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The USS Liberty Incident: Accident or Intentional Attack

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Introduction

To many, June 8th, 1967, is just another tragic accident in the history of the U.S. Navy. However, this incident on the fateful June day was not an aircraft accident or training exercise failure. Rather, it was a controversial attack committed by the state of Israel, an allied nation to the United States, which resulted in the death of 34 American service members and the wounding of 171 others.¹ Additionally, this attack was not just a stray missile or lone boat attack. Instead, this was an attack that lasted for over two hours by both air and sea forces of the Israeli Defense Force (I.D.F.).² Nearly sixty years later, this incident is still very much relevant in the American-Israel geopolitical conversation and yet is largely forgotten or ignored by the American public.

The 1960s were a tumultuous time for the American military, which was in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. In addition, the American military began deploying troops to Vietnam in 1965, and in June of 1967, the Six-Day War began between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.³ This conflict began with Israel launching pre-emptive strikes initially against Egypt but also expanding to Syria and Jordan due to their attempts to stop Israeli ships conducting trade through the Straits of Tiran.⁴ This war became a cause of concern for the American government, as they feared it could potentially escalate into a larger conflict with the Soviet Union.⁵ With the USSR supporting the Arab nations in the Middle East and the U.S. backing Israel, officials on both sides were aware that conflict in the region could quickly expand into a Third World War.⁶

Aware of the rising tensions in the area and the potential for expansion this conflict held, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered that the U.S.S *Liberty*, a technical research ship, be moved from its normal operational area of Western Africa to the coast of Egypt and Israel.⁷ In addition, there was a large Soviet presence in the Mediterranean, with many of their vessels supporting the Egyptians.⁸ Thus, the *Liberty* was ordered to deploy on May 23rd, 1967, and was

¹Peyton E Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty: Deliberate Action or Tragic Accident?* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 1.

²*Ibid.*, 10.

³Michael B Oren *Six Days of War June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 2003), 11.

⁴*Ibid.*, 11.

⁵Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It: a Secretary of State's Memoirs* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 384.

⁶*Ibid.*, 384.

⁷Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 5.

⁸*Ibid.*, 8.

instructed by VADM William Martin to conduct an “extended independent surveillance operation in the eastern Mediterranean.”⁹ The *Liberty* picked up linguists trained in Arabic and Russian on the way.¹⁰ While en route to its destination, Israeli military forces attacked Egyptian military targets, and The Six-Day War was declared on June 5th, 1967.¹¹

The U.S.S. *Liberty* was commissioned in 1945 and later converted into a technical research ship in 1964. The ship was crewed by two different crews, the regular crew of the *Liberty* and crewmembers from the Naval Security Group, which numbered 294 men altogether. The Naval Security Group, associated with the U.S. Navy and the N.S.A., was responsible for counterintelligence, communications intelligence, and electronic intelligence.¹² The two crews were berthed separately on the ship, and certain areas on the ship were off-limits to the regular crew.¹³ The *Liberty* was equipped with only four Browning .50 caliber machine guns, as its primary purpose was to gather intelligence rather than engage in combat.¹⁴ Understanding their defensive limitations and being made aware of the outbreak of the Six-Day War, *Liberty* ship Captain Cmdr. William McGonagle requested a destroyer escort from his 6th Fleet commander, William Martin.¹⁵ Admiral Martin responded to McGonagle, stating that the *Liberty* “is a clearly marked United States ship in international waters and not a reasonable subject for attack by any nation.”¹⁶

On the morning of June 8th, the *Liberty* reached its position 13 miles off the shore of the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt.¹⁷ During this morning, multiple Israeli reconnaissance planes flew over the *Liberty*. The first of these flyovers occurred at approximately 6 AM when an Israeli naval pilot relayed to the Israeli naval command that he believed he spotted a “U.S. Navy cargo type ship” with a GRT-5 designation.¹⁸ Israeli Naval command would later confirm that this ship was indeed an American, and they would conduct seven more flyovers before the attack at approximately 1400.¹⁹ Crewmembers of the *Liberty* reported these

⁹W. D., Gerhard, & Millington, H. W., Attack on a SIGINT Collector, the U.S.S. *Liberty* (S-CCO) (1981). *National Security Agency*, 27.

