

The USS *Liberty* and the USS *Stark* :
A Twenty-Year History of Tragic Mistakes

**A Research Paper
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*A = Fully written +
researched. Enjoyed reading
it and learned from it -
Happy holidays
Dr. Stein
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A few months ago, Americans were aghast when they heard about the tragic mistake which occurred in the Persian Gulf. The crippling of the USS *Stark*, a *Perry* class frigate, by a friendly nation's Exocet missile justifiably shocked U.S. citizens. But perhaps the incident should not have come as such a surprise. Supposedly secure Middle Eastern waters had proven deadly to American sailors only twenty years earlier, on June 8, 1967. Instead of an Iraqi missile penetrating an American frigate, this episode in the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean entangled an American technical research ship (a.k.a. a "spy ship") with several Mirage and Mystère jets and their cannon, rocket, and napalm weapons, as well as a torpedo hit from a handful of torpedo boats--all proudly displaying the Israeli flag. Ally, as in the *Stark* incident, had assumed the offensive against ally. Why did these fatal errors occur? And how did the nations who fired on friendly U.S. naval vessels, killing over 70 Americans, apologize and explain their position? The answers to these questions are deeply complex and, in many ways, aggravating to hear. The blame for these disasters rests not only with the brutal attackers, but also with the inept American naval policies, tactics, and fighting capabilities in the Middle East.

The USS *Liberty* Incident

Tension between Israel and the surrounding Arab states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria mounted throughout the 1960's via hostile words, ideological threats, and border clashes. This stretching of the limits of

I think you "surprise" people
but "attack" airfields!

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"peace" erupted into war on the morning of June 5, 1967 when the heavily outnumbered Israeli air force almost completely wiped out the enemy's jet aircraft by surprising airfields in Egypt, then Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. But it can be legitimately argued that Egypt's Nasser started the hostilities by ordering the blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba, Israel's only gate to the Red Sea and, consequently, Persian Gulf oil tankers. With air superiority in their hand, the Israeli ground forces ~~over~~took the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. On June 8, a United States "spook ship" off the coast of Sinai was snooping on the communications of both combatants. That afternoon, the USS *Liberty* was attacked and disabled in international waters by Israeli jets and torpedo boats. And the next day, the Jewish forces handed the Arab world (and the rest of the world) another surprise--they invaded the Golan Heights in Syria. Very probably, the Israelis could not afford to have an outside faction aware of their intention to invade Syria. If this claim is not merely speculation, the misfortune that befell the USS *Liberty* is not too difficult to explain.

Acquired by the U.S. Navy in 1963, *Simmons Victory* was converted in 22 months with 20-million-plus dollars into Auxiliary General Technical Research ship #5, the USS *Liberty*. The official mission of AGTRs was "...to conduct technical research operations in support of U.S. Navy electronic research projects which include electromagnetic propagation studies and advanced communications systems."¹ What better field research project for *Liberty* than to monitor wartime radio communication? Unfortunately, the Navy sent *Liberty* into a dangerous area with little protection.

The vessel was a distinctive one. Her superstructure consisted of a complicated array of radio antennae, radar masts, and what was sometimes erroneously known as "the Big Ear" (a large, revolving sonar

dish). *Liberty*'s only defensive armaments were four .50 caliber Browning machine guns.² Before being dispatched to the Sinai coast, *Liberty* was spying on the upcoming Biafra coup off the Nigerian coast. The ship and her captain, Cmdr. William McGonagle, were no strangers to important National Security Agency and CIA missions. So when she arrived off the Gaza Strip at 0900 June 8, 1967 and set a westward course parallel to the Sinai coast, *Liberty* and her crew knew the gravity of the mission.

Earlier that morning, at 0600 hours (standard-time for *Liberty*'s position), a French-made Nord 2501 Noratlas bearing the Israeli flag flew by the *Liberty*. A slow, heavy cargo craft, the "flying boxcar" most probably identified the clearly marked U.S. vessel. At 0900, a lone Israeli French-made Dassault Mirage III jet passed the spook ship off the town of El Arish. The jet was followed an hour later by two armed Mirages which made, in broad daylight, three complete orbits of the *Liberty*. At 1030, 1100, 1130, 1215, and 1245 the Noratlas "boxcar" observed the *Liberty*.³ Surely, the American sailors aboard must have felt some relief that the Israeli military was so carefully double-checking the *Liberty*'s condition. At 1400 hours, such hopes would be dashed.

