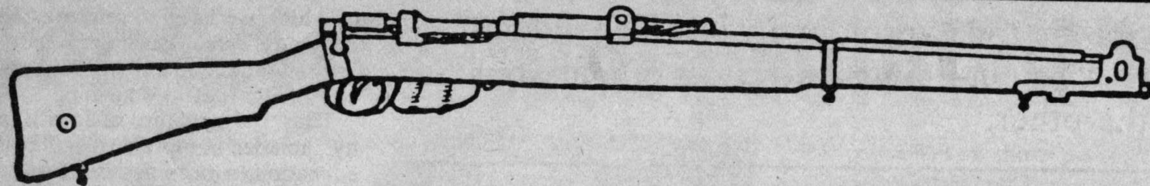
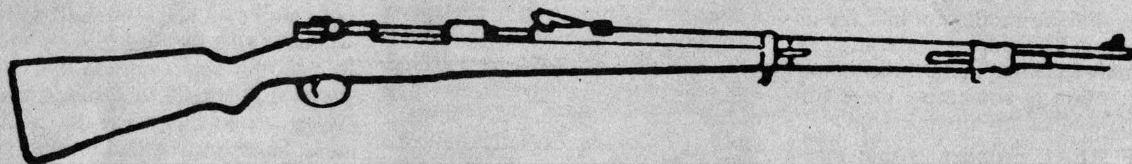


Sniping at a legend

The Palmah 'was essentially an overblown youth movement,' says Netiva Ben-Yehuda. She explains why she's trying to tell the story of the 1948 war 'like it was,' to BENNY MORRIS.



ARAB SNIPERS screamed *"Itbah el-Shagra"* (slaughter the blonde) as the fair, long-haired Netiva Ben-Yehuda and her 13 trainees crawled foot after slow foot to escape the heavy fire from the surrounding hilltops. But only 12 of her wards, who included four girls, and Netiva herself, got away. The dead youth's body was collected later that day, after the British forces had arranged a temporary truce.

That was in mid-February 1948. Netiva, one of the few women combat officers left in the Palmah — the assault branch of the Hagana — was already famous. For one morning the previous month, sapper Segen (Lieutenant) Netiva Ben-Yehuda, had lain behind a rock at a bend in the mountain road curving up from the Jordan Valley to the Nebi Yusha police fort in northern Galilee. Beside her were a Sten gun and a battery-connected plunger. Wires led to a 40-kg. charge hidden by the roadside. Netiva was waiting for a busload of Arab irregulars.

"We had been ordered to get the bus after innumerable Jewish vehi-

THE STORY of the ambush is related in Netiva's newly-published memoirs of the grim days of December 1947 to March 1948, *1948 — Between Calendars.* She hopes the book will help to "debunk" Israel's War of Independence — "like what Norman Mailer and Nicholas Monsarrat did for World War II in *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Cruel Sea.* I tell it as it was."

"Oh no," she grimaces, bitterly, "1948 wasn't the clean, pure, distilled war concocted by Israel's 1948 writers.' Most of them were nowhere near the battlefields during the pre-May 1948 fighting, when the fate of the embryonic Jewish state hung by a thread."

Netiva enjoys being controversial, eccentric, extreme, even perhaps brash. She says that the "climate" in Israel for a book such as hers "wasn't right until now, but I think many Israelis are now more open to an iconoclastic viewpoint." She hopes it will contribute to "an atmosphere which will reduce the eagerness of some Israelis to go to

pany had destroyed the bridge over the Litani. When we approached the Hasbani, the Arabs were ready for us. The crossfire was awful. We lost four dead and some wounded. We beat a retreat through rocky, mountain terrain, the wounded and dead on our backs or on stretchers. They kept falling off, onto the rocks."

Today she believes that had the attack been pressed home, the bridge would have been taken and blown. "It was typical of 1948."

For all its successes and undoubted valour, the Palmah "was essentially an overblown youth movement," says Netiva. "Commanders rose through the ranks. the better they performed as youth counsellors."

