

1997

Set and Drift—"In Retrospect: The Employment of Antiship Missiles"

Asen N. Kojukharov
Bulgarian Navy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Kojukharov, Asen N. (1997) "Set and Drift—"In Retrospect: The Employment of Antiship Missiles"," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 50 : No. 4 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol50/iss4/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

SET AND DRIFT

In Retrospect The Employment of Antiship Missiles

Lieutenant Commander Asen N. Kojukharov, Bulgarian Navy

AMBUSH AT SEA AS A CONCEPT has a great deal to do nowadays with the first successful employment of antiship missiles in 1967. A closer look at history shows that this relationship is not coincidental but rather a phenomenon that developed along with the methods of naval warfare used by light forces. Although thirty years have passed since that memorable event, it is still of great interest today, which is why the world press is giving due attention to the date that marks the onset of missile deployment in naval operations.

By the early 1960s the Soviet military industry had not only armed its own navy with missile-carrying vessels but had begun exporting the new weapon to "friendly" states, which then included the United Arab Republic (a short-lived formation comprising Egypt, Syria, and, for an even shorter period

Lieutenant Commander Asen N. Kojukharov is a 1984 graduate of the Naval Academy in Varna, Bulgaria, where later he also completed the advanced courses for officers. He has served on board warships in the Bulgarian Navy, and since 1992 he has lectured at the Naval Academy, Varna, on naval history. Commander Kojukharov is currently working on his doctorate in naval history, concentrating on local conflicts from 1967 to 1991. His works also have appeared in the Russian naval journal *Morskoi sbornik*.

Naval War College Review, Autumn 1997, Vol. L, No. 4

of time, Yemen). However, the new weapon was inadequately dealt with by the Arabs, because of, first, their chronic difficulties with its operation and employment, and second, their doubts about its efficiency. The Arabs had such a deep psychological barrier regarding the reliability of this weapon in combat that when any mistake occurred during maneuvers the offender was severely dealt with. Another contributing factor may have been that since the 1950s antiship missile trials had been carried out in many countries, yet then, a decade later, only Sweden and the Soviet Union were producing ships with antiship missiles; other countries remained reluctant.¹

To a large extent this explains why no missiles were fired during an early engagement between Arab missile boats and Israeli torpedo boats and destroyers during the Six Day War. On the night of 5 June 1967, off Port Said, an Israeli task force consisting of the destroyer *Jaffa* and three torpedo boats supported a group of divers trying to penetrate the Port Said naval base. The frogmen were unpleasantly surprised to find not a single target either in the harbor area or at the base areas. Because events had happened so quickly, Israeli intelligence had failed to learn of the redistribution of Egypt's navy to Alexandria after a heavy defeat by Israeli aviation. However, Israeli support ships did locate two Egyptian picket-patrol missile boats trying to escape to Alexandria at full speed. In spite of several direct hits, the Egyptians finally succeeded in breaking away from their pursuers.

Indeed, before the battle the Israeli squadron commander had been informed that he might encounter missile boats in the vicinity.² However, the message was considered to be only general information and contained no express warning to avoid an encounter with those boats. On the contrary, the Israelis were intent on fighting the Arab forces—which clearly shows how much the antiship missile was underestimated.

