

CUTTING EDGE

BY EDWIN BLACK

Jerusalem Bomb Squad

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This column was adapted from a forthcoming article in the Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine.)

For an instant, there is no street, no crowd behind police barriers, no world, not even a sense of time. There is only Yoni and a large plastic yellow bag atop an illegally parked BMW in the midst of downtown Jerusalem. Just a man and a package. Yoni is a member of Jerusalem's elite Bomb Squad, the most experienced and field tested Bomb Squad in the world. As he studies the suspicious yellow shopping bag, Yoni's face suddenly tightens up.

Turning to his partner, he mutters, "I think it's real."

Like a finely tuned mechanism, they immediately begin what the Squad calls "an attack." Yoni's partner directs motor traffic away from the tight little street. People emerging from doorways and around corners are shooed back.

During those same seconds, Yoni races to the hightopped white Dodge van that everyone in Israel recognizes as the Bomb Squad. He swings open the side panel door, adjusts the shiny .45 automatic hugging the small of his back and gets dressed. With the distinct rhythm, speed and grace born of experience, Yoni straps on the lightweight velcro tipped protective clothing: a flak jacket, leggings, and a thick crotch protector. Jogging back to the suspect yellow bag, he dons his heavy helmet and dense plastic face mask to complete the ensemble. Minute one has elapsed.

The equipment has already been laid out by Yoni's partner. He now begins the ritual, deploying a special device at various points in the vicinity of the bomb -- some as far away as down the street. Neither the device nor any of the Squad's sophisticated techniques can be described. Specially designed by the Jerusalem bomb sappers, "the device" is only the Squad's initial countermeasure.

Now, Yoni must attach "a gadget" to the bag. He approaches again, eyes surrounded by sweat, gaze transfixed. Slowly, centimeter by centimeter -- attached. Backstepping away, Yoni makes a final check of the vicinity. "Wait!" his partner yells.

A woman carrying a baby has just turned the corner and has walked right near the yellow bag. Yoni waves her down: "get back." As soon as she sees his green bomb protection suit, she fades from sight. Minute two has elapsed.

The street is finally clear. Yoni crouches behind a pillar. Fear comes to his side, not as an enemy, but as a companion. A pause. A thought. And he activates the anti-bomb "device." The package is suddenly "neutralized." Minute three has elapsed.

The happy-go-lucky Yoni returns, grinning through the streams of sweat. How does he feel? Still caught in that netherpoint between a forced smile and an outbreak of tears, he answers, "I feel fine. For a while in the beginning, we are always afraid. But then it comes out okay, and we feel fine."

Even as Yoni collects his gear, and speedily returns the street to normal, people in the crowd can be heard shouting to the 24-year-old sapper, "Kol hakovod, Kol hakovod," a Hebrew phrase meaning "all glory to you." As usual, Yoni pretends not to hear. He was only doing his job -- a job that he and several dozen other sappers anonymously perform about a hundred times each and every day -- sometimes as often as thir-

ty times per day.

This is Jerusalem, where bomb threats are as common as paper bags and forgotten briefcases. Only one percent of them are "real bombs," and only a mere fraction of those ever detonate. It's the Bomb Squad's mission to ensure that whatever the numbers, the city of Jerusalem is not paralyzed, and its citizens not afraid to venture out. As such, the sappers know their very lives are the first line of defense.

A BUNCH OF BOYS

Since pre-State Palestine, Jewish Jerusalem has always lived with the threat of bombs. Ten years ago, with the upsurge in terrorism, autonomous sapper units were developed throughout the country. There isn't a town in Israel without a resident Bomb Squad. The largest and most active of these is in Jerusalem where the Squad has become one of the few in the world that not only responds to threats, but patrols around the clock seeking out possible bombs hidden from view. Poking through garbage cans, searching empty buses, checking suspiciously parked cars, the men are trying to come in contact with bombs nearly every minute of their shift.

Every day begins in the Old City. An old Ottoman police station known as "Kishle," encamped beneath minarets and behind stone fortress walls, serves as the Squad's headquarters. Dressed in their regular uniforms, form fitting dark blue t-shirts, grey-green army pants and comfortable rubber soled boots, the men look like phys ed teachers -- except for the telltale baretts or .34 automatics stuffed into special holsters at the small of their backs.

At heart, they're a bunch of boys, nearly all under 24, some as young as 21. When they get together, they joke and laugh and try not to let life or their jobs become oppressive. At shift change, and while waiting for new orders, they can be seen lazing around, reading magazines, snoozing in their bunks or drinking instant coffee. A favorite pastime is to enter each other's locked cars without a key. It generally takes them less than ten seconds to get in. Then they'll pop into the squadroom and say, "Hey, Shimon, I think you left your door open." It's bad form to use a key to open a car door at Kishle.

