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Special Report

USS Liberty Veterans Present Pentagon With Report on Israeli War Crimes

By *Delinda C. Hanley*

SURVIVORS, friends and family gathered at Arlington Cemetery on June 8, 2005 to honor 34 USS *Liberty* sailors killed in Israel's shocking naval and air attack on the ship 38 years ago. As a sailor struck a triangle, breaking the silence in a sea of tombstones, shipmates read the names of each victim. One survivor, whose ill health made him miss this reunion, listened from afar via cell phone.

As survivors watched the 90-year-old mother of one fallen hero and the sister of another lay a wreath at the grave marker where 11 crew members are buried, these men, and the women who love them, silently vowed to keep fighting until the murders and the subsequent cover-up are explained.



Survivors of Israel's 1967 attack on the USS Liberty have been silenced and ignored by the country they put their lives on the line to protect. They are asking the Bush administration for a thorough investigation (Staff photo D. Hanley).

There was a palpable, almost electric feeling at this particular gathering in Washington, DC. At past reunions survivors swapped talk of recent surgeries and the continuing struggle to cope with their injuries. Of the original crew of 294 officers and civilians, 34 men were killed and another

173 wounded in action that day in June 1967. Because the few who survived without physical wounds had to gather up their buddies' body parts, no one left that ship unscathed. Even harder to bear than the physical and mental anguish these Americans have endured, however, has been their government's betrayal and silence for nearly four decades.

At their reunion this year, crewmembers began the legal process which they hope will open the doors to the first thorough investigation of the Israeli attack.

At a June 10 press conference at the Hotel Washington, *Liberty* survivors presented details of a "Report of War Crimes" brief filed by James R. Gotcher, general legal counsel for the USS *Liberty* Veterans Association (USS-LVA). On June 8, the anniversary of the attack, Gotcher submitted the 35-page, carefully footnoted report to Army Secretary Francis J. Harvey, who acts as executive agent for Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. After receiving this report, brimming with evidence of war crimes committed by Israel against U.S. military personnel, the secretary of defense is obligated to initiate an official inquiry.

The report lists the laws of war that Israel ignored and provides vital testimony from survivors, as well as pertinent quotes from leaders of that time. To examine the entire report, visit the USS *Liberty* Web site: <<http://www.usliberty.org/>>. It's vital that all Americans and their elected officials read this compelling and conclusive document.

USS-LVA board member Moe Shafer told reporters that the victims of the Israeli attack filed this report after 38 years because their government has never asked them to testify or carried out a complete investigation. "There is no statute of limitations on war crimes," Shafer pointed out.

"It's now incumbent on the U.S. government to take action for the vindication of the survivors of this attack," said Shafer, "but most importantly for those who lost their lives. To continue doing nothing sends a message to the rest of the world that they may attack U.S. personnel without fear of reprisal.

"Every other maritime attack has been investigated, including the *Pueblo*, *Stark* and *Cole* incidents. This event remains unexamined. It's long past time to uncover the cover-up," Shafer concluded.

Next to address reporters was former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Akins, who for years has spoken up for *Liberty* survivors. Akins noted that his friend Ambassador Dwight Porter, U.S. ambassador to Lebanon in 1967, had told syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, Akins, and other friends (including the *Washington Report's* publisher, executive editor and this reporter), that he had seen transcripts of Israeli radio discussions during the attack. The U.S. monitors heard an Israeli pilot identify the *Liberty's* American flag. His superiors ordered him to attack the ship anyway.

In his book *The Liberty Incident*, A. Jay Cristol, a self-proclaimed historian whose day job is that of a bankruptcy judge, claimed Porter recanted that testimony. "If he had recanted, he would only have done so under threats or blackmail," his old friend Akins noted.

It's time to get everyone's testimony recorded once and for all, Akins said. "Justice must be served while the victims are still alive," he told the press.

Rear Admiral Merlin Staring, USN, Ret., former judge advocate general of the Navy, who was involved with the initial Court of Inquiry in 1967, next described hurriedly reading 607 pages of typed testimony. When he questioned some of its conclusions, the report was taken from him and whisked off to Washington officials.

