

THE USS LIBERTY

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June 8, 1967, Israeli forces attack the USS *Liberty*. They kill 34 American servicemen, wounding 171 others. It will be the highest casualty rate ever inflicted on a U.S. naval vessel, with 7 out of every 10 crew members killed or injured. It will also be the only peacetime attack on a U.S. naval vessel that, to this day, the Congress of the United States of America formally refuses to investigate. The facts, as known, are as follow:

24 May 1967. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) orders USS *Liberty*, an intelligence-gathering vessel, to depart Abidjan for eastern Mediterranean, via Rota, Spain.

1 June 1967. Commanded by Capt. William McGonagle, *Liberty* arrives at Rota to load technical support material and supplies.

2 June 1967. *Liberty* departs Rota at top speed of 18 knots en route to a point 13 miles off the Gaza Strip, well within international waters.

5 June 1967, 7:45 (all times cited are local *Liberty* time). Israel attacks Egypt, simultaneously putting out false reports that Egypt had attacked first. Captain McGonagle asks Vice Admiral William Martin at Sixth Fleet headquarters to send a destroyer as an armed escort and auxiliary communication center, noting that *Liberty's* "self defense capability limited to four .50 caliber machine guns and small arms."

6 June 1967. Admiral Martin replies "*Liberty* is clearly marked United States ship in international waters, not a participant in the conflict and not a reasonable subject for attack by any nation . . . Request for escort denied."

7 June 1967, shortly before midnight. Office of the U.S. Defense Attaché in Tel Aviv sends coded message to U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) that Israel intends to attack the *Liberty* if her course is not changed.

8 June 1967:

0030: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint

Reconnaissance Center (JRC) orders *Liberty* to go from 12½ to 20 nautical miles off coast. An error by the U.S. Army Communications Center at the Pentagon results in message never reaching the ship.

0130: JRC orders *Liberty* to approach no closer than 100 miles to the coasts of Egypt and Israel. Due to misrouting it will take 16½ hours for message to reach *Liberty*.

0600: Israeli Nord 2501 Noratlas (flying boxcar) reconnoiters *Liberty*.

0603: Reconnaissance aircraft reports to Israeli naval headquarters that "GTR-5" is written on the ship, identifying it as an NSA intelligence vessel.

0720: Fresh American flag is raised.

0900: Jet aircraft approaches *Liberty*, then veers off towards Gaza. *Liberty* crewmen unable to identify markings.

1000: Two unmarked, rocket-armed, delta-winged jets circle *Liberty* three times. *Liberty* officers can count rockets and see the pilots, but see no identifying marks on the plane. The jets radio Israeli headquarters that the ship is flying an American flag.

1030: Israeli "flying boxcar" with Israeli markings circles *Liberty* at about 200 feet. Crew member Larry Weaver says, "I was actually able to wave to the co-pilot, a fellow on

the right-hand side of the plane. He waved back, and actually smiled at me.”

1055: Pinchas Pinchasy, naval liaison officer at Israeli air force headquarters, reports to Naval Headquarters that the ship cruising slowly off El Arish is “an electromagnetic audio-surveillance ship of the U.S. Navy, named *Liberty*, whose marking was GTR-5.”

1100 & 1130: Israeli reconnaissance aircraft again circle *Liberty*.

1205: Three Israeli motor torpedo boats leave Ashdod at high speed headed toward *Liberty*. They are followed by Israeli air force fighters, loaded with 30mm cannon ammunition, rockets, and napalm.

1215 & 1245: Israeli reconnaissance aircraft again circle *Liberty*.

1341: Israeli torpedo boats spot *Liberty* and call for an immediate air strike.

1358: Two unmarked delta-winged Mirage jets attack *Liberty*. After taking out gun mounts, they target ship’s antennae and bridge with heat-seeking missiles.

1405: Three unmarked Dassault Mystère IIIC jets attack with napalm and rockets. Ship tries to contact Sixth Fleet headquarters, but five of *Liberty*’s six shore circuits are jammed. Radio operator manages to send distress

signal from Captain McGonagle: "Under attack by unidentified jet aircraft, require immediate assistance." Attack lasts approximately 22 minutes, involving 30 to 35 sorties, killing nine men and wounding around 60. Israeli pilot reports to base: "Great, wonderful, she's burning, she's burning."

