes the air. Everything smell from phosphor, from burning.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: I immediately identify it, and I shouted to my soldiers, “get into the bunker,” that small room of concrete. And I knew that indeed it begin now. I didn't know what is beginning. But here they are, here they come.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** What Menachem didn’t know at the time, but would very soon discover is thatthe Syrian army had opened their offensive with a massive bombardment of the entire Golan Heights.

**Mordechai Aviam:** It felt like an earthquake. And then I look up. I see Syrian jets dropping bombs on us. That was unbelievable. I didn't think it’s can happen.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: It was the end of the summer, all the Golan Height, *kotzim*.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Thorns.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: *Kash.*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Dry grass.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: Heavy smoke, fires. My mission was to observe and trying to identify from where they are shooting but the smoke was so thick, I couldn't see even my shoes.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** We’re estimating 30,000 artillery shells land in all of northern Israel.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** That’s about a thousand bombs a minute.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** That's like crazy.

**Yoram Yair:** When I reached the edge of the ridge, suddenly I saw like a wall of black. The whole line was covered with thousands of artillery shells.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** This is retired general Yoram Yair, better known by his nickname ‘Ya Ya.’

**Yoram Yair:** Which is very catchable. So, this is my trademark.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ya Ya, Menachem’s direct commander, was only twenty-six at the time.

**Yoram Yair:** I was during the Yom Kippur War commanding the southern half of the Golan Heights.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ya Ya was actually in Jerusalem on that fateful Saturday morning. As soon as he caught wind of intelligence reports predicting a local skirmish with the Syrians, he quickly made his way up north, and reached the regional command center at El-Al just as the bombardment started. Immediately following that initial shelling, Syrians forces began their foray.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And the major break in was in our area.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ya Ya relied on reports from his soldiers on the frontline - people like Menachem - to understand what was going on. As the bombardment eased and the smoke cleared, Menachem could hardly believe his eyes. Shocked, he reached for the comm, and relayed what he was seeing to Ya Ya in El-Al.

**Yoram Yair:** He say to me, “Ya Ya, an armor brigade is attacking me.” I say to him, “hey, boy, do me a favor. Where have you seen in your life an armor brigade? Don't tell me armor brigade! Count the numbers! How many tanks you see?” When he reach sixty or I don't remember how much, I said, “hey hey, stop!” I didn't tell him, but I knew that it's not an armor brigade. It's a whole division.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** The ratio on the Golan... we're talking about a hundred-and-seventy-seven tanks facing fourteen hundred Syrian tanks. Add in artillery, add in planes, add in the combat engineering soldiers who were coming with bridges, and the infantry. Every Israeli soldier, six hundred Israeli soldiers, every guy in the frontline - every Menachem - has a hundred Syrians in front of him.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Overwhelmed by the sheer number of troops headed their way, the unprepared Israeli forces on the Golan watched as columns of tanks rolled westward on an old Roman road, much as Ahab, Cyrus, Saladin, the Crusaders, the Mamluks and the Ottomans all had before them.

**Nir Atir:** They are just moving. Tanks, tractors, D9, you know? To the trenches.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Anticipating that Israel would quickly deploy its Air Force, the Syrian anti-aircraft batteries were set and ready. IDF phantoms were dropping like flies, as the Syrian Engineering Corps quickly got to work bridging the anti-tank trenches and dismantling landmines along the border.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And it's a big operation to break in. It took all the afternoon.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem had the questionable fortune of having a front row seat to what was perhaps the biggest tank battle since Rommel and Montgomery clashed at El-Alamein.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We just sat on this hill and saw the big show, and nothing happened at Tell Saki at that time.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** By late afternoon, the Syrian Engineering Corps had completed its mission, and enemy forces made their way into Israeli territory.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** Menachem sees that the valley under him is covered with hundreds of Syrian vehicles - logistics, radio lines... the full package - a whole Syrian brigade is parked under him.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Throughout the afternoon, the few Israeli tanks deployed in the area fought bravely, taking out dozens of Syrian vehicles. But as the battle wore on, they started to run out of ammunition and reinforcements were nowhere to be seen. When night fell, the situation got even worse since the Syrian forces had night vision equipment that the Israeli troops lacked. Ya Ya knew the situation was dire.

