

The Palyam: Servant and Samurai of Aliya Bet¹

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In recent years a number of good research articles have appeared dealing with illegal immigration in general, and the period following the end of WW II in particular. It would be sufficient to mention the “History of the Hagana” and the important publications of “Shaul Avigur’s Research Society of Aliya Bet”, and other research works that were published such as: “The Rebellious Vessels”. Other research publications dealt with the activities of more specific groups, such as the Gideonim (wireless communications network); the “Gang”–‘Ha’chavura’ (Hagana members serving in the British Army); and the Machal – (Aliya Bet volunteers from North America), and more. But in all these various publications you will not find one decent research article on the Palyam as an organic unit containing various elements. The Palyam is often mentioned but not directly nor as the central force in all these activities. We now have the peculiar situation where the vital unit in the success of this whole episode and in the creation of the Israeli Navy and its achievements in the War of independence has still not found its rightful place, nor has its vital contribution to our history been defined.

This article is not intended to take the place of an in-depth research work on the Palyam. I intend simply to emphasize a few of the outstanding characteristics of the Palyam that define its specific contribution to the battle for Aliya Bet. In so doing, I am certain to mention many things that are known to all of us. I shall not apologize for that, but I quote the noted physicist, Enrico Fermi, who said:” We are never allowed to take lightly the pleasure which is rightly ours, when we hear something that we already know.”

There is a long history of the attempts to establish a naval unit of the Hagana. The beginnings go back to the 30’s when the first two vessels of Aliya Bet were organized and reached Palestine. This was followed by a period of cooperation between the British during the Second World War and came to a tragic end with the loss of the 23 who were lost at sea on June 1941, and who some of them were the finest seamen of the Hagana. Even during WW II there were thoughts within the Hagana and the Mossad Le’Aliya Bet (established in 1939) and in Palmach Headquarters that political and perhaps military struggle was imminent with the British Mandatory Government on the subject of Jewish immigration to Palestine. These estimates caused the Palmach Headquarters to initiate and renew naval activity in 1943, when the first courses for launch commanders were begun in Caesarea.

The graduates of these courses became the cornerstone for the founding of the naval platoon of the Palmach in 1943. This platoon grew and expanded until it became a naval company and was known as the 10th Company of the Palyam (Palmach-Yam). In the Palmach book that was published in 1953 we find a definition of the activities for which the Palyam had been established:

- A. Aiding Aliya Bet : from the transport of immigrant vessels on the water to the delivery of immigrants on shore.

¹ Israelis used the term “Aliya Bet” and the British “illegal immigration” to refer to the clandestine immigration to Palestine during the British Mandate.

- B. Sabotage of vessels: Training of sea commandos who will be able to sabotage British vessels that try to prevent immigration.
- C. Sailing ships: The movement of vessels at sea for the transport of fighting units, transport of supplies and ammunition if movement by land is not possible because of British or Arab interference.
- D. Training infantry in landing on shore from landing craft in case it is necessary to invade enemy soil while under attack.
- E. Training sea commandos in attacking British vessels that interfere with Aliya.
- F. Handling vessels at sea for the movement of troops or supplies, if roads are blocked for any reason.
- G. Training troops and landing craft in invasion techniques under combat conditions.

I am of the opinion that these definitions were formulated after they were needed and I doubt that they were around when the sea platoon was first formed. At any rate, I never discovered such a document or anything similar that was published in 1948 or earlier. My own personal experience leads me to believe that no such document was formulated at the time. In practice, we know that the Palyam concentrated on the transport of immigrants and only later did it embark on sabotage, when the blockade of the shore of Palestine by the Royal Navy tightened. As the blockade became more severe so did the efforts of sabotage increase, and the sabotage unit of the Palyam assumed a larger and more important role. This came into being in 1946 and the "Unit" as it was called, numbered no more than 5 men. On the other hand, no effort was made until the War of Independence to train units in landing tactics.

The three things that characterized what a Palyamnik had to do in order to abet Aliya Bet were:

- A. Accompany the Ma'apilim (the immigrants of Aliya Bet):** This is an idea that the Palyam inherited from the beginnings of Aliya Bet during the 30's. Its meaning was that on every ship of immigrants to Palestine, the ship would be accompanied by a commander whose job it was to see that the immigrants and their vessel was delivered with the maximum of security to the shore of Palestine. This individual had to have sufficient knowledge of navigation and of overseeing the crew of a vessel so that he could actually take command of the vessel if need be.

His responsibilities also included overseeing the daily requirements of the passengers such as the supply of food and water, the hygienic and sanitary conditions of the vessel, etc. When the [British navy captured the] vessels and the passengers were sent to detention camps in Cyprus, then the Palyamnik in charge had to take responsibility and organize the resistance of the Ma'apilim to deportation.

