

Thirty Men in a Boat

Combat soldiers who experienced severe trauma in the 2006 Lebanon War came together on a sailing ship for a week-long trip across the North Sea. With the help of therapists, they tried, for the first time, to talk about bitter battles in Bint Jbeil, Debel and Saluki. Many a silence was broken in that small kitchen-cabin, much tears and alcohol soaked the deck. Most importantly: finally, someone was there to listen and to understand.

Igal Sarna, The Netherlands // photos by Nissim Daboush

Published in "Yedioth Ahronoth", national daily newspaper published in Tel Aviv, Israel.

On the sixth night of the sailing, I saw the Kfar Giladi triplets huddled over something in a kitchen corner. Nearing closer to see, I noticed it was a memorial candle. It was flickering in a gust of wind from the open door, blowing from the vast North Sea, wild, unbounded and dark on a grey Dutch August. It was the second anniversary of the HQ Company Disaster, a harrowing event that haunts them until this very day. The three paratroopers, men in their forties, family men, breadwinners, were lighting a candle in memory of their fallen friends.

"Write," they tell me, "that we're still there in mind. Let them know". 'Them' are the widows of the 12 victims hit by a Katyusha rocket Kfar Giladi, their orphaned children who were surely gathering in the cemetery, along with all the others who survived, some disabled and maimed, others shocked and post-traumatic. This year, these three men boarded the sailing ship and headed out to sea, to see to their own wounds. They were not there, this year, at the remembrance ceremonies and memorials, they did not meet the survivors, not even their commander, who lost all his hair overnight, head and body, from shock and terror.

They huddled together on the ship, over a flickering candle, just as they did over that pocket-stove, on that predestined spot, on the afternoon of August 6th, 2006, between the lion's statue and the cemetery of the First Watchmen. While the small flames licked the coffeepot, a terrifying explosion was heard, and the world crumpled around them. Then silence. Then the screams.

This is the story they keep telling themselves, for the umpteenth time, never missing a single detail. Like so many others who have returned from that place: a crystalized memory experienced in all senses: fire, screams, horrible smell, the empty, unseeing eyes of a friend who was there merely seconds ago, laughing. Since that day, they are a Siamese triplet, welded together by the rocket flame. M, whose wonderful sense of humor keeps him (and the others) from freefalling into the abyss; Religious A who's holding on to God, and would never dare having a bite of the ship's food; and solemn R, who drowns his body and soul into work.

As the rocket hit, the cypress trunks surrounding them bent inwards with impetus, absorbing the shockwave and the hail of shrapnel. Had they not been out there, making coffee, they too would have perished. Withing a fraction of a second, the world around them has become a valley of death. Men were incinerated, those who were standing up were no longer. Those who laid down were spared. The bodies of those killed by the shockwave were intact. Those three men had seen Mr. Death in their own eyes.

On the 22-trooper-strong sailing ship I learned that in events such as the one in Kfar Giladi, in Saluki, in some unnamed alley in Gaza, the divide between you and death is removed. Once you see how close death is, how helpless you are – any illusion of protection life has to offer is gone, and you find

yourself completely and utterly alone. Even among friends, among family. You are alone. Ever alone. Only on that ship were they together. All those alone people. Some talkative, some taciturn. 22 Men in a Boat.

"The sailing ship idea started in a rumor that hundreds of homes housed soldiers, back from Lebanon, who were simply sitting in silence", said organizer Anat Yoffe. "Parents were talking about discharged soldiers whose lives were still very much charged. We went looking for those men".

Not only shell shock and combat stress, not just PTSD. Simply put: shaken soldiers, just like I was when I came back from the Yom Kippur War half-shocked. Just like so many others. The entire state of Israel sometimes seems like a boat full of combat-stressed, checkpoint-stressed, refugee-stressed passengers, floating haunted on the surging waves. Two days flickered the flame of the Kfar Giladi candle on the kitchen shelf before it died out. Had only pain and memory died out as candles do, but they do not. They linger on within the soul, gnawing at it like a rat in the belly of the ship, eating away at any semblance of calm or tranquility. Flashbacks of scenes of terror. Restlessness, fits of rage. Short fuses. Panic. Loneliness. On sails the ship.