NETIVA lives alone in a fifth-floor walk-up in Jerusalem's Rehov Palmah. ("There were only two flats for sale in the capital when we looked in 1958, this one and another in Rehov Rabbi Bar-Ilan. Can you see me living in a Rabbi Bar-Ilan Street?")

viously nostalgic about those heady days of action, when a handful of ill-armed fighters held five Arab armies at bay and assured the emergence of the Jewish state.

She regards herself as a member of one "international fraternity of blood, of those who actually fight and kill and die in the world's wars."

"We seem to carry a stigma. When I was in Bangkok in the late 1960s, I met some American GIs on leave from Vietnam. There was an immediate rapport between us, a common language based on a shared, awful experience."

She points out that only an infinitesimal part of any nation actually fights in any war. In the case of the Yishuv's 660,000 Jews, the brunt of the fighting at the beginning of the War of Independence was borne by the Palmah's 5,000-6,000 soldiers. (Jewish dead in 1948 numbered 6,000 and about 20,000 wounded.)

FOUNDED in May 1941 as

She says that for years, she was denied the automatic promotion accorded men. "I wasn't pushy, I didn't care," she insists, but her voice betrays a lingering resentment.

IN 1972, together with Dahn Ben-Amotz, Netiva published *The World Dictionary of Hebrew Slang*. This marked a high point in her decades-long campaign to close the gap between literary and colloquial Hebrew that still characterizes much of Hebrew culture.

"Why, people today go to plays where they can't understand more than half of what the actors are saying," she says indignantly. Netiva takes everything to heart, and what she regards as the abuse of language above all.

In their preface to the dictionary the authors define their purpose as "giving roof and shelter to the illegitimate spawn of the Hebrew language... Without asking anyone's permission, we have applied the

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"We had been ordered to get the bus after innumerable Jewish vehicles had been ambushed along that road," she recalls.

The middle-aged, sprightly Netiva of today hardly looks like the hardened fighter she evidently was. Only her straightforward, earthy language and her grating voice give a hint of her past. She tells her tale simply.

"AFTER hours of waiting, the bus chugged into sight. I pressed the plunger. Nothing happened. Perhaps the wiring was faulty — we'd used bits and pieces collected from the scrapyard of a nearby kibbutz. I don't know."

Realizing that something must have gone wrong, the Palmah machine-gun covering team on the opposite hill opened up, bringing the bus to a halt.

"Arabs, waving rifles, poured out of the bus's single door, which faced me. I was alone. I opened up with the Sten. It jammed. I picked up my partner's rifle, and told him to get away with the Sten. I fired and fired. The Arabs fell one after another."

Netiva declines to say how many Arabs she shot in that morning's brief, bloody ambush, noting only that it was her first experience of close combat.

"Four Arabs survived the attack and fled. Word got around the Galilee Arab villages of the prowess of 'the yellow-haired devil.' A Syrian newspaper even advertised a 'wanted-dead-or-alive' poster, offering a large reward for my scalp," she says with a smile.

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Netiva enjoys being controversial, eccentric, extreme, even perhaps brash. She says that the "climate" in Israel for a book such as hers "wasn't right until now, but I think many Israelis are now more open to an iconoclastic viewpoint." She hopes it will contribute to "an atmosphere which will reduce the eagerness of some Israelis to go to war, an atmosphere closer to that prevailing in the rest of the Western world."

She thinks that Israel has served as the testing-ground for America's military hardware for the past two decades — "as Spain was used in the late 1930s by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. We, with our blood, have determined the price tags on every bullet, rocket, tank and plane the U.S. markets."

Like all wars, 1948 was "awful — dirt, blood, despair, brutality, mistakes, bungling," says Netiva.

In her book, she dwells on the sheer incompetence.

"We were really all such amateurs. When the war came, Ben-Gurion, a former private in the Turkish army, simply donned a khaki uniform and became commander-in-chief.