1409: Captain Joe Tully of the USS *Saratoga* acknowledges call for help, dispatches four F-4 Phantom jets, and informs *Liberty* that help is on the way. Within minutes U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara orders rescue jets to return: "Tell Sixth Fleet to get those aircraft back immediately." Rear Admiral Geis relays message and tells them to re-launch jets in 90 minutes.

1424: Three French-built 62-ton Israeli motor torpedo boats approach *Liberty* in attack formation. Because the Israeli fighters had destroyed the American flag, Captain McGonagle orders the signalman to hoist the "holiday ensign," the largest flag the ship has.

1435: Torpedo boats launch five German-made 19-inch torpedoes at *Liberty*. One torpedo strikes starboard directly into NSA area, accounting for 25 of the 34 men who would be killed. Torpedo boats then circle, machine-gunning the ship with armor-piercing projectiles for another 40 minutes.

1450: Commander of Sixth Fleet orders carriers USS *America* and USS *Saratoga* to send aircraft to defend *Liberty*.

1500: NSA Sigint Command Center receives first notice of the attack from either the *America* or *Saratoga*: "USS *Liberty* has been reportedly torpedoed by unknown source in Med near 32N 33E. Request examine all communications for possible reaction/reflections and report accordingly."

1505: Message sent to *Liberty* from Sixth Fleet: "Sending aircraft to cover you. Surface units on the way." *Liberty* is off the air and does not receive the message.

1511: First "official" notice that *Liberty* is under attack reaches National Military Command Center in Washington.

1515: After the order to "prepare to abandon ship" comes over the loudspeaker system, the lifeboats are lowered into the water. Israeli torpedo boats move in closer and fire on them, as well as those still on deck, making them all unusable. "I watched with horror as the floating life rafts were riddled with holes," recalled Lieutenant Lloyd Painter, in charge of the evacuation. Said Petty Officer Rowley, who also witnessed the event: "They didn't want anyone to live." After destroying the life rafts, the

Israeli boats departed. Next, two Israeli SA-321 Super Frelon Hornet assault helicopters carrying soldiers in battle dress circle ship several times, then depart.

1520: Commander of Sixth Fleet announces that 12 aircraft will be launched at 1545 to arrive near *Liberty* at 1715.

1532: Walt Rostow, President Johnson's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, notifies the president of the attack.

1536: Israeli torpedo boats return, then leave.

1545: USS *Saragota* and *America* launch second rescue flights.

1555: *Liberty* regains its transmitter; still has no receiver.

1600: *Liberty* transmits: "Flash, flash, flash. I pass in the blind. We are under attack by aircraft and high-speed surface craft." Deputy Director Louis Tordella is informed by Deputy Director of Joint Reconnaissance Center, Captain Vineyard, that "consideration was then being given by some unnamed Washington authorities to sink the *Liberty* in order that newspaper men would be unable to photograph her and thus inflame public opinion against the Israelis." Tordella makes an "impolite" comment about the idea, writes a memo of the conversation for the

record, and stores it away.

1605: *Liberty* transmits: "Request immediate assistance. Torpedo hit starboard side."

1614: American embassy relays Israeli apology to White House, Department of State, and Sixth Fleet that an unidentified "maybe Navy" ship has been erroneously attacked.

1615: Two unidentified jets approach *Liberty*, then veer off.

1630: Israeli jets and three torpedo boats return, offer assistance. Captain McGonagle refuses their help. Boats leave after 12 minutes.

1639: Secretary of Defense McNamara again orders rescue planes recalled; order is confirmed by President Johnson because "we are not going to embarrass an ally." Naval Air Attaché at U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv, Commander Ernest Castle, is summoned to Israeli Defense Forces headquarters.

1717: Deputy Secretary of Defense orders that all news releases on attack are to be made in Washington. Soon after, Israeli helicopter approaches *Liberty* and requests permission to land. McGonagle refuses. Helicopter departs.

