

## **Young Warrior** **Memoirs of Machalnik Elihu King**

### **TO ISRAEL**

At 19 I was dogmatic and prejudiced as well as idealistic. Our ways, the ways of Habonim (and of my particular faction within Habonim, the Syrkinists, at that) were the only right ways. My greatest scorn was reserved for those closest to us politically (and I was deeply engrossed in and committed to Zionist politics, though I also supported the "progressive" American political movements), Hashomer Hatzair on the Left (mechanistic, too disciplined, and too close to Russian communism for me) and Young Judea on the right (naive tools of imperialist capitalism). The neo-communist Jews in the Workmens' Circle, the Arbeiter Ring, and those who were neo-Fascists over to the Right in Betar - these were too far away from my ideas and my group/family to be an opposition. Anti-Zionist Jews in the American Council of Judaism were so alien as to be incomprehensible. They seemed to be the American equivalent of collaborators with the Nazis in Europe. As to non-Jews.....those who were Roosevelt Democrats were alright (though I severely faulted them for not giving enough support to rescue victims of the Holocaust and more support to the Jewish State in Palestine), and the rest were unknown to me. I did participate in American politics besides their Zionist aspect. I worked hard for liberal candidates and causes, especially for racial civil rights. I worked hard for unions, marching in picket lines and demonstrations and attending rallies. I was a prig, a Puritan, very intolerant of others' ideas.

My small participation in sending arms to the Haganah (wiping the cosmoline off aircraft machine guns, in Los Angeles) was exciting, my work as a gofer in the fund raising campaigns and rallies for the Haganah was not. When the shaliach, the Israeli emissary to our movement, said that it would be good to volunteer to go to Israel, I stepped forward immediately. (There were two shlichim at that time: Moshe Hirsch and Dani Brisker. I was close to both. Later I heard that Moshe changed his last name to Ofer and worked in Israel's diplomatic service. He it was that taught me some of my favorite Israeli songs. As to Dani Brisker: by chance I was near the Beilinson Hospital near Tel Aviv in the 1960s when I heard he was there and dying of cancer, and I visited him and we had a good goodbye).

So as I said, I stepped forward. So did most of the other guys but they soon found family and school reasons not to actually go. What I had volunteered for was called "Land & Labor for Palestine". I was told that we would be used as farm or factory workers so that fighting men could be released from there for military duty. Years later I learned that this story was a cover, and that the intention was to recruit men to actually fight, and that I had probably been one of the very few who didn't realize that. But it just didn't occur to me that little me would be entrusted with the high responsibility of being a fighter to defend the Jewish community in Palestine. Besides everything else I was unaggressive physically and of course utterly untrained to arms or warfare.

They accepted me. I had to get inoculations, and was sent to the office of the project's doctor who turned out to be my cousin David Rosenbloom (I think he knew the truth about the organization and assumed that I did too). His nurse gave me the shots. She was in on the whole thing and perhaps because excitement made her clumsy the shots hurt like hell and my arm was very sore that night. Dani Brisker chanced to need a bed that night and shared mine, and

he thrashed around a lot in his sleep and bashed my sore arm and I didn't sleep. I'd had a nice farewell from my friends, and let a bit of awareness that they liked me into my soul but quickly tucked it away where it was unseen. And so I got on a Greyhound bus for the long ride to New York.

My folks had a fine big apartment near Columbia University, and I stayed with them for a few days. Israel took me out to get clothes for the trip and he bought me a very expensive (twenty dollars!) pair of English shoes. Very good leather, fitted well, and I got the horrible yellow colour down to a good oxblood by using black shoe polish. I had no other shoes for the trip and for all my time in Israel.

I got my US passport easily enough though others didn't. Then I had to get a British visa (they were still the Mandatory power, this was in May of 1948). The British were closing down their Palestine activity and were trying to prevent young Jews from going there to fight against them or their Arab protegees. I gave the Consulate person a story about my sick aunt Yona who had nobody and needed me there, and a supporting letter from Israel and a (forged) letter from her to prove it all. The official was suspicious but I pleaded hard and well because he ended up giving me the visa. He told me that mine was the last visa for Palestine that his office would issue.

The Land & Labor people told me to appear at a designated street corner at a set time, to be taken out of town for some training. Okay. Israel dropped me off and I found a bus with a bunch of other guys, mostly older. Many were combat veterans or said they were. My own cultured manner and accent made them suspicious of me, we were all nervous of the British Secret Service blocking our passage and the guys thought I was probably a spy or something like that. Our leaders told us the British and the FBI were out to stop us from sailing; they may have believed that; they may have been right.

The bus took us to an estate somewhere in New Jersey. The owner, a doughty Revisionist, greeted us. We lined up in ragged-ass formation before him and he went down the line handing each of us a Bible to protect us from the enemy in combat. The book was about 3" by 5" - and had a metal cover. "Wear it in your shirt pocket" he said "and it will deflect the deadly bullet". Still I did not realize that I was in a group of future soldiers. I just thought him a stupid old fart.

We spent two days on the estate in training in physical fitness and unarmed combat. Our trainer, who was to be our commander on the trip, was a Sephardic Israeli poet, Oded Bourla. Also at the estate with us was a couple: Hillel/Ilka who had one leg and played the halil and sang in a marvelous basso, and Aviva his wife who taught us Hebrew songs and folk dances and flirted with us all. In my innocence with no experience in flirting, I thought she was interested in me. I was passionately lustful towards her and had fantasies but no realities.

Then we were taken back to New York and I said goodbye to Israel and Berenica on the street outside of the docks. The farewell was brisk and cheerful on my part; I was full of my importance and virtue, and eager to get on with it. They may have known that I was headed into danger but they didn't show anything.

Now with my comrades I got on board, having agreed not to group together so that if some were taken the others might yet escape! I suspected anybody who talked with me, though most were in fact Jews going back home to Palestine. Of the 400 passengers on board the ship most were

Arabs going to Beirut or Alexandria. The ship was to put in to Haifa between those ports.

The Marine Carp was a semi-converted Liberty ship, and accommodation was frugal. The women were bunked six to a cabin, two tiers of three bunks. The men slept in huge bays with racks of pipemetal framed steel spring bunks five high. By tacit understanding or something, we Jewish men, about 75 of us, were given one bay to ourselves though it was not full. Some were Israelis going home. A few were from Canada, Mexico and elsewhere, off to fight in Palestine. There were some old religious Jews. About 24 of us were native born US citizens fully covered with passports, visas, and blue jeans. Oded Bourla was the designated commander of us Americans including 5 of the women in the "first class" cabins.

The Atlantic was very rough and most of us on board were badly sea sick. I avoided being sick by sleeping on deck and never going below until I got my sea legs. There were some deck chairs lashed to a rail on a hatch cover and that was my place for the first three days and nights.

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## A PRISONER IN BAALBEK

While cruising through a now calm Mediterranean we got the news on the ship's radio that the STATE OF ISRAEL had been declared. Somehow the Arab passengers on the "Marine Carp" disappeared, maybe they moved away from where we were. Us Jews gathered in the dining hall and roared out our joy and pride. We sang "Hatikvah" and a thousand other anthems and songs, danced the hora until we dropped, cried, laughed, and carried on. The fears and doubts were kept inside, for that evening.

The crew joined us. Their union was Communist led and they were radicals all, and they were very much on our side.

Fears and doubts were not revealed. My own were devastating. Though credulous and enthusiastic I knew enough to realize that there would be a fearful armed attack on the new state, by the armies of the surrounding Arab states. I knew that the Egyptians had a large and well equipped army, and that the Transjordan Legion though small was very well armed and well trained and led by British officers of great experience. I knew that the Yishuv was lacking in organization, that only a small number of trained soldiers were available, and that the shortage of arms was an agonizing problem. How could we survive such an onslaught? The Arabs kept saying they were going to kill all the Jews, and I believed they meant it.

