

A black and white photograph of the USS Liberty (AGOS-13) at sea. The ship is a large, grey-hulled vessel with a complex superstructure featuring multiple masts, radar domes, and antennas. The hull number 'GTR 5' is visible on the side. The ship is positioned in the foreground, with other vessels and a port facility visible in the background under an overcast sky.

BEFORE

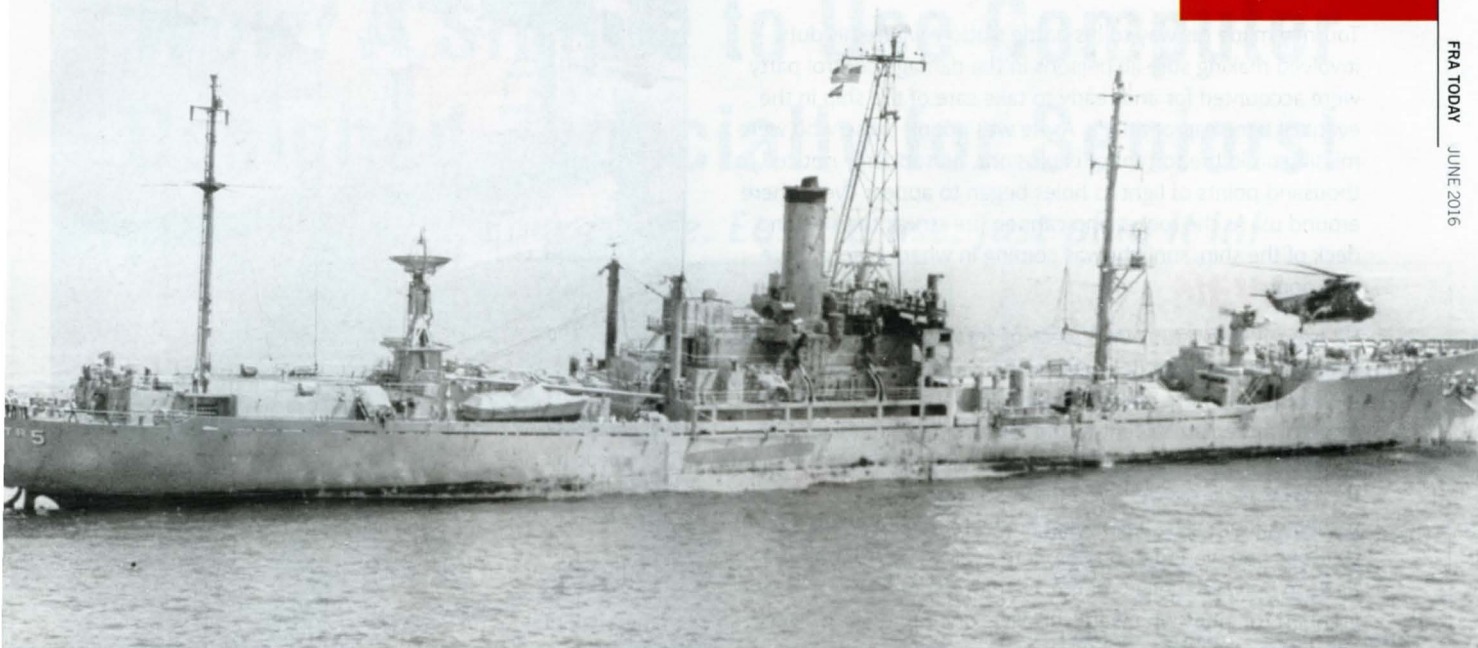
THE USS LIBE

Photos courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command

By
Ernie Gallo,
Phil Tourney
and Lauren
Armstrong

On June 8, 1967, the USS *Liberty* was attacked by Israeli Defense Forces while she was in international waters. The Israeli government said the U.S. vessel had been mistakenly identified as an Egyptian horse carrier and that the attack was a case of mistaken identity — “a tragic accident.” A U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry confirmed the Israeli position, but surviving crewmembers, including several FRA shipmates, wholeheartedly believe the attack was an intentional and willful act that killed 34 Americans and wounded 174 others. Survivors have fought for the past 49 years to have their perspective heard and a proper investigation undertaken. This is their story.

