

I Flew For Israel

By JULIAN SWING

as told to
QUENTIN REYNOLDS



These are the kind of men you'll find in the Israeli Air Force. The author (right) says that the IAF, with very poor planes, easily outfought the Arabs

A veteran of our Air Force with Jewish blood tells why he fought for Israel, and why the Israelis, hopelessly outnumbered, won the war with the Arabs. His experiences taught him that the Palestinian Jews have been badly treated by the outside world, and he says, "The people of Israel are the most democratic in the world"

THE Brindisi airport looked nice from the air, and this should have been just another routine landing. There was a long concrete strip, no cross wind, and the Norseman plane I was flying had no bad habits. I got my clearance and circled the field. Then I circled it again and Alfredo Malpine, my Italian-American copilot, looked at me strangely.

I went around a third time and then straightened out, lowered my flaps and made my final approach to land. The controls seemed heavy and the whole plane wobbled sluggishly, but I knew this wasn't the fault of the plane. The white concrete runway stretched in front of me but I wasn't seeing it.

I was seeing the quiet smile on Lennie Cohen's face and hearing Buzz Beurling chuckle as he stepped up into the cockpit. That had been only four hours ago at the Rome airport. There were three Canadian single-engined Norsemen on the field, and we were to fly them to Israel. I was to fly with Beurling, the leading Canadian fighter pilot during the war, but at the last minute we shifted assignments and put Lennie Cohen, the ex-R.A.F. pilot, in with Buzz.

They had taken off for a quick check flight around the field before heading for Israel and on the landing approach the engine backfired; the flame caught the fabric of the fuselage and within four seconds the plane was nothing but a sheath of flame plummeting down.

The airport commander and I ran toward the inferno. Lennie and Buzz were strapped in there. Soon the flames died down and we went as close as we could and saw the two charred bodies. The airport commander turned to me and said, "Swing, your ship is ready to take off."

Dazed, I walked away toward the Norseman, climbed in and took off. It was all automatic. I looked straight ahead, changing course when Malpine, who was navigating, told me to change. Brindisi is down in the heel of Italy not far from Bari. We would refuel there and head for Israel.

They called Buzz Beurling "Screwball," but I never saw anything screwy about him. He was

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quiet and soft-spoken. He didn't even drink the wine they gave us with our meals in Rome. He earned that nickname when he was flying Spitfires during the war. They say there was no crazy chance he wouldn't take in the air. Lennie Cohen, the Englishman, was quiet too, but he was intense and a great idealist. He believed that Israel's fight was his fight just as England's fight had been his fight.

Instead of seeing the runway as we came into Brindisi I was seeing their faces, but again instinctively I eased the stick back and we hit the concrete strip, bounced badly and then settled. I taxied to the small administration building, climbed out of the ship and went behind the building and got very sick. I leaned against the white wall and looked at my hands. They were shaking.

I leaned there trembling all over, and I knew that I could never fly again. I tried to rationalize my condition and decided I was suffering from delayed shock. The full impact of what had happened to Beurling and Cohen was hitting me now. My rationalizing it didn't make it any better. Like every other pilot who had flown in the Pacific, I'd had my quota of close calls. I'd had them in the Philippines and in flights over Okinawa and Japan, but nothing had ever hit me like this.

I asked for a telephone and called the Haganah representative in Rome. To my surprise he seemed to understand.

"I can't fly," I told him a bit hysterically. "I'm through."

He said soothingly that that was all right, and told me to return to Rome and he'd have transportation for me back to Los Angeles. I flew to Rome as a passenger. I went to the Mediterraneo Hotel where Buzz and Lennie and I had stayed. For three days I brooded. Then one morning I woke up and my hands were no longer shaking, my head was clear, and I realized that I was all right again.

I called the Haganah man, told him I was ready for duty, and he said there would be a plane waiting for me the next morning. And from that time on I was a full-fledged member of the volunteer Israeli Air Force.

