

# An Account of *Altalena's* Last Voyage

**Louis Arthur Norton**

*This commentary introduces and reproduces a first-hand account of the 1948 sinking of Altalena off a Tel Aviv beach.*

*Ce commentaire présente et reproduit un récit de première main du naufrage de l'Altalena en 1948 au large d'une plage de Tel Aviv.*

In June 1948, the newly created Israel Defense Forces (IDF) attacked and sank a former American Landing Ship, Tank (LST), re-named *Altalena*, off a Tel Aviv beach. The vessel was carrying weapons and fighters for the *Irgun* (or *Etzel*) a Jewish paramilitary group. Nineteen Israelis, three of them IDF soldiers and sixteen of them *Irgun* members, were killed in the confrontation. The *Altalena* Affair had broad repercussions, raising the spectre of civil war and greatly influencing the political alignments following Israel's War of Independence that were and still are long lasting.

At the close of World War II, soldiers of the British Army's Jewish Brigade, whose unit insignia was a golden Star of David over two vertical blue stripes, searched for Holocaust survivors. They were mainly seeking able-bodied Jewish men who were former slave laborers, concentration camp survivors, and those few who had successfully hidden from the Nazis. The veterans of the Jewish Brigade played a vital role in helping displaced Jews escape Europe for British Mandated Palestine, a task that continued after the Jewish military unit was disbanded.<sup>1</sup>

The members of the brigade had made alliances with diverse political groups in Palestine. All had the same goal: the establishment of a new nation and recruitment of survivors to help build a secure homeland. One such band, under the command of Menachem Begin, was called the *Irgun Tzvai Leumi*

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Howard Blum, *The Brigade: An Epic Story of Vengeance, Salvation, and WWII* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

(National Military Organization) a Zionist militant group that broke away from the mainstream Jewish paramilitary organization *Haganah*.<sup>2</sup>

Initially some of these recruits were transported into Italy and assigned to engage in intelligence activity for the *Irgun* in Rome. Shortly thereafter, a small unit received orders to leave Rome for the port of Genoa. The *Irgun* had purchased a surplus Landing Ship, Tank and needed to replace the crew that had sailed the vessel across the Atlantic Ocean and into the Mediterranean. The *Irgun*'s leadership planned to use the vessel to transport weapons and refugees to *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel).<sup>3</sup>

LSTs were special logistical-transport warships used by the Allies during in World War Two. Relatively slow and ungainly, these ugly 342-foot vessels transported tanks, large-wheeled vehicles, and troops, mostly for the conduct of amphibious operations during the war. They were designed to unload their cargo under enemy fire directly onto a beach and proved vital during the Normandy and Sicily invasions. LSTs had two huge steel doors at the bows

USS LST-138 at anchor,  
date and location unknown.  
(NavSource Online)



that could be opened to unload the tanks that drove over a heavy steel ramp that was lowered onto a beach. The ship's bottom was flat out of necessity, so that the vessel could run aground onto a beach to discharge the mechanized heavy equipment it carried. Unfortunately, this feature allowed LSTs to easily pitch and roll when underway at sea making them efficient seasickness generators

<sup>2</sup> On the *Irgun*, see, for instance, J. Bowyer Bell, *Terror Out of Zion: Irgun Zvai Leumi, Lehi, and the Palestine Underground, 1929–1949* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977); and Menachem Begin, *The Revolt: Memoirs of the Leader of the Irgun* (New York: Dell Books, 1978). The current Israeli Defense Force is commonly known in Israel by the Hebrew acronym *Tzahal* meaning the military forces of the State of Israel, its army navy and air force.

<sup>3</sup> For overviews, see, Begin, *The Revolt: Memoirs of the ETZEL Commander*; U. Brener, Altalena (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1978); and O. Gruweis Kovalsky, "The ghost of the Altalena seventy-five years on," *Israel Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2023): 587–601, <https://doi.org/10.1080/013537121.2023.2206228>.

for the crew and/or passengers.<sup>4</sup>

After the war, the United States Navy mostly decommissioned its LSTs or sold some for scrap. Thus, the *Irgun* was able to purchase the decommissioned rusting USS LST-138.<sup>5</sup> All its guns and other military installations had been removed. The steel bow doors were welded shut, all related egress mechanism disabled, and most of its mechanical equipment needed repair. The ship was refurbished and registered in Panama as the cargo ship *Altalena*, a pseudonym of the Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, a skeleton crew of non-Jewish sailors was hired to crew the vessel and keep the true purpose and ownership a secret. In January 1948, *Altalena* left Norfolk, Virginia bound for Genoa, Italy. Once it made port in Italy, an all-Jewish crew took over. The plan was to use *Altalena* to transport weapons and people to Israel. The ship carried 800 men and 130 women and children – Jewish displaced persons intending to immigrate to the new Jewish state, many of whom planned to join Irgun units upon arrival.<sup>7</sup>

*Altalena's* crew did not want anybody in Genoa to know that they were Jews.



