It had been a gruesome four nights and four days since two Japanese torpedoes had sunk the USS Indianapolis just after midnight, on 30 July 1945. Of the 1,197 men on board, about 879 survived the sinking. Injuries, fatigue, starvation, delirium, and of course the sharks, had reduced that number far below 400. Now another night was falling. Nobody had come to the rescue. Nobody else even knew she'd been sunk.

The USS Indianapolis had been a proud ship. Built in 1930, she was a heavy cruiser, 610 feet long, with a displacement of 9,950 tons and a top speed of 32.7 knots. She carried nine 8" main guns and an assortment of secondaries and anti-aircraft guns. The flagship of Admiral Raymond Spruance, she had led a fleet of bombardment ships throughout the campaigns in the central and western Pacific. While repairs from a Kamikaze attack were being made, Spruance moved on in a different ship, to help lead the planned invasion of the Japanese homelands later that summer. Following repairs, the ship was captained by Captain Charles B. McVay III and tasked with a secret mission ordered by President Truman: transport our first atomic bomb core to the B-29 509th Composite Group at Tinian, near Guam.

That delivery was successful, but in the eleven days between delivery and dropping of the bomb on 6 August 1945, the ship was directed to steam to Leyte at normal speed. Still under secret orders, the ship was not provided with anti-sub escorts. Due to grievous lapses in intelligence and communications, Captain McVay was never informed of the possibility of Japanese ships nor submarines being anywhere near his route. No escort ships were available. When he turned into his sleeping quarters on the night of the 29 July, the ship was steaming in relaxed condition at modest speed; bulkhead doors open for ventilation in the summer heat; no zigzagging on the mostly overcast night.

Lieutenant Commander Mochitsura Hashimoto of the Japanese submarine I-58 looked through his periscope and couldn't believe his eyes. Fate had placed him directly ahead of the path of the huge cruiser. Even if she had been zigzagging, he later testified that he would have easily been able to sink her. Two torpedo hits did the job, mortally
wounding the ship and driving her beneath the waves in just 15 minutes.

**Imagine** you are one of the survivors of the sinking. It's now four days later. The sinking had been bad enough. The explosions, the fires, the confusion, the heroism, and the unstoppable tragedy. Then, the scramble for too-few remaining life rafts, floating nets, and even life preservers. But worse was yet to come.

Thousands of gallons of heavy, black, boiler oil covered the sea and the swimmers. Hope for rescue faded, when no rescue ships or planes appeared the morning following the sinking. The injured suffered severe pain in the hot sun, stung by salt water; there were not enough medications, food, or water. By day 2, the groups of survivors had started to drift apart, eventually being spread out over 25 square miles of ocean, and from 55 to 80 miles from the spot of the sinking. Nobody knew that, because of bureaucratic screw-ups, the Navy thought the *Indianapolis* was either still safely en route or tucked up at a port in the Philippines. Nobody was coming.

By day 3, the sharks were taking a heavy toll. You'd be hanging onto the edge of a raft and, without warning, your buddy would scream and be dragged to his death in the jaws of a shark. Exhaustion and ingestion of salt water and oil were driving some sailors out of their minds. Though very few were driven to cowardice, most still tried to help and protect their shipmates. Others succumbed to delirium, and set out to swim to the mirage of a nearby island or ship; some shed their life jackets and simply upended like ducks, after telling their mates they were going below decks to their bunk or to get some fresh fruit from the galley.

By the evening of day 4, you were resigned to the fact that nobody was coming. You'd clung to the raft, to your prayers, to your memory of your girlfriend and parents, but now it was hopeless. You were dying of thirst, your kapok life preserver was waterlogged, and you could hardly move. It was time to let go.

**Light from Heaven.** Suddenly, 25 miles to your south, a column of light beamed down from Heaven. No! It was the searchlight of a ship, aimed straight up. You shouted to your friends. It was not a mirage; they saw it, too. Help was on the way!

Captain Lt. Cmdr. W. Graham Claytor, Jr., USNR, had graduated from the University of Virginia and become a lawyer. When the war started, he joined up and became an officer in the US Naval Reserve — a "90-day wonder". Shortly after noon on 2 August 1945, he found himself heading southbound from a fruitless sub-search mission, over 200 miles from the survivors of the *Indianapolis* sinking, commanding the little ship, *USS Cecil J Doyle*, DE-368. The World was still unaware of the sinking.

The *Doyle* was a Butler-class Destroyer Escort. Laid down in 12 May in 1944, in Texas, launched in July and commissioned in October, she had an interesting but not remarkable career during shakedown, early Atlantic runs, and then to the Pacific in February. She was similar to our *USS Slater* in size and shape, except for the lowered command bridge, and two 5" main guns instead of our three 3". Instead of 6,000 horsepower diesels, she had 12,000 horsepower twin boilers and geared turbines. Maximum speed was a little faster than ours, reaching 24 knots.

Captain Claytor chatted briefly with a fellow lawyer and old aviator friend of his, Adrian Marks, who was flying his PBY "Dumbo" overhead. Marks was heading north, to where a garbled message from another pilot, Wilbur Gwinn, said something about people in the water about 215 miles away. There had been a missing bomber days earlier,
but this report seemed to involve more men than that. Were they from one of ours? The Japanese? Dummies put out as bait by an enemy sub?

