

Flying TRUCK

Shlomo Aloni explains how bushplanes were turned into bombers

Chaos engulfed the British Mandate of Palestine from late 1947 and the situation deteriorated still further up to May of the following year. On November 29, 1947 United Nations Resolution 181 declared that the land would be divided into an Arab and a Jewish state. Hostilities erupted immediately and intensified as the British withdrawal in May 1948 approached.

The land offered to both communities was fragmented and the roads were unsafe to travel as both sides fought to gain an advantage. Thus the first task of the unofficial Jewish air force was to supply remote outposts.

In October 1947, a document titled *A Plan for a Jewish Air Force* called for the immediate acquisition of 20 commercial aircraft that could be legally imported to Palestine; among the types mentioned was the Noorduyn Norseman.

AFRICAN SMOKESCREEN

Small enough to land on improvised strips yet capable of delivering a respectable load, the Norseman was designed for bush operations as a rugged flying pick-up truck. It seemed to be the ideal solution.

By March 31, 1948, it was arranged to purchase 15 C-64 Norsemen that were surplus to USAF Europe stocks and in store at Oberpfaffenhofen, Germany. The acquisition was brokered by a Paris-based US dealer, via a Madrid middleman.

US civil registrations were allocated to the dealer who then sold the aircraft to a Belgian company that allegedly planned to use them for operations in Congo. In line with this smokescreen, the

Norsemen were flown to Toussus-le-Noble, outside Paris, where the dealer operated his business.

To provide the range to fly to 'Africa', the C-64s were moved to Amsterdam where the local KLM workshop installed a cabin fuel tank to boost endurance from 8 to 14 hours. The ferry flight to Palestine was planned via France, Italy and Greece. The first two modified machines were ready by late April 1948 and augmented the embryonic Jewish air force in early May 1948 after a non-stop, 11-hour flight.



Israeli SURVIVOR

Norseman 0806 was ferried from Haifa to Lod on March 18, 1954, its days with the IAF apparently over. Bedek Aviation sold it to a local operator registered as 4X-ARS. It was retired and placed on the roof of a steakhouse as an attraction. In 1990 its remains were returned to IAF 'service' when restoration for static display for the IAF Museum was planned. Sadly, this was never accomplished and the wreckage - in 'as is' condition - was transported to the IAF Museum at Hatzerim during 1997 and it has been displayed as such ever since.



MISERABLE MAY

Practicalities demanded more of the C-64 than its obvious role of flying truck – it was expected to carry a specially-prepared 440lb (200kg) bomb. The first Norseman bomber departed Squadron 1's base at Dov Field, Tel Aviv, on May 10, 1948, for its operational debut.

All this back-fired; the would-be bomber crashed over the target area west of Jerusalem, killing the two pilots, radio operator and three bomb 'chuckers'.

They were the first fatalities in what was to become

the Israeli Air Force. It has been suggested that control was lost when the barrel-like bomb was rolled towards the cabin door, ready to be tossed overboard.

The creation of a new nation – Israel – was announced on May 14, 1948. The following day Arab League nations invaded Palestine and attacked the Jewish state.

At this time, three more C-64s were in Italy awaiting dispatch. On the 20th former RAF pilot Len Cohen – acting as Norseman mission commander – checked out George 'Screwball' Beurling. The World War Two Canadian 'ace' had volunteered and Screwball was expected to fly

combat missions once he arrived in the new nation.

Cohen and Beurling flew four circuits before disaster struck. Observers noted that tight turns were being flown during the circuits and that the approach was in 'fighter' fashion. Suddenly the Norseman caught fire and plunged to the ground, killing both men. ➔

Below
Flight 35's flight-line at Tel Nof during the summer of 1948.



