

USS Bennington 26 May 1954 Explosion

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General Quarters: Memoirs of the Explosion

26 May 1954

On the CVA-20

USS Bennington

Richard S. Pope

October 1992

ADDENDUM TO 'GENERAL QUARTERS'

From: Jim Phillips

After Pope's piece

The following information is from a Publication by Mr. Richard S. Pope, former HM1 aboard the USS Bennington on 26 May 1954. He has granted permission for it to be entered to the website for historical purposes.

Richard S. Pope is currently involved in matters related to biomedical research and nursing education. He holds a doctoral degree in nursing and an advanced degree in physiology.

At the time of the explosion on the USS Bennington, he was the corpsmen in charge of the operating room. As such, he had little knowledge of what had happened except that the operating room had no physician but had scores of casualties, both living and dead, some of who were literally still burning.

It is hoped that this effort will provide an understanding of the totality of the events, which happened within minutes or less, throughout the ship.

It is also hoped that this effort will serve as a small memorial to those shipmates who lost their lives, as well as to the many shipmates who put care for others above their own needs.

Those of you who were present will understand the odors, sounds and jots of memory which bring the searing events back into consciousness and remove us from ongoing events even forty years after.

Hopefully this information will help those who survive do so in a bit more peace and will provide a small honor to those who no longer are with us except in our memories.

Richard S. Pope

3139 S.W. 11th Avenue

Portland, Oregon 97201-3022

1-503-221-0157

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"This Effort Is Dedicated to The Memory and Honor of Shipmates"

Preface

On May 26, 1954 the USS ***Bennington*** suffered an explosion which claimed the lives of over 100 men and officers. This was the second worst ship disaster not involving enemy action at the time.

This incident followed an active period of duty during the end of the Second World War and prior to action during the Korean and Vietnam periods. The greatest loss of life occurred during the explosion.

These memoirs are a tribute to those men who lost their lives and to those who suffered and continue to suffer as a result.

Few medals were issued after the explosion, but there were many unwritten and unrecognized heroes who conducted their duties with honor, saved lives and helped their shipmates in a dangerous environment without considering their own safety. I hope that some of the courageous actions will be evident in the following.

A brief note about how these memories were obtained is in order. I wrote to as many of the crew of the Bennington as I could find names and addresses for. Those who were able responded with their own thoughts and memories. Some were unable to put words to paper but I was able to listen to their verbal memories. This is then only a sampling of the men who served on the Bennington at the time. It is, I believe, a fair sampling of what happened. However, there are definite gaps. No pilot responded and no other officer responded.

This may be because of the source of my names rather than any suggestion that

Officers were disinclined to respond.

It was difficult after forty years to obtain the names and current addresses of more than a sampling of the crew. However, this explosion caused the largest number of casualties aboard a US Naval ship where there was no enemy action and when only a single ship was involved.

[A Brief History of The USS *Bennington* CV-CVA-CVS-20](#)

The USS *Bennington* was laid down during World War II as a CV or fast carrier. She was constructed at the Navy Yard in New York in 1944. World War II.

Action included support of the landings on Iwo Jima, attacks against the islands of Japan including factories and shipping facilities of Tokyo and Yokosuka. She also provided support for the landings on Okinawa. After the war she was decommissioned in April of 1946 in the Atlantic Fleet.

The Bennington was re-commissioned in November 1952 following extensive modernization. After this modernization she was reclassified as a CVA or attack carrier and began her shakedown training in February 1953. During this activity an explosion occurred on 27 April 1953 in the forward fireroom which cost eleven lives. Following a two-week period for repairs, the Bennington took part in NATO exercises and made a Mediterranean cruise.

During April 1954 the Bennington again began qualification trials during which a second and much more extensive explosion or series of explosions occurred. The second explosion on 26 May 1954 turned out to be a far worse accident and caused over two hundred casualties. Extensive repairs were required at Brooklyn Navy Yard. At the time of these repairs the Bennington was further modernized and she was designated as a CVS or anti-sub carrier and moved to the Pacific Fleet. Various actions involving threats to the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, the Laotian crisis, Gulf of Tonkin and support during the Vietnamese War were provided until she was again decommissioned in January 1970 to be mothballed. During the twenty-six-year life of the Bennington, she was directly involved in two periods of enemy action. She had duty in both the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets and she saw duty as a CV-20, CVA-20 and a CVS-20. Only the two explosions (27 April 1953 and 26 May 1954) marred her service.