Crew members on board *Altalena*, 1948. (Wikimedia Commons)

They pretended that *Altalena* was just another Panamanian cargo ship shuttling between Mediterranean and North African ports hauling miscellaneous cargo. The ship's several lifeboats were put in good working order as alternate means of transport to land refugees on the disputed Palestinian shores. *Altalena* was

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Gordon Rottman, *Landing Ship, Tank (LST) 1942–2002* (Oxford: Osprey, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> See NavSource, “USS LST-138,” *NavSource Online*, last updated 26 January 2024, <https://www.navsource.org/archives/10/16/160138.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Ze'ev Jabotinsky MBE was a Zionist leader, author, poet, orator, soldier, and co-founder of a Jewish Self-Defense Organization, a Jewish Legion of the British army in World War I. From 1939 to 1940, Jabotinsky was active in Britain and the United States in the hope of establishing a Jewish army to fight side by side with the Allies against Nazi Germany.

<sup>7</sup> United States Holocaust Museum, “Group portrait of Jewish DPs aboard the *Altalena*, an immigrant ship bound for Israel,” *USHM*, last modified 3 March 2021, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1107211>.

prepared for its intended mission: sail east to Israel and help defend the nascent nation that was being attacked by five Arab armies.

On 20 June 1948, *Altalena* reached the shores off Kfar Vitkin about midway between Tel Aviv and Haifa. It arrived in the midst of a convoluted and complex struggle between several novo-Israeli political factions grappling for power and disputing the makeup of Israel's Defense Force. David Ben-Gurion oversaw the new state's military operations. During the first weeks of Israel's independence, he ordered that all Jewish militias be replaced by one national army, the IDF, which would eliminate competition and ensure the central government controlled all military forces in the country. On 1 June, an agreement was made for the absorption of the *Irgun* into the IDF, which included a clause dictating that the former would cease all independent arms acquisition. Thus, when the ship arrived in Israel's coastal waters, Menachem Begin began negotiations with Ben Gurion in an effort to ensure a percentage of the arms and military equipment on board would flow to Irgun units. Ben-Gurion 'agreed to Begin's initial request that 20% of the weapons be despatched to the [Irgun's] Jerusalem Battalion.'" Begin's second request, however, "that the remainder be transferred to the IDF to equip the newly-incorporated Irgun battalions was rejected by the Government representatives, who interpreted the request as a demand to reinforce an 'army within an army.'"<sup>8</sup> The negotiations broke down and the government issued an ultimatum that all cargo on the vessel be turned over to the IDF or it would be confiscated by force.

At Kfar Vitkin, *Altalena* was met by Begin and other *Irgun* members. After many of the passengers had disembarked, the Irgun started to unload the military cargo. During this operation, a firefought broke out on the shore between *Irgun* members and IDF personnel, leading to the surrender of the former.

Meanwhile, Begin boarded *Altalena*, which was now heading for Tel Aviv shadowed by Israeli naval vessels. The vessel arrived at midnight, running aground approximately one hundred meters offshore, at the foot of David Frischmann Street. On 22 June, *Altalena* came under fire from IDF forces on shore and sea. An artillery shell eventually hit the ship, igniting a devastating fire and leading to the vessel's abandonment. Besides the sixteen Irgun men and three IDF soldiers killed, dozens more were wounded, and over 200 people were arrested, though they were soon released due to public pressure.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Yehuda Lapidot, "The Irgun: The Altalena Affair," *Jewish Virtual Library*, n.d., <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-altalena-affair>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Lapidot, "The Irgun: The Altalena Affair"; Jerold Auerback, *Brothers at War: Israel and the Tragedy of the Altalena* (New Orleans, Quid Pro Books, 2011); Daniel Gordis, *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's Soul* (New York: Schocken, 2014), 82-98; and David M. Castlewitz, "The Altalena affair brought the newborn state of Israel to the brink of a



*Altalena* on fire after being shelled near Tel-Aviv. (Wikimedia Commons)

The *Altalena* Affair had great partisan costs involving some of Israel's most renowned early political figures resulting in animosity that festered in the nation for many years. Despite the importance of the event, only a handful of first-hand accounts have been published about the vessel, its operations, and the incident.<sup>10</sup> The following is the first-hand account of an ex-slave laborer, Natan, who served on board *Altalena* and lived through these events.<sup>11</sup> This account, which was shared directly by Natan with the author, has been edited and annotated for clarity.

