

# ON LOCATION: ISRAEL

## Soundperson: Aerlyn Weissman

— edited by Krisztina Zách  
and Á Ibrányi-Kiss



*Aerlyn Weissman is a sound recordist who recently went on location in Israel for CTV's W-5 program. Besides having worked on numerous documentaries, she was also the soundperson on Jack Cunningham's feature film, Peep, and is teaching a workshop for the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op*

**To start with — where was this photograph taken?**

It was taken in a bunker along the cease fire lines on the Golan Heights — which is a pretty incredible area. As you drive by to the headquarters at Tel Aviv, it's all farmland until you get right to the edge of the Golan Heights which looks over a beautiful valley — Hula Valley — where the Syrians were sitting in '67. On the Heights, the entire area is desolate. It's like Sudbury. Just rock and minefields all over the place. And tanks. Right up at the cease fire line itself is a chain of bunkers. We went up on the night of the cease fire to see if in fact there was going to be a cease fire.

There were three of us — myself on

sound, Jim Mercer on camera and Peter Kent of CTV News. We did some filming as the sun was going down. That's where those pictures were taken. Everyone was looking at their watch — the cease fire was supposed to start at 6:52 PM. Over to the left of us was Mt. Herhon Bridge and they were still shooting — we could see artillery fire. Nothing happened. Everyone kept right on shooting. Actually, that area had very heavy fighting at the beginning of the war. There was a surprise attack by the Arabs on the first day, and the Israeli lines were broken through.

**Was there any difficulty getting clearance to go to those areas?**

The procedure was that you had to get press credentials as soon as you got there. That was no problem — I still have mine, printed in Hebrew and French. Then you went to headquarters for military PR where all the arrangements were made.

Everywhere you went you had to be accompanied by an Israeli Escort Officer. It was funny — a lot depended on the particular Escort Officer. Some of

them were anxious to see what was going on themselves and wanted to get as close to the front as they could, and you would go with them some of the way. It was very carefully supervised.

In addition, the footage had to be developed there. I think the Israeli film labs made a fortune out of the war. They were processing day and night! There were almost a thousand journalists, and every foot had to be seen by a military person.

**Did you have any footage censored?**

We had less than a hundred feet censored on our entire tour. As long as you stayed on close-ups, you were safe. But if you pulled back and you could see a mountain range in the background — they would cut that out. Groups of tanks and shots of specific officers were censored, and they wouldn't let you film dead Israeli soldiers for reasons of morale.

**How much equipment did you take under such difficult circumstances?**

While out filming, I carried in one hand a shot gun and a hand mike, on the other shoulder my bag containing mikes and cables, in case something went wrong. With shells bursting all around you, it was a problem to get as close as you could and more still — to get good sound! When you get right on top of the action, it's so loud that the distortion could possibly damage the mike.

It worked fairly well. People were satisfied with what came back. It was strenuous. Sure. You're out on the battlefield during the day, and at night you drive back to the hotel where you have a swim in the pool, drinks at the bar, or whatever. The changes of reality were quite mind-boggling! And what was more mind-boggling was that you knew you had to go back the next day. You're running around for 26 hours, then it's a 7 hour drive back. Take the films to the lab . . . the tapes had to be listened to . . .

**Were you ever frightened for your life while filming?**

No. I wasn't frightened. I was very

hyper. My senses became super keen. I got so I could recognize a MIG by its sound! Besides, I couldn't just *wonder* about the front lines. If I happened to get on the other side, it wasn't like I could just say, "Hi guys! I'm a journalist. An objective observer." They were trying to kill me! I was on the Israeli side, so there was definitely this business of "our side" and "their side". I suppose the situation could have been reversed. At one point, there was talk of sending our crew to Cairo because the Canadian Peace Keeping Force was coming, but it turned out there were too many problems involved in getting visas. The prospect of being, probably, the only Jew in Cairo scared me. What would it be like being on the other side feeling the way I do?

