

The Link

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Memorandum

To: AMEU

From: Admiral Thomas H. Moorer

Subject: Attack on the USS Liberty—June 8, 1967

Date: June 8, 1997

I have never believed that the attack on the USS Liberty was a case of mistaken identity. That is ridiculous. I have flown over the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, thousands of hours, searching for ships and identifying all types of ships at sea. The Liberty was the ugliest, strangest looking ship in the U.S. Navy. As a communications intelligence ship, it was sprouting every kind of antenna. It looked like a lobster with all those projections moving every which way.

Israel knew perfectly well that the ship was American. After all, the Liberty's American flag and markings were in full view in perfect visibility for the Israeli aircraft that overflew the ship eight times over a period of nearly eight hours prior to the attack. I am confident that Israel knew the Liberty could intercept radio messages from all parties and potential parties to the ongoing war, then in its fourth day, and that Israel was preparing to seize the Golan Heights from Syria despite President Johnson's known opposition to such a move. I think they realized that if we learned in advance of their plan, there would be a tremendous amount of negotiating between Tel Aviv and Washington.

And I believe Moshe Dayan concluded that he could prevent Washington from becoming aware of what Israel was up to by destroying the primary source of acquiring that information — the USS Liberty. The result was a wanton sneak attack that left 34 American sailors dead and 171 seriously injured. What is so chilling and cold-blooded, of course, is that they could kill as many Americans as they did in confidence that Washington would cooperate in quelling any public outcry.

I have to conclude that it was Israel's intent to sink the Liberty and leave as few survivors as possible. Up to the point where the torpedo boats were sent in, you could speculate on that point. You have to remember that the Liberty was an intelligence ship, not a fighting ship, and its only defensive weapons were a pair of 50-caliber machine guns both aft and on the fore-castle. There was little the men could do to fight off the air assault from Israeli jets that pounded the Liberty with bombs, rockets, napalm and machine gun fire for 25 minutes.

With the Liberty riddled with holes, fires burning, and scores of casualties, three Israeli torpedo boats closed in for the kill. The second of three torpedoes ripped through a compartment at amidships, drowning 25 of the men in that section. Then the torpedo boats closed to within 100 feet of the Liberty to continue the attack with cannons and machine guns, resulting in further casualties. It is telling, with respect to whether total annihilation was the intent, that the Liberty crew has reported that the torpedo boats' machine guns also were turned on life rafts that were deployed into the Mediterranean as well as those few on deck that had escaped damage.

As we know now, if the rescue aircraft from U.S. carriers had not been recalled, they would have arrived at the Liberty before the torpedo attack, reducing the death toll by 25. The torpedo boat commanders could not be certain that Sixth Fleet aircraft were not on the way and this might have led to their breaking off the attack after 40 minutes rather than remaining to send the Liberty and its crew of 294 to the bottom.

See page 3.

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About This Issue

At 10:25 p.m. on Sunday, May 18, 1997, Joe Meadors, a *USS Liberty* survivor, received the following E-mail from Elie at Jdlnorcal@aol.com:

Don't think you will get away with selling your bullshit to these people. We all know your true agenda, look to your own web cite [sic], and by your friends we shall know you. By the way, after 30 years, "BE A MAN AND SUCK IT UP AND GET A LIFE." You play with the big boys in a War zone, and you get your nose bloodied, stop your whining and take it like a man, you are pathetic.

Israel's 1967 attack on the *USS Liberty* was examined in a 1984 *Link* article by Jim Ennes, a *Liberty* survivor and author of *Assault on the Liberty*. Eleven years later, John Borne, a doctoral student at New York University, published his dissertation on the official cover-up that followed the attack. Both books have been well reviewed, most recently by Ron Miberg in the Hebrew daily *Ma'ariv*. Miberg noted that these books triggered awkward efforts by the Jewish lobby to depict the survivors as anti-Semites and Israel-haters. Both books are available from AMEU (see page 15).

Much has occurred since these books were written. We thank Admiral Moorer for his introductory memo, and we welcome John Borne's update. Dr. Borne

was among the speakers at the survivors' 30th anniversary commemoration, June 5-8, in Washington, D.C.

The men of the *Liberty* know what happened that day in 1967, and they know the odds against setting the record straight. The years, however, have not dulled their survivor's instinct. Joe Meadors wasted no time in responding to his Sunday night E-mailer:

Elie, Great to hear from you. What "big boys" are you talking about? Those incompetent wimps who attacked us?

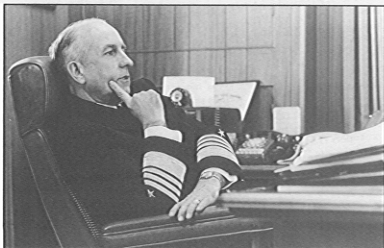
They had the full firepower of the Israeli Navy and Air Force at their disposal. And with the Sixth Fleet forbidden to come to our assistance they couldn't even overcome a single, virtually defenseless US Navy ship despite being able to subject us to a continuous, unimpeded attack for some 90 minutes and being allowed to waive their obligation under every applicable international law and convention with impunity.

No wonder you guys don't want the incident to be investigated. If the truth were to come out everyone would know just how inept the Israeli Navy really is.

Fact is, Elie, you and your ilk at the JDL [Jewish Defense League] are just a bunch of wimps yourselves—scared of the truth. Perhaps because you're staffed with a bunch of bungling 1967-era Israeli Navy vets whose only claim to fame is their inability to sink a solitary, defenseless US Navy ship during a 90 minute attack.

The *USS Liberty* web site that Elie alluded to in his E-mail is at <<http://www.usliberty.org/jim/usliberty>>.

John F. Mahoney



Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, whose memorandum introduces this issue of *The Link*. — Official U.S. Navy photograph, 1966.

-2-

Congress to this day has failed to hold formal hearings for the record on the *Liberty* affair. This is unprecedented and a national disgrace. I spent hours on the Hill giving testimony after the USS *Pueblo*, a sister ship to the *Liberty*, was seized by North Korea. I was asked every imaginable question, including why a carrier in the area failed to dispatch aircraft to aid the *Pueblo*. In the *Liberty* case, fighters were put in the air—once, but twice. They were ordered to stand down by Secretary of Defense McNamara and President Johnson for reasons the American public deserves to know.

