

Ben -Nun, Yochai (Fishman) (of Blessed Memory)
 Born 1924 in Jerusalem, Palestine
 Joined the Palmach in 1942, joined the Palyam in 1944
 Palyam – Commander of Flotilla 13
 Commander of the Navy 1960 – 1966
 Died June 6th 1994 in the USA of a heart attack

This is the Way it Was

Yochai told about the unit that dealt with underwater sabotage and Saya Ben-Nun had it published.

The beginning of the group's activities took place on the night of November 1st 1945, when train tracks were blown up at 153 points by the Palmach. The Palyam was asked to take part in this operation in at least a minimal and symbolic manner. Their object was to destroy two patrol vessels that the British used in coastal waters to prevent immigrant ships from landing passengers on the shore. Avraham Zakai (the commander of the naval company, Palyam) called me to his tent and said, "Tomorrow night those two ships have to be sunk." I told him that I had never been involved with sea sabotage, and didn't know which charge I needed or what I had to use to do the job. I had never been in the port area and knew nothing about the structure of those ships. He had one simple answer. "If you don't do it, nobody will." I said that I would look into it.

From then on and for the next two years, a small group of barefoot youths working out of a boat shed in Sdot Yam tweaked the British lion time and time again. They performed feats that provoked the mighty British fleet, which had as its chief goal, the prevention of remnants of the Holocaust from reaching the Land of Israel.

The results were not to be shrugged off:

- Two police boats in the port of Haifa and one in the port of Jaffa.
- A patrol boat of the British navy.
- Three landing craft that were used as floating bridges to transfer immigrants to the deportation ships.
- The deportation ship "Empire Rival" in the port of Haifa.
- The "Ocean Vigour " in the waters of Cyprus.
- The deportation ships "Empire Lifeguard" and "Empire Comfort"
- And just for good measure, a vessel used by the mandatory Ministry of Fishing and Agriculture that happened to be anchored where it should not have been.

One could say that there were periods when these acts were the sole vestiges of action taken against the British mandatory forces.

How Primitive were the Means.

After the success of this first act and the strong impression that it made upon the British, large forces were brought in to protect the port, and lighting of the area was increased, as were the patrols. A two-year period was now begun in which we worked by the method of "Hit and Run". We would sit on the porch of the Carmelia Hotel and observe the port with binoculars for hours and hours, find a weak point, go in, act, and escape.

When we acted on that first night against the two police boats, the British had been lethargic in their reactions. The area around the boats was not lit and the lights on the boats themselves blinded the guards and prevented them from being able to see. A gramophone was played that covered any noise we made and the whole operation was a snap for us. The British learned from their mistakes and future operations were much more difficult to accomplish.

Our first operations were so primitive as to be close to ridiculous. For instance, it took us several trials before we learned that instead of carrying a mine on one's body, you could swim with it tied to a piece of cork which floated along behind you. We did not have any rubber suits or fins for our feet to help us swim. We had no equipment to submerge in the water and all of our operations were carried out while swimming on the surface.

We tried to develop equipment as we went along, and the father of Amos Horev helped us. He was a man with a head full of ideas and had a small mechanical workshop in the basement of his house in Tel Arza, Jerusalem. We tried to build our own model of a diver's breathing apparatus from assorted parts of gas masks. The first time we tried out our new invention at Sdot Yam I went underwater with the contraption and ended up unconscious. A few days later Eskimo went down to try again and he also lost consciousness. We decided to hide the contraption and put it away in a "slick" (hiding place). The British found it somehow and punished the kibbutz severely. They were positive that the kibbutz was the base of the underwater operations that had hurt them so badly.

We built a sort of headdress that would alter the shape of the head of a swimmer as seen by a searchlight. It was built of wire netting and rags and made the head look like a piece of flotsam. Swimmers found cold water very difficult to cope with, so we used a heavy grease to ease entry into the water. After a short time, however, the body would rapidly lose heat and shivering and involuntary contractions would develop. This would impair the ability to swim after a short time. We found that the best way to maintain body heat for the longest time was by drinking cognac. One had to be able to drink the maximum and still remain sober. This system was good enough to allow a person to remain in the water for about an hour.

There is the true story of Ossie from Kfar Giladi, who came back from a cold swim and was almost frozen. He sat on a blazing stove but felt nothing at first.

When the smell of burning steak filled the air he realized that his "behind" was on fire. It took several weeks before he recovered and was able to sit properly again. As the British developed their defenses following our first easy success, we had to exercise our ingenuity to overcome their developments. They started to put floating fences around their ships and that forced us to swim under them. When they attached the fences to the sea floor we had to go over them. When they put barbed wire on top of the fences, we had to go through them, and then they wired their fences with phosphorescent mines that lit up the surroundings when activated. In all, things became more and more difficult.

The British started using anti-personnel mines which caused a lot of trouble as the force of the explosion was quite strong. We managed to have a few stolen from their warehouse, and practiced with them. We found that we could get within 25 meters of a mine without being harmed, if one's head was kept above water. We noticed that these mines were thrown into the water at exact intervals of one half hour. We would swim toward our objective, hide behind a buoy or something else nearby, wait for the explosion, accomplish what we had to do, and make our getaway within the half hour.

Later, the British anchored their ships outside the port area and did not anchor regularly in the same place.. They also hung strings of lights around the ships and used searchlights as well. Soldiers manned machine guns to also guard the ships. They did all they could to make life for us more difficult.

The Winter of the Ropes

After we sabotaged a deportation ship we had to look for new methods to crack British defenses and take further action. The British used more rowboats, guards and special lighting, and tried to be very precise in their guard duties. They used depth mines and the entire port area was heavily guarded. The British used their "Green Beret" commandos for guard duty, and were all over the port area. In the end they also brought underwater "frogmen" under the command of the famous Commander Crabb. (**Lionel "Buster" Crabb**) These latter actually searched for us underwater. They were to neutralize our mines when they found them. This was a battle of wits, not of strength. Despite all of our endeavors, we could not find another weak point in their armor.

The winter of 1946 is recalled as the "winter of ropes." Since it became almost impossible for a swimmer to approach a ship, we tried to devise means whereby we could deliver a mine to a ship by some other means. We tied a mine to a rope about 700 meters long and a rowboat at each end was supposed to tow the mine forward. This, in practice, was very difficult to do. The rope would sink in the middle and get stuck on something on the sea floor. We then tried to float a rope with cork buoys attached to keep it from sinking. This created other problems. How can we store all this on a rowboat without making it too bulky and without it becoming fouled up? Another problem was how to make certain that the mine went with its face to the ship and not its back? We then needed contact between

two towing boats so we laid a telephone line along the rope, with a phone at each end. The rope would stretch, but the phone wire would not, and more problems were created. After numerous experiments and working with three rowboats we finally straightened out almost all the snags and started to get some decent results.

Just when we were ready to venture to a British target and try out our equipment "for real", we found that there was no possible way we could approach near enough to any British target. The British started patrolling around their ships with rowboats and thereby cleared a distance of one kilometer around all their ships. We could not even get close to them.

We did however develop many kinds of weapons for sabotage purposes. One of these was "the Shark", which was a pinnacle of modern technology. "The Shark" was actually a torpedo which could be directed by remote control. This torpedo was the first of its kind and was developed by, and belongs to, the people of Israel.