

Kasi McWha
Great Niece of Ray Johnston, LAS
2008 Recipient of USS Indianapolis/Gwinn “Angel” Scholarship

Q. 1. How has being a child/grandchild/great-grandchild of a USS Indianapolis Survivor (or LAS) affected your life? Please include details of your specific Survivor’s experience that you can obtain through a person interview with either him or another relative (his wife, siblings, etc.).

Being related to one of the brave crew members of the USS Indianapolis has inserted a greater sense of pride into my life. Knowing that I am connected to a man who gave his life, literally, for his country makes me feel proud to be an American. He laid down his life for my freedom, for my independence, for my happiness. After having a long discussion with my Great Aunt Sue, I learned a lot about Machinist Mate First Class USNR Ray Francis Johnston. He had a wonderful life, and loving parents; a real skinny boy who appreciated love and God. I was lucky enough to get my hands on a letter personally written from Ray to his mother. It read: “San Francisco, California July 11, 1945 Dear Mom: Just a few lines to let you know that I am still in the states and doing just fine. However I won’t be here long, until about the 15th I think. I’ve had just about enough shore duty in the States to last me until the war is over. I tried to have too much fun in too short a time; any how I had a good time while it lasted. I don’t think this war will last for too much longer and I’ll be looking for a new job. I’m anxious to get back out there and finish up the job, not that I’m a flag waver but I want to get it over with and see what follows. I have a chance at a promotion but don’t know if I’ll take it or not. I have enough experience to hold it down OK but I’ll let them beg a little first. We have all new officers on the ship and they don’t know what the score is yet. I’ll wait and see how we get along together before I start teaching them. We got a good yard overhaul and the ship is in good shape, I hope it stays that way. Well I hope everyone is OK at home and not working too hard. -Ray P.S. I’m getting so fat that I’ll have to buy all new clothes.”

Within the Navy, Ray was considered a Machinist Mate First Class USNR. The duties performed by service men in his field include: aligning piping systems for oil, water, air and steam, and controlling the operation of ship boilers and steam turbines used for ship propulsion and service systems; controlling operation of turbo generators used to produce electrical power; cleaning, adjusting, testing and performing other preventive maintenance on a ships boilers, main engines, turbo generators and other auxiliary machinery including steering engines, elevators, winches, pumps and associated valves; operating and maintaining desalinization plants (distilling plants) to make fresh water from sea water; maintaining refrigeration plants, air conditioning systems and galley equipment; repairing or replacing valves, pumps, heat exchangers, compressors, steam turbines and hydraulic or pneumatic control devices; making entries in and analyzing machinery operating records and reports. Machinists mates work within the hull of a ship in fire rooms, boiler rooms, engine rooms or shops. These places are loud and hot. They may be required to perform some heavy physical work in short periods of time. The story of the USS Indianapolis is said to be the worst naval disaster in US history. The Indianapolis were ordered under top secrecy to sail to Tinian island, carrying an atomic bomb named “little boy” which was to later be dropped on Hiroshima and end the war. Since the importance of this mission was so vital to the on-going war, The Indianapolis left San Francisco on July 16. They made a stop at Pearl Harbor and then went on with no extra protection besides their own resources. Absolutely no other ships were sent to accompany it. They finally arrived at Tinian on July 26 and successfully completed their task by dropping off the top secret bomb. On July 30th 1945, while