Sailors aboard the *Liberty* recognized at once that the three jets they monitored, which approached the ship from 082° (the general direction of Tel Aviv), were not closing in the same manner as had the observation planes all day. But the *Liberty* was no battleship; she was alone on the high seas facing three fearsome Mirages. Mirages pack a cannon with a 30mm punch and 36 rockets under the wings. The 1,460mph fighter-bombers⁴ cut down men and riddled the ship both lengthwise and amidships across the beam.⁵ Then, carrying jellied gasoline--napalm, slower and more accurate Mystère IV-A jet interceptors ~~en~~joined the assault. Their napalm burst into searing flame inside the *Liberty*, as the

jelly easily seeped into the rocket and cannon holes. Many men were injured in this manner. The jets made at least six passes.⁶ Then they mercifully left.

The terror was not over yet for the *Liberty*. Rather, the worst was yet to come. A full twenty minutes after the jet attack, three Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) approached the wounded ship at high speeds, and like the planes before them, they were all Israeli. Each fired a torpedo shot. One torpedo came as close as 75 feet astern of the *Liberty*. Another pummeled the vessel on the starboard side, tearing a 40-foot hole and killing at least two dozen men.⁷ In all, 34 American naval officers, seamen, Marines, and civilians on board were violently snuffed out by an ally's hand.

Although, in itself, the attack on the *Liberty* was tragic, the real disgrace lies in the disastrous mistakes leading up to the incident and in the disguised explanations for the crimes committed. Both America's and Israel's governments and military leaderships deserve blame and judgement.

It will be best to first describe the myriad reasons that leave American decisions to blame, then Israel's excuses can be viewed more fairly. The combatant forces in the Sinai maintained that a twelve-mile war zone extended into the Mediterranean. The USS *Liberty* honored this demand, and maintained a course fifteen miles out. When the electronic intelligence ship was approaching Gaza, staff officers in Washington concluded that the assigned position was not safe and that the *Liberty* should change her position to twenty miles out. The message was addressed through three levels of command, and eventually it was misrouted fourteen hours late to the Philippines!⁸ The Joint Chiefs soon decided that a 100-mile limit for the *Liberty* would be wise to employ;

however, an incredible delay in writing the "information copy" and in processing the "action copy"⁹ spelled eventual doom for the *Liberty* .

While the *Liberty* was being strafed by the Mirages, a message was hastily radioed out to the Sixth Fleet Command requesting help. According to James M. Ennis, Jr. in his Assault on the *Liberty* , "reports persist that two flights of rescue aircraft were sent to the *Liberty* 's defense. ...[T]he first flight...was hastily and angrily recalled by Secretary of Defense McNamara..."¹⁰ This "scramble and recall" is verified by Capt. Joseph Tully. He maintains that before his Navy F-4B Phantom fighters could reach the beleaguered ship, they were ordered by Washington to return.¹¹ The reason for this recall is that the Phantoms were armed with nuclear-tipped missiles, and the Soviets had a moderately large naval force in the region. McNamara's actions, if veritable, endangered the lives of American men on account of atomic diplomacy. The Hot Line should have been used to explain the situation to the Soviets, as it was utilized by President Johnson later in the day.¹²

Perhaps most importantly, the question of why the ship was there at that time remains. Clearly, the whole point of naval communications intelligence is to keep the fleet at large up-to-the-minute about important military developments. In the *Liberty* 's case, when about the most blatant "military development" possible exploded, there was no response. The Sixth Fleet, the Navy, and the Washington bureaucracy ignored the very key source and most qualified origin of information: the *Liberty* .

Now, the United States was not entirely to blame for the *Liberty* incident. Far from it, really. Israel, in attempting to prove its "honest mistake," came across as a bold-faced liar. General Yitzak Rabin, C-in-C of the Israeli Defence Forces, summarized the Israeli position on June 18,

1967 in a telegram to the US Naval Attaché in Tel Aviv: and I abridge:

The attack arose out of a chain of three mistakes. [First,][Israeli] Navy and Air Force Headquarters had received a number of wrong reports stating Al Arish was being shelled from the sea. [Second,] was a mistaken report that *Liberty* was steaming at 30 knots. This mistake had two significances: (A) When *Liberty* was identified in the morning her maximum speed was determined from Jane's Fighting Ships to be 18 knots. (B) If there is information of enemy ships in the area any ship or ships discovered by radar which are determined to be cruising at a speed above 20 knots may be considered an enemy. [Third,][the MTB's attacked because of] the mistaken identification of *Liberty* as the Egyptian supply ship *EI Quseir*. ...Finally, a grave additional mistake was made by the *Liberty* itself: By approaching excessively close to the shore, by not advising the Israeli authorities of its presence, and by flying a small flag.¹³

