



H-Gram 007: USS *Liberty*

8 June 2017

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Attack on USS *Liberty*, 8 June 1967

This date marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most bitterly contentious events in U.S. Navy history, and the controversy continues largely unabated to this day. It involves the mistaken attack by four Israeli jet fighters and three motor torpedo boats (MTB) on the USS Liberty (AGTR-5), which was conducting an intelligence collection mission in international waters off the north coast of the Sinai Peninsula in the midst of the Six-Day Arab-Israeli War. Of the 293 U.S. personnel aboard, 34 (31 Sailors, 2 Marines, and 1 National Security Agency civilian) were killed and 171 were wounded as a result of multiple strafing runs by jet aircraft, surface fire from the MTBs, and one hit by a 19-inch torpedo.

The crew of Liberty performed their duty with exceptional valor during that attack, saving their ship from severe damage that could easily have resulted in her loss. Liberty's commanding officer, CDR William L. McGonagle, was awarded the Medal of Honor for directing the response to the attack and saving his ship, and for refusing to leave his position on the bridge for many hours despite wounds incurred in the first strafing attack. Liberty's executive



Commander William L. McGonagle, USN, commanding officer of USS Liberty (AGTR-5), points out damage inflicted on the ship's superstructure when Israeli forces attacked Liberty off the Sinai Peninsula on 8 June 1967. The photograph was taken on 16 June, two days after Liberty arrived at Valletta, Malta, for repairs (NH 97476).

officer, LCDR Philip Armstrong, killed by strafing while leading a party attempting to jettison burning fuel containers over the side. was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. The ship's intelligence officer, LT Steve Toth, was also killed by strafing while attempting to positively identify the attacking aircraft. Toth, along with ten others (two posthumously), was awarded the Silver Star. Bronze Stars were awarded to 21 other crew members for bravery under fire in rescuing wounded crewmen during strafing attacks and for subsequent actions in fighting fires and flooding, and tending to the many wounded. Liberty was subsequently awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

The central question that has caused the raging debate is whether the Israeli attack was premeditated or deliberately conducted against a ship known by them to be American, or whether it was a tragic accident resulting from negligent mistakes or the fog of war. To this date, no evidence has ever surfaced that the Israelis deliberately attacked what they knew to be an American ship, although numerous books and TV documentaries have attempted to make this case. There is certainly evidence that some Israelis began to doubt that the ship was Egyptian during the course of the air attack, and that failures in command and control contributed to the subsequent torpedo attack. In my view, looking at the evidence available, the initial Navy board of inquiry, led by RADM Isaac Kidd, Jr., was correct in its judgment that the attack was a tragic accident. However, that board was focused on whether actions of Liberty's crew were in any way responsible for the event, which has led others to question the thoroughness of RADM Kidd's investigation. However, the investigation has actually stood the test of time.

Nevertheless, beginning almost immediately after the attack and continuing over the years, numerous government and even very senior Navy officials have gone on public record with some version of "in no way could this possibly have been an accident, and no way could the Israeli's have been that incompetent." Such opinions, however, have either been based on hearsay, or originated in opinions uttered in the immediate aftermath of the attack, before any investigations were complete. Such expressed opinions by senior government and service officials have lent gravitas to all manner of conspiracy and cover-up theories ranging from the somewhat plausible to the ridiculously outlandish. To this day, various groups with both anti-Israel and pro-Israel agendas continue to challenge the official records in both the U.S. and Israel with alternative hypotheses.

It should be noted that members of the USS Liberty Survivors Association, who were on the receiving end of a devastating mass-casualty attack, remain adamant in their belief that it was a deliberate attack against a ship the Israelis knew to be American. This belief is not universally held among the survivors,

but remains predominant. It was a horrific and traumatic attack, so hard feelings by the crew against the Israelis would appear completely understandable. There continues to be strong feelings amongst the crew that RADM Kidd's investigation was a rush to judgment that too readily accepted the Israeli explanation (and apology), and that the U.S. government deliberately whitewashed the event for political reasons. There is no question that both governments sought to play down the incident. For example, on the advice of his staff, President Johnson declined to personally present the Medal of Honor to CDR McGonagle. A low-key presentation was conducted at the Washington Navy Yard rather than at the White House, an action viewed by some of the crew as disrespectful of the sacrifice of the commanding officer and crew.