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My adolescent years from age twelve in Poland ended in Austria as a weak

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minor civil war," *Military History* (December 2006), <https://www.historynet.com/the-altalena-affair/>.

<sup>10</sup> Gruweis Kovalsky, "The ghost of the Altalena seventy-five years on," 588. See, for instance, E. Lankin, *The Story of the Altalena Commander* (Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1974). For accessible interviews of participants in the event, see Joanna Saidal, "Fire in the hole: Blasting the Altalena," *Times of Israel*, 13 June 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/fire-in-the-hole-blasting-the-altalena/>.

<sup>11</sup> Natan requested that his identity remain "quasi-anonymous." Please note that part of this account has already been published in the *Jewish Literary Journal* 41 (November 2016), though without the introduction and annotations.

and emaciated nineteen-year-old. I was one of a score of former slave laborers working for the Nazis when we were liberated from the death camp at Mauthausen, Austria. My education had been halted at the sixth grade. I had been deprived of my adolescence, its schoolmate friendships, ball playing, a first crush, and the emotion of teenage puppy love. For me, the horror of war ended on 5 May 1945, but a scar from a tattoo I cut from my arm would regularly remind me of both my prisoner number and the several camps in which I was interred.

I had the good fortune to be well cared for in an American field hospital. After my partial recovery, I was astonished to see British soldiers with a golden Star of David over two vertical blue stripes as their unit insignia. They were from a unit that fought in Italy as part of the British Eighth Army and Fifteenth Army Group. The Jewish Brigade members were searching for Holocaust survivors to aid and assist those who wanted to return to their former countries of origin and homes. In time, they played a vital role in helping displaced Jews escape Europe for British Mandated Palestine; a task that many of its members continued after the Jewish Brigade was disbanded.

The members of the brigade had allegiances with diverse political groups in Palestine, but all had the same goal, the establishment of a Jewish state and recruitment of strong survivors to help build a Jewish homeland in Palestine. One such band recruited me to become first a sailor then a soldier and help in the establishment of the State of Israel. That group was called *Irgun Tzvai Leumi* [National Military Organization] under the command of Menachem Begin who would later become the nation's Prime Minister. After I had sufficiently regained my health, they smuggled me into southern Italy and assigned me to engage in intelligence activity for *Irgun* in Rome, Italy. After only a month, my small unit received orders to leave Rome for the port of Genoa. When we arrived and met our contact, we were brought to a refurbished LST [Landing Ship Tank] and told that we were to replace the crew that had sailed her across the Atlantic Ocean and into the Mediterranean. The plan was to use the vessel to transport weapons and people to Israel. Not only was I finally to get to *Eretz Israel* [the Land of Israel] myself, but I was going to help others to get there as well....

A skeleton crew of mostly non-Jewish sailors was hired to man the vessel and disguise its true purpose and ownership. In January 1948 the *Altalena* left Norfolk, Virginia bound for Genoa, Italy, its mission a secret. The Jewish crew took over the LST once she made port in Italy. The plan was to use the *Altalena* to transport weapons and people to the hoped-for the new State of Israel. For a young man full of patriotic zeal, an emotion that had been missing in my life, this was exciting.

Each member of the *Altalena's* crew was given an English nickname because the *Irgun* did not want anybody in Genoa to know that the crew was Jewish. I became Mike, instead of my given name Natan. Therefore, the *Altalena* became my floating home for 158 days. We pretended that the *Altalena* was just another Panamanian cargo ship visiting and revisiting Mediterranean and North African ports hauling all kinds of cargo, mostly between Marseilles, France and into the

Atlantic to Casablanca, Morocco. My personal reward was experiencing some of the exotic life that these shores provided, something of which I had been deprived during my years in the concentration camps.

As one of the deckhands, I chipped the ever-returning rust down to clean bare metal, applied a coat of a red rust-inhibiting primer followed by blue/gray marine grade oil paint. It was simple and tedious, but a trivial job that had to be done – a far less arduous task than that I faced as a slave laborer.

