
ISRAEL LAUNCHES FIRST: BLUE FLAG 2013

INTRODUCING BLUE FLAG

Blue Flag exercise in Israel, organized for the first time in the desert out of all places as a major large international exercise at the military airbase down in the Negev desert just above Eilat the holiday paradise. Place of action: Ovda airbase which is partly civil, partly military and about 60 kilometers north of Eilat. Due to tourism Ovda became the second international airport. Who needs time to consider such an opportunity to visit. Though less it had from a holiday however because to get there it was necessary to travel from Tel Aviv along Jerusalem, Hebron, Hatzetim, Be'er Sheba and Mitspe Ramon right down through the middle of the Negev, about twice 300 kilometers up to almost the Gulf of Aqaba in about 38 degrees summerscene, with absolutely no gasstation on the road and worse perhaps, not even a Coca Cola venue !

A DAY AT OVDA

11.00hrs local time was the welcome time for international press at OVDA airbase, magazines, newspapers, radio and TV in Hangar #2 of the 'Red Dragon'squadron. Ambassador's statements were given, amongst them the one of Dan Shapiro, the US ambassador to Israel who stated that this exercise that runs amid the tensions that play around Iran's nuclear program. However as he stated, Blue Flag is not related to any recent developments, neither Iran, nor any others. Quite remarkable it is anyway, and who can exclude the Blue Flag being a non-verbal demonstration. Major 'Dan' (Deputy Squadron Commander of the 'Red Dragon's , the 'Red Forces in the exercise) speched with helmet on for recognizable reasons, a background briefing took place and next seconds the 'Reds' (F-16) came taxiing along and parked. From there the actual exercise started, showing F-15 Israeli and USAF Eagles, F-16's,

AT THE CRADLE

At the cradle of this exercise off course stood the well known 'Red Flag' exercise that takes place in Nevada / Alaska every year by the USAF. Though complete IDF (Israel Defense Forces) had to deal with the training, the IAF (Israel Air Force) had the prevalence. Although more participating countries were expected, it were only the United States , Greece and Italy who participated next to Israel itself. Poland had already cancelled, but it was all together eventually a great succes! This exercise was held within the framework of NATO and the USAF that take place every year and took place between november 17 and 28. This is not the first time that IDF joins force with other airforces to strengthen ties and share operational knowledge. But first of all it's an exercise involving extensive training of the own IAF squadrons. The exercise will be characterized by Israeli F-16 Fighting Falcons and F15 Eagles, as well as USAF F-16E planes, Greek F-16's and Italian AMX and F-3 Tornado's. While being the first time held, observers from several additional countries participated in the exercise to examine possible participation future in case the Blue Flag will be continued the coming years. This option is realistic, since Israel was practicing for many years in 'Anatolian Eagle' in Turkey, but Turkey cut off this relation for political reasons due to an incident with the blockade of the Gaza Strip, thus forcing Israel to conduct their own 'show'.

SHOWING FLAG

Blue Flag did take some preparations and precautions for the Israeli's however for Ovda airbase. After all this was one of the largest exercises of the last past years to take place. There had to be a certain balance between 'showing flag' and on the other hand not to be too much defiant for the neighbourhood countries. IDF succeeded well in that aspect. Blue Flag exercise is based on mutual interest and therefor a strategic asset for IDF and the rest of the world as well. If the intentions of neighbour Iran are sincere, there is much to gain in future but the nuclear threat cannot be underestimated. It would be absolutely fabulous for Israel and worldpeace in general if Iran actually makes a turn under president Hassan Rohani in making clear that they don't want to make nuclear weapons, and also have this checked by the international community. However the turn is about 180° to former president Mahmoud Ahmijad, and who can guarantee this won't happen the other way around again. Prime Minister Netanyahu has his doubts, President Obama is cautious optimistic but it is clear that Israel wants to show flag in case 'the world' makes a historic mistake.

There is much to gain in future but the nuclear threat cannot be underestimated. Israel deals daily with facts however. It's quite confusing when you know that very recently there were fatalities due to a missile attack some 200 meters from the place we stayed. We were warned in case of an alarm, we had exactly two minutes to get in the concrete shelter next to the house. Many of the local people do not think there will ever be peace and this kind of incidents do not help. But when you see passing by a six-ship formation of Israeli F-16's, 4 next to each other and two both sides on the flanks at high altitude, you understand that Israel makes a winged statement with this 'showing flag' which can be seen by every (hostal) radarsystem of neighbouring countries: 'Beware, we're prepared and not alone' seems to be the message.