¹⁰James Bamford, *Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency* (United States: Anchor Books, 2001), 197-198.

¹¹United States Cryptologic History, Gerhard, W. D., & Millington, H. W., 27.

¹²Philip Tournay & Dave Gahary, *Erasing the Liberty: The Battle to Keep Alive the Memory of Israel's Massacre on the USS Liberty* (Rockstar Publishing, 2018), 19.

¹³*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵Oren, *Six Days of War*, 263.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Tournay, *Erasing the Liberty*, 56.

¹⁸Oren, *Six Days of War*, 263.

¹⁹Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 7.

overflights and mentioned that some were “low and slow.”²⁰ One crewmember would also state, “I recall seeing the Star of David on the side and was relieved that it was our friends, the Israelis. We even saw the pilot's face and waved to him. I don't recall that he waved back.”²¹ After these multiple reconnaissance overflights, the Israeli naval command marked this ship as neutral on their control board.²² However, at 1100, the Israeli command center staff removed this neutral identification, as this was a common procedure for a staff change.²³

At approximately 1130, a large explosion occurred on the coast near where the *Liberty* was positioned.²⁴ While in reality, this explosion was caused by an ammunition dump igniting, the Israelis believed that the shelling came from an Egyptian vessel.²⁵ Fearing Egyptian naval superiority, the Chief of staff of the I.D.F., General Yitzhak Rabin, deployed three torpedo boats and fighter jets to find the vessel they believed was responsible for shelling the beaches.²⁶ According to Israeli reports, Israeli forces were unaware of *Liberty's* presence in the area because of the staff change at Naval headquarters.²⁷ Rabin thus ordered to the Israeli navy that “all unidentified vessels sailing at over twenty knots- a speed attainable by only gunboats- would be sunk.” Thus, three Israeli torpedo boats were sent out and reported to General Rabin that they had found the unidentified ship traveling toward Egypt at a speed of 30 knots.²⁸ The torpedo boats also reported that they could not reach the vessel due to its speed and requested air assistance.²⁹

This calculation of speed would become a major area of discussion following the attack, as it was severely miscalculated.³⁰ In addition, the Israeli explanation of how the attack was instigated does not make sense as Israeli reports and sources claim the torpedo boats spotted the ship at 1341 but did not arrive at the *Liberty* until 1424, thus making their radar detection of the *Liberty* impossible.³¹ Furthermore, both during Israeli reconnaissance flights and directly leading up to the attack, *Liberty* was traveling at a speed of five to eight knots up and down the coast of Egypt, nearly half of its maximum speed of 18 knots.³²

²⁰Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 58-59.

²¹*Ibid.*, 58-59.

²²Oren, *Six Days of War*, 264.

²³*Ibid.*, 263.

²⁴Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 8.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶Oren, *Six Days of War*, 264.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 264.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 265.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 265.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 265.

³¹Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 9-11.

³²Gerhard, W. D., & Millington, H. W., 10.

Thus, not only was the *Liberty* traveling nowhere near 30 knots, but it would also be impossible for the *Liberty* to be detected by the Israeli torpedo boats that were not anywhere near it before and during the initial stages of the attack.³³ Moreover, on the morning of June 8th, eight earlier Israeli reconnaissance flights identified the *Liberty* as an American ship.³⁴

