

July 14, 2020

Naval Aviator saves lives of USS Indianapolis Crew

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Photo of Jacket, MM2006.8.2

This U.S. Navy Naval Aviator's Working Green uniform jacket belonged to Lieutenant Commander George C. Atteberry (b.1914-d.1986). Atteberry was instrumental in rescuing survivors from the USS Indianapolis, torpedoed by the Japanese on July 30, 1945.

The USS Indianapolis set sail from San Francisco, California on July 16, bound for Tinian in the Mariana Islands. The ship was carrying a secret cargo which included key components necessary for the construction of the atomic bomb the US planned to drop on Japan. Due to a shortage of escort vessels, the Indianapolis was sailing alone in waters likely populated with Japanese submarines. The ship arrived at Tinian in record time,

safely unloaded its cargo, and set sail for Guam and Leyte, again without an escort. The Indianapolis also set a straight course rather than adopting the slower zigzag course most often taken to avoid torpedo fire.



Photo of the USS Indianapolis.

On the morning of July 30, the Indianapolis was bound for Leyte when she was struck by two torpedoes fired from a Japanese submarine. The ship sank in twelve minutes, throwing survivors into the shark-infested waters of the Philippine Sea. Of the 1,196 men aboard the ship, 900 made it into the water, many of them with nothing but their life jackets. Naval Command remained unaware of the ship's sinking for four days as distress calls went unanswered, during which time all but 317 men had perished; many died of hypothermia, others had been eaten by sharks. Survivors recalled hearing the agonizing screams of their fellow sailors as they were pulled under the water.

Planes from the nearby island of Peleliu regularly patrolled the waters where the Indianapolis sank, but generally flew too high to be able to spot men floating in the water. However, on the morning of August 2, Lieutenant Wilbur C. Gwynn noticed an oil slick on the water about 250 miles north of Peleliu. He changed course to investigate and quickly spotted a group of 30 survivors. Gwynn dropped emergency supplies, including a life raft, to the men below and called for help.

Lieutenant Commander Atteberry was stationed on Peleliu and received Gwynn's call for help. He arrived at the survivors shortly after 2 p.m., and with the assistance of a Navy patrol seaplane searched the area for more survivors and radioed for additional help. LTC Atteberry guided a PBV-5 "Catalina" floatplane piloted by Lieutenant Adrian Marks to the locations of 58 survivors. Lt Marks's plane was too badly damaged during the landing and rescue operation to transport the men to safety but provided elementary first aid and held the men until they could be transferred to a surface vessel.

Throughout the afternoon, an Army rescue seaplane, seven large Navy planes, and two Army heavy bombers delivered additional life rafts and rescue gear to the survivors. Overnight, three high speed transport ships recovered the survivors and transported them to safety.

The quick actions of Gwynn, Atteberry, and Marks saved the remaining 317 men of the Indianapolis from suffering the harrowing fate of their fallen comrades.

The sinking of the USS Indianapolis remains the largest loss of life at sea in U.S. Navy history.