"Nobody remembers it now, but at the beginning of 1948 we had very little confidence in ourselves, in our commanders, in our war-making capacity. In fact, we were *afraid* of the Arab soldiers. We thought they were efficient and brave, while we were poorly armed and poorly trained. Abu Jilda, a fierce if mythical warrior, was the Arabs' folk hero, and at first, we saw our adversaries in his image."

She recalls the night of May 15, 1948, when she accompanied a Palmah company into Lebanon on a mission to blow up the Hasbani River bridge, one of the major routes into Israel from the north.

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Netiva's room is cramped with memories. She denies that she is a "collector." But a pre-World War I Lee-Enfield leans against one wall; a guitar occupies one armchair; and two mandolins and a plastic bust of Beethoven are perched atop the piano that has been squeezed in somehow. Framed drawings by her daughter, Amal, partly obscure the mostly English books lining the shelves; and there are photos of cats, including some of Netiva's own deceased threesome — Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein and Frederic Joliot-Curie.

On a shelf almost touching the ceiling are Amal's first shoes and Netiva's old Palmah boots. She is unapologetically sentimental, ob-

Netiva Ben-Yehuda

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FOUNDED in May 1941 as Rommel's Afrika Korps was advancing towards the gates of Palestine, the Palmah was largely based on the kibbutzim. Its companies contained a large minority of women. "It was, initially, completely egalitarian," says Netiva.

But on the night of December 8/9, 1947, a Jewish patrol was ambushed near Bir Asluj and a wounded Palmah girl was raped and mutilated before being murdered by the Arab irregulars.

"An order went out to all Palmah units to leave the women back at the base," recalls Netiva. But because of the acute manpower shortage, some women remained in combat roles for several months. Netiva was one of the last to be relegated to an instructor's position, and served intermittently at the front until mid-May 1948.

Some of the women went on strike to protest this discrimination. Netiva writes about these strikes in her book, but refuses to be called a feminist.

"You know what? Women in today's world have it easy. Why, to be a housewife is the easiest thing in the world. *She* doesn't have to foot the bills, contract ulcers, elbow her way to professional success. But, if she wants, she *can* opt for the rat-race and a career. She has a choice; men don't."

NETIVA HERSELF, formerly married to a Hebrew University physics professor, brought up Amal on her civil service pay as editor of the Labour Ministry's monthly journal.

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"Why, people today go to plays where they can't understand more than half of what the actors are saying," she says indignantly. Netiva takes everything to heart, and what she regards as the abuse of language above all.

In their preface to the dictionary the authors define their purpose as "giving roof and shelter to the illegitimate spawn of the Hebrew language... Without asking anyone's permission, we have applied the linguistic Law of Return to all the words and idioms that have come to settle among us, whatever their origin, nation, race, colour, and educational or moral value."

THERE IS a major irony here. Netiva, born in Tel Aviv in 1928, is the daughter of Dr. Baruch Ben-Yehuda, headmaster of the famous Tel Aviv high-school, the Gymnasia Herzliya.

Like his namesake, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the father of modern Hebrew, Netiva's father enforced what Netiva calls "a tyranny of language," in his home.

"No colloquialism or foreign word was ever utttered. Of course, I spoke normal Hebrew outdoors, which only emphasized to my mind the vast gulf between literary jargon and everyday usage. Practising this 'deceit,' we grew up guilt-ridden, ashamed of our linguistic lapses and desecration. Perhaps this is common to all sabras of my generation and one reason for the sabra's inarticulateness."

Netiva ascribes the success of the dictionary — now in its 10th printing and a giant bestseller by local standards — to a general awareness of this linguistic "schizophrenia."

SHE LIVES alone, an old—in the word of her dictionary —*fightereet*. She has abandoned the sword for the pen, but continues to go out into the world to do battle with the *eechsim* and *fooya* of this world, who emasculate language and distort the past. □