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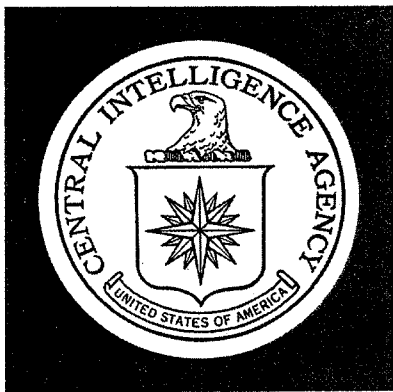
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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

The Israeli Attack on the USS Liberty

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13 June 1967

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
13 June 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Israeli Attack on the USS Liberty

The US Naval technical research ship Liberty was attacked by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats off the Sinai Peninsula on 8 June. The following account of the circumstances of the attack has been compiled from all available sources.

1. The Liberty reported at 9:50 a.m. (2:50 a.m. Washington time) on 8 June that it had been orbited by two delta-wing jet fighters, presumably Israeli Mirages.¹ At 3:05 p.m. (8:05 a.m.) the Liberty was strafed by unidentified jet aircraft. The Liberty apparently was not able to establish communications with other units of the US Sixth Fleet during the air attack, and the first information available to the US commanders was after the subsequent attack by unidentified torpedo boats, which occurred at 3:25 p.m.²

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2. At 4:11 p.m. (9:11 a.m.) the US Commander in Chief, Europe, notified the National Military Command Center in Washington that the Liberty was under attack and was listing to starboard after being struck by a torpedo. The Commander of the US Sixth Fleet declared the attacking units hostile and sent attack aircraft from the carriers America and Saratoga to protect the Liberty. A good part of the ship's communications equipment was destroyed by the crew during the attack but emergency communications were soon established with the Saratoga and with the naval communications station in Greece.³ Because of the tenseness of the situation and the communications delays, the initial reports from the Liberty were sketchy and somewhat confusing.

Specifics of the Attack

3. According to these reports, however, the sequence of events took place as follows. The ship was attacked at 3:05 p.m. (8:05 a.m.) by unidentified jet fighters, believed to be Israeli, at position 31-35N, 33-29E. Six strafing runs were made by the jets. Twenty minutes later three torpedo boats closed at high speed and two of them launched torpedoes after first circling the Liberty. One torpedo passed astern, and the other struck

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the starboard side of the ship in the spaces occupied by the SIGINT collectors. One of the boats was later identified as Israeli and the hull number of one unit was noted as 206-T. Some 50 minutes later two Israeli helicopters arrived on the scene.⁴

Israeli Identification of the Ship

4. None of the communications of the attacking aircraft and torpedo boats is available, but the intercepted conversations between the helicopter pilots and the control tower at Hatzor (near Tel Aviv) leave little doubt that the Israelis failed to identify the Liberty as a US ship before or during the attack. Control told (helicopter) 815 at 3:31 p.m. (8:31 a.m.) that "there is a warship there which we attacked. The men jumped into the water from it. You will try to rescue them."⁵ Although there were other references to a search for the men in the water and although US units later searched the area, no survivors were recovered from the sea, nor were there any indications that any of the 22 missing personnel from the Liberty had been lost overboard.

5. A subsequent message from the control tower to the helicopter identified the ship as Egyptian

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and told the pilot to return home. Although the Liberty is some 200 feet longer than the Egyptian transport El Quesir, it could easily be mistaken for the latter vessel by an overzealous pilot. Both ships have similar hulls and arrangements of masts and stack.6

6. The weather was clear in the area of attack, the Liberty's hull number (GTR 5) was prominently displayed, and an American flag was flying. The helicopter pilot was then urgently requested to identify the survivors as Egyptian or English speaking (this being the first indication that the Israelis suspected they may have attacked a neutral ship). The helicopter pilot reported seeing an American flag on the Liberty. In another intercept between an unidentified Israeli controller and the helicopter number 815, the pilot reported that number GTR 5 was written on the ship's side. The controller told the pilot the number had no significance.7

