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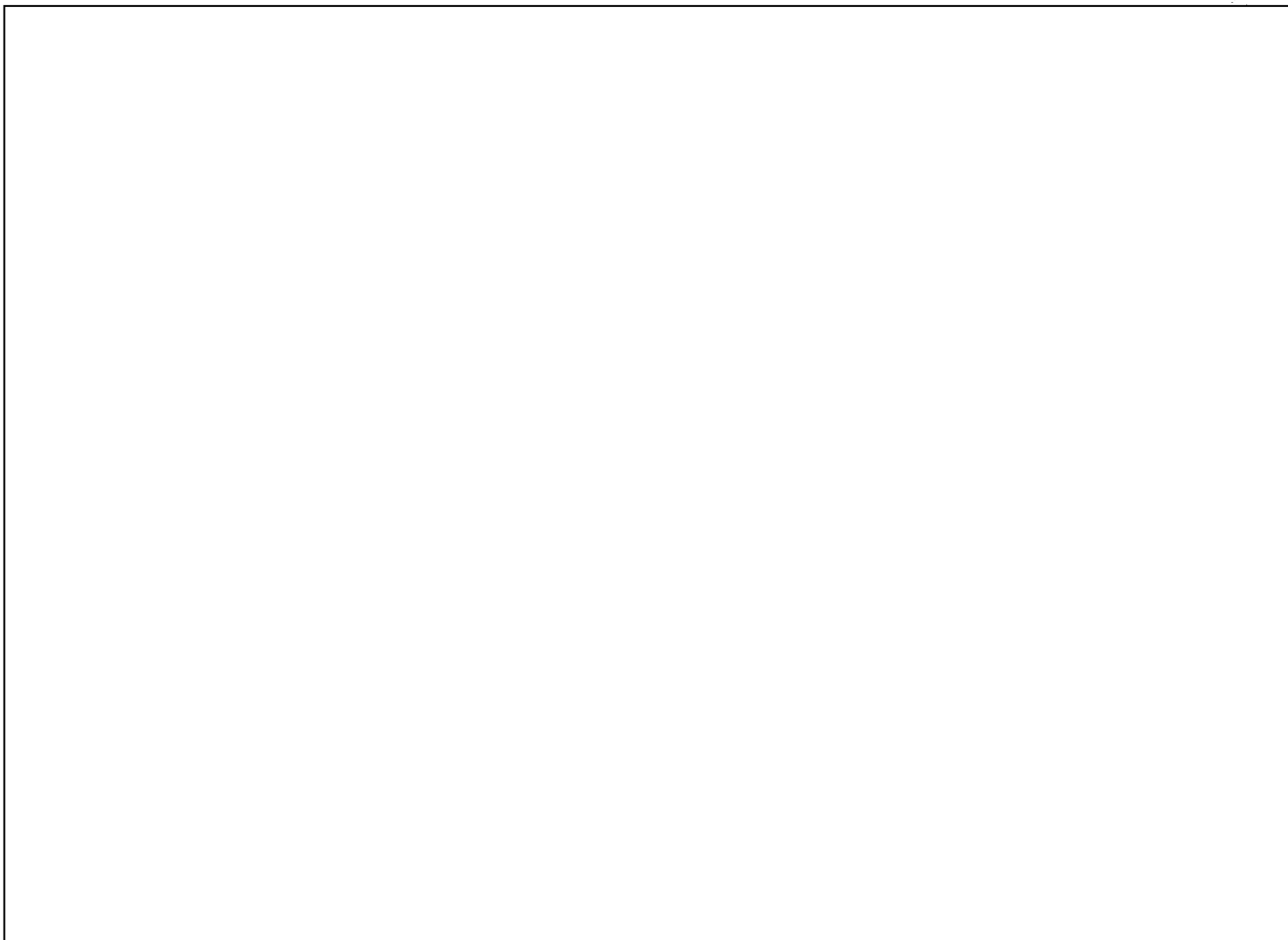
Task Force

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21 Jun 67

Directorate of Intelligence  
Intelligence Memorandum



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[redacted]  
21 June 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Israeli Statement on the Attack on the USS Liberty

1. The preliminary report of the special Court of Inquiry convened by the Government of Israel has concluded that the "attack on the USS Liberty was not in malice; there was no criminal negligence and the attack was made by innocent mistake." The report, however, has been turned over to the military judge advocate who has ordered a preliminary judicial inquiry by an officer empowered to convene courts martial.

2. According to the Israeli findings a chain of three regrettable mistakes led to the attack by Israeli jets and torpedo boats upon the USS Liberty on 8 June 1967.

