

OPERATION CYANIDE

**WHY THE BOMBING OF THE USS LIBERTY
NEARLY CAUSED WORLD WAR III**



**'An extraordinary story: one of the most extraordinary, perhaps,
of the entire twentieth century.'** JOHN SIMPSON, BBC WORLD AFFAIRS EDITOR

PETER HOUNAM

During the Six-Day War Israel attacked and nearly sank the USS *Liberty*, a ship belonging to its closest ally. Thirty-four American servicemen were killed in the brutal two-hour assault by unmarked warplanes and torpedo boats. For over seventeen hours the *Liberty* received no assistance from US forces in the Mediterranean. In fact, US planes dispatched to aid the stricken ship were twice recalled by Washington.

Then Israel owned up to the attack, claiming the affair was 'an unfortunate accident' based on mistaken identification of the ship. To the anguish of the surviving sailors, the American government appeared to accept the explanation. While it became clear that US President Lyndon Baynes Johnson ordered a massive cover-up, the real reason for the atrocity has remained a baffling mystery – until now.

Thirty-five years after the event, investigative reporter Peter Hounam has uncovered LBJ's astounding secret. Through interviews with former officers in the US and Israeli armed forces and intelligence services, Hounam reveals that hidden in the *Liberty's* safe were top secret orders for Operation Cyanide – a clandestine CIA and Mossad plan to foment the Six-Day War and guarantee an overwhelming victory for Israel.

That the attack on the *Liberty* nearly caused a nuclear confrontation between the superpowers is only one of the devastating revelations in this significant book, which gives an essential reappraisal to the background of the current conflicts in the Middle East.

OPERATION CYANIDE

*Why the Bombing of the USS Liberty
Nearly Caused World War III*

Peter Hounam



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To the crew of the USS Liberty, their families, and the families of the 34 who died aboard a remarkable ship.

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Acknowledgements

In the summer of 2000 I was asked to investigate the attack on the USS *Liberty* for British television. Like many people I had never heard of this incident. An American naval ship had almost sunk in 1967 when Israeli planes and torpedo boats bombed it during the Six-Day War. The crew who survived were convinced the onslaught was deliberate, but the issue had quickly died when Israel said it was friendly fire and apologised.

My assignment, 33 years later, was to uncover why this 'error' had occurred. The *Liberty* veterans in the United States, mostly now long retired, were still furious that their Government had bullied them into silence and had accepted Israel's explanation. It has taken two years to uncover what really happened that day in June when 34 US naval servicemen died. There was abundant evidence the attack was carefully planned but the most difficult task was to uncover the motive. The outcome of my enquiries in the US, Europe, Moscow and Israel was a 68 minute BBC documentary *Dead in the Water* and this book. Both show that there is a side to the Six-Day War that has never been told. The present turmoil in the region is partly its consequence.

One person who provided unstinting help was Jim Ennes, a *Liberty* officer who survived the attack. In 1979, he published an account that focused public attention on the events. His book provided a rallying point for many of the crew who had been ordered to remain silent about their experiences. Jim handed over all the material he collected before and after his book came out, and kept me posted of further revelations.

There were many well-placed informants who asked to remain anonymous but their knowledge of the attack and what happened behind the scenes was invaluable. In Nebraska, Richard

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Schmucker, a retired naval intelligence officer, was such a ferret, gathering together documents and accounts from many of the survivors. Among them, George Golden, Dave Lewis, Ernie Gallo, John Gidulsko, John Hrankowski, Joe Lentini and Joe Meadors were particularly generous with their help and encouragement.

In Israel, the journalist Ran Eddelist helped with introductions to many significant players in the Six-Day War. In Moscow, Vice Admiral Nikolai Cherkashin, now a military commentator, tracked down some of the Soviet officers who were posted to the Mediterranean when trouble loomed. Andy Braddell accompanied me to Russia to meet them, acting as interpreter and adviser.

Chris Mitchell, producer of our BBC documentary, was a partner in much of this inquiry. We puzzled together over many strange twists in the story as we travelled through Israel and America in search of answers. Sheena Dewan and my editor Charlotte Cole of Vision must also be mentioned for their professional expertise, and always believing a manuscript would arrive one day. Thanks are also due David Ben Areah, Marion Woolfson, David Grant, and of course my wife Hilarie who understood that the long hours this investigation consumed were for a good cause.

The final credit goes to the scores of interviewees whose stories and opinions enrich this book. Due to them, there is a chance the truth will now be recognised.

Peter Hounam, September 2002

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Foreword

This is an extraordinary story: one of the most extraordinary, perhaps, of the entire twentieth century. Suppose, in an attempt to shore up his critically damaged presidency, Lyndon Johnson deliberately engineered an event in which American lives were sacrificed and the United States was brought disturbingly close to an all-out nuclear war with Russia? Suppose this involved a secret agreement between Israel and American intelligence, which resulted in an Israeli attack on an American naval vessel, in the latter stages of the Six-Day War?

It sounds, I know, like one of those depressing conspiracy theories which cluster round every big controversial event, from the death of Princess Diana to the attack on the World Trade Centre: people often have problems in handling the banality of truth, and prefer to imagine deeper, darker plots beneath the surface. Yet this book is based on careful, rigorous investigation by a well-known and respected journalist who has meticulously tracked down the people and the documents who have survived from the event itself: the attack on the USS *Liberty*, in the eastern Mediterranean in June 1967.

As with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy four years earlier, the official version is even more unlikely than some of the conspiracy theories. In order to believe the hasty, often contradictory account which came out of Washington, you would have to accept all sorts of virtual impossibilities: that Israeli planes and torpedo boats could have mistaken a modern American naval vessel of ten thousand tons for an elderly Egyptian horse transport less than a quarter of its size, come to within 50 feet of it without spotting that it was flying a particularly large American flag, and blazed away at it from close range for 40 minutes before

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realising what it was they were shooting at. A hasty American inquiry immediately afterwards called it a 'bona-fide mistake'. That seems, to say the least, a little implausible.

Yet this is the official version, which stands to this day. Any other version – that of the *Liberty's* surviving crew members, for instance – has been extremely hard to establish because of the intensity of the security blanket which the Israelis and Americans wrapped around the entire incident. The blanket still remains in place; yet this book provides sufficient evidence for any open-minded person to see that something else lies beneath: something very disturbing.

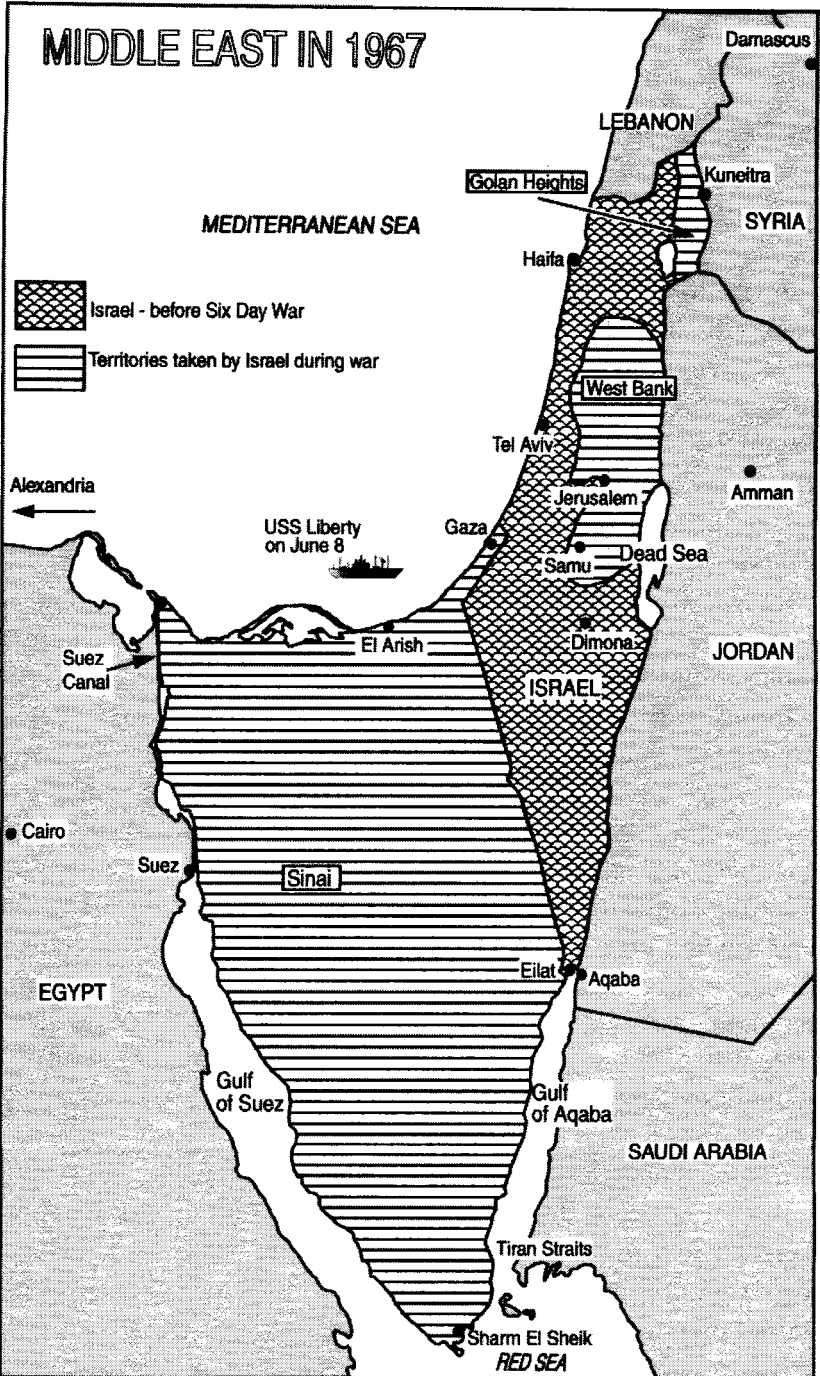
I have found Peter Hounam's research compelling, and the story which unfolds in these pages riveting. It is time a little daylight was shed on Operation Cyanide. This book does precisely that, and we should be very grateful for it.

John Simpson, BBC World Affairs Editor
Paris, October 2002

SACRIFICING LIBERTY

Liberty has been bought and paid for with blood but the price extorted from the USS *Liberty's* crew was, and still is, too high. The political objectives were a stain on our country's honour. The American public has long been owed the truth for them to decide the future direction of their country.

R.S. Thompson, 4 July 1997



Introduction

A dramatic and disturbing story came my way in October 2002 when this book had almost been completed, although by this point it came as no surprise. Jim Nanjo, a 65-year-old retired US Air Force pilot, was describing the unusual and top secret job he had specialised in during the 1960s. Under the right circumstances, his task would have been to help bomb the Soviet Union and its allies during the Cold War using nuclear weapons. Of particular significance was the day one summer when, as he told it, he was within a whisker of helping to start World War Three, a situation that has hitherto escaped public attention.

It was in the early hours of 8 June 1967. Nanjo was deeply asleep in his quarters at 744 Bomb Squadron, part of 456 Strategic Air Wing, at Beale Air Force Base, California, north of Sacramento. Suddenly klaxons and sirens began sounding. 'It was between 2 and 4 am,' he said. 'I remember it was absolutely pitch dark in my room. I jumped out of bed and hit the wall, I was a little disorientated.' As he had been trained to do a thousand times, he grabbed his gear, put it on, and ran out into the night.

He was not alone; other aircrew were responding to the alert – rushing with similar haste to their planes nearby. Lit by arc lights, half a dozen B52 bombers – 160 feet long with a 185-foot wingspan – were standing on the tarmac; they were fully fuelled with ground crew already in attendance. Lined up behind them were a larger number of KC-135 tanker planes ready to accompany them on their mission; if needs be they would extend the B52s' range to the other side of the earth.

Nanjo said that in those days they were allocated just

two and a half minutes to get aboard and be ready to fly: 'Once the phone went off we [would] dash to the airplanes, start the engines and begin listening to the incoming messages by way of radio. It could come from Strategic Air Command (SAC), Airborne Command Post, or National Command Authority... I assume [from] the nature of this that it was Strategic Air Command at Omaha.' Climbing aboard his airplane, he had broken a pack of codes, the key to deciphering his mission orders. Then he put on a survival suit and took his position in the cockpit. As he strapped himself into his seat, the pilot beside him began to start up the engines.

Nanjo said he was operating like an automaton so thorough was the training he had undergone, but he was very much wide awake, and apprehensive. He took a moment to wonder whether this call-out was for real or an exercise. 'There were practices every four to seven days,' he told me. 'Essentially, you could discern the difference between an exercise as opposed to a real incident... If it [was] locally generated, it [was] usually a practice. Then they told you to hold position... This particular early morning, [we] had to break the seal into certain codes we had to carry with us. We knew it was not a practice. Not only that, we had practiced only a couple of days before.'

Alongside, another four or five bombers were also revving up. 'In this particular case we were asked not to take off,' Nanjo said, 'but to go to the end of the runway and [keep] our engines running.' He said getting this far was very unusual; the final step of taking off with nuclear weapons on was 'not to be taken very lightly'. He added, 'We referred to these airplanes as "cocked" just like olden days when guns were cocked ready to fire.'

Even after 35 years, he was reluctant to provide details of the bombs carried by his squadron that morning: 'Other than to say it was a weapon of mass destruction, I am not able to give you the nomenclature.' Then he confirmed they were carrying thermonuclear weapons – H-bombs. Nanjo went on: 'If you recall, [...] a B52 had an accident that dropped a number of nuclear weapons off Spain; [...] that was a similar set up.' He indicated that the type

of bomb his squadron was carrying was the Mark 28 (RI) version. RI stood for Retarded Internal and was designed with a special fusing and parachute system allowing it to be dropped by a bomber flying at just a few hundred feet and therefore below enemy radar. Each of these weapons had a quoted yield of 'kilotons up to a megaton'. A megaton is equivalent to the explosive power of a million tons of TNT.

The Spanish accident to which Nanjo referred would have been fresh in his mind in June 1967. It had only happened 18 months earlier, and had helped to prompt a complete rethink about the way America's nuclear force was to be deployed during the Cold War. At the time, B52s patrolled the skies, armed with nuclear weapons and ready to strike in the event of any threat from the Soviet Union. It was part of an SAC operation known as Chrome Dome, and was integrated with America's ballistic missile defences.

In January 1966, a bomber carrying four Mark 28 H-bombs was refuelling above the coastal town of Palomares when it collided with its tanker plane. The explosive 'fission' triggers on two of the bombs detonated as they hit the ground, digging craters and scattering radioactive plutonium across the fields; it necessitated a huge clean-up operation as well as a placatory gift to the town of a desalination plant. One bomb landed harmlessly nearby and was quickly recovered intact, but the fourth plunged into the sea and was only recovered by a flotilla of US mini-submarines. This secret operation called Broken Arrow cost \$50 million; the deactivated H-bomb with a large dent in its nose is now an exhibit at the US's National Atomic Museum.

When the seriousness of this and several other nuclear accidents became apparent, US President Lyndon Johnson had ordered a new strategy by which most of his nuclear bomber force remained in readiness on the ground; Chrome Dome was phased out. It explains why on 8 June 1967, Nanjo was fast asleep when the alert was sounded, and no longer having to fly around the stratosphere at 50,000 feet, his bomb bay fully armed. He said that under the new system, his crew would be on duty for four or

seven day stints, billeted within 150 yards of their airplane: 'Every unit in the height of the Cold War had a certain percentage of aircraft fully loaded with weapons as well as standing on alert, ready to take off.'

At the time he was nearly 30 years old, he had been born in the USA but his parents were Japanese. Despite the destruction from atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima during World War Two, Jim Nanjo was never affected by the irony that he was now involved in the delivery of a nuclear weapons programme many times more powerful. 'At my age, at this point, I think it was a ridiculous idea,' he said. 'But as a young, hotshot pilot, a crewman in a B52 when we were in our twenties; I thought that was a normal thing to do. During World War Two, they were dedicated people who flew those lumbering Lancaster bombers over Germany day after day. To me, the big thrill was that I was able to fly a B52.'

He said that at the height of the Cold War, there was a similar sense of dedication: 'Today it is very casually taken, but in those days the members of Strategic Air Command were hand-picked. Hand-picked meant the Air Force chose you because of a certain amount of devotion to duty. [They judged] the type of person you were, and the things that you were willing to do.'

Nanjo was almost matter-of-fact in the way he described those 'things': 'We had been trained to react, not only to go through our mental preparation but to physically get ourselves to do our mission as we had been trained to do, and that was ultimately to deliver nuclear weapons.' He knew that on a number of occasions he almost took part in a nuclear shoot-out but he added: 'You don't want to think about it.' In that eventuality, they all knew they were unlikely to return: 'We knew [that] although we trained, it would have been a one way mission.'

Procedures were strictly laid down and talking between the crew and with SAC on the radio was kept to a minimum. Each possible mission had been meticulously planned in advance so that all they needed was the appropriate 'go-code'. 'The message from National Command Authority would have been very

specific,' he said, 'in that if you received a go-code for that country you would have gone... We did target study; we knew exactly which targets. Whether we would be able to attack that target remains to [be seen].'

Nanjo said the number of weapons carried by each bomber depended on the target and how far away it was. Each B52 would have a pre-assigned list of places to destroy, travelling from one to the next and hoping not to be shot down en route. I asked what happened when all six had been released: 'Ah – you do your best to get back,' he said.

Nanjo was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1977 and retired in 1990. It became evident from his recollections that the alert in June 1967 was one of the most hair-raising moments of his career, and a vivid memory. 'One of the first things we did was to cover the windows of our cockpit with a brass shade,' he said, 'so that if there was a nuclear explosion our vision was not impaired. We had what we call a peephole. [I had] to peep through this hole with one eye covered to get a physical reference to where we were.'

He said he was occupying the radar navigator and bombardier's position, and he had to break out the navigation chart for the mission from its sealed container. What was on his mind more than anything else was the moment when his task would be to release the bombs on the targets marked on this chart. I asked if it was a World War Three situation. 'It was. Yes. Yes,' he said. 'The only thing we were looking for was the go-code, authorised by National Command Authority. The aircraft commander and myself were the only people [who were authorised] to authenticate the message. We were both waiting for this message to come, which never came.'

Having arrived at his plane between 2 am and 4 am, and taxied to the end of the runway, the squadron waited – and waited – with engines running. Nanjo cannot now remember whether they sat there for four hours, six hours or even longer, but it was well into the morning before a coded message came through ordering everyone to stand down. Relieved that the emergency

was over, they packed away their kit and returned to their quarters for a meal.

As yet they had no idea why an alert had been called; in these critical situations they rarely received any official explanation. But when Nanjo and his colleagues began to relax in front of the television, they discovered that an American naval ship called the *USS Liberty* had been attacked in the eastern Mediterranean and badly damaged. Later reports said the Israeli Government had eventually admitted responsibility and apologised for the error. Nanjo said that despite having no official confirmation it was clear the first reports of the attack, which were said to be by unidentified forces, had prompted the emergency. He said his unit at Beale Air Force Base was not alone in being alerted; he also referred to Guam, bases in Britain, Morón in Spain, as well as more in the US.

Nanjo said it was one of only a handful of such emergencies he encountered in nearly 20 years working for the H-bomb attack force: 'I'll give you an example of the real cases where we started engines and started to taxi. The afternoon President Kennedy was assassinated, the klaxon went, we broke seals and taxied... Messages started to come back that it was not at the hands of an enemy country. Essentially as soon as the cause [was] disseminated, the command authority [could] turn us back... The *Liberty* [attack] was another. There was one more when another [US] ship, the *Pueblo* [was attacked by the North Koreans]... I was off that day. It was three times in twenty years that I know of. There may have been a few more depending on what the National Command Authority deemed as a real threat...'

He had heard of one other occasion when it was for real: 'We responded in a like manner [in] the Cuba crisis in 1962; we spent a whole week in that mode. I was still under training... but that was not a practice. [The day the *Liberty* was attacked] people talked about this [being] just like the Cuban crisis days.'

Nanjo was in no doubt that the world was near to Armageddon that day, and if the Israelis had not accepted responsibility in time, the Soviet Union might have been the target. There was however

one other significance of his story that he had not spotted. The klaxons had woken him at between 2 am and 4 am; he was certain it was no later, but the *Liberty* was not attacked until 5 am California time. How were the American military and their commander in chief, Lyndon Johnson, able to anticipate the attack, and yet apparently not know the Israelis were behind it?

On 8 June 1997, Captain William McGonagle strode stiffly up to a microphone that had been set up beside a grave in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC and began to recall an incident that had long distressed him. During the Six-Day War in 1967, while Israel was conquering parts of Egypt and Jordan, his ship had been bombed and torpedoed off the Sinai coast and 34 of his men killed. He glanced at the tombstone commemorating five of his shipmates whose bodies were never recovered, and at the all-too-brief inscription: 'Killed USS *Liberty* – 8 June 1967'. With tears in his eyes, he turned to the audience gathered for the 30th commemoration ceremony and let fly. 'I think it's about time,' he said, 'that the State of Israel and the United States Government provided the crew members of the *Liberty* and the rest of the American people the facts of what happened, and why it came about that the *Liberty* was attacked 30 years ago today.'

Then 71 years of age, the *Liberty's* skipper was expressing feelings he had bottled up for most of his adult life. He was in poor health, but he was in full naval uniform and proudly wearing the Congressional Medal of Honor, his country's highest citation, awarded for his gallantry during the attack. He continued: 'For many years I have wanted to believe that the attack on the *Liberty* was pure error, but it appears to me that it was not a pure case of mistaken identity. It was, on the other hand, gross incompetence and aggravated dereliction of duty on the part of many officers and men of the state of Israel. American citizens deserve no less than to know exactly what transpired.'

Friends would later relate that McGonagle had never forgiven himself for failing to save more of his men, and harboured a guilty conscience because he knew a great deal more about the

impending danger they faced than he had ever admitted. Others less impressed with his conduct said he was 'bought off', the Medal of Honor being given to secure his lasting silence. When he stopped speaking that day at the cemetery, his nation's last resting-place for all its military fallen, an honour guard began a moving procession. Prayers were said for the dead and the 294 survivors, 171 of whom had been injured, and there was a flypast by naval fighter planes that for a moment drowned out the sound of the band.

McGonagle was not a man given to theatrics, and the importance of his remarks was grasped by an Associated Press reporter, who filed a syndicated story. It included the words: 'Shipmates who credit the former CO's heroic leadership with keeping the listing, crippled ship from sinking agreed that it was the first time he has shared publicly their frustration about withheld information and suspicions of a cover-up.' The reporter pointed out that the brief speech stopped short of some allegations that the air and torpedo boat attack conducted by Israel was intentional, with knowledge that the target was a United States ship in international waters. But the *Liberty* veterans who were present were delighted their skipper had stepped out of line. To most of the surviving sailors and their families, the attack was an atrocity.

They have not succeeded in unravelling why Israel bombed, napalmed and torpedoed a 'friendly' US Navy ship during a war in which their country was merely a bystander. But they know it was deliberate, and view as a betrayal their country's acceptance that the attack was an identification error. Given this bitter divergence of opinion, the assault on the USS *Liberty* has become one of the greatest naval mysteries of the twentieth century – not so much a 'whodunit' but a 'whydunit'.

For many aboard the vessel, life – which before had been so carefree – was never to be the same again. June 1967 was the beginning of the 'Summer of Love'. Across the Western world hippies were garlanding themselves with flowers and experimenting with psychedelic drugs. The Beatles had released their album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The message was

'Turn on, tune in and drop out'. Many of the crew had joined up to serve in the US Navy to avoid fighting in Vietnam, and being sent to the other side of the planet seemed a good way of avoiding trouble. Even when an unexpected war broke out in the Middle East, there was no inkling of danger.

A few weeks before, when the *Liberty* was sailing off the African coast, no one had imagined that Israel and Egypt would soon be fighting one another, that the conflict would spread to Jordan and Syria or that in just six days Israel would have conquered four times more territory than it had controlled previously. Tension had built up over border disputes and the Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was making belligerent threats, but pundits seemed to think sense would prevail. On Sunday 4 June, just hours before war actually broke out, most of the international press had decamped and returned home, believing nothing newsworthy was likely to happen.

A cataclysm was about to befall the Arab world, and with uncanny prescience the United States had already taken steps to monitor it. A weird-looking US Navy ship, the USS *Liberty*, was sailing towards the Egyptian coast from its regular position off Africa. As it crossed the Mediterranean heading east, most crew took the opportunity to sun themselves on deck beneath the complex array of aerials through which they listened to the radio traffic of the region when on duty.

Few aboard were concerned, even on the fourth day of the war when they were just 13 miles from land and the smoke of the fighting could be seen on the horizon. The sailors knew that Egypt was being routed, that the Israeli victors were close allies of the United States and that their ship was in international waters outside the 12-mile limit. Then came the attack on them, firstly by unmarked planes and then torpedo boats. Miraculously, the ship stayed afloat, and managed to get under way, heading for Malta; but in less than two hours, maritime history had been made.

Though Israel admitted responsibility for the attack and apologised, the deaths of 34 young Americans were not soothed by the ✓

compensation offered by Tel Aviv, almost all of it collected by Jewish groups in the US. The surviving crew viewed as laughable the explanation that the Israeli Navy and Air Force had mistaken the ship for an old Egyptian freighter used for transporting horses. Yet the United States Government promptly accepted this excuse, burying the evidence of those in the firing-line who could prove otherwise. As they were bullied into silence, the *Liberty* men would never again have the same faith in their country.

Telling the terrible story of the carnage they suffered aboard the ship is straightforward, because there are so many eyewitnesses. The *Liberty* veterans have formed their own association to keep the issue alive. But this book attempts to go further – to explain why Israel took the astonishing decision to sink a ship belonging to its ally and benefactor, why United States rescue aircraft launched from aircraft carriers of the Sixth Fleet were recalled by the White House, and why these matters were so sensitive that a total information blackout was imposed, preventing access to the truth. The task of winking out the reasons has meant a much wider examination of events before, during and after the *Liberty* attack.

McGonagle was right to demand a Congressional investigation in 1997, because there is no other way of fully establishing how far the skulduggery went. Some people who know a vital part of the story are literally scared to contravene their oath of secrecy, or worry they might be in physical danger. In Israel, the United States and Britain, doors are still slammed shut and important documentation remains classified. A lengthy National Security Agency analysis was released some time ago, but large parts were censored. Other paperwork known to exist has not even been released.

Robert McNamara, United States Secretary of Defense at the time, does not even mention the USS *Liberty* in his memoirs, and he walked out of a lunch date when someone brought up the subject. When I interviewed him for a BBC TV documentary and for this book, what he said was unbelievable. 'Don't have... anything about the *Liberty* on the tape,' he told me after we finished

recording, 'because I don't know what the hell happened and I haven't taken time to find out.' It was an unusual type of amnesia, because he remembered without difficulty many other lesser matters.

It was fortunate a few members of the crew knew important details about a secret project that, in due course, proved to be the key to this extraordinary story. Some of the most significant witnesses had nothing to do with the ship or its mission. Some were on submarines, some were in the Negev Desert, some were stationed on the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, and some were in secret intelligence centres in Morocco and Nebraska. Everyone contributed a part of the jigsaw.

Along the way, there were a few individuals who said it was all so long ago that it was no longer important, and others were reluctant to talk because it was too important and self-revealing. One Israeli general tried to argue the attack was just a footnote in the history of the Six-Day War. Another bristled with contempt for the survivors' charge that it was deliberate. 'That only shows that indeed it was a lousy crew,' he said. 'They had no idea whatsoever what was going on.' It was a lousy thing to say, and unworthy of a former head of Israeli military intelligence who was a master of disguising what was going on.

A final tactic was to level the accusation that I was out to discredit Israel. But the focus of this book is not merely on the young and insecure Jewish state – the 'oyster without a shell', as one veteran CIA officer poetically described it to me. It is also on the Johnson White House and the President's desperation about being re-elected. The Vietnam War was being lost and his dream of a second term was fading. In the midst of trying to revive his popularity, he nearly blundered into a nuclear war. That is why the *Liberty* attack had to be covered up, and why any evidence of the disastrous secret project had to be expunged. It was appropriately called Operation Cyanide.

1. Sitting Duck

'Their sustained attack to disable and sink *Liberty* precluded an assault by accident or some trigger-happy local commander... The attack was outrageous.'

Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State, in his memoirs

The crew of the USS *Liberty* had no inkling of the catastrophe that awaited them as they sailed slowly at five knots along the Egyptian coast in the early afternoon of 8 June 1967. The Six-Day War had been raging for four days but America's ally, Israel, was winning, and Western news bulletins were marvelling at the defeat of the Egyptian Air Force. President Gamal Abdel Nasser looked on in horror as his army retreated across the Sinai, taking heavy losses from the advancing Israeli tanks. It is no surprise, therefore, that 294 men aboard this United States ship never even considered anyone would dare attack a vessel flying the Stars and Stripes and which was easily identifiable by its Navy markings. It was, after all, a mere bystander to the events on shore.

The weather in the eastern Mediterranean was sunny with a light wind, and some off-duty officers had taken the chance to sunbathe on deckchairs. Others were on the mess deck eating a late salad lunch, while their colleagues had returned to their duties. Everyone had just taken part in an all-quarters drill to rehearse defending the ship against a poison gas attack, and it had gone well. Their captain, William McGonagle, had praised them over the Tannoy system. He was a stickler for these routines.

A few minutes before 2 pm, the Captain was on the bridge with the officer of the watch, Lieutenant Lloyd Painter, when a radar operator called them over. 'There were three blips on the radar screen,' Painter recalled, 'on a steady bearing, decreasing range,

from three different angles.' They indicated that surface boats were heading towards the USS *Liberty*, all from the direction of Israel and moving, he calculated, at 30 to 35 knots.

At that speed most commercial vessels could be ruled out, but there was no call to actions stations; simply a greater sense of caution. A routine signal went off informing the National Security Agency and the Pentagon of the sightings on the radar, along with the *Liberty's* position, 17 miles off the coast. It was safely in international waters, beyond Egypt's 12-mile territorial limit, but war zones are always dangerous and the *Liberty* was not there by accident. Euphemistically it was called a 'Technical Research Ship', but in common parlance it was a 'spy ship', and specialised in electronic surveillance.

No pretence was made about this, as the ship was not in disguise, unlike Russian 'trawlers', and it was so lightly armed – just four .50-calibre machine guns, two on the forecastle and two others aft – that it had no hope of defending itself. The *Liberty's* masters in Washington relied, as with all their spy ships at the time, on its distinctiveness. On a bright, clear day like this it could not easily be confused with any other vessel in the region. It was 455 feet (136.5 metres) long with a displacement of 10,000 tons and was festooned with radio aerials, including a unique steerable dish that could bounce signals via the moon back to the United States. Every navy would know its function because it was pictured with details in *Jane's Fighting Ships*, the mariner's guide to every ship afloat. Nevertheless, the bridge kept an eye on those radars and the three blips.

Down below, the vessel buzzed with activity. The regular sailors were not allowed into a warren of secure rooms known as the secret spaces where more than 150 men, employed by the Naval Security Group, were monitoring the radio traffic of the region. The NSG was one of the Navy sections that collected intelligence data for the National Security Agency, and thereafter for the Pentagon and CIA. The latest in radio gear, computers and encryption machines enabled the *Liberty's* radio operators and cryptologists, known as communications technicians or CTs, to

provide Washington with a vivid picture of Israel's battle with Egypt and Jordan. Moment by moment, the minutiae of the Six-Day War were being revealed.

One unit had the job of monitoring signals from Egyptian bombers to see whether Soviet pilots were flying them. Russian linguist Bryce Lockwood remembered later that Washington was interested in a Russian squadron of five Tu-95 'Bear' bombers at Alexandria. 'These were probably configured for electronics intelligence,' he said. 'The Russians had broadcast to the world that they were manned by United Arab Republic crews, but in fact... nobody but Russians was allowed anywhere near there. While they were on the ground they would use plain-language Arabic, but when they would get airborne they would switch to a different frequency and go to Russian, and it was our assignment to catch them.'

Lockwood recalled how a voice supervisor for Charlie Section came up to him: 'He said, "Hey, Sarge – I got 'em! I got 'em! I found 'em!" and I said, "Got who?" and he said, "The Russkies – the Russkies!" and he went back in there, and within a matter of seconds he was killed.'

CT Charles 'Chuck' Rowley, who was also the ship's photographer, was probably saved that fate when he was abruptly called to the bridge. McGonagle wanted a record of whatever was heading towards his ship as soon as the cause of the radar blips could be seen with the naked eye. With four years' sea experience before joining *Liberty*, Rowley always looked to make sure the United States' colours were visible. That day, as he rushed up to the deck, there was no doubt.

'I just loved to see it flying in the breeze up there,' he said. 'I know darn good and well that flag was flying – I'd stake my life on it. [It was] unfurled and flowing freely in the breeze. It would have been visible to anybody.' Rowley arrived on the bridge and took some shots of the flag.

Suddenly, someone yelled that planes were heading towards the ship. They had first been spotted on another of the radar screens, but it seemed only moments before they appeared over

the horizon. The skipper first saw the planes about six miles away; he grabbed his binoculars and ran to the starboard wing. He estimated they were at 7,000 feet (2,100 metres) and travelling very fast but they were not, he first thought, in a 'hostile attitude'. It crossed his mind that they were similar to two spotted earlier that day which had flown over his ship but which could not be identified. Likewise, these planes appeared to have no markings.

Lookouts shouted to McGonagle that they could make out three delta-wing Mirage III jets. Lieutenant Jim Ennes, an officer on the bridge, saw the smoke from the exhaust as one jet turned left and then steered straight down the centreline towards him. Lloyd Painter, his shipmate, realised they were in trouble. 'I saw them come at us,' he said. 'In fact, I was looking through the porthole when the jets came down and levelled off at us in attack attitude.'

Ennes was stupefied. 'To my surprise there were red flashes under the wings,' he said, 'and missiles – rockets – started hitting the ship.' Painter had no time to take avoiding action. 'The portholes were blown out instantly – mine in my chest; the fellow next to me got it in his face and we all went down on the deck with the force of the concussion from the glass.'

'They shot the camera right out of my hands,' said Rowley, who by this time was trying to get a picture of the assailants. '(I had) a 500-millimetre lens approximately a foot long and they shot that right out of my hands.' He had no time to see who had fired, and remembers the attack as the worst moments in his life. He was injured, but the camera saved him.¹

Ron Kukal, a CT, was in the secret spaces at his General Quarters station and the rocket fire and .50-calibre rounds sounded like hail as they struck the main deck. 'I thought we had run aground, but common sense told me this couldn't be true, and it was furthest from my mind that we were under attack. The sound of the rocket fire and bullets hitting the deck above me went on for what seemed like an eternity.' There was an eerie silence as the planes made their pass, and then swung around for another strike.

Lieutenant David Lucas is astonished he survived those few minutes. 'When these shells started flying,' he said later, 'a

quartermaster stepped back from the helm to get as much protection from the corner of the chart room as possible. He still had one hand on the wheel. I was two paces to his left, and two paces behind him. A fragment hit him, I think from behind. It must have come through the bulkhead in the chart room. He let out a gasp, fell backwards into the chart room and within, say, a minute was dead.'

Shrapnel had hit McGonagle and his leg was bleeding badly, but he had managed to keep himself upright. He hit the general quarters alarm and grabbed a microphone. With his voice betraying only slightly the dread he must have felt, he ordered his crew to battle stations over the ship's Tannoy system. He then signalled the engine room to stoke up the boilers to full speed, then flank speed, in an effort to get the ship further offshore.

The Mirage IIIs, which carried standard armament of 36 rockets and 30-millimetre cannon, were returning for another bombing run, but now a number of Mystère IV fighter-bombers had joined them with their complement of 55 rockets, 30-millimetre cannon and napalm canisters. The Captain instructed the radio room to transmit an urgent Mayday message for help. Out went a signal identifying the ship by its call-sign, 'Rockstar', and repeating, 'UNDER ATTACK BY UNIDENTIFIED AIR-CRAFT' over and over again. It was 1.58 pm.

In the hours beforehand, officers aboard the *Liberty* were under no illusion that they had arrived in the eastern Mediterranean unnoticed. Before midnight, as they drew nearer the Egyptian coast, Jim Ennes's CTs detected signals from fire control radars used to pinpoint a target. Based on the type of signal picked up, they were convinced they came from Israeli aircraft that were heard flying in the darkness overhead. 'The supervisor on duty refused to believe the Israeli forces would direct fire control radar at an American ship,' he said, 'and so he insisted that the operators must have misunderstood the signal.'² The *Liberty's* job was to report mysterious transmissions but, according to Ennes, for some inexplicable reason these went unreported.

When he came on duty to relieve the watch at 7 am that morning, he was told an Israeli 'flying boxcar', a Noratlas reconnaissance aircraft, had circled the ship. Ennes checked the flag and ordered it to be changed; it was a little ragged and dirty, the ship having steamed at full speed since departing Abidjan on the African west coast. Two extra lookouts had been posted and he told them to watch the replacement periodically and check it never fouled the mast.

By 9 am, when the ship had reached the most northerly point of the route it had been assigned to patrol along the Egyptian coast, the *Liberty's* speed was reduced to five knots, but there was still enough breeze to keep the flag streaming in full view. An unidentified jet aircraft had overflown them and then, at around 10 am, two armed Israeli Mirages were spotted. Down in the secret spaces of the *Liberty*, a pilot was heard reporting to his command centre that the US flag was flying on the ship. The crew counted 18 rockets under each wing, a formidable arsenal of weapons, but the Israeli insignia on the planes was a reassuring sight – these were friends, not foes.

According to Ennes, up to the attack at 2 pm Israeli reconnaissance aircraft came to look over the *Liberty* five more times, some flying very low. 'I could readily see the pilots,' he recalled. 'On one occasion, the Captain was on the bridge when a Noratlas approached at masthead level, causing him to warn me of a possible bombing run; the aircraft passed overhead at such low level that the deck plating shuddered.'³

Petty Officer Phil Tourney worked out that there were at least 13 over-flights. Boatswain's mate Richard 'Larry' Weaver twice saw 'flying boxcars' (the French-built Noratlas) passing overhead, and both times the Star of David insignia of Israel was prominent. 'I thought it was going to hit our mast,' he said about one of them. 'That's how low it was... I remember looking up and seeing this plane and I waved to the pilot or co-pilot, and he smiled and waved back. And a lot of people said, "Well, how can you see him smile?" And I said, "I tell you what: I could see the brightness of his teeth – that's how damn close he was."⁴

Senior Chief CT Stan White, an electronics specialist, didn't spot the Israeli markings but was not perturbed: 'I just figured that's who it was; they were friendly; they were waving, but I immediately looked up to see if our flag was flying because I had been hearing all day how close we were to action, and there it was, flying in a stiff breeze. It was a little bit of relief.'⁵ At noon, before he took the watch from Ennes, Lloyd Painter was equally reassured by an overflight: 'I remember feeling very good and very warm inside that we were safe. They knew who we were: we weren't a stranger out there that day.'

Everyone who survived that afternoon remembers pandemonium, acts of conspicuous bravery, some acts of cowardice, and blind panic. Senior CT David McFeggan was also the chaplain. 'It was very intense,' he said. 'The first thing I did was pass out the extra Bibles I had in my desk area, where I wrote sermons and stuff like that. I passed them to all the CTs; they all wanted a Bible. I even gave a book on how to use the rosary to two or three guys. I put my life in God's hands and said, "Whatever will be will be." Sure, I had fear when I was above deck, ducking bullets, seeing sailors out in the open, bullets just strafing right across the deck, and trying to get them out of harm's way.'

While trying to save people, McFeggan was blown across the deck by a rocket and slammed into a bulkhead. Today he is in a wheelchair, but he never put himself up for a medal. 'The medal I got is in my heart. The way I look at it is, these guys are alive today. It was a Christian thing to do.'

In his book about the *Liberty*, Ennes vividly describes the onslaught unleashed when the *Mirages* and *Mystères* stepped up their attack. 'Hell's own jackhammers pounded our steel plating... the aircraft rockets punched eight-inch holes in the ship,' he wrote, and 'suddenly searing heat and terrible noise came from everywhere... like all the earthquakes in the world with all the thunder and lightning going off at once.'⁶

Ensign John Scott said subsequently that damage control, for which they had repeatedly trained, was a shambles because

nowhere was safe from the onslaught: 'The safe door blew open; logs went flying off the shelves; we were knocked on the deck.'

Someone noticed the flag had been shot down in the first strafing attack and another was hoisted – the holiday colours, far larger and more prominent. Ennes turned sideways to make himself a smaller target: 'Searing heat and terrible noise came suddenly from everywhere,' he later wrote. 'A solid blanket of force threw me against a railing. The air filled with hot metal as a geometric pattern of orange flashes opened holes in the heavy deck plating.'⁷ Ennes went down, his leg shattered, and he began crawling and dragging himself to safety. Eventually he was helped down below to the cabin of the ship's doctor. He had used a sheet to stem the flow of blood but rocket fragments and napalm-coated particles had been falling on him, searing his skin.

A rocket exploded on the superstructure two levels down from the bridge. McGonagle realised it had been fired by another plane swooping down towards the port side. Two 55-gallon gasoline drums stowed amidships were holed, and poured flaming fuel on the decks below. Four life-rafts were alight. One drum was burning right outside the radio room window but inside, the men were still trying to get the Mayday signal out.

Lieutenant James O'Connor and Lt Commander Philip Armstrong, McGonagle's number two, began descending a ladder to reach the quick release lever that would jettison the fuel tanks overboard. They found they were being fired on by cannon. Bullets were drilling holes in the deck plating and they were the target.

At this moment a rocket hit the whaleboat, the Captain's personal transport, which was hoisted on deck aft of the bridge. Crew in the pilothouse were blown off their feet. Armstrong was thrown back into the bridge, mortally wounded. O'Connor was struck by fragments and crashed down to the deck below.

Then came the napalm. Canisters of this jellied petroleum rained down, exploding into flame on impact and sticking to the superstructure. The main military purpose of napalm is to kill and maim personnel and generate panic and confusion; it did just that. Soon parts of the ship were an inferno, but the skipper's

obsession with training now paid off. Where they could, his men were braving the bullets to douse the outbreaks, though their ship was afire from stem to stern.

John Scott remembered those moments: 'The first orders we got were, "Two fires, one port side in the vicinity of the gas drums, one starboard side vicinity of the motor whaleboat." I ordered fire-fighting parties out. Next we were ordered to pick up the wounded... repeated calls to pick up the wounded. Every available stretcher was in use. They were using blankets and mattresses to haul the people back.' Periodically they slipped and fell in the pools of blood gathering everywhere.

Above them, the planes continued the onslaught. One pilot, speaking in Hebrew, was pleased with a colleague's accuracy: 'You hit her – you hit her good,' he radioed. 'There's oil coming out of her,' said another pilot excitedly.⁸

The fires were now causing problems below decks. 'We had a fire going that was out of this world on the port side,' remembered Lieutenant George Golden, the Chief Engineer, who was getting the boilers up to full power. 'It was bad in the engine-room because the vents that bring air in were pulling all that smoke down. It was so bad I had people crawling on their hands and knees to move around.' A rocket came through the side of the ship and knocked him from a ladder to the steel decking, but he was only bruised. He shouted at his men to get down as more rockets started exploding.

Above them, men were lying injured on the deck, wide-eyed and terrified, their ears ringing with the cacophony. By now McGonagle himself was losing blood fast from the leg wound. He told his radio operators to keep sending out the message that 'Rockstar' was being attacked by unidentified aircraft. Signalman Second Class Russell David was puzzled by this; he said he had seen Star of David markings, the Israeli insignia, on one of the Mirages. When he told the skipper, he was just ignored, and the same message was repeated.⁹

When Ron Kukal came up on deck, he was horrified by the carnage. 'The only armament we had were .50-calibre machine

guns, and they were like peashooters. The element of surprise was theirs.' In the first minutes, those manning the machine guns had been shot to pieces, tossed into the air like rag-dolls.

Jim Ennes had managed to pull himself into the bunk of the ship's doctor, Richard Kiepfer. His left leg was useless and bleeding badly, and he used the sheets to make a tourniquet. He could feel his leg was broken and splintered ends were tearing at his flesh. 'I was only abstractly aware of pain,' he recalled. 'Instead, I was conscious of fear, of duty abandoned on the bridge, and of an urgent knowledge that, no matter what else might happen, I would almost surely die if I didn't soon stem the flow of blood, particularly from the leg wound.'

At the same time, he was trying to figure what the hell was going on. 'We still had no idea who was attacking,' he said. 'Although the Arab countries largely blamed the United States for their problems and falsely charged that American carrier-based aircraft had assisted Israel, we knew that the Arab air forces were crippled and probably unable to launch an attack like this one. And to increase the confusion, a ship's officer thought he saw a MiG-15 over *Liberty* and quickly spread a false report among the crew that we were being attacked by the Soviet Union. Probably no one suspected Israeli forces.'

His main worry was whether the radio message from the *Liberty* had been received by the Sixth Fleet, prompting a rescue mission. The huge US Navy flotilla, including the aircraft carriers USS *America* and USS *Saratoga*, was near to Crete. Alerted to the attack, its Commander, Vice-Admiral William Martin, would surely send help. It was unthinkable they would abandon nearly 300 men in a defenceless, unarmoured vessel to this ordeal. Rescue planes were no more than 30 minutes away.

In the radio room, there was desperation. In the first wave of attacks the transformers feeding the aerial systems had been destroyed. Trying to take stock, McGonagle realised the *Liberty* was the victim of a carefully planned and murderous attack in which the first move had been to wipe out its ability to reach the

outside world. The onslaught was coming from an unknown number of planes, possibly as many as eight. Some were diving low over his vessel and firing heat-seeking missiles. Clearly this meant an element of premeditation, as these were not normal armament. Someone knew that tuning transformers, attached to the aerial arrays on the ship, would generate heat, and detectors on the missiles could home on to this.

Lt Commander David E. Lewis, officer in charge of the CTs and the *Liberty's* secret spaces, confirmed the significance of this. 'From all the photographs I saw of the *Liberty* after the attack,' he said, 'it appeared to me that every tuning section of every HF antenna had a hole in it. It took a lot of planning to get heat-seeking missiles aboard to take out our entire communications during the first minute of the attack. If that was a mistake, it was the best-planned mistake that has ever been perpetrated in the history of mankind.'

After the first wave, the *Liberty* was no longer effective as a surveillance ship. It was incapable of listening in to the war, and – as the radio room personnel had immediately discovered – it was also incapable of sending out messages. But, if so, why did the attack continue? Several aboard with time to think now realised that the enemy's mission was not merely to disable but to sink the *Liberty* and eliminate the crew. It was now a matter of survival, and telling the world of their plight was paramount.

All the aerials were destroyed save one that had been malfunctioning, and was thus turned off and 'cold'. This turned out to be a godsend. A signalman thought he could get it going, and wired up the only transmitter still working. Miraculously, it began to load up with current and a sense of relief spread through the radio room. Signalmen James Halman and Joseph Ward began trying to make voice contact with the Sixth Fleet, or anyone else tuned into the frequency.

But there was another problem; the *Liberty's* ramshackle transmissions were being obliterated by a vibrating tone that was impenetrable. The radiomen knew instantly this was due to jamming by the attacking planes. Wayne Smith, another operator,

said it was a sophisticated system: 'Sometimes the jamming signal was a buzz-saw and sometimes it was a bagpipe sound.'

Reflecting on this later, *Liberty* radioman Richard Sturman concluded that the attackers had carefully prepared for the attack with the specific intention of preventing the ship communicating with the outside world. To do so effectively they must have had prior knowledge from shore-based receivers of the five frequencies being used by the ship, so that their jamming gear could be tuned to them. Sturman recalled his anger when he discovered that the international distress frequency, used for Mayday messages, was also jammed.¹⁰

At first, the signalmen felt their task was hopeless. Plane after plane was swooping in on the ship, firing cannon, shooting missiles and dropping napalm, and the US Sixth Fleet was oblivious. Then someone spotted that there was a respite from the jamming, lasting just a few seconds, when the attacking planes fired their missiles. Halman grabbed the opportunity and shouted into the mike, 'Any station, this is Rockstar. We are under attack by unidentified jet aircraft and require immediate assistance!' On the USS *Saratoga* (call-sign 'Schematic') the radioman picked up the message but it was garbled, possibly by further jamming. 'Rockstar, this is Schematic,' he said. 'Say again. You are garbled.'

After several further attempts by Halman, *Saratoga* acknowledged and they exchanged more procedural jargon to verify that the USS *Liberty* was genuine. 'Authenticate Whiskey Sierra,' said *Saratoga*. 'Authentication is Oscar Quebec,' replied Halman, reading from a list. At last *Saratoga* came back: 'Roger, Rockstar. Authentication is correct. I roger your message. I am standing by for further traffic.' Then acknowledgements came in from two United States embassies in the region. It was 2.09 pm; the attack had been going for ten minutes.

Halman and his shipmates could at last take comfort that the Sixth Fleet, and presumably the Pentagon, now knew of their predicament. A sense of relief spread around the ship as the news was passed on. However, after waiting a few minutes without any

further response, the *Liberty* went back on air. 'Schematic, this is Rockstar,' yelled Halman into his mike, 'We are still under attack by unidentified jet aircraft and require immediate assistance.' There was a pause, then a response. 'Roger, Rockstar,' said *Saratoga*. 'We are forwarding your message.' The operator then began yet another authentication check. Halman's patience snapped. Holding his microphone up in the air, he yelled: 'Listen to the goddamned rockets, you son of a bitch!'

'Roger, Rockstar; we'll accept that,' replied *Saratoga*.

Lewis was proud of his men. 'The only reason we got the SOS out,' he said, 'was because my crazy troops were climbing the antennas, stringing long wires, while they were being shot at.' The crew of the *Liberty* now felt sure that the Sixth Fleet, other friendly forces in the region and the Pentagon back home would respond with great speed and purpose. They were sadly wrong. The ship was still being bombarded, with brutal effect; people were literally dying because there was nowhere safe to hide – but no US planes came their way.

Heroes were being made that day and Dr Richard Kiepfer, the ship's doctor, was an outstanding example. As soon as the attack began he had headed for his battle station, stopped to treat a badly-bleeding sailor on the way and had then seen two sailors lying wounded and helpless on the weather deck. Having failed to get other terrified crew to dash outside and pull them to safety, 'Doc' Kiepfer ran across the deck, with bullets and shrapnel all around him, and carried each of them by the waist to the relative safety of the mess hall.

With his medics, he then began what became a 28-hour stint, fighting to patch up and revive scores of gravely injured men. He ordered one battle dressing station to be set up in the petty officers' lounge and commandeered the mess hall for the more severely injured. There he performed several major operations, working all the while to stop many from simply bleeding to death and aiding those with breathing problems and napalm burns.

Morphine was doled out to those in agony from shattered

limbs. The doc never mentioned that he had taken a hit in the chest. Some wondered why he wore his life-vest throughout; it was to keep the wound sealed. After 20 minutes, ten men were dead or dying, and several others would follow them if he did not keep going. His supreme efforts were later to win Kiepfer the Silver Star for his gallantry.

The blitz had now been pounding the *Liberty* for 25 minutes. Casualties were still being dragged in but medical supplies were beginning to run out. The mess tables were used to make improvised beds and operating tables, and the doc began transfusing blood from some crew who were uninjured. In the secret spaces, men were trying to destroy classified hi-tech equipment, cryptographic machines and code books, putting anything small into special weighted bags that could be ditched overboard.

There was then a lull in the explosions and someone reported the planes had headed away. The relief was fleeting. Those three blips on the radar screen had been transformed into an even more deadly threat.

Three surface craft were now seen speeding towards the USS *Liberty*. They were motor torpedo boats (MTBs) in a V-shaped attack formation; they were the blips previously seen on the radar. A feeling of dismay spread. The Captain thought he saw an Israeli flag but he ordered Seaman Apprentice Dale Larkins to fire at the lead boat from Mount 51 (one of the four machine-gun posts) which was still undamaged. McGonagle then changed his mind and told Larkins to stop, but he could not hear and fired a few rounds. The skipper had spotted an indecipherable blinking light from the lead boat and ordered signalman Russell David to flash a message back: 'USS LIBERTY' and 'US NAVY SHIP' by Aldis lamp.

Perhaps the signals were cloaked by smoke from the fires aboard his ship, because the MTBs kept coming. Then a rear gun on the *Liberty* opened up, infuriating the skipper, but his order to stop that firing was futile. There was no one left alive in the mount and the gun was firing wildly, triggered by burning napalm.

The MTBs were in range and began spraying armour-piercing bullets at the *Liberty's* bridge. Suddenly the tell-tale wake of a torpedo was spotted. McGonagle ordered the ship to take evasive action, but the torpedo had been badly aimed and passed just astern. The surveillance ship had so far withstood a withering air blitz; now, miraculously, it had dodged a bigger danger still. 'Stand by for torpedo attack, starboard side,' yelled someone over the Tannoy system as more were fired.

John Hrankowski was in the engine room. 'That torpedo's coming in,' he thought to himself. 'It's going to open that boiler up and you're going to die instantly; it's going to be like an atomic bomb because when that cold water hits that boiler, operating at full, there's just no hope. For all of us 19-year-olds, the best place to be is right there; you're going to get it; you're going to give it up right then and there.'

Hrankowski waited: 'They said [the first] went by, and this went on three or four different times. Finally, one was dead set and it was coming; we knew it was coming, and again we braced ourselves, and it hit. It lifted the ship right out of the water and put it down, and we started to list 10 degrees, but it was a slow list, and it was going, going, going, and I said, "My God, we're going to flip over."¹¹

According to most accounts, five torpedoes were launched, one striking the *Liberty* plumb amidships and below the water-line on the starboard side, making a hole measuring 45 feet by 34 by 37. Their luck had, incredibly, not yet run out because the *Liberty* did not flip over or begin to sink, and the crew kept their cool.

Ron Kukal was about 30 feet from the explosion, separated from it by a couple of bulkheads. 'They were like paper to the several tons of TNT that tore up the bowels of the *Liberty*,' he said. 'What had been several compartments were turned into one big room in a very short time.' He was immersed in sea water that was rising fast and, though he could swim, he realised the water would soon be above his head. The hatch to the deck above was dogged down (fastened), but it was opened just in time. 'This was the third miracle that I saw that day...'

He slipped and slid along passageways that were awash with blood, heading for the hatch to the main deck, but Chief Engineer George Golden told him to turn back and make sure everyone had escaped. 'There seemed to be no one left,' he recalled, 'and had I known that 24 more men were already dead down below, I'm not sure I would have wanted to go back.'

Returning to the engine room, Golden was trying to restore power. 'It knocked everything electrical out,' he recalled. 'We tried to get the emergency generators going and we did get the battle lanterns going. The Captain was hollering down the PA system to me as Chief Engineer, telling me what had happened and can I get some power, and I said, "We can't get any until we get the boilers back on line."'

The engine room was apparently functional, but amidships there was devastation and carnage. Joe Lentini still becomes tearful when remembering it. As a senior CT in the NSG's operations section, known as an 'O' Brancher, his task was to vet all incoming and outgoing message traffic passing through the cryptographic gear and teletypewriters. He had just left the large office where he and his men worked and was standing near a ladder to the deck above when he heard a noise from a bullet penetrating the ship near him. 'I felt something blow on my leg,' he said. 'I looked down and the upper thigh on my left pant leg had a six-inch tear in it – and so did my upper thigh. That saved my life. A guy was coming towards me with a bandage. And that's the last thing I remember until I came to.'

'I woke up, it was pitch-black and I was in water. I tried to stand up and put my weight on my left leg and it wouldn't support me, obviously, and I fell back down; I didn't know at the time I had six broken ribs, a collapsed lung, a fractured skull, both tympanic membranes in my ears were blown out, shrapnel all over me in my body... It never occurred to me that I didn't have a leg and it never occurred to me that I was about to die.'

'I cried out for help: "My leg's broken and I can't see. Somebody get me out of here!" I thought I'd gone blind. I must have passed out again. Once the guys that were further back in

that same level and amidships shook off the explosion they found some battle lanterns, and were heading for that ladder. And I was right at the bottom of the ladder, and somebody stepped on my leg. He and two other guys pulled my butt up out of there, which was no mean task.'

He discovered later how lucky he was among those he was working with at that moment: 'Every single one of them died. In a heartbeat. Fred Walton, who was at the sound-powered phone; they saw him floating in the water and pulled him up. When they rolled him over to try and get him up out of there, the back of his head was gone. Everybody who was in there – gone... with no rhyme or reason to it.'

Bryce Lockwood said that some men had earlier made an Israeli flag that was hanging on the starboard bulkhead. The torpedo exploded within a few feet, Lockwood getting shrapnel wounds in his face, and the flag disintegrated.

David Lewis was one of the luckiest survivors. After the planes began pounding the ship, he was below decks trying to bolster the morale of his men. He remembered a communications technician was having difficulty sending an SOS through the crypto gear [short for cryptographic gear – the equipment that encrypted signals]. He ordered him to forget regulations, bypass the crypto and go on the air in the clear. 'Whether or not his SOS was received by anyone I'll never know,' he said, 'and he was killed in the attack. I remember the eerie sound of rockets as they hit succeeding bulkheads, penetrating well within the ship before detonating. I remember the complete polarisation of the crew: they were all heroes or cowards, with the former outnumbering the latter by a wide margin.

'I remember wondering why I wasn't afraid: I just went around doing what I was supposed to do. The last thing I remember was the announcement, "Stand by for torpedo attack, starboard side." Then I have total amnesia until I found myself blinded and talking to the XO [Executive Officer] Philip Armstrong. I guess he died while we were talking.

'My troops later told me that they thought I was a goner, I

looked so bad, but fortunately my wounds were largely superficial. A 20-year supply of Navy paint exploded off the bulkhead that fortunately shielded me and covered me with charred paint. Considering that I was probably less than ten feet from the torpedo when it detonated, I was fortunate to be alive. I had some burnt paint on my eyes and I lost both eardrums.'

Lewis continued: 'I later found out that Bob Schnell was the sailor that saved my life by pulling me out of the flooded hold. For a month after I was breaking razor-blades as I shaved, but most of the shrapnel came out of its own accord. Two pieces, however, wouldn't go away, and Bethesda Naval Hospital refused to take them out for six months. On the operating table for eardrum repair, I asked the surgeon if he would salvage my sex life by removing them: I had an inverted thumbtack on my thumb and a large piece of concrete in my lip, and I told him I couldn't get near my wife with them. After five minutes of riotous laughter, he stopped the procedure and removed my shrapnel.'

By the time of the torpedo strike, McGonagle was semi-conscious. Still propped up on the bridge, he had lost so much blood his mind was drifting. He would tell a different story to the Navy Court of Inquiry. 'I was hit with flying shrapnel,' he said matter-of-factly. 'I was not knocked off my feet; I was only shaken up and it made me dance around a little bit, but my injuries did not appear to me to be of any consequence. I noticed slight burns on my starboard forearm and I noticed blood oozing on my trouser's right leg. Since I could walk and there was no apparent pain, I gave no further consideration to these minor injuries.'

Those who dealt with him at the height of the attack know that this was bravado. In the engine room, trying to deal with the damage and get the boilers on line again, George Golden was dealing with an increasingly erratic boss. With Executive Officer Armstrong dead, he was now second-in-command and was facing the dilemma of overruling some of McGonagle's decisions. Golden remembered: 'Just before we took the torpedo, the Captain said: "George, we don't stand a chance. I want to take the

ship out a little farther and get the people off the ship." Then the Captain again got on the PA system and said, "George, how long would it take if I told you to pull the plug on the ship and sink it?" And I said we had to take her into deeper water before doing that, and I said, "Let's start getting the wounded off now [in the shallower water]." I heard from up above that they started getting the life-rafts off but that the torpedo boats were shooting them up.'

Golden said the Captain was still intent on scuttling the *Liberty*: 'The officer of the deck on the bridge said, "It appears the Captain has lost so much blood he's telling us to do things that are wrong, Mr Golden." I told them I was next in command and to put it in the log-book that I was taking over the ship; to say, "Aye, aye, Captain" to whatever the Captain said, then to tell me on the speaker box what the Captain has told you and I'll tell you whether to do it or not. I said, "I can't come up there right now; the ship is dead in the water and the important thing to do is to get the pumps going so we can supply water to our people to fight the fires."' "

Thereafter, the *Liberty* was in effect commanded by Golden. This unassuming man, who had twice been sunk and rescued in World War Two, was content to let his close friend William McGonagle receive all the glory of that day.

The terror was not over, as John Hrankowski vividly remembers. When the lights went out in the engine room, he saw bullets like fireflies coming through the skin of the ship below the water-line. 'They were trying to shoot into where the boilers were,' he realised. 'I think that's probably all they had left, and you could see these machine-gun bullets going through and ricocheting off all the metal that was down there, and some were actually going into the boiler. They were trying to explode the boiler, and they knew what they were doing.' It went on, he estimated, for 40 minutes.

Ron Kukal had survived the initial air bombardment, missed being blown to bits by the torpedo and had almost been drowned. He finally headed topside: 'We were welcomed

by hails of machine gun fire from the torpedo boats,' he recalled. He still found it a relief. 'We were very happy to be away from what had happened down below.'

The ship was now listing 11 degrees. Though he would later deny it, the Captain, in his confused state, had shouted, 'Prepare to abandon ship!' into the Tannoy. The instruction was discreetly rescinded by Golden, but the ship's rubber life-rafts had been inflated and lowered overboard. To the despair and outrage of the US sailors who saw it happen, these too were attacked. Petty Officer Lloyd Painter was an eyewitness:

'Basically, we were dead in the water. The word came down, prepare to abandon ship... that meant go up and get ready, get near the life-rafts. Well, I went up first, popped the hatch, looked out for the life-rafts. They were either gone or burning, and at the same moment I looked to the stern of the ship and I saw one of the torpedo boats methodically machine gunning one of our life-rafts that had floated back. We [had] cut the life-rafts loose because they were burning or had been damaged and they floated back behind us. He was machine-gunning the life-raft and I knew that had there been anyone in there they certainly wouldn't be alive. It happened so fast it didn't seem real. None of the attack seemed real to me. I was bewildered. I couldn't understand why they would do it to us. I just didn't understand a thing at that point.'¹²

Only one of the life-rafts was not destroyed, and it was seen being pulled on to the deck of one of the MTBs and taken away. The torpedo boats continued firing on the ship for 40 minutes after it was holed, according to the crew, but failed to puncture the *Liberty's* boilers. Finally the violence stopped – at around 3.15 pm – but not the tension. The boats had moved away by the time Petty Officer Ernie Gallo, a CT, came topside. 'There was no more firing,' he said, 'and there seemed to be movement [of people] around. We took a look carefully outside to see what was going on. It was incredible to see what the ship had gone through: holes in the walls like peeled paper, and carnage – bodies.'

Then, to his amazement, he saw there were helicopters in the

air: 'They were Israeli helicopters with troops on board. They kind of circled around for a while and I remember being very happy to see them because, once again, at that time I didn't know that they were the perpetrators of the attack. We were waving at them and giving V-signs for victory, just being very happy to see them, not knowing what they might have done, given the opportunity, and that was to come aboard and finish the job that they'd started.'

As the helicopters appeared to be coming closer, one crewman shouted, 'They've come to finish us off.' Gallo is now in no doubt they were hostile and watched them hovering menacingly for several minutes without making any signal. Then they soared away. Apparently, for some reason, the attack had been called off: 'They did everything that they could to ensure that we weren't going to come away from that ship alive. I mean, why waste the time and effort to shoot up lifeboats that were being put in the water? This kind of reminds you of a World War Two movie where the German U-boats were making sure that nobody lived to talk about the attack. I mean, for a group of people who are supposed to be children of God, they didn't show any mercy for us.'