7. Thus it was not until 4:12 p.m. (9:12 a.m.) that the Israelis became convinced that the Liberty

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was American. This was about 44 minutes after the last attack on the ship and the attack had apparently been called off, not because the ship had been identified, but because it seemed to be sinking. (The US Defense Attaché in Tel Aviv reports that Israeli helicopters and the three torpedo boats searched the area until 6:04 p.m. (11:04 a.m.).⁸ The Israeli offer of assistance was declined because of the sensitive mission of the ship. According to US Navy reports, the ship was saved only through the efforts of her crew.⁹

Damage and Personnel Losses

8. The ship suffered heavy material and personnel casualties. A hole estimated to be 39 feet wide at the bottom and 24 feet wide at the top near the waterline was opened by a torpedo. The ship is flooded below the second deck between frames 52 and 78 (36-inch frame spacing).¹⁰ The crew carried out emergency destruction of classified communications and radar equipment, but the ship's engineering plant is intact. Several flash fires and cannon holes throughout the superstructure caused some minor damage, and the ship's motor whale boat and

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virtually all of its life rafts were lost. Personnel casualties include 10 killed, 90 wounded, and 22 missing, most of whom were probably trapped in the flooded compartments. The wounded and the dead have been removed from the ship and some additional crew members put aboard.¹¹ The ship is expected to arrive in Malta on 14 June for dry docking and hull repairs. Security precautions are being taken to protect the classified intercept equipment in the flooded spaces. The US Navy has convened a board of inquiry to look into the incident.

The Ship and Its Orders

9. The USS Liberty is a converted Victory class merchant ship utilized as a SIGINT collector. The unit had moved from its normal station off West Africa to provide additional SIGINT coverage of the Middle East crisis.¹² Official US statements, however, have described the Liberty as an electronics research ship which had been diverted to the crisis area to act as a radio relay station for US embassies.¹³

