

DONALD PAGELER

This is my statement of the USS Liberty's impact on my life.

On June 8th, 1967 the USS Liberty was attacked without warning by Israeli defense forces. The Liberty was a converted WWII cargo (Victory class ship). She was armed with only 4 – 50 caliber machine guns good for repelling boarders. When the Mirage fighters left the Liberty they had inflicted 820+ rocket and cannon holes. They were followed by Mystere bombers dropping napalm. While the crew of the Liberty tried to fight the fires the Israeli's brought out 3 torpedo boats that fired 5 torpedoes at the Liberty. One hit left a 40 foot hole in the starboard side. The Liberty was attacked at 2pm. At between 2:05 and 2:09 the Liberty transmitted a distress call. The Saratoga scrambled plains to come to her aid within 15 to 20 minutes of receiving the distress call. The flight was recalled by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Adm Geis sent a second flight from both the Saratoga and the America 90 minutes later. These flights were also recalled by McNamara. Geis then challenged his order by asking him to authenticate his message. President Lyndon Johnson told Geis to recall the planes. "I do not care if everyone dies; I am not going to embarrass my allies." The attack lasted between 1 hour and 15 minutes and 2 and a half hours (depending on what you call the end). The Liberty saw no Americans until the following morning. 9 sailors died during the air attack and 25 in the torpedoed spaces (where I worked). 174 of my shipmates were wounded including my self. We then sailed the ship 1000 miles for 6 days and put her in dry-dock in Malta. We recovered the bodies from the torpedoed spaces and civilians repaired the ship for return to Little Creek, Virginia.

During the attack I was assigned to repair party III on the mess decks. In that this was my first duty station after school in Pensacola; my assigned job was to be in charge of a submergible. There was no need for a submergible pump during the air attack, so some one told me to go to the bridge and retrieve wounded. I am not sure how many trips I made with wounded. After the torpedoes hit I took the submergible pump forward to the torpedoed spaces. Of course with a 40 foot hole in the side a submergible pump was of no use. After the order to seal the compartment, I returned to the mess deck to help with badly wounded. The only real memory I have of this time was when Doctor Keipfer told me to lie down next to a man he was going to operate on. They stuck a needle in me and ran a tube to my shipmate for a transfusion. Later that day or the next I remember helping take the body bags of the 9 killed topside to the refrigerator.

Of my duties on the way to Malta 2 things stand out. I stood duty in the passage way on the starboard side of the torpedoed spaces. I was given a little one battery flash light which put out very little light. The room smelled of fuel oil. I was told to watch the K shoring to make sure none of it gave way. The other duty I remember was down in shaft alley were the shaft runs from the engine room back to the screw. If we exceeded 5 knots the ship began to shake. I was told to watch to see if any cracks developed in the ship. If we started taking on water I was told to use the head phones and tell the bridge to order abandon ship. I thought, that's fine for everyone else but I will be stuck here in the bottom of the ship.

The torpedo hit were I worked in the research spaces (commonly called the spook shack). When we reached Malta and put the ship in dry-dock, having the top secret crypto security clearance, I was one of the first to go down to the torpedoed spaces to cleanup. Within the first 15 to 20 minutes, I picked up a piece of equipment. Under it was an arm. I knew whose arm it was. Although it had been soaked in salt water for a week, Phil Tiedke was a body builder and I could tell by the muscle structure it was his. It was like having an out of body experience. One of me said, "you have to find the rest of the pieces of his body and make sure they all get in the same body bag." Another one of me was saying, "they are all blown apart, just put it in a bag and get on with it." Of the 2 days I spent down there cleaning up that is all I remember. I went on liberty for a day or 2 and was flown back to Norfolk.

When I arrived in Norfolk I was debriefed. I was told, "You have the highest security clearance anyone can get in this country. Never speak about this to anyone including your family." 2 days later I was home in Kansas on 30 days leave wondering, what the hell happened to me.

