

The Palyam – Palmach-Yam
Established in 1943 at Kibbutz Sdot Yam, Caesarea

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The last commander of the Palyam

Preceding the Palyam – The 23 seamen.

During the Second World War the Yishuv in Palestine was intensely supportive of the British war effort, despite the White Paper. At the very same time there were secret courses for training sailors to act as commanders or in other capacities so that immigrants would be brought to Palestine. These courses took place in Tel Aviv, where the Yarkon River flows out to sea. They were held under the disguise of Hapoel sports activities. For the purposes of training, three sailboats were built with money supplied by the Jewish Agency and these were named after the Hoz family which had died in a road accident shortly before that. The boats were named ‘Dov’, ‘Rivka’ and ‘Tirza’.

Towards the end of 1940, when the British forces in the Mediterranean were at a low ebb in their fight against the Germans, another naval course was organized in cooperation with the British, the object of which was to prepare sailors for action against the Germans. 23 veterans of the Hagana volunteered for this course, all of whom were eager to fight against the Nazis. This unit left Haifa in a police motor launch (under the command of a British officer. AM). The launch and all the men aboard were lost at sea and no trace of them was ever found.

On the 16th May of that year, two days prior to the departure of the 23 sailors, the Palmach was founded. One and one half years later, the first unit of the Palyam was formed. This was a naval-marine outfit and was named after the 23 sailors. These men were the ones who led and taught the future members of the Palyam and included: Shmuel (Shmulik) Tankus and Dov (Berchik) Magen. Their leadership and devotion to the cause was the exemplary torch which the Palyam carried forward in all its future operations.

The Beginning – The Naval Platoon of the Palmach

During the Second World War, when the youth of Europe was fighting against the Nazi forces that were slaughtering the Jews, the members of the Palmach were quartered in the kibbutzim, working and training. In their work and training and famous treks there developed the legendary Palmach spirit. However, there was also a feeling of crisis, of something that was lacking. Haim Guri of Company A of the Palmach wrote, following a lecture by the Commander of the Hagana, Dr. Moshe Sneh, “There is a war going on Doctor, and we play no part in it.” There was an undercurrent in the Palmach that we do something to prepare to help illegal immigration, that we learn something about seamanship. This pressure from below grew more intense.

The first naval course of the Palmach started in January 1943, and was followed by a second and third course shortly afterwards. The permanent base for these courses was at Sdot Yam, a kibbutz near Caesarea. The equipment for training was that which had been used by the lost 23 and the three boats that the Hagana had built. In these boats the students learned about wind and tides, navigation and etc. there were lectures about how boats and ships were constructed, how to carry many passengers and quarter them and feed them, and how to hide them from planes overhead. Men who had experience in Aliya Bet were those that gave the lectures. Among the students were many Israeli-born who had never left the shores of the country and there were others who had come from Europe and had left their families behind. All of them were very highly motivated and wanted to learn the material so as to use it to carry out their mission in the best possible manner. The course lasted for three months and about 30 men took part in each of them. When the 3 courses were over the Palmach had 100 men who could go and earn their living at sea.

At this point there was a crisis, a strong difference of opinion between the seamen and the command of the Palmach. The commander of the Palmach believed that when the courses were over the men who had participated in them should return to their Palmach units as they would have done from any other land course, and they would be able to use their training if there was any action involved on the Jordan River or the Sea of Galilee. The seamen thought they must remain as a separate entity and gain more experience in the Mediterranean Sea and use their knowledge and experience for increasing immigration, Aliya Bet.

In the end, the seamen won the argument especially because their mouthpiece was a very determined character. This was Zalman Perach who had led the revolt. As a result, the 6th company of the Palmach was formed and Zalman became its commander. As the other Palmachniks worked in farming to support themselves, the men of the 6th company worked in the port for that purpose. They worked as stevedores and they worked on the small boats that ran around the harbor. The lucky ones worked in the engine rooms or as deckhands on ships at sea. The work in the port area was very difficult since the temporary workers, as most of the Palmachnikim were, worked invariably on the night shift. In the mornings they would ride back to the kibbutzim to sleep. Difficult or not, the work went on and the hard core of what became the Palyam was formed.

