



DANNY SHALOM

OPERATION PEACE FLIGHT

First flight from Jerusalem to Jordan

BY BARRY SCHIFF



When I led the first Pilots' Tour of Israel last year, I stood on the west bank of the Jordan River, gazed across the narrow waterway into Jordan, and thought of the enormous chasm it represented. Although it was at that point only a stream across which one could wade effortlessly, the penalty for doing so could be enormous, emphasizing how politics transcends geography. ■ It made me wonder, though, if general aviation could somehow be used to breach this political gap and contribute to Middle East peace. ■ A few months later, my idea of such a flight became more realistic, when Jordan's King Hussein and Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed a peace treaty ending 46 years of hostility. ■ Here, I thought, was an opportunity for general aviation to participate in the peace process. Such was my naivete about Middle East affairs. Although Israel and Egypt had signed a peace treaty in 1979, general aviation flights between those two countries are still very much discouraged. ■ But I was compelled to try. After all, Jerusalem and Amman, Jordan's capital, are only 40 nautical miles apart. There were two additional factors in my favor. The first was that King Hussein is an active pilot and aviation enthusiast. The second was that former FAA administrator Najeeb Halaby is the king's father-in-law. ■ I called Halaby and explained my desire to make the first flight between Israel and Jordan. Surprisingly, he did not laugh. Instead, he suggested that I make my request in a letter to King Hussein and said that he would forward it on my behalf. ■ It should be noted that since the birth of Israel in 1948, not one airplane—military or civil—has been allowed to take off in either of these countries and land in the other. Some overflights of Israel have been allowed.



The 31-airplane formation that comprised "Operation Peace Flight" departed the Jerusalem Airport (above) eastbound for the 40-nautical-mile trip to Amman's Marka International Airport. After leaving Jerusalem, the airplanes overflew Jericho and headed northeast to the Salam intersection, where they crossed the Jordan River. Below, the formation awaits departure from the Jerusalem Airport.



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The first was last year when King Hussein—en route from London to Amman—circled 1,000 feet over Jerusalem in his Lockheed 1011. Royal Jordanian Airlines aircraft may overfly Israel on flights to and from Amman, but none have landed there.

Nineteen days after sending my letter to Halaby, I received a fax in the middle of the night. It was a letter from Prince Feisal of Jordan. It said that "His majesty is pleased to welcome the Pilots' Tour to Jordan."

The letter also suggested that Jordanian pilots be invited to join the American and Israeli pilots, and "a mixed formation of Israeli and Jordanian aircraft could fly across the Jordan River [to Amman] as a symbol of peace." This ingredient was most responsible for the success of what was to be code-named Operation Peace Flight.

The short distance between Jeru-

The events began when five airplanes carrying 23 Jordanian pilots and guests departed Amman for Jerusalem.



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5/3/95	WITTEN	10:00	11:00	1.00		7.00
5/4/95	WITTEN	10:00	11:00	1.00		8.00
5/5/95	WITTEN	10:00	11:00	1.00		9.00
5/6/95	WITTEN	10:00	11:00	1.00		10.00
5/7/95	WITTEN	10:00	11:00	1.00		11.00
5/8/95	WITTEN	10:00	11:00	1.00		12.00
5/9/95	WITTEN	10:00	11:00	1.00		13.00
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salem and Amman belies the difficulty and frustration involved in planning such an historic cross-country flight. From my home in Los Angeles, I had to spend months coordinating efforts among government officials and individuals in Amman, Jerusalem, and elsewhere to bring this effort to fruition.

The events of May 23 began to unfold at 7 a.m., when five light airplanes carrying 23 Jordanian pilots and guests departed from Amman for Jerusalem. One can only imagine the excitement of the Israeli air traffic

■

***Pilots of both countries
had to avoid crossing
this frontier, lest they
become targets for
hostile jet fighters.***

The author presents Israeli President Ezer Weizman with a satellite image of the Jerusalem-Amman area, above. Below, (from left to right) heads of the Israeli CAA, Israeli AOPA, Jordanian CAA, and the author.

controllers as they observed on radar a formation of aircraft heading across their eastern border from Jordan. But on this day, no alarms were sounded.

