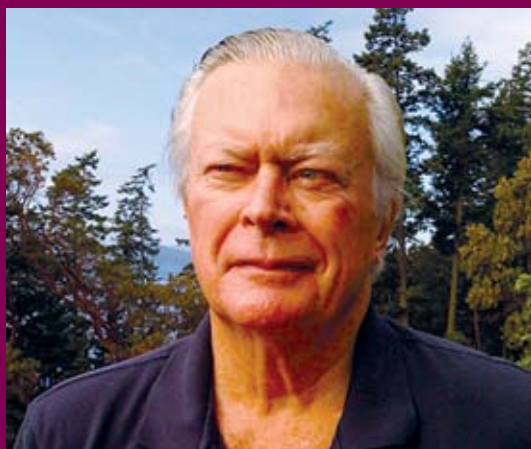


**IN GAZA, I SAW A RESILIENT PEOPLE LIVING  
THROUGH APPALLING RESTRICTIONS  
WITH GRACE AND FORTITUDE**

**David K. Schermerhorn**

5 March 2011 / U.S.A.



David K. Schermerhorn (1929) was born in New York City, graduated from University of North Carolina, and served in the U.S. Army infantry during the Korean War. He worked for thirty-five years as a film producer primarily of TV commercials, and retired in 1996. He is an explorer and adventurer; has traveled around the world on boats, and made over a dozen trips to the Arctic from Siberia to Greenland by dogsled, skis and kayak. He has served on numerous boards and committees, professional and civic, and has been an active member of such groups as Free Gaza Movement, Free Palestine Movement, American Civil Liberties Union, and Amnesty International. He has joined or supported most of the flotillas organized by the Free Gaza Movement that sailed to Gaza since 2008.

**Why did you join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla? What was your motivation?**

Since even before 1967, I have been concerned about the plight of the Palestinians and the biased pro-Israeli policy of the U.S. government. In those years, I have made modest contributions to various Palestinian charities. After moving to the Seattle sixteen years ago, I have attended and participated in a number of demonstrations supporting the Palestinians. In 2008, I attended a fundraiser organized by the Free Gaza Movement in Seattle raising money for two boats that would try to break the siege and sail to Gaza. I made a contribution, and after learning that they were also looking for crew, I volunteered since I had been on boats ranging from tankers to day-sailers since my college days and thought I might be helpful on the crew. Within a few weeks I was in Greece aboard the boat “the Free Gaza”. I made three trips to Gaza in 2008, and tried again in 2009, but our ship was not allowed to leave Cyprus. I joined the Freedom Flotilla in 2010 in another effort to reach Gaza, but unfortunately we were captured. Now I look forward to joining the next flotilla that is planned to set sail in May 2011.

**Did you foresee an Israeli attack before setting off? As you know, the Israeli authorities state that they warned in advance that they would not allow the Flotilla to go through.**

During my three trips we were repeatedly warned by the Israeli Navy on the radio that we must turn back or be attacked. We had all agreed beforehand that we would continue towards Gaza despite any threats, and on my first three trips we succeeded. On later trips by the Free Gaza Movement, our ships were either rammed and nearly sunk, or captured and taken to Ashdod Port by the Israelis. So I knew they were capable of stopping the Flotilla if they chose. However, I doubted that they would attack the Flotilla since the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had a meeting scheduled with the President Barack Obama on the day the Flotilla was due to arrive in Gaza, and I did not think he would authorize an attack at that same moment. He cancelled the meeting, and the attack went on.

**How was the atmosphere on the boat you boarded before the attack?**

I had been on the *Mavi Marmara* for about three days and then transferred on May 30 to the Challenger 1.<sup>1</sup> On both vessels there was a quiet optimism due to the fact that there were six boats traveling together carrying some 700 persons. As night fell we could see the lights of Israeli ships in the distance. Radio warnings were broadcast telling us to turn back because we were breaking a legal blockade. On the Challenger 1, Huwaida Arraf, who was the chairperson of the Free Gaza Movement, responded numerous times that we were unarmed vessels in international waters entitled to pass freely to Gaza.

On board the Challenger 1, the crew and passengers were determined to continue on regardless of threats. As the night progressed, we could make out that the Israeli ships were coming closer but no one aboard thought of turning back. We put inflated balloon fenders in the deck, and overturned tables and chairs to present at least symbolic obstacles and resistance to a boarding party. I had been using a camcorder that used tapes that would be hard to conceal, so I switched to a small point-and-shoot camera that used small memory cards that could be more easily concealed.