Several months later the Organization for Aliya Bet took upon itself the organization and financial backing of these courses and an advanced course for ships' captains was organized. This course lasted six months and was conducted in the Haifa Technion and was comparable to a course for captains in the merchant navy.

A unique atmosphere was created by the men in the camp at Sdot Yam. There were special songs and a very special feeling of camaraderie which developed. Much of this was because of men such as Chaim Hefer and Chaim Guri, and especially Shaikhe Ophir who participated in one of these courses and drove everyone wild with his first theatrical performances. Shaikhe was only about 17 when he made his initial appearance

in “The Eye” and “Threading a Needle” that are still a part of classic Israeli folklore. Dan Ben Amotz went AWOL from the British Navy and joined the group at Sdot Yam where his humor kept them all in good spirits as they sat around the campfire. Every so often, Benny Marshak would appear and make one of his fiery speeches which became fertile material for satire by others. Natan Alterman was also there and he took part in moving immigrants from ship to shore and then wrote some of his most famous poems. The spirit at the camp at Sdot Yam was such, that whatever went on there soon became known everywhere men of the Palmach were found.

The Naval Company – The Palyam – Goes Overseas

The Palyam grew and received official recognition of the Palmach and was designated as Plugah Yud (10th Company), the Palyam. Its first commander was Avraham Zakai, a graduate of the first course for captains. The Palyamniks who went overseas were under the command of the Mossad for Aliya Bet people in the country where they were located. They worked at preparing the immigrants for Aliya (immigration) and they prepared the ships for going to sea. When the immigrants were taken to Cyprus, they ran the camps there. During the years 1945 – 1948 when the fight for increased immigration was at the center of the Hagana’s activities, the Palyam was at the forefront of this struggle. In all, the Palyam ran nine courses for seamanship in which about 300 men and women participated, and 5 courses for captains in which 80 men took part. The graduates of these courses were then prepared to leave Palestine/ Israel and meet and care for the immigrants, to prepare and to handle the ships at sea and bring the immigrants ashore.

In May 1945, WW II came to an end and shortly thereafter the first men of the Palmach/ Palyam left for Europe. There was no way to prepare the men of the Palmach to appear in Europe in a “normal” way, as an Italian or Greek etc., so that they would not attract attention. It was mandatory that these young Israelis blend into their surroundings. In destroyed post-war Europe there were former Nazis and former fascists and other hated collaborators. Each Palmachnik who left for Europe was given one suit and one tie. They all left Palestine secretly or with a false identity. They stowed away on ships or left as British soldiers. Their first encounter with the remnants of the Holocaust was always a very traumatic one. These people were utterly different than the Israelis and most did not know Hebrew well or at all. They had gone through terrible events which had been only rumors to the Palyamniks, and they had not encountered these people “in the flesh” until this first time.

The Palyamniks were distributed to the various countries where the Mossad had representatives and took over the care and preparation of the immigrants for Aliya, and took the ships of immigrants from the Mediterranean ports to Palestine. During the years 1945 – 1948 65 ships of the Hagana, carrying carried more than 70 000 immigrants from Europe to Palestine. Between voyages the men of the Palyam trained the immigrants and worked on preparing the ships to carry them. The British thought that the difficulties of the journey and the imprisonment in Cyprus would dampen the appetite of the immigrants to undertake the voyage, but in this they were completely mistaken and the immigrants came in ever-increasing numbers. The first ship after the

end of the War was “Dalin”, which left Europe in August of 1945 and carried 36 immigrants. Towards the end of the Aliya Bet era, two ships left Bulgaria carrying no less than 15 000 immigrants.

Banishment to Cyprus – Opposition to Banishment – The Camps in Cyprus

The banishment of the immigrants, the remnants of the Holocaust, was an extreme act of cruelty on the part of the British, and the Yishuv in Palestine could in no way allow that to pass unnoticed. The men of the Palyam organized the resistance of the immigrants and led the battle, and on the orders of the Hagana joined the immigrants and went to the camps with them. They took control and established order in the camps and once these were running smoothly, usually a matter of several months, they were sneaked out of the camps and went back to the business of bringing more immigrants.

