

IDF FORCES

Rescue at Entebbe: An Interview With the Chief Pilot

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Brig. Gen. (res.) Joshua Shani was the lead pilot in [Operation Entebbe](#), flying the first C-130 Hercules cargo plane with the entire rescue force on board. This week, for the [36th anniversary](#) of the rescue operation on July 4th, he agreed to answer a few questions.



Joshua Shani was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Israel Air Force during the Entebbe rescue operation.

Tell us a bit about your family background.

My parents lived in what is now Ukraine. Their small town was part of Poland at the time. They escaped the Nazis and ended up in Siberia, where I was born in 1945. We were refugees, wherever we were.

Soon after the war ended, my family lived in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp in Germany, which was run by the British. We were there for almost a year. And then we made our way from Germany to Israel, via France and Egypt.

My parents were lifelong Zionists and fluent in Hebrew, which they spoke to me as a baby. They were thrilled to arrive in Israel and begin a new life, never again to be refugees.

Did you always know that you wanted to be a pilot?

No, actually. I wasn't interested in airplanes as a teenager. I wanted to be an electrical engineer. On my draft day, I was sitting on the grass with other new recruits at [the Bakum](#) (the IDF induction base), and a major with wings on his uniform approached us. He said, "You are all fit for flight school. Who here doesn't want to volunteer?"

I started to raise my hand, but when it was about halfway up I realized that nobody else around me was raising his hand. So I put my hand down. The rest is history.

What did you do when you first joined the Israel Air Force?

I was drafted in 1963. I received my pilot's wings in 1965 from Ezer Weizmann, who was then the commander of the Israel Air Force.

The first plane I flew was the [Nord Noratlas](#), a transport plane. I was also a Fuga instructor for two years.

The Air Force then sent me to the United States to learn how to fly the C-130 Hercules cargo plane. First I was in Little Rock, Arkansas, and later in Pope, North Carolina. It was my first time in the United States.

You were on active duty during some of Israel's major wars. Where were you then?

In 1967, during [the Six-Day War](#), I supplied fuel and ammunition to IDF soldiers fighting in the Sinai Peninsula.

In 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, I was a squadron commander. I was involved in fueling and reconnaissance missions with the C-97 Stratofreighter. I also flew the C-130 Hercules across the Suez Canal,

deep into Egyptian territory, in order to supply fuel and ammunition to the ground forces that were holding territory west of the canal. Those forces, by the way, were led by Ariel Sharon.



Joshua Shani accumulated 13,000 flight hours during his career in the Israel Air Force.

How did the crisis at Entebbe begin?

On June 27, 1976, a Paris-bound Air France flight from Tel Aviv, via Athens, was hijacked and diverted to Entebbe, Uganda. Two of the hijackers were members of the German Baader-Meinhof Gang, and two were from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. They demanded the release of 53 jailed terrorists in Israel.

On the third day of the crisis, the terrorists separated Israeli and Jewish passengers from the others. The captors freed the non-Jews and sent them to France the next day. Quietly, while the rest of the world talked but did nothing, the Israel Defense Forces planned a rescue mission.

How did you first find out that you would be asked to help rescue the hostages?

I was at a wedding when the commander of the Israel Air Force, [Maj. Gen. Benny Peled](#), approached me and began asking questions about the capabilities of the C-130. It was a strange situation — the commander of

the IAF, a major general, asking a lieutenant colonel questions about an airplane. But the C-130 was a new plane, and the IAF top brass were always focused on fighter jets, not transport planes. Peled asked me if it was possible to fly to Entebbe, how long it would take and what it could carry. I left him with the impression that a rescue would be possible.

How did the operation begin?

We began our journey from Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, which at the time was under Israeli control. The takeoff from Sharm was one of the heaviest ever in the history of this airplane. I didn't have a clue what would happen. The aircraft was crowded. I was carrying the Sayeret Matkal assault team, led by [Yonatan Netanyahu](#). I was also carrying a Mercedes, which was supposed to confuse Ugandan soldiers at the airport, because [Idi Amin](#), the country's dictator, had the same car. And I also found room to pack Land Rovers and a paratrooper force.

I gave the plane maximum power, and it was just taxiing, not accelerating. At the very end of the runway, I was probably two knots over the stall speed, and I had to lift off. I took off to the north, but had to turn south where our destination was. I couldn't make the turn until I gained more speed. Just making that turn, I was struggling to keep control, but you know, airplanes have feelings, and all turned out well.

The flight to Entebbe is about 2,500 miles (4,000 km). How'd you do it?

We had to fly very close to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, over the [Gulf of Suez](#). We weren't afraid of violating anyone's air space — it's an international air route. The problem was that they might pick us up on radar. We flew really low — 100 feet above the water, a formation of four planes. The main element was surprise. All it takes is one truck to block a runway, and that's all. The operation would be over. Therefore, secrecy was critical.