"The creation of a new nation – Israel – was announced on May 14, 1948. The following day Arab League nations invaded Palestine and attacked the Jewish state"

Israeli NORSEMEN

USAAF	US civil	IAF	Fate				
44-70458	NC74134	-	Crashed May 10, 1948	44-70388	NC79830	B-54 then 0803	Crashed at Sodom, Nov 10, 1948
44-70346	NC74133	B-51 then 0801	Crashed north of Tel Aviv, Jul 15, 1948	43-35337	NC79825	B-55 then 0804	Damaged, Dec 1948
44-70316	NC79833	B-52	Crashed at Tel Nof, Sep30, 1948	44-70498	NC79829	B-56 then 0805	Withdrawn in 1954 and sold
44-70337	NC79827	B-53 then 0802	DDT duster	44-70504	NC79832	0806	Withdrawn in 1954 and sold - now in the IAF Museum

The remains of Norseman NC79822, burning at Rome on May 20, 1948. Len Cohen and 'Screwball' Beurling perished in this accident.

Many Israeli publications have repeated the claim that the aircraft was a victim of an Arab sabotage; that a bomb had been planted and exploded. This is highly unlikely as it would require a very sophisticated timer or trigger to detonate such a device. An alternative explanation is that fuel leaked from the auxiliary cabin tank during the tight turns. Somehow the spillage ignited.

The other two Norsemen took off en route but never arrived. Fearing interception by Egyptian Supermarine Spitfires, the crews were briefed to enter Israeli airspace under the cover of darkness.

Flying over a semi blacked-out land that was unknown to them the foreign volunteer pilots identified what they thought was Tel Aviv, but was actually Gaza. Low on fuel, they decided to land where they could. One touched

down on a beach, the other at a small landing strip called Dir Sunid. The crews realized their error too late; Egyptian forces had already invaded the Gaza Strip, the Norsemen were seized and the pilots taken prisoner.

TIME TO ACT

There was just one Norseman operational in Israel and it flew 24 missions – two as a bomber – during May. It too succumbed; it was damaged in June and suffered another accident the following month. Ten C-64s still waited their turn in Europe.

During the summer of 1948, the IAF's priorities had shifted to the procurement of actual combat types. In June three civil-registered Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses were smuggled from the USA and flown to the clandestine Israeli base at

Zatec in Czechoslovakia, before transiting to Tel Aviv. As a result the US aviation authority grounded all US-registered aircraft suspected of being bound for Israel.

A prohibition order was issued on the ten Norsemen still in Europe on June 25 – it was time to act or the aircraft would be impounded. Five C-64s were ready to go and they set off across the 'Iron Curtain', from France, via Germany, to Zatec. Four made it through, via Yugoslavia, in August; the fifth following in September.

BELOW SEA LEVEL

The five were issued to Tel Nof Air Base as Flight 35, under Phil Marmelstein, with Ted Gibson taking over command from late August. The flight's initial task was to supply Sodom, an Israeli

44-70448	NC79828	0807	Withdrawn in 1954 and sold	44-70284	NC79831	-	Left behind in Czechoslovakia/ Yugoslavia
43-35417	NC79834	-	Left behind in Czechoslovakia/ Yugoslavia	44-70446	NC79826	-	Left behind in Czechoslovakia/ Yugoslavia
44-70256	NC79821	-	Landed in Gaza, May 25, 1948	44-70506	NC79823	-	Landed in Gaza, May 25, 1948
44-70262	NC79822	-	Crashed in Rome, May 20, 1948				

enclave on the south-west coast of the Dead Sea. This dirt strip was 1,200ft (365m) below sea level and temperatures exceeded 40 degrees Celsius at midday.

The first mission to Sodom was accomplished on August 9, 1948 in daylight. But five days later, Egyptian Spitfires intercepted an IAF Fairchild Argus south of the Norseman's route, so operations were shifted to the night. Over 300 flights to Sodom were staged from August to October 1948 with Flight 35 completing the lion's share.

Shortage of spares, harsh operating conditions and fatigued pilots began to take their toll – one was damaged in a landing accident at Tel Nof on September 30, 1948. Hopes for reinforcement evaporated during September when three Norsemen were involved in accidents over Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Two airframes were still in the Netherlands and were not delivered until after the War of Independence ended.

