

# Still Waiting for USS Liberty's Truth

**Exclusive:** During the Six-Day War in 1967, Israeli warplanes and warships tried to sink the USS Liberty, killing 34 of the spy ship's crew. Afterwards, U.S. and Israeli officials excused the attack as an unfortunate mistake and covered up evidence of willful murder, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

Israel's chokehold over U.S. politics and politicians has been so powerful for so many decades that this obvious reality is routinely denied, a collective gagging of the truth that is itself a measure of how strong the Israeli grip is.

The most potent and poignant example of how much American independence has been surrendered to Israel when it comes to events in the Middle East may be the contortions of cover-up that followed Israel's attempt to sink the USS Liberty during the Six-Day War in 1967, killing 34 American seamen.

The desire of virtually the entire U.S. political and media establishments was for this unpleasant incident to go away. No one, it seemed, wanted to hold Israel to account or to challenge its lame excuses about an inadvertent mistake. One of the few who eventually did was Navy Admiral and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Thomas Moorer, who helped lead an independent, blue-ribbon commission to investigate what happened to the Liberty.

Those findings were released on Oct. 22, 2003. The introduction and first four findings stated:

"We, the undersigned, having undertaken an independent investigation of Israel's attack on USS Liberty, including eyewitness testimony from surviving crewmembers, a review of naval and other official records, an examination of official statements by the Israeli and American governments, a study of the conclusions of all previous official inquiries, and a consideration of important new evidence and recent statements from individuals having direct knowledge of the attack or the cover up, hereby find the following:

"1. That on June 8, 1967, after eight hours of aerial surveillance, Israel launched a two-hour air and naval attack against USS Liberty, the world's most sophisticated intelligence ship, inflicting 34 dead and 173 wounded American servicemen (a casualty rate of seventy percent, in a crew of 294);

"2. That the Israeli air attack lasted approximately 25 minutes, during which time unmarked Israeli aircraft dropped napalm canisters on USS Liberty's bridge, and fired 30mm cannons and rockets into our ship, causing 821 holes, more than

100 of which were rocket-size; survivors estimate 30 or more sorties were flown over the ship by a minimum of 12 attacking Israeli planes which were jamming all five American emergency radio channels;

"3. That the torpedo boat attack involved not only the firing of torpedoes, but the machine-gunning of Liberty's firefighters and stretcher-bearers as they struggled to save their ship and crew; the Israeli torpedo boats later returned to machine-gun at close range three of the Liberty's life rafts that had been lowered into the water by survivors to rescue the most seriously wounded;

"4. That there is compelling evidence that Israel's attack was a deliberate attempt to destroy an American ship and kill her entire crew; evidence of such intent is supported by statements from Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Undersecretary of State George Ball, former CIA director Richard Helms, former NSA directors Lieutenant General William Odom, USA (Ret.), Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, USN (Ret.), and Marshal Carter; former NSA deputy directors Oliver Kirby and Major General John Morrison, USAF (Ret.); and former Ambassador Dwight Porter, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon in 1967;"

[The signers included Adm. Moorer; General Raymond G. Davis; former Assistant Commandant, United States Marine Corps; Rear Admiral Merlin Staring, United States Navy (Ret.), former Judge Advocate General Of The Navy; and Ambassador James Akins (Ret.) former United States Ambassador to Saudi Arabia.]

The findings went on to make other more general observations about U.S. political subservience to Israel, stating that because of Israel's "powerful supporters in the United States, the White House deliberately covered up the facts of this attack from the American people"; that because of that pressure, the attack was "the only serious naval incident that has never been thoroughly investigated by Congress"; that "there has been an official cover-up without precedent in American naval history"; that "the truth about Israel's attack and subsequent White House cover-up continues to be officially concealed from the American people to the present day and is a national disgrace"; that "a danger to the national security exists whenever our elected officials are willing to subordinate American interests to those of any foreign nation" and that this policy "endangers the safety of Americans and the security of the United States."

