

Jim Nanjo & the book Operation Cyanide

by
Michael Burke

Peter Hounam begins his book Operation Cyanide with the explosive suggestion that high U.S. officials (sometimes referred to in the military as National Command Authorities or NCA) may have known ahead of time that the U.S.S. Liberty was going to be attacked by Israel. Hounam bases this controversial allegation on information from a former Air Force B-52 pilot named Jim Nanjo.

Having spent a career in the Air Force myself, I determined to find out (1) if Jim Nanjo really existed and (2) whether he would verify Hounam's account. Due to the magic of the Internet and the cooperation of a true American patriot, I was able to find the answer to both questions.

Jim Nanjo has retired from the Air Force where he spent many years flying for the Strategic Air Command. He was unaware when I contacted him that Hounam had published Operation Cyanide or that he'd been mentioned in it. What follows, with his permission, is an uneditedⁱ transcript of some emails we exchanged. We hope you find it useful in evaluating Hounam's allegation and forming your own conclusion.

Emails between Mike Burke and Jim Nanjo:

BURKE, 30 JUNE 2005, Subject: Question

Hello Mr Nanjo,

I'm trying to contact a Jim Nanjo who is a retired Air Force officer and was quoted recently in a new book about the USS Liberty. Is that you or do you know the Jim Nanjo I'm looking for?

Thanks,

Mike Burke
MSgt (Ret), USAF

NANJO, 2 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Question

Jim Nanjo retired from AF in 1990. Not sure where we were together, but spent most of my time with SAC. 744th at Beale, 644th at KI Sawyer, 4th at Ellsworth, Yokota, Offutt, and Air Staff, among others, including intel/targeting world. Any help?

Jim Nanjo

BURKE, 2 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Question

Hi Jim,

Thanks very much for the reply. It sounds like you might be the guy I'm looking for.

Were you aware you're quoted in a recent book I have by BBC reporter Peter Hounam? Operation Cyanide (Vision Press, 2003) opens with a 6-1/2 page account credited to retired AF pilot Jim Nanjo. Nanjo's account concerns an unusual alert on 8 June 1967 during his time with the 744th at Beale. The account has interesting implications today for the surviving crew of the USS Liberty.

I'm retired Air Force myself and found the story fascinating. However, I wondered whether Hounam had the story straight or had gotten it wrong.

So, are you the Jim Nanjo that Hounam was writing about? If so, I'd very much appreciate being able to talk with you. I'm an associate member of the Liberty Veterans Association (www.ussliberty.org) and am trying to help that bunch of old sailors get to the bottom of a 40-year-old controversy.

Thanks for your time,

Mike Burke

NANJO, 3 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Question

Mike. Not have seen the book, but it is me who Peter Hounam spoke to some years (1 1/2 to 2 years maybe) ago via a long distance phone from UK. Am surprised that there is 6 1/2 pages of information from the casual conversation we had that lasted may be 10 minutes. And what I spoke about my participation was nothing to speak of, rather a routine duty I and other crew members performed. I was on an alert on that AM when we were sent via kraxton to alert airplane, started engines and stood by for additional instruction/message, per SOP with SAC during those days. Mr. Hounam was not very familiar with SAC procedures and policies during the height of cold war period; surprised by what we did in those days, including how the alert forces reacted, the idea of chrome dome missions, and how we were able and willing to perform our mission. The latter part of conversation seems to have taken more time than discussion on what happened on the morning of June. Told him it was part of duties we performed without reservation on a daily basis.

If you have old SAC combat crew members from the Cold War days near by, talk to them. They should be able to tell you bunch of things. Meantime, would like to see the book. Did not realize the book was out. Call me anytime

Jim Nanjo

BURKE, 3 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Question

Hi Jim,

I really appreciate you being willing to talk to me about Hounam's book.. He's supposed to have a great reputation but I've learned not to take anything for granted. My dad used to say, "Don't believe anything you read and only half of what you see."

