

The writer as a handsome young man on the Negev set of 'Hill 24 Does Not Answer.'  
(Photos: Charles Ticho)



## ISRAEL FILM DREAMS AND REALITY

### Mitzpe Ramon in 1954: Revisiting the dusty town

• By CHARLES TICHO

"I'll kill that bloody driver!" echoed over the hills of the Negev Desert, "I swear, I'll kill him!" At the bottom of the hill topped by the ancient Nabatean Avdat fortress stood Thorold Dickenson. At 190 centimeters tall, white hair flowing wildly around his head, arms outstretched and flailing, he looked like an irate Moses in the wilderness shouting curses toward a chaos that was happening in front of him. Despite all the noise – the explosions, the trucks and jeeps rushing downhill, and the troops firing their guns – I could clearly hear Dickenson's voice screaming in my earphones. He was using words much worse than "bloody."

WE HAD arrived here in the middle of the Negev just three days earlier and were in the second week of shooting the first real all-Israeli motion picture production, *Hill 24 Does Not Answer*, a dramatization of events that took place during Israel's War of Independence. During the first week of shooting one of the few helicopters in Israel was damaged; the accident nearly cost some lives. Now, during the second week, things were not going too well either.

For two days we had been filming scenes depicting the attack of Israeli forces trying to dislodge Egyptian soldiers from the fortress. Now we were at a point where the Egyptians were abandoning their position and were supposed to rush helter-skelter down the mountain and, as the audience was expected to assume, back to Egypt.

This involved major preparations. A dynamite charge had to be strategically buried so that explosions could be fired at appropriate moments as the Egyptian soldiers ran out of the fortress, climbed onto their vehicles, and charged down the hill. There was just one problem. The Egyptian Army truck, instead of rushing down the hill, would roll slowly downhill till the clutch was engaged and the motor got started. Only then would it finally move at an appropriate speed – much too late.

The assistant directors climbed up the hill to the truck and painstakingly explained to the driver, who was also the owner of the truck, what he was supposed to do. When the second take of this scene was shot, the slow-starting truck ruined the scene again, causing the director, Dickenson, to bring down his fury upon the poor driver.

The driver's problem was simple. The battery on his truck had gone dead, and he did not want to waste his own precious gasoline keeping the truck idling while the lengthy preparations were taking place between takes. Only a promise to repay him for the wasted gasoline finally convinced the driver to follow the instructions and cooperate with the production and make the next take of the scene a success.

WHAT DOES all this have to do with Mitzpe Ramon? In 1954, a very modest military installation was the nearest civilized location to Avdat, where the crew and equipment were housed.

Producing the first major film in Israel with a mostly Israeli crew, cast and resources was truly a daunting project. The helicopter and truck incidents were just the first of a string of problems and challenges that had to be overcome.

Today a sizable town with hotels, restaurants, a museum, and industry is located at Mitzpe Ramon, but in 1954 there was nothing more than a small fenced-in area (about the size of a soccer field) with a half-dozen wooden military barracks – but there was water, an electric generator and a chance for civilized living.

The male crew members were housed in two of these small barracks and the women in a third. There was a dining room/kitchen house and one shower room where the men and the women took turns cleaning up the day's dust, dirt and sweat. At the far side, along the fence, were two outhouses. The arrangement made for tight living conditions and occasional frayed nerves – particularly which gender had the first turn in the shower.

My job at this location was recording engineer. I sat in the sound truck that supplied the power to the

camera and the recorder. A bank of batteries, that I had to recharge every evening, would supply the power to a generator that, in turn, would run the camera motor and a Westrex 35-millimeter magnetic recorder inside the truck. Actually, it was somewhat of a miracle that the truck had arrived at the location at all.

In addition to being the recording engineer, I was also given the job of driving the truck. On a Thursday evening I suddenly learned that my American driver's license did not qualify me to drive a truck in Israel and that I had to get an Israeli truck-driver's license. Rather naively I arrived at the licensing bureau on Friday morning and announced that I had come to get my truck license.

"You must be kidding!" was what I understood the clerk to say in Hebrew when I told him what I wanted to do, "these things take three to four months at least."

"No, you don't seem to understand," I insisted, "I've got to be on location in the Negev on Sunday morning or a whole film crew and a cast of hundreds will be sitting around with nothing to do."

