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This Month in History

The Assault on the USS *Liberty* Still Covered Up After 26 Years

By James M. Ennes Jr.

Twenty-six years have passed since that clear day on June 8, 1967 when Israel attacked the USS *Liberty* with aircraft and torpedo boats, killing 34 young men and wounding 171. The attack in international waters followed over nine hours of close surveillance. Israeli pilots circled the ship low level 13 times on eight different occasions before attacking. Radio operators in Spain, Lebanon, Germany and aboard the ship itself all heard the pilots reporting to their headquarters that this was an American ship. They attacked anyway. And when the ship failed to sink, the Israeli government concocted an elaborate story to cover the crime.

There is no question that this attack on a U.S. Navy ship was deliberate. This was a coordinated effort involving air, sea, headquarters and commando forces attacking over a long period. It was not the "few rounds of misdirected fire" that Israel would have the world believe. Worse, the Israeli excuse is a gross and detailed fabrication that disagrees entirely with the eyewitness recollections of survivors. Key American leaders call the attack deliberate. More important, eyewitness participants from the Israeli side have told survivors that they knew they were attacking an American ship.

Israeli Pilot Speaks Up

Fifteen years after the attack, an Israeli pilot approached *Liberty* survivors and then held extensive interviews with former Congressman Paul N. (Pete) McCloskey about his role. According to this senior Israeli lead pilot, he recognized the *Liberty* as American immediately, so informed his headquarters, and was told to ignore the American flag and continue his attack. He refused to do so and returned to base, where he was arrested.

Later, a dual-citizen Israeli major told survivors that he was in an Israeli war room where he heard that pilot's radio report. The attacking pilots and everyone in the Israeli war room knew that they were attacking an American ship, the major said. He recanted the statement only after he received threatening phone calls from Israel.

The pilot's protests also were heard by radio monitors in the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon. Then-U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Dwight Porter has confirmed this. Porter told his story to syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak and offered to submit to further questioning by authorities. Unfortunately, no one in the U.S. government has any interest in hearing these first person accounts of Israeli treachery.

Key members of the Lyndon Johnson administration have long agreed that this attack was no accident. Perhaps most outspoken is former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer. "I can never accept the claim that this was a mistaken attack," he insists.

Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk is equally outspoken, calling the attack deliberate in press and radio interviews. Similarly strong language comes from top leaders of the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency (some of whose personnel were among the victims), National Security Council, and from presidential advisers such as Clark Clifford, Joseph Califano and Luc Battle.

A top-secret analysis of Israel's excuse conducted by the Department of State found Israel's story

to be untrue. Yet Israel and its defenders continue to stand by their claim that the attack was a "tragic accident" in which Israel mistook the most modern electronic surveillance vessel in the world for a rusted-out 40-year-old Egyptian horse transport.

Despite the evidence, no U.S. administration has ever found the courage to ever found the courage to defy the Israeli lobby by publicly demanding a proper accounting from Israel.

How Does Congress React to These Complaints?

Most members of Congress respond to inquiries about the *Liberty* with seemingly sympathetic promises to "investigate." Weeks or months later they write again to report their "findings": "The Navy investigated in 1967 and found no evidence that the attack was deliberate," they say." Israel apologized, calling the attack a tragic case of misidentification, and paid damages for loss of life, injuries and property damage. The matter is closed.

The fact is, however, that the Navy's "investigation" examined only the quality of the crew's training, the adequacy of communications and the performance of the crew under fire. The Navy was forbidden to examine Israeli culpability and Navy investigators *refused to allow testimony* showing that the attack was deliberate or that Israel's excuse was untrue.

The Navy blocked all testimony about Israeli actions

Instead of determining whether the attack was deliberate, the Navy blocked all testimony about Israeli actions. No survivor was permitted to describe the close in machine-gun fire that continued for 40 minutes after Israel claims all firing stopped. No survivor was allowed to talk about the life rafts the Israeli torpedo men machine-gunned in the water. No survivor was permitted to challenge defects and fabrications in Israel's story. Even my eyewitness testimony as officer-of-the-deck was withheld from the official record. No evidence of Israeli culpability was "found" because no such testimony was allowed. To survivors, this was not an investigation. It was a cover-up.

Congress Goes Through the Motions

Occasionally a member of Congress will seem to probe a bit deeper, as Ted Kennedy once did. In response to requests, Kennedy asked *Liberty* survivors and others for input, which his staff then "studied" for more than a year.