The captain and crew of the *Liberty*, rather than being widely acclaimed as the heroes they most certainly are, have been silenced, ignored, honored belatedly and away from the cameras, and denied a history that accurately reflects their ordeal. I was appalled that six of the dead from the *Liberty* lay under a tombstone at Arlington Cemetery that described them as having "died in the eastern Mediterranean," as if disease rather than Israeli intent had caused their deaths. The Naval Academy failed to record the name of Lt. Stephen Toth in Memorial Hall on the grounds that he had not been killed in battle. I intervened and was able to reverse the apparent idea that dying in a cowardly, one-sided attack by a supposed ally is somehow not the same as being killed by an avowed enemy.

Commander McGonagle's story is the stuff of naval tradition. Badly wounded in the first air attack, lying on the deck and losing blood, he refused any treatment that would take him from his battle station on the bridge. He continued to direct the ship's defense, the control of flooding and fire, and by his own example inspired the survivors to heroic efforts to save the ship. He did not relinquish his post until hours later, after having directed the crippled ship's navigation to a rendezvous with a U.S. destroyer and final arrival in Malta.

I must have gone to the White House 15 times or more to watch the President personally award the Congressional Medal of Honor to Americans of special valor. So it irked the hell out of me when McGonagle's ceremony was relegated to the obscurity of the Washington Navy Yard and the medal was presented by the Secretary of the Navy. This was a back-handed slap. Everyone else received their medal at the White House. President Johnson must have been concerned about the reaction of the Israeli lobby.

The Liberty Veterans Association deserves the encouragement of everyone who wants the facts of the *Liberty* incident revealed and proper homage paid to the men who lost their lives, to their families, and to the survivors. I have attended many of their reunions and am always impressed with the cohesion of the *Liberty* family. They arrive in town with their whole entourage—grandmas, grandpas, grandchildren. They promote the memory of the boys who were killed and I respect them for that. They are mostly from small country towns, probably a lot like Eufaula, Alabama, where I grew up, and they represent the basic core of America that has enabled us to be a superpower for so long. These are the kind of people who will make certain that our liberty and freedom survive if fighting is what it takes.

Admiral Moorer, a Navy pilot at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attack ignited World War II, was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the final four years of a distinguished 45-year military career, retiring in 1974. He is the only Naval officer to have commanded both the Pacific and Atlantic Fleets. He has been unequivocal before and after his retirement in condemning as deliberate the 1967 Israeli attack on the USS Liberty and has actively supported the surviving crewmen who wonder to this day why they were attacked, why rescue aircraft were recalled and why military honors to the dead and wounded have been grudgingly, almost furtively, bestowed.

Remember the ~~Maine~~ Liberty!

By JOHN BORNE

Israel claimed the attack was accidental. The crew of the *Liberty* insist it had to be deliberate. Their eyewitness observations, and the facts they have extricated with great difficulty over the past 30 years, bear them out.

Yet the U.S. Government accepted the Israeli excuse instantly. Ever since, the two governments have maintained this fictional account with elaborate falsehoods. *Liberty* survivors trying to correct the record have found themselves accused of anti-Semitism. This is one of the most incredible episodes in American history, one in which Congress, the press and the academic world all failed to provide balance or to correct a false official history.

The *Liberty* was positioned in international waters off Gaza and assigned to monitor communications of the Israeli and Arab armies. Starting at 0600 hours on June 8, the fourth day of the war, Israeli planes began a series of eight reconnaissance flights to observe the ship. James Ennes, Jr., saw seven of the eight overflights from his position on the bridge. At 1000, two Mirage III fighter-bombers flew close enough that he could see the pilots through binoculars. "If I could see the pilots in their cockpits, the pilots could certainly see our flag and no doubt the ship's name and number."¹

Liberty radio operators overheard one of the pilots reporting back to base that the ship was American and that he could see the flag.

At 1030, a Noratlas "flying boxcar" came at the *Liberty* about 200 feet above the water, its Star of David markings clearly visible. Vibrations from the engine noise caused the *Liberty's* decks to shudder.

When planes approached from the east at 1400, the crew was expecting another routine fly-over. Instead the fighter jets attacked with shells, rockets and napalm. The aircraft returned for repeated attacks, making 30 or 35 sorties.

The air assault lasted from 1400 to 1425. After the planes departed, three torpedo boats approached in "V" formation. One torpedo struck the *Liberty* amidships on the starboard side. The ship listed but did not sink. The torpedo boats then circled the ship at reduced speed, firing at the waterline and at the crewmen on deck who were fighting fires.

Captain William McGonagle gave the order to prepare to abandon ship. The crewmen deployed three life rafts overboard, and the torpedo boats sank two and took one aboard. The boats then departed to the west. Of the crew of 297 U.S. seamen, Israel had killed 34 and wounded 171.

THE WHITE HOUSE AND THE ATTACK

There is evidence that the White House had been warned of what might happen to the *Liberty*. Stephen Green writes that on the evening of June 7, the Pentagon received a message from the U.S. Military Attaché in Tel Aviv that the Israelis intended to sink the *Liberty* if it approached the Gaza coast. This warning was taken seriously enough for the

Joint Chiefs of Staff to order the *Liberty* to withdraw 100 miles from its assigned post. This order to the *Liberty* was one of several messages that never reached the ship due to an inefficient, unwieldy communications system.²

Mystery still surrounds why, after the *Liberty's* SOS was received by the Sixth Fleet, airborne rescue planes were twice recalled by the White House. Why, too, was an immediate cover-up initiated with instructions to intelligence agencies to stop gathering information that indicated the attack was deliberate?

The White House arranged for a Naval Court to meet at Malta to investigate the incident, but with certain limitations; the crewmen complained that the hearing focused only on the performance of the ship under fire. The summary of the Naval Court hearings, released on June 28, generally minimized the intensity and duration of the assault.