What makes a normal thirty-three-year-old American quit his job to travel 7,000 miles to a hunk of desert, and fly all sorts of broken-down crates under all sorts of conditions? There are those who think we did it for money. Money? My salary as an Israeli pilot was one hundred dollars a month. Was it a search for excitement, an escape from the boredom of routine everyday life? Not for me it wasn't. I was perfectly happy living in Los Angeles working as a salesman, going to the movies twice a week, going bowling on Saturday night, occasionally lifting a stein of beer with the gang and in the summer rooting for the Los Angeles Angels. I wasn't bored. Why did I enlist in the Israeli Air Force?

Why Pilots Joined Up

Often we'd sit in the ready room at an airport in Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia or at our Israel base at Aqir and we'd ask one another that question. Most of us were Americans but there were British, Canadian and South African pilots, also, in our volunteer group. Three of us had joined up together in Los Angeles: Bob Vickman, Stanley Andrews and myself. Bob and Stanley had been AAF pilots too, and they'd been doing all right as civilians. They didn't want any excitement either, but something within them impelled them to fight for Israel.

It was early in 1948 when I joined the volunteer group. For months I'd been reading about the fight the Jews of Palestine were making. During the war we knew what we were fighting for all right, and reading the newspapers out in L.A. I had got to thinking that the Jews were fighting for the same things that we had fought for. They wanted a democratic

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country of their own, the sort of country our forefathers had fought for.

The League of Nations had given them the world's blessing, but in recent years the world had turned against them, had repudiated the promises it had made. The world seemed more interested in power politics, in economic stability for well-entrenched Middle East interests, in maintaining the *status quo*. The world seemed more interested in oil beneath the ground than in people above the ground.

I'd been educated in the New York Public schools, and then I studied engineering at Cooper Union. You get an awfully good training in democracy in New York schools. I kept reading the papers and watching the United Nations evade its responsibilities toward struggling little Israel. I got madder and madder and one day a thought occurred to me. I too was a Jew.

I'd never thought much about that because it didn't seem to matter one way or another in school or college or in the Fifth Air Force. I had no kinship with the Jews of Europe beyond a historical relation. Back in 1921 a million or so Americans came to the sudden realization that although they owed allegiance only to this country they had Irish blood in them, and they poured forth their money and their efforts to help Ireland become a free state.

This in no way compromised their loyalty to America. Their only ties with Ireland were historical ties, but they arose in fierce anger to support and establish the De Valera regime. Now I felt as they had felt then.

It was that simple, and three weeks after I'd enlisted I found myself ferrying a bomber over Arab positions.

I felt very much at home in Israel, not because I was a Jew (non-Jewish members of our group felt the same way) but because the Israeli fighters of the Palmach and the Haganah and the civilians who were fighting in their own way were so much like men I'd trained with in the Air Force and had gone overseas with. The native-born Palestinian is called a Sabre. To my surprise the ordinary Sabre looked exactly like Hitler's definition of an Aryan. He was usually blond, regular-featured, blue-eyed and tall.

Sabre is the name given to the fruit of the cactus plant. This fruit is tough outside but sweet inside, and that about sums up the native Palestinian. In battle he was tough and he could embark on overnight marches carrying a pack and his gun and be fit to fight when he ended the march, and he could endure any degree of suffering.

They are definitely our kind of people, these Palestinians. That was the verdict of every one of the 300 volunteer members of the air force I knew. We were also surprised to find that the majority spoke English.

The military victory won by Israel contradicted every textbook ever written by the experts. On paper they had no right to win against the strength of five sovereign Arab nations. On May 15, 1948, Palestine became Israel, and immediately the fury of the Arab attack broke. On that date Israel didn't have a single fighter plane to defend her cities from air attack; she had no antiaircraft weapons—just machine guns, Bren guns and small-caliber stuff. Every day the Egyptian Spitfires and Dakotas came over to drop their bombs on defenseless cities, towns and villages.

