

The Voyage of the “Wingate”

This vessel was named in honor of the British Major, Orde Charles Wingate, who, while he was on tour of duty in Palestine during the years of the riots of 1936-1939, helped the Yishuv immensely in defending itself against Arab bands and taught the young men of the Hagana the basics of guerilla warfare. Because of his aid and his sympathy with the Zionist cause, (in contrast with the British government policy), he was given the sobriquet “Ha’Yadid” [Hebrew: the friend]. The vessel left from the small island of Palestrina, Italy, (not far from Venice), carrying 238 Ma’apilim. The commander was Dudale Ben Horin, accompanied by Aryeh Weizman and the Gideoni - Avraham Reis. The plan was for the vessel to rendezvous with the vessel “Tel Hai” and transfer her passengers to that vessel. That rendezvous did not occur and the Wingate continued on her route to Palestine, sailing in a very rough sea.

In preparation for her coming to shore at Tel Aviv, elaborate measures were taken for the night of the 25th-26th March 1946, which was to become known as “Leil Wingate” (Wingate’s night). Many men of the Hagana were mobilized under the command of Yitzchak Sadeh, Yigal Alon and Yigael Yadin, to help in the unloading of the Ma’apilim. The plan was foiled by the British, who managed to capture the vessel at sea. The atmosphere in and around Tel Aviv was very tense, and in an exchange of fire between a British unit and a unit of the Palmach, the Palmachnikit Bracha Fuld was killed. In her memory, a vessel of the Palyam bore her name. The “Wingate” was forced to sail to Haifa and the Ma’apilim were transferred to the Atlit detention camp. By mere coincidence, the captain of the “Wingate” and the captain of the “Bracha Fuld” was the Italian friend of the Zionist cause, Captain Mario Kenda, who was of great help in our work in Italy. Mario had been a former captain in the Italian navy and it was from him that Ha’Mossad Le’Aliya Bet purchased the vessel Noris (named for his wife). Mario went to Atlit together with the Holocaust survivors, but was extracted from the camp after a short stay.

Mario sailed back to Italy on a small fishing vessel called the “Ada”. This voyage was one long series of misadventures and troubles. A number of other Palyamnikim and others of Ha’Mossad Le’Aliya Bet took that voyage; among them was Lova Eliav, who describes his adventures in his novel: “The Vessel Ulua” There is also an account in the book by Uri Goren: “On Both Sides of the Crypto”. The Italian crew members of the “Wingate” and the “Enzo Sereni” were also a part of this story, which was brought to a happy end, thanks to the aid of an Italian whore, Lucia. After the voyage of the “Bracha Fuld” on October 1946, Mario was deported to Cyprus with the Ma’apilim. He was rescued from the island in February 1947, by the “Dalin”, under the command of Dudale Ben Horin. The Dalin was the first of the post-WW II Aliya Bet vessels. The paths of Dudale and Mario crossed once again in the “HaShoded” [Hebrew: the pirate] operation in the summer of 1948.



The “Wingate” surrounded by British Destroyers

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)