Joe Lentini, a communications expert who was wounded on the *Liberty*, presented a detailed history of the attack. He showed the audience that the *Liberty* was unmistakably a spy ship with the latest technology and flew the American flag during the attack. He dedicated his Power Point presentation to *Liberty* Captain William McGonagle, without whom, he said, “we wouldn’t be here today.” Lentini said he would give his Power Point talk, complete with photos and other evidence of a planned and sustained Israeli attack, to anyone, anywhere, who will listen.

“I don’t know why Israel attacked a neutral vessel in neutral waters without warning or justification,” Lentini said. He’d like to know, he explained, because 14 of the 34 people killed were his own men.

Lentini went on to describe a litany of Israeli war crimes: Israeli forces fired on the wounded and their rescuers. Israeli torpedo boats shot at firefighters, shredding their fire hoses. “The same torpedo boats shot at USS *Liberty*’s life rafts,” he said, “after the rafts had been put over the side of the ship into the sea for use by shipwrecked survivors.”

Israel’s attack was a violation of the Geneva Conventions regulating conduct of war, Lentini noted. But the subsequent actions of his own government are just as galling as Israel’s original offense. “Why did the U.S. put a foreign nation’s interest ahead of our own?” Lentini asked the audience.

When Ken Halliwell, a semi-retired telecommunications and information systems engineer, saw the photos Cristol used in his book, especially the cover photo, he was troubled, he said—so he did some sleuthing. Using survivor Warren Haney’s cane as an impromptu pointer, Halliwell showed the audience evidence of fraud in Cristol’s photos.

When he presented his findings to an Israel Defense Forces archivist, Halliwell continued, the IDF official agreed that Cristol’s photos, which the bankruptcy judge claimed were taken by the gun camera of Israel’s lead attack aircraft, were faked. The photos actually are doctored U.S. photos of a ship at dock, Halliwell said. Producing and using fraudulent evidence to support Israel’s case casts doubt on Cristol’s claim that the ship was attacked by accident, Halliwell concluded.

Richard Larry Weaver, who was a seaman on the deck of the *Liberty* during the attack, described his ordeal in moving testimony. “It seemed like the pilot went straight at me,” Weaver said. He wasn’t supposed to live through that first night, he added, and thanked Dr. Richard Kiefer, the ship’s brave physician—who was too ill to attend this reunion—for saving his life.

Weaver said he’d never forget recuperating in the hospital and being wheeled down to meet with a three-star admiral, who took off his stars



After describing the injuries he and others have suffered over the years, Larry Weavers is comforted by his wife, Pam, at the Army-Navy Club banquet (Photo by Michael Keating).

and asked him about the Israeli attack. The admiral then put his stars back on and said, "If you tell anyone what happened you will be put in prison and we'll lose the key."

Deserters get shot or put in prison, Weaver told the hushed crowd. "The USS *Liberty* was deserted by our own government for 38 years..."

"I've been living in pain day and night since that day," he continued. "I've had 29 major surgeries over the years...I've had sons and daughters of my friends on the *Liberty* ask me what their dad looked like—what kind of a guy he was," Weaver said, his voice breaking. "Every president, every government has turned its back on this tragedy. I challenge President Bush to step forward and right this wrong."

USS-LVA vice president Ernie Gallo, who, after surviving the attack on the *Liberty*, spent the next 30 years working for the CIA, introduced himself by saying, "First, I'm a loyal American."

He thought he'd start out that way, he explained, because survivors often are silenced by accusations that they are somehow anti-Semitic for speaking the truth. Gallo's presentation focused on the shocking cover-up by U.S. public officials of Israel's attack on his ship. "Why were U.S. planes called back and not permitted to come to our rescue? Why has Congress never investigated the attack?" Gallo asked reporters.

"We think the U.S. government is for the people and of the people," he noted. "But when it comes to the Middle East and our relationship with Israel, our country wantonly breaks its own laws and falsifies its records."

After all these years, Gallo said, the truth is still suppressed. Most documents are declassified after 25 years, he noted, but even today many documents requested by survivors are blacked out, or not even released, because they are still top secret.

The State Department's January 2004 panel discussion on the attack, Gallo marveled, failed to include even one survivor.

"You can't call what we witnessed an accident," he stated, but "not one crewmember has been able to tell their story to the authorities."

Gallo also called for an inquiry into the question of who was responsible for the attack on the USS *Liberty*, and why. Addressing the media present, he said, "We need your help to get our story out."

Delinda C. Hanley is news editor of the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