When I sat down and thought it through, it seemed most likely to me that we faced another holocaust. My own position was that I would not flinch, that I would go and be there and do whatever I could and if that meant going down with my people, so be it. My agonies of guilt at having been untouched by the Holocaust in Europe, and my gloomy view of where the world was going, could only be faced by such a stand.

Did I talk about this to my friends? I had no friends there, only comrades I had met in New York a week before or people I had met on the ship. Nobody I could talk with.

At the same time, I was twenty years old and had experienced almost no physical pain or fear in

my life. Boys like me could not believe that we, I, myself could ever be harmed. (If we could, there would be no wars).

There was also a primary cause that I had committed myself to. Some time before all this I promised myself that I would replace Ari Lashner, an American who had been murdered by Arabs at Kibbutz Kfar Blum. Ari had been my hero and my role model, and I had pledged, privately and to myself alone, that I would go to Israel and not fill his shoes but at least put my body and my energy to service there in his honor. Now I renewed that vow.

So overall I put up a cheerful and optimistic face and prepared myself for arrival in what was now Israel, in a few days.

The captain of the "Marine Carp" (we later learned) was concerned about the well being of his Jewish passengers when the ship called in at Beirut on its way to Haifa. It was an American ship and so we were unlikely to be bothered, but still..... He contacted the US Consul General in Beirut by radiotelephone and asked for instructions. The story I heard, from good sources, is that the Consul told him that there would be no trouble, he was to bring the ship in.

At 5 in the morning we pulled into the harbor at Beirut and tied up alongside a pier. The US Consul was there to greet us. So were about 400 Lebanese Marines, in tight uniforms of blue wool - must have been awfully hot for them, when the sun came out fully. The Marines came up the gangplank and set up machine gun posts in the main corridors. An announcement was made on the loudspeakers: all Jewish passengers were to assemble in the main lounge.

We didn't do that. We bunched up in little groups throughout the ship talking and trying to work out what to do. My group crowded around Oded Bourla in the shower room next to our sleeping bay. Some of the wild ones said we should fight. Two of them had pistols. We gabbed like a bunch of geese. There were an awful lot of the Lebanese. Then another announcement on the PA system: if the Jewish men would come along and be "interned" in Lebanon, the Jewish women would be allowed to continue their voyage to Haifa unmolested. The women were under Lebanese guard while we decided. This was clearly a serious threat. Most of the women were wives of husbands on the ship; couples had been separated because of the barracks-like sleeping arrangements.

We decided to submit. The Israelis among us were fearful but they led in that decision. Us Americans felt confident we'd be repatriated in a few days at most.

The two guns were stripped down to small parts and hidden on (in, actually) the bodies of a number of the men, as was ammunition. Somebody had a compass. Each took from his bags what he thought best. And so we slowly shambled up to the main lounge. The US Consul was there, and he collected the passports of the US citizens (and, it transpired, turned them over to the Lebanese commander). Some of us passed notes to the crew, for our families. In glum, defeated dribs and drabs we went down the gangplank and climbed onto Lebanese Army trucks. The Lebanese left behind some old, sick men, but 69 of us were taken away. The Jewish women waved and called to us as the trucks drove away from the pier.

The trucks drove through the city of Beirut and out through its suburbs. Through small towns and valleys and villages we drove, until the pressure on my bladder became extreme and I pissed off the rear of my truck after getting sign-language permission from the Marines who

guarded us. After what seemed like about four hours, the last parts climbing high into the cool hills, we arrived at Baalbek. We were taken to what had once been a French Foreign Legion barracks, a handsome building with large rooms opening out onto a long balcony on the second floor. At the head of the stairs, a washroom with a water tap, a pissing trough, and an Arab squat latrine.

In the three large barracks rooms were piles of boards of nice, soft pine. Three of these for a sleeping pallet and a thin blanket, a tin bowl and a spoon - these were issued to each of us. The guards turned out to be Palestinians, refugees. The Lebanese themselves acted frightened of us, very nervous. Some of the Palestinians were allright, some were sadistic bastards.

We were given a meal: a small cube of goats' milk cheese, a radish, a green onion, two pitas (the large flat kind, not the pocket kind). We could get water from the tap. That's what we got every day for our three meals though sometimes we each got a large spoonful of beans in tomato sauce for dinner instead of the cheese. I weighed 150 lbs when I got there, and 110 lbs when we got out six weeks later.

And so to bed, worried and fearful about what tomorrow would bring.

The morning brought the US Consul, all the way from Beirut. We all gathered together to meet with him. He told us that were a real nuisance, that the Lebanese were treating us very well, and that the families of the Americans were working for our release. He heard our requests for medicine for the two of us who were down with severe measles, and agreed to get us what we needed, we could give him the money now.

We had elected some leaders from among us, and they mentioned that the last time an American citizen had been taken by force from a ship (not even a US flag ship, at that) the US Navy had a cruiser in the harbor the next day and the citizen was released under the threat of our guns. The Consul assured us that there was no danger of that happening now. The Consul showed a marked distaste for Jews; of course he was accredited to an Arab state, so that would explain it.

(It was not until the 1960s when I subpoenaed my files from the US State Department in connection with my citizenship case that I felt the reality of the discrimination. The important document about me started out thus: "This obstreperous member of a despised race.....". The US Consul in Beirut had endorsed it thus: "Right!"). So much for the Consul. When we read in the local French language newspaper that he had been on the podium at an anti Israel rally at the American University of Beirut and had seen fit to stay there while a resolution calling for our (the US prisoners) death was passed by acclamation, we were not really surprised.

The next big event for us was the Selection. (That term refers to the procedure in the concentration camps in Europe, where those who were to be killed that day were separated from the rest). We had contacts with some of the guards, who would bring us news and stuff for money, so we were prepared. The camp commander showed up with a specially big and tough retinue of guards, and called us all together. He had all our passports before him, and told us that the Israelis would be taken to a different location. We had discussed this possibility and it seemed to us that this would enable the Lebanese to kill the Israelis without risking the consequences of killing citizens of the USA or Canada. So the night before we had all - Americans, Canadians, the two with Argentinian passports, and the Israelis (who had British

passports) - shaved our heads so we would not be easily identified from our passport photographs.

The first man was called forward and asked his name. "Yisrael ben Yisrael", he said, "Israel son of Israel". And so said the second shaven-headed man, and the third, and the Selection was called off.

After we'd been there for a month, and our families' efforts to get the US State Department to move on our case seemed to be stuck despite the best efforts of then-Congressman Jacob Javits of New York, we started to plan an escape. We had some Israelis among us who knew the topography pretty well, and they worked out a route to Israel (though we had no idea where the actual front line might be). We had the weapons we'd smuggled in, and accepted the fact that we would have casualties. We were tired now from poor nourishment, and dispirited from being prisoners, but we felt we had to do it.

(A few comments about being a prisoner. For me, the worst part was being so utterly helpless and not knowing what would be done to us. While it is true that I have always felt a particularly strong psychological need to control my environment I'm sure I was not alone in this distress. We were only imprisoned for six weeks but it seemed like forever and of course until the last day we had no idea if or when we might be freed. When I read of the hostages in Beirut these days, some of whom have endured over ten years of a captivity incomparably worse than mine, I feel sick and angry. That's something that might bring me to kill).

Just as we were getting ourselves ready, storing food at the expense of eating it and so on, we got some hints that we might be released. Then the US Consul came to visit. The Lebanese offered to release us and let us go back to the USA, providing we would each swear never to attempt to go to Israel. That included the Israelis. We agreed. An oath under duress is okay.

