

# Escape Into Stormy Seas

The Audacious and Thrilling  
Israeli Navy Operation to  
Extract Missile Boats Held  
under a French Embargo

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In the 1960s, Israel contracted a French company to build an entire fleet of advanced warships to replace its dilapidated navy vessels. After about half of them had been delivered, President Charles de Gaulle seized the rest in an attempt to curry favor with the Arab world. Faced with the loss of essential warships that it had already paid for, the Israeli Navy was forced to find a way to beat the French at their own game.... *Zman* not only revisits the dramatic episode in all its depth, but gets an inside perspective interviewing Rear Admiral (ret.) Chaim Shaked, who commanded one of the vessels



The 362-foot-long *Eilat*, Israel's flagship destroyer, closed in fast on the Egyptian P 6-class torpedo boat. The boat had sailed into Israel's new territorial waters off the coast of the Sinai Peninsula, known as the Rumani Coast, just a month after Israel's stunning victory in the 1967 Six Day War.

"Open fire," ordered Captain Yitzhak Shoshan, commander of the *Eilat*. Gunners aimed the Israeli destroyer's 40-mm and 20-mm autocannons at the 83-foot enemy torpedo boat and blasted the small vessel out of the water before it had a chance to lock onto *Eilat's* position and fire its torpedoes.

Minutes before, *Eilat's* radar had detected the enemy vessels exiting Port Said at the edge of Egyptian territorial waters and turning east toward the area that was now under Israeli control. Captain Shoshan had ordered two Israeli torpedo boats to approach, remaining close to shore to mask their radar signal, and wait in ambush. He then took the *Eilat* 10 miles out to sea.

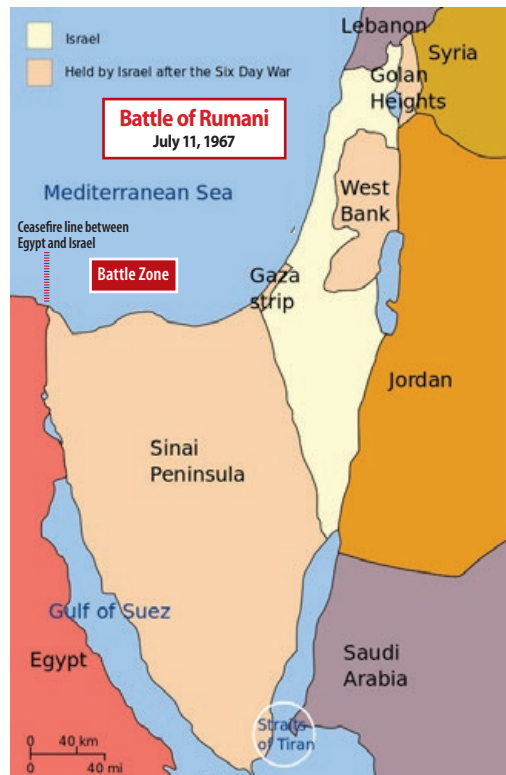
Sure enough, the Egyptian vessels ventured into Israeli territory. When they had gone far enough that the Israeli torpedo boats were behind them, the Israelis raced toward the Egyptian ships and began firing. One of the Egyptian boats turned around to escape and sped back toward Port Said along the coastline. The other headed out to sea.

The two Israeli boats overtook and finished off the vessel that had stayed closer to shore, while the *Eilat* took the second boat by surprise and sank it, as well.

Shoshan and his men had executed the ambush flawlessly, but Shoshan was in no mood to celebrate. Instead, he was worried about the battle's repercussions. He recognized that the Egyptians could hardly let this embarrassing episode pass in silence. He knew that they possessed a stronger navy, and they would be itching for revenge.

## Abandon Ship!

Day turned to dusk as the sun set behind Port Said, which lies at the northern entrance to the Suez Canal. Thirteen-and-a-half miles to the east, the *Eilat* was patrolling in



Map of the area where the Israelis sank Egyptian torpedo boats during the Battle of Rumani Coast, July 11, 1967, a few weeks after the Six Day War.

international waters, just a mile and a half from Egyptian territorial waters. It was October 21, 1967, three months after the Rumani Coast battle.

Cautiously, Captain Yitzhak Shoshan maneuvered his ship near Egyptian waters—not only to patrol against enemy infiltration but to assert Israel's military presence. Still, he made sure to leave a buffer zone between his ship and Egyptian territory. Although the Israelis had rather easily sunk the Egyptian boats three months before, Shoshan worried then, and now, that the enemy would unleash a long-rumored secret weapon that the Soviets were equipping the Egyptians with: sea-to-sea missiles.

No one knew if the missiles really worked, if they had homing capabilities or even if the Egyptians knew how to use them in battle. Sea-to-sea missiles were a new concept in naval warfare and had never been encountered by any navy. One thing

Shoshan knew, though, as the navy's former chief electronics officer, was that the Israeli Navy had nothing in its possession to defend against such missiles.

At 5:25 in the evening, everything seemed calm. Then a terrifying announcement rang out from the bridge. "Green rocket to starboard!"

The starboard lookout had seen a green-colored flare emerging from the direction of Port Said. As it rose, the flame reddened and a dark projectile was visible emerging from it. Captain Shoshan focused his binoculars on the object and followed it with trepidation. He immediately saw that its trajectory was not the steep ascent of a flare. Rather, the rocket was gradually making its way toward the *Eilat's* position.

All of a sudden, Shoshan saw the object swerve. Instantly, he realized the horrible implications. The first sea-to-sea missile ever launched in combat had locked in on his ship!

"Alert!" cried the commander, prompting warning sirens and jolting 199 crew members into frenzied action as they dashed toward their battle stations. Shoshan ordered the ship to turn sideways to present the missile with a narrower profile.

Although Captain Yitzhak Shoshan knew the true nature of the threat his ship was now facing, many crew members were confused. One of the sailors futilely opened fire on the object with a machine gun. The anti-aircraft gunners in a different section of the ship stared at the object in puzzlement, but did not open fire.

Less than a minute after it had been spotted, the bulky 5,000-pound Styx sea-to-sea missile pierced the *Eilat's* steel hull on the starboard side and detonated 1,000 pounds of explosives. The explosion rocked the ship with a deafening, ruinous blast and completely destroyed the engine room, also knocking out all radios on board.

Crewmen scurried around, trying to control the fires that had broken out. Shoshan, stymied by the inoperative intercom system, barked out orders and sent couriers running to various parts of the ship,



Russian-manufactured, Egyptian P-183 missile boat of the type used to sink the *Eilat*.



Russian-manufactured missile boat armed with Styx ship-to-ship missiles (note large missile launcher toward the rear of the ship angled upward).

which was now powerless, listing to one side and slowly spinning around. Worst of all, its broad port side now faced the direction that the missile had come from.

"Missile to port!" yelled the port lookout a minute later. With horror, crewmen turned their eyes westward and fixed them on a new object riding a trail of flames high into the sky. The ship was helpless at this point, though some machine gunners valiantly attempted to shoot down the incoming projectile.

Captain Shoshan, resigned to his fate, passively watched the missile arc toward the ship. *Crash!* The ship quaked from the powerful explosion as it met the hull on the port side and tore it open. Crew members were thrown to the deck. Many below deck were mortally wounded. The ship was now listing to port. Thick smoke filled the ship as the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared below the horizon.