

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

AN UNFORGETTABLE WWII STORY
OF SURVIVAL, COURAGE, AND THE SINKING OF
THE USS *INDIANAPOLIS*



EDGAR HARRELL, USMC
WITH DAVID HARRELL



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This book recounts events in the life of Edgar Harrell according to the author's recollection and from the author's perspective. While all the stories are true, some dialogue and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

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Dedicated to my shipmates,
the crew of the USS *Indianapolis*

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Foreword

“Have courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.”

Matthew 14:27 NCV

When that command was issued more than twenty centuries ago, it was to a group of fearful men in peril on a dark and dangerous sea. No exhortation is more appropriate to this chronicle than those words of Jesus Christ.

Shortly after midnight on July 30, 1945, just weeks before the end of World War II, the Japanese submarine *I-58* launched a spread of torpedoes at the USS *Indianapolis*. Two of the “fish” found their mark. In less than fifteen minutes, the heavy cruiser—a battle-scarred veteran of the bloody campaigns for the Marianas, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa—went down without a trace, and without anyone but the survivors knowing the ship had been lost.

Some nine hundred of the ship’s 1,196-man crew—cold, oil-soaked, many with injuries—were suddenly alone in the shark-infested waters of the Philippine Sea. For five horrific days

after the sinking, their numbers were cruelly depleted by shark attacks, saltwater poisoning, hypothermia, and dehydration. When they were finally spotted and rescued, only 317 remained alive. This is their story, recounted by one of their own—Edgar Harrell—a young member of the ship’s U.S. Marine detachment. It is an unparalleled account of perseverance, courage, self-sacrifice, and faith.

It has been a great blessing to spend most of my life in the company of heroes. By “hero” I mean a person who has wittingly put himself in grave physical jeopardy for the benefit of another. Heroes are people who overcome evil by doing good at great personal risk. Through self-sacrifice, fortitude, and action, whether they succeed or fail, heroes provide a moral and ethical framework—and inspiration—for the rest of us.

Unfortunately, our modern definition of *hero* has been stretched to include all manner of people. The athlete who just set a new sports record isn’t a hero. Nor is the “daring” movie star or even the adventurer out to be the first solo climber to scale Mount Everest. They may be brave—but they don’t meet the definition of a hero, for whatever they achieve benefits only themselves.

Real heroes are selfless. My father was one. Many of the Marines with whom I was privileged to serve for nearly a quarter of a century were heroes. The firemen and police who rushed into the World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon on 9/11 fit the description. Today, a good number of young soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Guardsmen that I cover for FOX News certainly meet the criteria. And Edgar Harrell, survivor of the catastrophic sinking of the USS *Indianapolis*, is a hero.

The true story that Edgar Harrell and his son, David, recount in the pages that follow is far more than a tale of terror on the sea. Together, they have prepared a timely and relevant work for a new generation of Americans once again confronting an enemy that teaches young men not how to live, but how to die the right way. The kamikaze pilot who crashed his plane into the *Indianapolis* on March 31, 1945, differs little from the nineteen terrorists of 9/11 or the suicide car-bombers trying to kill U.S. soldiers and Marines today in the Middle East.

All of that, and much more, is in this book. It is a gripping tale of men tested beyond anything they thought possible—and how they responded with bravery, endurance, and faith in the face of fear and overwhelming despair. Edgar Harrell is not the only hero in this book. But his faith is a testament to the Marine Corps motto: *Semper Fidelis*—Latin for “always faithful.”

Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, USMC (Ret.)
Host of *War Stories*
FOX News Channel

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee
from Your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, You are there;

If I make my bed in Sheol, be-
hold, You are there.

If I take the wings of the dawn,

If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,

Even there Your hand will lead me,

And Your right hand will lay hold of me.

