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Liberty and death



Twenty years ago today the U.S.S. Liberty sat in international waters in the eastern Mediterranean. Into the early afternoon the day remained calm as the sea. Some of the crew indulged their off-duty hours by working on their sun tans.

Below deck was another story. In a secure compartment an assortment of electronic technicians, translators and code-breakers were working at the limit of their endurance. They were exhausted, almost to a man, but reasonably satisfied. The end seemed near.

By June 8, 1967, the latest Middle East war appeared to be winding down. No doubt remained that the Israelis had delivered a stunning blow to any threat posed by their Arab neighbors.

Sometimes called the Six Days War, events 20 years ago barely deserve so grand a name. The outcome was decided the first hour of the first day when Israeli planes virtually destroyed the entire Egyptian air force sitting on the ground.

It was a Sunday (June 5), and the former British colony followed the Western custom of taking that day off, including the military.

Cairo had been lulled into a sense of further security by Washington's offer to mediate its latest crisis with Tel Aviv. Egypt's vice president was due to leave the next day for meetings with Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. A return visit by Vice President Hubert Humphrey had already been scheduled.

Then, as now, the Israeli government distrusted any outsider negotiations; it was particularly leary of Americans because President Eisenhower had forced them to give back territory swept up in the 1956 surprise assault staged with the British and French on the Suez Canal.

The presence of the Liberty added to the Israelis' concern. She was not a combat ship, but a floating electronic "listening" post; her mission was to monitor communications, and to pass the intelligence back to the United States.

Washington let it be known that the Navy vessel could serve to warn Tel Aviv against any sudden, hostile moves in the Arab world. But the Israelis suspected the ship might have another purpose, and they were right!

For, according to information

developed in the years after the war, the Liberty almost certainly acted as "mother" to an American submarine, the U.S.S. Andrew Jackson, capable of launching missiles from underwater.

In addition to her publicly announced missions, the ultimate purpose for the Liberty's presence was to stave off World War III.

If the tide of battle turned against Israel and an Arab invasion appeared certain, the U.S. joint chiefs of staff had no doubt that Tel Aviv would order launched the nuclear warheads stored in the Negev desert. America's top military leaders wanted to prevent the launching, knowing that Moscow could not ignore the destruction of Cairo, Damascus, Amman, Baghdad and Beirut.

In this worst-case situation, the Liberty was to alert the Andrew Jackson and notify Washington, which could order the submarine to hit the Negev desert sites before the Israeli missiles could lift-off.

At any rate, after the Sunday assault delivered more than Tel Aviv could have hoped — and reportedly brought cheers from the "listeners" inside the Liberty — tension eased in Washington. While not completely disappearing, a U.S.-Soviet confrontation eased with each Israeli victory.

During the fighting that remained, the ship's "special" gear developed what was almost certainly the first complete "electronic picture" of a war from its outset. Of course, the Liberty was not in on the ending.

In waves Israeli aircraft rendered the American Navy vessel a riddled hulk on the afternoon of June 8, 1967. On the bright sunny afternoon, officers and sailors aboard the doomed ship could see the faces of their attackers. They

could not believe pilots that close could not read their U. S. identification, including their Navy ensign.

When the planes finally departed, the *Liberty* clung to life, just barely. Her captain ordered the ship's huge ceremonial Stars and Stripes hoisted, still fearing the strafings and bombings might resume. They didn't.

Instead, Israeli motor torpedo boats appeared, apparently intent on finishing off the *Liberty*. They came in at sea-level; they could not have missed sighting the ceremonial flag. They launched torpedoes anyway.

The *Liberty* did not go down. Eventually she was towed to Norfolk, Va., and broken up for scrap.

As for the crew, I have read various casualty figures; the lowest reported 34 dead and 171 wounded.

America's joint chiefs did not take the destruction and deaths lightly. In their anger, they planned a retaliatory strike on the Tel Aviv naval base from which the planes and boats had come. The strike was cancelled by President Johnson.

What made the *Liberty* incident so different from the recent Iraqi attack on the *U.S.S. Stark*? After all, both governments claimed mistaken identity. At this peculiar point in Middle East history, Baghdad needs the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf. America is "allied" with Iraq, if the relationship must be placed in quotation marks. Our special relationship with Israel passed a long time ago the need for such editorial artifice.

One Iraqi pilot shot two missiles simultaneously, and in darkness. Compare that with the outline of what happened to the *Liberty*.

Am I suggesting the devastation of an

American ship and crew was deliberately ordered by Tel Aviv 20 years ago today?

Absolutely. Further, I'll give the motive I believe. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan wanted no repetition of 1956, when Washington ordered the Israelis back before they achieved all their objectives.

Dayan could not afford to have the *Liberty* keeping Washington informed of his armies' progress and in great detail. Looking out for his nation's best interest, destroying the U.S. monitor was worth the risk to the two nations' relationship. It all worked out, from the Israeli view.

In their love for a winner, Americans were so busy cheering Dayan's great triumph in the Six Days War, they scarcely noticed the *Liberty*. The media helped. Few stories appeared at the time.

From my own reporting 20 years ago, I learned to regard and respect the realities that cause Israel to exercise its powers as a foreign nation, answerable only to itself. Those who think otherwise have only to regard the *Liberty* and its fate.

In remembering the *Liberty*, I mean to make a plea for my neighbor's awareness that the Middle East must receive his attention. I believe the world's fate will be decided by present — and future — happenings in that terrible region.

This nation simply cannot afford to stumble along with no concrete policy based entirely on American interests. That is the lesson taught by the *Liberty* and the good men who died that day.