'In Awesome

Heroism in Defense of the *USS Liberty*

On June 8, 1967, the spy ship *USS Liberty* withstood an unparalleled assault by Israeli torpedo boats and planes off the coast of Egypt. Despite official and public abandonment, the courageous crew deserves recognition on this 40th anniversary of the costliest hostile U.S. ship action since World War II.

By Richard K. Kolb

"**T**hey [the Bureau of Naval Personnel] sent a message back, and they said, 'Wounded in what action?,'" recalled Ensign Pat O'Malley. "'Killed in what action?' They say it wasn't 'action,' it was 'an accident.'"

O'Malley was incredulous because his ship had just been subjected to intense incendiary, machine-gun and rocket fire by jet fighter aircraft and motor torpedo boats of what turned out to be an ally.

Even today, 40 years later, this reaction remains typical when a *Liberty* veteran relates the ordeal he experienced in the eastern Mediterranean Sea that summer day. Despite the fact that this ship sustained the highest per capita casualties—70% equating to 206 Purple Hearts—in hostile action of any American ship since World War II.

Medal citations related to the surface battle are replete with references to hostile fire. At least a half dozen use the phrases "rocket and machine gun fire," "strafing fire" and "attacking torpedo boat." Yet how many Americans—even those older than 55—are aware of what their sailors underwent during the Six-Day War of June 1967?

A highly sophisticated intelligence-gathering vessel, the *Liberty* was in the area to ascertain if Russians or Egyptians

The Main Battle Dressing Station was described as a "bloody scene reminiscent of the American Civil War." Torpedo explosions and aircraft machine guns took a terrible toll on the *Liberty's* crew, killing 34 and wounding 172.

were piloting six Cairo-based Soviet bombers flying missions against Israel.

Virtually all magazine accounts of this action focus on why Israel would have intentionally attacked an American craft, as well as on the Johnson Administration's cover-up. Suffice it to say that crewmen have no doubt the attack was deliberate. Unfortunately, the heroism of the crew is far too often lost amidst this controversy.

So for a change, the story of the gallantry of the sailors aboard will be told. Only then can the battle the *Liberty* waged find its rightful place in the annals of U.S. naval combat. Instead of being

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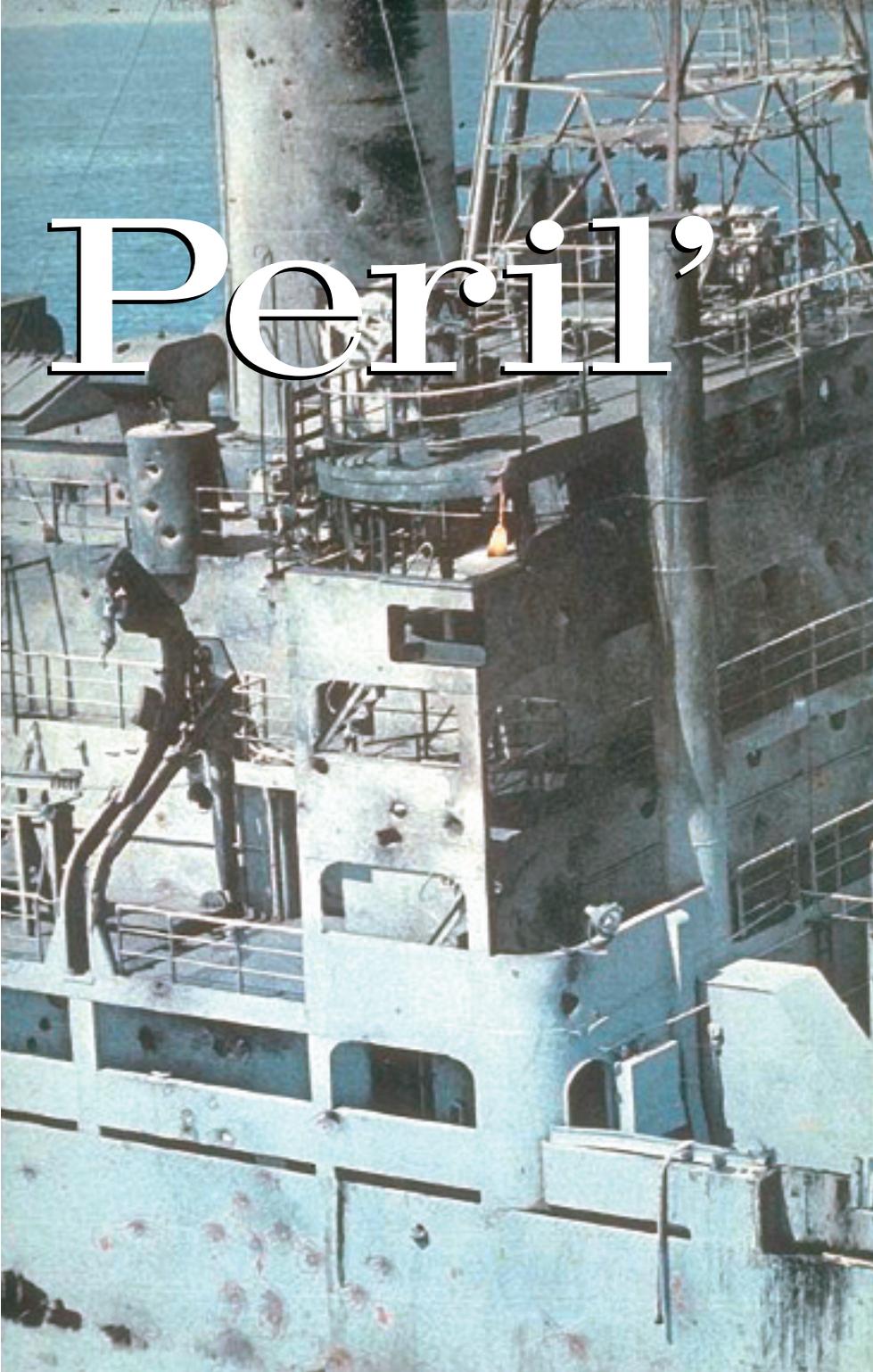
The bridge area of the *USS Liberty* looked like something out of a WWII naval battle. The signal intelligence ("technical research") ship was pockmarked with 821 shell holes.