unaccompanied on open sea, the ship was hit by two torpedoes from the Japanese submarine I-58. This Submarine was commanded by Mochitsura Hashimoto. For normal missions, there is an ETA or estimated time of arrival in case something happened to the ship. Under certain conditions though, and because the mission was so confidential, the Indianapolis had no ETA listed. Since there was no ETA no one knew that the ship was extremely late for arrival. The Indianapolis sent distress calls before sinking. However, the Navy stated that these calls were not received because the ship decided not to release radio signals so they couldn't accidentally be received by the enemies. It is now known that three SOS messages were received, but they were not reported because one commander was drunk, another had ordered his men not to disturb him and a third thought it was a Japanese prank. Because no-one knew the ship was missing, many, many innocent men died than would have if the Navy had been more responsible about the situation. About 300 of the 1,196 men on board died in the attack. One of these men was Ray Johnston. I am glad that he didn't suffer like so many other men did while waiting for rescue. The other 880 sailors were left in the water to float, drown, or be eaten by sharks until four days later when the rescue was completed. Only 341 men out of the whole crew were picked up alive, and only 317 remained that way for longer than a few days after. The unfortunate men, surrounded by fear and loss of hope, had no food or clean water. It is said that most of the non-impact deaths on the Indianapolis were due to prolonged sun exposure, salt poisoning, and thirst. This was an amazingly unfortunate event that could have been avoided. Since Ray was a machinist, he worked under the ship and was most likely killed on impact from the first torpedo. My family received a telegram from Vice Admiral Randall Jacobs explaining how he was at first "missing in action" and then later received another telegram on September 17th 1945 that said "there is no hope for his survival and that he lost his life as a result of enemy action on July 3". The family was devastated by the irresponsibility of the government and the loss of their son who was fighting for the United States of America. To stick the knife in a little deeper, the government didn't even release the information that the ship was destroyed by the enemies until after the war was over. It seems a little disrespectful to the men that died for us to not even publicly announce their deaths for months after it happened. Without this brave crew, the atomic bomb never would have been dropped on Hiroshima and the consequences of the war could have been greatly changed. I find myself lucky to have the same blood flowing through my veins as did Ray Johnston. He put his country, his family, and his friends before himself and gave the greatest gift of all to America, freedom. I wish I can one day show the bravery that he and the rest of the crew did on that summer day in 1945. It uplifts me that I can tell people of my relation to a great American hero. I intend to spread the word about this well kept secret and inform everyone on the courage of the shipmates on the USS Indianapolis.

Q. 2. *Understanding the miraculous and heroic story of the USS Indianapolis and its crew is one way to ensure that the service and sacrifices made by the men of the ship will not be forgotten. Please choose one of the following themes: miracle of the sighting, heroism, loyalty and brotherhood, service to country, forgiveness, righting a wrong, survival against all odds. In approximately 500 words, share your understanding of the tale of the USS Indianapolis.*

The date was July 30, 1945. It was a nice night for stargazing on deck as the temperature was about 50 degrees with clear skies. But for many of those soldiers on deck, it was the last stars they would ever see. At 12:14 a.m. the first torpedo hit the bow of the ship. Suddenly, everything changed. Within 12 minutes, 300 of the 1196 men aboard the U.S.S. Indianapolis perished. My great

grandmother's brother was one of the lucky ones to have died immediately (or so we think.) The remaining 900 men would spend the next four days fighting off sharks, thirst, hunger, and the burning effects of the sun. By the time rescuers arrived, only 316 men remained alive. Clearly, the most unfortunate men on the ship were the ones who died while waiting for help; but what about the survivors? Today, those men are in their 80's or 90's. I believe that the way we honor their service to our country is us to keep them from repeating the fate of their fellow shipmates. We should not let them die, while waiting for help. The veteran's health care system is America is shameful. We are a nation with the best healthcare in the world. Why should our aging and injured veterans suffer with old facilities and out of date equipment? These men deserve the best the United States has to offer. If it were not for our veterans, we would not be a free people today. These men and women put their country above their own wants and needs. They left their families, their friends, and their homes behind to fight so that you and I could live in the United States we know today; a free and affluent nation. We should take care of our war heroes. We must show them the appreciation they deserve. We must take care of them as they age. It is our responsibility as citizens of this country to fight for the ones who fought for us. These men are no longer capable of fighting for themselves and they deserve not only respect and admiration, but good healthcare. We just cannot leave them "floating," praying for someone to help them as those brave men did back in 1945.

Kasi lives in Tyler, TX. She will be attending University of Texas, Austin in the fall, majoring in Biology, with the ultimate goal of attending Medical School.