People were stunned into silence, but the fittest of the crew began helping the injured. Then at 4.32 pm the torpedo boats came back, and the planes briefly reappeared, then flew away. After all the din, there was now silence except for the cries of the injured. People began to go about making the ship safe, stunned by the horror, though everyone remained alert for any further trouble. The fittest began helping the injured. Then at 4:32 pm the torpedo boats came back. At the same moment, planes reappeared.

One of the MTBs was clearly flying the Israeli flag. It drew near and someone shouted through a megaphone, 'Do you need any help?' It got an obscene response and the three vessels then headed in the direction of Israel, as did the planes.

There was one last moment of excitement. At 6.41 pm, with the *Liberty* now under steam and moving slowly in the direction of Malta, a Sikorsky S58 helicopter with Israeli markings approached it. Someone was gesticulating from the cockpit,

wanting to come aboard. McGonagle, who had recovered somewhat, gave him the V-sign. Then a bag weighted with oranges was thrown on to the deck. Inside was the business card of Commander Ernest Castle, naval attaché to the US Embassy in Tel Aviv, with a scribbled note on the reverse: 'Have you any casualties?' That, too, received an equally impolite response, as the bodies of some crew were still lying where they had died, and the deck was awash with blood.

Jim Ennes later calculated that the attack on the *Liberty* had ended at about 3.15 pm, but some thought it lasted longer. Under Golden's guidance, the ship worked up enough steam to get itself under way. He counted 851 rocket hits and was later advised that at least 15 planes must have been targeting the *Liberty*. The pressure of seawater flowing into the torpedo hole was causing a bulkhead wall to flex and it was in danger of bursting. He had it shored up with steel girders and wood. The ship still had a list, but this was actually beneficial, keeping the hole further out of the water.

He organised a count of the survivors several times, forgetting initially to count himself. Even with the corpses, it fell far short of 294; he knew that many bodies were entombed in the secret spaces. 'Doc' Kieper worked on, dealing with the lesser injuries he had postponed during the mayhem. Everywhere crewmen were subdued, baffled by what had happened – and by the non-arrival of the US rescue planes.

They had learnt that some of the ships of the Sixth Fleet had left the Crete area and were heading their way. However, it was a Russian vessel that came to them first, the guided missile destroyer 626/4. 'Do you need help?' it flashed. 'No, thank you,' said the *Liberty*. 'I will stand by in case you need me,' said the destroyer.

Radioman Gerald Surette was aboard USS *Davis*, the Sixth Fleet commander's flagship, and witnessed events from another perspective. He remembered the dramatic moment earlier that day when a flash emergency message came over the teletype from the USS *Saratoga* saying they had picked up the *Liberty's* first

emergency distress signal. He had then run to the bridge with it. 'All hell was breaking loose with the Sixth Fleet,' he said. 'Planes were being launched from one of the carriers, and there were flashing lights everywhere. The whole fleet was coming together in battle formation. We got called back to the centre of the fleet with the USS *Massey*, and the Commodore was sent over to the USS *America* in a whaleboat.'

Surette said the *Davis* and the *Massey* were ordered at full speed to the USS *Liberty's* position with instructions to protect and help the ship, but it was about 300 miles away. He added: 'We knew men had been killed, and the USS *Davis* was more than ready for anything that came her way.' Steaming hell-for-leather through the night at more than their designated 36 knots, the two ships were due to rendezvous with their comrades at 5 am on 9 June. Surette was among the party selected to go aboard.

'My duty station that day was to be in the whaleboat with a PRC10 radio strapped to my back,' he recalled. 'The whole crew of that whaleboat was ready an hour before we were to go into the water, and the engines were warmed up already. When we got to the *Liberty*, we were trucking. General quarters had been called, and we had live rounds up to the guns.

'We slowed and circled the *Liberty*, and most of us on deck saw some things we had never seen before. That was the most beat-up ship I ever saw afloat. She was listing to starboard and down at the bow. She had a large hole from the torpedo about amidships or just forward on her starboard side, and there were holes everywhere in the skin of the ship. The bridge had been worked over and the gun tubs were filled with holes. There was nothing left of the lifeboats or the rafts; they were gone.

'We launched the whaleboat, and went over to the *Liberty*. They had set the rope ladder over the hole made by a torpedo, so it was scary to say the least. The XO went first, and I went second. I had never made a boarding before and didn't know about the wave action that got you. I got on the ladder as the wave was almost at the bottom in a trough, and when I got on the ladder, a wave came along and lifted the boat up and smacked me in the

butt, and dumped me into the bottom of the whaleboat right on the radio. I was going to be damned if I couldn't get on that ship, so when the lifeboat came up, I grabbed for a rung.'

He was met on deck by a *Liberty* radioman who took him to the bridge: 'The Executive Officer was nowhere in sight. The radioman took me through the crew's mess where all the wounded were, and then up some ladders to a radio shack that had more holes in it than you could imagine.'

The talk aboard was about just one thing. Messages had come from the US that Israel had admitted responsibility, had said it was a mistake, an accident, and the BBC's World Service radio channel was saying the same thing. Everyone was asking how. One hit, perhaps, could be explained that way, but such a concerted effort to sink them with planes, then MTBs, made that explanation hard to swallow.

The *Davis* came alongside and tied up to the *Liberty*. Its engineering crew began helping Golden repair the engine room, and a damage control party helped stabilise the ship. Surette said doctors and medical corpsmen from other ships in the Sixth Fleet came aboard, all doing 'one hell of a job that day'. He continued: 'The wounded were laid out all over the mess decks. They were on every table that was available, they were on the floor, and all over the ship; and the walking wounded were trying to get their ship to run. I have never seen, before or since, such carnage as I saw that day. All because someone didn't want the USS *Liberty* to be there...'

The injured were helicoptered away to the USS *America's* medical section and to shore hospitals, and the USS *Davis* and the tug *Papago* began to escort the *Liberty* to Valetta, Malta. During the journey, divers from the *Papago* tried to haul a net over the opening the torpedo had made to stop anything coming out of the hole, but it came off when the *Liberty* began to move. A ship was posted to follow in its wake watching for debris that might be security-sensitive. Finally, after six days, limping along at four knots, she made it to dry dock.

The grisly job of clearing the area inside the torpedo hole began

and a final count could be made of those killed in the bloodbath. The uninjured *Liberty* sailors were assigned the task because a security clampdown had been ordered. Of the 294 aboard that day, 34 were dead and 171 were wounded. Many body parts were just put into sacks and the remains of five were never found. A shared grave in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC commemorates them.

Somehow the valiant old *Liberty* had withstood the horrendous battering and was repaired by a team of 300 hundred Maltese workers. Crew were allowed shore leave in Valetta, but only in civilian clothes, in case pressmen might ask awkward questions. Among them was Gerald Surette, for the USS *Davis's* crew also badly needed a break.

Temporary repairs completed, *Liberty* soon sailed, with Captain McGonagle in command, for its home port of Norfolk, Virginia. It was distressing for the other ranks who were ordered to keep watch below, including John Hrankowski. 'It was pretty eerie, because we had to stand watch at different times down where the torpedo had hit,' he said. 'We had to check for leaks and you could smell the fuel oil; you knew your shipmates were just down there and you'd swear that they were talking to you.'

Lloyd Painter witnessed the arrival home: 'We arrived to a fanfare, to local press and Miss Norfolk, Miss Hospitality, Miss Everybody. Anyway, they got us in and got us tied up and we looked pretty darned good. And all inside was nothing but just a shell of a ship: nothing was left.' He did not know further repairs would be considered uneconomical and the ship would soon be heading for the scrapyard.

In Gerald Surette's mind was a question that was also puzzling his *Liberty* friends: what happened to the rescue flight? 'Planes were launched to cover the USS *Liberty*,' he said 34 years later. 'I watched them go and come back! I heard the radio messages.' He had no idea at the time that, for some baffling reason, the President of the United States and his Secretary of Defense had insisted on them being recalled.

2. The 'Mistake'

'We're talking about a war between us and our neighbours. Our neighbours were supported by the Soviet Union. The United States was supporting us. What logical reason could there be for us to attack our ally?'

Mark Regev, Israeli spokesperson, Washington DC, March 2001

The world fell in on Patricia Blue, wife of NSA employee Allen Blue, as she was eating a sandwich at lunchtime on 8 June in Farragut Square, Washington DC. 'It was a beautiful, clear, sunny day,' she remembered, 'and about 15 to 20 feet away from me someone had a radio saying an American ship had been attacked in the Mediterranean. My heart sank, even though I did not know he was on that ship. I went inside to my office, called NSA and they said, "Yes, we've been looking for you."¹

The moment she had heard the radio bulletin, Blue had a premonition her husband was dead, and she was frightened. As a linguist speaking Arabic and Hebrew, he was drafted periodically on hush-hush missions. She knew the trip he had embarked on a week earlier had worried him greatly but, true to his oath of secrecy, he never told her where he was headed. Nevertheless, he was somewhere in the Middle East on a spy ship.

Pat was picked up within an hour by NSA officials and taken to her home in White Oak, Maryland. Taking it in shifts, the NSA stayed with her night and day, saying little. 'They never left for six weeks,' she said. 'They answered the phones because they did not want me to talk to any reporters. By the second day there was an article in the *Washington Post* that a civilian from NSA was on board the *Liberty* and was missing, and then

reporters started to call my house.' If they came to the door, it was an NSA officer who shooed them away.

'They did not want me to speak... and I never did,' she said. 'I was very young and I just simply let them do it. I didn't want to talk to anyone anyway, but I had no doubt why they were there.' The NSA must have thought Blue had divulged details of his mission to his wife, and nothing must leak about his mission. Meanwhile, the uncertainty about Allen's fate went on. 'They told me that they could not account for him,' she added, 'that he was missing. They simply said there had been a torpedo attack and right away they followed the Government line that it was an accident.' Though in her heart she knew Allen was dead, it was not until after the *Liberty* had reached Malta on 14 June and his body was found in the torpedo cavity that she was told for sure.

Pat remembered Allen's last-minute call from the NSA headquarters in Maryland at the end of May, when he had been called to the office in the middle of the night. When he returned home he said things were heating up in the Middle East and it could be 'a very bad situation'. She was disturbed by his demeanour: 'He had to go to Rota, Spain, and from there to wherever he would be going. His behaviour from that time on... was very tense; he was very quiet. I think he knew what was going on.'

Blue's colleague Jim McCullough had been assigned to the task but had been stood down because his wife was having a baby. For the first time, Blue seemed to sense real danger: 'He never said why, but he was definitely worried,' Pat said. 'He didn't want to go. His behaviour prior to leaving on that assignment was unlike any he had ever exhibited when he had previous assignments in the Middle East.'

Allen Blue's body was returned to the US and he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, in July 1967, but Pat's ordeal was not over. She recalled: 'Shortly after this, I started waking up at night in a cold sweat, my heart pounding and certain that I was surely dying. At first these attacks came only at night, and then I began having them during the day. They would strike without warning when I would least expect it and

were almost unbearable, the fear was so great. I had no idea what was happening to me had a name. I was experiencing profound panic attacks. I wish I could tell you I had them for only a few weeks or months, but I had them for many years. I finally found a wonderful doctor who is still a close friend and supporter who taught me how to walk myself through them. Today, I no longer have them.'

It never occurred to her to share her problems with other *Liberty* victims, but in 1987 a retired naval friend drew her attention to a reunion of the *Liberty* survivors. Still she drew back: 'I had never spoken with a single survivor and I was sure that I would not be welcome... In September 1999 my friend, again, gave me a copy of an article regarding the *Liberty*. After leaving it in the bottom of my desk for several days, I decided to have a look at the *Liberty* website.² I was overwhelmed with what I found. I spent an afternoon reading the site... At last, here was an opportunity to talk with those who had lived through the attack and were now saying, "We will no longer be silent."'

She met some *Liberty* survivors in the Washington area, attended meetings of the veterans' association and began to face up to the question that haunted her, of why so much of this affair was covered up? 'I don't refer to the attack on the *Liberty* as "the incident" or "the tragic accident". I call it what I believe it was – a massacre. I did not believe then, and I do not believe today, that the attack was anything other than a deliberate, calculated attack with the intent to destroy the *Liberty* and all its crew. I believe the intent was to leave no survivors.'

Victims of the attack bottled up their feelings for many years. In those days, the term 'post-traumatic stress' was unknown, and the edict from the Pentagon was to grin and bear it. Many suffered recurrent nightmares, driving some to drink and others to mental breakdown. If the survivors had a sense of injustice and suspicions of skulduggery, it was best not to dwell on them. Faced with dire threats, they were banned from discussing what they had lived through that day.

When the veterans began to meet up in the 1980s, spurred on by the book about the attack written by Jim Ennes, it became clear how much they had all been intimidated into silence. It began before the *Liberty* limped into Valetta harbour, when Admiral Isaac Kidd was ferried aboard to begin conducting the official inquiry. Many veterans now recall how he walked around, casually dressed, informally chatting with the crew about their experiences. Then he became serious and invoked the regulations governing military secrecy.

'I don't know what kind of pressure the officers were under,' recalled CT Ronald Grantski, 'but we were told over and over never to say anything about the attack to anyone, ever, and told never to think that time had run out, because it wouldn't. And we were scared.' Petty Officer Philip Tourney, a ship fitter, had a similar memory: 'Admiral Kidd ordered me not to see what I had seen or I would be in the penitentiary or worse – meaning, I thought, death.'

Robert 'Buddha' Schnell was also debriefed by Admiral Kidd, then told not talk to anybody and to be especially careful to avoid the press. He said that when he was debriefed on leaving the Navy in 1968 he was threatened with a \$100,000 fine and 20 years 'in the brig'. 'They said they would be checking on me,' Schnell said, 'and they also told me I could not leave the continental US for ten years because of the attack.'

Richard 'Larry' Weaver survived the attack by a whisker, but he was not spared the threats. He had been on watch on the *Liberty's* stern deck when the attack began, and as the rockets and cannon shells rained down he tried to shelter by crouching behind some metalwork in a foetal position. His body was shattered by a rocket; he had more than 100 shrapnel wounds and lost three feet of colon. Eventually, he was flown to Philadelphia Naval Hospital where he was not expected to live. After several operations, he was in a wheelchair one day when he was called into a room for an urgent meeting.

'I was confronted by a three- or four-star Admiral,' Weaver recalled. 'He took the stars off his collar and said, "Richard, do you

know anything? Tell me everything you know." I did, and explained about being on watch... seeing the overflights, and all the truth. Then he said, "Fine, Richard." He didn't say much and he put his stars back on and said, "If you ever repeat this to anyone else ever again you will be put in the prison and forgotten about."

'I was 21 years old; I was fighting for my life; I'd already fought for my country, and I thought I served well. Now I was being threatened by the same Government that let us be a ship without a country for 23 hours, with guys bleeding to death. And this guy has the balls – excuse my language – to come down there and threaten me with prison as if I held up the bank or something. I was being attacked all over again by these threats of imprisonment. It's just mind-boggling.'³

Petty Officer William LeMay was also badly wounded during the attack and woke up in a hospital with a tag on his arm. It said his name was Smith. LeMay asked for it to be corrected. He was told, 'That is your name for the time being and you never served on the USS *Liberty*.'

Israel was busy while pressure was being exerted on the *Liberty* victims to button up and Admiral Kidd's hasty inquiry proceeded aboard the ship. On 12 June, military chief of staff Yitzhak Rabin set up a one-man commission to 'investigate the circumstances under which the American ship *Liberty* was hit by the Israeli Defence Forces'. He chose Colonel Ram Ron, a man who was seemingly uninvolved in the attack, as he was military attaché in Washington. As will be discussed later, the Washington Embassy, particularly Ephraim Evron, Ron's boss, was centrally involved in events surrounding the attack. In that light, Ron's conclusion is not surprising.

His report was produced in just four days, after interviewing 12 officers. He made no attempt to seek information from the US Navy or the *Liberty* survivors. His report to Rabin said: "The only clear conclusion arising from the facts determined as aforesaid (after having compared the various testimonies and unit journals

of the relevant units) is that the attack on the ship by the Israeli Defence Forces was made neither maliciously nor in gross negligence, but as the result of a bona-fide mistake.'

The Israeli pilots and sailors were ticked off for mistaking the *Liberty* for the *El-Quseir*, an Egyptian transport ship equipped for carrying horses (which was a third the size and parked at the time in Alexandria harbour), and for communication breakdowns. It said an officer at the Israeli naval headquarters on Mount Carmel, Haifa, had reacted to erroneous reports of shelling from the sea on El Arish, an Arab town close to where the *Liberty* was positioned. He had called in the Air Force to support the attack on the ship by torpedo boats he had ordered. No one more senior had played a part in the assault. He recommended more training.

Ron also censured the US. His report said: 'It clearly appears that the American ship acted carelessly and placed herself in far-reaching peril by approaching so near to the coast of an area known to her to be a war area – without giving notice of her presence to the Israeli authorities and without taking care to identify herself with conspicuous markings, while at the same time the said area was not a navigation area crossed by maritime routes and in which ships do not usually sail.'

This complaint was destined to vex the *Liberty* survivors, who knew beyond doubt that the overflights prior to the attack had provided Israel with all the information it needed. Ron, however, paid little attention to this aspect and many others, but on 16 June his report went to Meir Shamgar, the military Advocate General, and to the US Navy, to give it a chance to respond. The Advocate General was apparently perplexed that the US Navy declined to comment and therefore the 'contentions of the injured party' would not be known. He nevertheless acknowledged that a claim for compensation from the US would be appropriate, but said there was 'contributory negligence' on the part of the *Liberty* that should be taken into account.

Shamgar also said there should be a judicial inquiry to see if Israeli officers should be court-martialled, but he added: 'The officers involved may maintain that, in maritime combat, use was

made more than once in the past of camouflage tricks as ruses of war, and naval officers of all nations are trained to include this factor in their calculation. Therefore they may claim that the unfortunate incident be regarded as the consequence of an honest and reasonable mistake, which is not punishable by law.'

The *Liberty* was, of course, not camouflaged and was identifiable in the naval Bible *Jane's Fighting Ships*. Shamgar was probably conscious of one important allegation raised, by several of Colonel Ron's witnesses, and by Israel in public statements, that the *Liberty* had not been flying the US ensign. This allegation – that the *Liberty* was not flying its flag – has remained a boiling controversy for the *Liberty* veterans. There is not a single witness from the ship who subscribes to this Israeli allegation, and a large number saw the flag flying in the light breeze before the attack. When it was shot down in the first bombing run, it was replaced immediately by one much bigger – the holiday flag.

The official US Court of Inquiry convened in Malta soon after the *Liberty* docked. It was a hasty affair because Admiral Kidd and his staff were under pressure to come to a quick conclusion. The findings would run to more than 700 pages, but from the first session the crew began to realise Kidd was strictly limiting what issues would be covered, and avoiding anything particularly contentious.

Staff Sergeant Bryce Lockwood, the CT who was severely burnt and nearly drowned, said Kidd refused to enter into the record any testimony about Israeli helicopters arriving after the torpedo boats stopped their onslaught. 'The Israelis sent in two of them to finish off the job,' he said. 'They were fully loaded with Israeli combat troops armed with automatic weapons. They backed off only when the USS *Saratoga* acknowledged our Mayday distress signal. When we tried to bring up the Israeli helicopters at the Court of Inquiry we were told, "You weren't asked that. Confine yourself to questions asked."'

The witnesses selected were constrained in the evidence they were permitted to give. The effect was to reinforce the testimony

of the chief witness, Captain William McGonagle. He had already perplexed some of his officers when, after recovering somewhat from the loss of blood due to his leg injury, he had dictated a report to the Sixth Fleet in the late afternoon of 8 June. In essence, it said there had been just six strafing runs lasting five minutes, then a torpedo attack, after which the MTBs had cleared off.

Richard Kiepfer, the ship's doctor, and Chief Engineer George Golden had tried to argue with their skipper that the planes bombarded the ship for 25 minutes and that the MTBs continued firing for 40 minutes after the torpedo struck. It was baffling that the Captain could be so much at odds with everyone else, but he stuck to his account, refusing to change a word. And at the inquiry he continued to rewrite the history of that day.

McGonagle said there were three overflights beforehand, whereas the crewmen said at least eight. He said these planes 'were several miles from the ship' and 'none approached the ship in a threatening or provocative manner.' Jim Ennes was lying injured in a military hospital in Naples but sent written evidence. It read: 'The flying boxcar was usually close enough that I could see the pilot. It had a Star of David under one wing. On at least one occasion the Captain was on the bridge as the aeroplane passed overhead at very low level. We stood together as we saw it approaching. The Captain said, "If you see those bomb bay doors start to open, order an immediate hard right turn."' "

McGonagle was asked to explain this: 'No, sir, I cannot,' he said, 'except that I would like to point out that the statement is inconsistent with my own testimony before this court and is not confirmed in the ship's logs.' Indeed, it was not; but it eventually emerged the log for 8 June had been filled in long after the event, probably by the Captain.⁴

He also denied he issued an order to prepare to abandon ship, contrary to his crew's distinct memories. Larry Weaver, critically injured and 'frightened to hell', remembered pulling himself out on to the deck after hearing this message, only to find his lifeboat in tatters. Here was another disputed issue. McGonagle apparently had no knowledge of the torpedo boats shooting up the life-rafts.

George Golden, the officer who had effectively taken over from the skipper, was asked to give only brief evidence on damage control matters. He was livid. 'I got so peeved off,' he said, 'I couldn't see straight. Before it broke up, I stood outside the door and wanted to go in there so I could get my say, but they wanted to keep me out of that almost completely.'⁵

Lloyd Painter was on the bridge when the attack took place and was disturbed at the way testimony was manipulated, failing to pay heed to the fact the McGonagle was oblivious of most of the attack because of loss of blood. 'I testified about three major items that I'd witnessed,' he said. 'One was the Captain's condition. I also testified about the armour-piercing projectiles that had been sent through our ship, and I also testified about the machine-gunning of the life-rafts by the Israeli torpedo boats. I testified, like I said, for about two and a half, three hours. I didn't know until... months later that much of my testimony was never recorded.'

Many of the crew are now convinced their captain was under pressure to distort his story and collaborate in a rigged outcome to the inquiry. To Jim Ennes, the biggest puzzle was a statement by McGonagle in his message to the Sixth Fleet at 5.15 pm on 8 June that he had spotted an Israeli flag on one of the lead torpedo boats as it approached at high speed. Ennes knew that during the approach of the MTBs, and through the next hour or more, his skipper had ordered the radio-room to broadcast the message, 'Under attack by unidentified boats.' To add to the conundrum, the ship's log said the Israeli flag was spotted at 4.32 pm, two hours after the torpedo launch. Ennes wondered whether McGonagle somehow had foreknowledge that Israel was the aggressor, and deliberately concealed it.

Among other important matters, the crew's reports of jamming by the incoming Israeli planes was disregarded. The overall effect was to weaken the evidence of deliberateness. Kidd finished his hearing in Malta on 16 June and flew to London. Two days later, Admiral McCain approved it.

The main points must have pleased the Israeli Government, whose inquiry report from Colonel Ron was appended. A 28-page

version of the findings was quickly produced and the main document rendered top secret. The sanitised rendering said that available evidence combined to indicate the attack was a case of mistaken identity. The calm conditions and slow ship speed may well have made the US flag difficult to identify. There were no 'available indications' that any attack was intended against a US ship.

In Tel Aviv, military advocate Meir Shamgar had recommended a judicial inquiry and Judge Yeshayahu Yerushalmi was appointed to the task. During late June and early July he took evidence from 34 witnesses from the Navy and Air Force but not, apparently, the top brass such as Major General Mordechai 'Motti' Hod, Air Force Chief, Defence Minister Moshe Dayan or Yitzhak Rabin, military Chief of Staff. They apparently had nothing useful to add.

After studying the assembled testimony, which has never been released, the judge produced findings running to 6,000 words on 21 July. He focused on five factors he considered most relevant: reports received by the Navy 'of shelling of the El-Arish coast for hours on end' that were proved to be mistaken; the speed of the target, wrongly assessed by the torpedo boats as 28 to 30 knots when the *Liberty* was doing five knots; the course of the target towards Port Said, suggesting it was Egyptian; aircraft reports, again incorrect, that the target was a warship carrying no naval or other identification marks; the location of the ship close to a battle zone.

The judge acknowledged these failures and some others, including the remarkable claim that the *Liberty* had been seen and identified as American earlier that morning, marked as such on the Navy's plotting table, but then removed and disregarded. 'It was... the speed of the target,' he argued, 'which led to the final and definite conclusion that this was a military vessel, and thus there was no reason for surmising, in view of this datum, that the target could possibly be the ship *Liberty*.'

Commander Ernest Castle, the US naval attaché in Tel Aviv who had flown to the *Liberty* after the attack and dropped a message to McGonagle, pointed out to the Israelis that there was

a double inconsistency in this conclusion. He cabled Washington on 18 June to air his concern: 'If the 30-knot ship "couldn't have been *Liberty*", it follows that it could not have been *El-Quseir* [whose top speed is 14 knots].' The judge was apparently unimpressed. He said the cumulative effect of the five factors was 'to negate any presumption whatsoever as to a connection between the American supply ship' and the vessel being targeted.

Yerushalmi then turned to the identification problem as the MTBs closed in. 'It is noteworthy,' he argued, 'that the identification of the target as the *El-Quseir* was made both by the Division Commander and the commander of another torpedo boat, and on examining photographs of the two ships I am satisfied that a likeness exists between them, and that an error of identification is possible, especially having regard to the fact that identification was made while the ship was clouded in smoke.'

He rejected an argument from the chief military prosecutor that having come within sight of the *Liberty* it should have been clear it was not responsible for shelling El Arish. Instead, he blamed the *Liberty* for not identifying itself. He said the identification as the *El-Quseir* was 'well within reason' and added: 'For all my regret that our forces were involved in an incident with a vessel of a friendly state, and its sad outcome, I ought to put the behaviour of each of the officers who had any connection with the incident to the test of the conduct of reasonable officers during wartime operations, when the naval arm of the Israel Defense Forces was confronted with maritime forces superior in numbers,⁶ and when all involved were conscious of the task before them to protect the safety of Israel, to identify every enemy threatening from the sea, to attack it speedily and to destroy it.'

'The criterion for reasonable conduct under these conditions may possibly differ from that in times of relative quiet. Indeed, whoever peruses the ample evidence presented to me may conceivably draw some lesson regarding the relations between the two arms of the Israel Defense Forces which were involved in the incident and the operational procedures in times of war,

particularly between the different branches of the Navy, but all this is certainly not within the scope of my inquiry.'

Yerushalmi finished with this comment: 'I have not discovered any deviation from the standard of reasonable conduct which would justify the committal of anyone for trial. In view of what has been said above, I hold that there is no sufficient amount of *prima facie* evidence justifying committing anyone for trial.' The report, it seemed, required no action. Both the United States and Israel now agreed it had all been an unfortunate mistake.

Admiral Merlin Staring now lives in quiet retirement in Bowie, Maryland, after a successful career in the Navy where he rose to become Judge Advocate General, its highest legal post. In June 1968 he was legal counsel to Admiral John McCain Junior,⁷ the Navy chief in Europe in charge of the Sixth Fleet from an office in London. Staring's involvement in the *Liberty* controversy was inevitable once an inquiry was ordered, as it was his task to vet Admiral Kidd's report. A meticulous man, he measures his words carefully, and within that constraint it is clear he is sorely troubled about the *Liberty* affair.

One day in mid-June, a voluminous record of typed scripts – the record of the Court of Inquiry proceedings – arrived on the lawyer's desk and he set to work reading and reviewing the conclusions on orders from McCain. 'I worked at it until about two o'clock in the morning,' he said. 'I was pretty bleary-eyed by that point. After two or three hours' sleep I came back at about six o'clock in the morning and I was still engaged in it when Captain Ward Boston (Admiral Kidd's counsel for the inquiry) appeared in my office. I said, "I have some problems with it in trying to find the evidence or the testimony to support some of the findings that the Court of Inquiry had reached."' "

Staring said it appeared a set of conclusions had been drawn up and the evidence assembled to fit them. 'It said the attack by the Israeli forces on the *Liberty* was in effect a case of mistaken identity or an error,' he went on. 'I simply could not find an evidentiary basis for that conclusion.' Boston disappeared and about 20

minutes later came back and said Admiral McCain had asked him to pick up the record from me. I learned, later that day, that Admiral Kidd was en route back to the United States [with it].'

Fearing he might be blamed for endorsing a report he had not had time to assess and criticise, he wrote to his superiors in Washington explaining how he had been bypassed: 'I was concerned from my own professional standpoint with the possible reflection that might be cast upon my performance of duty in London by an unsound piece of work, and the assumption that I had had a hand in that. I learned much later that Admiral McCain had indeed signed a short action on that record of the Court of Inquiry, in essence approving what the Court had done.'

Staring said the way the court proceedings were handled was unique in his experience: 'Never before had a record sent to me for review been recalled by my superior commander without my having an opportunity to make a recommendation to him concerning his action on the record. In recent years I understand that some people have felt there was pressure exerted from some higher authority upon all the players in this matter, on the Court of Inquiry, perhaps on Admiral McCain, to get the Court of Inquiry completed and back there. Whether there was pressure to arrive at any particular conclusion I have no way of knowing. From what I understand about the events, I believe it's a plausible theory that there was some such influence from higher authority in the United States Government.'

Was it a whitewash? 'I'm not sure I can say that,' he said, but added, 'I think the surviving crew of the *Liberty* were treated very shabbily. They should indeed have the privilege of having the true facts of the incident brought out authoritatively, and I think that at this stage a Congressional inquiry into the episode would be well warranted. I think the crew are entitled to that courtesy, if nothing else.'⁸

Vindication of this view came recently from Captain Boston, author of most of the inquiry report on behalf of Kidd and the man who retrieved it from Staring before he could scrutinise it. Now retired and living in Coronado, California, he spoke about

the private convictions he shared with Kidd but was forced to suppress – that the attack was deliberate and that the Israelis knew the ship was American. Boston remembered how Kidd told him that officials were not interested in hearing the truth. ‘In military life, you accept the fact that if you’re told to shut up, you shut up. We did what we were told,’ Boston said.⁹

The ageing survivors of the USS *Liberty* have spent many years puzzling why anyone who seriously studied the facts could doubt the attack was deliberate. How, they pondered, could experienced Israeli naval officers mistake their ship – with its jungle of 45 aerials, its moon-bounce dish and naval markings – for a horse carrier a fraction the size? How could men aboard two of the MTBs independently commit a six-fold error in calculating the speed of their ship? How could people report that the Sinai coast was being shelled from the sea ‘for hours’ when no other ships were in the area except the *Liberty*? And why did people doubt their word that the US flag was prominently displayed?

The official Israeli enquiries provided further unease, not only because they were hurriedly conducted, excluded evidence from the victims and accepted far too readily that most of the Israeli military involved were incompetent, but also because they raised new inconsistencies. If one accepted the finding that Israeli officers made a catalogue of blunders, why were none of them court-martialled to test their innocence or guilt? In this formal environment, under oath, they might have claimed they acted under orders from their superiors in the military high command. However, that possibility had been ruled out by both Israeli investigations. A straitjacket had been put round the inquiry process.

The manner in which Israel handled the affair gave ample ammunition for the US to conduct its own inquiry. But the greatest pain for the *Liberty* men came from the failure of their own representatives on Capitol Hill to champion their case. Over the years, Democrat and Republican administrations showed distinct reluctance to put Israel’s story to the test or question the US Navy’s

response. Every fresh piece of evidence, such as Staring's, that challenged the official Israeli viewpoint was swept under the carpet.

The lack of engagement by Congress hurt most because this body had investigated every peacetime military disaster other than the *Liberty* attack, including the suicide bombing of the warship USS *Cole* in October 2000 that killed 17 sailors – exactly half the *Liberty* death toll. It was a further sign, the survivors believed, of a cover-up – now lasting 35 years – by both the US and Israeli Governments.

In 2002, Ennes was still battling with those trying to argue nothing had been concealed. 'The Israelis claim they mistakenly plotted our speed at 32 knots, marking us as a warship suitable for attack,' he wrote in a US Navy publication. 'We were moving at only five knots, and we were more than 30 miles away – double their 16-mile radar horizon. The Israelis claim the officers on two torpedo boats mistook the *Liberty* for a 40-year-old, out-of-service Egyptian horse transport. Israeli naval officers tell me that story is an embarrassment. It should be. It is unbelievable.

'Despite these things, a few Americans seem to accept the preposterous claims that a tiny motor torpedo boat can have a 30-mile radar horizon, can miscalculate a target's speed by 500 percent, can mistake a clearly-marked 10,000-ton US ship a mile away for an ancient 2,640-ton Egyptian horse carrier, can fail to recognize an oversize American flag from as close as 50 feet and can then continue to fire on that target from close range for another 40 minutes before suddenly recognizing it as American after learning that Sixth Fleet jets were on the way. Survivors cannot accept that.

'The typical Israeli reaction is that we are liars or anti-Semites, which of course we are not. We are American sailors honestly reporting an act of treachery at sea.'¹⁰

A cover-up invariably indicates something massively embarrassing was concealed under the carpet. But what would justify the sometimes frantic efforts to stop the full story of the *Liberty* emerging? After Ennes produced his book on the attack in 1979, a

number of survivors plucked up the courage to share information and others tried to gather documentary evidence using the US Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Their success was limited, despite a rule that should ensure classified material is released after 30 years unless it harms national security. They had only parts of a very large jigsaw, and have never managed to put it together.

Most documents released by the Navy and the NSA about the attack still showed areas of text blacked out. There were uncorroborated accounts that the United States had been warned of the impending attack. Ennes had pieced together information that aircraft had been sent from Sixth Fleet carriers to rescue the *Liberty*, but had then been recalled minutes after take-off. It was discovered that some crewmen in the secret spaces knew a lot more than they were prepared to share about a mystery submarine, and about a secret file held in a safe referring to something called Operation Cyanide.

Suspicion thus mounted that the *Liberty* was part of a much bigger clandestine operation during the Six-Day War. It was uncommonly difficult to discover whether surveillance aircraft and submarines were watching them on behalf of the NSA, though all these 'platforms' employed CTs working for the Naval Security Group, the same outfit as 150 of the *Liberty's* crew.

An example was an 80-page NSA report entitled 'Attack on Sigint Collector the USS *Liberty*', originally designated Secret and written in 1981 by one William Gerhard, whose position in the Agency is obliterated by a marker pen. In one earlier release of the report, even the phrase 'Sigint Collector' (Signals Intelligence Collector) on the cover was blacked over. A later, less expurgated edition allowed the public to read a few more paragraphs, but there was nothing revealing and much that was still unintelligible.

One section begins: 'While the *Liberty* was en route to Rota from Abidjan, the NSA was arranging with the Air Force Security Service (AFSS), now the Electronic Security Command...' The rest of the sentence and the next three lines are blank. It then continues: 'The objective was to establish a technical processing

center (TPC) for...' The next 29 lines are blank; what the TPC was 'for' is never revealed.

Examination of other material prised out of the Pentagon indicated one crucial thing – the *Liberty* was not on some simple, hastily-conceived, solitary expedition to observe the Middle East conflict from the sidelines. It was perhaps a small cog, but it played some mighty important role – and someone had wanted it removed.

The United States picture was obscure because there were so many black holes. Israel, by contrast, produced a large number of confusing accounts. Plenty of people were prepared to talk, but their testimonies coincided on only one point. Everyone rejected the proposition that Israel deliberately tried to sink a vessel it knew belonged to its friend, the US. It was an insult even to suggest it.

The men there who masterminded the Six-Day War, some still alive and in their eighties, even differed on who was responsible for the attack; was it the Air Force or the Navy? An example is General Ezer Weizman, who later became Israeli President. He was the main war planner in 1967, under Defence Minister Moshe Dayan and Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin. Months before the war, he had relinquished command of the Air Force after playing a significant role in planning the destruction of the Egyptian defence forces. 'I'm being quite frank to you: I don't know how it happened,' he said of the *Liberty* attack. 'It was a mistake by a few Air Force pilots.'

Speaking at his home in Caesarea, with a panoramic view of a Roman aqueduct and the Mediterranean Sea beyond, he was reluctant to explain further: 'I would rather not talk about the Six-Day War from a *Liberty* point of view. We had glorious days without the *Liberty*. It was a mistake; it's a pity, we're very sorry, but it happened.'

Weizman said his pilots never flew with unmarked aircraft – it was a myth to think otherwise. 'It was an intelligence listening ship with Hebrew-speaking Americans, with Arabic-speaking Americans... The Russians had the same [type of] ship there –

one of the great intelligence games nowadays. I think that whoever thought that we did it purposely must be crazy. I am sure that the boys thought it was Egyptian.'

He seemed perplexed that Americans could be so interested in the attack after so long. 'It was a very, very small part of the Six-Day War,' he said in conclusion.¹¹

Another key figure had much sympathy with the veterans, perhaps because he was a fellow-sailor. Admiral Shlomo Erell was in charge of the Israeli Navy and retired soon after the Six-Day War, but he has always wished some of the veterans had come to meet the people involved. He now lives in a high-rise apartment on the summit of Mount Carmel, Haifa, and spoke at length about the details of the attack.

There was, however, one surprising aspect of his testimony. He said he was not a witness to the crucial events before the torpedo attack. He was in Haifa harbour on duty, he said; but, for some reason that he had never unravelled, none of the staff at his command centre on Mount Carmel contacted him, though they were no more than a mile away, with a radio link to his car.

Admiral Erell said that on 5 June Israel had been informed there were no American naval ships within 100 miles of the coast. His ships were therefore not expecting any US vessels to turn up without warning. 'On 8 June the [US] Navy didn't know anything about the *Liberty*,' he said. 'The [US] Navy learned about it the same time as I did; when she was attacked...'

The ship had been sighted first by the aircraft, but they couldn't identify her: 'Torpedo boats were ordered out, and reported that the ship was making 28 knots, which she was obviously not. They used a very, very primitive method of plotting (calculating) the relative motions. You are looking at the stopwatch and measuring, taking readings, doing the reading every minute and trying to figure out the speed. Over a number of readings you get an average. The decision to order the air attack was made because anything that is making 28 knots running south-west off El Arish must be an enemy ship.'

The Admiral said that after the air attack it was realised the *Liberty* was not making 28 knots, and the torpedo boats approached and tried to identify her. 'They had a booklet on enemy ships,' he said, 'and they tried to find something that looks like it. The nearest was the Egyptian naval supply ship, *El-Quseir*. The *Liberty* is much bigger but the silhouette is really very close. When you see only one ship at sea, you don't know how big it is.'

He turned to the Israeli claim that the *Liberty* had been unmarked: 'They say there was no American flag and I believe them. Most probably the flag was shot by the air attack.' What about the huge letters on the stern? 'I don't think they saw huge letters on the side: the ship was in smoke, she had been attacked. You have got to understand from the point of view of the [torpedo] boat commander. The decision had been made already for him.'

Admiral Erell said that after the Air Force attack his officers tried to identify the ship, but got it wrong. 'That's where I say our mistake, as in "mistaken identity", was. It was an error of judgement on the part of Commander Rahav [acting head of operations in the command centre] because [he should have] stopped for a moment to consider what the *El-Quseir*, a supplies ship, does in the middle of the day off a coast occupied by our forces.

'This was the basic error of judgement. Of course I was furious: I was furious at the wrong decision, the error of judgement on the part of Rahav.' However, Erell disclosed he played only a minor role in the Israeli inquiry that followed, appearing there to answer just one question; whether it was possible to miscalculate the *Liberty's* speed so grossly. He told the judge that it was and went back to his office.

I asked Erell about a declassified CIA report that the attack was deliberate and ordered by Moshe Dayan; the admiral became animated: 'Can I use a bad word? Bullshit! I think the whole concept is really an attack on common sense. Look; if it were true, do you believe that a thing like this would have, or could have, been covered up without anybody [talking]? There must have

been hundreds of people who knew about it, in the Air Force, in the Navy, on the torpedo boats, in headquarters. Do you believe that this could have been, as you say, covered up?’

Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces during the Six-Day War, was assassinated in 1995 while serving as Prime Minister. His memories of the *Liberty* affair are recorded in an autobiography that is more candid than those of most of his contemporaries.¹² ‘I was seated in my office at the GHQ command post when I received a message that sounded odd,’ he wrote. ‘Explosions had been reported in the El Arish area... An initial guess was that the Egyptians might be coming in from the sea to attack our units in the town, so I ordered the navy and air force to look into the matter.’

Rabin said a second report an hour later changed his assessment: ‘A ship had been sighted opposite El Arish. Following standing orders to attack any unidentified vessel near the shore (after appropriate attempts had been made to ascertain its identity), our air force and navy zeroed in on the vessel and damaged it. But they still could not tell us whose ship it was. Then a third message removed all doubts, but it sent our anxieties skyrocketing. Our forces had attacked a Soviet spy vessel!’

The most significant thing missing from Rabin’s recollections is any explanation of how the calamitous false reports of shelling had arisen. He said that on ascertaining his forces had struck a Soviet spy ship he reported to his prime minister, Levi Eshkol, and defence minister, Moshe Dayan, and called in the senior commanders ‘for consultation’. He went on: ‘It was vital to make preparations, but no one wanted to articulate exactly for what. We did not dare put our fears into words, but the question that hung over the room like a giant sabre was obvious: Are we facing massive Soviet intervention in the fighting?’

Rabin pointed out that in the weeks before the war the Soviet Navy had reinforced its fleet in the Mediterranean up to a total of 70 vessels, and the US Navy had done similarly: ‘Now that the Egyptian and Jordanian armies had been routed and the fighting

on two fronts had essentially been decided, would the Soviets take advantage of this incident to join the war and tip the balance in the Arabs' favour? While we were discussing the matter, a fourth report came in and finally clarified the situation. The vessel was American – amazing but true.'

Rabin said before the attack four of his planes had flown at a low altitude to identify the ship but saw no markings: '[They] therefore concluded that it must be Egyptian. They notified the navy of their attack, and one of our ships finished the task by firing off torpedoes at the *Liberty*, leaving the vessel heavily damaged.' Rabin's account therefore differs considerably from the official Israeli enquires by Colonel Ron and Judge Yerushalmi. First, *Liberty* was a Russian spy ship, then an American ship and then an Egyptian ship – identified by default because it was allegedly unmarked, and not because it was thought to be the *El-Quseir*.

Rabin said he had 'mixed feelings' when he learnt he had shot the *Liberty* to pieces: '[I had] profound regret at having attacked our friends and a tremendous sense of relief stemming from the assumption that one can talk with friends and render explanations and apologies. The frightful prospect of a violent Soviet reprisal had disappeared. After consultation with the Prime Minister and the defence minister, we reported the mishap to the American Embassy, offered the Americans a helicopter to fly out to the ship and promised all the necessary help in evacuating casualties and salvaging the vessel. The Americans immediately accepted our offer, and one of our helicopters took their naval attaché to the ship.'

The future Israeli Prime Minister described the scene aboard the *Liberty* as dismal, with many 'wounded and some 32 [sic] dead, including a number of American Jews serving in the crew because of their command of Hebrew. The vessel's task was to monitor the IDF's signals networks for a rapid follow-up of events on the battlefield by tracking messages transmitted between the various headquarters.' Reading between the lines, he seemed to be saying the *Liberty* was helping the IDF during the war before it was disabled, but again there is no elaboration.

He concluded his story by fingering the US. 'It was only later,' he wrote, 'while serving as Israel's ambassador to the United States, that I learned further details that cast light on the tragic episode from an American viewpoint. With the outbreak of the fighting on 5 June, we notified the American naval attaché in Israel that we intended to protect our shores from Egyptian naval attacks by employing a combination of naval and air units. In the event that Egyptian vessels approached our shores, we would not be able to delay our response. We therefore asked that American ships be removed from the vicinity of the Israeli shore or that the Americans notify us of their precise location in the area near our coast.'

This claim by Israel had quickly become an issue after the *Liberty* attack. 'I personally called the American Embassy,' Air Force Intelligence Chief General Yeshayeah Bareket was quoted as saying, and the story reached the *Washington Post*. The US Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Walworth Barbour, was angry. He cabled the State Department: 'No request for info on US ships operating off Sinai was made until after *Liberty* incident. Had Israelis made such an inquiry it would have been forwarded immediately to the Chief of Naval Operations and other high naval commands and repeated to [your] department.'¹³

Rabin, however, restated the warning in his memoirs and emphasised its significance. 'In the storm of battle,' Rabin explained, 'there was no time to check whether or not our request had been fulfilled. During my term as ambassador, however, I learned that Washington had indeed instructed the Sixth Fleet to move its vessels away from the Israeli coastline, but due to a bureaucratic blunder the order failed to reach the *Liberty*.' Rabin was referring to a series of messages telling the *Liberty* to withdraw from the area that the US Navy had allegedly sent in the 24 hours before the attack, all of which failed to arrive. A later investigation blamed a series of signal routing problems by which one message arrived in the Philippines but not the ship, though doubts remained whether any signals were sent.

Yitzhak Rabin was in no doubt that his attack on the ship was very dangerous. 'What we at GHQ could not have known during

those tension-filled moments was that this local misunderstanding might easily have set off a far more wide-ranging war,' he wrote. 'Just as our pilots had failed to identify the markings of the ship (and at one point tentatively surmised that it was Russian), the Americans had failed to identify the planes that had attacked them, and their initial impression was that Soviet aircraft were assaulting a unit of the Sixth Fleet!

'President Johnson depicted the incident in his autobiography as one of the most critical moments in his life, for he faced the awesome decision of ordering US aircraft to attack the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean. I encountered a fascinating parallel: just as we were relieved to learn that the ship was American, rather than Soviet, Johnson and the heads of the American armed forces were reassured upon hearing that the attackers were Israelis.' Rabin said it did not detract from the pain of the human tragedy involved, 'but at least we were not plunged into a third world war.'

Rabin finally came to a remarkable conclusion – that Israel was not to blame for what his planes and torpedo boats had done. 'In any event,' he said, 'to express our goodwill and humanitarian concern, the Israeli Government paid US\$13 million in compensation to the families of the Americans killed or wounded in the attack.¹⁴ Yet despite repeated pressure, we refused to bear the cost of repairing the vessel, since we did not consider ourselves responsible for the train of errors. Regrettably, the Americans remained somewhat resentful about the affair, at least for the duration of the Johnson administration.' Apparently, according to the future Israeli Prime Minister, the injured and bereaved victims of the *Liberty* attack should have been grateful for Israel's generosity.

The *Liberty* veterans can at least be thankful that Yitzhak Rabin devoted space to giving his slant on the attack. Moshe Dayan, who as Defence Minister was Rabin's immediate boss, produced an autobiography three years earlier that became an instant best-seller. It contains a day-by-day account of the war covering 20 pages and, in characteristic style, it outlines in detail how he masterminded the stunning victory. In these 8,000 words, not once is the *Liberty*, or the attack, even mentioned.

3. Whose War?

'Israel has no aggressive designs. We do not demand anything except to live in tranquillity in our present territory.'

Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, 23 May 1967

Meticulous plans were being laid for a surprise invasion in the months before June 1967, but which side was plotting to invade? Was it Egypt, bent on destroying the Zionist state – the Goliath threatening David, as Israel maintained? Was it Israel, seeking to grab enormous tracts of territory? And what role did the super-powers play? The issue is still controversial because so much of what happened is secret and obscure even now.

The war began at dawn, but it was the middle of the night when news filtered through in the US. By breakfast-time there was little doubt in the Johnson administration, at the UN in New York or in London that Egypt was the aggressor because Israel informed the diplomatic world that Nasser's tanks and planes had invaded its territory, after which it had been forced to retaliate.

A telegram sent by the US Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Walworth Barbour, and handed to the White House at 5.58 am left no doubt: 'Have just seen [Abba] Eban at his request. After requesting GOI [Government of Israel] assessment of Nasser's aggressive intent, his build-up in Negev, his closing of Straits, his rallying of other Arab countries, Eban said that early this morning Israelis observed Egyptian units moving in large numbers toward Israel and in fact considerable force penetrated Israeli territory and clashed with Israeli ground forces. Consequently, GOI gave order to attack.' Barbour said a letter was being drafted by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol for President Johnson to 'rehearse developments re. Nasser's build-up' and the reasons for the Israeli action,

which was based on Article 51 of the UN Charter, and Israel's 'conviction that world understands Israel is victim of Nasser's aggression'. Barbour added: 'Letter will add that GOI has no rpt no intention taking advantage of situation to enlarge its territory, that hopes peace can be restored within present boundaries, that it also hopes conflict can be localized and in this regard asks our help in restraining any Soviet initiative.'

British diplomatic reports during the first day show how other ambassadors were also deliberately misled. That morning Michael Hadow, British Ambassador in Tel Aviv, went to the Israeli foreign office for a briefing from Abba Eban and in good faith wired a report to London about Israel's 'righteous use of force'. Based on what Eban had told him, Hadow said: 'Main burden was to stress that in recent days Arabs had put themselves into an overall offensive posture. At about 7 am this morning Egyptian tanks and aircraft had moved against Israel. Full radar plots were available.

'Clearly Nasser had decided his chance had come and wished to involve his allies as soon as possible... The land attack had been repelled or was in course of being repelled. Israeli Air Force had engaged Egyptians in the air and on their airfields. Latest news was that the air battle had been a great success and that Egyptian Air Force was for moment ineffective... Israel did not regret her patience in the face of pressure... Israel had had to repel an assault in strength and her decision was one which would be of national, international and historic importance.'

In Washington, by that evening Sir Patrick Dean, British Ambassador to the US, had sent two flash reports. The first followed a meeting with the Secretary of State: 'I have just spoken to [Dean] Rusk. He said that US policy was to make the most strenuous effort in the Security Council to bring about a ceasefire... Rusk said that the Americans had been in touch in Moscow and had expressed their astonishment and dismay at what had happened. They had said that they hoped the Soviet Government agreed that every effort should be made to bring about a cessation of hostilities and that the two governments could co-operate to

this end. Rusk said that the Americans had had no inkling of the hostilities from either side. Rusk said that the US had as yet formed no judgement about which side had started the fighting. This was still murky.'

Later Sir Patrick Dean had been to see senior figures in the Johnson administration including two brothers, Gene and Walt Rostow: 'Walt Rostow reiterated to me that the US had been caught completely unaware of Israel's intention to attack. No one I have talked to is sure (or is prepared to say) who started hostilities off. The general impression is still that the Israelis will win. American pronouncements have stressed US evenhandedness and the State Department spokesman said that the US was neutral "in thought, word and deed", which has since been heavily glossed by the White House. The administration's first objective is to secure a ceasefire, but their efforts to this end are concentrated for the time being in the Security Council.' Interestingly, Dean had picked up the impression that the US was not too enthusiastic, adding: 'I have not been able to find any trace of really strong pressure being put on the Israelis to desist.'

As 5 June wore on, it emerged that Egypt had been overrun, having not made any aggressive move. It was put succinctly by Ambassador Michael Hadow in a telegram to the British Foreign Office. 'It looks as if the Israelis started it. We have been led up the garden path...' But ten years later, Israel's respected Foreign Minister Abba Eban was still not prepared to offer an apology for misleading the entire world. His memoirs said: 'When I reached the Prime Minister's room, I learned that Egyptian planes advancing towards us had been sighted on the radar screens. In accordance with our decision of the previous day, our own aircraft had gone out to meet the advancing force. But this, our airmen's mission, was not tactical or limited as before; they had embarked on a total counter-attack against the Egyptian Air Force wherever it could be found. Shortly afterward, the Egyptian ground forces in the Gaza Strip had bombarded Israeli settlements. Our armoured forces were instructed to make a total response.

'The action to which Nasser had been goading us for three

intolerable weeks had now erupted. Israel was hitting back in the air, and from the beginning there was the glow of victory on her wings. Even before the first results of our air action were known, I was overcome by a vast relief. Everything that could be done to defend honour and interest without war had been exhausted. In legal terms Israel was exercising the inherent right of self-defence, recognised for all states in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter...'

Eban may have been deliberately lying about Egypt having made the first move, hoping that no one credible would contradict him. But his memoirs lend credence to the possibility that he and his prime minister were misled by their own military. By the time the world caught on to the fact that there had been no Egyptian attack, the war was effectively won and the press were hailing Israel's brilliant success. When the issue was raised, Israel said it had acted 'pre-emptively' to take advantage of the element of surprise, because there was abundant evidence Nasser would have pounced in the next few days.

The reason why Israel had gone to war was not a controversial issue. Western newspapers and TV news bulletins everywhere portrayed a country threatened with extinction by the surrounding Arab menace. It was a war of survival. Allegations that it might have been a war of conquest with Israel bent on grabbing land only emerged later, when Israel refused to hand back the territory it had occupied. Even then, they were defused when the Sinai was handed back to Egypt in a historic deal between Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin. Israel trying to steal territory under a pretext of self-defence? Successive governments in Jerusalem had little difficulty in ridiculing the suggestion.

Recently, however, some 'revisionist' scholars in Israel have begun to address this possibility, recognising the hard truth that Israel was not in mortal danger. Their stance is called 'the new history', and is seen by some as a pervasive revolutionary movement that has taken root in Israeli intellectual life. Haim Hanegbi, political columnist for the daily *Ma'Ariv* newspaper, commented: 'The war of June 1967 has not been fully researched, and much

about it remains classified. Perhaps the proper time has not yet come. Israeli hearts may still be unprepared for the difficulty involved in criticizing the war that was viewed not only as the greatest military victory in modern history, an example to the world, but principally as a sign from heaven, the footsteps of the Messiah and a harbinger of redemption...'

But Hanegbi admitted there was substance to the revisionist case. He concluded: 'It must be remembered that in 1967 the army was still commanded by former members of the Palmach (the elite fighting unit of the Israeli War of Independence) who were burning to exploit the Six-Day War to complete what was denied them in 1948: to take over the Palestinians' remaining territories and, through the power of conquest, realize the true Greater Israel.'¹

Powerful figures in Israel were determined on war, but were they justified? To have held back might simply have delayed the inevitable, to the point when Nasser might have been strong enough to destroy the Zionist state. In understanding how Israel and three of its Arab neighbours came to blows when they did, and with what justification, the *casus belli* needs to be examined.

Two actions by President Nasser in May 1967 are regarded as catalysts. The first was the decision on 16 May to expel the UN from the Sinai. Since 1956, the Egyptian side of the 164-mile long border had been patrolled by UNEF (the United Nations Emergency Force) commanded by Indarjit Rikhye, an experienced Indian officer. From a base in Gaza he commanded 3,378 international troops who also supervised the demilitarisation of Sharm El Sheik, a small Egyptian port close to the confluence of the Gulf of Aqaba, the Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea. That day he had planned to play golf but, to his astonishment, he was suddenly summoned to the UAR liaison office and handed this brief message from General Mahmoud Fawzi, chief of staff of the Egyptian Army:

'To your information, I gave my instructions to all UAR forces to be ready for action against Israel the moment it might carry out

any aggressive action against any Arab country. Due to these instructions our troops are already concentrated in Sinai on our eastern border. For the sake of complete security of all UN troops... I request that you issue your orders to withdraw all these troops immediately...'

Rikhye resisted pressure from Fawzi to act immediately and contacted UN Secretary General U Thant. The UN boss would later be criticised for the speed at which he ordered UNEF to disband. He could, it was said, have referred the matter to the UN General Council as a delaying tactic. But, of the seven countries providing troops, three – India, Pakistan and Yugoslavia – had insisted on withdrawal, as did the Soviet Union.

The allegation has also been made that U Thant could have kept some forces in Sharm El Sheikh, crucial to the passage of shipping in and out of the Gulf of Aqaba through the Straits of Tiran. He did, however, attempt one seemingly obvious solution that would have kept the belligerents apart: he asked Israel to allow the UNEF to cross to the Israeli side of the border and continue its peacekeeping role there. Israel refused U Thant's request. General Odd Bull, chief of staff of UNTSO, another Middle East peacekeeping force, said in his memoirs: 'The original plan had been for UN forces to be stationed on both sides of the demarcation line between Israel and Egypt but... Israel had refused to permit any on its side of the line. Had the original plan been carried out it is quite possible that the 1967 war could have been avoided.'²

It was, therefore, not surprising when at dusk on 19 May, in front of a guard of honour on the Gaza/Tel Aviv road, General Rikhye had a sense of foreboding as he ordered his men to stand down and prepare to leave aboard a chartered ship. Later that evening, Israel ordered a general mobilisation of reserves and Egyptian tanks began rolling into the Sinai.

Concerned at the mounting tension, U Thant boarded a plane for Cairo on the evening of 22 May in an effort to prevent any further escalation of the crisis, but he was too late. With ludicrous over-confidence, Egyptian War Minister Field Marshal Abdul Hakim Amer promised Nasser his forces were in 'tip-top shape'

and the President ordered the blockade of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. U Thant landed in the early hours of 23 May to learn the disastrous news. He was assured by Nasser that Egypt would only react if Israel attacked her first, but the Egyptian President refused to agree a two-week moratorium on implementing the blockade. From now on, any Israeli ship attempting to reach the port of Eilat would be stopped. In Tel Aviv, in an episode never properly explained, Yitzhak Rabin,³ the Israeli Chief of Staff, had a brief nervous breakdown.

As the world looked on that momentous Thursday – Independence Day in Israel – it seemed that Nasser was spoiling for trouble and that the young Zionist State's security and freedom to trade was being threatened for no legitimate reason. That was not, however, the view of one significant figure at a kibbutz in the Negev desert – the revered former Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion.

On 21 May, Rabin had briefed this elder statesman on the military picture. Rabin was exhausted after masterminding the Israeli military build-up, the Independence Day military parade, and at the same time flitting between interminable political meetings. Tension had been mounting between the Eshkol Cabinet, most of whom supported a diplomatic solution to the crisis in conjunction with the backing of the Western powers, and a powerful group favouring an immediate first strike against Egypt. The group included several generals and a number of opposition politicians, among them Moshe Dayan, then a Knesset member, and Menachem Begin, leader of the ultra-nationalist Herut (Freedom) Party.⁴ Shimon Peres, currently Israeli Foreign Minister, was also a leading challenger to Eshkol's dovish policies.

Rabin felt he was being pushed and pulled by dividing loyalties and no doubt hoped Ben Gurion would provide him with some solace. He was utterly wrong. His recollection of what happened is dramatic: "The Old Man received me warmly, but instead of fortifying my spirits he gave me a dressing-down. "We have been forced into a very grave situation," he warned. "I very much doubt

whether Nasser wanted to go to war, and now we are in serious trouble. Unlike in the past, we are totally isolated." He asked about the military situation and the balance of forces, and I gave him a brief review. It was painful to see him in his present state: totally cut off from any sources of information... He was convinced that Israel was in an intolerable political situation and doubted that she could extricate herself by starting a war with Egypt.

'As Ben-Gurion proceeded to pour scorn on the cabinet and the Prime Minister, his words struck me like hammer-blows: "The army is all right; the officers are all right; you're all right. But there's no one to tell you what to do! The Prime Minister and the cabinet should take responsibility for deciding whether or not to go to war..." But Ben-Gurion kept hammering away. "You made a mistake," he said, referring to our mobilization of the reserves... "You have led the state into a grave situation. We must not go to war. We are isolated."'⁵

This stinging rebuke rang in Rabin's ears as he went home, and the next day he was distraught. The story is taken up by Ezer Weizman, who saw Rabin's state at first hand, thinking him to be losing his balance: 'What happened on the evening of 23 May and on the following day reflected the peak of Rabin's personal crisis, which also affected his later ability to conduct the campaign. On 23 May, at about eight in the evening, Rabin phoned me at home. Speaking in a faint voice, he asked me to come to his home immediately. Within moments I was in Zahala, where I found him sitting alone in the larger room of his apartment. Everything was silent and still. He looked broken and depressed. He sat on the edge of the couch, and I sat down beside him. We remained alone. Yitzhak spoke in a weak voice. "Due to a series of mistakes, I've led Israel into an entanglement, on the eve of the greatest and hardest war the state has ever experienced. In this war, everything depends on the air force. The air force will decide the war. I believe that if a man has erred, he should go; I've erred. Will you take on the post of chief of staff?"' Weizman said Rabin was very upset and refused to allow him to quit. Rabin took two days off and seemed to recover, and his absence was explained by a bout of illness caused

by excessively heavy smoking. Nevertheless, in Weizman's view Rabin was operating below par throughout the war period.

Ben Gurion's verbal assault on Rabin called into question Israel's tactics before Nasser decided to expel the UNEF troops in Sinai. Tension had been building up between Israel and its neighbours for at least two years, primarily along the border with Syria, and the biggest cause for this was water, or rather the region's chronic lack of it. Some say this was the most significant cause of the Six-Day War, and certainly Israel's territorial gains largely solved its water problem for the rest of the century.

After gaining independence, work had begun on the National Water Carrier System, designed to divert the headwaters of the River Jordan. Pumps were installed to draw water out of Lake Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee) and convey it across the watershed and through the mountains for Israelis living on the Mediterranean coast and in the northern Negev Desert. (It was completed in the late 1960s, with the result that the main flow of the River Jordan has been enormously reduced and the Dead Sea is now fast shrinking.)

The Israeli diversion scheme reduced water in the Jordan valley and also in some areas of the Syrian Golan Heights, and a plan was implemented by Syria to foil it. It began massive earthworks to divert two tributaries of the Jordan away from Israel, potentially depriving it of most of the water flowing into its territory. Attempts by the US to mediate foundered and Israel decided to use force, bombing the earthworks so ferociously from its side of the border that they had to be abandoned.

Predictably, the matter did not end there. Yasser Arafat and his al-Fatah group began conducting cross-border attacks and border clashes worsened in the Golan area. A demilitarised zone patrolled by the UN had separated the two sides since the War of Independence, but in 1951 Israel had declared the right to farm it. One report in Washington said Israel had 'aggressively developed the area, draining water from Arab farms, levelling Arab villages, driving out residents, building roads and transplanting trees... Most

of the 2,000 Arabs living in the zone had been forced out by 1956.⁶ On 6 April 1951 the UN had complained that three of its observers had been surrounded by a group of armed Israelis near the village of Mishmar Hay Yarden and threatened with death. They had been told that the next time they were found there, they would be shot.⁷

By 1966 and 1967, the border problems had worsened. According to Israel, its tractors were being repeatedly fired on, without provocation by the Syrians. The Syrians said the tractors were armoured (which indeed they were) and that Israeli soldiers were driving them simply to exacerbate tension. In fact the Israeli version of events was not backed by some of those leading the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO), the group charged with preserving the status quo.

General Carl von Horn, the Swedish commander for one period, described how Israel would encroach slowly beyond the ceasefire lines, 'beneath the glowering eyes of the Syrians'. 'Gradually... the area had become a network of Israeli canals and irrigation channels edging up against and always encroaching on Arab-owned property.' Horn said it was unlikely Syrian guns would have come into action had it not been for Israeli provocation. He also added this conclusion: 'It was Israeli policy to maintain a situation pregnant with threats of Arab attacks.'⁸

Elmo Hutchison, a commander seconded from the US Navy, controversially described one massive action by Israel as 'a pre-meditated raid of intimidation motivated by Israel's desire... to bait the Arab states into some overt act of aggression that would offer them the opportunity to overrun additional territory without censure...'⁹

Apart from the rise of al-Fatah, the border incidents and destruction of the project to divert rivers, there was one other consequence. It brought together Syria and Egypt in a closer military alliance. The two countries had formed the United Arab Republic in 1958 but Syria had seceded in 1961 after a rift with Nasser. Now a coup in Damascus had brought to power a leftist, pro-Soviet, Baathist regime, and the military alliance was reformed to provide a stronger front against their joint enemy, Israel.

