

# NO MARGIN FOR ERROR

THE MAKING  
OF THE  
ISRAELI  
AIR  
FORCE



E H U D   Y O N A Y

# NO MARGIN FOR ERROR – EHUD YONAY

## Excerpt from: CHAPTER 6 - BLOODYING THE RAF

The war did not end quietly. On January 7, powerful windstorms buffeted the desert country, kicking up clouds of sand and fine, yellow desert soil. Early that morning, an Israeli military convoy radioed for help after it was attacked by enemy fighters, and two recently-arrived volunteers, John McElroy and Chalmers "Slick" Goodlin<sup>1</sup> were scrambled to the scene. According to McElroy, he and Goodlin spotted three columns of smoke from a distance, and reached the Israeli convoy just as four Spitfires were swooping down as if to shoot it up again. McElroy shot one of the attacking fighters from such a close range that when it exploded, McElroy's own plane was damaged by the flying debris. According to McElroy, Goodlin was going after the second Spitfire when he himself turned back and returned to base with his damaged plane.

Goodlin's recollection of the affair is somewhat different. He remembers no columns of smoke, and says that the thick sand-storms that day made it difficult to see anything. As he tells it, they had picked up some unidentifiable radio chatter, and McElroy said, "We've got some bogies out here." Just then, Goodlin recalls, "we noticed dark shapes ahead of us in the dust. McElroy said, "I'll the one on the left and you take the one on the right," and that's what we did." Goodlin says he saw McElroy blow up one of the planes, while he himself followed the second Spitfire up through the blowing sand. When they were out in the clear and the enemy pilot spotted Goodlin behind him, "he peeled off and came back, and I noticed gun smoke starting to roll out underneath his wing," Goodlin recalls.

It was only at that point that Goodlin first realised that the fighter he was up against was a Royal Air Force Spitfire with full insignia. "I remember seeing it and wondering why the hell he was shooting at me, especially since he was firing at the wrong angle and couldn't hit anything," Goodlin would say later. But by then the fight was on, and "I managed to get into position behind him and get off a couple of lucky shots [which] struck his engine." The RAF Spitfire went down through the dust clouds and crashed.

Goodlin's account that he saw no columns of smoke, and that the sandstorm made it impossible to see anything from a distance, is also supported by the fact that when he victory-rolled into Hazor and announced that he and McElroy had just shot down two British fighters, McElroy was a surprised as the rest of the pilots in the squadron. Has the air been clear enough to see the smoke columns, the two would have clearly identified the RAF fighters right from the start. The surprise grew as news reached the squadron that two more British Spitfires were shot down in the same area by Israeli anti-aircraft fire.

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<sup>1</sup> Goodlin was at the time one of America's leading test pilots. A year earlier he had taken the famed Bell X-1 to the threshold of the sound barrier, and it was only because of a contract disagreement that the U.S Air Force took over the test-flight program and Chuck Yeager ended up breaking the sound barrier. Goodlin had just left Bell when, in the fall of 1948, Joseph Berg, a Hollywood producer, talked him into volunteering to fly for the Israelis.

But what were the RAF fighters doing there in the first place? Did Britain decide to send in the RAF to help Egypt just hours before the cease-fire?

Had Britain notified the Israelis of the presence and the mission of the fighters things might have turned out differently,<sup>2</sup> but there was no such notification that morning, nor later that afternoon, when four Israeli Spitfires led by Ezer Weizman ran into a second British force of four Spitfire and fifteen Tempest fighters, and one of the American volunteers shot down a British Tempest – the fifth RAF fighter to go down that day.

The ensuing furore – Britain insisted that its fighters were on peaceful reconnaissance missions while Israel accused it of “unprovoked aggression” – was relatively short lived. It was a matter of record that British and Egyptian Spitfires had been overflying Israeli positions for weeks, and since their paint schemes were similar, the Israelis could not easily tell one enemy plane from another. In London and Washington alike, the British Government came under heavy criticism for sending armed fighters into the Arab-Israeli war zone. The RAF made things worse when it claimed that its fighters in the area were not even armed, only to be contradicted by its own pilots’ debriefing reports, in which they admitted not only to being armed but to having shot back at the Israelis.