**Yoram Yair:** I think that at ten o’clock at night there was nearly no operational tanks in my region.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Throughout the night, IDF soldiers fleeing burning tanks snuck up the hill in search of shelter.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: And arrived in a shock to Tell Saki.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Meanwhile, Menachem and his small crew were firing off with all they had at the Syrians down below.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: And actually today I consider it just a waste of ammunition, but I cannot change the past.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem manned the machine gun on their APC. Its metal plates dinged madly with the heavy showering of Syrian bullets.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: Ringing like a school ring. Driiing. I had an impression that I am some kind of super human. They are shooting so many bullets on me but no one hit me.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Until they did. Menachem took a bullet to his leg. Ronnie Herzenstein, one of his soldiers, quickly took his place and kept on firing.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: Before I finished to dress my wound, the heavy machine gun stop shooting.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ronnie was shot in the chest and head. He died shortly after. Again without a moment's hesitation, Leizi, another of Menachem’s soldiers, quickly took his place. Desperately, they kept fending off wave after wave of Syrian advances on the hill.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Andevery attempt they get better. And I was running very quickly out of ammunition.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** With the additional soldiers who fled to Tell Saki, the original force of five paratroopers grew to over two dozen. They were a ragtag collection of men splintered from their original units - tankless tankers and infantry men down to their last bullets. Menachem peeked into the tiny bunker where many of them were huddled together. He asked a soldier to dash out to the burnt tanks around the hill, and try to gather any ammunition he could find.

**Mordechai Aviam:** He didn't say Moti (he didn't know me, he didn’t know my name), but he said “someone,” and I thought that I’m the someone.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As Moti ran out of the bunker, Shaike - one of Menachem’s soldiers, who was outside and unaware of his commander’s orders - noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye.

**Mordechai Aviam:** He thought we are Syrians attacking him from the back. So he stood up with his Uzi and shot at us. Three bullets hit me. It just took me off the ground. I shouted something in Hebrew, and that's why he stopped shooting and ran to us and said, “why did tell me you're coming? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” But that's the war. He did exactly what a good soldier should do in a war - he turn around and he shoot, because otherwise you're going to lose your life.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Moti was quickly dragged back into the bunker.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Some guy from the paratroopers who wrapped me and put my arm on my chest and tied it. Suddenly I felt drops coming down from the tip of my nose. And I touched it and looked at it. I see it's blood. So I start to take my hand up, up, up and under the helmet, which was still on my head. And there was a heavy scratch in my forehead, right between the eyes. And then I put my finger through the helmet. There was a nine millimeter hole in the helmet. So the bullet went through the helmet and fell in the space between it and my forehead. And I said to myself, ‘I don't believe I got a bullet in my head, right between the eyes.’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The situation at Tell Saki was deteriorating rapidly, and Menachem - himself wounded - was frantically radioing for backup and medical assistance. Dan, at HQ with Ya Ya, heard all of these calls for help.

**Dan Almagor:** It was evident in his voice, Menachem’s voice, that he was desperate.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Also listening in on the comms was Menachem’s close childhood friend and fellow officer, Benny Hanani.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Benny, he was begging our commander to allow him to join us and reinforce us with his twenty soldier. He wanted to help.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ya Ya wouldn't authorise the rescue mission. He thought it was just too risky. But Benny wouldn't let it go.

**Dan Almagor:** Kept insisting again, “I need to help Menachem, I need to help Menachem.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Realizing Benny was likely going to disobey him and go anyway, Ya Ya finally gave him the green light to head towards Tell Saki on an evacuation mission. From his position on the tell, Menachem saw Benny’s and his men approaching.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: And I could see him running on the road, shooting at all direction. But just before he’s taking the road to the hill, there was a big cloud of black smoke going up.

