Start Up Nation by Dan Sensor and Saul Singer New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009, pgs. 46-8

The most interesting people here are the company commanders,” [Gilad Farhi, a thirty-year-old major in the IDF] told us. “They are absolutely amazing people. These are kids – the company commanders are twenty-three. Each of them is in charge of one hundred soldiers and twenty officers and sergeants, three vehicles. Add it up and that means a hundred and twenty rifles, machine guns, bombs, grenades, mines, whatever. Everything. Tremendous responsibility.”

Company commander is also the lowest rank that must take responsibility for a territory. As Farhi put it, “If a terrorist infiltrates that area, there’s a company commander whose name is on it. Tell me how many twenty-three-year-olds elsewhere in the world live with that kind of pressure.”

Farhi illustrated a fairly typical challenge facing these twenty-three-year-olds. During an operation in the West Bank city of Nablus, one of Farhi’s companies had an injured soldier trapped in a house held by a terrorist. The company commander had three tools at his disposal: an attack dog, his soldiers, and a bulldozer.

If he sent the soldiers in, there was a high risk of additional casualties. And if he sent the bulldozer to destroy the house, this would risk harming the injured soldier.

To further complicate matters, the house shared a wall with a Palestinian school, and children and teachers were still inside. From the roof of the school, journalists were documenting the whole scene. The terrorist, meanwhile, was shooting at both the Israeli forces and the journalists.

Throughout much of the standoff, the company commander was on his own. Farhi could have tried to take charge from afar, but he knew he had to give his subordinate latitude. “There were an infinite number of dilemmas there for the commander. And there wasn’t a textbook solution.” The soldiers managed to rescue the injured soldier, but the terrorist remained inside. The commander knew that the school staff was afraid to evacuate the school, despite the danger, because they did not want to be branded “collaborators” by the terrorists. And he knew that the journalists would not leave the roof of the school, because they didn’t want to miss breaking news. The commander’s solution: empty the school using smoke grenades.

Once the students, teachers, and journalists had been safely evacuated, the commander decided it was safe to send in the bulldozer to drive the terrorist out of the adjacent building. Once the bulldozer began biting in the house, the commander unleashed the dog to neutralize the terrorist. But while the bulldozer was knocking down the house, another terrorist the Israelis didn’t know about came out of the school next door. The soldiers outside shot and killed this second terrorist. The entire operation took four hours. “This twenty-three-year-old commander was alone for most the four hours until I got there,” Farhi told us.

“After an event like that, the company commander goes back to the base and his soldiers look at him differently,” Farhi continued. “And he himself is different. He is on the line – responsible for the lives of a lot of people: his soldier, Palestinian schoolchildren, journalists. Look, he didn’t conquer Eastern Europe, but he had to come up with a creative solution to a very complex situation. And he is only twenty-three years old.”