The political firestorm also provided the answer to one of the war’s longest-running mysteries. All through the summer and fall, Israeli Messerschmitts and Spitfires kept trying to catch up with the ‘*Shuftyeit*’, the mysterious high-flying plane whose contrails, snaking from Haifa and Ramat David to the north and all the way to Hazor in the south, were by now a familiar feature of the landscape. In the fall, however, Israeli ground crews finished assembling the two American P-51 Mustangs that Schwimmer had managed to get into Israel, and which could fly high and fast enough to give the mystery plane a good chase. On December 1, as soon as the ‘*Shuftyeit*’s’ vapor trails appeared over Galilee, a spotter at the Ramat David tower called Hazor, and Wayne Peake, a guitar-strumming North Carolina hillbilly volunteer who flew Mustangs in World War II and had just joined the squadron, immediately took off in one of the Mustangs. With the entire squadron watching from the tarmac below, Peake quickly climbed up to 30,000 feet, the ‘*Shuftyeit*’s’ estimated cruising altitude, and waited.

He didn’t wait long. A few minutes after he had settled into his aerial ambush, the pilots below spotted the vapour trails unfurl towards them from the north. When the plane was almost over the based, Sid Cohen, the squadron

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<sup>2</sup> According to subsequent testimony by Flying Officer Cooper, the RAF flight leader that morning, his four-fighter formation was on a tactical reconnaissance mission along the Egypt-Israel boundary, with two planes flying low for visual inspection of the combat area, and the other two photographing the terrain from 1,500 feet. When they flew over the Israeli advance route in Nizana, the two low-flying Spitfires were shot down by ground fire (one pilot was killed, and the other bailed out and was captured). Cooper and his wingman were looking for the downed pilots when they were attacked by “Jewish aircraft ... with British-type camouflage and with red airscrew spinners similar to those of the aircraft of the 208 Squadron” (both of them bailed out; Cooper was picked up by Bedouins and returned to Egypt, while his wingman was taken by the Israelis).

commander, ordered Peake to shoot it down. But Peake could not find it. The pilots below stared with fury and disbelief as both the mystery plane and Peake's Mustang kept flying their separate routes.

Then the control officer at the tower suddenly realised what had happened. Peake had simply set up his ambush too high. "He is right below you," he yelled into the radio. Peake rolled down, spotted what he later described as a huge four-engined Lancaster or Halifax bomber, and opened fire. But all four of his guns jammed after squeezing out only a few shells. Seemingly unharmed, but aware that it was being attacked, the '*Shuftykeit*' slowly turned west and headed out to sea. For a while it seemed as if the phantom plane would get away once again. "It was going away, and Peake was cursing like hell on the radio and almost crying because he couldn't fire another shot," says Sid Cohen, "but suddenly I noticed that the vapour trails were getting thicker and thicker, and then I saw fire, and the next thing I knew that thing just disintegrated in the air."

When Rudy Augarten in a Piper Cub and Ezer Weizmann in a Seebee flew out to sea to find its remains, they found nothing. The '*Shuftykeit*' had vanished without leaving a single clue as to what it was or to whom it belonged.

The mystery remained until mid-January, when during the commotion over the downing of the five British Spitfires, Winston Churchill unexpectedly stood up at the House of Commons and demanded an explanation for the downing of a British Mosquito fighter-bomber over Israel's coast a month earlier. The British Air Ministry first explained the episode as an accident, claiming that a Mosquito had drifted off course on a routine training flight, and was actually shot down over the Mediterranean. But, under Churchill's persistent questioning of why it was necessary to send an aircraft on a training flight over this "delicate and dangerous area," the Air Ministry finally admitted that the Mosquito that Wayne Peake shot down over Hazor was in fact gathering data for the British Government and, supposedly, for the United Nations. In other words, it was precisely what the Israelis thought it was all along, an enemy spy plane, a '*Shuftykeit*'.<sup>3</sup>

With the downing of the British planes, the war was effectively over.

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<sup>3</sup> The Mosquito has only two engines, but subsequent examination of the incident suggested that faulty oxygen equipment in his Mustang had, at that high altitude, probably caused Peake to suffer from a mild case of hypoxia (oxygen starvation), one of whose symptoms is double vision.