John Borne was 60 when he entered New York University to obtain his doctorate in history. "At that age," he told AMEU, "I wanted to select a dissertation subject that served a higher purpose than qualifying me for an extra three letters after my name. As a historian, I found the *Liberty* story irresistible. Here we had eyewitnesses—heroic men—being told to silently accept a history they know to be false."

According to Press Secretary George Christian, who wrote later to survivor James Ennes, "There was considerable skepticism in the White House that the attack was accidental."³ Despite the obvious anger of many top level government officials privy to the situation, they fumed in private and no investigation was authorized which might endanger Israel's account. Johnson ordered Clark Clifford to prepare a report without benefit of independent inquiry and The Clifford Report accepting the Israeli explanation was classified Top Secret.

ABORTING THE RESCUE FLIGHTS

Although the attacking planes intentionally jammed the *Liberty's* radio frequencies, the ship managed to send out a distress signal in the few minutes before its communications capacity was destroyed. The message—"UNDER ATTACK BY UNIDENTIFIED PLANES"—was heard by the carrier *Saratoga*, part of the Sixth Fleet at that moment off Crete. The *Saratoga's* commander, Captain Joe Tully, immediately turned his ship into the wind and notified Admiral Lawrence Geis, commander of the Sixth Fleet carrier force, that he was sending help unless instructed otherwise.

Tully launched twelve fighter-bombers and four tanker planes toward the *Liberty*. He was puzzled that the *America*, an accompanying carrier, had not launched planes and tried to find out why. Before he could do so, he was instructed to recall his own planes, then on the horizon.

The carriers were told they should launch again in 90 minutes. Tully replied that he could do so immediately, but received no reply. After 90 minutes, the planes were dispatched again, only to be recalled again.

The next morning when the badly crippled *Liberty* met ships of the Sixth Fleet, the most seriously wounded men were transferred to the carriers for medical treatment. Later that day Admiral Geis summoned to his cabin Lt. Commander David Lewis, the highest ranking of the wounded *Liberty* crewmen. Geis pledged Lewis to secrecy, saying that what he was about to reveal should not be repeated to anyone until after Geis's death.⁴

He then told Lewis that the first rescue flight had been canceled on direct orders from Secretary of Defense McNamara, who had ordered the 90-minute delay before redeploying. When the second rescue mission was launched, McNamara again ordered the planes recalled. Admiral Geis told Lewis he had protested the order and availed himself of the right to have it repeated by McNamara's superior officer, in this case the President. President Johnson came on the line and personally confirmed to Geis that the flights were to be canceled because "we are not going to embarrass an ally." True to his word, Lewis said nothing of the conversation until years later, after Geis's death.

Captain Tully never had the opportunity to find out why he had been ordered to recall the flights. A few days later he was transferred to another post. The flight groups of pilots who had taken part in the aborted rescue were broken up and the pilots transferred to stations all over the world.



Upon its conversion to an intelligence-gathering platform from its WW II freighter origins, the *Liberty* was christened in 1963 after American cities, towns and villages of the same name.—U.S. Navy Photo

CONGRESS REACTS

Congressman Tom Abernathy (D-MS), who came to be a friend and supporter of the *Liberty* men, has said that representatives of the State Department were on Capitol Hill on June 9, the day after the attack, to give assurances that it was accidental, even though there

had been no time to investigate the truth of that assertion. Lack of facts did not deter Senators Jacob Javits (R-NY) and Robert Kennedy (D-NY), and Rep. Roman Pucinski (D-IL) from asserting in floor speeches that the attack was accidental.

After Secretary of State Dean Rusk spoke to members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he reported them to be "enraged." These sentiments were never expressed publicly, however, and were not manifested in any resolution or investigation, or even in any notable speeches. Like other observers, Congress waited for the findings of the Naval Court in Malta, and when the court summary generally accepted the Israeli point of view—an accidental attack, of short duration—Con-

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

gressmen, like others, were disarmed.

An opportunity to probe the matter came in July when Secretary McNamara testified before a Senate subcommittee. Sen. Bourke Hickenlooper (R-IA) was indignant but ill prepared and didn't even ask about the recall of the rescue flights.

ISRAEL'S ACCOUNTS

El Arish, an Egyptian village and military logistics outpost on the Sinai coast, was taken by Israel on June 6. Israel claimed that there had been a report of the bombardment of El Arish from the sea. This report was false, but it led to the dispatch of torpedo boats to the scene and the surmise that the *Liberty* was the source of the bombardment.

The Israelis also claimed in some reports that the *Liberty* flew no flag, although in other reports they claimed that it was a "small flag."

One version, initiated by Micha Limor, said to be an officer on one of the torpedo boats, described a silent "ghost ship" that did not respond to either signals or gunfire until a solitary sailor appeared on deck and fired a machine gun at the torpedo boats. The ship was alleged to have flown no flag until much later, which then ended the attack, and the hull bore no name or markings. There were numbers on the side of the ship near the bow that "meant nothing" to Limor and his companions. Limor's account of a silent ship which refused to halt or respond was repeated by other writers such as Winston and Randolph Churchill and the authors of the official Israeli Defense Force History of 1982.

The Israelis also claimed in some accounts that the *Liberty* resembled an Egyptian ship, *El Quesir*, and that the naval officers made the identification based on *Jane's Fighting Ships*.

SECRET REPORTS

There were many events and documents relating to

the attack available at the time that were unknown to Congress, to the public at large, and apparently even to members of the National Security Council Special Committee.

In Lebanon on June 8, 1967, a CIA agent showed U.S. Ambassador Dwight Porter a printed report of intercepted messages between an Israeli pilot and Tel Aviv during the attack. The pilot reported that the *Liberty* was an American ship; his commander on the ground ordered the pilot to continue the attack. Porter did not report this officially, but in later years after his return to Washington he recounted the incident to columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak.

In Luxembourg a week after the attack, Secretary Dean Rusk spoke to NATO ambassadors and said that Israel's attack was deliberate. This was reported in some European papers but not in the U.S.

In the State Department, in September, legal adviser Carl Salans compared Israel's July, 1967 inquiry, the "Yerushalmi Report," with the findings of the U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry.

