

**Remarks by Thomas W. Schaaf
Dedication of USS Liberty Plaque
Navy and Marine Corps Stadium, Annapolis, Maryland**

June 9, 2007

Good morning Liberty veterans, families and friends, distinguished guests, fellow Naval Academy Alumni, ladies and gentlemen.

Before I introduce Commander David Lewis who will describe the maritime holocaust which enveloped the USS Liberty on that day of treachery, June 8, 1967 I would like to provide some background for those not familiar with this ship and her gallant crew and comment briefly on the Liberty story. It is truly a remarkable story. Biblical in many respects which unfolded in the shadow of the land where the greatest story ever told took place.

But with the goal of getting to lunch before the sun crosses the yard arm, from which you may have noticed is flying the Liberty call sign Nan, India, Roger, Yoke, I will only touch two subjects, the ship and the captain, both principals in the Liberty story, a story regrettably known to very few Americans.

Though the ship had an inauspicious beginning as one of over two thousand seven hundred Liberty type ships built in American shipyards during WWII and did not sail under the name Liberty in her first life nor was she a liberty ship. After acceptance by the Maritime Commission in May 1945 she steamed as the SS Simmons Victory for 13 years and then was relegated to the Puget Sound Reserve Fleet in 1958. She was in fact a victory hull, larger, stronger and almost twice as fast as a liberty ship. She was built by Oregon Shipbuilding which launched the first victory hull in January 1944 and subsequently built 135 victory ships.

In 1963 the SS Simmons Victory was born again when the Navy acquired the ship and invested over 50 million dollars in a 22 month long conversion. On December 30, 1964 she was christened (commissioned) USS Liberty AGTR-5 honoring all the cities, towns, hamlets and corners in America named Liberty. It is indicative of the selectivity and

discrimination of the Navy that the other victory hull acquired, the SS Iran Victory, which became the USS Belmont, was also built by Oregon Shipbuilding. These ships with the governors unlocked could make 21 knots. They were excellent ships, well built and meticulously converted for their new mission without regard of cost.

Liberty joined the Atlantic fleet in 1965 and the following year Commander William McGonagle became the commanding officer. He had been commissioned in June 1947 and his first six years were in sea going billets, in a destroyer, a minesweeper and as officer-in-charge of 18 German built, German manned minesweepers assigned to clear the Baltic and North Sea of WWII mines. His duty as executive officer of the wooden hull, non-ferrous minesweeper Kite, however was most notable as the Kite, AMS-22, was a lead ship in the clearing of Wonsan Harbor in North Korea and was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. The skipper of Kite lieutenant junior grade Nicholas Grkovic, later a company officer at the Academy when the classes of '53 and '54 were midshipmen, was awarded the Silver Star for his leadership in this extremely hazardous mission. When Commander McGonagle arrived on board Liberty he was indeed "no stranger to danger." The words in his Medal of Honor citation ring true and I quote "despite continuous exposure to fire he maneuvered his ship, directed its defense, supervised the control of flooding and fire and saw to the care of casualties" unquote.

Here is an excerpt from the criteria for awarding the Medal of Honor, quote "The Medal of Honor, established by joint resolution of Congress is awarded in the name of Congress to a person who, while a member of the armed forces, distinguishes himself conspicuously by gallantry at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force" unquote.

Returning now to the ship. Early in May 1967 Liberty departed Norfolk for a five month deployment. The first port of call was Abidjan, Ivory Coast and while there orders were received to depart without delay and proceed at best speed to Rota, Spain. Liberty arrived at Rota on the first of June, took on fuel, stores and six NSA personnel. The

following morning Liberty was underway. A passage from the James Ennes epic book “Assault on the Liberty” sets the scene. “The ship passed through the Strait of Gibraltar during the late afternoon enroute to a point 13 miles off the Gaza Strip, 2300 hundred miles away. Captain McGonagle ordered a speed of seventeen knots, the top speed we could maintain and Liberty plunged through the water with a bone in her teeth. In the distance we could see three Soviet ships which matched each course and speed change to maintain a constant distance of 6000 yards off our starboard quarter.”

On June fifth, no longer trailed by those Soviet ships, Liberty received the news that the Israelis had attacked the Egyptians. On one hand the Captain and crew were concerned that they were now proceeding into a war zone but they were also relieved that the Sixth Fleet Commander cancelled his planned visit aboard Liberty due to the crisis situation which kept him on his flagship.

The Ennes book provides a somber view of how it looked to the Liberty crew, “June 7 was sunny and clear, with a calm sea and light following breezes. We were almost alone in the Eastern Mediterranean. The few ships we saw were all going in the opposite direction, away from the war, and reminded me somehow of frightened animals fleeing a forest fire. We passed a huge Texaco tanker, her captain on the bridge examining us curiously through binoculars. He must have wondered what business we had in that area.” Unquote.

That night the Captain, commander McGonagle had a quiet conference with the mission commander, Lt. Commander Lewis. Both were fully aware of the risks and dangers of being only a few miles from an intense combat zone even though they would be in international waters. The captain asked the question, Is it absolutely necessary for us to be that close? Lewis’s answer was in summary that their mission capability would be substantially degraded if Liberty stood off in a safe area, in particular UHF intercepts which were essentially line-of-sight. The captain knew that his duty was to support the mission and all his seagoing experience on the destroyer and mine sweeping on the Kite

and with the German Navy had instilled in him the ethic of doing your duty and carrying out orders in spite of the risk.

Here in the words of Jim Ennes is how the meeting ended. "McGonagle sat quietly for a few minutes deep in thought. "Okay" he said "We'll go all the way in". After bidding Lewis goodnight on the bridge he carefully reread his night orders to the officer of the deck. That night, McGonagle added this note "Keep gun crews/lookouts alert. Call me for all challenges received, or in the event air or surface contacts approach in a suspicious matter.

On the morning of June 8 as the Liberty slowed to a patrol speed of five knots on a westerly heading 13 miles off the coastline of the Sinai Peninsula. Lt. Ennes was the officer of the deck. One of his first orders to the signalman was to replace the American flag which was dark from soot and badly tattered from high speed steaming of the past week with a new 5x8 flag.

Later in the morning Lt. Commander Armstrong conducted yet another General Quarters drill which had become daily routine since the departure from Rota, even at the expense of doing regular ship business and maintenance. At 1345 the executive officer was on the bridge briefing the Captain on the general quarters drill which had included setting the gas tight envelope. Captain McGonagle used the PA system to compliment the crew on their performance and reminded them once again that they were in a war zone and of their potentially dangerous position and the need to respond promptly to all alarms as the next one could be genuine.

Now it is my great pleasure and distinct honor to introduce Commander David Lewis. Commander Lewis.