The USS *Liberty* was a technical research ship, equipped with the day’s latest technology and manned by Navy communications technicians (CTs) and other specialized crew members who held high-level security clearances. A repurposed WWII Victory cargo ship, she was lightly armed with four .50 caliber machine guns for repelling boarders. Her military mission in 1967 was to monitor, intercept, and record all radio transmissions in the ambient ether. In the days leading up to Israel’s Six-Day War with several Arab nations, she was positioned off the coast of Egypt. Although the United States remained neutral in the conflict, *Liberty’s* crew continued recovering and reporting on communications traffic in the area.



LIBERTY STORY

THE SURVEILLANCE

June 8, 1967, dawned bright and clear, providing morning watchstanders an unencumbered view of the Israeli photo-reconnaissance aircraft that flew over the ship in the early hours of the day. These planes subjected the ship to intense scrutiny for six hours, as they conducted multiple flights over the ship, sometimes as low as 200 feet above the deck, and orbited *Liberty's* position. Like all U.S. military vessels, *Liberty* had traditional American markings: a hull number (GTR-5) on her bow and her name (USS *LIBERTY*) emblazoned across her stern. She was also flying a large U.S. flag that was standing out in the breeze on this sunny day.

Firefighter Specialist Third Class (SPF3) Phil Tourney (FRA member at large) was assigned to Sounding and Security aboard *Liberty*, which meant he was responsible for making sure the tanks of potable water were good and checking the watertight integrity of the ship. He was below decks when the "visitors" arrived, but his shipmates told him about the planes, which "were unquestionably Israeli, as the Star of David was easy to see. The guys described them as low and slow, and there was a general belief amongst the crew that Washington and Tel Aviv were working together to make sure we were safe. Knowing our 'friends' were checking on us caused the general mood to improve drastically."

THE AIR ATTACK

At approximately 1400 hours, with *Liberty* about 17 miles off the Gaza coast, the ship's radar crew observed three high-speed aircraft heading toward the ship. Without warning, the fighter aircraft launched an attack on *Liberty*, assaulting the ship with rockets, cannon fire and napalm for approximately 25 minutes.

Larry Bowen (FRA Member at Large) was a 21-year-old CT2 Radioman in the Radio Research shop, when he "heard what sounded like large, heavy deck chains being dragged across the deck. It was rocket and gunfire coming from the Israeli strafing attack. We heard the General Quarters call, followed by 'This is not a drill.' I was below decks, so I didn't have a visual perspective, but there were several flights that sent rockets, armor-piercing .50 caliber rounds, cannon fire and napalm down on us."

Tourney was returning to his workstation in the shipfitter's shop when the attack began. "As soon as I stepped in and closed the hatch, I heard an order over the PA to test the motor whale boat. A few moments after that, I heard a huge explosion right next to the hatch I'd just closed. The only logical explanation in my mind was that whoever was carrying out that order had done something wrong and the whale boat had blown up. The idea that we were under attack was the farthest thing from my mind."

Tourney made his way to his battle station, where his duty involved making sure all persons in the damage control party were accounted for and ready to take care of the ship in the event of a mishap or attack. As he was noting those who were missing amid the torrent of explosions, he suddenly noticed "a thousand points of light as holes began to appear everywhere around us. As the rocket and cannon fire struck the side and deck of the ship, sunlight was coming in where before there was none."

He was hit with a four-inch piece of shrapnel before he moved his party to the main deck. "We were not prepared for what we would see there," he continued. He and his shipmate Rick Aimetti immediately went to the forward gun tub to look for survivors. "I saw nothing but a pile of human remains. We knew there was no life to be saved there, so we moved on ... all while machine gun bullets and rocket fire were raining down on us. Dead and wounded bodies were everywhere on the main deck. In between volleys of fire, we darted out from safe cover, grabbed the ones who were still alive, one at a time, dragged them across the deck and threw them down the hatch. Others down below picked them up and took them someplace where they could be treated."