Then we waited some more.

One morning, the Lebanese Army trucks came grinding into the courtyard. We needed no further notice, put our belongings into our pockets and lined up with the weakest and sick ones at the head of the line....just in case. But no, they took us all. Huddled together in heaps at the bottom of the truck, we were too weak to sit upright and too scared that it might not be for real to sing or joke around. But yes, they took us to the pier, and there was the same "Marine Carp", this time on its way back to the USA on another round trip.

Weakly, still very fearful that the ordeal was not really over, we climbed up the gangplank. Crew members helped us on board and down to the sleeping bay and up onto the bunks. Later they gave us a festive meal of turkey and all the trimmings, ice cream, the lot. We gorged ourselves and soon returned the goodies, which our shrunken and tender tummies refused to hold.

The ship now carried many refugees from the war zone, Americans going home, many of them Jews. I met some politicals who told me with great excitement that they had a message for us from Haganah!!! Special arrangements had been made, they said, and the ship would make an unscheduled call at Palermo where Haganah awaited us and would take us off and on to Israel! Huzzah!

As they say in Israel, "Lo dubim v'lo yaar", "No bears and no forest".

Yes, we did pull in at Palermo. But nobody, it seemed, awaited us. Of those who decided to make a break for it anyway, some bought their crew papers from crew members, some went over the side and swam ashore. Three of us, lacking in funds or anyway experience or imagination, pried fillings out of our teeth and went to the captain and begged to see a dentist. The captain agreed, and called an escort of eighteen Carabinieri to take us to the dentist. Foiled!

The three of us, scrawny young Dave from Montreal, hulking Big Joe ("Gonna kill me a thousand Ayrabs!") from New York, and scrawny young me. We were taken in a truck to the center of town. Off we got and went upstairs to the dentist's office leaving two Carabinieri to guard the downstairs entrance. Once inside, Joe offered to go first. Dave and I sat in the waiting room, with two Carabinieri guarding the door and the rest sitting around in the room with us.

What the hell, I thought, what the hell. I can't get out of this. But I can give it a try, and then won't be so ashamed when they drag me back to the ship. I had stuffed my pockets with packs of American cigarettes before I left the ship, primo currency in Europe in those days. I stood up, walked briskly to the door, handed a pack of cigarettes to each of the guards, said "Vino, vino" with great brio, and walked out. To my surprise, nobody stopped me. (Why did I say "Vino"? Well, I couldn't think of anything else, that's why). I walked briskly down the stairs. The guards at the street door barred my way with their carbines. I handed them each a pack of cigarettes and said my magic "Vino" at them. They seemed confused but did not stop me. I marched down the main street of Palermo with calm and confidence until after a minute I heard them yelling and their pounding feet behind me so I picked mine up and ran like hell.

I ducked into a shop, a pharmacy, and the woman behind the counter, quickly seeing that I was running from the police, grabbed my arm and pulled me down to a crouch behind a counter where I couldn't be seen from the street. After a minute the chase seemed to have passed me by so I got up, said "Grazie" to the woman, and walked out of the shop.

Turns out that all the Carabinieri ran down the street after me, so Dave Sidorsky, finding himself all alone in the waiting room, stuck his head into the dentist's office and told Joe Nagdimon and then he walked out and down the stairs and out the front door and away. Nagdimon chose to stay and be taken back to the ship.

There were over twenty of us who got off the ship in Palermo, but ten went back to the ship before it sailed. The rest of us were rounded up into a cheap restaurant by street urchins who seemed to understand what was going on. We had a meal, and decided to look for Jews to help us. In Palermo there were none left so we took a train up to Naples where we found some but they wanted nothing to do with us because the police were after us and sent us up to the Jewish Agency in Rome where we finally found people to take care of us.

After some more adventures in a DP camp near Rome, I was assigned to lead a bunch of sturdy young Bulgarian Jews on their way to Israel in a chartered airplane. This was about 9 July.

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## **I ARRIVE IN ISRAEL, AND JOIN THE ARMY**

The airplane landed at an airstrip outside of Haifa and the young men were taken away in a truck. The two mystery passengers were somehow identified to me as pilots, and I was shocked to know that I might have had to try to coerce the charter plane crew to land without their help.....

Then I was alone there except for a grizzled man and his pickup truck. I believe he asked something like "Well, what about you?" and I replied that I was to go to Ramat Yohhanan where my garin was. (The "garin" was a nucleus of people from Habonim in the USA, living and working at Kibbutz Ramat Yohhanan until they would get an assignment of a location for a new kibbutz of their own). So the man indicated that I should get into the back of the pickup, and we drove off. But he didn't take me to Ramat Yohhanan. He took me to Haifa and dropped me off at the Technion, which appeared to be a sort of hostel or camp for unassigned odds and sods. I stayed there for a few days.

We were marched down to the old town for meals, in line.....but there was no sort of registration or sign-in that I could see so I felt free to wander. There first thing I did was to seek Norma, I knew she lived in Haifa. She was the girl I'd been squeezing on the "Marine Carp", and she'd written to me in Baalbek as though we were engaged to be married which upset me because we were no such thing but now I realize she was probably trying to be helpful to me with the Lebanese by giving me some sort of cover story for going on to Israel....something like that, probably. Anyway then I thought maybe she loved me and I wanted to see her so we could get things straight, also it would be nice to get a little loving. I found her apartment by the return address on her letter to me. Nobody home, I waited outside in the street. Groups of people walked briskly by, in no apparent order, carrying rifles and bound for the front which was just down the street a bit. It was like my imaginings about the Spanish Civil War: a peoples' army, civilians leaving their occupations for the afternoon to go off to fight the enemy. Even their cloth caps looked Spanish; it was the workingman's standard. Well, Norma didn't come home before I walked away (and later I learned that she had a current lover so that was that).

After I'd been at the Technion for five or six days a few of us were put in the back of a pickup (arranged by whom? on what basis? I know nothing) and driven by back roads to avoid the fighting, and deposited at Sarafand, a huge old British army camp. There I was given a bunk in a tent (from whence my Borsalino hat was stolen when I went to the washhouse) and somehow or other my cousin Danny Rappaport found me. He knew his way around and spoke Hebrew well and had a pickup at his disposal. We walked and talked and I nipped out of camp with him and went to Tel Aviv for the day with my Aunt Tamar and Uncle Mulya and young kid cousins Oded and Yoram. Then back to camp, delayed by an Egyptian air raid. The next day I was escorted to an office and told I had to "sign up". I was given the choice of signing a limited sort of pledge which would put me in the Israeli Army with less likelihood of compromising my American citizenship, or a full scale oath of allegiance. I took the big one. Thus I "volunteered" for service in the Army, and was assigned to an "Anglo Saxon" that is, English-speaking unit, the 72nd Regiment in the 7th (Dunkelman) Brigade, near Haifa.

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## EARLY DAYS IN THE IDF



Having been assigned to the Dunkleman Brigade (the 7th) and traveled up to the Haifa Bay area, I found myself in an English speaking unit. I was put into a Signals unit, living across the road from the main camp - but only after some days of lonely confusion and a sense of nobody being in charge. I think I was assigned only after buttonholing some officer type and demanding some structure.

One night I was on sentry duty and some officers rolled up to the main gate. I had visions of glory: I would refuse them entry and they would praise me - but they had the password.