Eventually, though, we had an air force of a sort. At its very greatest strength it consisted of three B-17s (flown "illegally" from America); 25 single-engined Norsemen (flown "illegally" from Canada); 15 Messerschmitts (bought in Czechoslovakia); 30 Spitfires (given to Czechoslovakia by the British as a gift and sold by the Czechs

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to Israel); two Mosquitoes (bought by an English film producer ostensibly to use in the making of a picture but smuggled out of England to Israel); six Osts (two-engined British training planes smuggled out of England); two C-54s (flown "illegally" from the United States); ten C-46s (flown from America) and a fleet of Piper Cubs, which, so help me, were used for bombing.

That was our air force. It was this tiny group of planes that cleared the skies, gave air cover to ground troops, and in the final analysis turned the tide of history.

I returned from Israel a short time ago, and already I've been shocked at some of the ideas people have of how the Israel army managed to get arms. A great many people have the idea that Russia backed the fight made by Israel, supplying arms and planes through Czechoslovakia. Here's how that deal was worked: There was an air base at Zatec, about 60 miles from Prague, and we would fly our C-46s there, pick up a load of guns, ammo and Messerschmitts and head for Israel.

Israel had tried desperately in the world market to buy guns and planes, but following the policy of the British Foreign Office, the world had declared an arms embargo against Israel. Only Czechoslovakia and Switzerland would sell to Israel, and Switzerland didn't have much to sell. The Czechs were in a nice spot. They had a virtual monopoly of the market and could name their own price. They agreed to sell Israel 15 Messerschmitts, and we crated these up and flew them to Israel in our C-46s. Czechoslovakia had acquired these Messerschmitts for practically nothing as part of Germany's war-surplus stocks left in Czechoslovakia. She sold them to Israel for \$40,000 each.

Ben-Gurion was so desperate for fighter planes to protect his civilian population from bombing that he had to submit to the holdup. These were very old, tired Messerschmitts. The guns were poorly synchronized and more than half the time they jammed.

The Egyptian air force had plenty of Spitfires and Fiats (a pretty good fighter sold to them by Italy) and dozens of C-47s given to them by the British. But the Gyppos were clumsy pilots, and even with their enormous advantage in aircraft they couldn't do any real damage to Israel.

One afternoon one of our lads was stooging along in his Spit when he saw seven Gyppo fighters (five Spits and two Fiats) below him. He dived at the formation and got one Spit, which went down in flames. Two of the Gyppo Spitfires lit right out for home, leaving four to battle it out. Our boy made another pass and hit two of them. They fell out of formation. The remaining two planes lit out for the south. Our pilot was about out of gas so he had to come back to the base.

Now no pilot, no matter how good, has any right to disperse a squadron of seven fighters. This happened time after time, and we couldn't figure it out. I suppose the answer was that the Arab pilots really didn't have anything to fight for. They were just going through the motions.

Once the B-17s and the C-46s began to arrive we were able to do a little bombing of our own. We used to laugh at the pretty blue uniforms the crews of the American ships arrived in. They were like the ordinary uniforms worn by transport pilots at home, but they had the letters L.A.P.S.A. on their caps. That meant *Líneas Aéreas de Panama Société Anonyme*, which was a Panama air line chartered for Central American trips.

Larger Planes from the U.S.

This was a dummy company and it

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bought ten C-46s in the United States. American volunteers donned the pretty, official-looking uniforms and flew the planes to Mexico City and then to Panama. They stayed in Panama, too—long enough to refuel. Then they headed for Israel via Natal (Brazil), Dakar and Catania (Sicily).

Not all of them arrived. One C-46 crashed at Mexico City because of overloading, killing its crew of four. Another B-17 stopped at the Azores, and State Department officials requested the Portuguese authorities to impound the plane and return the crew to the United States.