**Could you please tell us what happened during the Israeli attack on the Flotilla? I would like to learn your personal experiences and what you witnessed.**

Our boat, the Challenger 1, could make speeds of about 18 knots [33 km/h], considerably faster than the other ships in the Flotilla which were traveling abreast in a rough line. We were behind the others—somewhere between the *Mavi Marmara* and the Greek cargo ship *Eleftheri Mesogeios* [Free Mediterranean]. At around 4:00 a.m., May 31 on a very dark night, we were some 73-miles [117 kilometers] from Gaza according to my GPS.

Suddenly we could hear gunfire ahead of us, and make out inflatable chase boats [zodiacs] closing in on either side of us. We

---

1 The Free Gaza Movement arranged for one cargo ship (Rachel Corrie) and two passenger boats (Challenger 1 and Challenger 2). The Rachel Corrie and the Challenger 2 were delayed by mechanical problems—according to what David K. Schermerhorn says maybe due to sabotage. Schermerhorn was on board the Challenger 2 which had developed mechanical problems within hours of leaving Crete [a Greek island] and had to go into port for repairs. So he and other passengers, concerned about the probability of not to be allowed to leave Cyprus again, transferred to the nearby *Mavi Marmara* ship. He spent two nights on the *Mavi Marmara*. On the third day, learning that the three Scandinavian parliamentarians aboard the Challenger 1 wished to transfer to the *Mavi Marmara*, he transferred to the Challenger 1 with few others. So on the day of the attack, he was on the Challenger 1.

**MOST OF OUR PERSONAL PROPERTY WAS TAKEN WHILE WE WERE STILL ON BOARD, AND NOTHING HAS BEEN RETURNED DESPITE THE EFFORTS OF OUR CONSULATE. I DID HAVE ROAMING CHARGES FROM TEL AVIV BILLED TO MY IPHONE AT&T ACCOUNT. KATHY SHEETZ HAD BEER CHARGED TO HER VISA CARD IN TEL AVIV.**

proceeded at full speed and passed about 50 yards [46 meters] off the port side of the *Mavi Marmara* which was already under attack. A bright searchlight shone down on an inflatable boat in an apparent attempt to blind the Israeli naval commandos aboard. A fire hose was aimed down onto the inflatable from the main deck of the *Mavi Marmara*, but the attackers were responding with percussion grenades and paintball pellets. We could hear gunfire and the sound of helicopters though I do not think they had yet launched their soldiers onto the *Mavi Marmara*.

We sped past the *Mavi Marmara* and others, but even at top speed we could not outrun the Israeli boats that were drawing closer. To keep the Israeli naval commandos from boarding us, our captain began to zigzag our boat quite vigorously. The Israelis fired a series of flares—either as signals between their ships or to illuminate our position. At one point our captain had to swerve to avoid hitting one of their larger ships. After ten to fifteen minutes an Israeli frigate radioed for us to stop or he would ram us. On an earlier trip to Gaza, our captain Denis Healey's ship ("the Dignity") had been purposely rammed and almost sunk before limping into a Lebanese port. So he elected to stop and we were boarded.

Huwaida Arraf and several other women stayed near the bow yelling to the Israelis to stay away until they finally were subdued, manacled with bags placed over their heads.

I had planned to enter the main cabin, lock the door and film the Israeli naval commandos breaking it down. As I was about to enter, a stun grenade went off two feet in front of me. I did manage to enter and lock the door before they smashed it open.

**You were all taken captive on the ship, and then forced to sail to Ashdod Port. Could you please tell us your story about what happened during that time, both on board and in Israel? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?**

I AM NOT SURE IF THE ENDLESS LYING BY THE ISRAELIS THROUGHOUT MY CAPTIVITY WAS A FORM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE OR MERELY THE EXPRESSION OF A NATIONAL TRAIT. IN ANY CASE, IT REMAINS ONE OF THE MORE IRRITATING ASPECTS OF IMPRISONMENT.

I cannot say I witnessed any real torture though Paul Larudee and Ken O'Keefe were both badly beaten, away from my sight, for being uncooperative on the way back to the airport... The women on the Challenger 1 who remained on deck during the assault, especially Huwaida Arraf, were roughed up, and Griet Deknopper from Belgium was apparently hit on the nose by a paintball. She was bleeding profusely when later brought to the cabin.

Most of our personal property—including cameras, cell/sat phones, GPS, clothing, etc.—was taken while we were still on board. The soldiers made a great show of itemizing all the items, placing them in plastic bags with our names and an assigned number written on them (mine was 17). The same was done with our luggage. We were repeatedly assured that all would be returned but despite the efforts of our consulate nothing has been returned. I did have roaming charges from Tel Aviv billed to my iPhone AT&T account. Another passenger [Kathy Sheetz] had beer charged to her visa card in Tel Aviv.