**Dan Almagor:** And then we heard, “*Imma’le, Imma’le, Imma’le*.” And then quiet.

**Robby Rijkmans:** We lay down and see the vehicle burning and we smell their bodies.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: They fought until the end. It was a short battle. No one survived but two of the twenty.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Back in El-Al, Ya Ya turned to his men...

**Dan Almagor:** And he said, “I need six volunteers to go to Tell Saki.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Everyone understood the risks involved. And yet...

**Dan Almagor:** Every single person stood up.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In the end, fourteen people crammed into the brigade’s last armored vehicle and headed toward the hill.

**Dan Almagor:** Most of these fourteen guys get killed fairly quickly.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** There was more fallen soldier trying to rescue us, then the number we were on the tell.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Having seen dozens of his friends perish in the attempt to reach him, Menachem realized that he was running out of options.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** It was about eight o'clock in the morning, Sunday. After they failed to reinforce me and here come the attack that are going toward us. They are forming a row, they taking out the Kalashnikov, mounting the bayonet and they are beginning to advance. So I ordered at that time to burn out all the secret paper they have. To enter into the bunker.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** After a long night of fighting, the motley crew of twenty-seven wounded and tired soldiers on Tell Saki hid in the small bunker. Most of them didn't know each other. They took the bodies of their fallen friends with them and placed them at the two entrances. Before going in himself, Menachem broadcast one last message from the communication box on the APC outside.

**Yoram Yair:** Ansbacher in a very clear words say to me, “listen Ya Ya, this is the end.”

**Menachem Ansbacher:** “We don't have enough ammunition to stop the Syrian from climbing the hill. Most probably we’ll not meet again.”

**Dan Almagor:** “Over and out.” And he turned the radio off.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I scramble the frequencies.

**Dan Almagor:** It was not part of our nomenclature to show emotions. We are tough as nails. But inside, our heart exploded. I know my heart… I was literally hurting. My heart was hurting.

**Yoram Yair:** And from that moment on, I haven't heard from anyone on Tell Saki.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We’ll be right back.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now back to Tell Saki. It’s Sunday morning, October 7th, 1973. The second day of the Yom Kippur War. After staving off Syrian assaults all night long, and having witnessed several disastrous rescue missions, twenty-year-old First Lieutenant Menachem Ansbacher prepared his men for the end. He radioed in a parting message, scrambled the communication frequencies, destroyed maps and intelligence documents, and led the twenty-seven soldiers on the hill into a tiny bunker. OK, back to Yochai.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As Menachem and his men retreated into the bunker, to wait for what seemed like the inevitable end, he suddenly had one last desperate idea.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** To ask our artillery, IDF artillery, to bomb us.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hoping the shelling would discourage the Syrians from climbing the hill, he was finally fulfilling his original mission - directing Israeli artillery. He just never imagined he would be directing the fire on himself.

**Mordechai Aviam:** He gave them the exact position, location.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But the commander of the artillery battery kept asking him to repeat the coordinates.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Yeah he told me, “listen, you're making a mistake. That our position. It tooks long seconds that indeed I am asking him to shoot at me.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem and his men fully understood the possible consequences.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** If it fall directly on our bunker it destroy it. Definitely. No doubt about it. But I think it's... it's better than to meet the Syrian. It's quicker and less painful.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** He lay inside the bunker, waiting for the bombs to fall.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Only my eyes were outside just to be able to see if it falls in place. And after three shots, one big shell falled. And it tooks forty seconds for all the ash and rocks to fall down back to Earth. I told him, “OK, now you will shoot five or six per minutes. Shoot fire!” And then he answered me very politely and quietly that he don't have any more ammunition. He wished me luck, and just switch off.

