

Don't Give Up the Ship
by Tom Schaaf Sr.

The Attack on the Liberty
by James Scott
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The subtitle of this book is "The Untold Story of Israel's deadly 1967 Assault on a U.S. Spy Ship" and the question might be asked, "So What, So Long Ago?" A majority of Americans today were born after 1967 and not one in a hundred who were here then have even a dim recollection, if any, of that infamous event which occurred on June 8, 1967, the fourth day of the Six Day War .

From two until almost four o'clock on that sunny afternoon in the Eastern Mediterranean Israeli jets and motor torpedo boats mercilessly pounded the virtually defenseless *U.S.S. Liberty* killing 34 and seriously wounding 171, (two thirds of the crew) leaving the ship with a nine degree list and a huge hole in the starboard side from a torpedo. Though still afloat the ship was a total loss except for scrap value in a Baltimore breaking yard where she ended her days after slowly steaming, via a Malta dry dock, to her home port of Norfolk Virginia.

The author answers the "So What?" question on page three of his Prologue as follows: "The specter of the *Liberty* has haunted the U.S. Navy and intelligence community for decades. The underlying question the attack raised in 1967 still resonates: How do politics and diplomacy impact battlefield decisions? In the case of the *Liberty*, the White House, afraid of offending Israel's domestic backers at a time when it needed support for its Vietnam policy, looked the other way. Likewise, Congress failed to formally investigate the attack or hold public hearings. No one was ever punished."

The response from Israeli sources over the years has been that it was simply a tragic accident caused by misidentification in the fog of war. Though Scott refrains from injecting his opinions his many interviews and his disclosure of recently declassified documents show clearly that Israel's insistence that the attack was a mistake caused by misidentification of the ship is not plausible.

Soon after the attack Admiral John McCain Jr. (father of John McCain), the commander of the Navy's European and Middle East forces, convened a court of inquiry. Scott writes: "McCain understood the geopolitical challenge..... This was no typical collision at sea or a ship fire.....The attack involved an American ally, one that

commanded significant support from American Jews. A court of inquiry report critical of Israel would trigger diplomatic ramifications for the State Department and create domestic political trouble for the beleaguered White House, which now wanted to de-emphasize the attack.”

McCain appointed Rear Admiral Issac Kidd Jr. president of the court but allowed the court only one week to investigate, though the court's lawyer would later admit that a proper investigation would have required six months. McCain also barred travel to Israel to interview the attackers. The court of inquiry began its work in the *Liberty* wardroom two hours after the ship was in a British Navy dry dock in Malta. Scott notes that reporters had watched the *Liberty's* arrival from a nearby hillside by the Grand Harbor in Valletta Malta, jotting notes about its riddled hull and superstructure, torched life rafts and the torpedo hole that poked above the waterline. That same day McNamara ordered a news blackout.

For the next year until *Liberty* was decommissioned in June of 1968 news stories and discussion about the attack on *Liberty* diminished as the war in Vietnam became the major news topic. President Johnson continued to downplay the attack even declining to present the Medal of Honor to Captain McGonagle who had stayed on the bridge of *Liberty* throughout the attack and though badly wounded conned his ship under these extraordinary conditions to deeper water and a rendezvous with units of the Sixth Fleet the following day.

The Navy had chosen to honor McGonagle with the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for heroism. Traditionally service members fortunate enough to survive combat are invited to the White House, where the president personally presents the Medal of Honor. There was to be no White House ceremony for McGonagle.

Scott provides an interesting and detailed account of how President Johnson tried to control this politically sensitive award ceremony a year after the attack and even after Johnson's announcement that he would not run for reelection. Scott writes: “James Cross, the president's senior military aide, delivered McGonagle's citation and a Presidential Unit Citation for the rest of the crew to the president for his signature on May 15, 1968. Cross urged Johnson not to present either award in person. The president signed both citations that afternoon, then followed Cross's advice.” Both awards were returned to the Defense Department for presentation, and no press release regarding them was made by the White House.

