

THE USO IN HAIFA

Ed Note: One of the most visible signs of U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation has been the regular port calls of the U.S. Sixth Fleet in Haifa. Since 1984, the USO has been working to introduce the American sailors and officers to Israel in a most extraordinary way. We are pleased to bring our readers up to date on the USO facility in Haifa using excerpts from the USO newsletter and an interview with Gila Gerson, of Haifa.

From The USO Newsletter

When U.S. Navy and Marine personnel attached to the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Dwight D. Eisenhower and the guided missile cruiser, U.S.S. Mississippi, boarded liberty launches for a short journey to the port city of Haifa, they had no idea of the surprise that awaited them at fleet landing.

An estimated 50 school children were on hand to greet the hundreds of U.S. ships personnel as they stepped ashore. Singing songs in English and Hebrew and waving American and Israeli flags, the students of Haifa Haron School, dressed in red, white and blue handed roses to the arriving crew.

This heartwarming program was organized by USO representative, Gila Gerson, to celebrate the opening of the first USO Fleet Center in Israel and to welcome its first visitors — the combined crews of the two Sixth Fleet ships totalling 6,500 military personnel.

Comments from sailors and marines ranged from "Is this for us?" "Who thought this up?" to "This is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for us."

U.S. Sixth Fleet Requests USO

The search for a USO site in Israel was initiated at the request of Sixth Fleet Commander, Admiral Ed Martin. Due to the broadening cooperation between the Israeli and U.S. forces, Israel was becoming a primary post for visiting U.S. fleets.

Looking ahead to the future, W. Clarke Cook of the USO said, "We've got a lot of plans for Haifa. We will be scheduling events and anything that brings the American and Israeli communities closer together. We (the USO) like to think of ourselves as a cultural catalyst."

The Haifa Fleet Center as well as the over fifty other USO fleet locations in the Mediterranean and in the Pacific area are unique in that they are activated just before U.S. ships arrive. Mobile units are set up as ships, including carriers with 5,000 sailors, arrive in port often after two months at sea.

Gila Gerson Continues

In a recent interview in Washington, USO Haifa representative Gila Gerson explained exactly what "just before U.S. ships arrive" really means.

It was the evening of Rosh Hashana, the beginning of the Jewish New Year. Unlike the American New Year's Eve, Rosh Hashana is a holy day, during which Jews spend time with their families and in synagogue. In Israel, everything — everything — is closed: restaurants, drug stores, everything.

Gila received a call as she and her mother were preparing the holiday dinner. A ship was arriving just then and there were sailors who needed assistance. Gila went to the dock along with other USO volunteers to see what they could do. A short time later she phoned her mother. "Mom, I'm bringing some company home for supper — How many? — 100."



To her everlasting credit, Gila's mother replied, "I'm making more soup."

From "Newsview"

Commander Edward Simmons of the Eisenhower attributes "the remarkable absence of incidents" to "the response of the people here in Haifa. It's so sincere. Everything has been superb. I've never seen a more coordinated and hospitable port anywhere. The fleet landing service and the other services provided by the Israeli navy were flawless. But what I feel most strongly about is the hospitality, not just of the Israeli navy. The people here have been the warmest and most welcoming I've ever seen."

Captain Philip Olson of the Mississippi agreed, adding that "being able to walk down the street and converse with anyone and to feel the response of friendliness and the desire to help and a genuine interest in your well-being — the best way to sum it up is the warmth of the people."

Informal remarks made by blue-jacketed sailors with their distinctive white caps confirmed the opinions expressed at higher levels.

An 18-year-old sailor from "somewhere

in Alabama" grins. "Compared to other countries? There's no comparison. This is heaven."

A shore patrolman, strolling Haifa's streets, commented "in my eight years in the navy, this has been the best port. I hope we'll be coming here more often."

Gila Gerson Continues

Gila credited much of the warm feeling toward the American servicemen to the sailors themselves. "They're such gentlemen. Not only the officers — also the young boys. They so appreciate what you do for them. They wrote thank-you letters even before they left the port. . . And the proof of what kind of men they are, even the young ones, is that they didn't want only to receive from us. They also wanted to give."

And they did give. She recounted numerous stories of children being taken aboard the ships; of special trips for the children of Israeli servicemen killed in wars; of visits by sailors to Israeli military and civilian hospitals.

In one children's hospital, sailors asked what they could do to be helpful. They were told they could paint a wardroom. Instead

of simply painting, they drew and painted Disney characters for the children.

The USO Today

It seems clear that the Haifa USO is, and will continue to be, a force operating to bring American sailors and marines closer to the Israeli people, as well as providing special services to our forces overseas.

The USO is a voluntary, non-government, non-profit civilian organization committed exclusively to helping service personnel and their families. USO programs today serve almost five million men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces and their families.

USO receives no direct federal funding and is supported through voluntary private and corporate contributions. The USO newsletter writes of it's Israeli facility, "In ports such as Haifa, where USO is fortunate enough to have tremendous community support, the possibilities are endless. USO is the place where visiting military personnel can go to get information about the Israeli culture, tours, and what's happening in the area as well as emergency assistance."

Subscribe

(or send a gift to someone who needs to be informed)

An annual subscription to the JINSA *Security Affairs* is \$30.00. It is a small price to pay to better understand American defense and security needs and how a firm strategic relationship between the US and Israel can benefit both countries.

JINSA is the only Jewish organization solely devoted to explaining the link between US national security and Israel's security, and assessing what we can and must do to strengthen both.

Name _____

Address _____

Make checks payable to JINSA and send to 1411 K Street, NW, Suite 1002, Washington, D.C. 20005. JINSA is a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization.