The Sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis

Monday, July 28, 2008

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http://ourtribune.com/article.php?id=4155

The Texas Tribune

July 30, 2008, is the 63rd anniversary of the worst disaster in U.S. Naval history, an event memorialized by salty old shark hunter (Quint) in the movie "Jaws." It was the sinking of the heavy cruiser 'U.S.S. Indianapolis' and the brutal deaths of 3/4 of her crew in the shark-infested waters of the Philippine Sea.

July 30, 1945, 18 days before the end of the War in the Pacific, just four days after delivering the atomic bomb to Tinian Island and the B-29 'Enola Gay', the U.S.S. Indianapolis was torpedoed 650 miles west of Guam in the Philippine Sea. She went down in 15 minutes. There were 1,200 young sailors on board. More than 300 of her inexperienced crew perished in the attack. While almost 900 survived to abandon ship, only 320 were accidentally discovered and plucked from the jaws of feeding-frenzied sharks five days later. Four died in the hospital. Three-hundred-sixteen lived through the ordeal. The hell they endured waiting for rescue and the events that followed are a blemish on the otherwise valiant wartime record of the U.S. Navy.

The Last Voyage

Capt. Charles Butler McVay was the Commander of the 'Indianapolis.' He had been instructed to protect his cargo at all costs and make haste en route to his destination. Indeed, a speed record was broken on the way to Hawaii where the ship was refueled and underway again in only six hours. Ten days after it's departure from San Francisco, the 'Indianapolis' arrived at Tinian and was unloaded. It's cargo was transferred to the world's largest airbase and prepared for flight aboard the B-29 'Enola Gay' to it's ultimate destination: Hiroshima. World War II would be over in 18 days.

The 'Indianapolis' continued on to resupply at Guam. From there is was dispatched to Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. Once in Leyte, her orders were to take part in training drills which would prepare her mostly new crew to join Vice Admiral Jesse Oldendorf and his task force on patrol off the west coast of Japan. Admiral Oldendorf expected to hear from McVay upon his arrival in the Philippines. Oldendorf's next in command, Rear Admiral Lynde McCormick, was to have been informed of these orders by a message he never received because his staff improperly decoded it. They thought it was for another task force and did not ask for clarification. This was the first of several important messages that went astray. McCormick never knew that the 'Indianapolis' would be coming, and therefore would never know it was overdue, it's helpless crew floundering in the sea amidst rampaging sharks.

The Tragedy Begins: Information Lost

In July of 1945, Naval Intelligence knew enemy activity in the area west of Guam had increased. Even as it made it's way from Hawaii to Tinian, events were occurring that would ultimately spell doom for the 'Indianapolis.' The 'U.S.S. Underhill' had been attacked and sunk between Okinawa and Guam with the loss of over a hundred lives. During the rescue of the surviving crew members, other periscopes were sighted. The Combat Intelligence Section under Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz in Hawaii dispatched that information to Commodore James B. Carter of Advanced Headquarters, Pacific Fleet, Guam.

When McVay of the 'Indianapolis' visited Carter in Guam before the final leg of the voyage to the Philippines, Carter did not tell him of the lethal enemy submarine attack that took place just days earlier. Carter later explained to a board of inquiry that it was normal for captains to receive that type of information from the port director when the ship was routed. But the routing officers knew nothing of the sinking of the 'Underhill' near where the 'Indianapolis' was going. It was deemed too secret for them.

Although McVay expressed disappointment at the lack of an escort, he left headquarters with no indication that danger lay in his path. The Navy later admitted that McVay was not informed there was anything out of the ordinary, and was not given any data related to the sinking of the 'Underhill.' Because of these oversights, the 'Indianapolis' and most of her crew were about to be destroyed along Convoy Route 'Peddie.' Admiral Raymond Spruance might have been on the ship, but at the last minute changed plans. Had he been aboard, the 'Indianapolis' might have never gone to the bottom of the sea.

Once underway from Apra Harbor, Guam, the route and schedule of the 'Indianapolis' was encrypted to McCormick and Oldendorf, but once again the information did not reach everyone for whom it was intended. This time, Oldendorf didn't get the message. If he had, he might have wondered why an arrival message never came from McVay once in Leyte.

Since McCormick in the Philippines didn't know that the 'Indianapolis' was scheduled for training there in the first place, he thought the 'Indianapolis' had gone directly to Oldendorf near Japan. Neither Oldendorf nor McCormick knew where she was. Once she had gone down, no one reported her overdue.

