

The Story Of The Arms Ship Borea-2 (Santa-Chiara)

Written by: Yehuda Ben-tzur

Santa-Chiara (Hebrew nickname Behira), capacity 1,200 tons, hoisting the Panamanian flag and operated by an Italian crew, arrived at Tel-Aviv port on May 13 1948, two days before the termination of the British Mandate and the invasion of the neighboring Arab regular armies. She arrived somewhat beyond schedule because her original trouble-making crew had to be replaced. The shipment, bought by Arazi, included 5 antique 65-mm guns, the famous "Napoleon", 200 "Chateau" machine-guns and about 650 tons of ammunition. In addition, about 450 tons of onion, starch and tomato juice-cans were used as "cover". The arms were loaded in Marseilles, and the cover cargo in Naples. The escorts were Tzvi ("Miri") Katzenelson, a Palyam member, and Nachman ("Bob") Burstein, a "Gideonee". En-route the ship's name was converted, "semi-formal" as Arazi put it, to "Borea-2" (nickname "Erez") and some "cosmetic changes" were implemented, in order to fool the British.

Upon arrival to Tel-Aviv, the ship was approached by a British destroyer. At first the British took no action and let the ship cast anchor. It looked as if the changes made en-route were effective, so Miri decided to go ashore to coordinate the unloading. Soon after, the destroyer was back and a British boarding-crew climbed onboard and ordered the captain to sail for Haifa. The Italian captain took the initiative and ordered to "sabotage" the engine. The British tried to repair the engine, but failed. After that they took no chances and began towing her to Haifa, arriving there on Friday, May 14 1948 several hours before the end of the British Mandate. The search begun immediately. The "combination" of strong odor coming from the rotten vegetables and the unmotivated young British seamen, who after several hours were still struggling with the "cover" cargo, brought nothing but tomato juice...

Meanwhile at 4pm, B-G. declared in Tel-Aviv the establishment of the State of Israel. At that point, the search was suspended and everybody waited for instructions and/or new developments. Few minutes before midnight a British officer came to the captain and told him that he got no orders and as the Mandate is over, he his leaving and "you can do whatever you want". In no time the engine was "fixed" and the ship sailed back to Tel-Aviv, arriving there on May 15 in the late morning, where she was "welcomed" by Egyptian bombers attacking Tel-Aviv on the first day of the independence. Luckily the Egyptian pilots missed, so unloading started immediately and on that same day two of the "Napoleon" canons were rushed to halt the Syrian attack in the Jordan Valley.

Written by Yehuda Ben-Tzur, Caeseria, Israel, 1977

Yehuda, a Palyam and Aliya Bet veteran, escort the arms ship Maestralle that arrived on June 27th, 1948.