



Ben-tzur (Burstein) Yehuda Leib.

Nickname: "Pe're" (Wild).

Born in December 1925 in Tel Aviv.

Volunteered for the Palmach in 1943.

Joined the Palyam at the end of 1945.

[Click here](#) to link to the Hebrew version of Yehuda's personal stories

This is the Way it Was

Palmach: 08 / 43 – 10 / 45, D' Company.

Palyam: launch skippers course no' 6 – 45/46; Cadets course no' 4 – 46/47. In summer 1947 I had completed all the training necessary to accompany the 'Aliya Bet' ships (Illegal immigration). In the course of this training I participated as an oarsman in unloading the ma'apilim (illegal immigrants) from the 'Amiram Shochat' ship on 16 Aug. 1946.

During the period 08 / 47 – 09 / 48 I served in the following ships, three Aliya Bet ships and one related to arms procurement during the Independence War:

1- 'Barak' (real name: Yilderan):

On 22 Aug. 1947 I flew to Europe via Prague. From there I was told to report to the Mossad (i.e. Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet – the organization in charge of Aliya Bet) headquarters in Milano. I was lucky when within a month I was given my first assignment by the "Big Guns" themselves, Shaul Avigur, head of the Mossad and Yani Avidov, who represented the Mossad in North- Africa. The mission was to load ma'apilim (illegal immigrants) from a small gulf next to the port of Algiers. The information about the site was very poor and inexact and I was given no coordination points. I was told: "Approximately 60 km west of Algiers". This distance had been measured while speeding along in a car.

The following day I was given command of the schooner 'Barak' (the code name of the ship in the Mossad) at La Spezia. This was an antique Turkish schooner that had a small auxiliary engine. The ship had been leased from "The Midget", a small and greedy Greek ship agent. Unfortunately preparations for accommodating the ma'apilim had already been made before, but because I didn't think they were adequate, I managed to convince those in charge of the alterations that a railing had to be added to where a roof had been put on an extra hold, and which had now become a deck.

In the beginning of October I was joined by a 'Gid'oni' (a radio operator), Benny Geffen, and a doctor who was a ma'apil himself, Dr. Klein. We left port and sailed straight into a rough storm. At the peak of the storm, when we were sailing past the northwestern corner of Corsica, the engine died and only then did we become aware of the fact that the canvas of the sails was rotten. We were helpless and the ship took on the waves at broadside. We were in danger of

going under. The added hold had made the ship top heavy and this increased the danger of capsizing (only many years later was it brought to my attention that this ship had been judged unworthy for human cargo by a ship engineer in the summer of 1947, and the one in the 'Mosad' Headquarters who ignored that judgment took a very heavy responsibility upon himself). When we saw that there was no hope of fixing the engine we called for a tugboat to tow us. After a wait of about one day the Aliya Bet ship, 'Ha'chalutz' reached us. This ship was under the command of Nimrod Eshel and had been en route to France to pick up ma'apilim. We were towed into some god-forsaken bay in Northern Sardinia and our mission was transferred to this other ship. We flew back to Italy disappointed with our failure and eagerly awaiting a new assignment.

2- 'Ha'ziballe' (real name: Sette Fratelli):

At the end of Oct' 1947 I was called to do my second Aliya Bet mission. To my joy, this time I was to start at the very beginning in outfitting a vessel from 'A to Z'. This ship was in comparatively good shape and had been purchased by the Mossad and brought to a shipyard in La-Spezia gulf for repairs. This was a three masted 350 ton vessel. With Immanuel Katzav, my aide, we planned to carry 650 ma'apilim. We worked in two shifts, the first one comprised shipyard workers and the second crew members working overtime. The work went on very well except for a brief lull. This happened when Zaki Zakimovitz, Ada Sereni's assistant, and Assaf Levin, a Mossad activist, came to visit us with a bottle of brandy and the news about the UN's historic 29th November 47 declaration - the State of Israel had officially been born by this UN resolution.

On the 13th of Dec. 1947 we arrived off the southern coast of France ready to pick up ma'apilim. We were received there by Duda'le Ben Horin, and to my surprise he had another crew with him that was prepared to board the ship. Among them were Avner ("Skendi") Gilad, Yaakov ("Melech") Ben-Zion and the Gid'oni Aharon Michaeli. It turned out that there was some mix-up between the branches of the Mossad in Italy and in France. I suggested that they join us in the venture and they agreed. We loaded the ma'apilim onto the ship with the aid of rubber boats that were drawn by steel cable from ship to shore and back. This took a fairly long time and dawn was breaking when we finished loading.

As we set sail we were delivered a blow "below the belt", when Levin and Duda'le (the Mossad's representatives) informed me that we were to transfer our passengers to a ship that was waiting at Corsica. We agreed under protest and the ma'apilim were transferred to Ha'chalutz, the same ship that had helped me with the 'Barak' (after that help Ha'chalutz sailed to Algier area, managed to take there only 44 young ma'apilim and then sailed and waited in Corsica for her next assignment). Her commander was now Moka Limon. Ha'chalutz sailed to Eretz Israel under the name Hagana Ship Kaf Tet Be'November (the 29th of November), and two weeks later, on the 28th December 1947, she was intercepted by the British Navy.