I-58

On July 16, 1945, the same day the 'Indianapolis' was leaving San Francisco Bay with her historic cargo produced in the New Mexico desert, a Japanese submarine designated I-58 was dispatched to battle from her berth in the port of Kure. Aboard her were six kamikaze torpedoes know as 'Kaitens,' each carrying a ton and a half of explosives. The I-58 was part of the 'Tamon' battle group, named after a Buddhist god believed to be a defender of Japan. Although the majority of Japanese submarines had been used for reconnaissance or supply, as the war effort grew futile, the Imperial Navy designated the 'Tamon' group to seek and destroy as much enemy shipping as possible; even by suicide attack if necessary.

Midnight Attack

The Japanese submarine I-58 lay in wait along Convoy Route 'Peddie,' halfway between Guam and the Philippines. It's captain knew that sooner or later a target of opportunity would appear for him to destroy. When the 'Indianapolis' came into view, she was silhouetted by starlight against a moonless sky. At 12:05 AM, July 30, 1945, from a distance of about 1,500 yards, the captain of the I-58 ordered a spread salvo of six torpedoes. Within 90 seconds, two had found their mark on the hull of the 'Indianapolis,' catapulting her out of the water and into history.

When she settled back into the sea, her bow was gone and two huge vents to the ocean were blown in her side. All power was lost to the forward half of the ship. Communications from the bridge to the engine room were cut off. Water entered the hull from forward, driven inward by the continued thrust of the turbines aft. The Damage Control Officer reported to McVay that the ship was going down fast. Initially shocked from the jolt out of bed, McVay couldn't believe the ship was so severely damaged. So far, the was only a slight list and she was still making headway. He had not seen what the Damage Control Officer had seen, and thought the problem could be contained.

As the rate of list increased, the Executive Officer reported severe damage and recommended abandoning ship. Finally McVay acquiesced. They were indeed going down fast by the bow.

Within 10 minutes of the original strikes, the order was given for the bugler to sound the "Abandon Ship" call. Again, a failure to communicate resulted in the bugler jumping overboard without ever sounding the call. The order was passed by word of mouth and some frightened men inadvertently leaped to their deaths in the rotating propellers that had become exposed from the sea.

Two radio distress calls were sent while injured sailors struggled from below decks to find their way up to open air. Some had the presence of mind to unleash the life-rafts, while others swam desperately through water covered with burning oil. Attempts were made to rescue crew members from the below decks with little success. The ship took a sudden heave to the starboard side and started to roll over. Just 15 minutes from the impact of the first torpedo, she had gone down almost vertical by the bow, with propellers still turning, and disappeared entirely into the shadowy depths.

Thus began the hellish ordeal of 800 survivors who found themselves clinging to life, floating in the night, waiting to be rescued by a Navy that didn't know their ship lay at the bottom of the sea. Indeed it would be determined later that their distress calls were possibly ignored by other ships in the area. Furthermore, at the inquest it would come to light that within minutes, the Japanese submarine commander sent a message regarding the sinking to Tokyo that was intercepted and decoded in Hawaii and Washington. The kamikaze torpedoes had not been used. It was dismissed as propaganda without being investigated. Given the geographic coordinates, it could have been easily determined to be the 'Indianapolis.' Survivors might have been located within 24 hours and many lives saved. The Navy later admitted that failure to recognize the significance of the Japanese message fell squarely on the shoulders of Nimitz and his command.

Adrift in the Sea

Much of the emergency survival equipment from the 'Indianapolis' was damaged by the abandonment. Only a third of the life-rafts aboard were untangled before she went under. Wooden barrels of fresh water were quickly contaminated by seawater. They became undrinkable. The oil slick from the sunken ship spoiled most of the food rations in their boxes. As a result of the disaster, the Navy completely reviewed and revamped emergency provisions aboard ships at sea.

Only a few of the men knew they were in water populated by sharks accustomed to the long-range low-frequency rumble of explosive battles at sea. Like Pavlov's dog, they were conditioned to finding 'food' in the vicinity of torpedo blasts or surface-artillery barrages. Sinking ships meant swimming sailors. From miles around, the first of the devilish predators arrived before morning.

Survivors in the worst condition were put aboard the rafts tied together for security. The rafts were actually canvass-covered oblong rings with strap-nets for a bottom. Everyone remained wet, in direct contact with the water. Many of the injured were forced to hang on to cargo boxes and floating debris. As they grew fatigued, some tied themselves to whatever bobbed on the surface, their bodies and legs suspended in the drink. Blood beckoned the danger from below.