Psalm 139:7–10

Introduction

by David Harrell

It is easy to grow up in the United States of America and take for granted the wonderful freedom we enjoy. I confess that I have been guilty of being unintentionally indifferent about our nation's liberty, and perhaps even harboring an unwitting apathy concerning the wars that bought it. All too often Memorial Day and Veterans Day come and go with little serious reflection about the enormous sacrifices that have been made. Maybe this describes you as well. However, the bubble of peace and prosperity that once preserved my cavalier attitude was suddenly popped by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Instantly, all Americans saw with their own eyes what evil looks like, up close and personal. Our false sense of security exploded along with the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and United Flight 93 in a Pennsylvania field. With shocking abruptness, we were all reminded that freedom is not free—a simple yet profound truth our veterans know all too well.

Because of 9/11, I began to think deeply about our nation's history. Like never before, the stark realities of past wars and

the valiant men and women who fought them were thrust into the forefront of my mind. Almost overnight I developed a keen awareness of the evil that plunged us into World War II—the same kind of wickedness that now plagues the world through radical Islam. I also began thinking about the part my father played in that war, along with his shipmates aboard the USS *Indianapolis*.

I remember Dad's reaction to 9/11 was simply, "Here we go again." He was right. The same diabolical evil that motivated our enemies in World War II was once again at work. And once again, men and women of valor must take up arms to ward off barbaric aggressors; heroic soldiers willing to give their lives to preserve our freedom. But what is sad is how quickly we forget the noble military contributions of the past.

I remember hearing Dad talk about the war from time to time when I was a little boy. I recall his reluctant stories about the secret mission of the *Indianapolis*, the atomic bomb components they carried, and especially the gripping tales about the sharks when the crew was lost at sea for five days. I even remember attending some of the *Indianapolis* reunions and meeting Captain McVay and being awe-struck by his white Navy uniform and medals. Still, the depth of my father's sacrifice, and that of all the other World War II veterans, did not really hit me until 9/11. I became a man on a mission. Not just to tell my father's story and honor the crew of the USS *Indianapolis*, but to raise the awareness of the cost of freedom and to rekindle the fires of true, God-honoring patriotism and respect for our veterans. Fortunately Dad agreed with my goals, but with even greater passion due to his personal experience.

My father, like many other World War II veterans, has had many opportunities to speak around the country in a variety of

venues, including public schools. In interviewing him to write this book, I was saddened to hear about the prevailing ignorance most students have concerning World War II. He indicated that even many of the teachers and administrators he has met admitted they knew little about the war, not to mention the USS *Indianapolis* tragedy. This only fueled my fire to collaborate with my ex-Marine father in educating readers about the heroism of our veterans and ultimately glorifying God.

As you read this harrowing true adventure, you will quickly see the power of faith and the undeniable hand of divine providence in the affairs of men and governments. You will see the crippling effects of sin in the ravages of war and the transforming power of the gospel of Christ in the hearts of men. You will see the corruption of personal revenge and politics, even in our own military, that stooped to tactics of questionable integrity and succumbed to the temptations of injustice. But you will also rejoice in the victory of honor and honesty when a terrible wrong was righted because of the perseverance of those who would never stop fighting for truth. And certainly you will be deeply touched by the valor and humility of sailors and Marines who endured the unimaginable.

Finally, you will learn of a man, like many others, who truly loves his country and his Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Without reservation I can say that there is no hypocrisy here. My whole life I have watched my father practice what he has preached. He has been my mentor and friend, and for this I am eternally grateful. Every fiber of his being is dedicated to Christ—validated by his love for my dear mother and all of his family, friends, and his shipmates of the USS *Indianapolis*.

But I must hasten to add, while the steel of his faith was forged in eternity past by a sovereign God, it was undoubtedly

Introduction

tempered in the fires of his adversity at sea. No man could possibly be the same after enduring such a crucible of grace. And it is my prayer, along with my father's, that you too will never be the same after reading this story.

David Harrell

I said to the LORD, “You are my God; give ear,
O LORD, to the voice of my supplications.
O God the LORD, the strength of my salvation,
You have covered my head in the day of battle.”