The purpose of this memoir is to detail the explosion of May 26, 1954 in order to get a better understanding of what happened. This will also serve to commemorate the men of the USS Bennington.

May 26, 1954

This day started out early as the ship was undergoing flight trials; Planes and crews were already busy at work before 0600 hours. The ship's log gives a concise and all too precise glimpse of the events of that morning. The first evidence of trouble was noted at 0610 hours as a report of smoke. At 0611 hours there was a notation of two or three explosions. By 0725 hours the bridge was notified that the sickbay had been moved to the hanger deck because the available beds had been filled. By 1025 hours the first helicopters from Quonset Point had landed to pick up the most seriously injured. Five tugs had come along side to assist in berthing at Quonset Point by 1207 hours. Mooring was completed at 1233 hours and ambulances were loaded along side by 1233 hours. The casualty report at 1545 hours listed 201 injured and 89 dead men and officers. This number would rise as more definite reports became available and as the most severely injured succumbed. The force and extent of the explosions can be measured by the large number of deaths and injured, and by the fact that the sickbay had been filled and had been moved in an hour and fifteen minutes. Such numbers however do not give the human feelings of this event, which to a large extent was over in less than ten hours.

Explosion

On the 26th of May 1954 the aircraft carrier, USS Bennington CVA-20 was steaming off the Atlantic coast for carrier qualifications. This cruise was interrupted by a violent explosion or series of explosions, which claimed over 200 officers and men as casualties. The ship suffered massive damage in the forward third with sheets of flame and a series of explosions. Nearly one hundred men lost their lives within seconds of the explosion and over one hundred others were seriously injured. All survivors were left with a searing memory.

That Wednesday morning had started early. By 0600 hours, preparations to launch aircraft had been completed and aircraft had begun the procedure for launching. Most of the ship's crew who were not directly involved in the launch activity were in the process of waking. At 0611 hours with the propulsion system in use on the flight deck there was a violent explosion which involved the forward third of the ship.

Those corpsmen who had the night duty were beginning to start their day by 0600.

The sick bay was located in the stern area below the hanger deck. We thus did not hear any of the explosions. We did hear an announcement for "General Quarters", and we thought that this announcement was stated to be a drill. Within seconds after the corpsmen had begun to dash to their general quarters stations, we were aware that this was in fact not a drill.

Not a Drill

My first encounter with a hero occurred as the announcement over the speakers was advising that the "General Quarters was no drill". I had no reason to quarrel with that assessment.

A black shipmate started down the ladder to the sickbay. He had no clothes on. He pleaded for us to go and help his buddy. These were his last words. He died in my arms and I realized that his clothes had literally been burned off his body. In my mind he was a hero. Whether he ever received a medal I can't say, he was not easy to identify.

A boson mate remembers that he was half-awake in his bunk below the hanger deck and "felt the ship shuttering and a dull explosion echoed through the passageways". In his shorts he made his way up a ladder to the second deck and by feeling his way in the dark went up another ladder where he found several shipmates. They helped each other up another ladder and to the fresh air when there was another explosion. A shipmate gave him a pair of dungarees. The second explosion twisted the ladder, which they had just used, "like a pretzel". A third explosion occurred while these men began their work in the aftermath, work that included finding injured, transporting them to the hanger deck where the corpsmen had set up the aid station and searching for bodies.

A fireman, also a hero, had just started out of his bunk when the first explosion occurred. The compartment quickly filled with smoke so the men here formed a chain and started for the hanger deck. The second explosion killed the two men just in front of him. The third explosion "brought him to his senses". He made it to his station for damage control, passing through compartments, which were on fire. "Rockets, bombs and bodies were in the passageways". They found the forward mess hall filled with two feet of water and two casualties, one man on a table and the other face down in the water. They carried the first man out and came back for the second. The second man walked on his own after being turned. "I was scared". All of the men in the catapult room had been killed. "Fires were all around".

The general quarters alarm found a cook preparing breakfast. He started for his general quarters station on the telephone for "Repair 5". Before plugging in his phones the first explosion hit. The second explosion caught him on the ladder and threw him to the upper deck. The third explosion found him looking down into the space below which he had just exited and which was now filled with smoke and dust. He got back to his station and plugged the phone in and found the repair parties aft of his station all checked in but only one station forward of his had checked in and this was manned by a single person. He learned that his Repair Party Officer was dead. On the phone he had made contact with a

Damage Control Unit which was trapped. All members of this crew died before help could reach them. The cook's wife is, "still waiting for the telegram which was later sent to let her know he was ok".