The Israelis have sent photographs to our embassy of many of the cameras that they had taken from all the ships together with serial numbers. Neither it nor any of my other property (approximately \$8000 worth) has ever been returned.

Also they took my contact sheet with the American embassy and local attorneys' phone numbers during a frisking in Ashdod Port for making a copy, but was never given back despite my insistence and their promise to give back several times... I insisted on an attorney during the investigation, but the investigator responded, "If you insist on an attorney you will spend thirty more days in jail, and if at the end of that you again request an attorney, it will be another thirty days." I asked, "Is this an example of democracy in Israel?" and insisted on seeing an attorney plus a representative from my embassy.

I am not sure if the endless lying by the Israelis throughout my captivity was a form of psychological abuse or merely the expression of a national trait exemplified by Mr. Netanyahu. In any case it remains one of the more irritating aspects of imprisonment. Of course

IN 2008 WE EVENTUALLY BROKE THE SIEGE AT SEA FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 41 YEARS. WE COULD ONLY CARRY LIMITED CARGO ON OUR OLD BOATS, BUT FOR THE THOUSANDS OF PALESTINIANS, WHO CHEERED US INTO THE PORT, WE BROUGHT HOPE AND AN ASSURANCE THAT THE OUTSIDE WORLD HAD NOT FORGOT THEM.

it cannot be compared with the tragic loss of life aboard the *Mavi Marmara* or with the ships and cargoes unable to reach Gaza,<sup>2</sup> but it does say much about the mindset of this arrogant country.

**Could you please share with us the most striking events on this journey that you experienced or witnessed, and will never forget throughout your life?**

The warmth of the welcome aboard the *Mavi Marmara* that the passengers from the Challenger 2 received when we arrived... I was familiar with the hospitality extended in Gaza but it was somehow more memorable aboard the *Mavi Marmara*. Places were made for us at the crowded tables. Tea and cakes were instantly offered up. Warm silent handshakes were eloquent greetings when a common language could not be shared.

I asked a Lebanese man [Hussein Shukor] about a photograph of four women he had placed on a shelf of the bulkhead behind him. He paused for a long moment before telling me that they were his wife and three daughters. He had gone to Chicago to seek work during the war with Israel in 2006. He phoned them daily. Several hours after such a call, a neighbor phoned to say that all four in his family had been killed by an Israeli shell. His eyes welled as he told the story. Mine still well when I repeat it now.

Because the nights were mild and the cabins were crowded on the *Mavi Marmara*, I preferred to sleep outside on the deck. The father of two teenagers asked me where my mattress was. I said they were all in use and I was accustomed to sleeping on the ground from years of camping and sailing. He insisted I take one of his son's sleeping pads and would not take no for an answer. I woke early in the morning and found that someone had spread a blanket over me.

---

<sup>2</sup> The aid cargo of the Freedom Flotilla that was confiscated by the Israelis at first was delivered to the Gaza Strip by the United Nations later on.



*The welcoming ceremony  
in Gaza for the activists  
of the first sea voyage in  
August 2008*

In our cell block in the prison a burly outspoken Palestinian became our spokesman and leader by force of will. He led us fellow prisoners in nonviolent confrontations with the prison guards and officials, demanding better food, visits by lawyers and embassy staff, returns of personal belongings and so on. In the end the prison staff seemed relieved when we were all sent away for deportation.

**How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country?  
How did the Americans react to your participation in the Flo-  
tilla?**

I was greeted at 11:00 p.m. at the Seattle airport by Palestinian supporters and members of the press. My daughter Kate, who is a documentary filmmaker based in San Francisco, had spread the word to the national press throughout the experience. She forwarded a letter to Mr. Obama and released a video of me reading it before I left. It had some effect as I received a reply letter from a senior member of the State Department. (For the video of the letter to the American President see, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFQJpcXl90&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFQJpcXl90&feature=player_embedded))

When I went to recover my car at 5:00 a.m. from an airport garage, a picture of me was posted on the office bulletin board. The cashier matched me with the picture and said that her boss had told her to give me a good break on the parking fees. She charged me just one half.

Since then I have spoken at various locations in the area and given radio and TV interviews. I continue to be greeted by strangers where I live to commend me for supporting the Palestinians. The few cranky emails and letters are easy to dismiss.

