

Thirty Years Ago Today I Shot My First Fascist

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The camp was in a remote location in the Zahrani river valley. Access was by a steep track that snaked down the hillside from the Sida road. The track came to an end alongside what had been a farmhouse once, consisting of a stone hut where some of the men slept. Beneath this was a much larger stone manger, this was unused except by a few chickens, but in the warm weather it's flat roof became the main focus of the camp, being used for both eating and sleeping. Beyond this building were a few tents, one of which was my home. Straight ahead was a blind valley which held a concealed ammunition dump and field guns, but before that was a large tent in which several older *fedayi* lived. Some were recovering from injuries sustained in the conflict.

To the left of the manger a path led down to another stone building which acted as a storeroom for tinned food, dried foodstuffs, and also ammunition. The storeroom was built into the hillside, having a flat roof, and adjacent to this was a large stone water-tank, which had been cut into the terrain. Below the tank and next to the storeroom was a water-tap, and further along the path was the Zahrani river itself.

The camp was isolated and quite vulnerable, with the Phalangist-held village of Haga visible high on the far hillside across the river. Nonetheless, throughout my life, I have rarely felt more safe.

Ostensibly the camp was under the command of Abu Abdullah, a thoughtful, introspective man aged somewhere in his 30's. He had jet black hair and a full beard. The structure of the camp was entirely democratic though, and it had a militant reputation. Only weeks before our arrival the men had refused Yasser Arafat admission to the camp because they disagreed with a political decision he had taken.

Our training instructor was Ali Hassan from Gaza. He was aged only 23, but after 10 years fighting, it was impossible to guess that. He was tough, but with a warm, friendly manner, and bore a striking (and possibly cultivated) resemblance to Che Guevara. We also received some technical instruction from Jaffa, a Russian-trained armourer.

The older men kept to themselves for the most part, but I got on well with them, on occasion drinking tea and eating freshly caught fish in their large tent. Abu Muhamed was of the same age as the others, but he was still a very active fighter, and once saved my life.

Also at the camp was Abu Fathi, a round black man, filled with humour. Muhamed Ali had come to fight all the way from Sarajevo, a town in Yugoslavia I'd never heard of at the time. There were many more at the camp whose names I forget.

On the last day of July though, as darkness fell, the camp was nearly empty. Why I cannot recall, but there was only myself, Ali Hassan, and my English comrade (who had been given the *nom de guerre* Jihad), sat out on the roof of the manger. The older men were probably in their tent, but would have been out of earshot, while others I think were at the house at the top of the track, which guarded the Sida road.

We had just finished eating. There was little food because of the war, and we ate simply, sharing a plate in the traditional Arab manner. Suddenly Ali Hassan became alert, motioning for us to listen. I could hear nothing untoward, but Ali said he had heard something down towards the river. We both grabbed our Kalashnikovs and I strapped on my belt containing extra magazines of ammunition. As we stepped into the darkness and towards whatever was there, leaving Jihad to guard the house and wait for assistance, I felt no fear at all, except perhaps that I might be afraid.

Turning left in front of the manger, we skirted up the steep hill to the right, eventually passing the open water-tank and crawling on our stomachs across the flat roof of the storeroom. We reached the edge, with the level ground next to the river perhaps 30ft below us. We looked into the darkness listening for the slightest sound which might mean a raiding party of Israelis or Phalangists.

Ali beckoned me towards him and I rolled over. He pointed towards the dense undergrowth next to the narrow path which ran alongside the river. As I squinted in the darkness I saw the shape of a man standing, then another kneeling, and others behind. I could make out perhaps 4 or 5, but there were most likely others hidden in the darkness. The ones I could see were carrying Kalashnikovs, which meant they were almost certainly Phalangists rather than Israelis.

On my stomach I followed Ali back across the flat roof. Then he jumped into the darkness. I leapt after him, the fall seemed to last forever. It must have been at least 25 feet, but I landed well on the path below. As we slid the selector switches on our rifles onto full auto, Ali gestured for me to aim to the left and he would aim to the right.

We both came round the corner of the stone storeroom firing. I aimed into the darkness to the left of our position, firing on full auto and raking my gun round until it pointed straight ahead. Ali did the same, but starting from the right. We emptied our magazines. The fascist raiding party did not get the chance to return fire.

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