Most nights we'd go down the road a piece to the canteen of the Nesher Cement Co., and drink beer. My best friend was a cultured, crafty Hungarian Gahalnik in the 72nd.. He found me, I think, naive but okay, and kept telling me the inside story which of course meant nothing to me. It is true that I was naive. I was thrilled to be a part of the army, but distressed that my particular part seemed all screwed up and not serious. There were stories of incompetence about my formation, the 72nd Battalion, of going exposed along the edge of a ridge in combat and getting badly shot up and of leaving wounded men on the battlefield to be tortured by Arab women. In hindsight it seems I would have done well to check up on these stories, but I didn't. The officers I met seemed such a bunch of blowhard swaggering pricks that I didn't need much to want out of that unit. I asked my Company Commander to let me transfer to another unit, the 79th Regiment where George was and he said it was alright (George had been in Baalbek with me, and was our designated Military Commander when the ten of us escaped in Palermo). No, said Capt. Klein, a piggy faced Chicagoan, I should be proud that I was in the 72nd: no transfer. Without his approval, nobody could take me. Except ...I had heard....illegally....Palmach.

Palmach was a striking force within the framework of Haganah, tied to the kibbutz and labor movement, Mapai/Mapam/Ahdut Avodah. Its origin was in the Night Raiders, a force trained in the 1930s by the English eccentric Orde Wingate to counter attack the Arab terrorists and gangs rather than maintain a purely defensive posture as was overall Haganah doctrine. People who went into Palmach had to survive very intensive training, mainly in terrain recognition and survival. They lived at kibbutzim, worked in the fields, and had a tradition of stealing kibbutz chickens for cook-outs at which a main feature was singing and telling "tchizbaht" or tall stories about their exploits and those of their comrades. It was an elite group.

By the time I had got to Israel, David Ben Gurion was in the final stages of moulding a national army out of Haganah and intended to bring the Irgun and the Stern group into it as well. He could, therefore, not exclude Palmach despite the opposition of its officers and the left movement. In July 1948 Palmach still had a separate command structure but was prohibited from recruiting. Despite that, they ran a secret recruiting post in Tel Aviv; it was in a home, one heard, on Rothschild Boulevard, and there one Uri Meretz would sign you up if you were already well trained. (In 1990 I met Dalia Golomb, whose home it had been; her father was Eliahu Golomb, an early Haganah commander. Dalia knows Uri Meretz well). All came in as privates, whatever their rank. Shades of the Foreign Legion! AND in Palmach a wounded comrade was never left behind, never.

So, since I could not get a transfer from the 72nd to the 79th... I deserted and ran off to try to get into Palmach. I reckoned I could bullshit my way in despite my lack of training. Not having experience or sense enough to know about fear of consequences, all I wanted to do was fight for my country heroically. Youth has its moments. I hitchhiked off to Tel Aviv (no formalities on the roads, no checking of papers or anything organized at all), stopping off to stay with Uncle

Zyama at Bet Herut on the way. In TA I stayed with Aunt Tamar and Uncle Mulya while I scrounged around and looked for the secret office. Somehow, ineptly, I failed to locate it. Went back to the 72nd at Nesher, hangdog, hung around a few days and found it still pretty bad - sloppy, ignorant officers, no grounds for confidence in them at all - and slipped off to TA.....and this time I found the secret recruiter. I went into the office and said I'd come to see Uri Meretz. Bellied up to his table and coolly told him I'd been two years in the Ranger Battalion, US Army. His eyes lit up with pleasure, and he signed me up. The next morning Mulya took me on the bus on his way to work and dropped me off at the meeting point, a truck pulled up and I climbed on. I was in Palmach!

There was a ragged bunch on the truck. I don't remember who the others were. The trip to the base of the 9th Regiment, Negev Brigade, at Beer Yaakov was short and hot. We were dumped in a barracks. No orientation, no nothing. Somebody told me to walk down the road to another camp to get my Army card (Army #63144, a formidably low number in the 1960s!). I came back with the card, we were given a meal and taken forward by truck in the dark, turned out at the side of the road, one of us said he would lead us and so we walked through the enemy lines to our Negev base at Kibbutz Ruhama. en route we stopped to make sure nothing in our pockets would jingle and nothing reflect light. We inched forward, apparently through a gap between Egyptian posts: the front line. When we were clear we lay up for a while at an interim stop (maybe it was Kibbutz Nirim) where I met some of the other Americans there already: Harvey Sirulnikoff, Yehuda Lev, Al Wank, Al Twirsky. There was also a contingent of Jews from South Africa, mostly rural types and splendid marksmen, mostly veterans of WW II. I didn't see any of them again until the reorganization at Beer Yaakov in September.

So we ended up at Ruhama, where the unit was called the Negev Beasts (Hayyot HaNegev) and operated as motorized commandos, in two half-tracks with Bren guns mounted. This sixty-man unit was, I was told, the only Jewish attack force in the Negev. There were a few hundred defence forces, dug in at kibbutzim.

I was put into a sort of limbo. I didn't know enough Hebrew so I couldn't understand the briefings or the orders, and I didn't have a gun and there weren't enough to go around. So I was put on kitchen duty and another person there was assigned as a Hebrew teacher. The kitchen and dining hall was a wooden shed on the flat top of the hill near Ruhama. Housing was in big tents nearby; the latrine was at the edge of the cliff.

In the evenings when they didn't go out on a mission I would hang out around one of the tents where the real old-time Palmachniks lived. They seemed always cooking a chicken in the Palmach tradition. I was strongly struck by their consistent failure or inability to cook it properly, it was always badly underdone and very greasy. They let me into the circle, and sat around drinking Bedu coffee and smoking and telling tall tales, tchizbaht. One I remember was a big tower of solid muscle-fat with a tremendous sweeping mustache turned up at the ends; he was called, of course, Abu Schwarab (Father of the Moustache, in Arabic). (Of course all swearing was in Arabic or Russian; Hebrew does not really lend itself. Arabic is great for insults like "Twenty British battleships couldn't pull your moustache away from my asshole!").

After hovering around with no purpose for a week I was ordered to go out on an attack. We got into the half tracks at dusk. They chanted some sort of song, to the girls and the others who were staying behind. Harvey Sirulnikoff and I were given machetes as our weapons, and a couple of grenades. We were warned that the grenades were unreliable, so we should throw

them immediately after we pulled out the pin. The deal was that we would stick close to a man who had a rifle, so that we could pick it up and use it if he got hit. Off we rolled into the night.

We drove for a couple of hours, then stopped, then the half-track shifted about from spot to spot - all this on open scrub desert near Iraq Suidani police fort, I think. Then we stopped and all piled out except for the Bren gunner who covered us from the half track while we ran around a bunch of tents looking inside but there was nobody there. Then we got back in and drove back to our base.

I went on two more attacks and now there was action and the enemy was the Egyptian army. The big Sudanese fought hard, the smaller Egyptians seemed to have no energy (though in January, when they were defending prepared positions inside Egypt, they fought hard and well). After a few weeks of my having only my machete and hand grenades we got some Czech rifles and I was given one and some bullets. I expected somebody to teach me to use it but soon realized it was up to me so I asked Migdal (a tall South African who clearly knew all about rifles) to come with me to the wadi behind the latrine and I told him my problem and he showed me how to load the clip of 5 bullets into the rifle and work the bolt to put one in the chamber, how to sight, how to squeeze the trigger on the out-breath, how to work the bolt again and how to put the safety on and off. I fired a couple of shots into the wadi to get the hang of it and it seemed to work just fine. People sometimes cleaned out their guns by firing off a round or two, and nobody took any notice of mine.

I felt better equipped the next times we went out, and used the rifle effectively.

One night the kibbutz invited us to come down and see a movie. The screen was a bedsheet draped over the side of a large truck. We sat on the ground. The movie's sides were covered in subtitles: Hebrew on one side, French on the other, since the movie was "Gilda" and it was in English. Wow, what a movie! That Rita Hayworth was SOOOO sexy. That was one hell of a good movie.

Then we were taken out one night to a field where a big airplane landed and took us in to fly us up to Tel Nof. We marched - or straggled, actually - over to Beer Yaakov, for reorganization of the regiment.