**Mordechai Aviam:** So the Syrians were waiting for a few more minutes, and then they start climb on the hill.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I realized that I have no option that was the actually end of the game for me. They will come, they will try to enter, we shall shoot on them, they will throw inside grenade, and they will win. And then I’ll began to hear a black jokes, dark humor. “See you at Har Herzl.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The military cemetery in Jerusalem.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** “Did you left at home a good picture?” And things like that, that no mother will… would like to hear it. I stopped it by order. And then it was quiet inside. And in this quiet, in this silence, we could hear only the Syrian shouting outside. We can hear the loudspeaker of their communication, the engine of their APCs. So I took a prayer book that was in my shirt pocket. And I told them that I'm gonna read a small prayer from *Tehillim*, Psalms. And then a burst of shooting was entering from the right entrance.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Everyone who was in the army knows that the way to clear a bunker is to shoot inside and then throw a grenade, and then you go inside. That’s the method.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I was a hit by something that hit my chest. It took me a few seconds to realize that it was a hand grenade. It fall on the ground. I just succeed to turn on on place.

**Mordechai Aviam:** There was a huge explosion.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** One of the soldiers, Corporal Shlomi Pahima, was hit in the head and died on the spot.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I was thrown on the air to the other entrance. And I began to lose conscience.

**Mordechai Aviam:** There are no words to explain it, OK? The only thing I felt, and remember it very well, it's like someone who takes a heavy sledge hammer and hit you on your chest. I heard the air coming out of my nose from my lungs, OK? Squeezed the body. And after that, there was an absolute silence. And I knew I am dead.

**Yochai Maital:** Was it like comforting this thought? That you’re...

**Mordechai Aviam:** No, no, no. I was very sad to be dead. I was very sad.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Mordechai Aviam:** I wanted to stay alive, like most of people.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Just before phasing out, if I can say that, I shout into the black space, “if anyone is alive, he should go out, surrender, and tell the Syrian that all the soldiers inside the bunker are dead.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak Nigerker, one of the tank soldiers, bravely volunteered, and stepped outside the bunker.

**Nir Atir:** We hear him shout, “don't shoot, don't shoot, we surrender.”

**Mordechai Aviam:** The minute he went outside, we heard shooting.

**Nir Atir:** We understood that the Syrians are not taking any prisoners.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Menachem said, “they are going to slaughter us with knives. We not let them.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Grenades in hand, the soldiers waited tensely for the Syrians to enter the bunker. But as the smoke cleared, no one did. It seemed that they had all been taken for dead.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** This end the battle on the tell, on the hill.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And now begin a second story of simple surviving in a room inside the Syrian territory.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** For the next thirty-six hours, they're not war heroes. They're a bunch of nineteen-twenty-year-olds who just want to survive, and get back home to their mamas. That's it.

**Mordechai Aviam:** No food or water. No medical equipment. Nothing.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** For hours, the soldiers - many of them severely wounded - sat motionless in the dark, suppressing their moans. Each in their own world, trying their best not to make a sound.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** They think we are dead. We are behaving very carefully not to give them any hint that they are wrong. When I was awake again, we could hear Syrian all around, talking to themselves, giving order. We heard the communication.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Every now and then another group of Syrian forces would reach the hill, toss a grenade and shoot some bullets into the bunker. At some point, a tank shell or RPG hit the roof shaking the room violently.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** All of us get wound again, get hit from the fragments.

**Robby Rijkmans:** We swallowed the pain because we knew. We know that we have to keep the silence.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Suddenly Menachem’s soldier Shaike, who was severely wounded, regained consciousness.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** He was very thirsty.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And started shouting.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** He was shouting...

**Mordechai Aviam:** “I want more water, I want more water!”

**Menachem Ansbacher**: “*Shaike, shtok!*”

**Mordechai Aviam:** Menachem said, “Shaike, Shaike, don't shout, there are Syrians outside.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But in his distress, Shaike wouldn't let up, thereby endangering the entire group. Menachem faced the hardest decision of his young life. He could barely move, yet still he was the man in charge, and all eyes were on him. He needed to make a call, and he needed to make it fast.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: So I… I ordered Leizi, one of the soldier, to strangle him.