Psalm 140:6–7



A Call to Arms

Every survivor of war has stories to tell—stories of triumph and tragedy, faith and fear—stories like mine, where fact is often stranger than fiction. Since that fateful night in 1945 when I stepped off a sinking ship into the unknown depths of the Pacific Ocean, there has never been a day when I have not reflected upon the horrors I experienced in the four and a half days of swimming in shark-infested waters. However, while those frightening memories remain vivid in my mind’s eye, one memory eclipses them all—namely, the unfailing presence of God that sustained me.

Luck had absolutely nothing to do with my survival. I believe with all my heart that it was solely by the providence of God that I lived through those dreadful days and nights.

From Turkey Creek to the Marines

I am sure that my background is little different than hundreds of thousands of other folks who grew up in our great country

during the Depression and World War II. I suppose we all developed a survivor mind-set in those days of adversity.

I was born in a small house near the banks of the Tennessee River on October 10, 1924, in a little western Kentucky community called Turkey Creek. I was the oldest son of a family of two girls and seven boys. Descendants of the British Isles, we lived on a small farm where my dad was a hard-working farmer, carpenter, and, when necessary, schoolteacher. Mom was our best friend; she had an amazing ability to provide for her family by cooking, sewing, helping in the garden, canning vegetables, and caring for her henhouse, a husband, and nine children.

Those were days of Spartan living. Shoes came once a year from Sears Roebuck, and, for the most part, we made our own toys. Life was simple back then: work or starve! But we were happy. With their faith deeply rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ, my parents did all they knew to raise their children for the glory of God.

My family—like thousands of others across our great nation—had no way of knowing that wicked men across the sea had our great country in their crosshairs. Little did we know that they even considered our safe little Kentucky farm part of a great spoil of war. I'm sure we took our freedom for granted in many ways; after all, freedom was all we had ever known. But by the time I was a junior in high school, the war in the Pacific was in full swing. With the decisive battle at Midway proving to be a turning point for the Allied forces in the Pacific, and convinced that my home and family were in imminent danger, I felt compelled to do my part by volunteering for the United States Marine Corps. In the fall of 1943, when the corn crop was “laid by,” I went to the draft board and asked to join the Marines.

I remember well those days of duty and honor. I felt proud I would be serving my country, and even more honored to be able to protect my family and friends. As I listened to our old Silvertone radio, it sounded as though the Japanese were ready to storm the beaches of California. All of those Pacific islands seemed much closer in my limited and naïve comprehension, and I said to myself, “The Japanese must be stopped!”

Years later I discovered that my fear of a Japanese invasion was not as silly as it sounded. The Japanese commander that sunk the USS *Indianapolis* later revealed that one of their submarines actually did launch a small-scale attack on California. In his book *Sunk*, Lt. Cdr. Mochitsura Hashimoto writes,

On February 24, 1942, submarine *I-17* penetrated the Santa Barbara Straits to the north of Los Angeles, and made the first submarine bombardment of America itself. The boat surfaced five minutes before sunset and fired rapidly at a target indicated by the captain at the periscope. There was evidence of panic on shore. Air-raid sirens were sounded. After firing ten rounds, *I-17* retired at high speed on the surface. En route she met an enemy destroyer hurrying to the scene of action, but slipped by unnoticed.¹

Even if I had known of this small invasion, I really don't think it would have made much difference to me. This was a fight for freedom, a fight for survival, and a war where evil must be vanquished so justice and freedom could prevail. So, with the soul of a patriot and the heart of a warrior, I committed myself to the Marines. After having been sworn in in Indianapolis, Indiana, I was sent back to my home in Kentucky before reporting for duty.

Joining the service, or even being drafted, was an honorable undertaking in those days. We never heard of protesters, draft



The Harrell family (1940), Turkey Creek, Kentucky. I'm the tallest boy in the back row, on left side.

dodgers, or flag burners. When the war broke out, patriotism swelled in America. We willingly rationed clothes, food, fuel, and other resources. It seemed that every able-bodied person was involved in working to defend America in some way or another.

On the day I was to report for duty, I remember my dad took me to the bus station and we said our good-byes. Dad was thirty-nine and I was nineteen. Leaving home wasn't easy. Not only was I leaving Mom and Dad, but also two sisters and six brothers. What made it even worse was I also had to leave a certain young lady who had caught my eye one day at school, a girl named Ola Mae Cathey.

