

Sadeh, Oved

Born in Tel Aviv in 1925

Volunteered for the Palmach in 1943 while at Kadoorie High School

Joined the Palyam in 1946

This is the Way it Was

I was born in 1925 in Tel Aviv to my parents Dvora and Shmuel (of blessed memory). They had immigrated to Palestine in 1921 and had been members of The Work Battlion. I was educated in the school of the workers movement in Tel Aviv and in Givat Hashlosha, Haifa and Yagur. My secondary school education was at Kadoorie in the Lower Galilee. Upon completing my studies I joined Company A of the Palmach and served at Kvutzat Kinneret and Yagur. I participated in a course for squad leaders at Kibbutz Geva and a course in Morse code at Juara, near Kibbutz Ein Hashofet.

During the years 1945-1946, I served as radio operator in the First Battalion of the Palmach and at Palmach Headquarters in Kibbutz Mizra. In June 1946 I was transferred to the Palyam branch of the Palmach and sent to Italy as "Gidoni" (radio operator). I saw action on the following ships:

Albertina 1: This vessel transferred immigrants to the ship "Palmach". Sept. 1946.

Albertina 2: This vessel transferred immigrants to the ship "Bracha Fuld". Oct.1946.

Shabtai Luzinski: This vessel sailed with immigrants in March of 1947.

Shaar Yashuv: This vessel sailed with immigrants in April of 1947.

Medinat Yisrael: This vessel sailed with immigrants in May of 1948 and arrived in Israel on the Day of Independence.

Risorectio: This ship brought weapons for the defense of the State of Israel.

The "Pirate": August of 1948.

In August of 1948 I and my friend David Ben Chorin participated in the commandeering of a Syrian ship, the Argiro, on the high seas. The ship was carrying 8000 guns and 2 million bullets. This cargo was transferred to two vessels of the Israel Navy, the K-18 and K-20 and delivered to Tzahal (I.D.F.) during the second lull in the fighting between the new State of Israel and the Arab armies. This amount of weapons and munitions played an important role in bettering the situation of the defenders of Jerusalem and aided greatly at a time that was most critical for our defense. The full story of this episode is related in the book by Mordechai Naor, "Stories of the Good Land" (published by the Ministry of Defense and told here with its permission).

A Blue-White “Pirate”

In April 1948, a Palyam team sank the vessel Lino which was carrying 8,000 rifles and ammunition from Czechoslovakia to Syria (the rifles were actually intended for the Palestinians). The Syrians did not give up. They retrieved the weapons from the sea, cleaned them and readied them for reshipment. At this stage, the leaders of three-month-old Israel decided that these weapons would be of good use for us. At first it was decided that a team of Israelis in disguise would infiltrate the Syrian team and commandeer the vessel from the inside. There were difficulties that arose in carrying out that task so instead, two Italian mechanics that were on our side were able to join the crew and be counted upon to carry out our instructions.

This sounds like some James Bond adventure; the idea was that once the vessel was out at sea these two machinists would find some reason to shut the engines down for a short time or cause the ship to sail at slow speed for some time. Meanwhile, a small fishing boat would approach the ship and two supposedly Italian naval officers would board the vessel and commandeer it.

Two veteran Palyamniks were chosen for this job: Oved Sadeh and David “Dudale” Ben-Chorin . On the other end of the line, a Syrian officer, Mardam Bey - a relative of the Syrian Prime Minister, was responsible for contact with the vessel. He was responsible for having a vessel named Argiro loaded with 8,000 rifles and two million bullets, and this vessel sailed eastwards in about mid August, 1948.

From this point onward the operation, dubbed “The Pirate”, went into action. This was one of the most amazing and clever operations that were executed during the War of Independence. Sadeh and Ben-Chorin, in their small craft, approached the Argiro which had slowed down for some minor repair, as arranged with the two Italian mechanics. They boarded the Argiro dressed in the uniforms of Italian naval officers and appeared before the vessel’s captain and told him that they had been sent by the Italian Government to take command of the ship. The captain and his whole crew accepted what they were told and gave them command of the vessel. If the captain and his men had had any doubts about the veracity of these two officers because of the poor quality of their Italian, this was cleared up two days later when the two officers admitted that they were actually... Egyptians, who were sent to the vessel because they were capable of navigating it through the Eastern Mediterranean which was dotted with many mines from World War II. Every once in a while the two would give the captain some phony report of what the Syrians had supposedly communicated to the vessel. The communication was of course with Israeli headquarters in Rome and in Israel.

The Syrians felt that they had lost contact with the ship but did not know why, nor did they know where the ship was. In Israel there was much excitement about the arrival of the ship and discussion about how to conclude the episode. The decision finally made was that two corvettes of the new Israeli Navy, the K-18 and K-20, would meet the Argiro at a rendezvous off Crete. There they were to intercept the Argiro and take the Italian crew into custody, pretending to detain the “Egyptian” officers as well.

All went according to plan and all the weapons and ammunition were transferred to these two corvettes, as were the Italian crew and the “Egyptian” officers Oved and Dudale. The Argiro had completed its role, so it was sunk by one of the corvettes. The weapons and ammunition reached Haifa and were quickly transferred to soldiers in the front. They fulfilled a very important, perhaps vital role, in the ongoing War of Independence.

What was the Syrian reaction to this event? Find the guilty individual! Mardam Bey was accused of a betrayal of his country. The Syrian press reported that he had been seduced by a beautiful Jewish-Czech woman who had convinced him to hand over the cargo of the Argiro to the Israelis...

In September of 1948 I joined the Israeli Navy and served on the K-18 as communications officer. In 1949 I retired from Tzahal (I.D.F.) and went to live in Kibbutz Bet Keshet in the Lower Galilee, where I reside until this very day.