WITH MOST SOURCES TO COMBAT PLANES TIGHTLY CLOSED, ISRAELI AGENTS HAD TO SEARCH THE AMERICAN WARBIRD MARKET TO ASSEMBLE A CLANDESTINE SQUADRON OF THREE FLYING FORTRESSES

ISRAEL'S SECRET WARBIRD SQUADRON

BY MIKE MINNICH

Editor's Note: If this story was fiction, it would be considered preposterous. There were just too many obstacles to overcome. For pickup volunteer crews to beg, borrow and steal three war surplus, unarmed B-17s; ferry them 4,000 miles to Communist Czechoslovakia in the middle of the Cold War; arm them and then, without prior planning, practice, or dry runs, deliver them 1,500 miles further east, while simultaneously mounting a bombing raid along the way on the soil of two foreign nations that their own country, the United States, was not at war with, makes for a tale that is difficult to swallow. Nevertheless, it happened, and this article is the first, straight-from-the-source, authenticated account of that amazing exploit ever to appear in print.

Beyond the plexiglass nose blister of the lead Flying Fortress, the seacoast was visible, a white line of surf delineating the start of the tan earth from the end of the blue water over which the small formation now droned.

Up front, the navigator called in a course change, and the bombers made landfall almost exactly on time. The bombardier took over direction of the aircraft and maneuvered towards the target, now visible in his bombsight. Ahead, dirty black smears of *flak* scarred the blue sky, and in seconds the bombers were among them.

With a lurch, ten 550-lb general-purpose bombs dropped earthwards from each B-17's midsection, erupting into a mass of explosions and flames as they impacted among the buildings of the enemy supply complex below.

The bomber formation turned away, back towards the coast. As the lead ship banked, a glint of sunlight played on the air force insignia painted on the fuselage. It wasn't the white star-and-bar of the USAAF, however.

It was a blue six-pointed Star of David. The target was Majdal, Palestine. The year was 1948.

Flown to immortal fame in the Second World War, Boeing's B-17 was obsolete by the end of hostilities in Europe during May 1945. The bigger, faster, more capable B-29 Superfortress would remain on strength as a combat aircraft with the USAAF, but the fate of the Flying Fortress was, with few exceptions, to be flown back to Arizona and parked in the desert sun to be sold for scrap.

But the Flying Fortress — once hailed as the Queen of the Skies — had one more battle to fight. And, of the 12,731 B-17s built, just three would fight it.

Here, drawn from the recollections and photo albums of the publicity-shy volunteers who flew and serviced them, is the story of the Queen's last battle.

When the State of Israel came into existence on 14 May 1948, it was immediately attacked by its Arab neighbors: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. The new nation was vastly outnumbered. Outgunned on the ground and in the air, earlier covert efforts by Jewish agents around the world to provide Israel with warplanes took on added urgency.

Czech-built versions of the Messerschmitt Bf 109G fighter, the Avia S-199, were purchased from that Eastern European country, which also secretly agreed to offer air-staging facilities. To find bombers, however, the United States seemed the best bet.

Al Schwimmer, an American aeronautical engineer and dedicated Zionist, had already purchased some Curtiss C-46 Commandos and a trio of Lockheed Constellations for the infant Israeli Air Force though a cover organization, and, in early June 1948, he struck paydirt again.

"Two demilitarized B-17Gs were owned by a fellow in Florida named Charlie Winters," Schwimmer recalls. "He used them to haul fresh fruit between Puerto Rico and Miami. Winters was willing to sell them to us, and we found two more surplus Forts out near Tulsa, Oklahoma."

The B-17s purchased were all G-models, and none had seen active service with the USAAF, having been consigned to surplus depots straight from the factory. The two owned by Charlie Winters were NL5024N (USAAF 44-83753) and NL1098M (USAAF 44-838512), while the ones found in the midwest were NL5041N (44-8381), used by Universal Aviation (Tulsa, Oklahoma) as a photo-survey ship, and NL7712M (44-83842), which still had its original turrets and reportedly had been used in one or more movies made earlier in 1948.

Fearing Arab reprisals, the US government had clamped a strict embargo on all shipments of military equipment to the Middle East, so Schwimmer, Winters, and their co-workers had to constantly keep one jump ahead of an ever-more suspicious FBI.

Three of the Forts were ready to go at Miami International Airport by 12 June. Dave Goldberg, one of the pilots hired to make the ferry trip, remembers it this way:

"I had flown B-24s with the 15th Air Force in Italy during the war. While making cargo runs out of Miami in the spring of 1948, I was contacted by phone and asked if I'd be interested in earning $1000 to ferry an airplane to Europe. I said, sure.

"That was supposed to be one of the Constellations at Millville, New Jersey, but they got impounded or something by

Fortress 1601 photographed from Fort 1602. The camouflage was slapped on by brush and quickly began to weather.