At approximately 1400, two Mirage class Israeli fighter jets attacked the *Liberty* rockets and machine gun fire.³⁵ Immediately after their first strafe, they would severely damage the *Liberty*'s only form of defense: the four .50 caliber browning machine guns positioned on the main deck.³⁶ They would also target the bridge and communication antenna, aiming to kill the ship's officers and disable the *Liberty*'s ability to call for reinforcements.³⁷ These Israeli fighters created over 800 holes in the *Liberty*'s hull over three strafing runs.³⁸ Four soldiers were killed and dozens injured, including the *Liberty*'s skipper, Commander McGonagle, whose legs were severely injured.³⁹ Although injured, McGonagle attempted to send a radio message to the Sixth Fleet for help.⁴⁰ A message would eventually be sent to the Sixth Fleet, and RADM Lawrence Gies ordered American aircraft to be launched from the U.S.S. *America*.⁴¹ American fighter jets on *America* were armed with nuclear ordinances, but minutes after they took off, they were recalled under orders from President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.⁴² There are conflicting accounts regarding these nuclear-equipped planes. Historian Michael Oren, many of the survivors of the *Liberty*, and multiple government officials claim that the F4s aboard *America* were equipped with nuclear ordinances and were recalled by McNamara and President Johnson.⁴³ However, historian A Jay Cristol claims these planes were not armed with nuclear weapons and doubts assertions that the F4s were equipped with nuclear ordinances.⁴⁴ This is among the numerous instances of debate between scholars and witnesses to the attack.

³³Oren, *Six Days of War*, 264.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵United States Cryptologic History, Gerhard, W. D., & Millington, H. W., 36.

³⁶Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 89.

³⁷James M Scott, *The Attack on the Liberty: The Untold Story of Israel's Deadly 1967 Assault on a U.S. Spy Ship* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), 47.

³⁸Oren, *Six Days of War*, 266.

³⁹United States Cryptologic History, Gerhard, W. D., & Millington, H. W., 36.

⁴⁰Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 99.

⁴¹Philip Nelson, *Remember the Liberty!: Almost Sunk by Treason on the High Seas* (Trine Day LLC, 2017), 32.

⁴²Oren, *Six Days of War*, 267.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 2/67.

⁴⁴A. Jay Cristol, *The Liberty Incident Revealed: The Definitive Account of the 1967 Israeli Attack on the U.S. Navy Spy Ship* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 101.

The *Liberty* would have likely not been able to send a message to any American ship without the heroic actions of James Terry Halbardier, who heroically repaired the antenna under Israeli air fire.⁴⁵ Halbardier was ultimately awarded the Silver Star for his actions, and many survivors of the *Liberty* believe that the ship would have sunk if it were not for his actions.⁴⁶ Halbardier's display of bravery is one of the countless stories of heroism from the crew of the *Liberty* during the attack. In fact, after the attack, the *Liberty* would become one of the most highly decorated crews in American naval history.⁴⁷ Out of the attack came one Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses, a dozen Silver Stars, twenty Bronze Stars for valor, and more than 200 Purple Hearts.⁴⁸

Once the first group of Israeli fighters ran out of ammunition, additional fighters arrived, attacking the *Liberty* with napalm causing extreme damage.⁴⁹ The Israeli Air Force command center ordered the Mystères class fighter planes to verify the identity of the *Liberty*, as they were concerned by a lack of anti-aircraft fire from the ship.⁵⁰ The defenseless *Liberty* could not properly defend herself as the Mirage fighters had severely damaged all four of her .50 caliber machine guns.⁵¹ After napalm had been dropped on the *Liberty*, Israeli pilots relayed to I.A.F. headquarters that the *Liberty* was marked with a Latin alphabet designation rather than an Arabic identification that would be present on an Egyptian ship.⁵² Thus, I.A.F. headquarters and chief controller Shmuel Kislev ordered the Mystères to disengage.⁵³ Years later, Kislev would admit that he immediately realized *Liberty* was an American ship.⁵⁴

Approximately thirty minutes later, at 1430, three Israeli torpedo boats attacked the *Liberty* with 20mm and 40mm machine guns.⁵⁵ The torpedo boats would launch five torpedoes at the *Liberty*, with one striking the ship, killing 25 crewmembers.⁵⁶ Approaching the *Liberty*, the Israeli torpedo boats began using their 20mm and 40mm guns. Survivors of the *Liberty* noted the boats aiming and

⁴⁵Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 100.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁷Jordan, Bryant, "Liberty Survivors Say Us Still Downplays Israel's Attack on Ship." Military.com, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/06/09/liberty-survivors-say-us-still-plays-down-israels-attack-on-ship.html>.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Oren, *Six Days of War*, 267.

⁵⁰Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 10.

⁵¹United States Cryptologic History, Gerhard, W. D., & Millington, H. W., 36.

