THE SPY SHIP LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

A HALF-CENTURY AFTER ONE OF HISTORY’S MOST CONTROVERSIAL ATTACKS ON A U.S. NAVY SHIP, THE WOUNDS FROM THE LIBERTY INCIDENT REMAIN UNHEALED.

BY JAMES M. SCOTT

The 8th of June this year will mark the 50th anniversary of the attack on the USS Liberty (AGTR-5), a spy ship the Israelis repeatedly strafed, napalmed, and torpedosed during a ferocious hour-long assault that The Washington Post later described as “one of the most bloody and bizarre peacetime encounters in U.S. naval history.”

In the five decades since that tragic afternoon on which 34 Americans were killed and another 171 wounded, the Liberty has become an albatross. The long-standing pleas of surviving crew members—convinced Israel intentionally targeted the ship—for a congressional investigation have fallen on deaf ears. Lawmakers never have—not likely ever will—pick up a cause that even a half-century later remains so politically fraught that midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy were barred from even asking questions about it during a 2012 visit by the Israeli ambassador.

But the story of the unprovoked attack on a U.S. ship in international waters still ignites passions, not only among the survivors, whose numbers are dwindling, but also among authors, filmmakers, and the legions of online sleuths whose zealousness has prompted Wikipedia to lock down the editing page on the assault.

All this comes at a time when declassified documents in the United States and Israel, coupled with interviews of those involved, help illustrate what a sordid affair the Liberty was for both nations. Records show, for example, that U.S. leaders, anxious to protect Israel from the public-relations fallout, went so far as to contemplate sinking the ship at sea to prevent reporters from photographing the damage. Israeli diplomats meanwhile manipulated the media to downplay or kill stories about the attack and even silenced an angry President Lyndon Johnson by threatening to publicly accuse him of “Mossad libel” or anti-Semitism.

Senior naval officers, following the lead of U.S. politicians, refused to thoroughly investigate the attack. “The Navy was ordered to hush this up, say nothing, allow the sailors to say nothing,” said Rear Admiral Thomas Brooks, a former Director of Naval Intelligence. “The Navy rolled over and played dead.”

None of this was known by the public at the time, a fact some senior leaders later regretted, recognizing that the lack of accountability served as the catalyst for the controversy that still haunts the Liberty decades after metal cutters reduced her to scrap in a Baltimore shipyard. “We failed to let it all come out publicly at the time,” recalled Lucius Battle, who served as the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. “We ignored it for all practical purposes, and we shouldn’t have.”

From Calm to Inferno

The Liberty was part of a secret program run by the U.S. Navy and the National Security Agency (NSA) in which the United States dispatched cargo ships outfitted as mobile listening platforms to eavesdrop on the world’s hot spots—places such as Cuba, North Korea, and the Middle East. Though the Liberty officially was classified as a technical research ship, her 45 towering antennas used to soak up communications of foreign nations made it obvious to any trained observer that she was a spy ship.
UNITED STATES NAVAL INSTITUTE

Commander William McGonagle displays an armor-piercing machine-gun round fired at the Liberty during the attack. Due to the diplomatically sensitive nature of the disaster, McGonagle's subsequent Medal of Honor presentation was kept low-profile at the urging of White House advisers.

The vessel was armed with only four .50-caliber machine guns to repel boarders; her principal defense rested on the idea that no nation would dare attack a U.S.-flagged vessel in international waters. That flawed logic was exposed, not only with the attack on the Liberty, but also with North Korea's seizure just seven months later of the spy ship Pueblo (AGER-2). The Liberty's principal operating area was West Africa, but in late May 1967, tensions mounted between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the ship received orders to depart immediately for the eastern Mediterranean to monitor what we now know as the Six-Day War. At 0515 on 8 June—soon after the Liberty arrived off the coast of the Sinai Peninsula—the first Israeli reconnaissance plane circled the ship several times. That initial recon flight on the morning of the war's fourth day began a steady pattern of observation that continued for hours. A State Department report later determined that a recon plane located the Liberty as many as eight times over a nine-hour period. Some planes flew so low that crewmen on deck could see the pilots. Sailors took confidence in the fact that the Liberty steamed in international waters and was clearly marked with freshly painted hull numbers on her bow and her ensign stenciled across the stern. Visibility was excellent. The U.S. flag fluttered from the mast.

But that calm was shattered at 1358 when Israeli fighters, three torpedo boats attacked at 1431, strafing the ship. At 1435, a torpedo hit the starboard side of the ship, killing more than two dozen men. The Liberty rolled nine degrees as water flooded her lower compartments. Generators shut down, power went out, and the steering failed as the ship became dead in the water. The torpedo boats then continued to strafe the ship. Armor-piercing bullets zinged through bulkheads, shattered coffee mugs, and lodged in navigation books. Others shredded several life rafts Liberty sailors had dropped in the water.

