

# “REEL STUFF”

## “ABOVE AND BEYOND”

NANCY SPIELBERG DOCUMENTS AMERICAN  
VOLUNTEER PILOTS IN ISRAEL’S 1948  
WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Story by **Ron Kaplan**



Photo: David Whitworth



Photo: Playmount Productions

NEW YORK native Al Schwimmer was an experienced flight engineer for TWA that assisted Air Transport Command during World War II. In 1947 Palestinian Jews asked him to help obtain planes for the expected Arab conflict instigated by the pending establishment of Israel. Despite its surplus of World War II aircraft, the U.S. government decreed it a federal offense to sell or provide aircraft to Israel. Using his veteran network and incredible ingenuity, Schwimmer cobbled together some 30 surplus aircraft, mostly transports. By establishing fictitious companies, his pilots and mechanics were but one or two steps ahead of the FBI. Schwimmer eventually paid a personal price, being convicted in 1949 of violating the U.S. Neutrality Act. He would later move to Israel and establish what would become its largest company, Israel Aerospace Industries, valued at \$1 billion when Schwimmer retired in 1988.

Schwimmer died in Tel Aviv on his 94th birthday, June 11, 2011. Obituaries ran worldwide, and among those reading the New York Times’ account of his passing was Nancy Spielberg. The youngest sister of filmmaker Steven Spielberg, Nancy possesses her own storytelling experience as the producer of film documentaries about subjects near and dear to her heart.

She recalled that her big brother had once toyed with producing a feature film about the American volunteer pilots that fought for Israel in what became its 1948 War of Independence. They were but a part of a critically needed corps of international volunteers known as the “Machal,” which translates to “volunteers from abroad.” Covertly recruited like Schwimmer, Machalniks were a vital and most unique band of brothers, comprising 90% of Israel’s fledgling air service.

Eventually some of Schwimmer’s sorely needed transports circuitously made it to Israel, where they augmented a handful of well-worn, mostly light aircraft. Obtaining fighters was harder still. As Arab enemies prepared to squash the nascent nation-state of Israel, in one of many twists of irony, the only single engine combat-worthy fighters the Israel Defense Force could obtain were Czechoslovakian S-199s — a license-built and underpowered variant of the German Me-109G. It was arguably as dangerous to its pilots as was its chief nemesis, the British Spitfires flown by the Egyptian air force.

Nancy realized Schwimmer’s loss underscored the urgency of authentically documenting the incredible truth of the American Machalniks’ “more amazing than fiction” story. Not wanting to step on her brother’s toes, a quick call gained not only his encouragement but a modest contribution to the budget. And thus, in the summer of 2011, Nancy’s work on Above and Beyond: The Birth of the Israeli Air Force, a feature length documentary, took wing.

Be they Jew or Gentile, each foreigner had his own personal reasons for volunteering; deeply rooted religious beliefs, a thirst to relive World War II flying glory, and the lure of international adventure were but a few. Such is reflected by the half dozen surviving Machal participants that Nancy and project director Roberta Grossman have called upon to share their intensely personal perspectives, including former US Navy torpedo bomber pilot Leon Frankel, Marine Corps fighter pilot Lou Lenart, and Army Air Force pilots Gideon Lichtman, George Lichter, Harold Livingston, and Coleman Goldstein.

Not content to leave the visuals to rare archival film and images, Above and Beyond, with a budget of \$1.3 million, boasts both re-creations using actual aircraft as well as judiciously utilized computer generated imagery (CGI). The filmmakers’ aim is to vividly illustrate the harrowing yet victorious story of a rag-tag air force that, by the war’s end in January of 1949, had repelled five Arab armies. In so doing, American Machalniks helped create the extraordinary legacy from which Israel’s now vaunted air force evolved.

On the heels of Above and Beyond’s projected mid-2014 release, Nancy is also establishing a follow-on preservation and education program similar to the non-profit Shoah Foundation that was born out of her brother’s feature film, Schindler’s List. Once it makes the rounds of the international film festival circuit, Above and Beyond will most certainly make a theatrical tour before broadcast airing. For updates and to make a tax-deductible contribution, visit [www.playmountproductions.com](http://www.playmountproductions.com).

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