- B. Loading and unloading the passengers onto the vessel:** This was especially important when the loading and unloading **were not done** at a harbor or a pier that were suitable for that purpose; that is when they were carried out under difficult or dangerous conditions, and in secrecy. The Palyamniks had to be able to load men women and children at night, in the dark. Often, this had to be done at awful piers and in shallow waters. These missions also had to be completed before daylight.

In truth, the training that the men of the Palyam received did qualify them to devise original ways and means of carrying out their tasks successfully. They succeeded in loading the Olim (passengers) onto vessels under the most difficult conditions. This is evident in their use of inflatable rubber boats and ropes strung from vessel to

shore, so that the Ma'apilim themselves could pull the boats to shore or to the boat. If anyone has doubts about the feasibility of that system they only have to inquire how this was actually done at Metaponto or at Bari in Southern Italy or at Boliasco on the Italian Riviera. This method was used with great success at all of these shore points.

C. Sailing small and medium sized vessels: It was a vital necessity for the Palyamnik to know how to handle these vessels since there were to be instances when the crew was all-Jewish, (and not dependent upon foreign sailors). This was the case when vessels were purchased for the use of Aliya Bet and when they had to be prepared and outfitted for the task of carrying immigrants. Theoretical knowledge was not sufficient, so soon after the formation of the Palyam men were sent to work on foreign vessels in order to learn from practical experience.

The plan of training for the Palyam was planned to meet these objectives that the Palyam intended to accomplish. The basic course which they all took was the course for launch commanders. This course lasted three months. In this basic course the men were hardened and became skilled and at home on the sea. These were difficult courses and demanded both strength and will-power. The men studied handling small craft and coastal navigation, meteorology as well as rowing and sailing. They made many voyages to familiarize themselves with the coast and the weather conditions of Palestine. Advanced training was given at the course for naval officers that many of those who completed the course for launch commanders would attend. This course offered theoretical training also which was comparable in level to that of a second mate in the merchant marine. Practical training on commercial fishing vessels gave the graduates of this course experience. Teachers in this course came in part from the Naval School which was affiliated with the Haifa Technion. Special attention was also given to the specific problems of Aliya Bet and its problems of organization. This course lasted for 5 months. The bases of this outfit were located in settlements that bordered the coast. The main base was at Kibbutz Sdot Yam (Caesarea). The basic equipment of the outfit consisted of several rowboats and sailboats (some were inherited from the equipment used to train the 23 who were lost at sea on May 1941), and there were also some small motor launches. As most of the training was underground, and because of a limited budget, it was out of the question to try and procure larger and better equipment. Sometimes a larger fishing vessel would be rented for special purposes.

In some ways the Palyam was different from other units in the Hagana. One of the differences was in length of service and manner of service. The men of this unit were mobilized for at least 3 years and during this time they were completely at the service of their command. The advantage of this arrangement was that the training they received could be concentrated and be conducted in larger units, and there could be a series of courses of training at regular intervals. The most important attribute was that the unit was always in readiness for action, be it for defense or attack.

The men who volunteered for the naval unit of the Palyam came usually from backgrounds that were connected to the sea. There were those that had served in the British Navy during WW II, there were graduates of the Naval Officers' School connected with the Haifa Technion but there were also men who had had no previous connection with the sea. Other companies of the Palmach were also a source of Palyam candidates. In addition to training that was connected to the sea the Palyam men also had basic infantry training, as compared to that of other companies of the Palmach. Basically, the Palyam was an integral unit of the Palmach, and there was no real difference in the training or in the

general culture and morale of the two. There was no difference in their education or motivation and the kind of soldier that developed in both units was almost identical, with the Palyam being slightly more down-to-earth.

The land and sea training of the Palyam produced a type of fighter who was a good combination of both. The whole unit took study seriously and tried to improve its theoretical and practical knowledge. The result was that the Palyamnik was not simply a good fighter but also an educated person who worked towards the goal of assisting Aliya Bet and understanding it in its broader aspects. Many of those who volunteered for the Palyam did so because of their desire to aid in Aliya. Work for Aliya was not important solely because it was important for Zionism in increasing the size of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) but even more so because of the mission of saving people. This was a mission for the completion of which the men of the Palyam became dedicated. The solidarity and the loftiness of the cause for which he was working gave the Palyamnik the strength and the energy to carry out any mission and to dare to do anything. This was true regarding work for Aliya Bet but also in confrontation with the British on land.