Throughout the night, it became apparent the men had been divided into groups some distance apart. One was as large as 400 men equipped with only life-preservers. In the five days of terror that followed, each group was subjected to the madness or sanity of it's strongest members. As

fear and despair set in, some men became selfish and greedy. Others rose to the occasion, earning the lasting respect and admiration of survivors by rendering aid and volunteering rations to the weakest.

One such hero was Dr. Lewis Haynes, a Lt. Commander who swam from group to group. Ignoring the danger of sharks, he distributed medical ointment from toothpaste tubes that were undamaged by exposure to saltwater. With each stop, he did his best to encourage the men to hang on, reminding them that help was on it's way and ships were close at hand. Lieutenants Richard Redmayne and Charles McKissick, Airman 1st Class Anthony Maday, Capt. Edwin Parke, Lt. Commander Cedrick Coleman, and Ensign Howard Moynelo among others, deserve honor for their compassionate efforts to maintain reason and sanity among the terrified seamen. Some were decorated later, but others died waiting for help. Little did they know they were not even missed, but would be found quite by accident in four days, after two-thirds of the men who lived through the original Japanese attack were eaten by the savages that were closing-in from the depths.

Deaths began as a result of burns and other injuries incurred during the attack. Once confirmed, life preservers removed and the bodies allowed to drift away from the groups. It was thought that doing so would keep the sharks busy, buying time for those who lived on. At daybreak, a horrible scene lay before those anxious to be saved.

Each hour became an eternity as circling sharks picked off sailors on the outskirts of the groups. Those who were able tried to distract the fish by beating them with whatever was as hand. In a short time, the sharks were directly attacking victims as they screamed in terror and pain. Some were only mutilated. More blood in the water compounded the feeding frenzy. Witnesses became jaded with time, thankful they had been spared so far.

In the days that followed, aircraft passing high above knew nothing of the dying sailors stranded below. Not even flares attracted any attention. The heat, bright light of the sun, and inevitable ingestion of saltwater caused all the men to become physically sick. Soon waves of madness crept over some. Reality was slipping away. At one point, someone became convinced an allied submarine was passing beneath them. Several men drowned when they swam down to try and attract it's attention. On another occasion, word was passed that if one went deep enough, the water became fresh. More were lost diving to water they thought they could drink Some died in fights over life-preservers. They even thought there were Japanese among them. Some gave up hope, allowing themselves to drown.

In Port: Nothing Amiss

In the Philippines, the Surface Control Officer in the Plotting Office knew the 'Indianapolis' was coming, but not that it hadn't arrived. A recent letter from Nimitz Chief of Staff dictated that arrival reports would not be made for combatant ships. That simple letter set up a situation that precluded reports for non-arrivals also. With no specific reason to inquire, Advanced Headquarters Guam did not know the 'Indianapolis' was not in port. Days continued to pass with no concern for McVay's ship and crew.

Rescue at Last

The crew of the 'Indianapolis' was inadvertently discovered on the fourth day by Lt. Wilbur Gwinn as he flew a routine reconnaissance patrol from Palau in his Ventura bomber. His decision to investigate an oil-slick he spotted saved those who remained alive. Descending for a closer look, he spotted sailors signaling in the waves. Radio silence was broken. Within minutes the information was passed to the Commander of the Western Carolines Sub Area and the rescue began. It was known that no enemy ships had been sunk in the region. Finally, the 'Indianapolis' was accounted for. Not all the men could be lifted from the water until the following day. The dying would continue in the interim.

Seaplanes and ships were dispatched to the position of Gwinn's fix. The sky came alive. Although spirits were uplifted, the men in the water now became concerned they might not survive until the boats arrived. Supplies and additional rafts were dropped. One PBY landed in an attempt to rescue men that were at that moment being badgered by the razor-toothed sharks. Unable to take-off again from the choppy seas, it was ultimately destroyed by rescue-ship's guns once all were safely aboard the following day. Small boats were used to retrieve the living and the dead to the larger rescue ships. Some served as morgues. Survivors were laid on the decks and served food, water, and medical aid. Later they were transferred to the bunks of the rescue ship's crews, and finally to the hospitals on Palau and Guam.

