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*Editor*

Harriet Dashiell Schwar

*General Editor*

Edward C. Keefer

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284. Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency<sup>1</sup>

SC No. 01415/67

Washington, June 13, 1967.

THE ISRAELI ATTACK ON THE USS *LIBERTY*

The US Naval technical research ship *Liberty* was attacked by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats off the Sinai Peninsula on 8 June. The following account of the circumstances of the attack has been compiled from all available sources.

1. The *Liberty* reported at 9:50 a.m. (2:50 a.m. Washington time) on 8 June that it had been orbited by two delta-wing jet fighters, presumably Israeli Mirages. At 3:05 p.m. (8:05 a.m.) the *Liberty* was strafed by unidentified jet aircraft. The *Liberty* apparently was not able to establish communications with other units of the US Sixth Fleet during the air attack, and the first information available to the US commanders was after the subsequent attack by unidentified torpedo boats, which occurred at 3:25 p.m.

2. At 4:11 p.m. (9:11 a.m.) the US Commander in Chief, Europe, notified the National Military Command Center in Washington that the *Liberty* was under attack and was listing to starboard after being struck by a torpedo. The Commander of the US Sixth Fleet declared the attacking units hostile and sent attack aircraft from the carriers *America* and *Saratoga* to protect the *Liberty*. A good part of the ship's communications equipment was destroyed by the crew during the attack but emergency communications were soon established with the *Saratoga* and with the naval communications station in Greece. Because of the tenseness of the situation and the communications delays, the initial reports from the *Liberty* were sketchy and somewhat confusing.

*Specifics of the Attack*

3. According to these reports, however, the sequence of events took place as follows. The ship was attacked at 3:05 p.m. (8:05 a.m.) by

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Middle East Crisis, CIA Intelligence Memoranda. Top Secret; Trine; No Foreign Dissem. Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Intelligence. A covering memorandum from Helms to the President states that it was the "special study" he had requested the previous evening. Helms' notes of the June 12 meeting of the NSC Special Committee indicate that the President requested a "special study on strafing & torpedoing of USS *Liberty*—pilot conversations, etc.—everything we can get—NSA, etc." (Central Intelligence Agency Files, DCI Files: Job 80-B01285A, Box 11, Folder 12, DCI (Helms) Miscellaneous Notes of Meetings, 1 Jan 1966–31 Dec 1968) Rostow sent a preliminary version of this report to the President at 12:45 p.m. on June 13 with a covering memorandum calling it "CIA's first cut at the problem" and noting, "They do not find evidence of U.S. identification before the attack." (Ibid.)

unidentified jet fighters, believed to be Israeli, at position 31-35N, 33-29E. Six strafing runs were made by the jets. Twenty minutes later three torpedo boats closed at high speed and two of them launched torpedoes after first circling the *Liberty*. One torpedo passed astern, and the other struck the starboard side of the ship in the spaces occupied by the SIGINT collectors. One of the boats was later identified as Israeli and the hull number of one unit was noted as 206-T. Some 50 minutes later two Israeli helicopters arrived on the scene.

#### *Israeli Identification of the Ship*

4. None of the communications of the attacking aircraft and torpedo boats is available, but the intercepted conversations between the helicopter pilots and the control tower at Hatzor (near Tel Aviv) leave little doubt that the Israelis failed to identify the *Liberty* as a US ship before or during the attack. Control told (helicopter) 815 at 3:31 p.m. (8:31 a.m.) that "there is a warship there which we attacked. The men jumped into the water from it. You will try to rescue them." Although there were other references to a search for the men in the water and although US units later searched the area, no survivors were recovered from the sea, nor were there any indications that any of the 22 missing personnel from the *Liberty* had been lost overboard.

5. A subsequent message from the control tower to the helicopter identified the ship as Egyptian and told the pilot to return home. Although the *Liberty* is some 200 feet longer than the Egyptian transport *El Quesir*, it could easily be mistaken for the latter vessel by an overzealous pilot. Both ships have similar hulls and arrangements of masts and stack.

6. The weather was clear in the area of attack, the *Liberty's* hull number (GTR 5) was prominently displayed, and an American flag was flying. The helicopter pilot was then urgently requested to identify the survivors as Egyptian or English speaking (this being the first indication that the Israelis suspected they may have attacked a neutral ship). The helicopter pilot reported seeing an American flag on the *Liberty*. In another intercept between an unidentified Israeli controller and the helicopter number 815, the pilot reported that number GTR 5 was written on the ship's side. The controller told the pilot the number had no significance.