Jordan, led by King Hussein, was having none of this in late 1966. He was viewed by the UAR as a reactionary collaborator because of his close relations with Britain and the US. Cairo called him 'the Harlot of Amman' and the CIA 'Dwarf', though it was not known at the time that the CIA regularly supplied him with suitcases full of cash intended to keep him on-side. Despite this he was a shrewd operator, and his own man. He rejected Arafat and his Fatah movement, finding many of the West Bank Palestinians a disruptive element in his country, prone to supporting Marxist elements opposed to his reign. Arafat was not permitted to operate from Jordanian territory but it was difficult to stop his guerrilla force using the Jordan valley as a route into the most populous parts of Israel.

The King's stance against terrorism made an incident on 13 November that year all the more baffling. At dawn, a large force of Israeli troops and 17 tanks, backed by air cover, opened fire on a Jordanian police post at Rujm Madfaa, south of Hebron. The force, with other tanks, sped across the border and began attacking the small market town of Samu. They then withdrew, having shot down a Jordanian Hunter fighter, killed 15 Jordanian soldiers and three civilians and injured 50 others.

When UN observers arrived at Samu they were confronted with devastation. The 5,000 residents had been driven from their homes and sappers had systemically blown up 125 houses, the clinic and the school. A woman's body was found lying in a pool of blood near her home and 20 domestic animals had been killed 'either by explosions or by small arms fire'. Nearby, in the village of Khirbet Jinba, 15 stone houses had been deliberately destroyed, seven homes damaged and a well blown up. The Rujm Madfaa police post was completely destroyed.

Israel claimed it was responding to a land mine that had blown up a military vehicle in the Hebron Hills the day before, the derailment of a freight train on 27 October and the dynamiting of three houses in Jerusalem not far from the home of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol the same month. But the indiscriminate nature of the attack gave the impression it was a provocation.

Certainly, it hugely undermined the position of King Hussein, who was subjected to taunts from Nasser and the Baathists that he was soft on Israel, and there were riots and marches in Amman and other Jordanian cities by protesters seeking King Hussein's overthrow.

Moshe Menuhin, a respected economist and father of the famous violinist, accused Israel of being a military 'junta' that had engineered the Six-Day War for financial reasons, as its economy was in a mess. He was a vocal anti-Zionist and argued the Samu invasion was the catalyst that started the war. 'It was wanton, indiscriminate murder and destruction,' he claimed, 'just to teach the Arabs a preliminary lesson about the real thing to come. And, of course, the old pretext offered was "fedayeen" [an Arab commando group fighting Israel and prepared to sacrifice themselves in the cause].'¹⁰

This view was also voiced more diplomatically in the State Department. Ambassador Charles W. Yost, who was sent as a special emissary to Cairo before the conflict, came to the conclusion that Israel had contrived the crisis because 'it is difficult to see how any Israeli leader could have failed to foresee that such repeated massive reprisals must eventually place the leader of the Arab coalition in a position where he would have to respond.'

The pressure on Jordan continued through 1967 until, on 30 May, with war looming, Hussein decided he must unite with his Arab cousins and signed a mutual defence pact with Nasser, fatefully placing his military forces under UAR joint command. He was wooed by a speech by Nasser to his National Assembly on 29 May in which he said: 'The issue today is not the question of Aqaba, or the Straits of Tiran, or UNEF. The issue is the rights of the people of Palestine.' The day before, he had stated at a press conference of several hundred journalists, 'I believe that after 19 years in which not a directive of the UN has been applied, [the Palestinians] have the right to pursue themselves a war of liberation to restore their rights in their country. If things should develop into a general struggle in the Middle East, we are ready for this struggle.'

Nasser's remarks fell short of threatening to go to war; indeed, he said he did not plan to go to war, as his aims had already been achieved – the blockade and removal of UNEF. Again, he had failed to appease the hardliners in both Syria and Egypt. Pressure from these quarters had grown intense since another even more dramatic brush with Israel, this time involving Syria, which in the opinion of Israeli Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin 'sparked the process that climaxed in the Six-Day War.'¹¹

It began with another Israeli tractor being fired on from the Golan Heights, but this time Israel responded by launching aircraft that fired on the attackers and on several Syrian villages nearby. The Syrian Air Force was mobilised and an air battle took place, with disastrous consequences for Damascus and for the Soviet Union which had supplied the MiG jets that took part. Six were shot down, two not far from Damascus.

As Rabin admitted later, and perhaps appreciated when he authorised the attack, it set Arab against Arab. He wrote: 'Throughout the 1960s, Nasser had maintained a policy of building up Egypt's military strength and nurturing his alliance with Syria while repeatedly stressing that he would not be drawn into a war with Israel over "a tractor in the demilitarised zone or a border incident in the north." But six Syrian MiGs were not a tractor; and Nasser had, at any rate, been so constantly needled by his counterparts in other Arab states that he had relinquished his deterrent role by hiding behind the UN force stationed on the Egyptian-Israeli border.'

The intelligence reaching Rabin was that Nasser had rejected Syrian calls for a joint assault on Israel, believing that as long as Israel did not perpetrate an all-out attack on Syria the UAR should not be drawn into war prematurely. Rabin said the Syrians fumed but they did not give up: 'Egypt's reluctance only left them more determined to escalate the tension and draw their ally into a military confrontation.'¹²

Israel could have chosen to calm things: instead, it did the opposite. In early May, several Fatah attacks provoked widespread concern in Israel and it quickly became clear a dramatic response

was being planned. On 12 May the news agency UPI reported: 'A high Israeli source said today Israel would take limited military action designed to topple the Damascus Army regime if Syrian terrorists continue sabotage raids inside Israel.' The *New York Times* said Israel had 'decided that the use of force against Syria may be the only way to curtail increasing terrorism...'¹³ Then Levi Eshkol, the normally cautious Israeli Prime Minister, went on radio and said Israel 'may have to teach Syria a sharper lesson than that of 7 April... but we shall choose the time, the place and the means to counter the aggressor.' If the intention was to provoke Syria, it succeeded; Syria turned to the UN, claiming these were pretexts to justify war and 'another 1956 Suez is in the making'.

In his memoirs, Rabin expressed no regret at having helped create a situation that greatly exacerbated Middle East tension and led to war. Equally tantalising, he did not say whether Ben Gurion cited the 6 April attack, the Samu raid and the inflammatory comments in the media, in their anguished meeting on 21 May when the 'Old Man' complained Israel had been led into a grave situation.

The last word on this episode came from Moshe Dayan – long after he died. He had spoken at length to his journalist friend Rami Tal in 1976 but had prohibited disclosure because he still harboured hopes of a political comeback. In 1997, Yael Dayan, his daughter and a Knesset member, gave permission to tell the story. Speaking from beyond the grave with a candour that shocked Israel, the great military hero admitted that he had once 'not fulfilled his duty' as Minister of Defence by attacking Syria in June 1967.

He said on Day Four of the war he should have resisted the pressure after a delegation of kibbutz members had met Eshkol to convince him to do battle with Syria and capture the Golan. The Prime Minister had been accused of abandoning them and allowing the Syrians 'to get away clean, and all this kind of rubbish'. Then Dayan added: 'You see, you can talk in terms of the Syrians (being) "scoundrels", "They should be screwed" and "It's the right time" and other such talk, but this is not policy. You don't screw the enemy because he's a scoundrel, but because he threatens

you. And the Syrians, on the fourth day of the war, were not a threat to us.'

Tal pointed out the Syrians were threatening Israel from the Golan Heights. Dayan said: 'Leave off: I know how at least 80 percent of the incidents began there – in my opinion (it was) more than 80 percent, but let's talk about 80 percent. It would happen like this: we would send a tractor to plough some place of no value in the demilitarised zone, knowing ahead of time that the Syrians would begin to shoot. If they did not start shooting, we would tell the tractor to keep going forward, until the Syrians in the end would get nervous and start shooting. And then we would start firing artillery, and later also the Air Force, and this was the way it was. I did this, and Laskov and Tzur (two previous commanders-in-chief) did it. Yitzhak Rabin did it when he was there (as commander of the northern district at the beginning of the Sixties)...'

Tal, astonished, asked why these provocations had been authorised. Dayan answered: 'We thought then – and this continued for quite a long time – that we could change the lines of the armistice agreements by military actions that were less than war: that is, to grab some territory and to hang on to it until the enemy despairs and gives it to us. It can be said absolutely that this was sort of naïve on our part, but you should remember that we did not have the experience of a state...'

On 8 June, against his better judgement, Dayan vetoed plans to divert troops from the Sinai to open a new front against Syria, but that night he ordered the attack, without informing his prime minister and despite Syria having agreed to the UN ceasefire terms. It took a threat of military intervention by the Soviet Union to stop Israeli forces rampaging all the way to Damascus, but by then the Golan Heights were secured.

Yigal Allon, one of Eshkol's senior cabinet ministers and an outspoken hawk before the war, wrote in 1970 that 'the global strategic needs of Israel require the control of the Golan Heights as we have to defend our main water sources.'¹⁴ In his view, they should never be returned to Syria.

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Trouble along the demilitarised Syrian border was undoubtedly one of the sparks that led to war, but Dayan's view that he and his military colleagues were naïve in masterminding their 'tractor campaign' stretches credibility. The reality is that many senior figures in the military, supported by a group of hard-line politicians, had long backed a high-risk strategy to create conditions that would make war inevitable. Far from rueing the raid on Samu, the downing of the six MiGs and the border battles in the Golan, they rejoiced as they saw King Hussein being drawn into the UAR's net and Nasser being goaded into precipitant action by a similarly belligerent faction in Cairo headed by General Mahmoud Fawzi, Rabin's opposite number.

As Nasser's tanks and troops moved across the Suez Canal and into Sinai in late May, the generals on both sides were confident. But was Nasser similarly spoiling for a fight? Nasser had expelled the UN observers and declared the Straits of Tiran closed to Israel's ships, but was it warmongering or brinkmanship to placate his people? Yitzhak Rabin, after giving up his post as Chief of Staff and becoming Ambassador to the United States, thought it was the latter. 'I do not believe that Nasser wanted war,' he said. 'The two divisions he sent into Sinai on 14 May would not have been enough to unleash an offensive against Israel. He knew it and we knew it.'

At the time, Israel was the toast of its supporters throughout the world for its stunning military feat, and a post mortem on the war's origins was not a popular topic. Rabin's comments raised few eyebrows, but his reference to two Egyptian divisions is significant, for it would indicate that fewer than 40,000 men had been deployed in the Sinai, out of a total of 264,000 in the Egyptian military.¹⁵ Histories of the war still perpetuate the estimate that between 80,000 and 100,000 Egyptian troops were massed against Israel, which at the time could mobilise 264,000 troops and 800 tanks. But Nasser was fully engaged in the Yemen supporting the leftist regime against rebellious tribesmen in a long-drawn-out conflict which became known as Nasser's Vietnam.

During the Six-Day War, Egypt's surface ships took no part in

hostilities, resisting the temptation to wipe out Israel's puny contingent. According to Admiral Shlomo Erell, head of the Israeli Navy, with the exception of a brush with Egyptian submarines Nasser's vessels stayed well away from the conflict. The decision not to deploy its surface naval fleet undermines Israel's claim that Nasser was planning an invasion; the Egyptian Navy could have wrought much damage on coastal cities such as Haifa, Tel Aviv and Ashdod, and the Israeli Navy did not have the firepower on its own to counter it.

As Rabin later indicated, anyone with good intelligence of Egypt's military posture would have concluded there was no plan to wage war against Israel. Even before war broke out the CIA shared Israel's own assessment that Israel would win in a week – something Nasser must have known too. At the end of Day One Israel's rampage was being described to President Johnson as 'a turkey shoot'. Yet it is still commonly held that Nasser's intention was to pit all his might behind the liberation of Palestine.

Abba Eban, Israel's foreign minister, played a crucial role in writing the history books through a much-praised speech to a Special Assembly of the United Nations on 19 June 1967. He said the danger facing his country was great: 'The military build-up in Egypt proceeded at an intensive rate. It was designed to enable Egypt to press its war plans against Israel while maintaining its violent adventures elsewhere. In the face of these developments, Israel was forced to devote an increasing part of its resources to self-defence.'

He went on: 'With the declaration by Syria of the doctrine of a "day by day military confrontation", the situation in the Middle East grew darker. The Palestine Liberation Organisation, the Palestine Liberation Army, the Unified Arab Command, the intensified expansion of military forces and equipment in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and more remote parts of the Arab continent – these were the signals of a growing danger to which we sought to alert the mind and conscience of the world.'

'In three tense weeks between 14 May and 5 June Egypt, Syria and Jordan, assisted and incited by more distant Arab states,

embarked on a policy of immediate and total aggression. June 1967 was to be the month of decision. The "final solution" was at hand. There was no convincing motive for the aggressive design which was now unfolded. Egyptian and Soviet sources had claimed that a concentrated Israeli invasion of Syria was expected during the second or third week in May. No claim could be more frivolous or far-fetched.'

Eban quoted a Cairo Radio broadcast on 25 May that had said: 'The Arab people is firmly resolved to wipe Israel off the map and to restore the honour of the Arabs of Palestine.'

He said, the following day Nasser had told his people: 'The Arab people want to fight. We have been waiting for the right time when we will be completely ready. Recently we have felt that our strength has been sufficient and that if we make battle with Israel we shall be able, with the help of God, to conquer. Sharm el Sheikh [a reference to his blockade of the Straits of Tiran] implies a confrontation with Israel. Taking this step made it imperative that we be ready to undertake a total war with Israel.' And on 28 May, Nasser had said, 'We will not accept any possibility of co-existence with Israel.'

Without doubt, it was fighting talk; but were Nasser's words a threat to overrun Israel – justifying Eban's use of the emotive expression 'final solution' – or was it flamboyant rhetoric preparing his people for a battle he believed Israel was planning? Eban's own prime minister, Levi Eshkol, appeared to think so. He said in a newspaper interview in October 1967, 'The Egyptian layout in the Sinai and the general military build-up there testified to a military defensive Egyptian set-up south of Israel.'¹⁶

Eban's remarks also contrast with those of another military expert, Ezer Weizman, chief of the operations staff under Rabin. In 1972 Weizman told an Israeli newspaper there was 'no threat of destruction'. He said the attack on Egypt, Jordan, and Syria was so that Israel 'could exist according to the scale, spirit and quality she now embodies.'¹⁷ He was backed a few weeks later by Mordechai Bentov, who had been a member of the coalition cabinet during the war, who said: 'All this story about the danger of

extermination has been a complete invention and has been blown up *a posteriori* to justify the annexation of new Arab territories.¹⁸

They were responding to similar comments by Major General Mattiyahu 'Matti' Peled, head of supply command on the General Staff, who had stated: 'To claim that the Egyptian forces concentrated on our borders were capable of threatening Israel's existence not only insults the intelligence of anyone capable of analysing this kind of situation, but is an insult to Zahal [the Israeli Army].'

He went further in a broadcast on US television during a tour of North America in 1989. He reiterated that Israel was not in any military danger of being overrun, that this was well known by the Israeli military beforehand and added: 'The conquest of the West Bank and the Golan Heights was never decided by the Israeli Government. This was a private venture of the then-Defence Minister Moshe Dayan and a few generals who were very much interested in this adventure, and the Israeli Government was really faced with a *fait accompli*.'¹⁹

On the tour he pointed out that in 1982 Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who was a Cabinet member during the war, had said: 'In June 1967 we... had a choice. The Egyptian Army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him.' However, the US press seemed uninterested in the issue. In 1989 the Palestinian problem, exacerbated by the fallout of the Six-Day War and the first Intifada of 1987,²⁰ was not a headline issue.

Matti Peled's personal recollections that Dayan and a few generals had, in essence, usurped the authority of the elected Government are an eye-opener. Israel was not merely confident of victory: it was certain. A factor in this calculation may be that Dayan had a weapon that would make it very difficult for the rest of the Arab world to retaliate if things went wrong, then or now. Since the late 1950s, his country had been developing a secret nuclear weapons production facility, initially under the guise of an agricultural chemicals plant, and 1967 was the year it first bore fruit.

The hugely ambitious scheme, calling on the services of many of Israel's best scientific brains, was the pride of Shimon Peres, currently Israel's foreign minister. He had entered the Cabinet in the government of national unity on 1 June 1967, and was a key political wheeler-dealer with Dayan and his generals. Before becoming a Knesset member he had been director of the Ministry of Defence where, with covert French help, he had masterminded construction of a reactor and plutonium separation plant near Dimona in the Negev Desert.

In his memoirs, Peres made this cryptic remark: 'My contribution during that dramatic period [of the Six-Day War] was something that I still cannot write about openly, for reasons of state security. After Dayan was appointed Defence Minister, I submitted to him a certain proposal which, in my opinion then – and in my opinion today, nearly three decades later – would have deterred the Arabs and prevented the war. My proposal, which, by the way, Yigael Yadin²¹ knew about and supported, was considered – and rejected.'²²

In 1966 Dimona had begun producing plutonium, the crucial component of the atom bomb, and it is now believed by analysts that two crude bombs had been constructed by June 1967.²³ Was Israel prepared to use them, and did the knowledge that it now possessed the ultimate deterrent add to Israel's confidence that this was the right time to make a move? The role of the Dimona plant, only 50 miles from the frontiers of Egypt, was unquestionably of significance in that period, if only because it would have been a target if Nasser had launched an invasion.²⁴

A week before war broke out Munya Mardor, Director-General of Rafael, the Armaments Development Authority which manufactured the devices, wrote in his diary: 'I went to the assembly hall... The teams were assembling and testing the weapon system, the development and production of which was completed prior to the war. The time was after midnight. Engineers and technicians, mostly young, were concentrating on their actions... It was evident that the people of the project were under tension – the utmost tension – physical and spiritual alike.' As

these bombs were completed, Israel successfully tested a two-stage Jericho rocket, designed to carry a nuclear warhead.

Israel has never fully admitted to having nuclear weapons, let alone talked about its strategy for ever using them, but it seems Peres suggested to his Government that a bomb should be detonated, perhaps in an unpopulated area, to demonstrate Israel's invincibility. It is not surprising that Dayan rejected the idea but, as argued above, he may have had no wish to 'prevent the war'. Without doubt, he did little to allay public panic in the weeks before 5 June, when many Israelis were hoarding food, digging bomb shelters and being issued with gas masks. On the contrary he wanted war, albeit a conventional one.

Eitan Haber, a leading Israeli writer who composed the eulogy for Yitzhak Rabin's funeral, now regards the military's warnings of imminent invasion as 'a huge and successful deception aimed at gaining world support for the subsequent assault.'²⁵ In that respect, Eban played a final part in proclaiming that the war was all Nasser's fault.

Leading up to the conflict, the Eshkol Cabinet was in crisis. The Prime Minister was being bombarded with demands to sanction war, and Ezer Weizman was in the vanguard. He said Nasser had placed a noose around Israel's neck, and his colleagues at military HQ were anxious and angry. 'There were disagreements in the general staff about how long to "give" the Government to try out all the possibilities of a political settlement for the crisis,' he wrote. 'Not that anyone thought of acting in defiance of the government should it remain hesitant and continue to pin its hopes on a political solution, but there would be a recommendation, something like: "Keep trying for a political solution for such-and-such a time longer. At the end of this period the armed forces will be ready to act. Beyond that time will be against us, for the element of surprise, which is the basis of our plan, may disappear, or at least dwindle, and Egyptian military deployment will make things hard for us."²⁶

Weizman took an enormous risk and barged into Eshkol's

office, demanding that a decision be taken. 'Most of us felt that we were ready to strike,' he said, 'and most of us felt that if we dilly-dallied too long, the surprise will be more difficult – and that we were wrong not to strike. Perhaps, then I was much younger than I am now. But I think I would have done the same at the ripe age of close to 78. I went to see him, I walked into his office. I was quite heated up, my throat was all fully open, and I told him: "You have the best army since Biblical days. If you give the orders, history will carry you in its arms; if you don't, you'll fail a historical moment, or you'll fail people." He was quite shocked, but I got away with it.'²⁷

Eshkol's reputation for prevaricating was probably unfounded, but one significant failure was a live address he had given on 28 May. He was dog-tired, having had little sleep since his foreign minister, Abba Eban, returned the day before from a visit to the US and Europe. Following close behind him was a cable from Lyndon Johnson who had been contacted on the hot-line with a dire warning from Alexei Kosygin, the Soviet premier. He had told the President that if Israel started military action, 'the Soviet Union will extend help to the attacked party.'

Johnson said the US had an interest in Israel's safety and added: 'As your friend, I repeat even more strongly what I said yesterday to Mr Eban. It is essential that Israel **JUST MUST** not take any pre-emptive military action and thereby make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities.' The words in capitals had been added by Johnson.

Eban drove straight from the airport to join a Cabinet meeting at 10 pm which had already been going for two hours and finished at 5 am the next morning. He was arguing for a postponement of military action, opposed by a large group, including Rabin, which favoured an immediate invasion of the Sinai. Eban wrote later that the issue was one of timing, not of whether the invasion would be sanctioned. He believed Johnson would back war provided Israel was 'seen' to have given peace a chance. No formal vote was taken but the Cabinet was split, nine to nine. Eshkol ordered another meeting for 3 pm.

It was that same afternoon that Nasser gave his mammoth press conference, and transcripts were relayed into the reconvened Cabinet meeting, which lasted another five hours. Some froze with alarm when the Egyptian leader said, 'The existence of Israel in itself is an aggression,' but others believed he was bluffing and had no immediate aggressive plans. Finally, sick with tiredness, Eshkol secured a vote for a two-week delay in any decision. He now faced a live radio broadcast in just 30 minutes to announce to a nation agog with anticipation what had been agreed.

When he sat down, Eshkol had barely had time to run through the final draft of the script which had been written by his aides, and as he began to read he had a stammer. At one point he was about to announce the Cabinet had 'agreed action for the removal of troops in the Sinai' when he realised it gave the wrong message. He paused for a long time. He was heard to whisper, 'What's this?' He continued, replacing 'removal' with the word 'movement', but the impression he gave to millions crouching over their radio sets was one of bumbling indecision.

Eshkol never recovered his authority before being forced, on 1 June, to create a government of national unity. The military and political pressure from those wanting to fight had become too much, and people who had hitherto been some of Eshkol's bitterest political rivals, such as Dayan (the new defence minister), Menachem Begin, Peres and others, were brought into what effectively became a war cabinet. The decision to delay military action for two weeks was overturned and peace moves being brokered by the State Department became a problem rather than a solution.

It was learned that Nasser had agreed that Johnson's vice-president, Hubert Humphrey, could make a visit to Cairo. More immediately, he had agreed to send his vice-president, Zacharia Mohieddin, to Washington; he was due to leave on 5 June and see Johnson on 7 June. With the possibility that war might be averted, the Israeli Cabinet decided that 5 June would be the date to launch its invasion of Egypt.

4. The Big Lie

‘We must avoid arousing the sentiment, “Methinks the lady doth protest too much”... There is a certain type of mind which, if we protest our innocence too much, will assume that we are hiding something.’
British Foreign Office official

Time zone differences of six hours meant that when Israeli planes were raining destruction on the USS *Liberty*, it was breakfast-time in Washington DC. That sunny Thursday morning there was much talk in the media of the Beatles’ latest concept album, *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and its psychedelic imagery. The Wimbledon tennis finals were reaching a conclusion in London, with Australian John Newcombe heading for victory, while in the White House – according to the official log – President Johnson had just woken up in the Mansion, his suite of rooms above the Oval Office. At 7.45 am his favourite breakfast arrived: ‘creamed chipped beef and hot tea’, and he apparently stayed in his rooms for several hours receiving phone calls.

The previous morning he had been up at 6.15 am and had made a call to the Situation Room at 6.29 am for a briefing on the Middle East conflict. But on 8 June, as flash messages were arriving from the Sixth Fleet and from the NSG station in Morocco that a US ship with a crew of nearly 300 was being bombed, there were apparently no calls between Johnson and the Situation Room in either direction – according, that is, to the log.

The President made several calls from his bedroom to various senators, no doubt on domestic political matters, and twice to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, at 8.13 am and 8.38 am, but apparently there was no news of the *Liberty*, first attacked at around 8 am Washington time. At 9.48 am a hot-line message

arrived from the Soviet premier, Alexei Kosygin, calling for more action from the US in support of a ceasefire. Officially it was not until 9.49 am, when the attack was over, that Walt Rostow, Johnson's special adviser, phoned him about the attack and followed it up with a quick memo: 'We have a flash report from the Joint Reconnaissance Center indicating the US Elint (electronics intelligence) ship, the *LIBERTY*, has been torpedoed in the Mediterranean... Reconnaissance aircraft are out from the 6th Fleet. We have no knowledge of the submarine or surface vessel which committed this act.'

Rostow makes no mention of the air attack that began 30 minutes before the torpedoes were launched, prompting the thought that maybe this was not the initial message about the ship he passed up to the Mansion that morning. A record at the Pentagon showed it learned of the attack at 9 am,¹ but that clashes with a number of official reports released over the years. The deck log of the USS *America* records that the *Liberty* sent a flash message that it was under attack to the CNO (Chief Naval Officer) by 'HI COM' at 8.32. The signal had been picked up by the aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga*.

A CIA report, later declassified, said the Sixth Fleet Commander had notified Washington at 8.30 am that the *Liberty* had been hit by a torpedo. A National Security Agency Report said the *Saratoga* relayed a message to its London naval headquarters that Rockstar (*Liberty's* call-sign) was requesting immediate assistance, and it added: 'I AM UNDER ATTACK MY POSIT 31 23N 33 25E. I HAVE BEEN HIT.' London headquarters recorded that *Saratoga* relayed a signal from the *Liberty* at 8.40 am saying 'UNIDENTIFIED GUN BOATS APPROACHING... NOW.' Another was sent on at 8.45 am: 'UNDER ATTACK AND HIT BADLY' and 'HIT BY TORPEDO STARBOARD SIDE LISTING BADLY NEED ASSISTANCE.'

A National Security Agency Report said the US Navy's London HQ phoned the Pentagon at 9.11 am to advise them of the attack on the ship. But a CIA report said that at 8.50 am the *Saratoga* had signalled it had launched 'ready aircraft'. These largely

contradictory records also show that Admiral Martin, the Sixth Fleet commander, reported back to base that by 9.45 am Washington time (3.45 pm *Liberty* time) some of his aircraft were 'on the scene'.² However, as other evidence shows, the reconnaissance planes from the Sixth Fleet had already been recalled and the embattled *Liberty* crew saw no US aircraft that entire afternoon.

Given the gravity of the events in the Mediterranean, it would be astonishing if the Situation Room, a few yards from the Oval Office, was not following this spate of messages moment by moment and keeping McNamara and Johnson informed of a crisis. However, there is good reason to believe that the records released of the message traffic are not simply contradictory but deliberately misleading.

Glaringly, they clash with the evidence of the *Saratoga's* captain, Joe Tully, that McNamara ordered the recall of the aircraft sent to rescue the *Liberty* at 8.24 am Washington time, a few minutes after Johnson had put in a call to the Defense Secretary from his bedroom. Tully had kept personal copies of the *Saratoga's* log and other records and confirmed that at that time, 12 fighter-bombers and four tanker aircraft took off from his flight deck bound for the position radioed to them by the *Liberty*. A minute later Admiral Lawrence Geis, who commanded the Sixth Fleet carriers, radioed Tully and ordered the planes – which were still in view – to return.

Tully was told he could launch again in 90 minutes, at 9.50 am Washington time, only to have the aircraft recalled once more. According to the White House records Johnson was just being informed of the attack at this point. Until his death, Tully was furious that Washington prevented him rescuing the *Liberty* but never discovered the reason for the recall.

Military policy in the US is that any flash message reporting an attack on a US naval vessel must be passed to the Commander-in-Chief – the President – immediately, even if he is asleep. The White House version of events is that Lyndon Johnson, who was wide awake, was not passed any messages. The man who had demanded to be told of bad news at any hour is therefore said to

have learned of one of his country's worst military tragedies more than 90 minutes after the first flash messages had been sent to Washington from the Mediterranean.

The discrepancies continued. Once Johnson officially knew that a US ship had been torpedoed by unknown forces, the cataclysmic assumption must have been that the attackers could be Egyptian or Soviet. And yet his actions thereafter, as logged by his aides, are bizarre. Did he rush off to the Situation Room and gather round him his military commanders? No. He telephoned McNamara at 10 am, and then, at 10.10 am, he rang his secretary about his plans for re-election in 1968. His logged instruction was: 'Get me in 20 minutes how many States I have been in since I became President, broken down by years.' The answer was back in 15 minutes.

In the next hour he made several other phone calls, including some to Walt Rostow, and together they framed a message for transmission through the diplomatic circuit to Moscow stating – falsely – that planes were heading for the *Liberty*. It read: 'You should know that I have just received a report that a US ship off the Egyptian coast has been torpedoed. I have ordered aircraft from carriers in the Mediterranean and other US ships to proceed immediately to the scene to protect the ship, investigate the circumstances of the attack and rescue survivors.'

There was no mention of who was to blame, but by 11 am a hotline message direct to Kosygin had been agreed, with the same inaccuracy as before but this time mentioning Israel. It read: 'We have just learned that USS *Liberty*, an auxiliary ship, has apparently been torpedoed by Israeli forces in error off Port Said. We have instructed our carrier *Saratoga*, now in the Mediterranean, to dispatch aircraft to the scene to investigate. We wish you to know that investigation is the sole purpose of this flight of aircraft, and hope that you will take appropriate steps to see that proper parties are informed.'³

In fact, a flash message to Washington reporting Israel's admission of responsibility from Commander Ernest Castle, the US naval attaché in Tel Aviv, had arrived at 10 am, followed at 10.45

am with one reporting: 'Israelis erroneously attacked *Liberty*.' The log shows the President finally went to the Oval Office at 11.04 am, and two minutes later to the Situation Room. There he met McNamara, Rusk, Rostow and several other senior administration officials, and finally the attack was discussed. It was almost three hours since the first distress message had been received.

With Israel known to be the culprit and the Soviet Union informed of this through two routes, it should have been a case of sorting out the repercussions of the 'erroneous' destruction of a valuable naval vessel. However, Dean Rusk told a different story about this meeting in a letter to *Liberty* survivor and chronicler Jim Ennes in 1981. He wrote: 'I am puzzled by a number of questions you posed about events during the actual attack itself. Did you fellows on board know you were being attacked by elements of the Israeli armed forces? If so, was that identification of the attackers flashed back to the Sixth Fleet and Washington? I raised this question because my appointment books (now at the LBJ library in Austin) show that I attended a meeting at the White House Situation Room with the President, Robert McNamara and others, at 10.40 am Washington time. As I check the time zones, that was substantially after the attack on *Liberty* was all over.

'I remember very clearly that when we sat down in the White House Situation Room at 10.40 am we did not know the source of the attack. The purpose of the meeting was to consider appropriate action if the attack had come from an Egyptian or Russian source. It was during this meeting itself that we received the message from the Israeli Government to which you referred.

'As for the report that Secretary McNamara personally recalled the aircraft from *Saratoga* within minutes after their launching, [this] seems highly improbable. However, he almost certainly would not have issued such an order without at least a telephone call to President Johnson.'

Rusk twice referred to the time being 10.40 am, not 11.06 am as the White House log stated. His ignorance of when flash messages about the attack arrived in Washington, and his need to ask Ennes about it, is surprising given the powerful position he once

held. That this meeting began discussing a possible attack from America's feared Cold War enemy is utterly at odds with events as listed in the White House log. And Rusk was not alone in this recollection. Clark Clifford, Counsel to the President, a trusted friend and adviser of LBJ, also remembered that the meeting began by discussing the implication of a Soviet attack when information came that it was Israeli.

Clifford later wrote: 'We were baffled. From the beginning there was scepticism and disbelief about the Israeli version of events. We had enormous respect for Israeli intelligence and it was difficult to believe the *Liberty* had been attacked by mistake. Every conceivable theory was advanced that morning. It became clear that from the sketchy information available we could not figure out what happened.'

The question of who knew what that morning is further clouded by press aide George Christian, who wrote to Ennes that he found the President 'upset' at 9.45 am: 'His first thought was that the Russians had done it; [he] said something like, "If they did it, we're in a war." When he found out later in the morning it was the Israelis, he was visibly relieved; "Thank God it wasn't the Russians."'4

But as previously noted, Admiral Geis had apparently been ordered to recall the second flight of rescue aircraft by McNamara or Johnson at around 9.50 am.⁵ There is also evidence from an NSG duty officer, Tony Hart, working feverishly to cope with a deluge of traffic in Morocco flowing to Washington from the Sixth Fleet and the *Liberty*, who is quite certain Washington was informed that Israel was responsible in a signal from the *Liberty* within three or four minutes of the first distress message being identified (discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight).

The dark suspicion arises of a pre-arranged plot and falsification of White House records, and that Johnson knew at breakfast-time it was not the Russians who attacked the *Liberty* but the Israelis. It fits with the remarkable possibility that the President wanted a pretext for launching a US strike against Soviet ally Nasser, a plan that was thwarted when messages

arrived at the White House, which could not be ignored, reporting that Israel had revealed its role.

If Johnson was involved in such a Machiavellian conspiracy, it could explain a note from the White House log the previous evening when, at 8.42 pm, Walt Rostow phoned the President from home. It read: 'Mr Rostow gave the President a report which he had obtained from Eugene Rostow⁶ and through CIA sources on the status of one of the rulers of the Middle East. Also discussed the implications this would have on the Americans in that country and the possible necessity of evacuating them.' The matter must have been important because Rostow interrupted Johnson's evening again at 9.04 pm talking about the same matter – there can be little doubt they were discussing the 'status' of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The leader of the Arab world's position was precarious – but, to Johnson's dismay, he was still there.

The United States Embassy in Cairo had reported a confusing picture the day before (Tuesday, 6 June) with anti-American feeling mounting. David Nes, chargé d'affaires, had managed to evacuate wives and children but many US diplomats and businessmen remained and he was concerned for their safety. The Egyptian authorities were providing security but there was no accounting for what an unruly crowd might do. The city was awash with rumours, including some that US planes had been seen in dogfights with Egyptian ones.

It was clear to Nes from listening to the BBC and reports flowing in from Egyptian contacts that Nasser had been humiliated militarily, with Israeli troops bulldozing aside opposition as they headed west across the Sinai. Official reports from Nasser's generals admitted troops had abandoned the Red Sea port of Sharm el Sheikh and Egyptian tanks had moved to 'secondary positions' in the Sinai. Yet, verging on hysteria, the Egyptian press was gripped by wishful thinking. Stories implied that Israel was being driven back. It was a false picture, of course, but the Egyptian Government was suppressing most of the bad news and Moshe Dayan had deliberately ordered a news blackout about Israeli successes in the early

part of the conflict to confuse the enemy.⁷ Another factor was a black propaganda operation, masterminded by Israeli intelligence with covert US help, to send out fake messages using native Egyptian Arabic speakers (discussed in Chapter Nine). They had posed as field commanders and, using Egyptian military frequencies, had reported Israeli positions were being overrun.

By Day Three, the main objective seemed to be finding someone to blame. The talking point, splashed across most front pages in Cairo, was that Israel was not acting alone. Following up the earlier rumours, Nasser's spokesmen alleged that they had evidence that US and British planes had taken part in the air assault. The headline of *Al Akhbar* trumpeted: 'OUR FORCES IN STRENGTH AND HEROISM GIVE CHASE TO AMERICAN AND BRITISH FIGHTERS.'

Seeing this reported on the wires, State Department officials were inclined to sneer at this preposterous claim but they agreed, on advice from Nes and ambassadors in other Arab capitals, that the stories must be rebutted. London had been stung by reports that countries in other parts of the world were beginning to believe Nasser's allegations. Questions were being tabled in Parliament about the role of British aircraft carriers in the eastern Mediterranean. British Foreign Office officials had even given the smear a name – 'The Big Lie' – and Secretary of State for Defence Denis Healey was preparing to order his navy and air force to make public some operational log books.

The Big Lie should have been less of a problem on Capitol Hill where sentiment was almost entirely on Israel's side, except that the Soviet premier, Alexei Kosygin, had been making it clear on the hot-line that he blamed the US for not leaning heavily on Israel to comply with the ceasefire proposals. President Johnson had been obliged to respond to this via the hot-line on Tuesday, 6 June. He wrote: 'I was puzzled, Mr Chairman, by what has been said by the Soviet press and radio since our exchange of messages yesterday morning. It does not help to charge the United States as a participant in aggression, especially when our only role has been to press for restraint at every step of the way.'

'I know you are not responsible for Cairo, but you should know that we were astounded that Cairo, just a few hours ago, alleged that US carrier aircraft had participated in attacks on Egypt. This wholly false and obviously invented charge has led to attacks on our representatives in various Arab localities, in violation of the most elemental rights of legation. Since you know where our carriers are, I hope you can put Cairo right on this matter and help us eliminate that kind of needless inflammation.'

To make things worse, there had been a diplomatic glitch three days earlier which had made a hot topic of the United States' policy position. That Monday, at a State Department briefing by Press Secretary Robert J. McCloskey, reporters had raised questions about violent anti-US demonstrations in a number of Arab capitals. One pressman had said: 'These demonstrations obviously are linking the US with Israel. The US position in the UN had been stated as being neutral. Would you reaffirm that?'

'Indeed I would. I would be more than happy to,' McCloskey had responded, and he then repeated a remark made at a meeting earlier in the day in the State Department Operations Room. 'We have tried to steer an even-handed course through this. Our position is neutral in thought, word and deed.'⁸ It seemed a straightforward thing to say, and it was indeed an accurate rendition of official US foreign policy. But McCloskey had not taken account of the reaction this would ignite. There was fury in Congress as speaker after speaker affirmed support for Israel.

Eventually McCloskey's boss, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, had been forced to issue a statement: 'The fact is that we're not a belligerent... that does not in any way imply a lack of deep concern about the situation. Any notion that "neutral" means disinterest is just very far beside the point.' Later, when the clamour continued, the White House, showing how much it was aware of the political damage the issue was causing, had added that 'neutrality does not mean indifference'.

The spat had eventually died down, but as the week wore on it had left the impression among more than just the Arab world that the United States was not unhappy with the way events were

unfolding. On the morning of Day Four, therefore, the State Department set about vigorously repudiating the allegations of US military involvement with Israel. In Cairo, the effort was futile. Not only did Nasser believe he had evidence to prove claims of American intervention; he believed that for at least two years the US had been plotting to bring him down, cutting vital food aid to the point where the US Embassy in Cairo was baffled at the way Washington seemed to be pushing the Egyptian leader into Moscow's arms, and provoking his antagonism.

Chargé d'affaires Nes remembered: 'I set forth fairly specifically the various items that the Egyptians were becoming worried about, that we were not taking any action [about food aid] over a long period of time... I felt, and the Embassy felt, that we were in effect driving Nasser into a corner, where he thought rightly or wrongly that we were out to create a situation that would lead to his downfall, and we so alerted Washington. He started reacting in a very irrational way.'⁹

Workers arriving at Foggy Bottom, the State Department's drab headquarters one block from the Lincoln Memorial, on Day Four of the war were keyed up by events at a variety of international hotspots. Half a million US troops were fighting in Vietnam, the Nigerian Government was preparing to invade the breakaway oil region of Biafra and officials in the Near East section were focused on the war that had taken the whole world by surprise.

Staff were trying to assess the implications of Israel's stunning military successes over the previous three days, during which the country had conquered three times more territory than it had occupied the previous week. Cable traffic had poured in overnight from embassies in Amman, Cairo, Tel Aviv and other neighbouring states, and several ambassadors in Arab capitals were pressing for the US to jolt the parties into agreeing a ceasefire.

There was mounting frustration that Rusk and his inner circle were not responding to this pressure with much enthusiasm. The UN had begun discussing a ceasefire on Day One and by the end of Day Two (Tuesday) a resolution had been drawn up. However,

Arthur Goldberg, the US Ambassador to the UN and another ranch guest of LBJ, stubbornly resisted any proposal that included the by now self-evident point that Israel was the instigator of the war. More puzzling, he stood squarely against Israeli forces being required to withdraw to pre-war frontiers.

In 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower had forced Israel to pull its army out of the Sinai after the Suez invasion by threatening economic sanctions.¹⁰ United States policy had consistently held that the territorial integrity of all states in the region should be respected, and Johnson had reaffirmed this principle before war broke out. Goldberg's departure from this principle hampered those seeking a solution to the diplomatic impasse, and raised allegations that he was using delaying tactics to give Israel time to consolidate its territorial gains.

The UN envoy was an avowed Zionist who saw no conflict of interest in the close links he maintained with the Israeli Government.¹¹ There is little doubt he had the backing of Johnson, who was his close friend, for this stonewalling exercise, and the significance of his strategy was not ignored in Cairo. Mohammed Heikal, a historian of the war and close friend of Nasser, wrote: 'Goldberg first said that the United States did not know who had started the fighting, but then went on to accept the Israelis' story that Egypt had attacked first. Nasser was disgusted with Johnson. He felt that he had been betrayed by Johnson's honeyed words and that while Johnson had been sending him messages pleading for peace, the Americans had been preparing to involve themselves in the Israeli aggression.'

Heikal said this was why he accused Johnson of collusion, broke off diplomatic relations with the United States and ordered all Americans out of Egypt: 'Several other Arab states did the same and soon Johnson, already angered by the charge of collusion, had to watch the humiliating spectacle of 24,000 American men, women and children being thrown out of the Middle East. Johnson never forgot and never forgave.'

Dean Rusk's attitude to the President's Middle East bias was never clear but the impression is that he was being a loyal, though

reluctant, servant. The night before the UN ceasefire moves, the Secretary of State had shown concern that continued fighting in Jordan was creating a huge refugee problem and threatening the stability of King Hussein, and he had fired off instructions to Tel Aviv to lean on Eshkol's government to limit its military advance towards Amman. At the same time, however, neither the President nor Rusk appeared fazed that Israel was also rampaging across the Sinai towards the heart of Egypt.

It was America's Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, that had been taking the initiative. Since Day One, Moscow had been alarmed at the pace of Israeli advances and was humiliated by the failure of Soviet armour and aircraft supplied to Egypt. The Politburo faced up to the tough reality that both Egypt and Jordan had few if any bargaining chips left, and were in danger of being conquered completely. It leaned heavily on Nasser and King Hussein to agree to a ceasefire without making Israeli territorial withdrawal an immutable condition, as it had done earlier in the week.

At 5 pm Washington time on Wednesday, 7 June, Jordan and Israel had finally agreed to comply with these terms. The West Bank was now overrun, depriving Jordan of more than a third of its best agricultural land. Its tourist jewel, the Holy City of Jerusalem, which King Hussein had pledged to protect for all of Islam, was lost to the enemy. The King's Army had fought bravely but had had no success repelling the invading Israeli battalions, even failing to prevent them from taking three bridges that crossed the River Jordan.

By Thursday morning, however, Cairo was still dithering about suing for peace. The proposed UN ceasefire terms did not oblige Israel to withdraw from the Sinai. Nasser's plan of only a few days earlier to send his vice-president to the US for peace talks had been abandoned. The Egyptian leader despised Johnson in any case,¹² but to add to his ire, Dean Rusk had the previous day evaded press questions about who had invaded whom. With stories circulating of US planes taking part in attacks on his country, there could now be no

possibility of the US acting as intermediary in the peace process.

The most immediate victim of this was Dick Nolte, the man Johnson had sent as Ambassador. He had arrived in Cairo just before war broke but had not even presented his credentials when, on Tuesday 6 June, diplomatic relations were broken off and he was ordered to make plans to leave the country. He was a noted academic and Middle East expert but he was not a career diplomat and Nasser viewed him an amateur, and yet another insult.¹³

Mahmoud Riad, Egyptian Foreign Minister, recalled in his memoirs how he expressed his government's feelings about the US's dissembling. He told Nolte the day he was sacked: 'You say you are against aggression, but when you have aggression of Israel against Egypt you do nothing. You say you don't know who is the aggressor. It is perfectly clear who is the aggressor and there are 90 or at least 80 ambassadors in Cairo who know this to be true. You are not neutral at all. If Egypt had been the aggressor, the Sixth Fleet would now be on the shore of Egypt.'

Riad was particularly annoyed at Nolte's arrival because the ambassadorship had been vacant since March, when Lucius 'Luke' Battle had been sent back to work in the State Department. Courteous and cultured, Battle had developed a good relationship with him, with Nasser and with Anwar Sadat, speaker of the National Assembly; his wife had even been teaching Sadat's wife English. His departure had left Egypt adrift; a serious mistake, it would seem in hindsight to many observers, but was it deliberate? The Egyptians believed he had been removed and replaced by someone of lesser stature in anticipation of the forthcoming conflict. They were convinced the US had been planning the war in collaboration with Israel for many months.

It was a wretched two weeks for Nolte. Before the would-be ambassador had left for Egypt, his own President had not even bothered to meet him and he had only spent 15 minutes with Rusk. Nevertheless, while collecting together his belongings in the Cairo Embassy, Nolte sent one final cable to the State Department: 'Survival of Nasser regime at home is in question as

well as the allegiance of other Arab states,' he said. 'Necessary to recognize very real passion mobilized in whole area by Nasser on Palestine issue. Present defeat would only make that "anger of inferiority" all the more ready a few years hence for the next hero... Maybe now, on basis of new security, Israel can be made to see wisdom of settlement along less one-sided lines. Impartial and constructive US role here could go far toward reversing universal loss of respect for and influence of US in whole Arab world.'

Nolte's remarks were apposite, but the 'anger of inferiority' threat had little impact in terms of galvanising Rusk, adding to the sense of frustration and disillusionment in the corridors at Foggy Bottom that Thursday. As the morning wore on no one, except perhaps Rusk himself, apparently had an inkling that the USS *Liberty* had been attacked. It was the mess in Cairo that was taking up their energies, and the lack of an effective diplomatic presence.

The man in the hot seat was Luke Battle, now Rusk's Assistant Secretary for Near East and South Asian Affairs. In consultation with the Defense Department, Battle was arranging plans for a briefing to journalists travelling with the Sixth Fleet showing that US planes had gone nowhere near the war zone, as Cairo alleged. Cables were prepared for all the embassies in the region instructing ambassadors to stress vigorously that the US was acting only through diplomatic channels.

Suddenly, Battle's assistant rushed into his office with news that two senior people from the Israeli Embassy had arrived wanting to see him urgently. Battle pushed aside his paperwork; the Israeli Ambassador and his deputy were ushered in. They brought almost unbelievable news of an attack by Israel on an American naval vessel. All the other problems were swept aside.

Battle remembered the meeting as one of the most momentous of his career and, given its brevity, the most dramatic. 'I was in the State Department and Abe Harman, the Ambassador, and Ephraim 'Eppie' Evron, the Deputy Chief of Mission, came to my office with a note saying the ship [the *Liberty*] had been hit. The

conversation lasted all of about three minutes. They were just unbelievably nervous.'

Evron said Israel had been responsible but it was an accident, a mistake. 'He was horrified this had happened and it was not intended. I read the note and we called the President and told the Secretary... We got the word to them very quickly. I was not responsible for any action with respect to it, except for being the first to get the word. My immediate reaction was it could not have been an accident.'¹⁴

The meeting must have been late morning and Battle cannot recollect hearing anything about the attack before that. To this day, he is certain Israel's actions were intended, knowing the ship was American, and cannot explain the pusillanimity of his government. He said his superiors, including the White House, seemed to be equally doubtful in private about the truthfulness of Israel's explanation and their motive. He added: 'Exactly why they wanted to [attack], I'm not sure. They may have felt that with the *Liberty* we were listening in to some conversations and other things that were going on that they didn't want us to know about. They had been engaged in some pretty outlandish stuff in the course of the war and I didn't think they wanted us to know. I think that was possible, but I can't tell you why they did it.'

Throughout his remaining career Battle has been perturbed by events in Washington surrounding the *Liberty* affair. As head of the Near East Department, he should have had access to any classified information relevant to his region. He said: 'I can't tell you what the military or CIA or anybody else did. In theory I ought to be able to, being the head of what was called a senior interdepartmental group, and I was the chairman of the interagency meeting.'

He added: 'The attitude or the policy was to make it go away as soon as possible, to make as little of it and do as little blaming as you could. Unfortunately I had to make some speeches on the subject from time to time but I was not involved in the examination, the reconsideration of the whole merits of this thing. It went on and on and on. There were other committees and groups that

were assigned the job; thank God, I was not given it. The Defense Department was basically responsible. And CIA.'

With Luke Battle out of the loop, the White House embraced the damage limitation exercise instituted by Israel. Its apology was to be the official end of the affair as far as the public was concerned, and a press statement of masterful blandness was drafted for LBJ to approve. He wanted no elaboration on the following four paragraphs issued by White House spokesman Phil Goulding:

'A US Navy technical research ship, the USS LIBERTY (AGTR-5) was attacked about 9 am (EDT) today approximately 15 miles north of the Sinai Peninsula in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

'The LIBERTY departed Rota, Spain, 2 June and arrived at her position this morning to assure communications between US Government posts in the Middle East and to assist in relaying information concerning the evacuation of American dependants and other American citizens from the countries of the Middle East.

'The United States Government has been informed by the Israel Government that the attack was made in error by Israeli forces, and an apology has been received from Tel Aviv.

'Initial reports of casualties are four dead and 53 wounded. The LIBERTY is steaming north from the area at a speed of eight knots to meet US forces moving to her aid. It is reported she is in no danger of sinking.'¹⁵

At a briefing at lunchtime, press aide Christian informed the media that this was all the information available until further reports arrived from the scene. The statement was economical with the truth. The time of the attack was wrong. The *Liberty* had played no part in assisting in evacuating people; the death toll and number of casualties had not been updated; and there was no reference to the more than 20 crewmen who had not attended a roll-call soon after the attack. As the Pentagon had been informed that morning, they were presumed lost, entombed below decks.

Behind the scenes, Dean Rusk decided to make his feelings clear to Tel Aviv. At his disposal he had personal emissaries, as well as

private diplomatic telephone and Teletype networks, protected by encryption, with operators under oaths of secrecy. On reading the content of Harman and Evron's economically worded note passed to Battle, the Secretary of State fired off a diplomatic complaint to Israel expressing his administration's anger and demanding compensation. It was 'an act of military recklessness reflecting wanton disregard for human life,' he bluntly told Abba Eban, his counterpart in Tel Aviv.

Rusk was one of the few senior members of Johnson's team obviously to express such emotion. A week later, at a meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in Luxembourg, he vented his feelings privately to Manlio Brosio, NATO Secretary General, and others present. US NATO Ambassador Harlan Cleveland was in difficulty dealing with the inevitable reaction and cabled home seeking help: '...Secretary's comments to Brosio and several foreign ministers at Luxembourg about Israeli foreknowledge that *Liberty* was a US ship piqued a great deal of curiosity among NATO delegations. Would appreciate guidance as to how much of this curiosity I can satisfy, and when.'¹⁶ The advice that returned was to back-pedal and imply the remarks were of no consequence, but Rusk never changed his view that the 'accident' explanation was untenable.

In his memoirs, published in 1990, he wrote: 'We... lost 34 American lives when, on 8 June, the fourth day of the war, the US communications ship *Liberty* came under air and naval attack. We were meeting with President Johnson in the White House Situation Room, considering the implications had the Soviets or Egyptians attacked the ship, when we received word from Tel Aviv that Israeli forces were responsible. That didn't please us, although an Israeli attack on *Liberty* was far easier to deal with. But I was never satisfied with the Israeli explanation. The sustained attack to disable and sink *Liberty* precluded an assault by accident or some trigger-happy local commander. Through diplomatic channels we refused to accept their explanations. I didn't believe them then, and I don't believe them to this day. The attack was outrageous.'¹⁷

However, the Secretary of State chose to express no opinion on

why Israel might have been motivated to attack a United States ship with the intention of destroying it. Nor did he explain why his government apparently made so little effort to ascertain the truth, or why his own department was prone to falsifying the record. A recently declassified document headed '*Liberty Incident*' contained this example of obfuscation: 'Under-Secretary [Nicholas] Katzenbach today told Israeli Ambassador Harman about certain time inaccuracies contained in our note to the Israelis about the *Liberty* incident. He also suggested Harman think about the possibility of making some amendments in the Israeli note, which we think contains some statements they might find it hard to live with if the text some day became public. There was tentative agreement that the best procedure might be to make a few revisions in both notes and back-date them to replace the originals.'¹⁸ Even if Rusk later had a tinge of guilt about the affair, he and his advisors knew far more than they were prepared to admit.

Other senior State Department officials were candid, but only behind the scenes. George Ball, Under-Secretary of State, said privately in June 1967 that official exchanges between the two countries over 'this sordid affair' were 'unedifying' and 'an elaborate charade' designed to vigorously downplay the whole matter.¹⁹ He explained this even more explicitly on a later occasion: 'The United States complained pro-forma to Israel... which reacted by blaming the victims. [Israel made a] reluctant and graceless apology... American leaders did not have the courage to punish Israel for the blatant murder of its citizens.'

For Ball, as with Rusk, the motive for this blatant murder – the key to solving any mystery – remained unexplained. It is possible that the hot-shots at Foggy Bottom, from Rusk downwards, did not know why Israel attacked. They were highly critical and yet, minus a plausible reason, the matter had to become a closed issue. That was what the White House clearly desired.

Nicholas Katzenbach, Rusk's Under-Secretary of State, saw the State Department's influence being usurped, particularly over affairs in the Middle East. Asked about this a year later, he commented: 'There's a tendency, I think, on the part of the Jewish

community here to have some mistrust of the State Department. The State Department always seems to be more pro-Arab in their view than the White House. And I guess historically there's some justification to that. The State Department has tended to be more oriented towards foreign policy considerations, and the White House tends to be more oriented towards domestic political considerations...²⁰

Luke Battle and several others close to the action were right in their suspicions; the show was being run by McNamara and the President, and the State Department was sidelined because it was not paying enough heed to domestic politics, which in this context meant the influence the Jewish community might have on the re-election of Lyndon Johnson. Israel was beyond reproach, not because its military were not guilty of a terrible atrocity but because metaphorically Johnson had 'a great many Jewish corpuscles in his blood', and he would not risk damaging his political power base.

In the months and years that followed the Six-Day War, the US built up aid to Israel and, in conjunction with the Defense Department, sanctioned huge arms deliveries, treating Tel Aviv as a bigger friend than ever. It coincided with a transformation in Jewish influence in the US. Jonathan Goldberg, a respected American author and son of Arthur Goldberg, a close friend of Lyndon Johnson as well as his ambassador to the UN during the Six-Day War, best described this in 1996: 'In the popular mind, the New Jews of 1967 – the Zionists, the Orthodox, and the neo-conservatives – quickly came to be identified as the leadership of the American Jewish community. Their defiance was so strident, and their anger so intense, that the rest of the Jewish community respectfully stood back and let the New Jews take the lead. The minority was permitted to speak for the mass and became the dominant voice of Jewish politics.'²¹

5. CONTACT X

'[Every] man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness.'

US President John F. Kennedy, 1962

Aboard the USS *America* on the morning of 8 June, a 29-strong contingent of Western journalists was invited to a press conference conducted by Admiral Geis. Secretary of Defense McNamara had directed him to brief the press about United States operations in the eastern Mediterranean to 'refute the United Arab Republic allegations that the Sixth Fleet was actively supporting Israel.'¹ Geis approached the task with gusto, festooning the briefing room with maps showing where his aircraft had allegedly flown – none had ventured anywhere near the war zone. His message was that the United States had nothing to hide, there were no US vessels within 300 miles of the war and the Sixth Fleet was an innocent bystander. It was simply a fortuitous coincidence that the Sixth Fleet was marshalled so powerfully close to Crete and near enough to intercede if needs be. The fleet was on a training mission; nothing more.

Needless to say, Geis omitted to mention that the USS *Liberty* was a few miles from the Egyptian beaches. Equally, the promise 'we have nothing to hide' was quickly broken that afternoon when the pressmen were shepherded back into the briefing room and kept there for more than five hours to prevent them watching the USS *America's* response to the *Liberty's* Mayday message. They were finally briefed about the attack on the USS *Liberty* at around dusk, only just in time for the broadcast media to file stories for transmission around lunchtime on the US east coast.

Spokesmen for the US Navy had to move quickly and deftly to deal with a number of awkward questions. What was the function of this ship that few members of the public knew existed? Why was it so close to the Egyptian coast when promises had been made to the contrary? The questions were side-stepped.

At the Pentagon in Washington there were two schools of thought. Phil Goulding, McNamara's assistant secretary for public affairs, was for openness and told his colleagues: 'This ship collects intelligence. We should take the public affairs initiative, levelling with our people from the beginning.'² However, the US did not recognise it had such vessels. Normally the ship was described as a technical research ship that was studying electromagnetic phenomena and radio wave propagation. It would seem very odd that the *Liberty* was embarked on such a worthy expedition in the vicinity of a bloody conflict. McNamara therefore preferred obfuscation. At 7.30 pm the 29 frustrated and indignant newsmen on the USS *America* were handed this news release, without a word of embellishment or further explanation: 'A US Navy technical research ship, the USS *Liberty* (AGTR-5) was attacked about 9 am (EDT) today approximately 15 miles north of the Sinai Peninsula in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The *Liberty* departed Rota, Spain, 2 June and arrived at her position this morning to assure communications between US Government posts in the Middle East and to assist in relaying information concerning the evacuation of American dependants and other American citizens from the countries of the Middle East...'³

The press corps was even more frustrated that their stories, correctly describing the *Liberty* as a 'spy ship', were being sent via the Pentagon, causing further delay. Anger was assuaged a little when Captain McGonagle's brief report of the attack was released⁴ and it became clear the *Liberty* was heading their way. But the Captain's report, apparently dictated to Lieutenant Maurice Bennett, was not only brief; it also underplayed events, referring to just six strafing runs and 'extensive superficial topside damage' when the ship's massive aerial system had been irreparably destroyed.

The story the Navy wanted told omitted any mention of the *Liberty's* role of eavesdropping on the protagonists in the region. This evasiveness is at least understandable, given the Pentagon's sensitivity on such matters and the political importance of the Middle East. From the date of the attack to the present, many have simply taken it for granted that this was all the Pentagon, McNamara and Johnson, had to hide. The truth is, however, much more intriguing.

Had the ship's mission been solely to keep a close eye on Nasser and the progress of the Israeli invasion, it could have performed very effectively, and safely, anchored near Cyprus. Another spy ship, the USNS *Private Jose F. Valdez*, which had recently passed through the Suez Canal and was sailing west for home through the Mediterranean, had reported exceptionally good listening conditions at this location.⁵ That the *Liberty* was ordered to venture much nearer was due to the fact that Washington had assigned some people aboard even more sensitive duties. Quite apart from eavesdropping, the ship was also entangled in a covert project involving United States submarines whose presence within the war zone has never been officially admitted.

Jim Ennes discovered one aspect of this after his ship sailed from Rota, Spain: 'There was a chart that showed our track across the ocean up the Mediterranean and I noticed that not far from us was an X marked near us which wasn't identified in any way. I had no idea what that was; I asked my room-mate and long-time friend Jim O'Connor,⁶ and he just indicated it was something I didn't need to know. It told me that this was some sort of compartmented project that Jim was aware of but that wasn't generally identified. I wasn't cleared for the project, so all it was known as at the time was CONTACT X. It was some sort of other vessel that was following or at least in the same general track that we were... it certainly wasn't a surface ship or it would have been close enough that we'd have seen it.'

As the *Liberty* voyage progressed, CONTACT X seemed to be on an intercept course, though it gave the Captain no apparent cause for concern. Ennes could not discover who was following its

progress, although he had seen O'Connor carefully marking the position. The only other mark on the chart was the *Valdez*, heading for Norfolk. Then, Ennes recalled, the 'X' was erased: 'The unidentified object had been tracked for days until it merged with *Liberty's* track, when suddenly the plot was discontinued... clearly something had been charted right across the Mediterranean until it came alongside or under or over the *Liberty*. I guessed that we had rendezvoused with a submarine.' He assumed that it stayed with them as they reached their patrol area.

Almost immediately after recovering from his injuries Ennes began collecting information, believing the memory of it should be preserved, and later this formed the basis for his book *Assault On the Liberty*, published after he retired from the Navy. O'Connor was one of the first of his former shipmates whom he approached. According to Ennes, O'Connor looked stunned when asked about CONTACT X: 'I don't know how you learned about that,' he said. 'Yes, there was a submarine near us. If you ever quote me, I'll swear you're lying.' Ennes said that thereafter, until he died, he refused to say another word about the matter.⁷

The possible presence of a US submarine near the ship when the attack began was a talking-point as soon as the torpedo boats had withdrawn. Several crewmen said they had seen a periscope come out of the waves and submerge soon after. When the deliberateness of the attack became an issue, these sightings grew in importance. If it was true, there had been a witness, albeit one that rendered no assistance.⁸

Ennes pursued the matter doggedly. In his book he remembered his excitement when he heard that the commanding officer of the sub had activated a periscope camera 'that recorded *Liberty's* trauma on movie film'. He went on: 'This story first came to me from an enlisted crew member of the submarine, who blurted it out impulsively in the cafeteria at Portsmouth Naval Hospital a few weeks after the attack. The report seemed to explain the marks I had seen on the chart in the co-ordination centre, as well as reports of periscope sightings that circulated in the ship on the day of the attack. Since the attack, three persons

in positions to know have confirmed the story that a submarine operated near *Liberty*, although no credible person has confirmed the report that photographs were taken.'

Ennes's shipmate, communications technician Jeffrey Carpenter, was one of those witnesses. He said in response to a query: 'Oh, I knew there was a US submarine near us, but they hauled ass; they bailed out as soon as we got hit. I was told [that] by someone who was on it. I was also told there was a Soviet submarine somewhere around in the area.' Other naval officers, described by Ennes as being in key positions, went further. They said there were three submarines in the war zone, which spent most of the war on the bottom before leaving in a hurry.

Petty Officer Joseph 'Joe' C. Lentini was badly injured in the attack (see Chapter One) and after being evacuated to the USS *America* was flown to Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Virginia. He was soon able to move around on crutches, wearing his uniform with USS *Liberty* embroidered on his shoulder. One day a sailor spotted this and asked him if he was there. 'We were there,' the sailor said, '[on] our submarine. We saw the whole thing. We took pictures. Then we sent an officer back to the Pentagon to deliver them.' Lentini was astonished; so much so that he failed to ask the man's name or his vessel, and he never saw him again.

In November 1986 Gary Ackerman, a New York Congressman, wrote to a constituent having apparently received confirmation of this. The letter said: '...submarine photography taken during the incident indicates that the *Liberty* may have been under siege for approximately two hours. Further, it was later discovered that the Israelis had warned the US to keep all intelligence ships away from their coast during the war. In fact, after the arrival of the *Liberty*, the Israelis warned Washington to order the ship to leave the area.'

These tantalising snippets of evidence indicated US naval activity in the war zone was more prolific than has ever been admitted; but nothing more specific emerged for many years. Then in February 1997 the *Liberty* Veterans' Association was contacted through a third party by another submariner who also claimed to have been near the ship during the attack, watching

through the periscope. He said pictures had been taken through cameras coupled to the optics, as the attack continued for more than an hour. He said his boat was the USS *Amberjack*, SS522,⁹ on a reconnaissance mission in Egyptian waters. Ennes then tracked down other crewmen of the *Amberjack* who said they were so close to the *Liberty* – or ‘almost underneath’ – that they thought they were under depth charge attack, such were the deafening sounds of gunfire, missiles and the torpedo explosion.

