

Israeli Kurnass Aces – Part 1

by Shlomo Aloni – all pictures via Shlomo Aloni or Aloni Collection



Moshe Melnik became a Kurnass ace on October 23, 1973, while flying Kurnass 162 seen here at Tel Nof air base in July 1972.

Israeli F-4 Phantom II aircrews are officially credited with 116.5 air-to-air kills. Though the nature of air warfare history is somewhat fluid and this total may still vary, the fact is that the Israel Defence Force/Air Force (IDF/AF) awarded kill certificates covering 233 victories, as every kill achieved by a Phantom actually involves both the pilot and the navigator. A relatively high percentage of the IDF/AF F-4 kills are “squadron kills”. This is a controversial heading for ambiguous victories when enemy aircraft crashed during air combat without fatal damage from the weapons of the pursuing F-4. Deducting the 19 Phantom “squadron kills” from the total results in 97.5 kills or 195 personal kill certificates of which 52.5 (27% of the total) were awarded to five pilots and four navigators, the Israeli F-4 Aces.

Squadron 69’s commander Yoram Agmon achieved ace status on October 16, 1973, during a strategic bombing mission to Harsata, Syria while flying Kurnass 109 (USAF 71-1396).

Initial Kills

The McDonnell Douglas F-4E Phantom II entered IDF/AF service on September 5, 1969, when the first four examples landed at Hatzor air base. The type became known in IDF/AF service as the Kurnass (Sledgehammer) and was initially operated by 201 Squadron from Hatzor and 69

Squadron from Ramat David air base. Soon after arrival the new multi-role combat aircraft flew operational sorties against Egypt as part of the Attrition War and in border skirmishes between Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The Kurnass set an IDF/AF jet age record as only 67 days elapsed between service entry and the credit of the first air-to-air kill.



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Though possessing roughly similar air combat aerodynamic performance to the then IDF/AF air-to-air platform, the Dassault Mirage IIICJ known in IDF/AF service as the Shahak (Skyblazer) – the big fighter-bombers from the United States primarily flew air-to-ground missions. Yet in one aspect of air combat the Kurnass was vastly superior to the Shahak. The combination of the AN/APQ-120 radar, the AIM-7 Air-to-Air Missile (Sparrow AAM) and the navigator offered the Kurnass superior all weather and Beyond Visual Range (BVR) attributes. This resulted in the allocation of the nighttime Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) mission to the Kurnass force and in the introduction of mixed formations with a Kurnass pair leading a Shahak pair on certain high priority air-to-air missions. The leading Kurnass aircrews scanned the radarscopes for enemy aircraft, while the trailing Shahak pilots searched the sky to visually acquire the hostile fighters.

Between September 5, 1969, and August 7, 1970, the day the Attrition War



ended, the Kurnass squadrons were credited with seven kills compared with 67 kills credited to the Shahak community. The pendulum began to swing in favour of the big fighter-bomber during the inter-war years between the end of the Attrition War and the start of the Yom Kippur War (YKW) on October 6, 1973. Limited-scale operations resulted in a higher percentage of the Kurnass force available for air-to-air missions than could be expected during a war when the Kurnass force was to fly demanding air-to-ground missions. Fully exploiting the situation, a total of 19 kills were

credited to the Kurnass squadrons during this timeframe compared to 14 kills credited to the Shahak fighters.

The First Kurnass Ace

The Israeli government decision to avoid a pre-emptive strike on October 6, 1973 possibly generated the required environment for the emergence of the first three Kurnass aces. Instead of bombing enemy targets, the Kurnass force was heavily committed to the frustration of the Arab air offensive. The Kurnass aircrews were credited with 23

Moshe Melnik graduated from the IDF/AF Flying School Class 54 in November 1967. Following assignment to the Ouragan OTU he flew the A-4 Skyhawk from April 1968 until October 1970. He was then posted to fly the Kurnass with Squadron 119. This photo beside the unit's flagship Kurnass 119 was taken in December 1970. In 1976, Melnik was among the first group of IDF/AF pilots to be converted to the F-15 and three years later he was the first pilot to be credited with an F-15 kill.

