

Review Essay

Surviving a Sinking Ship

James Claude Beasley. “*Get the hell off this ship!*” *Memoir of a USS Liscome Bay Survivor in World War II*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, www.mcfarland.com, 2018. viii+161 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. US \$29.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-4766-7328-8. (E-book available.)

John Johnson-Allen. *They Were Just Skulls. The Naval Career of Fred Henley, Last Survivor of HM Submarine Truculent*. Dunbeath, UK: Whittles Publishing, www.whittlespublishing.co.uk, 2018, xii+124 pp., illustrations, appendices, bibliography. UK £16.99, US \$21.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-84995-404-4.

Anthony Richards. *The Lusitania Sinking. Eyewitness Accounts from Survivors*. Barnsley, S. Yorks; W.W. Greenhill Books, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk, 2019. Published in North America by Dundurn Press, Toronto, Canada. 214 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. UK £19.99, cloth; ISBN 978-1-78438-301-5. (E-book available.)

Three recently published books address the topic of surviving a sinking ship and its aftermath. Two deal with wartime sinking by torpedoes, the other an accidental collision which sent the vessel to the bottom. Two vessels were naval and the other, a commercial liner and the destruction of each one made the headlines. All three books depend on eyewitness accounts of the event by the survivors to tell the larger story of the ship’s demise.

James Beasley penned a memoir of his war experiences in the US Navy and his continued friendships after the war with the men with whom he sailed. The manuscript was originally written for his family, but after his death his wife, Elsie, finished and edited the manuscript for publication. Beasley wrote about his experiences as a signalman in the Pacific theatre during the Second World War, serving on USS *Liscome Bay* and USS *Alpine*. Though a handful of secondary sources were consulted, the book is narrated from Beasley’s perspective, of what

he experienced and thought. There are gaps in the larger narrative of the war and the island-hopping by American forces, where Beasley did not directly participate. The book does not suffer from this, but if readers are looking for detailed blow-by-blow accounts of the various battles, they ought to look elsewhere. This is the story of Beasley's experience of war.

The book explores the reasons a young man goes to war and his grasp and growing understanding of what war was and how you survive it. It is about the impact of war, aging him beyond his years, changing his understanding of just about everything in his world. Beasley was in high school, in his state of North Carolina, when war broke out. In 1942, as he graduated, he decided to enlist in the navy. A family friend convinced his parents it was best for him to select the service he entered than wait to be drafted. His first training was at the Great Lakes Naval Training School on Lake Michigan. Next came training as a signalman at the Navy's school in Farragut, Idaho. Young Beasley entered the service filled with national patriotism and sense of adventure.

Posted to the new escort aircraft carrier *Liscome Bay*, James Beasley travelled to Astoria, Oregon, and joined 600 other seamen and officers. Beasley notes that the crew came from around the country, but as they settled into the ship, "we were together - we were one!" (19). Carrying Wildcats, Hellcats, and Avengers, the ship sailed out for a shakedown cruise. During this cruise he witnessed a Wildcat miss the stopping cable and go off the side of the ship. He watched as the pilot struggled and failed to escape the sinking plane. Beasley notes that he had seen this man take leave of his family as they left San Diego. This would be but the first of many deaths he witnessed, and the beginning of the memories that would follow him the rest of his days.

Sailing to Pearl Harbor, the *Liscome Bay* was assigned to the 5th Fleet (Admiral Nimitz) under Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance. As a signalman, Beasley's station was split among the signal bridge, watching for enemy aircraft and ships, or assisting the quartermaster. His first engagement was in the Gilbert Islands, with the assault on Makin Island in November 1943. *Liscome Bay* provided air support for the landing and subsequent battle. His ship was close enough to the island that he could see the bomb blasts and the resulting damage to the island. His initial enthusiasm upon enlistment starts to shift as he wonders how an 18-year-old (himself) could be in the thick of such destruction.