The brutal assault left 34 men dead and 171 wounded—one out of every three men on board were either killed or injured. In addition to the torpedo hole, which measured 24 feet tall by 39 feet wide, naval investigators later counted 821 shell holes, a figure that did not include machine-gun rounds and shrapnel holes, which were deemed simply “innumerable.” The 60-minute attack would prove to be the bloodiest assault on a U.S. ship since World War II, one best described by Patrick O'Malley, a Liberty ensign at the time. “There wasn’t any place that was safe,” he recalled. “If it was your day to get hit, you were going to get hit.”

**Accident? Inconceivable!**

Back in Washington, President Johnson and his advisers gathered in the Situation Room the morning of the attack. While relieved neither Egypt nor the Soviets were responsible, Johnson and his team realized that an attack by Israel—in ally with a local domestic following—raised a host of other complicated political issues for the administration. At the time, the United States was bogged down by the Vietnam War, where 25 men died each day in 1967. In May, that number spiked to 39 men a day. Johnson’s approval numbers simultaneously were plummeting from 61 percent in March 1966 to just 39 percent in August 1967. It all came down to Vietnam. Complicating matters, American Jews—a powerful and important constituency for Johnson, who was facing reelection in 1968—were at the forefront of the antiwar movement. Adding to his frustration was the fact that he had done more than any prior President to improve U.S.-Israel relations. “If Viet Nam persists,” one memo warned him, “a special effort to hold the Jewish vote will be necessary.”

The Liberty—tiddled with cannon shots, her decks soaked in blood, her starboard side ripped open by a torpedo—evolved in a matter of hours from a top-secret intelligence asset to a domestic political liability. That was evident by one proposal. “Consideration was 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,” NSA Deputy Director Louis Tordella wrote in memo for the record. “I made an impolite comment about that idea.”

The day after the attack, Johnson met with his Special Committee of the National Security Council. The Liberty discussion was heated, minutes show, as Johnson’s advisers spurned Israel’s claim that the attack was simply a tragic accident. With a head of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and one of Johnson’s most pro-Israel advisers, demanded the attackers be punished. “Inconceivable that it was an accident,” Clifford said. “Punish Israelis responsible.”

Clifford’s strong comments—echoed by others in the meeting, including the President—reflected just how upset many in Washington were over the attack, a hostility that was never shared with the American public.

To senior officials, the idea that the attack on the Liberty was friendly fire defied logic. Friendly fire accidents often happen at night or in bad weather. Furthermore, such accidents tend to be over in a matter of seconds, maybe minutes.

In contrast, the attack on the Liberty lasted on a clear, sunny afternoon in international water. No other ships were in the area. The attack involved two branches of Israel’s vaunted military and raged for approximately an hour.

In the heat of battle, Liberty officers were able to identify the flag and hull number of a ship moving toward their ship, yet Israel claimed its own forces were unable to identify a lumbering cargo ship with towering hull numbers, her name stenciled across the stern and an American flag on the mast. To many, that seemed impossible. “I just don’t believe that it was an accident or trigger happy local commanders,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk later said. “There was just too much of a sustained effort to disable and sink the Liberty.”

But it wasn’t just politicians who disputed Israel’s explanation. Senior intelligence leaders also were convinced the attack was no accident. “It couldn’t be anything else but deliberate,” concluded NSA Director Marshall Carter. “I don’t think there can be any doubt that the Israelis knew exactly what they were doing,” recalled CIA Director Richard Helms. “We were all quite convinced the Israelis knew what they were doing,” added Thomas Hughes, director of the State Department’s intelligence bureau.

Many senior Navy officers agreed. Vice Admiral Jerome King, senior aide to Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral David McDonald, challenged the claim of friendly fire. “It certainly was not mistaken identity,” he later said. “I don’t buy it. I never did. Nobody that I knew ever did either. It wasn’t as though it was at night or a rainy day or anything like that. There wasn’t any excuse for not knowing what that ship was. You could divine from just the apparatus on deck—all the antennas and so on—what its mission was.”

"Wonderful. She’s Burning!"

So how did Israeli pilots fail to identify the Liberty? How, over multiple strafing runs and often at low altitudes, had no pilot noticed the spy ship’s unique markings, particularly
President Lyndon Johnson (foreground, center) and his advisers gather in the Cabinet Room for a meeting of the Special Committee of the National Security Council the day after the attack, 9 June 1967. The Liberty is the focus of heated discussion.

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Diplomats also needed to tone down President Johnson. To pressure the President, Israeli officials tapped Justice For- tas and Washington lawyer David Ginsburg to make Johnson “aware of the dangers facing him personally if the public learns that he was party to the distribution of the story that is on the verge of being blood libel.”