THE WARMTH OF THE WELCOME AND HOSPITALITY ABOARD THE *MAVI MARMARA* WAS VERY MEMORABLE FOR ME. PLACES WERE MADE FOR US AT THE CROWDED TABLES. TEA AND CAKES WERE INSTANTLY OFFERED UP. WARM SILENT HANDSHAKES WERE ELOQUENT GREETINGS WHEN A COMMON LANGUAGE COULD NOT BE SHARED.

**Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful and achieved its aims?**

Despite the tragic loss of life and the frustration at not being able to bring the supplies and material to Gaza, it succeeded in focusing world attention on the situation in Gaza and the West Bank, and increasing outrage throughout the world. The BDS Movement (Boycott-Divest-Sanction) is growing here and abroad. International opinion continues to shift away from Israel, and the Freedom Flotilla contributed to that reevaluation.

**You are a first-hand witness of the Israeli aggression. What do you think about Israel?**

Each day I become more contemptuous of their national policies and of the tepid efforts of the United States in trying to alter them. By our continuing support of them we have allowed them to act with impunity regardless of how outrageous their actions are. My wife of fifty years is Jewish. Two of my oldest friends fled Germany in 1939, but were ardent supporters of the Palestinians. I read *Haaretz* online almost daily for a rational view with all the demagoguery. But I fear their voice does not represent a majority of the Israelis.

**Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?**

No, I am not hopeful. After the reception of the Goldstone Report [The Report of the UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict] and Israel's continued disregard of the UN sanctions, it is obvious they will pay no attention to international legal proceeding—though it is encouraging to see their officials having to avoid countries where they might be subject to arrest.

**What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?**

Several years ago I spoke with a doctor who had just returned from a stay on the West Bank. I told him that I was not a doctor or a teacher, and asked him what contribution I might bring. He

replied, “Hope... Hope and the realization that the world has not forgot or forsaken Palestine.” I remembered that when I volunteered to go aboard “the Free Gaza” boat. Even though the *Mavi Marmara* did not reach Gaza, it brought hope and the message that the world had not forgot the Palestinians.

**Israel claims that the activists on the Freedom Flotilla were politically motivated, and that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza since they have already been sending food, medicine and other humanitarian needs. As a person who went to Gaza before, what do you think about it?**

The Israeli claim that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza is yet another falsehood. Before the restrictions imposed on Gaza after Hamas took control in 2006, there were roughly 900 trucks entering each day; after the restrictions, the daily average dropped to about 75 trucks per day. Concrete and building supplies were excluded; exports from Gaza have been almost stopped. During the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel in June-December 2008, the number of trucks allowed to enter was roughly 95 per day instead of the agreed upon 950. Then you know Operation Cast Lead came...

The Flotilla was bringing not only hope but also meaningful supplies and material needed for reconstruction of sites destroyed by the Israelis. The amounts Israel have allowed entering since then does not provide a continuing source of the necessary material. Thank goodness for the tunnels and the hopes of an open border with Egypt... The *Mavi Marmara* and the other ships were a symbol to the world that 1.5 million people need help and support from the outside.

**I wonder about your previous journeys to Gaza. Could you please tell us your past experiences?**

The first flotilla preparations in Greece were made secretly due to the security concerns. E-mails were sent on encrypted servers. We exchanged our mobile phones every few days. The old wooden boat that converted from a fishing into a passenger boat (and later named “the Free Gaza”) was hidden among a crowd of pleasure and fishing vessels. There was a large hole in the deck while a new cabin was under construction. For the next two weeks, the Irish volunteer Derek Graham, the Italian volunteer Vic Arrigoni and I worked on the boat along with the local crew until the wheelhouse was rebuilt, electronic installed and the old engine tested at dockside. When the time came we set off although there was still work left undone on

SINCE THE DISCOVERY OF NATURAL GAS IN 1999  
IN GAZAN WATERS, THE ISRAELIS HAD BEGUN A  
POLICY OF ATTACKING FISHING BOATS THAT TRAVELED  
MORE THAN 6 MILES FROM SHORE. OVER A DOZEN  
FISHERMEN HAVE BEEN KILLED, 200 PLUS WOUNDED,  
AND SCORES OF BOATS CAPTURED OR DESTROYED.

the ship. When we joined the second boat of our little flotilla, “the Liberty”, near Piraeus/Greece then a press conference was held to broadcast the story as widely as possible.

Because of our limited fuel capacity, we had to leapfrog from port to port in order to refuel. On every port we visited, the local populace and port officials were very cooperative and welcoming, but then we were warned to leave as soon as possible. It appears that the government in Athens was being pressured by the Israelis to confiscate our boats. Then we spent several days in Larnaca/Cyprus for performing minor repairs and installing a sophisticated uplink so live video coverage could be sent to news outlets as events unfolded. Also medical and other supplies were loaded as much as our limited storage space allowed. And then the forty-four passengers and crew boarded the two ships.