The Jordanians were greeted at Jerusalem Airport and taken to a reception hosted by Israeli President Ezer Weizman, who is also a pilot and ex-commander of the Israeli air force. The Jordanians were then taken on an emotional tour of Jerusalem's holy sites, which had been off-limits to them since Israel captured the city during the Six Day War in 1967.

That afternoon, the small terminal



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at Jerusalem Airport was bedlam, except to those who could hear the speeches and preflight briefings above the excited din of Arabic, English, and Hebrew. History was in the making.

I was to lead the 31-airplane formation in a Britten-Norman Islander. Arrangements also were made for some Jordanians to fly in Israeli airplanes and vice-versa.

At 4 p.m. the aircraft began departing, four at a time. Once airborne, each quartet formed a loose diamond formation. We were on our way from Israel to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The view from my window was incredible. To my right was an Israeli airplane carrying a Jordanian; and to my left, a Jordanian airplane carrying an Israeli. As trite as it may sound, it would not have surprised me to see doves of peace join the formation.

From over Jericho, we turned northeast toward a checkpoint established for our flight. It was appropriately named Salam, a five-letter shortening of the Arabic *salaam*, which—like the Hebrew word *shalom*—means peace.

We approached the serpentine Jordan River north of the Dead Sea. This was the border, which had represented some of the most restricted airspace in the world. Pilots of both countries had to avoid crossing this frontier, lest they become targets for hostile jet fighters.

As we crossed the river, someone observed over the radio, "It is as if God's breath were lifting our wings."

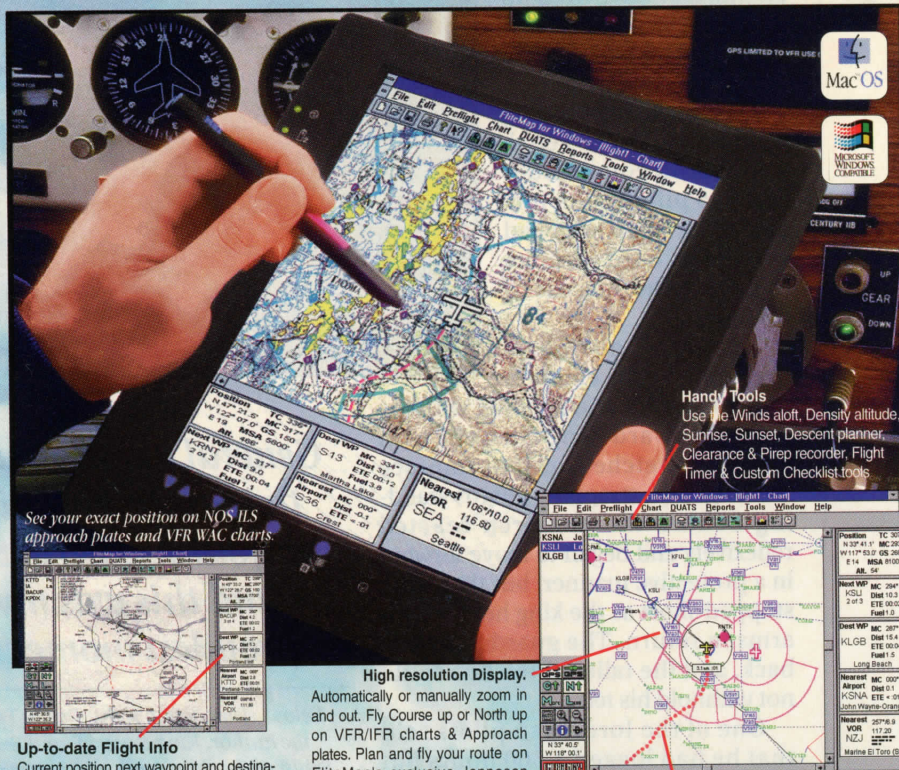
We approached Amman from the west, in violation of a briefing page included with our Jeppesen charts. Although soon to be deleted, the instructions said, "Aircraft registered in Israel or other aircraft on flights to or from Israel are not allowed to overfly or land within Jordan territory."

