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# USS Indianapolis: Survivor Accounts From the Worst Sea Disaster in U.S. Naval History

**'There were a lot of sharks,' says one of the surviors. 'So many.'**

**LYNN VINCENT & SARA VLADIC**

Though Tony King is sharp and alert at the age of 94, a part of him is trapped forever in the summer of '45. He time-travels there when he speaks of it—even as he sits in a wheelchair near the lone window in his San Francisco apartment. King's eyes mist over as he tells his story, and with his arms swimming in the sleeves of an old blue bathrobe, his hands draw pictures in the air.

He is young again. It has been days since his ship, USS *Indianapolis*, was sunk from under him, and he is among hundreds of sailors fighting for their lives in the center of the Philippine Sea. Hundreds have already died of wounds or dehydration. Now, among those still living, many are losing their minds.

"Men started getting ideas that the ship wasn't far in the distance," King says. "Promises of pretty girls carrying fresh buttermilk biscuits, or a cold drink just over the horizon. It wasn't hard to be talked into things out there. So a group of us swam off, following the leader, not wanting to be left behind."

Then King's story pauses and his demeanor changes. He looks down at his lap, clearly reliving the nightmare as though it happened just moments before. "There were a lot of sharks," he says, his voice nearly a whisper. "So many. I'd see them swimming below me."

King's hand traces slow circles near his legs, describing the sharks' menacing patrol. His eyes unfocus as he watches the scene play out, the predators still lurking just feet below him after all these years. His breathing shallows and tears stream down his tortured face. "So many friends," he finally says. "Gone."

Tony King was one of the lucky ones. When he and nearly 1,200 USS *Indianapolis* crew members sailed from Mare Island, California, on July 16, 1945, no one aboard dreamed that in exactly two weeks they would be cast adrift while their beloved *Indianapolis*, the 5th Fleet flagship, lay at the bottom of the sea. Or that its sinking would precipitate the worst sea disaster in the U.S. Navy's history.

No one dreamed that *Indianapolis* would be at sea at all, the war being almost over. On March 31, 1945, the eve of the Allied landing at Okinawa, a Japanese kamikaze struck Indy, killing nine sailors and sending the ship to Mare Island, California, for repairs. Most men thought that meant they'd sit out the balance of the war. But Manhattan Project scientists had just completed the world's first operational atomic bomb, and Lieutenant General Leslie Groves needed to move the uranium core of the weapon to within striking distance of Japan.

On July 15, Vice Admiral William Purnell summoned Indy*'s* skipper, Captain Charles B. McVay III. McVay was to speed highly classified cargo to Tinian Island in the northern Marianas, Purnell said. Neither McVay nor anyone aboard would be told the contents of the shipment, which consisted of two cylindrical containers and a large crate. The cargo would be accompanied by two Army officers and was to be kept under armed guard at all times. (continued on next page)

## The top-secret mission

Harold Bray, Seaman Second Class, Repair Division: The ship was looking good—new paint, some new guns. It was a very exciting time for this old country boy. Then we had sea trials. That was great, but then, all hell broke loose. The yard birds [shipyard workers] took all of the equipment off our ship in a big hurry! On July 15, we were out of Mare Island and into Hunters Point in San Francisco. Everything was very hush-hush and secret.

Major Robert Furman, Chief Intelligence Officer, Manhattan Project: The shipment was no bigger than two old-fashioned ice cream freezers, cylindrical and of shiny aluminum. The lid of the bucket-like container was bolted down and out of the top protruded two eye bolts through which we ran a pipe whenever we carried it over long distances. Uranium being the heaviest of natural elements, the weight of this object was considerable, and it moved about as easily as a lump of lead… Actually, what we were transporting was one-half the essence of the [atomic] bomb with all the fusing, firing mechanism and casements removed… It seems unbelievable now that we did all we did, knowing as little as we knew of what the bomb, in that form, could do. We knew from what we had been told that the contents of our shipment were inert, but no one acted too sure about it.

Louis "Kayo" Erwin, Coxswain: Most didn't pay attention at first, it was just the typical loading of supplies with the crane. But we knew something was going on. They had guards on station at all times. 'Course, we didn't know what it was, but we knew it was a big deal, and we were glad to get rid of it by the time we reached Tinian.

Clarence Hershberger, Seaman First Class: Rumors started flying all over the place. Wagers were being made and everybody was betting on what that crate contained. They were wagering it was anything from a new type of airplane engine to scented toilet paper for General MacArthur. Needless to say, nobody ever collected a nickel on that bet.