⁵²Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 97.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵John Crewdson, "New revelations in attack on American Spy Ship." *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 2007.

⁵⁶Oren, *Six Days of War*, 267.

shooting at the *Liberty's* boiler and deployed lifeboats.⁵⁷ Prior to the torpedoes attacking the *Liberty*, Commander McGonagle noticed that the American flag on the *Liberty* had fallen during the Israeli air attacks and ordered it to be replaced with a holiday-sized American flag that measured seven by thirteen feet.⁵⁸ After approximately 30 minutes of attacking *Liberty*, the Israeli torpedo boats would, according to Israeli reports, finally realize the ship was American and disengage.⁵⁹ After over 16 hours, the *Liberty* would finally be assisted by the U.S.S. *Davis*, whose crew helped wounded *Liberty* crewmembers and assisted in limited repairs.⁶⁰ Over the 2-hour attack, the *Liberty* had sustained a 40 ft hole in her hull and severe damage on her deck, yet thanks to the heroic actions of her crew, she still managed to stay afloat and would be brought to Malta for further examination.⁶¹

Since the U.S.S. *Liberty* attack, viewpoints have differed from both the governments involved and the survivors of the attack itself. These viewpoints fall under two sides. The first side, which includes many survivors and American government officials, asserts that the Israeli military intentionally attacked the *Liberty*.⁶² The other side, which includes the state of Israel and multiple studies conducted by U.S. government agencies, states that the attack was an accident and Israeli Defense Forces mistakenly identified the U.S.S. *Liberty* as an enemy Egyptian ship.⁶³

In the days following the attack, President Johnson and Admiral John McCain, Sr., Commander in Chief of Naval Forces Europe, directed Admiral Issac Kidd and Captain Ward Boston to conduct an official Naval Court of Inquiry into the U.S.S. *Liberty* attack.⁶⁴ Boston and Kidd estimated the investigation to take over six months, yet Boston claims that he and Kidd were orally directed by the Johnson Administration to complete the investigation in one week.⁶⁵ Additionally, Kidd and Boston interviewed only 14 of the 260 survivors and could not interview 60 of the hospitalized survivors.⁶⁶ Boston would later

⁵⁷Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 120-121.

⁵⁸Walter L. Jacobson, "A Juridical Examination of the Israeli Attack on the USS *Liberty*," *Naval Law Review* (1986), 13.

⁵⁹Oren, *Six Days of War*, 269.

⁶⁰Philip Nelson, *Remember the Liberty!: Almost Sunk by Treason on the High Seas* (2017), 97.

⁶¹Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 260.

⁶²"Jocko Podcast 327: Attack on The USS *Liberty* w/ Phil Tourney, Larry Bowen, Joe Meadors," (YouTube), 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JITBsNMcn8A&t=3662s>.

⁶³Oren, *Six Days of War*, 270.

⁶⁴James M. Scott, *The Attack on the Liberty: The Untold Story of Israel's Deadly 1967 Assault on a U.S. Spy Ship* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), 177.

⁶⁵Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 12.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 12.

admit that both he and Kidd believed that the attack was deliberate, yet were ordered by Secretary McNamara to conclude the attack was one of mistaken identity.⁶⁷

The Israelis would also conduct their own investigations. All the investigations, led by Col. Yeshayahu Yerushalmi, concluded that the attack was a mistake rather than deliberate.⁶⁸ Yerushalmi would go on to state that the attack was an “innocent mistake” and that he did “not discover any deviation from the standard of reasonable conduct which would justify a court martial.”⁶⁹ Similar conclusions would also be made by historians Michael Oren and A. Jay Cristol.⁷⁰

In a 2004 affidavit, Boston declared that Cristol’s book *The Liberty Incident Revealed* contained multiple out-of-context quotes from himself and “twists the facts and misrepresented the views of those who investigated the attack.”⁷¹ Boston also stated that Kidd directly spoke to him after being called by Cristol and negatively commented on Cristol’s book.⁷² Multiple *Liberty* survivors agree with Boston’s assessment.⁷³ When asked about Cristol’s book, *Liberty* crewman Phillip Tourney referred to it as “a piece of junk that does not accurately explain the events that happened during the attack.”⁷⁴