Soon I found myself enduring boot camp in San Diego, California. Boot camp was tough and demanding, but I appreciated

their commitment to see to it that we were well trained. They knew our lives would depend upon it. When I completed boot camp I was sent to “Sea School” and learned I would be assigned to a large combat ship. Somehow I knew then in my heart that God was up to something in my life far beyond my understanding. Far from the safety of my beloved Kentucky, I found myself alone in a world filled with dangerous unknowns, relieved only by the comforting truth of God’s promise, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. . . . The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Hebrews 13:5–6 KJV). In March 1944 I was assigned to the USS *Indianapolis*, and this was to be my home until her sinking on July 30, 1945.

The USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35)

I still remember my first impression when I boarded the *Indy*, as she was affectionately called: *This thing is big—really big!* It was like a floating city. For a country boy from Kentucky, it was overwhelming. The sight of the massive guns gave me goose bumps. Never having seen guns larger than a double-barreled shotgun, I remember laughing to myself, thinking, *My, my, my. We can win the war just by ourselves with these monsters!*

By many accounts, the *Indianapolis* was the pride of the U.S. Navy. Built for speed, her keel (the structural part under the hull) was laid down in Camden, New Jersey, on March 31, 1930, by the New York Shipbuilding Corp., and she was launched on November 7, 1931. After being properly outfitted for military service, she was officially commissioned by the Navy in the Philadelphia Navy Yard on November 15, 1932.

She was enormous at 610 feet, 3 inches long, and 66 feet 1 inch at her widest point. Her keel lay 24 feet below the surface

The *Indianapolis* was the largest ship I had ever seen. Having grown up during the Depression in Chicago, seeing the magnificent ship was one of the greatest moments of my life. I hadn't seen a boat much bigger than a canoe for most of my life—the biggest thing I had ever seen was a barge offshore on Lake Michigan. Not only was the *Indianapolis* larger than this barge, but I got to see it sitting right there in the bay before me.

Survivor Michael N. Kuryla Jr.

when she was fully loaded with men, arms, and provisions. Armed with the latest technology of her day and loaded with four Parsons turbines that gave her a total of 107,000 horsepower, she was designed to travel at a maximum speed of 32 knots (over 36 mph).

I was fascinated to learn that the *Indianapolis* had been chosen by President Roosevelt as his Ship of State. Her speed and massive firepower truly captured the spirit of America. Before the war, Roosevelt used her on numerous occasions to entertain royalty and great leaders from around the world as she frequently crossed the Atlantic and toured the great ports of South America.

She was armed with three turrets—two fore and one aft—each containing three 8-inch guns. She also had four 5-inch guns and twenty-four intermediate-range 40 mm guns, of which both types I learned to operate. And in several overhauls during the war, thirty-two 20 mm Oerlikon guns were added.²

From the start, I was determined to make the best of my new home. The bunks (or sleeping racks) were stacked three high,



Proud to be a United States
Marine (1945)

and of course new recruits got the top ones, so my sleeping quarters were small and hot. They sure were a far cry from the feather bed I had at home. But why complain, and who would I even complain to? That said, I must admit that I shed many a tear those lonely, homesick days and nights. I often poured out my heart to the Lord as I faced the unknowns of the future.

Now, as a Marine having been joined to a detachment of thirty-nine Marine officers and enlisted men, I knew that I had a job to do and a load to carry. It would be our job to manage the ship's brig (guardhouse) and operate various weapon systems, but also lead any potential landing operations that might be required. It was an honor to be part of ship's company of the *Indianapolis* that would eventually earn ten battle stars.