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## **PALMACH**

An acronym of the Hebrew words "Plugot Machatz", meaning "Attack Units" or "Commando"-equivalent.

Palmach was formed as a response to a need to expand the Jewish self-defence system in British-mandated Palestine of the late 1930s and early 1940s.

The Jewish community in Palestine - the Yishuv - could not rely on the British to protect them from frequent and damaging terrorist Arab attacks. For one thing, there were too few British police forces. For another, they were sometimes more sympathetic towards the Arabs and would turn a blind eye to terrorist attacks on Jews. A cynic might also see a strain of imperial technique at work, the ploy of divide and conquer.

From the first days of the British mandate it was clear that the Yishuv needed its own defence force. The settlements were assertive enough in defending themselves, but training and supplies were sketchy and not coordinated. There was in being a nucleus for creating a larger defence organization: "HaShomer" ("the guardian" or "watchman"), formed by the Yishuv before the Turks were driven out of Palestine by the British in the First World War, in 1916. These men were on horseback and armed with rifles and most spoke good Arabic, they were indigenous to the region and to all the local cultures. Mostly mustachioed Russian Jews, big and tough and slow spoken, with good friendships and contacts among moderate Arabs and a detailed familiarity with the countryside,

It was from this nucleus that a self defence force was grown. It was called "Haganah", "Defence". The political orientation of Haganah was Left, and the source of its members the kibbutz movement primarily, though members of Habonim from the towns and cities were also involved. Men, and women too, were given paramilitary training by instructors from the ranks of Jews in the Mandatory police force, working on their own time. Activity in Haganah was of course on a volunteer basis, and after training the participation was part time and almost always on call for special needs. Most members did Haganah activities when they were not needed for farm work or, in the case of the city kids, when they were out of work. The full-time cadre was very small. The leaders were the leaders of the Left wing political movements: Mapai, Achdut HaAvodah, and Kibbutz Artzi/Mapam. Funding was from the organs of the Yishuv, largely the quasi-government called the Jewish Agency for Palestine and also from the various kibbutz movements. It was a technically illegal organization, though its members were not actively sought by the Palestine Police at first.

With the beginning of the Second World War, the political leadership of the Yishuv, particularly its Left wing, accepted David Ben Gurion's formula: "We will fight against the Germans as if there was no Mandate - and we will fight against the Mandate as if there was no War!". This was because in a White Paper in 1939 the British as Mandatory Power sealed the borders of Palestine to Jewish refugees fleeing from the Nazis, and the Yishuv did not recognize this stricture and indeed Haganah brought in thousands of such refugees despite the British military blockade and serious attacks by the Royal Navy and the British Army. Many refugees got caught en route, and over a thousand perished in the course of trying to get to Palestine; the British are solely responsible for that.

According to BG's formula, many if not most members of Haganah - as well as tens of thousands of Palestinian Jews who were not members - volunteered for service in the British forces. (No Arabs. They were all indifferent or sympathized with the Germans or the Italians. Haj Amin el Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who had been banished by the British - even their patience was exhausted - before the War, spent the War in Berlin broadcasting support for the Nazis and working to enlist Yugoslav Muslims in a German combat force).

Many of the Jewish volunteers were relegated to British Army labor battalions and service units but as the war went on first a few and then many were given specialized training and served as infantry and in special service units where their language skills and devotion to killing Germans found good use. (Among them was the young Moshe Dayan, who lost an eye directing a British-sponsored attack on a position in Vichy-controlled Syria). Others were eventually formed into a Jewish Brigade which saw service in the Italian campaign. Members of this Brigade mostly took their discharge from the British Army in Europe and went on to form and operate "Breychah",

the organization that smuggled Jewish refugees from the Displaced Person camps across Europe and across the Mediterranean to get past the British blockade - which was maintained past the end of the War, of course - or be caught and turned back or interned on Cyprus in concentration camps the British set up for them there. The corporate name adopted by these veterans was "TTG", which stood for Tilhas Tizi Gesellschaft. Tilhas tizi means "kiss my ass" in Arabic; Gesellschaft is German for "Company".

These trained people formed the cadres for the post-War Haganah and Palmach.

Haganah, as the name says, dealt with defence. "Forward defence" actions such as hitting Arab terrorist bands in their own bases was not unknown - indeed in the early days of the War the British soldier and idealist Charles Orde Wingate, later renowned commander of British forces in Ethiopia and later in Burma, trained and led a group of Haganah members called "Special Night Forces" which set the tone for Palmach in its day.

An impatience with what some perceived as Haganah's passive or at least unaggressive position, coupled with political pressures from the Right for their own militia, resulted in the formation of a separate armed group in the early 1940s. It was called Etzel (an acronym for Irgun Tsvaii Leumi, or National Army Organization). Its Right wing members (now the Likud party in Israel, led by Menahem Begin) did not share Haganah's scrupulous (and often costly) concern to avoid killing, and they attacked ferociously and with a tinge of racial hatred against the Arabs. They financed themselves with robberies of (Jewish) banks and donations from American Jews who were beguiled by the rhetoric of their leader, Menahem Begin, as translated and enhanced by Ben Hecht, their American publicist and devotee. They took hostages and in fact hung two British soldiers, bombed public buildings with innocent people in them, and generally behaved as a terrorist organization. Not so Haganah, which warned British radar stations set up to intercept the Jewish "illegal" immigrant ships before bombing them, even when this cost Haganah members their own lives.

Finding even Etzel lacking in aggressiveness, and moving to the sound of a nihilist ideology, a group under the leadership of Abraham Stern split off from Etzel and became Lehi ("Lochamei Herut Yisrael", "Fighters for the Freedom of Israel"). Their primary tactic was individual assassination, and their last act was the killing of the UN mediator in Israel, Count Bernadotte, in late 1948 or early 1949. Stern, called "Yair", was killed in the 1930s but his program was carried out by others, among them their operations commander Yitzhak Shamir who is now the Prime Minister of Israel! (*For an alternate view on Lehi, by one of the readers of this page [click here](#). Ed*)

It must be noted that despite the attacks on Jewish communities by Arab terrorists and the lack of protection from the British authorities, the British were determined to root out Haganah and employed very strong means to do that. It was a capital offence to possess arms, even the rifles previously issued by the British for self defence in the kibbutzim. The kibbutzim were invaded by Army units, very roughly and with much deliberate damage, in arms searches, and the British intelligence services particularly Military Intelligence under Gerald Templar used terror, infiltration, and torture of Jewish captives. Arab areas were not searched by the British authorities, though the Arab bands used rifles and machine guns freely in attacking Jewish settlements. Many Jews were imprisoned, beaten, deported to camps in Africa - and hung for bearing arms, even those clearly involved in self defence against Arab terrorist attacks. It was against this background that Haganah's policy of self restraint - "havlagah" - became

inadequate, even to its members and commanders. Something had to be done, and done within the only organization that represented the vast majority of the Yishuv: Haganah.

The members of Haganah did not want to split the organization in two, and so an organization arose within Haganah and under the command of Haganah's commanders but with a separate mission: "aggressive forward defense". It was to strike Arab terrorist groups in their own bases, and to be the forward echelon in attacks on British radar stations. As part of Haganah, it avoided killing as much as possible, and British troops were given warning to evacuate before attacks on their installations.

