

USS Liberty Incident

USS Liberty was originally the 7,725 long tons (7,849 t) (light) civilian cargo vessel Simmons Victory, a mass-produced, standard-design Victory Ship, the follow-on series to the famous Liberty Ships, which supplied the United Kingdom and Allied troops with cargo. It was acquired by the United States Navy, converted to an Auxiliary Technical Research Ship (AGTR), and began its first deployment in 1965, to waters off the west coast of Africa. It carried out several more operations during the next two years.

Events Leading to the attack

During the Six-Day War between Israel and several Arab nations, the United States of America maintained a neutral country status. Several days before the war began, the USS Liberty was ordered to proceed to the eastern Mediterranean area to perform a signal intelligence collection mission in international waters near the north coast of Sinai, Egypt. After the war erupted, due to concerns about her safety as she approached her patrol area, several messages were sent to Liberty to increase her allowable closest point of approach (CPA) to Egypt's and Israel's coasts from .4 and 7.5 miles, to 23 and 17 miles and then later to 120 miles for both countries. Unfortunately, due to ineffective message handling and routing, the CPA change messages were not received until after the attack.

According to Israeli sources, at the start of the war on 5 June, General Yitzhak Rabin (then IDF Chief of Staff) informed Commander Ernest Carl Castle, the American Naval Attaché in Tel Aviv, that Israel would defend its coast with every means at its disposal, including sinking unidentified ships. Also, he asked the U.S. to keep its ships away from Israel's shore or at least inform Israel of their exact position. The United States did not provide Israel any information about Liberty's mission or location.

American sources said that no inquiry about ships in the area was made until after the Liberty attack ended. In a message sent from U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk to U.S. Ambassador Walworth Barbour, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Rusk asked for "urgent confirmation" of Israel's statement. Barbour responded: "No request for info on U.S. ships operating off Sinai was made until after Liberty incident." Further, Barbour stated: "Had Israelis made such an inquiry it would have been forwarded immediately to the chief of naval operations and other high naval commands and repeated to Department of State."

With the outbreak of war, Captain William L. McGonagle of the Liberty immediately asked Vice Admiral William I. Martin at the United States Sixth Fleet headquarters to send a destroyer to accompany the Liberty and serve as its armed escort and as an auxiliary communications center. The following day, 6 June, Admiral Martin replied: "Liberty is a clearly marked United States ship in international waters, not a participant in the conflict and not a reasonable subject for attack by any nation. Request denied." He promised, however, that in the unlikely event of an inadvertent attack, jet fighters from the Sixth Fleet would be overhead in ten minutes.

Meanwhile, on 6 June, at the United Nations, in response to United Arab Republic complaints that the United States was supporting Israel in the conflict, U.S. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg said to the Security Council that aircraft of the Sixth Fleet were several hundred miles from the conflict, indicating that elements of the Sixth Fleet itself were far from the conflict. When the statement was made this was the case, since Liberty, now assigned to the Sixth Fleet, was in the central Mediterranean Sea, passing between Libya and Crete; but she would ultimately steam to about 15 miles north of the Sinai Peninsula.

On the night of 7 June Washington time, early morning on 8 June, 3:10 am local time, the Pentagon issued an order to Sixth Fleet headquarters to tell the Liberty to come no closer than 120 miles to Israel, Syria, or the Sinai coast. According to the Naval Court of Inquiry and National Security Agency official history, the order to withdraw was not sent on the radio frequency that USS Liberty monitored for her orders until 15:25 Zulu, several hours after the attack, due to a long series of administrative and message routing problems. The Navy said a large volume of unrelated high-precedence traffic, including intelligence intercepts related to the conflict, were being handled at the time; and that this combined with a shortage of qualified Radiomen contributed to delayed sending of the withdrawal message.

Visual Contact

Official testimony combined with Liberty's deck log say that throughout the morning of the attack, 8 June, the ship was overflown, at various times and locations, by Israeli Air Force (IAF) aircraft. The primary aircraft type was the Nord Noratlas, in addition to two unidentified delta-wing jets at about 9:00 am Sinai time Liberty crewmembers say that one of the Noratlas aircraft flew so close to Liberty that noise from its propellers rattled the ship's deck plating, and that the pilots and crewmembers waved to each other. It was later reported, based on information from Israel Defense Forces sources, that the over-flights were coincidental, and that the aircraft were hunting for Egyptian submarines previously spotted near the coast.

