

Conway Cadets and the Holy Land *by David Andrews-Brown (52-53)*

If Conway Cadets know far-flung places - which of course they do - they are sometimes washed up on foreign shores, surprising themselves by embracing other cultures.

Following a visit to the Holy Land in 1968, 18 months after the 1967 Six Day War, that part of the Near East which we might now call Israel-Palestine has been a never-ending source of inspiration to me, religiously, culturally and politically. That initial visit was a professional one, resulting in a sixty-minute radio documentary for SABC, the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Between 1981 and 1985, I compiled and presented a weekly mini-documentary series, titled *Cameos of the Holy Land*, for Springbok Radio, then SABC's principal commercial service. I have since read news of television from Jerusalem, and I currently write a monthly column for the Christian edition of *The Jerusalem Post*.

The call of the Holy Land was earlier heard by Douglas V.



Duff (15-16), (left), a prolific author of stories for young readers. He served with the (British) Palestine Police in the 1920s and 1930s, writing of his experiences in *Palestine Unveiled*, published by Blackie & Son Ltd, (Glasgow) in 1938. To my surprise, he presented me with the Marconi Prize for Sound Signalling at the Conway prizegiving towards the end of 1953. Another OC, Col Rixon Bucknall (17-19) looked back in history to write *The Story of Palestine, 1914-1918*.

Britain's relationship with the Near East has been varied and uncomfortable, a fact well known to Lt-Cdr Geoffrey Haskins RNZN (40-43), and his experience of the RN's role in the prevention of illegal Jewish emigration to the Holy Land is linked with a fascinating historical experience I had in 2011.

Having collapsed during a walk from Nazareth to Jerusalem, I was rushed to hospital in Galilee, and next to me lay a man, whom I came to know as Aharon. In his 80s, this Romanian-born Israeli enabled me to make contact with the beginnings of the State of Israel. He did not speak English, and so we communicated in German, and, on my part, a little Hebrew.

WWII over, Aharon had made his way from his native Romania to the Italian port of La Spezia, where two old, small ships had been acquired by the Haganah, the fledgling Israeli Defence Force. We British were trying to stop them sailing for Palestine, as our policy about Jewish immigration had changed in the face of violent Arab opposition. However, the pitiful Jewish refugees, who had gathered in the hope of reaching the Promised Land, went on hunger strike, eventually forcing a change, which was usefully linked with international pressure.

One ship had been renamed *Eliyahu Golomb*, in honour of one of the founders of the Haganah. She eventually left La Spezia, with Aharon among her too many passengers, on 6th May, 1946, and reached the Palestine coastline on 13th May, two years before the creation of the State of Israel, while Britain still exercised a League of Nations' mandate over Palestine.

At sea off the coast of Palestine, the *Eliyahu Golomb* had been intercepted by two RN destroyers, HMS *Charity* and HMS *Chaplet*, both of which had been launched towards the end of WWII, but commissioned some months after the end of hostilities in Europe. The destroyers, Aharon told me, cut off

the passage of the *Eliyahu Golomb* by maneuvering across her bows, one to port, the other to starboard. The immigrant ships had been expected, and were sighted earlier by RAF patrol aircraft. The *Eliyahu Golomb* was escorted to Haifa, where the immigrants were taken to a detention camp, from which they and many other inmates were eventually released in batches of 1600. Aharon has lived in Tiberias, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, ever since.



Geoff Haskins (40-43), now a much respected Senior Hand, was an RN sub-lieutenant at the time. When I told Aharon's story, on Conway's website, Geoff wrote: 'I was involved for a while in that very unpleasant period for all concerned. I was in HMS *Raider* in 1947 (below), and we did a stint intercepting immigrant ships, escorting them to Cyprus where Larnaca had one of the biggest refugee holding camps. We didn't like the job and clearly the would-be immigrants did not like us. We boarded the ships wearing tin hats and dressed in oilskins, mainly to protect us from unmentionable contents of containers being poured down on us as we ascended.'

The Mediterranean lies some 60 Kms from the Sea of Galilee, and there was a time when Israel's merchant fleet included graceful white passenger liners such as the *Zion*, the *Shalom*, the *Theodore Herzl*, the *Israel* and the *Jerusalem*. Might OCs have been among their partly-foreign crews? A RN officer, Robert Stephenson Miller, is mentioned as a participant in the history of Israel's navy, recording he went on to serve in the Israeli merchant fleet. An officer by the name of Robert Miller is indeed included in the Cadets List, featured on the Conway website, and his Ship years were 1921-1924, but I have been unable to establish an Israel link. However, the 4th Earl of Balfour (41-44) was the great nephew of the 1st Earl, author of the controversial Balfour Declaration, announcing support for a Jewish national state.

Perhaps no Jewish Cadets served in Conway, but the Ship's motto, *Quit ye like men; Be Strong!* is attributed to a quintessentially Jewish man, Saul of Tarsus, he who became Paul, a celebrated Christian saint.

