

The day we nearly lost our *Liberty*

The date was June 8, 1967.

On that day, the *U.S.S. Liberty*, a converted civilian freighter, vintage 1940s, was in the Mediterranean Sea steaming off the Sinai Peninsula toward Gaza.

Admittedly, the *Liberty* was a “listening” ship, a spy ship if you will.

Its mission was to monitor events in Israel, Egypt, and certain Middle East nations, all of which were engaged in the Six Day War that had begun on June 5.

At 8:50 am an unidentified jet circled the plane and headed toward the mainland.

At 10:56 and 11:26 am jet aircraft again circled the ship, the second time being joined by a propeller plane.

No signals were exchanged between the ship and aircraft.

The ships officers had seen the aircraft, but were unable to identify them through their field glasses.

The *Liberty*'s captain, Commander William L. McGonagle, was not alarmed, but, knowing the mission was not neutral to the warring nations, he considered being at some risk especially to Egyptian MIGs.

At approximately 2 pm, three jets were sighted headed toward the ship. They were not MIGs but Israeli Mirages.

Within seconds the ship was rocked by an explosion. Moments later the jets passed directly overhead, strafing the ship with heavy caliber bullets and rockets.

More explosions followed. Part of the superstructure crashed to the deck.

At 2:10 pm McGonagle ordered radio contact be made with the Chief of Naval Operations, advising the command of the attack and the need for immediate assistance. He also ordered an open-channel Mayday distress call.

The later message got through to the Sixth Fleet's *Little Rock*. It was the last communication that was made. The air attacks had knocked out all communication equipment. Only a single radar scanner was operating, and that picked up the approach of what turned out to be three high-speed motor torpedo boats.

The center of the three MTBs that approached in triangular formation signaled the ship. McGonagle could not read it through the thick smoke billowing across the deck, but he did believe he had seen an Israeli flag.

The ship was unable to signal back, however; its starboard signal had been knocked out. McGonagle tried to signal with a handheld lamp, but doubted its beam could be seen.

The *Liberty*'s forward and aft Browning machine guns were now manned. Though the guns were no match for the MTBs, they opened up but were soon knocked out of commission by returning cannon fire.

At 2:35 pm a torpedo struck the *Liberty*'s starboard side and had hit the communications room dead center. This blast alone killed 25 of 34 who died in the attack.

The *Liberty* took on a nine-degree list to starboard. Without power or steering, she was literally dead in the water, awaiting the final death blow.

It never came.

Instead one of the MTBs signaled asking whether assistance was needed.

Unable to return the signal, McGonagle ordered the international sign for “not under control” to be hoisted.

The MTBs did nothing other than drift along with the *Liberty* a half-mile astern.

Thirty minutes later, two helicopters bearing the Star of David insignia hovered above the ship, and someone shouting through a loudspeaker indicated the helicopters carried medical personnel.

McGonagle's response was recorded by journalist Anthony Pearson in his 1976 three-part article, "Mayday! Mayday! The Attack on the U.S.S. *Liberty*."

"Go to hell," a limping McGonagle shouted back.

The individual aboard the helicopter restated the offer for assistance.

"I told you to go to hell" McGonagle again shouted. "You're not coming on my ship. Go to hell, you bastard."

McGonagle then placed several men in the rudder room and phoned down directions so the ship could be hand steered. Though badly injured, McGonagle would continue to direct the ship through the night.

At 6:45 pm, McGonagle rebuffed another Israeli attempt to give aid.

On June 14, the *Liberty*, escorted by a destroyer and tug, managed to limp back to Malta.

Why had the *Liberty* been fired upon with the intent to sink her?

Israel's official response was that the event had been a mistake. An apology was issued.

It was, however, no mistake. The profile of the ship was distinct. A 5' x 8' American flag flew from the masthead on the ensign staff. The ship's name was painted clearly on her stern and had large U.S. Navy letters and numbers on her bow.

The real reason the *Liberty* was attacked by Israelis was that her listening devices were trained on both Arab and Israeli transmissions.

The information gathered by the *Liberty* revealed that the Israelis were able to intercept and reconstruct messages between King Hussein of Jordan and President Nasser of Egypt. The tone of these messages was that things were going well for the Arab forces.

In reality, they weren't.

The Israelis had changed their plan—sanctioned by the Johnson administration—to fight a contained war with Egypt as its foe, a war that would have no impact on the boundaries between Israel and Syria and Jordan.

Its "cooking" of the Arab messages allowed Israel to furtively grab Jordanian territory, to push Egyptians from the Sinai, and to seize the east bank of the Suez and the canal.

Pearson writes: "On June 8, Israel was still three days away from her final objectives. It was possible that drastic measures might have to be taken at any time. The Israeli leaders were afraid that the continued presence of the *Liberty* off Sinai, monitoring their activities for both the U.S. government and the United Nations, might wreck their plans. If the ship was sunk with all hands, the attack would be blamed on the Egyptians, or perhaps on Russian fighters from a Soviet fleet carrier.

At 1:30 pm, on June 8, Tel Aviv issued orders for the sinking of the *Liberty*.

The emergency messages the *Liberty* sent were "lost," therefore, no aircraft or ship ever came to its rescue.

The Johnson administration did not pursue the matter, evincing a desire not to embarrass a U.S. ally.

Ally?

Pearson ends the first part of his article by stating: "In fact, the strangest part of the whole *Liberty* affair has increasingly seemed the United States government's anxiety to excuse and cover up an attack on one of its own ships.

Israel's deliberate and cold-blooded attack on a defenseless American vessel provides some telling insight as to the extent that nation will go to in its desire to implement its own agenda.

And this is the poor little nation we're so concerned will be rubbed off the face of the Earth?