swept under the historical rug, their actions should be celebrated along with those of other valorous ships' crews throughout history.

The official attempt to deny what happened that June 8 knew no bounds. Yet the evidence was clear to see: The *Liberty* sustained 821 shell holes. All forms of

recognition, however, were stalled and/or concealed. Hostile fire pay was denied the crew; when it was finally granted, only the wounded were deemed worthy.

The prestigious Presidential Unit Citation was not presented to the men; they didn't know anything about the award until years later. And it did not

even identify the attackers, making only vague references to "foreign" aircraft and boats. Though the citation used phrases like "heroic achievement," "extraordinary heroism" and "exceptional courage."

Likewise, the ship captain's Medal of Honor citation failed to delineate those responsible. The Navy secretary, not the President as usual, presented the actual medal at the Washington Navy Yard, instead of in the White House.

Harrowing Ordeal

At 2:03 p.m. on June 8, two Israeli Mirage fighters attacked the ship, killing nine sailors. Mystere aircraft trailed, dropping napalm on the deck. Torpedo boats followed close behind, launching their lethal projectiles at 2:34 p.m.

By all measures, the 72 minutes of combat experienced by the *Liberty* was intense. In his book *Assault on the Liberty*, James M. Ennes, off-going officer of the deck at the time, provides ample graphic descriptions. "The air filled with hot metal as a geometric pattern of orange flashes opened holes in the heavy deck plating," he wrote of the initial volleys. "An explosion tossed our gunners high into the air—spinning, broken, like rag dolls."

He continued: "With incredible noise the aircraft rockets poked eight-inch holes in the ship; like fire-breathing creatures, they groped blindly for the men inside. Already the pilothouse was littered with helpless and frightened men."

Below deck, an Israeli torpedo—one of five fired—explosion flooded the Research Operations Department, instantly killing 25 cryptologists. Some died while burning code lists and destroying a crypto machine—performing their duty to the very last. The bulkhead had disinte-

A total of 172 sailors were wounded in the Israeli attack of June 8, 1967. Three were so severely hit that they were not expected to survive.

grated before the crew's eyes.

"With a great crunch," Ennes wrote, "flesh and steel were compressed into a distant corner as the blast hurled men and equipment the width of the ship." After a futile search for the living, a Marine conceded, "No one is alive down there."

Meanwhile, on the deck, sailors had furiously attempted to fight off the merciless machine gun fire. Gunner's Mate Alexander Neil Thompson manned one of the four unprotected .50-caliber machine gun mounts over the bodies of dead shipmates.

His posthumous Silver Star citation reads: "Courageously and single-handedly operated machine gun 51 and continued to fire on the aircraft in the defense of his ship and shipmates until he was fatally wounded by a rocket blast. His aggressiveness and coolness under fire was exceptional inspirational leadership in an hour of awesome peril."

Seaman Dale D. Larkins also received the Silver Star for solely manning Mount 51 and firing on the attacking torpedo boats until ordered to stop. Fireman David Skolak and Lt. Stephen Toth were awarded posthumous Silver Stars, both fatally wounded while performing their duties without regard for their own personal safety.

Skolak was even a candidate for the Medal of Honor for attempting to evacuate wounded sailors under heavy fire. Unfortunately, there were not enough witnesses.