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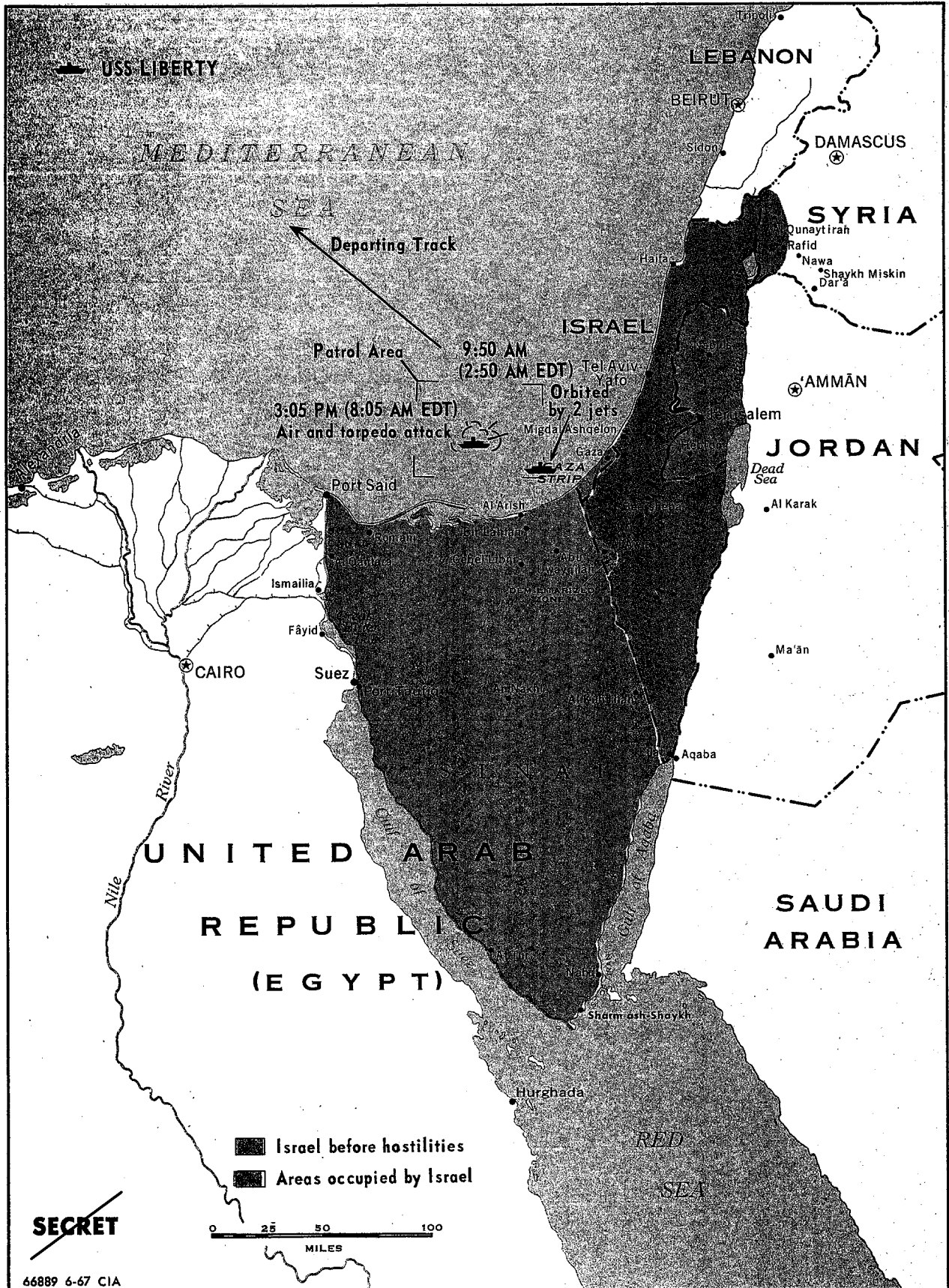
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10. The Liberty sailed from Rota, Spain, on 2 June under orders to patrol no closer than 12.5 miles of the UAR coast and 6.5 miles of the Israeli coast. A modification of orders issued by the Commander of the US Sixth Fleet at 12:17 p.m. (5:17 a.m.) on 8 June had not been received aboard the Liberty, according to the ship's commanding officer, before the Israeli attack. This change, together with messages from other commands which ordered the Liberty to approach no closer than 100 miles of the coasts of the UAR and Israel and 25 miles of the coast of Cyprus, was delayed in transmission in part because of a misunderstanding of responsibilities for delivery.¹⁴

11. At annex is a listing of events in chronological order.

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CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

(Stated times are local; Washington times in parentheses)

- 2 June 1967 Liberty departed Rota, Spain en route to position 32-00N, 33-00E, to remain 12.5 miles from Egyptian coast and 6.5 miles from Israeli coast. 15
- 8 June 2:50 a.m.
(7 June 7:50 p.m.) CINCUSNAVEUR Duty Officer received phone instructions from Joint Reconnaissance Center directing Liberty to comply with COMSIXTHFLEET 100-mile operating area restriction. 15
- 8 June 9:50 a.m.
(2:50 a.m.) Liberty was orbited by two unidentified delta wing single engine jet fighters, presumably Israeli Mirages. 16
- 8 June 12:17 p.m.
(5:17 a.m.) COMSIXTHFLEET orders Liberty at least 100 miles away from coast of UAR and Israel and 25 miles from Cyprus. This message apparently not received by Liberty prior to Israeli attack. 17
- 8 June 3:05 p.m.
(8:05 a.m.) Liberty attacked by unidentified jet fighters which made six strafing runs. Ship at position 31-35.5N 33-29.0E (25 miles north-east of nearest land). 17
- 8 June 3:25 p.m.
(8:25 a.m.) Three torpedo boats, one identified as Israeli, approach ship. One boat bore number 206-T. 18
- 8 June 3:27 p.m.
(8:27 a.m.) Liberty fires at torpedo boat at range of 2,000 yards. 18
- 8 June 3:28 p.m.
(8:28 a.m.) Ship hit by torpedo. Torpedo boats cleared to east about five miles. 18
- 8 June 3:30 p.m.
(8:30 a.m.) COMSIXTHFLEET reports Liberty hit by torpedo at position 31-23N, 33-25E. Three unidentified gunboats approaching. 19