At about 5:45 am Sinai time a ship-sighting report was initially received at Israeli Central Coastal Command (CCC) about Liberty, identified by an aerial naval observer as "apparently a destroyer, sailing 70 miles west of Gaza." The vessel's location was marked on a CCC Control Table, using a red marker, indicating an unidentified vessel. At about 6:00 am, the aerial naval observer reported that the ship appeared like a U.S. Navy supply ship; the red marker was replaced with a green marker to indicate a neutral vessel, at about 9:00 am. Also, at about 9:00 am, an Israeli jet fighter pilot reported that a ship 20 miles north of Arish had fired at his aircraft after he tried to identify the vessel. Israeli naval command dispatched two destroyers to investigate, but they were returned to their previous positions at 9:40 am after doubts emerged during the pilot's debriefing. After the naval observer's Noratlas landed and he was debriefed, the ship he saw was further identified as the USS Liberty, based on its "GTR-5" hull markings. USS Liberty's marker was removed from CCC's Control Table at 11:00 am, due to its positional information being considered stale.

At 11:24 am, Israeli Chief of Naval Operations received a report that Arish was being shelled from the sea. An inquiry into the source of the report was ordered to determine its validity. The report came from an Air Support Officer in Arish. Additionally, at 11:27 am Israeli Supreme Command Head of Operations received a report stating that a ship had been shelling Arish, but the shells had fallen short. (Investigative journalist James Bamford points out that Liberty had only four .50 caliber machine guns mounted on her decks and, thus, could not have shelled the coast.) The Head of Operations ordered that the report be verified, and determine whether or not Israeli Navy vessels were off the coast of Arish. At 11:45 am, another report arrived at Supreme Command saying two ships were approaching the Arish coast.

The shelling and ships reports were passed from Supreme Command to Fleet Operations Control Center. The Chief of Naval Operations took them seriously, and at 12:05 pm torpedo boat Division 914 was ordered to patrol in the direction of Arish.

Division 914, codenamed "Pagoda", was under the command of Commander Moshe Oren. It consisted of three torpedo boats numbered: T-203, T-204 and T-206. At 12:15 pm, Division 914 received orders to patrol a position 20 miles north of Arish. As Commander Oren headed toward Arish, he was informed by Naval Operations of the reported shelling of Arish and told that IAF aircraft would be dispatched to the area after the target had been detected.

Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin was concerned that the supposed Egyptian shelling was the prelude to an amphibious landing that could outflank Israeli forces. Rabin reiterated the standing order to sink any unidentified ships in the area, but advised caution, as Soviet vessels were reportedly operating nearby.

At 1:41 pm, the torpedo boats detected an unknown vessel 20 miles northwest of Arish and 14 miles off the coast of Bardawil. The ship's speed was estimated on their radars. The Combat Information Center officer on T-204, Ensign Aharon Yifrah, reported to the boat's captain, Commander Moshe Oren, that the target had been detected at a range of 22 miles, that her speed had been tracked for a few minutes, after which he had determined that the target was moving westward at a speed of 30 knots. These data were forwarded to the Fleet Operations Control Center.

The speed of the target was significant because it indicated that the target was a combat vessel. Moreover, Israeli forces had standing orders to fire on any unknown vessels sailing in the area at over 20 knots, a speed which, at the time, could only be attained by warships. The Chief of Naval Operations asked the torpedo boats to double-check their calculations. Yifrah twice recalculated and confirmed his assessment. A few minutes later, Commander Oren reported that the target, now 17 miles from his position, was moving at a speed of 28 knots on a different heading. Bamford, however, points out that the Liberty's top speed was far below 28 knots. His sources say that at the time of the attack the Liberty was following its signal-intercept mission course along the northern Sinai coast, at about 5 knots speed.

The data on the ship's speed, together with its direction, indicated that it was an Egyptian destroyer fleeing toward port after shelling Arish. The torpedo boats gave chase, but did not expect to overtake their target before it reached Egypt. Commander Oren requested that the Israeli Air Force dispatch aircraft to intercept. At 1:48 pm, the Chief of Naval Operations requested dispatch of fighter aircraft to the ship's location.



