



# Reflections by UNIFIL's 1st Force Commander

UNIFIL Force Commander Major-General Emmanuel Erskine inspects Dutch peacekeepers at their Battalion Headquarters, Haris May 1980

As required by Security Council Resolution 425, UNIFIL's area of operations had to be defined through negotiations with the parties. The political shuttles to achieve this objective commenced immediately. Lt-Gen Ensio Siilasvuo, the Chief Coordinator, and I held meetings on 20 March 1978 with Israeli Minister of Defence Ezer Weizman and IDF Chief of Staff Lt Gen Gur. The following day, we flew to Beirut for meetings with Prime Minister Selim el Hoss, Foreign Minister Fouad Butros and General Victor Khoury, the Army Commander. On 28 March, Dr James Jonah from the Office of the Under Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs joined me to meet the PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

The presence of UNTSO Observers, in particular the Israel-Lebanon Mixed Armistice Commission (ILMAC), in South Lebanon since 1972 was immensely beneficial to the establishment and initial peacekeeping operations of UNIFIL.

In practical terms, Military Observers of ILMAC, which was later split into Observer Group Beirut (OGB) and Observer Group Lebanon (OGL), served as the advance party of UNIFIL, doing a lot of organizational work for the in-coming contingents.

Contributions by member states was commendable. On 23 March, only four days after the resolution, I received the French Contingent at the Beirut International Airport; two days later, the Norwegian Contingent flew into Tel Aviv. The last contingent to arrive was the Iranian, on 9 June.

The French constituted the largest contingent - an Infantry Battalion, with its HQ in Tyre, as well as Engineering, Logistical and Transportation services; Norway provided an Infantry Battalion, with its HQ in Ebel es Saqi, a repair and Maintenance Company and a Field Hospital at Naqoura; Canada sent a Signals Company; Irish Battalion provided a detachment for the security of UNIFIL HQ

in Naqoura; Italy provided the air capability; Ghana later joined with a battalion and additional Engineering Services and Sweden came in to replace the Norwegian Medical Company. In 1979, France withdrew its combat unit and was replaced by the Dutch. Senegal, Fiji, Nepal and Nigeria also provided troops. On 22 March, two reinforced Infantry Companies (Iranian from UNDOF and Swedish from UNEF) moved to South Lebanon to strengthen the operations of UNTSO Observers.

The strength of UNIFIL was increased from 4000 to 6000 as a result of our discussion with the Secretary-General, Dr Kurt Waldheim, during his maiden visit to us in April 1978. Force Standing Operating Procedures (SOP), developed earlier by ILMAC Military Observers, facilitated deployment and military operations of the in-coming contingents.

Force SOPs from which Battalions developed their Unit SOPs emphasized the imperativeness to stop all incursions by IDF/DFF ("De Facto Forces", the Israeli surrogate Christian militia under Major Haddad, a defector from the Lebanese Army), and infiltrations by Armed Elements, i.e. PLO and other armed Lebanese fighters, into UNIFIL's Area of Operations.

Our mini-war in At Tiri, which cost us a few men, demonstrated the vital principle of firmness by a peacekeeping mission.



Consequently, Check Points were well fortified to provide maximum protection for the troops, mobile and foot patrols were conducted day and night and movements of people were observed from well fortified Observation Posts. These activities constituted the principal duties of UNIFIL troops and in view of the hazards associated with them, in particular the checkpoint duties, UNIFIL suffered some casualties from time to time. Nevertheless, in the formative years of the mission, they had to be vigorously pursued.

UNIFIL demonstrated the professionalism of an effective and efficient Peacekeeping Mission when it came to the use of force in defence of its mandate. When in April 1980 the DFF attempted to take the village of At Tiri by force, UNIFIL mobilized its Force Mobile Reserve, including the Dutch TOW anti-tank missile, into action. Our mini-war in At Tiri, which cost us a few men, demonstrated the vital principle of firmness by a peacekeeping mission. It succeeded because of the professionalism of the troops, the unwavering support of the Secretary-General and the contributing governments and the effectiveness of unified command.

UNIFIL has had its fair share of political, operational and administrative difficulties in the Lebanese crisis. The failure of the IDF to hand over to UNIFIL the stretch along their border inhabited predominantly by Christians, giving it instead to the DFF during their final withdrawal on 13 June, represented the principal political obstacle to UNIFIL fully implementing its mandate.

