
Interview: Tito Howard

Israel's Attack on The 'USS Liberty'

Mr. Howard is an American filmmaker who produced "The Loss of Liberty," a documentary released in 2002 about the June 8, 1967 Israeli attack against the USS Liberty, in which 34 American servicemen were killed and 171 wounded. The Israelis later claimed it was a case of "mistaken identity," and the affair was covered up. There has never been an investigation by Congress.

Howard is currently the executive director of the Liberty Alliance, a not-for-profit corporation dedicated to achieving a full investigation by the U.S. Congress into: the Israeli attack, the recall of the U.S. Sixth Fleet fighters sent to protect the Liberty, and the subsequent coverup by both the Israeli and U.S. governments. His current project is a series of biographical documentaries on America's Congressional Medal of Honor winners. Howard was interviewed on March 29, on "The LaRouche Show," the weekly audio webcast (www.larouchepub.com), by EIR's Jeffrey Steinberg and Michele Steinberg, co-directors of Counterintelligence.



Jeffrey Steinberg: Tito, you have been involved in filmmaking for a number of years. You have 44 documentary films to your credit. You have spent nine years in the Middle East. Tell us a little bit more about your career.

Howard: Well, it's an interesting story. Some of it takes a long time, but I'll be brief. I was in Lebanon. I moved to Lebanon in October 1971. . . . I decided to get into film work—no experience, no training, but I finally convinced an ad agency to let me do a commercial for them, and it was for the Commercial National Bank of Kuwait. . . . Then I got into doing, in some senses, important work in the Middle East from a film standpoint, in places like Afghanistan, Turkey, Egypt, the Sudan, and so on.

And then I got very interested in the *Liberty* situation, and I had the burden on me from about the middle of 1975, when Adm. Thomas Moorer—who is one of the heroes in our film, had just stepped down eight months previously as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in his second term; he had also

been on the Joint Chiefs, as Chief of Naval Operations for an additional two terms—and he told me that the Israeli attack on the *Liberty* was premeditated and deliberate.

So, it was a burden on me, because then I knew it was a deliberate attack. (I want, very quickly, to point out to people: It doesn't normally take me a quarter of a century or longer to do a documentary film, but that was the case here.) The film, itself, is a pretty powerful document, we think; and my main effort was to get Americans, particularly military heroes of the United States—we have six Metal of Honor heroes. We have several key people from that time in the film, so I've enjoyed the film work. It hasn't always been lucrative from a financial point of view, but we do feel like we have helped to shed some light in some corners that perhaps needed more light.

Jeffrey Steinberg: One of your other documentary films was on the massacres that took place at the two refugee camps in Lebanon—Sabra and Shatila, Palestinian refugee camps.

Howard: Yes, that was an absolutely vicious thing. Nearly 2,700 Palestinians were killed, and it was a series of events. The Israelis said, when they attacked Lebanon, that they were going to go just 20 kilometers in, and would not approach Beirut, an Arab capital—but they lied to us. They went into Beirut, and we [the United States] pressured the Palestinians into leaving.

The Palestinians asked us, "Well, if we leave, what about our women and children?" And the United States, in a document signed by Philip Habib, said, "Well, we will take care of your women and children." Then the Israelis surrounded the two smaller camps of Sabra and Shatila, near the much larger camp of Bourj al-Barajni in southern Beirut, and massacred a lot of people over two days, until, finally, it was stopped.

And I was very fortunate in getting some Americans, who had been in Beirut, to speak strongly about the massacre. I called the film *The Massacre and the Masquerade*.

Maybe my most important film after *The Liberty* is probably a film I did on Jerusalem. I called that *Prophets and Paratroopers*. But the *Liberty* film, I think, is the most important one for Americans to look at now. Because this country that we give 34% of our entire aid package to, made a deliberate attack on an American ship in international waters.

And the *Liberty* wasn't just any ship. In 1967—this predated the satellites—and the *USS Liberty* was 460 feet long. It was the most sophisticated intelligence ship in the world at that time. It had a Moon-bounce dish, eight 40-foot whip antennas, a top-side configuration *totally* unlike the *al-Quseir* [an old Egyptian ship], which is what the Israelis claim they mistook the *Liberty* for—in perfect weather in the afternoon of June 8, 1967.