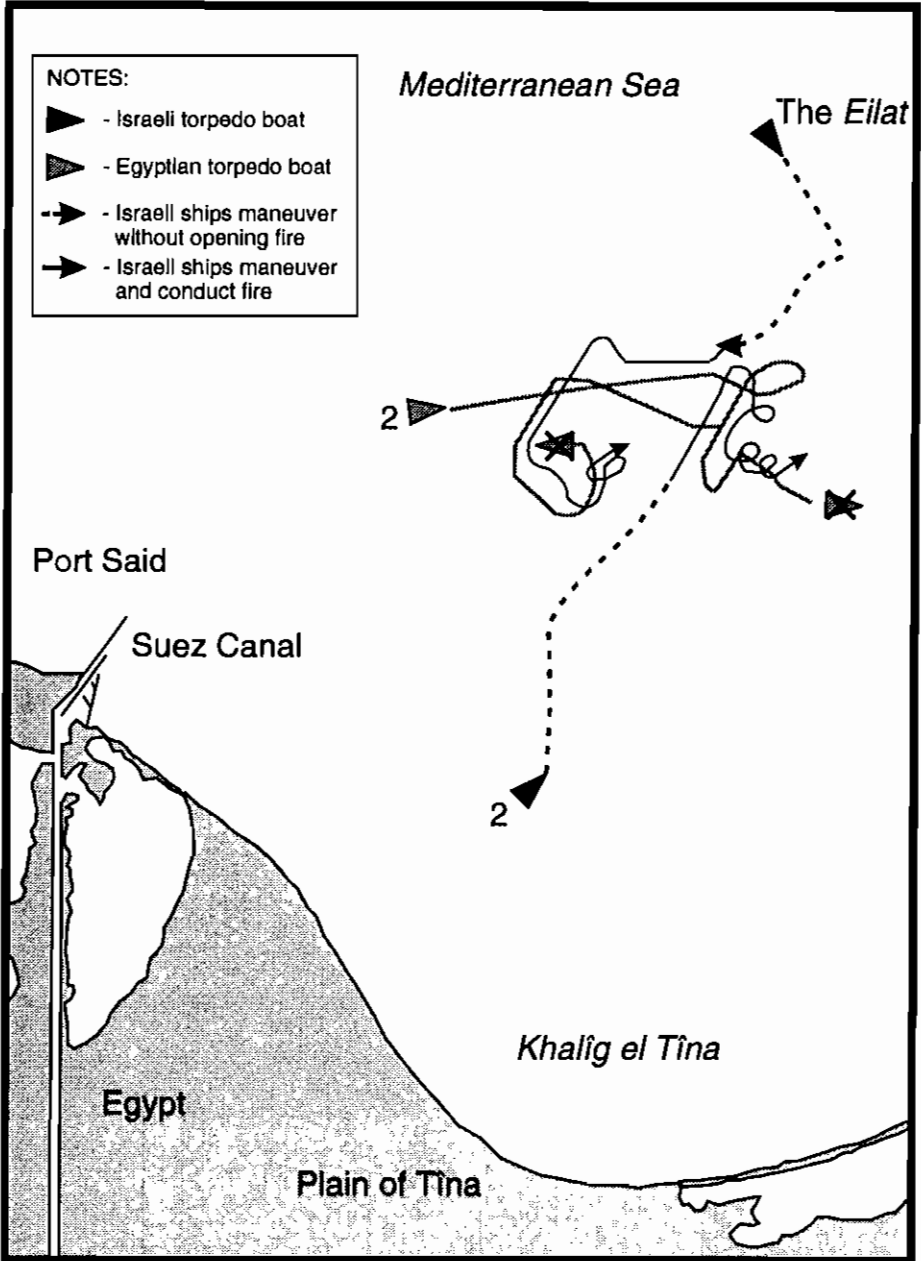
Another engagement relevant to this situation took place six days later, on the night of 12 June. The Israeli destroyer *Eilat*, escorted by two Saar-1 type torpedo boats (Italian craft armed with 457 mm torpedo tubes and 20 mm guns), was conducting a patrol northeast of Port Said along the newly occupied shore of the Sinai peninsula, when its radar detected a target that the ship identified as an Egyptian missile boat. The Israeli ship abruptly changed course to approach more closely.³ Meanwhile, the Israeli commander ordered his high-speed escorts to engage the enemy. But when they drew closer, the Israelis realized that their target was not a missile boat but a group of torpedo boats (Soviet-built P-6s, with a displacement of 75 tons, a speed of 43 knots, 25-man crews, 450 mm torpedo tubes, and an antiaircraft gun) that were approaching head-on. The Egyptians managed to avoid fighting by making for the harbor of Port Said, where they were protected by coastal and field artillery.

120 Naval War College Review

However, the large Israeli destroyer was a tempting target, and the two escorts were now out of sight. So, without knowing the real composition of the enemy, the Egyptian commander made the decision to get close to the destroyer. Leaving their ambush position in the radar shadow of Port Said, the Egyptians believed they were delivering a surprise attack as they gathered speed eastward. They apparently were the source of a torpedo attack that was then evaded by *Eilat's* rapid maneuvering. The Egyptian forces also may not have suspected that another force of Israeli boats was on their starboard side. The Israelis, creeping along the coast of Tina Bay, had succeeded in fooling the enemy, using the destroyer as a decoy, drawing the Egyptians away from their position along the coast, and trapping them in an ambush. At the beginning of the attack, however, the Israeli patrol was in the dark as well: it was unaware that the Egyptians had separated the *Eilat* from its escort, thus complicating the engagement. When the Israelis maneuvered to join *Eilat*, the Egyptians started shooting. The Israelis returned fire immediately despite the risk of reciprocal fire. Soon an Egyptian boat was hit; it proceeded eastward with its stern ablaze, apparently out of control, while the other turned west.⁴ *Eilat's* commanding officer ordered the patrol to destroy the "eastern target" while he fought the "western target." The battle lasted more than thirty minutes. The disabled Arab boat was slow to sink; the destroyer's escort had to circle the target and shoot at the burning wreck until it was submerged. Meanwhile, *Eilat* fired a salvo at the other target, heading west, and blew it up. The Israelis carried out an extensive search and rescue operation but found no survivors⁵.

