

Essay on in harms way by doug stanton

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



In harm's way is a famous (some would say the definitive) account of the sinking of the USS Indianapolis – which has become one of the most notorious incidents involving the US Navy during World War two, because her sinking led to the greatest loss of life that the US Navy suffered in a single engagement. Stanton tells the background to the ship's sinking, but the book stands out because of the first-hand accounts of the sailors who survived the initial attack and then waited days to be rescued. As we shall see some of the sailors' accounts are harrowing and towards the end of the book Stanton offers an analysis of what went wrong in the navy's response to the sinking and reviews the faults in the emergency response systems. The book is a remarkable one to read because Stanton tells the story in a brisk and efficient manner, only slowing down when we get the riveting eye-witness accounts of the men who were involved.

The book begins on Wednesday November 6th 1968 describing a an apparently tranquil scene at Winvian Farm in Connecticut where the former captain of the USS Indianapolis is living in prosperous and seemingly happy retirement. His day is described, as are his plans for playing bridge at a nearby gentleman's' club. But all is not well. Florence his house keeper is worried about him:

For all the customary good cheer, Florence had been worried about him. She knew he was having nightmares; he'd told her they were filled with circling sharks. When she'd reminded him. Several weeks earlier, that the storm windows also needed installing, he had remarked, ' Oh, that won't be necessary,' ' why not?' ' because,' the captain told her, ' I won't be here.' (Stanton p. 18).

Slowly Stanton builds the tension up, describing McVay's last actions and his last words with Florence until we reach this paragraph: " Whatever good fortune the captain had enjoyed in his life, it has run out. He pulled the trigger." And he commits suicide.

The rest of the book acts as a one long flashback to the events of the sinking of the USS Indianapolis – because those events and the US navy decision to court-martial McVay have led slowly but inexorably to McVay's suicide in 1968. In *Harm's Way* not only tells the story of the sinking of the USS Indianapolis, but it also seeks to exonerate the reputation of McVay – who was the only American naval captain to be court-martialed during the Second World War for having lost his ship. Nearly 400 ships were lost in the war.

After the prologue Stanton begins to tell the story of the ship's sinking. He does not waste time telling the reader the action the ship had been involved in in the earlier parts of the war, but begins the action in the first chapter on Sunday, July 15th 1945. Almost every chapter heading is meticulous in its use of date and location so that the readers get the sense of the larger story unfolding before their eyes. The chapter begins with McVay walking on board on captain and mentions the ' secret project' (Stanton p. 27) that the Indianapolis will undertake as her next mission.

Before I deal with the details of the narrative, I want to say something about the method Stanton uses to write this book. It was based on interviews with survivors, survivors' families, anyone who had been connected with the fate of the Indianapolis in some way. Stanton writes in a factual manner certainly,

but passages of the book read like parts of a novel – even though the events are real. By that I mean that he uses or re-creates dialogue that occurred between men involved in the story; he describes new characters as they are introduced to the action, so that the reader can get to know them, and, crucially, he allows us into the thought of some of his characters – so this becomes not a dry, factual book about a naval disaster (although its facts are very accurate), but instead becomes a fast-paced thriller which uses the enlivening techniques of fiction – dialogue, description, character, inner thoughts – to make the book engaging to the reader. He also frequently changes perspective and scene so that we have a sense of the whole pattern of events unfolding. The Indianapolis was a large ship and this change of perspective helps to remind us of the huge numbers of men who were members of the crew. Imagining or recreating their dialogue or their thoughts also allows us to see them as human beings, so that we sympathize and empathize with them more. Some of the conversations, some of the thoughts must be the product of Stanton's imagination, but some must also be the result of the interviews he conducted with survivors of the disaster.

The secret project that the USS Indianapolis was engaged on was the delivery of the atom bomb which was to be dropped on Hiroshima. This task was accomplished on July 26th, 1945 – the bomb being delivered to Tinian Island in the south Pacific. This part of the story is complete on page 83, leaving Stanton enough space to deal with his real interests: the sinking of the Indianapolis, the sufferings of the survivors and McVay's court martial.

The USS Indianapolis was hit by two Japanese torpedoes fired from a submarine at 12. 05 am on July 30th 1945 and, as Stanton puts it, “ all hell broke loose” (Stanton p. 121). By chance the torpedoes had taken out the electronic communication system on board the ship meaning that the bridge had no way of communicating with the engine room (it would have been standard practice to switch the engines off immediately to slow down the rate at which the ship took on water). There was a gaping hole in the starboard bow, fires were raging out of control all over the ship and in the dark without effective communication it was unclear how extensive the damage to the ship had been or been what the attack had been by – torpedo, kamikaze plane or bombardment from a Japanese ship. “ The second torpedo had torn open a gaping hole forty feet in diameter in the broad side of the ship.” (Stanton p. 129). With twelve minutes the Indianapolis would be sunk. Captain McVay took the decision to abandon ship at 12. 13 am – just eight minutes after the torpedoes struck (Stanton p. 131-132).

And this is where the real story begins. In wars many ships are sunk but efforts are made to rescue the survivors. What happened to the men of the Indianapolis once they abandoned ship is the tragic heart of this story. It is estimated that around 30 men went down with the ship; the remaining 900 sailors ended up in the sea, without sufficient life boats and some without life jackets. They then had to wait three and a half days before anyone realised that the Indianapolis had sunk and that the survivors were fighting for their lives in the water. Nearly 600 men died in the water before they could be rescued, mainly from shark attacks, but also from dehydration, photophobia,

hypothermia, starvation and dementia. This period while they awaited rescue is described in appalling detail by Stanton. On Tuesday July 31st the shark attacks began:

As the water flashed with twisting tails and dorsal fins, the boys resolved to stay calm, clamping their hands over their ears against the erupting screams, but his resolve vanished when one of the boys was dragged through the water like a fisherman's bobber tugged by a big catfish, (Stanton p. 194)

Stanton individualizes the suffering by concentrating on the stories of individual men and their memories of the suffering of those four days waiting to be rescued. Of the 900 who entered the water only 321 emerged alive and 5 of those were to die shortly.

Stanton describes the rescue efforts once the sinking has been discovered, but the last part of the book deals with McVay's court martial. He was charged with two crimes: being too slow in deciding to abandon ship and in not zigzagging in his course – a tactic designed to make the ship harder to hit with torpedoes. And he was found guilty. Stanton is at great pains to argue that this verdict was wrong and that McVay was wrongly court-martialled. The speed with which the Indianapolis sank makes his decision to abandon ship not an especially slow response, especially since communications were down and no one knew the extent of the damage. Abandoning the ship earlier would not have avoided the sailors' ordeal in the sea. As for zigzagging, the Japanese submarine commander was flown to the court martial to testify that zigzagging would not have prevented his sinking

of the Indianapolis. Stanton puts a lot of emphasis on things that were not mentioned at the court martial: McVay was not zigzagging because it was rarer to do it at night and the latest intelligence reports assured him there were no Japanese submarines in the area. May day messages were sent out by the ship, but no one responded to them for various reasons. When the Indianapolis failed to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet, the Operations Officer did notice but failed to inform his superior officers. And so, many men perished or suffered appallingly from operational issues within the US Navy, for which Captain McVay was made the scapegoat.

I would recommend this book to anyone: you do not have to be interested in military history to enjoy it because Stanton makes it interesting by focusing on the individual lives of men who suffered so much.

Work Cited

Stanton, Doug. *In Harm's Way*. Bantam Press: London. 2001. Print.