There were, however, numerous blunders by both the United States Navy and the Israeli air force and navy that resulted in the attack. Please see Attachment H-007-1 for more detail.



With a decided starboard list, USS Liberty (AGTR-5), accompanied by the guided missile cruiser USS Little Rock (CLG-4), limps slowly toward the Port of Valletta, Malta, for repairs following the attack by Israeli torpedo boats and aircraft. The helicopter hovering over the bow of the ship is removing the wounded and dead to the attack carrier USS America (CVA-66) 6 June 1967 (USN 1123118).

H-007-1: Attack on USS *Liberty* (AGTR-5)—Additional Detail

H-Gram 007, Attachment 1
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
8 June 2017

USS Liberty's mission was to collect intelligence on activity along the north coast of the Sinai Peninsula. Although *Liberty* was a U.S. Navy ship with a mostly U.S. Navy crew, its mission was in support of National Security Agency and Joint Chiefs of Staff tasking, i.e., a "national mission" not a "Navy mission," which at the time resulted in a convoluted chain-of-command. The Six-Day War broke out between the time she was ordered to proceed to the eastern Mediterranean in response to rising tensions and the time she

arrived on station 13–17 nautical miles off the northern Sinai coast on 7 June. *Liberty* had Arab and Russian linguists embarked (including USMC and NSA civilians), but no Hebrew linguists. Her designated patrol area was out of VHF/UHF collection range of Israel proper, but she could monitor and collect (but not understand in real time) Israeli military activity in the Sinai, which had commenced with the Israeli pre-emptive strikes on 5 June. At the time of the attack, she had been transiting westerly for six hours. *Liberty* was armed only with four .50-caliber machine guns intended to repel boarders. At the time, the fact that *Liberty* was an intelligence collection ship was classified. She was officially designated as a general purpose auxiliary technical research ship (AGTR) and she carried "GTR-5" freshly painted on each side at bow and stern.

Five messages originating in Washington changing *Liberty's* orders and instructing her to approach no closer than 100 nautical miles to the war zone were misrouted or dropped; none were received by the ship until after the attack, or were not received at all. *Liberty* received a message just prior to the attack, directing her to take a referenced JCS message for action. The referenced message directed the 100-nautical mile stand-off, but had not been received by *Liberty*. The massive and multiple communications foul-ups were a major embarrassment to the U.S. Navy, which at the time had no interest in this fact becoming widely known. The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations had also made public assurances on 6 June that no U.S. ships or aircraft were operating within 100 miles of the combat zone, so the fact that *Liberty* was well inside this radius was a major embarrassment to the U.S. State Department. No one in a position of significant authority was held accountable for the communications errors, but the event did lead to Congressional investigation and a subsequent massive overhaul of U.S. Navy communications systems and networks.

In the very early morning of 8 June, an Israeli air force propeller-driven aircraft (a Nord 2501) flew a standard dawn maritime reconnaissance mission on behalf of the Israeli navy (which had no organic air capability). The aircraft located the ship at 0558 and it was correctly identified as USS *Liberty* by an Israeli naval intelligence officer when the aircraft landed. *Liberty* was then plotted as a neutral on the situation board at Israeli naval headquarters in Haifa. By late morning, the contact had gone stale and in accordance with standard operating procedure was removed from the plot. However, the fact that a U.S. ship was out there did not survive an 1100 watch turnover (following an investigation and "pre-trial hearing" the responsible watch officer was not referred to trial). Other Israeli aircraft flew in the vicinity to and from combat air patrol (CAP) and ground-attack missions in the Sinai throughout the morning; these flights did not report on *Liberty*

(since it was not their mission), but were observed from by the ship and have since come to be erroneously reported as additional Israeli pre-attack surveillance assets.