However, Captain August Hubal, in command of the *Amberjack* in June 1967, emphatically rejected these stories.¹⁰ He said that many of his crew would not have known the precise position of his ship. He admitted it was near the Egyptian coast on a special operation but would give no further details, other than that it was not near the USS *Liberty* and ‘at least 100 miles away’. For this reason, if for no other, his boat had not filmed or photographed the attack.

It was at least an admission that the submarine was in the war area, contrary to the US’s official story.

Charles ‘Chuck’ Rowley, now sadly dead, was one of the *Liberty*’s communications technicians and a crucial witness to the Israeli bombardment. He settled in Sonoma, California, after leaving the Navy, and began to tell his story after Jim Ennes started collecting evidence for his book. As reported earlier, Chuck had been on the open bridge of the ship with Ennes when the attack started and was taking photos for the Captain with a Nikon camera when a bullet from one of the aircraft in the first strafing run smashed its telephoto lens; it saved his life. Moments before, he had photographed the ship’s flag flying in a light breeze and showed this picture to the naval Court of Inquiry. Rowley was angry that when he handed over the film he had shot, they stamped it Top Secret and confiscated it. Later a Navy captain ordered him to ‘shut his mouth and never discuss the attack again’.

Fortunately Rowley did discuss it again, with Ennes and others, and confirmed there was a submarine somewhere not far from the *Liberty*. He said he was cleared for ‘a secret submarine

project under codename Cyanide'.¹¹ His shipmates Jim O'Connor, Carpenter and Dodd had clearance, and he kept an envelope on his desk describing it. He said that just before the ship was attacked he picked up very low-frequency signals (VLF) from a submarine and these were sent back to the NSA in Washington by 'Flash' precedence without being decrypted. Rowley said that later he was told that the President, Lyndon Johnson, had been woken up because of what the message contained. 'It was a radio-type signal and it was very unusual,' Rowley remembered. 'I had about 12 years in service. I was told to be on the lookout for a different type of signal, so when I got a hold of one that I had never heard and I analysed it and sent it in to NSA, I got my butt chewed out. They said it was a British signal and I should never have reported it, and I knew damned well that it wasn't.'

Rowley told Ennes he was unsure whether this incident was part of Operation Cyanide but that 'something was happening the evening before the attack, possibly connected with Cyanide.' A message marked 'FOR COMMANDING OFFICER'S EYES ONLY' had been received for delivery to McGonagle. The message was sealed in an envelope and that was all he saw.

Rowley's story was one of the first times the term 'Operation Cyanide' had come to light and it seemed to be connected with at least one submarine, possibly more. One of the next people who added to the mystery was Lieutenant-Commander David E. Lewis, temporarily blinded in the attack and evacuated to the USS *America*. He said he had been cleared for top-secret work and towards the end of 1966, when he arrived to join the *Liberty* at its home port of Norfolk, Virginia, he and his section chief were handed secret sealed orders to do with Operation Cyanide.

Lewis said: 'When I checked aboard I got a briefing from Jim Pierce, my commanding officer, and he mentioned that there were sealed orders in his safe to be opened in case of a need for emergency communications via submarine in the event of hostilities. He told me that he and I were the only ones cleared for it, and then only in a wartime emergency. To my knowledge, that is the only thing that Captain McGonagle was not cleared for. I

assume that the orders were destroyed by the torpedo blast, along with Jim Pierce.'

Operation Cyanide seemed to be one of the keys to the puzzle of why the *Liberty* was sent into the war zone without protection, and the secrecy surrounding it suggested it was a very sensitive matter indeed. Even after 30 years, the Freedom of Information Act in the United States can produce no piece of paper that refers to it.

A search request of Government archives in the United States, which for this period are primarily held in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, produced one significant document among those filed with papers about the *Liberty*.¹² The document was 'sanitized' in December 1988 but was originally dated 10 April 1967 and headed 'SECRET - EYES ONLY'. It shows only item number one from the minutes of a group called the 303 Committee of 7 April 1967. Present were its chairman Walt Rostow, also Johnson's influential national security adviser, Ambassador Foy Kohler (Deputy Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs under Dean Rusk), Cyrus Vance (Deputy-Secretary of Defense) and Admiral Rufus Taylor (CIA deputy chief). Additionally, it states that General Ralph D. Steakley attended for this one item. A line is blanked out, followed by just two sentences: 'DOD Proposal: 1) General Ralph D. Steakley briefed the committee on a sensitive DOD project known as Frontlet 615. After a number of questions exploring alternative methods of satisfying the requirements and assessing the mission's current priority, the proposal was approved by the committee principals.' The item is encircled by pen with a handwritten note evidently designed to explain the mission's main military aim. The note says: 'Submarine within UAR waters.'

Another witness aboard the USS *Amberjack* was able to provide light on this. Wendell Switzer, now living in Modesto, California, was the senior Naval Security Group officer aboard, and was a Russian specialist. He said the *Amberjack* had indeed been in the eastern Mediterranean during the war acting as a 'spy sub' and, as Captain Hubal had indicated, the boat was positioned off

Alexandria, sometimes only three miles offshore, but emphatically not near the Sinai or the *Liberty*.

In 1997 Switzer decided to disclose this secret mission because of stories from *Liberty* crewman suggesting his submarine had been sighted during the attack. 'I am writing this,' he said 'because of a sense of obligation to 34 of my Security Group shipmates who died in the attack on the USS *Liberty*, a sense of sincere sorrow for the lack of closure that has haunted the survivors for these past 30 years and an honest sense of obligation that the history of this incredible incident be accurately written. Was there a United States Navy submarine in the area of the assault on 8 June 1967? I don't know. Was the USS *Amberjack* in the area of the attack on 8 June 1967? No, she was not.'

Switzer continued: 'I was "asked" to volunteer for this mission by "high authority".' A decision had been made, 'sometime in late 1966', to deploy a submarine with a Naval Security Group detachment on board to the eastern Mediterranean for reconnaissance purposes. Not knowing this at the time, he was abruptly ordered to report to Naples, Italy.

Up until then he had been working for NSG in the eastern Mediterranean for two years, operating both surface and airborne missions out of Rota, and had never worked on a sub before. He discovered the *Amberjack* had been specially equipped to receive and process radio transmissions, similar in function to the *Liberty*. He was excited because he found he was about to embark on the first sub-surface listening mission the NSG had conducted in the eastern Mediterranean.

According to Switzer, the plan was to patrol the southern Egyptian coast, remain submerged and intercept UHF and VHF Egyptian military radio signals. He said the mission was to be conducted in two parts, taking about six weeks each. Firstly they were to operate in the area of Alexandria and the area of the western Nile Delta. The second half of the mission would be to operate in the Sinai/Gaza areas and the eastern side of the Nile Delta. They sailed in late April or early May 1967 and he had remembered the *Amberjack's* movements because the boat's

periscope sextant became inoperable: 'We spent the entire mission – 14 May to 8 July 1967 – navigating by using the BRD-5 direction finder operated from Security Group Spaces during the first half of the mission, taking bearings [which he had to check] on navigation beacons operating from Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Israel and the UAR... On one occasion we found ourselves in the midst of a UAR Navy exercise during which a surface-to-surface gunnery round struck near our periscope, and there was the possibility that depth charges were being used, but the veracity of this remains unclear to me.

'On the morning of 5 June 1967, *Amberjack* was operating very near Alexandria Harbour when intercepts revealed that Israel had attacked. We moved our operations area further north after a few hours. We remained in the western operations area until 11 or 12 June [when] we received a Flash message which I personally decrypted. We were ordered to immediately depart the operations area and to report immediately to Suda Bay, Crete.'

What stuck in his memory was the date on the message: 8 June. 'We were informed... of the attack on *Liberty* and the loss of lives. It even included a preliminary list of the fatalities. One of the great mysteries of this whole affair in my mind was why it took three or four days to deliver a Flash message to *Amberjack*. We had been trailing the long wire antenna during all but the first few hours of the war and we had received fleet broadcasts almost uninterrupted. We immediately headed for Crete, still submerged, and arrived there two or three days later.' According to this testimony, the earliest the submarine could have berthed in Crete must have been 14 June.

Flash messages are by definition of the highest priority, and Switzer was baffled why, if one went out on 8 June and the *Amberjack* was duly found to have ignored the priority instruction to return to Suda Bay, no attempt had been made to contact the submarine.

Though he did not realise it, this experience mirrored the Pentagon's failure to withdraw the USS *Liberty* before the Israeli attack. Unlike the circumstances of the attack itself, which

Congress ignored, this signals snarl-up was fully investigated and a Congressional inquiry concluded it was caused by a catalogue of unfortunate errors, though no one individual was to blame.

A copy of the deck logbook of the USS *Amberjack* sheds no light on Switzer's story. Unusually, there are simply no pages for each day from 1 to 8 June. The page for 9 June has a single reference to the missing eight days: '1-8 June Special Operations.' The entry for 9 June also shows that at 3.15 pm it ceased special operations under orders from the Sixth Fleet task force and entered Suda Bay harbour at 4.34 pm that same day, where it tied up beside another diesel submarine, USS *Trutta*. Yet Switzer was certain his boat was still on station off Alexandria for another three days after that. He was baffled by the discrepancies: 'I don't understand them. It appears to me that... these logs were filled out *post facto*. I can't explain the dates but I am sure of my memory of the events.'

The failure to withdraw the *Amberjack* on 8 June, due to another Flash message that took three days to deliver, was not an issue tackled on Capitol Hill simply because Congress was not aware of the USS *Amberjack's* presence in the waters off Alexandria, within Egyptian territorial limits. Without that knowledge, the deck log would have raised no suspicions if it were produced in evidence. However, if anyone from the *Amberjack* had been invited to testify it would have strengthened the argument of those few on the Congressional committee who suspected the fiasco of the lost *Liberty* messages was not a series of unintended errors. As with many *Liberty* survivors, they guessed this was another part of an all-embracing cover-up instituted by the US Navy and that the ship was intended to remain in position, despite the dangers it was known to face.

The *Amberjack* was undoubtedly a piece of the jigsaw, but not an answer to the sightings of a periscope from the *Liberty's* deck. Why had some of the *Amberjack's* crew thought they were nearby and might have been the witnesses to the tragedy? Switzer said most of the lower ranks would not have been aware of their boat's exact position, the code name 'Frontlet 615' or what it

meant: 'The crew were kept in ignorance of what was going on and the only information they received was what they heard on the BBC, which was patched by our detachment to the 1MC [internal intercom]. I say this not to malign the crew, but to emphasise that considering the state of morale of the crew, the lack of information passed to them at the time and the passage of almost 40 years should certainly mitigate what they may remember as being factual.'

He added that explosions and artillery mentioned by the *Amberjack's* crew might have been the depth charges that they had heard during several UAR Navy exercises prior to the outbreak of hostilities. He said the *Amberjack* did its listening at just below the sea surface, unless there were other vessels in the vicinity, when they would drop the periscope and go silent. Throughout the Six-Day War he and his men continued to process, analyse and store away signals intercepts, and no attempt had been made to send back intelligence data because the submarine's presence would have been compromised.

'We were able to recreate orders of battle and their operations, in anti-submarine warfare, for instance,' he added. 'We didn't communicate with the US the entire trip. The advantage of having a submarine is, firstly, it is invisible and secondly, it can stay on station. If you have aircraft, they're only flying for two to eight hours, depending upon what the platform is, and a ship like the *Liberty* is obvious to anyone looking at it – well, it should have been obvious, anyway.'

Switzer is unaware even today that his mission was particularly sensitive and has always believed it was just a natural extension of the 'capabilities the Navy was developing at that time... This kind of operation was beginning to build up years before. There had been other missions out there, mainly by plane and a couple of surface missions; of course, everyone was aware that it was a tense situation.' Then he added: 'The name of the mission was Frontlet 615.' He doubted the code word meant anything: 'No – they pop off these codenames like street names. [There's] no significance to that.'

Operation Cyanide

At last someone in the theatre of the Six-Day War had come forward admitting knowledge of a secret mission called Frontlet 615, authorised by the mysterious 303 Committee. I asked him if he had ever heard of an Operation Cyanide, for which Charles Rowley had been cleared? 'I have,' Wendell Switzer said, 'and I don't know if I'd heard that before or if it's been planted in my mind from reading about this thing that's going on with the *Liberty's* crew. It's been 40 years. I must say that it does sound familiar. But I can't say what it was or if we were part of it.'

When told of Switzer's story, Lt Commander Dave Lewis, head of the NSG personnel aboard the *Liberty* and the man who carried sealed orders about Operation Cyanide, said he thought the *Amberjack's* presence in the area was highly significant. 'If this submarine was on such a mission,' he said, 'in circumstances when war was imminent and with Washington fearing the Soviet Union might get involved, the *Amberjack* might have been needed just in case it turned nuclear. Not many people realise that when an atomic bomb is detonated, radio signals in the area would be disrupted for several hours. This is caused by the electromagnetic pulse produced by the explosion. However, submarines have systems using ELF – extra-long frequencies – that [receive signals] through the sea and through the Earth. The sub could have been a vital communications link in those circumstances.'

The explosions heard one day by the *Amberjack's* crew and ascribed to the USS *Liberty* attack may have another explanation. On the night of 5 June, a submarine secretly transported a contingent of Israeli special forces into Alexandria harbour. They were trained as powerful swimmers and sabotage experts, and their precise mission has not been disclosed. They were supposed to be recovered by the submarine at a later stage in the war – but they were caught red-handed by the Egyptians.

Admiral Shlomo Erell,¹³ head of the Israeli Navy, explained why the covert operation ended disastrously. As the 1967 crisis

heightened, he could only deploy his two S-Class submarines and, in a final blow, only one, the INS *Tanin*, was functioning when war broke out. 'One submarine – one single submarine that I had¹⁴ – was sent to Alexandria. I lent it to the frogmen and they swam through the harbour. They couldn't find any warships, and they failed to rendezvous with the submarine on their way out. They hid somewhere among rocks and the breakwater because the plan was for the submarine to come in the next night to collect them, but they were unfortunately discovered by a boy who went fishing and that's how they were captured.

'These men were real heroes, I must say. It's interesting. Police surrounded them, and two of them managed to escape and were caught again at the outskirts of Alexandria. They spent seven months or more... until the exchange of prisoners.¹⁵ They were, of course, tortured.'

Erell was not aware of their capture when they failed to return, just that something had gone wrong: 'Egyptians were patrolling the harbour with motor launches and throwing grenades, small depth charges. There was an alternative place for retrieving them the following night. The submarine was detected, was attacked, she got some damage, she fired torpedoes, they missed and the engagement was broken [off]. She retreated, signalled and reported they landed the six men but failed to rendezvous, had certain damage and awaited orders. I said, "According to plan you go in the next night, through the line of patrols."'

According to Wendell Switzer and Captain Hubal, the *Amberjack* was unaware of this Israeli mission, but the entire crew of the *Amberjack* must have heard the depth charges fired in pursuit of the Israeli submarine.¹⁶ Admiral Erell said he was aware there was other underwater activity, but not by the US. 'The only offensive action taken by the Egyptians was that three submarines were sent to our coast on 8 June,' he said. 'I believe that was something automatic. They spread along the coast. We expected them; we awaited them. We had very little to oppose submarines. The PT boats detected a periscope and they fired on it with machine guns and it dived and went away.'

He was sure they were Egyptian: 'We know another one was attacked by one of our destroyers, definitely hit and probably had damage, because they asked for a dry-dock facility on arrival. We had all our PTs... there was nothing we could do about it; three submarines were detected.'

However, Switzer thought there were US subs there other than the *Amberjack*. 'I believe that it's likely,' he said. 'When we arrived in Suda [Bay] there were at least two diesel boats tied up alongside us and I've heard that there were nukes in the area as well. From the grapevine I heard that there was a Soviet boat in the area but I learned a long time ago not to put too much credibility on grapevine intelligence.'

The 303 Committee, which rubber-stamped the Frontlet 615 project, was apparently named after the room where it met in Washington. The State Department website describes it as 'the interdepartmental committee which reviewed and authorised covert operations'. It was renamed the Forty Committee later in 1967 and had previously been called Special Group; the name changed whenever its existence was uncovered.

Documents declassified by the US State Department give a glimpse of some of the dirty tricks it was asked to sanction in the mid- to late 1960s. In the 1965 Chilean congressional elections, for example, the CIA station was authorised by the 303 Committee to spend up to \$175,000. The file on this continues: 'Covert support was provided to a number of candidates selected by the Ambassador and Station. A CIA election memorandum suggested that the project did have some impact, including the elimination of a number of FRAP [leftist coalition] candidates who might otherwise have won congressional seats.'

In July 1967, the 303 Committee 'discussed a [text not declassified] proposal for covert support on a trial basis of paramilitary operations by dissident groups in Yemen with the purpose of increasing Nasser's difficulties in Yemen and South Arabia.' In this case, Dean Rusk managed to persuade Johnson to stop the project. In 1968, the committee also decided 'a large-scale covert

action program in Italy would no longer have pertinence...’ The files added: ‘The amount of covert assistance the United States is prepared to offer in light of other more pressing commitments no longer equates with the amounts needed to have other than peripheral impact on the Italian political scene.’¹⁷

Probably the 303 Committee was secretly meddling in the politics of several democracies and was prepared to finance paramilitary groups. But even more morally and politically questionable ventures have never been admitted. Retired Air Force Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty spent the last years of his military service as the Pentagon Focal Point Officer, through which CIA requests for military assistance were channelled for the Department of Defense, but later became a vocal critic of the way the Committee bypassed the normal democratic controls. He asked in 1975: ‘What is this Forty Committee, which has this power over the non-communist world? Who are its members? Do they operate within any law? Whom do they represent and whose interests do they promote?’ He went on, ‘The power of this committee is awesome. Like the Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, there is almost nothing in the world that cannot be done secretly by the might and money of the Government of the United States.’ He added: ‘The Special Group or Forty Committee has become a power unto itself. The State Department has thousands of career people who are responsible for the foreign policy of the United States to the Forty Committee’s five men. They approve items that have much greater impact on world events than the State Department. They do this secretly, without proper review, without comprehensive experience and often without anyone but a very few “spooks” knowing about it.’¹⁸

Richard Helms, Director of the CIA in 1967, was quite candid when interviewed 35 years later: ‘The 303 Committee was simply a device for examining covert operations of any kind and making a judgement on behalf of the President so he wouldn’t be nailed with the thing if it failed.’¹⁹

Frontlet 615 was therefore so sensitive it had to be deniable, and save the President from blame if it ever went wrong. This was

the type of matter the CIA could not initiate without the higher authority of the National Security Council or this delegated offshoot.²⁰ It was 'off the books' because it reeked of political or military jeopardy.

The secret to all this secrecy must lie in the identity of the mysterious 'CONTACT X'. If it was not the USS *Amberjack*, was there another submarine near the spy ship? Jim Ennes heard that the USS *Trutta* was sent to the eastern Mediterranean in this period. As Switzer said, the USS *Trutta* was already docked when his boat berthed in Suda Bay. Its logbook showed that it operated in the same area as the *Amberjack*, while another US Navy account said, probably euphemistically, that it was 'breaking routine with goodwill visits to... Mediterranean ports'. But that is not evidence that it was shadowing the *Liberty*.

The names of two other contenders emerged from contacts between *Liberty* crewmen and shipmates on other boats: the USS *Requin*, whose logbook showed it was carrying out exercises with various navies off South America at the time, and the USS *Parche*, which one retired US Navy intelligence officer said was not the 'culprit', though he added: 'I can tell you that it was deployed in the area and was equipped with an air-lock system so that Special Ops frogmen could be released underwater to install electronic taps on undersea cables. We needed to listen to everything that was going on.'²¹

The most intriguing possibility is that a much more formidable vessel, the Polaris submarine USS *Andrew Jackson*, had followed the *Liberty* across the Mediterranean and was lurking in the waters below when the attack began. Jim Ennes first heard this suggestion from a British journalist called Anthony Pearson in 1978 and, because of the doubtful provenance of his research, Ennes has never been inclined to believe it.

Anthony Pearson was a freelance who never seemed to stint himself. When he went on assignments he would stay at five-star hotels, and he rented an expensive flat in Cheyne Place, London,

but he never seemed to be earning quite enough to support this lifestyle. He had worked for the *Manchester Evening News* and in 1963 joined its sister paper the *Guardian* as a staff reporter, where he also wrote a fishing column. He left there around 1967 after running up 'vast expenses bills', according to his news editor at the time, Harold Jackson. Another colleague, Campbell Page, thought he was a good reporter and well-liked but, like all Pearson's previous colleagues, he was not aware he had an interest in the *Liberty* affair.

Pearson began investigating this in the mid-1970s and published an intriguing magazine article and book claiming a wealth of inside information about the reasons for the attack. However, he suddenly died after tackling another investigation that was critical of Israel.²² It is frustrating he is not available, because his research notes have not survived either. His findings are interspersed with careless errors but the substance is of interest, even after 27 years, because some of what he apparently discovered – dismissed as fantasy at the time – has more recently turned out to be true. One of the mysteries of the *Liberty* affair is therefore whether Pearson had an 'inside track'.

He first started investigating the *Liberty* attack for Bob Guccione, the flamboyant owner of *Penthouse* magazine, which published two long articles about it in 1976.²³ There is no mention of the *Andrew Jackson* in these pieces, but Pearson followed them up in 1978 with a book in which the role of this Polaris submarine figured prominently.²⁴ He recounted how a 28-year-old employee of the British Secret Service called Steven Vincent McKenna had briefed him about the *Liberty* affair in 1975. McKenna's original source had been another MI6 officer called 'Mr Clarkson', who in 1967 had been working under the cover of the British Council in Tel Aviv. McKenna was then assigned to finding out more about what happened to the spy ship, and it meshed in with other aspects of the Six-Day War.

The story from Mr Clarkson was third-hand, but one main element of it is interesting: that the USS *Andrew Jackson* had apparently filmed the attack. According to Pearson, the submarine had

left Rota around the same time as the USS *Liberty* had decamped on its mission to the eastern Mediterranean. The *Andrew Jackson* was on covert attachment to the United States Sixth Fleet with orders not to break radio silence except in the case of a 'Red One' alert. Pearson went on, 'The submarine commander was also ordered not to abort his mission unless directly instructed to do so by the White House. Acting jointly as a liaison with the *Andrew Jackson* and as a surface intelligence-gathering machine made *Liberty's* mission doubly dangerous, a fact of which Commander McGonagle was well aware... Although his ship had been involved in the last three days in transmitting continuous batches of war information, its primary role was still as a liaison with *Andrew Jackson*.'

Pearson wrote that a Lieutenant Commander from the *Andrew Jackson* had been put ashore at Rota about 12 June. He added that his contact, Steven McKenna, had learned that this officer 'had been dispatched to Washington in a special US Air Force transport carrying a canister of film, which was believed to relate to the attack on the *Liberty* by the Israelis.'

Jim Ennes was rightly dubious of Pearson's book because McKenna and all other key informants were either dead or unidentifiable. Ennes said: 'Pearson called me in 1978 [and]... he proceeded to write his whole book around the idea that the *Andrew Jackson* was working closely with the *Liberty* and our mission was to tip them off if we learned that Israel was about to nuke the Arabs... A lot of people have read the Pearson book and think it's true, and a lot of others use Pearson as a starting-point and then speculate wildly from there.' Ennes said his research indicated the nuclear sub was in the Atlantic at the time and was not in touch with the USS *Liberty*. 'I say it because I was a member of the intelligence unit in that ship and think I would have known.'²⁵

However, Pearson's account of a sub filming the attack was intriguing. His book was published before Ennes's and he had nothing like the same degree of access to the survivors. Furthermore, stories have circulated over the years that pictures

from a submarine had been shown at Pentagon briefings. Ennes was informed by Commander Bender Tansill that a military man called Paul Forsyth, living at an address in Washington DC, had given a talk to members of a US organisation called Military Orders of the World Wars. He had told the military officers present that a US naval commander and two majors had piloted Israeli aircraft and had participated in the attack against the *Liberty*. Tansill had named another US Navy commander in intelligence who claimed to have seen the film of the attack taken from a submarine, and Forsyth had said the films were taken from the USS *Andrew Jackson*. When Forsyth was later contacted he agreed he gave a talk, but denied this version of what he said.

What of Ennes's contention that the *Andrew Jackson* was not in the Mediterranean? Steve La Torre, a *Liberty* shipmate, was sure it had followed the *Liberty* out into the Mediterranean when his ship left Rota bound for the Sinai coast. More conclusive evidence came from Ray Sharer, an operator in the nuclear propulsion plant of the *Andrew Jackson*, who had joined that spring. He said the boat operated out of Rota, though its home port was Charleston, South Carolina, and in April, May and June 1967 it did a tour of the Mediterranean: 'Basically, you'd just make a circle, and it would take you about two months to make the circle. You never came up: you just stayed down, and you were on alert for most of that time.'

Is it possible, therefore, that a Polaris submarine had been deployed to accompany the USS *Liberty*? In the 1960s, the American ballistic missile submarine fleet was symbolic of America's resolve to out-gun the Soviet Union. Sending one to the Sinai coast in conditions of great secrecy indicates that the Pentagon feared a serious threat from another nuclear power. The Soviet Union was one obvious contender, but another was Israel itself. By June 1967 there is evidence it possessed at least two atom bombs of its own and the *Andrew Jackson* may have been dispatched just in case trouble from either party should lead to a doomsday scenario.

Picking up on Pearson's account, Wilbur Eveland, a former CIA

agent, was convinced this was plausible. He wrote: 'The *Liberty* wasn't sent alone, for... the Pentagon knew that the CIA had aided Israel in acquiring a nuclear capability. Moreover, the US had provided the Israelis with missiles, to which atomic warheads could be attached. Thus, in case a bogged-down Israeli Army decided to use ballistic missiles to win a war against the Soviet-equipped Egyptian Army, the US was in a position to warn both Israel and Russia that the introduction of nuclear warfare would produce instantaneous retaliation.'²⁶

There were 41 Polaris subs in service by 1967, dubbed in US Navy lingo as 'The 41 for Freedom', and at any one time there would be 22 on patrol somewhere in the world. The destructive potential of these craft was formidable. Collectively, they had the ability to fire 352 Polaris missiles up into the fringes of space and target any chosen spot on the planet.

The *Andrew Jackson* was equipped with 16 firing tubes capable of launching Polaris A-2s containing a W-47 thermonuclear warhead with an explosive power of 500 kilotons, 40 times more destructive than the two atom bombs dropped on Japan in World War Two. It also had four torpedo tubes and a range of torpedoes including MK 45 ASTORS tipped with W-34 fission warheads. On patrol, the vessel could operate for 60 to 70 days before surfacing and returning to base and had a top speed underwater of 30 knots.²⁷ It was therefore in constant readiness for a possible World War Three and under orders never to betray its presence by using terrestrial radio. The *Liberty* may have been its link to the outside world.

6. The Luncheon Group

'Johnson boasted... "Give me a man's balls, and his heart and mind will follow."'

Denis Healey

Lyndon Baines Johnson dropped dead of a heart attack in January 1973 at the age of only 64, but he left behind a topsy-turvy legacy as one of America's most controversial Presidents. While never really believing the United States could win in the war that he waged in Vietnam, the tall, charismatic Texan blundered on, committing more and more forces through pride and stubbornness. He feared he would have lost face and political stature if he had actively sought a peace settlement.

He was thrust into the top job when President Kennedy was assassinated, and then won a landslide victory in his own right in 1964. His dream was to win again in 1968 and he worked feverishly to that end, regularly telephoning his political contacts to request, or grant, a favour. Obsessed by leaks and paranoid that some of those near him were plotting against him – including his attorney general, Robert Kennedy – he surrounded himself in the White House with people he felt he could trust and who would never talk. Johnson was a driven man, working long hours, sleeping little and bulldozing legislation through Congress more successfully than any other modern president. He also knew how to bypass Congress when needs must, sometimes by telling the odd fib.

He was ruthless, but many poorer people admired the way Johnson piloted through legislation for his Great Society, which provided wide-ranging social benefit reforms, and he was a dogged campaigner on equal opportunities. He was tough, resourceful and almost overbearingly persuasive – the characteristics of a good

operator on Capitol Hill, where he had become a senator in 1948 and manoeuvred to become leader of the Democratic majority in the Senate in 1955.

He was also a great supporter of Israel. In 1956 he ran a campaign against what he saw as President Eisenhower's anti-Israeli policies. When he was finally sworn in as President himself, a number of leading Jewish intellectuals and Zionists were keen to serve under him. They formed an influential cluster of talent in his administration and helped him win the backing of the important Jewish community in the US.

His secretary of state, Dean Rusk, grew to know LBJ well after he became Vice-President to John F. Kennedy, and admired his ability despite his homespun Texan crudeness. In 1969, after both men had left office, Rusk recalled: 'I never sat in a session with him about even the most complex and technical matters when I had any impression that he was failing to grasp all that was involved and was missing the key issues that were before him. That high intelligence was concealed – at least as far as some snobbish Eastern intellectuals were concerned – by a Southern accent and his Southern mannerisms, but he was a man of great intellectual capacity and had an ability to understand the issues that were in front of him clearly and in great depth.'

Many commentators have argued that Johnson took little interest in overseas problems, but Rusk did not agree: 'I found him extraordinarily well-informed about foreign affairs,' he said. 'He had an all-consuming commitment to his job as President. He had become President through the great tragedy of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and it was as though he felt that, since he had not been the first choice for President, he was going to do everything that he possibly could to be a good President and to be a great President.'

'He was a severe task-master, in the first instance for himself. He never spared himself, and his colleagues were anxious from time to time about whether he might draw upon himself another heart attack. He worked late at night, he worked early mornings, he took his evening reading to his bedside with him, and that kept

him up frequently most of the time until one or two o'clock in the night. He would wake up at four or five o'clock in the morning and call the Operations Room of the Department or the White House to see how things were going in Vietnam.¹

He wasn't sleeping and had become a tormented man, according to Bill Moyers, his press secretary. Even Johnson's wife, Lady Bird, knew that by 1965 the pressure of Vietnam was unhinging him. She kept an audio diary and recalled that even in the middle of the night he would ring the White House Situation Room to see how the war was going and, in particular, learn of any US losses. Staff were often given orders to wake him if there was bad news, and Lady Bird resisted raising objections. One night she confided into her microphone that, 'this heavy load of tension and this fog of depression' were having an erosive effect on his personality. In 1965 Lady Bird Johnson bought a black silk dress, 'having, in the back of my mind when I bought it, the grim, unacknowledged thought that I might need a black dress for a funeral.'²

Johnson was clever – there was no doubt about that – but this picture of a man of high principle and humanitarian concern is contested by many who knew him. Denis Healey, who as British Secretary of State for Defence in 1967 was Robert McNamara's opposite number, summed up the President in five words. 'Lyndon Johnson was a monster,' he wrote in his memoirs. '[He was] one of the few politicians with whom I found it uncomfortable to be in the same room. Johnson exuded a brutal lust for power which I found most disagreeable. When he said, "I never trust a man unless I have his pecker in my pocket", he really meant it. He boasted about acting on the principle, "Give me a man's balls, and his heart and mind will follow." I could never forgive him for the way he destroyed Hubert Humphrey's personality while Hubert was Vice-President, thus costing the United States the best President it never had.'³

In fact, Johnson's trust in most of the people he had not personally hand-picked was legendary. Clark Clifford, Counsel to the President and Chairman of the Foreign Intelligence Board, explained how under Johnson's rule the National Security

Council, comprising the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the heads of many other Government agencies, was sidelined. 'As far as important national security questions were involved, like the war in Vietnam and other problems we had over the face of the globe, those discussions and the decisions were made in a group that consisted of the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [Earle Wheeler], the Director of the CIA [Richard Helms], and the President's assistant in charge of National Security Affairs [Walt Rostow in 1967]...'

It was called the Luncheon Group and it met weekly: 'If we needed anybody else, somebody might be brought in to brief us, but the President learned if you began to talk about very important policies and begin even to make preliminary decisions, when you got a whole group together like the National Security Council, you'd be almost sure to get a leak... I think he never had a leak.' He also shut out advice from people who might be more inclined to challenge his viewpoint. He was happy about that.

The spring and early summer of 1967 was a time of particularly high tension in the White House, with trouble both in Vietnam and the Middle East, and with Johnson almost paranoid about protecting his re-election chances the following year. Though in a relatively lowly position as a staff writer there, Grace Halsell has vivid memories of those weeks when she could sense 'events of great portent were transpiring' and observed the 'glee' with which reports of Israel's conquests were received.

'I was aware of that year's Middle East crisis,' she wrote, 'but, like most Americans, understood little about it other than the fact that it involved Jews and Arabs. In that year I did not know a single Arab, and possibly LBJ did not either. Like most Americans, I was pro-Israel, Israel having been sold to almost all of us as the underdog. Everyone around me, without exception, was pro-Israel.'

Halsell found it remarkable that, at the very seat of American power, the President surrounded himself with people who, to say the least, were far from impartial: 'Johnson had a dozen or more

close associates and aides who were both Jewish and pro-Israel. There was Walt Rostow at the White House, his brother Eugene at State, and Arthur Goldberg, Ambassador to the United Nations. Other pro-Israel advisers included Abe Fortas, associate justice of the Supreme Court; Democratic Party fundraiser Abraham Feinberg; White House counsels Leo White and Jake Jacobsen; White House writers Richard Goodwin and Ben Wattenberg; domestic affairs aide Larry Levinson; and John P. Roche, known as Johnson's intellectual-in-residence and an avid supporter of Israel.' She often observed the comings and goings of Abe Fortas and Arthur Goldberg, and knew that Rostow, in particular, had close Israeli connections.

She noted he often met up with Israeli Embassy Minister, Ephraim Evron. There was also a 'strikingly attractive blonde woman', Mathilde Krim, who was an ardent supporter of Israel and a close friend of LBJ's. She held no official position, but seemed to come and go at will.

Looking back, and having taken the trouble to research events surrounding the war, Halsell is now deeply concerned how partisan the US was, and how the Arab position was relegated. She added: 'I was, at the time, a typical American. I was convinced back then that the Arabs had started the war – and deserved what they got. I didn't try to reason how, if the Arabs had started the war, they were surprised with their air forces on the ground and how it was that Israel so easily seized all of Palestine, including the rest of Jerusalem. Instead, like millions of Americans, I was thrilled by the might of "little Israel".'

'Yet, despite the euphoria around me, what I saw in the White House planted questions in my mind. As Americans, we had just passed through a dangerous Middle East conflict that threatened to explode into World War III. There were two parties to the conflict, Arabs and Jews. But for weeks on end I had seen only one set of advisers who could call or see Johnson whenever they pleased. The Arabs had no voice, no representation, no access whatsoever.'⁴

*

Mathilde Krim, Johnson's blonde friend, was a remarkable figure in her own right but with her husband, Arthur Krim, who was 20 years her senior, they made a formidable team. When war broke out in the Middle East, she was staying at the White House and was still there when the USS *Liberty* was being bombed.

Arthur was a wealthy film mogul, chairman of United Artists and a devoted Democrat. He was finance chairman of the Party's national finance committee and ran the President's Club, a Johnson fund-raising vehicle that on 3 June had hosted a \$1,000-a-head dinner-dance in his honour in New York. Krim had made no secret from the outset of his Jewish background or his Zionist convictions, and they became close political allies. Then they became buddies. At Johnson's suggestion, Arthur bought a 150-acre estate next to the President's ranch in Texas and built a lavish mansion, ensuring the two friends were even closer.

Mathilde's good looks, her intelligence and her exotic background dazzled Johnson. She was an Israeli whose daughter, by a previous marriage, was about to serve in the Israeli Defence Force. However, she was not by background Jewish but Catholic, and her commitment to Israel exhibited the zeal of a convert. She knew many of Israel's leaders and military commanders, and helping Israel had become a mission.

Born Mathilde Galland in Italy, her family moved to Switzerland where she became a Lutheran, but while a teenager in Geneva she fell in love with David Danon, a Bulgarian Jew who had been raised in Palestine. He was living in exile, having been identified as a member of the Irgun, the terrorist group fighting for Israeli independence against the British.

She said she viewed him as 'a heroic figure', being friendly not only with the Irgun but also the Stern Gang,⁵ another of the Zionist terrorist groups, which was headed by Yitzhak Shamir, later Israeli Prime Minister. She married Danon and converted a second time, to Judaism. She later admitted to author Donald Neff that she then became a gun-runner; 'a seemingly innocent petite and pretty blonde [was] in reality taking messages and explosives into neighbouring France and Italy to be passed on to

the Irgunists.⁶ Five years later she had changed tack again, taken a doctorate in genetics, divorced Danon and moved to the US.

On 3 June 1967 she was sitting beside the President at the New York dinner-dance when they were interrupted by banker Abraham 'Abe' Feinberg, another of Johnson's friends and a big money-raiser for the Democrats as well as for Israel. He was reputed to have raised large sums for Dimona, the secret nuclear weapons plant in the Negev desert. Feinberg whispered to the President that he had some important news from Israel. 'Mr President, it can't be held any longer,' he said. 'It's going to be within the next 24 hours.' The President continued with the fun, and took no action on this important piece of intelligence.

Was Walt Whitman Rostow a sinister, Svengali-like figure in the White House, or simply the biggest and best fixer? Of all the people in Johnson's entourage, he was crucial in determining which way the US might respond to the threatened hostilities in the Middle East. His title was not impressive, but as Johnson's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs he had acquired enormous influence, acting as a filter for policy advice from the State and Defense Departments and running the committee that sanctioned covert operations by the CIA. He also knew that in taking Israel's side on most issues he was playing to the President's tune. He described Johnson as 'the most pro-Semitic man' he had ever met.

Rostow was a hawk who believed in the justness of the Vietnam War and, as a Jew, his Zionism was strongly felt and expressed. His brother, Eugene Rostow, was Under-Secretary for Political Affairs to Dean Rusk, an equally important factotum, but Walt had daily contact with the President. This gave him especially close access.

He had a glittering academic background, but during World War Two he became a major in US Army intelligence and joined the OSS, forerunner of the CIA.⁷ In the 1950s he was an economics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and made a name as a financial guru but then he

moved into politics, joined the Kennedy administration and began impressing everyone with his high intelligence and energy.

It was Rostow who, according to official accounts, first received the message, at 2.50 am on 5 June, from the White House Situation Room about a Foreign Broadcast Information Service⁸ transmission that had just been received saying Egypt had invaded Israel. He had been in bed at home, but made his way to the White House where he contacted Rusk. They found the NSA was receiving reports that Israel was attacking Egyptian airfields. At 4.30 am they ordered the guard outside the President's door to wake Johnson and Rostow gave him the news. He told him it was not clear who had fired the first shot.

Like many official accounts, this story is unsatisfactory. If the first piece of information alerting Rostow was an intercepted radio station report more than an hour after a squadron of Israeli planes had taken off on their way to destroy the Egyptian Air Force, what were the NSA and CIA doing? Surely the CIA bureau in Tel Aviv would have alerted its headquarters and the NSA in moments?

Rostow's explanation for this has never been ascertained, as he has rarely spoken of his Six-Day War experiences. The impression is that the war was no surprise, and even of some satisfaction. As mentioned in Chapter Three, he had sent a brief, derisive memo to the Oval Office at the end of Day One of the war (5 June) that read, 'Mr President: Herewith the account, with a map, of the first day's turkey shoot.' On 6 June he passed on another memo to the President, recommending that Israel should not be forced immediately to withdraw from the territories it had seized. This was a sea-change in US policy, a departure from the principle reaffirmed in 1956, when Israel had previously invaded the Sinai and the US had pressurised Tel Aviv to withdraw. LBJ's defence adviser added: 'If the Israelis go fast enough and the Soviets get worried enough, a simple cease-fire might be the best answer. This would mean that we could use the *de facto* situation on the ground to try to negotiate not a return to armistice lines, but a definitive peace in the

Middle East.' There lay the policy that the US has *de facto* adopted ever since the Six-Day War.

Ephraim 'Eppie' Evron was never a prominent figure in Israeli public life, and he preferred it that way, but he played a crucial role in the Six-Day War through a remarkable relationship with the President that casts another light on his character. To the Israeli LBJ was a hero, certainly not a monster, and he made his admiration of the leader of the free world clear to anyone who would listen.

Though a diplomat, he had close links to Israeli military intelligence, having been a case officer there in the 1950s.⁹ He ostensibly served Abba Eban, his foreign minister, but he was also the intelligence service's eyes, ears and fixer in the US, with close ties to the CIA.

In 1967, Evron was serving as Minister in the Israeli Embassy in Washington, number two in rank, but equal in influence to Ambassador Avraham Harman. Unlike Harman, he would be invited to Johnson's Texas ranch and treated to LBJ's legendary hospitality. On one visit Johnson bundled him into a small blue car he had bought and headed straight for the lake. Fearing he was about to drown Evron tried to jump out, but the car went into the water – and kept going. It was amphibious. Johnson liked frightening people like that – for fun.

One man who knew Evron well, and marvelled at his access to the Oval Office, was Harry McPherson, Special Counsel in the White House. Like Evron, he was a link between Johnson and the US Jewish community, and was candid enough to dub himself 'the staff semi-Semite'.¹⁰ Evron was a 'small, large-eared, thin-nosed, thin Israeli,' he said, with 'superb judgement' who 'developed one of the most unusual friendships with an American President... that any Minister has ever developed.

'He genuinely loved Lyndon Johnson from afar before he had met him,' McPherson added. 'He just decided that he was the best thing that ever happened to the United States. He felt that he was going to achieve a social revolution in America, and as an old

socialist of many years' standing Eppie thought that was great, and he thought also that he would do nothing that ever hurt Israel and was the best friend Israel could have.' In McPherson's view there were 'a great many Jewish corpuscles' in Johnson's blood. 'I think he is part-Jewish, seriously; not merely because of his affection for a great many Jews, but because of the way he behaves. [Johnson] reminds me of a six-foot-three-inch, Texan, slightly corny version of a rabbi or a diamond-merchant on 44th Street. He is just as likely to spill out all his woes, his vanity, his joy, as the most gesticulating Jew. He has the kind of hot nature that one associates with Jews.

'He will play for enormous stakes and will really cash in his chips, his emotional and political and monetary chips, everything he has got, just as Jews often will. He's a fulsome man. Eppie sensed that, and sensed also that he was a real friend of Jewry. Eppie became a good friend... of a number of other very important Jewish figures in the United States, many of whom were quite close to President Johnson.'¹¹

How they first met is unclear but Evron not only sensed the President's emotional attachment, he also exploited it. As the war clouds loomed in 1967, he was deeply involved in marshalling US support for his country's 'plight'. It rapidly became clear that Johnson was more than willing to assist, not merely for sentimental reasons but because it also meant votes. The influential Jewish community in the US, totalling 5.5 million, were generous supporters of the Democrats and they were one of the groups most understanding of Johnson's Vietnam policy, which was dividing the country. At the same time, their leaders were assiduous in making sure the President provided the *quid pro quo*.

One of Eppie's prime contacts in Washington was John P. Roche, a historian and trusted friend of Johnson who strongly supported Israel. Roche was bemused, and sometimes unsettled, by how Johnson handled the pressure from this quarter. He recalled how on 22 May, a fortnight before war broke out, Johnson teased Evron and other Jewish lobbyists over what he was intending to say in a speech about Nasser's blockade of the Straits of Tiran.

Roche had been appalled at a draft speech prepared by Dean Rusk's department, which he regarded as far too even-handed in tone. Johnson readily ordered Roche to rewrite it but told no one. 'Jewish pressure groups in this country were lined up all the way from Washington to California,' Roche remembered, 'and Johnson engaged in one of his malicious little games. The various Jewish groups would call him, and... he'd fish out the State Department draft and read it to them and say, "Well, how do you feel about that?..." So – boom! The phones are ringing. The Israeli Ambassador, Avraham Harman, is over in Humphrey's [Vice-President Hubert Humphrey] office with Eppie Evron, who is practically in tears. All day Johnson went on doing this. I called [Walt] Rostow. I said, "For God's sake, what is he doing?" Walt said, "Oh, he's just getting a little therapy for all this pressure they put on."'12

The final story on Evron also came from McPherson in an interview in January 1969. Evron was so smitten with Johnson following the Six-Day War that he asked to remain in the US and help his friend win in the 1968 Presidential election. 'He wanted to go out and campaign as Minister of Israel,' McPherson said, 'and he was fantastically effective. In the two or three months after the Six Day War in mid-1967 the American Jewish community believed that Johnson had done nothing for them; that he was in effect prepared to see Israel suffer terribly. The opposite was the case, but we were in a terrible situation. We couldn't say it. We couldn't say anything about the fact that the Sixth Fleet had been turned east, aimed at the Russian fleet, to head off the Russian fleet before it got to Alexandria. We couldn't say what we'd said on the hot-line about the necessity for Russia to keep its mitts off the Middle East, because of our relations with the Russians and because we were trying to settle the Middle Eastern situation.

'I once pleaded with the President to let me authorize Eppie to spill the beans: I saw the memo the other night. It's in the middle of a long memorandum to him about a conversation with Eppie, and it's "No, no, no!" on the sides. Couldn't do it. But Eppie, nevertheless

went around to Miami, Los Angeles, everywhere, spoke to large collections of Jews and he would simply say, "I can't tell you anything about the facts, but let me tell you; I'm the Minister of Israel. I have the strongest interest in the United States helping Israel and I can tell you that Lyndon Johnson saved Israel." And finally he prevailed upon Eshkol to say that, and Eshkol did say it. And Lyndon Johnson's popularity rating in Israel [rose]: as the Jews would say, "Oi vey, if he could be transferred here..." The most popular man in Israel in the popularity polls is Lyndon Johnson.¹³

Alas for Evron, Johnson could not repair the damage to his popularity caused by the escalating carnage in the Vietnam War. In March 1968 he decided not to stand again and Vice-President Hubert Humphrey took on Richard Nixon and failed. Evron expected to be ambassador to the US but Yitzhak Rabin, who as Chief of Staff was a hero of the Six-Day War, had first choice. Evron spent his last two weeks in the US on LBJ's ranch, and was devastated when Johnson had his third heart attack, this one fatal.

Evron provided one postscript to the *Liberty* story. In June 1968 Israel paid out \$3,323,500, or an average of \$100,000 each, to the 34 families of the men killed on the ship. The individual amount depended on the numbers of dependants and their ages. In April 1969 it made another gesture with a further payment of \$3,452,275 for 164 claims from those wounded; seven declined to apply. But the question of compensating for the damage to the ship remained in limbo and, remarkably, the US simply got weary of reminding Israel that it had not paid up.

When *Liberty* was patched up in Malta, holes were plated over so that externally it looked almost untouched but internally, where the research sections had been, there was a cavernous chamber. Viewed from the inside, the rocket holes looked like a giant can opener had been at work. Thus the repairs were never intended to make the ship more serviceable and it was never reinstated as a spy ship. It was sold in 1973 as scrap for \$101,666.66. The ship had cost \$20 million to equip and was worth considerably more before the attack, but the US asked Israel for a paltry \$7,644,146 plus interest. By 1980, 13 years on, the matter was

clearly considered buried until Jim Ennes's book *Assault On the Liberty* came out. Finally, prompted by press comment and questions in Congress, the US revived its claim. By then Eppie Evron was the Ambassador in Washington. The outstanding interest alone was \$10 million, but Evron suggested what he thought was an equitable solution. He offered \$6 million, and President Jimmy Carter's administration meekly took the money. As Evron would sometimes privately boast, it didn't really matter to his country as the money came out of American aid, and he thought his old friend LBJ would have enjoyed the bargain he had struck, had he lived to see the matter concluded.

Harry McPherson had an interesting Six-Day War, though he was not able to reveal his experiences for many years. In May 1967 he had organised a trip to Vietnam with a view to visiting Israel on his way home. While in Saigon, he heard that Nasser had expelled UN peacekeeping forces and then blockaded the Straits of Tiran. He said he assumed his trip to Israel would now have to be cancelled but, just in case, sent a cable to the White House. He asked the President if he could continue, 'as a kind of hand-holding operation to show the Israelis that we were friends.' Back came the message from LBJ saying okay.

In a taped interview with the LBJ Library in January 1969, and made public much later, the White House Special Counsel said he flew into Tel Aviv at three o'clock on the morning of 5 June, which by a remarkable coincidence was just four and a half hours before the time Israel had decided to attack Egypt. This close aide to Johnson then spent most of the conflict being entertained and briefed by the Israeli Cabinet and military high command.

His memories are vivid. The country was very quiet when he went to sleep that first night at the home of Ambassador Walworth Barbour, but he was awakened at 8 am by an air raid siren and told the war had started. McPherson sent a wire to the White House saying that he was safe. Johnson now had one of the most trusted of his coterie right on hand; it was indeed a fortunate fluke, if that is what it was.

The Special Counsel liked to describe himself as a 'semi-Semite'. He said that 'in a curious way' he was the instrument for informing the White House that Israel had started the war: 'The first day, 5 June, I was with Wally [Walworth] Barbour, the American Ambassador. About 11 am we came out from under our air raid shelter at the embassy and went over to the Israeli defense ministry. It had moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem out of the line of fire, and we met with [Abba] Eban and with the Israeli chief of military intelligence, General Yariv. We listened to Eban for half an hour on the rationale for the war, why it was necessary, but they were still saying they were hit by the Egyptians, were attacked by the Egyptians, and they [Israel] had counter-attacked. It didn't seem right to me, and I kept asking about this. We were sitting in a little bare room, looking out at a walk that led to an underground war room. I kept saying, "Well, where did they hit you?" and he said, "Oh, there were big movements down in the Sinai – in the Negev." I said, "You mean they were into Israel?" "Big artillery barrages." I said, "Into Israel? They came in?" And he said, "It was imminent. It was coming." I said, "But did they cross over?"'

McPherson told Eban that the President would be with Israel in any case, but when Washington formulated its response it was vital for him to know if Israel was literally attacked or was the country that launched a preventive attack. At that moment the air raid siren went off again and Eban did not seem concerned: 'He kept talking, and he didn't make a move. Nobody made a move to go underground. Several other people – privates and sergeants around there – were sort of looking around for a place to go, and finally Wally Barbour said, as the air raid siren kept going, "Shouldn't we go underground?" And General Yariv looked at his watch and thought for a minute and said, "No, that won't be necessary."'

McPherson got the message: 'Suddenly, the whole thing just broke open. Of course it wasn't necessary – there weren't any damned Arab airplanes left... They'd picked up a blip and it was one of their own planes... [The] chief of military intelligence at 11.30 in the morning thought there was no reason to go underground without even asking anybody about it. So we went back

and sent off a cable and described this unusual scene, and it was the first, I believe, information back to Washington – clear information – that they [Israel] had begun the war.'

It was an interesting encounter for the President's man, but it is also important evidence of when Johnson knew for certain that Egypt had not launched the first strike. McPherson must have cabled Johnson from Tel Aviv about noon on 5 June, or 6 am Washington time. Even before the President was served breakfast, the White House knew, directly from Israel's war headquarters, that Prime Minister Eshkol had broken his promise to Johnson not to attack for at least another week. Why, then, did the White House pretend for the whole of that day that it was unclear who launched the attack, and do nothing to lean on Israel to stop fighting? An obvious inference is that the White House did not want to intervene.

Certainly McPherson was not asked to make representations, though he met Eshkol that day. He described his next four days as glorious: 'The Israelis assigned a couple of men to be with me and I went down through the Negev [Desert] and went to the Gaza Strip while the fighting was still going on... I only saw a great tower of smoke coming out of the city... I went north to the mountains, to Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee, when the Israeli fighters were overhead going in to hit the Syrian Heights, the Golan Heights.'

McPherson then went to Haifa, Caesarea and to the Weizmann Research Institute on one 'glorious Wednesday night'. A collection of scientists there 'were all blind, wild drunk' and celebrating at the taking of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Contrary to his thoughts that such intellectuals would not care much about this news, they told him 'they would fight the entire world – us and the Russians and anybody else – to keep it.' As Israel was blasting hell out of the Syrians at the end of that week, and causing Moscow such anxiety that it mooted military involvement in an angry hot-line message to Johnson, McPherson caught a plane home, having thoroughly enjoyed his experiences.

In his detailed account to the LBJ Library, McPherson makes no mention of the traumatic attack on the USS *Liberty* on the

fourth day of his visit, just before he left. If he was kept informed that day, it is odd he has not shared for the record what he learned and what, if anything, he did to discover why it happened.

Instead, back in Washington, he was discreet about the entire visit: 'I kept that very much to myself when I got back, as far as the press was concerned, because the Arabs were claiming that we had had something to do with the starting of the war, and even though I would hardly have been the man to bring the "Go" signal for the Israelis, it would have been a nice piece of Arab propaganda.'

It may not be incidental that Harry McPherson arrived in Israel after visiting South Vietnam. On 3 June two F-105D Thunderchief fighters from the United States Air Force's 355th Tactical Fighter Wing had been sent to bomb a rail track near Cam Pha Harbour in North Vietnam. The experienced pilots apparently knew that the harbour itself and the seas around were designated a 'sanctuary', or no-go area, by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Nevertheless, both planes opened up and attacked a Russian freighter, the *Turkestan*, which was moored there.

Apparently there had been anti-aircraft fire from the shore but the action was foolish, to say the least. As far as anyone was aware the two pilots, Major Ted Tolman and Major Lonnie Ferguson, were acting without authority, and it was well-known that violating the sanctuary policy would lead to automatic court-martial. Their actions were also compounded by the fact they had shot up a vessel belonging to America's Cold War enemy, and to make it worse they had killed one of its Russian crew-members. When they arrived back at Takhli Air Force Base in Thailand they were potentially in big trouble.

Their acting commander, Colonel Jacksel 'Jack' Broughton, then made a career-destroying move. The only direct evidence against the pair was Tolman's gun camera film, which had captured every moment of the attack. Broughton demanded it be handed over, and then he burnt it. When this was discovered, the pilots and Broughton were all court-martialled, and the court

found the pilots not guilty because of lack of evidence.

That in itself was an odd outcome, as there was other evidence to establish the two pilots had acted against the rules, and their story that the ship was in the way when they fired at the anti-aircraft batteries was implausible. The military court then turned its attention to Broughton, who had made no secret of the fact that he had destroyed the film. He was found guilty, but only on a minor indictment. No allegation was made of perverting the course of justice and tampering with evidence. Instead, Broughton was convicted of the destruction of Government property, a gun-camera cassette valued at \$5. He was fined \$600 dollars and he left the Air Force.

Meanwhile the attack on the *Turkestan*, which some reports suggested had been a Soviet spy-ship, and the death of the sailor on board had caused intense diplomatic problems for President Lyndon B. Johnson. Moscow had issued a complaint about this 'flagrant provocation' against a ship that was playing no part in the Vietnam War. There were angry protests in Leningrad and Moscow, street marches, a riot near the US Embassy and furious denunciations of America across the Soviet Union.

The US response was one of denial. It stated, and continued stating, that no US planes had opened fire and that an investigation into the affair had established this. Two weeks later Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin was due to visit New York to address the United Nations and he met Johnson for an impromptu summit at Glassboro, in New Jersey, to discuss the Middle East crisis.¹⁴ An indication of Kosygin's fury at America's stonewalling, and his determination to prove the 'provocation', came when he handed over a fragment of rocket casing as proof of America's culpability.

Washington could no longer deny it was responsible for the attack. Johnson and his secretary of state Dean Rusk apologised and assured the Soviet leader that it was 'an accident', and an 'unfortunate mistake'. It helped to calm things, and in any case there were even more pressing problems. In the intervening period the Six-Day War had begun and ended, the *Liberty* was being

patched up in Malta harbour and Israel was resisting demands in the UN to withdraw from the territories it had occupied.

Histories of the Vietnam War rarely dwell on the *Turkestan* incident, just as the attack on the USS *Liberty* is rarely considered of significance in the Six-Day War, but readers will not have missed certain similarities in these two events on opposite sides of the planet. Both were allegedly 'accidents'; there were attempted cover-ups, and the level of punishment meted out to the perpetrators was in both cases puny. No one was court-martialled for the attack on the USS *Liberty*; Broughton was lightly punished.

However, the gung-ho airman's story did not end there. The colonel appealed against his conviction, his appeal was upheld and he was vindicated. An observer on the Correction of Military Records Board rather overstated the case when he called the original finding 'the grossest example of injustice in history'. Broughton knew he was fortunate, commenting: 'I found it interesting that in the entire history of the United States flying forces, only one other officer had ever had a general court-martial set aside and voided.'¹⁵

Much later the colonel wrote two books about his exploits in Vietnam, complaining bitterly that Johnson and McNamara had foolishly sought to fight the war from Washington and had not allowed officers in the fray any room for initiative. Ten thousand copies of one (*Thud Ridge*) were later bought by the Air Force and given free to everyone promoted to Captain. Broughton was, in effect, rewarded for his actions over the *Turkestan* incident – a surprising outcome considering the attack had provoked the Soviet Union so much. It did, however, serve one useful purpose, whether or not it was inadvertent – it was a useful test of how far the Soviets might retaliate. Apart from bluster, the answer was, 'Not much'.

By June 1967, unhappiness was spreading in the United States about the Johnson administration's commitment to Vietnam. People were becoming aware their country was embroiled in a bloody war that would be difficult, if not impossible, to win. An

increasing number of young men figured each night on the TV news returning from the war in wheelchairs and body-bags. The press was beginning to accuse the Government of incompetence, making decisions on the hoof and excessive secrecy.

Johnson had exploited the good will that the public had given him after Kennedy's tragic death had elevated him to the Presidency. Decisions to escalate US military commitment in South Asia had received Congressional backing, but Johnson and some of his senior team had been deliberately economical with the truth. Until too late, Congress was not fully aware that the US had in effect taken over the war from the demoralised military leaders in Saigon. South Vietnam had become America's vehicle for halting the Soviet-inspired spread of a great wickedness – communism.

Johnson was acutely aware that his poll ratings were plummeting, and a less arrogant man might have changed tack. There were a few senior figures in his circle who urged a withdrawal from the battle but, on the principle that this would be a sign of weakness, the President ordered more of the same – more bombing and more rhetoric. Americans were leading the fight for freedom, wherever that freedom was threatened. Johnson thought this gave him the best re-election chances.

Events unfolding in Tel Aviv, Cairo and Damascus, and the part being played by Moscow, were another case in point. As the White House saw it, for 'South Vietnam' one could read 'Israel' – a country valiantly standing firm against the red tide. Johnson threw himself into the problem with vigour. 'At moments of great crisis, the President would put an enormous amount of time in on the crisis itself,' Dean Rusk said. 'This would be true whether it was the June War between Israel and their Arab neighbours, or the Soviet move into Czechoslovakia, or any major new move as far as Vietnam was concerned. The President would give whatever time was necessary.'

Some historians have argued that Vietnam distracted the President during the Six-Day War, and that was why so little effort was made to stop it. Rusk denied this. He said LBJ was such

a frequent visitor to the Situation Room he could have been personally manning it, and the hyperactive Robert McNamara, his defense secretary, was there almost as often. It is therefore surprising that both men wrote so little about the Middle East conflict in their memoirs, bound up as it was with the destruction of a US Navy ship.

McNamara, for example, made no mention of the *Liberty* attack, and he devoted less than two pages to the Six-Day War.¹⁶ He recounts how the first ever hot-line message was received that day, remarkably coming into the Pentagon because the line did not extend to the White House; and how, on the final day, he had ordered the Sixth Fleet to turn and head east towards the war zone in a demonstration of force to the Soviets. That is the sum total of what he considered to be his relevant memories of the war.

Lyndon Johnson's account of his own record as President had a little more to say about the conflict in general and made embarrassing errors about the numbers killed and injured aboard the *Liberty*, apparently taking the figures from the hot-line message sent to Moscow at lunchtime on the day of the attack, which were obviously provisional. It is known Johnson dictated his thoughts and gave his staff the task of writing them up and checking them against the files and yet he said this about the biggest peacetime naval disaster ever to befall the United States: 'Thursday, 8 June, began on a note of tragedy. A morning news bulletin reported that a US Navy communications ship, the *Liberty*, had been torpedoed in international waters off the Sinai coast.

'For 70 tense minutes we had no idea who was responsible, but at eleven o'clock we learned that the ship had been attacked in error by Israeli gunboats and planes. Ten men of the *Liberty* crew were killed and a hundred were wounded. This heartbreaking episode grieved the Israelis deeply, as it did us. There was a possibility that the incident might lead to even greater misfortune, and it was precisely to avoid further confusion and tragedy that I sent a message to Chairman Kosygin on the hot-line.'

Johnson continued: 'I told him exactly what had happened and advised him that carrier aircraft were on their way to the

scene to investigate. I wanted him to know, I said, that investigation was the sole purpose of these flights, and I hoped he would inform the proper parties. Kosygin replied that our message had been received and the information had been relayed immediately to the Egyptians.

'Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson reported, after his return to Moscow, that this particular exchange had made a deep impression on the Russians. Use of the hot-line for this purpose, to prevent misunderstanding, was exactly what both parties had envisioned.'¹⁷

The families of those Americans who were killed on the USS *Liberty* do not appear to have made much of an impression on Johnson, even though they had been grieving with a little more emotion than the Israelis. They do not receive a mention. One possible explanation for this offhandedness is that the war, and particularly the *Liberty* affair, was a source of guilt and embarrassment; that to write more fully about it could reveal a little too much of some unsung role that the United States played.

One significant omission from Johnson's slipshod account is a special committee meeting of the National Security Council that took place one day after the *Liberty* debacle, on 9 June, when almost every high official was present, from the President downwards. Much of it was to discuss the attack, and apart from all the Luncheon Group members it was attended by, among others, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, Luke Battle, Nicholas Katzenbach (Rusk's under-secretary of state), Eugene Rostow, Clark Clifford and Harold Saunders, an NSC staff member who took hand-written notes which were later declassified and 'sanitized' in 1996.