We suffered our first casualty when Master Warrant Officer Karl Oskar Johansson of Sweden went over a mine in the area of Khardala Bridge during the early deployment period and, on the day following their arrival, three Senegalese soldiers were killed when their jeep went over a mine.

Troops have been murdered, abducted and fired upon; Force HQ in Naqoura had deliberately been shelled and Battalion HQs had come under bombardment from time to time. Firing on UNIFIL was always in retaliation to the mission performing its legitimate duties. Naqoura was heavily shelled on 12 April 1980 because Major Haddad and his DFF had been humiliated at At Tiri. I had been physically assaulted in the course of my negotiation at the meeting with Haddad and his DFF personalities for the release of my three Dutch soldiers who had been abducted and held hostage. As per our SOP, we always fought back.

Movement by UNIFIL personnel using the coastal road to Beirut for the collection of logistical supplies were seriously hampered by the myriads of checkpoints mounted by various armed groups involved in the Lebanese quagmire. This was our principal administrative difficulty.

One of the most important but difficult assignments we had to undertake was to bring Lebanese Army troops from Beirut to our area of operations. Their presence was seen as a challenge to the image and authority of Major Haddad and his militia. Violent opposition to the Lebanese Army deployment was demonstrated in the shelling of Norwegian HQ in Ebel Es Saqi,

the Nepalese HQ in Blat and the Lebanese troops in Kaukaba. In spite of these difficulties, UNIFIL, with the support of OGL on 1 August 1978, succeeded in bringing the Lebanese Army troops down to operate side by side with UNIFIL contingents.

Humanitarian services were not envisaged by the architects of our mission, but we realized that we could not accomplish our mission without helping the poor Shiites to return to normal life. During the Secretary-General's visit to Damascus in mid-July 1978, I raised the issue with him and he readily agreed. Consequently, humanitarian services became a major function of UNIFIL operations. Medical facilities were made available to the people. We provided them with water. The engineers assisted with the restoration of electricity and helped in demining farms to facilitate the return of the farmers to their main source of livelihood. It was heart-warming to see the displaced people returning to their homes and the children going back to school.

UNIFIL's presence has been absolutely necessary not only to stabilize South Lebanon, but also to provide a peaceful environment conducive to the peacemaking process. It is my hope that UNIFIL will continue to make an impact on the peacemaking process in search for lasting peace. I seize this historic opportunity to pay my highest tribute to all servicemen, women and civilian staff, both international and local, who have served, and continue to serve the cause of peace through UNIFIL.

Lieutenant General  
**Emmanuel A. Erskine**





# UNIFIL was born out of crisis in 1978

40 years on it's helping to keep the calm in south Lebanon

By General Emmanuel A. Erskine, UNIFIL's first Force Commander, from March 1978 to February 1981

As a result of the Israeli invasion of south Lebanon on 14-15 March 1978, following the killing of Israelis near the coastal town of Hertzliya four days earlier, a large number of the villages and homes of the south Lebanese were reduced to rubble. In addition, farms were infested with unexploded ordnances and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), mostly bombs and landmines, thereby depriving the local Lebanese of their means of livelihood. Water pumps and electric poles had equally been destroyed by the constant shelling of mortars, artillery pieces and airstrikes.

The invasion, code named "Operation Litani," was a blitzkrieg attack, also strategically aimed at driving the armed Palestinian fighters who had orchestrated the attack in Israel, northwards from the Litani River. It was a move to help ensure that the Israeli coastal towns, including Haifa and Nahariya, were outside the range of the Katyusia rockets, which had become a regular danger to the residents.

Following the adoption of the Security Council resolution 425 on 19 March, establishing the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), French engineers were among the very first contingent to arrive to UNIFIL.

I personally met and welcomed them at the Beirut International Airport on 23 March

followed by the Norwegians on 25 March. Ghanaian Engineers joined the mission in August 1979.

The contribution by the Engineers in helping to restore life to normalcy in south Lebanon was highly commendable.

As the First Force Commander, I had the onerous duty of pioneering the reconstruction of south Lebanon and performing the tasks to achieve the four thematic objectives set out in the Security Council Resolution 425, including the strict territorial integrity of Lebanon, the withdrawal of Israeli forces, and restoring peace.

The then UN Secretary General, Dr. Kurt Waldheim of Austria, appointed me initially

as the Acting Force Commander. That was later confirmed as the Substantive Force Commander - thereby becoming UNIFIL's first head.

