

138 Jewish Soldiers Drowned in Naval Action –

Hebrew Songs Sung As They Wait To Be Rescued

(From Our Own Correspondent)

South African Jewish Times

September 3, 1943

The tragic but gallant story of the death by drowning of 138 Palestinian Jewish drivers serving with the R.A.S.C, announced briefly in the press some time ago, is told for the first time more fully in an article by Dr. Bernard Joseph in the latest issue of "Life in Palestine". The men were members of a General Transport Company which first came into being in June, 1942, when its mother-company, founded in February, 1941, 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 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 among the veterans of Tobruk and had learned there the lesson of endurance and perseverance.

The Palestinian transport units in the desert were essentially Jewish with Hebrew as their language. Jewish traditions were observed and Jewish festivals celebrated. Most of the higher posts in their Commands were gradually entrusted to Jewish officers.

The new 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 the 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, together with a group of Jewish A.T.S. somewhere in Egypt before they received the order to embark for a new adventure.

NAVAL ACTION

This time luck did not favour them. Their transport was sunk in a naval action and many of their numbers 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 life-boats. 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 lashed the rafts together and put on board those who shouted for help. Others clung to floating spars and to an overturned boat.

THE RESCUE

A destroyer passed close by a group of swimmers but failed to see 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 searchlight picked out one group and the vessel hove to. Most of them men were picked up by the minesweeper; some of them by another vessel which came upon survivors, elsewhere. But 138 men lost their lives beneath the waves.