

Subj: **Fw: USNA talk**
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From: delewis@ncia.net
To: TWSCHAAF SR@aol.com

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From: Ed Lewis
To: TWSHAAF SR@aol.com
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Subject: USNA talk

Good morning, classmates, ladies and gentlemen, Naval Academy dignitaries, and especially those who were instrumental in getting Naval Academy recognition for one of the most highly decorated ships of the US Navy and the only one in the Navy's history to sustain serious damage without a Congressional inquiry.

I was the "Research Officer" aboard Liberty, a euphemism for Intelligence Officer. Of the ships complement of 297, 195 were in my Department. The Liberty was unique among US Naval vessels in that it had the first production model of a satellite communications system in the Department of Defense. The AN/SRD-19 Moon Bounce system with its 18 foot dish aft of the superstructure. When operating properly, with its four earth stations, one could expect to get 16-18 hours of comms via the moon. On our usual station south of the hump of Africa we'd often go 3 or 4 days with no radio contact with the rest of the world so this was a welcome addition. Unfortunately it was installed in the shipyard with 150 psi fittings for a 1500 psi system and was usually leaking hydraulic fluid or blowing fittings

The day started peacefully enough. Under a bright Mediterranean sun, the troops were sunbathing on deck. We'd had several recon and photo-recon flights that morning and the Star of David was reassuring. The 6th Fleet Commander, Vice Adm Martin, Class of 34, had said earlier we had no need for an escort in international waters flying the American flag and that they would be only 30 minutes away (actually they turned out to be an hour away) so it was nice to see a friend overhead. Some of the flights were so low that we were waving to the pilots and they were waving back. The Israeli Defense Force had identified our ship in their War Room from Janes Fighting Ships as the USS Liberty AGTR-5.

Steve Toth, our Navigator, Class of 63, had been photographing the Recon missions for the record, so he didn't suspect anything when a flight came in low until they started firing. Then it was too late, he took a rocket to the midsection and was killed instantly.

Phil Armstrong, our XO, Class of 53, got hit next. After heroically trying to jettison burning gasoline drums, in which attempt he got hit with a rocket which shattered his legs, he was finally killed by a small piece of shrapnel in his chest which apparently severed an artery. His autopsy revealed that his chest had filled with blood putting pressure on his heart which stopped it. I guess I was the last person to talk to Phil but I'm ahead of myself.

I'm not supposed to be here today either. I guess I'm fortunate because I never saw the mangled bodies or mayhem and I have total amnesia from the time the CO said stand by for torpedo attack, starboard side, until I regained consciousness and heard Phil talking to me. We were sitting, propped up against a bulkhead, waiting for an empty table on the mess deck, which the ship's Doctor had taken over as a giant Sick Bay.

Nearly everyone who had been within 20 feet of me was killed instantly. The force of the torpedo dislodged a temporary bulkhead which wrapped itself around me and I was shielded from the full force of the blast but blessed with 20 years of burnt navy paint and deprived of 2 eardrums. The burning paint had seared my eyes shut and the intense heat and pressure had deprived me of both my eardrums, so I could neither see nor hear. It didn't end there. After everyone had left the flooded spaces and watertight integrity had been established one of my seamen on a hunch decided to violate Navy Regs and opened the hatch's scuttle, saw me, and pulled me out. Even then it wasn't over. Sickbay wrapped me from head to toe and placed me in a litter basket the next day and Helo'd me to the USS

America. The Corpsman flying with us couldn't tell top from bottom and sat on my head for the whole flight. All I could think of was what an ignominious way to die after surviving the attack. I was blue when we finally landed.

As soon as my eyelids were lanced open and the burnt paint removed from my eyeballs I was summoned to RADM Lawrence Geis cabin. Admiral Geis Class of 39 was Carrier Division 2 Commander. He swore me to secrecy for his lifetime and proceeded to tell me, as the Senior Officer from Liberty on board America, what had happened from his perspective since he said he knew there would be a coverup and wanted someone to know he tried. He said that upon receipt of our SOS he immediately launched aircraft to come to our assistance, which were almost instantly recalled by the Secretary of Defense. He assumed that someone might have suspected that nukes were airborne since they were in the middle of a SIOP drill when the SOS was received. He said he reconfigured a flight of aircraft using aircraft incapable of carrying nukes and relaunched and renotified Washington. The Secretary of Defense again ordered the flight recalled and RADM Geis challenged the order, upon which the Commander in Chief came on the phone and ordered the recall saying he wouldn't embarrass an Ally so we were left alone after the attack ended until the next day when the USS Davis arrived.

You won't find many Victory hulls that survived a torpedo attack and it was only through outstanding damage control and a heroic effort on the part of LT George Golden and Ens. John Scott that the ship was able to limp back to Malta with 821 holes in the hull including one 22X39 feet. Drills do pay off and Capt McGonagle drilled the ship incessantly. Victory hulls were basically 4 compartments. Three holds and engineering. The torpedo had completely destroyed Number 2 hold, my spaces, and ruptured the mainframes into number 1 hold. Survivors say that on the trip to Malta the shoring moved an inch with each turn of the screw but with constant attention and continuous pumping they made it.

It is fitting that today you recognize those from the Naval Academy who were assigned to the Liberty but we must also recognize all the heroes of that infamous day as well. The Skipper got the Congressional Medal of Honor, there were 2 Navy Crosses, 11 Silver Stars, many bronze stars a couple Navy Commendation medals and 208 Purple Hearts awarded for that engagement. Not many of us were missed. 28 were killed by the torpedo. The former US Navy Judge Advocate General, RADM Staring has stated that the Court of Inquiry had changes made after he reviewed it. All the Liberty Veterans Association has ever wanted is a fair and complete Congressional investigation or a new Navy Court of Inquiry in which all survivors are allowed to testify. I have never been allowed to testify and 28 of the sailors murdered that day worked for me and I'd like to see their deaths vindicated and that the official record would clearly show that they did not die in vain. I thank my classmates and those of the Classes of 53 and 63 who have made possible this dedication and I thank especially all my Liberty shipmates here this morning for their devotion to the memory of our gallant crewmembers who are no longer with us. God Bless You All.