

Collection #
M 0782

**COLLEEN MONDOR
USS *INDIANAPOLIS* CORRESPONDENCE, 1995–1996**

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Processed by

Paul Brockman

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Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
William Henry Smith Memorial Library
Indiana Historical Society
450 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF
COLLECTION: 1 manuscript box

COLLECTION
DATES: 1995–96

PROVENANCE: Colleen C. Mondor, P. O. Box 61555, Fairbanks, Alaska 99706,
30 January 2002

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ALTERNATE
FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS: USS *Indianapolis* Collection, M 0645

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2002.0282

NOTES:

HISTORICAL SKETCH

Colleen Mondor was a student at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, in 1996. The collection's focus is on the history of the USS *Indianapolis*.

The heavy cruiser USS *Indianapolis*, CA 35, was commissioned in November 1932. It saw its first combat of World War II in the South Pacific Theater in February 1942. The *Indianapolis* became the flag ship for the 5th Fleet and it saw extensive combat duty in the South Pacific, receiving ten battle stars for action in numerous engagements including the assault on the Marianas ("The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot"), June-August 1944, the covering of the Iwo Jima landings, February-March 1945, and the pre-invasion bombardment of Okinawa, March 1945.

On 16 July 1945 the ship departed from Mare Island Navy Yard in California on a secret cargo mission to Tinian Island in the Marianas. The cargo mission entailed carrying several parts for the assemblage of the atomic bomb, including uranium. After successfully delivering its cargo on 26 July, the ship was torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine between Guam and Leyte four days later. Because of the secret nature of its mission, there was some confusion after the ship's sinking and it was four days before all the survivors were rescued. Of the 1,196 men on board, only 316 survived, many perishing because of the elements while waiting to be rescued.

The ship's commander, Captain Charles Butler McVay, III, was court-martialled and found guilty of negligence in failing to issue the order to "zig-zag" in hostile waters. McVay was the first officer in the history of the United States Navy to be court-martialled for losing his ship to the enemy in time of war. He was sentenced to lose 100 numbers in his temporary grade of Captain and also in his permanent grade of Commander. The Navy granted McVay clemency in February 1946.

Charles Butler McVay, III (1898-1968), was a 1920 graduate of the United States Naval Academy. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War he served as senior naval aide to President Roosevelt. During the war McVay won the Bronze Star, Silver Star, and the Purple Heart. In November 1944 he was given the command of the *Indianapolis*. After his court martial, McVay was assigned to the 8th Naval District in New Orleans. He retired as a Rear Admiral and chief of staff from that district in 1949. McVay died from a self-inflicted pistol wound to the head. In July 2001 the Secretary of the Navy officially cleared Captain McVay of any negligence resulting in the ship's destruction.

Sources:

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection contains letters from 47 of the survivors (or their family members) of the USS *Indianapolis* to Ms. Mondor regarding the ship's sinking and Captain McVay's responsibility in the ship's loss. Ms. Mondor had written to the survivors on this subject for an undergraduate research paper on the ship's sinking for a class at the University of Alaska. The letters are generally quite candid and are supportive of their captain's innocence in the sinking.

In a few instances the survivor had recently died and was answered by his widow. In other cases the veteran was too ill to respond and his wife or other family member wrote the letters.

The letters range in size from a few lines to several pages in length. The letters were written in 1995–96 and are arranged alphabetically by correspondent.

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CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog: <http://157.91.92.2/>
2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, M 0782).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.