

IAF's Pioneering Achievements

Israeli Air Force

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"Shavuot" is known as the "holiday of the first fruits", as it was customary to bring the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple. The world of aviation has its own "first fruits", or pioneering achievements and a quite a few of them were thanks to the Israeli Air Force: from the first flight by a westerner on a MiG to the first downing by a reconnaissance UAV

One of the main customs of the holiday "Shavuot" is the donation of the first fruits, the first crop, to the priests in the Temple. These days, the custom has been reinforced, due to the proximity of the holiday to the harvest season and for many it is customary to put their first fruits on display. Not many people know that the Israeli Air Force boasts a number of trailblazing achievements in the world of aviation.

The First Interception Of Its Kind

In 1980, the F-16A/B officially joined the ranks of the IAF. Just half a year after the fighter had been integrated into the IAF, it made history with the first ever downing by an F-16 combat jet.

This historic record was set by Brigadier General (res.) Rafi Berkovich. In those days, he was a young pilot who only a few months earlier had been trained to fly the F-16A/B. While he was on standby, Brigadier General (res.) Berkovich was dispatched to intercept a pair of Syrian Mi-8 helicopters around the Jebel Sanin area in Lebanon.

While the first missile that was launched towards the helicopters missed, it did not stop him from continuing to attempt to down it: at a high speed of 570 knots (1,050 km/h) and at a downward 45 degree angle, he fired a wad of hundreds of rounds on the helicopter. This left the Syrian helicopter without any ability to escape and it fell and caught fire and the IAF consequently set a world record.

Flying with the Enemy

Another world record was set by the IAF in 1966. At the time, Operation "Diamond" was underway: an operation, in which the Iraqi pilot, Munir Redfa, defected to Israel and brought with him the MiG-21 plane, which was the most advanced fighter jet of the Arab air forces at that time. Before the plane landed in Israel, Western pilots had only met the Russian plane in aerial combat, and now the IAF had its chance to study it in depth and even take it out on a flight.

Meeting this unfamiliar plane involved much preparation, a part of which was done in conjunction with Redfa himself and the flight in question took off from Hatzor, as the top brass

of the IAF and the IDF were presented at the airbase and an Israeli test pilot, Danny Shapiro, sat in the cockpit.

"There was no problem during the flight", Shapiro said in a past interview with IAF Magazine. "This plane flew very high and accelerated very quickly. It had always been hard for us to catch up with it during a chase and now I understand why".

David and Goliath: The Real Story

This record also involves a MiG-21. This time, it was a MiG of the Syrian Air Force that had been shot down and surprisingly not by an Israeli fighter jet but by an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that was designed for reconnaissance missions.

This very scenario took place in the skies above Syria on May 14th, 1981, when a Ryan "Firebee" reconnaissance UAV from the "First Drone" squadron was on intelligence gathering flight. The Syrians discovered the Israeli UAV and sent a MiG plane to intercept it. In order to evade the enemy plane, the UAV used the tactic of quick and sudden changes in altitude and gradual speed reduction in a way that would make it harder for the MiG to launch a missile at it.