Only a few days later as dawn broke, Beasley was in the signalmen shack next to the signal bridge when a torpedo struck the *Liscome Bay*. It hit the magazine, setting off bombs and ripping a hole in the end of the flight deck. Beasley writes of looking over the side of the bridge into the gaping hole, where fire swirled up from the bottom of the ship. To him it looked like hell. He knew that many of his friends had been in that area and were now all dead. Relying on his training, Beasley searched for men around him whom he could assist, grabbed his life preserver, and used a rope to ease himself over the side and into the water, as the ship listed. The water was covered in oil, some on fire, as burning oil dripped off the tilting flight deck. Failing to convince a sailor, without a life jacket, to let

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OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH THESE CAME BACK



ON THIS FLOATING FIELD OF WAR HUMANITY SUPPLANTS THE INSTRUMENTS OF DEATH—More than 2000 soldiers are rescued on the topside of the yellow transport, America's greatest carrier, as she glides through the Golden Gate with her previous cargo of men who managed for a while to avoid the life out of the Japanese empire. See that machine vapor? In it you could take quite a bite from steel in steel.

Rationing Days to Remember
MEAT, BUTTER—Dues 7¢, Beef 15¢, Bacon 15¢ through 20¢, through 20¢, 20¢ through 20¢, 20¢ through 20¢.
EGGS—Dues 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢.
WHEAT—Dues 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢.
YOGURT—Dues 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢.

SHIRAZ—Dues 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢.
AGRICULTURE—Dues 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢.
WHEAT—Dues 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢, 10¢ through 10¢.

Beasley saved him, the 18-year-old swam away from his ship. In less than a half-hour, *Liscome Bay* slipped beneath the waves.

Rescued from the water, Beasley was taken back to Makin Island, and then on to Pearl Harbor to recover. The sinking had left him with bruised ribs and abdomen, a nearly-severed little toe, and all the hair on his head singed off. In comparison to the wounds of many of the rescued seamen, Beasley escaped relatively unharmed. Throughout the ordeal he had kept reminding himself that the next day would be his nineteenth birthday, and that he wanted to see it. Of the 23 signalmen aboard, only five survived; the five on duty on the bridge. For the first few months of that year, Beasley's nights were filled with dreams and flashbacks of the friends who died, and the sinking ship.

From Pearl Harbor survivors were taken to a hospital in California. After recovering, Beasley was given leave to visit his family in North Carolina for Christmas. He arrived at his home to learn that they had thought he had died when the *Liscome Bay* sank. Beasley blamed a Red Cross program for failing to send a telegram home for which they had charged him \$2. He speaks ill of the Red Cross, while praising the USO.

His next posting is to the attack transport USS *Alpine*. He returned to the island hopping, starting with Guam, and then Leyte, where he first saw kamikaze (which he spells kamakazi) attacks against ships. When *Alpine* returned to Leyte Bay a second time, it was hit by a kamikaze. Beasley praises the crew for putting out the fire, saving the ship and keeping the death toll to only five men. The *Alpine* was heavily involved in the battle for the Philippines. Submarine attacks against the fleet were numerous, death too common. New recruits were constantly funnelled into the ships. Beasley does not remark on his thoughts about this progression

(battle, loss, replacements, repeat) at the time, which strikes the reviewer odd, as he clearly took in all the profoundness of the destruction he personally witnessed, and carried it with him the rest of his life.

The next battle was for Okinawa. Landing troops, arms and ammunition; collecting injured men; repairing landing craft; and fighting off rounds of kamikazes continued the cycle of war. As at Leyte, one plane managed to hit the *Alpine*, resulting in more destruction this time. The fire that raged required hours to extinguish, causing Beasley some worry about the ship sinking, a thought he struggled to keep at a safe distance. The ship was saved and sent back to Seattle for repairs. By July, *Alpine* was back in Hawaii, and then pressed on to the Marshall Islands for the invasion of Japan, when the war ended.