**Mordechai Aviam:** He gave an order to execute one of his soldiers, which he loves very much in an attempt to save the rest. That's one of the hardest decision I've ever heard of a commander.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Leizi tried to comply, smothering Shaike with his bare hands. But with a shattered and dislocated shoulder, he simply couldn't press down hard enough. This just made matters worse as Shaike’s pleas for water got even louder.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: So I ordered Avital, another soldier of mine, to do it.

**Mordechai Aviam:** But Avital - who had a very good sense of solving problems - he said, “wait, wait, I have an idea.” So he took his cigarette box.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: He wrote on it, “Shaike, shut up. Syrian outside, no water.” With a match, he light a match near the paper, and Shaike saw it and kept quiet until the end of the war.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Since they believed all the Israelis were dead,the Syrian forces who had conquered the hill eventually left Tell Saki and moved on west, leaving only a couple of foot soldiers to guard the post. So in a moment of relative quiet, Nir and two other soldiers crept out of the bunker and snuck on to one of the defunct tanks scattered on the hill.

**Nir Atir:** We took water, we took four blankets, and as I am going off the tank, I see that the electricity is working, that means that I have radio.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Justa few miles away, Ya Ya - who was certain that Menachem and all his men on Tell Saki were either long dead or else captured - was standing on the roof of the regional command in El-Al.

**Yoram Yair:** Suddenly I hear, “*kodkod marak, kan gafrur.* “Tell Saki is calling.” Wow.

**Dan Almagor:** My G-d, it's like hearing someone from the dead side.

**Yoram Yair:** *[In Hebrew]* Voices from the dark side.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** “How are you doing there?” Ya Ya asked him.

“Same as before, *garu’a*, terrible.” Without missing a beat, Ya Ya told them that an extraction force would be on its way momentarily. “Hold on,” he said. “Over and out.”

**Nir Atir:** We crawled from the tank back to the bunker.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Carryingsome much needed water and blankets, Nir and his friends returned with something even more precious - hope. He told Menachem what Ya Ya had said.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** That I shouldn't be an hero. Just to keep quiet to keep calm. He will be coming very shortly to rescue us. How much time? About an hour or so.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** An hour passed, and there was no sign of Ya Ya or his extraction forces.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** So I waited another ten minutes, another fifteen minutes, and then very hesitantly very politely, “what’s about the issue that we talked earlier?” And he said that he has an encounter with the Syrian forces. He destroyed them, annihilate them, and he will be with us in about half-an-hour, forty minutes or so, over.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Another hour passed. Again, hesitantly, Tell Saki checked in with Ya Ya. He told them that the rescuers…

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Had some technical problem with the APC. They will fix it within ten minutes, and then he will continue towards us, over.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And so it went on throughout the tense night.

**Yochai Maital:** But it's all stories?

**Yoram Yair:** Listen, I am standing alone. Not that I don't have a tank. I have my personal Uzi. I am telling them lies, and use all my creative imagination, and the fact is that…

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It worked.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I believed him, everyone believed him.

**Yoram Yair:** They are convinced. You know, the most important thing that you need to keep is the hope of your soldiers. A slight flash of hope he has everything.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Even if you are very low but you can collect some motivation to withstand another half-an-hour, another several minutes. He understood it very well and gave us exactly the dose that we needed of hope until the battery dead… was dead. And then we lose communication with him and that was almost morning.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** During the night, the Israeli reserve forces had finally made their way up north and prepared to launch their counter-offensive at dawn. As the sun was rising on the third day of the war, October 8th, the soldiers on Tell Saki - now an enemy position - were holding on by a thread. They had been in the bunker for over thirty hours when, again, the hill started to shake. But this time, it was the *IDF* doing the shaking. The few Syrian soldiers left to guard the hill quickly scrambled to find shelter.