7. Thus it was not until 4:12 p.m. (9:12 a.m.) that the Israelis became convinced that the *Liberty* was American. This was about 44 minutes after the last attack on the ship and the attack had apparently been called off, not because the ship had been identified, but because it seemed to be sinking. (The US Defense Attaché in Tel Aviv reports that Israeli helicopters and the three torpedo boats searched the area until 6:04 p.m. (11:04 a.m.)) The Israeli offer of assistance was declined

because of the sensitive mission of the ship. According to US Navy reports, the ship was saved only through the efforts of her crew.

*Damage and Personnel Losses*

8. The ship suffered heavy material and personnel casualties. A hole estimated to be 39 feet wide at the bottom and 24 feet wide at the top near the waterline was opened by a torpedo. The ship is flooded below the second deck between frames 52 and 78 (36-inch frame spacing). The crew carried out emergency destruction of classified communications and radar equipment, but the ship's engineering plant is intact. Several flash fires and cannon holes throughout the superstructure caused some minor damage and the ship's motor whale boat and virtually all of its life rafts were lost. Personnel casualties include 10 killed, 90 wounded, and 22 missing, most of whom were probably trapped in the flooded compartments. The wounded and the dead have been removed from the ship and some additional crew members put aboard. The ship is expected to arrive in Malta on 14 June for dry docking and hull repairs. Security precautions are being taken to protect the classified intercept equipment in the flooded spaces. The US Navy has convened a board of inquiry to look into the incident.

*The Ship and Its Orders*

9. The USS *Liberty* is a converted Victory class merchant ship utilized as a SIGINT collector. The unit had moved from its normal station off West Africa to provide additional SIGINT coverage of the Middle East crisis. Official US statements, however, have described the *Liberty* as an electronics research ship which had been diverted to the crisis area to act as a radio relay station for US embassies.

10. The *Liberty* sailed from Rota, Spain, on 2 June under orders to patrol no closer than 12.5 miles of the UAR coast and 6.5 miles of the Israeli coast. A modification of orders issued by the Commander of the US Sixth Fleet at 12:17 p.m. (5:17 a.m.) on 8 June had not been received aboard the *Liberty*, according to the ship's commanding officer, before the Israeli attack. This change, together with messages from other commands which ordered the *Liberty* to approach no closer than 100 miles of the coasts of the UAR and Israel and 25 miles of the coast of Cyprus, was delayed in transmission in part because of a misunderstanding of responsibilities for delivery.

11. At annex is a listing of events in chronological order.

## Annex

## CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

(Stated times are local; Washington times in parentheses)

- 2 June 1967 *Liberty* departed Rota, Spain en route to position 32-00N, 33-00E, to remain 12.5 miles from Egyptian coast and 6.5 miles from Israeli coast.
- 8 June 2:50 a.m.  
(7 June 7:50 p.m.) CINCUSNAVEUR Duty Officer received phone instructions from Joint Reconnaissance Center directing *Liberty* to comply with COMSIXTH-FLEET 100-mile operating area restriction.
- 8 June 9:50 a.m.  
(2:50 a.m.) *Liberty* was orbited by two unidentified delta wing single engine jet fighters, presumably Israeli Mirages.
- 8 June 12:17 p.m.  
(5:17 a.m.) COMSIXTHFLEET orders *Liberty* at least 100 miles away from coast of UAR and Israel and 25 miles from Cyprus. This message apparently not received by *Liberty* prior to Israeli attack.
- 8 June 3:05 p.m.  
(8:05 a.m.) *Liberty* attacked by unidentified jet fighters which made six strafing runs. Ship at position 31-35.5N 33-29.0E (25 miles northeast of nearest land).
- 8 June 3:25 p.m.  
(8:25 a.m.) Three torpedo boats, one identified as Israeli, approach ship. One boat bore number 206-T.
- 8 June 3:27 p.m.  
(8:27 a.m.) *Liberty* fires at torpedo boat at range of 2,000 yards.
- 8 June 3:28 p.m.  
(8:28 a.m.) Ship hit by torpedo. Torpedo boats cleared to east about five miles.
- 8 June 3:30 p.m.  
(8:30 a.m.) COMSIXTHFLEET reports *Liberty* hit by torpedo at position 31-23N, 33-25E. Three unidentified gunboats approaching.
- 8 June 3:31 p.m.  
(8:31 a.m.) Hatzor air control (near Tel Aviv) told helicopters (two) to try to rescue men who had jumped into the water from "warship which we attacked."
- 8 June 3:34 p.m.  
(8:34 a.m.) Israeli helicopter identified ship as "definitely Egyptian." Helicopters ordered back to base.
- 8 June 3:39 p.m.  
(8:39 a.m.) Hatzor control told helicopter to rescue men.