Palmach was a peoples' militia. There were no ranks, only responsibilities. Members who had appropriate training and were accepted by the troops as leaders were given commensurate responsibilities. Those who had passed the training course for Squad Leaders (said to have been more difficult than the training given Royal Marine Commandos in those days), were termed Squad Leaders. My platoon in the 9th Regiment consisted of three jeeps, each with a front gunner who was the squad leader, a driver, and a rear machine gunner - which on my jeep was me. Platoon Leaders had passed that course. The Platoon Leader of the 3-jeep platoon next to mine was a stolid, chubby fellow nicknamed Motta; as Motta Gur, he later became Commander-in-Chief of the Israeli Defence Force). The formation above Platoon was Battalion or Regiment. The largest formation was a Brigade (a number of Regiments and independent units, such as the Negev Brigade), and the largest command was a Front (e.g. Northern Front).

Palmach training had been very tough. Physical fitness was required to a very high standard. A detailed knowledge of the countryside was ensured by frequent and exhaustive marches and surveys of the terrain of all of the country - and outside its borders too. Every person was trained to function as part of his or her group - but also as an autonomous fighter. One was required to understand the objective of every action so that one could go on to achieve it alone if need be.

The style of life was very informal. There were no uniforms, of course, it being a secret underground army. No ranks, of course, and no saluting. Discipline was self-induced, and based on trust as well as full briefing for all involved. All were called by given names or nicknames, including Brigade commanders and all senior officers. Brigades were named after their commander ("Carmeli") or a geographical feature of their fighting locale ("Negev"). In harvest time, all hands worked together in the fields. The Palmach grew its own culture, sang its own songs ("Bat shevah" was one), and had a tradition of stealing a chicken from its host kibbutz and cooking it over a small fire, sitting around and telling tall stories (Tchizbatt).

In the guerrilla war that preceded the War of Liberation Palmach units almost always displayed devotion and self sacrifice; they generally fought skillfully, too, though sometimes they too got into a "balagan" or screwed up and often were committed against overwhelming odds in men and weapons. They took very heavy casualties, particularly in officers because the command to charge was "follow me".

When the British left and the War of Liberation proper began, the Etzel retained its separate command and mounted its own operation in Jaffa at first and in Jerusalem, while Haganah became Tzvah Haganah L'Yisrael, Tzahal, the Israel Defence Force.

Etzel had many brave fighters, but their lack of training made them effective in street fighting if

anything. Also they had some aberrations, such as a murderous attack on helpless civilians in an Arab village called Deir Yassin.

David Ben Gurion, then Prime Minister and Defence Minister, intended that there be only one military force in Israel, the IDF. (He also had a deep antagonism for Begin and what he stood for). He ordered the dissolution of all paramilitary and military units and their absorption into Tzahal; their officers were to be given equivalent positions in Tzahal. This was accomplished only after some struggle that caused painful casualties and nearly grew into a civil war, but it was done. It was the sacrifice of the independence of Palmach, the Left wing militia, that justified the similar sacrifice on the part of the Right wing. Finally, Tzahal included units that had been Palmach and others that had been Etzel but were now united in one force, a national force. This force, the IDF, served a vital role in education and integration of young men and women from many differing cultures into an Israeli culture, as well as defending the infant and young Israel. Part of the IDF's central dogma was called "tehorat ha neshek", the purity of the weapons, calling for scrupulous care to avoid dishonoring weapons by using them for evil. This means tactics that were inclined towards sparing lives rather than slaughter. Since the invasion of Lebanon, it may be that this principle has eroded.

Anyway, in my days as a Reservist in Israel, there was always somebody during training who would respond to the instructor's closing "Any questions?" with

"Yes....why was Palmach broken up?"

We all know why, but some of us are nostalgic for a group of comrades whose mission was attack - but who kept their human spirit and ethical standards high.

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## **THE NEGEV BRIGADE September 1948-March 1949**

In September of 1948 my unit, Hayyot HaNegev, was brought back to its main base in Beer Yaakov to be reorganized. We took in some new people, and broke up into three units: half tracks as before, an armored car unit, and a jeep commando. I chose the jeep commando. Albert Monteux, my mentor, explained that on the half tracks there was too much crowding, and the armored cars would burn up and burn those inside them if they got hit. The jeeps had a crew of three (four, sometimes) and one could always have a place to store a bag of onions which Albert pointed out would make all the difference in cuisine on long patrols. He was right. Our food was canned Canadian kosher corned beef, biscuits and jam. An onion made the corned beef palatable cold or cooked, and one could have an onion with the dry biscuits in a pinch.

We started by stealing the jeeps. The Army had imported some jeeps, but the Army Headquarters staff in Tel Aviv got them before they could be sent out to the fighting units. We had copies of an order from Ben Gurion that any jeep we found in Tel Aviv - no matter how exalted its master - was assigned to us. Off we went one evening, in groups of three: a driver, a commander and a guard in case of trouble. Each group had a hacksaw to deal with locks and chains, and a distributor arm to replace those taken off as a means of immobilizing a vehicle to prevent it being stolen. We roamed the streets of Tel Aviv, and stole enough shiny new jeeps for the unit. Back at the base the armorers welded on gun mounts fore and aft, one for the commander and one for the rear gunner. The rear gunner had the capacity for high firing at

aircraft as well as flatter trajectories for ground combat. The machine guns were the Czech Spandau MG32 type, very fast firing and sturdy. They got blocked up by sand easily, but were easy to clear. The bullets were in belts of fifty, four belts to an ammo box and we had brackets welded in for four ammo boxes. A 4' x 4' x 4' metal box was welded on the rear panel on the outside of each jeep, for supplies. Three jeeps were a squad, nine a company. The company commander's jeep carried a two way radio. We were supported by armorers and mechanics in two command cars, for our two companies. Mota commanded one company (he's now known as Mota Gur) and first Nissan and then Israel the other (in which I was rear gunner on a jeep commanded by Romik and driven by Shloimeleh). This was the Jeep Commando of the Negev Brigade. We were in the 9th Regiment, whose commander was then known as Haim Kidoni and now is called Haim Bar Lev. The Negev Brigade commander was Shimon Avidan (who I got to know at Ein Hashofet, in the 1960s).

I was in contact with my aunt Tamar in Tel Aviv, and she told me that Israel and Berenica were going to arrive in Haifa on the SS "Kedmah". There was a lull in the fighting (the second UN truce, maybe) and I got a pass and hitchhiked up there, got there just before the ship docked. It was a Saturday, and the religious were making trouble about Shabbos and trying to keep the ship from docking or unloading - even unloading passengers. Most of the passengers were displaced persons from the camps in Europe and it was brutal to have them kept from landing in the promised land. Those meeting the ship were kept away from it and all the approaches fenced and guarded - but I found a way to sneak through and got to the side of the ship which was up against the dock. No sign of the Rapps; they did not know I was going to meet them and had been told there would be a long wait before they could get off so they were in the dining salon. So there I was on the dock, the ship tied up alongside, no sign of my folks, guards all over the place. The lower deck seemed almost within reach, crowded with the new immigrants pointing and calling. After a bit of hesitation I took a flying leap across the gap between the dock and the ship and managed to grab the rail on the lower deck. With cheers and laughter the olim pulled me over and hid me from the guards who came running to see what was happening. I ducked up the companionway, and found myself in the dining salon and there were Israel and Berenica and so we had a splendid reunion and spent a couple of days together before I went back to my unit.

And so it was back down to the Negev, on a bitterly cold night. The jeeps and half tracks and armored cars are in convoy, slow going with many stops and starts. By 3 am we are frozen and miserable. We are stopped and just sitting there, too cold and tired to bitch about it. Suddenly.....figures coming towards us over the fields. Gun up, safety off, ready! Turns out to be not Egyptian soldiers but Jewish settlers from a nearby village, Kfar Warburg (my cousin Luki lives there now), come to bring us poor heroes a little comfort. They hand three small bottles of arak into each jeep. We murmur our thanks, unscrew the caps and glug the stuff down; in a minute we are warm and comfortable. I will never forget that kind act.