First Mistake

3. The first mistake was decisive and set the scenario for the subsequent errors. On the basis of erroneous reports, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) was convinced that Israeli positions near El Arish were being shelled by an unidentified vessel off the coast. However, "even the officers who knew of the identification of Liberty early the same morning did not connect Liberty with the unidentified ships said to be shelling El Arish."

4. (CIA has no evidence of these erroneous reports, but the information is plausible in light of the very speedy Israeli advance and the heat of battle in the El Arish area. The UAR Navy is not known to have shelled Israeli shore positions on 8 June. The above admission that Israelis had identified the Liberty--presumably following the overflight by jets at 9:50 AM (2:50 PM EDT)--is the first indication that the Israelis knew the Liberty was in the area prior to the attack.)

Second Mistake

5. The three Israeli torpedo boats patrolling near the Liberty reported that the unidentified vessel was steaming at 28-30 knots. A check of Liberty's maximum speed in Jane's led IDF headquarters to believe that the unidentified (radar) target was a high speed combatant and not the Liberty. Considering the erroneous information on the shelling of Israeli coastal positions, the IDF asked the torpedo boats to verify the unidentified vessel's speed and then ordered an air attack.



6. (It is most bizarre that a qualified naval commander would twice compute Liberty's speed to be 30 knots or that the IDF would authorize an attack solely on the basis of an unidentified high speed contact. There is not a ship of Liberty's general appearance capable of such a speed and few have deck guns capable of shelling coastal installations. If the authorization to attack was made solely on radar tracking, the attacking aircraft would normally make a preliminary identification pass over the ship.)

Third Mistake

7. The Israeli torpedo boats then joined the fray. They claimed they mistook the Liberty for the Egyptian transport El Quseir and attacked with torpedoes after the jets had broken off. This attack is laid to the overeagerness of the torpedo boat skippers as the jet pilots were already having their doubts as to the ship's identity. The Israelis further state that the Liberty refused to answer a challenge sent by flashing light prior to the attack by the torpedo boats and the ship was firing toward the Israeli torpedo boats.

8. (CIA concurs that the torpedo attack was made by overeager Israeli commanders. There have been no US Navy reports of the visual challenge--probably issued in the heat of battle--but if such a challenge were received it would have been answered.

9. A partial explanation for some of this unprofessional military performance is found in a report from Tel Aviv that at least one of the officers aboard the torpedo boats was a reservist recalled to service during the mobilization. In light of the demonstrated Israeli military capabilities, however, it is difficult attribute all of the contributing errors to inept personnel.

(Sources: USDAO Tel Aviv 0928/1 Jun 67, 18 Jun, Confidential  
USDAO Tel Aviv 0933, Jun 67, Secret No Foreign Dissem  
CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Israeli Attack on  
the USS Liberty," SC No. 01415/67, TOP SECRET TRINE)

General Comments

10. The findings of the Israeli Court of Inquiry generally are consonant with the conclusions made in the CIA Intelligence Memorandum. It is now known, however, that the IDF Headquarters had identified the Liberty, probably more than four hours before the attack. The Israelis presumably thought the vessel they were attacking not to be the Liberty, for it is also clear that when the initial attack took place the ground controllers and the pilots believed the ship to be a belligerent. In addition, the Israelis have admitted that the jets were ordered to attack the unidentified vessel and, therefore, the Liberty was not taken under fire by overzealous pilots, acting on their own. We do



not know if they had been advised of the presence of the Liberty in these waters.

11. Two rather incongruous statements in the findings of the Court of Inquiry only detract from their explanation. The Israelis offer as a reason for the air attack a standing IDF order authorizing an attack upon any ship steaming at a speed above 20 knots if Israeli ships or shore positions in the area are being shelled. To say the least, it is questionable military policy to authorize an attack upon an unidentified ship based solely upon a radar track of over 20 knots and erroneous reports that Israeli positions were being shelled. The Israeli statement that the Liberty could not be identified because it was covered with smoke also is a piece of self-serving over rationalization. Clearly the smoke was the result of the Israeli attacks.

12. In light of the findings of the Israeli Court of Inquiry, we conclude that our previous statement that "the Israelis did not identify the Liberty as a US ship until some 44 minutes after the second attack" is in error. The Liberty had been identified prior to the attacks, but the Israelis were apparently not aware that they were attacking the Liberty. The attack was not made in malice toward the US and was by mistake, but the failure of the IDF Headquarters and the attacking aircraft to identify the Liberty and the subsequent attack by the torpedo boats were both incongruous and indicative of gross negligence.