Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

Volume 16 Article 11

2011

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Phillip Di Tullio

frage movements in New York and California, such a link is undoubtedly newsworthy.

Jacqueline Stotlar is a senior History and Women's & Gender Studies double major with a minor in English. This essay is an abbreviated version of her senior thesis, which was awarded the Mehl Prize, an annual award given to the best senior thesis in the History Department. Jacqueline enjoys playing the double bass and trap and skeet shooting in her spare time. In the fall, she plans on pursuing a Master's in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University.

No Room for Error: How a Breakdown in Naval Communication Led to a Needless Tragedy

Phillip Di Tullio

The horrific events that took place on 11 September 2001 are forever carved into the American psyche. An estimated 3,000 lives were lost in the World Trade Center alone. The list of casualties includes nearly 2,800 civilians. Perhaps the most appalling is the staggering number of first responders – 343 firefighters and sixty police officers – who were killed while attempting to save civilian lives. Even more offensive are the reasons why they died: faulty radios and improper communication within, and between, the New York fire and police departments.[1] These internal failures in the wake of external attacks compound the tragedy and reveal the vital nature of effective and efficient communication, a factor too frequently underappreciated. Communication failures in history confirm this assessment. A case in point is the sinking of the U.S.S. *Indianapolis* in 1945, known as the worst open-sea disaster in U.S. Naval history, which took the lives of nine hundred men.

The attack took place fifteen minutes after midnight on 30 July 1945, when the bow of the U.S. Naval heavy-cruiser, *Indianapolis*, was struck by two Japanese torpedoes. Just twelve minutes later the vessel,

along with three hundred of its men, sank to the ocean floor. The surviving sailors swam hurriedly from the wreckage. Nearly nine hundred men went into the water after the *Indianapolis*' sinking; by the time help arrived nearly four days later, only 316 survived. Among those survivors was the ship's captain, Charles B. McVay III, who was later court-martialed by the Navy and convicted of not taking the appropriate measures to protect the ship – a charge clearly intended to spare the Navy any further embarrassment stemming from the tragedy.[2]

The survivors, meanwhile, were outraged by the conviction of their captain, and accused the High Command of using McVay as a scapegoat for the disaster. Vital information was withheld from McVay prior to the *Indianapolis*' final voyage, which led to a lessened state of alert.[3] Although McVay reported that distress calls were sent before the ship sank, the Navy insisted that none were received. Information declassified in 1999 refutes the Navy's claim.[4] Furthermore, when *Indianapolis* failed to arrive at its destination in the Philippine islands on 31 July, no one at the base reported the ship as missing. Following Captain McVay's posthumous exoneration by the US Congress in October of 2000, blame still needs to be assigned for the sinking of the *Indianapolis*; the role that communication failures played in the death of hundreds of sailors needs to be carefully assessed.

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[2] Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis and the Subsequent Court Martial of Rear Adm. Charles B. McVay III, USN*, 106th Cong., 1st sess., 1999, 29.

[3] Ibid., 30.

[4] Ibid., 39.

Following the court martial of Captain McVay, the sinking of the *Indianapolis* slowly faded from the minds of the American public. Steven Spielberg's 1975 cinematic classic, *Jaws*, reintroduced the subject when Captain Quint, a fictional survivor of the *Indianapolis*, retold the story of the sinking. Quint's famous monologue sparked a wave of new scholarship examining the causes of the disaster. The most complete analysis of the onshore communication errors prior to and immediately following the attack appears in Dan Kurzman's *Fatal Voyage* (1990). Kurzman explores the communication breakdown between the major players involved in the sinking and delayed rescue: the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington (CNO), the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC), and Captain McVay.[5] Meanwhile, Doug Stanton's *In Harm's Way* (2001), discusses the onboard communication failures during the ship's sinking.[6] This paper synthesizes all of the Navy's miscommunications – before, during, and after the sinking – that led to the disaster, revealing the enormity of the communication failures at all levels and phases of the event. While the Navy's official intelligence report in 1945 stated, "all of the products of intelligence must be available to all branches and all specialists," this was not the case with the *Indianapolis*.[7] A careful reexamination of the

evidence reveals that the avoidable tragedy was not only the ship's sinking, but also the delay in rescuing its survivors; and was due to a complex web of factors, including flaws in, and violations of, naval communication procedures during an unprecedented event.