GOALS

By inviting several friendly airforces such as in this case the participating Greek, Italian and American airforces Israel indirectly also sends a signal 'beware, we're not alone!' To really shape this image an exercise like Blue Flag is the ideal tool to make that new and different combat tactics can be discussed, tried out and evaluated. Aircrews trained together in many disciplines like air-to-air refuelling, air-to-air combat, air-to-ground actions, (combat)search and rescue missions and so on. This way the cooperation among different airforces will be improved as well as the flight proficiency, and relations between the mutual countries. Also it's a perfect situation for the visiting airforces to fly in not familiar areas, in other weather conditions, and with other types of aircraft around. For pilots it's a successful formula to get them out of their own comfortzone and meet sudden unexpected situations. Individually the participants already had been practicing with the IAF, but Blue Flag now implicated the interaction of an exercise like 'Anatolian Eagle' where they were excluded due to deteriorating relations between Turkey and Israel in recent years. Summary one can say that the goals implicate improvement of operational capabilities of the participants, to engender familiarity and mutual learning, and to demonstrate these capabilities of the international forces.

PERFORMING BLUE FLAG

Every two years different aggressor squadrons at Ovda are trained in attacking ground-to-air stations and the destruction of these groundtargets, for which several positions were manned in the south area of the Negev desert. The F-16A block Fighting Falcons took off from Ovda

to make the scores in eliminating groundtargets and in their agressor role they were trained to act in modern threats of air-to-air dogfights. Realistic engagements had been designed, low visibility targets were attacked, and also there were scenario's to gain photographic material from the 'Arabs' which experiences could be used to train other squadrons and exchange with the allied airforces. Off course the pilots were confronted with 'incoming airplanes from opponent countries' in the denied access environment. IAF had to 'deal' with these facts. The operational pressure was going up during the exercise days. The exercise accomodated seven combat squadrons (F-15, F-16), the 'Flying Dragon' squadron provided itself as enemy forces. Condition that also was to be trained was the use of the English language for all participants. Being an advanced exercise of very high level the communication had to be in English, something where namely the Israeli's were not always used to.

The drill was conducted into two parts. Individual training was the first part for the forces during the first week, including for the combat planes to fly often over the South of Israel. The second week characterised itself in consisting high intensity aerial combat in various types of structures and complicated missions. As example can be mentioned that during missions of combined aerial training the avoiding of ground-to-air missiles had to be practices while flying at low altitudes. The Israeli 'Red Dragon' squadron (F-16 from Ovda airbase) and the 'Cutting Edge' squadron (F-15) were performing as the 'Red forces' simulating the enemy. The Red Dragons were specially trained in operating from out of denied environments using various tactics, particular tactics that are used by the Arab airforces to train both internal squadrons but specific also the foreign participants. Remaining squadrons thus were simulating the 'Blue forces' (the good guys) led by the 'Twin-tailed Knights' squadron (F-15) Aircraft of the bases tel Nof, Ramat David, Hatzetim and Ramon airbase participated. To avoid any incidents a vast area over the South of Israel was closed to any other air traffic during the exercise. This way the large number of fighters could be allowed to fly according pre-designed scenario's.

IDF AND IAI

One of the advantages of Israel is the presence of the IAI, Israel Aircraft Industries where high-tech products are developed in the countries own backyard. Israel therefor is not depending on goodwill of other countries, in the contrary it provides techniques and equipment throughout all over the world. Israel adjusted the Douglas A-4 Skyhawk to it's own best use, which appeared to be a key-role in the Yom Kippur war in october 1973, and let's not forget the Kfir project that lead to a highly developed jet-fighter. Nowadays IAI provides the top of equipment to detect, record, signaling, communications, datalink and so on and these properties are used in evenso highly developed unmanned aerial vehicles that not only protect Israel but sold all over the world. These techniques are also used and admired in the Blue Flag exercise by the allies.

ROYAL WARFARE

To end up this overview it must have been strange if you join such an exercise as a foreign country pilot, and you are made aware of the fact that the IAI not seldom fights a 'Royal War'. IAI tries to avoid collateral damage and victims as much as possible. No, off course this is not always A 100% succesful, but is any war ? Shimon Peres recently explained Israels tactics, and the strong will not to fight war but to achieve peace. In Israel it was also shown by video earlier to us that IAF thanks to techniques (IAI) occasionally can choose exactly

where can be fired very focussed, so that for instance only a room will be destroyed instead of a whole house. Or a terrorist building instead of just 'launching a missile into a city and hope for casualties' as it happens to Israel so many times. Another example was told us that when for instance a ground-to-air battery has been discovered in somebodys backyard which is a threat, IAF just (really!) takes the phone and calls: 'There is a hostile object placed in your backyard which is a threat for the State of Israel. Please run and take cover soon as possible because in a few moments this object will be destroyed by us'. If more countries decide to take part in the coming Blue Flag exercise next occasion it will be even more interesting, for all the skills and experiences will contribute to better results. Nobody knows what timepath should be wandered to get peace in the Middle-East, but perhaps trust in the fact it should be possible to achieve it may be the best tool to use, now, and over and over again until all party's are convinced that peace is better than war.

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