The British Navy which was now free of the fight against the Germans had its hands full in fighting to halt Jewish immigration. 49 vessels of His Majesty’s Navy of various classes took part in this engagement and were helped by airplanes and by radar stations as well. Small naval vessels patrolled close to the coast and the larger ones were farther out at sea. The Navy had a training camp in Malta where the sailors/marines learned how to overcome the resistance of the passengers and commandeer a ship. The sailors were in for a surprise when instead of doing battle with hard-line terrorists they found themselves fighting against boys, girls and men and women, all dressed in rags and with no decent weapons in their armory.

Despite that difference the struggle sometimes became very violent. A unit was established in the Palyam that specialized in underwater sabotage. This unit succeeded in damaging a number of naval vessels and ships that were used to transfer immigrants from Haifa to Cyprus. The sailors on the ships that moved the immigrants to Cyprus were ordinary merchant seamen and they had no enthusiasm for the job that they had to do and their morale was very low.

The ships kept coming and 37 were caught by the British and their passengers transferred to Cyprus. A total of 52 000 immigrants passed through Cyprus at a time when the Jewish population of Palestine was about 500 000. That is, about 10% of the Yishuv consisted of immigrants that had been in Cyprus. At the end of 1947 when the War of Independence was imminent, the camps in Cyprus became (underground) training camps for the Israeli Army. Youth that had been trained in the camps were enlisted into the Israeli Army as soon as they set foot in Israel and thousands of them fought, and many of them fell in the War of Independence.

The Independence War

The historic decision of the United Nations in November 1947, and the start of the War of Independence was the beginning of a new era in which Aliya was no longer the epitome of the Zionist struggle. However, that did not mean that the job of the Palyam was finished. In the midst of the fight to clear the road to Jerusalem, and to break the siege of the Negev, the Palyam was called upon to fight on the land. The Palyam was now a force of 400 well-organized and well-trained fighters. Half of their number was

committed to the Fourth Battalion of the Harel Brigade which fought to clear the road to Jerusalem. More than 90 members of the Palyam fell in this battle. Others fought in the Negev and ten men were killed there. at the end of these battles most of the men that were left returned to the Palyam.

Another front of action had now opened; this was the battle for procuring arms from overseas and bringing them to Israel. The seamen and radio operators of the Palyam were actively involved in this activity. 42 shipments of arms were brought to Israel by these seasoned veterans and were vital to the successful achievements of Tzahal (Acronym for the Israeli Army).

From The Palyam to the Israeli Navy

In a letter written in February of 1948, the Minister for Defense stated: Naval defense is an essential part of the national defense and we must establish in our headquarters a naval department and organize our naval force. I am now discussing what we need with experts in this field. Previously, our naval forces dealt mainly with immigration. This is still necessary, but the demands of the defense of the nation needs new, strong measures and the present tools at our disposal are not suitable. Following this, in March of 1948 a n order was given to the the command headquarters and some of its directions are as follows: The High Command has decided to establish a naval force whose task will be to protect the coast of Israel...In order to establish a naval force, all units of the Palyam are to be transferred from the Palmach to the Army Headquarters. These units will be the core of the Naval Command.

The Minister of Defense nominated Gershon Zack to be the Chief of the Naval Command. This was a political appointment. The Naval Service, as the unit was called at first, was still in a state of flux and in the beginning it was modeled after the British Royal Navy, in which the assistant Minister of Defense was called First Lord of the Admiralty. The Palyam, which now consisted of about 300 men, was now called upon to fulfill its last task in the line of duty, it was to be the Naval arm of the Israeli Army. Two main tasks had to be performed now in as short a period of time as possible.

Task A: It had to integrate new people from the general enlistment, including:

- Betar seamen who had trained in Italy;
- professional merchant seamen;
- veteran seamen of the Royal Navy;
- political activists who joined the Navy following Gershon Zack.