On the night we were sailing toward Gaza, at about 10:00 p.m., we began to receive radio warnings from Israeli boats that we were breaking a legal blockade and would be stopped if we continued. We replied that we were unarmed civilians taking medical supplies to Gaza and that we were proceeding. Over the next hour or so, we received several similar warnings. At about midnight, all our communication devices were jammed. At about 3:00 a.m., I had a thought that possibly the *Al Jazeera* journalist on board might have a satellite phone with a different frequency that the Israelis might not have jammed. And indeed he was able to get through to his office and tell them what was happening. They apparently released the story widely and immediately. As the sun rose, our communications came back on line, and we received word that the Israelis had agreed to let us continue to Gaza for humanitarian reasons.

**What happened when you arrived in Gaza? Also could you please share with us your observations on the situation in Gaza? How was the life going on there?**



*David together with a Gazan fisherman whose hand was blown off by the Israelis*

Our arrival in Gaza will remain one of life's more memorable occasions since we eventually broke the siege at sea for the first time in forty-one years. Dozens of fishing and pleasure boats from Gaza harbor raced out to greet us. Many were so loaded with passengers that I feared they might capsize. As we entered the small harbor, thousands of Palestinians lined the shore shouting their welcomes and waving aloft the victory gesture. No one aboard those two old boats could ever forget that moment... We could only carry limited cargo on our old boats, but for the thousands of Palestinians who cheered us into the port, we brought hope and an assurance that the outside world had not forgot them.

We were given VIP Palestinian passports and greeted by the Prime Minister Ismael Haniyeh. We toured by bus from Rafah (where by chance an olive tree was being planted in a ceremony commemorating Rachel Corrie) to an Israeli checkpoint in the north. Everywhere we went, people on the streets saluted us with the V for victory sign. We visited hospitals, the Legislative Assembly, a school for deaf children, the ruins of factories and homes that had been reduced to rubble by the Israelis. Food and other products were available in the markets in limited supply. I saw no signs of malnutrition as I had seen on my visits to Haiti, but it was obviously a meager fare that was available. In the hospital the doctors complained of construction or equipment that was perhaps 80% complete but non-functioning because of the Israeli ban on concrete and other building supplies needed. In sum, I saw a resilient people living through appalling restrictions with grace and fortitude.

### What about your next voyages to Gaza?

I went twice more shortly before and after the presidential elections in the U.S. held in November 4, 2008. We were aboard newer and faster boats. They were relatively uneventful and a good deal more comfortable if not as memorable. On both occasions, I went out on fishing boats as an observer and hopefully as a deterrent to attack by Israeli naval ships. The captains of both boats went out the furthest of all the ships, and we were attacked each time by high pressure water hoses plus cannon and machine gun fire passing within feet of our boat. After that experience I filmed interviews of two fishermen: one had his hand blown off and the other's son had been killed by the Israelis (see <http://www.youtube.com/user/djschermerhorn#p/a/u/1/d6lovdey81o> and [http://www.youtube.com/user/djschermerhorn#p/a/u/2/r41lgj\\_1l-i](http://www.youtube.com/user/djschermerhorn#p/a/u/2/r41lgj_1l-i)) Since the discovery of natural gas in 1999 in Gazan waters, the Israelis had begun an increasingly stringent policy of attacking fishing boats that traveled more than 6 miles [9.6 kilometers] from shore despite the Oslo Accord that permitted fishing and other commercial activities in a corridor extending out 20 miles [32 kilometers] from shore. Over a dozen fishermen have been killed, 200 plus wounded and scores of boats captured or destroyed.

In 2009, I again joined the crew of a boat, "the Humanity". The old "Free Gaza" boat that had been moored among the fishing boats in Larnaca was planned to accompany "the Humanity". We spent several days refitting the boat that had been stripped from much of the electronic equipment and stores. When we were nearly finished preparing for the trip, a series of Cypriot inspectors came on board and cited us for various minor infractions, and this practice was repeated several times. It became obvious that the Israelis had applied pressure on the Cypriot government. In 2008, the Cypriot authorities had been very supportive of our mission. They had facilitated our permits, even sent divers down to make sure that no limpet mines had been attached to our hulls... Only "the Humanity" was allowed to leave, not "the Free Gaza". It was one of the most disheartening moments of my life to watch it from the quay sail away without "the Free Gaza". Later that day "the Humanity" was captured by the Israelis and taken to Ashdod.