Salans noticed many discrepancies. Israel claimed that the *Liberty* and *El Quesir* could be mistaken for each other, while U.S. observers said the two ships were so dissimilar that one could not have been

mistaken for the other. Israel claimed that *Liberty* refused to identify itself, but the crew said otherwise. The *Liberty* crew claimed there were eight overflights, while the Israelis claimed there was only one. The Salans Report, classified Top Secret, was never used to challenge the Israeli claims.

CIA REPORTS AND GEN. DAYAN

The CIA issued three reports in the summer and fall of 1967 which said that the attack was deliberate. One of these specifically states that the attack was ordered by General Dayan.

These cables were unknown to Congress or the public until 1977, when they were released due to a Freedom



Suffering serious shrapnel wounds, Capt. William McGonagle was on the bridge throughout the air and sea assault and for 17 hours afterward, commanding the damage and fire control efforts and directing the crippled ship's journey to join elements of the Sixth Fleet. This 1967 photo, taken at drydock in Malta, shows the captain inspecting a rocket hole inflicted by an Israeli jet.—U.S. Navy Photo

of Information (FOI) suit by the American Palestine Committee, an Arab-American group.

In its first story on the incident, *The New York Times* of June 9 proclaimed in a headline that Israel had attacked a U.S. ship "in error." *Times* correspondent Neil Sheehan, aboard the carrier *America*, reported that *Liberty* survivors were saying the attack was intentional, but this eyewitness version was given no prominence. When crewmen repeated their observations to Colin Frost of the Associated Press on June 18, the Department of State countered with a Reuters dispatch which claimed, falsely, that *Liberty* officers said that the attack was accidental. The two stories ran side by side in the *Times*, without comment and apparently without arousing any curiosity on the part of its editors. From that day forward *The New York Times* has seemed to close the books on this "accidental attack," failing to review Ennes's book, *Assault on the Liberty*, and ignoring the campaign of the *Liberty* men to reopen the investigation.

At first, other papers and columnists were at least willing to consider that the attack was deliberate. Syndicated columnists Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson wrote on June 16 that the attack was too well coordinated to be accidental. On June 19, a *Newsweek* item said that "some high Washington officials" believed the attack to be deliberate. A week later, *U.S. News and World Report* said "the mystery continues" and that the attack might have been deliberate.

William Buckley, writing in the *National Review* of June 27, called for a Congressional investigation. On June 28, the Summary of the Naval Court was released to the press, and greeted with much criticism; *The National Observer* said that "only the blind or the trigger happy" could have attacked the ship.

By mid-July, press criticism of Israel virtually stopped. Articles in the fall of 1967 and in 1968 left Israel's version of events unchallenged. Columnists reversed their stand without explanation. For example, when the Israelis claimed that the *Liberty* resembled *El*

Quseir, the press often repeated this without qualification, although all U.S. officials disagreed. On June 16, *The Washington Post* quoted unnamed "sources" in Israel who claimed that on June 5, the first day of the war, Israel had asked the U.S. Embassy if there were U.S. ships in the area but had received no reply. This story was to be repeated time and again by various media, which seldom mentioned that the U.S. government had emphatically denied there had been such a request.

By September, *National Review* had lost the scent. Its columnist James Kilpatrick addressed the issue with some caution, accepting the Israeli version and leaving aside Buckley's earlier challenge to Congress. *U.S. News*, in May 1968, reported as fact Israel's claim that the *Liberty* showed no flag or other signs of identity. *Newsweek*, in August 1968, ran an item adopting the same claim without reservation.

Shoddy journalism helped in promoting the Administration's false story. A prime example is Limor's dispatch in *The New York Times* alleging that the *Liberty* displayed no flag or other markings, a story repeated by other papers. Not to have flown the flag, the defenseless vessel's only protection, would have been irrational and the claim is absurd. As for the ship's number and name, these are easily seen in photographs of the ship immediately after the attack, as any journalist worthy of the title could have checked for himself.

FORCING REPORTS INTO THE OPEN

In 1977 the American Palestine Committee (APC), a small group of lawyers of Arab descent, used Freedom of Information (FOI) suits to obtain three 1967 CIA reports that showed the *Liberty* attack to be deliberate. In one, Gen. Moshe Dayan was said to have ordered the attack. The APC published the reports in a *New York Times* advertisement on September 17, 1977, along with a picture of General Dayan, then visiting the U.S. The ad asked: "Are we welcoming the murderer of our sons?"

Admiral Stansfield Turner, head of the CIA, appeared on the "Today" show the same day. He claimed

(Continued on page 8)



171 crewmen were wounded in the attack. In more than 30 sorties, Israeli jets pounded the *Liberty* with rockets, machine gun fire and napalm.—U.S. Navy Photo

(Continued from page 7)

the three reports were "unevaluated" and therefore unreliable. Turner said the CIA had not given to the APC a CIA document of June 21, 1967, that concluded that the attack was accidental, but had turned over a document of June 13, 1967, that reached the same conclusion.

The APC protested that the CIA had misled them by withholding documents, and also that the reports of June 1967, now referred to by the CIA, could not possibly be evaluations of later CIA reports. The episode demonstrates the government's power to control public perception of events. The release of these CIA documents in the summer of 1967, when there was much suspicion of Israel and its conduct, would have been sensational. In 1977 there was no reaction at all, in Congress or the press. By 1977 both had become used to regarding Israel as a useful ally and there was only indifference to the revelation that the attack on the *Liberty* may have been deliberate. It also showed how quickly the Administration could react to counter unfavorable news. The head of the CIA was on television belittling the ad the same day it was printed. Many readers and viewers heard the ad criticized before they saw it in print.

ENNES BOOK PUBLISHED

After the inquiry in Malta, the crewmen were isolated, scattered and watched carefully to see that they did not speak against the Administration/Israeli version of events. But James Ennes gathered notes and information from them and prepared to speak out. Ennes worked on his book for 12 years, and many of the crew members sent material and notes to him. *Assault on the Liberty* was published by Random House in 1979, and Ennes hoped that it would be important as the first public statement by a survivor of the attack.