### **Frightened Presidents**

Just weeks before his death on Feb. 5, 2004, Adm. Moorer made a final public statement urging that the truth finally be revealed about the attack on the USS Liberty but recognized the behind-the-scenes control that Israel exerts over even the highest U.S. officials:

"I've never seen a President, I don't care who he is, stand up to [Israel] They always get what they want. The Israelis know what is going on all the time. I got to the point where I wouldn't write anything down. If the American people understood what a grip these people have got on our government, they would rise up in arms." [As quoted by Richard Curtiss in "A Changing Image: American Perceptions of the Arab-Israeli Dispute."]

Israeli messages intercepted on June 8, 1967, leave no doubt that sinking the USS Liberty was the mission assigned to the attacking Israeli warplanes and torpedo boats as the Six-Day War raged in the Middle East. Here, for example, is the text of an intercepted Israeli conversation, just one of many pieces of evidence that the Israeli attack was not a mistake but likely a willful attempt to prevent the U.S. government from eavesdropping on Israel's military operations.

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

Ground control: "Yes, follow orders."

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

Ground control: "Never mind; hit it!"

The Israelis might have been able to report "mission accomplished, ship sunk, all crew killed" save for the bravery and surefootedness of 23-year-old Navy seaman Terry Halbardier, whose actions spelled the difference between the murder of 34 of the crew and the intended massacre of all 294.

Halbardier skated across the Liberty's slippery deck while it was being strafed in order to connect a communications cable and enable the Liberty to send out an SOS. The Israelis intercepted that message and, out of fear of how the U.S. Sixth Fleet would respond, immediately broke off the attack, returned to their bases, and sent an "oops" message to Washington confessing to their unfortunate "mistake."

As things turned out, the Israelis didn't need to be so concerned. When President Lyndon Johnson learned that the USS America and USS Saratoga had launched warplanes to do battle with the forces attacking the Liberty, he told Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to call Sixth Fleet Carrier Division Commander Rear Admiral Lawrence Geis and tell him to order the warplanes to return immediately to their carriers.

According to J.Q. "Tony" Hart, a chief petty officer who monitored these conversations from a U.S. Navy communications relay station in Morocco, Geis

shot back that one of his ships was under attack. Tellingly, McNamara responded: "President Johnson is not going to go to war or embarrass an American ally over a few sailors."

John Crewdson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for the Chicago Tribune, asked McNamara about this many years later. McNamara's answer is worth reading carefully; he said he had "absolutely no recollection of what I did that day," except that "I have a memory that I didn't know at the time what was going on."

Crewdson has written the most detailed and accurate account of the Israeli attack on the Liberty; it appeared in the Chicago Tribune, and also in the Baltimore Sun, on Oct. 2, 2007. Read it and you'll understand why Crewdson got no Pulitzer for his investigative reporting on the Liberty. Instead, the Tribune laid him off in November 2008 after 24 years.

On the few occasions when the mainstream U.S. media outlets are forced to address what happened, they blithely ignore the incredibly rich array of hard evidence and still put out the false narrative of the "mistaken" Israeli attack on the Liberty. And they attempt to conflate fact with speculation, asking why Israel would deliberately attack a ship of the U.S. Navy.

Why Tel Aviv wanted the Liberty and its entire crew on the bottom of the Mediterranean remains a matter of speculation, but there are plausible theories including Israel's determination to keep the details of its war plans secret from everyone, including the U.S. government.

On June 25, 2015, The Real News Network interviewed the only U.S. Marine survivor, Sgt. Bryce Lockwood, and me, a CIA analyst in June 1967 responsible for reporting on the activities of the Soviet Union. Paul Jay, the interviewer, made a strong attempt to separate fact from speculation.

Part 1 presents the facts. They include: (1) Israel attacked the USS Liberty by air and sea for two hours on June 8, 1967 during the six-day Israeli-Arab War; (2) The Israelis knew they were attacking a U.S. Navy ship and gave the order to sink it and leave no survivors; (3) The U.S. Navy betrayed its own in obeying White House orders to parrot the Israeli excuse of "mistaken identity." Not one naval officer resigned in protest.