Once the decks were cleared, Tourney was ordered to the log room, the location of Damage Control Central. "As was standard procedure, my supervisor was burning documents to prevent the enemy from getting any useful information. I kept thinking, 'Who but an enemy would be attacking us?'"

He then went to the bridge, where he saw that Captain William McGonagle was badly wounded in the leg, but still calmly and professionally in command. "There were rocket and cannon holes everywhere, and burning napalm was dripping through the holes and into the bridge compartment," he recalls. The CO2 canisters were basically useless against the intense heat of the napalm fires, so he requested a fire team with water hoses. "In hindsight, I realize this was just a waste of time, since the hoses had been shot up like a snake hit with birdshot."

He left the bridge to secure more CO2 canisters and, upon his return, he slipped in something wet and fell violently on his back. When he got up, he realized he had slipped in the blood of his good friend Francis Brown, who'd been shot in the head. "It's something no human being should ever have to see, especially when it's your good friend. My first thought was, 'Those Arab bastards just blew my friend to pieces.' How could I have thought otherwise? I figured this attack [on our ship] was the Arabs' last gasp after having just gotten their clocks cleaned by the Israelis [who waged a sneak attack on the Arab nations on June 5th as part of the Six-Day War] and they'd naturally be unhappy with America. We were a defenseless ship and an easy target. It would be like a turkey shoot for them, giving them a trophy to hang on the wall and talk about years later in order to lessen the sting of what was such a humiliating loss." Tourney's suspicions were strengthened when he learned that



The torpedo hit *Liberty* at and below the waterline, creating a 24- by 39-foot hole in her hull.

the attacking aircraft had no markings on them.

At the beginning of the attack, the *Liberty's* radiomen and electronic technicians attempted to send a May day. Their SOS did not identify the attacker, as it was unknown at that time. The transmission antenna had been damaged during the initial stages of the attack, but a makeshift antenna was rigged and calls for help were sent. There is reason to believe that those distress signals were jammed by the attackers, but eventually the calls for backup were received and, about 15 minutes into the Israeli air attack, the USS *Saratoga* responded by launching fighter aircraft to assist *Liberty*. Although the crew wouldn't learn of it until later, the rescue flights were aborted within minutes after launch.

"The White House recalled all aircraft, abandoning the USS *Liberty* and subjecting her to an additional hour of an Israeli turkey shoot," says Ernie Gallo, who was a CT2 at the time of the attack. "In disbelief, RADM Raymond Geis, Sixth Fleet Carrier Division Commander, challenged the order, as was his right and responsibility in this situation. Unbelievably, the White House reaffirmed the order to recall all aircraft despite *Liberty's* plea for help. Without a full and complete investigation, it cannot be determined if Sixth Fleet aircraft would have prevented the subsequent Israeli torpedo boat attack, that accounted for 25 of the 34 crew deaths that day."

Gallo didn't personally hear the exchange, but he and other crewmembers quote President Johnson's reported command: "Recall the damn planes. I don't care who dies; I'm not going to embarrass my allies."

"USS *America* was able to communicate with Washington, D.C., and had an open line with President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The order to recall the United States strike force was given by McNamara," says Bob Casale, who reported to *Liberty* in 1964 as a CT2. He was not aboard during the attack, but has done considerable research and estimates the air attack was ending at about the same time U.S.

jets left the USS *Saratoga*. Casale and many of his shipmates believe that if the U.S. jets had not been recalled, they would have arrived on the scene about the same time Israeli torpedo boats were posturing for their attack on *Liberty*. They contend that, if the American jets had been deployed as originally ordered, the 25 deaths that resulted from the torpedo blast might have been prevented.

THE TORPEDO ATTACK

When the jets realized they couldn't sink *Liberty*, they called off the attack and left. Before the crew could breathe a sigh of relief, Captain McGonagle came over the intercom, ordering the crew to prepare for a torpedo hit, starboard side.