I'll email you an excerpt of the first 6 1/2 pages of Hounam's book. That way you'll be able to judge better what he said. The major point is that if the 744th was alerted before the Liberty was attacked, it may be an indicator that national command authorities had prior knowledge. Have you read much about the Liberty incident? If not, a great place to start is www.usliberty.org

Looking forward to talking with you,

Mike

P.S. Hounam's book has also been adapted into a video called USS Liberty: Dead in the Water.

NANJO, 5 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Question

Mike

Have not seen the content of book. The point I am somewhat disturbed from you e-mail, we reacted prior to the attack. Our reaction most likely came after the attack when the defcon was changed. Nothing happens until something happens. We at 744th was not the only wing alerted. The entire SAC was, again that was the SOP. If Hounam said anything else, he made it up, it did not come from me. Wait till I had chance to read. Again, what ever that is written came from one single phone call lasting 10-15 minutes, and certainly did not talk about NCA. SAC HQ., etc. Our discussion was what a new captain on a SAC bomber crew remember doing.

I have not really spent too much time reading about the Liberty incident. I'll however.

Jim Nanjo

BURKE, 5 MAY 2005, Subject: Book Quotes

Hi Jim,

Here's the extracted introduction from Hounam's book for your reading enjoyment. I'll be very interested in hearing what you think of it. BTW, the book Operation Cyanide (ISBN: 1904132197) is available thru Amazon.com for \$16.47

Enjoy!

Mike Burke

Excerpt from Intro to Operation Cyanide: (Omitted)

NANJO, 5 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Book Quotes

Thank....
will get back to you.

Jim Nanjo

BURKE, 8 MAY 2005, Subject: Beale Time

Hi Jim,

I've been doing a lot of thinking re the reported time of your alert (between 0200-0400) versus the time at which the Liberty was attacked (0500). One plausible solution would be if you were talking about Greenwich Mean (i.e. Zulu) Time but Hounam was talking about Pacific Standard Time. He has no military experience and may not have realized you were both talking in terms of two different time standards.

I was never in SAC but I've seen my share of TAC alert facilities and Command Posts. They typically have clocks referencing zulu time and I assume the pilots and aircraft do as well. Was that the case at Beale in 1967?

Mike

NANJO, 9 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Beale Time

Mike...

The only explanation for the time difference is that I must have been mistaken in term of when the alert went on. It was early AM and I said that. Am not sure whether I said it was 2am -4am - etc, however. It was early.

I cannot see any reason for us to be alerted before the incident occurred, so 5-7AM? I just cannot be certain. We do not react prior to any change in Defcon. Yes, we worked with GMT and GMT only but it was early in the morning at Beale when the alert when on. Yes it was dark. We were housed in a underground bunker, and I do remember being disoriented because I was awoken from a deep sleep and no light. I do not recall whether it was light, sunshine, cloudy, etc. on our way to the aircraft. Did not pay any attention as usual procedures. Our job was to get to the aircraft and start the engines and await for the message(s).

About the article itself. Mr. Hounam takes a broad interpretation and/or embellishes what I remember saying. I never or could have said what our targets are or what country. Was and is still classified information. What I stated was that during the cold war, our enemy was USSR. Mr Hounam assumes that the targets were automatically against USSR. That is not true and we do not break into the target folder to find out where we are going. Mr.

Hounam needs to study SAC procedures and practices during the cold war, particularly those in the 50s and 60s.

Wonderful description of what a crew members did during the alert with my name thrown in periodically, but again somewhat with a dramatic touch. For instance, I'm quoted as saying I knew that this alert was not a practice, therefore the implication was that this was the "real thing".

Again, Mr. Hounam need to read and learn bit more. Many other information he put together with a right effect. For instance, he refer to this as my hair raising incident. Yes, but this was not the only hair raising incident during my SAC crew member days. The main point however is the time and SAC/NCA knowing what was about to happen with the Liberty. That is pure non-sense. We would not have reacted to any incident before it happened. Lastly, we do get placed on alert just to attack our targets. There are other reasons that Mr. Hounam needed to investigate.

Somewhat disappointed by the approach this article took. What the point of this book? Mike, you said you were trying to help those who were involved in this incident. How?