At about 0530 hours a pantry man noted smoke coming from the galley. This was located on the third deck amidships. The cook's also noted smoke but no fire. The escape route for these men was through a hatch, which was blown, shut as they approached and became red-hot. One survivor recalls that an "extraordinarily brave man" who searched among all the dead to find him still alive helped him. He was evacuated by helicopter to Newport Rhode Island Naval Hospital and finally recovered and returned to active duty.

Rescue Efforts

Not all efforts to rescue shipmates were successful. There was no doubt that in many cases friends were already beyond help. In some cases the efforts to help were not to succeed. One frantic effort to disengage a shipmate from entangled metal and machinery ended in watching the friend slowly drown as water filled the space where he was trapped. His knowing that he was nearing his final moments and his

Encouragement to those trying to help typified the spirit of the men of the Bennington.

Number Of Explosions

The number of explosions heard by various persons varies. Officers on the bridge recalled hearing two explosions. Some individuals in the area of the worst damage recalled three explosions, while one heard no explosion but saw a wall of flame. Certainly, some of the differences relate to location. Where one was at the time determined what was heard as well as the chances of injury or death. We heard no explosions in the sick bay, probably because of the location. It appears from the memories that there was a series of explosions, that these were of varying intensities, and that some at least were confined to small areas. With hatches closed there would be a dampening of sound transmission.

Physical Damage

Casual inspection of the damage to the ship following our return to dry dock in New York gave startling evidence of the tremendous forces, which were unleashed by the explosions. There was no evidence of harm on the flight deck or on the hanger deck, but in the forward third of the ship one saw structural I-beams twisted. Ladders were torn and twisted. Paint was burned; bulkheads were pushed out in bubbles and all the spaces were covered with greasy soot. Burned rubble was strewn about.

The Cause

An obvious question was what caused these explosions. As a corpsman I was not in a position to know exactly what happened to cause this accident. I have put my personal observations and other explanations together to try to make sense of the causation. It appeared that there had been a slow leak in one of the catapults. A hydraulic fluid operated the catapults, which was supposed to be safe from fire or explosion. However, the timing of the first explosion makes it appear that at some level in the ship the hydraulic fumes were in a vaporized state and had reached a concentration which permitted it to explode and burst into flame when a seaman awoke and lit his first cigarette. The flames spread rapidly throughout the spaces, which had accumulated the leaking hydraulic vapors. These flames must have been extremely hot as suggested by the rapidity of doors reaching a "hot" temperature. The initial

flames consisted of the burning of the vaporized hydraulic fluid and lasted only seconds. Other material then began to burn.

Final Thoughts

The explosion on the Bennington which cost the lives of 104 officers and men and caused serious injury to over 139 others was the second worse disaster aboard a Naval vessel which did not involve enemy action. The worst accident at this time was the collision of the carrier Wasp and the destroyer Hobson in 1952.

Hundreds of men showed exceptional heroism and devotion to their shipmates. The Secretary of the Navy awarded medals to 178 of the crew on 22 April 1955. Probably many more men deserved such recognition. The vignettes of memories, which I have received and have tried to collate in this memorial, pay tribute to the extraordinary concern for fellow shipmates. Over and over there was the plea to "help my buddy". The first injured man to arrive in the sick bay uttered these words as he died in my arms. I will never know who he was since he was not recognizable, but his family should know that he was a remarkable and brave person.

I dedicate this information to the memory of those that died and hope that it will ease the pain of those injured. In addition, I hope that this memoir will help in some small way to ease the continued pain of the last forty years of those of us who survived. While we each believe that we did not do enough, we each did more than thought possible. Finally, perhaps we can smell the roses again free of the odor of that day in May.

Finally, I believe that there was more than one hero that day, just as Captain Raborn stated, "there were countless acts of individual heroism".

List of Those Who Died

At 2111 hours, fifteen hours after the explosion, the first official dispatch to the Secretary of the Navy from the USS *Bennington* listed persons as having died in the explosion. The following lists were compiled from the official Court of Inquiry and were complete as of the early part of June 1954. Others surely died at later dates but are not listed here. Many other shipmates carry scars as a result of the explosion and the loss of shipmates.