A Mysterious Departure

Years after the war I learned of some intriguing history involving the *Indianapolis* that helps set the stage for the story you are about to read. In April 1940, when tensions concerning Japanese aggression began to mount, the U.S. Fleet, including the *Indianapolis*, was moved from the west coast to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. But just before the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, the *Indianapolis* was suspiciously removed from port, as if someone knew what was coming and wanted to protect her. To this day, these unexplained maneuverings remain a mystery. One historian writes:

Officially, on the day the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor, December 7th, 1941, the *Indianapolis* was conveniently out of her home port, Pearl Harbor, making a simulated bombardment of Johnson Island off to the west. Captain E. W. Hanson, USN, was then in command. It is noteworthy to mention here that all of the carriers assigned to Pearl were also conveniently out of Pearl as well. *Indianapolis* immediately joined Task Force 12 to search for the attacking Japanese carrier force. Returning to Pearl Harbor, the *Indianapolis* was assigned to Task Force 11 for operations against the enemy.³

We may never know with certainty the political and military machinations behind the scenes that resulted in the *Indy's* orders to leave Pearl Harbor just prior to the Japanese strike. Some have concluded that this is yet another piece of evidence validating the hypothesis that the American forces had prior knowledge of the attack. Certainly the implications are staggering given the loss of life that was averted that day.

Daniel E. Brady, seaman second class of the V (Aviation) Division, was on board the *Indianapolis* at the time; a paraphrase of his account of the events follows.

On December 5, 1941, a Friday, they were docked in Pearl Harbor at the mine dock next to the submarine base, across from what was referred to as Battleship Row. That afternoon all the married men and “liberty sections” (men who were given authorized absence) were ashore, which was the normal routine while they were at port on weekends. That left about one-third of the crew on board and on duty. Suddenly, word was passed that the ship would be getting underway in only an hour, an impossible task. Brady shared:

Most of our crew were ashore and we could never recall them in time on such short notice. Soon, fifty Marines in full battle gear came aboard, followed by forty or so civilian shipyard workers with their toolboxes. Next came truckloads of food and vegetables, which were dumped unceremoniously on the bleached, white, teakwood quarterdeck!

The quarterdeck, which is part of a ship’s upper deck near the stern, is generally set apart for admirals, captains, and other official and ceremonial usage. Tossing food onto its surface would have been unheard of. In fact, enlisted men weren’t even allowed to walk across it with their shoes on.

Sure enough, the *Indianapolis* was underway in one hour’s time, leaving behind much of her crew as she steamed out of Pearl Harbor. The crew on board was not told where they were headed until they arrived Sunday morning at a small island about seven hundred miles southwest of Hawaii. As the crew began unloading, they heard rumblings and rumors that the Japanese were bombing Pearl Harbor. Immediately they had to prepare the ship for battle.

They threw overboard everything that had the potential to burn, from lumber and small boats to President Roosevelt’s



The USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35), 1945, in the last known photograph of the great ship, just days before she was sunk. (Bureau of Ships Collection, US National Archives)

own beautiful bedroom suite that he used when he was aboard (since the *Indianapolis* was his favorite ship). Then the *Indianapolis* sailed for Hawaiian waters once again and joined up with the *Lexington*, an aircraft carrier. But they weren't able to enter Pearl Harbor for seven days—attempting three times—as Japanese submarines were trying to sink the *Lexington* in the entrance to the harbor.

Finally they made it into the harbor and looked upon the damage that the attack had wrought. If they had remained there, the *Indianapolis* would have surely been destroyed. Brady, among others, believed someone must have known the attack would take place and made sure it sailed away to safety at just the right time. Whether they're right, I cannot say.⁴

In some ways it seems as though I never left the *Indy*. Indeed, her story lives on even after all these years, even though—or because of—the mystery that shrouds her story. Perhaps no other ship in wartime history has grabbed the interest of the American people like the *Indianapolis*. To her crew she was the

queen of the fleet. Spared at Pearl Harbor, yet sacrificed for the cause at the deciding climax of WWII, the USS *Indianapolis* gave her all. As you will see, her fate stretches the limits of bad luck to the breaking point. There was something far greater at work, something supernatural, a force that orchestrated her every move.

To every thing there is a season, and a
time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck
up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .

A time to love, and a time to hate;

a time of war, and a time of peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–4, 8 κJV