The one who covered his friend

That war, that has already been forgotten in the hectic pace of current affairs, laid heavy and thick as smoke in the belly of the ship as it set sail on August 8th. "*Bshvil*"¹ organization located 22 soldiers, raised the funds and donations and created the journey plan with the aid and support of the Herzliya sailing club "*Derekh HaYam*"². Two weekends were spent together back in Israel, to get acquainted and talk a little, and they would meet again after the journey is concluded.

In August they flew together to the Netherlands to board the Dutch Noah's Ark: three paratroopers who have survived the terrors of Debel village, near Bint Jbeil; a medic who went through the chaos of a bloody battle; one who suffered head-trauma in a mid-war accident; the guy who spends his nights from one bar to another telling others what he had seen; the one who tried every drug under the sun; the drunk who saw his friends die out while waiting for rescue; the silent ones; the one that got paralyzed in battle; the standoffish who would only ever introduce himself after four loaded days; the guy who carries his secret, telling terrible jokes but never really opens up; the one that cries; the one that doesn't sleep; the macho-type who acts like nothing ever really happened; the infantry soldier whose body, crushed by explosives in the Kasbah, was rehabilitated, but his mind lies broken still; the medic who both healed and killed; the one who covered the body of his dead friend in a warm blanket; the ones in regular service, the ones in reserve. Four military women, three of them Casualty NCOs, one paramedic. Two psychologists; two organizers, a man and a woman; and one writer who has gone through a war some thirty-something years ago, that still traces a burning scar.

Armed with five sails, the old iron ship weighing 250 tons set sail from Friesland, Netherlands, into the North Sea. Wind-driven, the ship is one of a large navy consisting of about 400 old ships, some of whom are commissioned to carrying groups of damaged people – disabled, victims, survivors – taking them on a rehabilitation workshop. This is a short-term process, it offers resilience, not resolution. The passengers make their own food, operate the ship, clean – and talk.

On deck were waiting the Dutch seaman Dros, who looked like green hulk, his plump and perky spouse Michelle and a pair of dogs – Peake and Junah.

¹ A play on words: "for tomorrow" and also "en route to tomorrow". (the translator)

² Sea Route. (the translator)

Three in a Cabin

We set sail on a Friday, for one week. Some thirty men packed together in an area of a medium-sized apartment. The only escape route is through the ice-cold water of the North Sea. Boarding the ship on the Halingen shipyards, I was allotted a tiny cabin-cell. I was the only one who got to have a room of their own. All the others were stacked, three or four bunks a cabin: like a wood-plated iron-coffin. One cabin for the Kfar Giladi survivor triplet, one cabin for the three who lived through Debel. One small room was allotted to moderators Doron Marom and Tal Maimon and to organizer Anat Yoffe.

My cabin, large enough to contain only a bunk and a washbasin, was adjacent to the cabin of the gaggle of giggling Casualties NCOs on the one side and to the larder and kitchenette on the other, next to the engine room. When the wind subsided or when we were approaching port, the engine was rattled into action, and I would wake from slumber only to sink back to sleep to the sounds of its monotonous rumbling. I had some dreams of wandering and travel, and I liked my cabin. It's been over a generation since I slept in a Company, and I don't miss it one bit. When the clamor grew too strong, I'd close the cabin door, turn on a soft reading light that was fixed over the bunk that filled the entire cabin space, and read Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Bad Girl*.