Scott continues: “The president instead visited former president Dwight Eisenhower at the Walter Reed Army Hospital the morning of McGonagle's ceremony. The president returned to the White House afterward, less than four miles from the Washington Navy Yard, where he presided over the graduation ceremony of the Capitol

Page School in the East Room. Too concerned about domestic politics to present the nation's highest award for heroism, the commander in chief instead handed out diplomas to high school students. “

So Admiral Thomas Moorer, then Chief of Naval Operations, and the Secretary of Navy, Paul Ignatius, on the morning of June 11, 1968 at 11:30 A.M. conducted the ceremony in the sail loft of the Washington Navy Yard and presented the Medal of Honor to Captain McGonagle. Moorer described the president's refusal to present McGonagle his award as a “back-handed slap “ and went on to say, “the way they did things I'm surprised they didn't just hand it to him under the 14th Street Bridge.”

This affront to the Captain of *Liberty* by President Johnson was rude, to say the very least. Far more egregious was Johnson's meddling in the Navy's Court of Inquiry report which sparked outrage among military leaders in the Pentagon, anger by a handful of congressmen who rallied for action and was slammed by the media, even The Washington Post.

Scott notes in the Prologue that Chief of Naval Operations ,Admiral David McDonald, seethed when he read the June 28, 1967 findings prepared for the public by McNamara's top aide, Cyrus Vance, Deputy Secretary of Defense The report left McDonald “with the feeling that we're trying our best to excuse the attackers...I myself do not subscribe to it.”

The author has been a reporter with the Charleston, South Carolina, *Post and Courier* where he was named the Journalist of the Year by the South Carolina Press Association. From 2006 to 2007 he was a Nieman fellow at Harvard University where he started work on this book. His father, John Scott, was the damage Control officer on *Liberty* and was awarded the Silver Star for his role in keeping his ship afloat and leading the fire fighting teams during the attack. Although when growing up James heard and read about the attack on his father's ship he has said that his father did not dwell on that horrific experience nevertheless there were occasional reunions of the survivors James attended, visits of his father's shipmates and other reminders of the maritime holocaust his father had witnessed. The book is dedicated to his father and his shipmates as follows:

For my father, John Scott, who lived to tell about it. And in memory of the thirty-four, who didn't.

James Scott then lists the names of 34 who were killed. The second name on that list is Philip McC. Armstrong, Jr., the Executive Officer of *Liberty* who was mortally

wounded as he tried to jettison two 55 gallon gasoline drums that had been set afire. For that act of valor he was awarded the Navy Cross and I should also disclose that he was a Naval Academy classmate of mine. One reviewer commented that while scenes of the attack (chapters 4 and 5) represent incredible action writing it should give the reader pause to realize that the violence is almost too descriptive as it is depicting real events and lives.

On the last two pages of this book James tells about his travel to Israel in the fall of 2007 with his father who found an unlikely sense of closure there. Yiftah Spector, one of the pilots who had attacked the *Liberty* had declined to be interviewed but invited James to visit in his home in the suburbs of Tel Aviv. Spector had also flown in the 1981 attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor and more recently had signed a petition, along with other pilots, refusing to conduct airstrikes against militants hiding in densely populated Palestinian areas.

James left his father behind and arrived at Spector's home to find the sixty-six-year-old brigadier general building a playground for his grandchildren. Over coffee in the kitchen Spector asked why he was interested in a four decade old story and James told him his father was one of the *Liberty* officers. Knowing that his father had accompanied him to Israel Spector asked why he had not brought him along for coffee. James thought that might be awkward. "Nonsense" said Spector so James called his father and thirty minutes later his father came face to face with one of the pilots who attacked his ship that sunny afternoon of June 8, 1967. Now here in the words of James is what transpired:

"The two men , both young and confident so many years earlier, were now gray and wrinkled. Spector stuck out his hand for my father to shake." "We came within 300 meters of one another" " he told my father. " " I'm sorry." " These were the words my father and many of his shipmates had wanted to hear for decades, the words no one in the Navy, the White House, or Congress had ever been publicly willing to say. The *Liberty* and its crew had become pariahs, shunned for political reasons.....Even though my father had long ago packed up his memories of the *Liberty* and moved on with his life, I know how much Spector's apology meant to him. A burden had been lifted. My father reached out and took Spector's hand and said: " "Thank you . " "

This is a book all true blue Americans should read. Though it may not be a happy read it is a gripping story. Those who read through the seven page Prologue are not likely to put down *The Attack on the Liberty*.