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Oral History Interview

NSA OH-33-80

with

JOHN A. CONNELL

15 September 1980

M62, NSA

By Mr. Henry Millington and Bob Farley

FARLEY: Today is the 15 of September 1980. Our interviewee, Mr. John Connell. Mr. Connell was the NSA rep to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, JRC, during the Israeli LIBERTY crisis of June 1967. Our interview is taking place in the M62 area, NSA. Interviewers, Mr. Henry Millington, Bob Farley. Mr. Connell will discuss what happened at JCS during this critical period. The classification of the interview according to Mr. Connell is TOP SECRET CODEWORD.

FARLEY: John, what we want to do today is try to stimulate your memory; give us any piece of information that you have regarding your tour at JCS. Henry and Bill Gerhardt have been working on the SIGINT history of the LIBERTY Israeli Crisis and we just need a few more pieces to wrap it up. So let's start from the beginning. John, what was your position, or assignment during the period May-June '67?

CONNELL: Well, I was the NSA liaison officer to the JCS/JRC and in conjunction with that, also as ~~a~~ information exchange officer as needed with the comparable DIA staff. I forget what they call it now, but Colonel Cole was the officer in charge when I first went there.

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So on one of these contacts, I was always,

they had the secure phone there in JCS, and in DIA when I was there, too. and one of these days I was talking to Gene Sheck while this operation was going on and while I was talking to him somebody came in. I don't know whether it was from the Joint Command Center or one of JRC's home operational officers, came in from some place and says, "the LIBERTY's been torpedoed." And I said, "what?" and I said, "hold it Gene." and I forget what was that brought the message in, I said, "what the hell is going on?" And they says, "the LIBERTY's been torpedoed!" I said, "by whom?" They didn't know at that time, apparently, although it became pretty obvious quickly that they did know or ~~where~~ they found out quickly. And, so I told Gene and I said, "did you hear that?" he said "if I got you straight," he says, "the ship's been torpedoed. ~~but~~ my God!" I said, "that's right, start telling people, get up to the top right away." and I said, "I'll try to find out more information and pass it out to you." So in that sense, see, with a grey phone you could bring people the information right away, you know, as things happen. and of course sometimes it got to the point where ~~you know~~ the Director himself or some, or Tordella would be calling directly, but usually they called on a higher level, ~~you know~~, ~~and~~ to ~~chase yes~~ Into JCS itself, you know. So after that it was, what I usually did, constant exchange of information and I don't know that anybody came out here from JCS on that thing for that

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particular purpose, cause everybody was just busy taking care of trying to find out what was happening and afterwards ~~they~~ it may have been we exchanged groups to get clarification for final a wrap-up of the incident.

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FARLEY: John, were you involved at all in the early discussions regarding the deployment of the LIBERTY?

CONNELL: I probably was, but I don't remember any of the details.

FARLEY: Can you recall anything, whether there were any ~~decenters~~ dissenters, anybody who didn't want to send it out and the people who wanted to overwhelmed the others?

CONNELL: ~~A,~~ Y I can't recall, there may have been.

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FARLEY: John, can you recall any of the discussion regarding the LIBERTY preliminary to it's deployment at one of these meetings?

CONNELL: Well, I can't, I can't specifically, but in that sense I had a number of discussions and people out here would ask me about it, what are they gonna do for to support this thing if it gets in trouble? and of course the philosophy down there was it wasn't their responsiblity, it was the CINC's responsibility. And see, this was one of, in my opinion as humble as it may be, that this was really one of the shortages in the operation. the CINC was absolute in his area and they didn't tell him what to do. And where if they did they were very carefully how they

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couched their language and said here's some information about a certain area. Now this was very true and... Well let me give you an example.

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FARLEY: John, was the discussion regarding the LIBERTY routine ~~or~~ unusual or pretty much like discussions regarding previous deployments of vessels, aircraft? Is there anything unusual about it?

CONNELL: Well, of course I can't remember now whether it was out there before the war started or whether it got there in the middle of it. Huh?

FARLEY: It was on the way.

CONNELL: It was on the way. And so ~~if the,~~ I guess that was where

the discussion started coming, like it indicates in here when you know things were getting rough and it was in there within 20 miles or something like that at a coast. And of course the tragic thing about it was they were expecting the danger I think more from the Egyptians or the Russians or anybody else and never thought about the Israelis being sensitive about this thing. But again, what can you do? you can't go around telling the whole world watch out for our ship or our airplane, but there was some, some concerns as the war started ~~you know~~ for this thing going in there. But again, I think probably part of that business of the command structure; he was under the, supposedly under the CINC's command, ~~there~~ or ~~were~~ at least he was in the CINC's operation and the CINC should have known everybody was into his area, what they were doing, and ~~they~~ he apparently didn't.

