

A USS Liberty's Hero's Passing

Exclusive: Silver Star winner Terry Halbardier, the hero who got off the SOS that saved the USS Liberty from Israeli destruction in 1967, died last week in California, prompting ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern to recall the murderous attack and the cowardly cover-up that followed.

By Ray McGovern

Terry Halbardier, who as a 23-year old seaman in 1967 thwarted Israeli attempts to sink the USS Liberty, died on Aug. 11 in Visalia, California. It took the U.S. government 42 years after the attack to recognize Halbardier's heroism by awarding him the Silver Star, a delay explained by Washington's determination to downplay Israeli responsibility for the 34 Americans killed and the 174 wounded.

On June 8, 1967, during the Six-Day War, the Israeli military attacked the USS Liberty, an American spy ship which had been monitoring Israeli transmissions about the conflict. Intercepted Israeli communications indicated that the goal was to sink the Liberty and leave no survivors.

Warplanes and torpedo boats had already killed 34 and wounded 174, when Halbardier slid over the Liberty's napalm-glazed deck to jury-rig an antenna and get an SOS off to the Sixth Fleet. The Israelis intercepted the SOS and broke off the attack immediately. In effect, Halbardier prevented the massacre of all 294 onboard. Still, the infamy of the attack on the Liberty was two-fold.

First, the Liberty, a virtually defenseless intelligence collection platform prominently flying an American flag in international waters, came under deliberate attack by Israeli aircraft and three 60-ton Israeli torpedo boats off the coast of the Sinai on a cloudless June afternoon during the six-day Israeli-Arab war. Second, President Lyndon Johnson called back carrier aircraft dispatched to defend the Liberty lest Israel be embarrassed, the start of an unconscionable cover-up, including top Navy brass, that persists to this day.

Given all they have been through, the Liberty survivors and other veterans who joined Halbardier to celebrate his belated receipt of the Silver Star on May 27, 2009 can be forgiven for having doubted that the day of the hero's recognition would ever come.

In the award ceremony at the Visalia (California) office of Rep. Devin Nunes, the Republican congressman pinned the Silver Star next to the Purple Heart that Halbardier found in his home mailbox three years ago. Nunes said, "The government has kept this quiet I think for too long, and I felt as my constituent he [Halbardier] needed to get recognized for the services he made to

his country.”

Nunes got that right. Despite the many indignities the Liberty crew has been subjected to, the mood in Visalia was pronouncedly a joyous one of Better (42 years) Late Than Never. And, it did take some time for the moment to sink in: Wow, a gutsy congressman not afraid to let the truth hang out on this delicate issue.

Treatment Accorded the Skipper

I was present that day and I could not get out of my head the contrast between this simple, uncomplicated event and the earlier rigmarole that senior Navy officers went through to pin a richly deserved Medal of Honor on another hero of that day, the Liberty's skipper, Captain William McGonagle.

Although badly wounded by Israeli fire on June 8, 1967, McGonagle was able to keep the bombed, torpedoed, napalmed Liberty afloat and limping toward Malta, where what was left of the bodies of the 34 crewmen killed and the 174 wounded could be attended to. Do the math: yes, killed and wounded amounted to more than two-thirds of the Liberty crew of 294.

I remembered what a naval officer involved in McGonagle's award ceremony told one of the Liberty crew: “The government is pretty jumpy about Israel the State Department even asked the Israeli ambassador if his government had any objections to McGonagle getting the medal.”

When McGonagle received his award, the White House (the normal venue for a Medal of Honor award) was all booked up, it seems, and President Lyndon Johnson (who would have been the usual presenter) was unavailable.

So it fell to the Secretary of the Navy to sneak off to the Washington Navy Yard on the banks of the acrid Anacostia River, where he presented McGonagle with the Medal of Honor and a citation that described the attack but not the identity of the attackers.

Please don't misunderstand. The Liberty crew is not big on ceremony. They are VERY-not-big on politicians who wink when Navy comrades are killed and wounded at sea. The Liberty survivors are big on getting the truth out about what actually happened that otherwise beautiful day in June 1967.

The award of the Silver Star to Terry Halbardier marked a significant step in the direction of truth telling. Halbardier said he accepted his Silver Star on behalf of the entire 294-man crew. He and fellow survivor Don Pageler expressed particular satisfaction at the wording of the citation, which stated explicitly – with none of the usual fudging – the identity of the attackers: “The USS

Liberty was attacked by Israeli aircraft and motor torpedo boats in the East Mediterranean Sea.”

