

# Remember the Liberty

## A Congressional Report reveals the fate of five warning messages sent to U.S.S. *Liberty*

STATUTORILY EXEMPT

*Editor's Note: In May 1971, an investigating subcommittee of the U.S. Congressional Committee on Armed Services published a report based on detailed analysis of Department of Defense worldwide communications systems. Of compelling interest to the cryptologic world are the subcommittee's findings concerning the transmission and handling of messages to the U.S.S. Liberty June 7-8, 1967. This section of the report is presented in its entirety; it needs no editorial comment.*

We are grateful to [redacted] of the Office of Telecommunications for bringing this report to our attention.

Hostilities commenced between Israel and the United Arab Republic on June 5, 1967. On that same date at 2015 hours, the Commander, 6th Fleet, ordered all his surface and air units to stand off at least 100 miles from the coasts of the belligerent nations. At the time of the order, U.S.S. *Liberty* was not assigned to 6th Fleet, but was under the operational control of Commander-in-Chief Europe. On June 7th, at 0001 hours, U.S.S. *Liberty* was transferred to the operational control of Commander, 6th Fleet. At the time of her transfer, her operational orders, dated June 1st, directed that the closest permissible approach to the coast of the United Arab Republic would be 12.5 nautical miles, while she could approach no closer than 6.5 nautical miles to the coast of Israel. No action was taken by the Commander, 6th Fleet, on June 7th to cause U.S.S. *Liberty* to conform to his order previously issued to all other 6th Fleet surface and air units.

During the afternoon of June 7th, the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to reposition U.S.S. *Liberty* to move her farther from the coasts of the belligerent nations. In implementing that decision, a series of five messages from JCS and U.S. commanders in the European Command were directed to U.S.S. *Liberty* and other addressees. None of those messages had reached *Liberty* by 1200Z hours on June 8th, 13 1/2 hours after the first message was released for transmission. The circumstances surrounding the misrouting, loss and delays of those messages constitute

one of the most incredible failures of communications in the history of the Department of Defense.

Those five messages will be discussed seriatim. Each is described according to its date-time-group, a six-numeral designation assigned by the originator of the message reflecting the date and hour, month and year [*sic*] of its release. At the time of the U.S.S. *Liberty* incident, the date-time-group was not an accurate reflection of the time the message had been released by the sender to the communications center, although, in most instances, the difference in the time was an interval of only a few minutes, e.g., JCS 072230Z was released to the communications center at 072241Z. Each date-time-group includes the letter "Z" designating the Greenwich time zone; thus all times are standardized.

### JCS 072230Z June 1967 to CINCEUR

This message contained the first directive from the Joint Chiefs of Staff concerning the relocation of U.S.S. *Liberty*. It was directed to the Commander-in-Chief Europe (CINCEUR), for action. Information copies of the message were addressed to Commander-in-Chief Naval Forces, Europe (CINCUSNAVEUR); Commander U.S. 6th Fleet; Commander Task Force 64; U.S.S. *Liberty* and others. This message modified the operational orders of U.S.S. *Liberty* by directing that her closest permissible approach to the coasts of the United Arab Republic and Israel should be 20 nautical miles and 15 nautical miles, rather than 12.5 and 6.5 miles, respectively.

This message was released from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Army Communications Station, at the Pentagon, for transmission at 2241Z hours, June 7th. The action copy of that message to CINCEUR was not transmitted from the Army communications station until 1255Z hours, June 8th, more than 14 hours after its receipt in station. The information copies, addressed to Commander, Task Force 64, and U.S.S. *Liberty*, were not transmitted until 1315Z hours, June 8th, and then were incorrectly routed to the Naval Communications Station, Phillipines. From that

station, they were sent to Navy Communications Station, Asmara, where they were placed on Fleet Broadcast at 2135Z hours, June 8th, 23 hours after the date-time-group of the message, and about 9 1/2 hours after the attack on U.S.S. *Liberty*.

This message lost some of its significance, since it was canceled by a subsequent message from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described in the next section.

