

## “The Lord Mountbatten Incident”

Written by Tzvi Ben-tzur, based on an oral testimony of Yehuda Ben-tzur<sup>1</sup>

The relations between Israel and Britain during Israel’s War of Independence and right after it were far from friendly, but they started to improve after Britain formally recognized Israel in April 1950. By the summer of 1954 they were good enough to allow the three Israeli Navy frigates – INS Miznak, INS Misgav and INS Mivtakh – to visit Malta, still part of the United Kingdom at that time. The visit was the first courtesy call by Israeli naval ships to a base of the British Mediterranean Fleet – the same fleet that had caused us so much grief and sorrow only a few years earlier during the pre-state Aliya Bet era. The visit overall was very successful, although it ended with an unplanned and unpleasant incident in which pain was inflicted on the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet at that time. Here is the story.

Present in Malta when the visit took place was the famous Admiral of the Navy Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas Mountbatten, 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma, or Lord Mountbatten in short (in the photo). This was not a coincidence: at that time Lord Mountbatten was the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet and his headquarters were in Malta<sup>2</sup>. As is customary, the British commander of the Malta Base was invited to visit the flagship frigate INS Mivtakh. Although not required by protocol, Lord Mountbatten was also invited to a brief courtesy visit aboard the frigate. He accepted the invitation with one string attached: the gun salute in his honor, as required by protocol, should take place only after the launch taking him back ashore would be very far away from the frigate. The reason: ever since WW-II cannon sounds had caused sharp pain in the Lord’s ears.



The request was translated into a special action plan whereby the commander of the frigate, standing on the bridge, would signal when the salute should start. The time came and Lord Mountbatten arrived in his launch to the frigate and enjoyed the hospitality of the Israeli Navy. At the end of the visit, as he was about to get into his launch, all of a sudden BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! – the gun salute started, and as the rounds were fired poor Lord Mountbatten was visibly more and more shaken<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Yehuda was an officer onboard INS Miznak

<sup>2</sup> Lord Mountbatten was Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet between 1952 and 1954. He even visited Israel in this capacity in 1952.

<sup>3</sup> Quite ironically, the visit to Malta originated by a personal invitation from Lord Mountbatten himself. The Israeli Navy took part in the disaster relief operations following the devastating 1953 Ionian earthquake. Lord

The British didn't of course hide their rage, which can be understood. What happened? A quick investigation revealed that the artillery drill sergeant ordered the opening of fire after he mistakenly interpreted a head movement – the commonly-understood “go ahead” movement – made by the gunnery officer who stood between the bridge and the gun. Now go and explain to the British that this particular gunnery officer was suffering from chronic tics that resulted in involuntary movements of his head; and as fate would have it, one of his tics occurred at exactly the wrong moment, and its meaning was misunderstood...



**The three frigates are visiting Venice in the summer of 1954; during that same voyage they also visited Malta, where the “Lord Mountbatten incident” took place**

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Mountbatten met Shlomo Erell – the commander of the Israeli Navy frigates flotilla – during the operations, and he handed him the invitation to visit Malta after being much impressed with the significant and resourceful contribution of the Israeli Navy.