With one final trip to carry occupation troops to Japan, the *Alpine* was decommissioned and the men sent home. Post-war life saw James Beasley graduate college and begin a career in teaching. He met and married Elsie Lowe and raised three children. For the rest of his life he kept in contact with the men he had served with on both *Liscome Bay* and *Alpine*. The camaraderie formed in war helped to carry them all forward into their post-war lives. In 1990, survivors of USS *Liscome Bay* formed an Association and began holding gatherings, usually both emotionally moving and wonderfully energizing events.

Other stories in the book cover such experience as crossing the 180th meridian, port call in Hawaii, and time in a hospital. The reader also gets snippets of Beasley's his comments on various officers (i.e. Curtis LeMay), his reaction to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's death, and news of the atomic bomb. The end of the war with Japan is greeted by a prayer of thanks, offered for having survived.

As the title suggests, the main point of the book is about the impact of having his ship sunk from under him, killing many of his shipmates and friends in a matter of minutes. The fight for survival, and dealing with the fact he survived, left an indelible mark. Beasley never let the sinking of USS *Liscome Bay*, nor the men who went down with the ship, pass into some contained, safely-partitioned thought. It is clear that throughout the remainder of his life, he constantly lived with the memory of the ship and men in the background, motivating him to live life fully. The repeated reunions and sojourns to sites of war memorials (i.e. the World War Two Memorial in Washington, D.C.) were to honour those who died, see old shipmates, and allow for a healthy renewal of those profound memories.

John Johnson-Allen recounts the naval career of Fred Henley. Unlike Beasley, he interweaves Henley's story into brief encapsulations of the larger context of the naval actions in which Henley was involved during the Second World War and subsequent relevant experiences in the post-war navy. The substance of Fred Henley's narrative on his sailing career was a five-hour interview with the author. Extended quotes from the interview alternate with Johnson-Allen's description of the larger events of which Henley was part. More than in the book just reviewed, the reader learns of contextual factors that influenced Henley's experience.

Fred Henley went to work on the water at the age of 14, as a seamen in a Thames

barge. When war broke out in 1939, he entered the British Navy as a boy and was sent for training to the *Ganges* shore establishment at Chatham, and then HMS *St George* on the Isle of Man. His first posting was to the heavy cruiser HMS *London* running convoy to Lisbon and Gibraltar, and then as part of the force that captured Iceland, which Britain needed as an air base. Two supply missions to Russia were followed by the ship's posting to Scapa Flow. Though *London* had seen combat against enemy aircraft, the rough North Sea did more damage, necessitating a refit.

At age 18, Henley was rated an ordinary seaman and sent for Asdic training in Dunoon, Scotland. Leaving the school as an able seaman, he switched into the Coastal Forces and joined a motor launch craft (ML 463) for inshore work and anti-submarine patrols. Sent to the Mediterranean Sea, Fred Henley took part in the American invasion of North Africa, in Morocco. ML 463's attack at Oran, along with another ML and two coast guard cutters, was a disaster, resulting in the two MLs retreating and the cutters surrendering, after many of the troops aboard were killed. ML 463 then assisted troops as they secured Morocco and moved east into Algeria and then Tunisia. Following the German surrender in North Africa, ML 463 was assigned to Malta, for the invasion of Italy. There, they ran anti-submarine patrols in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic. Henley spent the summer of 1944 in Naples, witnessing the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. In the fall, his boat was sent around to Bari, Italy, and ran special forces units into Split, Yugoslavia. From there, ML 463 assisted in the invasion of Greece, where he saw little of the Germans but was nearly shot in a gun fight between rival Greek partisan groups. After a brief visit to Alexandria, Egypt, he was sent home in the early spring of 1945.

At war's end Henley was placed in ML 131 and sent to Cuxhaven, Germany, with occupation forces. After a few months, he was transferred to the hydrographic department at Grimsby, England. Here he met his future wife, she 16, he 23. Their marriage lasted 56 years. Oddly enough, the woman's name is not mentioned, nor later, that of his daughter.