1729: Rear Admiral Lawrence Geis, commander of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, protests decision to recall rescue planes to Sec-

retary of Defense McNamara. At that point President Johnson comes on the phone and says he didn't care if the ship sunk, he would not embarrass his allies. Admiral Geis tells Lt. Commander David Lewis, head of the *Liberty's* NSA group, of the remark, but asks him not to repeat it until after he dies. It is a promise Lewis will honor.

1915: Captain McGonagle, wounded and exhausted, dictates first report on estimated casualties: 10 dead; 15 severely wounded; 75 total wounded; undetermined missing. His estimates would prove low.

9 June 1967:

After midnight: Soviet guided missile destroyer sends flashing-light message in English: "Do you need help?" *Liberty* responds: "No thank you." Soviets answer: "I will stand by in case you need me."

0600: USS Navy destroyers *Davis* and *Massey* arrive.

Mid-morning: Dead and wounded are evacuated by helicopter.

1450: Israeli Lt. Col. Michael Bloch telephones Commander Castle that *Liberty*, because it was not flying a flag, had been mistaken for the Egyptian supply ship *El Queseir*. State Department assures Congress that attack was accidental.

10 June 1967: Vice Admiral McCain orders

Rear Admiral Isaac Kidd to convene Navy Court of Inquiry.

11 June 1967: Admiral Kidd boards *Liberty* with small staff to head Navy Court of Inquiry.

14 June 1967: *Liberty* arrives in Malta. Total news blackout imposed. Rear Admiral Kidd warns crew: "You are never, repeat never, to discuss this with anyone, not even your wives. If you do, you will be court-martialed and will end your lives in prison or worse." Secretary of Defense McNamara informs media that, "Department of Defense will have no further comment."

15 June 1967: Secretary of State Dean Rusk tells NATO ambassadors in Luxembourg that Israel's attack was deliberate. His remark is reported in European, but not U.S. papers.

18 June 1967: Israeli Court of Inquiry exonerates Israeli government and all those involved, saying that its torpedo boats erroneously reported the *Liberty's* speed at 30 knots instead of 5, and that the *Liberty* flew no flag and had no identifying markings. Later, Israel will honor Motor Torpedo Boat 203, the one that fired the deadly torpedo at the *Liberty*, by putting its wheel and bell on display in its naval museum, among those maritime items of which it is most proud.

July 1967: Shortly after the burial of six *Liberty* crewmen in Arlington National Cemetery, a monument is erected describing the six as having "Died in the Eastern Mediterranean." *Liberty* survivors complain that the marking is evasive and improper.

September 1967: State Department legal adviser Carl Salans finds many discrepancies with the Israeli report. His report is classified Top Secret.

11 June 1968: Captain McGonagle is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Medal, usually presented by the President of the United States at the White House, is presented by the Secretary of the Navy during a hastily arranged ceremony at the Washington D.C. Navy Yard. Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the Chief of Naval Operations, calls the way the Medal is presented a back-handed slap. "Everyone else received their medal at the White House," Moorer will later observe. "President Johnson must have been concerned about the reaction of the Israeli lobby."

1980: National Security Agency Director Marshall Carter tells investigative author James Bamford that, regarding the attack on the *Liberty*, "There was no other answer than that it was deliberate."

1981: National Security Agency review, "Attack on a Sigint Collector, the USS *Liberty* Incident," rejects the Israeli Court of Inquiry's "mistake" theory and accuses Israeli fighter pilots and torpedo boat crewmen and commanders of perjury.

1982: Israeli senior lead pilot approaches former Congressman Pete McCloskey and admits that he recognized the *Liberty* as American immediately, so informed his headquarters, and was told to ignore the American flag and continue his attack. He said he refused to do so and returned to base, where he was arrested.

6 October 1982: A new headstone for the six *Liberty* crew members at Arlington National Cemetery is unveiled. This one reads: "Killed USS Liberty June 8, 1967."

1986: Lt. Commander Walter H. Jacobsen writes in *Naval Law Review*: "To speculate on the motives of an attack group that uses unmarked planes and deprives helpless survivors of life rafts raises disturbing possibilities, including the one that the *Liberty* crew was not meant to survive the attack..."