The book got an encouraging early reception. *Military Review*, *Naval War College Review*, and the *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* at Annapolis praised it highly, as did *The Hartford Courant*, *Washington Post* and *People* magazine. Larry King interviewed Ennes for two hours on his

national radio network and there were over 150 radio and television interviews in all. All this would seem to presage a wide reception.

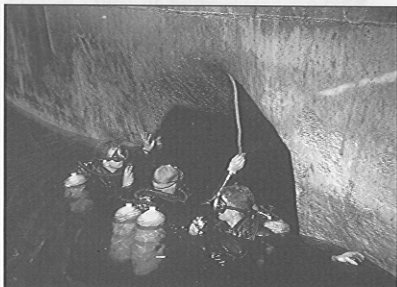
Journalist friends told Ennes that the Israeli Government was working hard behind the scenes to discredit his story. The Israeli Foreign Office in Jerusalem prepared a four-page criticism of the book and The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee published a six-page attack drawing on the Israeli document. "Fact sheets" and "background papers" were prepared by other pro-Israeli organizations. Ennes found his name included in AIPAC's "Who's Who in Arab Propaganda."

Book orders disappeared and some large distributors dropped the book. The advertising department of *The Washington Post* refused to accept a paid ad for *Assault*. *Newsweek* magazine's "Periscope" section had a favorable comment prepared, but then canceled it.

Ennes found commitments for television coverage evaporating with lame explanations. He believes the campaign to suppress the *Liberty* story was most effective with national commercial television networks. Interviews were arranged, then dropped, at ABC's "Good Morning America" and ABC's "Nightline." Work went ahead at "60 Minutes" and was then canceled.

As these setbacks occurred, Ennes learned that crew members were much encouraged and heartened by the appearance of *Assault*. He contacted survivor Stan White, who laboriously traced more than 150 crewmen. When contacts were made, it became clear that many of the men wanted to help tell the *Liberty* story to a wider audience. White set to work planning the first reunion of the *Liberty* crew.

Over 100 crewmen met in Washington in the Hotel Washington in early June 1982. It was a joyful, tearful, emotional occasion. The men had been ordered never to say anything about the *Liberty* to anyone; now they felt free to discuss the attack, and found that speaking out lifted a heavy burden. There were candlelight services



All but nine of the 34 men killed in the Israeli attack on the *Liberty* were victims of the torpedo that left a gaping, 40-foot hole amidships on the starboard side. In this 1967 photo, divers in Malta inspect the damage. —U.S. Navy Photo

for the dead, a trip to Arlington National Cemetery to the grave of six of their crew, and personal reunions of those who had not seen each other for 15 years. The main event was a banquet with guests who lent their support.

The keynote speaker was Admiral Thomas Moorer, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who told them that no U.S. government official really believed that the attack was accidental, and concluded: "You survived because you had great heart. . . . I am humble in your presence. The nation owes every one of you a great debt of gratitude."

Philip Geyelin, syndicated columnist and scholar at the Johns Hopkins School for International Studies, told them that the *Liberty* affair included "deception and even denigration. . . . Why is it that fifteen years after the fact we cannot get a credible explanation of how this seemingly senseless engagement came about? . . . Israel's explanation is simply not believable."⁵

On Sunday there was a business meeting. It was agreed unanimously that there would be a permanent organization, to be called "USS Liberty Veterans Association." The *Liberty News* would be the official organ of the organization, to be published quarterly. Goals would include (1) getting the story of the *Liberty* into the public consciousness; (2) correcting the false version of the attack promoted by the government; (3) encouraging the Navy to reexamine the Navy Court of Inquiry Report.

The *Liberty* men had found they had friends in journalism and in public life who wanted to join in their cause. Such allies could become associate members of the LVA, and many did important work in this regard. Two in particular were Admiral Moorer and Paul McCloskey.

MORE EXPLANATIONS FROM ISRAEL

The Israeli government appeared to time the release of an official history of the *Liberty* affair to coincide with the first reunion of the *Liberty* men in June 1982. Called

"The Attack on the Liberty Incident," this history generally repeated previous Israeli accounts with two important differences: There was no pre-attack aerial surveillance at all; and Israeli forces identified the ship not as *El Quseir* but as an Egyptian destroyer.

In *Liberty News* Ennes criticized the history severely. The claim of no aerial surveillance contradicted the experience of the *Liberty* crew, the conclusions of the Naval Court, and all previous Israeli reports. The account of the brief air attack contradicted the personal experience of the crewmen and the Naval Court Summary that reported 820 cannon and shell holes in the ship.

In September, 1984, *The Atlantic Monthly* published an article by Hersh Goodman and Ze'ef Schiff, widely respected Israeli military analysts. The article, which was given much advance publicity, claimed that the attack was accidental. The authors said that Israelis

strafed the ship four times, but hit the ship with only one bomb. Contradicting the 1982 IDF history, they claimed that the *Liberty* was spotted by IDF aircraft several times during the morning of June 8 but that these identifications "came to naught" when a new shift came into the war room and removed from the table the marker designating the *Liberty*.

Goodman and Schiff also claimed that the ship identified it-

self to the torpedo boats with the signal "AA," which had previously been used by an Arab ship. Before, Israel most often said the *Liberty* refused to identify itself at all. Ennes was highly critical, pointing out that the authors had made no attempt to contact the crew in writing about the attack, and only Israeli sources were cited.

However, the *Atlantic* article was widely quoted. Dozens of newspapers reprinted or summarized the article with headlines such as "New Evidence Shows that Attack on American Ship was a Mistake." *Liberty News* wrote rebuttal letters, but most papers would not print them. *The London Times* said that it would be "disloyal to its reporter, Goodman, to print a rebuttal, and said the

(Continued on page 10)



To the *Liberty* survivors fell the grim task of recovering their fallen shipmates from the torpedoed compartment. The work party is shown here as it rested on the top deck.—U.S. Navy Photo

authors had "credentials" that the *Liberty* men lacked.

The *Liberty* men and their friends organized a counteroffensive. David Smyth of Associated Press wrote an article challenging the *Atlantic* piece that was printed in 30 newspapers. Ennes's critique appeared in *The Jerusalem Post*.

