

From the Old Maccabees to the New Maccabees

“A wrong made right”

By Jerry Klinger



The Machal Memorial in Jerusalem

Every year there are fewer and fewer of them. The “they” are *Machal*, a Hebrew acronym for – Volunteers from Outside of Israel. They came to defend the Jewish people and help birth the State during its War of Independence, 1947-1949.

They came from 59 countries. There were fewer than 5,000 of them out of 2,000,000 Jews who had served in World War II Allied Armies. Yitzhak Rabin poignantly said years later about them, *“You came when we needed you most, during those dark and uncertain days in our War of Independence. You gave us not only your experience, but your lives as well. The People of Israel and the State of Israel will never forget.”*

For the most part, Israel did forget them.

The thinning ranks of those who had made the crucial difference between life and death for Israel became resigned to their future, a fading into the darkening mist, part of a forgotten past. Their unique sacrifice officially ignored, not even a special citation exists in IDF archives recognizing what they had done. Their passing is even more complete than the cold relocation of the fallen, iconic armored convoy trucks that had once rested where they fell along the defile lifeline road to Jerusalem.

A request for a unit commendation, even though they served in all units of the IDF, is being sought from Prime Minister Netanyahu. It would be cosigned by the Chief of Staff of the IDF. A non-response has been the only response, so far.

A few years ago, I went to the Israel Air Force Museum in Beersheba. A young docent, really a young female soldier doing her national service at the museum because her English was good, showed me around. Aircraft equipment was everywhere, interpretation almost nowhere. I asked her about Machal. She never heard of them. I told her that 95% of the Air Force during the War of Independence were

Machal, 21% of that number were Christians. Her doe eyes stared at my headlights and she turned off her translator.

My historic society, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation motto is;

“Shaping the future by Remembering the Past”.

I wondered what sort of a future my docent friend would have if she did not have a past? The decision to do help Israel shape its future was made. I committed my society and its resources to tomorrow.

The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation allied with the American Veterans of Israel Legacy Corporation and World Machal. With strong support from the City of Jerusalem, December 17, 2017, we forever visibly changed memory.

On a tiny wedge of undevelopable trash and weed collecting City owned land, directly across the street from the entrance to Israel’s Ammunition Hill National Memorial, an impressively large, permanent Machal Memorial, 70 years late, 70 years present, was finally dedicated. For the Machal veterans who came in 1947-1949 believing the impossible possible, once again, the impossible became real.

The Memorial, designed by noted sculptor Sam Philipe, a fifth generation Jerusalemite, is simple, powerful and easily comprehensible. The Memorial is 10’ long and 8’ high shaped as a large Jerusalem foundation rock. The acronym Machal is boldly displayed on the face under an Avia War of Independence aircraft reaching for the sky to defend Israel. On the right side is a British Cromwell tank, one of only three tanks in the entire IDF arsenal at the time. On the left side is a ship designed on an Aliyah Bet ship. The Aliyah Bet ships manned largely by American volunteers who risked their citizenships, their futures in British prisons, and their lives, to bring desperate, stateless Holocaust survivors to Israel.

The quote from Prime Minister Rabin is in Hebrew on the front below the Machal. Two large rectangular interpretive markers, one in Hebrew on the left of the Machal platform and one in English to the right tell the story of Machal in less than 250 words.

Who were the men and women of Machal?

The vast majority came with military and specialty skills. Many had been actively recruited by Pre-Israel representatives who sought veterans with vital military experience, organizational skills and contacts. Of extreme importance was the recruitment of people with aviation skills, pilots being the most important even if the State did not have any significant aircraft. A mini miracle smuggled in a few Avia 199 fighter aircraft. They were flown by Machal. Without question, during the early days of the War, Machal pilots saved the Jewish State from annihilation.

Some volunteers were idealistic, Zionists. Many came repulsed by the Holocaust. They were intent on preventing a second Holocaust promised by the Arabs. Some volunteers came for mercenary reasons; the promised pay, may or may not have been paid. Some came for religious reasons, especially Christian

volunteers. Most brought active World War II combat skills and one brought a skill no one today would think was vital – the ability to drive.



Ralph Lowenstein and his halftrack, at Camp St. Jean, a former British army base near the port city of Acre. (Photo courtesy of author)

Ralph Lowenstein was eighteen years old, an idealist from Virginia. He told his parents he was leaving Columbia University for a summer in England. Ralph found his way to a recruiter screener. Ten days after arriving in Israel he was thrown into battle driving a homemade half-track as part of the famed largely English speaking 79th Armored Brigade. Ralph could drive a stick shift. “The 79th spearheaded the major battle at the end of October 1948 that cleared the entire north central Galilee of Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi troops,” Lowenstein said.

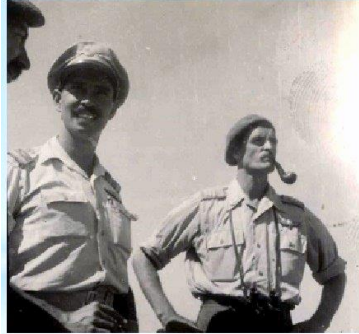
“Neither my parents, two brothers nor anyone else had any idea that I was contemplating such a mission.” Ralph crossed to France in August and began searching how to enlist.