At some places that were particularly dangerous, we flew at an altitude of 35 feet. I recall the altimeter reading. Trust me, this is scary! In this situation, you cannot fly close formation. As flight leader, I didn't know if I still had planes 2, 3 and 4 behind me because there was total radio silence. You can't see behind you in a C-130. Luckily, they were smart, so from time to time they would show themselves to me and then go back to their place in the formation, so I still knew I had my formation with me.



The crew of the C-130 that landed at Entebbe poses with their plane after the mission. Joshua Shani is in the center of the front row.

What was going through your head as you approached the runway in Uganda?

My biggest fear was not being shot at from the ground, but making a mistake as a pilot. All I could think the entire time was "Don't screw this up!" True, the risks to my life were real, but I was more worried about botching the landing and endangering the success of the entire operation. Think about it — how many people would have died at Entebbe if I had made a mistake?

In case something did go wrong, though, I was prepared for the worst. I was wearing a helmet, a bullet-proof vest, and I had an Uzi. I was also given a thick wad of cash in case I needed to use it to escape Uganda. Luckily, I never had to use it. I returned the cash after returning to Israel.

What happened after you landed?

I stopped in the middle of the runway, and a group of paratroopers jumped out from the side doors and marked the runway with electric lights, so that the other planes behind me could have an easier time landing. The paratroopers went on to take the control tower. The

Mercedes and Land Rovers drove out from the back cargo door of my airplane, and the commandos stormed the old terminal building where the hostages were. While coordinating the assault, Yonatan Netanyahu, Sayeret Matkal's commander, was fatally shot by a Ugandan soldier.

When the hostages were freed, what was your next move?

We had a little problem: We needed fuel to fly back home. We came on a one-way ticket! We had planned for a number of options for refueling, and I learned from the command-and-control aircraft flying above us that the option to refuel in Nairobi, Kenya, was open. After about 50 minutes on the ground in Entebbe, I gave the order: "Whoever is ready, take off." I remember the satisfaction of seeing plane number 4, with the hostages on board, taking off from Entebbe — the sight of its silhouette in the night. It was then that I knew. That's it. We did it. The mission succeeded.

How were you greeted in Israel?

The plane with the hostages landed at Ben-Gurion Airport, where they were reunited with their families. The other three planes remained for a debrief. Here comes Yitzhak Rabin, prime minister of Israel, walking up to me. I had been in my flight suit for 24 hours straight, in temperatures over 100 degrees in the airplane, sweating and smelly, and here walks the prime minister with big open arms. I'm thinking — please don't hug me — he may die from this! He hugged me for what felt like a full minute, and said only "Thanks."



Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin greets the rescued passengers after their arrival in Israel.

What was it like returning to Israel as a hero?

After my father's death, I found his letters from Bergen-Belsen that he sent to Kibbutz Mishmar Haemek. The letters describe his experiences during the Holocaust, what happened to his family, etc. I won't discuss it here. One of his letters said, "My only comfort is Joshua. He gives me reason to continue."

The reason I mention this letter is because, 30 years later, when I returned from Entebbe, my father hosted a party for me. Family and friends were all there to celebrate the success of my mission. My father was in a great mood. I know what he was thinking, a Holocaust survivor. His son at the time was a lieutenant colonel in the Israel Air Force and had just flown thousands of miles in order to save Jews. It probably added ten years to his life.

Are you still in touch with people from the mission?

Well, as you probably know, many of them are in high places today.

Ehud Barak, the minister of defense, was the same rank as me at the time. He was in the planning group for the operation, and I was the chief pilot. We consulted each other then, and I see him often nowadays.

Shaul Mofaz, recently named vice prime minister, was in charge of destroying MIG fighter jets on the ground in the Entebbe airport so that our rescue force could not be pursued as we left Uganda.

[Matan Vilnai](#) was in the cockpit with me. [Ephraim Sneh](#) was on the plane as a doctor.

[Dan Shomron](#) died a few years ago — he was one of the leaders of the entire operation.

And, of course, Yoni's brother, Benjamin, is the prime minister. I first met him in the early 1980s when he was Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Israel in Washington, DC.

Where has your career taken you since Entebbe?

I stayed in the IAF for a while – more than 30 years, in fact. I accumulated 13,000 flight hours, including nearly 7,000 in C-130s. Over the years, I commanded three squadrons and a mixed base of four squadrons and eight ground units.

From 1985 to 1988, I was the Air Force attache in the Embassy of Israel in Washington, DC. I retired from active duty in 1989, as a Brigadier General. For ten years after that I was in the reserves.

Today, I am the vice president of Israel operations for Lockheed Martin. And to think, as a new recruit in the IDF, I wasn't interested in being in the Air Force — and airplanes became my life. You never know how things will turn out.

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