The loss of these boats clearly demonstrates the inability of the Egyptian naval forces to keep a proper lookout in the base responsibility zone, locate the whole enemy force, and then strike a blow with sufficient strength and weaponry to accomplish the task. The commander of the Egyptian task force impetuously launched a torpedo attack at the start of the battle only to lose the initiative shortly thereafter. The Israeli crews showed combat readiness and tactical experience, although in the initial stages their maneuvering was not optimal for the situation.

But apart from the ineffectual Egyptian ambush and the brilliant Israeli counter-ambush, there is another aspect to these events that no one took into account. Both battles of 5 June and 12 June exposed the attitude toward—in fact, the disregard for—antiship missiles on the part of Israeli headquarters and commanding officers. It was imprudent of them to send large combatant ships with poor antiaircraft armament to a region where missile-carrying boats were likely to operate. They were later severely punished for their poor judgment. The 12 June episode became a prelude to another, far more important, event, which decades later is still topical and merits consideration.



The Torpedo Boat Battle on 12 June 1967

Joseph R. Nunes, Jr.

122 Naval War College Review

The end of the Six Day War and the annexation of the occupied territories did not settle the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries. To the contrary, armed skirmishes continued along the Arab-Israeli border, in the so-called War of Attrition. There were battles at sea as well, one of which marked a global turning point for future naval warfare.

On 21 October 1967, two Arab boats sank *Eilat* with four Styx missiles in Tina Bay, thirteen miles off Port Said. At nightfall, an Egyptian radar station had detected a single ship proceeding along the coast of the Sinai peninsula—it was the *Eilat*. Its commanding officer, Commander Itshak Shoshan, feared only enemy submarines, so he conducted only antisubmarine zigzag maneuvers. He even ignored the two small Komar missile boats (a 183P design, armed with two launchers for Soviet Styx missiles) that were on patrol. (He had destroyed a P-6 under similar circumstances at nearly the same position; the two small targets now visible on *Eilat's* radar screen did not differ from those he had sunk on 12 June.) At 1700 the destroyer assumed a steady course. Sixteen minutes later, a signalman reported bright bursts and curls of smoke in the direction of Port Said. Then the trace of a launched missile could be seen in the sky. The *Eilat* was put on full alert and turned to resume its zigzag. Its navigator at first reported that the missile would fly past and clear the stern, but then, at a range of six miles, the missile veered toward the destroyer; apparently at that instant it engaged its homing warhead.⁶ The *Eilat* immediately opened fire on the missile as it closed in, but in vain. Minutes after the first hit on the stern, a second missile struck amidships.⁷

In spite of the measures taken by the crew to save the ship, it lost way and began to sink, with a noticeable list. Within two hours a third missile struck the destroyer, detonating its ammunition magazines.⁸ The last message from the *Eilat* was transmitted at 5:28 P.M., picked up by an Israeli combat unit on the Sinai peninsula. Commander Shoshan ordered the crew to abandon ship.⁹ The destroyer was still visible on the Egyptian radar screens. The last missile was launched from a minimum distance of safety. It fell on the derelict, spilling fuel and oxidizer. The *Eilat* sank. A twenty-hour search and rescue operation was carried out by the Israeli Coast Guard. From the crew of 199, forty-seven perished, and ninety-one were hurt or suffered severe burns.¹⁰

The sinking of the *Eilat* was the first successful employment of antiship missiles. The event received wide discussion in the world naval press. Many (including Soviet writers) tried to point out that the *first* antiship missile attack had been on 9 September 1943, when German Dornier 217 bombers sank the new Italian battleship *Roma*, using a homing bomb, an FX 1400.¹¹ It is true that the Germans also employed an antiship missile, the H 293, but it was ineffective because of its insufficient tactical and technical characteristics.¹²

Many authors have attempted to explain why the *Eilat* was lost. They point to a number of factors. First, the *Eilat* was an old destroyer (built in 1944) that lacked modern anti-aircraft armament. The Israeli navy soon decommissioned its remaining destroyers, the last in 1969. (It is true that in 1968 Israel decommissioned its destroyer *Haiifa*, but it was only in April 1969 that its last destroyer, *Jaffa*, was sunk by two missiles as a target during testing of the Israeli Gabriel missile.) Also, on the eve of the attack *Eilat's* normal combat readiness was reduced because of the ship's celebration of the twelfth anniversary of its commissioning into the Israeli navy. Also, whereas a normal crew consisted of 250, the ship carried a complement of 199 as it proceeded on its last patrol (20 percent less than normal). Fourth, the small Egyptian boats shot from a sheltered bay, a fact which, to a large extent, increased their firing efficiency. Further, the *Eilat* was patrolling in one area at cruising speed, which allowed the Egyptian missile crews to prepare properly for the attack and conduct it in close to firing-range conditions. Finally, the attack was a complete surprise to the Israelis, because they failed to identify the boats as carrying missiles. Thus an unsuspecting *Eilat* proved crucial for a successful attack.

