

GUEST COLUMNS

# Opinion | Remembering the USS Liberty — and why it still matters

By Terry Hansen | guest column  
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The USS Liberty  
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On June 8, 1967, the USS Liberty, a U.S. Navy intelligence ship, was attacked by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats while operating in international waters off the Sinai Peninsula during the Six-Day War. The assault killed 34 Americans, wounded more than 170 and nearly sank the ship. A Navy court of inquiry convened soon after the attack concluded that it was a case of mistaken identity, though the incident has remained controversial ever since.

One matter of contention is whether the American flag was clearly visible to the attackers. However, a declassified National Security Agency document states: "Every official interview of numerous Liberty crewmen gave consistent evidence that indeed the Liberty was flying an American flag -- and, further, the weather conditions were ideal to ensure its easy observance and identification."

Notably, in a 2004 signed affidavit released at a Capitol Hill news conference, retired Navy Captain Ward Boston, chief counsel to the Naval Court of Inquiry, stated that Adm. Isaac Kidd told him President Lyndon Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had ordered the inquiry to conclude that the attack was a case of "mistaken identity." Boston added that this conclusion was reached despite "overwhelming evidence to the contrary."



Adm. Thomas H. Moorer served 41 years in the U.S. Navy, including as chief of naval operations and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was the only officer in Navy history to command both the Pacific and Atlantic Fleets. Moorer also chaired the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the 1967 attack on the USS Liberty, which was introduced into the Congressional Record on Oct. 7, 2004.

The Moorer report, a damning indictment of the official narrative, concludes that Israeli aircraft attacked the USS Liberty for about 25 minutes using napalm, cannon fire and rockets while jamming U.S. distress channels. It also asserts that Israeli torpedo boats machine-gunned firefighters, stretcher-bearers and life rafts. It further states that the White House recalled military rescue aircraft while the ship was under attack,

Crucially, the Moorer report contends that crewmembers were threatened with court-martial and imprisonment if they revealed the truth, and that "to this day, no surviving crewmember has been permitted to *officially and publicly* testify about the attack" (emphasis mine).

According to Liberty survivor Glenn Oliphant: "I specifically remember ... Admiral Kidd coming over to us and saying, I don't ever want you guys to talk about this again. That was a terrible tragedy for many of us because when you go through this traumatic stress syndrome, you need to talk about it."

An Oct. 2, 2007, feature article on the Liberty incident in the Chicago Tribune notes that, even after four decades, many of the more than two dozen survivors interviewed were unable to discuss the attack "without shouting or weeping."

Furthermore, Liberty Capt. William McGonagle was severely wounded early in the attack, suffering heavy blood loss. Yet he commanded his ship for over 17 hours, maneuvering her while directing damage control, fire suppression and care for his wounded crew.

Although it is customary for the Congressional Medal of Honor to be presented by the president in a public ceremony, McGonagle instead received the United States' highest award for military valor from the chief of naval operations in an unpublicized ceremony at the Washington Navy Yard.

Returning to the Moorer report, it concludes, "Fundraising and election pressures have prevented an honest investigation from being conducted for the past 36 years." That sentence still rings true today.

The same political currents that shaped the original inquiry have sustained the silence that followed.

The report also calls for a new Court of Inquiry by the Department of the Navy to take public testimony from surviving crewmembers and thoroughly examine the attack, as well as for June 8 to be proclaimed USS Liberty Remembrance Day. These are not radical demands; they are minimal steps toward accountability and closure.

If we claim to honor all who wear the uniform, then we must also have the courage to confront the full story of the USS Liberty. Our military veterans, and the integrity of our democracy, deserve nothing less.

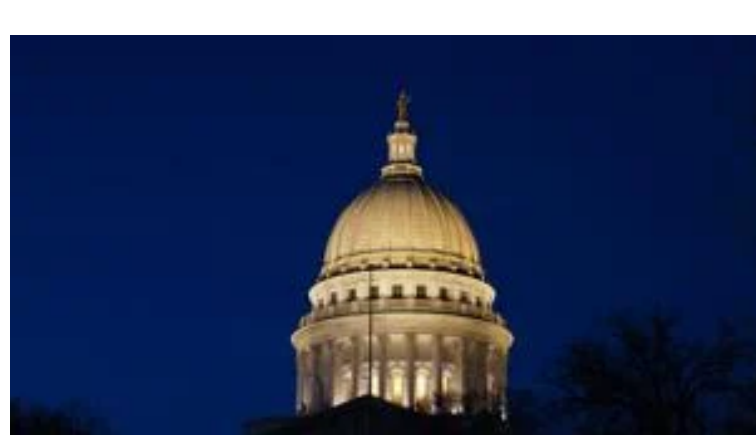
*Terry Hansen lives in Grafton, home to the USS Liberty Memorial Public Library.*

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