The *Indianapolis* played a crucial role in World War II's Pacific theater. The ship was commissioned in 1932 as a combat vessel used to bomb onshore, enemy encampments. Equipped with a laundry-mat, butchery, and even its own water plant, the *Indianapolis* "was a floating city… [with] enough weaponry to lay siege to downtown San Francisco."[8] The ship was put under command of Captain McVay in 1944; becoming the flagship of the Navy's Fifth Fleet under Admiral Raymond Spruance.[9] During the Battle of Iwo Jima, the *Indianapolis* served as the Command Ship and took part in the bombing of the island. Following the U.S. victory at Iwo Jima, the ship shot down seven Kamikaze planes as part of the pre-invasion bombardment of Okinawa before returning to the San Francisco Bay for repairs. It was in San Francisco that the *Indianapolis* was given a mission deemed vital to U.S. victory in the war. Two heavily guarded crates were secured onto the deck of the ship. Unbeknownst to the crew, the crates contained weapons grade uranium-235 core – the key component of a nuclear weapon – and the "Little Boy" atomic bomb, which would be dropped on Hiroshima.[10] The crew was intrigued by the mysterious crates, and its curiosity was intensified when Captain McVay broadcast a message he had

[8] Stanton, 27.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 36.

received just moments before setting sail: "*Indianapolis* under orders of Commander in Chief and must not be diverted from its mission for any reason."[11] The *Indianapolis* departed San Francisco Bay on 16 July 1945 and arrived in Tinian on 26 July, successfully delivering the bomb.

Shortly thereafter, the *Indianapolis* was sent to the Island of Guam to refuel before joining an invasion fleet in Leyte, Philippines. The route it would take from Guam to Leyte was known in the Navy as the Peddie Convoy Route (PCR).[12] Traveling the PCR was always a challenge, for at times it was relatively safe, while at other times extremely perilous. On 24 July 1945, as the *Indianapolis* was en route to Tinian Island, a destroyer-escort, U.S.S. *Underhill*, was sunk while traveling along the PCR. The *Underhill* was brought down by a Kaiten: a secret Japanese suicide torpedo. Kaitens traveled in packs led by the largest, most effective Japanese submarines, called Tamons. When driven into a ship, the Kaitens detonated, causing catastrophic damage. The *Underhill* was cut directly in half upon impact.[13]

Members of a top secret U.S. code-breaking project known as ULTRA had been working tirelessly to break Japanese codes concerning the Kaitens. After the attack on the *Underhill*, ULTRA was able to officially confirm the existence of the suicide crafts. Furthermore, ULTRA discovered the presence of Tamons near the PCR. Worried that the Japanese would know their

codes had been broken, ULTRA refused to wirelessly transmit the position of Tamons, even if a ship was in danger of attack.[14] The information involving Kaitens, Tamons, and the sinking of the *Underhill* was labeled as ultra-secret and sent to CNO, where it would have to trickle down the chain of command.

The relaying of PCR information is the first breakdown in communication that led to the *Indianapolis*' sinking. Admiral Ernest King, Commander in Chief of CNO and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was the Navy's head honcho. His office in Washington was the first to receive the report from ULTRA about the PCR and the *Underhill*. Captain Samuel Anderson, who worked as the Pacific Fleet Operations Officer for Admiral King, read the report and was frightened by what he saw. Immediately, he drafted a dispatch to Admiral Chester Nimitz, the Commander in Chief of CINCPAC, advising him to change the *Indianapolis*' route. Anderson's superior, however, stopped the dispatch before it was sent out and promised that a higher authority – Admiral King – would handle the issue.[15]

Apparently, Captain Anderson was the only Navy officer to make a forthright effort to relay the information. The report was sent from the CNO office to CINCPAC, where it reached combat intelligence officer, Captain E.T. Layton. Layton sent the information to Vice Admiral Charles McMorris and Commodore James Carter, Admiral Nimitz' chief of staff and assistant chief of staff, respectively. No one appeared willing to take responsibility for this ultra-secret intelligence

[14] Ibid.
[15] Kurzman, 45.

report, as once again, the information was sent to another department. This time Captain Oliver Naquin, operations officer for a sub-division of CINCPAC called the Marianas Command, was the recipient. Naquin, paranoid and consumed with maintaining intelligence integrity, locked the report in his office.[16] Naquin was so wrapped up in "[intelligence] security that he seemed prepared to jeopardize the safety of a particular ship in order to maintain the integrity of the system."[17]