**Nir Atir:** Now the only place to hide, as you can see, is only the bunker.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And two Syrian enter with the back toward us. They are looking what's happening outside.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In other words, the Syrian soldiers were now hiding in the same bunker with all the Israeli soldiers who themselves had been hiding there from the Syrians. They were so close Menachem could reach out and touch them.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** A meter from me. Three feet something like that.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The Syrians, of course, thought everyone in the bunker was dead. So they sat facing the entrance, from where - as far as they were concerned - an Israeli attack might come. Silently, Menachem pointed his Uzi in their direction, and very slowly reached for a hand grenade. He gestured to his men, whose eyes - unlike those of the Syrians - had long grown accustomed to the dark.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I showed them that I take the safety pin out of the hand grenade, and I think they understood, that if something like that happen, we are throwing the hand grenade into the entrance and we are shooting at them.

**Mordechai Aviam:** We are going to die, we are going to take them with us.

**Nir Atir:** *Shimshon Ha’Gibor*, you know?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Like biblical Samson bringing down the temple on himself and the Philistines around him, the Tell Saki soldiers braced themselves for a fight to the death.

**Mordechai Aviam:** And I was saying to myself, ‘I was lucky once - I got a bullet in my head. I was lucky twice - there was a grenade bomb and I'm alive. Now we're going to die.’ I knew that in a few seconds I am going to die.

**Nir Atir:** We understood that our destiny was doomed. decided.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** It's like what you do in a falling plane in the middle of the ocean.

**Robby Rijkmans:** Everyone is in his own thought, you know?

**Mordechai Aviam:** It's so pity to die, especially when my sister have to give birth every day. They will name the baby after me.

**Nir Atir:** All the history came back. Everything came back to us - home, working in the bananas, my family.

**Rubi Rijkmans:** I was thinking about my mother, I don't know why. Just my mother.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I heard many stories about that all your life is running in front of you like a high-speed film. I heard the stories about a white tunnel that goes from you to the sky. I cannot confirm it. It’s just a densed stress. Nothing but that. And after quarter-of-an-hour, twenty minutes or something like that, the bombardment outside finished.

**Yochai Maital:** That’s a long time. It must have seemed like forever.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** More than that. For few evers.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As soon as the shelling ceased, the Syrians dashed out of the bunker, having never turned around to see Menachem and his men. But...

**Nir Atir:** Before they deserted, the one who was standing over here decided to leave us with a parting gift and he rolled a hand grenade. And boom blown.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Amazingly, the grenade rolled underneath the stretcher where the body of Shlomi Pahima - the tank soldier who died in the first grenade explosion - lay. The corpse absorbed most of the impact and saved many lives. Within minutes, the soldiers on Tell Saki heard the sounds of war getting closer and louder.

**Menachem Ansbacher**: We heard shooting and we heard engine. And I cannot differentiate between Israeli tank engine and Sytrian tank engine. But the guys from the Armed Force can.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Their reports, however, were discouraging.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** “It’s Syrian, it’s Syrian, it’s Syrian,” until a point in time that they said, “oh, this is… this engine is Israeli.”

**Mordechai Aviam:** We hear a tank climbing the hill. The tank stops. There's like tomb silent. No one was breathing.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We got used that every time we can hear this, it's a sign for a coming problem.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Suddenly there’s a call from outside.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** They shout in Hebrew, “*yesh po shiryonaim*?”

**Mordechai Aviam:** “Hey! Are there any tank units here?”

**Nir Atir:** We thought that the Syrians are making a game on us. First time we didn't answer, a second time we didn't answer, a third time I went up with two hand grenades in my hand.

**Robby Rijkmans:** That was the moment that we all *noladnu me’chadash.*

**Yochai Maital**: Born again.

**Robby Rijkmans:** Born again, yeah.

**Leizi Agasi:** When they tore off our bloody uniforms I noticed that my prayer book - the same one I’d been using when we set out for the battle - was still in my breast pocket. And look, it saved my life - a piece of shrapnel hit it, went through all the pages, and by the time it reached my body it barely scratched me.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I can recall two reserve captains that take care of me, each one of them gave me a shot of morphine in each leg. And everything was in vivid color. And I felt very relaxed.