"Look," said the clerk, "this is Friday. We close at one o'clock and there is no way that you can get a license to drive a truck in four hours."

I kept insisting and asked to talk to the head of the department. A half hour went by before I was finally ushered into an office to see a man who fortunately spoke enough English to understand what I was trying to do.

I pleaded my case forcefully. He seemed sympathetic and, at last, I convinced the man of the urgency of my request. The director took me under his wing and proceeded to process me through the various steps of the procedures. In quick succession the application forms were filled out, I took the eye test, passed the physical examination, and took the written examination, which the director kindly translated for me. Each of these steps was taken in front of the startled faces of the clerks and the envious and outraged eyes of the poor other applicants who were standing in long lines at each station waiting for their turn.

"Where are your photographs?" asked the director. "Photographs! God! I should have thought of that! What do we do now?" It was almost 12 o'clock, time was running out, and I was getting desperate.

Fortunately there was a photo store for just this purpose across the street. After a brief argument I persuaded the owner to stay open past noon and 15 minutes later I was rushing back with pictures in hand.

"OK" said the director, "Now for the driving test."

"Driving test! Where do I get a truck?" I looked around bewildered. Things were looking dark. I rushed out of the building just as a truck owned by a driving school was pulling out of the parking lot. I ran after him.

"Please, please can I use your truck? I have to take a test," I pleaded. The driver hesitated.

"First you've got to take at least one lesson," he insisted. "There is no time for that. I've got to take the test." The driver insisted that I, at least, must show him that I knew what I was doing. So I hopped into the cab. The man explained the gears to me quickly, and we were off on a quick spin around the block.

It was a good thing that I had this preliminary ride because the gearbox had apparently been ruined by previous learners and was very difficult to operate. It was 10 minutes before closing time when an examiner joined me in the truck to test my driving skills. As luck would have it, his daughter lived in Chicago and, when I told him some complimentary details about the area where his daughter was living, he saw no reason to make this examination too thorough.

Five minutes later I was back in the director's office having passed the driving test. Ten minutes after that, as the building was being locked up for the day, I walked out of the building with my brand-new and hard-won truck driver's license in my pocket. As I was

walking over to the bus station, the clerks, who were leaving the building and were gathered in the parking lot, applauded as I passed by. I had, apparently, made history.

BEN BRIGHTWELL was one of four British crew members brought over to head up the departments. Ben was chief sound engineer and my boss on this project. The others were the chief cameraman, the script clerk and, of course, Dickenson, the director. Despite his name, Brightwell was not all that bright - a fact that he would often demonstrate.

Here in the desert, after hearing that Arabs attacked Jews at times; he was extremely upset that we were usually the last ones to leave the location. We had to gather up all the cables we had run to the camera and to the microphones before we could leave, so, regardless of how fast we moved, everyone was long gone before we were ready to leave. Night falls quickly in the desert and we often traveled in the dark.

"Stick your guns out the windows," Brightwell would insist as we departed for the half-hour drive back to Mitzpe Ramon, "so people will see that we are armed."

The truck was hard enough to drive on the unpaved desert road. Now I had to do it with a gun butt clutched between my thighs. However, the chance of being attacked was a real possibility that we had to be prepared for. This is why the police in Beersheba insisted that anyone traveling south from the city had to have a rifle or a handgun.

Brightwell was not the only one who was concerned. Mildred Solomon, an American visitor in Israel who was acting as a secretary on the production, felt a certain kinship towards me, a fellow American. Unfortunately, this affinity induced her to feel free to wake me in the middle of the night so that I could escort her, rifle in hand, while she marched out



Deep in the desert, dramatizing War of Independence events.

to the fence line to use the outhouse. I would then stand there on guard while she relieved herself and march her back to her quarters when she was done. I made it my business, after a few of these nightly sojourns, to remind Mildred not to drink too much water at dinner and to be sure to use the toilet before going to sleep.

After Mitzpe Ramon the crew went to Haifa, Nahariya, Acre and several other locations, but nothing was as memorable as the two weeks in Mitzpe Ramon.

As for the movie, in 1955 it marked the first appearance of an entry produced in Israel at the Cannes Film Festival.

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