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

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.

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


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.”

E-mail rkolb@vfw.org