### JCS 080110Z June 1967 to CINCEUR

#### *Preliminary telephone call*

One hour and nine minutes after releasing the above 072230Z message for transmission, the Joint Chiefs became more concerned over relocating U.S.S. *Liberty* and decided that 20 and 15 nautical miles was too close to the coasts of UAR and Israel for safety. At 072350Z hours, June 7th, a JCS representative made a telephone call to the Command Center duty officer at Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe (CINCUSNAVEUR). In that call, a verbal directive was issued to the CINCUSNAVEUR Command Center duty officer to order U.S.S. *Liberty* to operate no closer than 100 nautical miles to [*sic*] the coasts of the belligerents. The duty officer at CINCUSNAVEUR was also told that a message formalizing the verbal directive would follow later. However, the JCS might as well have omitted that telephone call since it proved completely ineffective in accelerating action at CINCUSNAVEUR headquarters. It is true that, as a result of the telephone call, a message incorporating the oral directive was prepared at CINCUSNAVEUR headquarters for dispatch to Commander, 6th Fleet; but despite the urgency indicated by the JCS call, the release of that message for transmission was delayed until the formal notification message from JCS had been received.

#### *Formal message*

The promised confirmatory message was not released by the Joint Chiefs of Staff until 080110Z, more than an hour after the telephone call to CINCUSNAVEUR. That delay is not necessarily significant, since JCS could reasonably have expected an immediate and intelligent response to its telephone directive. This message, JCS 080110Z, canceled the earlier JCS 072230Z message and directed that U.S.S. *Liberty* should remain at least 100 nautical miles from the coasts of any of the belligerent nations.

An immediate precedence\* was assigned to this message, whereas the 072230Z message had been assigned a

\*There are four Department of Defense precedence categories: flash, immediate, priority, and routine.

priority precedence, thus indicating the increased concern of the Joint Chiefs concerning the repositioning of U.S.S. *Liberty*. This message was also released to the Army Communications Station at the Pentagon for transmission. The action copy of this message was again addressed to Commander-in-Chief, Europe with information copies addressed to CINCUSNAVEUR: Commander, 6th Fleet; Commander, Task Force 64; and U.S.S. *Liberty*, among others. A delay of 44 minutes occurred in the Army Communications Station, Pentagon, before the message was transmitted to CINCEUR, the action addressee, at 080211Z. Rear Adm. Francis J. Fitzpatrick, Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Communications, testified before the subcommittee that he thought 44 minutes was an inordinate amount of time for processing such a short message.

The delay in processing the action copy of the message is insignificant, however, when compared with the deplorable handling of the information copies addressed to Commander, Task Force 64, and to U.S.S. *Liberty*. First, there was a delay of 2 hours, 25 minutes before those messages were transmitted from the Army Communications Center, Pentagon, at 080350Z. The only explanation for that delay was that messages of equal or higher precedence were awaiting transmission before this message arrived in station. The Department of Defense, however, was unable to furnish the subcommittee with any documentary evidence which would support that explanation.

The information copies of the message, addressed to U.S.S. *Liberty* and Commander, Task Force 64, were finally transmitted at 0350Z, but, once again, those messages for addressees in the Mediterranean area were misrouted to Naval Communications Station, Philippines. A subcommittee witness testified that the misrouting was due to an erroneous routing indicator which had been assigned to the message by a civilian clerk in the Army Communications Center, Pentagon. Upon its arrival at the Naval Communications Station, Philippines, the error was recognized, the routing indicator was corrected to Naval Communications Station, Morocco, and the message was retransmitted within an hour. That correction should have taken those copies of the message to the Mediterranean area and ultimately to the addressees, except that the message was routed to pass through the Army Communications Station, Pentagon. That station, instead of transmitting the message to the Navy Communications Station, Morocco, to which they were addressed, sent them to the National Security Agency, Fort Meade, Md., where they were filed without further action. The only explanation given for this inexcusable conduct was that clerical personnel had misread the routing indicator. Needless to say, those messages had not reached either

U.S.S. *Liberty* or Commander, Task Force 64, by 1200Z hours, June 8, 1967.

**USCINCEUR 080625Z June 1967 to  
CINCUSNAVEUR**

JCS message 080110Z was received at CINCEUR headquarters at 0212Z hours, June 8th. That headquarters, in a telephone conversation with CINCUSNAVEUR headquarters at 0325Z hours, directed CINCUSNAVEUR to take the JCS message for action. That oral order was confirmed by a formal message directed to CINCUSNAVEUR for action, with information copies to Commander, 6th Fleet, and U.S.S. *Liberty*, among others. The formal message, however, was not released until 0625Z hours. No explanation has been offered for the 3-hour delay in preparing that message at CINCEUR headquarters. A further delay of 46 minutes occurred in the message center at CINCEUR before the message was transmitted.