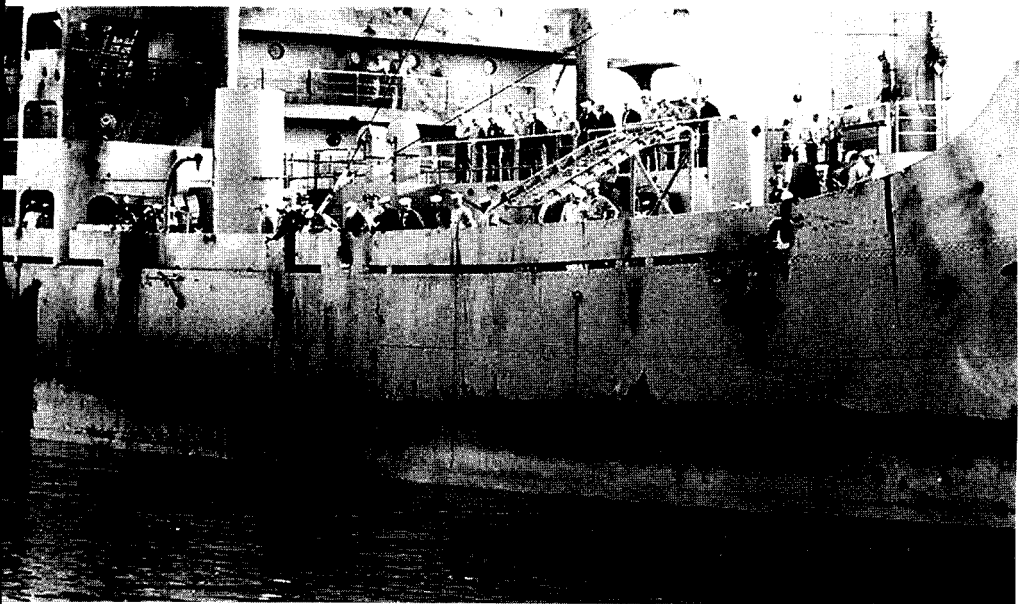
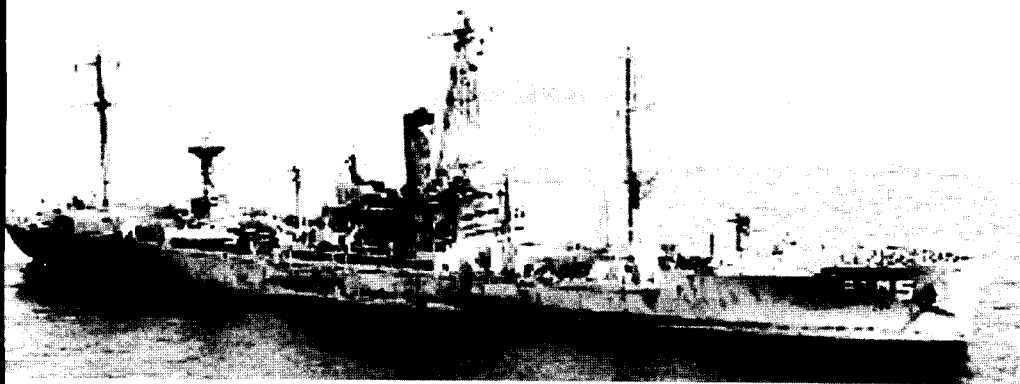
In the version made public a remark from Richard Helms, CIA Director, had been blanked out. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported 'Senators outraged', and demanded a bill be issued for damage to the ship. Battle talked of 'this incomprehensible attack'. Rusk said, 'Do what is normal: 1 - reparation, 2 - Punish, 3 - No repetition.' It was Clifford who was the most vocal. According to the notes, he said: 'My concern

is that we are not tough enough. Handle as if Arabs or USSR had done it. Manner egregious. Inconceivable that it was accident. Three strafing passes, three torpedo boats. Set forth facts. Punish Israelis responsible.'

There was no sympathy for the 'grieving Israelis' and, most significantly, written in the margin alongside Clifford's remarks is a note stating: 'President subscribed 100%.'

Clifford went on to produce a report into the *Liberty* affair for the President that suppressed much of this ire. However, in his memoirs he reveals how he remained puzzled about it: 'I do not know to this day at what level the attack on the *Liberty* was authorised and I think it is unlikely that the full truth will ever come out. Having been for so long a staunch supporter of Israel, I was particularly troubled by this incident; I could not bring myself to believe that such an action could have been authorised by Levi Eshkol. Yet somewhere inside the Israeli Government, somewhere along the chain of command, something had gone terribly wrong – and then had been covered up. I never felt the Israelis made adequate restitution or explanation for their actions...'¹⁸

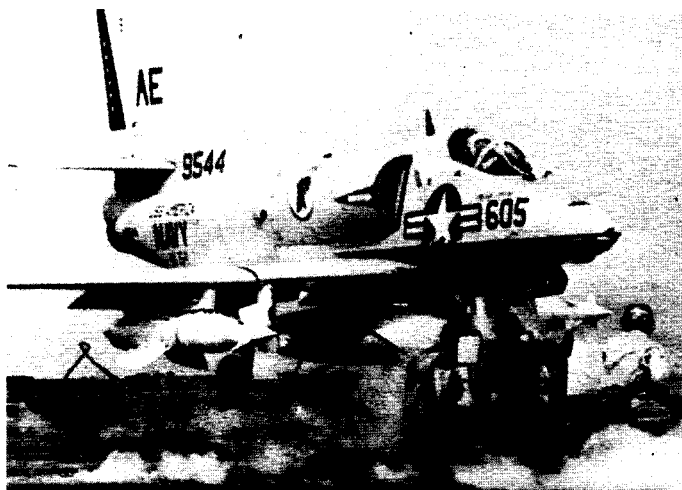
It was at least recognition, from someone who had been high in the administration in 1967, that the public response by the US was governed by political expediency. There had indeed been a cover-up, as the *Liberty* veterans had all along maintained; and clearly, in the hearts of those who dealt with the crisis in Washington, there lingered real annoyance at Israel's response and frustration at their failure to fathom why the attack had occurred.

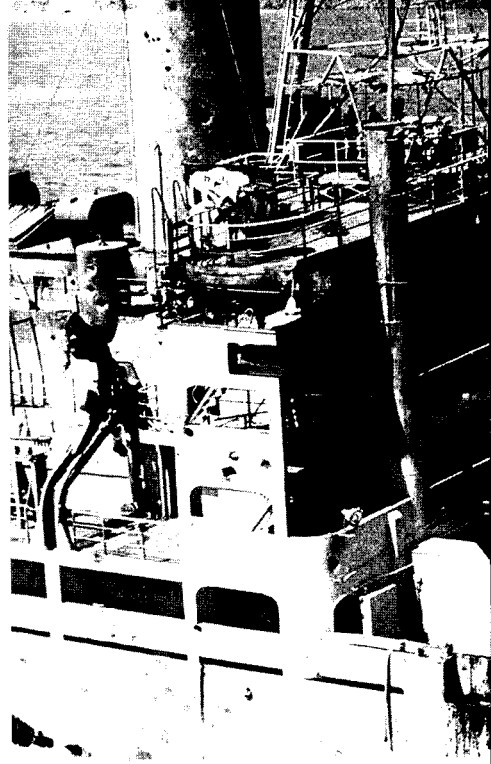
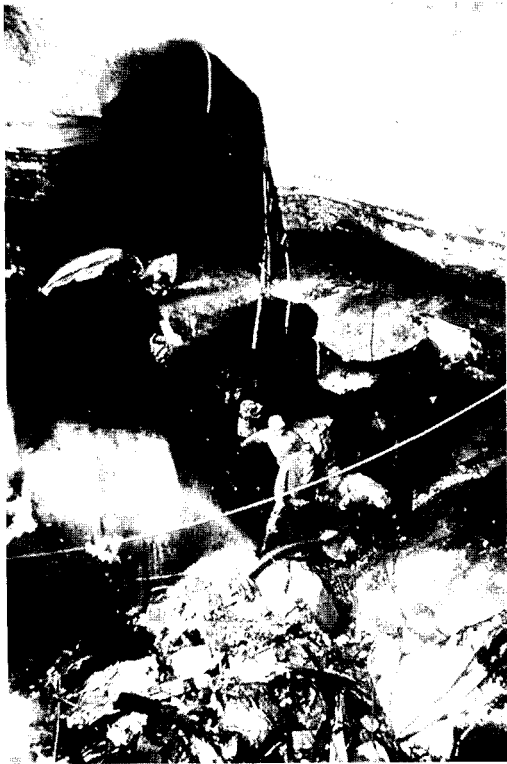


Top: The crippled USS *Liberty* heads for safety in Malta.

Middle: As the ship enters Malta harbour, the torpedo hole is clearly visible.

Bottom: One of the A-4 Skyhawks on the USS *America* scrambled. Minutes later it was recalled.

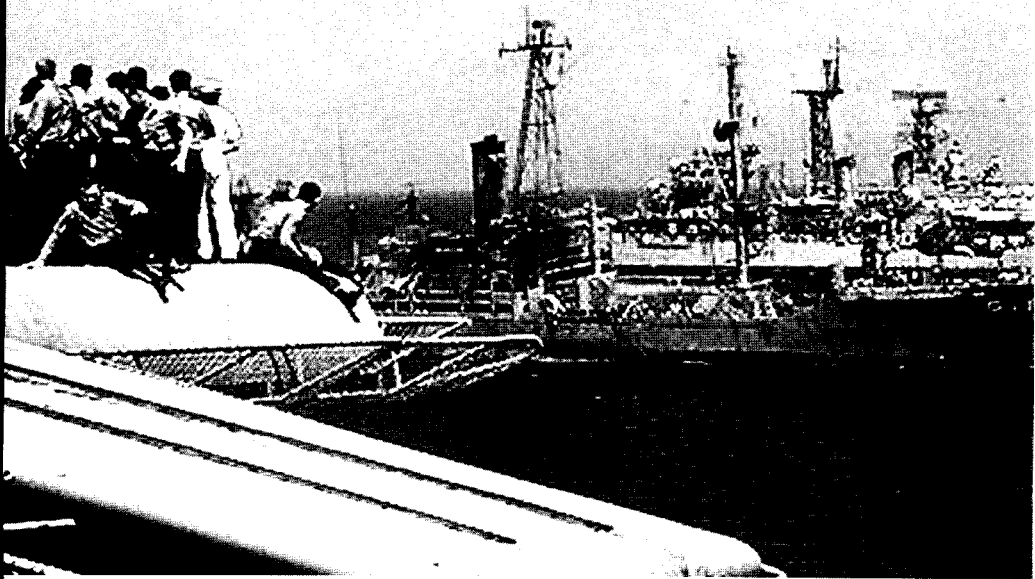




Top: Captain William McGonagle inspects a rocket hole.

Above left: The grisly task begins of clearing the area damaged by the torpedo.

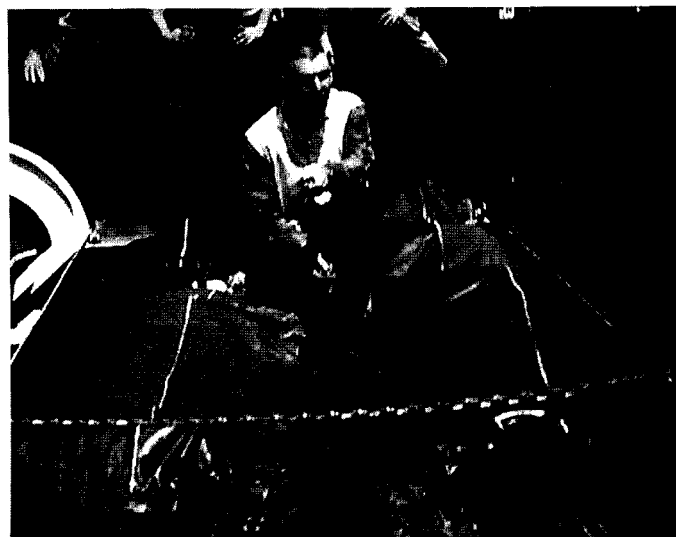
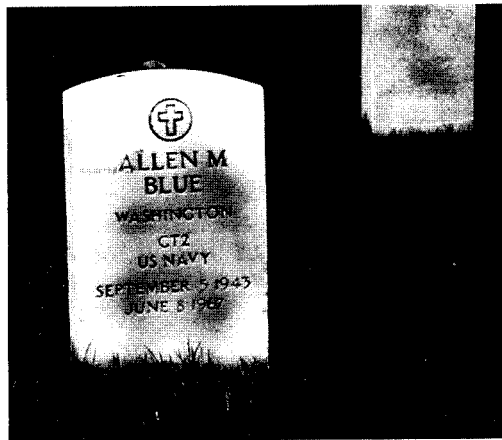
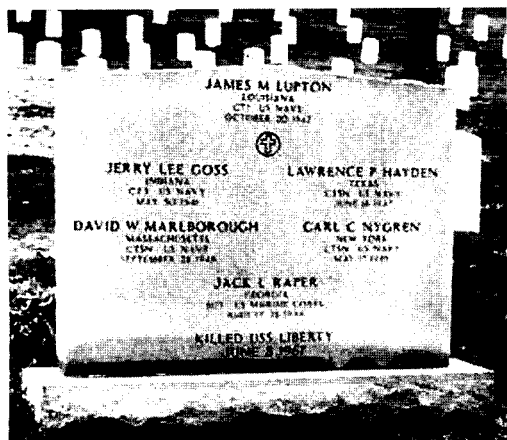
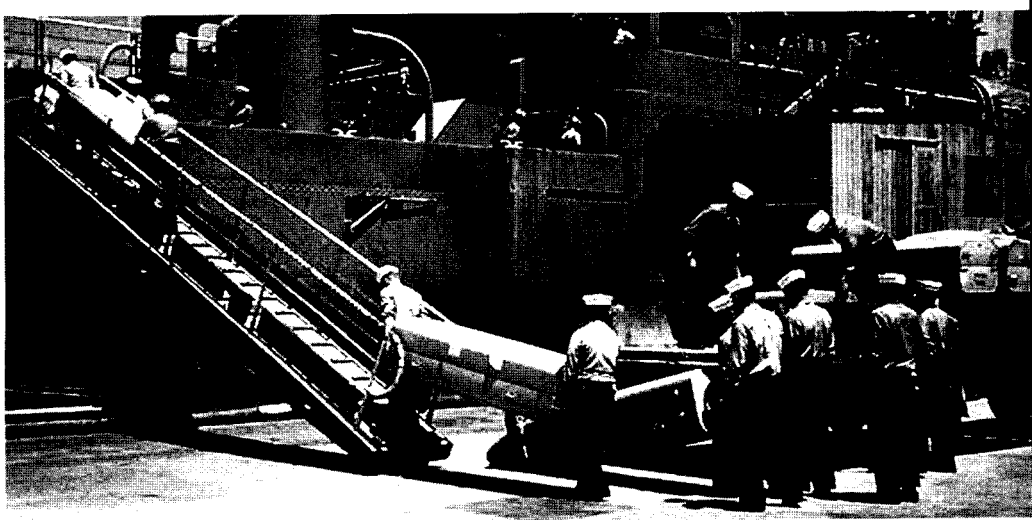
Above right: Rocket and fire damage to the ship's superstructure.



Top: The ship finally meets up with the Sixth Fleet – as seen from the USS *America*.

Above left: USS *Davis*, flag ship of the Sixth Fleet, meets up with the ship.

Above right: Admiral Lawrence Geis briefs press aboard the USS *America* about the Six-Day War.



Top: Coffins are taken aboard the USS *Liberty* after it docked in Malta.

Above left: The Arlington Cemetery memorial to the five crewmen whose bodies could not be found or identified.

Above right: NSA employee Allen Blue's memorial nearby.

Left: Two of the dead are removed from the ship in body bags.



The USS *Liberty* sails to Norfolk, Virginia, after its rapid patch-up in Malta.



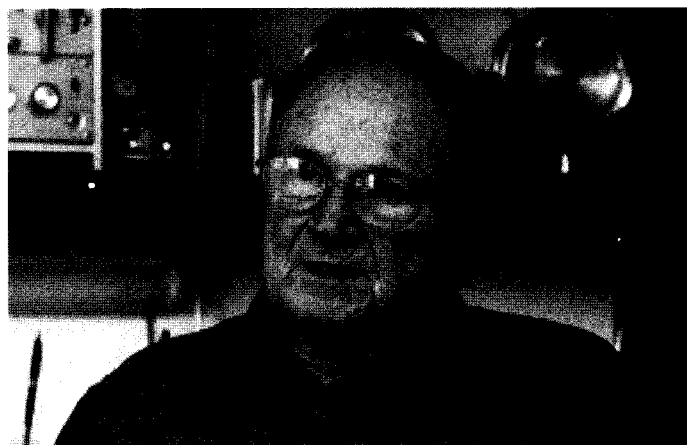
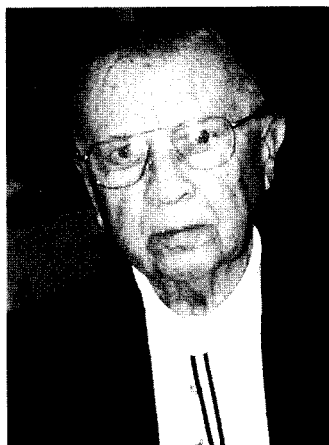
*Top row, left to right: Survivor Jim Ennes, author of the book *Assault on the Liberty*; Lloyd Painter; John Hrankowski.*



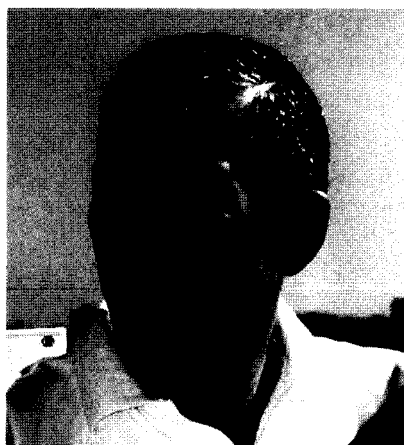
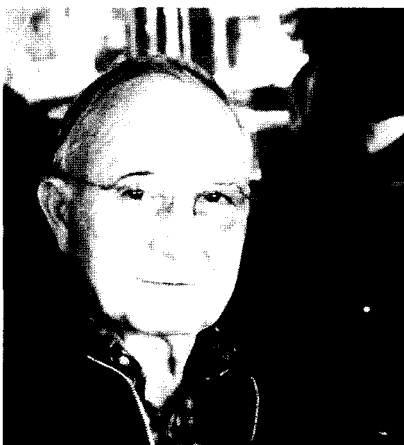
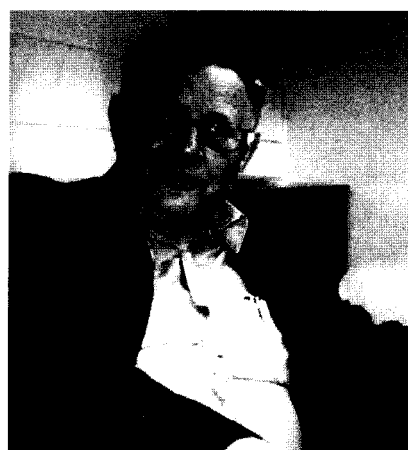
Middle row, left to right: Commander Dave Lewis, after being flown to the USS America after the attack, and today.



Bottom row, left to right: Joe Lentini, aboard the USS America after being pulled out of the Liberty's flooded research section, and today.



Top row, left to right: Tony Hart, Greg Reight, Mike Ratigan. Middle row, left to right: Robert McNamara, claiming he could not remember the *Liberty* attack; Admiral Merlin Staring; Lucius Battle. Bottom row, left to right: Richard Helms, CIA Director in 1967; *Liberty* chief engineer George Golden, who says his ship and its crew were 'guinea pigs' to be sacrificed so the attack could be blamed on Egypt and the Soviets.



Top row, left to right: Admiral Shlomo Erell, head of Israeli Navy in 1967; General Shlomo Gazit, deputy chief of Aman. Middle row: General Ezer Weizman, Chief of the General Staff. Bottom row, left to right: Captain Isaac Rahav, acting head of Israeli navy during the Liberty attack; Udi Erell, torpedo boat officer.

7. Cover Story

‘There is such a thing as legitimate warfare: war has its laws; there are things which may be fairly done, and things which may not be done...’
Cardinal Newman, 1864

Udi Erell is one of the few Israeli entrepreneurs currently making money. Despite the violence engulfing his country in February 2002, the marina and apartment complex he runs in Herzliya, a fashionable seaside resort north of Tel Aviv, is booming. Aboard his ocean-going yacht, shared with two friends, he spoke of the moment 35 years ago when he was an officer cadet aboard one of the three motor torpedo boats that attacked the *Liberty*, and the terrible moment his crew discovered they had torpedoed an American ship.

Erell is the son of Admiral Shlomo Erell, head of the Israeli Navy in 1967. Late on the morning of 8 June, his MTB was in harbour at the southern Israeli port city of Ashdod. ‘One of the boat’s sirens went off, a sign everybody had to get aboard, and they immediately started the engines. There was a fantastic roar and we immediately cast off our lines and rushed out. I, at least, didn’t know why. The sea was very calm, a bright day. On the way we were told there was an unknown vessel to the south or south-west of us, and we sped over in that direction.

‘Apparently there had been reports that Gaza – I think Gaza – was being shelled from the sea. Anyway, very soon we did see a ship, clearly a naval vessel, and I remember the planes were already going in when we were speeding there. We tried to identify the vessel; it was a little difficult because when we were closer the aeroplanes were already dropping bombs on her and there was a lot of smoke going up. We were even a bit disappointed that

we weren't first on the scene. For us, it was clear that we had an enemy ship in front of us that we were going to attack.'

Erell said they were closing toward her starboard bow when someone produced an identification booklet: 'It had pictures of the Egyptian Navy ships and she was identified as the *El-Quseir*, which is a supply ship. It looked very similar to the *Liberty* [but] you have to remember she had already been fired upon by the aeroplanes.' He remembered seeing letters on the bow but he said that was not considered 'odd': 'I don't personally recall seeing the name *Liberty* at any point but it must have been there, and somebody did see it at a certain point.'

The *Liberty* survivors, including Captain McGonagle, had reported that Signalman Russell David had used an Aldis lamp to flash 'USS LIBERTY' and 'US NAVY SHIP' in Morse code to the approaching MTBs. Erell denied this. He said his boat was signalling, 'What ship are you?' but only received 'AA', meaning, 'identify yourself', in response. 'So they didn't identify themselves,' Erell added. 'At that point we were all quite sure that it was an Egyptian ship.' He said it looked like a supply ship, but admitted that in retrospect it didn't make any sense for the *El-Quseir* to be there. 'Everything happened so fast with the Six-Day War, it could clearly have been mixed up. But we didn't stop to reflect about that because the ship had already been attacked and the order was to attack the ship.'

He said the three Israeli boats headed for the ship, his a little ahead, and 500 yards apart: 'Each boat fired torpedoes at will, [from] something like 1,000 yards. We immediately went after the torpedoes... shooting with our guns.' He said his boat had a 40-millimetre gun in the stern and a 20-millimetre gun forward that was also firing. Significantly he claimed the shooting lasted just five minutes, not the 40-minute bombardment the *Liberty* crew remembers. 'Some of us were pretty sure that they were shooting back at us,' Erell said. 'Personally, I didn't think so. But I remember that the crew – at least, the crew of the 40-millimetre – were shouting, "Did you see how they shot at us?"' This was probably the cannon aboard the *Liberty*

which was firing by itself after the operator had been killed.

Erell described how each torpedo was launched overboard to free-fall into the water, after which the propeller started up automatically: 'You lose sight of it for a minute and then you see the wake. You don't actually see the torpedo, at least from behind. It was going straight for the ship and we were sure that our torpedo was the one that hit – about amidships or maybe a little forward of that.' He said the explosion was 'not as big or as dramatic as what we saw when the planes dropped their bombs, much less fire... there was a feeling of an implosion, not an explosion... of the ship going up in the water a little and then settling back down. It wasn't a very dramatic thing.'

He was also adamant that there was no sighting of the US flag until the torpedo had exploded: 'I definitely recall we only saw the flag afterwards and I wasn't the only one [who thought] that it was being raised up. It suddenly came out of the smoke and at first it looked red and we were sure it was a Russian ship. All the boats were stopped dead in the water, very close to each other. We were used to Russian spy ships being in the area and so we thought it was a Russian ship. Then we heard the skipper of the other boat calling our skipper and doing the sign for being demoted, for shooting a Russian ship. You sometimes get flashes of scenes that you always remember: that was one of them.'

'But then we came in a little closer and we saw that it was an American flag. We radioed back to headquarters to say it was an American ship and we simply sailed around her a few times. There was some debris in the water. It went along with the spy ship thing; very long strips of paper like they use in telegraphic typing machines... It was kind of a shock. Of course we understood the gravity of the situation. At first we thought it was a Russian ship and the shock was even bigger because we knew that the Russians were on our enemy's side, and this was a super-power that we had fired upon. When we found out it was an American ship it was some kind of a relief. It's very difficult to use that word [but] we didn't know at that point there were injured people there. We weren't that happy about it, of course.'

Having realised the mistake, Erell claimed the MTBs quickly tried to help: 'I remember at a certain point we went closer in to offer assistance; I think we hailed them with a loudspeaker and we were turned away. Definitely they didn't want any assistance from us, so we kept our distance. And then the helicopters came – big helicopters: we knew they were Israeli helicopters, we identified them and we were sure they also came to offer assistance, maybe to take wounded people off the ship. They were driven away too. So at a certain point we simply turned back and left the ship.'

Erell denied the allegation that the MTBs shot up the life-rafts. 'There was nothing even resembling a life-raft,' he said, 'and we certainly didn't shoot at it.' Then he discussed why the *Liberty* was attacked: 'A lot of things, of course, went wrong, and it began at naval headquarters; they should have been in much more control. When the aircraft identified a naval vessel, they should have waited for a better identification because the ship wasn't going anywhere. There was no way the ship could get away. If the ship hadn't been fired on [by the aircraft] we would have probably gone in for a better identification. Somebody should have asked the question what a supply ship was doing in this area with no naval combat around her; it didn't make any sense.'

More questions should have been asked of other powers, Erell argued, about whether they had a ship in the area, and the US was at fault for not getting a message to the *Liberty* to stay away: 'Having said all that, it was clearly a case of mistaken identity... but we were inexperienced at the time; we were probably a little trigger-happy because the war was running away from us. And it was a war zone. No one should have been there, and anyone who was there was doing it at his own risk.'

Erell said the stories of El Arish being shelled for two to three hours should have been checked, and he described the error made in the speed of the ship they were sent to attack – 30 knots instead of five – as 'a very normal mistake' given the equipment they had at that time. 'I am very, very sorry that all this happened. It's a tragedy, but it's a tragedy that happens in war and mistakes were done on both sides. There is no doubt in my mind, not a

shred of a doubt, that this wasn't intentional. I don't believe that we are that well organised to be able to premeditate such an attack. You need a fantastic organisation and I don't think we have that, not now. For sure we didn't have it at that time to be able to create such a fantastic story.'

Defeating the official Israeli argument, so eloquently and passionately put by Udi Erell, that it was inexperience and error that led to the calamity has been a tough job for the *Liberty* veterans. If Israel was lying, one had to calculate that a carefully drawn-up plan must have been formulated – well in advance of the attack – that would ensure deniability and total secrecy. People down the pecking order like Udi would not have been informed of the overall objective. Indeed, they may have been deliberately misled about crucial details.

The post-attack cover-up, orchestrated by the United States Government, was another obstacle to exposing the truth. After the torpedo boats withdrew, several *Liberty* CTs remembered that signals had been picked up from the attacking planes showing the pilots were fully aware they were attacking a United States naval vessel. Apparently a tape had been kept of these conversations and handed over to Admiral Isaac Kidd. But none of this evidence has ever been released, if indeed it was kept.

Over the years, witnesses came forward who might be able to confound the official view, but with unsatisfactory results. A tantalising story emerged in 1983. East Coast attorney Joseph Adragna said that summer he and a former New York policeman, Art McHugh, had visited a federal prison on Park Row, New York City, to interview Amnon Even-Tov, an Israeli who was pleading guilty to larceny 'by trick or fraud'. Even-Tov had proposed a deal; he wanted a new identity, protection from further action by the United States Government and discharge from the long jail sentence he was expecting. In return, he would reveal what he knew about the *Liberty* attack, and hand over a recording he had made of a 40-minute conversation with General Ezer Weizman, Chief of the General Staff.

Even-Tov was described by Adragna as 'handsome' and 'for real'. Apparently he had been second-in-command of an eight-plane flight ordered to bomb the ship. He and his commander had refused to participate in the attack because it was a United States vessel, but had not been punished because of their good records. Two days after the visit to the jail, the attorney received a call from the prison saying the Israeli no longer wanted their help.¹

It later became clear that Dwight Porter, US Ambassador in Lebanon at the time of the *Liberty* attack, knew far more about the circumstances than most of his State Department superiors in Washington. In a conversation in 1986 with his friend William L. Chandler, who had been president and chief executive officer of the Trans-Arabian Pipe Line Company in Beirut in 1967, he revealed that Israel's excuse of mistaking the ship for the *El-Quseir* was a sham. 'Bill, you probably wondered why our Beirut Embassy was so large, with so many people,' Porter said to Chandler. 'We were the communications centre for the USG [United States Government] in the Middle East, and we had a highly sophisticated communications system, capable of listening in on everything going on in the area. We had people fluent in the various languages of the area, including Hebrew.

'We were listening to all of the battle communications of both sides, and on the day of the attack on the *Liberty* we heard the pilot of an Israeli aircraft say to his ground control: "But Sir, it's an American ship: I can see the flag." And we heard the ground control respond: "Never mind; hit it!" There was no case of mistaken identity.' Chandler also said Porter had mentioned that a radio transmission had been intercepted that they thought was Robert McNamara's, ordering the carrier aircraft which had been dispatched to aid the *Liberty* back to the carrier.²

Porter evidently repeated this story to US journalist Rowland Evans, who published the story in a syndicated newspaper column co-written with Robert Novak on 6 November 1991. The pair also interviewed Seth Mintz, a former major in the Israeli Army who had attended a reunion that summer of *Liberty* veterans. Mintz, who was by this time living in the town of Holden,

Maine, revealed he had been in the Israeli war room during the attack. He told the *Liberty* veterans that the Israelis knew the *Liberty* was American, adding: 'You could read the numbers on the side of the ship. It was no big secret.' Evans and Novak quoted Mintz as saying, 'Everyone felt it was an American ship and that it was the *Liberty*... there were comments about the markings, about the flag. Everyone in that room was convinced that it was an American ship.' Mintz apparently had said his country was 'guilty of an outrage'. However, soon after this the Israeli clammed up, leading to suspicions he had been ticked off.³

As previously reported, a story emerged that as many as three of the 'Israeli' pilots were US citizens. The names of Commander John Fitzgerald, Major Walter Rothstein and Major Jack Batey were apparently quoted at a talk by Paul Forsyth in Washington, but they were never traced. It is possible they were trained in the US and held dual nationality.⁴

Later still, in December 1994, a Colonel Yoash Tsiddon-Chatto, said to be an Israeli pilot who participated in the attack, came forward with this comment: 'When one fights a war for life and death, one does not allow oneself a low fly-past to positively identify and, maybe, read the ship's name (which does not say much in these circumstances). Anti-aircraft radar-guided weapons were too efficient to permit it.' The implication was that whether or not a United States flag was spotted was immaterial; their orders were to shoot first and not question them.

However, it was in May 2001, with the publication of a book about the National Security Agency by the US writer James Bamford,⁵ that public interest was rekindled in the *Liberty* controversy. In a chapter discussing the attack, he quoted a senior CT and Hebrew linguist, Marvin E. Nowicki, who in 1967 had flown in an EC-121 Ferret, a converted Lockheed Constellation, with enormous bulbous radomes above and below the fuselage. The plane was designed to give early warning of nuclear attack, guiding planes and missiles to targets, and on 8 June that year was spying on the military traffic of the Six-Day War.

Nowicki said he and his men 'were going crazy' trying to cope

with the heavy radio traffic when another of his Hebrew linguists contacted him on the secure intercom. 'Hey, Chief; I've got really odd activity on UHF,' the linguist said. 'They mentioned an American flag. I don't know what's going on.' Nowicki said he asked him for the frequency and tuned to it. 'Sure as the devil,' said Nowicki, 'Israeli aircraft were completing an attack on some object.'

There was a gap before the linguist called again: 'He told me about new activity and that the American flag is being mentioned again... I heard a couple of references to the flag during an apparent attack. The attackers weren't aircraft; they had to be surface units... I had never heard MTB attacks in voice before, so we had no idea what was occurring below us. I advised the evaluator; he was as mystified as we were.'

The story seemed to be convincing, and Bamford's book became a best-seller partly on account of it, but Nowicki quickly made it clear that he disagreed with the author's interpretation. In a letter to the *Wall Street Journal*, he argued the attack was called off as soon as the US flag was spotted. 'My personal recollection remains... that the aircraft and MTBs prosecuted the [attack on] the *Liberty* until their operators had an opportunity to get close in and see the flag, hence the references to the flag... My position, which is the opposite of Mr Bamford's, is that the attack... was a gross error...'⁶

There is little doubt, however, that the presence of the EC-121 in the area was a serious annoyance to the Israeli Air Force, so much so that it was nearly shot down. Charles Tiffany, now an attorney in the US, was in the cockpit. 'I was a brand new navigator flying in a Navy EC-121m electronic surveillance aircraft,' he said. 'This was the military version of the Super Connie [Super Constellation airliner] of TWA [Transworld Airlines] fame. We were so loaded with equipment and drag inducing antennae, that we were sitting ducks if attacked... I was on course and 20 miles off the Egyptian coast. We had flown that track before so the Israelis knew where and when we would be heading their way. We were at 20,000 feet, about 75 miles west of Gaza, when the guys in the special tent for radio intercepts yelled that we [had]

got something crazy on UHF. The skipper had them record it. Seconds later we were tearing back to Athens in a screaming dive to get as much air speed as possible. We had been given a Code One which means you are about to be shot down. I thought it was from Egyptian or Soviet fighters; little did I know that a flight of Mirages was heading to kill us because we had just stumbled on the *Liberty* slaughter. We got back by a miracle and the blessed short range of the Mirage 1...'⁷

The significant breakthrough came from a man who in 1967 was stationed at Offutt Air Force Base in windswept Omaha, Nebraska, one of America's most secret military complexes. Working in a highly secret vault at the Strategic Air Command headquarters there, he was cleared to read and handle the most sensitive signals traffic intercepted by the NSA and other agencies.

Steve does not want his full name published, but his knowledge of the *Liberty* attack is of significance, for he not only learned at first hand that it was committed deliberately, with the intention of killing every single crewman; he can also testify that the Pentagon was aware of this from a very early stage, probably before the Israeli planes opened fire. Having remained silent since 1967, he finally decided to reveal his knowledge in April 2002, and contacted *Liberty* veteran Jim Ennes. He said he had always been disturbed at his own government's ready acceptance of Israel's explanation that it was an accidental attack. His disapproval of Israel's recent handling of the Palestinian problem, exacerbated as it had been by the Six-Day War, was a factor in his going public.

He revealed that in June 1967 he was working under the direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the 544th Air Reconnaissance Unit in a part of the Nebraska centre where banks of Teletype machines received raw data from all over the world.⁸ There were several teams, led by officers, who were responsible for various areas of the world. 'We basically kept track of many areas, mostly pertaining to the USSR, and tracked order-of-battle information,' he said. 'The product we produced was the SIOP or Single Integrated Operational Plan. This was a JCS [Joint Chiefs of

Staff] publication; thus there were members of different service branches working there.

'We, as far as I could tell, had access to virtually all sources of information in order to comprehensively do our mission. This profusion of sources and data was how I happened to pick up on the 1967 Israeli/Arab conflict. If it was in a foreign language, it would be translated before we received it, as it came in, and passed on within minutes – not a simultaneous relay, but almost as good as that. This type of traffic was also forwarded through other agencies to the senior leadership, and we were certainly not the only agency forwarding to the JCS.

'My role was to study transmissions about Soviet activity, but everything came into our centre and we all read everything. It was felt that regardless of the context or source of information it may contain a tidbit that applied to an analyst's area... On the Monday, 5 June, we were following the war and there was no correlation between what we were receiving and what was appearing in the media. It was clear from the moment the war began that Israel had started it, and that the Egyptians were acting defensively and were being heavily defeated. On the Tuesday, we began hearing the Israelis had attacked Jordan.'

Steve said he could not recall details for the first three days of fighting after such a long timespan, but his memory of Day Four was still clear: 'On Thursday we began receiving transmissions translated from Hebrew from planes that had been sent by the Israeli command centre to attack an American ship. I don't believe the specific name of the ship was mentioned but it was evident it was American and that it was imperative it be sunk quickly before it could alert American forces and get help.'

Later, he discovered from news reports it was the USS *Liberty*. He continued: 'After the initial attack failed to sink it, there was a lot of activity indicating that a way to sink it had to be found immediately and there could be no witnesses to the sinking. We received a stream of transmissions between the command centre and the aircraft. I didn't know that surface vessels were attacking the *Liberty* as I was not reading any

intercepts from them, only [from] aircraft and ground stations.

'It was clear from the outset that they had been sent to attack an American naval ship. There was no mistaken identity; they knew exactly who they were attacking and it was deliberately planned and executed. No one expressed any doubts about it; the [Israeli] ground station was obviously frustrated and reiterated that it was imperative that the ship be sunk immediately. All the time we heard the command centre expressing annoyance that the attack was supposed to sink the ship in the first few minutes and it was taking far too long. That was their only concern – that the ship was staying afloat.'

Steve said the message traffic indicated that the Israeli planes had stopped attacking. Later, after they had been ordered to go in again with yet more bombs, the attack was called off. He then learned why: 'I heard verbally from another team-mate that diplomatic messages [from the State Department] had been intercepted from the US to Israel telling them to cease the attack immediately because we were aware of what they were doing and that they knew it was our ship. Shortly after that intercept, traffic relative to the attack ceased. However, there is no doubt that within minutes of the attack commencing, the Joint Chiefs knew it was Israeli and it is a mystery why they did nothing about it until the ship had been battered for an hour and a half.'

Steve said he had the impression the senior leadership in Washington had taken a long time to gather together and decide to send Israel the message, which he recalled carried the threat of military retaliation by the United States if Israel did not comply. Sitting in his high-security chamber in Nebraska, the strategic reasons for the attack were a mystery to him. 'I assumed at the time that [Israel] didn't want us to know, or at least get, hard data, that they were the aggressor in the conflict,' he said. 'The USS *Liberty* would have been the most open and obvious indicator of our capability to monitor them. We couldn't understand why they would have attacked the ship otherwise, because these ships [were] common, garden-variety collection vessels found everywhere.'

Steve dismissed the notion that orders were given to sink the

Liberty to disable the United States' ability to eavesdrop: 'People say the *Liberty* was attacked because it was picking up signals showing Israel was planning to attack Syria and could, throughout the rest of the conflict, confirm the offensive nature of the Israeli actions. In fact we received very little from those ships comparatively; we got much more from other platforms and sources. Removing the *Liberty* would not have meant we would have not learned what Israel was up to. They were generally ignored by nations, just as we mostly ignored other countries' collection vessels. As I stated previously, there were many other sources of intercepts beside these collection vessels.'

Going home that night, Steve was bemused by the TV news reports about 'the tragic mistake, and how both countries felt it was just a series of errors that had a tragic result.' He added: 'I cannot prove anything. I can only tell you that after my experience I came away with what I feel are two facts: one, that Israel started the Six-Day War, and two, that the USS *Liberty* was intentionally attacked knowing it was American, and that there were some very upset people when it didn't go down easy.'

The story is compelling, and another witness came forward a few weeks later who was able to confirm it further. Richard Block, an Air Force Captain, had kept his experiences of 8 June 1967 to himself until provoked by a book, written by a Miami judge, Jay Cristol, which claimed that the attack was provably an accident. Block confronted Cristol at a book-signing in Coral Gables, Florida, in July 2002 and accused him of ignoring evidence that showed Israel acted intentionally. He also wrote to the *Miami Herald*.

He said he was Operations Duty Officer on watch in the 6931st Air Force Security Group in Crete and was receiving signals picked up by a number of C-130 reconnaissance aircraft which were monitoring the war. This was a separate operation from the EC-121 Ferrets flown by Marvin Nowicki's unit, which belonged to the United States Navy. Block said on 8 June he was listening to Israeli ground-to-air communications when the USS *Liberty* was attacked. 'The Israeli pilot clearly identified the ship as a US intelligence-collection vessel,' he said, 'and asked

the ground controller for guidance. I sent a CRITIC message to President Johnson over the incident.'

He said the C-130s were relaying real-time intercepts from the Israeli aircraft, and these were immediately translated from Hebrew by people in his unit. He was in no doubt that the Israeli pilots were ordered to attack what they knew was an American ship. He sent the CRITIC, ultimately destined for the White House, via the Air Force's All Source Reconnaissance Center in San Antonio. Block said Lyndon Johnson must have known about the attack, and the identity of the attackers, as soon as it began.

Beyond all reasonable doubt, the attack on the *Liberty* was intentional and authorised by the military high command, but how did they get away with it; in planning the details, how could the generals guarantee obedience? A considerable number of Israeli officers and men in both the Air Force and Navy had to carry out an operation that was morally highly questionable. Both General Ezer Weizman and Admiral Shlomo Erell focused on this issue and argued that, however dastardly the motives of the Israeli military top brass might have been, it would have been impossible to persuade people lower down the pecking-order to carry out an attack that meant killing nearly 300 American sailors and destroying an ally's vessel.

But what if the people lower down the chain of command were deliberately fooled into attacking the ship by means of a carefully concocted pretext? The cover story for the outside world was that, in the fog of war, the *Liberty* was accidentally mistaken for an Egyptian supply ship. But how could people like Udi Erell be lured into the deceit?

The report by Judge Yerushalmi into the attack provides a pointer to how this was done. The first essential, from the viewpoint of Defence Minister Moshe Dayan or Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin, would have been to insulate the top brass from any blame. According to the judge, Captain Itzhak Rahav – the acting chief of naval operations – was the crucial figure. All decisions, it was argued, came from the Navy command centre on Mount Carmel,

where Rahav was responsible for all the vital decisions because, by some fluke, his boss – Admiral Shlomo Erell – was absent. He was a mile away, down in the naval dockyard and, by the admiral's own account, he was not contacted even though his car had a radio.

Rahav had, of course, authority to mobilise the MTBs and order them into action but the planes, under the control of the Air Force, were surely a different matter. Not so, said the judge: 'Even though Air Force Headquarters issued the order to the pilots to attack, it was really an order issued by the Navy, passed on through Air Force HQ, and the responsibility for its issue falls upon whoever issued it at Naval HQ.'

The next question addressed by Yerushalmi was what triggered the combined air and sea onslaught. He covers this in some detail, placing great weight on one aspect – the assertion that on the morning of 8 June, El Arish had been under shelling attack 'for hours'. The report states: 'Before noon, between 1100 and 1200 hours, Navy headquarters received reports from two separate sources, according to which El Arish was being shelled from the sea. The naval representative at Air Force headquarters was ordered to check the credibility of the report. This officer got in touch with Air Force operations branch, and was told that the source of the report was the air-ground support officer. Immediately thereafter he was informed by the naval representative at general headquarters (GHQ) that the information about the shelling received by them originated from southern command. It is to be noted that the reports from southern command were also accompanied by information that two vessels had been observed approaching the coast.'

The judge gives no details about these sightings or the shelling and, if a reconnaissance plane was despatched to take a look, there is no reference in his report to it. It continued: 'At 1205 hours an order was given to three torpedo boats of the division at Ashdod to proceed in the direction of El Arish. Reports about the shelling continued to reach GHQ/Operations, and pressure was exerted on the naval representative, on the lines that, "the coast has been shelled for hours, and you – the navy – are not reacting".

'The naval representative contacted navy HQ and proposed an immediate action. He was informed that torpedo boats had been sent to the spot to locate the target, and it had also been agreed with the naval representative at Air Force HQ that, as soon as the torpedo boats located the target, aircraft would be dispatched... According to the division log-book, a target was located at 1341 hours situated at a distance of about 20 miles north of El Arish. The division was ordered to "close in and identify the target", and reported that the unidentified target was moving at a speed of 30 knots westwards – that is, in the direction of Port Said.

'A few minutes later, the Division Commander reported that the target, now 17 miles from him, was moving at a speed of 28 knots, and since he could not overtake it, he requested the dispatch of aircraft towards it... The aircraft carried out a run over the ship in an attempt to identify it. According to their statements, they were looking for a flag, but found none; likewise, no other identification mark was observed. As against this, it was established that the painting of the ship was grey [the colour of a warship], and two guns were situated in the bow. This was reported to HQ. On the assumption that they were facing an enemy target, an order was given to the aircraft to attack.'

Crew aboard the *Liberty* would, of course, argue that the witnesses in Israel were wilfully lying about the absence of the US flag, about the miscalculation of their ship's speed and about planes making a reconnaissance run first. They said the incoming aircraft fired immediately, which was also confirmed by Steve and pilot Tsiddon-Chatto. Yerushalmi did not seek to interview any US survivors and so this contradiction did not trouble him, but his report still begs many questions, none more glaring than these: if two of the *Liberty's* 50-millimetre cannons were spotted by the attacking aircraft, why did the pilots not consider the *Liberty's* distinctive aerial arrays a significant feature worth reporting to HQ? And if nothing more lethal than cannon were aboard this so-called warship, how could it have been shelling El Arish?

The official Israeli position, that the acting chief of naval operations took all the key decisions, is simply not true, according to

the man himself, Captain Itzhak 'Izzy' Rahav. Now 76 and retired after a successful career in the shipping business, he agreed to meet at a café in Ramat Hasharon, a town near Tel Aviv, but was at first reluctant to talk about the attack. He opened up, however, in reaction to the notion that he was the instigator. Quite the reverse, he argued: he was simply following instructions shouted at him from military headquarters.

In any case, he said, he had no authority to mobilise the planes. 'I couldn't order the attack. It was GHQ or the Air Force,' he said, and he could not explain why Admiral Shlomo Erell was absent that fateful day. 'Ask him. I don't know where he was.'

He said no one told him earlier that morning that a US vessel had been spotted by reconnaissance planes and identified with a marker on the plotting table in his command centre. I pointed out that duty officer Avraham Lunz had said he noted the marker when he arrived at 8 am. Lunz had then added: 'At around 11 am, checking the situation and knowing that no ship would stay on its place, and five-hours-old information was quite old, we took it off without knowing where it went.'⁹ Rahav refused to comment on this except to say he did not remember seeing Lunz that day: 'Anyhow, I wasn't told there was an American ship there.'

He said shortly after 11 am he had been alerted that there must be a foreign ship threatening the Sinai coast when information came in from his GHQ that the beach near El Arish was being shelled. 'The information about shelling of El Arish came from GHQ,' he said. 'They were sure it was Egyptian. They hadn't seen the ship but they were sure... They told me, "We are under fire: why are you indifferent?" They got it from the southern theatre – people who were in the field. They told GHQ: "The southern front is under attack." They got information from the people in El Arish: they communicated to GHQ. I was amazed how an Egyptian [ship] would be able to do it. How would they dare when we had such an Air Force? It was ridiculous.'

Rahav said he realised it was illogical, but he was trying to deal with the emergency in the Navy command centre in Haifa, and he relied on his superiors in the main military command HQ in Tel

Aviv. From just after 11 am that morning until the time of the attack – 2 pm – they were being informed by Southern Command that El Arish was being shelled from offshore. He added with emphasis: ‘They were sure! They called me at least ten times! “Why are you waiting – they are shelling us?” They were sure they were shelled by a ship.’ Following firm orders, he thus exhorted the MTBs to attack, as he knew the planes had done.

He was certain of one thing: ‘Nobody would dare to attack an American ship. The MTBs identified it as an Egyptian ship. They had a book ... and they didn’t see any sign of an American flag. You must understand one thing; if somebody had thought or imagined it was an American ship, no action would have been taken. You can’t attack your best friend; it’s impossible.’

We returned to the issue of Rahav’s missing boss. Did he contact Shlomo Erell to tell him of the attack? ‘I couldn’t find him,’ said the Captain. ‘He says he [was in Haifa naval dockyard]: what can I say? Maybe he had a radio, but [it was] closed. I don’t know. I don’t know whether he was in the port... He came back several hours later. Listen: I don’t want to discuss the relationship between us. He came after a few hours, I don’t know how many – two, one, three hours.’

I pointed out that Shlomo Erell implied the attack was his fault and he had been pressed to resign his commission. Rahav instead blamed his series of mistakes on ‘fog in a battle’. He added: ‘There was an investigation. I left the Navy, so I don’t know. I didn’t see it.’ But he stressed that he left because he wanted to, and was immediately offered the post of head of Haifa commercial docks, from which position he rose to become general manager of all Israel’s ports, as well as a director of Bank Leumi. He said if he had been really at fault, he would never have been rewarded with such a plum job.

Thirty-five years after the event, it is impossible to know what pressures were put on Judge Yerushalmi, now long deceased. Though he confined his investigation to Israeli witnesses, the opinions of the United States Navy were sought but the offer was declined. Only those aboard the MTBs and aircraft know what

they saw that day, and they may not have been free to speak to the official inquiry. Whether it is credible that the attacking planes and boats could have missed seeing the US flag, then misconstrued, as well as misread, the five-foot-high lettering on the *Liberty's* bow (it said GTR-5), and then not seen 'USS LIBERTY' across the stern, is a matter of opinion.

However, the testimony of Izzy Rahav, Steve and Ambassador Dwight Porter cannot be so easily buried. What is most likely is that Rahav was not the culprit but the fall-guy, that someone ensured Admiral Erell was deliberately absent during the crucial period and that the plan to sink the *Liberty* was orchestrated from Tel Aviv and southern command. But why? Most *Liberty* veterans naturally focused on the most obvious explanation; they were a spy ship.

The vessel might have been in international waters, but it had been operating with all the latest electronic gadgetry in a war zone, and eavesdropping on the military radio traffic of the combatants. This, the survivors concluded, had made them a target; the Israelis wanted to conceal plans for extending the conflict and were fearful the United States might try to scupper them.¹⁰

To support this theory, it was known Israel had put off discussion of its plan to invade Syria until the evening of 8 June, when the *Liberty* was disabled and limping towards Malta. To everyone's surprise, Dayan had fought a one-man battle to veto extending the conflict northwards, and won. As the Cabinet went home, everyone thought the war was all but over, with the parts of Egypt and Jordan that Israel coveted conquered. However, they woke the next morning to news that their defence minister had changed his mind, and had already given the order to attack the Golan Heights without further consultation.

'I opposed such action [at the Cabinet meeting] in the most extreme terms,' Dayan later wrote, 'but conditions changed. At midnight that night, after I had had my say, I went to general headquarters. There I learned that Nasser had agreed to a ceasefire. At three in the morning, Syria announced that she, too, accepted a ceasefire. There was also an intelligence report that Kuneitra [a Syrian town near the border] was empty, and that the

Syrian front was beginning to collapse. These announcements and reports prompted me to change my mind. At 7 am I gave the order to go into action against Syria.¹¹

Israeli tanks stormed up the Golan Heights at dawn on 9 June, and they were well on their way towards Damascus when an edgy Washington, and an even edgier Moscow, put pressure on Levi Eshkol to call a halt¹² (see Chapter Three). As already noted, Dayan makes no reference to the *Liberty* in his memoirs and it is impossible to know if its presence offshore was a factor in delaying the invasion. But much later in life, he admitted he had acted against his better judgement. He said he had responded to the 'greed' of those of his countrymen who wanted to extend their settlements in the area. 'I did not fulfil my duties as the Minister of Defence, in that I did not prevent things that I was certain had to be stopped,' he said, rueing the way it had become a cause of continuing conflict.¹³

To many, however, Dayan seemed to be attempting to rationalise his own bizarre behaviour, and it was seen as a support for those who thought the *Liberty* was the missing link in his decision-making. Yet this theory does not hold water. Dayan had spent weeks in Vietnam the previous year as the guest of the United States military. He would have known, as Steve confirmed, that the *Liberty* was only one of many spying platforms deployed by the US to monitor trouble-spots. Removing it would make no decisive difference.

Furthermore, it assumes that the United States would have minded if Israel had invaded Syria. Though it would have conflicted with United States diplomatic policy, the attitude of the White House at the time was a different matter. Giving another Soviet-backed regime a bloody nose, provided it did not go too far, was what Johnson and his closest advisors appeared to relish.

John Haddon, CIA chief in Tel Aviv during the Six-Day War, had a unique viewpoint of the build-up to the conflict. He saw Israel's position in historical terms; a country with borders difficult to defend which was determined on expansion. '[Israel] was about the stage of Prussia before Frederick the Great,' he said when we

met at his home in Brunswick, Maine. 'Prussia was at that time an oyster without a shell, but they had the same dreams that Frederick did; they were on their way to achieving it. They've got the water, they've got the land, there's no going back, it's gone too far and of course they've [now] created the settlements in order to create a constituency that would never let an Israeli administration go back.'

For the CIA's man on the spot, there was no question that Israel was simply pre-empting an Arab invasion on 5 June 1967. There was, for some Israeli leaders, a grand plan, which is still in place. It seemed also that Lyndon Johnson went along with it. He had no impression that Washington was alarmed at Israel's belligerence, merely concerned that Israel stopped short of going all the way to Damascus. 'Oh, I think the United States was perfectly happy to see Israel win,' he said. 'I never saw any sense from any American side that was unwilling to see Israel win hands-down.' Chuckling, he added: 'By the time the end of the week turned up, and they moved on the Syrians, then the Americans began to say, "Enough is enough. Why don't you sort of cool it? Let's just pack it in; don't you have enough?" Then they finished off the Syrians...'

In Haddon's opinion, 'the Americans were getting a little "antsy" about going too far and putting the Soviets in a position [with] no place to go. You know, you don't want to back a guy up against the wall.' As mentioned earlier, Johnson had Harry McPherson, one of his closest advisers, in Israel watching the military build-up and he paid a visit to the Syrian front during the war. The *Liberty* was not, therefore, a sufficient threat to Israel's war plans to justify the force unleashed against Syria or the possible repercussions. There had to be another reason.

In one sense, Israel is right that the *Liberty* attack was a mistake. Its military failed, though only just, in their objective of sinking expeditiously and killing all on board. If one penetrates the fog of this war, and the smog generated by innumerable historical analyses, there is an answer to why it happened. It is the secret role the US played in the Six-Day War that is the key.

8. Condition November

'Men are free to walk around the deck of a ship about whose destination they know nothing, and over which they cannot exert the slightest control.'

Arnold Geulincx, seventeenth-century philosopher

On the morning of 5 June the *Liberty* was steaming near its maximum speed of 13 knots and was midway between Rota and the Sinai coast. As the realisation dawned among the ship's officers that they were being sent perilously close to what was now a war zone, it seemed sensible to request protection from the Sixth Fleet, which was assembled and on alert near Crete.

A formal request was encrypted and radioed to Vice-Admiral William Martin, Fleet Commander, for a destroyer to be sent as an armed escort and auxiliary communications centre. The *Liberty* suggested it should remain five miles away as the spy ship followed its planned route along the coast.

Martin took his time, perhaps to consult with the Pentagon, and eventually responded on 6 June. His message surprised Lt Commander Dave Lewis, who passed it to Captain McGonagle: 'USS *Liberty* is a clearly marked United States ship in international waters, not a participant in the conflict and not a reasonable subject for attack by any nation. In the unlikely event of an inadvertent attack, jet fighters from the Sixth Fleet carrier force could be overhead in less than ten minutes. Every commanding officer has authority to withdraw from danger. Request for escort denied.'¹

McGonagle and his men had assumed there would be little problem detailing an escort, and as a precaution it made a lot of sense. After the outbreak of hostilities the Egyptians had unilaterally

declared a 200-mile exclusion zone to shipping in the eastern Mediterranean and had closed the Suez Canal. Moving to almost 12 miles from the Egyptian shore was risky, even though the United States was not a participant in the conflict and a mighty foe to attack. The *Liberty* had just four 50-millimetre cannon, allowing only token resistance if anyone threatened the crew or tried to hijack the top-secret cipher codes and the ship's state-of-the-art electronic equipment.

McGonagle and his officers were comforted that air support from the Sixth Fleet would be less than ten minutes away; but by 8 June the Fleet had withdrawn to a position near Crete and was several hundred miles from the *Liberty*. Although planes could be launched within minutes from its two aircraft carriers, the USS *America* and USS *Saratoga*, Martin had grossly understated the possible response time.

Nevertheless, when hell descended on the USS *Liberty* at 2 pm that day, and a distress signal was sent out along a hastily improvised antenna, the expectation of those cowering from the assault was that the help would soon come – maybe not in ten minutes, but surely within half an hour. In between jamming signals from the attacking planes, radioman James Halman repeatedly sent out the distress message: 'Any station, this is Rockstar. We are under attack by unidentified jet aircraft and require immediate assistance.' It was received by the USS *Saratoga* at 2.09 pm and simultaneously by other US ships and shore stations. But after receiving acknowledgement, several minutes elapsed without a sign of action being taken. Halman radioed again, only to be plunged into a bureaucratic nightmare. The *Saratoga* was now requesting authentication, a standard procedure whereby the sender has to quote a secret codeword. The codebook was a heap of ashes on the floor. Halman yelled: 'Listen to the goddamned rockets, you son of a bitch!'

Minutes later came a response confirming that help was indeed on the way. The torpedo blasted into the starboard side of the ship; the MTBs circled round shooting at everything that moved and using armour-piercing bullets to fire below the waterline, trying to explode the *Liberty*'s boilers. Half an hour elapsed, and then an

hour, with no let-up in the concerted effort to sink the spy ship. Still the jets – said to be less than ten minutes away – failed to appear overhead. No help at all would come from the Sixth Fleet that day. The mystery of why the Israeli aircraft and boats broke off the attack, having stopped short of their apparent intention of removing all traces of the ship and crew, will be discussed later. The *Liberty's* crew have focused more on why they were abandoned by their own country, an issue that has never been addressed by the United States Government.

The naval Court of Inquiry makes no reference to planes being launched by the aircraft carriers of the Sixth Fleet because officers from the Sixth Fleet were not called to give evidence. Since then, the Pentagon has sidestepped the issue; but a handful of people who were witnesses to aspects of this episode have come forward.

One of the first was Captain Joseph Tully, who in 1967 was commanding officer of the carrier USS *Saratoga*. For days, several Russian ships had been playing cat-and-mouse with the two aircraft carriers, weaving in and out and impeding their opportunity to turn into the wind and launch aircraft. In the early afternoon of 8 June Tully was conducting a drill when he was interrupted. This is an extract from his written account.²

'The *Saratoga's* communications officer came hurriedly to the navigation bridge and reported, to the best of my memory, the following: "Captain, a US ship with the call sign of ROCKSTAR," which he identified as an AGI (intelligence-gathering vessel), "is calling on the Hi-Com net and advising that she was under attack by aircraft and surface ships and nobody was answering." As I recall, a position was given.

'My reaction was, "For God's sake, answer, and keep the circuit open, advising me of any further transmissions from ROCK-STAR." This was my first information that any AGI or AGTR was even in the Med... I said to myself, "That Joe Tully isn't going to be accused of doing nothing."

'I add at this point that *Saratoga* was in a condition of readiness such that an aircraft striking group was at 15 minutes' readiness,

requiring pilots [to sit] in the cockpits of at least four F-4s, four A-4s, plus some A4 tankers (just how many I don't recall) and four A-1s. In short, a strike group of 16 to 18 aircraft was ready and steam [was available] to the catapults.

'My immediate problem was [that] here was the whole Sixth Fleet carrier striking force, including two cruisers and numerous destroyers, all of which I could have hit with a thrown spud from the forecastle, and nobody but *Saratoga* was receiving the distress message... My decision was to use PRITAC, a plain-language circuit (either VHF or UHF, I don't remember which), since I figured that Vice-Admiral Martin, then busily exercising the fleet, almost had to be on the other end. In short, I re-sent [the distress] message plain-language to VADM Martin using his personal call-sign, and mine as CO *Saratoga*.

'His reaction was immediate! He turned the force into the wind, ordered both carriers to launch but, to my astonishment, on signal from the Sixth Fleet flagship, only *Saratoga* launched! To put it mildly, I was appalled! Shortly afterwards I was directed (by whom I don't know) to recall my strike group and to ready another to be launched when *America* was ready (?) to launch. No other explanation.'

Tully was clearly baffled at the *America's* behaviour, and his addition of the question-mark simply emphasised this. He went on: 'As a matter of common sense, on receipt of the distress message I had immediately ordered another similar group readied... *Saratoga's* aircraft were going to be loaded with some anti-aircraft and some anti-ship weapons. After some period the force was again ordered into the wind and we launched two strike groups, one from each carrier. This group was scarcely over the horizon [when] it also was ordered returned.'

Tully later remembered that the orders for each recall came from Rear-Admiral Geis. On each occasion Tully had to divert some of *Saratoga's* aircraft to Crete for unloading, because with 500lb bombs aboard they could not return to the carrier. What surprised Tully was that he and Captain Donald Engen, in charge of the carrier USS *America*, were never questioned about the affair.

He commented: 'This is the only incident of damage to a major US ship since the sinking of the USS *Maine* in Havana Harbour in 1898, prior to the Spanish-American War, that has not been investigated by the US Congress, and this must tell something.'

Tully's story fits with another told to one of the luckiest survivors of the attack, Lieutenant Commander David E. Lewis, whose rescue was described earlier.³ Lewis was temporarily blinded from the torpedo blast and later hoisted on to a helicopter for treatment in the USS *America's* sickbay.

Lewis said: 'After the doctor had lanced my eyelids open and cut the burnt paint off my eyeballs, I was told to report to Rear Admiral Geis [carrier commander]. This I did, thinking that the admiral wanted to congratulate my crew for their heroic attempts to save the ship [the *Liberty*]. I was very surprised when he apologised to me, as the senior officer from the *Liberty* aboard. He then told me about his two attempts to help us.'

Lewis learned that Geis had twice ordered the launching of aircraft to defend the *Liberty*, and each time he had received orders from the White House to recall them when they were already in the air. Lewis added: 'When the first were recalled by Robert McNamara, Geis thought McNamara was afraid that some of the aircraft might carry nuclear weapons. He immediately configured a flight with aircraft which could not carry nukes, relaunched and again notified Washington. Again McNamara ordered them recalled.'

'Geis then requested confirmation of the order and the Commander-in-Chief, Lyndon Johnson, came on and ordered them recalled, with the comment, "I will not embarrass our ally." Geis said that he was sure that it would all be hushed and our conversation would be highly classified. With that, he asked me to keep it confidential, but [said] that he had to tell someone that he had tried to help us.'

Lewis kept this story secret until Geis died 20 years later, but he then felt he had to tell: 'Twenty-four of the sailors who died in that attack were my sailors and as long as I live I will try to see that their deaths are vindicated.'

No paperwork has been voluntarily disclosed by the United States Government to support this serious allegation and nothing has come to light under the Freedom of Information Act. Lewis's story might be dismissed, as it seems incredible that rescue of the USS *Liberty* was cancelled on orders from Lyndon Johnson and his most trusted lieutenant, McNamara – except that he has an unshakeable memory of this brief encounter with Geis and has no obvious motive for attributing the decision to recall the planes to two people of whom one is still alive. More significantly, there is powerful corroboration from Julian 'Tony' Hart, the watch supervisor at the US Navy's primary CRITICOM⁴ communications centre at Sidi Yahia, Morocco. This state-of-the-art relay station was located inland 15 miles from the coastal town of Kénitra; the centre was also known by its former French name of Port Lyautey.

After leaving the US Navy, Hart had a highly successful business career in the California computer industry before retiring to Newcastle, Pennsylvania. He said that in Morocco in 1967 he worked for the Naval Security Group, helping to take charge of relaying classified naval traffic to the Sixth Fleet and other vessels in the Middle East, and was on duty on the afternoon of 8 June. For several days he had been handling signals from the *Liberty* and from two or three other US intelligence ships in the region, and with the war raging he and his men were working under high pressure to keep up with the volume of messages.

He said the *Liberty* normally communicated with Washington by transmitting at a prearranged time each day. It was therefore unusual when his radiomen⁵ rushed in and said the ship had come up on air and was transmitting. 'We first got in Teletype communications, and there was a voice circuit back-up that was more of a tactical link, and they said they were under attack. We went from "Oh, gee, they have something important" to "Wait a minute – this is real serious stuff here." At that point, they had my full attention.'

Hart said he contacted his boss and a 'CRITIC' message (the highest priority) was sent notifying Washington of an unconfirmed report that the *Liberty* was under attack by unknown

forces. Ten minutes later, after the identity of the ship had been authenticated, another CRITIC to this effect was dispatched. At the same time Hart picked up a 'flash message' from a carrier in the Sixth Fleet saying they had launched ready aircraft. Hart added: 'Within three or four minutes – it was very, very quickly – we had a flash message come through from Washington to the Sixth Fleet commander saying to recall the aircraft. Sixth Fleet sent a message to both the carriers to recall their aircraft and sent a message back to DC requesting authority to relaunch. There was then a period of maybe ten or 15 minutes, and then a voice communication link with Washington was brought up.