## Arriving at 'Destination'

On July 26, 1945, the sea breeze brought the welcome smell of tropical land, signaling that Indianapolis was approaching the 40-square-mile coral lozenge referred to by Manhattan Project insiders simply as "Destination." A miniature armada of motor whaleboats and other small vessels streamed toward the ship, all of them containing a lopsided number of high-ranking brass. Meanwhile, the pier beyond rippled with military police.

Ensign John Woolston, Junior Damage Control Officer: Back in the late '30s and '40s, I think, Time magazine had an article that talked a little bit about the possibilities of what could be done with uranium. Being a curious kind of a guy, I kept that in mind. When we were in Mare Island, a very large box was put into the port hangar and that's where everybody's attention, including mine, was put. It was only when the ship arrived at Tinian and a small boat came alongside and the first thing offloaded were the two cylindrical containers that I immediately knew what it was - that those had to hold the two pieces of an atomic, or uranium, bomb. I was tempted to ask the Army major [Furman] about his uranium, but quite frankly, I just didn't have the guts. (continued on next page)

*U.S. Navy Captain Charles B. McVay of USS Indianapolis during World War II. Captain McVay was court-martialed as responsible for the sinking, in which almost almost 900 men were killed. He wasn't exonerated of any wrongdoing until 2000, after his death.*

## The final voyage

After Indy's crew offloaded the top-secret shipment, Captain McVay stopped over at Guam. Then, on July 28, McVay and his crew put to sea again, this time on a routine voyage from Guam to Leyte, Philippines, about 1,200 miles almost due west across the Philippine Sea. Before sailing, McVay, who had not been in the active war zones since Okinawa in March, inquired about the tactical situation.

"Things are very quiet," Commodore James Carter, commander of Pacific Fleet's advance headquarters, told him. The Japanese "are on their last legs, and there's nothing to worry about."

However, Lieutenant Commander Mochitsura Hashimoto, captain of the Japanese submarine I-58, had other ideas. With his nation on the verge of defeat, he hoped to take one more prize for his emperor.

Loel Dene Cox, Seaman Second Class: The big ships like Indianapolis didn't have sonar and they required some destroyers to be with them. Here we were going from Guam to the Philippines without a destroyer escort. They [both Carter and the Guam routing] assured the captain everything was all right. We left thinking everything was fine. July 30 was a black, dark night and that submarine skipper, he looked towards the east and here was a little speck that he recognized as a ship. We were coming right toward him or fairly close, and he crash-dove, got in position, put his periscope on us and watched us.

## The torpedoes strike

As the American ship drew closer, Lieutenant Commander Hashimoto's heartbeat quickened. She appeared to be a large cruiser approaching off the submarine's starboard bow. The target closed the distance: 2,500 yards . . . 2,000 . . . 1,500.

"Stand by . . ." Hashimoto commanded in a loud voice. "Fire!"

The first torpedo slammed into Indy's starboard bow, killing dozens of men in an instant. Another shattering concussion rocked Indy amidships. Her aviation fuel stores ignited, and a maelstrom of flame and explosions ripped through the ship.

Santos Pena, Seaman First Class: I heard an explosion which knocked me off the ready box, knocking me on the deck. I had no time to get off the deck before I heard the second explosion. I got up as soon as the second explosion and looked forward and found the whole bow was gone… I tried to get communication between sky control and the bridge using sound power phones and the ship's service phones, but both were out of operation.

Felton Outland, Seaman First Class: I asked my friend George Abbott, after the ship got hit, I says, "Go get us some life jackets. This thing's jumping mighty bad, and I don't know what's going to happen." George went, and he come back in a few minutes and had one life jacket, so he gave me that one. He hung around a minute or two and he said, "I think I'll go get another one," I said, "I think you better." He did, but I didn't ever see him again.

Don McCall, Seaman Second Class: They tell you to throw your life jacket in first, then jump in and get your life jacket. I looked over [at the ship's rail] and there was too many guys who didn't have a life jacket. I decided when I got there, I was going to have one. I strapped mine on before jumping overboard and went through the Navy procedure, holding on to the collar when you hit the water. It felt like my legs were going down and my top was going up. When I hit the water, fuel oil and sea water went down my throat. I was gagging and spitting and trying to swim away from the ship. I finally threw up and got rid of most of it, but then when I ran out of air, I stopped and looked back at the ship and it was going down.
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## In the deep


*Japanese Commander Mochitsura Hashimoto testifying at the McVay trial in 1945 as USS Indianapolis Survivors observe. (Credit: National Archives)*

Indianapolis sank in just 12 minutes, 280 miles from the nearest land. About 300 men went down with the ship, including Chief Warrant Officer Leonard Woods. As the bow plunged and Indy listed to starboard 10, 20, 45 degrees, Woods ordered his men to abandon the radio shack. But Woods himself did not move. Instead, he stood fast, trying to send an SOS even as Indy headed for the bottom.