We had several lifeboats on board, one of which was a small landing craft itself. The captain was concerned that these small boats be in good working order because they might have to be used to land refugees on the Israeli shores. Another important job was to release the ship's bow doors by cutting through the welding and then repair its complex opening and closing system. This had to be done at sea to avoid being observed. This suspicious activity might be reported to Arab or British forces, hostile to Jewish immigration activities.

I was assigned the dangerous job cutting through the weld. While underway, two of my fellow crewmen lowered me over the bow in a boatswain's chair. With an acetylene torch in my hand, I was suspended on a rope about twenty-five or thirty feet above water. I had to carefully cut through the welds using an ungainly torch. I could only do this exacting work when the sea was calm, precariously hanging and sometimes swinging above the ocean. During many hour-long sessions over several days, I succeeded in severing all the welds. To operate the huge doors, the defunct electric motors had to be refurbished. A shipmate nicknamed Augie had been an electrical engineer. He relished the challenge of figuring out how to reconnect wires and switches. After working on the problem for several days, Augie linked the motors to the ship's electrical system, pushed a button and the bow doors rotated open. The entire crew cheered.

Among my duties as a crewman, I stood watch in the crow's nest, a small platform on the tallest mast. Once there I scoured the horizon with binoculars and reported the position of any ship or potential problem spotted to the bridge below. Occasionally fierce windstorms churned up the Mediterranean Sea causing a series of waves to lift the grunting ship and then violently dropped the vessel with a resounding bang. The *Altalena* became an oversized diver executing repeated huge belly flops. During these storms I tied myself to a rail to prevent the wind or waves from sweeping me off my precarious perch, an unforgettable feeling of utter helplessness before the power of nature.

We now prepared the ship for its intended mission. Although we acted like we were a Panamanian cargo ship, we anxiously awaited instructions to sail east to Israel. The nascent state needed all the help it could get. The military order from the *Irgun* headquarters finally came. We set sail to Port-de-Bouc, France to pick up over 900 Holocaust survivors from assorted displaced persons camps, all desperately wanting to immigrate to Israel. Our secondary purpose was to transport a load of weapons, ammunition, and other military supplies for Israel's War of Independence.

While in Port-de-Bouc we guarded our ship closely. Anyone approaching the *Altalena*, whether from land or water, was viewed with apprehension. I had the early morning watch when a convoy of heavily loaded French military trucks approached the ship at dawn delivering the military cargo.<sup>12</sup> For me this was an exhilarating sight. Longshoremen started unloading the trucks and moving the cargo into the ship's hold. Then they quit. Most of the dockworkers were Arabs from Morocco and Algiers and they had discovered the ship's ownership and its likely destination. The Jewish crew was now forced to take on the job of loading of the ship, but in a reasonable in time it was completed. Shortly thereafter, trucks loaded with refugees started arriving and these passengers quickly came onboard. On the next high tide, a French tugboat guided us out of the port, and we left for Israel. It was Friday, 11 June 1948.

The passage to the ancient Levant might be precarious. Our captain, Monroe Fein, was concerned that the British Navy might intercept us, or the Arabs might attack us from the air, so he set additional watches.<sup>13</sup> Also, to counter this threat, we sailed a zigzag course for nine days, thus slowing our approach to Israel. I was on lookout and the first onboard to see the Israeli coast. I yelled into the voice tube to the bridge below, 'Land ahead at one o'clock.' It was Saturday, 19 June 1948.

We made a slow approach and stopped some distance west of the shore. We did not know exactly where we were. Waiting until evening, we lowered our small landing boat. An older more experienced crewman and I were selected to take the boat to shore along with an *Irgun* ranking official. A dim red light on dark shore guided us. When we got closer, I spotted a man swimming in the sea. I asked him in Hebrew, "Where are we here?" In the typical, brash Israeli manner, he replied, "What do you mean where you are? You are at the Redding power plant." We now knew that the ship's position was near Tel Aviv's power plant, and we radioed the captain that information. We landed the *Irgun* operative on a beach and returned to our darkened ship.

The *Altalena* slowly cruised well offshore and, hopefully, out of sight. The next evening, we moved north towards Kfar Vitkin. The *Altalena*, along with the *Irgun*'s military commander Eliahu Lankin, reached the beach off Kfar Vitkin on 20 June 1948. There we off loaded most of our passengers sending them to shore. [Later, a firefight broke out between *Irgun* members and IDF soldiers on the beach, culminating in the surrender of the former]. ... [W]e set a southerly course toward Tel-Aviv. Something was wrong. An Israeli ship suddenly appeared over the horizon and started to shadow us.

*Altalena* arrived at a beach across from north Tel-Aviv's Frishman Street.

