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'The USS Liberty':

America's Most Shameful Secret

by Eric Margolis

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This article was written in 2001.

NEW YORK – On the fourth day of the 1967 Arab Israeli War, the intelligence ship "USS Liberty" was steaming slowly in international waters, 14 miles off the Sinai Peninsula. Israeli armored forces were racing deep into Sinai in hot pursuit of the retreating Egyptian army.

"Liberty," a World War II freighter, had been converted into an intelligence vessel by the top-secret US National Security Agency, and packed with the latest signals and electronic interception equipment. The ship bristled with antennas and electronic "ears" including TRSSCOMM, a system that delivered real-time intercepts to Washington by bouncing a stream of microwaves off the moon.

"Liberty" had been rushed to Sinai to monitor communications of the belligerents in the Third Arab Israeli War: Israel and her foes, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.

At 0800 hrs, 8 June, 1967, eight Israeli recon flights flew over "Liberty," which was flying a large American flag. At 1400 hrs, waves of low-flying Israeli Mystere and Mirage-III fighter-bombers repeatedly attacked the American vessel with rockets, napalm, and cannon. The air attacks lasted 20 minutes, concentrating on the ship's electronic antennas and dishes. The "Liberty" was left afire, listing sharply. Eight of her crew lay dead, a hundred seriously wounded, including the captain, Commander William McGonagle.

At 1424 hrs, three Israeli torpedo boats attacked, raking the burning "Liberty" with 20mm and 40mm shells. At 1431hrs an Israeli torpedo hit the "Liberty" midship, precisely where the signals intelligence systems were located. Twenty-five more Americans died.

Israeli gunboats circled the wounded "Liberty," firing at crewmen trying to fight the fires. At 1515, the crew were ordered to abandon ship. The Israeli warships closed and poured machine gun fire into the crowded life rafts, sinking two. As American sailors were being massacred in cold blood, a rescue mission by US Sixth Fleet carrier aircraft was mysteriously aborted on orders from the White House.

An hour after the attack, Israeli warships and planes returned. Commander McGonagle gave the order: "prepare to repel borders." But the Israelis, probably fearful of intervention by the US Sixth Fleet, departed. "Liberty" was left shattered but still defiant, her flag flying.

The Israeli attacks killed 34 US seamen and wounded 171 out of a crew of 297, the worst loss of American naval personnel from hostile action since World War II.

Less than an hour after the attack, Israel told Washington its forces had committed a "tragic error." Later, Israel claimed it had mistaken "Liberty" for an ancient Egyptian horse transport. US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and Joint Chiefs of Staff head, Admiral Thomas Moorer, insisted the Israeli attack was deliberate and designed to sink "Liberty." So did three CIA reports; one asserted Israel's Defense Minister, Gen. Moshe Dayan, had personally ordered the attack.

In contrast to American outrage over North Korea's assault on the intelligence ship "Pueblo," Iraq's mistaken missile strike on the USS "Stark," last fall's bombing of the USS "Cole" in Aden, and the recent US-China air incident, the savaging of "Liberty" was quickly hushed up by President Lyndon Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.

The White House and Congress immediately accepted Israel's explanation and let the matter drop. Israel later paid a token reparation of US $6 million. There were reports two Israeli pilots who had refused to attack "Liberty" were jailed for 18 years.

Surviving "Liberty" crew members would not be silenced. They kept demanding an open inquiry and tried to tell their story of deliberate attack to the media. Israel's government worked behind the scenes to thwart these efforts, going so far as having American pro-Israel groups accuse "Liberty's" survivors of being "anti-Semites" and "Israel-haters." Major TV networks cancelled interviews with the crew. A book about the "Liberty" by crewman James Ennes' was dropped from distribution. The Israel lobby branded him "an Arab propagandist."

The attack on "Liberty" was fading into obscurity until last week, when intelligence expert James Bamford came out with *Body of Secrets*, his latest book about the National Security Agency. In a stunning revelation, Bamford writes that unknown to Israel, a US Navy EC-121 intelligence aircraft was flying high overhead the "Liberty," electronically recorded the attack. The US aircraft crew provides evidence that the Israeli pilots knew full well that they were attacking a US Navy ship flying the American flag.

Why did Israel try to sink a naval vessel of its benefactor and ally? Most likely because "Liberty's" intercepts flatly contradicted Israel's claim, made at the war's beginning on 5 June, that Egypt had attacked Israel, and that Israel's massive air assault on three Arab nations was in retaliation. In fact, Israel began the war by a devastating, Pearl-Harbor style surprise attack that caught the Arabs in bed and destroyed their entire air forces.

Israel was also preparing to attack Syria to seize its strategic Golan Heights. Washington warned Israel not to invade Syria, which had remained inactive while Israel fought Egypt. Bamford says Israel's offensive against Syria was abruptly postponed when "Liberty" appeared off Sinai, then launched once it was knocked out of action. Israel's claim that Syria had attacked it could have been disproved by "Liberty."

Most significant, "Liberty's" intercepts may have shown that Israel seized upon sharply rising Arab-Israeli tensions in May-June 1967 to launch a long-planned war to invade and annex the West Bank, Jerusalem, Golan and Sinai.

Far more shocking was Washington's response. Writes Bamford: "Despite the overwhelming evidence that Israel attacked the ship and killed American servicemen deliberately, the Johnson Administration and Congress covered up the entire incident." Why?

Domestic politics. Johnson, a man never noted for high moral values, preferred to cover up the attack rather than anger a key constituency and major financial backer of the Democratic Party. Congress was even less eager to touch this "third rail" issue.

Commander McGonagle was quietly awarded the Medal of Honor for his and his men's heroism – not in the White House, as is usual, but in an obscure ceremony at the Washington Navy Yard. Crew member's graves were inscribed, "died in the Eastern Mediterranean." as if they had be killed by disease, rather than hostile action.

A member of President Johnson's staff believed there was a more complex reason for the cover-up: Johnson offered Jewish liberals unconditional backing of Israel, and a cover-up of the "Liberty" attack, in exchange for the liberal toning down their strident criticism of his policies in the then raging Vietnam War.

Israel, which claims it fought a war of self defense in 1967 and had no prior territorial ambitions, will be much displeased by Bamford's revelations. Those who believe Israel illegally occupies the West Bank and Golan will be emboldened.

Much more important, the US government's long, disgraceful cover-up of the premeditated attack on "Liberty" has now burst into the open and demands full-scale investigation. After 34 years, the voices of "Liberty's" dead and wounded seamen must finally be heard.