

Clarence Hupka

My name is Clarence Hupka. I was born on February 7, 1922. I grew up on the farm and helped my Dad until December 7, 1941 when World War II started. I enlisted in the Navy and was assigned to the Indianapolis, which was a flagship that carried a crew of 1150-1200 personnel.

We were bombarded near Alaska and a Japanese suicide plane came down on us when we were in Okinawa. It hit within 50 feet of my left side, pretty close to my head, and flooded the compartments down below. After repairs we shipped material that was the mechanism for atomic bomb.

Later we were to go to the Philippines from Guam. The captain wanted an escort because of submarines in the area, but he didn't get one. In our second day out, we were spotted by a Japanese sub. On Sunday evening they fired 6 torpedoes, and two hit the bow of our ship. I was in the bunk on the topside of the ship and the jar of the blast threw me out and onto the deck. I could hear lots of guys screaming from being hurt. There was fire all around the ship. Then we were in the water, which was covered with oil, and we all were sick from vomiting. Men were scattered over a 30-40 mile area. We didn't know what to do.

By Tuesday we were losing guys to sharks. Wednesday was a day that we started losing lives from the pressure and the exposure. Many got delirious and saw girls, mountains, and ships coming towards us. They took off and we never saw them again.

Late on Wednesday afternoon a pilot was patrolling for subs. He had radio problems, and he was going to fix the antenna. Below him, he saw an oil slick on the water, and then he saw that there were people down there, scattered all around. He didn't know who it was at first because they didn't know where the Indianapolis was. We should have been in port Tuesday at eleven, but the Navy messed up and didn't check out why we didn't arrive.

About 5 Friday morning, the USS Talbot threw a spotlight on us and we were saved! We were later transferred to a hospital ship and were taken to Guam. While we were in Guam the atomic bomb was dropped. I was discharged from the Navy and got the Purple Heart, which is highest distinguished medal you can get for bravery or act of duty for your country. I came back home and returned to farming. When I got home it was hard to readjust. Our group of survivors had a reunion in 1960. The reunion was emotional. We learned how close we were to not being found. The Navy screwed up.

Someone in the higher brackets fouled up and they needed someone to be the scapegoat. They picked our captain for that. He was brought up for trial. The Japanese sub captain testified. He said, though, that it wouldn't have mattered if we were zig zagging. He said he fired six torpedoes in that direction, and didn't know if they would hit. They didn't have a direct bearing on us. But they still convicted our captain and found him guilty for not zig zagging. We've been trying to get him pardoned all these years. In 1968, Captain McVay committed suicide.

I think the main thing for children nowadays is to do the best job you can no matter what job you get involved with, and be truthful. I would say, don't lose sight of God. Keep religion as one of your main things to be doing in your life. The good Lord has been with me all my life. It was Him that saved me.

Big Ship Going Down

(Inspired by Clarence Hupka)

(Chorus)

Oil out on the water,
Fire all around,
Listen to the silence,
Of that big ship going down.

On the 7th of December,
Nineteen forty one,
Japan bombed Pearl Harbor,
I was nineteen years young.
When I enlisted,
To join that Navy crew,
Of the Indianapolis flagship,
To sail the ocean blue.

(Chorus)

Bombarded near Alaska,
Okinawa, a suicide plane,
That hit our ship port side,
While I was getting shaved.
Seven in the morning,
Directly over head,
When it was all over,
Nine sailors dead.

(Chorus)

30 Marine escorts,
Watching around the clock,
On a secret mission,
With a guarded box.
To Tinian Island,
With parts to ignite,
The A bomb, over Hiroshima,
To show the world our might.

(Chorus)

To the islands of the Philippines,
From the island of Guam,
Crossing the Pacific
From a sub, we got bombed
By Japan, two torpedoes
Exploding in the dark,
The sound of sailors screaming,
Beneath smokestacks of sparks.

(Chorus)

Without drinking water,
There was little we could do,
From Sunday until Monday,
Then we began to lose,
Sailors to the pressure,
One by one brought down,
By sharks that swam beneath us,
To be lost and never found.

(Chorus)

A sea plane came to get us,
But the water was too rough,
Till 5 on Friday morning,
When they shined a light on us
From the USS Talbot
With a net over the side,
Of 1200 sailors
Three hundred survived.

(Chorus)

Fifteen years later,
Long after we came home,
We learned about the pilot,
Who saw us down below.
While those who knew better,
While those farther up,
Blamed it on the captain,
For why the big ship sunk.

(Chorus)

"All Those Drowned Sailors,"
"Ship of Doom," "Jaws,"
Out of all those millions,
Not a single dime we saw,
To help pay the lawyers,
Fighting for the captain's name,
Down the halls of Congress,
Let's honor Captain McVay.

(Chorus)

*Words & music by Larry Long with Alta
Bohling's 5th Grade Class, Nemaha
Valley Schools, Talmage, Nebraska*