But everything else was super-crammed. Three toilet stalls and three showers. A short corridor led to a common area that was a living room, a mess hall and a kitchen, where everyone spent the better part of the day. If you were suffocating, you could always climb the five stairs up to the wind-stricken deck. Rain hit the deck intermittently. When hoisted, the sails, 350 square meters of thick, sturdy fabric, caught the wind and drove us onwards in great force, cutting through sea as a sharp blade, silent as a knife, no engines or pollution. This nautical journey was the brainchild of Yossi Sokolov, a young but experienced sailor, who joined forces with Ilan Lior, an ex-construction contractor, to bring this project of "conversation journey" to life. For a week we sailed over the high, swelling seas. Haunted by memories, fueled by beer, we exhumed confessions.

Is glass digestible?

Back on the bus from the airport to the port where the ship was docked, the 22 soldiers from all units – Golani and Egoz, special units and paratroopers – started to fill out forms that would later be re-filled, anonymously, on a daily basis. I feel: tense / sad / I felt scared / helpless / difficulty concentrating, difficulty following a tv-show plot / a sense of emotional numbness / I tell myself: this is unreal / I feel uncomfortable with my back to the door / I feel like I will never have a career or a marriage or a long life, etc.

Armed with pencils, the soldiers rated their fears and emotions, traveling through the Dutch landscape of picturesque towns, untroubled elderly couples, green meadows, cows, bars, cafés and windows into calm, quiet homes. We were like a tank ablaze, crossing through the high road of a sleepy vacation town.

Twice a day we convened on in the ship for an hour and a half of conversation. Compulsory. No food, no drink. No cigarettes. Exposed. "They're very tense", said therapist Doron. "The will to tell conflicts with the fear of exposure". A fountain of beer was rushing in the kitchen. Speech was silent, subdued. Slowly, the soldiers started to open up, one conversation at a time, one day at a time. Slow burn. At first, it was as if they had no idea what this was about: what's trauma? What's resilience? Prior to leaving on the trip, a psychologist friend told me that his patients from the 2006 Lebanon War talk like abandoned children, they convey a sensation of a neglected child. A sense that the army failed them. That they were sent to a pointless battle, that their friends withered before their

eyes, unretrieved, un-rescued. He told me that the Second Lebanon War is the Vietnam of troopers returning to a society that has lost the sense of solidarity leaving them with profound loneliness. On the ship, soldiers said that, this was the first time since the war that anyone actually cares for them. "Not checking a 'therapy' box like they do in the army, but showing real interest".

Twice a day they sat in a circle of benches under a low ceiling in the light of iron lanterns. Outside, the sea was tempestuous. At first, they spoke ineloquently: Morse-Hebrew, coded language, flattened and bereft of emotion. Slang took the place of feelings. "Chill, dude, don't be heavy" lingo where weightiness was explicitly called-for. Not to skip to the next topic, to get stuck on precisely what they are running away from, to express weakness, to voice pain. To tell how scared they were. How helpless felt they who were taught to fight. The kings of Balata³ and Khan Yunis⁴, how they got screwed over in Lebanon.

They talked in the sessions, but also among themselves: on deck, in the cabins, in the mess hall, in the bars. They talked of a war that did not go as planned, on wounded screaming with no help in sight. "It's all stunted afterwards", said the medic to the group. "Who you are, it's all just black and white, no life". Everything swells inside them, they hoard it all in for fear of speaking, for their inability to express emotion. Very few got therapy. Some spilled their hearts out with friends, some kept quiet. None told the parents. The girlfriend wouldn't understand. Stiffened by events that cut their lives in two, they weather on, they function. At this age, you can even digest glass. But then, at a later age, it all bursts out. Like the Kishon trainees.⁵ Dormant service damage ahead.

On the ship, therapists Doron and Tal listened to the soldiers, staving off any judgmental comments, halting detailed recounting of events, forestalling interruptions. They maintained the group's attention and mindfulness. It was all conducted as the exact opposite of loud, overzealous politics. Quietly, this quality of receptiveness wrapped around the speakers as a warm quilt, softening up even the silent ones.

"You want to get as far away from what happened, but you can't forget, you keep coming back to it, you talk about it with any person you see", said the combat soldier from Debel. On his back a blue tattoo: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.* "In every bar, every night, with every chick, I tell everything, every time I'm drunk".

