



Leadership lessons from history

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11/4/2010 - LAJES FIELD, Azores -- In a previous Crossroads article, I wrote about how Lajes warriors can learn valuable and relevant leadership lessons by studying the great military leaders and battles of previous historical conflicts such as the American Civil War.

A much more recent conflict that is both highly worthy of study for its insights into airpower, and has important direct ties to Lajes Air Base, is the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1973 often referred to as the October War.

Operation Nickel Grass, dramatically re-confirmed the value of Lajes as an instrument of strategic air power. Overall, the U.S. Air Force shipped 22,325 tons of tanks, artillery, ammunition, and supplies to Israel in C-141 and C-5 transport aircraft between October 14 and November 14. Most of that vital military cargo moved through Lajes.

Over 30 aircraft per day were transiting the base. To accommodate this mission, Lajes instantly grew to house an extra 1,300 people who were billeted in improvised housing and hastily reactivated World War II barracks. Could such a dramatic surge happen again today, and are we as a Wing prepared for a similar eventuality?

Thus, the first lesson I draw from my study of the 1973 conflict is that the unique geo-strategic location of Lajes has been a key asset to American Air Power in the past, and we should prepare ourselves as to the greatest extent possible for whatever contingency might affect the base in the future.

The reason Operation Nickel Grass spun up so rapidly was because of a series of major leadership miscalculations, the war was going badly for Israel and was threatening to expand into a larger and more dangerously widespread international conflict. The two fundamental mistakes made by Israel were that they were overconfident in their ability to detect and preemptively stop any possible surprise attack by their Egyptian and Syrian opponents and that leaders did not account for major developments in military technology that would dramatically impact the 1973 war.

The lesson from the first mistake is simple: Don't be overconfident in your own abilities, and likewise, do not underestimate your opposition (or any other leadership challenge you might face).

The lesson from the second mistake can be summarized as "Don't get caught fighting the last war." In 1967, Israeli airpower had been key to their victory in the Six-Day War.

Ironically (considering what would happen just six years later), in a surprise attack, Israel destroyed much of their enemies' air capability on the ground. Subsequent Israeli losses from traditional anti-aircraft artillery and existing Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) were minimal, and Israel was able to use their air supremacy to effectively support major ground operations. Israeli leaders thought any future conflicts would follow the same pattern. They expected continued overwhelming air supremacy, so their military planning was predicated by the idea that their airpower would be able

to compensate for relative disadvantages in the numbers of tanks and artillery. They assumed they would always have a dramatic overmatch in airpower that could rapidly stop any enemy ground attacks. The actual experience of the 1973 war would prove them almost fatally wrong.

Israel leadership did not account for the dramatic advances in SAM technology in the years between 1967 and 1973. The Arab forces fielded large numbers of new Soviet-supplied missile systems, particularly the mobile SA-6, and these weapons inflicted heavy casualties on the Israeli Air Force planes which were being so heavily relied upon to blunt the ground offensive. The Israelis had been caught trying to refight 1967, instead of looking forward to the dramatically different operational realities of just 6 years later.

The Israelis, managed to eventually adapt to the new combat environment, develop effective SAM suppression tactics, and turn the tide of battle, but it was a near-run thing. It is important to remember that the error of "fighting the last war" does not have to necessarily apply to such dramatic life-and-death operational considerations as the revolution in SAM technology. ANY Lajes leader will be more effective with regards to the completion of any task or process if they ensure they do not get too tied to the past and "the way things were done last time."

The last lesson I like to think I have learned through my study of the October war can be summarized as "Encourage ALL your Airmen to think outside the box." Another reason why the Israelis almost lost the war, was because their ground defenses along the Suez Canal were rapidly pierced by just such an example of "thinking outside the box." After the Six-Day War, Israeli combat engineers along the canal had constructed a massive artificial sand barrier supported by concrete, which was relatively impervious to conventional explosives or (considering defenders would fire on engineering teams) things like bulldozers. The Israelis believed any ground attack across the canal would be sufficiently mauled to prevent, or at least significantly delay, any advance.

The solution to this dilemma was simple, but nonetheless, ingenious. An Egyptian JUNIOR officer suggested the use of small, gasoline-powered high-pressure water hoses that could be ferried across the canal in inflatable rafts to blast through the sand barrier. A combination of five such pumps made it possible to clear a sizeable passage in only two hours. The Egyptian attackers literally hosed the Israeli defenses off the map. Armored units rapidly crossed the "un-crossable" Suez Canal and advanced deep into the Sinai. Again, it was a near-run thing for the Israelis. The lesson for Lajes leaders is clear: empower all your Airmen to think of innovative ways to solve problems.

I hope this article has again demonstrated the value of Lajes warriors studying military history to improve their ability to accomplish the many varied missions under their responsibility. The specific operational details are interesting, but not as important as the general leadership lessons.

As we move towards our "Rendezvous with Destiny" (MASSIVE success in the October 2011 ORI), I encourage you to continue to add the study of military history to your "Airman's Toolbox."

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