In the early afternoon of 8 June, Israeli army forces in the vicinity of El Arish reported that they were being shelled from the sea. An unidentified grey ship (*Liberty*) could be observed on the horizon and was presumed to be the source. At that time, *Liberty* was operating about 14 nautical miles off the coast, and at least one massive explosion and other smoke near El Arish were observed from the ship at 1300 as the crew commenced a general quarters drill (which concluded at 1345). At the time, the Egyptian army had been driven well out of artillery range, and the Egyptian air force had been destroyed on the ground in the initial Israeli preemptive strikes on 5 June. Whether the explosions were the result of sabotage, or some other activity, remains unknown, but they certainly were not due to any action by *Liberty*.

In response to the report of shelling from the sea, the Israeli navy was ordered to dispatch ships to intercept. Two destroyers were promptly recalled, but three motor torpedo boats (MTBs—MTB Division 914) under the command of LCDR Moshe Oren, were ordered to continue. At that time, *Liberty* was heading westerly in the general direction of Port Said, held by the Egyptians, at a slow speed under 15 knots. As the MTBs made initial radar contact with the ship (at fairly long range—22 nautical miles—due to atmospheric ducting), the combat information center (CIC) officer on the command MTB erroneously calculated *Liberty's* speed as 30 knots. By Israeli SOP, an unidentified ship transiting at greater than 20 knots was presumed to be a warship and could be attacked. It also meant that the MTBs would be unable to make the intercept before the contact reached Port Said, which forced Oren to call for air support. Given the testy and competitive relationship at the time between the Israeli navy and air force, it is very unlikely Oren

would have called for air support unless he believed there was no alternative. In fact, the Israeli air force and navy had only narrowly averted a potentially catastrophic “friendly fire” engagement the previous night.

Two Israeli Mirage IIICJ fighters returning from a CAP mission over the Sinai were ordered to locate, identify, and, if the contact was a warship, to attack the contact. In their initial stand-off reconnaissance, the two fighters identified *Liberty* as a warship (painted gray, and not Israeli), and the aircraft also identified the three MTBs to ensure de-confliction. The fighters also identified *Liberty* as a destroyer (which it definitely was not), because that was what they expected to see and since the only ships the Egyptians had that could have been responsible for shelling El Arish were destroyers (or missile patrol boats, which even air force pilots could tell the contact certainly was not). At a safe distance and altitude, the fighters did not discern the five by eight-foot American flag nor the “GTR-5” on the bow and stern, and requested clearance to engage. After double-checking with the navy that the contact was a warship, which navy headquarters verified (based on the erroneous calculated speed), the air force controller cleared the fighters to engage.

At 1358, the two Mirages commenced a bow-to-stern firing pass from out of the sun. CDR McGonagle had already ordered the machine guns (which were already manned as a precaution) to Condition One because he didn’t like the look of the jets’ actions and immediately called general quarters. Flying at a speed of a half mile every three seconds, each Mirage opened fire with a three-second burst of 30 mm cannon fire, aimed at the forward superstructure, with devastating result, before looping around for another pass. Neither jet experienced any return fire. Although not entered in the ship’s log—but noted in the board of inquiry testimony—one Sailor (GMG3 Alexander Thompson, Jr.) did open fire, and was killed on the second pass trying to do the same. The first pass ignited a fire in two 55-

gallon drums holding fuel for the motor whaleboat and set the whaleboat on fire as well. The first pass either shot away the American flag or the halyards burned; either way, the flag was gone by the second and third passes. In the Israeli gun camera footage, the flag is not visible on any pass, and on the second and third pass, the heavy smoke from the gasoline fire is rising straight up, indicating that at least at the point of the first pass the flag would not have been flying straight out. Even if it was, making out a flag from a high-speed jet from a bow-on aspect would have been exceedingly difficult. The pilot would have been concentrating on hitting the target and then not crashing into the ship or the water in the three or so seconds after firing. Some accounts claim that the Mirages fired rockets; however, since their primary mission was air-to-air, that would have been very unlikely. The hundreds of impacts from high-velocity 30 mm cannon were more than adequate to cause major damage throughout the ship. The first air attack concluded by 1404.