'The person identified himself on the phone as Secretary McNamara and wanted us to patch [him] through to Commander, Sixth Fleet... it was an unclassified link; it wasn't encrypted – we didn't have that capability back then. Commander, Sixth Fleet, the Admiral [presumably Admiral Geis], was talking to McNamara and asking for permission to relaunch the ready aircraft – relaunch any aircraft – and McNamara said no, that no aircraft were to be launched. He [McNamara] would give the launch orders, that at the time he was on his way to the White House and decisions made would be passed on. Both of the aircraft carriers had also sent Teletype traffic, through to Com [Commander] Sixth Fleet and back to Washington, requesting authority to at least investigate what was going on; and this was denied. McNamara directed Com. Sixth Fleet to recall the aircraft and Com. Sixth Fleet said, "Are you sure?" And he said, "Absolutely certain."

'About 40, 45 minutes later there was a second voice communication with Washington DC to Com. Sixth Fleet. The person again identified himself as McNamara and the Admiral identified himself as being there. He was told to dispatch investigating aircraft in 30 minutes or 25 minutes from when that occurred. It was not immediate, with no explanation as to why that was; of course, McNamara's the boss, you know? He doesn't have to explain why he says what he says. In the meantime, of course, traffic's flying back and forth between the various commands

asking for authority or for information, but no one knew anything. By then, the *Liberty* had been silent for quite some time.'

Hart said he realised at the time that the launching of ready aircraft was a serious matter and he had often wondered why McNamara was so promptly available so early that day. He remembered thinking when the call came through from Washington how quickly the Defence Secretary had responded: 'Understand, this was a long time ago and it was not like technology is today where I can pick up my cellphone in the middle of the deepest, darkest alley anywhere in the world and call to the deepest, darkest alley anywhere else in the world. That wasn't the case back then. It took some time to set up the communication links.'

He said 'ready' aircraft involved nuclear-armed planes that would sit on a carrier's deck with an armed guard: 'They are ready to go in the event of a nuclear attack. That was part of the strategy of the Cold War, of "We'll get you back; we aren't going to strike first, but if you attack us the retaliation will happen." When they were sent off, my first thought was: "Well, we don't want to do mushroom clouds."'

Hart assumed these planes were recalled in order to re-arm them conventionally: 'I was surprised by the length of time it took to get the second call, and then for the delay to launch aircraft, because by then the non-nuclear aircraft would certainly have been ready to launch to go to the aid of the USS *Liberty*.'

He has clear memories that three or four minutes after the distress message was confirmed as coming from USS *Liberty* his unit picked up a signal from the ship specifically identifying the foe: 'They said, "We're being attacked by Israeli aircraft." I know the *Liberty* told us that... and even though I was not involved in the sending of that report back to Washington, I can't imagine it wasn't. That would be so important that it would've been sent back. And there were other people there by that time in my communications centre to take care of those things for me. Shortly after that, within three or four minutes, they [the *Liberty*] were out of communications. They were dead in the water; I assume

they didn't have any power, but we couldn't hear them. We continued to call to the *Liberty* for hours after that...'

He said he had always believed in his heart that McNamara must have known Israel was responsible for the attack.

Survivors from the ship have always said that the distress signals sent out by the *Liberty's* radio room before the torpedo struck had attributed the initial attack to 'unidentified aircraft', as their skipper Captain McGonagle later testified. But Hart said he was receiving signals transmitted on Navy Security Group channels from the secret spaces on the boat, where almost all the crew died.

Hart said that later that afternoon messages were relayed to Washington DC from an aircraft dispatched from one of the two carriers to overfly the USS *Liberty*. It reported the ship was no longer under attack, that there was smoke and the ship was dead in the water. The Sixth Fleet said it had dispatched a destroyer. Hart is bitter that the ship, which contained several NSG colleagues he knew well, was abandoned to its fate.

However, a few days after the attack he received a pleasant surprise: 'Before I left Morocco to come back to the United States, I was given this letter of commendation by my division officer. It sticks in my mind because I was called up to his office and I had to go in the back way because I was no longer cleared to be in that area. The letter was thanking me for assisting and providing superior service during the [Six-Day War] period and it was either from Secretary McNamara or someone in his office; that, or the Joint Chiefs of Staff.' Hart was reminded that everything he did was strictly confidential.

Why had he spoken about this incident? Hart said he was angered at the way his colleagues aboard the ship were treated, and later at the cover-up. He added: 'The intelligence community is looked down on until after you have an event like September 11. Then they say, "Gee, you guys should have done more." But in the interim we think it's almost un-American to be a spy, even though that's the only way we know what's going on in the world. So I think, politically, our intelligence agencies – our intelligence people – are expendable.'

McNamara and Johnson must have had pressing reasons to leave the USS *Liberty* to languish – but what Tully and Hart's evidence indicate is a nuclear dimension – a feature of events that day concerning the Sixth Fleet that other participants have raised.

Brad Knickerbocker, now a journalist on the *Christian Science Monitor* in the US, was on the USS *Saratoga* on 8 June 1967 and recalled the tension he and his colleagues felt aboard the carrier. He wrote this account in June 1982:

'I was a young naval aviator at the time, flying A-4 Skyhawks with the Black Diamonds of Attack Squadron 216. I was a relatively lowly spear-carrier in a drama whose principal players were admirals, diplomats and heads of state. But the dominant feeling for an agonizingly long time after the attack began was one of confusion.

'Aircraft were hurriedly armed with bombs, rockets and air-to-air missiles. Flight deck crewmen in brightly colored jerseys scrambled as the *Saratoga* turned into the wind, the catapults prepared for launch. The first flight of Skyhawks and F-4 Phantoms hurled off the ship, rendezvoused and headed for the *Liberty*.

'Those of us assigned to the second launch began our briefing with reports from meteorologists and air intelligence officers. There seemed to be more questions than answers. Who was attacking the *Liberty*, and why, had to go unanswered at this point. Briefers used large maps of Egypt, pointing out surface-to-air missile sites, anti-aircraft emplacements, port facilities and other military locations. It was well-known that the Soviet Union was providing Egypt with military advisers and massive amounts of hardware, including advanced MiG fighters.

'The battle in the Middle East was between Israel and its Arab opponents, but this seemed to increase the likelihood of a superpower confrontation – especially if the *Liberty* had come under Arab attack and the Soviet Union was at least indirectly involved. Within a couple of hours, however, the confusion was reduced considerably. Israel said it had mistakenly attacked the US ship. The first flight of aircraft from the *Saratoga* was recalled without engaging in combat, and my flight did not launch. My combat initiation would have to wait for Vietnam.'⁶

Knickerbocker was not given his orders on where he and the other planes in the second launch were to be sent from the *Saratoga*; that would have been dealt with just before or just after take-off. From the briefings, the main targets appear to have been Egyptian ground installations rather than aircraft or boats. It could mean they were not simply preparing to support the *Liberty*, but for a reprisal attack on Egypt. This is not idle speculation, as the evidence of an enlisted sailor stationed on the USS *America* testified.

Mike Ratigan was a centre-deck catapult operator responsible for making sure the equipment for launching aircraft into the air was adjusted correctly, so as to apply the correct force. His position, between the two catapults on the bow, was an opening in the flight deck from which he had a ringside view of the aircraft being prepared for take-off. In the early afternoon of 8 June, general quarters (battle stations) was sounded and he later learned that this was prompted by the attack on the *Liberty*. Two F-4 Phantoms were quickly launched and then A-4 Skyhawks – two, he thinks – were brought forward.

Ratigan, now a yacht broker, recalled: 'The ship went into Condition November.⁷ Now, I'm not a weapons person, but [previously] Condition November was used when we were off-loading nuclear weapons at the pier... in our home port. A-4s were brought up from the hanger deck to the flight deck; one of them was taxied forward to Cat [Catapult] One, and it had like an olive-green shroud, a tarp [tarpaulin], around the underside of the fuselage.'

After the tarpaulin had been removed, he remembered seeing a large bomb slung under the centre of the plane with a gold-coloured tip. 'I'd never seen that particular type of ordnance, and as we had gone into Condition November subsequent to being in general quarters it was definitely not a drill. Marine guards were escorting the A-4, and that was a very unusual experience. I'd never seen anything like that in the four years that I was in the Navy as a Cat operator.'

He added: 'That aircraft was launched and it didn't return to the ship for four or five days – and the unusual thing was that when it did return, it had a different skin on the tail.' Ratigan believes the

plane may have suffered damage. 'I was convinced that the ordinance was being launched in anger and it was my assumption, because of the way the Soviet ships were hounding us, that we were launching nuclear weapons in anger against the Soviets.'

The theory that the Soviets were being targeted spread around the ship, and there was a sombre mood. Ratigan said most of his shipmates realised Moscow had been arming the Egyptians, but they could not figure out why a crisis had blown up so quickly. 'All we knew when those planes took off was that we were about to begin World War Three,' Ratigan said. 'We thought, "This is it!" I can remember wondering if I was ever going to see my father again, or my sister. I can remember those emotions. We were demanding from our officers, to the point of near-insubordination, what the hell was going on.'

Jay Goralski, a US reporter, was on the bridge with the *America's* captain, Donald Engen, at the time of the attack on the *Liberty*, with 27 other correspondents from British and US media. They had flown in at short notice when war broke out, and would have been in a position to report the response of the Sixth Fleet to the attack on the USS *Liberty* – except they were told nothing when the distress message came in and were shepherded into a room below decks.

Engen asked Goralski not to report what he had observed and the reporter agreed, knowing he was dependent on the USS *America* radio room to transmit his copy. He later disclosed that combat aircraft were launched towards a target, on the initiative, he believed, of the Sixth Fleet commander. He was not told where the planes were directed to go but suspected at the time that they were on a retaliatory strike against a shore target. He understood the pilots were briefed in their cockpits, as they were moved off very quickly. He said they were recalled 'at the last moment, just before they would have lost radio contact.'⁸

Harry Stathos, a correspondent for United Press International (UPI), was also on the USS *America* when the alert was sounded. When he heard it, he ran down and looked for the nuclear-armed aircraft he knew were in a 'ready' status on the *America's* flight deck.

Stathos said the planes were launched and he asked the deck crew where they went. They said the planes had been targeted against Cairo. Stathos also agreed not to report what he had learned.

Charles 'Chuck' Rowley, the communications technician and photographer who survived the *Liberty* attack, said he had talked with a pilot on the USS *America* who had told him he had flown one of the jets launched that day. He said he had been carrying nuclear weapons and had been ordered to target Cairo. The *Liberty* survivors heard other stories over the years, including one from a dental technician who said that, in an alert, nuclear weapons had to be transported along the corridor that passed by the clinic. After *Liberty's* distress message, he had been locked in the clinic while this type of armament was taken to the flight deck.

Another piece of the jigsaw came from Joe Meadors, one of Rowley's shipmates who was seriously wounded in the attack and flown to Suda Bay, Crete, en route to Malta. Meadors said when he arrived in Crete and was waiting on the tarmac for his plane to be refuelled, some of the US ground crew there came over to ask him if he was from the *Liberty*. They said they had earlier handled the refuelling of a US fighter which, to their amazement, had an atomic bomb underneath. They said it had been launched from the *America* to bomb Cairo as a result of the *Liberty's* distress call. After being recalled, it could not land on the ship's deck with the atomic bomb still slung beneath it and had therefore been diverted to a land-based airstrip.

It appears from these accounts that a very serious reprisal attack had begun against Egypt and then aborted. Knickerbocker, the USS *Saratoga* pilot, was surprised at the apparent deployment of nuclear weapons. None of the briefings he was given had discussed this option, but then his flight had never been launched. He explained that every aircraft carrier and its attack squadrons were trained to deliver nuclear weapons. In the event of a threat from the Soviet Union a procedure called SIOP – Single Integrated Operational Procedure – went into action. He added, 'Basically it was the US nuclear war-fighting plan, including submarine-launched missiles, ICBMs, heavy bombers and also

tactical aircraft. So each of us was trained in nuclear weapons delivery and we were each assigned targets in case the balloon went up and the US and the Soviet Union started lobbing missiles at each other. The plan would have included launching, as quickly as possible, carrier-based nuclear-equipped aircraft headed for targets in Russia, the idea being to launch them quickly, because one of the first targets the Russians would be lobbing missiles at would be the aircraft carriers, so you wanted to launch before the carrier was destroyed.⁹

Knickerbocker said that aboard the USS *Saratoga*, no SIOB order was given. In his opinion, there would be no reason to launch aircraft carrying nuclear missiles in the absence of a real Soviet threat. But, he said, it was never the practice to send aloft planes carrying live atomic weaponry just for training purposes. If they were launched from the USS *America*, it was a very unusual but real situation.

Whatever the type of armament aboard the planes sent into the air that day, there is no question Cairo was a target of the US Sixth Fleet. The evidence comes from an impeccable source – one who was in the line of attack. On 8 June, David Nes was chargé d'affaires at the United States Embassy in Cairo, coping with rising resentment against America while trying to advise the State Department on Nasser's reaction to the abject military defeat he had suffered. To his great alarm, in the afternoon he received a message which put all these problems out of his mind. It notified him that the USS *Saratoga* had launched bombers which were heading his way.

At his colonial-style mansion in rural Maryland, he described that electric moment. 'We got one of those "flash" messages saying Navy ship *Liberty* had been attacked, presumably by Egyptian planes, and that a retaliatory launch was under way. Because [of the war] we weren't using our normal land-based communications through ordinary cable channels; we used our emergency radio communications, which went through the Sixth Fleet. Naturally this put us in a pretty frightful position in Cairo. We destroyed everything at the Embassy and created a small fire in the process. Had any American or British planes attacked

Egyptian targets, it would have been Suez all over again, but of course much worse. Our chance of security for the American colony, business and otherwise,¹⁰ would have diminished considerably. But within a very short period of time another "flash" telegram came through saying that the attack [on the *Liberty*] had been identified as Israeli and that was the end of that.¹¹

One of the hot-line messages from Johnson sent that day to the Soviet premier, Alexei Kosygin, supports what Nes said. It went through the Pentagon Teletype machine at 11.17 am Washington time and was acknowledged to have been received in Moscow at 11.24 am. It read: 'Dear Mr Kosygin, We have just learned that USS *Liberty*, an auxiliary ship, has apparently been torpedoed by Israeli forces in error off Port Said. We have instructed our carrier *Saratoga*, now in the Mediterranean, to dispatch aircraft to the scene to investigate. We wish you to know that investigation is the sole purpose of this flight of aircraft, and hope that you will take appropriate steps to see that proper parties are informed... Respectfully, Lyndon B. Johnson.'

The reply from Moscow arrived in Washington at 12.23 pm: 'Dear Mr President, Your telegram concerning the incident of the American ship type *Liberty* which was torpedoed near Port Said was received and transmitted immediately to President Nasser for his knowledge. With respect, A. Kosygin.'

Johnson used the hot-line again to say thanks: 'Dear Mr Kosygin, I deeply appreciate your transmitting the message to President Nasser. We lost 10 men, 16 critically wounded and 65 wounded, as a result of the Israeli attack, for which they have apologized. Respectfully, Lyndon B. Johnson.'

The exchange is puzzling because the timing simply does not fit. It was 5.17 pm in the eastern Mediterranean when the first hot-line message was allegedly sent to Moscow and yet the attack was all over, and Commander Ernest Castle in the Tel Aviv Embassy sent Washington a flash message about Israel's admission of guilt and apology at 4.14 pm. Even more puzzling is the reference to flights of planes from the *Saratoga* to investigate the attack when they were all quickly recalled by Johnson. It raises

the possibility that some United States planes travelled much nearer Egyptian territory than has ever been officially admitted. The message makes better sense if it was a self-serving one, designed to explain the presence of planes that had been sent to blitz Cairo and recalled only just in time.

Journalist Mohammed Heikal was such a close friend of Nasser's that he became his unofficial spokesman and biographer. As editor of *Al Ahram*, the leading Cairo newspaper, he published a long analysis of the reasons for Egypt's rout and blamed it on covert United States and British involvement. He claimed that between March and May of 1967 the United States had supplied Israel with 400 new tanks, 200 planes and 1,000 military pilots and navigators from United States units. Egypt's radar networks were rendered useless because of sophisticated jamming of their receivers from, it was thought, equipment on the USS *Liberty*.

Hard facts to back much of this up were lacking, but Heikal then made mention of a highly significant sighting of a United States incursion into Egyptian airspace. He wrote: 'The USA took her attempts at hypocrisy and deception to such a degree that when it was officially announced in Cairo that two American reconnaissance planes with American insignia were seen over the Canal Zone and Sinai on the day of the horrible tank battle in the Mitla Pass, US President Lyndon Johnson quickly contacted premier Alexei Kosygin and requested him to communicate a message to President Gamal Abdul Nasser that the two American planes which flew over the Canal Zone were on their way to befall [sic] an American ship which was attacked by an Israeli torpedo boat. It was then that President Abdul Nasser received, through premier Alexei Kosygin, an explanation from President Johnson why the American reconnaissance planes were seen over the Canal Zone and Sinai.'¹²

Heikal stressed the significance Nasser attached to this episode in a book he wrote about the Six-Day War: 'One hour after the American planes had been reported, the Soviet Ambassador went to see the President – again without an appointment. He was carrying a message from Johnson to Nasser sent via Kosygin. The message said

that two American fighters had been obliged to pass over Egyptian positions on their way to help the American ship, the *Liberty*, which had been attacked by the Israelis. Johnson wanted Kosygin to convey this to Nasser as evidence of its truth.' However, Heikal said, the Egyptian President thought this was all 'lies and hypocrisy'.

'Nasser smelt a double-cross in all this. First of all, there were the American planes over Egyptian positions. Secondly, the message was passed through Kosygin, so it was not directed at Egypt; it was directed at the Russians in an effort to neutralise the Soviet Union, blinding them against an operation being conducted against Egypt. Thirdly, he learnt that the *Liberty* was a spy ship which had been listening in to Egypt's communications and deciphering them. Who knows where those decoded messages ended? So he began to see the shape of collusion.'¹³

According to the *Al Ahram* editor, Nasser had read in the US papers that when Walt Rostow had told the President Israel had attacked Egypt, Johnson had turned to his wife Lady Bird and said, 'We have war on our hands.' Heikal said the operative words for Nasser were 'we' and 'our': 'All his previous suspicions of Johnson came to the surface and when he combined these with the American overflights, the Kosygin message and the *Liberty*, he felt that it was impossible for the United States not to have played some part in the aggression. He did not know exactly how they were involved, but everything pointed towards it and he reasoned that, as we had not learnt the full facts of the British and French collusion with Israel until four or five years after Suez, so American collusion would also be shrouded in mystery.'

Before Day Four of the war, Nasser had been accusing the US and Britain of directly assisting Israel. After the hot-line exchange about the *Liberty*, he was convinced of it. Of course, he was not aware that the 'reconnaissance planes' had in fact been on their way to bomb Cairo, or about Condition November – that an atomic device could have been detonated. Thirty-five years after the event, the possibility seems incredible. Yet the evidence is persuasive that something sinister lay beneath these stories.

9. Operation Cyanide

'If anyone finds out about this, we might as well be dead.'

A CIA official

Early in the voyage, some of the crew realised there was more to the *Liberty's* mission than the task of listening to the signals of the combatants. Various aspects were out of the ordinary, but this information was never shared. For security reasons, every man aboard the vessel was drilled in the need-to-know principle. In World War Two it applied to everyone, civilian and military, on the basis that idle talk cost lives. In the 1960s, with the Cold War raging, the need to limit sensitive material leaking to the enemy was just as vital. In the *Liberty's* case, however, it served to prevent various warning signs of disaster being heeded, and facilitated the cover-up engineered by Israel and the United States, each for their own reasons.

McGonagle must have been aware that this was a dangerous assignment, although his fellow-officers say he never betrayed any fears before the attack began. In early 1967, the NSA's G Group at its Fort Meade, Maryland, headquarters, which was responsible for intercepting radio signals coming from the non-communist world, had drawn up plans for the USS *Liberty* to remain off the coast of West Africa near the equator. In this position, it would be available for a speedy journey to the eastern Mediterranean if the portents of trouble there proved correct.

As news worsened in the Middle East the G Group's chief, Frank Raven, objected to the plan being implemented, insisting that the ship would be defenceless. He told his bosses, 'If war breaks out, she'll be alone and vulnerable. Either side might start shooting at her... I say the ship should be left where she is.'¹ He

was rebuffed. The *Liberty* was docked in Abidjan when the order came to head for Rota, and on eastwards. It came not from the NSA but from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Unusually, the Agency had been bypassed in the decision-making process and the Joint Chiefs were directing the mission themselves.²

Another curious sign was CONTACT X. As related by Jim Ennes and confirmed by others,³ a submarine was being plotted on the *Liberty's* charts shortly after leaving Rota. This vessel – possibly the USS *Andrew Jackson*, equipped with Polaris missiles armed with nuclear warheads – was travelling beneath their ship as it approached the Egyptian coast, and a periscope seen nearby when the attack began almost certainly belonged to it.

As Commander Dave Lewis noted, word also arrived during the voyage concerning the seemingly inexplicable decision by Admiral Martin, the Sixth Fleet commander, to refuse McGonagle a destroyer escort. Some also thought it odd that the skipper had become such a stickler for emergency drills – they had become a daily occurrence. There is little doubt that his unvoiced thoughts dwelt on his ship becoming a vulnerable target – just as Frank Raven back at NSA headquarters had feared.

Down in the secret spaces there were other significant happenings. Charles Rowley found himself in dire trouble – he was never told why – for relaying an encrypted signal from a mysterious submarine; something he was trained to do as a duty. Apparently it had led to the President himself being woken up in the middle of the night, though why was never divulged.

The night before the attack, other CTs had picked up signals from fire control radar coming from Israeli aircraft flying nearby. With this device, a pilot could 'lock' his weapon system on to a target so that when it was fired, a missile would home in on it. The *Liberty* crew knew such signals spelt potential danger but no action was taken and, allegedly, it was not even reported to Washington.⁴

It also appeared that the Pentagon was more suspicious of Israel's intentions than of Egypt's, contrary to the stated objectives of the mission. After leaving Rota, the *Liberty's* main aim was supposedly to search for radio transmissions from Egyptian

aircraft and collect evidence that the crews, particularly of USSR-built 'Bear' bombers, were taking orders from Soviet controllers. Those duties were undoubtedly carried out, but Robert 'Buddha' Schnell has revealed that during the voyage across the Mediterranean his section was under firm orders to tape the signals of Israeli military traffic. Allen Blue, as a Hebrew speaker, was instructed to translate the intercepts and despatch the information to Washington.

Schnell believes the Pentagon knew and accepted that war against Egypt was imminent, but that was not its prime concern. '[We were] about half-way from Spain,' Schnell said. 'We were focusing in on anything that was coming out of the Jordan Heights area. They [the Israelis] were not supposed to expand any of their territories, but immediately that's what they did.' It was only after the war that he appreciated his ship had been sent to police Israel's behaviour in the war and inform Washington if the conflict was directed against Jordan, a country considered a United States 'asset'. He confirmed that the deliberate conquest of the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, was detected by the *Liberty* through its interception of military signals, and that this was reported home long before the ship drew near to the Sinai coast.

Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Chief of Staff, later touched on this aspect of the *Liberty's* role in his memoirs. After describing, with some regret, the effects of the attack as 'dismal', with 'many wounded and some 32 [sic] dead', he added that a number of American Jews were serving in the crew because of their command of Hebrew: 'The vessel's task was to monitor the IDF's signals networks for a rapid follow-up of events on the battlefield by tracking messages transmitted between the various headquarters.' Rabin clearly thought the United States had stepped out of line in this respect.

As the spy ship continued on its way, there can be no doubt the wires buzzed between Washington and Tel Aviv, with angry complaints that Israel was not following the game plan. The *Liberty* had become an annoyance to Israel but, as will be seen, some in

Washington may have been equally alarmed, reflecting that if the ship could uncover Israel's perfidy it could equally well expose the duplicity of those in America who, as is discussed later, were entangled in the conflict.

Lt Commander Dave Lewis was in charge of the CTs, but he now accepts that some facets of the *Liberty's* mission were withheld from him. He believes that his subordinate, Lieutenant Maurice Bennett, was privy to some of these and loyally helped in concealing them after the attack. Bennett, now living in California, is one of the few veterans who have cut themselves off from the *Liberty* Veterans' Association. Apparently the secrets he kept are still a burden to him, and he refuses to speak.

However, Lewis was privy to another curious snippet which opened up a crucial line of inquiry. As reported in Chapter Five, his colleague Jim Pierce had asked to see him when he joined the USS *Liberty* in July 1966 to take charge of the 195 security group personnel. Lewis was told there was an envelope in his safe containing sealed secret papers from the Pentagon concerning 'Project Cyanide' or 'Operation Cyanide'. He believed it anticipated the possibility of the United States becoming directly involved in the war, and concerned maintaining communication via a submarine.

'The orders were never opened,' he told me. 'The attack took place; there wasn't time [to read them], so I don't know what they said... My assumption was that it was a contingency for an all-out war that would destroy all conventional communications, such as a nuclear war. On 5 June [Day One] we still had conventional comms [communications]: ergo, no need for contingency comms. On 8 June, Lt Pierce was killed and the safe destroyed... but I've always thought this was Johnson's repeat of the Tonkin Gulf fabrication.⁵ If he thought war was inevitable with Russia, and they were getting stronger every day, maybe he was fool enough to set this whole attack up. Israel nearly eliminated us with no one knowing. Who would have thought that anyone would be fool enough to string a long-wire antenna while the ship was being strafed and the deck was ablaze in napalm, to get

an SOS out? Had they succeeded [in eliminating the *Liberty*], I'm certain Israel would not have apologised after the fact.'

Lewis was largely speculating, but he was not alone in suggesting that America might have very dirty hands in its dealings with the Middle East. Senior CT David McFeggan was another *Liberty* veteran who hinted at American skulduggery. As described in Chapter One, he faced many horrors during the attack and has little memory of events after the torpedo struck and he was blown across the deck.

He is now a retired accountant living in Chicago, and recently became confined to a wheelchair as a result of his Six-Day War injuries, but several of his shipmates urged me to contact him because he apparently knew considerably more about the *Liberty's* secret mission than most of the other crew who survived, though he had never divulged very much. 'He had some kind of special communications capability,' said CT and Russian linguist Bryce Lockwood. 'He told me that there had been a message delivered to Captain McGonagle, something connected with Frontlet 615 or Operation Cyanide – I think it was Operation Cyanide – and that that message had been delivered to him some time prior to the attack.'

McFeggan declined a face-to-face meeting but spoke, very guardedly, over the phone. He revealed he worked on sending encrypted signals back to Washington via the moon-bounce dish. 'Working in the code area, you see the total picture,' McFeggan said. 'You would have access to all areas. Every one of your sailors had pieces of the puzzle.' He said it was hard for other people to understand why there was so much secrecy, but there was still a danger for him in talking: 'All the stuff is filed away in top-secret documents and that's why I don't know what would happen to me.'

I reminded him that when we talked previously, he had asked a question that had stunned me: he had wanted me to tell him who was responsible for the attack. I replied it was Israel. 'And I said "Yes",' McFeggan added, 'but I would not tell you otherwise. I have to be very careful. I've been married for 35 years to a very wonderful woman and she does not know all the information.'

He would not be drawn further, but it seemed that maybe Israel had not acted alone. One of McFeggan's concerns was that there was no one he could rely upon to support his story if he were to speak freely. 'The people who would back me up, Jim O'Connor and Dick Blue[sic], are both dead. I was in hospital with Dick Blue and I presume he died in hospital because the next time I came back he wasn't there.'

I asked if the *Liberty's* problems had anything to do with Operation Cyanide. 'I can answer nothing about that,' he said. 'The United States will not release documents on the attack – period. Israel will not release proper documents on the attack – period. They're locked up and are top-secret.'

McFeggan said he was deeply affected by his memories of what happened: 'I break down and cry like a baby, even now. The incident with the *Liberty* was totally not right. Whoever knew about it, whatever country knew about it, [it] was wrong and I wish some of them would rot in hell.

'I won't tell you who,' he added. 'The only name I'll give you is Moshe Dayan, because I have a lot of respect for the man, even though he was in charge of the attack, and he had to be because he was in charge of the war. He made a decision, and you've got to respect the decision he made. Someone had to make a decision...

'I was a member of the World War Two generation, patriotic 100 percent. I'm still patriotic, but my eyes aren't closed any more. Dayan was the biggest patriot and the biggest saviour in Israel being a country. There would be no Israel today without him.' He said he could not go into that any further: 'I wasn't there. The only one who could comment today is McNamara and he won't.'

What did McFeggan mean – that through attacking the ship Dayan had stopped America doing something even more cataclysmic? He also seemed to be implying the Russians were a factor, and that the United States feared Moscow might intervene. 'There was a cold war then,' he said. 'Of course they were scared. We all knew about how the Russians were going to react.'

I asked if America was directly helping Israel in the war, and

somehow Russia might have discovered that fact. 'I can't go into that at all,' he said. I asked if I was on the right track. 'Yes,' he replied. So the shit had hit the fan? 'Right!' he added, firmly. He then said it was difficult to help me more, other than to suggest I read the Penthouse articles written by journalist Anthony Pearson, which he promptly posted. 'It will help you a whole lot,' he promised. 'There are some things wrong... but it gives a good overview.'

David McFeggan is one of the very few *Liberty* veterans who give any credence to Pearson's findings, some of which were discussed in Chapter Five. His long articles on the attack for *Penthouse* magazine and his later book *Conspiracy of Silence* identify few sources but, as previously pointed out, a significant number of his findings have later been borne out as true (though there are many inaccuracies). As McFeggan considered them a good overview, and in the light of Schnell's story and the testimony of other witnesses, discussed later in this chapter, further parts of his book are worth re-examining.

'When the Arab-Israeli war began,' Pearson wrote, 'the listening devices on *Liberty* had been tuned to transmissions from both sides. With radar monitoring it had been possible to carefully map the movements and positions of troops, armour and aircraft, showing the true progress of battle. This information was being transmitted in full to the NSA at Fort Meade and selected parts were being passed to the UN Security Council in New York.

'It had quickly become clear to the observers on *Liberty* that the strength of the Israeli offensive lay in a superb intelligence capability. The Israelis had broken the Arab codes from the moment the fighting began and were tuned to every Arab communication. The importance of this became evident when the *Liberty* began monitoring exchanges of war information between Nasser and King Hussein of Jordan concerning the strategy and progress of the Arab allies. Somewhere between Cairo and Amman, in a field relay station hastily constructed in Sinai, the messages were being blocked by the Israelis, reconstructed and passed on so swiftly and effectively that there was no apparent break. The outgoing

transmissions from Egypt did not appear in the same form as incoming transmissions to Jordan. In the language of electronic intelligence, this type of interference is called "cooking".

The first batch of these messages transmitted from Cairo advised King Hussein of the bad military situation in Sinai, that the Egyptian Army was hard-pressed and was unable to give him tactical support to hold his position on the West Bank. The message also told Hussein that the Israelis now had total air superiority and that he could expect heavy air strikes against his ground troops, with no chance for the Arab armies to throw any opposition against them. The Israelis blocked these transmissions and re-worded them to misinform Hussein that three-quarters of the Israeli Air Force had been destroyed over Cairo and the 300-plus aircraft he was now picking up on radar approaching Jordan were Egyptian jets sent to raid targets in Israel. They were, in fact, Israeli aircraft returning from the destruction of Egyptian airfields.

Throughout the first day of fighting, the Israelis continued to cook the Arab transmissions to give both the Egyptians and the Jordanians an impression the war was going favourably for the Arabs. There was no chance for the plan to go wrong because Hussein had broken off diplomatic relations with Syria over allegations of sabotage by the Syrian Secret Service a week before the Israeli attack, and so he was not in communication with Damascus.

'The Egyptians had been misled by the Israeli "cooking" on 6 and 7 June into believing that the Jordanians were making this successful attack in Hebron and they in turn counter-attacked during the early hours of 8 June, ignoring a United Nations call for a ceasefire which would have greatly limited the extent of the final Arab defeat. As they launched their counter-offensive, the Egyptians marched into a carefully laid Israeli pincer ambush and were badly mauled and forced to retreat, losing all their heavy equipment.'

Pearson's research on the falsification of signals was largely disregarded because, frustratingly, his sources were untraceable. But did he invent this account? Working less than ten years after the Six-Day War, it would have been necessary to protect many

people's identities, and therefore he may have used pseudonyms. Friends of Pearson say that although he was notoriously cavalier with his expenses claims, he was a diligent journalist when he worked for the *Guardian* newspaper, based in London. There is no doubt he travelled widely, meeting people face to face wherever possible, and some thought he had MI6 connections.

McFeggan was impressed with what Pearson apparently uncovered, and with new evidence, described below, it shows the full extent of the Cyanide story. Pearson was right in many significant respects, but with one critical exception. His book and articles make much of the genius and cunning of the Israeli intelligence services and its extraordinary technological prowess. In reality, it was the United States providing the expertise.

Joe Sorrels lives in Naples, Florida, which according to the guide-books is a 'semi-exclusive' reserve of the rich and powerful. A popular figure in his local tennis club, he is known as the successful manager of golfing and leisure resorts, including one in China. He also claims to work from time to time on freelance special operations for the United States Government, and sometimes for the British Government. This expertise dates back to the late 1960s when his communications knowledge, and his gift for languages, took him to Israel, an experience he only narrowly survived.

Across his belly Sorrels has a prominent scar, the result of a dicey moment just before the Six-Day War when he was attacked during a secret assignment in Egypt. His story about this incident, and the reasons why he was deployed by the United States in mid-1966 to help the Israelis, explain much of the secrecy behind the *Liberty* affair. The name for his mission was Operation Cyanide. Sorrels confirmed to me that this was a joint plan by elements of military intelligence in Israel and the United States to engineer a war with Egypt and depose its leader Gamal Abdul Nasser who, the US believed, was a dangerous puppet of Moscow.

Was he telling the truth? It is difficult to fathom any motive for him making up the extraordinary story he told me in four

telephone interviews conducted over a period of 15 months. He sought no payment and did not want to meet face to face. He was reluctant to volunteer much in the way of detail, but he differentiated between what was speculation and what he knew from his direct experiences. Furthermore, what he disclosed matches other evidence.

Sorrels said that at the time he was injured he was working for part of US intelligence, 'equivalent today to the Defence Intelligence Agency', though he was no longer enlisted in the military as he had previously been. In August 1966 he was secretly sent as an adviser to the Israeli Army. Tension between Israel and her Arab neighbours was no worse than usual, but when he arrived in Tel Aviv he found 'a total commitment to a state of readiness' among the military. On his first day on duty working with the Israeli Defence Force, it became evident he was part of an extensive, covert, foreign military presence.

Sorrels said he was not alone when he flew to Israel from his base in Fort Benning. 'There were others that had come before me,' he said, 'some that went with me and some that came after me, doing essentially the same things in different ways, using different technologies.' He discovered on arrival that he was part of a multi-national force of so-called 'advisers': 'There were some Brits and a couple of Aussies there - intelligence people; they were communications people. I just know we were working out of the same ops office. They kept to themselves; I kept to myself. We ate together; we billeted together. Our controller, who's dead now, was an Australian.'

Sorrels said senior officers from the United States were in charge: 'I had a briefing on a weekly basis. I made a weekly report directly to an individual but I cannot give you his name because he's still wired [working for United States intelligence]. One's role in an environment such as that is [that] you ask few questions, you try to absorb as much as you can and focus on what you've been instructed to pass along.'

He said the British intelligence people might have been from MI6. They were equally tight-lipped, but he shared a room with

one of them. Like him, they took part in the protocol meetings. I asked if that meant Britain was going to be involved in the forthcoming war. 'That was my read on it,' he said. 'Everybody in the room was. Hell, there were people in there, I didn't know where they were from. They were in suits.'

He remembered three British names: 'There was a McCarron and a Naughton: I think his name was Frank Naughton. There was an O'Hara as well [who was] English rather than Irish. As a matter of fact, O'Hara was a couple of years older than me, but I remember [him] because he and I had asked out this delightful-looking nurse and they ended up, so I understand, getting married.'

Sorrels was guarded about his own role. 'I tutored young Israeli officers in a number of situations, a number of venues.' They were provided with 'state-of-the-art' communications equipment from the US which, he divulged, was specially designed to distort or 'cook' signals. One of his team was a fluent Egyptian speaker who could imitate voices – for example, those coming from the Egyptian high command.

Exactly as Pearson had described, the special equipment could suppress incoming signals coming from Cairo and misleading messages could be transmitted to field units in the Sinai, or Egypt's allied forces in Jordan. I asked about the Egyptian speaker. 'He's American,' Sorrels said. 'His mother was Egyptian, his father was British. I personally haven't spoken to him in a long time.' Was he specially trained to imitate voices of anyone in particular? 'You would have to discuss that with him. He's still alive and living in Cincinnati. He was fully trained in a number of things along those lines.' Sorrels would not divulge his name.

In the course of his assignment in Israel, Sorrels said, he met and shook hands with Meir Amit, the head of Mossad, the Israeli secret service: 'I worked for some of his people.' Amit was present at what Sorrels had described as protocol meetings he attended in late 1966, designed to prepare for the conflict with Cairo: 'We were discussing military bearing protocol, who gives orders to whom, that sort of thing. They were laying groundwork... They didn't say when that [the war] would take place. You knew that was what was going on.'

Sorrels said he was injured in late May 1967 but by this time he had been stationed in Israel for nine months, flying there in August 1966. Did he know when he arrived in Israel that war was going to happen? 'I had an idea, because they were in a state of total mobilisation,' he said. 'I mean, it was obviously inevitable. They were organising themselves.'

From his viewpoint, it seemed the Israelis were responding to pressure from the United States to eradicate Nasser; Israel was not the prime mover. He added: 'They were led to believe they were going to have a lot more assistance from other people, including us, than was actually given. My understanding was that we were going to become involved.'

Would the *Liberty* attack have prompted that assistance? 'There's just so much speculation on that,' he said. 'You'd be amazed at some of the things that were discussed – who perhaps promulgated it [the war]; who masterminded it; who supported it; who logistically assisted. There were a lot of things going on at that time. There were other things that were happening around Israel. Well, it would have taken a hell of a lot [of resources] for somebody to press a direct confrontation.'

According to Sorrels the war plans went well, the driving force being the US, and around 18 May 1967 he was ordered to do 'some night work in the Sinai', installing equipment and putting people in place with a view to returning three days later to collect them. 'It was just a training exercise for night-time gathering, for stealth movement, for perhaps utilisation of some night-scopes that at that time had been introduced.' He said the idea was that if war broke out Israeli troops, using United States equipment, could operate behind enemy lines.

He had four or five from his 'cadre' there. 'We set up the situation to train these young lads and we came back three nights later to execute the exercise. As we were approaching [the spot] where we had set up the exercise, the people we thought we had in position weren't there. Then we just happened on some others who I have to believe were Egyptian soldiers. We didn't introduce ourselves.'

'They surprised us; we surprised them. I had around 20 [people] give or take a couple. The moment we saw each other was virtually simultaneously and I said, "Let's go." I started to turn [and] they squeezed off some rounds and I happened to be in the line of fire. I caught three of them in the abdomen.'

It is clear from Sorrels' description that he was lucky not to die on the spot, and he is still puzzled as to how he and his men were discovered. His men took him to Hadassah Hospital on the outskirts of Jerusalem, where he had an emergency operation: 'From there, I ended up going all the way round the damn world. I ended up in an Air Force base in Japan, of all places. That was how the [US] Government wanted me to get back to Martin Army Hospital in Fort Benning... As a guess, somebody had to explain what had happened. I didn't ask any questions.' Evidently, no one wanted Sorrels to be asked any awkward questions, either, about his mission.

I asked again how Operation Cyanide had come about and Sorrels' language became more elliptical. 'My understanding was that there had been some commitments unfulfilled that were discussed. I was far beneath that echelon... It's just that at the time we'd committed... we were selling a bill of goods as [regards] alliance, capability and commitment to the Israelis.' Did the United States want to get rid of Nasser and engineer a confrontation? 'Hell, yes. There were a lot of things going on to stimulate and provoke. We'll never know exactly the root of where that came from.'

Sorrels described as 'horse shit' the commonly-held notion that Israel fought this war on its own: 'Anybody working around intelligence knows it isn't true.' He repeated that Operation Cyanide was a secret plan to start a war against Egypt. I asked if he had heard there might be an attack on a United States ship as a pretext for bringing the US into the war? 'Not until later on,' he said. 'You get two or three people together and you get two of them speculating...'

I then asked about the launch of planes to attack Cairo, at least one with a nuclear weapon on board. 'I can't respond to that,' Sorrels said. 'I know they were talking about different avenues of

approach, that being one option – that being the least desirable of three or four options... We had a number of individuals that were there [in Cairo] and it would have proved to be counter-productive. It doesn't make a damn bit of sense to me.'

He said Israel's only motive was to grab territory, nothing more, and it was elements in the United States who were pushing them to invade Egypt: 'As far as they were concerned, it had to be done. It was inevitable. I think they probably took the path of least resistance...' Did the United States want Israel to launch attacks on Jordan? 'No. Not at all,' he said. 'Nor, at the time, Syria.'

Was King Hussein pushed into the arms of Nasser by provocation? 'Absolutely,' Sorrels said. Was the Israeli cross-border raid on the Jordanian village of Samu an example? 'From time to time they would execute things like that,' he added, 'as a provocation, of course.'

Cyanide was the main name? 'Sure.' And how broad was its scope? 'I think it went from extreme to extreme. I think it was extremely deep-rooted. I think there were some people involved in Israel [he named Meir Amit again] who had different objectives. Of course they were collaborating with the United States, with military intelligence – or what [would be] equivalent today to the DIA [Defence Intelligence Agency].' The implication was that Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and other senior Government leaders were not consulted, at least in the early stages.

William Goodwin, a retired British expert in aviation radio now living in Kendal, Cumbria, was an eyewitness to another example of covert co-operation that was perhaps part of the Cyanide project. In 1967 he was in charge of the communication systems at Amman airport and he was advised that on 7 March two Americans, a Mr Maxwell and a Mr Brown, would be coming to visit him. Both the Jordanian manager of the airport and his boss, King Hussein's transport minister, instructed him to answer all *their* questions.

After they had been ushered into his office the visitors, both smartly dressed, said they were conducting a 'development study'

of the country's civil aviation. He was, however, puzzled when Maxwell and Brown seemed to be interested in only two things: the position of the main telephone cable running in a duct under the runway, through which the airport was connected to the outside world, and, more bizarrely, where the Dakota (DC3) aircraft belonging to the UN's Mediator, General Odd Bull, was normally parked when he was in town.

Recalling this 34 years on, Goodwin said the plane was distinctive, being 'painted entirely white with the letters "UN" in black on the upper and lower sides of both wings and each side of the fuselage.' It was 'always parked at a remote dispersal area right away from the airport and other planes.' He was certain the two polite but uncommunicative Americans were from the CIA, and reported the meeting to the British Embassy. An official was surprised because, contrary to protocol, America had not consulted them about any proposed study. Despite his better judgement, Goodwin was nevertheless obliged to provide the information to the Americans.

On 5 June, Goodwin went home in the late morning when news began flooding in of war with Egypt. It was a wise move because, at just after 1 pm, delta-wing Israeli planes attacked the airport. When he returned, he found his office had a rocket hole through the wall and the cable duct under the runway had been precision-bombed. The United Nations Dakota, which had arrived the night before with a message from Israel to King Hussein that it would spare his country if he stayed out of any conflict,⁶ was a burnt-out shell.

From his viewpoint, Goodwin remains convinced that the two Americans were spying on behalf of Israel and the destruction of the UN Dakota was planned with the intention of stranding General Odd Bull where he could not intervene in the crisis. He is dismissive of the Israeli explanation at the time that it was a case of 'mistaken identity'.

The shocking suggestion made by Nasser, King Hussein and some other Arab leaders that Britain, as well as the United States, was

directly aiding Israel in the Six-Day War threw the Harold Wilson administration into a fit of indignation. Diplomats were exhorted to nail what was dubbed 'The Big Lie', with public relations officers working overtime to furnish suitably convincing rebuttals for a spate of Arab allegations. Big Lie or Big Fact, the suspicion of British collusion led swiftly to oil sanctions and, when Nasser closed the Suez Canal, a merchant-shipping crisis had to be coped with, as well as diplomatic outrage. Because Joe Sorrels is quite certain British and Australian intelligence personnel were serving alongside him in Israel as part of Operation Cyanide, the possibility has to be considered that there was some substance to Nasser's allegation of an Anglo-American plot.

The furore for Harold Wilson's government began on Day One as soon as Israel launched its invasion. In a flash telegram the British Embassy in Jordan, seeking guidance from London, reported that Arab radar had spotted two aircraft carriers, one 20 miles and the other 80 miles west of Tel Aviv. The telegram said: 'Eight aircraft had been seen to leave each of these ships and to land at the Israeli airfield at Ramat David [south-east of Haifa]. Their nationality had not yet been established, nor was it known whether they were participating in action against the Arabs.'

The United States Sixth Fleet had been in the area before turning westwards towards Crete, and it was pointed out by military experts that no Arab radar – not even a system known as 'Big Ear', supplied by the Soviet Union to Egypt and installed in El Arish – could look that far over the horizon. It made no difference. The Arab impression was that far more planes had been launched against them than Israel could have mustered alone. In the Egyptian press, Britain was seen as being the United States' co-conspirator, and hostile crowds baying for reprisals gathered outside its missions in the region.

Arab fury against London could be explained as guilt by association, but Britain did have carriers in the region – though not, apparently, close to the Israeli coast. It also had large airbases in Cyprus and Aden, where there was much air activity. The British Government said its planes were engaged in 'routine

training exercises' but that is what any government would say if it was engaged in a clandestine operation conflicting with its stated purposes.

Getting at the truth by studying Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence records is not easy. Remarkably few documents have been released in the Public Record Office under Britain's 30-year disclosure rule. There is virtually no reference to the attack on the USS *Liberty* except in a military attaché's report months after the war ended, which accepted the Israeli explanation. There is, however, a fat file on the news management of the Big Lie controversy, revealing how Whitehall embarked on a campaign to 'prove' non-involvement while downplaying a number of dis-comforting details that hinted at clandestine military activity.

It is clear that 'spin' is not a recently invented PR skill. One document contains this note: 'The RAF logs will inevitably show a number of training flights which our ill-wishers could claim had in reality been sorties against the Arab states. Editorial work by the Air Force Department should remove most if not all of these from suspicion... In no case could the deleted matter conceivably contain evidence of a "guilty" flight.'

As the news of Israel's success on Day One became clear George Brown, the British Foreign Secretary, had to field an angry delegation from the Jordanian Embassy. After emphasising his government's denial of any involvement, Brown wrote a placatory letter to Ambassador Midhet Juma. 'I feel sure you will have dismissed the reports that have since been put out from Cairo alleging British participation in the bombing attacks on the United Arab Republic yesterday,' he began. 'You will no doubt have seen what the Prime Minister said in the House of Commons this afternoon about this malicious fabrication. As an indication of how ridiculous these reports are, I can assure you that the only two British aircraft carriers in the area were at Malta and Aden respectively, both over a thousand miles away; and on Monday both were at anchor in harbour, and as you know no planes can take off from a stationary aircraft carrier...'

In a debate on the Middle East in the Security Council on 6

June Lord Caradon, British Ambassador to the UN, damned the collusion claims being made by the representative of Syria as 'lies without foundation'. He disputed a Damascus Radio story that, according to a captured Israeli pilot, 17 Vulcan aircraft had arrived in Israel ten days earlier, and a Cairo radio broadcast alleging that British Canberra bombers had taken part in destroying Egyptian positions in Sinai. Equally false, he declared, was the claim that British aircraft from British aircraft carriers had taken part in recent attacks.

Caradon went on to reiterate what Brown had told the Jordanians: '[The] fact of the matter is that there were only two British aircraft carriers in the area at all – if they can be said to have been in the area, because they were both a thousand miles away – and at the time they were both stationary in harbour. And though the representative of Syria may not know it, it is a fact that the aircraft from an aircraft carrier cannot take off when the carrier itself is stationary and in harbour.'

He added that the British Government was scrupulously following a policy of avoiding any involvement in the conflict: 'I would suggest to the representative of Syria that he does not help his cause by coming here with repeated allegations that have already been denied; and I would go further and say to him that if accusations are to be made, it would be well to be careful that they cannot be immediately and completely disproved.'

Undaunted, King Hussein of Jordan joined the fray, urging an early and impartial UN investigation into reports of Hawker Hunter fighters and Canberra bombers participating in the war, which he assumed must be British as Israel did not possess these types of aircraft. J.C. Moberly in the Foreign Office's eastern department, tried to discover if this could possibly be true by ringing the duty air operations officer at the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall. Moberly angrily reported: '[The officer] was unable to give me any satisfactory information about the whereabouts of our Canberras and Hawker Hunters during the relevant days and indicated that the subject was being handled at a very high level, and that he had been instructed not to comment on it further to me.'

Egypt supplied the most extensive list of allegations. In a long diatribe no doubt aimed at explaining away the war's one-sidedness, it claimed United States and British carrier-based planes had afforded air cover to Israel; that an Israeli pilot captured in Egypt had confirmed this; that another pilot captured in Syria said 18 British Vulcan bombers had arrived ten days earlier and had taken part in the war; that a pilot taken prisoner by Iraq had flown planes from a United States aircraft carrier (with other Israeli pilots) and taken part in the air raids; that 32 US planes had used a base in Libya for 'aggressive acts'; three others had carried out reconnaissance flights over the Suez area; that RAF Canberras had 'participated in operations in Sinai', with one being shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft fire.

There was no supporting evidence but reports of some of these alleged incidents were taken seriously. One British diplomat said the rumour of British intervention was 'given force' by 'the incident of an Israeli pilot, speaking perfect English and named George Brown [sic], being captured on bailing out over Mafraq [northern Jordan].' Another diplomat sought from the Foreign Office 'immediate denial', with supporting evidence, of a Damascus radio broadcast that the Vulcan aircraft, 'with full equipment and pilots', had arrived in Israel ten days before the war, and that they had participated in the raids on Syria and Egypt.

The problem facing the real George Brown and his functionaries was that supporting evidence was not easy to produce. A confidential telegram from the Foreign Office to Middle East ambassadors admitted that between 5 and 7 June there were '63 Canberra flights carrying out a variety of routine training tasks from Akrotiri [the British military base in Cyprus].' Under 'Operation Hydraulic', as many as 16 Victor tankers had passed through the base on the days in question, allegedly escorting 13 Lightning aircraft to the Far East. Also, under 'Exercise Sunspot', four Vulcan bombers 'flew a total of six low-level sorties all over the Libyan desert and practised bombing on the El Adem range on 5 and 6 June.' The telegram added, 'All of the above aircraft could, in theory, have reached the area of conflict.'

The Foreign Office said some flights to the Far East probably arrived on time and could not have been diverted, 'but in the [case of the] others we could only say that they were engaged in routine operations and exercises and furnish details from the flight authorisation sheets to show that the nature of these operations and exercises effectively excluded their taking part in any warlike operations against the Arab states.'

Unfortunately, Rear-Admiral Ashmore, Commander British Far Eastern Fleet, gave an unwelcome news interview in which he apparently admitted that Buccaneer strike aircraft from HMS *Hermes* could have flown to the war zone on 6 June and that refuelling aircraft were airborne at the time. Attempting to rebut Arab propaganda, the Foreign Office noted that 'the academic question about the Buccaneers' performance capabilities related only to 6 June when HMS *Hermes* was at sea (mostly within sight of Aden). Logs were produced to the press showing that on 6 June no practice sortie exceeded one and one half hours in duration. To reach the Nile delta required four and one half to five hours.'

Denis Healey, Defence Secretary, decided logs should be placed in the House of Commons Library recording the activities of aircraft carriers HMS *Victorious* and *Hermes* and RAF stations within 1,000 miles of the combat area. Officially, the purpose was 'to allow all-comers – especially neutral or impartial countries – to see for themselves that Royal Navy and RAF aircraft did not take part in hostilities.' A presentation of the information was organised for 29 June.

To the Government's relief, the British press and MPs showed little interest in wading through the detail, and few took advantage of the opportunity to view the logs. Had they done so, they would have noticed that Lord Caradon's rebuff to the Syrian Ambassador about aircraft carriers being operational was untrue. A Foreign Office report admitted: 'HMS *Victorious* was not actually in harbour at Malta when the first Israeli air strikes were taking place. Her logs therefore do not bear out Lord Caradon's statement to the United Nations that both carriers were stationary in harbour at the time of the attacks... HMS *Hermes* was in Aden

harbour during 4 and 5 June, but she did put to sea on 6 June, although only flying short sorties and practice flights on that and the following day; two of her Buccaneers were in fact operating from Khormaksar [Aden] on Monday, 5 June... The logs for both ships confirm that in-flight refuelling is used; also that the Sea Vixen is used in this role, with the result that the full complement of strike aircraft could have reached the area from the carriers by using this technique. It is therefore not possible in the face of informed technical questioning to sustain the argument that these aircraft were physically incapable of reaching the area. The best answer will be that the logs conclusively demonstrate that no such flights took place.'

The report added that 'a hostile critic' might notice that Canberra flights from Akrotiri, some loaded with practice bombs, 'were of sufficient duration to have permitted the aircraft to reach the area of hostilities, at least on the Syrian front.' In addition, 'suspicion might be aroused locally by the fact that a photo-recce aircraft was flying on missions labelled mysteriously "Task 703" and "Task 704" on 5 and 6 June. In fact, however, these tasks concerned the photography of disused airfields in Muscat.'

On 8 July, however, a diplomatic alert to the Foreign Office warned of more hullabaloo brewing in Cyprus. Dr Vastos Lissaridhis, a local deputy (MP) and chairman of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Movement in Cyprus, said he had seen aircraft 'for the aggression' leaving the British military base at Akrotiri on Day One of the war, and aircraft had continued taking off from the base for three days. The deputy said British forces had issued a complete prohibition preventing Cypriots from approaching the base, and inside 'a state of emergency was declared'. He also said Archbishop Makarios, the Cypriot leader, had summoned the British High Commissioner and informed him that its Government strongly opposed the use of the bases to strike at the Arab countries.

On 30 August the BBC's foreign-language monitoring service reported a story in a Syrian newspaper, *Al Thawrah*, headed, 'Cypriot Deputy Exposes The Use Of British Bases Against The

Arab States'. Quoting Lissaridhis, it claimed 'that British and Israeli planes took off from British bases in Cyprus to raid Arab countries and Arab forces in Sinai, and on the West Bank and Syrian Front. The bases were used as staging-posts for Israeli planes and foreign pilots. Archbishop Makarios was unable to stop the use of the bases because the Zurich agreements give Britain sovereignty over the base areas.'

Elsewhere the media seemed unimpressed with the deputy's claims and the issue died, but in May the next year he was reported to have 'revived the big lie' by stating that RAF aircraft flying from Akrotiri had assisted Israel in the war. According to the British High Commission, this had been reported in the local left-wing press, but it was recommended no British statement should be issued to refute his remarks, 'as Lissaridhis commands very little credibility outside the Party'. There the matter was left. The Big Lie controversy finally faded from view, the Western press viewing as preposterous the suggestion of British military support for Israel.

How preposterous this really was is difficult to judge. Some military commentators have suggested the amount of training conducted so blithely near to the war zone by the British Navy and Air Force was, in the circumstances, unusual and somewhat foolhardy – if the official story is true. With battles raging close at hand, the interest of the British Government must surely have been to remain on alert and prepare to rescue the considerable number of its citizens in the area if the conflict worsened. At the same time, it must surely have been realised that training flights, and squadrons of fighters crossing the region to the Far East, would have aroused legitimate suspicion.

A further possibility is that British air bases in Cyprus were being used by aircraft from other countries to refuel before heading for Israel. No evidence even suggesting this came to light.

Could Sorrels be inventing the story of Anglo-US intervention in the Six Day war? As he was paid no money and sought no publicity, there is no clear motive for him doing so. I was put in touch

with him through a mutual friend who vouched for his authenticity. More convincingly there is other evidence to support significant aspects of his account.

Major General Rikhye, the commander of the United Nations Emergency Force patrolling the Egyptian–Israeli frontier, witnessed a frightening incident that may have been triggered by Israeli concern that covert special operations in the Sinai, such as Sorrels described, had been blown.

Rikhye said that on 18 May he had flown in a Caribou transport plane to observe UNEF positions in the Sinai. The plane was painted white with prominent UN markings, but without warning it was buzzed by two Israeli Mystères. Rikhye wrote later in his memoirs that the fighters flew dangerously close and then fired a warning burst. He was in no doubt they were trying to force his plane to land. He said they only escaped because his pilot employed ‘daredevil tactics by sand dune-hopping, sharp turns, steep climbs with the engines sputtering and revving their guts out, sudden low dives and skimming over the cactus in the sand in order to avoid a situation which might lead to the crash of our aircraft and brought about by the pushing, shoving and jostling of the high-speed Israeli jet fighters.’

On landing in Gaza, where UNEF was based, he made an official protest. In his letter of complaint he stated his plane had never overflown Israeli territory; it had been ordered to stay at least a mile inside Egypt. Furthermore, visibility was perfect. In response, Israel claimed the UN plane was 20 kilometres inside Israel, infuriating Rikhye, who contacted Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin. Rikhye said Rabin soon apologised, without providing an explanation.

The UN commander remained puzzled, however: ‘[I concluded Israel] had something to conceal and felt that aircraft, even though flying well inside UAR [Egypt]-controlled territory, could perhaps pick it up in their innocent passage.’ He later learned that 24 hours earlier Israel had secretly sent a ‘reconnaissance battalion’ into Egypt. This story therefore meshes with that of Sorrels, who first went into Egypt with his men around 18 May and was injured about three days later when he returned to the scene.

Mahmoud Kassem, a senior official in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry in 1967 who later rose to ambassadorial rank, wrote an unpublished account of the Six-Day War in which he, too, claimed that the *Liberty* had picked up evidence of compromising covert operations. Without quoting many sources, he argued that the *Liberty* was targeted because of what it uncovered when it arrived in the area. He wrote: '[The] American ship *Liberty*, a spy vessel in the East Mediterranean, was using the most complex technological systems of communications of that time and apparently came across vital intelligence information that dramatised the outcome of the war between Israel and Jordan... The Israelis had no alternative but to destroy the *Liberty*, and to sink her with the secret she had learned in her spying mission along the coasts of Israel and Egypt.'

In particular Kassem focused on the 'cooking' of signals: 'There had been no indication that Jordan would join any fighting that might erupt between Egypt and Israel. Nasser, knowing the weak position of the Jordanian front, hadn't pressed for a Jordanian commitment and King Hussein hadn't offered one. But suddenly, after what was believed to be a telephone call from President Nasser alleging the sweeping advances of Egyptian troops into Israeli territory, King Hussein decided to join the fighting. He hoped to be included in a victory of the Egyptian Army with little or no Jordanian sacrifice. Unfortunately, President Nasser never telephoned King Hussein. It was a trap set by the Israelis to bring Jordan into the fiasco. For the Israelis, the big prize for such a fatal jump by the Jordanians was to conquer not only the West Bank of the Jordan, but all of East Jerusalem.

'Over the years since the war, many theories and hypotheses have been put forward concerning the mysterious telephone call received by King Hussein. The neat, logical explanation seems to be grounded in Israel's sudden hostile attitude toward the *Liberty*. Israel had been aware of her presence in the area and the nature of her mission, and until that time had not felt compelled to act against her. The theory points out that Israel knew the *Liberty* had intercepted the telephone message and knew the origin of the call

and that it had not emanated from Egypt, although the voice was President Nasser's.

'The theory goes along these lines: Israel wanted to conquer the rest of Palestine, particularly Jerusalem, which was still in the hands of Jordan. Israel knew that King Hussein would only join the fighting if he believed the Egyptian Army was marching to victory, and what better way to assure him of that than a personal telephone call from President Nasser? The rest is history. King Hussein joined the losing battle and lost what the Israelis were precisely aiming at getting from him.

'As to how the Israelis managed to imitate Nasser's voice, it was not a problem. They recorded a voice and words from previous speeches and calls and composed the fake call to King Hussein. Here, the theory stops. This theory may give some logical explanation for the sudden and weird Israeli air attack on the *Liberty* and the strange silence of the Americans in the light of that hostile behaviour that caused great losses of American lives by a country considered a close ally.'

Unlike Kassem, King Hussein apparently never charged Israel with 'cooking' signals, but in his memoirs he made it clear he had launched attacks on 5 June after receiving encouraging signals from Egyptian military commanders. 'We were the recipients of false information,' he wrote, 'about what had happened in Egypt since the attacks by Israeli Air Forces on the airbases in the UAR. A new message from Marshall Amer [Field Marshall Abdul Hakim Amer] informed us the Israeli air offensive was continuing. However, it went on to affirm that the Egyptians had destroyed 75 per cent of the Israeli Air Force! The same communication told us that Egyptian bombers had counter-attacked with a crushing assault on Israeli bases.

'Amer continued with the information that Egyptian ground forces had penetrated Israel through the Negev. These reports (which were fantastic, to say the least) contributed largely in sowing confusion and distorting our appreciation of the situation. At that point, when our radar signalled to us that machines coming from Egypt were flying towards Israel, no doubt crossed our mind.

We were instantly persuaded it was true. They were Israeli bombers returning after carrying out their mission against Egypt.⁷

Soon after Israel began to invade Egypt on 5 June, Jordan had complained that its city of Mafraq, north of Amman, had been attacked. This, too, was a factor in prompting King Hussein into military action. Israel denied the raid had taken place. In an urgent telegram to Washington at mid-day on 5 June, United States Ambassador Walworth Barbour reported on a meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban that he had just left: 'Eban interprets erroneous Jordanian claim of Israeli attack on Mafraq as possible ruse by Hussein to justify keeping his forces back to protect his airfields.'

It was later shown the raid did occur. It seems possible that this provocation, and the judiciously directed squadrons of returning Israeli bombers that had fooled King Hussein into thinking Egypt's Air Force was mounting a blitz on Israel, were further parts of a clever plan to lure Jordan into a trap.⁸

According to Sorrels, another specialist function the US provided was the dispatch of a team with the latest equipment to jam enemy communications. This aspect of the plan, almost certainly another component of Operation Cyanide, first came to light 20 years ago, shortly after the publication of Jim Ennes's book. He was contacted by Dominic Romano of Belleview, Florida, who in December 1981 was staying briefly in Huntsville, Alabama. While visiting a local bar called Finnegan's, the topic of the *Liberty* had come up.

Romano said he was drinking with a local journalist called Jack Hartsfield when they fell into conversation with a local businessman called Robert 'Bob' Douglas. He claimed to have been part of a United States Army jamming unit sent to support Israel by disrupting signals transmitted by the Egyptian military during the Six-Day War. Douglas said that, to his great regret, he and his fellow-communications experts had jammed the *Liberty*, 'although he was not aware at the time it was this ship he was jamming.' He also claimed an Egyptian shell had later exploded close by and he was injured. As a result, he was

evacuated to a hospital to which some of the wounded *Liberty* crew had been taken.

Hartsfield followed up the story, establishing Douglas had a successful silk screen printing business and that he had served either in the Air Force or with the Signal Corps, working in intelligence in Vietnam and elsewhere. He then approached Douglas and asked about the jamming of the *Liberty*. Hartsfield later reported, 'The man immediately turned visibly pale and seemed to tremble. He was very agitated and said that he knew who he had told that story to, but that he was drunk or had been drinking and should not have said anything. He said he shouldn't have talked so much...' As Ennes said later, it would be a breakthrough if Douglas now felt he could tell more of this story, but he has not come forward.

