

In Harm's Way

(sinking of the USS Indianapolis in WWII by Doug Stanton (2001))

Captain Charles McVay III [CM], former commander of the cruiser USS Indianapolis [Indy], committed suicide at his home in Litchfield, CN in 1968.

Indy was in for repairs at Mare Island, CA when they rec'd secret orders to leave on 16jul1945 [same day the 1st nuclear explosion occurred in NM]. She took on 60,000 gal of fuel & a secret crate [little boy] & set a record for the 2400 miles to HI in 74.5 hrs & another 3300 miles in 6 days to Tinian.

Navy Admiral Nimitz & Army General MacArthur had conflicts of power over the navy & thus there were communication inadequacies. Indy had no sonar & was told the waters were clear to travel solo even though a ship was sunk nearby 3 days prior. ULTRA was a top-secret code-breaking program that was previously compromised by a journalist. So vital info was not used.

A Japanese sub was waiting when it heard rattling dishes on its sonar. The Indy was traveling 17 knots heading straight to the enemy. The sub waited until they were less than a mile away & fired torpedo at 12:04am on 30jul1945. The 1st hit the bow & exploded 3500 gal of aviation fuel opening a hole that scooped in seawater as the ship moved forward. The 2nd put a 40' hole mid-ship. Thousands of gallons of fuel were pouring out as seawater rushed in.

Communications & electrical was gone in the front half of the ship. She started to list to the right. Hatches were closed but it didn't matter. Only 12 of the 35 life rafts made it off the ship. Few had provisions, none had water. Some grabbed life vests or belts [worthless]. Distress signals were sent out giving her location & rec'd in Leyte, but the officer ignored it. Someone sent out two tugs but were called back. A 3rd msg was rec'd but ignored since the Indy wouldn't confirm.

The Indy sunk 12 minutes after being hit. 300 of the 1200 men died immediately. Black oil was on the water & men. Sharks feed on garbage tossed in the wake of the ship & now they were feeding on the men. It was 100 dF at day & 80 at night, but even the 85dF water was causing hypothermia. Men that drank salt water went crazy & died. After 48 hrs 300 more had died.

The life vests were only designed to last 48 hrs & soon began to lose buoyancy. Most had nothing else. Each man had to choose the will to live or give up. Those with strong ties back home had more will. There were several communication failures about the Indy not arriving. The 3rd day some men lost their mind & started killing others [thinking they were the enemy].

Many began to hallucinate; most had saltwater ulcers. Some exhausted themselves to death helping others. The doc & chaplain prayed for the dead & gave the vest to those who had none. On the 4th day a plane was searching for enemy subs when they spotted the oil slick, then men. He dropped emergency supplies, dye bombs & radioed in at 11:25 am 2aug45.

Most cans of water explode on impact. The nearest ships were 12 hrs away. Two small sea planes saw men attacked by sharks & decided he had to ditched it just to get them out of the

water. They pulled 56 out of the water by nightfall. Most were picked up that night by ships. The next day they found the small groups that drifted away [112 hrs adrift without food, water or shelter]. The search continued for 7 days. Of the 1196 men onboard, only 317 survived. Probably 50 men a day died to shark attacks.

Atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima 6aug1945 killing 140,000 & another on Nagasaki on 9aug1945 killing 40,000. The war was finally over. The Navy soon changed some of its policies. The captain survived but knew he would have to endure another nightmare. CM was the only captain court-martialed for his ship being sunk by an act of war. CM rec'd hate mail the rest of his life.

McCoy [the last survivor picked up] organized a reunion in 1960 & spent countless hours trying to get the court-martial overturned. Finally, in 2000 CM was exonerated [55 yrs late & 32 yrs after his death]. Those who lived vowed to themselves never give up – I'm going to live.

Notes:

Indy was 610' long with 107,000 HP & a top speed of 32.75 knots. She only had a 3" steel hull [compared to 13" for a battleship]. The 8" guns had an 18-mile range while the 5" reached 8 miles. The 40mm & 20 mm guns were for close combat.

Books:

Zane Grey novels; Abandon Ship (Richard Newcombe);

Quotes:

"I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast; for I intend to go in harm's way." (John Paul Jones)

Definitions:

4- tempestuous = emotional

41- ochre = orange

45- recalcitrant = unruly

46- stanchions = scaffolds

95- missive = letter

136- kapok = padding

158- aspirating = breathing into airway

180- furtively = secretly

216- occluded = obstructed

228- detritus = debris

256- billeted = housed

257- sued for peace = negotiations to avoid complete surrender

257- culpability = fault

275- consigned = handed over

288- existential = affirming an existence