ABROGUST, George Albert, LT
ADAMS, Charles, Edward, AN
ALEXANDER, Conelius, Melroy, SD3
ARRIGONI, Joseph, F., LT
BACON, Francis Sylvester, TN
BAIRD, Delbert, PFC
BARBER, Cyron Melvin, LTJG
BARNES, Roger Earl, LTJG
BASKIN, William Nash, AA
BEMISS, Guy Morton, CHPHOT
BOYD, Rossell (or Russell), AN
BRYAN, Terry Willard, LTJG
BYERS, George Washington, TN

CAPISTRAND, Stanely Leo, CHPMLK
COLEMAN, Lloyd, TA
CROMARTIE, James, SD2
DAVIS, Prince Arthur, TN
DEAN, Albert Penton, CHGUN
DEMERS, Raymond Conrad, RELE
DOLL, Charles Joseph, SD2
DREW, Henry Jackson, LT
DUFFY, Robert James, LTJG
EOVINO, Dominick J., CHSCLK
EPPS, Robert Daniel, Jr., AB3
FAVRE, Joseph Louis, TN
FIX, Leo Francis, CHBOSN
FORE, Fred Walter, FP3
FOURNIER, Paul Eugene, LCDR
GOINS, Floyd Wilson, AOU3
GOLASZEWSKI, Edward John, AB1
GONZALES, Leon, SD3
GOODRUM, Douglas, TN
GREEN, Jesse Nelson, AO3
HACKBARTH, Thomas C., AO3
HART, George Joseph, Jr., AB3
HILLYER, Donald Paul, DT2
HOLLOWAY, Delois Vergil, LT
HOOKER, Alfred Punnel, SD3
HOPPER, Charles Edward, LTJG
HUBETSEL, Alexander, AO1
HURD, James Walter, CHCARP
HUSTOFT, Harold Roger, ME3
INGE, Robert Paul, LTJG
JACKSON, Billy Glen, LT
JACKSON, Charles, SD3
JEFFERSON, Paul B., SN
KANE, Orlo Hamlin, LTJG
KEIR, Richard Henry, AB3
KING, Max, CHGUN
KOVINO, Domenic Joseph, CHSCLK
KRASSY, Charles Edward, ADE3
[LAMBDIN, Dewey Whitley, LT](#)
LAKATOS, Albert "J", MM3
LENZ, George William, SK2
LEWIS, Elliot Stanley, AO3
LOUKIS, H.I., (civilian from Westinghouse)
MARCHISELLI, Fredrick David, PFC

MARTIN, Ernest Simms, AM1
MATTHAIS, Albert Joseph, EM3
MAYES, Bobby Lee, PFC
MCGHEE, Charles Hunter, AN
MCNATT, Lloyd, CHMACH
MILLER, Gordon R., LTJG
MILLS, Arthur Gean, SN
MOODY, Thaddeaus Eugene, AN
MORTON, J. Clyde, LT
O'DONNELL, Roger Raymond, LT
O'NEAL, Walter Issiah, SN
PENDELL, Emory Dean, ENS
PHELPS, Donald Lee, LTJG MSC
PRAMEK, Francis Joseph, SN
PUGH, William Howard, PACT
RAMEY, Jesse Herbert, EM2
REED, Marvin, LCDR
REYES, Juan, SD3
RICH, Wallace, LT
RILEY, Claude Patrick, SK1
RIVERS, Jesse Elmore, SD2
ROBINSON, Alto Lee, TN
SCHMUCKER, Charles Edwin, Jr., LTJG
SICO, Benigno, SD2
SMITH, Daniel Joseph, LT
SMITH, Ralph C., AMC
SMITH, Robert Kent, SD3
SOMMARS, Cantrell Wallace, IC3
STANFORD, James T., PFC
THOMAS, Clyde Dana, Jr., LT MC
THOMAS, Eric Alfrado, SD1
THORNHILL, David R., LTJG
THORNTON, Earl Jr., CHSCLK
TINNEY, Earl Crawford, AO3
TONDO, Paul S., LT
TRIPLET, Howard M., SD2
VAN DER HOONING, John, AOC
WAGES, Kelley Bruce, Jr., AB3
WILLIAMS, Marion, TN
WILLIS, Herbert Lee, SD1
WILLIAM, Willie, TN
WITVOET, Gerald James, LTJG
WONSETLER, Paul Dallas, PT3
WOODUM, Lonnie Gene, TA