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<sup>12</sup> On France's involvement, see M. Zamir, "'Bid' for Altalena: France's Covert Action in the 1948 War in Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 1 (2010): 17–58, doi:10.1080/00263200903432258.

<sup>13</sup> Lieutenant Monroe Fein served as a US naval officer in World War II and was a decorated veteran of the Pacific campaign.



Two of our small boats loaded with men headed toward shore under a white flag. Viewing the ship as a challenge to its authority, the newly formed defense forces of Israel, the *Tzahal*, fired upon the *Altalena*. A warship fired a machinegun at us from the sea and artillery fire came at us from shore. A heavyset *Altalena* crewman named Sam who was standing nearby suffered a wound in the knee. I tended to him the best I could by placing a tourniquet above the wound, but I was unable to move him safely below deck. The bullets were now whistled at us from several directions, many of them pinging off the ship's bulkhead...<sup>14</sup> Suddenly, an artillery shell struck the ship, causing an explosion. Thick smoke rose from



*Altalena* on fire near the shore. (Wikimedia Commons)

an open cargo hatch. The *Altalena* was on fire. Captain Fine reluctantly gave the order to abandon ship.

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<sup>14</sup> At this point, Natan's account states: "The captain gave an order to haul in the stern anchor (a kedge) and, in turn, pull the vessel stern-first away from the beach back to open sea. We moved only a short distance then stopped abruptly with a shudder. The *Altalena* had grounded on the sunken wreckage of another ship." This detail is not included in most accounts of these events, which describe the vessel running aground either accidentally or intentionally shortly after arriving off Tel Aviv. In his history, *Brother at War*, Jerold Auerbach notes, "Trailed down the coast by the navy vessels, there were intermittent gunfire exchanges as the *Altalena* maneuvered to prevent another ship from slipping between it and the shore. Shortly after midnight ... *Altalena* ran aground, 150 meters off the Tel Aviv beach at the end of Frishman Street, opposite Palmach headquarters in the Ritz hotel. Captain Fein remembered: "We hit the beach at top speed and settled down to await daylight and further developments."

I stripped to just my trousers and a life jacket, but kept my big hunting knife, a souvenir of the episode that I still have to this day. Bullets continued whizzing around me. I jumped off the stern to have the ship between the shooters on land and me. I swam away from the now exploding and burning ship. Israeli machinegun bullets shattered the placid surface seawater around me with a popping sound.<sup>15</sup> The projectile entry-points produced small orange and black geysers reflecting the light from the blazing ship I had just abandoned. First, I headed away from the shore into the open sea to the west then I slowly turned towards the beach. The orange life jacket hampered my swimming and presented a potential target, so I discarded it. I swam for approximately four or five hours until dusk. At about this time I spotted a large pipeline coming from the land into the sea. It was the North Tel Aviv sewer line. I swam behind it and reached the beach, completely exhausted. Exhausted, I dragged my body onto a sandy beach, the shore of my ancestral "Promised Land." At that moment, it did not seem very promising. Luckily two strangers picked me up and reunited me with some of the surviving crew. It was Tuesday, 22 June 1948.<sup>16</sup>

\* Natan or Nathan first became an Israeli soldier, then a blue-collar mechanic and welder and ultimately a scholarly mechanical engineer educated at Virginia Tech. He was holder of many patents and, most important to him, a productive American citizen. Sadly, he passed away a few short years ago.

*Louis Arthur Norton, a professor emeritus at the University of Connecticut, has published extensively in both the scientific and maritime history literature. His books having to do with maritime history include Joshua Barney: Hero of the Revolutionary War, Captains Contentious: The Dysfunctional Sons of the Brine (finalist, 2011 Eric Hoffer book award) Sailing Under John Paul Jones and a children's book, New England's Stormalong. Dr. Norton received Mystic Seaport Museum's LOG's 2002 and 2006 Gerald E. Morris Prize for maritime historiography and three Connecticut Authors and Publishers Association's awards for fiction and non-fiction writing. Perhaps apropos to this article, he served as a Fulbright Research Fellow at the Hebrew University's Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem in 1972.*

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<sup>15</sup> Although the ship flew the white flag of surrender, firsthand accounts note that automatic fire continued to be directed at the unarmed survivors swimming in the water.

<sup>16</sup> Of the sixteen Irgun fighters killed in the confrontation, six were killed in the Kfar Vitkin area and ten on Tel Aviv beach. Of the three IDF soldiers, two were killed at Kfar Vitkin and one in Tel Aviv.