The *Liberty* men criticized the official and semi-official accounts from Israel on the grounds that the accounts were contradictory and constantly changing, never mentioned the jamming of radio frequencies or the sinking of the life rafts, and never quoted *Liberty* survivors, eyewitnesses to the attack. Invariably, they said, the authors of these accounts refused to provide sources and documentation.

MINNESOTAN SUES FOR FOI RELEASES

If the *Liberty News* was to be of value, it needed official documents and these had to be forced out of a reluctant U.S. government. The crewmen were greatly aided by the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in 1974. They were also helped by the actions of an accountant from Burnsville, Minnesota, Jim Miller. He read *Assault* in 1981 and, in his own words, became "obsessed" with the book and the subject.

In July 1981 Miller filed a FOI request with the State Department for all documents relevant to the *Liberty*. "This simple move, inspired by curiosity," he wrote later, "inspired a seemingly endless struggle."⁶

He obtained some documents but knew, because of his contacts with Ennes, that he had been denied others. So he filed law suits, first to bring about compliance with FOI, then to recoup legal fees spent in the effort.

Miller discovered later that 16 persons had filed FOI requests for *Liberty* material. All but Miller and Ennes had finally given up, worn out by the State Department stonewalling. Miller appealed his case from Federal District Court to Appeals Court in 1985, finally winning a decision that paid most of his legal fees. The exhausting and expensive ordeal made clear that the State Department intended to make it difficult for any citizen to

obtain documents about the *Liberty* affair.

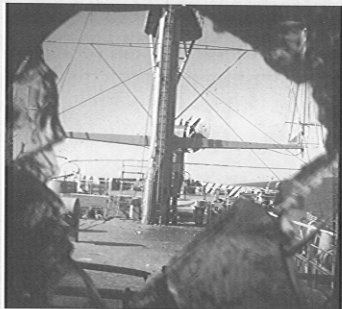
Ennes made his first contacts in Congress in 1980 when he promoted his book in Washington. He met with staff members of Sen. Adlai Stevenson (D-IL). Stevenson announced in the fall of 1980 that he would hold hearings on the *Liberty*.

Before Stevenson dropped the plan for lack of interest among his colleagues, Israel suddenly came forward after years of rejecting the U.S. claim for physical damage to the *Liberty*. Israel had claimed no liability because the *Liberty* would not have been near the Israeli coast had it received Washington's orders to reposition 100 miles away. Israel paid \$6-million of the original \$7.6-million claim, and the U.S. Government waived \$10-million in interest that had built up over 12 years.

In their contacts on Capitol Hill, the *Liberty* men often found sympathetic listeners, but none willing to pursue an investigation. They also found many legislators wary of the subject. Rep. Buddy Mackay (D-FL) wrote that "to determine whether or not the attack . . . was intentional or accidental is virtually impossible." Other members argued that no purpose would be served by an investigation.

Sen. Albert Gore (D-TN) praised the Goodman-Schiff *Atlantic* article as objective. Sen. Paul Simon (D-IL) went further, writing that prior to the attack the *Liberty* had been in Port Said, Egypt, and the Israelis believed it was relaying information to the Egyptians.⁷

In 1967, there had been much anger and hostility toward Israel in Congress, although it did not contribute to an investigation of the *Liberty* matter. After 1980, the members of Congress knew, or could easily find out, much more information about the attack. The CIA reports, for example, unknown to the public in 1967, were published in *The New York Times* in 1977. However, there was no will in Congress to examine the issue, and there was much respect for an Israeli lobby that had since 1967 become much more powerful and well organized.



The *Liberty's* top deck as seen through a gaping rocket hole—U.S. Navy Photo

STARK AND LIBERTY COMPARED

In May 1987 the *USS Stark*, a guided missile cruiser, was struck by an Iraqi missile late at night while on patrol in the Persian Gulf, during the Iran-Iraq war. The ship was 85 miles offshore when it was hit by a single missile fired from beyond the horizon. Thirty-seven men were killed.

President Reagan immediately demanded "in strongest terms" that Iraq account for the attack. President Hussein of Iraq at once admitted that an Iraqi plane had fired the missile, promised "full cooperation" and expressed "heartfelt condolences."

On May 23, the Reagans attended a service for the victims in Jacksonville, Florida. The relatives of the dead were flown to the service at government expense. On the same day Iraq announced that it would welcome a team of U.S. investigators in Baghdad. A ten-man team including Pentagon officials, navy men and Congressional aides arrived in Iraq, where they found "sincere cooperation" from Iraqi officials. Meanwhile other Congressional aides went to the Gulf and interviewed crew members of the *Stark*.

On May 28, *Stark* officers testified in a closed session of the House Armed Services Committee. After a month of investigation, U.S. officials decided that the attack was clearly a mistake. Iraq paid full compensation two months later.

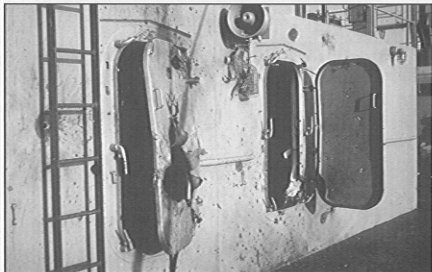
The whole affair received wide publicity. It made the front page of *The New York Times* for eight days and the inside pages for twelve more. Other papers had similar coverage, with articles in all the opinion magazines. The issue was twice discussed on "McNeil-Lehrer," with the Iraqi ambassador present once.

The *Stark* affair also produced nationwide press comparisons to the attack on the *Liberty*, as *Liberty News* noted. There were numerous radio show interviews.