Hunt-class destroyer HMS Blean. The Egyptian Navy had Hunt-class destroyers in 1967

The IAF dispatched two Mirage III fighter jets that arrived at Liberty at about 2:00 pm. The formation leader, Captain Iftach Spector, attempted to identify the ship. He communicated via radio to one of the torpedo boats his observation that the ship appeared like a military ship with one smokestack and one mast. Also, he communicated, in effect, that the ship appeared to him like a destroyer or another type of small ship. In a post-attack statement, the pilots said they saw no distinguishable markings or flag on the ship.

At this point, Colonel Yeshyahu Barekat, the Chief of Air Force Intelligence, contacted US Naval attaché Castle in an attempt to ascertain whether the suspect ship was the Liberty. Castle reportedly professed no knowledge of the Liberty's schedule, a statement later denied by Castle. Also at this point, a recorded exchange took place between a command headquarters weapons systems officer, one of the air controllers, and the chief air controller questioning a possible American presence. Immediately after the exchange, at 1:57 pm, the chief air controller, Lieutenant-Colonel Shmuel Kislev, cleared the Mirages to attack.

Air and Sea Attacks

After being cleared to attack, the Mirages dove on the ship and attacked with 30-mm cannons and rockets. The attack came a few minutes after the crew completed a chemical attack drill, with Captain McGonagle on the command bridge. The crew was in "stand-down mode", with their helmets and life jackets removed, except battle readiness "modified condition three" was set which meant that the ship's four .50 caliber machine guns were manned and ammunition ready for loading and firing. Eight crewmen were either killed immediately or died later, and 75 were wounded. Among the wounded was McGonagle, who was hit in the right thigh and arm. During the attack, antennas were severed, gas drums caught fire, and the ship's flag was knocked down. McGonagle sent an urgent request for help to the Sixth Fleet, "Under attack by unidentified jet aircraft, require immediate assistance."

The Mirages left after expending their ammunition, and were replaced by two Dassault Mysteres armed with napalm bombs. The Mysteres released their payloads over the ship and strafed it with their cannons. Much of the ship's superstructure caught fire. The Mysteres were readying to attack again when the Israeli Navy, alerted by the absence of return fire, warned Kislev that the target could be Israeli. Kislev told the pilots not to attack if there was any doubt about identification, and the Israeli Navy quickly contacted all of its vessels in the area. The Israeli Navy found that none of its vessels were under fire, and the aircraft were cleared to attack. However, Kislev was still disturbed by a lack of return fire, and requested one last attempt to identify the ship. Captain Yossi Zuk, leader of the Mystere formation, made an attempt at identification while strafing the ship. He reported seeing no flag, but saw the ship's GTR-5 marking. Kislev immediately ordered the attack stopped. Kislev guessed that the ship was American.

The fact that the ship had Latin alphabet markings led Chief of Staff Rabin to fear that the ship was Soviet. Though Egyptian warships were known to disguise their identities with Western markings, they usually displayed Arabic letters and numbers only. Rabin ordered the torpedo boats to remain at a safe distance from the ship, and sent in two Hornet helicopters to search for survivors. These radio communications were recorded by Israel. The order also was recorded in the torpedo boat's log, although Commander Oren alleged not to have received it. The order to cease fire was given at 2:20 pm, 24 minutes before the torpedo boats arrived at the Liberty's position. At 2:35 pm, Liberty was hit by a torpedo launched from one of the torpedo boats.

During the interval, crewmen aboard the Liberty hoisted a large American flag to be clearly identified. During the early part of the air attack and before the torpedo boats were visually sighted, Liberty sent a distress message that was received by Sixth Fleet aircraft carrier USS Saratoga. Aircraft carrier USS America dispatched eight aircraft. The carrier had been in the middle of strategic exercises. Vice-Admiral William I. Martin recalled the aircraft minutes later.



Israeli Motor Torpedo Boats in formation, circa 1967

McGonagle testified at the naval court of inquiry that during "the latter moments of the air attack, it was noted that three high speed boats were approaching the ship from the northeast on a relative bearing of approximately 135 [degrees] at a distance of about 15 [nautical] miles. The ship at the time was still on westward course 283 [degrees] true, speed unknown, but believed to be in excess of five knots."

McGonagle testified that he "believed that the time of initial sighting of the torpedo boats ... was about 2:20 pm local time, and that the "boats appeared to be in a wedge type formation with the center boat the lead point of the wedge. Estimated speed of the boats was about 27 to 30 knots and that it "appeared that they were approaching the ship in a torpedo launch attitude."

