Being at the front lines of the conflict was a life-changing experience. No matter how much training I went through, I never could have imagined myself in a war zone by the Gaza border.

My friends and I were stationed next to a Kibbutz on the Gaza Strip when Operation Shomer HaChomot – Guardian of the Walls – broke out. We were there primarily to react as first-responders in the event of an intrusion by terrorist forces. Groups like Hamas were attempting to breach the border and inflict harm. We were there to make sure this wouldn’t happen.

When we weren’t in konenut, ready to respond to an incident, we did guard duty around the base. Ordinarily, guarding is monotonous. You stand at a post and do little to nothing. But during Shomer HaChomot, we had to remain vigilant. On top of that, mortars were falling all around us and we had five seconds to run into a shelter after the sirens were sounded.

Since our bomb shelters were not entirely closed off like the civilian ones, we were able to watch the aerial attacks transpire like a live-action war film. There were multiple times when I watched a small glimmer in the dark night sky zoom above. “A shooting star!” I thought. “Perhaps an F-15 fighter jet.” After a few moments, I realized that this glimmer of light was heading right in my direction. The light grew and grew, approaching at a rapid pace and suddenly I knew it was a mortar. I could have sworn that it had my name written on it. A moment later, I heard a thundering boom and saw a flicker in the sky: Iron Dome had intercepted yet another rocket.

Another time, we were asked to deliver supplies to the troops in the shetach – on the ground. Many of the roads in the area were exposed to the Gaza Strip and our enemies were waiting for the perfect opportunity to blow up an Israeli vehicle like ours. We just so happened to be delivering gasoline and my imagination was exploding with worst-case scenarios (no pun intended).

During the last few days of the war, we were stationed in the shetach. If anything...
happened, we would be ready in seconds. In the shetach we didn’t have bomb shelters to protect us. All we could do was lay down and pray that the mortar wouldn’t fall on us. I watched my samal – chief sergeant – a brawny, black-haired, uber-confident 22-year old, look so powerless with his head sunk in the dirt throughout the never-ending sirens.

In the middle of our hang-out, a siren went off. We heard a high-pitched whistling noise. We had become familiar with that sound: a mortar soaring above us. A moment later, the field about 150 meters behind us burst into flames. Wondering how the fire spread so rapidly, I examined the terrain beneath us and noticed that it consisted primarily of dried-up (and therefore highly flammable) grass. If a mortar fell anywhere near us, we would not have long to flee the flames.

It is impossible to fully describe the fear I felt during moments like these. I frequently thought of Dr. Paul Kalanithi’s words in his memoir, When Breath Becomes Air, when he discovered that his cancer was terminal. Upon hearing his devastating prognosis, Dr. Paul’s bright aspirations turned into a depressing nihilism: “I saw instead only a blank, a harsh, a vacant, gleaming white desert as if a sandstorm had erased all trace of familiarity.” As a 20-something-year-old post-college soldier on the border, I too dreamed about what lay ahead: a good job, a lovely wife, and a welcoming community. But throughout Shomer Hachomot, I was uncertain that any of these things would come about.

Amidst this difficult experience, I witnessed remarkable strength from my commanders and fellow soldiers. Throughout the war, my commanders maintained order in the platoon and were available to speak to us about anything. My fellow soldiers’ positive energy and endless tzchokim (joking around) allowed us to forget where we were and lighten the mood somewhat. That said, the situation was a living hell. All we wanted to do was return to our homes and normal lives, far away from the deafening booms and blood of war.

My friend from Ashkelon told me that his mother and girlfriend were waiting for him; he didn’t want to fight. He reminisced about their camping trips in the North and showed me pictures on his Instagram – “Isn’t my girlfriend perfect?” he asked me. All he wanted was to return home, away from the madness. But I tried reminding him: Someone needs to do it; someone needs to stand at the front lines when the enemy is approaching.

I went through many low points of my own and searched for inspiration. “If I am only for myself, what am I?” asks Hillel the Sage. What makes my life more valuable than any other young man – the fact I was born in a different country? Is Israel not mine as well? “And if not now,” continues Hillel, while I have the physical strength, then “when?” Now is the time in my life when I can sacrifice myself for the Jewish people if need be.

During those 11 days, I kept a diary. One of my entries read: “I am ducking my head straight into the ground, with my body laid out, praying that I won’t be blown up or injured by a mortar or rocket. I yearn for the moment when I’m safe at home and can give my family a big hug. I can’t wait for the skies to be silent, for the background sounds to be wind, rain, and the bristling of the leaves, as opposed to explosions and the whistling of rockets above our heads.” I am grateful that this day has arrived.

The war has just ended, yet Tzahal is already preparing for the next one. But I have faith that better times are ahead. Bret Stephens, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, recently wrote in an op-ed in the New York Times: “Last year’s Abraham Accords brought the overarching Arab-Israeli conflict to a near conclusion, even if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unsolved.” Israel has finally made peace with some of its greatest adversaries. We must remain hopeful, for seeping into despair accomplishes nothing. We must do everything we can to bring about the words of the prophet Yirmiyahu: “For I am mindful of the plans I have made concerning you – declares G-d – plans for your peace, not for disaster” (22:19).

May that day come very soon.