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William Jones World War II Scrapbook

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In 1945, the USS Indianapolis sank in the greatest single sea disaster in the history of the U.S. Navy. Was the ship's captain unfairly blamed?

THE UNTOLD STORY OF AMERICAN TRAGEDY

THIS IS A STORY THAT began one horrific night in the black waters of the Pacific in the summer of 1945 and only now, 55 years later, is nearing its conclusion.

She was, by any measurement, a ship of destiny - the heavy cruiser USS Indianapolis, carrying a crew of nearly 1200 men. On July 16, 1945, she sailed out of San Francisco. Onboard she had a secret cargo that not even her captain was privy to. Encased in a heavy lead cylinder was Uranium 235, the heart for two bombs of never-before-seen explosive power that would soon obliterate two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and change the world forever.

After depositing her cargo on the island of Tinian in the western Pacific, she proceeded to Guam. From there, she was to cross the Philippine Sea to a base that the Navy had established on Leyte in the Philippine Islands. She never got there. It would be the greatest single sea disaster in the history of the U.S. Navy.

Although the Indianapolis had no submarine-detection gear, the request of her captain, Charles Butler McVay III, for a destroyer escort was rebuffed. The threat of enemy submarines along the cruiser's route, he was told, was practically nonexistent. As a precaution, he was instructed to zigzag at his own discretion, depending on the visibility and the weather.

Late on the evening of July 29, the sky had a cloud cover that made it almost impossible to see one end of the ship from the other, and the Indianapolis ceased zigzagging. Before retiring, Captain McVay left orders to resume zigzagging if conditions changed. Around midnight, for a brief interval, the clouds suddenly parted, revealing a quarter moon. At that precise moment, one of the few Japanese submarines still operating, the I-58, surfaced and spotted the cruiser. Six torpedoes were fired. One blew off the bow of the ship. The second slammed into her powder magazines and fuel tanks. She sank in only 12 minutes. In those frantic minutes, at least three SOS messages were sent over an international distress frequency channel.

About 300 men went down with the ship. Some 900 more, many of them naked or in their underwear, managed to don life jackets and leap into the oil-covered ocean. Others, including Captain McVay, found refuge on a handful of rubber rafts. In the morning, they had no doubt they would be quickly rescued. But the day passed. Then a second day. And a third. Their kapok life jackets were designed to keep them afloat for 48 hours. Now they had to keep their chins high to keep breathing. The sun beat down mercilessly on the faces, ulcerated by oil and salt water. Surrounded by water, they had no water to drink. In despair, some did anyway and died. Others began to hallucinate and swim off to mirages that promised a safe haven. Sharks circled them and attacked. The men could see the incoming fins and hear the screams.

By the fourth day, all hope seemed gone. The incredible fact is that they hadn't even been missed. Nobody knew they were out there, dying one



after another. Then, miraculously, around noon on the fourth day, the pilot of a Navy patrol plane on a routine flight happened to spot an oil slick in the middle of nowhere - and heads bobbing in it.

By the time a massive rescue operation was completed, barely a quarter of the crew - 317 men - survived. The Navy announced the sinking of the Indianapolis on the same day that Japan surrendered, which did not make it headline news. But the media started making inquiries. How could this have happened? In fairly short order the Navy's response was to court-martial Capt. McVay and find him guilty of "[[hazarding?]]" his ship while the nation was at war. The question of why all those men were left helpless in the ocean was not addressed. At the time, that seemed to bring closure to the whole affair.

But the story was far from closed. In 1958, Richard F. Newcomb, an Associated Press features editor, wrote a best selling book about the Indianapolis catastrophe and the subsequent court-martial of McVay titled *Abandon Ship!*, an updated version of which will be published next January by Harper Collins.