Kennedy asked no questions, conducted no interviews, and showed no curiosity about the many discrepancies in Israel's story. Then Kennedy reported his "findings" in a letter to survivors. Carefully avoiding the circumstances of the attack, Kennedy's letter deplored the "tragic circumstances and loss of life" and declared that the facts about *the Liberty must* be uncovered "to the maximum extent humanly possible."

That letter, however, represented Kennedy's maximum effort. Appeals to Kennedy for some real help go unanswered.

The Guest Goes On

The best forum in the '90s for this story and related stories of the Middle East may well be electronic mail, the complex of computer and electronic mail systems that now span the globe.

For instance, the USS *Liberty* and the Middle East are hot topics in the "Prodigy interactive computer service" run by Sears and IBM. With over 2 million members, Prodigy's "Israel" forum guarantees some lively and often bitter debates.

Unfortunately, the playing field often seems uneven. The cover-up side heavily outnumbers its critics, and is allowed tactics rarely tolerated from others. Criticism of Israeli policies is seen as "attacks on the Jewish homeland." Pro-Israel debaters charge that Israel's critics are "disciples of hate," and "pathological haters of Israel and all things Jewish."

The language gets worse. Prodigy allows Israel's critics to be called "sodomists," and "derriere bussing anti-Semites." The *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, which prints an update on progress toward a congressional investigation every year on the June anniversary of the tragedy, comes in for special vitriol. The magazine is described almost daily as "a hate rag." Yet Prodigy censors often reject even mild and factual rebuttals of such charges as "insulting."

Despite a near media blackout, and such invective directed at publications that defy it, Americans do continue to support the *USS Liberty* and its survivors' association. Late last year the *Veteran of Foreign Wars Post 560* in Zimmerman, Minnesota, raised over \$12,000 to create a rest stop

and picnic area on donated land near a major highway as a memorial to the men who died on the *Liberty*. This makes the 29th public memorial to the *USS Liberty*.

The memorial area and an inscribed granite stone were appropriately dedicated in a ceremony attended by survivors, VFW members, Mayor Randy Hanson, and *Liberty's* heroic Congressional Medal of Honor-winning skipper, Captain William McGonagle, among others.

Inspired by community support, members of Post 560 are now telling the *USS Liberty* story to every VFW post in Minnesota. Member Stan Wuolle tells us that after they cover all of Minnesota they will start on Wisconsin and the Dakotas.

In New York, meanwhile, Korean War veteran John Everts learned about the attack just last year and was similarly moved. Everts inspired two Korean vets groups in which he is active, "The Chosin Few" and "The Korean War Veterans" Kivlehan Chapter, to write more than 100 letters to Congress seeking the investigation that survivors still are denied.

To date, no member of Congress has risked re-election chances by agreeing publicly to Evert's request. No one really expected that to happen. But efforts like these help members of Congress and the American public remember that Israel attacked the *USS Liberty*, deliberately and then lied about it. Sooner or later, Americans will insist that their government and their representatives in Congress find out why.

James Ennes retired from the Navy in 1978 as a lieutenant commander after 27 years of enlistment and commissioned service. He was a lieutenant on the bridge of the USS Liberty on the day of attack. His book on the subject, Assault on the Liberty (Random House, 1980), is a "Notable Naval Book" selection of the U. S. Naval Institute and was "editors' choice" when reviewed in The Washington Post. Copies of the book are available from the American Educational Trust, publisher of this magazine, at \$25.00 each.

SIDEBAR

About James Ennes' Assault on the Liberty

"I've never read a more graphic depiction of war and its effects at sea ... an insider's book by a honest participant."

—Author Seymour Hersh

"If this book received more attention, U.S. policies in the Middle East might be better balanced and more successful."

—Former U.S. Senator Adlai E. Stevenson, Jr.

"Searing heat and terrible noise came suddenly from everywhere. Heat came first, and it was heat—not cannon fire—that caused me to turn away. An explosion tossed our gunners high in the air—spinning, broken, like rag dolls. We were being pounded by a deadly barrage of aircraft cannon and rocket fire.

"A solid blanket of force threw me against a railing. My arm held me up while the attacker passed overhead, followed by a loud swoosh, then silence. I seemed to be the only one left standing as the jet disappeared astern of us. Around me, scattered about carelessly, men squirmed helplessly, like wounded animals—wide-eyed, terrified, not understanding what had happened."

—From *Assault on the Liberty*