

## **Palestine Jewish Transport Unit Lost in Mediterranean Naval Battle**

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<http://www.jta.org/1943/09/10/archive/palestine-jewish-transport-unit-lost-in-mediterranean-naval-battle>

The tragic story of the death in a naval engagement of 138 Palestinian Jewish drivers serving with the British forces, briefly announced some time ago, was told in the press here today for the first time in detail by Dr. Bernard Joseph, legal adviser of the Jewish Agency for Palestine.

The men were members of a General Transport Company which came into being in June, 1942, when its mother company, formed in 1942, was divided into two separate units. The new company had a good heritage. Many of its members had been among the first Jewish recruits to volunteer in Palestine. They had their baptism of fire in Greece and Crete and brought the fighting qualities of seasoned men to the new unit. They had stood the test of siege for they were veterans of Tobruk and had learned the lesson of endurance and perseverance.

The Palestinian transport units in the desert were essentially Jewish, with Hebrew as their language, Jewish traditions observed and Jewish festivals celebrated. Most of the higher posts in their command were gradually entrusted to Jewish officers. The men of the Jewish company lived up to their heritage, playing the part assigned to them in the fateful days of El Alamein and helping to drive the enemy from Egyptian soil. They moved forward with the victorious Eighth Army, transporting in their vehicles men and materials, water and other essential supplies. They were among the first to enter Benghazi, among the first to enter Tripoli.

After a brief breathing space, the men of this transport company were again called upon to take their part in a new and great action. They had scarcely time to celebrate the traditional Passover Seder somewhere in Egypt before they received the order to embark for a new adventure. This time luck did not favour them. Their transport was sunk in a naval action, and many of them were lost at sea.

The whole story cannot yet be told, but some details have been made available. The vessel sank so rapidly that there was no time to lower the lifeboats: the men could only manage to throw a few rafts overboard. When orders came to abandon ship, all jumped into the water except those who were manning the guns; they stayed at their posts until the water covered both them and their guns. The men behaved magnificently, and one British officer who was present later declared that he had never seen such exemplary conduct. The Jewish soldiers helped one another in the water and remained calm, singing Hebrew songs to keep up their spirits. They tied the rafts together and put those aboard who shouted for help. Others clung to floating spare rafts and to an overturned board.

A destroyer passed close by a group of swimmers, but failed to notice them in the darkness. The men were in the water for over three hours until finally a minesweeper approached them. In order to attract attention the men banded themselves into a group, shouting in unison. Eventually the sweeper's searchlights caught one group and the vessel hove to. Most of the men were picked up by the minesweeper and some by another vessel elsewhere. But 138 men lost their lives beneath the waves.