The Navy Cross went to Lt. Cmdr. Philip Armstrong, as well as Petty Officer Francis Brown, both of whom died at their posts. Armstrong was trying to jettison the gasoline drums on the bridge and organize a party of men to extinguish the blazing lifeboats, all the while being fired upon. Brown was acting as helmsman, standing fast to maintain the ordered course until torpedo boat strafing-fire cut him down.

Others performed extraordinary lifesaving measures. Dr. (Lt.) Richard F. Kiepfer administered first aid—including a major surgical operation—throughout the ship despite enemy fire. Ensign David G. Lucas assisted in controlling the ship though he was already wounded.

Capt. William L. McGonagle, a Korean War veteran, received the Medal of Honor one year after the attack, on June 11, 1968. Constantly exposed to fire, he kept control of the Liberty and cared for casualties. Weakened by the loss of blood, the commander nonetheless remained at his battle station for 17 exhausting hours.

Severely wounded, he steadfastly refused any treatment. To the bitter end, McGonagle declined medical attention until convinced that all his crew had been tended to first. None of the sailors

onboard would have expected "Old Shep" to be commended with anything less than the nation's highest honor for bravery—for his "extraordinary valor" and "courageous fighting spirit."

In an ironic twist of historical fate, it was a Russian guided-missile destroyer that first arrived to offer assistance to the Liberty. Though declined, the Soviet ship stood by until U.S. warships made it to the scene of the action in international waters 13 nautical miles off the Sinai Peninsula near El Arish.

What the crewmen of the USS America, Davis and Massey witnessed was appalling. The torpedo had hit the starboard side of the superstructure, leaving a gaping 40-foot hole. Even the life rafts had been fired upon and, symbolically, the U.S. flag was shot down.

Ennes described the Main Battle Dressing Station as "a bloody scene that seemed somehow reminiscent of the American Civil War." Three men were so badly mangled that they could not be identified; three others were swept away into the sea. All six found a common grave in Arlington National Cemetery.

The treatment meted out to USS Liberty survivors by their country for years after the Israeli assault constitutes a mark of shame. Denied respect and real recognition, they were never accorded their proper place in U.S. Navy history. Eventually awarded the Combat Action Ribbon, crewmembers still never saw their action join the pantheon of heroic sea engagements.

Only relatively recently has the recognition Liberty vets so richly deserve come their way. (For the efforts of Liberty vets to erect memorials to their shipmates, see the June 2005 issue of VFW.)

Instead of being shunned, the record of that ship should go down in the Navy's proud past as the vessel that engaged in the most intense surface combat since WWII.

A Superlative Naval Action

The Liberty had a complement of 294 men, including a 94-man National Security Agency contingent. Of the crew, 34 were KIA (25 of them cryptologists) and 172 were WIA (three so severely that they were not expected to live.) Two of the 34 dead were Marines (the three Marines aboard were Russian and Arabic lin-

guists) and one a civilian. That calculates to 70% casualties. Eighty-eight of the men were not physically wounded.

How does that compare with other U.S. ship casualties due to hostile action since WWII? Let's take a look.

The frigate *Stark*, hit by an Iraqi aircraft missile on May 17, 1987, in the Persian Gulf, had a crew of 221. With 37 KIA and 21 WIA, that left the ship with a startling 26% casualty rate.

During the entire Vietnam War, the Navy's greatest single ship loss was that of the *USS Westchester County*. The landing ship, tank, anchored in the My Tho River, counted 18 sailors KIA (five U.S. soldiers also were killed) on Nov. 1, 1968, due to two mines planted by VC frogmen. Another 22 crewmen were WIA. With total Navy losses at 40, the "Wesco" had a 30% casualty rate among its 132-man crew.

For the Korean War, it was the destroyer *Walke* that sustained the Navy's severest single loss. On June 12, 1951, either a mine or a torpedo claimed the lives of 26 sailors and wounded 40 others in the Sea of Japan. With a crew of 300, that amounted to a casualty rate of 22%.

Four months after the end of WWII, on Dec. 29, 1945, the minesweeper *Minivet* hit a Japanese mine in the Tsushima Straits between Japan and Korea. The crew of 91 counted 31 KIA—34% of all sailors aboard. Ten also were WIA, for a total casualty rate of 45%.

Several better-known land operations also suffered fewer KIAs. Neither the Dominican Republic (1965-66), Koh Tang Island off Cambodia (1975), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989) nor Somalia (1993) equaled the number of KIA of the *Liberty*.

Moreover, the *Liberty* crew certainly qualifies as one of the most highly decorated for a single ship action. With one Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses and 36 Silver or Bronze Stars for little over a one-hour action, few crews have been so courageous.

As Vice Adm. William I. Martin, commander of the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea, said in July 1967, "I commend to every man who sails in the Sixth Fleet the fact that the *USS Liberty* has become a legend in her own times." ✪

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