8 June 3:50 p.m. (8:50 a.m.)	COMSIXTHFLEET orders carriers to provide air cover for <i>Liberty</i> .
8 June 3:52 p.m. (8:52 a.m.)	<i>Liberty</i> reported under attack to COMSIXTH-FLEET.
8 June 3:55 p.m. (8:55 a.m.)	<i>Liberty</i> reported hit by torpedo starboard side (National Security Agency (NSA) follow-up to Critic, probably a delayed report).
8 June 3:55 p.m. (8:55 a.m.)	Two Israeli helicopters orbited ship at range of 500 yards. Israeli torpedo boats offered assistance which was refused.
8 June 3:59 p.m. (8:59 a.m.)	<i>Liberty</i> still under air attack (NSA follow-up to Critic).
8 June 3:59 p.m. (8:59 a.m.)	Hatzor control told helicopter to clarify the nationality of the first man he brings up.
8 June 4:02 p.m. (9:02 a.m.)	Helicopter reports (to Hatzor) a big ship and three small ships about a mile from the helicopter. (This places the torpedo boats about eight miles from <i>Liberty</i> .)
8 June 4:07 p.m. (9:07 a.m.)	Hatzor told helicopters if men were Egyptians to take them to El Arish; if they spoke English and were not Egyptians, to take them to Lydda.
8 June 4:10 p.m. (9:10 a.m.)	Hatzor told helicopter again to clarify nationality. (It appears from the obvious importance of this question that the Israelis suspected they may have hit an American or British and not an Egyptian ship.)
8 June 4:10 p.m. (9:10 a.m.)	Hull number of <i>Liberty</i> seen by Israeli helicopter pilot who did not recognize significance.
8 June 4:12 p.m. (9:12 a.m.)	Hatzor asked helicopter, "Did it clearly signal an American flag?" and later requested helicopter to make another pass and check again whether it was really an American flag.
8 June 4:16 p.m. (9:16 a.m.)	Hatzor orders helicopters to return to El Arish.
8 June 5:14 p.m. (10:14 a.m.)	Tel Aviv reports Israeli aircraft and patrol boats attacked ship at 3:00 p.m. (8:00 a.m.) at position 31-25N, 33-33E. Suspecting a U.S. ship, Israel rendering assistance and expresses deep regret.

8 June 6:04 p.m.  
(11:04 a.m.)

The US Defense Attaché in Tel Aviv reports that Israeli helicopters and the three torpedo boats searched the area until 6:04 p.m. (11:04 a.m.). The Israeli offer of assistance was declined because of the sensitive mission of the ship.

COMSIXTHFLEET then recalled the aircraft launched from the carriers *America* and *Saratoga* and sent two destroyers to assist *Liberty*. *Liberty* proceeding north-west at eight knots.

There was no further contact between *Liberty* and Israeli forces. Two Soviet ships have trailed the *Liberty*, which proceeds under escort to Malta.

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317. Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central  
Intelligence Agency<sup>1</sup>

SC 08384-67

Washington, June 21, 1967.

SUBJECT

The Israeli Statement on the Attack on the USS *Liberty*

1. The preliminary report of the special Court of Inquiry convened by the Government of Israel has concluded that the "attack on the USS

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Central Intelligence Agency Files: Job 85-01007R, Box 5, Folder 50. Top Secret; Trine. Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Intelligence.



*Liberty* was not in malice; there was no criminal negligence and the attack was made by innocent mistake." The report, however, has been turned over to the military judge advocate who has ordered a preliminary judicial inquiry by an officer empowered to convene court martial.

2. According to the Israeli findings a chain of three regrettable mistakes led to the attack by Israeli jets and torpedo boats upon the USS *Liberty* on 8 June 1967.

#### *First Mistake*

3. The first mistake was decisive and set the scenario for the subsequent errors. On the basis of erroneous reports, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) was convinced that Israeli positions near El Arish were being shelled by an unidentified vessel off the coast. However, "even the officers who knew of the identification of *Liberty* early the same morning did not connect *Liberty* with the unidentified ships said to be shelling El Arish."