Part 2 of the interview proceeds from those facts; it features speculation regarding what the Israelis may have had in mind in trying to sink the Liberty and leave no survivors. The facts being what they are, it should come as no surprise that trying to put a rationale behind them is a mind-boggling task. And, sad to say, no U.S. official has apparently dared confront the Israelis!

Interviewer Paul Jay, understandably, comes down hard on the obvious need for an

official U.S. investigation. We know from the testimony of some of those who actually took part in the whitewash "investigation" commissioned by Adm. John S. McCain Jr. (father of Sen. John McCain) that it was a travesty.

### **Will the Navy Finally Take Care of Its Own?**

There are some glimmers of hope.

–The annual ceremony on June 8 to honor Liberty crew killed that day has typically been ignored by Navy brass. This year was different. Three senior active duty Navy officers came to pay their respects. They were led by Rear Admiral Nancy A. Norton, Director, Warfare Integration Directorate, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations.

It struck others, as well as me, not only that her presence betokened more interest on the part of the Navy in righting this wrong, but that the admiral seemed genuinely interested herself in digging into what happened and what might be done at this point to properly acknowledge what happened.

–The current chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-California, is one of the few politicians who knows and cares about the attack on the Liberty. Congressman Nunes took the initiative to facilitate the awarding of a Silver Star to Terry Halbardier, the seaman from Texas who did what was necessary to save what remained of the crew and ship. He had to slosh through a lake of napalm and dodge Israeli strafing of the deck to hook up the cable needed to broadcast the SOS.

Halbardier was finally honored on May 27, 2009 42 years late but better late than never at the small award ceremony in Rep. Nunes's office in Visalia, California. The Republican congressman pinned the Silver Star next to the Purple Heart that Halbardier found in his home mailbox three years before.

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 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. I was able to be there that day; seldom have I experienced a more poignant moment.

Congressman Nunes, by virtue of the powerful position he now holds as chair of the House Intelligence Committee, is in position to extend recognition and gratitude to the rest of the Liberty crew, whether alive or dead. (Halbardier

died last August.)

–Israel’s seizure of the Swedish boat Marianne in international waters on June 29 en route to Gaza brought back bitter memories of the torpedo attack on the USS Liberty. The Marianne’s passengers and crew were taken to the Israeli naval base of Ashdod the same base from which three Israeli torpedo boats sailed at noon (local time) on June 8, 1967 with explicit orders to join Israeli Air Force fighter-bombers already engaged in trying to sink the USS Liberty.

Most of the 34 Liberty crew killed that day died when one of the five torpedoes fired by the Ashdod-based torpedo boats hit the Liberty. Sgt. Lockwood, who was in the process of throwing sensitive material and equipment over board, lost all the Marines under his command in that attack. According to Lockwood, the wheel from the torpedo boat that fired the killing torpedo has been on display at the Israeli Navy Museum in Haifa along with a life raft the Israeli boats picked up on their way back to Ashdod adding insult to injury.

Would it be too much to expect that, after the latest Israeli crime on the high seas on June 29, a Navy admiral might find his voice and pick up where Adm. Moorer left off? My candidate would be the unsung patriot who helped prevent the war on Iran that Vice President Dick Cheney and President George W. Bush were still planning for 2008, their last year in office, despite the unanimous conclusion of the U.S. intelligence community that Iran was not working on a nuclear weapon.

It took some guts to say, as Admiral William J. “Fox” Fallon did in early March 2008, an attack on Iran “isn’t going to happen on my watch” as CENTCOM commander for which he was unceremoniously replaced by a far-more-malleable general named David Petraeus, a former insubordinate subordinate for whom Fallon had a personal as well as a policy dislike. After his first meeting with Petraeus a year earlier in Baghdad, Fallon reportedly sized him up as an “ass-kissing little chickenshit.”

Assuming there is no Omerta code for Navy admirals (at least not for retirees) why should we hesitate to encourage Adm. Fallon to push for a proper investigation of the attack on the USS Liberty. Perhaps while Israel’s most recent act of piracy is fresh in some minds, Fallon could reboot the process of righting the wrong done to the USS Liberty crew.

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