"I remember every detail and I break it down to bits and then reconstruct it all again, every time again, a hundred thousand times", said the guy from the Kfar Giladi incident. "What I did, where I did wrong. Had I stood there, and had this guy stood there and that friend who had just given me a cookie his wife made him and then died. Every fighter jet sends me back there. The scent of BBQ".

"I told a friend, and at night I had a nightmare that she's cheating on me and tells everything to the teacher", said the paramedic. "I grew up in a family where you don't talk about things, and here it's not easy. I have knots in my stomach. Had we sat another half hour I might have spoken", said the reticent guy, and turned silent again.

Samson's daughter

Every night, there was a soldier playing a guitar. Two were singing. Every group of Israelis of that age always has at least three guys who play guitar, at least two guys who'll make you laugh 'til you cry.

³ A Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank (the translator)

⁴ A Palestinian city in Gaza (the translator)

⁵ Kishon was a polluted river in Haifa Bay where navy diving training was held. Years later, higher rates of cancer were found in many soldiers from the unit (the translator)

Five who are heavy drinkers. Four who were flying high in the sky with diamonds of ecstasy and coke. Two who don't say a word. One who's depressed. But brought together under the well-trained hand of a good moderator, they're a team. Great people. In a heartbeat, lists and shifts for cleaning, cooking and deck-chores are set up. The medic became the accountant. Breakfasts were conjured out of thin air; dishes were washed without a single complaint; toilets were pristinely cleaned. The four young women softened up the masculinity, but could not prevent sexist jokes or the homo-erotic jangle of brothers in arms.

Anat Yoffe was the ship's mother, containing, embracing. At the age of 12 she lost her father, Hanan Samson, a soldier in the famed Unit 101, a lauded commander who was shot in '69 in the Chase-lands⁶ when a terrorist came shooting out of a cave, using a woman and baby as human shield. Four years later, her adopting father also died, in Yom Kippur War. "I've been conscripted ever since. I carried the family on my back, I didn't dare approach the pain. I hadn't opened up for many years. An uncured pain will turn to a bottomless pit".

The ship rose and fell with the ebbs and flows of the tides. The iron-clad house rocked and swayed like a cradle. Organizer Uri Povizer, rescue unit trooper, embraced and listened. "Things you don't let out will get stuck inside like a knot" – he mused a pearl of Chinese medicine wisdom.

The ship's innards were warm and welcoming, the deck torrential and windswept, cold and wet. In the storm you felt calm, in the calm storms raged inside. The mind is a complex mechanism – even more so having taken the hard blows of war or other sights that should not be witnessed. Those who lived through hell together, stick together. Such is the case of the three guys from Debel, the Lebanese village where the paratroopers took a hard hit. The dark-skinned orphan, the fair-skinned Kibbutznik, and the one who never speaks shared the same cabin, stacked one above the other. Together they disembarked onto the shore for a night of drinking, together they staggered back on deck at the end of the night. Together they made fun of the rest of the guys in the warm shelter of the cabin.

At night, silence fell on the ship. It was as if most were trying hard to postpone sleep. Only around 2 or 3 a.m. did they finally sleep. The cabins were populated by sleepers and dreamers, nightmares tormented some, who were moaning and tossing in their sleep, while others still would lie awake in bed, forsaken by sleep. All night, someone was up in the kitchen, scouring for a bite, rummaging through the larder adjacent to my bunk. In the mornings, the daily kitchen duty would wake early and cook breakfast. Then we would sail from the small port into the sea. Gusty winds would fill the sails and sailor Sokolov taught us the secrets of zigzagging along with the winds. Knots were tied and untied. The wind blew strong. Sails were raised. The motion fortitude embodied in simplicity. Fabric and wind and human hands and pure speed. The ship became a parable for a thought that must not be allowed to sink into, but rather sail onwards, propelled by the force of the strength within us.