FARLEY: Did anybody at JCS at that time suggest that the vessel was out there by itself and maybe somebody should send some escort out there or some protection of some type?

CONNELL: They may have, but I can't recall. Cause you know as I ~~say~~ said I brought this up before, where the hell is the nearest help, three or four hundred miles away, well why don't you go and do something about it. ~~It's~~ That's the CINC's responsibility.

MILLINGTON: John, whenever there were these reconnaissance missions, be the air or the sea ship reconnaissance mission such as the

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LIBERTY, did the JRC maintain any kind of plotboard that it kept regular postings as to where?

CONNELL: The action officer did.

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FARLEY: John, were you involved in the initiation that could have been initiation of a message on the 6th of June, which told the LIBERTY to maintain a high state of readiness because of the unpredictability of the UAR actions and to report by FLASH any threatening or suspicious actions?

CONNELL: Where was that message from?

FARLEY: I think it was from the JCS, wasn't it Henry, or was it from the Navy?

MILLINGTON: I think, well as I remember it, it was from, it was initiated by Sixth Fleet after the war had started and it was sort of you know a, well let's say kind of a...

CONNELL: You mean this was to all units?

MILLINGTON: All of Sixth Fleet, all of Sixth Fleet components.

CONNELL: Well, I may have been aware afterwards.

MILLINGTON: I mean they would obviously... ~~(365)~~ cause they would have, JCS would have been an info addressee.

CONNELL: I probably saw it cause I had access to the daily files and messages, you know.

MILLINGTON: Well ~~this, this, one of the~~, this was one of those messages which there is no evidence that any such message got to the LIBERTY. ~~delivered.~~ Now this could well have been because...

CONNELL: They didn't know about the LIBERTY.

MILLINGTON: Sixth Fleet was...

CONNELL: Yeah.

MILLINGTON: In error, ignorant, of the fact that the LIBERTY had been chopped over to it.

CONNELL: Yeah, that was a... I don't know. Of course I think, I don't know whether, some of these things may have gone directly to the Sixth Fleet, but I think they had gone from CNO, then the JRC route of course was CINC EUR ~~Europe~~, as you notice in here.

MILLINGTON: Yes.

CONNELL: ~~that~~ the message went to CINC EUR ~~Europe~~, or a certain message went to CINC EUR. ~~Europe.~~ That was the ~~re~~ channel; the CNO you know could go directly and those guys, see CNO, see, the service components in the operations, they had access to JRC just like I did only ~~on morse though for~~ more so, ~~(385)~~ cause they were running the operations and I was just providing backup and information both ways and if they needed ~~justi~~ further justification or something like that, I'd get it. It wasn't that much trouble. NSA was very cooperative and as a rule they were, too in the JRC.

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FARLEY: Ok. John, do you recall any information related to the alleged two-day delay in directing the move of th~~is~~e ship which was supposedly blamed on the Deputy Chief of Staff, CINCUSNAVEUR? That was the message that was supposedly telling them to move and this got lost in the?

CONNELL: Well, I don't remember it specifically. I know as we all know now, there were delays and people didn't get messages or people that got them didn't do anything with them, so ~~it~~ but specifically, The only thing I know that I knew, well, heard informally and I can't vouch for the truth of it was the SIGINT officer on the FLAGSHIP or one of the ajoining ships in the ~~platoon~~ flotilla or whatever they had, ~~started~~ was trying to tell this fleet commander, ~~he had~~, what was going on, his staff didn't make the appointment for him or wouldn't let him in or you know, brushed him off, I don't know. He was probably maybe a lieutenant, at the most probably senior grade and you know captains don't pay much attention to those guys, they're supposed to keep out of the way. That's unfortunately, but that's the way it happened.

FARLEY: John, were you involved in the activity of ~~one~~ when, supposedly the Sixth Fleet was going to send a flight of fighters into shoot up anybody around the LIBERTY and McNamara and Johnson cancelled the flight?

CONNELL: No, I don't know anything about the flight being cancelled... when it was hit, it was my understanding a couple of jets did take off and go over there right away. I don't know anything about any cancellation and I'm sure they didn't shoot at anybody or I would have remembered it.

FARLEY: Well this was related to the alleged apology received from the israeli to the U. S. and at that time was just a

matter of minutes I guess, maybe the order was given and then recalls instantaneous because the Israeli's simply made a mistake. Were you involved in any of the hectic activity?

