

Trespassers in Israel

By Alfred Friendly

Hard Words, Soft Drinks Greet Newsmen

TEL AVIV—A few days ago, Yuval Elizur, The Washington Post's Jerusalem associate, and I incurred the wrath of the Israeli army. Psychically we were beaten, but physically we were pampered.

We were at a place where the army did not care to have us be, and which, accordingly, will not be identified beyond the fact that it was in an excessively unattractive desert area occupied by Israel during the war.

A couple of miles from our goal, we drove past an army command post, unchallenged. A mile further on, our car sighed and sank mournfully into sand, six inches deep and so fine that it sucked at one's shoes. Looking for help, we trudged on to our objective, which was interesting enough, and innocently began to photograph what we saw.

A young soldier approached. In positive terms and with admirable economy of words he demanded our films. On the supposition that his nasty-looking little UZI, a cross between an automatic rifle and a pistol, could actually be unlimbered and was not merely an amulet which Israeli troops invariably drape over their shoulders, we did not argue very long.

He then told us, equally forcefully, to get the hell out.

TWO YOUNG LIEUTENANTS appeared on the scene, advising us of our crimes with considerably more embroidery, and repeating the invitation. That done, they plied us with ice-cold bottles of orange soda—the staple on which the Israeli army marches — and drove us back to our car.

Cheerfully, they got it running again and, wreathed in smiles, waved us on our way.

Back at the command post, a lieutenant colonel appeared. His rage at the sight of us was of precisely the same shape, color and dimension of a gigantic dust-devil that was storming over the dunes a hundred yards away. I did not need Elizur to tell me that his denunciation of us in Hebrew was brilliant in its vigor and inventiveness.

Three miles further on, the car died again. We sat, watching the clouds of sand kicked up by passing trucks cover our automobile and everything in it, including us. Elizur looked like the end man in a minstrel show and so, I assumed, did I.

After two hours, an open truck came by, bearing the lieutenant colonel and half a dozen soldiers. We shuddered, but the officer grinned.

The truck stopped and the colonel and his driver fell deftly to work trying to repair the auto, commandeering water for us from one passing truck and tools from another. When the job proved impossible—a vital part was damaged beyond field repair—the colonel appropriated a towrope from another truck, and hauled us for 20 miles.

WE STOPPED AT a small oasis where, miraculously, there was a tiny brook. "Follow me," said the officer, ominously. He led us to a small stone structure. It sheltered a limpid pool, four feet deep, of hot mineral water, fed by the stream. Never was a bath more welcome. We wallowed—officer, soldiers and miscreants—in sheer bliss.

Towing the car was no longer possible, so we joined the party in the truck for the long drive back to civilization, stopping, as the need arose, for endless bottles of orange soda, courtesy of the colonel.

But by the time we reached his headquarters, the thought of our crime had so gnawed at him that he found it necessary to telephone his superior officer, the brigade commander, and ship us off, for another hour's drive, to the higher headquarters.

The commander was a full colonel, and on being ushered into his presence, we verified what we had suspected, namely, that the capacity for anger in the Israeli army increases in direct ratio with rank. His tirade was infinitely more gifted than that of the junior colonel.

"In a socialist country," he began, furiously decapping bottles of orange soda for us, "you would be put before a wall and shot. But since this is a democratic country, I will commence by asking you what papers or authorization you have to be in a highly sensitive military area."

It went on from there, at quite some length. Finished, at last, he demanded the keys to my car and turned them over with an order, to a lieutenant he had summoned.

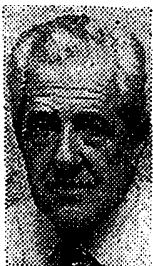
"We'll send a tow truck for the car, and bring it here," he said. If it were left overnight, there wouldn't be enough of it by morning to be worth bothering with. (It was hauled back, we learned later, 60 miles or more by 3 a.m., with one window and the ignition smashed, and only the radio and mirrors stolen—about par, considering the neighborhood.

"And now," the colonel continued, "Dinner is ready in the officers' mess. I hope it's a good one."

We contented ourselves instead with some more orange soda and asked, finally, if we could return to Tel Aviv. The request caused some embarrassment. It seemed that the colonel had called the general commanding the whole district, and orders had come back to keep us in custody until further notice.

But orders are made to be broken, so we were sent back in a command car, preceded by a jeep flying a red flag and carrying a driver, machine gunner and rifleman.

First, however, we were asked to make a "gentlemen's agreement" to check in on our return with the military headquarters. I consented readily. After all, I reflected, we had been dealing with gentlemen all day.



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