

Remember the Liberty

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It has been 50 years since Israeli air and naval forces attacked the USS Liberty (AGTR-5) on 8 June 1967 during the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War. Thirty-four Americans were killed and 171 wounded, accounting for more than two-thirds of the crew. The attack began at 1400 local time, when three Mirage fighters attacked the ship with cannon fire and rockets that disabled nearly every radio antenna on the vessel. The fighters were followed by Mystère aircraft that not only fired cannons and rockets, but also dropped napalm, which is rarely used against ships. During the attack, the Israelis were able to jam five of the Liberty's six communications circuits. Even when the ship finally was able to get out a distress call on the sixth circuit, the attackers could not be identified because the aircraft did not bear any national markings.

After some 30 minutes of intense air attack that left the Liberty covered in blood, full of holes, and burning from napalm, three Israeli motor torpedo boats (MTBs) arrived from Ashdod, Israel. Just prior to their arrival, the Liberty's commanding officer, Commander William L. McGonagle, ordered the holiday-size U.S. flag measuring 7 by 13 feet to be raised to replace the flag shot away earlier. Despite the flying of this large U.S. flag, the MTBs fired five torpedoes, one of which struck amidships in the cryptologic spaces. The torpedo left a 40-foot hole in the hull, killing 25 men and trapping 50 more in the flooded compartment.

With the ship in flames, dead in the water, and sinking, orders were given to abandon and scuttle the Liberty. When sailors put rubber life rafts in the water, however, the Israelis proceeded to machine-gun them.

A little over an hour from the time the air and sea attacks began, someone from the U.S. Sixth Fleet erroneously radioed the Liberty that help was on the way. At this same time, the MTBs discontinued their attack, but this was followed by the arrival of two helicopters armed with mounted machine guns and carrying combat troops. The Liberty crew believed this combat force was sent to kill whoever might have survived the air and sea attacks. After circling the ship a number of times, the helicopters suddenly withdrew.

The Cover-Ups

The case of the Liberty is not the first time the U.S. government has covered up atrocities committed by allies. When mass graves of some 22,000 Polish nationals were discovered in the Katyn Forest in 1943, the Soviet Union's longtime dictator, Joseph Stalin, claimed that the victims had been murdered by the Nazis. Even though President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill knew Stalin was lying, their response to a request from the Polish government in exile for an investigation was the same one given by the White House and Congress over the past five decades to queries from the Liberty's veterans and their families: silence.

It was not until 1990, 50 years after the Katyn Forest massacre, that General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev formally expressed "profound regret" and admitted responsibility for the killings by the Soviet secret police. Twenty years later, in April 2010, Russian President Vladimir Putin likewise expressed regret by attending a Katyn memorial service at which he knelt over the graves of the Polish dead.

Just as the Russians lied about the massacre of 22,000 Poles, so too did the Israelis lie about their intentional attempt to sink the Liberty. In his book *Body of Lies: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency* (Anchor Books, 2001), James Bamford discusses the Six-Day War and writes, "An essential element in the Israeli battle plan seemed to have been to hide much of the war behind a carefully constructed curtain of lies. Lies about the Egyptian threat, lies about who started the war, lies to the American president, lies to the UN Security Council, lies to the press, lies to the public."

Because the survivors of the attack on the Liberty were threatened with courts-martial or imprisonment if they were to discuss what they considered to have been a war crime, media coverage of the attack over the years has been limited. The two most extensive reports on the attack were produced not by U.S. news outlets, but rather by the British Broadcasting Company, which produced the 2002 documentary "USS Liberty: Dead in the Water"; and Al Jazeera, which produced the 2014 documentary "The Day Israel Attacked America."

Most researchers and members of intelligence agencies believe the Israelis attacked the Liberty to conceal their troop movements to take the "impregnable" Golan Heights. The attack originally was scheduled for 8 June 1967. Many believe it was postponed until the Liberty's electronic surveillance capability had been neutralized by Israeli jet fighters and motor torpedo boats. If the Liberty had not been eliminated, the U.S. Navy technical research (electronic collections) ship possibly could have intercepted Israeli communications regarding the troop withdrawal from the Egyptian front for this planned attack. Had the Americans learned of the planned attack against the Syrians, which they had warned Israel not to undertake, lest the Russians be drawn into the conflict, the Israelis feared their plan would be compromised. Had this been the case, the Egyptians might then have counterattacked after learning of the redeployment of Israeli forces. Further, had the Syrians learned of the threat, they might have repelled the attack, and Israel might have lost the war.

During interviews undertaken by Anthony R. Wells in 1976–77 with Dean Rusk, Secretary of State in 1967, Rusk went on record as saying the attack on the Liberty was “not an accident, but deliberate.”¹ He also stated that Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan’s orders to attack the Liberty, as well as his decisions to attack Syria and take the Golan Heights, were made without consulting Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and other key Israeli officials.²

Although Admiral Isaac C. Kidd, president of the Liberty Court of Inquiry, and Captain Ward Boston, Judge Advocate General’s Corps, the court’s lead counsel, concluded “it was a deliberate, planned attack on an American ship,” the report that was officially recorded in the U.S. Navy Department branded the attack an accident, a case of mistaken identity with the Egyptian ship El Quseir.

Today, when congressmen write to the Defense or Navy Departments inquiring into the attack, they receive carefully crafted form letters saying, “The Government of Israel . . . has consistently maintained that the attack was the result of an error.” These communications go on to say, “The Navy plans no further investigations into the incident.” What the letters do not address is the wealth of evidence to prove what Captain Boston stated in a sworn affidavit before his death in 2009 when he testified, “I know from personal conversations I had with Admiral Kidd that President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered him to conclude the attack was a case of ‘mistaken identity’ despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.”³

The most tragic part of this cover-up has been the harm that has been done to the survivors and families of the dead and surviving crew members. No monetary compensation can heal the pain and suffering they have endured. Considering the intensity and duration of the air and sea attacks, it is a miracle the ship did not sink with all on board.

The Liberty survivors and their families believe the time for confessing, forgiving, and healing is long overdue. Because less than 20 percent of the members of Congress are veterans, and with billions of dollars in foreign military sales to Israel at stake, the survivors do not believe they can count on congressional support. The only way they believe justice might be achieved would be if the U.S. media were to expose the cover-up, as did The Boston Globe in the case of the sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

1. Anthony R. Wells, “Moshe Dayan and the Attack on the United States Ship Liberty, June 8, 1967,” USS Liberty Document Center, September 2013; Eric Ture Muhammad, “The Matter of Liberty: The Day Israel Attacked America,” The Final Call, 9 June 2006.

2. Wells, “Moshe Dayan and the Attack on the United States Ship Liberty.”

3. <http://rense.com/general47/statementbycaptward.htm>.

Captain Gomulka served on active duty for 24 years, during which time the Secretary of the Navy presented him with the Alfred Thayer Mahan Award “for literary achievement and inspirational leadership.” He took Captain Boston’s deathbed testimony about the cover-up of the investigation on the attack on the Liberty.

Editor’s Note: The Naval Institute’s Naval History magazine published a full-length article on the attack on the USS Liberty, “The Spy Ship Left Out in the Cold,” by James M. Scott, in the June 2017 issue.