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- 8 June 3:31 p.m.
(8:31 a.m.) Hatzor air control (near Tel Aviv) told helicopters (two) to try to rescue men who had jumped into the water from "warship which we attacked." 20
- 8 June 3:34 p.m.
(8:34 a.m.) Israeli helicopter identified ship as "definitely Egyptian." Helicopters ordered back to base. 20
- 8 June 3:39 p.m.
(8:39 a.m.) Hatzor control told helicopter to rescue men. 20
- 8 June 3:50 p.m.
(8:50 a.m.) COMSIXTHFLEET orders carriers to provide air cover for Liberty.
- 8 June 3:52 p.m.
(8:52 a.m.) Liberty reported under attack to COMSIXTHFLEET 21
- 8 June 3:55 p.m.
(8:55 a.m.) Liberty reported hit by torpedo star-board side (National Security Agency (NSA) follow-up to Critic, probably a delayed report) 22
- 8 June 3:55 p.m.
(8:55 a.m.) Two Israeli helicopters orbited ship at range of 500 yards. Israeli torpedo boats offered assistance which was refused. 23
- 8 June 3:59 p.m.
(8:59 a.m.) Liberty still under air attack (NSA follow-up to Critic)
- 8 June 3:59 p.m.
(8:59 a.m.) Hatzor control told helicopter to clarify the nationality of the first man he brings up. 24
- 8 June 4:02 p.m.
(9:02 a.m.) Helicopter reports (to Hatzor) a big ship and three small ships about a mile from the helicopter. (This places the torpedo boats about eight miles from Liberty.) 24
- 8 June 4:07 p.m.
(9:07 a.m.) Hatzor told helicopters if men were Egyptians to take them to El Arish; if they spoke English and were not Egyptians, to take them to Lydda. 24

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8 June 4:10 p.m.
(9:10 a.m.)

Hatzor told helicopter again to clarify nationality. (It appears from the obvious importance of this question that the Israelis suspected they may have hit an American or British and not an Egyptian ship.) 24

8 June 4:10 p.m.
(9:10 a.m.)

Hull number of Liberty seen by Israeli helicopter pilot who did not recognize significance. 25

8 June 4:12 p.m.
(9:12 a.m.)

Hatzor asked helicopter, "Did it clearly signal an American flag?" and later requested helicopter to make another pass and check again whether it was really an American flag. 26

8 June 4:16 p.m.
(9:16 a.m.)

Hatzor orders helicopters to return to El Arish. 26

8 June 5:14 p.m.
(10:14 a.m.)

Tel Aviv reports Israeli aircraft and patrol boats attacked ship at 3:00 p.m. (8:00 a.m.) at position 31-25N, 33-33E. Suspecting a US ship, Israel rendering assistance and expresses deep regret. 27

8 June 6:04 p.m.
(11:04 a.m.)

The US Defense Attache in Tel Aviv reports that Israeli helicopters and the three torpedo boats searched the area until 6:04 p.m. (11:04 a.m.). The Israeli offer of assistance was declined because of the sensitive mission of the ship. 28

COMSIXTHFLEET then recalled the aircraft launched from the carriers America and Saratoga and sent two destroyers to assist Liberty. Liberty proceeding northwest at eight knots. 29

There was no further contact between Liberty and Israeli forces. Two Soviet ships have trailed the Liberty, which proceeds under escort to Malta.

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