

Liberty Incident Demands Answers

Bryant Jordan | February 05, 2008

In the past year, Congress has been busy defending the reputations of American service members.

Republicans pushed for a resolution condemning the now famous "General Petraeus or General Betray Us?" ad. Democrats opened up a front against Rush Limbaugh after he asserted that some of those who criticize the Iraq war were actually "phony soldiers."

Meaningless antics.

If senators and representatives want to take up an issue that has insulted service members and their families, they can look at the Liberty, an American spy ship that was strafed, napalmed and torpedoed by Israeli air and naval forces on June 8, 1967, as it sailed in international waters [during the Six-Day War between Israel on one side and Egypt, Jordan and Syria on the other]. Thirty-four American men died in the incident; at least 173 were wounded.

For 40 years politicians have dodged this issue by relying on the Naval Court of Inquiry report that concluded that it was all a mistake. But that report never held much water. It ignored most of the testimony of the survivors. The last drop turned to vapor more than five years ago when its legal adviser, retired Capt. Ward Boston, told me the court's work was a sham to cover up the truth.

Since then I found copies of Navy telegrams to the Liberty deads' next-of-kin, in which the Navy had labeled the incident an accident even before the court convened. Anyone who knows -- or can even imagine -- military policy on death notification will find this more than strange.

More recently, reporter John Crewdson, in the Chicago Tribune, reported that the National Security Agency intercepts of the Israeli pilots' communications during the attack left no doubt that Israel knew that it was attacking an American ship. Crewdson, relying on recently declassified NSA records and interviews with people with first-hand knowledge of the intercepts, tells a story that backs up the survivors' long-dismissed claims.

Why investigate a 40-year-old incident? These Americans were serving their country, and they -- and their families -- deserve better than to be disregarded because their claims may embarrass a country with close connections to the U.S. or because its American supporters wield a lot of political clout.

And if American deaths of 40 years ago can be ignored, does the same hold true for deaths today or tomorrow? You would think that at a time when politicians are so quick to defend the honor and integrity of living service members and veterans, some might decide it's time to ask some long overdue questions about those who did not come home.

Sen. John McCain, himself a Navy man who served his country in combat, ought to be interested. Five years ago, even as Captain Boston was admitting what many had long suspected about the court's work, McCain was endorsing *The Liberty Incident*, a book that argues the attack was a tragic misunderstanding.

McCain's connection to Liberty is personal. His father, Adm. John S. McCain, then commander of U.S. naval forces in Europe, ordered the court to be convened and offered the first official endorsement of its findings.

In 2002, Senator McCain noted on the back jacket of *The Liberty Incident* that author A. Jay Cristol "reached a similar conclusion to the one my father reached in his June 18, 1967, endorsement of the court of inquiry. I commend . . . Cristol for his thoroughness and fairness, and I commend this work."

What, then, does McCain owe to the survivors and the dead of the Liberty, given that the report has been skewed and new evidence and witnesses point to a different conclusion? How about his fellow senators, so

ready to defend living veterans from the rantings of talk-show hosts, or the hundreds of legislators in the House who ran to the battlements to defend General Petraeus's good name from a newspaper ad?

Where Congress was right to interject itself was in the case of Pat Tilman, the soldier whose friendly-fire death was covered up by who-knows-how-many rungs in the chain of command. Tilman's family and his fellow Americans deserve to know what really happened to him on that day. Same with the Liberty crew -- the living and the dead.

Congress at long last needs to muster the courage and decency to demand answers to what really happened to those American sons. Until it does so, it only shames itself by posing as the defender of American troops against radio hosts and newspaper ads.