



A flying dream

Although 70 years apart, two related pilots contribute to Israeli aviation history

US AIR FORCE pilot John Trygve in his flight gear from WWII.

(All photos courtesy Jonathan Everett Maseng)

• JONATHAN EVERETT MASENG

The big news in Israeli aviation circles this month was the opening of a new nonstop route between San Francisco and Tel Aviv by United Airlines. The route linking America's hi-tech capital with the capital of high tech in the Middle East, and launched with some fanfare, as United assigned its most advanced plane, the Boeing 787 *Dreamliner* to the route.

What hasn't been reported, though, is that one of the three pilots flying the inaugural flight on March 30 has a strange connection to Israel. That pilot is my cousin, John Maseng, and this is the story of how both of them – non-Jews who share the name John Maseng

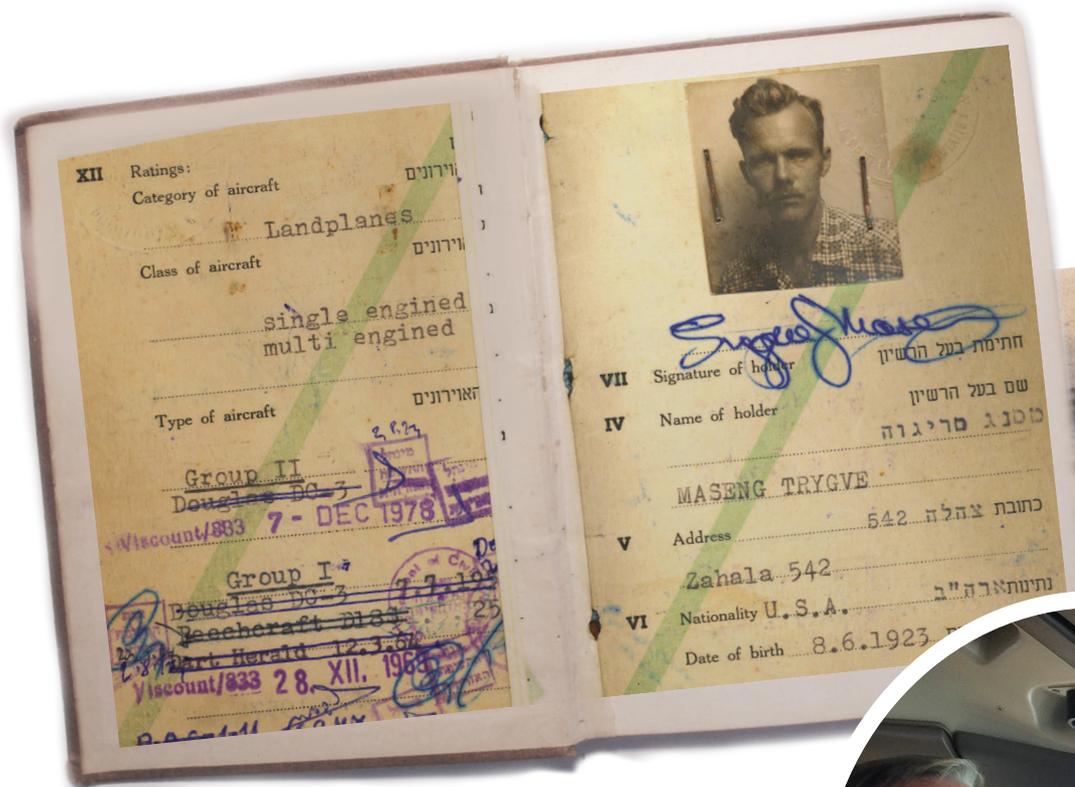
– made Israeli aviation history nearly 70 years apart.

THE STORY begins in Mount Prospect, Illinois, in 1923, where my grandfather Trygve Johannes Maseng was born into a family of Norwegian and Danish immigrants. Because his father was also named Trygve, and because most Americans struggled to pronounce his Norwegian name, everyone called him John. He grew up, like most Americans of his generation, struggling with the hard times brought on by the great depression. His father worked as an engineer, and earned enough to send him off to college. Like many men of his age, when the United States entered World War II, he volunteered for military service.