"I could see the torpedo boats coming at us at a high rate of speed," Tourney recalls. "Unlike the jets, the boats were proudly flying their flag with its Star of David. I initially breathed a sigh of relief, foolishly thinking that our beloved ally had scared off the jets and were coming to our rescue. That delusion lasted for only a minute, until I saw the splash of several torpedoes being dropped in the water as they headed toward us. Unable to find a big enough vein during the air assault, the vampire now moved to a different part of our neck, searching out the jugular."

Three torpedo boats fired 40mm cannons and launched five torpedoes at *Liberty*. Since she was a virtually unarmed vessel and not a military threat, at no time did the torpedo boats request the *Liberty* surrender.

The crew braced themselves in "torpedo attack mode, which meant bending your knees and elbows, putting your hands against the bulkhead and relaxing your neck. This last action is nearly impossible when you know that death is approaching," says Tourney.

Many crewmembers credit their skipper for his skill and professionalism under pressure. "Realizing *Liberty* was in immediate danger, [McGonagle] took evasive action and yelled to Helmsman Frank Brown to make a hard left," notes Casale from his research. This action forced four of the five torpedoes to miss the ship, but the fifth found its mark, "striking *Liberty* on the starboard side, a little forward of the bridge [piercing the hull at the waterline]."

"I was directly above the explosion ... a mere eight feet away ... and it was literally deafening," says Tourney. "My eardrums were blown out, something I live with to this day as a reminder of what happened. My feet remained on the floor and, at the same time, I was airborne. We all were, because the ship was picked completely up out of the water by the force of the explosion. When it came back down, it bounced like ball that had been tossed onto the pavement."

Even with his impaired hearing, Tourney could hear "moaning, groaning and wailing ... not of wounded men, but rather of a

wounded ship, as metal gave way to the rush of sea water in the compartment directly below me." Grateful that the torpedo hadn't hit the engine room and blown the *Liberty* to bits, Tourney still braced himself as the ship settled and began to list. "It seemed impossible that she would not go down, but miraculously ... and I do mean *miraculously* ... she steadied herself."

Bowen was one deck above the secure Communications section and the Process and Reporting (P&R) shop, which was where the torpedo hit, at and below the water level. "We were thrown from the deck to the overhead and back, as was a lot of the equipment. Many suffered concussions and injuries as a result. And the torpedo hit knocked out all our [electrical power]. We immediately realized that the shipmates below needed to be evacuated from the research spaces that had been hit. Lt. Maurice Bennett sent me to secure the entrance to the research space, which was restricted to CTs. I was positioned at the door to ensure security and also to hand out life jackets to those who were evacuated from the flooded compartment.

"When we believed we'd gotten all the surviving crew out of the compartment, the water was four or five inches from coming over the hatch. Lt. Bennett yelled in, asking if anyone was still down there. He told them to bang on something if they weren't able to yell." Bowen's voice catches as he continues, "After 49 years, that memory is just as vivid as if it happened yesterday. Bennett gave the command to dog down the hatch. If he hadn't, we would have sunk. He had to do it to save the ship and the rest of the crew."

After helping to secure the Comm spaces, Tourney and Aimetti returned to the main deck and where they helped get survivors to a hatch or corner that might provide some protection as they fought for their lives. The fight wasn't over yet.

"Now, instead of the jets firing at us with machine guns, it was the gunner aboard the torpedo boats," recalls Tourney. "They circled the ship like vultures and shot at anything that moved; including firefighters or stretcher bearers. It seemed to last forever. They were also shooting at the waterline, as well, right in the direction of the boilers and from no further than 35 yards away. There's no way, from less than 100 feet, they could have missed 'USS LIBERTY' and 'GTR-5' on our hull. It was obvious to me they were trying to blow up the ship by hitting the boilers."