Jeffrey Steinberg: With flags flying?

Howard: Well, a flag flying. Early on in the fight, in the attack by the Israeli aircraft, which lasted 23 minutes,



Left to right: the USS Cole, bombed by terrorists in Yemen in October 2000; the USS Liberty, attacked by the Israelis in June 1967. The Liberty incident was covered up by both Israeli and U.S. governments, and Israel's incredible claim that this was a case of "mistaken identity" has never been subjected to the scrutiny of Congressional hearings.

pounded by at least 18 Israeli aircraft, mostly Mirage, but some Super-Mystères. [Then the holiday ensign was raised—the largest flag on a ship, used for special occasions.] But there were two people that didn't raise the holiday ensign—Brownie, [Francis] Brown, the helmsman, was killed at the helm of the *Liberty* during the attack. The Israelis ferociously attacked the bridge of the ship, and killed a lot of people, and the captain was badly wounded and the executive officer was killed on the bridge.

The *al-Quseir* is one-fifth the size of the *Liberty*. It looks absolutely nothing like the *Liberty*.

Jeffrey Steinberg: Give us a general summary of the findings—your 25 years of investigation, and what you have put together in, I think, a 53-minute very, very powerful documentary.

Howard: Well, I think that there is overwhelming evidence in the film that this was indeed a deliberate attack. And to me, even worse than the Israeli attack on the ship, was the *American government recall of help*.

We had two large carriers with the Sixth Fleet in 1967, the *USS Saratoga*, skippered by Joe Tully, and the *USS America*, skippered by Don Engen, who was recently Director of the Air and Space Museum in Washington, until he was killed in a glider accident in July 2001. I had scheduled an interview with him in August, but he died about two and a half weeks before then.

I think one of the salient characteristics of this account, and I would like for an Israeli to have to answer this, is: If the

Israelis really want us to buy their argument that this, indeed, was a case of mistaken identity, why in the world did the attacking Israeli aircraft *jam all five American emergency radio channels*, if they thought it was an Egyptian ship?

In the film, Admiral Moorer handles that, and one of the radiomen, Terry Halbardier. And that's one of the things that I think is indefensible in [the Israeli] argument.

The other thing is the coverup that happened, which happened *immediately* after the attack.

We have a guy in the film, named Bill LeMay, who has 53 pieces of shrapnel in him. He was medivac-ed from the *Liberty* to the *America*, and then wound up in the American military hospital in Lanschtoven, Germany; and as he was coming out of a morphine-induced stupor, he noticed that his wristband had the name "Smith" on it. Shortly after that, a young Navy intelligence told him that "your name is now Smith. You were never on board the *Liberty*. Don't ever tell anybody you were." And that was the beginning of the coverup. And he says that in the film—and one of the guys who raised that flag.

Every single Israeli report on the Liberty attack says there was no flag! And every single *Liberty* survivor—and I have interviewed over 100 of them—all insist that the flag was flying, except for about 2-3 minutes, when the one was shot down. The Israelis "couldn't see it," but they could shoot it down! They put up the holiday ensign, and it's in the film, that holiday ensign. That ensign is at the end of the film, and it has bullet holes and things in it, and it is now at Fort Meade in Maryland, at the National Headquarters

of the National Security Agency.

And this is where the investigation would have to begin, because if there ever is an in-depth and honest investigation, it's an absolute lay-down. There is no question that this was a deliberate attack, and if Americans were aware of it, it would certainly create some serious downward pressure, in my view, on the amount of American aid going to the State of Israel.

Jeffrey Steinberg: Tito, the attack on the *Liberty* ship, which, of course, occurred during the concluding days of the 1967 Six-Day War, lasted, you said, two hours and twelve minutes. Give us just a real quick sense of the sequence of the action.

Howard: I think it is again very important to note that on June 8, the war against Egypt and Jordan was virtually over. There was no fighting anywhere around al-Arish [in Egypt]; the *Liberty* was about 12 miles offshore, leaving plenty of leeway to the Egyptian-international line—about 10 miles.