Although vital information was withheld from him, Captain McVay was briefed on the potential hazards along the PCR on three separate occasions. First, he was given a briefing by Lieutenant Joseph Waldron, the routing officer for the port director. McVay, who had no knowledge of the *Underhill*'s fate, inquired about the safety of the PCR and even requested an escort to Leyte. Waldron called Naquin's office with the request, and was told that no escort was needed. Waldron, like McVay, was not informed of the sinking of the *Underhill*; so he assured McVay that "there was nothing out of the ordinary in the area."[18] Next, McVay met with Commodore Carter. Carter, although fully aware of the report, assumed that Lieutenant Waldron would pass on such information, and did not mention the issue to McVay. Finally, McVay had lunch with his Fleet Commander, Admiral Spruance. Once again, the life saving information was withheld from McVay. There are only two explanations for Spruance's failure to alert his flagship's captain to the dangers awaiting

McVay on the PCR: CINCPAC did not give the information to Spruance, or the Admiral felt the report was too ultra-secret to divulge.[19] However, it is unlikely that a fleet commander would not be warned of a serious threat to his flagship, especially when the information had crossed the desk of his superior, Admiral Nimitz. After three briefings, McVay still remained unaware of the dangers that awaited him and his crew; and on 28 July 1945, he and the ill-fated *Indianapolis* set sail for Leyte.

McVay was well aware of the Navy decree, "Commanding Officers are at all times responsible for the safe navigation of their ships," and must, during times of good visibility, "zigzag at discretion of the Commanding Officer."[20] He spent all of 29 July 1945 zigzagging through the PCR. By eight o'clock pm, visibility had become poor, and he ordered the ship to stop zigzagging. Prior to retiring to his bunk at eleven o'clock, McVay ordered his officers to "resume zigzagging at their own discretion," and "to wake him if there were any weather changes."[21] At 12:15 A.M. on 30 July, two torpedoes from the Japanese submarine I-58 struck the *Indianapolis*. The first caused the most structural damage to the ship, exploding its bow. More ominously, the second destroyed the ship's power center, rendering the ship's internal communications useless. McVay immediately returned to the bridge and ordered a distress signal be sent marking the ship's

[19] Ibid., 45.

[20] Raymond B. Lech, *The Tragic Fate of the U.S.S. Indianapolis: The U.S. Navy's Worst Disaster at Sea* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 211.

[21] Kenneth E. Ethridge, "The Agony of the Indianapolis," *American Heritage Magazine* 33, no. 5 (August 1982): 1.

location, indicating that it had been hit by torpedoes, and that immediate assistance was required. Since communications were down, the Captain's orders had to be sent by runner. With no means of efficiently communicating with the crew en masse, his orders were unknown to most onboard. To make sure the distress signal was sent, McVay ordered Commander John Janney to the communications center. However, radio shack one, which was used to send messages, was completely wrecked.[22] Radio shack two, used to receive messages, remained functional after the second hit. Herbert Miner, a technician in radio shack two, worked with Communications Warrant Officer L.T. Woods to quickly transform the receiver into a transmitter. Miner watched as Woods furiously keyed out the distress signal. According to Miner, "the antenna needle jump[ed]… indicating that the message was in fact being transmitted."[23] Unaware if any distress signal had been sent, Captain McVay gave the order to abandon ship. Minutes later, the *Indianapolis* sank, stranding nine hundred soldiers in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

The *Indianapolis* was scheduled to arrive in Leyte at eleven o'clock on the morning of 31 July 1945.[24] As evening approached, Lieutenant Stuart Gibson, the port director of the Harbor Entrance Control Post (HECP) in Leyte, noticed the *Indianapolis*' tardiness. Gibson was not disturbed, for he fully expected the ship to arrive in port, and, without recording an arrival time, added it to the Ships Present list. CINCPAC

protocol stated "arrivals not to be reported for combatant ships."[25] Furthermore, it was commonplace for a cruiser, particularly a flagship, to be redirected without notice. This matter of the *Indianapolis*' whereabouts was better suited for the fleet commanders in Leyte, but Gibson never relayed the message to his superior officers. One of those commanders was Captain Alfred Granum, operations officer of the Frontier Command. Although the *Indianapolis* was in his area of responsibility, Granum assumed that a distress signal would have been sent in any case of danger. Like Gibson, Granum figured a higher-ranking official would handle the issue; once again, superior officers were not contacted.[26]

Adding to the tragic comedy of errors, the lack of communication and knowledge of the *Indianapolis*' whereabouts was present even among the highest-ranking officers in Leyte. Rear Admiral L.D. McCormick was also aware of the *Indianapolis*' scheduled time of arrival, but did not know why the ship was coming. McVay and the *Indianapolis* were being sent to Admiral McCormick to receive training prior to joining Vice Admiral Jesse Oldendorf's Tokyo invasion fleet. Oldendorf, on the other hand, knew why the ship was being sent to McCormick, but was unaware of its anticipated arrival time.[27] When asked why neither commander knew such vital information, Oldendorf explained that the Okinawa communications center was "notoriously inefficient in the forwarding of mes-