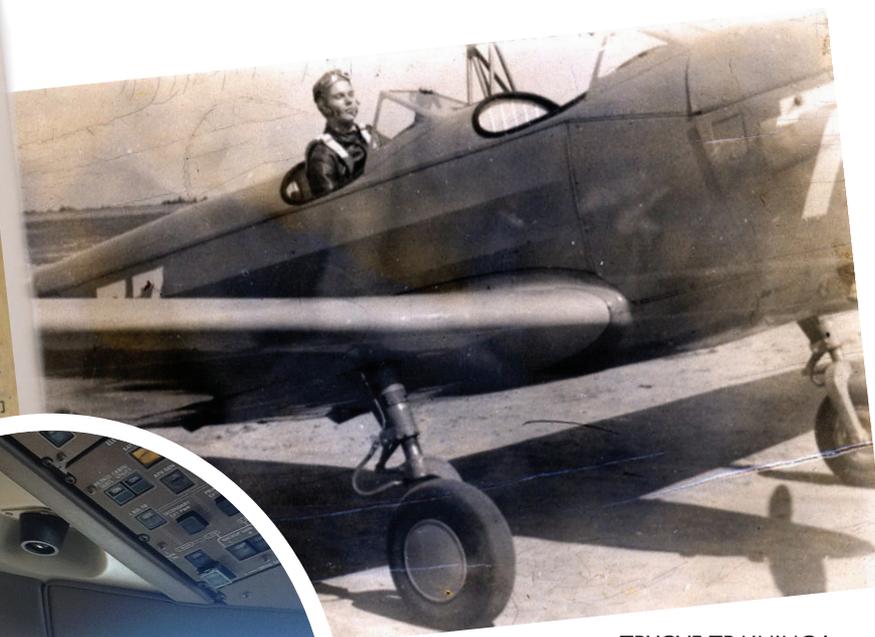
My grandfather served as an officer in the Air Force.

Trained as a pilot, he flew bombers in Europe and the Pacific during the war. His favored plane was the B-26, nicknamed “the widowmaker” due to the many accidents suffered by its pilots because it was incredibly hard to fly. If you could fly it, however, it was one hell of an aircraft. My grandfather survived bombing runs that claimed countless lives, and returned to the States after the war, ready for civilian life.

It was during this respite from war, studying literature at Columbia University in New York, that he was found by an agent of the Hagana. They were searching for pilots to help out the Jews of Palestine. To this day, no one in my family really knows why my grandfather agreed to help. He wasn't Jewish, didn't have any close Jewish friends, and had no connection to the Mid-



TRYGVE'S ISRAELI pilot license.



TRYGVE TRAINING in an US Air Force plane.



UNITED AIRLINES Pilot John Maseng on the inaugural San Francisco to Tel Aviv flight.

dle East. When my father once asked him years later why he chose to join Mahal (overseas volunteers who fought for the Jewish state), my grandfather told him it was because he "abhorred asymmetry." He simply couldn't stomach the thought of 600,000 Jews fighting against such great odds.

Join he did, however, and my grandfather Trygve "John" Maseng soon found himself helping a man named Al Schwimmer conduct a dangerous scheme in California to break a blockade and smuggle American military aircraft to Israel. Schwimmer knew that Israel lacked aircraft, and using his contacts, he managed to secure some American military planes and gather them in Southern California. He needed pilots though, and that's where my grandfather came in. My grandfather flew one of the C-46s that Schwimmer's operation managed to smuggle overseas. He risked being arrested to help out a people who were not his own.

The events in this story were the subject of the documentary *Above and Beyond*, produced by Nancy Spielberg in 2014. A bonus feature on the DVD includes a segment that features my father and a couple of other pilots speaking about my grandfather. He's also referenced quite a number of times in Leonard Slater's book *The Pledge*.

