



## **Last Delivery**

**By Christina Harlin, Your Fearless  
Young Orphan**

***USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage*  
(2016)**

**Directed by Mario Van Peebles**

In a drunken monologue in *Jaws*, Robert Shaw as Quint paints a more vivid and terrifying picture of the fate of the USS Indianapolis crew than this movie manages to do in its entirety, but we're going to mostly forgive that because this movie is trying to view the disaster in its historical context rather than as the last remaining nightmare of an old man. But I'll be the first to admit that everything I knew about the *Indianapolis* was, up until now, thanks to Quint's monologue.

The USS Indianapolis was a ship at the center of a bold and forevermore controversial move to end World War II, a plan which succeeded by the numbers, but at a terrible price. The United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan surrendered. The war was over. The atomic bombs had to be delivered to their targets, however, weaving their way through warring oceans on ships that had been designated top secret, need-to-know, non-escorted missions. The Indianapolis sailed to Tinian Island, dropped off the bomb, and then sailed toward Guam only to be torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. The ship sank fast, and some 900 crewmembers were set adrift across miles of ocean water, many of them badly injured.

Because this was a top-secret mission, the ship was not reported as missing – most of the people who were notified of the disaster seemed astonished to hear that the ship had even gone down in such an unexpected location. But the secrecy of the mission added to the disaster: with no one watching out, no one noticed they were



***And this is only the beginning of their troubles.***

late to arrive, nobody knew there was a missing naval ship, no one was looking for them. Thus the men were afloat for several days before an aircraft, looking for something else entirely, stumbled across their waning numbers. Men died of by the hundreds from their injuries, from dehydration and exposure, and from shark attacks. Sharks of course, smelling blood, were quickly on the scene, picking off the men at their sharky leisure from almost the moment the ship went down, the main thrust of Quint's unforgettable tale. It is hard to keep in mind that Quint was a fictional character.

But this isn't fiction, or at least, it is fictionalized only so far as to "entertain" us, which is probably the biggest mistake the film makes. Beyond the physical tragedy itself, the historical focus of *USS Indianapolis* lies mostly on the responsibility of Captain McVay, and the scapegoat-hunt of the U.S. Navy and Government to "find someone" responsible for this incident (which resulted in the largest number of lives lost in Naval history). Captain McVay was court-martialed for mishandling the affair until he was exonerated in 1996 by President Clinton – nice, except that it came too late, almost thirty years after the disgraced and guilt-ridden Captain's death by suicide.

Nicolas Cage – but which Nicolas Cage is it? – plays Captain McVay with complete seriousness and utter, angel-eyed goodness, so that the audience need never doubt that the man is blameless. Is this historically accurate? Well who knows – I imagine that under such duress, everybody does just about the best he can, which for some people just isn't much. Nevertheless in this context, it is inspiring to watch Cage's McVay struggling to provide what help he can for his shipwrecked men after such a massive disaster, as hope dwindles, meager supplies vanish, and the men steadily disappear beneath the water in a flash of blood and screams. Cage has a few moments in the film when he ponders the Japanese kamikaze fighters and "what hope can we have against an enemy like that," which are chilling, so we know that in this movie, we're getting the serious actor Cage rather than the goofball Cage.

The ship's story is a powerful enough example of heroism, sacrifice and survival that the movie had no reason to *Pearl Harbor* the whole thing for us (I'm looking at you, Michael Bay). But boy, it does, providing a bit of romantic rivalry between friends who love the same woman, a missing engagement ring, a disapproving father. It's a bit of fluff that drags at the film like it weighs a ton. There is also a



*At least it ain't bees.*

commanding officer who acts like a jackass for no better reason I can see than to offset the heroism of everyone else.

The embellishment is not all bad. There is some interesting positioning of the racial tensions aboard the ship which nicely (if that's the appropriate word) counterpoint this truth: sharks don't care what color you are, and after a few hours of drifting over a sunken ship, nobody else does either. There is a profound moment when the ship's brave young chaplain, a hero to the end, faces down what appears to be about sixty sharks at once, putting himself into his God's hands, which resonates with me still. Another moving subplot involves a young writer keeping morale up by reading his racy stories aloud. Finally, we are also privy to the thoughts of Japanese submarine Captain Hashimoto, who did his duty by sinking the *Indianapolis* (though he had no idea of the ship's significance at the time). He is forced to listen for the next four days to the torments of the men floating on the surface without rescue.



***How big can an ocean be, anyway?***

Once the survivors are finally rescued, the film still has a bit of harrowing trouble to take us through, the trial and conviction of Captain McVay and the fallout, if you'll pardon the expression. What you think of this final quarter of the film will

depend on your tolerance for fiddling with the milieu; the writers seem to have come at this from a modern interpretation of the events rather than what was thought at the time, which gives the movie a kind of seasickness of its own, wishy-washing around like it does and being awfully obvious about it. For example, Captain McVay and Captain Hashimoto (who has been called to the States to testify in the court-martial trial) are actually given the opportunity to have a tear-filled talk about how hard it was to live with their own actions. Did such a talk ever take place? It's hard to imagine a meeting between the men going down like this.

Noteworthy: while I'd call *USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage* something of a mixed bag, a story worth knowing but suffering from melodrama and a bit of heavy-handed apologizing in its delivery, my honeypunkin, a history buff who has never met a World War II story he didn't like, thought this was a very good film. So there's something to consider when you're making your viewing choices: it's "Honeypunkin-Approved."