But *Abandon Ship!* was much more

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than another best-seller. It would trigger a bitter controversy that rages to this day, with allegations of shameful injustice and massive cover-ups, duplicity, personal humiliation and convenient scapegoats. Decades later, it would be discovered that the Navy's high command knew all along that the Indianapolis was sailing into extreme danger and never warned the captain.

The unspeakable ordeal the survivors had endured was such that they did not talk about it to their families, friends, or even other survivors. But Newcomb, helped in large part because he himself had been an enlisted Navy correspondent with a Purple Heart, got enough of them to talk to him. Publication of his book was a catharsis for them all and led to their first reunion, in 1960. Giles McCoy, also had been part of a Marine attachment aboard the cruiser.

Said a Washington Post reporter covering one of the reunions, "I got the idea for the reunions after the book came out. It was an emotional cleansing."

Seaman John Bullard could speak freely now. "Somebody yelled, 'Shark!' he recalled for the Post reporter, "and we saw this fin coming toward us... A fellow had drifted off from the group. You know how the bobber on a catfish line floats on the surface above the bait and runs when the fish hits? The last time I saw this fellow, his head was running like a bobber. A shark had hit him. His head was like a bobber."

Coxswain Mike Kuryla remembered, "The exposure and dehydration were worse than the sharks. We were blistered like prunes. During the day, you'd roast and pray for night. At night, you'd freeze and pray for day. If you gave up, you died. One guy said, 'I'll see you, good buddies,' and then he swam away and was gone."

Captain McVay reluctantly attended the first reunion. Because of his court-martial conviction, he had been receiving vicious hate mail from relatives of those who had died, accusing him of murder. He was unsure of the reception he would get. To his evident surprise, McVay was emotionally embraced and saluted by the survivors as a man they were proud to serve under. But even this was not enough to sustain him. In 1968, on a day when he had opened another piece of hate mail, he committed suicide.

At that first reunion, Richard F. Newcomb was named an "honorary survivor" because of his book, and efforts were begun to clear the captain's name on the grounds that he had unfairly been made a scapegoat for what had happened. But it wasn't until the early 1990s that declassified documents stunningly revealed that the Navy's high command knew the I-58, as well as a sister Japanese sub marine, had been lurking in the Indianapolis' path. Even worse, only four days before, a U.S. destroyer had been torpedoed in that same area. McVay was told none of this.

The reason was that the Navy did not want to risk exposing its most closely held secret - that it had broken Japan's naval codes. Who in the chain of command made this decision not to inform McVay remains murky. The Navy claims there is nothing on paper, and all the participants are dead.

Still, Senators and Congressmen were
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THE CAPTAIN OF THE DOOMED SHIP

[[image: photo of Capt. McVay]]

[[caption: Capt. Charles Butler McVay III, circa 1945.

CHARLES BUTLER McVAY III, the decorated skipper of the doomed cruiser Indianapolis, was the son of a four-star admiral. Court-martialed unjustly after the loss of his ship during World War II in the greatest single sea disaster the U.S. Navy ever suffered, he never complained. And McVay never spoke about what had happened to him - even to his two sons.

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[[image: photo of U.S.S. Indianapolis]]

[[caption: The USS Indianapolis at Pearl Harbor, circa 1937. Eight years later, the cruiser, carrying a crew of nearly 1200 men, was struck by Japanese torpedoes. It sank in 12 minutes.

[[box]]

TWO WHO QUESTIONED HISTORY

[[image right: photo of Richard F. Newcomb]]

[[caption: In 1958, Richard F. Newcomb (r), now 87, wrote Abandon Ship!, which uncovered allegations of injustice and coverups. For many Indianapolis survivors, it was an "emotional cleansing" and led to the first reunion.

[[image left: photo of Hunter Scott]]

[[caption: In 1996, after watching a scene from Jaws that referred to the

disaster, Hunter Scott (I) of Pensacola, Fla., then 11, contacted survivors from a list compiled after Abandon Ship! was published. Hunter learned that all felt their captain had been wronged.

BY PETER MAAS
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