Fallout Prevention vs. Full Inquiry

Ultimately, Israeli diplomats succeeded in pressuring the administration. Johnson, whose focus largely was on Vietnam, looked for a compromise that would guarantee that American families were compensated but would not risk a clash, with Israeli domestic supporters. He ordered Nicholas Katzenbach, second-in-command at the State Department, to negotiate the deal. If Israel publicly apologized for the attack and paid reparations, the United States would let it go, no more questions asked.

The administration’s decision not to dig into the Liberty incident was evident in the incredibly weak effort the Navy made to investigate the attack. “Shallow,” “curt,” and “perfunctory” were words used by Israeli officials to describe the “informative process” in which they were asked to participate. “Our informative process,” one cable stated, “must avoid confrontation with the United States Government, since it is clear that the American public, faced with a direct argument, will accept its government’s version.”

Israeli diplomats tapped influential American Jews, many of whom were close friends with President Johnson, to help. Documents show that Eugene Rostow, who was third in command of the State Department, repeatedly shared privileged information with U.S. Israel diplomats. Others who assisted included Supreme Court justice Abe Fortas and Arthur Goldberg, who was the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Many of these and others who helped the embassy are referred to by code names in Israeli documents.

For example, the head of the Israeli embassy’s political division, Yehuda Schwartz, oversaw the Pentagon’s effort to condense the court’s full transcript for the American public. “I am certain that the Israeli pilots that undertook the attack, which Israeli officials learned from the details of Johnson’s interview within 24 hours and successfully pressured the magazine to water down its planned version that I was shown last night,” Patric cabled Jerusalem.

The proceeding’s officers used to interview crew members in Malta for an investigation into an attack that had killed 34 men. The proceeding’s transcript shows just how shallow it truly was. The Liberty’s chief engineer was asked only 13 questions. A chief petty officer on deck during the assault and a good witness about the air attack was asked only 11 questions. Another officer was asked just 5 questions.

In evaluating the Liberty court of inquiry, it is worth comparing it to the court that examined North Korea’s capture of the USS Pueblo. The Liberty court lasted just eight days, interviewed only 34 crewmen, and produced a final transcript that was 155 pages. In contrast, the Pueblo court lasted almost four months, interviewed more than 100 witnesses, and produced a final transcript that was nearly 3,400 pages.

Captain Ward Boston, the lawyer for the Liberty court, broke his silence in 2022, stating that investigators were barred from traveling to Israel to interview the attackers, collect Israeli war logs, or review communications. Furthermore, he said Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had ordered the court to endorse Israel’s claim that the attack was an accident, which Boston personally did not believe was the case. “I am certain that the Israeli pilots that undertook the attack, as well as their superiors who had ordered the attack, were well aware that the ship was American.”

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McGonagle’s medal in person and to make sure the White House issued no press release. “Due to the nature and sensitivity of these awards, Defense and State officials recommend that both be returned to Defense for presentation, and that no press release regarding them be made by the White House.”

In 1968, Israel paid $33.3 million to the families of the men killed. A year later, Israel paid $35.5 million to the men who were injured. Israel then balked at paying the $7.6 million for the loss of the ship, secretly offering at one point the token sum of $100,000. Negotiations dragged on until 1980, at which time the bill plus interest totaled more than $17 million. Under the threat of a congressional investigation, Israel struck a deal to pay $6 million in three annual installments. The United States accepted.

Even now, a half-century later, the attack on the Liberty and our government’s handling of the affair still vex many. Among many, including Chris Armstrong, the son of Liberty executive officer Philip Armstrong, who was killed that afternoon, Chris, who was three at the time, received $52,000 for the loss of his father. “It would give it all back and then some. My emotional scars are very deep from this incident.”

Likewise, Vance clashed with NSA Director Carter over the mess deck, injured sailors struggle to survive after the attack. To many in Washington, the idea that the attack had been a friendly fire mishap “defied logic.”

McDonald wrote in a handwritten memo, substituting the letter X for an expurgation. “If the attackers had not been Hebrew there would have been quite a commotion.” Tordella’s memo reflected the special treatment many in Washington recognized Israel received in the aftermath of the attack. The failure to reprimand anyone left lingering resentment among many, including Vice Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Horacio Rivero, who was later asked for his most prominent memory of the Liberty: “My anger and frustration at our not punishing the attackers.”

The administration’s effort to deemphasize the Liberty also spilled over into the presentation of awards in June 1968. Liberty skipper Commander William McGonagle was nominated for the Medal of Honor, an award customarily presented by the President at the White House. McGonagle would not be so lucky. The President’s senior military aide, James Cross, urged Johnson not to present his emotional scars are very deep from this incident.”

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