Israel's chief enemy was always the combination of the British Foreign Office and our State Department. The Arabs were easy enough to handle, but it was hard to understand or cope with the hatred displayed toward Israel. It was also a mystery to us why the world jumped through a hoop when our State Department cracked the whip.

If it hadn't been for the State Department, the fighting in Israel would have ended long before it did, and hundreds of lives would have been saved. Let me explain that one. Last summer Israel needed ammunition desperately. We shuttled back and forth from Czechoslovakia to Israel as fast as our planes would fly. When we'd reach the limit of our endurance we'd often collapse into bed and sleep for 24 hours.

There was one man, though, who never collapsed, an iron man, Raymond Kurtz, who had been a B-17 pilot during the war. Ray, a New York policeman before he joined the Israeli Air Force, became a legend in the Israeli Air Force. While the rest of us were dropping from exhaustion he kept right on flying. During one stretch of ten days last September, Kurtz flew exactly 200 hours. Figure that out.

And the stuff that Kurtz and the rest of us were bringing in from Czechoslovakia was the only thing that kept the Palmach and the Haganah fighting there in the Negeb. Then it came to an end.

A Visitor from Prague

One day we were all sitting around our shack at the Zatec airport playing bridge. Our planes were all loaded with those wooden boxes marked "Glass" or "Fragile," and we were waiting for a weather clearance. A pleasant sort of chap—an American—walked into the room and started to talk to us. He said his name was MacDonald and that he was from the U.S. embassy in Prague.

We dropped our cards and felt sick. Obviously he'd come to investigate this airport. He knew that most of us were American citizens and he knew what we were doing.

"I guess we've had it," I said, and MacDonald smiled almost apologetically. It seemed awfully funny to us that he was fighting on one side and we other Americans were fighting on the opposite side. Anyhow, the next day the Czech government got a strong request from our State Department to close up Zatec. And the Czech government meekly obeyed.

Occasionally a plane did make a quick trip into Czechoslovakia and return with a load of supplies, but as a main artery of supply the route no longer existed and we confined our activities to bombing Arab military positions at Gaza, Rafah, El Majdal and Falujja.

We usually bombed at night. The Arabs for some reason or other seemed afraid to fly in the dark. The nights were usually clear and our heavily loaded transport planes would have been sitting ducks for their Spitfires, but they never bothered us. They depended entirely on flak and sometimes that was pretty good, because they had fine anti-aircraft weapons which they had obtained from the British.

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A few days after Bob Vickman had got it—he was killed when a defective Messerschmitt he was piloting crashed—my other Los Angeles pal, Stanley Andrews, was killed when flak brought down the Mosquito he was flying.

It was the Pacific all over again. You'd come back from a mission, go in the mess hall to have some coffee and look around rather surreptitiously to see who was missing. There were plenty who didn't come back, and we always hoped they had died quickly. This was after we found out what Arabs occasionally did to prisoners. Two of our men didn't return one night—we found their horribly mutilated bodies a week later.

The bombing we did was hardly in the American Air Force tradition. To begin with, we had no bomb racks. When we got over the target the pilot would yell and the bomb chuckers (that's what we called them) would roll the bombs out of the open door. We usually had to make three runs over the target.

We didn't use bomb sights or the usual aids to accurate bombing we had during the war. When our instruments went haywire we couldn't replace them. Our fleet of bombing planes would have shocked an American Air Force C.O.

In addition to a few heavies we used single-engined Norsemen and Piper Cubs. It was quite a sight to see a little Cub stagger off the runway under the weight of three bombs and a pilot, but they did it every night.

And the war was won. Israel not only had to fight the whole world on the diplomatic front and the five Arab nations on the military front; she had to fight broken-down, inferior equipment. Colonel David Marcus, the West Point officer whose memory is now revered in Israel, once explained to me that there never had been a war like this.

"Before we can start a real offensive," he told me, "we have to go out and capture the weapons we need. We start off with Sten guns and two-inch mortars, machine guns, Bren guns and some ammo. Then we are ready to make a real attack. These boys I command can do more with fewer weapons than any fighters I've ever seen. And they never know when they've had enough."