CONNELL: No. ~~No I, facts that,~~ well I was there you know and I knew what was going on and I was involved in a sense, I kept NSA informed, sometimes you know, usually it's the operational officer like Gene Scheck or somebody like that, or Dick Harvey, but there were times when of course I called Tordella direct or something like that when something was going on, or maybe ~~an~~ occasionally ~~that~~ he called me.

FARLEY: Did you get frequent reports from anybody during the attack on the ship by the Israeli? Was there any source at all where you could get minute by minute reports?

CONNELL: No, not that I recall, nobody knew what was going on, cause the only thing was happening of course, the captain on the LIBERTY was yelling SOS, I'm under attack, things like that, and hell, he was shot in the leg himself, wasn't he wounded? lying there on the deck bleeding for quite a while, I believe.

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FARLEY: But there were communications from the ship saying SOS?

CONNELL: Well, well, sure, nobody else knew anything about it except that way, "I'm hit, somebody's torpedoed me, and I'm under attack." I don't know whether it said under attack by Israeli's right away or whether they knew who was attacking.

Apparently it was totally unexpected as I recall.

MILLINGTON: John, when, after word had been received of the attack and which was followed within about ~~an hours,~~ less than an hour's time of the word of the Israeli apology, for this was there consideration to your knowledge given by JCS to scuttling the ship?

CONNELL: No, I don't remember anything like that. might have been, but I didn't hear anything. I mean I can't recall, why, was there any allegation that I told anybody this was going on?

MILLINGTON: No, in the discussions that General Carter was having with people down at JCS was an Admiral, I think his name was Vineyard.

CONNELL: Captain Vineyard, he was even at JRC.

MILLINGTON: There was some mention made there that they were considering scuttling the ship and both Carter and Tordella were ~~ex~~incensed at this idea, cause number one the ship was in very shallow water, they were...

CONNELL: Loaded with equipment.

MILLINGTON: That's right, loaded with this equipment that would never, you know, it wouldn't be down in any deep water anywhere that it was easily recoverable and supposedly that after such conversations the people downtown changed their mind and said no, we discount that, we'll try to get her out of there.

CONNELL: Well, I may have heard something about it at the time,

but I don't recall anybody asking me my opinion and I don't recall ever telling anybody that there were plans to, maybe or they were think of scuttling it. I don't recall hearing that at all.

FARLEY: John, were you ever aware there might have been a submarine accompaning the LIBERTY or trailing the LIBERTY or taking film of the attack on the LIBERTY by the Israeli?

CONNELL: Never heard anything, you mean by the Israeli's?

FARLEY: U.S. submarine.

CONNELL: Oh, U. S. submarine. No I never heard anything about a U. S. submarine. I don't know whether I ever heard anything about any UAR, or Israeli submarines. Did they have any submarines, I don't remember? No I don't remember, I guess people, when the word torpedo came up, I guess people naturally think of a submarine because they can do it by stuff? ~~(506)~~ But I didn't hear anything about any U. S. operational subs any place.

FARLEY: Then you had clearance for compartmented material such as that?

CONNELL: Yeah, yeah.

FARLEY: And there was no mention at all of the ANDREW JACKSON submarine that you recall?

CONNELL: Not that I recall.

FARLEY: Ok. And again, when NSA became aware of the attack was the time you mentioned it over the telephone?

CONNELL: That was the first time because Gene Scheck and I were on

the telephone on some matter, maybe this, something about this ship, maybe something else when that happened, and somebody walked in, said that it was hit, torpedoed. In fact I didn't hear the ship's name when they came in and that's why I hesitated a minute and I said, what ship? and then the guy says the LIBERTY. That's when I told Gene, get the word out quick, I'll pass back any more I can have on it. We hung up.

FARLEY: Did you get any more guidance from NSA other than that keep alert and listen for more data?

CONNELL: ~~A~~ No because at that stage I didn't much guidance, I knew what they wanted and who wanted it and something on a big flap like that, it was necessary to right up to the top.

MILLINGTON: Was there any talk in JCS about questioning the need for a replacement platform for the LIBERTY or would they not have considered that, and rather have expected any such request to have been initiated by NSA?

CONNELL: Well, right, it was ~~the R&D~~ our mission and they, ~~they~~ would not have been making decisions like that about that. Now if it had been some other ship, you know, smaller ship like that, like the PUEBLO or something and a war situation was going on, they might have ~~one~~ wanted it for their own interests.

MILLINGTON: Yes.

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FARLEY: Henry did your question say, did John participate in any investigations, have you asked him yet?

MILLINGTON: No, no.

FARLEY: Did you participate in any investigation or post-mortem either here at NSA or at JCS?

CONNELL: Well certainly not formally; maybe informally, I might

have sat in on something out here or down there, but I don't recall.

FARLEY: Did Walt Deeley ever call you to ask you anything about what happened so that he could include it in his overall report, post-mortem report?