It was about 10 minutes after midnight on July 30. The nearly 900 men who made it into the water alive found themselves swimming in a vast, gooey slab of fuel oil that had been released from the ship. Many of the castaways were upbeat at first, certain rescue was on the way. But a combination of incompetence, bureaucratic malaise and the crushing pace of operations as the Pacific war neared its climax would doom many men: The sun would rise four times before the Navy realized Indianapolis was missing. Only 316 men would survive.

Lyle Umenhoffer, Seaman First Class: When I looked down at myself, I noticed I was covered in this oil and the first instinct is to get away from it, you know, because if it catches on fire then you are really in trouble. The first impulse is to swim away from it, so I swam away, and this was a little after midnight when it happened. And then by probably about 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning, I was still swimming. I didn't have anything. I didn't even have a life jacket, so I was swimming from midnight to 5:30 in the morning.

Paul McGinnis, Signalman Third Class: While I was completely coherent, this was my thought: Keep struggling and stay alive. It was very miserable because of the sun burning the skin, one could not escape it. It was like having your head in a hole in the middle of a mirror, with all this sunlight being reflected and burning your face. So hot, it was miserable—like hell. You couldn't wait for the sun to go down. When the sun went down it was a relief. Then it would get cold and you would start to shiver, and you couldn't wait for the sun to come back up.

Granville Crane, Machinist's Mate Second Class: Men began drinking salt water so much that they were very delirious. In fact, a lot of them had weapons like knives, and they'd be so crazy, that they'd be fighting amongst themselves and killing one another. And then there'd be others that drank so much [salt water] that they were seeing things. They'd say, "The Indy is down below, and they're giving out fresh water and food in the galley!" And they'd swim down, and a shark would get them. And you could see the sharks eating your comrade.

*Survivors of USS Indianapolis en route to the hospital following their rescue. (Credit: National Archives)*

Eugene Morgan, Boatswain's Mate Second Class: All the time, the sharks never let up. We had a cargo net that had Styrofoam things attached to keep it afloat. There were about 15 sailors on this, and suddenly, 10 sharks hit it and there was nothing left. This went on and on and on.

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## The rescue

By Thursday morning, August 2, the dead outnumbered the living. Then, just after 11 a.m., Lieutenant Junior Grade Wilbur "Chuck" Gwinn, a PV-1 Ventura pilot on a routine sector search spotted the winding slick of fuel oil. At first, he thought it was the trail of an enemy sub. Descending to 300 feet to take a closer look, he saw the last thing he expected—oil-covered men waving and splashing and slapping the water.

Edgar Harrell, Marine Corporal: On that fourth day, I said, "I hear a plane!" And we began to splash water, we began to yell, we began to pray—everything! And seemingly, when he got to a point that had he gone any further he would've gone over us, you know what he did? He made a dive.

George Horvath, Fireman First Class: Rescue planes dropped this one survival craft close to where I was and I thought, "Geez, there's gotta be water on that!" After four and a half days you get pretty thirsty. So, I left the big group I was in and headed to the craft. Of course, I couldn't swim all the way to it, so I stopped and had to rest on my life jacket. That's when I happened to glance down in the water. There was a shark looking back at me, and I said, "Not now, Lord, not now!"

## They still had fight

Men continued to expire so quickly that it became almost impossible to move around without having to shoulder through shoals of corpses. As rescue efforts stretched into the night, the surface ships USS *Cecil J. Doyle* and USS *Bassett* arrived on the scene.

Ensign L. Peter Wren, Rescuer: We get to the Survivors and there are these [oil-covered] faces—black hair and faces, round eyes, white teeth. I mean stone black, and it's midnight. We cut the engines on our boats and said, "Who are you and what ship are you from?" They come back and they still got fight in them, and yell, "Just like a dumbass officer! Asking dumbass questions!"

Dick Thelen, Seaman Second Class: I was 17 when my dad signed the paperwork for me to join the Navy. He took me to the railroad station after boot camp, and he shook my hand with a real firm look in his eye and said, "I want you to come home, Dick." And I said, "Well, the war is just about over Dad, don't worry about it." So, when I was in the water and I wanted to give up, I saw my dad's face, and I wasn't going to give up for him. He brought me home.

Lynn Vincent and Sara Vladic are the *New York Times* bestselling authors of Indianapolis*: The True Story of the Worst Sea Disaster in U.S. Naval History and the Fifty-Year Fight to Exonerate an Innocent Man.*

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