WRIGHT, Henry Harold, Jr., SD3

WRIGHT, Robert Reid, LT

List of Those Who Were Injured

(The same listing of casualties provided the following individuals as injured)

Allen, Isaac, PFC

Andreason, Veryl L., SN

Anthony, Roger, TA

Banks, George J., AA

Baxter, Robert C., LTJG

Belmer, Richard G., SN

Berry, Robert Edmond, SN

Blamick, Joseph Emmanuel, IC2

Blossom, Robert S., SA

Bogumil, Valentine Bernard, QM2

Bower, George W., SN

Bowie, Marshall L., FT3

Brown, James Henry, SD3

Bruck, Ronald J., FN

Brukhead, Leslie G., IC3

Burnett, John Paul, LCDR

Carrier, Cecil K., Jr., AN

Caruthers, Adrain F., Jr., AO3

Charpentier, Alfred Paul, QM2

Chase, Nelvin, DC3

Cline, John D., ADAN

Cobb, George E., FP3

Cole, James M., FN

Collura, Nicholas, BT3

Covington, James S., SD1

Dickson, Richard H., H., MM3

Dobias, Andrew, SA

Donegan, Henry J., TN

Dorado, Arthur N., SN

Dougherty, William, AD3

Doughlas, Jack C., AKAN

Duvall, John S., LTJG

Ferguson, Byron W., FT3

Flink, William H., AK

Foley, W., J., LTJG

Fortham, Earnest Almer, IC3

French, Robert D., LTJG

Garfinkle, Morton, SN

Gennarino, Lawrence J., SN

Gerrald, John D., Jr., BM1
Gerules, Ernest, ENS
Glenn, Clifton C., Jr., ET1
Green, Lee E., SD3
Grippe, Robert J., SN
Groff, Ralph, SN
Harris, Cecil I., SD1
Hatfield, Harold E., BT3
Highe, Leroy, Jr., SD1
Hollingsworth, Davis L., AOAN
Huling, Wade U., PFC
Hunter, Charles M., SN
Jenkins, Winston L., TA
Johnson, Charles Edward, TN
Johnson, Wilber H., TN
Jones, Sammie L., SD3
June, Daniel A., SN
Kaigler, Joe H., GM2
Keckler, Donald L., SN
Keeton, Davis R., SN
Lang, Arthur A. SK3
Lazar, George, AO3
Leboeuf, Joseph, SN
Lelle, Frank F., PR1
Lennox, Gernes J., LTJG
Litchfield, Earnest L., AN
Lintz, Thomas L., SN
Lomax, Prestley H., SN
Mader, Frank C., AMAN
Mallon, Richard J., LT
Maronry, Robert M., AN
Martin, Milton T., SN
Mayes, Arthur L., SD3
Mehlin, Donald D., SK3
Miller, Richard F., BM3
Mitchell, James D., SK3
Newby, John F., TN
O'Brien, George W., TN
Ogle, Thomas J., AOAN
Olivarri, Alfredo, SA
Palmer, Carl H., FA
Parson, Dean A., SA
Paulson, Gerard, AN
Pennington, Harold J., RD3

Pfefferie, Robert Richard, IC2
Pickrell, Keith W., SN
Pittman, Shelly, LCDR
Popick, S., J., IC2
Prestige, Roy D., FT3
Reed, Donald L., CPL
Renneberg, George S., SN
Ricchiuto, John, SN
Robinson, George A., SD2
Ronegan, Henry J., TN
Severson, James D., FP3
Scarborough, William Henry, EMP3
Shambo, Earl T., FN
Sleeper, Henry E., AD1
Smith, Henry L., AN
Soucy, Rene C., PFC
Souva, Robert A., FN
Steeves, Clark A., SN
Surowic, David, AOAN
Svobda, Ray J., SA
Taylor, Samuel R., Jr., TN
Teague, Joe F., LT
Testagrose, Thomas J., TN
Valdez, Boni A., SN
Wade, Robert E., SK2
Wallace, Ross P., LT
Wallace, Staten G., AN
Warren, Ralph X., SK3
Wells, Frank M., LT
White, Calvin N., TN
Wisher, Frank, SD2
Wole, Elmer, ET1
Wollam, John S., LTJG
Wanne, James, IC2
Yanuskiewicz, John R., DC3

The final number of casualties as notes in the official history of ships state that there was a total of 304 casualties (103 dead and 201 injured). The above list was compiled from the official Court of Inquiry and documents dated through 6 June 1954 indicates a total of 139 injured and a total of 104 dead, or 234 casualties. There were undoubtedly some that died at a later date and are not reflected as such in this accounting.

