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HVL LESSON TITLE:

# THE USS INDIANAPOLIS

DEVELOPED BY: ERIN COGGINS

## THE USS INDIANAPOLIS

GUIDING QUESTION:

**How did the tragedy of the USS  
Indianapolis impact WWII?**

### OVERVIEW:

The USS Indianapolis secretly transported parts of the atomic bomb later dropped on Hiroshima. Upon returning to the U.S., the ship was torpedoed and sunk in the Pacific Ocean. This lesson will allow students to learn about the tragic incident, analyzing primary sources to understand the sacrifice of the sailors on the USS Indianapolis.



**SUBJECT(S):**  
Social Studies



**VIETNAM VETERAN(S):**  
Pat Patterson



**DURATION:**  
60 minutes

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**“I was on the USS Amsterdam, and we were anchored not too far from the USS Missouri where the armistice was signed. And I could see through my field glasses the signing of the declaration of armistice.”**

WWII Veteran Pat Patterson

## OVERVIEW:

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## HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The USS Indianapolis was a Portland-class heavy cruiser commissioned in 1932. During World War II, the ship served in numerous Pacific battles. In July 1945, it secretly transported components of the atomic bomb later dropped on Hiroshima.

After completing the mission, the ship sailed toward the Philippines without escort. On July 30, 1945, it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine and sank in approximately 12 minutes.

Nearly 900 sailors entered the water. Many died from dehydration, injuries, exposure, and shark attacks while awaiting rescue. Only 316 survived. The disaster became one of the deadliest naval tragedies in U.S. history.

## OBJECTIVES:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Describe the role of the USS Indianapolis during World War II.
- Analyze the circumstances surrounding its sinking.
- Evaluate survivor accounts and historical evidence.
- Explain the long-term impact of the disaster on military policy.
- Develop historical empathy through primary source analysis.

## STANDARDS:

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas of a source.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.1

Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

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## MATERIALS & DOCUMENTS

[Pat Patterson HVL Video](#)

[USS Indianapolis Short Video](#)

USS Indianapolis Video Questions (Doc A)

Primary Source Packet (Doc B)

Graphic Organizer (Doc C)

Poster Activity Directions (Doc D)

Poster board, markers, etc.

Internet Connection

## PROCEDURES

### ACTIVITY 01

- Inform students that they will watch a video of WWII veteran Pat Patterson. Instruct them to jot down in bullet format, their thoughts as Mr. Patterson tells his story.
- Show the [Pat Patterson HVL Video](#)
- After the video, ask students what they wrote down. Inform students that before Mr. Patterson could witness the Japanese surrender on the USS Missouri, the USS Indianapolis, a ship that secretly carried parts of the atomic bomb to Tinian, was torpedoed and sunk on the return home to the U.S.

### ACTIVITY 02

- Distribute the USS Indianapolis Video Questions (Doc A). Instruct students to answer the questions as they watch the [USS Indianapolis Short Documentary](#).
- After the video, discuss the questions and the USS Indianapolis incidents with students.

### ACTIVITY 03

- Distribute the Primary Source Packet (Doc B) and the Graphic Organizer (Doc C). NOTE: Teachers can assign this as an individual assignment or divide students into groups, assigning each group a different primary source.
- After students/groups complete the Primary Source Packet (Doc B), call on a few students to share their answer to the following question:

### ACTIVITY 04

- Distribute Poster Activity Directions (Doc D). Read the directions aloud as students follow along.
- Create a gallery of the posters in the classroom or the hallway as a reminder to honor those who perished on the USS Indianapolis.

# THE USS INDIANAPOLIS

## USS Indianapolis Video Questions

DOC A



On what date was the USS Indianapolis sunk?

What caused the USS Indianapolis to sink?

Approximately how many crewmen were on board when the ship was attacked?

How long did it take for the ship to sink?

About how many sailors survived the sinking itself and ended up in the water?

What important mission had the USS Indianapolis completed shortly before it sank?

What conditions did the survivors face while stranded at sea?

Why did many sailors begin hallucinating?

What danger besides dehydration and exposure threatened the survivors in the water?

Who first discovered the survivors in the ocean?

How long were the survivors stranded before rescue arrived?

How many of the approximately 900 men in the water survived?

Why were distress calls from the Indianapolis not acted upon?

Why was Captain Charles McVay court-martialed after the sinking?