The Palyam was such a close-knit and well-organized unit that it had no difficulty in integrating and activating the various groups according to their ability and their training. Of course there were some hitches here and there but by and large the whole effort was successful the veterans of the Palyam, who became the commanders of various units in the Navy, knew how to integrate and coordinate between the veterans and the newcomers, and this new arm of Tzahal became an efficient addition to its land force.

Task B: The building of a naval fighting force. The original ships of the Israeli Navy were those that had been captured by the Royal Navy and had been kept near the breakwater of the harbor of Haifa. These were the ships:

- The immigrant ship 'The Jewish State' which had brought 2664 immigrants to Haifa and which was originally an ice-breaker in the Canadian Navy. This was the first ship of the Israeli Navy and renamed 'Achi (acronym for navy ship) Eilat' A-16. the commander of this vessel was Major Yosef Almog, who had been its commander when it had been an Aliya Bet ship;
- The immigrant ship 'Wedgwood' which brought 1257 immigrants to Israel and which had formerly been a corvette in the Canadian Navy. This ship was renamed 'Achi Hashomer' K-18. Its commander was Major Aryeh Kaplan (Kipi), a Palyamnik who had commanded Aliya Bet ships;
- The immigrant ship 'Hagana' which had brought 2678 immigrants to Israel. This was the sister ship of the Wedgwood and had also been a corvette in the Canadian Navy. This ship was renamed 'Achi Hagana' K-20 and its first commander was David Maimon, a Palyamnik who had commanded Aliya Bet ships;
- The immigrant ship 'Hatikva' which had brought 1414 immigrants to Israel. This ship had been a destroyer used for patrol in the Canadian Navy and it became 'Achi Hatikva' K-22 and its commander was Major Moshe Rabinovitch, a Palyamnik who had commanded Aliya Bet ships;
- The Commander of this fleet of vessels, 'the big fleet', was Lieutenant Colonel Shmuel 'Samek' Yanai, who had been a commander of Aliya Bet ships and the last commander of the Palyam;
- A fleet of small patrol boats, 'the small fleet', was under the command of Zalman Perach who had been a commander of Aliyaa Bet ships and had been the first commander of the Palyam at its inception;
- 'Fleet 13' was transferred "as is" to the Israeli Navy, with its commander, Major Yochai Ben-Nun, who later became the commander-in-chief of the Israeli Navy.

The End of the Independence War

Many former members of the Palyam continued to serve for many years in the Navy in vital positions. They contributed much to its development and progress. Five commanders-in-chief of the Israeli Navy were members of the Palyam. At the end of the War of Independence the merchant navy of Israel received a large number of veterans of the Palyam who had become fond of the sea and continued to work at sea. Many became captains of merchant ships and passenger ships. They 'grew' into these positions as a result of their work in the Palyam.

A Literary Intermission

Nachum Gutman, the painter, was a relative of Catriel Yaffe, a veteran seaman and commander of the 23 that were lost at sea. Towards the end of his visit to Africa where he gathered material for his children's book, "The King of Zulu in the Land of Lubangulu", Gutman happened to meet a sailboat of the Hapoel which was captained by Catriel. This meeting was described as only Gutman could describe it, and this sailboat was a precursor of the work of the Palyam at sea, so I take the liberty of including a portion of that episode here, with several drawings of Gutman:



"A small white dot appears on the horizon. It grows closer and closer. I looked and looked and could not move my eyes from it. What am I seeing? It looks like a large pot carried along by the wind. What, am I dreaming? .. I see a sailboat flying the blue-white flag! No doubt! The boat comes closer and in it are boys with blue shirts. The boat comes still closer and I hear the boys singing: "Forward, forward.." I pinch my cheek, is this a dream? Catriel, Catriel, my brother Catriel is there in the boat. Who would have thought that my own brother would be there for me? My brother Catriel is a ship's captain and the boat is a Hapoel boat from Israel. They also left for a short trip and came as far as Egypt. This was on the morning of the 2nd of June 1935."