As the captain ordered the crew to prepare to abandon ship, it became even clearer that the attackers were bent to sink the ship and kill the crew. "When we started our voyage from Norfolk, we had enough life rafts for 294 crewmembers. Most of them had been destroyed by rockets, gunfire or napalm and there were only three left ... each large enough to hold about a dozen men," explains Tourney. "I personally jettisoned one of them into the water and watched as all three inflated. A few minutes later, I watched in horror as they were machine-gunned by Israeli gunners. In an act that still makes my blood



When she made her way to Malta, sailors worked tirelessly to clean *Liberty* and salvage whatever they could. The torpedo damage was so extensive, however, the Navy was forced to scrap the vessel.

boil, I watched as one of the destroyed rafts was taken aboard a torpedo boat as a trophy, while the other two were sunk. Those life rafts were intended to evacuate our most seriously wounded and gunning those rafts was a war crime. I realized then that there was no hope for our crew. Israel clearly understood [what they were doing] and they were not about to allow even one of us to live to tell our story."

"The Israeli choice that day was live target practice as the USS *Liberty* could not fight back," recalls Gallo. "The motor torpedo boats leisurely circled our ship, shooting at anything that moved and whatever target suited their whim. It defies logic as to why they expended so many munitions on a defenseless ship unless they were trying to send the United States a message. When they were finished, the *Liberty* was riddled with 821 holes [the size of a man's fist or larger], sustained two napalm bombs, and had a 24- by 39-foot hole in her starboard side from a direct torpedo hit. It was obvious to the *Liberty* crew that survivors were not to be taken."

The revelation that the ship and crew had been attacked by an ally hit hard. "Betrayal is always heartbreaking, especially when it's coming from someone really close to you. I could make no sense of it. The knowledge that this had been done to us by a friend filled me with seething rage," remembers Tourney. "I was determined to do whatever was necessary and at whatever cost to save the ship in whatever way I could. Knowing we had been betrayed by a friend made me stronger. And, as angry as I was at the time, it was nothing compared to when I later learned the terrible truth that we were also betrayed by others even closer to home."

THE HELICOPTER ASSAULT

When the torpedo boats finally left the scene, helicopters were observed overhead with Israeli commandos at the ready. Despite his impaired hearing, Phil Tourney could hear

the unmistakable "whomp whomp" sound of troop-carrying helicopters approaching from the starboard side. When he saw them, he felt they were looming like birds of prey.

"As they approached, a call came over the intercom: 'All ship's personnel prepare to repel boarders.' Aimetti and I went to the arms locker to prepare for a firefight with the few small arms we had on the ship. I couldn't stop the jets or the torpedoes, but, by God, if it was going to be a man-to-man fight with whoever was aboard that helicopter, then I was going to try to make up for lost time. I was filled with such rage that I could envision nothing better than delivering a little payback," says Tourney. Unfortunately, the locker was locked and, though "beaten to death, it would not give. We left the area, unarmed and just as defenseless as we had been earlier when the jets and torpedo boats attacked."

The choppers hovered about 50 feet above the deck; close enough for Tourney to see a "hornet-swollen hive" filled with special forces commandos armed with sub-machine guns and ready for close-quarter combat. "They were not here to give us help. They were going to murder the entire crew and, once we were all dead, they could move about the ship as they pleased to place explosives and sink us all. The perfect crime, leaving no witnesses.

"They were only about 75 feet away and, like a dumbass, I stood in an open doorway, where they had a clear shot at me. I locked eyes with one of my would-be assassins who was sitting on the floor of the helicopter, with his legs hanging out and one foot on the skid as he waited for the order to rappel down to the ship's deck." Helpless and enraged, Tourney stepped out from the doorway and stood on the deck of his battered and bloody ship. "The only thing I could do to let my killers know what I thought about what they'd done to my ship, my friend and my country was to give them the finger. The Israeli with whom I'd locked eyes merely chuckled at the sight of something so impotent and harmless as my middle finger. In the midst of all his machine gun-toting buddies, he simply smiled and gave me the finger back."

They left without apparent reason or warning, sending a wave of euphoria through the crew. A short while later, another helicopter approached the ship and, "like the one before, it hovered above us. A sack was dropped from the helicopter, which was taken to the bridge. Inside were some oranges, along with a card from Commander Cassel, the American attaché for the U.S. Ambassador to Israel. Handwritten on the back of his card was a single line: 'Have you casualties?' Upon reading the card, Capt. McGonagle became furious. He limped out of the enclosed part of the bridge and yelled, 'Get out of here! We don't want any help from you!' This helicopter was hovering above our once-pristine, beautiful ship, now riddled with holes. There's blood all over the place, the deck is covered with body parts and this idiot asks something as inane as 'Have you casualties?' The helicopter left," recalls Tourney. "We had

defeated the beast without firing a shot, but by merely staying alive and remaining afloat."

