

Sailing into Gaza (Update 8)

Contributed by Yvonne Ridley
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HOORAH! The hour has arrived ... by the time you read this I should be onboard one of the two boats bound for Gaza to break the Israeli-enforced siege. At around 9pm on Saturday evening the SS Free Gaza and the SS Liberty sailed in to the idyllic port of Chania on the Greek island of Crete, where film-maker Aki Nawaz and myself have been marooned for the past few days.

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Actually we can't complain too much - this is an amazing location ... and completely free of the drunken British drongos who usually engulf the mediterranean at this time of year.

We linked up in Chania with fellow passengers journalist Lauren Booth (aka Tony Blair's sister-in-law), Palestinian-American Huwaisa Arraf who lives in Ramallah and the remarkable Jeff Halper, an Israeli Jew nominated for the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for opposing demolitions of Palestinian homes.

It's a very exciting day for Aki Nawaz and myself - not only do we finally get to find our sea legs, but it is the first time that the two boats have been publically displayed.

On board already to greet us was co-organiser of the Free Gaza Movement, Paul Larudee and a group of other activists.

The plan now is to sail to Larnaca in Cyprus where we will pick up the bulk of the other Free Gaza campaigners who number nearly 40 and represent 15 different nationalities - our country's flags will be hoisted up the masts.

But before we head to Gaza from Cyprus there's another more poignant ceremony to do.

As you know, one of our boats is called the Liberty in memory of the USS Liberty which was bombed, napalmed and torpedoed by Israel during the Seven Day War.

I wrote about the incident in a previous blog about how 34 US naval men were killed and 172 injured. Well it turns out that some of the survivors have heard about our plans to smash the siege of Gaza and they've made a request.

One wrote: "What is the possibility of you and the crew of the SS Liberty throwing 34 long stemmed roses into the sea as a memorial to the 34 Americans killed aboard the USS Liberty?"

"The survivors of the Liberty and their families would be eternally grateful to you and your ship mates for this gesture as no one has ever done anything like this before." Another wrote: "I am one of the survivors of the USS Liberty. A very tired man, who woke up somewhat when I heard of the SS Liberty. I was the petty officer in charge of the body recovery and identification, and I remember it almost like it was yesterday. May God Be With You."

So, when we leave Cyprus early next week, we hope to have a ceremony for all of those killed by the Israelis on board the ship in 1967.

Co-organiser Greta Berlin says the names of the dead will also be read out.

Jim Ennes, an officer aboard the original Liberty and author of the book *Assault on the Liberty* was invited to take part in Free Gaza campaign to smash Israel's siege by peaceful means. Until our project was launched he was unaware that organizers had named one of the ships after the Liberty, but he is said to be "absolutely" pleased with the move and wishes he could be there.

Just to fill you in a little more on the background of the USS Liberty - this is one massacre the White House never commemorates because there has been, and continues to be, a huge cover-up.

While the Bush Administration loves to make a big deal about the terrorist bombing of the USS Cole on October 12

2000 while it was berthed in Aden, Yemen, in which 17 American sailors were killed, nothing is ever mentioned about the deliberate attack on the Liberty.

You tell me what is the difference between an act of state sponsored terrorism or terrorism carried out by individuals - innocents die in both and the death of innocents is to be condemned at all times.

The fact is Israel deliberately attacked the Liberty on June 8, 1967, later saying they thought it was an Egyptian vessel - though survivors and others have long said the Israeli pilots and sailors knew exactly who they targeted.

The US Navy began telling families of the American dead that the attack was accidental even before it convened an official board of inquiry, which about 10 days later delivered that same finding, according to Navy documents.

Only six years ago the legal affairs adviser to the board, retired Capt. Ward Boston, broke his silence to say the investigation was a sham, and that the final version was altered to exonerate the Israelis. Boston died in June.

Personally, I think we should also drop a rose into the water for him for finally having the courage to tell the truth.

A lot of deceit and lies have floated to the surface since the Free Gaza Movement launched its campaign two years ago.

Now, at last, the dream and vision of the organisers has become a reality - we are on our way to Gaza armed with nothing more than a vision of peace and a desire to expose the truth.

And, as we are beginning to find out, telling the truth in these treacherous times is becoming an act of resistance in itself.

* For more information: www.freegaza.org – live video streaming will soon be available. And since funds are now running low, if you can donate towards this amazing project then please do so. This breaking the siege of Gaza is not a one off - the aim of the campaign is to raise awareness as well as open a direct sailing route between the people of Gaza and Cyprus.