**Robby Rijkmans:** It's like the war stops for... for a second. I'm not sure it was quiet, it was quiet for me. Maybe because everything was behind me now.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I could see only the sky, the blue sky.

**Robby Rijkmans:** Clear blue, and quiet.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Very special blue. With morphine. And suddenly I saw Ya Ya. His head was covering at least half of the sky.

**Yoram Yair:** I ran up and I found them already out on stretches.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And it took him some second to realize that I am Menachem, because I was full of black ash.

**Yoram Yair:** And he look at me and I say to him, “*kol ha’kavod*” or something like this. And that's the end of the story.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But the end of one story, is only the beginning of another.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yochai Maital produced, scored, and sound-designed that story. The battle at Tell Saki was one of the most dramatic sagas in what was one of the most intense theaters of war in 1973. Throughout the Golan Heights, Israeli forces were vastly outnumbered in the first few days of the Yom Kippur War. Still, through tremendous acts of heroism and ingenuity, they managed to delay the Syrian troops. In doing so, they not only prevented a devastating invasion into the heart of Israel, but they also bought the IDF precious time used to mount a response. But - of course - this came at a horrible price. Many lost their lives in those first few days of war, and many of those who survived spent years - sometimes decades - piecing their lives back together. In our next episode, we’ll return to Menachem and his group of fragmented soldiers, and follow them on a very different kind of journey.

**Mordechai Aviam:** I knew it's a war only three days later in the hospital, when my girlfriend - who was sitting near me - read from the newspaper and said that the headlines are, “The War Continues in Both Fronts.” And I said, “what war?” She said, “where do you think you come from?” I said, “I don't know. I never thought about it.”

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We didn't have a chance to reunify after the big war and to close the story.

**Robby Rijkmans:** For years I was very lonely because of it. I was unpleasant guy. My oldest daughter ran away from me to New Zealand. So far, if you keep walking, you start come back *[laughs]*. She couldn't stand me.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** You, know, these guys wake up every morning in that bunker. They go to sleep in that bunker. They celebrate, they mourn. They’re all still on that hill.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** The task of a commander is to go to battle and to come back, after he won it, with all his soldier with him. And first of all, I didn’t won this battle. And second, most of my soldier are dead now. And I am alive. So it’s hard to explain. Still too hard. I don’t know what to say.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So be sure to join us next time, for **Tell Saki - Part II**.

Thanks to the Friendship and Heritage Foundation, an NGO set up by the survivors of Tell Saki in order to commemorate their fallen friends. Thanks to Aviram Barkai, Moshe Givati, Dan Carlin, Hallie Lerman, Reuven Gal, and Ya’akov Seh Lavan for his help with fact-checking this story. Ya’akov actually leads tours of Tell Saki and runs an escape room experience at the tell. You can check it out at slingshot.co.il. And, of course, thanks to Esthern Werdiger, Wayne Hoffman, Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick, Jeff Feig and Joy Levitt.

A massive thanks to Leat Sabbah, who arranged and performed the haunting rendition of *Avinu Malkeinu*, and a bunch of other tracks you heard on today’s episode. Go to our site, israelstory.org, where we’ll post a link to Leat’s beautiful work. Additional music from Jorge Mejia, Doug Maxwell and Yochai Maital. As always, Sela Waisblum created the mix.

Israel Story is produced in partnership with Tablet Magazine. Our staff is Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Joel Shupack, Yoshi Fields, Skyer Inman, Marie Röder, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Jeff Umbro, from The Podglomerate, is our marketing director. Clara Fuhg, Michael Vivier and Alicia Vergara are our wonderful production interns. I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back soon with a new Israel Story episode. So till then, stay safe, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

--- END ---