We get through the lines with only a little shooting. No longer near Ruhama, we are now based at Nirim, a front line kibbutz that has defended itself against severe attacks. The Egyptians attacked with tanks, artillery, air support and infantry in strength. The 45 defenders had minefields all around - and that proved very effective - about 40 rifles, two Stens, two Brens all with very small quantities of ammunition, and a PIAT and four missiles.

Now we headquarter in a grove of bare young trees, and we go on the offensive. Night raids against Egyptian posts and camps, we roar into them with machine guns blazing and throwing



grenades around and screaming like banshees, and roar out again before they have collected their wits. Some damage, lots and lots of panic. We learn that Egyptian Intelligence reports refer to us (9 jeeps, 2 half tracks, 6 armored cars) as a Russian armored column of division size. Raids against Rafiah and Gaza and the police fort at Iraq Suidani known as "The Monster".

Then comes the attack on Beersheba. Us jeepnicks lie along the outside of the battle zone all night, but bullets do whistle our way (if you hear it, it hasn't hit you.....). I am nervy because of a strafing incident the day before.

We'd been resting in a grove of trees, my squad of three jeeps, and we were spotted by a trio of Egyptian Spitfires. All the other Israelis ran for the slit trenches we had dug but I was the squad anti-aircraft gunner so I ran to my jeep and unsheathed the machine gun and waited for the order to fire. I guess that the MemMem, Nissan, thought we had not been seen or that they might not attack so he ordered me not to fire. I saw the planes dive for us in a strafing run and unthinkingly dropped down behind the nearest shelter - a very wrong move indeed since it was my jeep and turned out to be THE target. Down came the first plane. Crouching beneath the jeep I saw the puffs of dirt from it's 20 mm cannon shells marching in a straight line right for me. It was happening too quickly. I was paralyzed with fear. Rifle fire, bayonets, artillery, mortar shells - none of those triggered acute terror in me.....but the strafing did. I knew beyond any doubt that the third or fourth next shot would hit me. I knew it. Boom.....Boom.....and no more, the first plane swerved away without firing the fatal third shell. I leaped up and galloped over to a slit trench and threw myself into it, as the second plane attacked. The shots were now aimed at the trenches, not the jeeps. We had dug the trenches carefully, deep and with small mouths. Nobody was hurt, though we had two killed and two wounded in another air attack later that afternoon. So I am a little gun-shy the night of the attack on Beersheba, but I can hold my water.

In the morning we attack the city, in line next to Freddy and his French Commandos (that is the name by which I know the unit). Scattered firing, signs of flight and abandoned military equipment. As we drive along the street and Egyptian soldier appears from a doorway, he has a rifle in his hands but does not menace us. A jeep stops and the Egyptian walks up to it.....the gunner points the machine gun at the Egyptian.....the soldier keeps walking up to the jeep until his chest is touching the machine gun's muzzle.....he raises the rifle and works the bolt, clearly he means to fire at the Israelis sitting in the jeep not two feet from him. The machine gunner fires, the Egyptian is torn in half. Relieved it was not me. We drive on. Our objective is an Egyptian command post in the railroad station, a fine stone building. The others cover me, I burst inside.....no resistance. I take a Tommy gun and bag of .45 ammo from an Egyptian sergeant...go into the next room and find an Egyptian major . Handsome man, very military bearing, spoke good English "We didn't think you could attack us; our Intelligence said you were defeated and fleeing north to Tel Aviv". I took a splendid fleece-lined canvas British "Officers Warm" coat from his room for mine own, and led him out to the prisoner interrogation area.

That was all of it, in the city. We were given an hour off and looted the abandoned shops. No Arabs anywhere, just Egyptian troops marching off to the POW enclosures. I got a small rug and four cartons of good cigarettes.

Then: on to the jeeps again. Since the Egyptians were fleeing, a small column was organized to chase them as far south as we could. Off we go, in high spirits. Stop at a little oasis a few miles out to take map bearings.....alas, a hidden tank fires one round and kills our Brigade second in

command, a fine and popular commander who was exposed in the open hatch of his armored car. We are crushed at the loss, and end the pursuit.

We go back sadly, to Beersheba. There my unit is assigned to our living quarters, an abandoned Arab group of houses around a courtyard with a fountain and trees. The houses are well built of dressed stone but inside they are filthy with feces and other refuse. We put our sleeping bags out on the flat roof, that first night.

We talk, too nerved up to sleep. There was Harvey Sirulnikoff from Canada, Sam Rosen from the USA, Aryeh Englesberg (Arnon, later) from England, "Stern" the crazy talking English gentile (said to be a deserter from the British Army who came over to our side driving a Centurion tank), "Eskimo" (well, he said he was an Eskimo but I think he was a Belgian). There were the South Africans: Jack Lifshitz (my buddy; he'd got shell shock with the 8th Army at Monte Cassino, and I had to "make siss" for him before he could piss), and Migdal, and Big Max with his Oom Paul pipe, and young Gordon Jamison. There was Albert Monteaux, said to have given up high rank at IDF Headquarters to come in with us as a private.

Albert was older than the rest of us. There was a story that he was of a prominently wealthy French Jewish family and that he had fought in the Maquis as a devout communist, been captured and tortured by the Gestapo. (In 1954 when I visited Paris I asked the Israeli Consulate there if they could locate him for me as an old friend, mentioning that Albert Monteaux was his nom de guerre in the Palmach. They said they had no records of him. An hour later he phoned me, giving me to understand that he was a senior officer in some French Intelligence outfit dealing with the Viet Minh in Indo China. We had a meal together and he gave me to understand that he was now in French Military Intelligence, doing something high level about the Viet Minh). Ah, it was as Albert that taught me always to carry a supply of onions on the jeep, to make the food palatable.

That night on the roof in Beersheba we talked about life and death, mourned those who had died and wondered about the progress of the wounded, talked a lot about what had happened to us that day, about fear..... We talked about banding together after the war and settling down to raise chickens in a cooperative village (and in fact some of them did, mostly South Africans, just south of Haifa; we visited them in 1958, and then dropped the contact). Nobody talked about their children, none of us had children.

The next day we started to clean out the houses and when they were clean the compound was taken over for Regimental Headquarters and we were assigned another filthy place so we cleaned that out and we were not moved again. Rusty rigged up a drum on the roof that we could build a fire under, for hot water for showers.....but water of any sort was rarely available; Yehuda Lev was driving a water tanker at that time, and it would roll up every few days and we'd crouch under its four pipes and wash ourselves off.

That was when we started our scouting and night probing patrols in enemy territory, testing their defences and contacting our isolated outposts.....down Maaleh Akrabim and through Ein Husub and the Red Wadi to Sdom.

But first came the concert given in Beersheba by Leonard Bernstein at my invitation. This is how it came about. My Aunt Yona was Lenny's Hebrew teacher while he visited Israel. She got me a ticket to one of his concerts, and took me backstage to meet him after. He was sitting down,

stripped to the waist and having his sweat wiped off by a couple of pretty young women, drinks all around, a very excited "theatre" atmosphere. "Lenny" trilled my aunt, "I want you to meet my nephew Elihu - - the conqueror of Beersheba!". Oof! I tried to vanish, but Lenny took it in stride (he probably was used to my aunt and her dramatic pronouncements) and greeted me cordially. "Lenny!" trilled my aunt, "On behalf of all his heroic comrades, Elihu invites you to give a piano concert in Beersheba!". "Oh yass" says I, dutifully. Lenny protests that Beersheba is behind the battle front, and that there may not be a good piano there. Aunt Yona overrides. She can and will arrange for a plane to fly Lenny and His Piano down to Beersheba. And so it was. I was to introduce him, but was out on patrol when the blessed event took place. I'm told it was a really good concert, and much appreciated.