AFTER THE ATTACK

Miraculously, the *Liberty* refused to sink and was able to get underway on her own power. The crew worked tirelessly through the night to care for the wounded and secure the ship for its voyage to Malta. Despite the USS *Saratoga* and USS *America* being only 15 air minutes from *Liberty*, help did not arrive until 18 hours after the attack.

"We received no immediate air or sea support from Sixth Fleet. We learned later that support had been recalled. We did what we could to keep the ship afloat and prepare her for transport. She was listing and it took us some time to restore power. The next morning, the USS *Davis*, USS *Popago* [and other vessels] arrived, then *America* and *Saratoga* provided support," remembers Bowen. "We eventually headed to Malta in a zig-zagging pattern, with a Soviet vessel trailing us."

USS *Liberty*, one of the most advanced intelligence ships of the day, would eventually be declared a total loss. Besides the loss of life and two-thirds of the crew being wounded, a \$40 million, state-of-the-art signals intelligence platform was later declared unsalvageable and sold for scrap.

THE COVER-UP

Many of the crew believe they were not only betrayed by the Israelis, but also by their own government. It started with the recall of U.S. air support during the early stages of the attack, and after the ship limped into Malta it became apparent that the investigation into the attack was not conducted appropriately.

"We were surprised that the Court of Inquiry didn't include the entire crew. I don't know how many enlisted personnel were included, but certainly not me and certainly not the whole crew," says Bowen.

THE USS LIBERTY VETERANS ASSOCIATION (LVA)

Many of the surviving crewmembers belong to the USS *Liberty* Veterans Association (LVA) and work to pursue the publication of the true story. Readers can contact the LVA at USS *Liberty* Veterans Association, PO Box 680275, Marietta, GA 30068 or by phone at 770-363-3986. To learn more, visit www.ussLiberty.org or www.ussLibertyveterans.org



Exit hole as rocket passed entirely through ship(67)

"You can see by the way the metal is spread that the hole in the hatch was created when a rocket exited. I feel sure the rocket entered on the starboard side and passed through the ship to exit on the port side," says Don Pageler, who shared this photo with *FRA Today*.

"The subsequent U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry was a sham," according to Gallo — a view supported by many *Liberty* crewmembers. "It sorely lacked naval judicial standards (as cited by Rear Admiral Merlin Staring, former Judge Advocate General of the Navy) and was deliberately falsified to complement the Israeli story (as observed by retired Navy Lawyer Captain Ward Boston in a sworn affidavit). Details acquired were either changed or dropped [to reflect Israel's claim] that the attack was a tragic mistake. The orders to falsify came directly from President Johnson. This is obstruction of justice at the highest levels. The rights of 291 military personnel were violated."

"I retired from the Navy in 1986 and then spent another 22 years as a civilian contractor working with the National Security Agency (NSA)," says Bowen. "I had a top secret document in my desk that was released in 1980 or so. NSA folks would tell me to my face that they never believed the attack was a case of mistaken identity, but that document ... the official position ... was that it was just a tragic mistake."

Surviving crewmembers don't buy Israel's claim that they didn't know *Liberty* was an American vessel. In his video essay on the attack (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYjvOhuFr5g>), Casale notes that "the 5 [on the ship's bow] was almost the size of a phone booth. [Fellow crewmember] Jim Ennes could see the pilots, so surely the pilots could see the U.S. flag. *Liberty* radio operators heard the pilots reporting that it was a U.S. ship and could see the flag."

"After the air attack, the captain looked up at the yard arm and noticed that our flag was shot down," echoes Gallo. "He ordered the signalmen to run up our holiday colors — a 9-by-15-foot U.S. flag."