Having given up our ma'apilim, we were now redundant. We turned back towards France and asked the Mossad to prepare more ma'apilim for us to load. Before we had received a reply our engine died. With the aid of our sails we reached a bay in one of the islands off the coast of France. We reported to the Mossad and asked for a tug to port. Instead, the French navy arrived and threw us into jail in Toulon. We spent Christmas there. The ship was bailed out and we were set free. At this juncture I received notice that my father had passed away so I gave over command to Avner ("Skendi"), and I returned to Palestine. (On Feb. 20th 1948 the ship, which sailed with 699 ma'apilim under the name Hagana Ship Le'Komemiyut (To Independence) was intercepted by the British Navy. When the 30 days of mourning were over I awaited my next assignment.

3- "The Old Man" - Maestralle

By the end of Mar. 1948 I was in France again. I took part in loading ma'apilim onto the Aliya Bet ship 'Nachshon'. In the beginning of May I was given a group of 500 young people whom I was to train prior to their immigration. Shortly after the Declaration of the State I helped load these young ma'apilim onto the Fabio, "The Rebel". Her name was later changed to Hagana Ship "Ayalon Valley Battle".

Several days later I was ordered to go to Prague, and I arrived there the 29th of May 1948. There, an idea to use me as a navigator on planes that the State had bought, and that had to be flown from Zatacz to Tel Nof, was scrapped even before it "took off the ground" (no plan intended). Peter, Biber, "Boutrus", Jabin and I were sent to Yugoslavia where we were to pick up a ship and bring her to Tel Aviv. On the 13th of June 1948 we arrived at the port of Shvnik just as the ship was being loaded with arms. The deck was covered with some lumber after the cargo was loaded in order to camouflage it from the eyes of the UN observers [to enforce the arms embargo] who had been stationed in the ports. On 27th of June we arrived at Tel Aviv with ten thousand rifles and 2200 machine guns, 1100 heavy machine guns and ammunition.

During the first lull in the fighting I wanted to join the navy and I talked this subject over with Avraham Zakai. Shaul Avigur vetoed this and sent me as speedily as possible back to Yugoslavia (on a ship that could scarcely do 8 knots in order to bring back some cannons to Israel. We went back to the same port in Yugoslavia but no cargo of cannons was waiting for us there. We were ordered to proceed to Naples and upon arrival there Zakimovitz, who had taken over Ada Sereni's job, ordered me, against my will, to leave the ship and take a job at headquarters – that was: in charge of the Naples branch of operations. At this point I decided that at the first opportunity I shall try to return to Israel and join up with one of the Palmach brigades.

4- "The Rebel" – Fabio

September 1948: Mobilization of volunteers from the Diaspora. I felt miserable at the job in Naples and Zaki finally relented and sent me back to Israel on a ship that also brought volunteers for the Israeli Army from the Diaspora. The

command of this ship was a good way for me to conclude my years of service for the Mossad. My good friend, Willie Rostoker, from Canada also joined me on this voyage (he also had been on the "Fabio" when it had sailed the first time as Aliya Bet ship "The Battle of the Ayalon Valley"). Shalom Burstein, a veteran Gid'oni, was also on board.

On Sep. 9th we sailed from the Bay of Gaeta with 301 passengers; among them were 31 volunteers from South Africa. All was smooth sailing except for two incidents: Before we started on the journey it turned out that our compass had gone haywire and it was necessary to get another. Since this was to be the last voyage of this ship it was decided not to waste the money for a new compass and I took it upon myself to be the navigator. When we reached the Straits of Messina it turned out that we had a very bad oil leak. We did not want to complicate matters by going into port so we asked a passing fishing vessel to buy the oil for us. This whole incident of purchasing and loading the oil took about ten hours and the fishing boat made more money on the transaction than on fishing. On the 17th September 1948 we entered the port of Haifa. I was given a week's holiday by the Mossad and used the time to choose which Brigade of the Palmach I would join. This had been my "swan song" with the Palyam.

The War of Independence:

On Yom Kippur of '48 I crossed over into the Negev which was besieged and joined up with the 9th Battalion of the Negev Regiment of the Palmach. Until after the well-known ink-flag-raising at Eilat, I served as the commander of a jeep reconnaissance platoon.

My career in the Navy:

From November of 1950 until January of 1971 I served in the Navy, retiring at the rank of commander. My duties were: commander of the landing flotilla during the Kadesh Operation (1956); Commander of the Navy's training base; commander of the destroyers I.N.S Eilat and I.N.S Haifa, the later during the Six Days War; and last, commander of the IDF's Command & Staff School/naval division.

Civilian activity:

From 1973 and until I retired from active work in 1989, I worked at The Bank of Israel in Jerusalem. After my retirement I'm devoting my time to the research of Aliya Bet and the Palyam, and to the development of The Palyam & Aliya Bet Website.



Yehuda Ben-Tzur fu comandante di Palyam la prima forza navale del Palmach e, in questa veste partecipò allo sbarco, avvenuto a Sdot Yam, di 183 ma'apilim che erano partiti da Bacoli a bordo della goletta Ideros. Grazie a questa sua partecipazione, ha fatto conoscere, attraverso suoi scritti pubblicati sul sito palyam.org, la storia della Ideros e dei 183 reduci che erano stati a Bacoli prima di imbarcarsi per raggiungere Eretz Israel. A lui la Cittadinanza Onoraria del Comune di Bacoli.

Many thanks to Elio Samuele Guardascione, from Bacoli, for his initiative to honor Yehuda