U.S. INVESTIGATING ATTACK ON VESSEL
By WILLIAM BEECHER Special to The New York Times
New York Times (1857-Current file); Jun 10, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2002)
pg. 14

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Aides Ask Why It Was Not Identified as Friendly

By WILLIAM BEECHER
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 9—Pentagon officials disclosed today that a board of inquiry had been ordered to investigate the circumstances surrounding an air-sea attack yesterday on a United States Navy communications ship in international waters off Egypt's Sinai coast.

They said the most puzzling aspect of the unprovoked assault was that the ship somehow was not identified as a friendly vessel during a 20-minute interval between strafing runs by two Israeli jets and subsequent torpedo attack by three torpedo boats.

The board of inquiry will be convened, informants said, by Adm. John S. McCain Jr., Commander in Chief of navy forces in Europe.

It is expected, they said, that the board will have its first session Monday at Suda Bay, Greece. The stricken vessel, the Liberty, was due to arrive at Suda Bay at about 6:30 P.M. tomorrow, New York time.

A report late today listed 9 killed, 24 missing and 75 wounded in yesterday's attack. Some military men expressed fears that none of the missing men were alive. Some of the missing may have been thrown overboard in the attack, and the rest were believed trapped in flooded compartments of the ship.

The White House made public the text of a message from the Israeli Premier, Levi Eshkol, to President Johnson. It read:

"Dear Mr. President:

"I was deeply grieved by the tragic loss of life in the United States naval ship Liberty. Please accept my deep condolences, and convey my sympathy to all the bereaved families.

"May all bloodshed come to an end, and may our God grant us peace evermore."

Observers pointed out that the White House did not usually make public communications between heads of states and particularly not the messages of other Governments. That it chose to do so in this instance was viewed as an attempt to soften the impact of the Liberty incident.

Pentagon sources said the full story of the attack probably would not be known until after the board of inquiry concluded its investigation. Even that report, they added, may not be made public.

Sequence of Attacks

As pieced together from various sources, this appears to be the sequence of events as understood in Washington.

The Liberty, a so-called technical research ship equipped for electronics intelligence missions but officially described as being on a communications assignment, arrived at a position about 13 to 15 miles north of Sinai late yesterday morning. She was suddenly attacked by two Israeli jets at 2:05 P.M.

The jets apparently did not make an initial pass to determine the identity of the ship, but moved immediately into machine-gun passes. Liberty got off a message saying it had been attacked by two unidentified "delta-wing" jets.

About 20 minutes later, three torpedo boats hove into view and two of them commenced the attack, firing one torpedo each. One of these struck the Liberty's starboard side.

An American military attaché in Tel Aviv picked up a radio message disclosing the attack. It was not clear whether the message was from the Liberty or Israeli forces.

The attaché asked Israeli officials to fly him to the scene. He was provided two helicopters.

When the helicopters arrived after a 90-mile flight, they found that one of the torpedo boats was alongside the Liberty asking if it could be of any assistance.

By that time, the ship had received instructions from the Sixth Fleet to head north to rendezvous with two destroyers. It declined any help.

American officials, trying to explain the initial attack, said there had been an unconfirmed report the day before that Egyptian ships had bombarded Israeli troops in the nearby Gaza Strip.

"And it was known that various Egyptian navy elements were roaming around the eastern Mediterranean," one officer said, "and you could understand the pilots being a little trigger happy."

But, as for the torpedo boats, there the matter was more difficult to understand.

The weather was clear, with visibility of 15 miles. The sea was a little choppy, however, and this might have made it difficult for the fast-moving, bobbing boats to have got a good view of the Liberty until too late.

While two of them attacked, firing one torpedo each, the third hung back. Presumably the error was discovered at that point. Otherwise, it is believed, they would have sunk the vessel.

Officially, defense officials say the Liberty is believed to have fired her four .50-cal. machine guns at the torpedoes. One source, however, said the ship was believed to have challenged the onrushing motor boats with machinegun fire.

"After all," he said, "she had just been strafed by unidentified jets and then saw torpedo boats on attack runs."

A defense spokesman declined to comment on an Associated Press report from the Sixth Fleet carrier America quoting an unnamed officer as having admitted the Liberty had been on an electronic eavesdropping mission to monitor the communications of both Egypt and Israel.

The official explanation for the presence of the Liberty near Sinai was that she had been assigned to assist "in relaying information concerning the evacuation of American dependents and other American citizens."

One Washington source said that, while the Liberty was given a communications relay mission, she might also have done a little eavesdropping "had she been there long enough."

This, he said, could have supplemented other radio intercept facilities in the Middle East.

A Defense spokesman said it was not common practice to inform neighboring countries when an unarmed vessel approached their shores so long as it stayed in international waters—in this case, more than 12 miles to sea.

N. Y. Area Casualties

WASHINGTON, June 9 (AP)—The Defense Department made public today an incomplete list of casualties resulting from the Israeli attack on the Liberty yesterday. Following are those from the New York area:

Among those listed as dead was Quartermaster 3d Cl. Francis Brown of Troy, N. Y.

The wounded included Communications Tech. 2d Cl. Richard W. Keene of Poughkeepsie, N. Y.; Communications Tech. Seaman Carl C. Nygren of Seaford, L. I., and Communications Tech. First Cl. Frederick, J. Walton of Niagara Falls, N. Y.

Casualties Taken to Carrier

Special to The New York Times

ABOARD THE U.S.S. AMERICA, in the Eastern Mediterranean, June 9 — Helicopters brought nine dead and 50 wounded men from the navy electronics ship Liberty aboard this carrier and the nearby cruiser Little Rock today.

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