He joined the submarine service as it came with an increase in pay (as he said, needed for a married man). After training, Henley was posted to one of the reserve crews that rotated through submarines, operating out of Chatham.

Henley entered the crew of HMS *Truculent* in October 1949, then in refit. The submarine returned from sea trials on 12 January 1950. They headed back into the Thames Estuary, on the surface, at approximately 19:00. Henley was in the control room when a call from the conning tower came for a Seamanship Manual to be brought up. Henley grabbed a copy and went above. A freighter with a light array that the Commander and junior officers on the conning tower could not read correctly was bearing towards them. The officers thought the lights indicated it was stopped, and so the commander ordered the submarine to cross the other ship's bow. This proved to be a deadly choice as the merchant ship was actually moving quickly towards them. The resulting collision cut into the forward end of the submarine. Henley and the officers on the bridge dived into the water as the submarine went down, to be picked up by the freighter that had hit them.



The escape hatch and canvas (or twill) trunk within a submarine (John Johnson-Allen collection)

The other crew members, not killed in the collision within the submarine, waited until the vessel settled on the bottom and prepared to exit the ship as they had been taught. The first man who opened the outer hatch was blown out of the submarine and into the cold channel water to die. The remainder exited the submarine in a fairly controlled, orderly fashion, bobbed to the surface, and were carried by the outgoing tide into the English Channel, where almost all of them died from exposure.

Henley was taken to hospital and given an entire new uniform and kit, which amazed him. News of the sinking and those who escaped was quickly broadcast. When he was trying to make his way home, his train ticket and a meal were purchased by a civilian who recognized him from the newspapers as a survivor of the

mishap. After a brief stay at home, Henley returned to Chatham for the inquiry, the court martial and the coroner's inquest. He participated in the identification of bodies that washed ashore shortly after the accident. The commander, Lieutenant Charles Bowers, was found guilty of hazarding his ship, and was removed from the submarine service and placed aboard HMS *Indefatigable*.

Henley later helped identify the bodies of the men killed in the submarine when it was brought to the surface in March 1950. A grisly task, his remark provides the title to the book, "They were just skulls" (103). Repeated telling of the events and the sight of the decomposing dead certainly affected him. He knew it had been luck that had him on the conning tower at the time of the collision. But there is not the amount of introspection over this experience as Beasley engaged in around the loss of *Liscome Bay*.

Henley's next assignment was to be HMS *Affray*, but he switched to HMS *Scotsman*, as the later sailed out of Chatham where he and his wife lived. The *Affray* sank with all hands in 1951. Again, Fred appreciated his luck. The first few dives aboard the *Scotsman* were anxiety provoking for Henley, but he managed to overcome the fear. His naval career ended with a posting to the destroyer HMS *Chequers*, at Malta.

After the navy, Fred Henley worked in the mines as an electrician. Made

redundant in 1981, he switched to working for himself. In 2013, he received the Arctic Star from Britain and the Russian Arctic Medal for his services during the war. He does not record his reaction to these medals.

Unlike Beasley, Henley's interview does not leave the reader with a sense that the remainder of his life was somehow shadowed by the dead men from HMS *Truculent*, as was Beasley's with the Liscome Bay's dead. Perhaps the newness of the crew had not yet allowed him to develop the friendships which Beasley had established aboard *Liscome Bay*. Perhaps if the interview had lasted longer, or continued another day, Henley might have talked more about any long-term impact the sinking had. Beasley certainly had much time to ponder and decide how to write about his experience, whereas Henley's *Truculent* experience was just one part of a five-hour interview.

