

INDEPENDENCE DAY SPENT REMINISCING ABOUT U.S.S. LIBERTY

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Joseph (Joe) Lentini was one of the survivors on the U.S.S. Liberty that was attacked in the late 1960s.
Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea



MONTEREY — This past Independence Day, citizens around the country celebrated America's independence. While July 4th is a day to celebrate, it is also a day to think soberly about the sacrifices people have made for our country. Joseph (Joe) Lentini of Monterey is just one of the many veterans in Putnam County who put his life at risk in service of the United States. He is a survivor of the attack on the U.S.S. Liberty.

Not long after graduating first in his class, Lentini reported for duty on the U.S.S. Liberty in the late 1960s. The ship, a converted Victory ship from World War II, was kept floating offshore of foreign countries in order to eavesdrop on their communications. The only weapons aboard were a few machine guns, pistols and M1s. Lentini was a communications technician.

At this time in 1967, Israel was at odds with Egypt and the surrounding states, and all signs pointed toward a looming war. The Liberty was sailing off the coast of west Africa when they received orders to leave their current post and travel up to Egypt. "The idea being, we had a good opportunity to find out how the Arab states command worked, how their radars worked, how their missile guidance systems worked back in the 60s," said Lentini.

The Liberty traveled to her assigned location and set to sailing in a circle-like formation at the slow pace of three to four knots. They were about 13 miles off shore from El Arish in Egypt.

"The military, especially we sailors, believed that if we were in international waters, flying a U.S. flag, that nobody would mess with us. So we felt very secure," said Lentini.

On the 7th of June, Lentini says that they started seeing Israeli aircraft making low flights over the ship.

"So low, in fact, that we could wave at the pilots and see them waving back," he said.

The next day, Lentini was below deck after a general quarters drill when an announcement requested the ship's photographer come to the bridge. Three high speed surface aircraft were heading toward the ship.

"They were now close enough that they looked like they were going to overfly us and (the captain) called the photographer to the bridge to take a picture of the planes," said Lentini.

Shortly after, Lentini heard a loud banging from above. Six unmarked jets had flown up behind the ship, looped around to the front and then sliced down the center of the Liberty, shooting down her center. As they continued to criss-cross the ship, the jets expertly took out the machine gun mounts, communication antennas, water-tight hatches, life boats and life rafts and even the gasoline storage area. The executive officer and quartermaster were killed instantly, and the captain, William L. McGonagle, was severely injured.

During the attack, a torpedo hit the side of the ship, making a 30-by-35 foot hole. The immense pressure of the torpedo explosion compressed two separate rooms into one, including the people inside.

Lentini himself had just stepped out of that room seconds before. He woke up some time later on his back in a pool of water. He was saved when a sailor, who was running by, accidentally stepped on his leg which

was now severely broken. Lentini cried out, alerting the other man that he was still alive. In addition to his injured leg, Lentini also suffered a fractured skull and one of his ribs had pierced his lung.

Despite the chaos on the ship, several of the surviving sailors were able to rig up an antenna and sneak out a distress call in between attacks.

The full attack lasted about an hour, and when the attackers finally retreated, there were 34 dead and two thirds of the entire crew injured.

It was discovered that the jets belonged to Israel, America's ally. Israel apologized and said it was a case of mistaken identity — a stance that many people still hold today.

However Lentini, and other surviving sailors aren't convinced. According to Lentini, the ship was clearly flying an American flag which was shot down by the attacking aircraft and that the sailors even brought out a larger flag to display while they were under attack. He also says that the ship that the Israelis claim they mistook the Liberty for was only 275 feet long and displaced 2,750 tons, whereas the Liberty was 455 feet long and displaced 10,680 tons. It is also suspicious, he says, that these jets knew the exact frequency to use to block the ship's attempted transmissions. In his opinion, which is echoed by many of the Liberty survivors, the Israeli military attacked the Liberty in order to keep them from witnessing war crimes they were committing against Egypt.

The debate still rages on to this day as a very touchy subject for many.

Whether an accident or a purposeful attack, Lentini says he is not bitter about what happened. He believes that the decision to attack was made for purely political reasons by Israeli military personnel and does not reflect on the people as a whole. Instead of being consumed by hatred for the people who attacked him, as some of his fellow sailors have, Lentini instead has turned his mind to the positive.

He is very involved in community service events. In addition to speaking at schools and special events, he also works with a Veteran support group in Nashville that helps veterans find necessities such as jobs, food and health care. Retired from the service himself since 1969, Lentini has since received a Purple Heart, President Unit Citation and Combat Action Ribbon. His picture is even on display in a museum in Washington, D.C.

"There's always good in every bad," he says of the Liberty attack. In addition to being spared his life, Lentini is thankful for the opportunities this event in his life has brought his way, including being able to attain a Masters degree with honors and half a second Masters degree.

"I was blessed multiple times that day," he said. "I've met people and seen places that I never would have otherwise."

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