A flurry of cables were transmitted between various commands in the Navy once the 'Indianapolis' was discovered and the tragedy of errors unfolded. From that day forward, ships overdue more than five hours were to be reported. Ships with more than 500 crew members were to be escorted when traveling in the area of the 'Indianapolis' catastrophe. Information relating to enemy submarine activity was to be distributed promptly. Rules for a deadly game were rewritten, albeit too late to help McVay and his young crew. As the worst sea disaster of the U.S. Navy drew to a close, a courtroom travesty was about to begin.

Factors

A number of factors culminated in the loss of lives in the Philippine Sea. During their visit, Carter did not personally insure that McVay knew of the impending danger along his course on Convoy Route "Peddie." On a ship with no sonar, McVay was provided no escort. Carter's Routing Officers in Guam were not privy to the deadly enemy activity. McCormick's staff in Leyte failed to properly decipher a message that would have provided a means of determining the 'Indianapolis' was overdue.

Oldendorf near Japan didn't know where the 'Indianapolis' was supposed to be because he'd missed the message relating to her orders. Radio distress calls were possibly ignored by other ships in the area. The message from the Japanese submarine commander to Tokyo was not investigated by either Nimitz staff in Hawaii or the Navy Intelligence Headquarters in Washington. The letter from Nimitz staff dictating that arrival reports for combat ships would not be made, left the circumstances of non-arrivals unaddressed and missing ships forgotten.

Finally, the 'Indianapolis' herself was ill-equipped and poorly provisioned for an en route emergency. The training scheduled in the Philippines would have better prepared her green crew for the ordeal, but should have been done before she left San Francisco.

Scapegoat

Within a few days after the rescue, Nimitz convened a court of inquiry to determine the causes and responsibility for the disaster. What ensued amounted to the selection of McVay as a scapegoat.

McVay was accused and found guilty by Court Marshall of negligence in failing to protect his ship in enemy territory by zigzagging, and waiting too long to give the "Abandon Ship" order after the torpedo attack had taken place. His trial was brief. He was disgraced and sentenced to lose position in his temporary rank of captain and his permanent grade of commander. For all practical purposes, his career was ruined.

The Navy found McVay at fault when he had been given no reason to believe there was anything unusual about his ship's routing, and therefore no reason to perform anti-submarine maneuvering tactics. Furthermore, they didn't know the "Indianapolis' was lost at sea despite distress calls, enemy reports, and numerous means of determining the ship's location. They had given him a war-weary ship and an inexperienced crew.

In order to make their case, Navy prosecutors went as far as subpoenaing the Japanese I-58 submarine commander to testify in Washington after the war. The public was outraged. At a time when racist anti-Japanese sentiment was at an all-time high as a result of the reported enemy atrocities in the Pacific, a Court Marshall had required an enemy commander to testify against an American Captain. In his testimony, Lt. Commander Mochisura Hashimoto stated that a zigzagging course would not have saved the 'Indianapolis' but might even have made it easier to destroy. The 'U.S.S. Indianapolis' was clearly in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Quiet Vindication

Within months, the story left the eyes of the press. The war was over and the public was sick of it. Numerous memoranda relating to the sinking of the 'U.S.S. Underhill' in the days before the loss of the 'Indianapolis,' the enemy submarine activity in the Philippine Sea, and the growing evidence of incompetence circulated within the walls of Naval Headquarters and the Pentagon. What amounted to an acknowledgement of complicity instigated an acquittal of McVay's charges and a restoration of his rank. He was quietly vindicated.

News of his exoneration was never officially released to the press until 1998. Until then, the Navy could not very well admit they had failed to provided McVay with the information he needed to protect his crew from the living hell that befell them. Indeed, the letters of reprimand issued to various parties involved in 1945 were later rescinded. The public was allowed to believe it was all his fault for 53 years.

McVay remained on active duty another 3 years, retiring to Connecticut as an Admiral in 1949. He received numerous medals and letters of commendation, and although his career was indeed honorable, he must have lived with great doubt and sorrow. Under his command, almost 900 young men had lost their lives in a horrible nightmare at sea.

In the years that followed, the weight of his burden must have become too much to live with. In the fall of 1968, 23 years after that terrible event in the Philippine Sea, McVay laid his conscience to rest by taking his own life. In the garden at his home, he finally joined his fallen 'Indianapolis' crew members with a toy sailor in his hand. So ended one of the saddest chapters in American naval history.

Photos: "Official U.S. Navy Photograph" per instructions of the News Photo Division.

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