Bowen agrees. "It is impossible for the Israelis NOT to know we were a technical research ship. They flew over us, took photos and they knew what we were doing, which is why they attacked us, in my opinion. In a war, you know who your target

is, just like when you go hunting. There is no doubt among the crew that the attack was deliberate.”

Gallo, who has written a book and numerous essays on the attack, cites more decisive proof. He references three U.S. Air Force intelligence personnel (Ronald Gotcher, Steve Forslund and Richard Block) who observed real-time U.S. Air Force Security Group aircraft translations (Hebrew to English) of intercepted communication between the attacking Israeli fighter pilots and their ground controllers. When the Israeli pilots confirmed the target was American, ground control then ordered the aircraft to attack, sink the target and ensure no survivors. This has been confirmed by other reliable news sources, as well, and Gallo says everything he’s written about the *Liberty* attack “is accurate and can be proven by corroborated individual witness testimony, logical deduction and documentation.”

The survivors of the attack were told never to talk about the incident under penalty of fine and/or imprisonment. This order was followed by a White House directive that Israel not be referenced as the attacker in any documents, monuments and the like. As an example, the USS *Liberty* skipper was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions to keep the ship afloat and operational, saving countless lives. Captain William McGonagle’s award was presented not by President Johnson at the White House, as is customary, but by the Secretary of the Navy at a low level Washington Navy Yard ceremony. His citation lacked any mention of an Israeli attack.

According to *Liberty* crewmember Ron Kukal (FRA Member at Large) and many other survivors of the attack, “USS *Liberty* is the most decorated ship in the U.S. Navy for a single action, but that is rarely mentioned.” Among the awards earned by the officers and crew of the USS *Liberty* are the Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses, 11 Silver Stars, 20 Bronze Stars, nine Navy Commendations, 208 Purple Hearts, 294 Combat Action Ribbons and a Presidential Unit Citation and a Navy “E” Ribbon for Battle Efficiency.

“What gnaws at the crew is that we were abandoned,” says Bowen. “Israel is a key ally, particularly with regard to the Middle East. Politics being what they are, I can understand why we wouldn’t want to embarrass them. But when you choose to protect an ally over defending your own troops, you’re telling those troops that they are, indeed, just cannon fodder.”

MOTIVE

If the attack was intentional, what would be the motive? Why would an ally attack a defenseless American vessel?

There are a variety of theories, but none can be proved or disproved. Many believe the intent was to sink the ship and kill everyone aboard so Egypt would be blamed for the tragedy. This would convince President Johnson and the American

public to join in the fight against Israel’s enemy. Others believe that Israel perceived *Liberty* as a threat to its war agenda to take the Golan Heights, and it didn’t want to risk U.S. involvement or intervention in the Six-Day War.

CONSPIRACY THEORISTS, ANTI-SEMITES AND MORE

Many surviving crewmembers feel they’ve been dishonored by the cover-up. “We’ve been made to appear as bigots and the lies frustrate our efforts to distance ourselves from neo-Nazi organizations [and other anti-Jewish groups],” says Gallo. “Our government put the Israeli relationship over and above the crew and, time after time, the eye witnesses of the attack are called conspiracy theorists. Because the events involved Israel and are compounded by a state lie, we are automatically labeled a bunch of whiners. I guess we are supposed to keep our mouths shut. I suppose if no one was killed or wounded, we could possibly do that. However, [Israel] attempted to murder 294 Americans. We would be remiss as Americans if we did not speak out and our 34 shipmates would have died for nothing.”

Kukal feels the same way. “It’s easy for those who want this kept under wraps to call us names such as anti-Semitic. You can call us what you want, but common sense will tell you that almost three-fourths of the crew were Communications Technicians. All of them, including me, held a security clearance with the government. So we were considered the most trusted men in the Navy. Do you really think we banded together to lie about what we saw? Do you really think that these men banded together after the attack, and decided to become racists and haters of Jews, when some of the crew were Jews?” Kukal and Tourney co-host a radio show on the Republic Broadcasting Network. (Visit <http://republicbroadcasting.org/listen-live/> to listen to the live broadcasts.) “I ran a guy off our show because his remarks were entirely against the Jewish faith. We wouldn’t tolerate his remarks.”