After my release from active duty in March of 1970, I returned to Kansas and achieved a Bachelors Degree in Business Administration from the University of Kansas. In 1985 I began to loose my vision. I could no longer see the center strip in the road while driving. An optometrist looked in my eyes and said I had a physical

problem, not an eye problem. He referred me to a doctor who came in looking as white as a sheet after running his tests. He told me I should have died a long time ago. One of my major organs should have popped. My blood pressure was 240/145. He said it had been that way for a long time to the damage to the eyes. Luckily I was having strokes in the retina of my eyes, instead of my heart or brain, where it could have killed me. I worked with Greg Jarvis who was on the Challenger shuttle when it blew up. After that I started having nightmares. Late in that year I drove off the San Diego Freeway on my way home to Orange County from work at Hughes Aircraft Co. in El Segundo balling like a baby. I cried for 10 minutes before I realized I was thinking about the Liberty. My doctor put me on heavy blood pressure medication. For a year and a half, it only came down to 140 to 180/100 to 140. During that year and a half my 20 year marriage dissolved. In February of 1987 I found out about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) while watching a Simon & Simon episode. I finally called the VA hospital in Long Beach. They said they did not treat that at their facility. The closest Vet Center to me was 5 blocks north of Disneyland. Within a month of being able to talk about the Liberty both blood pressure numbers dropped 30 points. In the late 1990's I came down with Type II diabetes. While my doctor says stress is not the cause, he believes stress has contributed greatly to the severity of the disease. I have included a medical study to this fact.

I attended group therapy from April 1987 to March 1990. During that time I had to confront many issues. One night in group a Marine from Viet Nam looked at me and said, "You guys got screwed as bad if not worse than anyone I knew in Viet Nam. You have every right to be as angry as you can be. But it is your anger. What are you going to do about it?" It took me over 4 years to answer that question. I would never write congress. I am not stupid. I have a college degree. I knew they would not do anything about it. Finally I realized the way I was going to get rid of my anger by giving it to congress. I wrote every California and Kansas congressman and senator a 3 page letter with 30 pages of documentation. They all passed the buck back to my local congressman, Dana Rohrabacher. He asked me to come in and see him. He looked at me and said, "I have read everything you have written and all the material you sent me. There is no way I believe this was a mistake on the part of the Israeli's. But I have to tell you, congress will not touch this until after there is peace in the Middle East." That will not be in my life time. But I succeeded in getting rid of my anger (at least to a great degree). This man that fancies himself a supporter of Veterans had to face me and say your right and we don't have the courage to do anything about it. Another issue was the memory. I remember bits and pieces of the attack but can not feel comfortable with a time line. Most days I know how I spent my days even if I do not remember every second. But the attack is just remembering specific items. I can not place them on a time line and know exactly how it went. One night I went to my counselor's office after group. I asked him if he thought I should get hypnotized to remember the rest of the 2 days cleaning up in the torpedoed spaces. He told me I would have to make that decision. If it was something during the attack and I had an issue of cowardice it might be worthwhile. But this was a week after the attack was over. It is only the mind's way of protecting you from pain. That made sense intellectually, but it still gnawed at me emotionally. It was 9 months after leaving group that I stopped and told him, I am finally ok with the lack of memory.

In 1993 I married (Eva Garcia) after dating for 6 years. When we started dating she said I shook like the old veterans at the VA. One good thing from group was I came out of my shell and went to Palm Springs and became friends with my Captain. William L McGonagle was born in my home state of Kansas, He grew up in Thermal, CA and graduated from Coachella Valley High School. He retired in Palm Springs (the other end of the valley). He shared much about his childhood with my Eva and I. When speaking in public, he would hold his Medal of Honor and say, "I wear this for my whole crew. I stayed at my post for 17 hours because I was so inspired that my crew was not giving up their efforts to save the ship." Between 1995 and 2004 I was vice president, secretary, treasurer, and newsletter editor of the Liberty Veterans Assoc. Bill McGonagle died on March 3, 1999. Between November 1999 and May 2004 I was a part of getting McGonagle's star on the Walk of Stars in Palm Springs, attended the dedication of Bills stone in Indian Wells and McGonagle Plaza at Coachella Valley High School, and helped organize and dedicate the USS Liberty Tree at the Coachella Valley historical society in Indio. In 1997 I got the Navy Memorial to put on a month long display about the Liberty in Washington DC. I retired from Hughes Aircraft Co (now Boeing) in February 2002. I continue the battle for recognition of our service to our country. Today I still shake when I am stressed.