

Israeli Navy Man Describes Attack on the Liberty

The following article was written for The Associated Press by Micha Limor, an Israeli naval reservist who was serving on one of the torpedo boats that attacked the United States communications ship, Liberty off the Sinai coast on June 8:

TEL AVIV, July 6—The torpedoes were ready for firing when our three Israeli torpedo boats zeroed in on the gray ship moving slowly on a southeasterly course off El Arish.

At that tense moment, not one of us on those torpedo boats could have suspected that this was the beginning of an incident that was to cause a long international wrangle.

The morning of June 8, the fourth day of the six-day war, the Israeli torpedo boats were at their base refueling and taking on provisions.

On the ground, the capture of Sinai and of the western bank of the Jordan River had already been completed. On the naval front, the torpedo boats had already seen action and had spent many hours patrolling Israel's western border.

Well-Trained for Action

The crew—most of them members of the regular navy and only a minority of them reservists like myself—took advantage of the short time in base for rest and to care for our weapons.

Over the years we had been trained to operate these French-made torpedo boats, some 10 years old, against the possibility that they would be put to the test.

Over the last few days we had learned that our training had not been wasted. The gunners showed great accuracy in their hits. The instruments worked as they were supposed to, and the little vessel functioned with maximum efficiency in the hands of the trained Israeli Navy crew.

On June 8, the sun was already high in the sky when we received notification of an unidentified sailing vessel some 12 miles off El Arish, suspected of being an enemy craft.

Formations Taken Up

Within moments, the face of our torpedo boat changed. Sailors took their positions, engines were revved up, and in five minutes we were moving out in formation, torpedo boat after torpedo boat, toward the deep sea.

We spotted the objective once on the radar screen. She was moving on a steady course, southeast at about 10 knots. We sailed toward the objective at an increased speed, looking at her through binoculars in an effort to identify the vessel.

Two of our planes flew over our heads a few minutes afterward. We saw them circle the ship several times, and then dive into the attack.

They spat two rockets into the gray ship, and plumes of smoke

Reservist on Torpedo Boat Says Identification Came After the Ship Was Hit

rose from her. Then the two jets headed away toward the coast.

About 2,000 yards from the ship, a strange spectacle met our eyes. The high masts and the many weird antenna showed that this was a warship. The side of the vessel was blotted out by smoke, and apart from three numbers along her side, which meant nothing to us, we could not discern a thing.

We could see no flag on the mast, nor was anyone to be seen on the decks and bridge.

[The United States Navy, in investigating the incident, reported the Liberty was flying the American flag when the planes attacked. It conceded, however, that the resulting smoke might have obscured the view of the attacking torpedo boats.]

For seamen, this can mean only two things: it was either a ghost ship or an enemy ship. To us, who do not believe in ghosts, it was clear that this was the enemy.

No Answer Received

We spent several minutes trying to contact the ship and demanding identification. We tried by radio and by heliograph, in accordance with internationally accepted means. But she gave no answer. It also seemed that she had managed to control the fires and continued on a stable course.

It was decided to pass by her in battle formation and demand identification by firing across her bow. So we moved past at a tremendous speed, firing across the empty bridge and the bow.

Suddenly, a sailor appeared in view and started firing at us with a heavy machine gun from the bridge. We took the challenge and directed cannon fire against him. A moment later he fell, together with the machine gun.

Thus there was no doubt that we were faced by the enemy. The prolonged refusal to identify herself, the absence of any flag, the shooting at us, and above all, the weird contraptions on the ship left us without doubt.

We wanted to make the ship surrender without sinking her. Once again we circled the vessel in battle formation, firing again and again. This had no effect. No one appeared. No one reacted. The shells caused little damage to the hull and the ship proceeded on her way.

Order for Torpedoes

You could almost hear the men's teeth grinding aboard our boat. Nothing can annoy a torpedo boat crew more than being completely ignored. The order was given to prepare for a torpedo attack.

We drew up along the left

side of the ship and advanced at full battle speed. Just as in dozens of training exercises we reached the right angle and range—and let go.

We thought only a miracle would save the ship.

One of the torpedoes hit amidships. There followed an enormous explosion and a huge water spout.

And then fires broke out and the ship leaned sideways as if about to sink. We waited for survivors as is customary, whether friend or enemy. But no one appeared on deck.

First Identification

Suddenly, something fell into the sea. One of our boats approached and, picking it up from the waters, found it to be a rubber lifeboat with the lettering "U.S. Navy."

That was the very first sign of identification.

A moment later there arrived on the scene the helicopter that was to have picked up prisoners. He hovered over the ship and then signaled us:

"They are raising the American flag."

It was crystal clear we had hit friends.

Dozens of shells, rockets and torpedoes were needed to drag a sign of identity from them, said one of my seamen who, like the rest of his mates, was bitterly upset at this surprising turn of events.

He was right. The showing of the Stars and Stripes at the first stage would have prevented all that happened subsequently.

At the same time, it turned out later, shore emplacements also learned that the attacked vessel was the Liberty.

Help Offered

We received orders directly from the officer commanding the navy to give all necessary help. So we approached the Liberty and offered help, shouting through a loudspeaker.

Then an officer appeared for the first time on the bridge and screamed, "Go to hell!"

It seems they didn't want strangers aboard.

Learning they did not need aid, we left. And the Liberty returned to its regular operation. It seemed any other ship would have sunk.

It was only later that we learned how many casualties had been caused by our torpedoes.

"If this had been our boat," one of our officers said the following day, "we would have done everything to save the wounded and not the boat."

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