In the past, official citations, like Captain McGonagle’s, had avoided mentioning Israel by name when alluding to the attack. I think former U.S. Ambassador Edward Peck put it best in condemning this kind of approach as “obsequious, unctuous subservience to the peripheral interests of a foreign nation at the cost of the lives and morale of our own service members and their families.” Strong words for a diplomat. But right on.

Just a Guy From Texas

Were it not for Halbardier’s bravery, ingenuity, and technical expertise, the USS Liberty would surely have sunk, taking down much if not all of the crew.

You see, the first thing the Israeli aircraft bombed and strafed were the Liberty’s communications antennae and other equipment. They succeeded in destroying all the antennae that were functional. One antenna on the port side, though, had been out of commission and had escaped damage.

In receiving the Silver Star, Halbardier made light of his heroism, claiming that he was just a guy from Texas who could do a whole lot with simple stuff like baling wire. (In the infantry we called this kind of thing a “field expedient.”)

In any case, with his can-do attitude and his technical training, he figured he might be able to get that particular antenna working again. But first he would have to repair a cable that had been destroyed on deck and then connect the antenna to a transmitter.

The deck was still being strafed, but Halbardier grabbed a reel of cable, ran out onto the deck, and attached new cable to the antenna so a radioman could get an SOS out to the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.

Voila. “Mayday” went out; almost immediately the Israeli aircraft and torpedo ships broke off the attack and went back to base; the Israeli government sent a quick apology to Washington for its unfortunate “mistake;” and President Johnson issued orders to everyone to make believe the Israelis were telling the truth, or at least to remain silent.

To their discredit, top Navy brass went along, and the Liberty survivors were threatened with court martial and prison if they so much as mentioned to their wives what had actually happened. They were enjoined as well from discussing it with one another.

As Liberty crewman Don Pageler put it, "We all headed out after that, and we didn't talk to each other." The circumstances were ready-made for serious Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The stories shared by Liberty survivors after the award ceremony, including descriptions of the macabre but necessary effort to reassemble torpedoed body parts, and the plague of survivor's guilt, were as heart-rending as any I have heard. They are stories that should be shared more widely for those muzzled far too long.

These were the deep emotional scars to supplement the ones all over Halbardier's body, some of which he uncovered when asked by the local press gathered there in Visalia. Typically, Halbardier made light of the shrapnel that had to be plucked out of his flesh, emphasizing that he was lucky compared to some of the other crew.

No Mistake

Despite Israeli protestations, the accumulated evidence, including intercepted voice communications, is such that no serious observer believes Israel's "Oops" excuse of a terrible mistake. The following exchanges are excerpts of testimony from U.S. military and diplomatic officials given to Alison Weir, founder of "If Americans Knew" and author of *American Media Miss the Boat*:

Israeli pilot to ground control: "This is an American ship. Do you still want us to attack?"

Ground control: "Yes, follow orders."

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"But sir, it's an American ship, I can see the flag!"

Ground control: "Never mind; hit it!"

Haviland Smith, a CIA officer stationed in Beirut during the Six-Day War, says he was told that the transcripts were "deep-sixed," because the U.S. government did not want to embarrass Israel.

Equally telling is the fact that the National Security Agency (NSA) destroyed voice tapes seen by many intelligence analysts, showing that the Israelis knew exactly what they were doing. I asked a former CIA colleague, who was also an analyst at that time, what he remembered of those circumstances. Here is his e-mail reply:

"The chief of the analysts studying the Arab-Israeli region at the time told me

about the intercepted messages and said very flatly and firmly that the pilots reported seeing the American flag and repeated their requests of confirmation of the attack order. Whole platoons of Americans saw those intercepts. If NSA now says they do not exist, then someone ordered them destroyed.”

One need hardly add at this point that the destruction of evidence without investigation is an open invitation to repetition in the future. Think the more recent torture-interrogation videotapes.

As for the legal side: the late Captain Ward Boston, unburdened himself on his accomplice role as the Navy lawyer appointed as senior counsel to Adm. Isaac Kidd, who led a one-week (!) investigation and then followed orders to pronounce the attack on the Liberty a case of “mistaken identity.” Boston signed a formal declaration on Jan. 8, 2004, in which he said he was “outraged at the efforts of the apologists for Israel in this country to claim that this attack was a case of ‘mistaken identity.’” Boston continued:

“The evidence was clear. Both Adm. Kidd and I believed with certainty that this attack was a deliberate effort to sink an American ship and murder its entire crew. Not only did the Israelis attack the ship with napalm, gunfire, and missiles, Israeli torpedo boats machine-gunned three lifeboats that had been launched in an attempt by the crew to save the most seriously wounded, a war crime

“I know from personal conversations I had with Adm. Kidd that President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered him to conclude that the attack was a case of ‘mistaken identity’ despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.”