A few minutes after the Mirages’ attack concluded, two Super Mystère B.2 fighters, diverted from a ground attack mission in the Sinai, commenced a stern-to-bow pass at 1407, dropping two napalm canisters each; three missed and one ignited a fire in the bridge area. The aircraft then looped around for a strafing pass from the beam, again inflicting severe damage with 30 mm cannon fire. However, on the second pass, the lead pilot noticed unusual markings, and the Israeli air control officer in Tel Aviv was already becoming seriously concerned by the lack of any reported return fire. On the third pass, the lead pilot reported that the target had “CTR-5” on the bow. The Israeli air control officer immediately ordered a halt to the attack, and ordered a third flight tasked against the ship, two Mystère IV fighters armed with 500-pound iron bombs, to resume their original ground attack mission in the Sinai. The air attacks were over by 1410. Nine U.S. crewmen, including the executive officer and the intelligence officer, had been killed or would die of their wounds.

Although Egyptian ships had been known to use subterfuge in ship markings, they used Arabic script for names and numbers, not the Latin alphabet. The Israeli air controller's concern that Israeli aircraft might have hit a U.S. ship was quickly replaced by concern they had hit a Soviet intelligence collection ship (AGI.) The Israeli fighter had misidentified GTR-5 as "C"TR-5, an easy mistake. Soviet AGI's would normally be identified with CCB-## (Cyrillic for SSV-##.) This resulted in a flurry of reports up the Israeli chain of command.

At 1424, *Liberty* sighted the three MTBs approaching at high speed. At 1417, LCDR Oren had requested authorization to employ torpedoes, which was granted by the deputy commander of the Israeli navy under the mistaken presumption that the contact was an Egyptian destroyer (since that was the only thing that could have shelled El Arish and be making 30 knots). The three MTBs caught up to the heavily damaged *Liberty* about 1430; the ship was billowing heavy black smoke and obviously not making 30 knots—nor was it a destroyer to anyone with rudimentary recognition skills.

The MTBs held short about a mile from *Liberty* while Oren and the skippers of the other two boats identified the ship as the Egyptian transport vessel *El Quseir*. One junior officer under instruction expressed doubt about the identification. *El Quseir* was superficially similar in silhouette to *Liberty*, although less than two thirds the size. However, the rationale for why *El Quseir*, a 1929-vintage horse-and-passenger transport armed only with two antiquated three-pounder guns, would have been anywhere near that location defies easy explanation, nor could the vessel possibly have been responsible for shelling El Arish. The Israeli MTBs did not see the much larger eight by thirteen-foot "holiday" American flag that had been hoisted after the air attacks. Due to the fire, the flag was on a halyard on the opposite side from the torpedo boats and mostly

likely obscured by the heavy smoke. The Israelis were also looking into the sun, and the "GTR-5" on *Liberty's* bow and stern would have been harder to see in shadow.

The Israeli command MTB attempted to signal *Liberty* with a hand-held Aldis lamp, flashing "AA," the international maritime signal to "identify yourself." The signal was obscured by smoke, and *Liberty's* signal lamps had been destroyed in the air attacks. Accounts conflict as to whether *Liberty* responded with a hand-held lamp, but what the Israeli's reported seeing was "AA" flashed in return. (In an encounter with an Egyptian destroyer in the 1956 Arab-Israeli war, a then very junior Moshe Oren had seen an Egyptian destroyer respond with "AA" in a response to an "AA" challenge from an Israeli warship.)

In the Israelis' minds, the identification issue was rendered moot when the *Liberty* opened fire as they began to close. CDR McGonagle had given the order to fire, but immediately countermanded it after he saw what he interpreted as a possible Israeli flag on an MTB. However, with all communications destroyed (except for shouting down from the bridge), a forward gunner got off one .50-caliber round before hearing the cease-fire order. An amidships machine gun (to which there was no easy access from the bridge due to the fire) may also have opened fire, or, much more likely, ammunition cooked off due to the fire at a most unfortunate time.

Believing they were being fired upon, (and unaware that the commander-in-chief of the Israeli navy had countermanded the torpedo-launch authorization as soon as he was briefed on the situation), the MTBs opened up with a sustained barrage of 40 mm, 20 mm, and .50-caliber fire, which killed *Liberty's* helmsman (who had taken over from the helmsman wounded in the air attack). They then commenced a high-speed attack run, firing five of the six torpedoes on the MTBs (each was armed with two torpedoes). LCDR Oren did not even wait to set

up a doctrinally correct multi-axis shot, and four of the five torpedoes missed, one ahead and three astern.