30 years with the Air Force and almost 20 years with SAC. Lots of things happen. Lots of things I still cannot and will not be able to discuss. Lots of thing I am proud to have done. How come I have an uneasy feedling after I read this article.

Jim

BURKE, 14 MAY 2005, Subject: Re Beale Time

Hi Jim,

Sorry for the delayed response; life got real busy on me all of a sudden. Your comments on the excerpt were fascinating! Here's answers to your questions:

>What the point of this book (Operation Cyanide)?

Other books and reports have established beyond a reasonable doubt (IMHO) that Israel deliberately attacked the U.S.S. Liberty; their excuse of mistaken identity was clearly an outrageous lie. Hounam's book goes beyond them in attempting to answer the question of motivation.

Hounam mixes a lot of facts with loads of conjecture to develop a controversial conclusion: Israel's goal was to entice the U.S. into helping them invade Egypt and overthrow it's leader, Gamal Abdal-Nasser. They intended to sink the ship, kill all aboard, and then pin the blame on Egypt; kind of a Mediterranean Tonkin Gulf incident. Hounam also suggests that a handful of U.S. officials (Johnson, McNamara) had prior knowlege of the Israeli plan and may even have sanctioned it in a Top Secret plan named

Operation Cyanide. As you put it, 'The main point however is...SAC/NCA knowing what was about to happen with the Liberty.'

Like he did with your interview, I think Hounam spun a lot of conclusions that are not completely supported by the evidence. Yes, the Liberty was deliberately attacked. Yes, 34 sailors were killed and over half the crew of 294 men were wounded. Yes, the ship was nearly sunk as the Israeli's certainly intended. Yes, there was a Top Secret plan called Cyanide. Yes, the U.S. did covertly provide photo reconnaissance & other intelligence to help Israel during the 6-day war. Yes, Johnson did everything he could to cover-up US assistance to Israel and the facts behind the attack on the Liberty. However, none of that proves why Israel attacked Liberty or that Johnson was in on it.

>Mike, you said you were trying to help those who were involved in this incident. How?

Like I've been doing with you, Jim: trying to sort the facts from the fiction to establish and publicize the truth. The Liberty survivors want Congress and the Navy to declassify all remaining documents on the attack and conduct a full unhindered investigation. They want the cover-up to end and the facts to come out before they die.

Now here's a question for you: would it be OK if I share your reaction to Hounam's book with the crew of the Liberty? They have an Internet website where they post questions and answers concerning the attack on their ship. Please look it over at www.usslibertyinquiry.com and let me know what you think. I'd like them to know your reaction to Hounam's version of your interview.

Thanks for your help,

Mike Burke

BURKE, 22 JUNE 2005, Subject: Hounam Book

Hi Jim,

It's been a busy month since I last heard from you. I went to Wyoming and during layovers was able to finish reading Hounam's book, Operation Cyanide. You may be interested to hear that Hounam mentions you again briefly at the very end of his book in the very last paragraph; I included the text of it below.

I'd very much appreciate permission to share an unedited copy of your earlier emails on the Liberty website (www.usslibertyinquiry.org). There's a lot of other people who have read Hounam's book but would like to know what you have to say about it. Unlike Hounam, I'd only post exactly what you said in it's entirety. It's important they know your side of the story so they can sort the facts from the fiction.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Mike Burke

Excerpt from last page to Operation Cyanide: (Omitted)

NANJO, 5 JULY 2005, Subject: Re Hounam Book

Mike.

Found your e-mail amongs hundreds of accumulated e-mail. Wife and I just returned from an extended vacation in Mexico.

Still not happy about the Mr. Hounam's implication. Furthermore, very disappointed that he never made any contact with me about what he was about to publish and I think generally in difference or lack of knowledge in relations what we did and asked to do during the cold war period.

If what I have shared with you is useful, please share information with your comrades.

Jim Nanjo

i(For the sake of brevity, I've omitted extracts from Hounam's book that I emailed to Jim. For the sake of our privacy, I've excluded phone numbers and addresses. Anyone wanting to contact Jim or I can do so thru my account at ammo_mike@yahoo.com)