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William McGonagle, 73, Hero Of Israel Attack on the Liberty

By ERIC PACE MARCH 9, 1999



William L. McGonagle, who as a Navy captain won a Medal of Honor for maintaining control of the technical research ship Liberty although wounded when the ship was attacked by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, died on Wednesday in his home in Palm Springs, Calif. He was 73.

Donald Pageler, editor of The Liberty News, a newsletter published by the survivors of what is sometimes called the Liberty incident, said he did not know the cause of death.

Captain McGonagle was a commander then, and badly wounded in the attack by military aircraft and torpedo boats using rockets, napalm and other weaponry. Afterward Israel apologized, saying the Liberty had been mistaken for an Egyptian ship. Israel also contended that the markings on Liberty had been insufficient, but it paid compensation of more than \$12 million.

The attack left 34 of the ship's occupants dead and 171 wounded. The Liberty was in the Mediterranean off the Sinai Peninsula, in international waters, when the Israeli forces struck.

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crippled vessel to safety. In 1968, having been promoted to captain, he wept when awarded the Medal of Honor for keeping the ship under control for 17 hours after



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retired.

In the years after the attack on the ship, there were charges of a Government cover-up. At a gathering of survivors of the attack in 1997 in Washington, Captain McGonagle said, "I think it's about time that the state of Israel and the United States Government provide the crew members of the Liberty and the rest of the American people the facts of what happened, and why the Liberty was attacked 30 years ago today."

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"For many years I have wanted to believe that the attack on the Liberty was pure error," he went on, adding: "It appears to me that it was not a pure case of mistaken identity. It was, on the other hand, gross incompetence and aggravated dereliction of duty on the part of many officers and men of the state of Israel."

William McGonagle was born in Wichita, Kan. He enlisted in the Navy in 1944. Three years later, after finishing a Navy training program at the University of Southern California, he became a Navy ensign. He rose through the ranks and was given command of the Liberty in April 1966.

In an interview last year, he said that recently, while taking a shower, he noticed that an old piece of shrapnel had come loose and was sticking through his ribs. He pulled it out and fell in pain to the shower-stall floor. "I asked my wife for a Band-Aid," he recalled, "and she said, 'What do you need it for? You just took a shower.' "

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



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