IMPACT

Some survivors haven’t borne these insults, simply because they never let anyone know they experienced this trauma and tragedy. “I’ve never been called anti-Semitic and I’ll tell you why,” explains Bowen. “I never talked about the *Liberty* incident. For 43 years I didn’t speak or write about it. If anything, I was anti-government. I was angry that the government didn’t get the true story out, but I just kept my mouth shut because I didn’t want to lose my [security] clearances.”

Shortly after the attack, Phil Tourney got a letter and a check from the State Department. “They said, ‘Here’s \$300 for your wounds, sign this document that says you agree to never sue



Members of the USS *Liberty* Veterans Association gather regularly to reconnect with their shipmates and supporters.

the state of Israel.' I was a scared kid at 21 and I signed it. I just wanted it all to go away."

But Tourney understands now that it never really goes away. "After it was all over and I was debriefed, they said 'You've got the highest security clearance anybody can get in this country. When you walk away, never talk about this to anybody, including your family.' So for 20 years, I kept it all bottled up inside."

Larry Bowen still gets choked up when recalling the need to seal the hatch and won't forget his efforts to find and identify the body of his "good friend, Bob Eisenburg — a 23-year-old Jewish kid from Minnesota. Bob was supposed to separate from the Navy in August." It took Bowen nearly five decades, but he finally located Bob's family and was able to tell Bob's nephew that he'd died instantly and hadn't suffered.

Don Pageler (FRA Branch 175, Orange County, Calif.) was a 21-year-old Navy seaman assigned as a CT on *Liberty* when it departed from Norfolk in May of 1967. He witnessed the same trauma, horror and fear as his shipmates and carried tremendous guilt afterward. He was very young and did as he was told, but he felt like that wasn't enough.

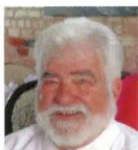
"One of the guilt trips I laid on myself was that I don't have the right to feel sorry for myself. I felt guilty because all I did was survive. I felt like I should have been able to grab those planes out of the sky, slam them down in the water and [make them stop]. During the attack you have a job to do. You can't fall down and start crying. After the attack, you've got to help the wounded and get the ship to port. You've got to get the thing cleaned up. I think you get yourself in a habit of [knowing you just need to carry on]. Pretty soon, it becomes the easier thing to do, instead of having to deal with it. When I got home, I didn't really want to talk about it, but as time goes on, all those bad feelings keep wanting to come out."

CONCLUSION

The crew of the USS *Liberty* did everything possible not to give up their ship and fought the only way they could by maintaining vital engineering propulsion machinery, water tight integrity and most of all, helping keep their wounded shipmates alive. Individual survivors have different perspectives on the attack and how it impacted the rest of their lives, but most agree that they simply want the truth to be known.

"Our frustration remains that our government didn't do what they had a legal requirement to do and that's to conduct a legitimate inquiry into the attack," summarizes Bowen. "I don't think there's any need to discredit anyone. We're not anti-Jew or anti-Israel, just disappointed that the two governments couldn't get together and tell the truth. We don't expect any additional compensation; we just want the American public to know the truth. I don't believe it will ever happen, but I think that might bring closure or appease some of my shipmates. There are some who will never get over it.

"I lived through it and I'll never forget," he continues. "It's painful to recall it and brings tears to my eyes sometimes, but that's part of getting through it. The bond between the *Liberty* shipmates is extremely strong. We lived through it together; we're brothers and that bond will never be broken."



Ernest A. Gallo is a USS *Liberty* survivor and a member and former president of the USS *Liberty* Veterans Association. He is also the author of *Liberty Injustices – A Survivor's Account of American Bigotry* and can be reached at ernie7900@aol.com



Phillip Francis Tourney is a three-time president of the USS *Liberty* Veterans Association and author of *What I Saw That Day*. He can be reached at tonktime5@tds.net



Lauren Armstrong is the Contributing Editor and Member of the FRA Auxiliary. She can be reached at lauren@fra.org