After reading Ennis' book, the above attempts to exonerate Israeli malice tear at the heart as falsehoods. It does not take a genius to see that all three "mistakes" being passed off as "reasons" are contradictory. First, if El Arish was being shelled, then *Liberty*'s four Brownings should have been the last guess as the source. Second, the "30 knot" explanation is ludicrous on two counts: (1) *Liberty* had slowed to a crawl for her operations in the area. How could a reading of 30 knots have ever been accepted? (2) If the ship was able to be properly identified for a speed check in Jane's, then why was it incorrectly identified later? And third, to compare the *Liberty* to the transport *EI Quseir* was an obvious attempt to find a scapegoat. The Egyptian Navy had only one transport. A 38-year-old junk heap, *EI Quseir* was kept at berth in Alexandria throughout the Six Day War.¹⁴ Funny thing that the transport was rated as having a top speed four knots less than *Liberty*'s, yet the U.S. ship was confused for both the transport and a "30-knot" ship capable of shelling

from fifteen miles out. Finally, the fact that the Israeli telegram put ultimate blame with the *Liberty* itself was showing Israel's true lack of apology and accident. The *Liberty* was well enough away from shore, it was not obligated to inform Israel of its position, and a standard flag was flying when the jets attacked. The flag was shot away, but a special oversized holiday version was flown from the yardarm at once. Because space does not permit, I cannot describe other Israeli excuses which were made, but each is equally or even more so weak.

Israel, taking advantage of a potentially embarrassing situation for the United States (a spy ship snooping on an ally), paid only about \$7 million in damages for the killed and wounded, and paid nothing for the ship's loss.¹⁵ The whole incident was a catastrophe: "...all contribute to the suspicion that Israel knew the ship to be American from the start, and attacked because of fear that the vessel's intelligence-gathering efforts could harm Israel."¹⁶ The least that could be learned from June 8, 1967 would be to take more care and precaution in Middle East war zones. But the *Liberty* affair slipped from the memories of Americans, and twenty years hence, the USS *Stark* incident sadly repeated past disaster.

The USS *Stark* Incident

Animosity has existed between Iran and Iraq for ages. Boundary disputes, religious differences, ethnic dissimilarity, oil resource control, and the personal vendetta between Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Iraq's Saddam Husayn: all have led to the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁷ In September 1980 Iraq, much like Israel twenty years before, protected its security interests by attacking revolutionary Iran. The war, for over seven years

now, has proven to be little more than a bloody stalemate. Although Iraq is overwhelmingly outnumbered by Iran, it maintains a technological edge.

The Reagan Administration ~~has~~ defended an American naval presence in the Persian Gulf as vital to national security throughout the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁸ The United States cannot allow a hostile power to dominate this strategic region because it is a choke point for free oil trade. However, Iraq began hitting vital Iranian oil tankers in the gulf, thus escalating the hostilities. Iran responded by hitting Kuwaiti tankers and mining the western waters of the gulf (Kuwait is an Iraqi ally). The USS *Stark* , at 2212 (10:12 pm) May 17, 1987, became another casualty on the already long list of "hits" on Persian Gulf vessels. And, like the *Liberty* , her aggressor was a "friendly" nation.

The USS *Stark* , commanded by Captain Glenn Brindel, patrolled in a safe area about 80 miles northeast of Bahrain and a good 40 miles south of the war zone. At about 2000 hours, a U.S./Saudi crew aboard an AWACS surveillance Boeing 707 picked up a single Iraqi Mirage F-1C as it took off from a military airbase near Basra. The Mirage chose a familiar path ("Mirage Alley") heading southeast along the Saudi coast.¹⁹ On the *Stark* , radar operators tracked the Mirage's southward course from about 200 miles away. Suddenly, the fighter made a sharp turn to the east, bringing itself to bearing on the *Stark* . At 2209, Brindel ordered a flash message: "Unknown aircraft. This is U.S. Navy warship on your 078 [relative bearing of the *Stark*] for twelve miles. Request you identify yourself. Over." There was no response to the message sent on the internationally recognized frequency. The *Stark* sent a more urgent message 36 seconds after the first: "Unknown aircraft. ...Identify yourself and state your intentions." The Mirage again did not answer; rather, it fired in short succession two Exocet AM39 air-to-surface missiles. One minute later,

the first missile slammed into the port side of the *Stark*, tearing a ten by fifteen-foot hole in the side. The second missile sliced through as well, but luckily its 352-lb. warhead did not explode.²⁰ 37 American sailors lost their lives in the explosion, fire, and asphyxiating smoke.

So much like the *Liberty* disaster, the true shame of the USS *Stark* incident lies in the incompetence of both the American and Iraqi parties. Again, the American failures should be discussed before the Iraqi negligence is presented.