Greg Reight did just that, however, by making public his experiences of June 1967. He has been a successful salesman most of his life. Today he stages sales promotions around his home state of Maryland, exploiting his abundant charm and wooing customers with free fruit-flavoured snowballs in summer and omelettes in winter which he makes on the premises. But as a young man and as an Airman Second Class he found himself playing a significant role in the Six-Day War.

In March 1967 he had left an Air Force technical school as an expert in the precision developing of reconnaissance film and also as an instructor, trained by the Air Force. That summer Reight was on duty at the US airbase at Upper Heyford, near Northampton, England, where he was assigned to the 17th Tactical Reconnaissance Unit. As a technician, his task was to help run an air-transportable photo-processing laboratory, type WS430B, which could be flown into a war zone inside a transport plane and quickly reassembled.

'It was made up of many units,' he explained. 'There was an expandable centre cube and auxiliary cubes that ran off that central unit. You had canvas-covered "causeways" about five feet long [that created] light locks; you could enter and exit the cube in the dark. You had photo-processing equipment

and a high-speed film processor for fine-grain photography.'

It was a state-of-the-art system, he said: so much so that phosphorus grenades were installed in each photo-cube, to be ignited if there was any danger of the equipment falling into enemy hands. Mostly, his team processed five-inch-wide rolls of film in 1,000-foot lengths, and the cameras could photograph from five positions, producing pinpoint images from high altitude. Reight said in war situations fighter planes or fighter-bombers had to be used for photo-reconnaissance because they could travel quickly to and from a conflict area.

In the middle of the night on 2 June 1967 he was sound asleep when his room-mate Tom ran in and shook him awake: 'He told me, "We've got a mission. Pack your gear; grab your bug-out bag."⁹ We then assembled and packed up the WS430B.' Reight said it was not unusual to be dispatched at short notice to practise fair-weather flying in Spain, which was supposedly their destination this time: 'It's real sexy, because you get away for a few days at Air Force expense and you have a good time. That was our assumption, but it didn't happen that way. We were briefed that we were to do a specific mission in support of an ally. So I said to myself, "I'm pretty well up on current events; where's the balloon going up? I've no idea.'"

Spain's fascist dictator, General Franco, was indeed on friendly terms with the United States, providing port facilities at Rota and an enormous air base at Morón near Seville. But it seemed unlikely this was the ally the 17th Group was about to support.

After his unit and its photo-cubes landed in Morón aboard a C-131 transport aircraft, Reight's puzzlement increased when they were asked to take out their identification papers. It was normal practice, he said, for people serving in United States forces to hand over their civilian passports and use their military identification papers on assignments overseas, 'but we got our passports [back], and had to turn in our military ID. That was curious to me. Why was I giving up my military ID? But I was 22, in the Air Force; I was being told what to do, so you do. You follow orders.'

His worries soon increased when they were marched into an empty hangar. 'The orders were: "Go into this hangar; take your personal gear with you; put your personal gear down; take your uniforms off." We left our personal gear there in a plastic bag with our name, took everything off and just walked across the hanger in our underwear. We were then given uniforms without insignia of rank, plain olive drab.' Reight was tired, hungry and craving a cigarette, but he and his team were then taken into a room where three Air Force officers were waiting.

'We were briefed that we were going to be part of an overall mission to support Israel; that it was top-secret, whatever that meant; that it was "No Foreign" – meaning no transmission to any foreign government, even friendly foreign governments. We were briefed that we were going to an abandoned French-built¹⁰ airstrip in the Negev Desert [the stretch of arid Israeli territory close to the Egyptian border]. The transport aircraft we were flying in would be unmarked and we would be supporting RF-4s, the most modern reconnaissance version of the F-4 Phantom.' Reight said his unit of 11 men had recently been trained to operate with RF-4s but the group was currently assigned RF-101s, which had flown to Morón but would apparently not be required.

As the briefing ended, he had an important question to ask the major who had been speaking to them. 'I said, "Where the hell are the [written] orders, Sir?" He answered, "Your orders are pending. Sergeant Reight. You'll receive them shortly." Never got them. Usually, you'd expect something in writing. The military is a paper-using machine. It destroys forests, even today by the acre. We were never given orders.'

Reight now knew they were on a secret operation to assist Israel's reconnaissance needs. 'Immediately, your imagination goes to work,' he said. 'Maybe they want to check on the movement in Syria. They want some tactical information on their borders. You think, "Right, that country is only 110 miles long and it's not very wide. Even from 10,000 feet you can see all of Israel." So we got on the C-131s and bingo: we cranked the birds, put the equipment on and took off.' Reight said by this time the

United States insignia on the transport planes had been painted over. They headed east from Morón after being on the ground for just 12 hours.

After landing on a barren landing strip, he found that an Israeli air control group had guided them in. Tents had been set up for them and there were staff on hand to cook their meals. Reight's unit began work immediately, removing the photo-cubes and setting them up. It was 3 June and war was only 48 hours away, though he had no inkling of it. 'The first thing we had to do was paint the tops of the cubes white, because it was so hot that it was actually dangerous. Our air-conditioners could not keep up with the heat we were experiencing.' He had only a sketchy idea of the geography of Israel, but soon discovered they were not far from Israel's secret nuclear reactor and atomic weapons plant near the city of Dimona.

Reight explained: 'I found out because we needed water. I did quality control when we were on dispersed operations. Before water could be used in the photo lab, I had to run some tests on it. Going to the desert, you're all set for the water to be brackish, but this had no salt in it and no iron in it. I did a specific gravity check and it was the way water ought to be. I thought there was something wrong with our equipment or it was distilled water. I tasted it and it was flat – no oxygen in it. So where the hell did they get me distilled water this pure, I asked, and they said, "Oh, it's coming from our nuclear power-plant at Dimona."' "

By 4 June the photo-lab was operational. 'That's when the RF-4s came in with eight crew,' Reight said. I asked him if they were American. 'Oh, yeah. To my knowledge they were American planes. They were marked with Israeli markings but the Israelis didn't have them in the inventory until much, much later. I never heard the back-seaters [the second member of each crew, seated behind the pilot] carry on a conversation, but I was under the impression that the back-seater was an Israeli, probably an Israeli pilot being trained, a trained weapons system officer [operating] in this case as a camera officer. The pilots frequently came and watched the film coming off [the processing machine]. To my

knowledge they were American. I assume they had come from [US Air Force bases in] Germany, but I've no way of knowing. I never knew the ranks of the Israelis on the base because they didn't address each other by rank. We were encouraged to have minimum contact.'

Reight was still concerned that he and his colleagues were highly vulnerable: 'I kept saying, "What the hell are we doing here?" and then – boom! The war! We were anxious to do our job and get the hell out of there. I had several discussions with Daniel McConnell [his unit chief] about our lack of ID and what would happen if we were over-run, if the Israelis lost. Our own people would have to kill us. There would have to be an airplane accident. I said whatever was going on was nuts. We were in harm's way, in a terrible way. It had to be a war; otherwise there was no conceivable reason to risk our being there like that. But it was not our war. The only thing I had with my name on it was my passport. Who knows what kind of story could be concocted?'

Reight said the RF-4s did not fly until fighting had started: 'I think that would have telegraphed the punch, had they flown before the war. That would have been provocative; they'd have been seen.' But the outcome was very quickly evident: 'We had pictures of good stuff – people with their hands in the air. It was real clear the Israelis were winning. We were filming bomb damage assessment [in Egypt]. The [Israeli] bombers would go in and the US 'recce birds' would come in right behind them, after two minutes, let's say, and you could count the dead aircraft on the ground. You could watch it step by step by step as the runways were cratered, as the Egyptian aircraft were laid waste.'

As each film was processed, it would be copied and handed over. 'The Israelis got a copy; we made three copies of all the film, then we'd turn the negatives over to the Israelis. We accounted for every inch of film. There were Israelis operating with us. They were doing the targeting, selecting the photographic missions, the locations they wanted photographed.' He was in no doubt that his unit was under Israeli control: 'Sure. Bomb damage assessment does two things: it tells you what has happened and what needs

to be done – if you have to send up another sortie of missions... There were Israeli intel [intelligence] folks there – tons of them. I've no idea how many, but we were a rich source of intelligence. I think we were *the* photographic intelligence. The only thing the Israelis had were gun-cameras.'

Reight's worries about being on the losing side soon diminished. 'The first day was, "What the hell are we doing here?" I was feeling pretty good by the end of the second day. The third or fourth day we did some night work up in Syria near the Golan and [filming] the fleeing Egyptian armies. It was pretty clear it was wide open for them in Syria – just a cake-walk for the Israeli Army.' He and his buddies worked intensively: 'We were working our tushies off. It was eat, sleep, work.'

The war ended but the team stayed for another five days before they were collected again: 'The 131s came back... we landed in Sevilla, unpacked the photo-labs and they were repainted. He said four RF-101s from his group had accompanied them on the outward journey but had stayed behind in Morón and had spent the time filming inconsequential tracts of Spanish countryside. His lab now processed this material, providing the unit with 'evidence' that they had spent their time in Spain on a routine mission.

The men were also called into another briefing by one of the officers they had encountered going out. Reight was told again that what had happened 'was completely top-secret, that it would reflect negatively on our careers if we ever divulged the nature of it. It was almost a caricature of itself. Were we going to talk about it? Hell, no!'

He returned to Upper Heyford and yet another briefing: 'We were told, "Thank you very much: your fair-weather flying was successful in Sevilla. Keep your mouth shut." And bingo – that was it. "Where were you?" "Oh, we were down in Sevilla flying fair-weather flights." We stood down for four or five days.'

Reight said he was never told the name of his mission but thought he remembered the name 'Operation Cyanide' being discussed one day when he stepped out of the photo-lab for a cigarette break. He has named several colleagues who accompanied

him to Israel. They have said Reight served in the 17th Group and that he was well-liked, but none has yet confirmed his story.

However, Joe Sorrels did. He said he knew that some of the people he met in Israel were tasked to provide logistical support at the Negev airstrip. The most convincing evidence is, however, film footage boastfully released by the Israelis after their war triumph. Experts confirm that pin-sharp shots of damaged Egyptian planes published in, for example, *Time* magazine, could not have been obtained by the Israelis at the time.

Reight said he had spoken out because, historically, it was important to appreciate the US played a significant, though never admitted, role helping Israel in the Six-Day War. He is also angry: 'My country put my life at risk when it didn't have to,' he said.

Reight has repeated the story to a number of journalists, academics and diplomats, as well as to Richard Helms, who was head of the CIA in 1967. Richard Parker, political consul in the United States' Cairo Embassy during the Six-Day War and later Ambassador to Algeria, Lebanon and Morocco, set up the Helms meeting. He has also attempted to verify the story by seeking confirmation from other members of the 17th Tactical Reconnaissance Unit. He obtained only denials, leading him to conclude that it was a fabrication, though it still nags him that it might be true.

'Well, the implication would be very serious,' he said. 'First of all, it would mean that LBJ and his people around him had been lying to us through their teeth. That may be a minor matter for most people, but it would be important to us; but, more important, it would mean American participation in the attack on Egypt, a very serious thing for us to have done. And it would have finished our relations with the Arab world for a long time to come. As it was, six Arab states broke relations with us.'

Parker would have been impressed with an interview that occurred by chance a few weeks after we met. On 4 May 2002, the *Liberty* veterans met in Pensacola, Florida, for a gathering to commemorate their upcoming 35th anniversary, and after the evening banquet I spoke briefly about my research. I said that

though most of the crew were baffled about the reasons for the attack, some could provide valuable information although they might not realise its significance or believe it was too far-fetched to be possible. Afterwards Moe Shafer, a CT on the *Liberty* now living in Marietta, Georgia, approached me with two important recollections.

Before the attack, he was cleaning the moon-bounce dish and watched as an Israeli plane flew low over the ship taking photographs. He had a direct view of cameras slung from an opening on the underside of the plane and it was confirmation of the testimony of other eyewitnesses that Israel was well aware of the ship's presence.

The second memory from after the attack was much more significant. Moe said he was hurt by shrapnel during the assault but continued helping the wounded and cleaning until, 24 hours later, he collapsed. Unlike most of the injured who had already been taken away to the USS *America*, he was loaded into a helicopter and flown to the USS *Davis*, the flagship of Sixth Fleet commander Admiral Martin. The next morning he was sitting on his bunk with two or three other injured men when Martin came in to see them.

Shafer said he seemed to want to tell someone about what had happened before he would be obliged through pressure from above to clam up: 'Not only did Admiral Martin tell me that four jets were on their way to the *Liberty* with conventional weapons [and were recalled]; he stated that four were on their way to Cairo loaded with nuclear weapons. He stated that we were three minutes from bombing them [the Egyptians]. He also said that the jets could not land back on the carrier with nuclear arms and they had had to land in Athens. He stated this from my bedside while on the Little Rock [the codename of the flagship] after the attack.'

10. 'Loyalty, to My Country'

'I know nothing about [the USS *Liberty*]. I don't want to say I didn't at the time, but today I have no knowledge of it.'

Robert McNamara, in a TV interview by the author

Many of the leading characters who had an impact on the Six-Day War, such as Eshkol, Dayan, Rabin, Johnson, Rusk and Kosygin, are long dead. It remained to be discovered if any of those left could, and if so would, shed light on Operation Cyanide and the *Liberty* riddle. After a third of a century, people might be more candid than they had been groomed to be, and less hide-bound by loyalty to their friends and former colleagues; but finding a whistleblower seemed unlikely. If it was true that Western powers had helped Israel plan and execute the 1967 war, then I was exploring issues of present-day relevance bound up with serious politics.

The conflict led to endless unrest and to human misery ever since, and the Arabs have one-sidedly taken the blame. It was apparent it would require chutzpah or a rebellious streak for someone to break ranks and admit that the United States and other allies had helped provoke the conflict, and engineered a massacre on 8 June that had nearly led the world into a nuclear conflagration. All the people I was seeking to meet had progressed in their chosen professions because they were reliable and discreet. This aside, some might even have felt it was physically dangerous to talk.

One anecdote, from a well-placed Israeli source, illustrated the effort that had been made to bury this story and silence people. I was told a secret meeting took place, after the Six-Day War, between senior officials of United States and Israeli intelligence. The United States was seeking what was called 'the Crown

Jewels', an ultra-secret file kept in a Tel Aviv vault that contained the truth about the *Liberty* affair and Operation Cyanide. Allegedly, only a handful of people in Israel knew the full story, and there was no other file.

The meeting concluded with it being handed over to the Americans for them to destroy: an act of friendship, but also a guarantee of many future favours. Each person who knew about the file was then told to forget it ever existed, for if there were ever even a hint that they might talk and 'betray their country' they would be in grave danger.

Another informant, with the highest security clearance, failed to unlock any answers on my behalf and was surprised at the hostile reaction his questions provoked. The response he received was: 'You have no need to know, and you don't want to know.' And then they would add: 'By the way, how did you hear about Operation Cyanide? No one is supposed even to know the name.'

The Israeli Defence Force and the Ministry of Defence were asked to set up interviews for the BBC documentary I was making. The producer, Chris Mitchell, and I were also seeking permission to film in Government buildings, for access to archives and for someone who would comment officially on the *Liberty* affair. But regardless of whether the approach was made by fax, telephone or in face-to-face meetings with the military press section, the effort was a waste of time. It was frustrating because no one could explain why we were being rebuffed and because others had been more fortunate. In the early 1980s, the British broadcasting company Thames Television had made a documentary and received extensive assistance. More recently a retired US judge, Jay Cristol, had been fêted by the Israelis as he pieced together a thesis, and later a book, that attempted to prove the *Liberty* attack was an accident by the spurious means of dismissing or downplaying all significant evidence to the contrary. My best remaining strategy seemed to be to make a direct approach to people who were no longer serving in the Government or armed forces, and hope they would break ranks.

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Rafi Eitan, the legendary Israeli spymaster, invited us to his home in Tel Aviv. A controversial figure in Israel, where he was born in 1926, he had wanted to be a secret agent from childhood and idolised Mata Hari. He was in charge of the Mossad team that travelled to Argentina to kidnap Adolf Eichmann, organiser of Hitler's 'Final Solution', and was a witness when the Nazi was hanged. Much later, in 1985, he was head of Lakam, another intelligence agency, when Jonathan Pollard, its spy in US Navy intelligence, was arrested, creating a long-standing cloud on United States–Israeli military relations.

In 1967 he was the head of Mossad's European operations, and though nominally based in Paris he was, by his own admission, intimately involved in the Six-Day War. Eitan must have known about Operation Cyanide, and I put it to him that before the Six-Day War the United States intelligence services and other parts of the military machine in America were secretly providing help to Israel. 'What do you mean, "help"?' he asked, prompting me to supply a list: the gathering of surveillance and intelligence information about the Egyptians, the provision of equipment, help with communications, with jamming, and training for special military operations. 'I can't go into details like this,' he said, 'but I could tell you generally we had enough information of our own... We had very good information of our own, but I don't want to go into detail.'

I said we had evidence that such assistance had been provided by the United States. Eitan said: 'I told you from the very beginning that when we go into details of my work, though it was 34 years ago, I am not able to reply. I'm not able; don't press me.'

I asked if he had ever heard of an Operation Cyanide in 1967. 'Operation Cyanide?' Eitan asked. 'If I heard about it? I have. So?' I asked what it was. 'I suggest we stop the interview here,' said Eitan, looking uncomfortable. 'What do you say? Why [do] you want it?' I said, 'I just want to know what it was.' Eitan suggested I question Meir Amit, the head of Mossad during the Six-Day War, adding: 'He knows what details he got permission to give you and what he didn't. OK?'

I then asked why he would be unable to speak about Operation Cyanide, as it was 34 years since it happened. 'Signature,' said Eitan, making a gesture with his hand as though he was signing the Official Secrets Act, 'and loyalty to my country.' I asked if it was very sensitive. 'I am built so,' he replied, 'and I know exactly what I am able to tell you, and I know exactly where I stop. And here I stop. I don't write books. I could write books; I don't write books. All the people are doing it; I'm not.'

Ezer Weizman, a former President of Israel, Chief of the General Staff and main war planner in 1967 under Dayan and Rabin, was equally sensitive. I told him that we had heard stories – not from the crew, but from other people – that Operation Cyanide was a secret plan between the American intelligence services and the Israeli military and intelligence services to help Israel plan and execute the war.

'Well, I'll tell you one thing,' Weizman said. 'The Americans were very, very highly surprised at what happened: the whole world was. Perhaps later on some people wanted to jump into success and say, "I advised them, I did this, did that." I know this game amongst military men. "We told them what to do, like we did in Vietnam, like we did in Korea, like we did here, like we did there." We never – at least I, in my responsibilities, never – talked to Americans about the war. We were training to go low-level and attack airfields: that's what we said, but when and where were never talked about.'

I said there was a secret plan between Israel and the American intelligence services called Operation Cyanide.

'I never heard of it,' said Weizman. 'Very soon I'll be sorry I'm being interviewed by you.'

I referred to Sorrels' account, without mentioning his name.

'No, no. I repeat again: after any war there are so many people who say, "I did it, I helped Montgomery..."'

He reluctantly let me relay exactly what Sorrels said: that he had helped to train the Israelis in night-time incursions into the Sinai Desert; that he was wounded and taken secretly back for

treatment to Japan because it was a very sensitive matter; that this was part of Operation Cyanide.

Weizman was animated: 'Look, you repeat yourself; you are a stubborn whatchamacallit! I don't know of any Americans who came to help us about how to penetrate the Sinai. To penetrate the Sinai was a not such a big achievement. We didn't get any assistance from any experts in America of how to run the war.'

I mentioned Greg Reight's story of the United States reconnaissance operation based in the Negev Desert – 'Why didn't he come to us to say so?'

And the story of protocol meetings attended by United States, British and Australian intelligence? 'Cyanide, protocol, shmotocol,' said Weizman. 'What the hell – ah, it's a load of bullshit. I'm not the one responding to protocols being made in the Air Force or the Army. I deal with shooting the enemy.'

I repeated the allegation that British, Australian, and Americans were taking part with the Israelis, in Israel, in planning meetings to do with the war. 'Untrue,' Weizman said finally. 'It's a big lie.'

Brigadier General Aharon Yariv, head of Aman (Military Intelligence) was a legendary figure in the Six-Day War. Undoubtedly, he knew much about Operation Cyanide; but, alas, he died in May 1994. At his funeral, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin struck a chord when he said: 'I am parting today, personally, from one of the best people who were at my side on the eve of the Six-Day War: the intelligence that Arale [Yariv's nickname] supplied me as Chief of Staff, to IDF commanders and their troops, was perfect; one of the central components of our victory.' Fortunately Yariv's deputy Shlomo Gazit, now a defence analyst at Tel Aviv University, was very willing to discuss the Six-Day War, though the *Liberty* issue made him irritable. 'It's very embarrassing for a military force like the Israeli Defence Forces to make such a blunder, no doubt,' he said. 'But we admit our mistake. That does not mean that there was any intention or any conspiracy or anything of the sort.' I said the crew

thought one of the reasons for the attack was Israel's fear the ship was spying on its plans to attack Syria. 'That only shows that, indeed, it was a lousy crew,' said Gazit. 'They had no idea whatsoever what was going on. There was nothing to spy on there... and the decision to attack Syria was made by the Minister of Defense on Day Five in the middle of the night, without any need for any preparations, and there was nothing they could monitor on the subject. Let's say that this boat would not have been attacked. Do you think that we would have not attacked Syria anyway? That the results would have been different? Was there any American intervention against our entrance into the West Bank at the time? Nothing. Why should we have been concerned about the *Liberty*? As I say, literally, there was nothing to monitor.'

I raised Joe Sorrels' story with Gazit. 'Well here you have an advantage,' he said. 'It's the first time I have heard this story. I have never heard it before. I don't believe there is again anything true in it. The man to confirm or to disprove it, of course, is General Amit [Mossad chief]. I might not know: not such a story. But listen: Israel is a small country – something of this kind cannot be kept secret for more than three days.'

I repeated the details of Sorrels' operation in Israel, his presence at war planning meetings and that he was working alongside British and Australian intelligence personnel. 'We're wasting our time,' Gazit said angrily. 'Listen: first of all, I don't know what Meir Amit said on this: I assume he said it's all bluff, it's nonsense, but that's his business. What I want to say is two things: one, that this could perhaps be a misunderstanding. The Egyptians at the time were stuck in Yemen, and we were supporting the anti-Egyptian forces in Yemen. Together with some Brits, there may have been also some Americans – as individuals, as volunteers – you know, those kind of people, who were involved in all kinds of operation. I don't think there was any government, neither American nor British, behind it. But this is something for Meir Amit to say.'

'So, if he [Sorrels] was one of those, then he might have come to Israel: he might have been in the war. We had been dropping

arms in Yemen at the time, and things like that. But – and that’s the second point – I was responsible for the assessment at the time, and our assessment until May 1967 was totally crystal-clear. There [was] no chance of a major war between Israel and our neighbours. They [were] not ready for a variety of reasons... We were assuming that ultimately there will be a war. But it won’t be for at least several years...’

Gazit’s reference to Yemen was interesting. Sorrels had mentioned that some of the United States and British personnel who worked alongside him in Israel might have been pulled out of that area, where they were engaged in destabilising the revolutionary Government. Nasser had 70,000 troops engaged in supporting the Yemeni regime and Britain was spearheading covert commando raids against it, assisted by the United States, Saudi Arabia and, it seems, Israel. The former Aman chief’s suggestion that foreign nationals might have been assisting Israel’s own plans in ‘all sorts of operations’ fits with Sorrels’ story, except that the American was certain his colleagues were fully under the direction of their national governments, not volunteers.

General Meir Amit, as Gazit and Eitan had suggested, should have been able to help with my enquiries, if he so wished. Head of Mossad – the Israeli equivalent of the CIA and Britain’s MI6 – in 1967, he had previously been head of Aman: a unique achievement. Today, at 81, he chairs a satellite television company and heads a combined museum, memorial and archive dedicated to the fallen of the Israeli intelligence services, north of Tel Aviv. We had two meetings in an 18-month period but, though he was courteous and generous with his time, his memory apparently failed on crucial matters – Operation Cyanide, for example.

‘We were always sure that eventually, if there will be a real crisis, America will be on our side,’ Amit said. ‘But to get into operational co-operation, or co-ordination – I don’t remember this period... I think this picture that you try to portray now is not the right picture. America was not helping us massively.’

Amit turned to the secret flying visit to Washington he made

on the eve of the war. He said he had headed for the United States on 30 May, at the suggestion of Aman boss Yariv, because there was confusion in Tel Aviv about the United States' attitude to the Israeli stand-off with Egypt. The first person he went to see in Washington was James Jesus Angleton, the CIA's head of counter-intelligence. This was someone he knew he could trust like a brother.

Angleton, a workaholic, also controlled the CIA's Israeli desk, and had built his career by exploiting his close contacts with Mossad, whose penetration of the Soviet Union was far more successful than his own agency's.¹ On his death in 1986, the American would be commemorated by two monuments in Israel paid for by Israeli intelligence chiefs, including Amit. One is opposite the walls of Jerusalem's Old City near the King David Hotel, and the other is in the Jerusalem Forest. In English and Hebrew, the inscriptions read: 'James Jesus Angleton. 1917-1987. In Memory of a Good Friend.'

With the Israeli cabinet's decision to go to war hanging in the balance, Amit knew Angleton would open doors for him: and so he did. They went to meet CIA boss Richard Helms at Langley, and in no time at all he was ushered into a large conference room. 'They gathered about 30 or 40 people,' Amit remembered. 'I lectured to them. I gave them our appreciation of the situation and we found out that we don't disagree almost on any one point.'

After this meeting, he was quickly granted an audience with Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense. The crucial moment had arrived when he hoped to discover the United States' true intentions, and Amit had no time for niceties: 'I told McNamara, "Look; we don't want even one soldier of you. All we want from you is to stop the Russians coming into the arena, and... to help us after the war." So when I finished, he asked me two questions. One was, "How long will it take?" I said, "One week." "How many casualties?" I told him, "Less than the War of Independence." So I asked him, "Mr Secretary, what do you advise me? Can I go home now, or stay here until things will clear up?" He said, "No, you go home; your place is there now." I drew the conclusion that it was a green light.'

Amit said McNamara consulted Johnson several times during this conversation, and so there was no doubt the President was fully informed and also signalling green. Israel now had permission from LBJ to go to war, at a time when the State Department was desperately attempting to avert war and solve the problem through diplomacy. The White House clearly had a secret agenda; but did it extend to the United States providing covert assistance to ensure an overwhelming victory by Israel? Amit seemed unused to being grilled. He denied knowing anything about Cyanide, or the examples of assistance I listed.

His eyes lit up, however, when I mentioned the name of James Angleton as a possible conduit for military aid. Amit said he remembered with pleasure Angleton arriving as the war ended: 'With a special aeroplane, we went from one place to another to show him what happened.' Then he hastily added: 'But before the war there was no co-ordination.'

John Haddon, now retired and living in Brunswick, Maine, is a veteran spook and an admirer of Angleton, who was his boss for ten years. A lifetime in the CIA has left him cynical about world affairs and he has a struggle to admit he took any part in them, being mostly still governed by his oath of secrecy. However, he was a witness to many unpublicised aspects of the Six-Day War from his base at the United States Embassy in Tel Aviv where, I had been told, he was Angleton's placeman. 'I suppose I can admit to that,' he said, 'though I don't like to do that.'

He had a seemingly simple view of the Six-Day War and why it happened: 'The problem with the Arab world is that their regimes and administrations are so fragile that they have to go to war knowing they're going to lose. Now, I realise that for the European mind that's an impossible thing to accept, but it's the best I can do for you.' Was it, therefore, all Nasser's fault? 'Goodness, no; goodness, no,' he said. 'It was just that he trapped himself, didn't he? He didn't want to go to war but he felt that to preserve his "street cred" he had to stand up to Israel...'

Haddon was open about Israel's readiness – its eagerness even –

to do battle: 'We knew there was going to be war; the problem was that the President [Johnson] needed a certain amount of time to prove to the world that he was a peacemaker, and that he was going to do everything in his power to prevent a war from breaking out in the Middle East... I was interested in making sure that they gave him time to run through the musical chairs. It struck me that three weeks was about right.'

Haddon said the arrival of the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean had created considerable paranoia: 'The Israelis, of course, were beside themselves... You could look out my window there and [there] was the Israeli Army camped in our backyard, on their way. So there was no secret; this wasn't an intelligence problem at all; everybody knew they were going to war. The only question was when, and the Israelis wanted to do it right away.'

He returned to his prime concern: saving Johnson's face. 'Of course, as I saw it, they had to give the President time to build up this idea that he was a peacemaker, and all the Israelis were giving me holy hell... They were furious: they were insisting that this meant with each passing day an extra thousand dead, which I just didn't believe in any way shape or form.'

The Israelis were grossly exaggerating the possible casualty figures. 'They were claiming that they were going to lose over 6,000 men... Of course, the facts bore me out: they lost 600, as it turned out. They used the word cosmetica; I said, "Well, cosmetica is fine; I just want you to understand that that was exactly what an American President needed – he needed cosmetica to survive, and if you give it to him, you can have everything. If you don't give it to him – well, things might be more difficult.'

The CIA agent said things finally came to a head around 1 June. 'Some of us went to Washington. It was my impression that Eban had told the Israeli Government they couldn't do it – that the Americans wouldn't put up with it. So then they sent Amit; he saw things more my way, and he came back and told them to go ahead, and so that's what happened.'

It was significant that Haddon admitted that he and Meir Amit

of Mossad were effectively working in tandem; they travelled to Washington together to ensure Israel would disregard Abba Eban's earlier assessment that the United States would not back a war. Equally important was confirmation that Johnson's public posture of wanting to stop the conflict was purely cosmetic. Haddon had confirmed the CIA wanted the Israelis to go in, but at the right moment.

I asked why this crucial mission was put in the hands of Amit, who was not a diplomat, bypassing Eban. Furthermore, it was evident the US State Department and its head, Dean Rusk, were also being sidelined, with McNamara being the point of contact. Haddon smiled: 'You know, that's a very interesting remark. It would be like saying [in the other direction] that it was a [United States] diplomat's job to deal with the Israelis and the Palestinians, and who have we had? We've had a retired marine general; we've had the head of the CIA; we've had the CIA station chief out there. I mean, diplomats play no role in this. It's the White House and the Prime Minister involved in all these things. There's no diplomacy. The State Department plays no role out there.'

I asked who in the Washington administration played the main role. 'McNamara and the guys over in the Pentagon,' Haddon said.

We turned to the issue of how much the CIA had helped Israel before and during the war. 'Oh, zero,' he said. 'They didn't need any help.' He was adamant there was no covert assistance, no photo-reconnaissance and no American fighters operating in the Negev Desert, nor other special operations. I suggested he would deny such things anyway. 'That's an interesting question,' he said, chuckling. 'There's nothing I can say to that, is there?'

I mentioned that people had told me these activities came under the umbrella of Operation Cyanide: 'Then they must know a great deal more and must have been in much higher positions than I, because I certainly never heard about them... I guess there are humorists in every line of work and you've met them all.' He laughed again, but then he admitted there had been some United

States help. 'There were clearly exchanges of information of a variety of sorts,' he said. 'I won't identify what sorts.'

It was clear that views within the CIA were 'complicated': 'You had Angleton, who would have had one view, and Helms [CIA Director] might have had a different view. Angleton had his own peculiar views, so there was a difference in tone, which was that anybody who was anti-Soviet was his friend – period.' Was it Angleton's view that really mattered, as I had been told? 'Not really,' he said. 'It was what the President of the United States thought that had the only meaning... There was the White House and the Pentagon all set to give the Israelis a green light. I think you're ascribing too much power to this man [Angleton]. He had great power within the Agency, but the Agency was not a mover and shaker of policy.'

Haddon said the overriding issue for the President in this period was the Soviet threat and concern about the Soviet presence in the Middle East. Moscow wanted to put the Americans 'in a bind... and increase tension. They hoped the US would stop it,' he said, 'before their Arab clients got too bad a pasting, and of course they misjudged it, didn't they?'

Israeli forces were at the Suez Canal in strength by Day Four and had built a pontoon crossing; I asked if there was alarm in Washington that Moshe Dayan might be heading all the way to Cairo. Haddon then revealed something stunningly new, showing how much the historical view of America's role in the conflict had been misjudged. He asked me to stop recording. Then he said that Washington had actively wanted the Israelis to go all the way and unseat Nasser but – to America's chagrin – Dayan and the Israeli Government had refused. When we resumed recording, he put this more diplomatically: 'It wouldn't have bothered [the Americans] had they overthrown Nasser. There would have been elements in the Government that would have thought this was a great idea, and there would have been other elements that might have had a longer view.'

I asked what the outcome of the war had meant for the United States. 'There was euphoria,' he said. 'Certainly, the people who

saw no dangers in it for us from the results were mighty pleased that the Soviet Union had been given a bloody nose in the Middle East. And of course the American Jewish community was beside itself with joy, and that's always reflected in support for candidates. So everybody was extremely happy.'

We moved on to another event that happened on Day Four – the *Liberty* attack. Haddon said he had spent two months investigating it and reached the conclusion it was a mistake. However, he refused to say who he had interviewed; the pilots, for instance. 'I can't talk about those things. I can tell you the *Liberty*, in my view, is a very unimportant event. It was made important because Admiral Moorer [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff some time after the Six-Day War] was convinced it was [done] on purpose.'

He argued there was no point in sinking the *Liberty* that far into the war: 'Had they sunk it on Monday morning, as the planes were going out and coming in at 50 feet off the water, I'd be much more willing to believe that the Israelis would have taken every action to make sure that no warning was given to the Egyptians.'

I asked if he knew the USS *Liberty* was there: 'I was paying no attention to that kind of thing,' he said. 'That was the Navy's business; that wasn't my business.' He advised me to read the doctoral thesis of judge Jay Cristol, which had concluded the *Liberty* attack was an unfortunate catalogue of errors. I said I regarded it as a shoddy piece of research, but Haddon persisted in insisting it was valid.²

Did he know in advance the *Liberty* was going to be attacked? Haddon sounded surprised: 'Goodness, no. Who did? Nobody knew.' I said that under the Freedom of Information Act, the CIA had released a report from his bureau in Tel Aviv that Moshe Dayan had ordered the attack: 'That's absolutely out of the question. I don't know; who told you that? Anything like that, that you're describing, I would have seen, if not written [it].'

Robert McNamara was reputedly a pernickety character but, potentially, he knew all the answers. After becoming President of the Ford Motor Company at the age of 44, he was appointed by

Kennedy as Secretary of Defense and he served in the same post under Lyndon Johnson until 1968. He left to become president of the World Bank for 13 years, and then held a clutch of directorships. Now in his mid-eighties, he is still extremely energetic. He granted me and the BBC TV crew precisely eight minutes to conduct an interview. We met at his offices in downtown Washington where he still works every day, surrounded by piles of files and papers.

I asked him if there was any pressure or encouragement by the Johnson administration for Israel to attack Egypt. 'Absolutely not,' he replied curtly. 'President Johnson and I met with Mr Eban [Israel's Foreign Minister] to put immense pressure on him to, in turn, persuade his government not to pre-empt. The reason was that we feared that the conflict between Egypt and Israel, with Egypt intending to literally wipe Israel off the map, would result in so much pressure on Israel they would need our assistance to prevent elimination. And we would not be able to provide that assistance with Senate support if our people believed, and the Senate believed, that the pressure on Israel came because Israel attacked Egypt, and therefore we insisted with Eban that they not pre-empt.'

Had preparations been made in case the US needed to assist Israel, I asked. 'We had capabilities that could be called on,' he said, 'particularly from the Sixth Fleet, and other capabilities as well.' I asked him if he could elaborate, being particularly interested in his reference to 'other capabilities'. 'No,' he said.

The indication was that the Sixth Fleet had been dispatched to the eastern Mediterranean not merely on a training exercise – the official reason for its being there – but prepared to attack Egyptian forces under certain circumstances. It implied a degree of foreknowledge at a time when few people were expecting a war. As evidence later showed, the CIA knew Egypt was neither poised to invade Israel nor had the capacity to 'wipe it off the map'. McNamara may not have been being entirely candid about the circumstances in which the Sixth Fleet would have been unleashed.

I told him that Meir Amit was definite that he had received a green light for Israel to launch an invasion of Egypt when he had met McNamara in Washington on the eve of the conflict. 'Absolutely not,' he said, 'because at that point President Johnson and I, and Dean Rusk, had fully agreed that we must keep the United States in a position where, if Israel called on us for military assistance to turn back the attack by Egypt – and possibly turn back an attack by Egypt with the support of the Soviet Union – we could obtain the support of the American people and the Congress for applying military force in support of Israel, and we would not have that support if Israel had attacked Egypt. So our position was, "No, don't initiate an attack", and I had no basis for believing that the Israeli you spoke of received any other indication from me than that.'

Was the USS *Liberty* sent in case there might be a need to help Israel? McNamara couldn't help: 'I'm sure it wasn't, but my recollection of the circumstances around the *Liberty* is very vague.' I said some of the *Liberty* survivors and some men serving with the Sixth Fleet had accused him of recalling planes sent to rescue the *Liberty* during the attack. 'I am absolutely certain that's false,' he said. So he didn't send a signal to the Sixth Fleet? 'Absolutely not!'

I asked how Washington responded to the invasion of Syria on Day Five. McNamara said: 'When Israel had so overwhelmed Egypt, and Jordan as well, the great difficulty was that we were fearful Egypt would call on Syria and the Soviet Union to come to its defence, and therefore we turned the Sixth Fleet around. The Sixth Fleet in the Med had been steaming west towards Gibraltar on a training mission, and when it became apparent to us that Israel might need support we instructed the fleet to turn around and steam east toward Israel; not to join Israel in an attack on Syria, but to be in a position to defend Israel against a Soviet and Syrian attack.'

I asked if a similar crisis had occurred over the *Liberty* attack as initially he must have wondered who was attacking that ship. Alas, McNamara could not help; his memory seemed to have let

him down. 'As I say, I have nothing to say on the *Liberty*,' he said. 'I don't recall it, but everything... well, I'm not going to go further. I'm not going to say anything on the *Liberty*.'

I said Britain had dubbed as 'The Big Lie' Nasser's claim that the United States and Britain were providing aircraft and secret reconnaissance assistance to Israel, and thereby were effectively participants in the war. "'The Big Lie" is an apt description of Nasser's position,' he said. 'What happened was that Israel preempted and they, in a sense, knocked the heck out of Egypt. Nasser then called on King Hussein in Jordan and said, "The US is bombing Cairo, using the Sixth Fleet for that purpose, and you, King Hussein, have got to come to our defence." King Hussein did attack Israel. Israel knocked the heck out of King Hussein. A year later, Nasser told *Life* magazine he had lied, and he HAD lied. We did not attack Cairo.'

He went on: 'I doubt your audience knows, and I don't believe five per cent of the American people know, that Israel has never had a security treaty with the United States. It didn't have it at the time of the Six-Day War, it doesn't have it today. I think that is a terrible mistake, and I talked to one Israeli Prime Minister not long ago who was very much inclined to agree with that. We have security treaties with Japan, with nations across the world, and we ought to have a security treaty with Israel, in our interest and in Israel's interest and in the interests of peace in the Middle East.'

He was, he said, deeply disturbed by the present situation in Israel: 'I think it's absolutely essential that the Arab nations, Egypt in particular, and Israel, and the United States, work toward a peace that would establish a Palestinian state and ensure peaceful relationships between that state and the Israeli state.' I wanted to ask whether, if United States actions during and before the 1967 War had been different, the present crisis could have been averted – but our eight minutes were nearly up and I was keen to raise the *Liberty* issue again. I pointed out that the surviving crew would like Congress to investigate the attack. He looked annoyed: 'I am not saying anything about the *Liberty* period. The reason I don't... You've got to deal with me fairly on this, now. Don't have

any of this – anything about the *Liberty* – on the tape... because I don't know what the hell happened and I haven't taken time to find out. There are all of these claims that we sent planes, that planes were going out and we turned them around and that we intentionally allowed the Israelis to sink the *Liberty*. I know nothing about it. I don't want to say I didn't at the time, but today I have no knowledge of it...'

Richard Helms was 88 when he agreed to do a TV interview, at his home in Washington DC, about events surrounding the Six-Day War. A little dodderly, his speech is sometimes indistinct, but he has lost none of the cunning and acuity that took him to the top of the CIA in 1966, where he remained as director for seven years. I asked why the *Liberty* was attacked. He said the ship was equipped with all kinds of listening devices. 'They were obviously trying to figure out what the Israelis were going to do next,' he went on, 'what the Egyptians were going to do, or what anybody was going to do. The reason for the Israeli attack, as far as I know, has never been admitted. I've sat in meetings with them and they simply say that this was a mistake and it was terrible, we're awfully sorry... How can my personal view be other than my American view, which was that they intended to attack this ship, and there's no excuse that can be found for saying that this was just a mistake?'

This was a surprisingly candid response, but it seemed incredible that he had failed to uncover why the ship was targeted. I asked again what could be the explanation. 'I haven't the faintest idea,' Helms said. 'You have to ask them [the Israelis].' I said he was head of the CIA at the time; he had the biggest and best intelligence organisation in the world; and he was saying the *Liberty* attack was deliberate. I therefore wondered why was there no Congressional investigation, leaving the *Liberty* veterans wondering why they were victims. 'I've never been able to figure this out,' said Helms. 'It's political pressure in this country.' I asked him to elaborate. 'I prefer not to,' said Helms.

I asked what pressure would prevent the issue of a United

States ship being attacked on the open seas by a friendly state being properly and thoroughly investigated. Helms said the White House was at first angry, but 'after 24 hours President Johnson just disappeared out of the picture... McNamara would be more involved in the politics of this, but I think the feeling was that the political pressure would be too much: let it go, just go away.'

I pointed out that people had been sworn to secrecy and the naval inquiry was regarded by many as a complete sham. 'You ask McNamara about those questions,' said Helms. 'I'm not going to answer those.' He added that the *Liberty* veterans were being badly treated, but he would say no more about it. On the issue of covert co-operation between Israel and his own agency to help Israel prepare for the conflict, Helms was adamant: 'I know of no secret plan such as that, and I don't believe there was one.'

No witness to the attack was more acutely aware that the naval inquiry was a sham than George Golden, the *Liberty's* chief engineer, whose story of the attack and the aftermath are so revealing. Some think this modest, courteous man was more deserving of the Congressional Medal of Honor than his skipper. As reported in Chapter One, he took charge when McGonagle became semi-delirious through loss of blood. He wisely resisted the Captain's order to abandon ship and the order to scuttle her after the torpedo strike. When Executive Officer Lt Commander Philip Armstrong was mortally wounded, Golden took charge of the vessel, shoring up the bulkheads and overseeing the voyage of his stricken vessel to Malta when she was still in dire danger of foundering.

Tattoos covering both Golden's forearms emphasise how, alone among the ship's officers, he had risen from the ranks. He served through World War Two, surviving when his ship was sunk at Pearl Harbour and again in April 1945 when another vessel on which he was serving was struck by two suicide planes in the South China Sea; on that occasion he spent ten hours in the water before being picked up. With such a background, he was more equipped to cope with the mayhem created aboard the *Liberty*

after the attack began. He was also a crucial witness in helping me unravel some of the mysteries of that day.

En route to Valetta, he had to respond to a spate of encrypted signals from Washington. Documents saved from the secret spaces were handed to him after the attack, many of which he retained. He was also close to McGonagle; they lived near one another in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and their children grew up together. In his later years, the Captain therefore became a confidante.

Golden agreed to be interviewed in August 2000 and drove from Virginia Beach to meet me in Washington. In February 2002 he also gave a long interview for the BBC documentary I was researching in parallel with this book. On both occasions Golden spoke more freely than he had done previously, though in his old age he often stumbled over what he was trying to say. His memories of the attack aside, the aftermath and what he learned over the years have made an indelible impact.

I first asked about Israel's intentions in perpetuating the onslaught. 'They didn't want any survivors,' he said. 'I was told when we got into Malta – and I'm not going to mention any names – that their orders were to sink that ship and kill everyone on it. I have nothing to prove it, [but] I have a lot of messages – secret messages; even in Washington they tried to get some of these from me. I won't say where some of this came from. The crew all feel that McNamara and Johnson were looking for an excuse to jump in and help Israel. Russia had already supplied Egypt with [weapons].

'We were hearing we were the guinea pigs, to get shot up, to make it look like Egypt was doing this so the United States could step in. Our country thought that the Russians were going to cross the Canal to help them [the Egyptians] out. We were told that the attack was supposed to have looked like it was the Egyptians, and that was going to give our country an excuse to get in there to help Israel.' Golden said he was informed of this after the ship was docked in Valetta.

He was also told that the various messages allegedly sent to order the *Liberty* away from the danger zone before the attack

were deliberately blocked, and not accidentally misrouted as a Congressional inquiry had been informed. 'When they made up that message for us to remain 100 miles off shore, we didn't get it,' he said. 'When they put it [in the communication system] we would have it in seconds. We had the most sophisticated equipment for spying in any country in the world.'

I asked how he felt when he was told all this about being guinea pigs. 'I thought I was going to cry,' Golden said, 'because I couldn't believe something like that would happen. I didn't think our government was that way.'

I asked if he was also told that McNamara and Johnson knew about that. 'Yes,' he replied. Did somebody tell him the orders not to help *Liberty* came from as high as the President? 'Yes,' he said again. 'Some of our people from the States came over when we came into Malta. I happened to know two of them. One of them was with me when we put the *Liberty* back in commission... and he said, "George, they really did it to you, old boy," and I said, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "You were a damned guinea pig." And that's all he would say.'

Golden said he would rather not say if he had documentation to verify any of this. Could he remember what any of the messages said? 'Only one that really stands out,' said Golden, 'that McNamara and Johnson were not interested in hearing that the ship had been shot up. It was from Fort Meade [NSA headquarters], from the general [or] admiral over there that handles all that security stuff. It was a message to the ship.'

He revealed that in Malta he had met a 'four-striper' (a senior United States Navy Captain with four stripes on his cuff) who, to his astonishment, had been in the Israeli war room in Tel Aviv during the attack. 'I don't remember his name,' he said. 'I remember he was a big, fat person. They all left the war room for a period of time; he stayed, and when they came back the planes and the boats were hitting us. What makes that stand out to me more than anything else was the fact that he said they should have sunk the whole ship, they had the power to do it, and the *Liberty* should not have gotten away. It was, to me, like he was on

somebody else's side, not America's side when they were shooting up our ship.'

Back in the United States, Golden decided that there should be a Government investigation. After putting together a dossier six or seven inches thick, he contacted the chairman of the Armed Forces Committee. 'It took a long time to get the appointment', he said, 'and we had three briefcases full of everything that you would need. We were stupid enough not to make copies of some... We spent about three hours with him. He says, "Well, aren't you going to leave all this with me?" He said, "This is good; I'll take it before the Armed Forces Committee." He says, "You told me all the things you've got in there so I'm not going to look at it now, but I will, and I will make an appointment and get all of this through the Committee."' Golden said he and three others who accompanied him were told the evidence was 'hot stuff': 'We were happy as a lark. We had finally got someone to listen to us – and nothing happened. So what do you do then?'

Golden discussed the attack with McGonagle in Malta: 'When I'd go up to fill him in with what was going on with the ship, he cried quite a bit. He'd start to say something, then he'd stop and cry. This was right after the attack. I got the impression that he knew something that none of the rest of us knew. I know that the Ambassador, before we left the Ivory Coast had called him over.' I asked him if McGonagle had been told he was going to be a sitting duck. 'In my heart, I feel he did know,' said Golden. 'I really believe that.'

Golden said he had found out more from the skipper a few years ago. 'He called me two or three years before he died. He was going to be in Washington [and asked] for me to come up there. I sat in a room with him: we chatted a while and he got started telling me. [He said], "Those SOB[s] [sons of bitches] really did us in, George." I said, "What are you talking about?" and then he told me that [it was] the President and McNamara – that he had straight information, through Fort Meade, that when they sent us up from over in Africa, we were there to have this happen.

'He told me a lot of things, like when I wanted to go to his

brand-new ship as a chief engineer. They didn't want two people together that would talk about it, and I guess that was a big thing back then.'

Golden described how, periodically, he would be threatened and people would visit him, who he believed were from the CIA, demanding he hand over documents he had kept. I said surely now was the time to tell. 'I talked to the Captain about this a while back,' Golden replied. 'He said, "Go ahead", but I said, "I'm the one that has to answer for all this."' "

Did he think the authorities would still try to silence him? 'Yes, I do,' he said firmly, 'because of some phone calls that I got.'

At our first meeting, I had put it to Golden that he must have kept copies of some key documents. After acknowledging this he promised to talk with his wife about handing them over. He had still not decided when we met again for the TV interview 18 months later, and as the film crew were packing up I broached the subject again. Golden said the papers had been left with his lawyer but he would consult him, and again with his wife. When I rang two days later, he had bad news. 'Peter, my wife and I discussed this at great length and we decided to order the lawyer to destroy them. The worry has been just too great.'

It is easy to understand why Golden heard nothing from the Armed Forces Committee. The allegation that the crew were destined to be guinea pigs was not a surprise; the evidence of many other witnesses pointed to the same conclusion. Even after 35 years, Golden was so scared of the consequences of this knowledge that he had destroyed vital proof.

11. Re-electing the President

‘Should a nation which attacks and occupies foreign territory in the face of United Nations disapproval be allowed to impose the conditions of its withdrawal? If we agree, then I fear we will have turned back the clock of international order.’

National broadcast in 1957 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower
commenting on Israel’s first invasion of the Sinai

The valiant crew members of the *Liberty* are the heroes of this book. For 35 years they have fought to have the true story of what happened to their ship uncovered and have refused to let the matter rest. But even if every one of those who are still alive felt free to speak, they would still have only a fragment of the reason why they were attacked. Alas they were not privy to the machinations of those in Tel Aviv and Washington who subjected them to a living hell on 8 June 1967.

They have spent all these years trying to convince people the attack was intentional, and been faced with rebuff after rebuff. In most Western countries there would have been a group in the mainstream of politics which would have demanded answers from their administration and censured those to blame. In America, despite having plenty of influential supporters, the crew has been unable to achieve its objective.

Admiral Thomas Moorer has been a stalwart supporter. As a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he has great authority. He wrote: ‘I have never believed that the attack on the USS *Liberty* was a case of mistaken identity. That is ridiculous. I have flown over the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, thousands of hours, searching for ships and identifying all types of ships at sea. The *Liberty* was the ugliest, strangest-looking ship in the US Navy. As a

communications intelligence ship, it was sprouting every kind of antenna. It looked like a lobster with all those projections moving every which way. Israel knew perfectly well that the ship was American.¹

Rear Admiral Paul Tobin, then a lieutenant in the damage control team that boarded the *Liberty*, agreed: 'To have mistaken this ship for an Egyptian freighter [as the Israelis claimed] would reflect poorly on their intelligence, and Israeli intelligence was rated as one of the world's best. Any form of electronic warfare sweep certainly would have identified the *Liberty's* SPS-10 surface search radar. I also believe strongly that no responsible young military professional would have attacked a virtually defenceless ship repeatedly without some strong guidance from a much higher authority. Any officer competent enough to fly a jet aircraft or command a patrol boat would have been able to identify this unique US ship, and would have been repulsed by the idea of attacking a lightly armed ship.'²

However, these experts' opinions have been ignored by successive administrations. The United States Congress has been supine throughout the entire period since the attack, apparently afraid to raise any dust in case it started a tornado of controversy from the vocal Jewish lobby. It was prepared to investigate the failure of signals reaching the ship (and was skilfully duped into thinking it was another catalogue of mistakes), but has disgracefully ignored the main issue – the cause of the attack itself. It is, however, not too late; and there are moves in the Wisconsin State legislature to press for action even as this book goes to press.

There is no doubt the issue is still relevant, given the parlous state of Israel today. Ambassador Richard Parker, political consul at the United States Embassy in Cairo in 1967, is precise in his view about the importance of the war on the United States' Middle East policy. 'It was a turning-point in our relationship with Israel,' he said. 'Up until that point we had avoided being a major arms supplier to Israel; we had considered Israel as a military and political liability. We were so impressed with the Israeli performance in the field that we dropped our reluctance and we became major arms

suppliers. Paradoxically, the security of Israel became one of our strategic objectives, which it never had been in the past.'

One person who never made public all that he knew was Captain McGonagle. After addressing the thirtieth crew reunion at Arlington Cemetery, he made another impassioned plea for an investigation. In October 1998 he wrote to President Clinton urging him not to release Jonathan Pollard, the Navy spy, until Israel publicly acknowledged that its armed forces deliberately attacked the USS *Liberty*. He summarised the lame excuses Israel had made, the horror of the assault and how his ship could not fight back. 'WE WERE DEFENSELESS,' he wrote, 'against the onslaught of eight or more firing passes by at least four aircraft, and the strafing and launching of five torpedoes by three motor torpedo boats. That a larger number of casualties was not reported is a tribute to the fighting spirit of the officers, crew, civilians and marines, when they had nothing to defend themselves with, during our awesome hours of peril.'

He said the attack happened 'without warning or provocation' and added: 'Except for a few high-ranking naval officers, no one has felt our pain of not knowing exactly why the ship was attacked. Over 31 years after the attack, the crew is entitled to know the details concerning the attack by the Government of Israel and also the details of the role [of] the US Government in the entire affair. Why were our aircraft recalled to their carriers on two occasions before they reached our location to assess the situation, and what official ordered the recall after hot-line communication was established with Moscow to alert Nasser that the planes were being sent to see what the condition of USS *Liberty* was? None of the planes ever reached our location. For over 17 hours we received no assistance from US forces in the Mediterranean.

'This is the only United States Navy ship attacked by a foreign nation, involving a large loss of life and so many personnel injured, that has never been accorded a full Congressional hearing.'

McGonagle died a few months later, leaving apparently no record of what he knew of his own country's role. He did, however,

speak to George Golden, as reported in Chapter Ten. The Chief Engineer's memories of his last conversations with his old friend are emotional, but Golden is confident that his skipper knew the attack was going to take place. As reported earlier, Golden said: 'We were hearing we were the guinea pigs, to get shot up, to make it look like Egypt was doing this so the United States could step in. Our country thought that the Russians were going to cross the Canal to help them [the Egyptians] out... We were told that the attack was supposed to have looked like it was the... Egyptians, and that was going to give our country an excuse to get in there to help Israel.' In essence, his own country was really the culprit.

Israel was doing the US a favour. When the attack failed it allowed a few witnesses to come forward and 'confess' to various blunders in an effort to substantiate that the *Liberty* was not a pre-meditated target. It was admitted that the ship had been identified early on the morning of 8 June and marked as a United States ship on the plotting table at naval headquarters, but that this marker was then allegedly removed around mid-morning because no recent information had been collected about the *Liberty* still being in the area. Bearing in mind that there were no other foreign surface ships of any description close to that part of the Egyptian coast at the time, losing track of the *Liberty* in this way was truly incredible. The story was, without doubt, concocted after the event. Witnesses aboard the *Liberty* saw Israeli spotter-planes circling the ship and taking photographs of them long after their vessel was supposedly 'lost' by Israeli naval HQ.

Equally bogus was the claim that the MTBs' officers misread their radar plots of the *Liberty* as they sped towards it, calculating the ship was doing nearly 30 knots when it was steaming at just five. Then, at 1,000 yards' distance, the three MTBs launched five torpedoes at the ship, having identified it as the much smaller *El Quseir*, which was actually docked in Alexandria harbour at the time. Again, this story is incredible. Any officer committing such gross errors would at the very least have had his failings tested in a court martial; but no one was even tried, let alone punished.

Here again is a concocted story, designed to sidestep the truth by sowing confusion and doubt.

The pilots of the Mirages and Mystères sent to attack the ship allegedly saw no United States flag before they launched their onslaught. As the *Liberty* witnesses have testified so many times, the flag was flying and was replaced as soon as it was shot down. If a case of mistaken identity has to be fabricated, one would have to claim there was no identifying flag to be seen. It was a falsehood, as witnesses to intercepted radio messages between the planes and their control centre have proved. Also false was the claim that the air attack lasted less than 15 minutes, and that the MTBs offered help immediately after their torpedo strike when, so Israel claimed, the United States flag was seen being erected.

The biggest lie of all was the extraordinary story that the ship was identified as a target because El Arish was reportedly being shelled from the sea. It was this aspect of the official story that gave the clue about how Israel hoodwinked people lower down the military command chain into firing on a vessel belonging to an ally. As Captain Rahav let slip, from around 11.30 am he was being harangued by Southern Command in Beersheba and Military Command in Tel Aviv to order his torpedo boats to engage an Egyptian warship. Over a period of several hours they were relaying reports to naval HQ in Haifa that El Arish was still under fire from an enemy vessel and it must be sunk. El Arish was never shelled. The story was a ploy to bamboozle Rahav, who took the brunt of the blame in the judicial inquiry. He left the Navy, his name sullied but unpunished, soon afterwards, and was given a plum job in which he continued to prosper.

All Israel's excuses collapse when examined objectively, but the prime motive of this investigation was not to prove intent on the part of the Israelis. That job was ably undertaken by Jim Ennes in his book *Assault On the Liberty* in 1979, and the further evidence that has come to light since serves simply to reinforce his argument. But one of the reasons he and others failed to make a greater impact was because many people could not – or would not – believe that Israel would premeditatedly sink an ally's ship

and kill the 294 crew. The crucial task, as in most detective stories, was therefore to uncover the motive, which has meant examining many events seemingly unconnected with the attack.

I had only a sketchy knowledge of the Six-Day War when I began this investigation, and no inkling that it would uncover such an explosive story. Events surrounding the *Liberty* attack represented far more than a footnote in the history of that period, as several senior Israeli figures had tried to claim. It was soon evident that I could not rely on history books some of which made no mention of the incident. There is a vast literature describing the war and analysing its causes, but it largely overlooks an even bigger missing ingredient – the American dimension.

It has been argued that the Arabs brought the disaster on themselves, and that Israel was the underdog forced to react to their aggression. Of course the Arabs hated Israel and wanted Zionism eliminated, but that had been the case since the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. As Chapter Three showed, the widely accepted notion that a beleaguered Jewish state was left with no alternative but to launch a pre-emptive war on Nasser or perish is, at best, over-simplistic. Israel's own leaders of that period, such as Rabin and Dayan, eventually admitted that Nasser – the undisputed leader of the Arab world – was not seriously planning an invasion of their country.

The Egyptian President was, of course, foolish to play into Israel's hands by closing the Straits of Tiran and kicking out the UN force patrolling the Sinai frontier, but he moved only two divisions across the Suez Canal into the Sinai. Stories of six divisions were falsely propagated by Israel; at least 70,000 of Nasser's troops were operating in the Yemen where the Western powers, including Israel, were sponsoring a guerrilla campaign against the revolutionary regime Egypt was supporting.

Israel had also been responsible for actions against Syria and Jordan that inflamed Arab opinion, putting pressure on Nasser to make some gesture of defiance. The evidence of Israeli provocation came not only from UN commanders and other observers; it

was later admitted by Israeli hero Moshe Dayan. To view Israel as an innocent victim, or as a country seeking peaceful co-existence, was misleading; and some less blinkered Jewish historians have recently begun to voice such revisionist theories, based on recently released archives.

Another surprise was that the Israeli establishment was not united in baying for war. The cabinet, headed by Levi Eshkol, was genuinely exploring ways of avoiding conflict. Ben Gurion – then in retirement but still a huge influence – lambasted Yitzhak Rabin for his belligerence in the preceding months and drove him into a temporary mental crisis. But the balance of power altered just days before war began when the Prime Minister was faced with what was tantamount to the mutiny of his military high command.

Ezer Weizman and others made it clear that they were prepared to wait no longer for peace; they had their sights on territorial gains, and Eshkol was forced to form a government of national unity. In came Dayan, Begin and Peres, and war became inevitable. This move gave Israeli and American military intelligence great satisfaction; their plan to strike at the Arabs had been gestating for 18 months or more and was now back on track.

In Washington, the State Department was deeply concerned at the change of political mood at the beginning of June 1967, but believed it had a deal with Israel not to make any move while Nasser's vice-president Zacharia Mohieddin visited Washington to see Johnson on 7 June. But, just as the political establishment in Tel Aviv was working with two different ends in mind, so was Washington. Dean Rusk's diplomats at Foggy Bottom were not aware that United States intelligence was bolstering Israel in its war aims under the codename Operation Cyanide.

There is little doubt that Johnson and his aides, assisted by McNamara in the Department of Defense, must have known of this plan. No one I interviewed believed it was possible, even for someone like arch-conspirator Jim Angleton in the CIA, to have organised something on this scale without higher authority. The attention to detail smacked of his *modus operandi* and he had all

the right connections, being extremely friendly with the elite of military intelligence in Israel. But he needed assistance from the US Navy, Army and Air Force – and that would have need approval from the shadowy 303 Committee.

The details so far unearthed concerning the extent of this multi-agency clandestine operation— apparently called Cyanide because ‘if anyone finds out we’ll all be dead’ – are still incomplete. But there is no doubt that, in the greatest secrecy, the United States actively participated in the war, as well as in its preparation. David Nes, US chargé d’affaires in Cairo, discovered one aspect of this early on. In early 1967 he was suddenly required to supply Washington with a wide-ranging list of intelligence information: ‘It struck me [this] satisfied Israeli requirements much more than ours,’ he said. ‘We had very little national interest in the location of Egyptian airfields, the type of planes on them and so forth. It was very detailed. We were being asked to monitor the airfields and keep track of what planes were where, and that was really of no interest to the United States.’ He asked Washington why it was being demanded. He received no reply.

Plans were already in place by this stage to provide Israel with the latest United States military technology and highly trained operators and support personnel. US fighter aircraft flew on Israel’s side when war began from an airstrip in the Negev Desert. They were shooting not with guns but with film, and Greg Reight helped develop it in the portable processing laboratory that he and a special team were manning.

At least one special US signals unit was also operating in the Sinai. It would have been under the command of Joe Sorrels if he hadn’t been wounded in the confrontation that occurred during a sensitive cross-border incursion.³ With this equipment, signals from the Egyptian high command were intercepted, ‘cooked’ and retransmitted, and this equipment was operated by an American linguist who, like Sorrels, was working for the United States Government. The falsified signals deceived Jordan into believing Egypt was winning the war; it helped lure King Hussein into making a military gesture of support and thereby provided Israel

with the pretext it needed to grab the West Bank and the prized parts of Jerusalem that people like Weizman and Dayan believed should have been taken during the War of Independence.

It also seems that when the *Liberty* was desperately trying to send out Mayday messages, the jamming transmissions that drowned them out came from a United States signals unit secreted in support of Operation Cyanide on the mainland not far away. It was operated by Robert Douglas, who clearly had no idea an American ship would become a target. According to Joe Sorrels, the planning for this – and, no doubt, much else – began a year or more before the war. By August 1966 he was already in Israel, secretly helping in the preparations alongside the Israeli intelligence services.

One of the most important recollections of the *Liberty* affair came from those crewmen who saw the Israeli aircraft swooping down to attack. They observed that the aircraft had no identifying markings, in contravention of normal military practice. The crew were therefore unaware until much later who was attacking them – but there were exceptions. Hours before the attack, Robert Schnell's section picked up an Israeli signal warning that their ship would become a target if it remained in the area. To his surprise and concern, the ship stayed on course, sailing slowly along a route beyond the 12-mile Egyptian territorial limit.

He is quite clear from this point that Washington had advance warning; something that has never been officially acknowledged by any US administration since.⁴ 'They would have sent it "flash" or something to the President that we were going to be under attack if we didn't leave,' Schnell told me. 'I remember asking if they ever confirmed the message about the attack, but nobody said anything and it wasn't brought up again.'