Multiple senior government officials at the time of the attack would share the survivor’s sentiments of a deliberate Israeli attack, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk, C.I.A. Director Richard Helms, and counsel to President Johnson Clark Clifford.⁷⁵ All three would later state in their memoirs that they believed the attack was deliberate and details were left out of the official narratives.⁷⁶ Rusk would assert in his memoirs that he was

never satisfied with the Israeli explanation. Their sustained attack to disable and sink *Liberty* precluded an assault by accident or by some trigger-happy local commander. Through diplomatic channels, we refused to accept their explanations. I didn’t believe them then, and I don’t believe them to this day. The attack was outrageous.⁷⁷

⁶⁷Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 373.

⁶⁸Oren, *Six Days of War*, 270.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 270.

⁷⁰Cristol, *The Liberty Incident Revealed*, 248.

⁷¹Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 375.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 376.

⁷³Maximus Marlowe and Phillip Tourney, “Interview with Phillip Tourney” Personal, April 5, 2022.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, np.

⁷⁵Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 16.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁷Rusk, *As I Saw it*, 388.

In 2006, the *Chicago Tribune* released an article discussing the recordings of an EC-121 spy plane that was over the *Liberty* during her attack.⁷⁸ The EC-121 spy plane recorded multiple Israeli messages proving that Israeli pilots knew the *Liberty's* nationality.⁷⁹ Additionally, analysts aboard the EC-121 also overheard the Israeli torpedo boats mention an American flag.⁸⁰ The recordings obtained on the EC-121 directly contradict Israeli claims that a flag was not present on *Liberty*.⁸¹ While the National Security Agency would release three of these tapes that occurred after the attack, officials and analysts aboard the plane believe that more tapes exist that were captured during the attack.⁸² Michael Prostinak, a Hebrew linguist aboard a U.S. Navy EC-121, spoke of these tapes and said, "I can tell you there were more tapes than just the three on the Internet."⁸³

In 2003, former Chief of Naval Operations and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas Moorer, developed an independent report about the *Liberty* attack with several other senior American military leaders and officials.⁸⁴ The report concluded that the attack was deliberate and covered up by both the United States and Israel.⁸⁵ He then called for a U.S. investigation into the attack's motive.⁸⁶ Many of the survivors of the attack and officials, including Adm. Moorer, believe that Israel planned to sink the *Liberty*, blame Egypt, and draw the U.S. into the Six-Day War.⁸⁷ Indeed, reports show that the Soviet Union was prepared to engage Israeli forces if its ally Syria had been invaded and the conflict expanded.⁸⁸ Thus, many officials believe that if the *Liberty* had sunk on June 8th, the conflict could have significantly expanded and ultimately started a Third World War.⁸⁹

To this day, the *Liberty* incident remains controversial. While official reports and figures such as Cristol declare the incident was an accident of mistaken identity, many survivors and eyewitnesses to the attack, as well as multiple senior government officials, assert the attack was a deliberate effort to sink the *Liberty*. Thus, the *Liberty* attack remains a divided issue with various

⁷⁸Crewdson, "New Revelations in Attack," 2007.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, np.

⁸⁰James Bamford, *Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency* (United States: Anchor Books, 2001), 216.

⁸¹Oren, *Six Days of War*, 270.

⁸²Crewdson, "New Revelations in Attack," 2007.

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴Tourney, *Erasing the Liberty*, 383.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 385.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷"The Day Israel Attacked America," Military.com, <https://www.military.com/video/forces/navy/the-day-israel-attacked-america/3875358637001>.

⁸⁸Smith, *Assault on the USS Liberty*, 17.

⁸⁹"The Day Israel Attacked America."

positions and motives that are debated today. In the future, further research should be conducted to highlight the possible reasons for a deliberate attack, as this issue remains controversial. However, regardless of the interpretation of the attack, the American people should remember survivors and the incident as a tragic event hidden from the public eye.

Consent Statement:

All information from the personal interview with Philip Tourney received his consent for its use.

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