4. (CIA has no evidence of these erroneous reports, but the information is plausible in light of the very speedy Israeli advance and the heat of battle in the El Arish area. The UAR Navy is not known to have shelled Israeli shore positions on 8 June. The above admission that Israelis had identified the *Liberty*—presumably following the overflight by jets at 9:50 AM (2:50 PM EDT)—is the first indication that the Israelis knew the *Liberty* was in the area prior to the attack.)

#### *Second Mistake*

5. The three Israeli torpedo boats patrolling near the *Liberty* reported that the unidentified vessel was steaming at 28-30 knots. A check of *Liberty's* maximum speed in *Jane's* led IDF headquarters to believe that the unidentified (radar) target was a high speed combatant and not the *Liberty*. Considering the erroneous information on the shelling of Israeli coastal positions, the IDF asked the torpedo boats to verify the unidentified vessel's speed and then ordered an air attack.

6. (It is most bizarre that a qualified naval commander would twice compute *Liberty's* speed to be 30 knots or that the IDF would authorize an attack solely on the basis of an unidentified high speed contact. There is not a ship of *Liberty's* general appearance capable of such a speed and few have deck guns capable of shelling coastal installations. If the authorization to attack was made solely on radar tracking, the attacking aircraft would normally make a preliminary identification pass over the ship.)

#### *Third Mistake*

7. The Israeli torpedo boats then joined the fray. They claimed they mistook the *Liberty* for the Egyptian transport *El Quesir* and attacked

with torpedoes after the jets had broken off. This attack is laid to the overeagerness of the torpedo boat skippers as the jet pilots were already having their doubts as to the ship's identity. The Israelis further state that the *Liberty* refused to answer a challenge sent by flashing light prior to the attack by the torpedo boats and the ship was firing toward the Israeli torpedo boats.

8. (CIA concurs that the torpedo attack was made by overeager Israeli commanders. There have been no US Navy reports of the visual challenge—probably issued in the heat of battle—but if such a challenge were received it would have been answered.)

9. A partial explanation for some of this unprofessional military performance is found in a report from Tel Aviv that at least one of the officers aboard the torpedo boats was a reservist recalled to service during the mobilization. In light of the demonstrated Israeli military capabilities, however, it is difficult [to] attribute all of the contributing errors to inept personnel.

(Sources: USDAO Tel Aviv 0928/1 Jun 67, 18 Jun, Confidential USDAO Tel Aviv 0933, Jun 67, Secret No Foreign Dissem CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Israeli Attack on the USS *Liberty*," SC No. 01415/67, Top Secret Trine

#### *General Comments*

10. The findings of the Israeli Court of Inquiry generally are consonant with the conclusions made in the CIA Intelligence Memorandum. It is now known, however, that the IDF Headquarters had identified the *Liberty*, probably more than four hours before the attack. The Israelis presumably thought the vessel they were attacking not to be the *Liberty*, for it is also clear that when the initial attack took place the ground controllers and the pilots believed the ship to be a belligerent. In addition, the Israelis have admitted that the jets were ordered to attack the unidentified vessel and, therefore, the *Liberty* was not taken under fire by overzealous pilots, acting on their own. We do not know if they had been advised of the presence of the *Liberty* in these waters.

11. Two rather incongruous statements in the findings of the Court of Inquiry only detract from their explanation. The Israelis offer as a reason for the air attack a standing IDF order authorizing an attack upon any ship steaming at a speed above 20 knots if Israeli ships or shore positions in the area are being shelled. To say the least, it is questionable military policy to authorize an attack upon an unidentified ship based solely upon a radar track of over 20 knots and erroneous reports that Israeli positions were being shelled. The Israeli statement that the *Liberty* could not be identified because it was covered with smoke also

is a piece of self-serving over rationalization. Clearly the smoke was the result of the Israeli attacks.

12. In light of the findings of the Israeli Court of Inquiry, we conclude that our previous statement that "the Israelis did not identify the *Liberty* as a US ship until some 44 minutes after the second attack" is in error. The *Liberty* had been identified prior to the attacks, but the Israelis were apparently not aware that they were attacking the *Liberty*. The attack was not made in malice toward the US and was by mistake, but the failure of the IDF Headquarters and the attacking aircraft to identify the *Liberty* and the subsequent attack by the torpedo boats were both incongruous and indicative of gross negligence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A DIA memorandum of June 13 to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff states: "There is no available information which would conclusively show that the Israelis made a premeditated attack on a ship known to be American. In fact the best interpretation we can make of the available facts is that Israeli command and control in this instance was defective." A June 28 addendum to the memorandum states that further information had clarified the sequence of events but failed to show that the attack had been premeditated and did not alter the interpretation of the incident in the prior memorandum.

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