An image of resilience

"Draw an image of resilience in your head", said Doron in the evening session. They all fell silent, in thought. The farmboy, a young, loquacious Marlon Brando, recalled himself a stuttering child, resolutely building a sand castle in spite of derision from the other boys. The bar-wanderer recalls an old photo of old Louis Armstrong smiling over a trumpet, victorious after a long life full of racism and hardship. Somebody else recalls a father's hug. A mother's caress. The medic recounted how, when

⁶ A geographical area along the Jordan Valley and in Samaria and Judean Deserts, where Israeli forces were chasing back guerilla fighters infiltrating from Jordan after the territories were conquered in the '67 war (the translator)

he passed by one of Lebanon's valleys of death, he caught glimpse of a strong combat soldier holding in his arms two friends over the body of a fallen friend. Two hours later, the consoling man with the strong arms arrived on a stretcher, mortally wounded, only to die in the medic's arms.

"This image of resilience", said the moderator, "is a memory you can call for when in trouble, to be used as an anchor, as a lifeline to grab onto and lift you up from complete desperation".

"Here, on the ship, It's the most alive I've felt since the war", said the medic, suddenly. He functioned well in the war. Set up a battalion aid station on his own under conditions of complete chaos. He won a citation, but deep inside he's still terrified. "Everything just goes right by me. Nothing gets in. Only now I feel like I can start breathing again".

Every morning, every evening, the circle session starts. None are absent, none sleep. Occasionally, one might nod off. My eyelids were also heavy at times. As time passes, expectations lay heavier on the silent participants. At one point, they mutinied. "Enough. You're forcing us to speak" – said the manager from Kfar Giladi. Even though his voice was steady, his hands were shaking. His friend shared with the group his anxiety that something bad might happen to us all. Each time he sits down with the group he expects some calamity, waiting for some rocket to hit and wipe everybody out. He is gripped by a nervous countdown. "I feel like every common cold would end in death". Like him, other soldiers were also in a constant state of unrest.

"I know I'm a ticking timebomb", said one of the silent ones. "I keep it all inside. All to myself. That's how I was brought up. In my house, my folks never spoke". One day it'll all burst out. He doesn't have close friends. Nobody to talk to. He keeps retelling himself the same story over and over again, brooding on the ticking egg of a memory.

"I'm happy on the ship", said the paramedic. "It's a very safe space. I feel very contained, very protected. I never felt this way out there". Some feel betrayed by the army. Abandoned. "It's not a sob workshop", said the medic, apologetically. As if I were there expecting some drama.

Think of a safe space, says Doron. He's a psychologist who has gone through a couple of wars himself, and has also served as a therapist in the rescue unit. He knows how to maintain order without doling out orders, how to calm without silencing. At his side was Tal, a young therapist whose previous research studied trauma and resilience in elite IDF units.

Under their moderation, I was surprised to witness Israelis listening. Being *my brother*⁷, without raising voices or tones, without interjection, domination or humiliation. One said he feels safe when he sits atop the Eagles' Cliff overlooking Nahal Kziv. Another said he feels safe on the ship. Another at home. In the battalion, before it all happened. Some had experienced loss even before their service, and had had this brooding sensation since childhood. One has parents with disabilities, one lost a mother. The mother of another was murdered.

At night, the ships at the docks were clanging. Rain swept the deck. All was dark and humid, those who had gone drinking haven't returned yet. The dogs were running deckside. The sailor slept in his little cabin out back. After 2 a.m., a drunken group returned on deck, carefully crossing the plank bridging over the water. Loud. They were raising their voices as they never did during the day. One spoke angrily of his mother. Another of the army. Another told of vital supplies that were air-dropped right into a Hizballah base. The night was filled with stories of soldiers enthused and

⁷ *My brother* is a common term of address in the army and among the general population. Although originally a term of respect and camaraderie, it does not necessarily indicate familiarity, and may sometimes be used to the exact opposite effect, in a disrespectful or belittling manner. (the translator)

dispirited, eager and betrayed at the same time. Helplessness and the rattle of masts and sails and relentless wind.