In order to ensure getting this message to its addressees, it was transmitted concurrently over two alternate relay paths. The necessity for the alternate transmission was quickly demonstrated by the loss of the message at the Pirmasens, Germany, Army DCS relay, the first station on one of the transmission paths. As a result of that loss, there was no further transmission of that copy of the message. The explanation offered for the loss of that message was that the

\*\*\*station was being operated under a combination of adverse conditions caused by the consolidation of commands and relocation of units from France. Heavy traffic volumes resulted from the extensive relocation of units and retermination of teletype circuits. The number of qualified personnel was inadequate to ensure error-free processing of traffic.

The second transmission route succeeded in getting the message to CINCUSNAVEUR and to Commander, 6th Fleet, by 0735Z hours on June 8th. The information copy directed to U.S.S. *Liberty*, however, had to pass through additional relay stations before it could be placed on fleet broadcast for dissemination to U.S.S. *Liberty*. That meandering route through relay stations consumed another 9 hours. During that time, there were long in-station delays for processing of the message, and there was a delay of more than 2 1/2 hours in passing the message from an Army DCS Communications Station at Asmara to the Navy Communications Station located within a mile of the Army station. Finally, the message was placed on the fleet broadcast at 1646Z hours, June 8th, at which time U.S.S.

*Liberty* was limping back to port with her dead and wounded, and so severely damaged that she was subsequently scrapped.

**CINCUSNAVEUR 080455Z June 1967 to  
Commander, 6th Fleet**

The headquarters, Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe (CINCUSNAVEUR) received three separate messages directing the repositioning of U.S.S. *Liberty*. Those messages and the times of their receipt were:

(a) A telephone call from the JCS reconnaissance center at 2350Z, June 7th.

(b) An information copy of JCS 080110Z message which was received at this headquarters at 0312Z hours, June 8th.

(c) A telephone call from CINCEUR at 0325Z hours, June 8th.

Despite the urgency which must have been obvious by that time, no action was taken at that headquarters for more than 3 1/2 hours after the initial telephone call. It was not until after receipt of the telephone call from CINCEUR at 0325Z hours, June 8th that CINCUSNAVEUR headquarters stirred into action. At that time, the duty officer directed that a teletype conference be established with Commander, 6th Fleet. That conference circuit was established, and at 0445Z hours, Commander, 6th Fleet, acknowledged receipt of the order to take action upon the JCS message. The teletype order was confirmed by CINCUSNAVEUR formal message 080455Z which was received by Commander, 6th Fleet, at 0518Z hours, June 8th.

For some unexplained reason, U.S.S. *Liberty* was not informed of either of these messages to Commander, 6th Fleet.

**Commander, 6th Fleet 080917Z June 1967 to  
U.S.S. *Liberty***

Upon receipt of the messages from CINCUSNAVEUR, the only action remaining for Commander, 6th Fleet, was issuance of an order to U.S.S. *Liberty* to comply with the minimums directed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was not until 0917Z hours, June 8th, however, more than 4 hours after his receipt of the order, that he released his action message directed to U.S.S. *Liberty*. Although his superiors had manifested their concern about repositioning U.S.S. *Liberty* by telephone calls which gave him advance notice of the order, the Commander, 6th Fleet chose not to use the voice circuit when he passed the order to the ship. Rather, he used the normal communications system for transmission of his message.

After its release to the communications center aboard the 6th Fleet flag-ship, U.S.S. *Little Rock*, that message was delayed for more than 1 hour and a quarter before it was transmitted at 1035Z hours. The explanation for that delay was that there were one flash and seven immediate messages being prepared for transmission at the time the message was received in the message center aboard U.S.S. *Little Rock*. The message arrived at the Army DCS station at Asmara by 1200Z hours, June 8th. That station, however, instead of delivering it to the nearby Navy Station for fleet broadcast, missent it to the Navy Communications Station, Greece. It was returned to Army DCS Station at Asmara and finally delivered to the Navy Communications Station at 1510Z hours, June 8th, 6 hours, 8 minutes after its release by Commander, 6th Fleet, and more than 10 hours after he had been ordered to act

upon the Joint Chiefs of Staff instruction. The message was transmitted on fleet broadcast at 1525Z hours, June 8th, more than 3 hours too late to alert U.S.S. *Liberty* to the danger of her position.

The circumstances surrounding the transmission of those five messages could be considered a comedy of errors were it not for the tragic results of the failure to move U.S.S. *Liberty*. At 1210Z hours, June 8, 1967, U.S.S. *Liberty* was attacked by Israeli aircraft and, at 1235Z hours, she was torpedoed by Israeli patrol boats. As a result of those attacks, 34 officers and men were killed, while 75 were wounded, and the ship sustained such severe damages that it was never restored to duty. At the time of those attacks, U.S.S. *Liberty*, through no fault of hers, had not received any of the above-described messages.