# THE USS INDIANAPOLIS

## PRIMARY SOURCE PACKET

DOC B



**DIRECTIONS:** Analyze each primary source by answering the questions that follow each source.

### SOURCE ONE: SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

The first torpedo hit 40 feet in front of me, cutting off the bow of the ship. The second one caused a massive fire. Men came from below deck, screaming with scorched flesh. The word came to abandon ship. I looked over the edge at all the oil on the water and held onto that rail, pleading with God. As we abandoned ship, I heard Him say, "I will not abandon you." I went in the water feet first and swam to a group of about 80 boys.

I found two Marines. One was a new boy we picked up in Pearl. He died in my arms. Fifty years later I got a call asking if I knew Leland Hubbard. I said no, but they sent me his picture. I broke down and cried. I told his family he was the Marine who died in my arms. That's what they needed to hear. The other Marine was my friend Spooner. I was his squad leader. That first night we lost several boys. At daylight, we saw fins. We formed a circle and tried to keep everyone in. Some guys strayed off. You'd hear a blood-curdling scream and see him go under. He would come back to the surface but you'd see fins and realize his legs were gone, or he just had a torso.

#### Second Day

We were desperate for water and were told not to drink the salt water because it affects the brain. Some would drink it and within the hour their minds were going. Our group dwindled to about 40 the second day.

#### Third Day

At noon there were only 17 of us. Bodies floated up so swollen and bloated you couldn't recognize them. We came upon five sailors around a raft with extra life jackets. Spooner, and I joined them. I noticed a crate in the water. They were half-rotten potatoes and we had a little picnic. That night we met up with Lieutenant McKissick and five boys.

#### Fourth Day

At daybreak I'm with McKissick and one sailor, but we had lost the raft and the others. No one was looking for us. Then we saw a plane a few thousand feet up. We yelled and waved. He saw the oil slick and debris and radioed Peleliu. A PBY plane arrived and picked up 56 stragglers. I met back up with Spooner.

The Doyle came that night and got us. I was covered with oil and they gave me a kerosene bath. They got the rotten flesh off me and wrapped me in Vaseline gauze. At a hospital in Guam, Admiral Spruance pinned the Purple Heart on me. That's where we found out what our cargo was. We lost 880 shipmates. Only 317 of us survived the four days.

It is much easier to die than live. You've got to struggle to live. I had something to live for—my family and a little brunette named Ola Mae who said she'd wait for me. We were married for 71 years.

## SOURCE TWO: CAPTAIN MCVAY'S COURT MARTIAL

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PRESS AND RADIO FEBRUARY 23, 1946

### REPORT ON COURT MARTIAL

OF

CAPTAIN CHARLES B. MCVAY, III, U.S.N.

COMMANDING OFFICER, USS INDIANAPOLIS

Captain Charles B. McVay, III, U.S. Navy, was tried on December 3-19, 1945, by a Naval Court Martial composed of seven members. His trial followed the sinking of the USS Indianapolis by a Japanese submarine and was based upon two charges: First, Inefficiency in failing to issue and insure the execution of orders for the abandonment of the USS Indianapolis: Second, Negligence in "Suffering a Vessel of the Navy to be Hazarded" by neglecting and failing to cause a zigzag course to be steered when visibility conditions and information concerning enemy submarines required him under current United States Fleet Tactical Orders to zigzag in order to minimize the danger from submarine attack. Captain McVay was acquitted of the first charge and therefore was cleared of responsibility for the loss of lives incident to the abandonment of the ship. He was convicted of the second charge. He was neither charged with, nor tried for, losing the Indianapolis. The sentence imposed by the court decreed the loss of one hundred numbers in his temporary grade of Captain and one hundred numbers in his permanent grade of Commander. In view of his outstanding previous record, the court unanimously recommended clemency.

The proceedings, findings and sentence were found legal by the Judge Advocate General and were approved by the Chief of Naval Personnel. This approval, however, was accompanied by the recommendation that in view of Captain McVay's excellent record and the unanimous recommendation for clemency by the court, the sentence should be remitted and he should be restored to duty. Fleet Admiral King, Commander in Chief and Chief of Naval Operations at the time of the disaster in July 1945, concurred in the recommendation by the Chief of Naval Personnel. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal has approved these recommendations and has remitted the sentence of Captain McVay in its entirety, releasing him from arrest and restoring him to duty.