This story was confirmed by Representative Robert Sikes, who sat on the intelligence working group of Congress's defense subcommittee. He revealed in the early 1980s that, when the group took evidence on the failure to relay signals to the *Liberty* ordering it out of the area, a CIA representative had testified that the

efforts to move the ship were prompted by an intelligence report indicating the Israeli Defence Forces would otherwise attack the ship. This report may well have been based on an interception made by Schnell's unit.

There can be little doubt that Captain McGonagle was aware of the danger he faced by continuing his mission; but as the *Mystères* and *Mirages* rocketed, strafed and napalmed the helpless vessel, he ordered his radio room to send out a Mayday message reporting the assailants as 'unidentified'. The Sixth Fleet, several United States embassies in the region, at least one 'Ferret' surveillance aircraft and NSG communication stations all sent off 'flash' messages to Washington relaying this information.

Any attack on a United States ship is serious, but it becomes a major emergency if the foe is unidentified. Washington's response is, therefore, of critical importance. According to a CIA report and signals from various vessels of the Sixth Fleet, the first messages arrived in the United States at around 8.30 am, and Johnson should have been told instantly. But according to the official account his defence adviser, Walt Rostow, did not inform him about the attack, by memo, until 9.49 am, when it was over. The White House log says that he remained in his quarters for most of the morning, answering and making occasional phone calls. Various accounts state that there was concern that the Soviets might have been behind the attack. Finally, Johnson – who must have known otherwise – went to the Situation Room at 11.06 am.

The delay of more than an hour in telling the President of the *Liberty's* plight would appear to represent a serious dereliction of duty on the part of several people – Rostow and the Joint Chiefs being only the lead suspects. But there is no hint that Johnson – a man who reputedly spent more time in the Situation Room than any other president – was furious, or even mildly annoyed at their omission. This does not make sense. The only possible explanation is that the official records have been falsified.

Admiral Geis told Commander Dave Lewis that when McNamara ordered the recall of the planes from the aircraft

carriers, the President came on the line to confirm the decision. He must have been in the Situation Room at this point, keeping in touch with every scrap of information arriving from the eastern Mediterranean. George Christian, his press aide, said the President was upset at 9.45 am: 'His first thought was that the Russians had done it...' By some act of prestidigitation, Christian managed to speak to his boss about the *Liberty* attack four minutes before the President was supposedly informed of it.

But even longer before this Johnson must have known that Israel, and not Moscow, was the culprit. He must have been aware of the advance warning of Israel's intention to attack, referred to above; but there were also the real-time radio intercepts from the Israeli pilots.⁵ These were heard and flashed to the US by Steve in Nebraska, Richard Block in Crete and Tony Hart in Morocco. That this information was passed to the Commander-in-Chief was indicated by his comment to Admiral Geis when he recalled the rescue aircraft: he said he did not want to 'embarrass an ally'.

It is of no significance that not a single sheet of documentation to confirm these matters has ever come to light. There is a mountain of testimony showing that there was a White House-inspired cover-up. The zealous way this was policed, to prevent any future disclosure, is proof that something shameful and politically damaging had taken place. It can now be summed up in two words: Condition November.

The only person in the United States allowed to launch a nuclear attack is the Commander-in-Chief – the President. America was entering frightening new territory when Admiral Martin ordered four planes to 'nuke' Cairo, as CT Moe Shafer so dramatically learned when he was evacuated for medical treatment. But America had taken precautions by assembling the military back-up necessary, in readiness for an all-out confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The Sixth Fleet, formidably equipped, was positioned so it could quickly be on the scene of potential action. Two reports indicated that while the main flotilla was concentrated near Crete

during the period of the war, amphibious units packed with crack marine troops were deployed elsewhere, under the direct orders from Washington.⁶ A week earlier, according to another source, they had been training on a beach in Malta, and the suspicion must be that they were deployed for a landing in Egypt, as one intelligence source told me had been the plan.

We know very little about the role of the USS *Andrew Jackson*, but this Polaris nuclear submarine was patrolling in the same area at the same time. It is conceivable it entered the war zone beneath the *Liberty* and was the vessel plotted on the *Liberty's* charts as CONTACT X. Its purpose, one can surmise, was to be on hand if there was a nuclear exchange. Other submarines such as the USS *Amberjack*, equipped for the interception of communications, were also secreted in the region and available in case United States forces went ashore. After the attack, the USS *Requin*, a sister diesel-powered vessel that was apparently close to the *Liberty*, is known to have rendezvoused with the USS *Davis*, the Sixth Fleet commander's flag ship, and to have transferred film canisters by line, possibly film of the attack. Unquestionably, there was a much larger US presence near to the Sinai coast than Washington has ever admitted.

The *Liberty* itself was apparently there with orders to link the Pentagon to submarines if it became necessary during Operation Cyanide. Little is known about United States air activity except for the planes aboard the Sixth Fleet aircraft carriers and the four reconnaissance fighters flown into the Negev desert. However, the intelligence source said planes based at a United States air base in Libya were also launched against Cairo, and recalled just in time. British bombers and other aircraft allegedly flying out of Cyprus may also be an example of the further back-up that was available.

When Mike Ratigan, the catapult operator aboard the USS *America*, launched nuclear-armed Skyhawks, he and his shipmates were understandably overcome by a sense of dread. According to the clear recollections of CT Moe Shafer, the planes were recalled when they were just three minutes from dropping their atomic weapons, but the *America's* crew had to live with the

thought that World War Three was under way. Tony Hart, listening to signals in Morocco, had the same anxiety.

Tension was also high in the American Embassy in Cairo after chargé d'affaires David Nes had been cabled that an attack on the city was imminent. Though nuclear weapons were not mentioned, he was told a bombing raid had been ordered in reprisal for the attack on the *Liberty*. Egypt and more particularly its Soviet backers, were about to be made to look responsible for what would no doubt be described as an unprovoked act of war. If the *Liberty* had been sunk with all hands, Johnson may have thought such a devastating response against a Soviet puppet would have won public support, and it may be that the atomic weapons were targeted to obliterate Cairo West military airport, outside the main population centre, where the Soviets' nuclear-capable 'Bear' bombers were based.

It is doubly fortunate that the *Liberty* did not sink. Not only were 260 of her crew saved, but the Middle East – and perhaps the whole world – escaped disaster.

The picture would not be complete without examining the contribution of the Soviet Union to the Middle East maelstrom, and how much of a threat it posed. By supporting left-leaning nationalist factions, and plotting against those leaders it viewed as allies of imperialism, it had established a foothold in an area traditionally the fiefdom of France and Britain. Was it now trying to exploit the unrest for its own expansionist ends? This imponderable was of vital consideration to a Washington hierarchy that was at that time escalating its commitment to fighting a Communist regime in South-East Asia.

More than 35 years afterwards, it is difficult to appreciate the state of paranoia that existed in the United States about the Soviet threat in the years after the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Johnson and McNamara had become heavily engaged in Vietnam because of their horror that Moscow was actively backing the regime in Hanoi. Fears were being expressed that the United States was losing the nuclear arms race and James Angleton, a Dr

Strangelove figure at the CIA, missed no opportunity to warn that the scourge of communism was spreading like the plague, not only in Asia but also in the Middle East. He even believed that the Soviet split with China was not genuine, but was instead deliberately designed to lull the West into a false sense of security.

The general opinion at the Pentagon, and of most Democrat and Republican leaders, was that the virus of communism had to be eradicated. The West, particularly Europe, was still highly dependent on Arab oil and the Suez Canal was an irreplaceable route for trade with the Far East. A showdown with Moscow was nevertheless a risky tactic. A third of the workforce in the Soviet Union was engaged in defence work and it was building up big stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

In October 1962, President John Kennedy had stood up to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev when Russia was discovered to be installing nuclear missiles in Cuba; but though this Soviet adventure was thwarted, it did not mean that they would not try again somewhere else. More than 30 years later, with the Cold War over, it is easy to overlook the apprehension felt around the world at the possibility that Moscow might be plotting some skulduggery with its Arab allies, in an area where skulduggery appeared to be endemic.

When Britain and France, in conjunction with Israel, had occupied the zone around the Suez Canal in 1956, Nasser had, almost inevitably, been pushed closer towards Moscow. By the mid-1960s, he was seen in the eyes of the CIA and Britain's MI6 as a Soviet stooge. When the Ba'athist socialist party staged a coup in February 1966, Syria too was seen as having become a Soviet puppet state. Soviet military hardware and advisers multiplied. In the opinion of Dean Rusk, 'the Soviets played a considerable role in stirring up the sense of hostility and crisis in the Middle East just prior to the June war.'⁷

Ambassador Georgiy Kornienko was head of the American Affairs Department in the Russian Foreign Ministry at the time – one of the right-hand men of Andrei Gromyko, the veteran Soviet Foreign Minister – and has since made a special study of the Six-Day

War. When we met at the Ukraine Hotel in Moscow, he said he had been given special access to Kremlin archives and was adamant that his country did not encourage Egypt or Syria to threaten Israel. Observing the worsening situation from Moscow, he and his colleagues had no doubt Israel was being deliberately provocative.

'War wasn't a surprise,' he said, 'but still it was a real shock. Among our people in the Foreign Ministry, there was talk of the possibility the Israelis had decided to involve the United States in military actions against Egypt, by pretending the *Liberty* was attacked by Egyptians. I was present at some Politburo meetings and I saw expressions and speeches; they were really angry and seriously disturbed. The tension was great; and really, even after the end of the six days, our leaders thought that the United States was responsible for this war.'

The Ambassador said Moscow was very restrained: 'Politically, it was not very good to be very loud, to accuse the Washington government for what had happened, but really, our leaders were very angry. It was not just by coincidence a special plenum of the party central committee was called... They were convinced Israel would not do that thing without the permission of Washington.' Kornienko played down any possibility that the Soviet Union was provoking tension, but said the deep suspicion that Washington had a hidden hand in the action had put the Soviet forces on high alert, though he was not aware of any nuclear-armed submarines being deployed until after the war was over, when regular patrols began in the Mediterranean.

The United States' bombing attack on the Turkestan in Vietnamese waters, with its uncanny parallels to the *Liberty* affair, may have been a pure coincidence, but it had been just one of several jolts to US-Soviet relations in 1967. Equally aggravating, in March that year, was the defection of Svetlana Alliluyeva, 41-year-old daughter of the late Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin. She had walked into the United States Embassy in New Delhi and had been speedily granted asylum in the USA. Far from settling into her new home quietly, the fiery Svetlana began lambasting conditions in her home country. Moscow believed that Johnson was using

her as a part of an anti-Soviet propaganda campaign, and said so.

It became even more suspicious of the United States' intentions in the eastern Mediterranean when the Sixth Fleet arrived there, possessing enough firepower to obliterate any of the feuding countries in the region. At least six Soviet surveillance ships, disguised as fishing boats, were said to be watching the US Navy ships; and it was at this point Kosygin ordered his Black Sea Fleet to sail through the Bosphorus,⁸ and other ships and submarines in the Baltic to head south. Though it has never been publicised, Nato apparently regarded this as a Cold War danger signal.

Admiral Ivan Matveevich, commander of a Soviet naval squadron in the Mediterranean, was aboard his destroyer, the *Nastoihev*. When the Six-Day War broke out, his task was to patrol the Syrian seaboard, and evacuate Soviet citizens if Syria was invaded. 'At that time,' he said, 'we had torpedo boats from the Black Sea fleet, and submarines from the Northern fleet, which kept track of the two [US] aircraft carriers. [They] held the greatest danger. We didn't have orders to enter the conflict [but] it was the zone where there were aircraft carriers prepared to strike at the southern borders of the USSR. They could reach us from there with missiles and planes. This was why this zone presented such a danger to the Soviet leadership, why they had to pay special attention to it.'

The admiral said he was aware all the time of the risk he took in being in the area: 'The *Nastoihev* could have been torpedoed, at night, by unknown forces. We saw quite a few [US] submarines then, and how their transport ships were fuelling them at night. The danger of being attacked was quite serious... it was very tense. The planes overhead, based on Cyprus, were English Lightnings. They had training exercises, and the Sixth Fleet was building up its aircraft carriers from America...'

Matveevich said it served someone's interest to aggravate the situation in order to provoke the Sixth Fleet to attack either Syria or Egypt. This, he believed, was the reason for the *Liberty* attack – Egypt and the USSR would have been framed if it had been totally destroyed: '[It] was an attempt to pull the Sixth Fleet and its allies

into the military conflict. Of course it was a provocation. We were patrolling to the north, evaluating what was happening around us; we could have also been the victim of a provocation. The *Nastoihev* could have been sunk, and nobody could have done anything about it.'

He saw the Soviet presence as a pacifying influence during the war: 'Because we had our ships with cruise missile launchers, in the end the order wasn't given to the Sixth Fleet to support the Israeli offensive. Probably [it was] because there were Soviet ships nearby which had massive [offensive] potential.'

In the 1950s, the United States was actively considering a 'preventive' nuclear strike against Russia. Britain's director of naval intelligence, Vice-Admiral Eric Longley-Cook, warned Prime Minister Winston Churchill about this development: 'Many people in America have made up their minds that war with Russia is inevitable,' he wrote, 'and there is a strong tendency in military circles to "fix" the zero date for war. There is a definite risk of the US becoming involved in a preventive war against Russia, however firmly their Nato allies object.' The admiral said a US general had remarked that the West could not afford to wait until Europe or even America was devastated by a nuclear holocaust, adding: 'We can afford, however, to create a wilderness in Russia without serious repercussions on Western civilisation. We have a moral obligation to stop Russia's aggression by force...' Another general said: 'Whether we call it a cold war or apply any other term, we are not winning... the only way that we can be certain of winning is to take the offensive as soon as possible and hit Russia hard enough to at least prevent her from taking over Europe.'⁹

It was the time of rampant McCarthyism, but this view was held just as strongly by many of the United States high command in the 1960s and was bolstered by the Cuban missile crisis. It also appears Nato secretly modified its opposition. Dr Colin Leakey, now living in Cambridge, England, worked for Nato in Malta under Lord Louis Mountbatten, Nato's Supreme Commander, Allied Forces, Mediterranean. '[The] philosophy of the pre-emptive strike was

precisely formulated,' he revealed, 'and the circumstances detailed under which such strikes were to be undertaken. A major area of concern lay in the Mediterranean, where Soviet "fishing boats" had been patrolling for some time. Nato wished to prevent the real Soviet Navy from entering the Mediterranean from the Black Sea and being able to join up with their other fleets, as well as supporting Nasser in Egypt.

'They were to be prevented from doing so by the use of conventional torpedo technology even if this resulted, as was probable, in nuclear war. Three British submarines armed with live torpedoes were dispatched from the First Submarine Squadron in Malta to intercept such an incursion that had recently occurred.' Leakey was referring to an incident in the early 1960s. He added: 'British naval intelligence was naturally closely involved, and before the submarines could reach the Soviet ship (or ships) they were recalled. We have, I think, to thank Mountbatten... for averting a major risk of nuclear war at that time. The Americans, I believe, were furious.'

It is clear that when Kosygin ordered his navy to sail in the direction of Israel in the summer of 1967, his action caused consternation. The Pentagon must have had contingency plans for retaliating against a Soviet threat to a United States ship, and on this basis a *Liberty*-type attack would have resulted in a devastating response. The evidence from this investigation is that the *Liberty* was sent to its position off the Israeli coast precisely in order to be attacked, for Moscow or its client Egypt to be blamed, and for this to provide a pretext for stopping the spread of Soviet influence. Whereas in the 1950s the United States' military chiefs saw this as a means of preventing communism taking over Europe, by 1967 there were new worries. According to some pessimists in Washington, the Middle East and Asia were already on the brink of being devoured by the reds.

With this mindset, any warship identified as Soviet near the Sinai coast was therefore a real threat. As already reported, Yitzhak Rabin, Israeli Chief of Staff, was fully aware of this: '[The] Americans had failed to identify the planes that had attacked

them, and their initial impression was that Soviet aircraft were assaulting a unit of the Sixth Fleet! In his autobiography, President Johnson depicted the incident as one of the most critical moments in his life, for he faced the awesome decision of ordering United States' aircraft to attack the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean. I encountered a fascinating parallel: just as we were relieved to learn that the ship was American, rather than Soviet, Johnson and the heads of the American armed forces were reassured upon hearing that the attackers were Israelis.'

What really comes over from his book is the slant Rabin was still prepared to put on the truth 12 years after he stopped the attack. His willingness to promulgate a false account of the attack on the *Liberty* discredits a holder of the Nobel Peace Prize.

'Nuking' Egypt seems an act of madness; Moscow would surely have felt obliged to respond. However, by the late 1960s, the tactical use of nuclear weapons by the US was considered an option open to the President. The White House had recently been equipped to receive NSA information directly, bypassing the military command structure.¹⁰ Elaborate plans existed for a first strike in certain circumstances in what was deemed a scaled response; and it was fondly believed this would not necessarily lead to World War Three.

Russia's had so far shown it was not keen to support Nasser militarily. It had stood back while Israel engaged in its 'turkey shoot' in the Sinai, trouncing the Egyptian Air Force and Army and humiliating Nasser. Moscow was behind a number of peace initiatives when its 'Bear' bombers were conspicuously inactive in participating in Egypt's defence. The presence of these massive aircraft in the region was, however, a nagging worry to the Pentagon and various Sigint (signals intelligence) platforms were assigned to watching their activities. Just before the *Liberty* was attacked, a CT had picked up signals indicating that the bombers were under the command of Soviet controllers. As was recalled by Steve, who was ensconced during the war in a vault in Nebraska, this was of intense concern to the United States high command. It would

mean Nasser had ceded defence of his country to Moscow, a step far beyond being merely a large recipient of aid.

The 'Bear' bombers could be equipped to deliver atomic bombs. If such weapons had been brought surreptitiously into the country, the United States would be faced with a situation similar to Cuba all over again. No evidence has ever come to light of such deliveries but, in its nervous state, Washington might have legitimately feared the worst; a fear that would have been strengthened by the presence of the nuclear-armed Soviet Black Sea Fleet.

One intelligence source in the United States said Washington was also afraid that Soviet nuclear-armed submarines, supported by large numbers of conventional craft, had begun patrolling along the eastern seaboard of the United States, with missiles targeted at America's coastal cities. It was also believed at least one nuclear-armed Soviet submarine was in the eastern Mediterranean, as was the *Moskva*, a carrier with 30 Hormone anti-submarine helicopters aboard which were said to be Russia's tactical answer to Polaris.

As already discussed, Israel too was concerned about the Soviets. When Mossad chief Meir Amit arrived in Washington just before the war and received what he described as 'a green light to go ahead' from Robert McNamara, he said: 'All we want from you is to stop the Russians coming into the arena.' McNamara appeared not to remember the meeting, but in an interview in 1996 he said that during the seven years he was Secretary of Defense there had been three occasions on which the United States came 'very, very close to war with the Soviet Union.' He then added: 'They put pressure on West Berlin to take West Berlin from Nato in August of 1961; we came close to war then. They introduced nuclear weapons into Cuba and we came close to nuclear war with the Soviets then – that was in October of 1962. They were backing Egypt to destroy Israel – eliminate it from the face of the earth – in June of 1967; the hot-line was used for the first time in connection with that. The message from Kosygin, the Prime Minister of the Soviet Union, to Johnson was, 'If you want war, you'll get it.' So we faced what we considered a terrible

threat to Western security from the Soviet communists and the Chinese communists. I think we exaggerated, but to some degree it was real.¹¹

There was a point on the last day of the war when Kosygin seemed to threaten military action against Israel if its forces continued on their rampage towards Damascus; indeed a hot-line message to Johnson to this effect stopped this advance in its tracks. But that action was not an implicit threat against the United States. Perhaps McNamara had in mind the events of 8 June. This was impossible to discover, as he so adamantly refused to discuss the *Liberty* attack.

In my interview with him, he was at pains to emphasise that after the war he found himself at odds with the official assessment of it, as far as the United States' interests were concerned. He listed these as: '[One], that it brought Nasser to an end; that he was so weakened that he would eventually be overthrown; two, that his status and prestige in the Arab world had been greatly diminished or, in effect, obliterated; and three, that we had so hobbled the Russians, with the failure of their training and equipment, that their position and influence in the Middle East was also greatly diminished.

'Well, I contested officially all those three conclusions and said they were 100 percent wrong: that Nasser's position in Egypt was stronger, that his position in the Arab world was stronger, that the Russians would be back in the Middle East in greater force and influence than ever before. That brought me in total confrontation with the top of the State Department and the White House, and I left soon after.'

It was an interesting insight that the Six-Day War was seen in the Washington administration as a success in 'hobbling the Soviets', and that saving Israel from destruction was not even listed as a factor. Also new was the fact that when McNamara left the administration in early 1968, before the end of Johnson's term of office, it was because of a clash of views on the war's successes. On the surface, it does not seem a resigning issue – unless McNamara was not as au fait with Operation Cyanide as one might want to assume.

McNamara's resignation was not the only significant one. It has rarely been noted that Cyrus Vance, Deputy Secretary of State for Defense, offered his resignation on the day after the *Liberty* attack – 9 June 1967 – an extraordinary action in the midst of a Middle East crisis. Johnson accepted it instantly and replaced him with Paul Nitze at 3.20 pm that day.¹² Vance said he was suffering from a bad back but within weeks he was in Detroit, trying to quell race riots.

There were a number of high-level departures within the armed forces, too. Admiral McDonald was relieved as Chief of Naval Operations just three days after the *Liberty* arrived at Little Creek Naval Station on 29 July 1967. At about the same time Captain Don Engen, commander of the USS *America*, was replaced after just a year in the post – although he later rose to the rank of vice-admiral – and two of his officers in charge of the A-4 Skyhawk squadrons were moved.

With Vietnam going badly, Lyndon Johnson felt insecure about his re-election prospects. His close Zionist friends such as Mathilde and Arthur Krim, and deputy Israeli Ambassador Eppie Evron, would frequently remind him that Israel was a friend whose support he could always count on as a bulwark against the 'red peril'. He was not just a fair-weather friend of the Zionist cause, either. His commitment to the idea of a homeland for the Jews displaced after World War Two was heartfelt, and he admired their talents. He also knew the Jewish lobby was a powerful asset on home territory. As his popularity plummeted because of the Vietnam crisis, the President needed friends with influence as well as cash to keep his re-election plans afloat.

Vietnam dominated the lives of Johnson and McNamara; it could be understandable had their eyes been 'off the ball' when the conflict between Israel and the Arabs erupted – except that all the evidence shows that Johnson in particular was equally focused on both problems. He saw them in very similar terms. He had never met Nasser, but he was convinced he was another Castro; and, like a number of American leaders, he found it difficult to

differentiate between Communism and nationalism. Nasser was not a Soviet puppet, but Johnson never saw it that way. As a Texan, he knew the importance of oil; and if the Soviet Union, with Nasser's assistance, succeeded in taking control of Middle East reserves, the economy of the Western world could be in jeopardy.

Johnson would have had difficulty putting such arguments in public without suffering a good deal of ridicule. This is reflected by the present controversy over whether an attempt should be made to remove Saddam Hussein. President George Bush Jr is clearly not admitting in public all the fears and intelligence information that he feels justifies an attack on the Iraqi leader. In Johnson's case, many of his fears centred on getting himself re-elected; that end alone could have forced him to take desperate measures.

Shrewd Israeli envoys rarely let anything significant out of their diplomatic bags; but Eppie Evron, deputy to Avraham Harman, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, related an interesting anecdote about Johnson's demeanour a few days before war broke out. Evron attended a conference in 1992 in Washington on the 25th anniversary of the Six-Day War, and recalled a visit he paid to see White House staff on 26 May to arrange a meeting with the President for his foreign minister, Abba Eban. On arrival, he learned that the President wanted to see him.

'I was completely taken aback by this,' Evron said. 'It was unusual that in such a situation – a critical situation – the President would speak to the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission]. He obviously felt it was important, otherwise he wouldn't have done it at that time, and therefore I listened carefully to what he had to say.'

He said Johnson spoke 'in Texan terms', off the cuff: 'He started by telling me in great detail about his visit to Ottawa. He had just returned from a meeting with Lester Pearson, who was one of the key designers, planners, of the 1957 arrangement [Pearson had played a leading role in helping to end the Suez Crisis]. He wasn't complimentary (I use diplomatic language), in his description of the Canadian position, of Mr Pearson personally, of the way he had been treated there... Obviously there was no clear Canadian support for whatever the President wanted.'

‘Then he went on to say, “I, Lyndon Johnson, have to get congressional approval if I want to act as President of the United States. Otherwise, I’m just a six-foot-four Texan friend of Israel.’ (That description stuck in my memory.) “But you and I, the two most powerful people in Washington, are going to get the Congress to pass another Tonkin resolution.” Then, knowing a little about the Tonkin resolution and the mood in the United States at the time, and what they felt about the President and the way he got his resolution, I thought, “He’s telling me that Congress is never going to give him permission to use military force.”’¹³

But Evron quickly realised Johnson was hinting the opposite, and would help provided Israel went through the motions of paying lip-service to peace moves. As he put it, the message was: ‘We should go the United Nations route and go through the maritime countries’ plan, but in the end, don’t worry; everything will turn out well.’

The reference to the Tonkin resolution could be central to why the *Liberty* was attacked. In August 1964 two destroyers, the USS *Maddox* and the USS *Turner Joy*, were in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin when the *Turner Joy* spotted blips on its radar that it thought were North Vietnamese MTBs. Some of the crew said they were false echoes and the *Maddox* detected no suspicious signals. Nevertheless, Johnson and McNamara chose to characterise it as a major threat and on that basis Congress granted permission for US attacks on North Vietnam. The resolution provided the legal basis for the entire military disaster that followed.

It is logical to suppose that Johnson went to Canada to seek Pearson’s support for launching a war against Egypt on Israel’s side, and was brusquely rebuffed. The Evron story may mean that, as with Vietnam, Johnson’s next strategy was to seek a pretext for winning Congressional support. The sinking of a US surveillance ship and the death of 294 Americans would undoubtedly be a suitable *casus belli*.

The Turkestan attack off Vietnam may have been intended to make allegations of a Soviet attack against the *Liberty* seem more plausible. It could have been portrayed as Moscow’s reason for attacking an American spy ship. This aside, sinking the *Liberty* and

blaming Egypt and the Soviets would have freed Johnson's hand to do almost anything – even to drop an atomic bomb on Cairo. Trouble only arose when the Israeli operation failed – and the damned ship stayed afloat.

Why did Israel stop firing on the *Liberty* and allow her to limp away? The general belief among the crew is that Israel picked up the message from the Sixth Fleet that its second flight of planes was heading for the scene. Israeli helicopters with armed commandos aboard were hovering above the *Liberty* ready to land, and the MTBs were still circling her at a distance. It seemed a coup de grâce was about to be executed but, miraculously, the attackers headed back to Israel.

The theory continues that Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin were unaware that the carrier aircraft had been almost immediately recalled, and feared a confrontation with the Sixth Fleet. However it seems unlikely that the Israeli high command, which was linked almost directly to the Pentagon, would not have known of the recall order; and if not, they would have soon found out when the Sixth Fleet aircraft did not arrive. The attack could then have been resumed with impunity, the ship sunk and Operation Cyanide could have continued.

Another possibility is that Admiral Shlomo Erell, or his subordinate Captain Rahav, aborted the attack after it was plain the ship was American, as both independently claimed they had done. However, the crew say the MTBs continued attacking long after the torpedo struck. Then Air Force helicopters packed with commandoes appeared overhead. The ceasing of hostilities at this point was therefore not simply a naval decision.

It is possible the Israelis decided to stop the mission for a quite different reason – that Dayan and Rabin had no idea the United States would drop atomic weapons on Cairo, and having been alerted (by the US or maybe its own intelligence network as it had its own spy ships), instantly realised the danger to Israel of such a move. The next target, if the Soviets chose to retaliate, might have been Tel Aviv, or Israel's nuclear weapons plant near Dimona. There were no advantages to the Israelis in the Americans

initiating a first strike if that would have been the consequence.

It is a theory that fits with the carefully weighed comment of CT David McFeggan, the retired Chicago accountant. He knows a great deal about what happened but is still too wary of reprisals to talk, largely because of fear on his wife's behalf. He said Dayan was a hero who that day saved Israel from destruction. His dissatisfaction is with Johnson; for him, the crimes were orchestrated by the White House.

It is also plausible that an order from the White House recalling the carrier-based aircraft was discovered elsewhere in the Washington administration, by influential people unconnected with, and unaware of, Operation Cyanide. These people may have intervened, with the result that Israel was told to abort the mission. In essence, this is what the witness Steve reported. He was working at the 544th Air Reconnaissance Unit in Nebraska and learned from his colleagues that they had picked up angry signals from the State Department to Israel telling it to stop the attack 'or else'.

Possibly the hero of that moment was Dean Rusk, the one man in the administration who was known to be furious with Israel about the attack. Maybe Cyrus Vance had a hand in it – he was to resign within hours. Or is it conceivable that McNamara played a role? He, too, left over disagreements to do with the Six-Day War. It is a pity he seems to have such difficulty remembering anything about the *Liberty* affair.

Johnson was probably thoroughly displeased with whoever undermined the entire strategy, because a political disaster now immediately loomed. The planes heading for Cairo would have to be turned back; Israel would have to make a grovelling apology; and the list of semi-plausible excuses – no doubt prepared in advance – would have to be produced. An impermeable cover-up was also essential, for the standing of the United States itself was now at stake.

Some people will say that too much of what has been written here is conspiracy theory but conspiracies can turn out to be true. Almost all the witnesses in this book have been named and can be

called to account, and what others have revealed anonymously can be substantiated, often from tape recordings. Nobody whose information has been given weight had an obvious motive for inventing what they revealed, and their accounts were largely consistent with those of others.

Lloyd Painter remains saddened that his skipper was not among those who were completely candid. 'I witnessed a cover-up take place of the highest magnitude,' he said. 'I witnessed someone receiving the highest medal of the land, someone being promoted, someone given his choice of duty in the Navy for his silence. Nothing more, nothing less. And the silence paid off, the Captain never stepped forward until the end of his life, and I only think what could have been if he'd stepped forward in 1967.'

One informant in particular, a US intelligence agent who had made a point of studying the *Liberty* attack, said the Captain knew much more in advance than he ever admitted. He said McGonagle was briefed to expect a superficial strafing attack on the *Liberty* which would be used as a pretext for attacking Egypt. The Captain was not expecting the terrible onslaught that occurred, but he knew he had been sent to the Eastern Mediterranean as part of a deception plan. If this was true, it meant the Captain knowingly put his ship and his crew in danger – a horrific burden to bear.

This source also said that the war was not meant to begin on 5 June, when the *Liberty* was still half way across the Mediterranean, but on 15 June. It was intended that the United States would be involved from Day One, beginning with an amphibious invasion by marines supporting the Israeli forces. The planned launch day, it was argued, explained the operational codename Frontlet 615. The only document mentioning it that has come to light, from the 303 Committee minutes, suggested it had to do with submarine deployment, but the source said the numbers represented the date for hostilities to begin, and that Frontlet 615 was the secret political agreement in 1966 by which Israel and the US had vowed to destroy Nasser. Operation Cyanide, on the other hand, was the military name for putting it into effect. He said

Israel had acted prematurely because of fears that Nasser would successfully sue for peace and the war plan would have to be delayed or abandoned.

This version of events leaves unanswered the question, 'Why was the *Liberty* attacked on 8 June when, by that stage, Israel had successfully done all the fighting itself and had reached the Suez Canal?' The most likely clue came from John Haddon, CIA station chief in Tel Aviv, speaking after our tape recorder had been turned off. As reported in Chapter Ten, he revealed Israel had refused to cross the Suez Canal. The White House was furious that Dayan was not prepared to continue to Cairo and unseat Nasser, as had been the agreement. But by this stage Israel was far more interested in grabbing large chunks of Jordan.

As Joe Sorrels showed, this was not a war into which Israel had dragged a reluctant America. The United States was a prime mover, and it is very possible the *Liberty* attack was rescheduled to give the United States an excuse to finish the job it had been planning since early 1966.

Is it credible that an American President would sanction the use of nuclear weapons in these circumstances? It is the most baffling of a series of riddles; but the reality is that if the *means* of the plotters was the sinking of a US Navy ship, the killing of everyone on board and the engineering of a deception to frame another nuclear power, the *ends* must have been something cataclysmic. In that sense the nuclear response has a sort of crazy equivalence. Given the right spin, such a measure would have been seen by the American public as proportionate particularly if, as I was told, the plan was to target Cairo West, a large military air base occupied by the Soviets which was outside the city boundaries and away from major population centres. But it does not explain why Johnson, knowing the sordid truth about the *Liberty* attack, saw advantage to himself or his country in pushing the button.

Joe Sorrels understood it was a plan of last resort – the bottom of a list of four or five others – to rid the West of Nasser. Perhaps by Day Four it was realised in the White House that using conventional forces to eradicate the communist menace in Cairo had

become too risky, given the international clamour for an end to hostilities. Nasser had agreed an unconditional ceasefire, Dayan had halted his troops at Suez and the United States did not have the conventional capacity in the region to replace them in time.

John McNaughton, General Counsel in the Department of Defense, was regarded as the principal civilian war planner and one of the Johnson administration's 'ideas men'. In 1965 he began to look at ways of extricating the United States from Vietnam, realising that a victory in that war was unlikely. In a memo to McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow's predecessor as National Security Adviser, he suggested that to recover its standing and divert attention while it retreated America might launch 'diversionary "offensives"' elsewhere in the world.¹⁴

It is just possible McNaughton meant 'diplomatic offensives', but that would not have made sense in the context of the rest of the memo. Is it possible Johnson saw the *Liberty* attack and the bombing of Cairo in those terms and that, having proved the United States' ability to wield massive force against one communist danger point, he hoped Ho Chi Minh would be coerced into accepting a peace deal? It would not be the first time that some desperate politician had launched a war as a means of restoring their popularity.

The risks President Johnson was prepared to take for his own ends is vividly illustrated at the very beginning of this book by the story of the suicide mission Jim Nanjo nearly undertook on 8 June 1967. Along with many others, his squadron of B52s in California were loaded with H-bombs and poised to 'nuke' the Soviet Union. If the *Liberty* had been sunk without trace, is there any doubt Nanjo would have received the go-code that morning? It is surely time America, Israel and anyone else involved in Operation Cyanide told the truth – the whole truth – about this fiasco. If not, can we ever be sure the nuclear button is in safe hands? And will we ever unravel the real causes of the Middle East crisis?

References

CHAPTER 1 SITTING DUCK

1. Rowley, who died in 2000, recovered from his injuries that day and kept the dented camera and smashed lens as a memento.
2. *Assault On the Liberty*, James Ennes, Random House, 1980.
3. Ibid.
4. Taped interviews with Richard Smucker.
5. Ibid.
6. *Assault On the Liberty*, James Ennes, Random House, 1980.
7. Ibid.
8. What was described as a 're-creation' of pilot communications released by Israel for a Thames TV documentary.
9. Russell David's sighting of the Israeli insignia is at odds with all other witnesses who have come forward who saw the planes, who say they were unmarked.
10. Interview with Dr John Borne, author of a thesis examining the *Liberty* attack.
11. Interview with author for BBC TV.
12. Interview with author.

CHAPTER 2 THE 'MISTAKE'

1. Pat remarried in 1971 and is now Pat Blue Roushakes.
2. www.usliberty.org
3. Interview with author.
4. The deck logbook was available to the court but was hardly referred to. According to several officers, including Ennes, it had been filled in afterwards, probably by McGonagle, and therefore it fits his version of events. Entries that were known to have been made in the log on 8 June by officers on duty before the attack do not appear in the version produced to the court. The actual log survived the attack but had apparently disappeared.
5. Ibid.
6. Egypt had a substantially larger navy: see Chapter Three.
7. Father of the present-day US Senator John McCain, who has rebuffed requests from *Liberty* veterans to support a Congressional inquiry into the attack.
8. Interview with author.
9. From an interview published in *Marine Corps Times*, Spring 2002.
10. *Navy Times*, 21 April 2002.

11. Interview with author.

12. *The Rabin Memoirs*, Yitzhak Rabin, University of California Press, 1979.

13. Later in June 1967, President Lyndon Johnson wrote in response to a query from Congressman Joseph M. McDade: 'I have seen a report alleging that the Israeli Government had asked us about the presence of the ship prior to the attack, but that report is not true.'

14. The figure is false. Compensation of \$3,323,000 was paid to the families of those killed in June 1968. A further \$3,566,457 was paid in April 1969, a total of less than \$7 million. A sum of \$6 million was paid in 1980 for the damage to the ship, a fraction of its real worth even if interest was foregone by the US (which it was). The payment was made after Jim Ennes's book came out in 1979 when attention was drawn to the fact that the US had apparently forgotten the debt. When it was paid, it was recognised by the US State Department that the money would simply have to come out of funds the US would have given Israel anyway.

CHAPTER 3 WHOSE WAR?

1. Haim Hanegmi, 'Where Are the Messiah's Footsteps?', *Ma' Ariv Supplement*, 14 June 1998.

2. *War and Peace in the Middle East*, General Odd Bull.

3. Yitzhak Rabin would later become Prime Minister and committed to seeking a peaceful solution to the Palestinian problem. He was assassinated in November 1995 by an Israeli extremist, a year after sharing the Nobel Peace Prize with Yasser Arafat.

4. During the last days of the British Mandate in the 1940s, Begin had been head of Irgun (National Military Organisation), a terrorist group that was fighting for Israel to occupy the whole of Trans-Jordan including both banks of the Jordan River. Among many killings, Irgun blew up the King David Hotel, causing the death of 91 occupants, and hanged two captured British soldiers.

5. *The Rabin Memoirs*, Yitzhak Rabin, University of California Press, 1979.

6. Sheldon Richman, Senior Editor at the Cato Institute, Washington, DC, writing in the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, November 1991.

7. *Yearbook of the United Nations*, 1951.

8. *Soldiering for Peace*, Carl von Horn, Cassell, 1966.

9. *Violent Truce*, Commander E.H. Hutchison, Bevin-Adair Company, 1956.

10. *The Economist*, December 1967. Menuhin also said: 'The most common gripe in Israel was that if the economic recession and emigration continued, no one would be left in another ten years but "dark Arab Jews". In March 1967 the Tel Aviv City Hall was stoned by rioters in protest on jobs. Israel looked for a miracle as tourism took an unexpected sharp drop. The reparations money from West Germany was fully paid up. The American Jews were not responding to appeals for funds as they did during "crisis" periods, and the American Jews were not responding to the propaganda for Aliyah – going to settle in Israel. A war, a real big war, might help matters. And, as we shall see, it did.'

11. *The Rabin Memoirs*, Yitzhak Rabin, University of California Press, 1979.

12. Ibid.
13. It has been reported that the source was Yitzhak Rabin.
14. *Israel, the Struggle for Hope*, Yigal Allon, 1970.
15. The estimate of the Institute of Strategic Studies, London.
16. Quoted in *Yediot Aharonot*, 18 October 1967.
17. Interview in *Ha'aretz*, 20 March 1972.
18. *Al Hamishmar*, 14 April 1972.
19. A PBS TV Special, *Days of Rage*, produced by Jo Franklin Trout, Pacific Productions, aired on 6 September 1989.
20. A five-year-long period of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation that began with riots in Gaza and a road accident on 8 December 1987, in which four Palestinians were killed and which were blamed on Israeli military action. Tension that year had been high as it was the twentieth anniversary of the Six-Day War.
21. A former Army Chief of Staff, a close confidante of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, and the power broker who helped put together the government of national unity.
22. *Battling for Peace*, Shimon Peres, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1995.
23. *Israel and the Bomb*, Avner Cohen, Columbia University Press, 1998.
24. After the war Israel said it had found Egyptian aerial maps of Dimona showing it was a target, and in 1966 Nasser had spoken of launching a 'preventive war against Dimona'.
25. *HaYom Tifrotz Milhama*, Tel Aviv, 1987.
26. *On Eagles' Wings*, Ezer Weizman, Macmillan Publishing, 1976.
27. Interview with author, February 2002.

CHAPTER 4 THE BIG LIE

1. US National Military Command Center document.
2. Passed to the President at 10.13 am. Perhaps Martin meant he had planes over some 'other scene', Cairo being one possibility.
3. Kosygin replied at 12.25 Washington time saying he had passed the message to Nasser and at 15.36 Johnson sent back his thanks, all on the hotline.
4. *Counsel to the President* by Clark Clifford, Random House, 1991.
5. Christian also wrote: 'There was considerable scepticism in the White House that the attack was accidental. An accident of this magnitude was too much to swallow.'
6. Eugene V. Rostow was Walt's brother and Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Rusk's number three.
7. In his memoirs Dayan wrote that on the first day of the war: 'Cairo Radio announced that the Egyptian Air Force had shot down forty Israeli planes. There was, of course, no substance to this claim, but Arab vanity and extravagance now served us well. I told those concerned with public information to make no mention of our victories for at least the first day to keep the enemy camps confused.' *The Story of My Life*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1976.
8. According to McCloskey, Eugene V. Rostow, Under-Secretary of State for

- Political Affairs and brother of Walt Rostow, had used the same phrase at this meeting when gently reminding other officials not to gloat over Israeli successes.
9. Interview with David Nes, US chargé d'affaires in Cairo. He left the diplomatic service soon after the Six-Day War and lectured widely in the US about America's policy failures in relation to Egypt.
10. In 1956 Nasser announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal to the fury of Britain and France which had built it. Under a secret plan drawn up with these two European countries, Israel over-ran the Sinai and its army was nearing the waterway when British and French forces invaded the canal zone on the pretext of protecting it from the warring sides and keeping it open to shipping. President Eisenhower was incensed at the actions of all three countries. Britain and France were pressurised into withdrawing, leading to the resignation of British Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, and as stated Israel was made to return to its boundaries settled in 1948.
11. Speaking to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in 1965, Goldberg said: 'I must frankly state that I do not understand the reasoning of those who question the support Americans and other free people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, extend to Israel and its people.' He said he could see no incompatibility in remaining loyal to the spiritual heritage of the Jewish people and at the same time retaining undivided allegiance to America.
12. Nasser's close friend, Mohamed Heikal wrote: 'President Nasser had an instinctive dislike for Lyndon Baines Johnson. He did not like what he heard of this Texan politician, this party man, the wheeler-dealer... When Nasser was dealing with any man he used to gather a collection of that man's photographs and study them trying to assess his character... He started to make a collection of Johnson's pictures. And two of them shocked him. The first showed Johnson with his feet up on his desk, and the second was the famous picture of the American President showing off his operation scar. Nasser felt that these photographs displayed a rudeness and a lack of sensitivity. "How can the leader of the United States do that?"' From *Nasser, The Cairo Documents*, by Mohamed Heikal, New English Library, 1972.
13. This view of Nolte was strongly held by several senior diplomats in the US Embassy in Cairo who were furious that a distinguished professional diplomat had not been chosen for one of the premier postings in the Middle East.
14. Interview with author.
15. From *Confirm or Deny – Informing the People on National Security*, by Phil G. Goulding, Harper & Row, New York, 1970.
16. Content of this secret cable was later released under the Freedom of Information Act in 1993.
17. *As I Saw It* by Dean Rusk, W.W. Norton, 1990.
18. Released by LBJ Library in June 2002, this is part of a memorandum for the record signed by Benjamin Read, Executive Secretary of State, dated 16 June 1967.
19. From *The Passionate Attachment; America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present* by George W. Ball and Douglas B. Ball, W.W. Norton, 1992.

20. Taped interview with LBJ Library, December 1968.

21. From *Jewish Power – Inside the American Jewish Establishment*, J.J. Goldberg, Addison Wesley, 1996. He added: 'In this new mood, the cause of Jewish advocacy underwent a fundamental transformation of values. The world after 1967 was regarded as a hostile place, divided between the Jews' friends and their enemies. The values that for so long had characterized American Judaism – equality, tolerance, and social justice – became suspect in New Jewish leadership circles. A new set of basic values came to replace them: loyalty to the Jewish people, commitment to its survival, and hostility toward its enemies.

'The Jews who rose to the leadership of the Jewish community after 1967 were those who most embodied these new values. Jews now expected to be represented, not by those who best expressed their beliefs and aspirations, but by those who seemed to them to be "most Jewish" – most loyal to the Jewish people and its traditions, or most hostile to its enemies.'

CHAPTER 5 CONTACT X

1. From 'Findings of Fact', the Russ Report.

2. From *Confirm or Deny – Informing the People on National Security*, by Phil G. Goulding, Harper & Row, New York, 1970.

3. The final part of the statement read: '...The United States Government has been informed by the Israeli Government that the attack was made in error by Israeli forces, and an apology was received from Tel Aviv. Initial report of casualties are four dead and 53 wounded. The *Liberty* is steaming north from the area at a speed of eight knots to meet US forces moving to her aid. It is reported she is in no danger of sinking.'

4. The full message from the USS *Liberty* timed at 081715Z (1715 hours GMT) reads:

SITREP AIR ATTACK

1. At time 081205Z course 283T speed 5kts, position 31-35.5N 33-29E, ship attacked with unidentified jet fighters believed Israeli. Approx six strafing runs made on ship. At time 081225Z three torpedo boats, one identified as Israeli, approached starboard quarter at high speed. Hull number 206-17. At approx 081427 took torpedo boat under fire at 2000 yards. Boats launched torpedo attack and strafing run. One torpedo passed approx 75 yards astern. One minute later took torpedo hit starboard side. Ship has 10 degree starboard list. Watertight boundary established. Am holding. After attack torpedo boats cleared to east about five miles. Clearing area at 10 knots.

2. Photos of aircraft and boats taken. After attack completed, two Israeli helos (helicopters) orbited ship at 500 yards. Time 081255Z. Israeli insignia clearly visible. Photos taken. Several projectiles recovered from topside area. Number dead estimated 10. Severely wounded 15. Total wounded 75, number missing undetermined.

3. Ship unable to carry out mission. Will report personnel casualties ASAP.

4. Extensive superficial topside damage. Lower decks forward destroyed.

5. Communications capability limited. Will provide film and projectiles as directed. Ship will require dry dock and extensive repairs.
5. The *Valdez* had a listening capability similar to the *Liberty*, with 165 US Navy officers and men but with a civilian crew. It had been operating along the eastern coast of Africa but was heavily barnacled, and was returning from Norfolk, Virginia. It passed by the *Liberty* on 6 June but no one seems to have queried why the US Navy did not assign the *Valdez* to the task of observing radio transmissions off the Sinai coast, as it was so much nearer. One US source said that in Washington it was believed a civilian crew might have been more difficult to silence after the attack.
6. Lt James G. O'Connor was badly injured in the attack, and Ennes was at first told he was dead. He survived, but died of Lou Gehrig's Disease 20 years later.
7. 'Anatomy of a 30-Year Investigation – USS *Liberty*: Periscope Photography May Finally Reveal Truth' by James M. Ennes, Jr, *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, June/July 1997.
8. Some crewmen have argued that if a US submarine was nearby it should have surfaced and rendered assistance; its appearance might have frightened away the attackers. The contrary view, in line with naval practice, is that submarines are under orders not to betray their presence, that surfacing would have made them a target and that submarines had no useful armaments to fight off a determined assault by planes and MTBs.
9. A Guppy or snorkel-equipped diesel submarine, built in 1945.
10. Telephone interview with author.
11. Interview with Jim Ennes.
12. Over the years many Freedom of Information Act requests have been filed with the LBJ Library, the US Navy, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and elsewhere seeking more information about this minute. The response is always that there is no record of Cyanide, Frontlet 615 or US submarines in the war zone.
13. Interview with author.
14. In the mid-1960s, the Israeli Navy was almost a laughing-stock. It had two destroyers, two ageing S-class submarines, nine motor torpedo boats, for which spares were difficult to come by, and some landing craft. The Soviets were supplying a small armada of vessels to Egypt, including submarines, and in terms of sea warfare it was a formidable foe. The Israeli Government therefore began secret negotiations with a number of European countries to remedy the situation. By mid-1967 it should have greatly enhanced its capability to withstand an Egyptian assault, but delays thwarted that plan. France was contracted to build a number of 40-knot-plus craft capable of delivering Gabriel surface-to-surface missiles.
15. Shlomo Erell said that 8,000 Egyptian prisoners of war were eventually exchanged for the six naval commandoes, a pilot, another soldier taken at the Suez Canal and a number of Egyptian Jews who had been jailed for espionage 14 years earlier.

16. Later in 1967, the British naval attaché in Tel Aviv reported to London about the attack in these terms (Public Record Office): 'Frogmen supported by the submarine *Tanin* attacked Alexandria. The Egyptians had been in a highly nervous state since the outbreak of war that morning and were taking precautions against such attacks. Certainly the results achieved appear to have been small; one MTB was sunk in the harbour and some of the frogmen were captured. The *Tanin* (it was an S-Class) was depth-charged and only the fact that she had a new battery of improved capacity enabled her to escape; her commanding officer is the only naval man decorated as a result of the war.'

17. National Security Council, Special Group/303 Committee Files, Subject Files: Italy.

18. Prouty also wrote: 'The Forty Committee is the latest of a long line of such committees, all of which live in deepest secrecy. Before it was called the Forty Committee it was the 303 Committee: before that, the Special Group. In the early Fifties it was the Special Group 10/2 and later the Special Group 5412 or 5412/2.[1] Ostensibly this organization has always been made up of a representative of the President (the President's Advisor for National Security Affairs – a euphemism for the CIA's man in the White House); a representative of the Secretary of State and one for the Secretary of Defense. It also includes the Director of the CIA, and since Kennedy's time it has included the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. These five men, representing as they do the principals of the National Security Council, have had thrust upon them the responsibility for international clandestine operations.' *Genesis* magazine, February 1975.

19. Interview with the author, February 2002.

20. The National Security Act of 1947 set out a number of duties for the CIA. The committee had to approve anything falling under duty number five: 'To perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct.'

21. Interview with author, Washington DC, February 2002.

22. Pearson's closest friend in journalism was probably Nick Davies, at one time foreign editor of the *Daily Mirror*. He said Pearson rang him one day from the Dorchester Hotel in London in the early 1980s complaining he had been poisoned by a cup of coffee. Davies said he took him to hospital with stomach pains and he died a few days later. Tito Howard, an amateur filmmaker with an interest in the *Liberty* attack, knew Pearson and heard he had died following two strokes, he thinks in 1984. He believes the death story was fiction and that he is still alive and living in his native Kenya.

23. 'MAYDAY!MAYDAY! – The Attack on the USS *Liberty*', *Penthouse*, May and June 1976.

24. *Conspiracy of Silence*, Anthony Pearson, Quartet Books, 1978.

25. Email to author.

26. *Ropes of Sand, America's Failure in the Middle East*, Wilbur Crane Eveland, W.W. Norton, 1980.

27. The USS *Andrew Jackson* (SSBN619) was 425 feet long and weighed 8,250 tons when submerged. It had 20 officers and 148 enlisted crew. The *Polaris*

A-2 missile had a range of 1,500 nautical miles, was 31 feet long, 4.5 feet in diameter and weighed 32,500 pounds, most of it fuel.

CHAPTER 6 THE LUNCHEON GROUP

1. From transcript of taped interview by Dean Rusk for Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas in July 1969.
2. Quoted in *Reaching for Glory: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1964–1965* by Michael Beschloss, Simon & Schuster, 2002.
3. From *The Time of My Life*, by Denis Healey, Penguin Books, 1989.
4. 'How LBJ's Vietnam War Paralysed His Mid-East Policy-Makers', Grace Halsell, *Washington Report*, June 1993.
5. Among other attacks, the Stern Gang killed British diplomat Lord Moyne and blew up the King David Hotel, killing 91 people.
6. Quoted from *Warriors for Jerusalem: The Six Days That Changed the Middle East* by Donald Neff, Amana Books, 1988.
7. Office of Strategic Services.
8. The FBIS was a Government department that monitored overseas broadcasts.
9. Evron was said to have been one of the case officers running the so-called Lavon spy network in Egypt, responsible for planting bombs in US-owned buildings in Cairo and Alexandria. The intention was that Arab terrorists would be blamed, harming US relations with President Nasser, but in 1954 the network was rounded up when a bomb detonated prematurely and the injured Israeli agent carrying it was captured. It created a big political scandal in Israel that embroiled Moshe Dayan, but there was a muted reaction from the US.
10. Taped interview for LBJ Library, Austin, Texas, January 1969. McPherson also explained this involved 'a continuing relationship with B'nai B'rith, the Anti-Defamation League, to some extent the Zionist organization, and others who want various things: either to see the President about something, to get a special message out, to have the President come speak to them, to express concern over Israel, to express concern over the state of Soviet Jewry, that sort of thing.'
11. *Ibid.*
12. Quoted in *Lyndon: An Oral Biography*, Merle Miller, 1981.
13. Oral history interview, LBJ Library.
14. Glassboro took place on 22 June at a local college and to comply with protocol was hastily chosen because it was exactly mid-way between New York City and Washington, ensuring that no leader was giving too much ground to the other.
15. *Going Downtown: The War Against Hanoi and Washington*, Colonel Jacksel 'Jack' Broughton, Pocket Books, 1990.
16. *In Retrospect*, Robert S. McNamara, Times Books, 1995.
17. *The Vantage Point – Perspective of the Presidency 1963–1969*, Lyndon Baines Johnson, Holt, Rimhart and Winston, 1971.
18. *Counsel to the President*, Clark Clifford, Random House, 1991.

CHAPTER 7 COVER STORY

1. Based on information passed by Adragna to P.N. McCloskey, a West Coast attorney and *Liberty* supporter, who passed the information to Jim Ennes.
2. Letter from Chandler to Ennes dated 3 October 1987.
3. I rang Seth Mintz in November 2001 and asked him to confirm these stories, but he put the phone down.
4. The talk on 10 March 1983 was by a military officer named Paul Forsyth, who apparently later denied providing these names.
5. *Body of Secrets – Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency*, James Bamford, Doubleday, 2001.
6. Published by the *Wall Street Journal*, 16 May 2001.
7. Email from Charles B. Tiffany, 9 June 2002.
8. Steve's story is extracted from emails to the author. Other information was added after the two met in the United States in May 2002.
9. Interview, *Attack On the Liberty*, a Thames Television documentary.
10. Another theory advanced recently is that Israel attacked the ship because it feared evidence had been collected of the killing of a group of Egyptian prisoners that day in El Arish. None of the *Liberty* crew remembers anyone in the secret spaces eavesdropping on this incident and, in the light of other evidence, it does not amount to a plausible explanation.
11. *Story of My Life*, Moshe Dayan, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1976.
12. See Chapter Three.
13. Interview with Israeli journalist Rami Tal, 1976, but only published in 1997. (See Chapter Three: Whose War?)

CHAPTER 8 CONDITION NOVEMBER

1. The existence of this exchange of messages has disappeared from official records and there are no references to them in the Court of Inquiry Report. Their 'loss' by the United States Navy has saved it from having to explain why the *Liberty* was allowed to continue its voyage unprotected and become a sitting duck. The wording of Martin's reply was later reconstructed by several *Liberty* officers including Jim Ennes.
2. Sent to Jim Ennes in 1981 after Tully had seen Ennes's book.
3. See Chapter One.
4. The system for relaying secret messages of the highest priority between US administration and naval vessels and shore establishments.
5. The staff who took care of the antennas, receivers and transmitters in the Communications Area Master Station.
6. The account appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor* (Washington DC).
7. In anticipation of a threat of conflict, ships could be put in any of three types of readiness. Condition x-ray was the lowest level of watertight security; a ship's lower compartments were sealed while living compartments and passageways were kept open to permit free movement. The intermediate level was Condition Yoke, which required the closure of more compartments. The highest level was Condition Zed; the only areas remaining open were

those needed for the ship to fight effectively. Condition November was another state of alert; it restricted access to any area in close proximity to nuclear warheads.

8. Goralski spoke about this to Jim Ennes. Bud Degler, a sailor on USS *Mole*, a destroyer alongside USS *America*, told Ennes he heard on the radio: 'We are ready to launch the ready aircraft. This is not a drill. This is for real.' He said four aircraft were launched.

9. Taped interview with author.

10. With great difficulty, Nes had managed to charter a ship at the beginning of the war and evacuate the civilian residential community, but many businessmen and some Embassy staff remained after their families left.

11. Taped interview with author.

12. 'Heikal Tells of "Five Horrible Days" – June 5 to 10', *Egyptian Mail*, 17 June 1967.

13. *Nasser, The Cairo Documents*, Mohammed Heikal, New English Library, 1972.

CHAPTER 9 OPERATION CYANIDE

1. Frank Raven was interviewed by Jim Bamford who reported this in his book *Body of Secrets*, Doubleday, 2001.

2. The *Liberty* crew wondered why it had been abruptly called off regular duties patrolling the African coast when a sister ship, the USNS *Private Jose F. Valdez*, was already in the Middle East, and passed them in the Mediterranean on 4 June heading home. It was heavily barnacled, it was said, but some *Liberty* survivors argued the *Valdez* did not suit the Joint Chiefs, as it had a civilian crew who would not have been so easily silenced.

3. See Chapter Five.

4. Witnessed by Charles Rowley and others in his section.

5. President Johnson is considered to have used the pretext of a probably fictitious attack on a United States destroyer by North Vietnamese torpedo boats as a means of getting Congressional backing for the Vietnam War.

6. Some historians have argued this was a self-serving message; Israel must have known King Hussein would have to make some response, as he had recently signed a joint defence pact with Nasser.

7. *My War with Israel*, Ibn Tal Hussein (King Hussein), Peter Owen, 1969.

8. Later in the war, the Israelis made much of an intercepted radiotelephone conversation between Nasser and King Hussein. The transcript was released by the Israeli Defence Force because it apparently showed the two leaders agreeing to make up allegations that the US and Britain has been assisting Israel. This interpretation is disputed, but it is still considered an example of Israel's command of the military airwaves, and the very basic equipment allegedly used to receive the signal is on display at the Israeli intelligence service's museum at Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv. It seems unlikely that this was a 'cooked' message, as Nasser never denied making this call.

9. A bag kept loaded with essential gear, including clothes, for a five-day deployment.

10. It was apparently used during the construction of the nearby Dimona nuclear weapons plant, also largely built by France.

CHAPTER 10 'LOYALTY, TO MY COUNTRY'

1. The extraordinary story of James Angleton's tenure at the top levels of the CIA and his paranoia about Soviet world domination is unravelled in *Cold Warrior*, Tom Mangold, Touchstone, 1991. For more on Angleton's Israeli connection, see *Dangerous Liaisons*, Andrew and Cockburn, The Bodley Head, 1992.

2. Jay Cristol's thesis was produced at Miami University, where he was an adult student, and a book based on it was published in the United States in June 2002. It is much praised by the Israeli authorities, as it backs their 'accident' argument and shows sycophantic gratitude for their munificent help. Although it contains useful material, the analysis is seriously flawed. The author gives the impression that his motive was to exculpate Israel, and treats all statements of that ilk as the gospel truth while downplaying all contrary evidence. It is surprising the university granted him a PhD for such poor work.

CHAPTER 11 RE-ELECTING THE PRESIDENT

1. From a memorandum by Moorer to an organisation called Americans for Middle East Understanding (AMEU) on 8 June 1997.

2. Naval Institute Proceedings (US), July 2002.

3. See Chapter Nine.

4. As reported in Chapter Two, Israel also claimed it had warned the US, something hotly denied by the US Embassy.

5. There have been stories that some of the pilots were Americans and three names were once quoted to Jim Ennes, though none were traced. Jews from many professions flocked to Israel before the war to help in its defence.

6. Captain M.J. Hanley, Deputy Chief of Staff at the US Navy's European headquarters in London, gave evidence at the naval inquiry into the *Liberty* attack on why a telephone instruction to move it the previous night had not been acted on. He said that because the ship was under the direct orders of the Joint Chiefs of staff, on a very sensitive mission, his staff had insisted on receiving formal written instructions containing times and codes from Washington before passing on the order to the Sixth Fleet. The formal instruction never arrived. Hanley then added that getting such details were 'particularly sensitive' because 'only the previous day, or perhaps the day before, we had, as a result of a phone call, sent out a flash message directly for the amphibians to sortie from Malta only to cancel this within the hour by another flash message as a result of another phone call.'

Another reference to amphibious vessels came from Captain Joseph Tully. He wrote to Jim Ennes that in early June 1967 his aircraft carrier, USS *Saratoga*, accompanied by its escort vessels, had originally been operating independently of the USS *America*. It was patrolling about 50 miles off the Israeli coast, where his carrier was trailed by a Soviet destroyer and Soviet

spy ships. He then added: 'Several days after the onset of Arab–Israeli hostilities, the whole Sixth Fleet was concentrated near Crete, minus the Amphibs, Logistics units (ServRon 6).' ServRon stood for Service Force Squadron. Before he died, Tully did not explain why this part of the Sixth Fleet was deployed elsewhere.

7. *As I Saw It*, Dean Rusk, W.W. Norton, 1990.

8. The Soviet Union had to notify Turkey of any ship movements through these straits. The Western powers therefore always had advance notice.

9. Reported in the *Guardian*, 16 June 2001. All but one of the copies of Longley-Cook's memo were destroyed. It was unearthed among Churchill's papers in British Government files by Richard Aldridge, professor of politics at Nottingham University.

10. The US academic Paul Bracken has published a study of US nuclear strategy: *The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces*, Yale University Press, 1983. He said that in 1962 presidential involvement in the details of operating US nuclear forces was greatly increased: 'The communications capabilities of the White House Situation Room were upgraded. After the Cuban crisis a direct reporting channel from the National Security Agency (NSA) at Fort Meade, Maryland, was brought into the White House... Bringing information from NSA directly into the White House bypassed the chain of military command and was an early example of how more direct political control over the nuclear forces was gained by bringing the information used to alert and command them into the presidential domain.'

11. McNamara was interviewed for the Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, on 16 April 1966 by Harry Kreisler in a series called *Conversations on International Affairs*. McNamara added: 'But with respect to Southeast Asia, I am certain we exaggerated the threat. Had we never intervened, I now doubt that the dominoes would have fallen; I doubt that all of Asia would have fallen under Communist control. I doubt that the security of the West would have been materially and adversely affected had we not intervened, or had we withdrawn after it became clear that we were having serious problems militarily. That was our major error.'

12. Detailed in the White House log for 9 June 1967.

13. Reported in *The Six-Day War – A Retrospective*, edited by Richard B. Parker, University Press of Florida, 1996.

14. Memo to Bundy dated 10 March 1965, LBJ Library.

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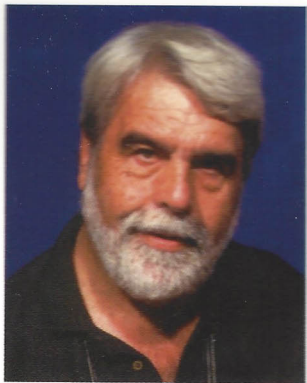
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Peter Hounam is an investigative reporter with over 30 years' experience, most notably as Chief Investigative Reporter at *The Sunday Times*. He is also the author of 5 books, including *The Woman From Mossad* and *Who Killed Diana?* (with Derek McAdam), both published by Vision, and *The Mini-Nuke Conspiracy* (with Steve McQuillan) for Faber & Faber. In 1997 he won the *What-The-Papers-Say* 'Scoop of the Year Award' for leaking the UK budget. He has made a number of documentaries including *Dead in the Water* (2002), about the sinking of the USS *Liberty*, for the BBC. He and his wife Hilarie live in the Scottish Highlands, 75 miles north of Edinburgh.



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