John Hrankowski, a *USS Liberty* survivor, later wrote a "flashback" in the September 1988 *Liberty News*, comparing the *Stark* and *Liberty* incidents. He noted that the *Stark* was attacked from a long distance at night, while the *Liberty* was attacked from close quarters in the daytime. The *Liberty's* radio frequencies were jammed, while nothing like that happened to the *Stark*. "It is in the aftermath of the two attacks, however, that the contrasts are clear."⁸

Hrankowski pointed out that the *Liberty* men were forbidden to speak to the press; there was no such prohibition on the *Stark* men. The press paid lavish attention to the *Stark*, but was "curiously uninquisitive about the *Liberty*." Congressional investigators went at once to the *Stark* to get the facts first hand. No such

investigators came to the *Liberty*. After the *Stark* attack, President Reagan commended the crew, denounced the attackers, and demanded compensation and an apology. President Johnson, in contrast, "seemed determined to shield the perpetrators" in the *Liberty* case. The *Stark* men testified before Congress, something the *Liberty* men have been vainly requesting for 20 years. And the President attended memorial ceremonies for the



In 1982, as the *Liberty* men were convening their first reunion, the Government of Israel released an official history that claimed that Israeli aircraft employing cannon—no rockets—made a brief attack of only six passes and scored only one hit. This was contradicted by official U.S. Navy photos showing hundreds of rocket and shell holes and the summary of the Malta Naval Court inquiry, which reported 820 cannon and shell holes.—U.S. Navy Photo

Stark, but "our dead got perfunctory treatment, our wounded were not met."

"Why were we treated so differently?" Hrankowski asked. "We are your sons. We served you honorably in the line of duty. Isn't it about time that the nation and the survivors find out what happened to the *USS Liberty* and why?"⁹

There was another notable difference in the two cases. In the instance of the *Liberty*, there were frequent mournful outcries from U.S. officials and from the press that "we'll never know the truth" and "there is nothing we can do." Instead, *Stark* investigators assumed that

(Continued on page 12)

(Continued from page 11)

they would find out what had happened, and they did, with Iraqi cooperation.

THE "VISIT" TO THE U.S. EMBASSY

In later years, partisans of Israel increasingly claimed that Israel was forced to attack the ship because the *Liberty* was conducting "hostile espionage against Israel," the tack that Sen. Simon had suggested earlier. This rationale was presented by John Loftus and Mark Arons in their 1994 book, *The Silent War Against the Jews*.

Whether advocates of Israel argue that the attack was accidental or deliberate, they usually claim that Israel approached the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv prior to the attack, and that the answer, or lack of response, encouraged them to attack. This claim has been made so frequently, and in such a confusing manner, that it should be clarified.

The claim of an embassy inquiry was first made by anonymous sources in Israel on June 16, 1967 and was published in *The Washington Post*. At this time, and for about 17 years afterward, Israel claimed to have made the inquiry on June 5, the first day of the war. Responses varied: sometimes the embassy said there were no U.S. ships in the area, sometimes the Israelis were said not to have waited for an answer.

In 1984, the Israelis claimed for the first time that they had made an inquiry at the embassy on June 8, just prior to the attack. In this case, too, the answers varied. Sometimes the *Liberty* was said not to be a U.S. ship, sometimes there was no answer. But the claim of such an inquiry is an important part of the Israeli argument, and some critics of Israel, such as columnist Robert Novak, also say such an inquiry was made.

Against these claims is the statement of Walworth Barbour, the U. S. ambassador to Israel at the time. Replying on June 16, 1967, to Secretary of State Rusk,

Barbour stated emphatically and without reservation that the Israelis never made such an inquiry.¹⁰

Seth Mintz, a major in the Israeli army in 1967, attended the 1991 *Liberty* reunion. He was video-taped by LVA member Bob Casale stating emphatically that: (1) the Israelis knew the *Liberty* was an American ship. "You could read the numbers on the side of the ship. It was no big secret." (2) Americans at the embassy said *Liberty* was not a U.S. ship.

Mintz also made other important statements, such as, "By all rights that ship should have gone down in 1-5 minutes with everybody aboard," and "[two] Israelis spent 18 years at hard labor because they refused to attack the ship."¹¹

Columnist Roland Evans interviewed Mintz, who was living in Maine, by telephone and combined this interview with the tape. Evans and Robert Novak wrote in their column of November 6, 1991 that the Israelis knew the *Liberty* was an American ship.

This led to a public feud between columnists when A. M. Rosenthal of *The New York Times* contacted Mintz and got a "furious denial" that he, Mintz, had ever said that the Israelis knew they were attacking an American ship. Evans-Novak and Rosenthal exchanged shots with several columns and letters.



In a ceremony that began 30 years to the day and hour of the *Liberty's* ordeal, survivors, their families and friends gathered at Arlington National Cemetery to honor the dead. One by one, surviving crewmen placed a small flag around the ship's emblem, one flag for each of the 34 men who lost their lives in international waters off the coast of Israel on June 8, 1967.—Photo by R.L. Norberg

SUBMARINE AMBERJACK SURFACES

Liberty survivors long have had reason to believe that an American submarine observed the Israeli attack and can corroborate their story. The few potential sources of confirmation either hid from view or said they would publicly deny being there. In February, there was a breakthrough which *Assault* author James Ennes described in the June/July 1997 *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*.

The eyewitness identified himself as a relatively senior member of the crew of the *USS Amberjack*. Fearing punishment, he would not give his name and spoke

only through a third party. He said, "I was there. We watched the attack through the periscope and took pictures. . . . News reports said *Liberty* was under attack for only five minutes, but that attack lasted more than an hour." The *Amberjack's* official ship history confirms its presence in the area during the Six Day War. Four crew members, "all career submariners . . . [who] had not seen or talked to each other for many years," confirmed they were so close to the *Liberty* that some thought the *Amberjack* itself was under depth charge attack.

But the *Amberjack* commander at the time, August Hubal, said the ship was nowhere near the *Liberty*. Writes Ennes: "When we told Captain Hubal that several senior members of his crew, including a periscope photographer, have told us they were within sight of the attack, he shrugged that off. 'They must be mistaken,' he says, apparently still muffled by ancient security restrictions."

SUMMARY

Although many questions have been answered in the intervening 30 years, two critical questions remain.

First, what was the motive for the Israeli attack on the *Liberty*? There has been speculation on this point since 1967. For some time it was thought that the *Liberty* might have overheard data which showed that Israel began the Six Day War, but this issue faded away as unimportant within a few days. It also was thought that the *Liberty* might have evidence that Israel lured Jordan into the war, but this issue, too, lost significance.