Something seemed strange to Claytor. It didn't matter what nationality they might be; sailors in the water needed rescuing. One small problem: he didn't have orders for that; it would take hours to get those; in fact, his orders were to proceed south to Peleliu, not go gallivanting off to the north on some whim.

But what the heck, he thought. He gave the order to come about and reverse course at flank speed.

In the meantime, the two aircraft and a third started learning more. The first PV-1 Ventura located some of the widely spread survivors, right after it almost bombed what it thought was an enemy sub beneath the head of a long sheen of oil on the water (yes, the oil which had been a curse was now a blessing). The aircraft shoved out rafts and supplies. Marks' PBY arrived on scene in early afternoon. The Ventura pilot showed him the extent of the area, and they dropped more supplies. Now, a PBY is amphibious, but it isn't strong enough to land on the open sea, only in calm coastal waters. But Marks saw men being eaten by sharks. In violation of orders, he made a heroic final landing (the plane was so damaged, it had to be sunk the next day) on rough seas and started to gather up survivors in its cabin and then more strapped to its wings. These were American survivors, and a radio message was sent out, but still no word of the Indianapolis sinking was broadcast.

Back on the Doyle, another garbled message came in from Marks: more than 150 men in the water, many being attacked by sharks, and no room for more than 50 could be housed on the disabled Dumbo. That was enough for
Captain Claytor. He ordered the engines of the Doyle to be run at full speed, in spite of shafts running so hot that they needed to be hosed down with water to keep from blowing their bearings. Oh, and while you’re at it, he said, tie down the boilers’ safety valves and go as fast as we can, even at the risk of destroying the engines.

The Light. And then at 2242 hours, he did one more thing. An act of heroism or recklessness that could have gotten him court-martialed or his ship sunk: he ordered their port 24” searchlight to be turned on and aimed forward, and their starboard one to be aimed straight up!

Now, every sailor knows that you run a dark ship in wartime. Any stray light from a loose door, small lantern, flame of a Zippo®, or a lighted cigarette could cause a Japanese submarine to unleash its deadly torpedoes, just like the ones that sank the Indianapolis.

The Doyle sailors were at first alarmed and confused. What was their captain doing, making them a target for any enemy warship for miles around? But they quickly learned the reason and got ready to look for survivors; boats were prepared; lookouts lined the rails; orderlies gathered food, clothing, and medical supplies.

Captain Claytor’s actions had the desired effect. Survivor Edward Brown said, “When the Cecil Doyle’s searchlight lit up the sky, one could not believe the relief we felt.” Bill Akines said that if Claytor hadn’t aimed his searchlight at the sky, he would not have lived. Richard Thelen added, “It probably saved many of us who were only clinging on by a thread.” Joe Kiselica said, “When I first saw those beams of light low and far on the horizon, I thought I had died and was going to go to heaven on one of those beams. Then I realized it must be a ship. If we could just hang on for another night, we might make it. We must not sleep. We must keep our faces out of the water for one more night.”
From over 25 miles away, dozens of hopeless survivors saw the light, cheered, and hung on for another hour or two or more until the **Doyle**, and ultimately the **USS Bassett** and others reached the scene. The **Doyle** was the first to arrive and started with the 53 sailors on the Dumbo, which was leaking and had to be scuttled. Then she plucked another one from a second Dumbo, and 39 from the sea. She was the first to radio to headquarters that the ship had been the **Indianapolis**.

Ultimately, the **Doyle** brought back 93 of the 317 sailors, who were rescued from the original complement of 1,197. This was a tragic loss of life, yes, with a court martial and outrage over the bureaucratic bumbling and bad decisions that had cost so many lives. But those who were rescued also felt gratitude and appreciation for the inspired actions of Captain Claytor, especially for our little ship, the Destroyer Escort Cecil J. **Doyle**, and her crew, who had the courage to take matters into their own hands, tear up their orders, tie down the safety valves, and provide a beacon of hope for so many sailors who were on the verge of giving up and surrendering to the sea.

**Postscripts.** Captain McVay was unfairly court martialed by the embarrassed Navy. Overcome with grief, he took his own life in 1968. His surviving crew members (with help from the Japanese captain, Hashimoto, who later became a Shinto priest and friend of the survivors!) were eventually able to get McVay exonerated by the Navy, the US Congress, and President Clinton in 2001. Captain Claytor continued a successful career, and rose to become Secretary of the Navy, and Assistant Secretary of Defense. He then became a railroad executive, and ultimately head of Amtrak for eleven years.

**For further reading.**

I recommend the Simon and Shuster 2018 book, **Indianapolis**, by Lynn Vincent and Sara Vladic. It's 578 pages in paperback and digitally at resellers and online. It has far more depth than the movies, and portrays our little Destroyer Escorts in, shall we say, a good light!

**We Were There** is a first-person account by one of the **Bassett's** rescue boat officers, supported by direct quotes from many of the survivors. It is accurate and heart wrenching.

A recent Hollywood movie starring Nicolas Cage, **Indianapolis – Men of Courage** gives a broad overview of the tragedy and rescue. I adapted the illustration above of the **Doyle** searchlight at night from one of its scenes, so please buy or rent the movie when you have a chance.

Another excellent earlier work by Sara Vladic is the video, **USS Indianapolis – The Legacy**, including in-person interviews with many of the survivors while they were still with us at the turn of the century.