Another "Berlin Wall" crumbled.

Moments later, Amman sprawled beneath our wings. I was the first to land at Marka International Airport and the first to deplane. Walking toward me on the hot tarmac ramp was a man familiar in face, short in height, and tall in stature. We shook hands and the man said, "Hello, Captain Schiff. I am Hussein. Welcome to Jordan."

The king of Jordan subsequently walked up to every airplane as it parked and greeted everyone. Some

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initially thought they were suffering from heat prostration and delirium. Others were convinced that the man was a stand-in. No one had expected the king to be awaiting our arrival. But King Hussein made everyone feel welcome and at ease despite our casual appearance.

Accompanying the king was his son, Prince Feisal, a squadron commander and F-5 pilot in the Jordanian air force, who had worked so hard with me to ensure the success of this event.

An Israeli obviously overcome by the emotion of the moment and sobbing with joy walked toward King Hussein with arms outstretched, as if to embrace the king. Two strapping guards standing behind the monarch reacted reflexively and began to move forward in a protective manner, but they were stopped short as the king held out his arms in return. The guards stepped back, and the taller of the two could not withhold his tears.

One of the Jordanian pilots said that he had logged 3,500 hours but that the last 30 minutes were his most exciting.



An Israeli pilot, Eli Inbar, said, "It is wonderful, seeing the Jordanians this way. In the past, I had only seen them through the sights of my rifle. And now we are their guests." (Inbar's father had been killed in battle against the Jordanians.)

I stood back to observe these former enemies laughing and embracing, and it seemed so natural. I wondered how these people could ever have been at war. They have so much in common, so much to fight for, not against. General aviation was the catalyst for this profound experience,

and this was my proudest moment.

Everyone was then led into a reception room, but my son, Brian, and I were whisked into a small anteroom where King Hussein and Prince Feisal sat waiting. There we did what pilots do best—we talked about flying. The king discussed the camaraderie of those who share the sky, and how this helped to bring the people of Israel and Jordan one step closer. "You are pioneers in the peace process, and I want to thank you."

I learned also that the king had taught his son Feisal to fly, as I had

■

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and this was my
proudest moment.***

Below, (from left to right) Prince Feisal, the author, King Hussein, and Brian Schiff gather in private to discuss the trip and flying in general. Both Feisal and Hussein are also pilots.



taught mine.

During his subsequent speech to members of the Peace Flight, King Hussein said, "Today you have made history. As you know, the distance you have flown is not a very long one, and I hope and pray that the distance will become even shorter with the passage of time.

"I never sought peace between only governments and leaders. But a peace between the people is a true peace and the only one that can last. There is no other way to carry out our obligation to future generations."

Our flight was given little advance publicity in the Middle East because there are enemies of peace shackled by the chains of the past. There was no reason to afford them an opportunity for sabotage. But afterward, the electronic and print media spread this remarkable story worldwide.

Operation Peace Flight marked the first time that any airplane had ever been allowed to fly from either of these neighboring countries to the other. It is anticipated that rapid progress now will be made toward the free flow of general aviation traffic between Israel and Jordan.

Prior to our departure from Amman the next day, Prince Feisal was on hand to say goodbye. In his farewell speech, he said that "this momentous event will not be considered successful until the safe return of the last plane in Jerusalem."

All members of the Peace Flight were given a small gift from the king, but the most precious gift that he gave to us and to the rest of the world is the one of which he is most proud: his peace treaty with Israel. Each of us also received a beautiful book containing the treaty and related documents, in English and Arabic.

Linda Regan, an American pilot and Presbyterian pastor, wrote a prayer the evening before our departure for Jordan, in which she said that "we are one people brought together by our love of flight."

During the return flight to Israel, I gazed down upon the Jordan River and reflected on Regan's prayer. Although politics can transcend geography, the love of flight can transcend both. □

The third Pilots' Tour of Israel and Jordan is being planned for May or June, 1996. For a color brochure, call Ami Travel at 800/821-8947 (312/267-5555 from within Illinois) or fax 312/267-5052.

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