A battery taking a hit

One dawn, before the first light, sailorman Dros sailed the ship as we were sleeping, in order to take advantage of the tide and pass over a large shoal. Proficient and silent was the captain of our journey. Junah the dog, and her spotty friend Peake, born onboard the ship, were running back and forth. We sailed past islands and regulated passes, canals and buoys and lighthouses. A meticulously ordered European world, an antithesis of chaos.

"The war was over and the army ran off and left us alone", said the medic, who stood before a battery that took a direct hit. A small group, seven men, cocked their heads to listen. The soldiers pleaded with the moderators to split up, to speak in smaller groups. It's petrifying to try to speak in full assembly. Around the table, seven were leaning in around the medic, a family hearing the story of a long-lost son returning home.

"It's the first time that people listen to me like this", he cries. He stood before the wounded men from the battery, petrified, unable to move. Paralyzed with horror, he did not tend to their wounds. Two years he had held it in. Who would ever understand? Another paramedic spoke. He found himself in some alley in Gaza, just him and combat soldier, under fire, in front of them an armed enemy. The enemy shot first, the soldier fell and the medic shot back, killing the enemy, then tending the wounded. He was terrified. Horrified by killing. this was not what he was supposed to be doing.

Another soldier described how he followed a tank into Lebanon, along with the rest of his platoon. The tank hit a monstrous explosive device. 50 tons of metal fell apart like a cardboard shoebox, all over his platoon. The tank was dissolved before their very eyes. What can you possibly rely on after this? What can you trust?

"I got back from the war, and everybody was sitting in cafés. I felt like an outsider, so out of place... the worst part was going back home", said the muscled one. "I saw a home falling apart. My mother and sisters were sleeping together in one bed, crying hysterically. They latched hold to me, I couldn't take it, I ran away... It was easier to cope with the war than with the fears at home".

One of the Kfar Giladi triplet suddenly said: "It's gotten so hard at home, all of a sudden. The boy wants something, the girl wants something, and you can't just tell them: 'stop. I have just been through something horrible. Leave me alone.' My friends saved me. They were my veterinarian", he laughs. He has no peace, since the event. Always making jokes, always the funnyman, not sitting still for one minute. Constantly active, constantly pushing to action, both in the kitchen and on deck.

"I collect every single word written on the war", said the paramedic. She's a startled young woman, long hair, terrified. Reads every book written on the battle. Keeps albums with newspaper clips, as if having everything would grant her some control over what happened, over the life that went off-track when her mother died or when her best friend died in battle. "Obsession," she called it.

"We all knew we shouldn't go in the Lebanese village in daylight", said to me the talkative guy from the Debel triplet. Tormented, bright, the guy with the 'shadow of the valley of death' tattoo. He was a machine gun operator in the battalion.

"We arrived in daylight. Everything was a mess, disorder. Yelling and fighting between the battalion commander in the field and the brigade commander back behind us. We had to hide in the Debel

houses until dark. We went in with grenades that gave away our location. 160 soldiers in the one house that was most conspicuous. We warned against it. I was in the house across from it", he draws a map on a napkin. "At 12:30 they shot the first rocket right in there. I saw the hit and we all ran down there. Four minutes later they shot the second rocket".

"As I ran in, in my mind, I was still the civilian I was yesterday. And then I stumble right into corpses, fire, screaming. Don't leave me alone, they were screaming from the burning house. Where's my hand? And then there was an olive grove, we took everyone we could out into the grove. Nine dead, tens wounded. Dying. Screams: where are the fucking helicopters that they promised us? Seven hours of hell, 5 kilometers from the border. I covered somebody's body and somebody told me 'close his eyes'. It sent me directly back to my mom. Crazy adrenaline, the strongest drug I've ever known. Addictive. It opens up your mind's eye like LCD, with flashbacks".

He's been drinking ever since. Drinking and drinking. With friends and on his own. Looking for comfort in women. Tall, dark and beautiful, with a childhood that's straight out of a Dostoevsky novel. "I read a book and suddenly I'm back in the olive grove. The earth, the scents. It's all coming back."