**Had you ever considered going to Israel before this assignment came up?**

I was always interested in going. I was very impressed with the people there. With what they were doing. Outside of Jerusalem, it's all desert. And when you go into the agricultural areas you realize that every plant, every tree was put there by somebody. I began to realize the problems of the country, of maintaining a way of life. It's awful to see people my age dying. They've got to do it. It's a matter of survival. This is their attitude.

**In five weeks, you must have made quite a few friends . . .**

The people I got off on were Israelis I'd met. We'd go back to their homes, sit around, listen to some good music, talk about photography . . . theatre . . . play Dylan records. There is a very lovely kind of honesty about human relations. One night, we were listening to the Peace Ship's broadcast, and on came John Lennon's song *Imagine*. And the line, "... imagine there are no countries . . ." Whew! If you just got back from almost being killed . . . It makes you think about mortality.

**Did the crew have any close calls?**

The first time we were up on the Golan Heights, we were on the road to Damascus. We were in Syria at a little town called Kananaba, which was sort of a rallying point for tanks to go out to the front. The artillery was coming from places near Damascus — something like 22 kilometres from us. We were just outside Damascus shooting at the crossroads. As we were interviewing a guy, someone started yelling, "MIGs! MIGs!" We started looking around and there were two MIGs behind us on their way to bomb the crossroads because there was equipment concentrated there. Anti-aircraft missiles got one . . . Afterwards, there was this neat row of trucks with tanks deployed on each side

that were all just smoking, molten metal. Just the skeletons of the trucks — filled with dead soldiers. There was one Syrian tank that was still locked — the soldiers were incinerated — and they were inside. It was very strange, very strange to walk down this road. Carole Taylor was still there, doing reporting for W5. When we both walked down that truck convoy, I know she was feeling just the way I was . . . It was so sad. So depressing.

**Did you ever have flashes of war being very much a man's game?**

Yes. Oh, yes. It is such a strange and intense experience. It's so bizarre. It really does create that certain masculine camaraderie, and women are completely excluded from it. Not that anyone should be included!! But I *was* struck by the whole maleness of it.

**Did you put up a wall of non-feeling to survive the experience?**

I guess I did. When I thought I wouldn't be able to function anymore. The day after the cease fire, we were down in the Sinai, and we rode all day in the back of a truck down roads that had sections where there were just dead bodies piled up along the sides. At one point, we had to walk off the road to do an interview with our Escort Officer and walk past stuff that . . . Well, it used to be a person but the arms and legs were gone, and it was really incredible. We had to stand with our backs toward that and just do this interview facing the other direction. At that point, I thought I might throw up. That was just a physical thing I couldn't have controlled. But I didn't feel I had the luxury as a member of any film crew doing a job to display any of that . . . If anyone had looked at me at that moment, they

would have seen a completely impassive, efficient sound recordist. I felt that if I had burst into tears or anything . . . Also, I'm a woman. I was the *only* woman there — and I just *knew* that if I had done that, everyone would say, "Oh yes. Well, there you are!"

**Right . . . Like they shouldn't have taken you in the first place . . .**

I'm really pleased I was given the opportunity to go, and it wasn't just dismissed out of hand because I'm a woman. It wasn't like, "Listen, it could get rough. We'd better take a guy. Sure, she's a fine sound recordist — but why take a chance?" Men really feel they're protecting your interests by protecting you from this. In fact, they're cutting you off from the chance to do your job and discover something about yourself.

At the same time, I did feel the heavy pressure to be Super Sound Lady. I had to be super competent in a very "I can handle anything" kind of way which I certainly didn't feel like all the time. I mean, a guy in that situation could have said, "Listen, I'm thirsty and it's 110 degrees and let's move over there instead." And they would have dealt with whatever his feelings were — he's just tired, or whatever. There were times I resented it. Why don't *I* have the luxury to complain too, without being put down cause I'm a woman? But in another way, more was asked. So I had to give more, and as a person I definitely grew. No question about that.

**Would you do it again?**

Sure. You're just not put in situations that are that extreme that often — where you can find out what your limits are, your capacities. What you can handle — what you're capable of doing as a human being. ●