One of UNIFIL's singular achievements is the introduction of humanitarian programme as an integral component of its intervention in south Lebanon and this has become part of subsequent peacekeeping missions undertaken by both the UN and other sub-regional organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

I am very proud of this innovative achievement. UNIFIL, as I have always maintained, has become an integral component of the Middle East peace process.

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Separately, Al Janoub's *Andrea Tenenti, Tilak Pokharel and Rania Bdeir* spoke to **General Erskine** by phone to learn more about his personal reflections from the early days of UNIFIL. Here are the excerpts:

**UNIFIL's first mandate:** Look at the word "interim" in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. It was not expected to go beyond its first mandate of six months (when it was established on 19 March 1978). Just before the extension of the mandate, I was invited by Secretary General Kurt Waldheim to be at the consultative session of the Security Council. That was when questions were asked and I could assist in answering them. He had invited me to his office on the 38th floor (of the Secretariat Building in New York). I was there having a discussion with him, briefing him on the situation in Lebanon, when he called the French President of the time (Valéry Giscard d'Estaing), virtually appealing to him to support the extension of the mandate for its full second term of six months. After 10-15 minutes of discussion the President agreed to a four-month extension. So the first mandate was extended for four months (until 19 January 1979). The second mandate was extended for five months (until 19 June 1979). Subsequent mandates were all authorized for their full term of six months. The Force was not expected to go beyond six months. It's now 40 years.

**Talking to the parties:** If you look at the mandate, it talks about contacting the parties to determine the area of operation for UNIFIL, and also to seek their support. On the 21st (of March 1978), I went to Beirut. I went, together with a senior officer from the Secretariat, to meet with (Yasser) Arafat (the leader of the PLO at the time). Even though the Israelis, the Palestinians and Arafat said they were ready to support us, talking about support and really getting that support was not easy. There were a lot of difficulties. The final Israeli withdrawal happened on 14 June 1978.

**Situation on the ground:** There were restrictions of movement and moving was not all that easy. There were a lot of mines on the ground. Most south Lebanese are farmers but they couldn't till their land, didn't have water and electricity. Our presence was a sort of inducement to return for the displaced Lebanese. They started coming back. There was a lot of sadness. There were no homes to go back to. Medicals, hospitals - all destroyed. Our contingents had water, food and medicines. There was so much work to do, including reconstruction. The locals



Yasser Arafat with UN officials making a press statement, after his acceptance of the Secretary-General's call for a general cease-fire in southern Lebanon

had to depend on us for everything. Mine clearance was another massive undertaking.

The presence of UNIFIL gave them hope of life. There was so much destruction. There was nothing. But we came with everything. It was not meant for them, but how can you eat when others are hungry? This explains the significance of UNIFIL embarking on extensive humanitarian programmes although there was no humanitarian component in our mandate. Later, the Secretary-General and international community agreed to my proposal of including humanitarian elements in the mandate. All of them helped because it was a humanitarian crisis.

**UNIFIL casualties:** The first casualty was a Swedish peacekeeper in Khardala Bridge. Then, we had Senegalese, French and Irish soldiers – all killed by landmines within 24 hours of their arrivals in the area.

**At Tiri crisis:** We had a major armed confrontation with the De Facto Forces (DFF) in At Tiri in 1980. We could not allow them (DFF) to control the area. It would have jeopardized the operations of the Irish and the Dutch, who were responsible for the area. DFF also lost men; we also lost men. As revenge, they got hold of two Irish soldiers and murdered them in cold blood. The soldiers were defending the mandate in At Tiri. That was a major crisis. This shocked the world. In the aftermath, the Dublin Summit was convened where we had all the troop contributing countries attending. It was a show of political force, it was a very good morale booster for us. They demonstrated solidarity with UNIFIL.

**Helicopter attacked:** I had got my helicopter attacked twice. Once, I was flying from Naqoura to Qana. There were gunshot holes in the helicopter. I don't know the details but we managed to land. The other flight attack I

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had was while flying from Beirut to Naqoura. When just off Tyre, we had a bang in the helicopter. When we landed in Naqoura, Italians came to open the door but there was no door to open. That's when I got frightened because I was not a good swimmer.

**Last words:** Let me end up by conveying my very best wishes and congratulations to the Force Commander, his troops, commanders at all levels, civilians staff and the contributing governments for all that they have done to assist UNIFIL, and through UNIFIL to assist the Lebanese people.