My unit, all 9 jeeps, was now assigned to scouting the way to the Potash Works, at the bottom end of the Dead Sea, from the South. We went down Maaleh Akravim, twisting down the hairpin curves, and over scrub desert to Ein Hussub. This was, I suppose, an old British Army post; there was a stone building on a slight hill near the spring, and a small wooden barracks building. We camped alongside the hill for a few weeks, scouting up to the Dead Sea and relieving the Jewish group that occupied the Potash Works compound. Lost two men on Israeli minefields, nobody had the maps. It was hard riding, and tense particularly when we were in Jordanian territory and saw tracks of the Arab Legion patrols (and once even had them in our gunsights in a good ambush situation, but did nothing).

My memories of this period are confused. We lay up most of the day, and went out a lot at night. No fighting, but a lot of tension. Part of the tension was finding our way, by map and compass reckoning and time. Part was the knowledge that we might be under Beduin eyes, since they were prone to snipe (and very accurately, too) and it was hard as hell to winkle them out once a fight started.

Then there was an electrical sort of excitement, and it turned out we went to the Egyptian border to ambush an Egyptian Army convoy. We dismounted the machine guns and emplaced them on a ridge of a hill. Sure enough, as Intelligence had promised, an Egyptian convoy came along on the track below us. We opened up with everything, I was careful to fire in three-second bursts so as not to overheat the MG's barrel. After a few minutes we saw trucks break for cover to the sides. Many trucks were hit and soldiers streamed out of them. We mounted the MGs back onto the jeeps and swarmed down after the enemy. We captured about ten vehicles and about a hundred soldiers. What to do with the prisoners? A hillock was designated, some of our less fortunate troops were assigned to guard it, and we rounded up the Egyptians and put them there. My jeep picked up a huge Sudanese soldier to bring him in. He didn't want to give up his rifle but I put on a fierce face and grabbed it away from him and gestured him to sit opposite my rear seat on the jeep. Then we bounced along to the prisoner point, with him glowering at me and me holding my rifle pointed at him. I was very uneasy, and would have shot him at the slightest provocation. When we offloaded him he stood at attention and saluted me. Relieved that there had been no trouble, I gave him a pack of cigarettes and saluted back.

Then we went on and found ourselves the spearhead of the Israeli Army's invasion force, on the Egyptian border in the Sinai. [I have a photograph of us there.](#) While waiting to go in, I got off the jeep and pissed on the border marker, on the Egyptian side. It was clearly a territorial gesture on my part, and I meant it as exactly that now that I remember it. So....down the road we went, with the rest of the column following us. Soon we were out of sight of the rest, bowling merrily through the gentle hills. Cresting one of the hills we found ourselves

in a large crowd of Egyptian soldiers. They were milling about, more in bunches than in organized groups, and were moving towards a line of trucks on the road, pointed south to Egypt. They ignored us; I think they took us for Egyptian military as was often the case when we raided Egyptian camps above the border. So there we were, among thousands of Egyptians (three battalions of infantry, we found out later) who had guns. Israel, the MemMem, radioed back to the column commander for instructions. He was told we were to hang on, that a support force was coming along at top speed. We waited. Some of the Egyptians were getting aboard the trucks and the full trucks starting to move off. Israel reported and was ordered to stop as many trucks as we could. We circled around to the head of the trucks, and started firing. Some trucks stopped, some broke off and went overland, some barrelled on through. My jeep found itself just behind a truck which was speeding down the road. Romik gave it a burst. This triggered an unpalatable reaction: the canvas at the back of the truck was pulled away unmasking a 20 mm gun which started firing at us. We veered away, and lost that truck.

We had found Abu Agella, a major Egyptian Army center. We ended up capturing about fifteen trucks and a number of 20 mm guns, some six pounders, and about 300 Egyptian soldiers. Then we scouted around the camp and found great booty: cigarettes, and good (officer) food, ammunition, gasoline, etc. We sat back to enjoy it all, but were pushed off on a mission for the Israel Air Force. Intelligence had it that there were three Egyptian Air Force Spitfires at an airstrip about twenty miles away, with minimal security. IAF wanted them, we had so very few planes of our own. So my three jeeps went bowling down a road to get them. We got to the field and shot up the guards and the planes were ours. But we could only take two because the only way we could transport them was by putting the tail in the back of a jeep and hauling the plane along on its landing wheels, backwards. And the MemMem's jeep has a radio in the back so two rear passengers so there was no room. Back we went, then, to Abu Agella, with two Spitfires. I had one, and rode holding its tail in the jeep as we bounced along. When we got back to Abu Agella we found a couple of IAF pilots who had come down to fly the planes back. First we made them stand in front of the whole invasion force to apologize for the error that the IAF had made when they strafed us some days before (killing one of the most respected men in the unit). They were confused, they explained, because we had neglected to paint out the Egyptian Army air markings on an ambulance we had captured from an Egyptian convoy we had ambushed. Since we had no ground-to-air communication (our radio connected with Brigade, which called headquarters, which called the IAF, which called the air base controlling the pilots, which called the pilots.....who by then had returned from their mission and were having a beer in their canteen). And so it goes in the most confused of all human undertakings.

After a small night's sleep, the Jeep Commando was assigned to attack another Egyptian air base, this one apparently ten miles from the Suez Canal. Two trucks full of infantry went with us. Intelligence told us that there were about ten airplanes there which we were to destroy, and that the defences were less than a company of Egyptian infantry. So off you go, me lads, to more glory! When we got there the cupboard was by no means bare. Our post-action estimate was two companies of Egyptian infantry, with heavy weapons support. They depressed their 20 mm anti-aircraft guns to flat fire across the fields and shot the shit out of us as we attacked, before we turned and ran for it (giving me a splendid opportunity to give covering fire to our retreat, as I trembled with soldierly passion as well as fear; I did alright). We in the jeeps took a few casualties, the truck-born infantry more than a few. And so we slunk back up to Abu Agella and cursed Intelligence.

That night or the next, we were ordered to pull out of Egypt. It seems that an Anglo-Egyptian

defence treaty was invoked and the Brits gave us a deadline to get out. As my unit was the spearhead of the invasion, we were ordered to cover the retreat and be the last out. That is why I was sitting there all night, in freezing cold, exhausted and miserable with reaction to the adrenalin wash from about ten days of combat after weeks and weeks behind enemy lines, on guard with my trusty MG against what was said to be an advancing tank Brigade of the Egyptian Army. We had two PIATs, for use against the tanks: hoorah. It was such a letdown, such a bummer. If an Egyptian had come up and quietly invited me to surrender and come over for a nice hot cup of cocoa.....who knows what I would have done. Well, nobody came. We sat there, on the three jeeps, at full alert, all night of New Year's Eve, calling headquarters plaintively from time to time to ask if it was time to pull out yet. Finally, just at dawn, the order blessedly came, and we gunned our motors and high tailed it up the road.

After that there was a period of which I have no memory at all. We were resting, probably at our base in Beersheba. Before we were properly restored, though, we were ordered down past the Egyptian border into Sinai again, something about clearing out some pockets of awkwardness, Egyptian mishlatim. We glumly trundled on down, and found ourselves attacking strongly defended forts whose artillery and machine guns had carefully ranged and set their lines of fire. We took heavy casualties, and I do hope it was worth it.

That was the end of the fighting, for me. We went up to the IAF airfield at Tel Nof, and hung around there while the army organized itself. Ranks were introduced (as Palmach, there had been no ranks only tasks or levels of responsibility), and salutes (anathema!). My unit accepted these manifestations as lawful and proper- but as individuals we refused to implement them.

The War of Independence was over except for the excursion to Elat, and by the time that went down I was out and working at Kibbutz Gesher HaZiv.