The raging sea had us docking in island ports in the evenings. In one of the islands, we pedaled among green plains and small houses, vegetable gardens and pastures. Wherever we went, a bottle would magically appear, shot glasses sprung into hands. Small chats bloomed everywhere, moments of laughter, of strain. When I needed a break, I snuck away to some small, rustic café to sit on my own, write my notes.

Nights were short. Very few retired early to the bunks in their tiny cabins. Most preferred to stay together. They played cards, drank, the game eliciting an occasional cry of joy. They sat on the dark deck and whispered among themselves. What in their short lives could ever compare to the excitement of battle? In spite of the feminine presence, no love blossomed. No moans of passions replaced the moans of the wounded. It was as if the helplessness of battle endured, as if memory allowed no space for other emotions. As the journey was coming to its close, some began to speak of leaving. Of goodbyes. Fear of returning home. Home is a place of loneliness. Home is where you will not be understood.

Scorched beyond recognition

The medic scarred by the terrible battle eventually opened up. They all do, each in his own time. He knows he will never again come across a ship like this, people who would listen. He was a part of a force mobilizing towards the battlefield, but got tackled on its way, like Debel, like Kfar Giladi. War lurks where you are least prepared. Three years they trained, operating in the Palestinian territories against a weakened pseudo-enemy, feeling like the strongest force in the universe, and suddenly weakness. Easy in Balata – hard in Bint Jbeil.

They were moving along the wadi. Near the village of Ghandouriya they came under heavy fire and immediately sustained twenty hits. Face-to-face battle. Booby-trapped yards. 14 dead, 40 injured. Four doctors they had with them, 12 medics, and still it was chaos. Under mortar fire, they started to transport the wounded towards shelter back in the wadi. They got there scorched beyond recognition. Horrible.

He's the guy who managed to put the chaos into order. He remembers leaning over an injured soldier with a mangled jaw. "Since then, I record everything in a binder. Every word ever written, recorded alphabetically. And feel guilty. Those I could have saved. Those I failed to."

He speaks as if he is trying to recover some version of himself that he remembers from before the war. To repossess some lost peace. Many do. They long to some absent tranquility, a stillness. To sit down with a newspaper in hand and read about somebody else's wars. "My deepest wish is to be able to go back to who I was before the war," cried the paramedic.

Towards the end of the journey, this platoon of young boys and girls suddenly seemed to me like some lost kindergarten class that had blindingly stumbled, completely unprepared and off-guard, into the chaotic, cruel world of the grown-ups, where you can find yourself strewn on the ground in a Lebanese olive grove, under direct, efficient fire, in the backyard of a burning house, in a deathtrap wadi, without a father or mother, screaming 'why aren't fucking helicopters not coming, and where is the strongest army in the world I was promised?' But you're on your own.

The tide rose, below us, then fell again. Down on the docks, the Dutch were peering, wondering 'who are these boys on the deck?' Every pat on the back, every inside joke, all this seemingly cheerful fun. Who knows the pain it disguises?

As we were alighting on the dock, I looked back one last time at my nautical home, lest it be forgotten. I was wondering, was there anyone who did not share? There was. The most bullheaded of them all. The bearded guy from Debel. The uncrackable. He will be left alone with his secrets, with his pain, with what must never be spoken of. With his inner bomb. The others were all laughing, much relieved. "I learned not to be afraid", said one, "I found out you can talk, you can be on your own. You can wake up at 9 a.m.".

The funnyman asked the lot if anyone wanted a post-trauma sandwich. Humor is an effective weapon in the memory's valley of the shadow of death. "I came from hell", said another. "I learned here not to let fear any power over me". For one week, these guys had a short breather, a much-needed time-out from the race they are caught up in for over two years. From now on, they would carry the Dutch sailing ship with them as a memory, a ship in a bottle. The place where they could talk about everything. A place where somebody actually listened.