The *Stark* should not have been a sitting duck. The ship has an Mk-92 antiaircraft missile system with a 90-mile range. At a range of up to twelve miles, the "OTO" antiaircraft gun can fire 90 shells a minute, dealing with up to three intruders at a time. And the frigate is electronically capable of creating a false radar image of the ship to deceive attackers. The *Stark* has a "last-ditch" weapon: the Phalanx. This amazing gun fires uranium bullets (2.5 times denser than steel) at a rate of 3,000 rounds per minute to create a metal "wall" in front of an incoming missile.²¹ The *Stark* was operating at Condition Code Three, the middle stage of combat readiness. The weapons systems are theoretically to be operational and manned at Code Three; however, the Phalanx remained silent.²² The gun that could have saved 37 American sailors was not fixed in the port of Manama, Bahrain the day before because a spare computer part was not available.²³

Another sad misfortune of the incident was Saudi Arabia's response to the attack. After they determined that the *Stark* was hit, the AWACS crew sent a priority message to two Saudi F-15 (American-built aircraft) pilots. The pilots were asked to pursue the Iraqi jet and force it to land. The pilots were eager to comply, but their ground controller did not have clearance to permit such an operation.²⁴ The United States

would have to wait for the Iraqi authorities to produce an apology, a motive, or an explanation.

"The Americans should have informed us they were there."²⁵ No, this is not an Israeli restatement; rather, it is the chiding response of Basil Kaissy, press counselor of the Iraqi Embassy in Jordan. Kaissy proved Iraq's two-facedness in his "apology" to the United States. Within his statement, he reminded Americans that Iraq's only enemies were Iran and Israel (why did he ignominiously mention Israel when that nation is dear to the U.S.?), he scolded the U.S. for its joint efforts with Israel to provide arms to Iran, and he hinted that the *Stark* was in a location where Iraqi pilots shoot first and ask questions later.²⁶ The misbehaving schoolboy stands before the class to berate the teacher!

Iraq's shots at the *Stark* were probably unlike Israel's strike on the *Liberty* in that they were genuinely thought to be directed at an enemy vessel. But the imprudence displayed by that pilot was reflective of the general Iraqi carelessness in the region. First, the pilot showed many signs of being a reckless soldier. Radar tapes of the F-1 Mirage showed the pilot had so much difficulty steering the plane that he almost crashed into the gulf at one point.²⁷ Second, Iraqi policy is so stubbornly single-minded against Iran that it comes across as stupidity. "We will shoot at anything, even a tree, if it's Iranian,"²⁸ said Kaissy.

It seems an outrage that such gross neglect of responsibility can go virtually unpunished. Talk of indemnity figures from \$300 to \$400 million²⁹ has been tossed around, but Iraq was practically forgiven by the Reagan Administration before the hair-trigger pilot even landed. To think that the USS *Liberty* tragedy served little or no lesson twenty years later is crushing, yet true.

Both of the factions involved in both of these most unfortunate

attacks deserve blame and could stand to learn a little about the value of human life. American foolishness in poking its nose into hostile Middle Eastern theaters must be drastically reformed. The threshold of proximity to war zones should be boosted. And when American seamen must make an ingress into these zones, they should be equipped and prepared to defend themselves. The *Liberty* should have had an armed escort. The *Stark* should have had the Phalanx in working order. Moreover, the warring Middle Eastern nations' propensity to using the trigger instead the radio must change. Admittedly, the history of Middle Eastern politics is rooted in tribal conflict resolved with violence; nonetheless, these nations are no longer in the past--they are now irrevocably a part of modern Western politics and must abide by standard rules of interaction. The USS *Liberty's* bell tolled a warning to the USS *Stark* 's sailors. Now the *Stark* cries out to the world an important warning. The question is, "Is the world listening this time?"

Endnotes

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² Anthony Pearson, Conspiracy of Silence (London, Quartet Books, 1978) 10.

³ Ennis 220.

⁴ Ennis 67.

⁵ Pearson 41.

⁶ "31 Deaths Possible In Ship Error-Attack," The Atlanta Journal June 9, 1967.

⁷ Ennis 85.

⁸ Ennis 47.

⁹ Ennis 271, from Review of Department of Defense, Worldwide Communications, Phase I (U.S. Government Printing Office, May 10, 1971).

¹⁰ Ennis 237.

¹¹ Ronald Fraser, "Stark Reminder of USS Liberty," Wall Street Journal June 5, 1987.

¹² William Beecher, "Israel, In Error, Attacks U.S. Ship," New York Times June 9, 1967.

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¹⁴ Ennis 154.

¹⁵ Ennis 197.

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