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**Friday, June 3, 2005**

## Rossie: 'Liberty' survivors can never forget

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A week after Memorial Day, the one day a year we set aside to pay lip service to the men and women who died fighting for this country, a group of veterans will gather in Washington (June 8-11) to hold their own memorial.

There will be no bands to greet them, no parades and no presidential platitudes honoring their sacrifices. Not that they are undeserving. Far from it. They are survivors of the crew of one of the U.S. Navy's most decorated ships.

They were members of a crew that in one horrific day, in 1967, earned two Navy Crosses, 11 Silver Stars, 20 Bronze Stars and 204 Purple Hearts; a casualty rate of 70 percent in a crew of 294. And their skipper received the Medal of Honor.

These are the men of the *USS Liberty*. If you've never heard of these men and their ship and their brush with death, that's by design -- the design of their own government.

In 1967, *Liberty* was the most sophisticated intelligence-gathering or spy ship in the U.S. fleet. On June 8, during the Six Day War involving Israel and its neighbors, *Liberty* was in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of the Sinai Peninsula when it was attacked without warning by Israeli aircraft and torpedo

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**DAVID ROSSIE** *Commentary*

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boats.

The attacks on the lightly armed vessel began with aircraft cannon, rocket and machine gun fire, and napalm. Following the air strikes, *Liberty* took a torpedo amidship. When crewmen lowered life rafts to rescue personnel and in preparation for abandoning ship if necessary, the torpedo boats machine-gunned the life rafts and crewmen.

All told, the attacks lasted a little over two hours. During that time, *Liberty*'s calls for help reached the U.S. Sixth Fleet, despite Israeli jamming efforts, and the carriers *Saratoga* and *America* launched aircraft to assist the beleaguered vessel. But that help never arrived. The aircraft were recalled on direct orders from the White House.

When Israel learned that the attack had been reported and *Liberty* was still afloat, it sent a helicopter to offer assistance, one of more hypocritical events in the annals of modern warfare. *Liberty* declined.

*Liberty* eventually made it to a neutral port, with 34 of its crew dead and another 171, including its captain, Cmdr. William McGonagle, wounded.

What the Israelis did was unconscionable, but understandable. They reportedly believed *Liberty* was transmitting intercepted Israeli military radio traffic to the Egyptians. They also reportedly feared that information about Israel's plans to seize the Golan Heights from Syria would be revealed. So they felt justified in waging an act of war against the country that had sustained it politically and financially from its inception and still does.

It's worth noting, too, that some Israeli pilots refused to fly on the mission, knowing the target was an American ship.

The United States' behavior during and after the attack is even more unconscionable. When the carrier pilots were recalled from their mission to aid *Liberty*, it marked the first time in naval history that an American rescue mission had been canceled when a U.S. vessel was under attack.

*Liberty* crew members were ordered to remain silent about the attack and were threatened with courts martial and imprisonment if they talked. They were not called to testify in a Navy court of inquiry, and Congress never convened an investigation of the incident.

Cmdr. McGonagle received the Medal of Honor for his heroic efforts to save his ship, but he didn't get it from Lyndon Johnson, as would have been customary. He got it from the Secretary of the Navy in a quiet ceremony at the Navy Yard in Washington.

Israel paid reparations to the survivors and next of kin of the dead, with money it got from the United States.

So, as they have done since 1982, *Liberty* veterans will gather to recall the most memorable day of the lives, a day official Washington would just as soon forget.

*Rossie is associate editor of the Press & Sun-Bulletin; his column appears on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Write to him c/o this newspaper, P.O. Box 1270, Binghamton, N.Y. 13902-1270.*

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