

Abramov, Zalman
Born October 1926 in Moshav Merchavia
Joined the Palmach in 1946, joined the Palyam in 1947.

This is the Way it Was

I was born in Moshav Merchavia in 1926. My parents were founders of the Moshav. As with all the youth on the moshav in those days, aside from the youth movement the main activity was helping with the farm work and "security training". In 1942 my father enlisted in the British Army to do his part in WW II and I, at the age of 15½, had the responsibility for running the farm, as all the other children were much younger. My father was discharged in 1945 and I was eagerly waiting for him to come back, so that I could join the Palmach. I could not leave immediately as I was a non-com in the Hagana and had responsibilities on the moshav which others had to relieve me of. I was only able to do as I intended, toward the end of 1946.

My career started in A Company which was stationed at Kibbutz Ramat Yochanan. I was very happy with that unit as we had very good officers and men. Most of the time my platoon leader was "Siko" (Prof. Pinchas Zussman). However, I was particularly interested in joining the Palyam so I put in for a transfer. This was finally granted in the summer of 1947 when I participated in the 8th course of the Palyam. The commander was Yossale Dror, who was later relieved by Yisrael Auerbuch. This was a period of tumultuous Aliya Bet activity and the "Exodus" episode was at its center.

When the course was over I was sent to Kibbutz Yagur and from there to Kibbutz Ashdot Yaakov to take part in a course in sabotage. From that course we went to the Negev for target practice and by the time that was over, the 29th of November had come and Israel was on the verge of becoming a State. I was then supposed to be sent to a course for naval officers but the "winds of war" were blowing, so instead, my platoon was sent from Yagur to the port of Haifa, under the command of Amos ben Tzvi, with Semion (from Hachotrim) and me as squad commanders. This was how the "port platoon" started. In Eliezer Tal's book: "Naval Operations During the War of Independence", there is a chapter devoted to the "port platoon" so I will only mention a few special things:

When we started working in the port we were divided to cover the most vital points of the port. These were mostly on the eastern side of the port near the Oil jetty. War was already raging in Haifa by this time, and it was difficult for the workers to get from their homes to the port, or from the port back to their homes. At the end of December, after the bloodbath at the Refineries had taken place, another platoon was set up under the command of Yochai. This strengthened our position a great deal and we went from guard duties to initiating actions. For instance, we made a retaliatory attack on Balad-a-sheikh and Hawasa (Tel Hanan and Ben Dor). We also carried out similar actions at Ein Ghazal and Jaba because of their blocking the Zichron-Haifa road. Another incident involved

veteran Palmachnikim, some of them from the Arab contingent of the Palmach, who entered the center of the Arab quarter of Iraq Street disguised as British soldiers, and blew up a car there.

There was a vessel sitting in the port of Haifa that belonged to a Jew and carried food supplies that were destined for Cyprus. The Arab crew refused to sail and the ship sat there. We intended to deliver the foodstuffs and then use the ship for our own needs. It was in such a poor condition however, that it barely managed the trip to Cyprus and then had to be abandoned. Thus ended our dream of a private navy of the Palyam.

Towards the end of February we received reinforcements: Zalman Perach and Avraham Dar. They were to do intelligence work and procurement. The British had already started to evacuate and a large amount of weapons and other materials was passing through the port. A lot more remained in the warehouses that was to be sent to Jordan in due time.

Another job we had was to clear out all the equipment from the "shadow fleet" of the immigrant ships that were gathered in a far corner of the harbor. Everything that was in them was transferred to the warehouses of the Jewish Agency. Once we also removed Palyamnikim who had hidden in a hold after the British had caught their ship, and had not yet found a way of escape. They came off with us as workers and disappeared once they were outside the port area.

In March, the 4th Battalion went up to Jerusalem. Yochai and Izzy went to see how the battalion was faring, and they were stuck there in the siege. Nissan Leviatan came and took Yochai's place. The company was highly trained and organized even though the chain of command was not very formal. Amos ben Tzvi was lieutenant, and I and a few others were the staff. Miri Cafri (later, ben Tzvi) was the Company secretary. Our headquarters were in the Jewish Agency offices in the Hamashbir building right next to the port.

Towards the end of March we were called to a meeting in the Herzlia Hotel in the Hadar Hacarmel area of Haifa and were met there by our friend Kipi (Aryeh Kaplan). He informed us that we were no longer the Palyam; we were now the Israeli Navy. Practically, this change made no difference at all in what we did or whom we did it with, as our officers were also still the very same officers. Any radical changes that were to come, came gradually.

Just about that time, the road to the Galilee was severed in the vicinity of Acre and convoys could not get through. We received orders to arrange transfers of food and other supplies by sea to Nahariya. We organized all the necessary ships and loading equipment in the makeshift Palyam style and soon had the ships loaded and on their way northwards. The trip was slow and difficult but we finally arrived, unloaded all the stuff, and completed the job, tired, wet and cold. We continued to supply the needs of the northern part of the country in this

manner until the siege was broken and Acre conquered on the 17th of May. We transferred supplies and troops, and took women and children back with us. At the beginning of May, the immigrant ship "Chana Senesh" was repaired and refitted and joined us in the trips to Nahariya.

On the 21st of April the battle for Haifa began. We took part in that action as a platoon under the command of Amos ben Tzvi. Our objective was to break through to the road leading to Bourge Street, from the old commercial center of the city. By noon of the following day we had accomplished our objective. Now, the tasks of the company changed from military duties to civilian ones. Many young people came to work in the port in place of the Arabs who had run away. It became our job to break them in to their new jobs. The work of repairing and refitting the old immigration ships that had been lying in a corner of the harbor began, so that they could be put into condition to be used by the Israeli navy.

On the 15th of May "Operation Ben Ami" began which was to break the siege of the Galilee. Our assignment in this operation was to blow up bridges in the area of Ras el Abiad, north of Rosh Hanikra. This operation failed, probably because our survey team was discovered before we went into action. After this, the Port Company was disbanded and its members assumed other tasks in the navy. Our job was over, but not completely. Many were recalled and formed into a unit of the Carmeli Battalion and we had one month of intensive training for the specific job of blowing up bridges over the Litani River. Before that operation could be carried out, the first cease fire of the War of Independence went into effect, the operation was cancelled, and our unit was disbanded.

I appeared at the Naval headquarters at "San Remo" in Tel Aviv where I met Yisrael Rotem and Eskimo (both of blessed memory). I learned that a unit was being formed which was a direct descendant of the unit for marine sabotage that Yochai had created in the Palyam. It was my honor to be among the first members of the "Shayetet" (the elite marine unit of the Israeli navy). I served in that unit for about one year, after which I returned to my family and farm on the Moshav, as I had always intended. Nevertheless, I was called up for reserve duty many times after my discharge and remained part of that elite unit for a long time.

In the years that followed I did a number of things. I was an adviser in farming in Iran during the 1960s and also helped farmers in the Golan Heights when new settlements were established there. I was in charge of security matters for the Jezreel Valley regional authority, but always remained close to my own little farm in Merchavia.

Today, (2000), I do so with the aid of my children and grandchildren.