



First-class soldier

Born in French Algeria, Norbert Beyrard, 1925-2017, headed the IDF's first special forces unit after serving in World War II with a Free French battalion of the British Special Air Service

By Bernard Edinger

HOW MANY people in Israel know that the Israel Defense Force's first long-range reconnaissance unit was made up of about 40 foreign volunteers – not all of them Jews – and that when they carried out their first operations behind Syrian lines in the 1948-1949 War of Independence, the only “real” Israelis among them were two liaison officers sent by army headquarters?

Frenchman Norbert Beyrard, a key actor in of this largely forgotten episode, passed away on February 13 at the age of 91, in Divonne-les-Bains, an elegant spa town near the banks of Lake Geneva, on the border between France and Switzerland.

Beyrard, originally Norbert Benchemoul, was born in the once populous, but now extinct Jewish community of then-French Algeria, on June 16, 1925.

At the age of 23, Beyrard helped create, and then commanded, the “Yehidat Siyur” (Reconnaissance Unit), the predecessor of the now world-renowned “*sayarot*” (recon) units of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The best known of these is “Sayeret Matcal” (General Staff Reconnaissance), whose exploits included spearheading the 1976 Entebbe raid to rescue hostages in Uganda. The unit's then-commander, Lt.-Col. Yonatan Netanyahu, brother of Israel's current prime minister, was killed in that raid.

Despite his youth, Beyrard already had considerable military experience before he came to Israel in 1948. In 1941, at age 16, and while still in high school, he was arrested by the French Vichy police in Algeria as a member of the French Resistance. After the Allies landed in North Africa in November 1942, Beyrard served as a scout for British troops fighting against the Afrika Korps in Tunisia. In 1943, when he turned 18, Beyrard joined a paratroop unit of General de Gaulle's Free French forces. He was dropped behind Nazi lines with small teams that conducted irregular warfare, in occupied France in 1944, and in the Netherlands in 1945. During that operation, aimed at disrupting the rear of Nazi troops trying

Norbert Beyrard (third from right) poses with fellow Free French paratroopers behind German lines in France, in 1944

to slip back to Germany as Hitler's regime crumbled, he was wounded, captured and escaped.

“I was held at Sandbostel, a camp in northern Germany, where there was a section for Allied military prisoners of war, where I was, and another part of the camp which belonged to the Nazi SS concentration camp system and whose inmates included Jews. “We learned what was going on in the concentration camp,” he said.

“It is when I found out that about 250 Jews were dying there daily, because they had been inoculated with typhus during absurd medical ‘experiments’ that I realized it was absolutely necessary that a Jewish state be created.”

Beyrard visited Israel several times over the years and found that the Machal volunteers were pretty much forgotten or unheard of

AFTER THE war, Beyrard settled in Paris to begin lengthy scientific studies, but they were soon interrupted by Israel's War of Independence.

“Since I had been in a Free French battalion of the British Special Air Service (SAS), and was a weapons specialist, the Haganah [the pre-state Jewish underground in British Mandatory Palestine] was very interested in my skills,” he told this reporter some years ago. “During my studies in Paris, I spent weekends outside the city testing weapons which the Haganah had bought – or stolen – in Europe.”

As Israel headed for independence, and it looked certain that a war of survival would be waged against surrounding Arab countries, Haganah recruiters went around Western capitals seeking Jewish veterans who had fought in World War II and who had special skills.

About 4,000 volunteers answered the call in the framework of the Machal (Volunteers

from Abroad) program. The biggest foreign contingents were from France, Britain, the United States, Canada and South Africa. But the so-called “Machalniks” also came from Scandinavia, South America and even China, more than 50 countries in all. A few hundred non-Jewish volunteers joined Machal for ideological reasons or out of a thirst to renew their wartime adventures.

It was to these men that the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, one of the IDF's founders, was referring when he wrote in his memoirs that the newly created State of Israel was “blessed with a flow of Jewish volunteers” when the country came under attack from several Arab armies. “They were first-class soldiers, but their principal contribution was to serve as a reminder that we were not alone,” Rabin wrote in his 1979 autobiography, “The Rabin Memoirs.”