One torpedo hit the intelligence space on *Liberty*, virtually wiping out the entire intelligence detachment in the compartment at the time. The torpedo opened a 39 by 40-foot hole below the waterline and the ship quickly took on a 9-10 degree list. Fortunately, much of the blast was dissipated by a mainframe that likely prevented the ship from breaking in two and sinking immediately.

Twenty-two Sailors, two Marines, and one NSA civilian were killed as a result of the torpedo boat attack. Among other things, life rafts that had been thrown over the side were shredded by the volume of fire from the Israeli boats. The apparent "precision" of the Israelis in destroying the intelligence compartment served as fuel for the "deliberate attack on a known U.S. ship" theory, which that doesn't explain why the other four torpedoes completely missed (as had every torpedo the Israelis had previously test-launched).

After the torpedo attack, the MTBs came close enough to read the name on the stern (which even then was initially reported as Cyrillic—i.e., Russian.) Released U.S. and Israeli transcripts of Israeli communications show a high degree of confusion within the Israeli air force and navy about whether the ship was Egyptian, Soviet, or American. The MTBs realized their mistake at about 1500 when they recovered a "U.S. Navy"-marked life raft, and Israeli headquarters became convinced at 1512 following a close pass by an Israeli helicopter, which was the first to report that *Liberty* was flying a flag and that it was definitely American. (The MTBs had previously reported seeing a red flag, which added to the "possible Soviet" confusion.)

The Israelis admitted and formally apologized for the attack, and eventually paid several million dollars in restitution to the families of those killed.

However, they balked at paying for the ship because they believed that the U.S. had erred in sending *Liberty* into a combat zone without prior notification (a compromise was eventually reached). Nevertheless, the apology and restitution were viewed as inadequate by much of *Liberty's* crew. I will not go in to the myriad of conjectural theories as to why Israel would have chosen to deliberately and knowingly attack a ship of the only nation in the world that was standing by them at that point. The most prevalent theory is that the Israelis attacked *Liberty* to prevent the U.S. from finding out they were about to attack the Syrian Golan Heights. However, the Israeli chief of defense had already notified the U.S. ambassador and the U.S. special representative of their intent to do so some eight hours before the attack. None of the other theories stand up to rigorous scrutiny either.

Because of the then-classified nature of *Liberty's* intelligence-collection mission, the initial Department of Defense press release deliberately contained false information (a definite "don't do that" lesson learned), that the press and others quickly determined to be false, adversely affecting the U.S. government's credibility in the matter. In addition, the results of the board of inquiry and much official documentation remained classified for many years. As a result, the "cover-up/conspiracy/the Israelis did it with malice aforethought" school of thought had a head start of over ten years in disseminating their versions of events, which continue to impact virtually every story done to this day on *Liberty*.

Of note, two days before the *Liberty* attack, U.S. Air Force jets mistakenly shot up the Soviet merchant ship *Turkestan*—flying a Soviet flag— in a North Vietnamese port in broad clear daylight, and killed and wounded a number of Soviet sailors. The Soviets refused to accept our admission that it was an accident.

One thing about the *Liberty* attack that has never been contested was the *heroism* of the crew in

saving their ship and many shipmates. As the board of inquiry determined, they were actually as well-drilled and prepared as possible, and they were well led by CDR McGonagle. As I mentioned in my previous H-gram about the courageous actions of U.S. Navy Sailors in the debacle of the fall of the Philippines and Dutch East Indies during World War II, Sailors on even the most unglamorous non-combat naval vessel can find themselves called upon with no notice to conduct the most heroic of acts under the most horrific of circumstances. The Sailors on USS *Liberty* more than lived up to the highest standards of valor exhibited by any combat ship in U.S. naval history, and deserve our nation's gratitude for their exemplary service in harm's way.

There have been many books and articles written on the *Liberty* attack and I have read most of them. There have also been a number of TV documentaries and I have seen some of them. Almost all the books and documentaries have major historical inaccuracies and many have an agenda. A recent book, *The Liberty Incident Revealed* (a follow-on to an earlier book) by Jay Cristol, published by U.S. Naval Institute in 2013, is the most thoroughly researched, has verifiable sourcing, and is certainly the most objective account that I have seen.