While there were a number of non-Jewish volunteers in Mahal, especially among the pilots; my grandfather was one of the few who stayed when the war was over. He met my grandmother, Eve, at a hotel in Tel Aviv, and fell in love. He decided to convert to Judaism.

When my grandfather went through with his conversion, he was in his late 20s, and had to be circumcised, an unpleasant experience to be sure.

In order to wish him a *mazal tov* on his conversion, Ezer Weizman, who was in charge of the fighter pilots at the time, flew his plane, possibly accompanied by a couple of others, very low over the hospital, and threw rolls of toilet paper out of the windows so that they'd rain down like streamers as they unfurled. It was their way of welcoming him into the tribe.

My grandfather continued to fly for the Israel Air Force, but also became a civilian pilot, flying for El Al and

Arkia. He served as one of Israel's first test pilots, making sure new aircraft were safe for other pilots to fly.

In the mid-1960s he flew stunt planes for Kirk Douglas's film *Cast a Giant Shadow* when it came to film in Israel.

My grandparents raised my father and aunt in Israel. My father, Danny, became a prominent singer in Israel in the late '60s and early '70s and eventually came to the States in the 1970s to star on Broadway in *Only Fools are Sad*. It would be years, however, before he fully reconnected with the Norwegian side of his family. It wasn't until I was in college, and the Internet was around, that I rediscovered a "lost" branch of our family. I stumbled upon the fact that a woman named Marie Maseng was attending the same small college in Boston as my best friend. I wrote to her and quickly confirmed that we were related.

MARIE AND her family lived in New Hampshire. Her father, Eric, was an engineer, like my great-grandfather, and his father Peer, and brother John, were pilots. As our once distant branches of the family grew closer over the years, a bizarre thing happened. John had married a wonderful woman named Nancy who had a daughter from her first marriage. Her daughter, Lizzie, was Jewish on her father's side, and felt strongly connected to her Jewish heritage. She wanted to have a bat mitzva. John and Nancy reached out to my father, who was serving as a clergy member by that time, to ask if he would conduct the bat mitzva.

So it was that my father and mother traveled to Las Vegas to perform the bat mitzva of the stepdaughter of our Norwegian-American cousin. It was a moving experience for everyone involved, and we didn't know at the time that years later John would be called on to "serve" Israel in his own way.

John, like my grandfather, was trained as a pilot in the US Air Force. He followed his father into the family business, flying for United Airlines. He's flown all over the world, most recently flying 777s on United's routes to Asia. When he got the news that he'd been chosen to fly the inaugural flight from San Francisco to Israel, he immediately contacted my father. Where should he go on his day off in the Holy Land? What should he see?

As it turns out, John ended up going on a tour of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea with about half the flight crew. He was amazed by the sights, but warned me that one should not try tasting the water in the Dead Sea, as he could speak from experience. He was proud, more than anything, of being the first to fly from San Francisco to Tel Aviv, opening a new route between the US and Israel.

In a way, my cousin John flies in my grandfather's wake. He traces the same route from California to Tel Aviv, except he has no embargo to duck, and no court martial waiting at home. Too often we've forgotten to honor the members of Mahal and the sacrifices they made. Mahal was not given a memorial until 1993, more than two years after my grandfather's death, and it was self-funded, at that.

Yet, here I am in 2016, a man named Jonathan Maseng, a proud Jew, writing a story about the strange coincidence of two men named John Maseng, neither of whom were born Jews, who flew to Israel for very different reasons nearly 70 years apart. In many ways, that is the greatest memorial of all to my grandfather. His story is not forgotten.

His memory – and the memory of the other Mahal pilots – lives on every time a person in California boards a flight to Israel, to the land they helped be free.

The writer is a journalist and screenwriter based in Los Angeles, CA. His work has appeared in LA Weekly, Newsday, The Press Enterprise and the Jewish Journal, among other publications. He currently writes about the New York Mets for SB Nation's Amazin' Avenue.