

Interview of Captain Bert Milton Atkinson, USN (Ret)

Note: I contacted Captain Atkinson at the suggestion of Admiral Isaac C. Kidd, Jr., USN, who described him as “tall, looks like the description of Icabod Crane and solid as a rock.”

I also tried to locate Captain Bernard J. Lauff. I was told by Captain Atkinson that Lauff had married a Norwegian girl and was probably living in Europe. I was never able to locate him.

I sent a letter to the Bureau of Naval Personnel indicating I would like to communicate with Captain Atkinson and Captain Lauff. I forwarded letters addressed to them and asked the Bureau to forward them. The letter to the Bureau was dated April 6, 1992.

I received a letter from Captain B.M. Atkinson, USN (Ret) post marked Daytona Beach, Florida, May 4, 1992. It contained a hand-written letter from Captain Atkinson in which he indicated, “I do recall most vividly the Liberty Court of Inquiry proceedings. However, as you are aware, that record was classified TOP SECRET. Do you know whether or not those proceedings were declassified or redacted in classification. I look forward to hearing from you and will cooperate in any way possible to aid you in the pursuit of your Doctorate!!! Sincerely Bert M. Atkinson”.

Thereafter I provided Captain Atkinson with confirmation that the record had been declassified. Upon confirmation of declassification he agreed to an interview and it was conducted on May 22, 1992 by telephone. Captain Atkinson was in Ormand Beach, FL. The interview began at 15.30 and went through 16:36.

Captain Atkinson advised that at the time he was appointed to the Court he was the Surface Operations Officer at CINCUSNAVEUR. He said that it was his recollection that Admiral Kidd was appointed to the Court by the Commander in Chief, Naval Forces Europe, Admiral John McCain.

He said that on June 8, 1967 he was the duty captain at CINCUSNAVEUR in London when word of the Liberty attack came through. We discussed the failure of CINCUSNAVEUR to move USS Liberty on the oral request of Major Breedlove at JCS. He said that he knew Captain Mike Hanley well and that Hanley was a good friend.

He volunteered a comment that the navigation on the Liberty was not all that accurate and he thinks that the Liberty was probably inside the 12 mile limit although that never became an issue.

He said the Court of Inquiry sessions were held first in London, then on board the Liberty, and then again in London.

His recollection was that the Court convened on 10 June 1967. He said the sessions conducted by the Court were long and they went into great detail. They were completed in about 8 days according to his best recollection.

He said the Court was very much concerned with whether or not the Liberty was at fault.

He said that Captain Boston and Admiral Kidd ran the schedule and that any member of the Court, he, Lauff, or Kidd could call a witness or ask questions.

He commented that Admiral Kidd had his own tape recorder in addition to the record being made by the Court reporter. He said it was very helpful although not too reliable - but nevertheless, very helpful.

He stated that they had not been directed to call any Israelis and only to look at what happened on the USS Liberty.

He remembered (correctly) that noone was called to testify from either of the air craft carriers, America or Saratoga. He said the Court unanimously felt that there was no need to call anyone from the carriers.

When I asked if they were told to take it easy on anything or focus their findings in any direction he replied, "No such thing." He said that it was their instruction to "call it as you see it". He said there was no outside influence whatsoever. The Court focused on what happened.

He said that there was no pressure of any kind put on the Court.

He said that the Court of Inquiry looked carefully into the organization of the ship and the operations of the ship in the combat zone. He was most emphatic that the Court worked very hard to determine what had happened and that the Court and its members were totally free of any interference or command control.