6 November 1991: Columnists Evans and Novak publish interview with Dwight Porter, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon in 1967, in which Porter says that during or immediately after the attack on the *Liberty* the CIA station chief showed him transcripts of intercepted Israeli messages. One has Israel ordering the attack on the *Liberty*, another has an Israeli pilot replying it's an American ship. When the order to attack is repeated, the pilot insists he can see the American flag. The pilot is told again: "Attack it."

8 June 1997: Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, appointed Chief of Naval Operations shortly after the attack on the *Liberty*, tells a reunion of survivors: "I have to conclude that it was Israel's intent to sink the *Liberty* and leave as few survivors as possible. Israel knew perfectly well that the ship was American."

November 1998: Captain McGonagle breaks his long silence: "After many years I finally believe that the attack was deliberate. I don't think there has been an adequate investigation of the incident . . . The flag was flying prior to the attack..." McGonagle will die four months later, on March 3, 1999.

References

Two 12-page articles have appeared in AMEU's bi-monthly publication *The Link*:

- "The USS Liberty Affair," by James E. Ennes, Jr. This issue is available in PDF download from the AMEU website. Search by author or year (1984).
- "Remember the ~~Maine~~ Liberty," by John Borne, with an introductory memorandum by Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This issue is available in PDF download from the AMEU website. Search by author or year (1997).

Ennes, James, **Assault on the Liberty**, 2002 edition. Available from AMEU, \$25.00 Ennes was the lieutenant on watch at the time the Israelis first attacked the *Liberty*. A full chapter is devoted to Israel's motives for knowingly attacking the ship.

Bamford, James, **Body of Secrets**, 2001 edition. Available from AMEU, \$19.95. Bamford offers several important pieces of information previous classified. On page 226, e.g., he tells of President Johnson's reaction:

At 11:29 A.M. (5:29 P.M.), Johnson took the unusual step of ordering the JCS to recall the fighters while the *Liberty* still lay smoldering, sinking, fearful of another attack, without aid, and with its decks covered with the dead, the dying, and the wounded. Onboard the flagship of the Sixth Fleet, Rear Admiral Lawrence R. Geis, who commanded the carrier force in the Mediterranean, was angry and puzzled at the recall and protested it to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara.

Admiral Geis was shocked by what he heard next. According to information obtained for *Body of Secrets*, "President Lyndon Johnson came on with a comment that he didn't care if the ship sank, he would not embarrass his allies." Admiral Geis told Lieutenant Commander David Lewis, the head of the NSA group on the *Liberty*, about the comment but asked him to keep it secret until after Geis died. It was a promise that Lewis kept.

Tito, Howard. **The Loss of Liberty.** This is a 50-minute video made in 2001, and includes graphic footage of the attack, and interviews with high ranking naval personnel. The video is also available through AMEU for \$22.50.

Triplett, William, "Death on the USS Liberty," in "VVA Veteran," Sept-Oct. 2002. Offers chilling interviews with survivors. Larry Weaver, a 21-year-old bosun's mate on the LIBERTY, who was not expected to live, was airlifted to the USS AMERICA, where he immediately underwent the first of 26 major surgeries. He was subsequently flown to American hospitals in Crete, Italy and Germany, and then sent to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital for recovery. He recalls:

"I was four days in intensive care in a wheelchair in Philadelphia, and I was told an admiral wanted to talk to me," Weaver recalls. "I went to meet him in a room and he closed the door and deadbolted it, which kind of scared me. He then took his stars off, saying, 'I'm not an admiral now. Tell me what you know.'" Weaver told him, emphasizing, among other points, that throughout most of the attack, because of his position on the ship, he had had a clear view of the Stars and Stripes flying off the ship's bow, clearly identifying the LIBERTY as American. The Israelis claim the spy ship was flying no flag. "The admiral then said, 'Okay,' and put his stars back on and he pointed at me. And he said, 'Larry, if you repeat this or talk to anyone about this you'll be put into prison and we'll throw away the key.'"

Green, Stephen. **Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel.** Published in 1984 by William Morrow and Company, Inc., this work remains a primary source on the attack and cover-up.

Borne, John. **The USS Liberty: Dissenting History Versus Official History.** Published in 1995, this book focuses on the contradictions in the various official explanations that have been given for Israel's attack on the *Liberty*.

The official web site for the USS *Liberty* is: www.usliberty.org.

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