The *Liberty* men and most of their supporters believe that the *Liberty* was attacked to preclude its overhearing Israel's plans to take the Golan Heights from Syria. Richard Parker, Mideast scholar and former ambassador to Lebanon, argues that the Israelis "didn't give a damn what we thought about Syria" and were capable of organizing their Golan attack without worrying about the *Liberty* and possible U.S. interference.

Parker describes himself as "the only Gentile in Washington who thinks [the attack on the *Liberty*] was accidental." Speaking this past May at two conferences in Israel commemorating the June War, Parker said that if the attack was accidental, "the Israelis should do a serious study of the incident and come up with a serious explanation that would hold water." Under the 30-year rule for declassification of Israeli archives, perhaps the truth can now come out, he added.

In the past year it was revealed that Israeli soldiers killed Egyptian prisoners near El Arish on June 8. However, the *Liberty* was too far from the shore to observe the

incident and little credence is given to this as a reason for attacking the ship.

In the absence of Israeli documents and testimony, the reason for the attack necessarily remains in the realm of speculation.

The second question is: What was so important to the Johnson Administration that it would stand silent after a foreign country's attack on an American vessel and order a cover-up as well?

One possibility is offered by author Grace Halsell, a staff writer for President Johnson in 1967. Beset at the time by media critics of the Vietnam war, President Johnson was advised by White House writer Ben Wattenberg to give unequivocal support for Israel in the wake of the war. Wattenberg told Johnson he saw a *quid pro quo* in quieting Jewish liberals, who were "doves" on Vietnam but "hawks" on Israel.¹²

Some Americans might have been persuaded that the rescue aircraft were called back for fear the action would be misconstrued by the Russians and ignite a superpower confrontation, but such an argument never was advanced seriously. And it might simply have been that once the monstrous deed had been done, Johnson's instincts of domestic political survival told him instantly that there was no upside in keeping the issue alive.

With no definitive answers, we are left with the President's own words as he confirmed the recall of Sixth Fleet rescue aircraft: "We are not going to embarrass an ally." To the men of the *Liberty*, this is insufficient and insulting.

When the survivors gathered recently in Washington, D.C., on the 30th anniversary of the attack, they went to Capitol Hill to press Congress again for hearings to answer these questions once and for all. Readers who agree that it is never too late for truth and justice can support them with calls and letters to their elected representatives. ■



Capt. William McGonagle salutes the brave men of the *Liberty* at the Arlington Cemetery ceremony. He called for the U.S. and Israel to make a full investigation of the attack, breaking his three decades of silence on the subject. He also said that, "American citizens deserve no less than to know exactly what transpired" when launched rescue flights were twice recalled.—R.L. Norberg Photo.

Debating Remembrance: Main Street USA And the *USS Liberty*

Grafton, Wisconsin (pop. 8,381) and Keene, New Hampshire (pop. 21,449) are 800 miles apart and unlikely communities to become embroiled in divisive verbal warfare over the remembrance of American war dead.

Naming a new public library after the *Liberty* ignited the controversy in Grafton. A Memorial Day newspaper editorial in Keene became an incendiary bomb for its mention of the *Liberty* as one example of a field of combat where Americans had perished.

Grafton, 20 miles north of Milwaukee, began raising money for a local library in 1987. Two local citizens, Ben and Ed Grob, then in their eighties, contributed half the cost, \$400,000. The town council offered to name the library after them, but the Grobs, who had read *Assault on the Liberty*, asked that the library be named the USS Liberty Memorial Library.

The town council agreed. Controversy began at once when members of the Milwaukee Jewish Council objected on the grounds that the name was an insult to Israel and American Jews.

The Milwaukee Journal commented that the fear of anti-Semitism was a legitimate issue and reported that the Grobs had contributed money to right-wing and anti-Semitic causes. In June 1988, Joe Meadors, John Hrankowski and Paul McCloskey went to Grafton by invitation for a debate in the American Legion hall. Some members of the audience asked whether the *Liberty* name might not be used to promote anti-Semitism, but the *Liberty* men insisted that the name was to honor dead seamen, and nothing more. The majority of Grafton citizens clearly favored using the name "Liberty Memorial Library," but the minority carried on the fight with the aid of *The Milwaukee Journal*, which devoted numerous stories and editorials to the issue.

There was an escalation of rhetoric. Those favoring the Grobs were denounced as "Nazis." Mayor James Grant claims that he and his wife were harassed. But on June 10, 1989, the library was dedicated and two buses filled with *Liberty* men and their families were there for the ceremony. Some of the *Liberty* men wept openly at

the first memorial to their dead comrades and their ordeal.

In the Grafton controversy, the *Liberty* men were willing to accept financial aid and emotional support from the Grobs, although these industrialists had a long history of support for causes that were distasteful to them. They may have felt that by this time they had fought many battles and absorbed unwaranted abuse, and that their attempts to be scrupulous and careful had earned them little.

The long dispute in Grafton had barely ended when Keene, NH, was divided by a battle over the *Liberty* issue that began with an editorial in *The Keene Sentinel*. Its Memorial Day editorial in May 1989 spoke of the American dead in many actions from the Revolutionary War to the present, including the men killed on the *Liberty*. The give and take in the letters column raged on for six months.

As was the case in Grafton, groups and individuals outside Keene joined the argument. Many *Liberty* men wrote letters to the paper, and opponents from Boston also wrote. Jewish hostility grew against the *Sentinel* for opening its columns to the continuing debate and some businesses withdrew their advertising.

In late October, interest in the topic had become so great that a formal debate was held at Keene State College with *Liberty* men participating. While not all opposing views were changed, the *Liberty* men were gratified by some aspects of the six-month "lesson in political science," as the local editor described it. They were particularly heartened by the agreement from two of their most eloquent opponents, one of them a rabbi, that Congress should investigate the attack. ■

ENDNOTES

1. James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty*, New York: Random House, 1979, p. 53.
2. Stephen Green, *Taking Sides*, New York, William Morrow, 1984, p. 215.
3. George Christian letter to Ennes, 1/5/78, Ennes Collection.
4. John E. Borne, *The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995, pp. 40 & 55.
5. Borne, p. 145.
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7. Borne, pp. 215-16.
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12. *Washington Report for Middle East Affairs*, June 1993, 85.



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