

ABOVE AND BEYOND: PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

By Nancy Spielberg

In 2011, after I finished executive producing the documentary *Elusive Justice: The Search for Nazi War Criminals*, I came across the obituary of a man named Al Schwimmer. “Father of the Israeli Air Force Dies at 94,” it read.

The obituary detailed how an American, a flight engineer for TWA, had smuggled the first planes to Israel, recruited volunteer pilots to fly them in the '48 War and, in doing so, helped create the Israeli Air Force.

The story immediately struck me. Smuggling operations? An American responsible for the Israeli Air Force? A David and Goliath story of a fight against five Arab armies? How could this story not be known? As soon as I read that piece, I said to my husband, “This has my name written all over it.”

I knew that time was of the essence. The pilots had to be entering their 90s. I needed to hire a team and film interviews before we lost any more of these “Top Guns” to the Grim Reaper. I wanted the film not to be about machines, but rather about the human spirit, about those “they don’t make ‘em like they used to” guys who felt a responsibility to help a brother in need.

My first task was to find a director.

Roberta Grossman’s name came to me from four sources. The joke she often tells is that whenever her phone rings in the office, she says, “If it’s Spielberg, tell him I’ll call him back.” Next thing she knew, there was a voice message from the “other” Spielberg. She thought someone was pulling her leg and actually called a friend to check me out.

We started filming interviews immediately. Our writer Sophie Sartain churned out questions at the same time she was writing a preliminary script. Interviewing 90+ year-olds is, at times, a

bit complicated, but these guys were really game. Even though they sat for hours in cold airplane hangars while we fiddled with their mics, they never wavered, never complained. The stories flowed, the details perfect.

In fact, they blew us away.

I had expected to hear wild adventure tales—evading the FBI, chasing after girls, racing through the skies in aerial dogfights—but what surprised me was the heart and emotion each pilot brought to his interview. Most of them did not grow up with a lot of Jewish pride in an era of widespread anti-Semitism. Some of them volunteered purely for the adventure of it. But in their interviews, they shared how their experiences in Israel awakened their Jewish identities and transformed their lives.

I identified with these flyboys, having grown up in Phoenix, Arizona, where we were the only Jewish family on the block. And, I saw my father in them. My dad used to fly B-25s. He was Army but flew with the Burma Bridge Busters Squadron doing radio communications. I marveled at the camaraderie he had maintained with his “band of brothers” and saw similar bonds among our pilots.

Creative partners with big hearts.

Once we had our core interviews and realized what a powerful story we had to tell, I searched for creative partners with big hearts. I found several. We needed flying sequences but they would prove costly. It was tough to find these ol’ war birds around the world in airworthy condition; their price tag made it even tougher.

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There was one company I wanted to handle the CGI work to help me get 12 Spitfires “flying” when I really only had one, and that was Industrial Light & Magic. I contacted them, and to my delight and overwhelming gratitude, ILM agreed to do our CGI.

My next phone call was to Hans Zimmer’s partner, Steve Kofsky. Steve enlisted Lorne Balfe, a star composer, to write the original score. Surprisingly, Steve was well aware of our story because his own father and uncle had volunteered to help Israel in 1948.

Filming on-location in England and Israel.

We flew to England to film aerial sequences at the Imperial War Museum in Duxford, and to Israel to interview President Shimon Peres and some of the pilots. The commander of the IAF opened up his base and assigned staff to help us maneuver. Harris Done, our DP, captured incredible footage on both trips.

We began post-production in the fall of 2013 with our editor Chris Callister, who helped us weave together a complicated story involving history, flying sequences and multiple personal stories. It’s no wonder Chris pulled a few all-nighters in the editing room!

Now that we are finished, I am grateful that we were able to capture the pilots’ stories and share them with the world. Sadly, since interviewing them, we have lost three of our pilots, George Lichter, Coleman Goldstein and, most recently, Lou Lenart. But we take comfort in knowing that their legacies—and the legacies of our other pilots—will stay with us and be taught for generations to come. Their families are very proud, as are the families of all the men and women who volunteered for Israel in 1948—some 3500 individuals from every corners of the globe.

We are honored to tell one part of this extraordinary story in ABOVE AND BEYOND.