Awards

Awards were made to 178 shipmates for individual heroism. The Secretary of the Navy (Charles S. Thomas) made these presentations on 22 April 1955. Contrary to what is believed by a few, there was no "unit citation" awarded, according to information provided by the Deputy Director of Naval History.

Note:

This Entire Article Was Typed by Former Sk3 Joseph L. Pires (USS Bennington Cvs-20) and Submitted For The Bennington Website With The Permission Of Richard S. Pope

Addendum To 'General Quarters'

From: Jim Phillips

On May 26, 1954, at approximately 6:00 A.M. I was heading back to my locker from 'chow hall' on board the USS Bennington, CVA 20, when a tremendous explosion threw me off my feet and into the bulkhead. On my way down, a huge ball of fire came pouring through the hatch in front of me. As I tried to get up, someone grabbed me and said, 'let's get out of here.' As I recall, it was at that time that sirens and bells were going off and a voice announcing 'General Quarters'. When that happened, we were dodging men running in the opposite direction that we were going. It was then, as I recall, they announced fire in the forward compartments - belay General Quarters. Then, there was a second explosion [not as forceful as the first], followed by a smaller blast.

Since I was connected to the air group on board, I was heading for my station with the planes. When I arrived, we were directed to go to the shops on the hanger deck. On my way, they began announcing for volunteers to help remove and search for wounded and deceased personnel. Many of the men were equipped with Air Packs and ropes tied around them to form a human chain as they went in to the smoke-filled areas. I know that a letter of commendation, to me, seems insufficient for the efforts put forth by these men. The experience of being a part of this disaster, has left me with memories that will never be erased. The dead and wounded, the stench of burning flesh, the mutilation of bodies. Even after 46 years, I can still picture the faces of the men I helped carry - some alive, some deceased. The pilot that was attached to my squadron and the officer I recognized as a person who was from my neighborhood in growing up. Not to mention the men I recognized from the ship. A fellow, known to me as 'Tiny' [Because he was so big] was a few bodies away from where I helped place someone. Looking at him, I thought he had false teeth that had melted over his lips and jaw. I never thought otherwise until a doctor said that possibly the skin had burned away to reveal the teeth and jaw bone. Whatever the case, the scene is well imbedded in my memory. It is most difficult to explain all this to people who have never experienced tragedy such as what happened on the Bennington. Somehow, I happened to be on the outside catwalk and realized that from below, ammunition and bombs or shells were being jettisoned. I guess it was then, my fears escalated. We were or could have been a floating time bomb.

It wasn't until much later, after we docked, I was able to go to my bunk and realize how lucky I had been. My blankets and sheets were scorched-all the nap on the blanket had been burned off. Had I not been knocked down by the first blast, I probably would have suffered burns to my face and upper body since my bunk was about chin level from the deck. I did lose the hairs on my hands and my shirt was covered with burn holes along with blood and black from handling the less fortunate men.

Credit should be given to the Coast Guard for their help in removing some of the wounded. The memory of the elderly women and men of the Salvation Army who came aboard to serve coffee and donuts, is still very vivid in my mind. Also, the phone company setting up phones so we could make that one call. Over the years, I have had occasion to 'bump' into some old Navy people that were involved on the 'outside'. In particular, a fellow who was stationed at Quonset Point and was called out to help when we docked. He told me he couldn't believe that we were able to make it the way the ship was smoking and the bow down so low. Apparently, they had flooded the forward compartments. Another fellow, a school friend, was on destroyer duty nearby and was ordered to assist and escort us through all the little civilian boats that were getting too close for their safety. I also talked with the officer in charge of the investigation after the explosion. He didn't give me much information; except he did not feel that a cigarette lighter was the cause.

As I had mentioned to you in our phone conversation, I have arranged to have a memorial service on the 46th anniversary of this tragedy. My hope is to bring some peace of mind from all these bad memories. Also to give thanks that for some unknown reason, you and I have become the 'survivors' [along with others] that must see fit to keep this sad incident a part of history. Thanks again, Dick, for being there and writing the story. Someday, maybe we can see each other again. Take care and good luck with all your ventures.

Sincerely,
Jim Phillips
1139 Dayton Drive
Warminster, PA 18974-1942
[215] 675-8986