When the torpedo boats arrived, Commander Oren could see that the ship could not be the destroyer that had supposedly shelled Arish or any ship capable of 30 knots speed. Oren believed it was a slower-moving vessel that had either serviced the destroyer or evacuated enemy soldiers from the beach. He ordered the squadron not to attack pending better identification "although this was difficult due to the billowing clouds of smoke that enveloped the vessel; only her bow, part of her bridge and the tip of her mast could be discerned." At 6,000 meters, T-204 paused and signalled "AA" – "identify yourself." Due to damaged equipment, McGonagle could only reply with "AA" using a handheld Aldis lamp. Oren recalled receiving a similar response from the Ibrahim el Awal, an Egyptian destroyer captured by Israel during the Suez Crisis, and was convinced that he was facing an enemy ship.

He consulted an Israeli identification guide to Arab fleets and concluded the ship was the Egyptian supply ship El Quseir, based on observing its deckline, midship bridge and smokestack. The captain of boat T203 reached the same conclusion independently. The boats organized into battle formation, but did not attack.



Liberty turns to evade Israeli torpedo boats

As the torpedo boats rapidly approached, Captain McGonagle ordered a sailor to proceed to machine gun Mount 51 and open fire. However, he noticed that the boats appeared to be flying an Israeli flag, and "realized that there was a possibility of the aircraft having been Israeli and the attack had been conducted in error." Captain McGonagle ordered the man at gun mount 51 to hold fire, but a short burst was fired at the torpedo boats before the man was able to understand the order. McGonagle observed that machine gun Mount 53 began firing at the center torpedo boat at about the same time gun mount 51 fired, and that its fire was "extremely effective and blanketed the area and the center torpedo boat." Machine gun mount 53 was located on the starboard amidships side, behind the pilot house. McGonagle could not see or "get to mount 53 from the starboard wing of the bridge." So, he "sent Mr. Lucas around the port side of the bridge, around to the skylights, to see if he could tell [Seaman] Quintero, whom [he] believed to be the gunner on Machine gun 53, to hold fire."

Ensign Lucas "reported back in a few minutes in effect that he saw no one at mount 53." Lucas, who had left the command bridge during the air attack and returned to assist Captain McGonagle immediately before a torpedo hit the ship, believed that the gunfire sound was likely from ammunition cooking off, due to a nearby fire. Prior to this time, after a torpedo hit the ship, Lucas had granted a request from

Quintero to fire at the torpedo boats before heat from a nearby fire chased him from gun mount 53. (McGonagle later testified, at the Court of Inquiry, that this was likely the "extremely effective" firing event he had observed.

After coming under fire, Commander Oren repeatedly requested permission from naval headquarters to return fire, and chief naval controller Izzy Rahav finally approved. Shelling by the torpedo boats killed Liberty's helmsman. The torpedo boats then launched five torpedoes at the Liberty. At 2:35 local time a torpedo hit Liberty on the starboard side forward of the superstructure, creating a 40 ft wide hole in what had been a former cargo hold converted to the ship's research spaces and killing 25 servicemen, almost all of them from the intelligence section, and wounding dozens. It has been said the torpedo hit a major hull frame that absorbed much of the energy; crew members reported that if the torpedo had missed the frame the Liberty would have split in two. Russian linguist and U.S. Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Bryce Lockwood later commented: "I would never deny that it was God that kept the Liberty afloat!". The other four torpedoes missed the ship.

The torpedo boats then closed in and strafed the ship's hull with their cannons and machine guns. According to some crewmen, the torpedo boats fired at damage control parties and sailors preparing life rafts for launch. A life raft which floated from the ship was picked up by T-203 and found to bear US Navy markings. T-204 then circled the Liberty, and Oren spotted the designation GTR-5, but saw no flag. It took until 3:30 pm to establish the ship's identity. Shortly before the Liberty's identity was confirmed, the Saratoga launched eight aircraft armed with conventional weapons towards the Liberty. After the ship's identity was confirmed, the General Staff was notified and an apology was sent to naval attaché Castle. The aircraft approaching the Liberty were recalled to the Saratoga.