W. Patrick Lang, Col., USA (ret.), who was the Defense Intelligence Agency’s top analyst for the Middle East for eight years, recounted the Israeli air attacks as follows: “The flight leader spoke to his base to report that he had the ship in view, that it was the same ship he had been briefed on, and that it was clearly marked with the U.S. flag

“The flight commander was reluctant. That was very clear. He didn’t want to do this. He asked them a couple of times, ‘Do you really want me to do this?’ I’ve remembered it ever since. It was very striking. I’ve been harboring this memory for all these years.”

Lang, of course, is not alone. So too Terry Halbardier, who told those assembled at his Silver Medal award ceremony, “I think about it [the attack on the Liberty] every day.”

Why Sink the Ship?

What we know for sure is, as the independent commission headed by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Thomas Moorer put it, the attack “was a deliberate attempt to destroy an American ship and kill her entire crew.”

What we do not know for sure is why the Israelis wanted that done. Has no one dared ask the Israelis? One view is that the Israelis did not want the United States to find out they were massing troops to seize the Golan Heights from Syria and wanted to deprive the U.S. of the opportunity to argue against such a move.

James Bamford offers an alternative view in his excellent book, *Body of Secrets*. Bamford adduces evidence, including reporting from an Israeli journalist eyewitness and an Israeli military historian, of wholesale killing of Egyptian prisoners of war at the coastal town of El Arish in the Sinai.

The Liberty was patrolling directly opposite El Arish in international waters but within easy range to pick up intelligence on what was going on there. And the Israelis were well aware of that. But the important thing here is not to confuse what we know (the deliberate nature of the Israeli attack) with the ultimate purpose behind it, which remains open to speculation.

Also worth noting is the conventional wisdom prevalent in our Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) that Egypt forced Israel into war in June 1967. An excellent, authoritative source has debunked that, none other than former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin! In an unguarded moment in 1982, when he was prime minister, he admitted publicly:

“In June 1967, we had a choice. The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that [Egyptian President] Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him.”

Thus, the Israeli attack admittedly amounted to starting a war of aggression, and the occupied West Bank territories and the Golan Heights gained by the Israelis in the 1967 war remain occupied to this day. The post World War II tribunal at Nuremberg distinguished a “war of aggression” from other war crimes, terming it the “supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes only in that it contains the accumulated evil of the whole.”

Perhaps the attempt to sink the Liberty and finish off all survivors qualifies as one of those accumulated evils. Terry Halbardier summed it up this way when he was awarded his Silver Star: “There’s lots of theories but let’s just say they didn’t want us listening in to what they wanted to do.”

Getting Away With Murder

In sum, on June 8, 1967, the Israeli government learned that it could get away with murder, literally, and the crime would be covered up, so strong is the influence of the Israel Lobby in our Congress, and indeed, in the White House. And those USS Liberty veterans who survived well enough to call for an independent investigation have been hit with charges of, you guessed it, anti-Semitism.

Does all this have relevance today? Of course. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu understands that there is little that Israel could do that would earn the opprobrium of the U.S. Congress or retaliation from the White House, whether it's building illegal settlements or slaughtering civilians in Gaza. The Israelis seem convinced they remain in the catbird's seat, largely because of the Israel Lobby's influence with U.S. lawmakers and opinion makers.

One of the few moments when a U.S. official has had the audacity to face Israel down came from significantly a U.S. Navy admiral. In early July 2008, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, was sent to Israel to read the riot act to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who seemed to be itching to start hostilities with Iran while President George W. Bush was in office.

We learned from the Israeli press that Mullen, fearing some form of Israeli provocation, went so far as to warn the Israelis not to even think about another incident like the attack on the USS Liberty on June 8, 1967, that the Israelis should disabuse themselves of the notion that U.S. military support would be knee-jerk automatic if Israel somehow provoked open hostilities with Iran.

This is the only occasion I am aware of in which a U.S. official of such seniority braced Israel about the Liberty incident. A gutsy move, especially with Vice President Dick Cheney and national security aide Elliott Abrams then in the White House, two hawks who might well bless, or even encourage, an Israeli provocation that would make it very difficult for Washington to avoid springing to the defense of its "ally."

The Israelis know that Mullen knows that the attack on the Liberty was deliberate. Mullen could have raised no more neuralgic an issue to take a shot across an Israeli bow than to cite the attack on the Liberty. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that Mullen cautioned that a Liberty-type incident must be avoided in any future military actions in the Middle East.

Perhaps Mullen had learned something from the heroism of Terry Halbardier

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