Captain McVay has a record of capable and gallant service to his country. During World War II he had extensive combat duty; he received numerous commendations and the award of the Silver Star Medal for heroism in action and the Purple Heart Medal.

**SOURCE THREE: NAVAL RESCUE DISPATCH**

NAVAL MESSAGE, NAVY DEPARTMENT

From: RINGNESS (APD 100)

Released By:

Date: 3 August 1945

Typed by: Hamilton/Buckman

For Action: CINPAC ADV. HDQTRS

PASSED BY PAC/POA ADV FOR INFO TO COMINCH  
COM MARIANAS AREA AS 031217

RINGNESS (APD-100) ORIGINATES ASKS RDO GUAM GIVE ACTION CINCPAC ADV HED INFO  
CTU P5-7-5 COM THIRD FLT COM SEVENTH FLT COMPHILBSEAFRON COMSERDIV 101 PD  
PELELIU COMWESCARSUBAREA

UR 20740. PROCEEDING PELELIU 030700 WITH REGISTER (APD-92). HAVE 37 SURVIVORS  
ABOARD INCLUDING CHARLES BUTLER MCVAY THIRD USN 20240 CO. REGISTER 37 SUR-  
VIVORS INCLUDING ENSIGN ROSS ROGERS JUNIOR USNR 440725. LIEUT HOWARD BRUCE  
FRIEZE USN 202132 DIED AND BURIED AT SEA FROM LIFE RAFT ON TUESDAY 31 JULY. CAPT  
PICKED UP LAT 11-35 LONG 133-21 WITH 9 OTHER RAFTS WITHIN RADIUS OF [end 6] FOUR  
MILES AND STATES BELIEVES SHIP HIT 0015 SANK 0030 ZONE MINUS NIN ONE HALD THIRTY  
JULY POSITION ON TRACK EXACTLY AS ROUTED PD GUAM. SPEED 17 NOT ZIGZAGGING.  
HIT FORWARD BY WHAT IS BELIEVED TO BE TWO TORPEDOES OR MINE FOLLOWED BY  
MAGAZINE EXPLOSION.

[illegible]

SOURCE FIVE: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE



Many survivors were covered in oil, making the rescue effort all the more difficult. U.S. Navy  
<https://allthatsinteresting.com/uss-indianapolis-sharks>

# THE USS INDIANAPOLIS

## GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the graphic organizer below to analyze the primary sources.

| SOURCE TYPE                                | MAIN IDEA | EVIDENCE | PERSPECTIVE | EMOTIONAL IMPACT |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|-------------|------------------|
| SOURCE ONE:<br>SURVIVOR'S TESTIMONY        |           |          |             |                  |
| SOURCE TWO:<br>CHARLES MCVAY COURT MARTIAL |           |          |             |                  |
| SOURCE THREE:<br>NAVAL RESCUE DISPATCH     |           |          |             |                  |
| SOURCE FOUR:<br>NEWSPAPER ARTICLE          |           |          |             |                  |
| SOURCE FIVE:<br>PHOTOGRAPH                 |           |          |             |                  |

# THE USS INDIANAPOLIS

## POSTER ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS



**DIRECTIONS:** You will create a poster to honor those lost in the USS Indianapolis. Your remembrance poster should honor the crew and survivors of the USS Indianapolis while demonstrating historical understanding, creativity, and respectful presentation.

### Required Criteria

#### 1. Historical Accuracy

Include accurate information about the USS Indianapolis

Mention important events such as: final mission, torpedo attack, sinking, survival at sea, and rescue effort

Include correct dates, names, and facts

#### 2. Message of Remembrance

Clearly honor the sailors and survivors

Include a memorial statement, quote, or tribute message

#### 3. Visual Presentation

Poster should be neat, organized, and easy to read

Use color, layout, and design effectively

Include meaningful visuals connected to the event

#### 4. Use of Images and Sources

Include at least 2–3 relevant visuals such as:

ship photographs, maps, historical images, or survivor quotes

#### 5. Creativity

Show originality in design and presentation

Use symbols, themes, or artwork that reflect remembrance and sacrifice

Create a visually impactful memorial poster

#### 6. Written Content

Include clear, grammatically correct writing

Use complete sentences where appropriate

Avoid spelling and punctuation errors

#### 7. Overall Effort

Demonstrate time, thought, and careful completion

Submit a complete and polished final product

Suggested Poster Components