ASTOUNDING TONNAGE

Israel launched an offensive on October 15, 1948 to lift the Egyptian siege of the emplacements in the Negev Desert. Flight 35's mission was nocturnal bombing. The Norsemen were fitted with wooden frames attached to the cabin floor and the rear port side door was removed. The frames safely held a typical load of 20 44lb or eight 110lb bombs. Two 'chuckers' accompanied the usual crew of two pilots.

While over the target a left-hand orbit was flown and the chuckers – harnessed to the airframe so they couldn't fall out – man-handled bomb after bomb to the doorway, pulled the safety pins and tossed the crude weapons out.

Accuracy at night was naturally not

high; targets were Arab towns: Beer Sheva (19 sorties), Bet Guvrin (8), Ishdud (2) and Faluja (1). In total the bomb load was 25,343lb, an average of 844lb per 'op'. The four serviceable Norsemen thus flew 10% of the IAF's total number of missions and dropped 8% of the overall tonnage. This was an astounding achievement for a generally under-rated type.



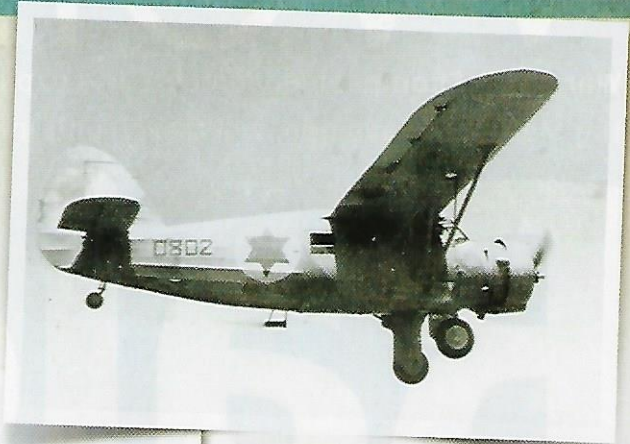
BUG BOMBING

The Israeli offensive ended on October 22, the Negev siege was lifted, Beer Sheva occupied and an Egyptian brigade was trapped near Faluja. Flight 35 resumed supplies to Sodom and flew occasional night bombing raids to harass the so-called 'Faluja Pocket'.

Flight 35 lost the services of B-54 which was damaged in a landing



accident at Sodom on November 10, 1948. Norseman 0805 (the serial system changed on November 13) was wrecked in a landing accident at Tel Nof. The remaining two were also involved in accidents during December: 0804 on the 15th and



0802 on the 28th.

The 1948 war ended in ceasefire on January 7, 1949, and Flight 35 was de-activated two days later. The damaged C-64s remained at Tel Nof under the care of the IAF's Air Maintenance Unit.

Israel embarked upon ambitious development projects immediately after the end of the 1948 war. One of these involved drying out Hula Lake and surrounding swamps from 1951 until 1958 to provide land for settlement. Prior to this, a major effort was launched to suppress or wipe out malarial mosquitos in the area, using the chemical pesticide DDT.

For this, IAF support was sought and a Norseman was allocated. An auxiliary fuel tank – one of those that KLM fitted in Amsterdam – was installed in the cabin of 0802 and modified to contain DDT. A nozzle was fitted below the cabin and a successful dusting test flight was flown on June 24, 1949.

In August, the two examples left over in the Netherlands finally arrived by sea at Haifa, but they were destined to fly operationally. The venerable 'bushplanes' were officially retired from IAF use in early 1954. Two were assigned to the air force technical school at Haifa as instructional airframes and three sold off by Bedek Aviation to civil operators. ●

Above
A landing mishap, Norseman B-56 inverted at Tel Nof on December 1, 1948.

Top right and below
DDT duster 0802 during its successful DDT 'bombing' test on June 24, 1948. ALL VIA SHLOMO ALONI