We may also add the fact that *Eilat* was sufficiently large to be an excellent target for the Soviet Styx missile, designed for such targets. Also, the ship took neither active nor passive countermeasures against these missiles, which were vulnerable to either. It was on patrol without an escort, which made it impossible to apply the well mastered methods of counter-ambush to obstruct the Egyptian picket patrol (as in the case on 12 June 1967), allowing the Egyptians to attack undisturbed. On the other hand, the innovative aspect of the 21 October ambush was that it achieved tactical surprise by deploying a brand new weapon, which allowed Egyptian missile boats, masked as torpedo boats, to feel secure enough to fire at ease.

Ambush is one of the most attractive methods of warfare, especially for the weaker of the two sides in conflict. However, it must be noted that the 1967 attack was to be the only successful ambush conducted by warships carrying antiship missiles against large men-of-war in the last thirty years. In the 1980s, fast attack craft employing similar methods failed, and even sustained heavy damage. Therefore, the Israeli navy was not the only one to learn the bitter lessons taught at Tina Bay.

The destruction of the destroyer *Eilat* was unique in yet another respect: it involved consecutive launches of single missiles with long intervals between—proof that the ship had carried poor anti-aircraft defences. (A similar case was the minesweeper *Yarmuk*, sunk in 1973 during the Latakia engagement, but that Syrian vessel sank as a result of both missile hits and subsequent gunfire.)

After the successful attack that sank the *Eilat*, antiship missiles finally acquired a secure place (and due respect) in naval warfare. In spite of the views of certain

124 Naval War College Review

experts, navies around the world embarked on rearmament with the new missile. A new kind of air threat had been created, and the character of naval warfare was radically changed forever. This is the result of that engagement on 21 October 1967.

Notes

1. B. Kolchanov, "The Main Weapon of the Mosquito Fleet: Missiles," *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 1, 1989, pp. 31–2.
2. L. Williams, *The Israeli Defense Forces: A People's Army* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Printing House, 1989), p. 263.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 265. See also A. Kojukharov, "The War of Attrition: Some Naval Aspects of the Arab-Israeli Armed Conflict, 1967–1970," *Morskoi sbornik*, no. 8, 1996, pp. 76–80.
5. Williams, p. 265.
6. V. Dotsenko, *Sunk: Combat Damage to Warships since 1945* (St. Petersburg: Deva, 1992), p. 45.
7. G. Smirnov, "Powerful Weapons for Small Ships," *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 7, 1988, pp. 31–2.
8. See Kojukharov, p. 77.
9. Dotsenko, p. 45.
10. Williams, p. 265.
11. S. Roskill, *The War at Sea*, vol. 3 (London: Collins 1962; reprint [as *Flot i voina*] Moscow: Military Publishers, 1974), vol. 3, pp. 170, 175 (reprint).
12. B. Rodionov and N. Novichkov, *Cruise Missiles in Naval Warfare* (Moscow: Military Publishers, 1987), p. 12; Roskill, vol. 3, p. 170 (reprint).

— ψ —

Marines and Others: The Paintings of Colonel Charles Waterhouse USMCR, Ret. Edison, N.J.: Sea Bag Productions, 1994. 280pp. (No price given)

Charles Waterhouse has a decades-long love affair with the U.S. Marine Corps, and plainly it has been reciprocated. His first exposure was enlisted service in the 5th Marine Division from 1943 to 1946, during which he was wounded on Iwo Jima (an event pictured on page 188). In April 1972 he became a Marine Corps artist in residence and was awarded a reserve commission (originally as a major) and the first of several historical projects. Over the next eighteen years he portrayed Marines in all the Corps' wars and phases, sketching and painting with both obvious affection and care for detail. (He also painted for a variety of other clients—the "Others" of the subtitle.) This volume collects samples of all this work, with the artist's recollections and comments. If some of his paintings (especially the historical ones) seem relentlessly cheerful, even wide-eyed, it only befits an artist who had had what he calls a "Norman Rockwell" childhood. But he was "there" (including Vietnam, where he not only had to dig his own foxholes but debit per diem to sleep in them), and many of his images are as grim as they could well be. If you're a Marine, ever were, or ever wished you had been, you should *already* own this book.