A PARKED CAR

Short relaxing interludes between assignments and shift changes are quite deceiving. Just when the day looks dull, the radio sandpapers a report of a suspicious object -- action, in sapper parlance. The men rise from their bunks, drop their magazines, leave coffee cups half empty and bounce into the white vans. Out they go.

This time it is an old Subaru parked obstructively across from the American consulate. Itzhak and Pyoter take the call. He has investigated numberless illegally parked and suspicious cars. This one could be routine -- a false alarm. But Pyoter warns, "Around here, the routine can kill you."

The car is a beat-up wreck, not a good sign. Jalopies are frequently sacrificed for car bombs. "On the other hand," explains Itzhak, "sometimes they use a brand new Mercedes." The two approach, one on either side, getting "the feel." Pyoter declares, "Yes, I can tell if its a bomb when I first see it, even before I come close. This one is not." Itzhak adds, "I know even earlier, as soon as the report first comes over the radio. Something electric goes off inside that says, 'this is real.'"

Both agree, the feeling isn't there on this jalopy. But they never second guess "the book," that is, the manual on proper bomb disposal. They attack. The license plate is called in. A computer at police headquarters checks the number. Within twenty-eight seconds information about the car's owner squawks back on Pyoter's radio.

Fifteen seconds later they have entered the locked vehicle. Materials in the glove compartment and back seat are examined. Itzhak then attacks the trunk and in a moment move, using "an unorthodox" technique, safely enters.

Examination shows the contents to be harmless.

Slowly walking to the front of the car, Itzhak begins on the hood. Just as he is about to pop it, he hesitates. His eyes squint. Pyoter looks at Itzhak. Is it boobytrapped?

Itzhak attacks. First, the hood is carefully "prepped" in a procedure unique to the Jerusalem Bomb Squad. Now Itzhak lifts the hood: first a few centimeters, just enough for Pyoter to look in, then all the way up. All motors look dangerous -- wires, cylinders and compressors. Hoses, wires, the battery and belts are checked with the thoroughness of a corner mechanic. Nothing appears tampered with. Itzhak slams the hood down. "Zilch," he barks. A woman standing nearby mutters "Kol hakovod," but as usual, neither man notices.

A MOMENT OF NEWS

Back at Kishle, over a large platter of hummos and pita, the men start horsing around. In the midst of it all, the radio crackles a report. A bomb has just exploded beneath the drivers seat on the express bus from Jerusalem to Haifa. The explosion was calculated to kill the driver while on the highway, causing the bus to crash into other vehicles on the road. The bus did not crash, but seven passengers were injured, one died.

It's a strange breed of anguish these men feel when they hear such news. For a moment, their minds flash as they ponder the possibilities: where was the bomb planted, in Haifa or Jerusalem? Why wasn't it found during the thorough searches made before and after each bus run? Was this an isolated incident, or part of a new campaign? And finally, they consider their situation, free to live in a State of their own, free to fear a bomb on every bus.

A FACT OF DEATH

Death is something the men rarely contemplate, and almost never discuss. Yet once, as they were kibbitzing in the squadroom, the subject does come up. In the middle of a joke, one of the family men, Pyoter, is suddenly asked outright, "When you kiss you wife goodbye in the morning, do you ever wonder if you're going to see her again that night?" The room falls silent, and Pyoter's face tightens red. It is a question none of them want to answer, but Pyoter finally does. After the longest time, a single word comes back. "Yes."

Then why do you work at a job that can kill you a dozen different ways a dozen times a week? "The tremendous satisfaction it brings me," answers Pyoter, "the knowledge that I am making a valuable contribution for my country."

"We don't believe in heroes," adds Pyoter, "especially dead heroes." As such the men do believe in fear, and each remembers vividly their most frightening moments. In Yoni's case, it was at a government building. "I was sent to dismantle an obvious pipe bomb," remembers Yoni. "But we couldn't see how much time was left on the timer. The robot was not available. If this bomb had gone off, it would have been very powerful. I would have been killed and many others. I disabled it, and when we checked the timer, only five minutes remained."

As he was defusing the device, did he speak to God? "There was no time to pray," declares Yoni, "only time to disable the bomb." Was there time afterwards to give thanks? "Oh, yes. The next day I went to the Kotel (the Wailing Wall), and said a special prayer for deliverance." And did anyone thank him, for risking his life. "Yes," replied Yoni with a broad boyish smile. "Many people applauded and maybe someone said Kol hakovod."

(Edwin Black is the author of *The Transfer Agreement: The Untold Story of the Secret Pact Between the Third Reich and Jewish Palestine* (Macmillan), winner of the Carl Sandburg Award for the best nonfiction of 1984 and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. His weekly syndicated column is published by Jewish newspapers in 45 cities throughout the United States and Canada.)