By the afternoon of the 6th of June, Israeli armor had already made it to Sharm al-Sheikh, at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, which had been the trigger that the Israelis used, and, of course, the Israelis said that Egyptian armor and infantry had attacked them from the Sinai, which was a lie. I mean, they attacked Egypt in what they called a pre-emptive strike, but like Pearl Harbor, it was a deliberate attack, sneak attack, much like Pearl Harbor in numbers.

We lost 80% of our non-carrier Pacific Fleet in 1941, and the Egyptians lost 80% of their Air Force on the ground.

And the sequence of the attack on the *Liberty*: About 2 minutes after 2 p.m., in the afternoon of June 8, the Israeli Mirages and Super-Mystères attacked the *Liberty*, but that was after being surveilled 13 different times, starting at 6:00 in the morning and into the afternoon, by four different kinds of Israeli aircraft; so they knew exactly where everything was on the ship. And they knocked out all seven of the connected antennae of the *Liberty*. The one that was not connected—they were having some problems with the tuner—but Terry Halbardier, one of the many heroes on the *Liberty* that day, connected that eighth antenna, and the attacking Israeli planes, when they fired the missiles, had to cut off their jamming devices, which gave a very narrow window that the *Liberty* could get out—and it was really carefully handled in the film by Terry Halbardier himself. The first to pick it up was Joe Tully on the *Saratoga*, and he immediately launched.

The carrier division commander was Larry Geis, who supported the action, and the Sixth Fleet commanding chief was Admiral Martin, who also approved it.

Several minutes after takeoff, those orders were countermanded by Secretary of Defense McNamara.

Jeffrey Steinberg: All the way back in Washington?

Howard: All the way back in Washington. It was a wonder how they could—they knew that early on. . . . All of that, I think, contributed to the manipulation of, not only the 1967

war, but the attack on the *Liberty*, which I think is the blackest chapter in American military history. Here our own government covers up the fact that a foreign country deliberately attacked an American ship with great loss of life and heavy casualties—70% casualties.

Jeffrey Steinberg: Last May, you along with a group of other very prestigious Americans launched the Liberty Alliance. Tell us about that, who some of the people are, and what the objective of the Liberty Alliance is.

Howard: We are blessed with a very, very capable board, and these are some of America's greatest people. Our chairman is Thomas Moorer, who was Chairman of the Chief of Staff for two terms, the longest-serving American four-star admiral, the only admiral to command both the Atlantic and Pacific fleets. He was head of NATO. The main Navy fighter, even now, is the F-14 Tomcat, named for him. Our vice chairman is Gen. Ray Davis, a four-star Marine general, who won the Navy Cross in the Second World War, Medal of Honor in Korea, Distinguished Service Medal in Vietnam. A great man. I am a great admirer of his as well. Our treasurer is Adm. Merlin Staring, the former Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Navy. The director, Jim Akins, is one of the top retired American diplomats; and Jack Tiller, who has won an Oscar and Emmy in film; and myself—I'm obviously the weakest of the six.

Jeffrey Steinberg: What is the purpose of the Alliance?

Howard: The only purpose for this—and we have a pretty good statement of purpose, I think, on that—is to have a full and complete investigation into the Israeli attack on the this American ship in international waters.

If that happens, we will unwind ourselves and go back to private life. Admiral Moorer was 91 years old on Feb. 9, and he used to be on the board of Texaco and Blunt Engineering and stuff, and he has cut out just about everything else. . . . We have a total of 18 admirals and only 3 generals, but we are working on that; in fact, that will be one of the topics on Wednesday.

Jeffrey Steinberg: Now, obviously, with Ariel Sharon—who we have referred to in *EIR* magazine as the “butcher of Sabra and Shatila”—in as Prime Minister of Israel, the implications today are precisely that the kind of action that was taken against the *USS Liberty*, targeting American military personnel, is not at all out of the question for this Israeli government. How do you foresee your initiative with the Liberty Alliance and the distribution of your documentary impacting on the fight for Middle East peace today?

Howard: Well, I think it brings a level of truth and concentration on the attack on the ship—and I think that one can add Jenin, to Sabra and Shatila for Mr. Sharon. I think he is a war criminal. I think he is very, very dangerous, and he is in unison with some of our misguided evangelicals in this country; it is

a very, very dangerous situation, as I see it in this horrendous war against Iraq.

