

The uss iowa essay



The USS Iowa was commissioned on February 22, 1943 and served until February 24, 1958 when it was decommissioned. On September 1st 1982 modernization and reactivation begun. On April 28, 1984 it was recommissioned and put back into active duty.

During its career it traveled all around the world. In one deployment it traveled 30, 983 nautical miles and crossed eight time zones. And it visited over 30 ports. On November 26, 1989 its last 16in round was fired giving the Iowa a total of 2, 873 rounds fired since the 1984 recommissioning.

Since its initial commissioning in 1943 a total of 11, 834 16in rounds were fired.

On April 19, 1989 a terrible explosion occurred in the number two turret on the Iowa. 47 out of the 52 men that were in the turret at that time were killed and there were no real witnesses. Killed in the accident was a 25 year old gunnery mate named Clayton Hartwig. For a while Hartwig was said to have been in a scuff with another man on the ship named Truitt Smith. The Navy had questioned Smith who said, " Hartwig made a homosexual advance at me which I rejected"(Peter Cary 5).

Then Smith said something that changed the investigation from accidental to criminal. Smith told them, " I had seen an electric kitchen timer, like the ones they sell at Radio Shack" (Peter Cary 5).

The Navy began checking Radio Shacks to see if Hartwig had bought one but it turned up nothing. They then began to analyze some of the residue from

the blast to see if they could find any particles from a timer but nothing was found. What they did find was chemical coated steel fibers.

They did tests to see what could of produced these wires and came up with an incendiary device of brake fluid, steel wool, and common chemicals. The device ignited and produced the same chemical coated fibers found in the residue. The scenario that the Navy came up with fit everything the navy knew. The many tests they conducted found no obvious way that the bags could ignite accidentally.

But Hartwig, “ A depressed suicidal gun captain with a knowledge of explosives, could have made a incendiary device and slipped it between the propellant bags”(Peter Cary 6).

This was a very convincing story, but, Smith recanted his hour interrogations and NIS threats that he could be an accessory to murder. He said he created a fictitious homosexual story to satisfy the NISs questions. “ They told me, We know he did it” (Peter Cary 5). He believed hed seen a timer somewhere on the ship, but he probably imagined seeing it in Hartwigs locker.

The whole idea of Hartwig intentionally causing the explosion was falling apart. A professor of psychiatry and director of the Suicide Education Institute of Boston said that the Navy needed more to prove that Hartwig was suicidal and homicidal.

He said that ninety percent of suicides are associated with drug addiction, alcoholism, or some mental condition. Hartwig was not a drug user or even a drinker. Some experts turned to Hartwigs letter home.

One to his hometown sweetheart was upbeat and happy. Also found in his room was a list of things to take to London for his next assignment. A psychologist said that, " If he truly wanted to die in an explosion, he could have gone to the powder magazines and blown himself up.

Even after four months, 20, 000 tests, 318 interviews, and four million dollars the incident was still a mystery.

Mullahy, the firing captain who was listening to the men in the firing room load the guns, kept remembering the last sentences said inside the firing room before the boom. " I have problem here, Im not ready yet" (Peter Cary 8). He then remembers once when Hartwig took Backherms, the gun powder rammer, aside and instilled the fear of God into him about overrams: " We told him, if you push that thing in too far or too fast on the powder, you are going to die" (Peter Cary 8). But what was the " problem" they were talking about? Many believe it had to do with the powder hoist which brought the powder up from the magazine.

After the explosion, sailors found the door to the powder hoist shut but it had not gone back down for more powder. This was strange because usually the hoist is sent down immediately after the door is shut and the door is closed before the powder is rammed. It was the job of Backherms, who had never done it before to close the powder hoist door with one lever while operating the rammer with another. Perhaps they had trouble with the hoist or the door and in the confusion he overrammed the propellant.

But, no one knew why it blew up.

Some look at static electricity. The Navy had reported that static electricity was considered a very high probability, but later after extensive testing had ruled it out. A recent incident seems strangely similar.

In 1985, a Pershing 2 rocket motor ignited while being pulled from its metal container killing three US soldiers. Static electricity had to set it off. The rocket had been tested to prove that it could not accidentally go off. A technician torched it with diesel fuel, dropped it onto concrete pads, and even exposed it to simulated lightning strikes of 2 million volts before the explosion.

Still, after the accident the investigators found that sliding the powder as little as 7 inches more than it should be, build up enough static electricity to set it off.

“ Any kind of friction can generate a static charge,” says Dan Curtis, an engineer with 32 years of military electrical experience (Peter Cary 9). He and many others believe that static electricity is the cause.

The Navy still believes it solved the mystery because they found foreign material and built a detonator that worked. “ One must understand,” said Raymond Walker, Army research director, “ That you have to consider the psychology of the Navy” (Peter Cary 9).

“ The Navy traditionally, technically, doesnt do anything wrong” (Peter Cary 9). Yet others will always have doubts.

On April 19, 1990 a year after the incident, a memorial service was held and a plaque was dedicated to the 47 men killed on the USS Iowa. Including

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Clayton Hartwig who was totally cleared of all charges and his family was officially apologized to by the US Navy. After all the investigation, the Navy finally acknowledged that it had been wrong.