[25] Ibid., 120.
[26] Ibid., 122.
[27] Ibid., 123.

sages."[28] The communication problems within the port of Leyte, however, exacerbated the issue. Had one of these three commanders taken the initiative to pinpoint the *Indianapolis*' whereabouts, hundreds of lives could have been saved. Unfortunately, nearly six hundred soldiers died in the water due to a lack of action and bureaucratic red tape that prevented effective communication.

No one in the port of Leyte took responsibility for the missing cruiser, but there remained the possibility that the frantic distress signals sent out before it sank would save the remaining stranded soldiers. Although it was likely that the message was received in multiple locations, it was equally likely that the recipients believed the message to be a Japanese prank. There are three documented recipients of the *Indianapolis*' distress calls, all revealed by witnesses years after the war. The first message was received, in a radio shack on Leyte, by a young soldier on security duty, Clair Young. Young stated that the message was "garbled," but still "identified the ship, its position, and its condition."[29] After bringing the message to his superior officer, Young was told not to reply, however, "if further messages are received, notify me immediately."[30] The second message was received by another radio shack in Leyte. This time, the on-duty officer responded immediately by ordering two fast, Navy tugs to the received coordinates. Meanwhile, Commodore Norman Gillette, in charge of naval operations on the island, was playing bridge with some fellow officers.

Upon hearing that tugs had been dispatched without his knowledge, Gillette had them recalled. The tugs were seven hours into the twenty-one hour trip.[31] The third, and final documented message was received by a landing craft docked in Leyte harbor. The craft received duplicate signals, eight minutes apart; it tried to contact the *Indianapolis*, but could not get a response. The craft sent the signals to the naval operating base in Leyte, but received no reply.[32] Ironically, just as three commanders withheld vital information from Captain McVay prior to his voyage, the *Indianapolis*' distress calls were ignored by three different radio shacks on the Island of Leyte, vividly illustrating the potential for multiple failures in communications and the need for duplication and confirmation.

The defense of a nation in wartime is as dangerous as it is difficult, and proper communication is key to the success of the Armed Forces. The tragedy of the U.S.S. *Indianapolis* is clearly the result of improper communication on every level. The *Indianapolis* was uninformed of the imminent danger that loomed along the PCR, and was unprepared for such an attack. Furthermore, the ship's line of communication was broken during the attack. This prevented Captain McVay from effectively relaying vital orders to his engine room and radio shacks. Finally, confusion regarding the *Indianapolis*' whereabouts, due mostly to a lack of initiative and faulty communication among Navy officers in the Pacific, lead to the unnecessary deaths of nearly nine hundred U.S. service members. To protect the High Command from public embarrass-

[31] Stanton, 133.
[32] Ibid., 134.

ment, McVay was forced to bear full responsibility for the tragedy. McVay nobly endured a rare and highly public court-martial, which permanently tarnished his decorated record. Suffocating under the immense weight of guilt, McVay took his own life on 6 November 1968. Today, the remaining survivors of the *Indianapolis* uphold his honor. This dwindling group of extraordinary soldiers recognizes the fault lies not with their beloved captain; but rather with the Navy High Brass, which, by the withholding of vital information, compounded with systematic inefficiency, allowed the worst open-sea disaster in U.S. Naval history.

This recognition of the vital nature of effective communications comes with it valuable lessons that can save lives if heeded, and cost them if ignored. A second look at the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center reveals avoidable errors largely due to a lack of communication between police and fire departments, and the use of sub par radios. Suicide bombers, torpedoes, and other attacks may be beyond all control, but creating and enforcing effective communication is not. The breakdowns in New York first-responder communication are eerily similar to those that led to the sinking of the *Indianapolis*: lack of efficient institutional communication and ignored radio messages. Both events – the loss of 343 New York firefighters and the deaths of nine hundred U.S. soldiers – serve as a tragic testament of the importance of flawless communication, including an established and responsible chain of command; multiple channels, checks, and confirmation; and state of the art equipment suitable to the task, among the men and women who defend those who cannot defend themselves.

Born in Washington, D.C., Phil Di Tullio lives in Los Angeles, and is currently a History major with an emphasis on United States history at Santa Clara University. He will spend fall quarter studying in Rome and hopes to one day use his knowledge of the past to create a better future.