Aftermath of the Attack



The 6th Fleet flagship, USS Little Rock standing by the Liberty

According to transcripts of intercepted radio communications, published by the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), at about 2:30 pm, near the beginning of the torpedo boat attack, two IAF helicopters were dispatched to Liberty's location. The helicopters arrived at about 3:10 pm, about 35 minutes after a torpedo hit the ship. After arriving, one of the helicopter pilots was asked, by his ground-based controller, to verify that the ship was flying an American flag. The helicopters conducted a brief search for crew members of the ship who may have fallen overboard during the air attack. No one was found. The helicopters left the ship at about 3:20 pm.

At about 4 pm, two hours after the attack began, Israel informed the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv that its military forces had mistakenly attacked a U.S. Navy ship. When the ship was "confirmed to be American" the torpedo boats returned at about 4:40 pm to offer help; it was refused by the Liberty. Later, Israel provided a helicopter to fly U.S. naval attaché Commander Castle to the ship.



Commander W.L. McGonagle in his damaged cabin after the attack and pointing out damage to the USS *Liberty*.

In Washington, President Lyndon B. Johnson had received word from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the Liberty had been torpedoed by an unknown vessel at 9:50 am eastern time. Johnson assumed that the Soviets were involved, and hotlined Moscow with news of the attack and the dispatch of jets from the Saratoga. He chose not to make any public statements and delegated this task to Phil G. Goulding, who was an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs at a time.

Soon afterward, the Israelis said that they had mistakenly attacked the ship. The Johnson administration conveyed "strong dismay" to Israeli ambassador Avraham Harman. Meanwhile, apologies were soon sent by Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Foreign Minister Abba Eban, and chargé d'affaires Efraim Evron. Within 48 hours, Israel offered to compensate the victims and their families.



Torpedo damage to Liberty's research compartment (Starboard side) & Amidships starboard hull and superstructure attack damage

Though the Liberty was severely damaged, with a 39 ft wide by 24 ft high hole and a twisted keel, her crew kept her afloat, and she was able to leave the area under her own power. The Liberty was later met by the destroyers USS Davis and USS Massey, and the cruiser USS Little Rock. Medical personnel were

transferred to the Liberty, and it was escorted to Malta, where it was given interim repairs. After these were completed in July 1967, Liberty returned to the U.S. She was decommissioned in June 1968 and struck from the Naval Vessel Register. Liberty was transferred to United States Maritime Administration (MARAD) in December 1970 and sold for scrap in 1973.



Damaged USS *Liberty* one day (9 June 1967) after attack

From the start, the response to Israeli statements of mistaken identity ranged between frank disbelief and unquestioning acceptance within the administration in Washington. A communication to the Israeli Ambassador on 10 June, by Secretary Rusk stated, among other things: "At the time of the attack, the USS Liberty was flying the American flag and its identification was clearly indicated in large white letters and numerals on its hull. ... Experience demonstrates that both the flag and the identification number of the vessel were readily visible from the air.... Accordingly, there is every reason to believe that the USS Liberty was identified, or at least her nationality determined, by Israeli aircraft approximately one hour before the attack. ... The subsequent attack by the torpedo boats, substantially after the vessel was or should have been identified by Israeli military forces, manifests the same reckless disregard for human life."



National Cryptologic Memorial. Many names are of those killed on 8 June 1967

George Lenczowski notes: "It was significant that, in contrast to his secretary of state, President Johnson fully accepted the Israeli version of the tragic incident." He notes that Johnson himself only included one small paragraph about the Liberty in his autobiography, in which he accepted the Israeli explanation of "error", but also minimized the whole affair and distorted the actual number of dead and wounded, by lowering them from 34 to 10 and 171 to 100, respectively. Lenczowski further states: "It seems Johnson was more interested in avoiding a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union, ...than in restraining Israel."



William Loren McGonagle, October 1967, recipient of the Medal of Honor.

McGonagle received the Medal of Honor, the highest U.S. medal, for his actions. The Medal of Honor is generally presented by the President of the United States in the White House, but this time it was awarded at the Washington Navy Yard by the Secretary of the Navy in an unpublicized ceremony, breaking with established tradition.

Other Liberty sailors received decorations for their actions during and after the attack, but most of the award citations omitted mention of Israel as the perpetrator. In 2009, however, a Silver Star awarded to crewmember Terry Halbardier, who braved machine-gun and cannon fire to repair a damaged antenna that restored the

[Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Liberty_incident Jun 2014 ++]