Iraq, you know, with Egypt, this is the cradle of civilization. And, we killed about 168,000 Iraqis in 1991, and we are going to kill a lot more now, and I think we are going to be very surprised when we find out that they don't love us.

I think it is a very dangerous situation. I think the *Liberty* story—and I believe this to my bone marrow—is the one story that can get Americans to react and become activists in getting the American policy in the Middle East much more in tune with our principles.

And what bothers me the most about all of this, is that Sharon's influence on George II, our President, is so dangerous, that it is like the man is giving orders to our President, and it is very scary. I think the ability to get Americans aware of what happened in the *Liberty* attack might put more pressure to look into the Jonathan Pollard affair, and my own investigations into that—he had a *very* high clearance, Pollard, and I think Paul Wolfowitz was one of ones who helped given him that high clearance. I hope that is known one day.

Michele Steinberg: I'd like to go back to the film itself. I was very deeply moved by seeing this. One of the things that listeners will see when they see the film, is many, many individuals who lived through this ordeal came forward and are interviewed on the film, as well as the leading people from the Liberty Alliance. Tito, how did you find the survivors? That was difficult, as you explained in the film.

Howard: Well, I put together a production team, when I started seriously putting the film together about four and a half years ago. It was Admiral Moorer and Ambassador Akins; and then I had two *Liberty* survivors. Richard Kieper was the only doctor on the *Liberty*, and was an incredibly brave guy. If ever an American military doctor deserved a Medal of Honor, I think it is Richard Kieper. He was badly wounded. He had a burn, a gunshot, a broken right kneecap, and a 16-inch scar on his left kneecap, and he had 11 pieces of shrapnel in his abdomen, which he kept together with a life jacket, and then stood on those legs for 28 consecutive hours, saving American lives and limbs.

The other guy from the *Liberty* was Phil Tourney, who is even still today, the president of the Liberty Veterans Association. And he helped out a lot of the *Liberty* people, a lot of whom really suffer this post-traumatic stress syndrome. They are very paranoid. They were abandoned by the government.

Admiral Kidd, who was head of the Navy Board of Inquiry, scared the hell out of these guys. He'd take them in small groups, and I had three or four survivors saying that in the film: how he would remove his two stars, and say, "I'm just one of you guys, so now tell me what happened." They open up their hearts and souls. He puts the stars back on and says, "Now I'm an admiral again, and I'm telling you, that you are not to speak of this attack *ever*, not to your wife, not to your kids, not to your friends. If you do, there will be a

court-martial, imprisonment, or worse." And they all knew what "worse" meant.

Michele Steinberg: So, getting this story out is long, long overdue. I think the other chilling thing that is unforgettable: The rescue plane was called back from the air before it could arrive to protect the *Liberty* ship from the Israeli attack.

Howard: As Admiral Moorer points out in the film, if those planes had not been recalled—they would have chased the Israeli Air Force away, and the motor torpedo boats which left Ashdod base at 12:30 to come on scene at about 2:35 to the *Liberty* site—25 Americans at least would have been spared, the lives of 25 Americans.

I'd like to mention, too, that the Israelis targeted and destroyed the captain's brig, the whale boat, and *all* of the life rafts. The *Liberty* had over 821 rocket and cannon holes, over 3,000 armor-piercing holes from 50-caliber armor-piercing shells, and a 40x42-foot hole at the water line, nearly dead amidships, and it survived all of that damage thanks to the myriad of heroes. The last three life rafts were put in the water, and we have Lloyd Painter—who, after he left the Navy, worked for the U.S. Secret Service until he retired a couple of years ago—and he was an eyewitness to the return of the Israeli torpedo boats that *shot up the life rafts*. One got loose. It was picked up by one of the Israeli motor torpedo boats, and is now in an Israeli military museum in Damona, in the Negev.

COVERUP EXPOSED!

The Israeli Attack On the 'USS Liberty'



"The Loss of Liberty," a video by filmmaker Tito Howard, proves beyond any doubt that the June 8, 1967 Israeli attack against the *USS Liberty*, in which 34 American servicemen were killed and 171 wounded, was deliberate. The video includes testimony from Liberty survivors, many Congressional Medal of Honor winners, and from such high-ranking Americans as Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, Adm. Arleigh Burke, Gen. Ray Davis, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

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