“The situation was so uncertain in late May 1948 when I was flown in on a Dakota aircraft to an airstrip just north of Herzliya that the pilot had to swerve sharply at the end of the runway because there were armed Arabs there,” Beyrard recounted.

Appointed to the rank of lieutenant upon arrival, Beyrard and a few other SAS types proposed to Yigael Yadin, one of the highest officers in the IDF, that they form a unit to work behind enemy lines, just as many of them had done just a few years earlier. “There were 40 of us – Americans, British, South Africans and several members of my Free French paratroop unit, including non-Jews out for adventure and the quest for a good cause,” he said.

Beyrard took command of the group in August 1948, and was made a *seren* (captain) later the same year.

“We were called the Yehidat Siyur – Reconnaissance Unit –and we worked mostly across the Jordan River, gathering information on the Syrians between the Hula [Valley] and Lake Tiberias. Our main enemy was mines, and two of my Free French comrades were seriously wounded between the lines going off to tap telephones and jot down the disposition of the Syrians.”

Simultaneously, Beyrard helped create the IDF's first parachute school at the Ramat David air base. “I took part in the



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Colonel Nishri, military attaché at the Israel Embassy in Paris, toasts Norbert Beyrard in 1954, after presenting him with the ribbon of the War of Independence

BEYRARD FAMILY

first jumps carried out by men in Israeli uniform,” he proudly recalled.

Later, it was decided to integrate Beyrard’s unit into the country’s first parachute battalion, commanded by Yoel Palgi, an officer of the Palmach, the strike force of the Haganah, who had been dropped by the British into Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia during the war.

“The parachute battalion numbered about 700 men, mostly from the Palmach and included some 60 Machalniks,” said Beyrard who became the battalion’s operations officer.

With others, he worked on a grandiose plan for a parachute assault on El-Arish in the Sinai Peninsula. “But the plan had to be abandoned because the number of aircraft was barely sufficient, and the navy did not have enough ships to pull the unit out at the end of the operation,” he said.

When the war ended in 1949, Beyrard returned to France to complete his studies in applied mathematics and physics. He created a firm to advise on industrial techniques and process engineering. He was particularly active in Africa, but was also called upon as a consultant in Israel when the country began setting up military industries in the

early 1950s. He was also a scientific adviser to the president of the West African state of the Ivory Coast and was frequently called upon by the United Nations Development Program as a consultant in Third World countries.

BEYRARD VISITED Israel several times over the years and found that the Machal volunteers were pretty much forgotten or unheard of.

“During one visit to Israel, a woman officer, the daughter-in-law of one of my friends, dismissed the idea that I had been an IDF officer, saying the first IDF paras were formed only in 1951. My friend was embarrassed and retorted that he knew me in IDF uniform earlier than that, but I was not really surprised. There have been so many wars in Israel since,” Beyrard said.

“The former French Machal volunteers were just as ignored in their home Jewish communities, possibly because later community leaders were of an age where they too could have come, but left the fighting to those they saw somewhat as ‘footloose adventurers.’

“I’m proud that in my battalion of Free French paratroopers in World War II, there

were perhaps 100 Jews, including 15 officers, from a total of 400 men. The Free French volunteers and the Machalniks had the same spirit – they were ready to fight against all odds.

“We were not particularly anti-Arab, we just thought we could do something to prevent genocide. No one came to gain any advantage, material or otherwise. I remember one guy wanted to come and fight for Israel after fighting the good war for France, but was worried because he had a wife and child to support. He asked the Haganah if they could send his pay back to his family in France while he was in Israel. The answer was, ‘What pay?’”

A memorial to the fallen foreign volunteers now stands near the Sha’ar Hagai intersection of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway not far from the remnants of ambushed military convoys left by the roadside as mementoes of the War of Independence.

Speaking several years ago, Joe Woolf, a former volunteer from South Africa who stayed on in Israel and recorded the Machal saga, said, “The memorial lists 118 names, but Israel was fighting for its life then, things were disorganized, and it is possible that some names will never be known.” ■