“The only French I knew was "Juif," the word for Jew. There were two listings in the phone book beginning with that word. The first was a kosher butcher shop. The butcher directed me to the newly-opened Israeli embassy. A secretary at the embassy wrote an address on a slip of paper and handed it to me silently. Two young Israelis in a bare room near the Arc de Triomphe questioned me, then sent me to three different Jewish physicians for a physical examination. A few days later I was on a train to Marseilles with two other American volunteers, Frank Perlman, 28, of Pittsburgh and Jack Shulman, 20, of the Bronx. (Jack Shulman was killed in the fight for Beersheba.) Both Frank and Jack were veterans of World War II studying at the Sorbonne on G.I. Bill scholarships. All three of us now had fake Displaced Persons (DP) papers instead of our American passports. My new name was "Zeretch Itscovitch."

... I cast my lot with 600,000 people with a will to survive.

My mother came close to having a nervous breakdown. But all was forgiven when I returned to the U.S.”

Ralph was later drafted by the U.S. Army during the Korean War.



Smoky Simon (SA - Chief of Air Operations) and Derek Bowden (UK) Paratrooper

(Tom) Derek Bowden was seventeen when he was sent to Mandate Palestine in 1938 by the English. He was regular British Army and served under the famed Pro-Zionist Christian British officer, Orde Wingate. Wingate taught the Jews to overcome their timidity, not to wait with savlanut - restraint - for the nightly attacks by Arab marauders and bandits. He taught the Jews to defend themselves – fight at night – find the enemy before they find you...

Having gotten to see what the Jews were accomplishing in Palestine, Bowden became a Zionist. As World War II broke out, Bowden was an officer. During a key battle in Syria against the Vichy French, his leg was badly wounded. In the same battle his Sergeant, Moshe Dayan, lost an eye.

Bowden was invalided back to England. He recovered and became a hard as nails paratroop officer. September 1944, Bowden parachuted into Arnhem – Operation Market Garden – a bold idea to short circuit the war in Europe. It became a British disaster. Bowden, wounded again, was captured by the Germans.

Bowden was interrogated by German officers. Cordial at first, until they found letters on him from former Jewish girlfriends in Palestine, the Germans morphed into Nazis.

“When he saw the papers, he told me he would show me how the Germans treated the Jews. I was sent for a month to Bergen-Belsen.” His job was carrying corpses from the Jewish barracks, piling them onto carts and tipping them into pits for burning.

Derek resigned his commission in the British Army in 1947. With surprising ease, he made his way to Palestine to fight for the Jews. Dereck went to Cyprus then on an air- charter to Haifa. With only a slip of paper, a name, he made his way to an IDF recruiter in Haifa. Three days later, he was sworn into the army.

Derek commanded a 30 man anti-tank unit of South Africans and later larger units. He took the name Captain David Appel after a Jewish family he knew well and because he could write apple in Hebrew. After the war, Derek, Captain Appel, founded the IDF Parachute School. He wrote the manual of operations and was the leadership in the development of the Tzanchanim – the Israeli Paratroop brigade. The Paratroopers were the key to the 1956 Sinai War victory and the 1967 taking of Ammunition Hill.

I met Derek at his home in Diss, England recently. He could not come to the Machal dedication because of health, though he wanted to. December 17, Derek turned 96.

I asked why he helped the Jews. A blue and gold bible, with a large Cross on the cover, lay on a table not far from where he sat. He said he needed to be part of what God had started, the rebirth of the Jewish state, the first in 2,000 years.

Leon (Jimmy) Kantey was a South African volunteer. He was part of "The South African 800" who came to fight for Israel. South African Jewry had one-fiftieth the Jewish population of the United States. The South African Jewish community actively sent Jews to fight. The United States and Canadian Jewry, combined, sent fewer than 1,200. In WWII, Kantey escaped a POW camp and fought with the partisans in Italy. Kantey served in Israel's elite commando unit. During one vicious fight, he was severely wounded and was evacuated for care.

Naomi Levin was an American trained nurse and a Zionist. She had family who lived on a kibbutz in Palestine. Refusing to stay safely at home in the States, the rational response, she volunteered to the IDF.



Leon (Jimmy) Kantey, Naoimi Levin Kantey

Beshert...perhaps... Levin was a nurse in Kantey's hospital. After the war, they married and moved back to the states to raise their family. Most Machal volunteers returned to their homes. They had come to do a job and they did it. Ben Gurion thought they had betrayed Zionism when they left.

The names of volunteers, some have been made famous in movies and books, are known only on spreadsheets and to their families.

December 17, beginning near the Western Wall, under the shadow of the Al Aqsa Mosque, on the fifth night of Chanukah, 700 soldiers began a Torch Run to Ammunition Hill. Amidst fireworks, hundreds and hundreds of onlookers, members of Machal, volunteers – many former lone soldiers who came to help in every year and every decade of Israel's existence, assembled. A giant menorah was lit by Mayor Barkat on the steps of Ammunition Hill, a site of deep meaning when the Israeli Paratroopers, in bitter hand to hand fighting, captured the doorway to the Old City in 1967. Amidst fireworks, music and passions no longer forgotten, the Old Maccabees were celebrated by the New Maccabees as the Machal Memorial was dedicated. 200,000 visitors a year will see "The Machal".

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