



How an Elite IDF Unit Is Mobilizing to Fight Coronavirus

by Yaakov Lappin

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,572, May 19, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The IDF has assigned a new role to an elite naval commando unit to apply its special skills and training to assist civilians in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

The Israel Defense Forces' elite naval commando unit Shayetet 13 has been making nonstop deliveries of oxygen cylinders to civilian care facilities that were struggling to get hold of supplies in recent weeks as hospitals raced to stock up on their own oxygen tanks.

Shayetet 13 is known for its daring operations on land, at sea, and in the air. It is designed to inflict strategic damage on enemy maritime infrastructure and gather critical intelligence. While the unit's core activities have not been compromised, it has taken on a new role during the coronavirus pandemic due to its extensive experience in scuba diving and ability to compress oxygen gas into cylinders.

In recent weeks, teams from Shayetet 13 have developed solutions for civilians in need of oxygen cylinders for medical purposes. "In Atlit [where the unit is based], there is a kind of small factory for compressing oxygen," said Maj. N (full name withheld). "We saw that nursing homes and organizations that care for vulnerable populations had a bit of a hard time getting hold of oxygen cylinders. We carried out a conversion of our factory and began producing two main products."

The first is a service for civilian organizations in which they send over empty oxygen tanks and the Atlit center compresses oxygen into them and returns them for reuse. Shayetet 13 is also responsible for the logistical operation of picking up, disinfecting, and delivering the cylinders. The unit has delivered

more than 500 tanks containing compressed oxygen to care centers around the country so far.

“The second product is something we developed in Atlit. We take a 12-liter cylinder, which is relatively big compared to the usual oxygen cylinder, and fill it—up to 150 to 200 units of atmospheric pressure. We install a faucet and an adjustment control and then deliver it to those in need. This service includes the entire logistical delivery package,” said Maj. N.

The unit receives phone and email requests from civilian centers asking for the equipment and services, and the request is examined by the national coronavirus control center at the Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer. Once approval is granted by the Health Ministry and the IDF Medical Corps, the unit springs into action.

“At the moment, this provides a solution to institutions that cannot get hold of their own supply—for example, a center for people with special needs that struggled to get hold of oxygen tanks because of hospital demand,” the officer said.

An additional service provided by the unit is the repair and upgrade of cylinders. The United Hatzalah volunteer medical service sent 200 cylinders to the naval commando unit, which carried out an examination and repair service.

The officer said the assistance does not come at the expense of any of the unit’s main security missions, stressing that “our main goal is to [engage in] security activities, and we do this continuously.”

He added that the unit uses gaseous rather than liquid oxygen, meaning that hospitals, which rely on liquid oxygen, are not negatively affected by its activities.

Shayetet 13 is on standby to provide additional services in case of a sudden deterioration of the health situation, he said. Places like senior homes “are not built for a sudden breakdown in oxygen supplies or for a national disaster. We took it on ourselves to provide them with assistance and to prepare to help them further if necessary.”

“Although we are not designed to deal with such things, we do not choose the responses that we need to provide. This is the need of the hour,” said Maj. N.

Meanwhile, the IDF’s Education and Youth Corps is leading a program in which IDF personnel care for the children of front line medical personnel, enabling hospital staff to work round-the-clock shifts.

Lt. Col. Yaarit Gozlan, head of the Gadna and Nahal Unit, directs the Educational Framework project, which is designed to relieve pressure on hospital staff.

“We are focused on the effort of setting up educational frameworks for children of essential Health Ministry workers,” she said. “This includes all the nurses who are working in the coronavirus wards.”

“We began on March 22 and have grown from one day to the next until we ended up opening 49 child-care centers from north to south,” said Gozlan.

The initiative has seen soldier-teachers from Nahal and Gadna, a military program that prepares youths for service, activate the care centers on a daily basis and supervise children ages 4 to 12. Children have their temperatures taken at the entrance and, together with the staff, are equipped with masks and gloves to ensure that no infections take place.

“To support this program, we created a counselor control center made up of highly creative soldiers from our unit. They prepared teaching material and activities to help the children mark recent days like Passover, Memorial Day, and Independence Day,” said Gozlan.

The centers are active from 7 a.m. until the evening, an effort Gozlan said is “not simple” to implement, particularly when large numbers of children are involved. “But our soldiers are very knowledgeable about working with civilian populations, which they do during routine times, though usually with teenagers,” she said. “They were able to adapt to this very well.”

The program caters to some 1,600 children around the country and is being run in coordination with the Education Ministry. “Our soldiers understand this is the national mission and the significance of their contribution. That we need to help free up medical personnel,” said Gozlan.

In addition, at the end of April, IDF Home Front Command conducted a large-scale food distribution and coronavirus testing operation in the Galilee Arab village of Deir al-Assad, which had experienced a spike in virus case numbers. The operation was designed to ensure that families had sufficient food for the Ramadan holiday, and that those who needed to could easily get to a drive-through testing center.

While overseeing operations at the food-distribution center, Col. Guy Berger, head of Home Front Command’s Northern District, said, “We will do whatever it takes to help these dear people get over this illness.”

This is an edited version of an [article](#) published by JNS.org on May 4, 2020.

Yaakov Lappin is a Research Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and a military and strategic affairs correspondent. He conducts research and analysis for defense think tanks and is the military correspondent for JNS. His book [The Virtual Caliphate](#) explores the online jihadist presence.