War Won by Men—Not Weapons

David Marcus never knew when he had enough either. A few days after I talked to him he was killed. Marcus was right; the war was not won by weapons but by people. Everyone you met in Tel Aviv or Haifa was doing a war job. One night they put a new bomb chucker on my plane. He laughed when I recognized him. I'd seen him the week before behind the desk of a hotel on Hayarkon Street in Tel Aviv.

One day a high-ranking Haganah military commander came to our air base. I asked him the size of the Israel army. He said, "We have an army of 750,000."

"But that's the entire population of Israel," I said, puzzled.

"That's right," he said calmly.

This was a war for survival and it was too important to be fought only by military men. Everybody old enough to walk was old enough to fight in one way or another. I was with the Israeli Air Force for nine months, and my admiration for the people of the country grew greater and greater the longer I stayed in the country. They had the same spirit of independence that our pioneers had. They were wise, too, and were not to be fooled by smooth promises.

Russia made a big point of supporting Israel at United Nations meetings, but the Israeli people only chuckled at the transparent attempt by the Communists to show friendship for the new country.

The people of Israel are the most democratic people in the world. They know what Fascism did to millions of

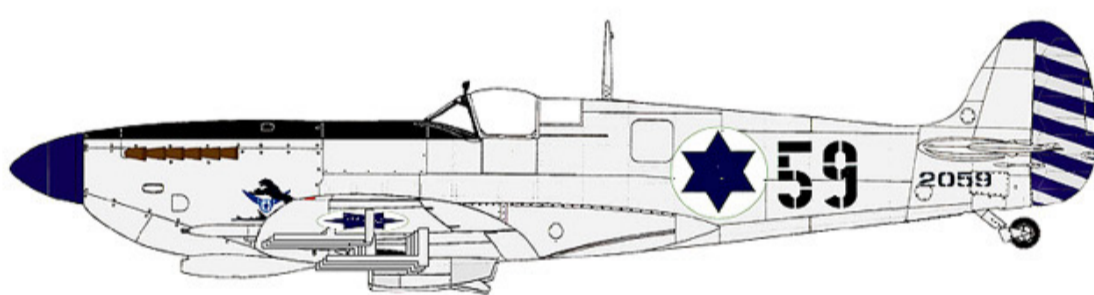
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their brothers in Europe. They know that thousands had fled Communism in Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary because they wanted to live the life of true democracy which they could find only in Israel. Israel is the only bulwark of democracy in the whole Middle East, and it is our kind of democracy.

The Israel Cabinet includes a Minister of Minorities, whose job is to safeguard the rights of Arabs and other minority groups in the country. As citizens they are guaranteed the same political and economic freedoms given to Jewish citizens of the country. Employers by law must pay Arab workers the same wages paid to Jewish workers. The Cabinet also includes a Minister for Religious Affairs, whose job is to see to it that no one of a minority faith is discriminated against.

Now I'm back home ready to go to work again. Friends of mine say, "You wasted nine months of your life flying for Israel." I laugh at them. I learned an awful lot in those nine months. I saw Communism in action in Czechoslovakia and did not like what I saw. I saw democracy in its finest form working in Israel and I couldn't help being thrilled at that. I read the Israeli Declaration of Independence which made the country a sovereign nation last May, and the wording of it seemed familiar to me. Then I realized that it was closely patterned after our own Declaration of Independence.

The Communist propagandists like to rant about the decadent democracies and the virtues of the totalitarian state. They forget that Thomas Jefferson wrote the basic rules for a democratic state more than 170 years ago and the rules are still working today. They've worked pretty well for us here at home and they're working well for the newest democracy on earth. This is what I learned in Israel and it had made me a better American and a more fervent believer in democracy than ever. No, those nine months were not wasted.



Collier's