CONNELL: I don't recall if Walt ever asked me cause I presumed people that were giving the stuff to Walt Deeley would get it from me if they needed it and Walt didn't have any occasion to call me directly. I don't ever recall hearing anything from Walt Deeley, I mean ever having any calls from him or anything, I don't even know where he was working at that time.

MILLINGTON: If I understand, John, what you've been saying about the, these quasi command relationships, would I be correct in a statement such as this: that the JCS and certainly JRC would be somewhat reluctant to question the safety of a given vessel in a particular operational area because to do so would be injecting an authoritative action that was rightly in the view of JRC and JCS, the exclusive prerogative of the area or fleet commander?

CONNELL: Right. The CINCs, CINCEUR and CINCPAC, and how many other CINCs we had, didn't we have, didn't we have one in the Caribbean for a while, well, CINCLANT. CINEUR, CINCPAC, and CINCLANT, they were the three big cheeses and you didn't fool around with them. I mean, see the JCS itself was limited as I understand it in the sense the way they were established I

don't think they, the only command function I think they had was directly to the CINCs and not to anybody else. If any of the operations needed command, it went through CINCEUR, I mean through Chief of Naval Operations or Chief Staff of the Air Force, the Army, something like that and that's why ~~you know~~ JRC had to be careful in what they did. To me it was a, it seemed to me to be an awful lack of responsiblity that nobody was closer to these ships in case they were in trouble, and I got the answer from the operattional officers it's the CINCs responsibility, and the best they could do at JRC was relay NSA information to them in a certain situation in a sense of for your information, not to do anything about it, though. Something had to be done about it, then the JCS itself would do it and maybe they'd do it through the CNO, or the Air Force, or whoever was running the operation or whoever was the group involved.

FARLEY: John, did anybody at JCS ever express an opinion that the support from NSA was good, adequate, superior, during this Crisis?

CONNELL: Well I can't recall, what... You mean during, after the ship was struck?

FARLEY: Yes.

CONNELL: I can't recall that NSA had anything, ~~to,~~ not immediately anyhow, cause they were just as much in the dark as everybody else. But like the PUEBLO, that was a question~~able,~~

that ~~it~~ got to me, they were trying to find out from somebody in the command center out here, Captain Vineyard was, and nobody would answer, well they'd say, I'll see what I can find out, but they never would get an answer and he didn't have a half an hour to wait for an answer, something like that. And that's why he called me at home, about, what time did that happened, about two or three o'clock in the morning, something like that our time. So I called out here, oh why the heck ~~hecht~~ can't I remember that General's name?

MILLINGTON: Morrison?

CONNELL: Morrison, yeah, Morrison, John Morrison. ~~and he~~ So I called then to the command center and said, "is General Morrison there?" and they say "yes." "let me talk to him." And I told him, I said, "Captain Vineyard has been calling out there trying to get information, if NSA had any communications from the ship itself before or during this crisis to tell them where it was." And he said, "well, I'll find out." and course then he says, "who's that again?" "Captain Vineyard." "what do they call him, what's his name?" I said, "they call him Tex." (laughter) ~~(chuckle, chuckle)~~ So I guess he did find out and got the message down to him because I didn't hear any more about it afterwards. But I know they were having a mad time out here, too, just as much as they were in JCS.

FARLEY: John did you read the book "The Assault on the LIBERTY" by one of the Sixth officers, Ennis?

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CONNELL: No. You know, when you get out of this things, you're sometimes pretty thankful you're out of it and ~~your,~~ when you hear about a book coming out on one of these subjects you say, well, why should I read that book. Why rehash all this business, you know, I was involved in it at the time and I knew a lot was going on and I'm not that interested now and who shot John and that sort of thing. That's one good thing about retiring, fellows, you can forget it.

MILLINGTON: Well this question really has, it's kind of general in nature, but at the time of the LIBERTY incident, this was in mid-year '67, was there, or do you believe that there was a feeling that the technical research ship program was a worthwhile investment?

CONNELL: A Not at that time, no.

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FARLEY: The LIBERTY was on that African mission when it was called to ARO~~TA~~ to refurbish and move into the Med.

CONNELL: Yeah, I think maybe you're right on that, I've kind of forgotten about it, yeah.

FARLEY: John, do you have anything else that we should put on record regarding the LIBERTY incident, maybe stimulated here, your memor~~ies~~y a little bit?

CONNELL: No.

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FARLEY: That's right. John we've interviewed probably seven or eight people and five or six of them were aboard the LIBERTY and they have also expressed concern about the

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poor communications between the ship and their superior headquarters. So if you want to say something, feel free.

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