By the end of 1947 the Palyam numbered some 370 seamen and fighters including about 80 naval officers². The strategy of Aliya was formulated by the Mosad for Aliya Bet, and the Palyam served as its naval arm. This task – serving as the naval unit of the Mosad – the Palyam fulfilled completely. On all of the 65 vessels of Ma'apilim that sailed for Palestine between 1945-1948 there were over 70,000 Ma'apilim, and on each of these ships there were men of the Palyam who sailed with them. They protected the passengers against the elements and against evildoers, often inviting danger to their own beings. The Palyamniks loaded them onto the vessels under the most difficult of conditions. This happened most often in France and in Italy³. They were the ones who prepared the vessels to carry the Ma'apilim and they also ran the camps where the Olim awaited their turn to board the vessels.

The Palyam however, was more than simply a servant of the Aliya operation. The Palyam showed initiative in taking action that was intended to prevent deportation of the Olim and to demonstrate their total resistance to the prevention of Aliya. The unit that was responsible for naval sabotage in the Palyam, known as the "Chulia" (Link, but I will refer to it hereafter as the Sabotage Unit), achieved remarkable results with very primitive means. This unit sank British police launches that blockaded the coast of Palestine and caused severe damage to a number of the deportation ships⁴.

The Mosad for Aliya Bet and Palmach Headquarters ordered the Palyam to defy deportation of the Ma'apilim, but this was a general command and left room for interpretation and initiative in the hands of the Palyam men who accompanied the Ma'apilim. They determined the amount of resistance in each specific case, and this differed in accordance with the Ma'apilim that were aboard each vessel, and depended upon the amount of children and pregnant women and babies, etc. The guiding principle in determining the resistance was 'not to endanger the lives of the Ma'apilim'. In no instance did the resistance of the Ma'apilim prevent their deportation; there was argument within the Yishuv at the time about the value of this resistance, but this is not the moment to discuss that aspect. I am simply pointing out that those Palyamnikim who accompanied the Ma'apilim on their voyages were the ones who determined how and what measure of resistance there would be.

² Not including about 250 Machal'niks, some of them naval officers.

³ Some were loaded in Greece and Algeria,

⁴ The unit later became the Israeli Naval Commando.

The positive-activist role played by the Palyam in Aliya Bet is further demonstrated in "the Ranks of Volunteers" that was formed in the deportation camps of Cyprus. The initiative for the creation of this body was that of the Palyamnikim who accompanied the Ma'apilim to the camps. The idea was to organize and train those younger and physically able among the Ma'apilim so that they would be able to be absorbed into the ranks of the Hagana when they reached Palestine. This group had a very positive effect on the morale of the inmates of the camps. This also proved to be of important assistance to Tzahal [IDF] in the early days of its formation.

These examples that I have shown you of the varied activities of the Palyam clearly demonstrate that the Palyam was not merely a sea servant of the Aliya Operation, but it was also active in its opposition to all the edicts and limitations which the British tried to enforce in Palestine. In both of these fields the Palyam wrote a magnificent page of glory, and of personal heroism and determination that it is well worth recalling.

It was the luck of the Palyam members that they played their role at a crucial moment in the history of our people. They had that one opportunity to be there and take part in saving tens of thousands of our people from the 'Valley of Death' that was Europe after WW II. In so doing they laid the background for world recognition of the need to create the State of Israel. This fact is certainly, but not only a source of personal pride, but I think that it gives the Palyam a place of honor in the Western Wall of those who paved the way to the establishment of the State of Israel.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize for anyone who is not already aware, that the Palyam was not alone in this field of operation. There were other organizations and institutions who were full partners in this task: The Mosad for Aliya Bet and its representatives in many countries, the Center for Work in the Diaspora, the men of the "Bricha" (those who led the survivors of the Holocaust from the inland cities of Europe to the port cities of the Mediterranean), "The Gang" (breakaways of the Jewish Brigade who stole and drove the trucks), The Gideonim (the communications personnel), Machal, the volunteers from North America (Jews and non-Jews who identified with the cause of Ha'apala (bringing the survivors of the Holocaust to Palestine) and volunteered their services, and others. But, first and foremost one must surely declare that the real heroes of the whole Aliya Bet Operation were the survivors of the Holocaust themselves. Were it not for their readiness and determination to make Aliya despite all the dangers of the voyage, the Aliya Operation could not have succeeded. Anyone viewing this operation as a political by-product of the Zionist Organization has no factual or historical basis for this view.

This overview of the Palyam concludes with the outbreak of the War of Independence, and does not deal at all with the contribution of the Palyam to the establishment of the Navy and what it accomplished during that war. Anyone interested in that part of the Palyam contribution may refer to my book, "The Campaigns of the Navy during the War of Independence".