Anthony Richards uses letters and inquiry testimony to explore the experiences among those who survived the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. The great ship of the Cunard Line was sailing from New York to Liverpool when it was sunk off Queenstown, Ireland, by U-boat 20. The context of the *Lusitania*'s loss is clearly explained by the author, as is that of the lives of the key witnesses to the event. Richards is adamant it did not bring the Americans into the war (other issues with Germany a year later did), but was certainly a propaganda disaster for the Germans.

Richards came to this topic through some 200 letters he purchased for the Imperial War Museum (where he is employed) on the subject of Preston Prichard's fate aboard the *Lusitania*. He uses the Prichard letters, and his family, to tell the story of Prichard's return to England aboard the ill-fated ship. For the attack, sinking and survival, he uses the correspondence of many other passengers, who may have known Prichard aboard ship and who were contacted by Prichard's mother for information about her son's death. Their letters to Mrs. Prichard and testimony at the various inquiries and inquests describe the aftermath of the torpedo attack, for the people in the ship's boats, and those who struggled for survival in the water, amidst the wreckage, dead, and drowning.

Preston Prichard had been in Canada since 1905, and was in medical school at McGill University in Montreal, in 1915. On a break from school he went home to attend to some financial matters. His exuberance towards life, his determination to achieve, and his gentlemanly character are clearly brought out in his own correspondence, the family history which Richards reviews, and the statements made by those who knew him at McGill, and on board the *Lusitania*. This background makes his unfortunate fate of going down with the ship all the more tragic. His family was deeply affected by his death and spent a lot of time, energy and capital trying to gain news of his demise and locate his remains. Though his body was among the more than 900 never recovered, much was learned of his last days. His time aboard the grand ship included card games, formal dress dinners, walks around the deck, conversations with men he met aboard ship, and innocent flirtation with at least one young woman.

Apart from Prichard's story, this book employs the numerous stories told of surviving the torpedoing of the *Lusitania* to describe the ship's final minutes and the lived experience aboard the ship as she sank. Mrs. Prichard had written to people who survived the sinking, and were likely to have spent time with her son, asking after him. Many of those who responded to her inquiries revealed how they escaped. Their accounts are detailed, vivid and thrilling (though not always correct, Richards comments). Chapters 4 and 6 of the ship's sinking, people getting off the ship and their experience in the water make for tense reading. The extremely short Chapter 5 hazards a best guess as to where Prichard actually was when the ship went down. It serves as an intellectual break between the emotional ride of the chapters before and after.

Multiple sources within the book describe a certain orderly calm aboard ship as the liner listed to starboard and then started to slide below. Boats on the port side could not be lowered safely because of the ship's list, yet many passengers and crew entered those boats and tried to launch them. The result was death and injury as the boats swung and crashed inboard, or emptied into the sea if they managed to be swung out. Occasionally there is a comment about a note of panic rising among those on deck as they waited to enter a boat, or frantically jumped overboard. These accounts cast a pall over the descriptions of calm order, rendering them perhaps more an effort to honour and dignify the final moments of frantic people.

Added into the survivors' tales are those of the people who went out to rescue them, and those who met them on the docks of Queenstown. Their stories note the survivors' state of shock and exhaustion. Some rescued passengers wouldn't remove their life jackets, even though they were on land. Some were marked for life by the event, never fully recovering from the fright they had sustained, or the memory of watching hundreds of people drown. Still others appear to have mustered themselves to help others survive, find shelter when they reached land, help identify the dead, and continue with their lives as best they could. This is much like the story told by James Beasley.

The book adds another perspective to surviving a ship sinking, that of the family left behind by those who did not survive. The story of the Prichard's search for their son and brother is a tale of profound, anguished grief. Early hope of good news was quickly dashed as lists of survivors were no longer added to, while the lists of the dead, missing and presumed dead, grew longer. As days turned to weeks and months, the family's anxiety turned to thoughts of how Prichard meant his end. In time, they could take some solace from the fondness the survivors held for their son and brother, and that he had helped others to survive.

In comparing the three works we find a unique qualitative range. James Beasley leaves the reader with a greater sense of his struggle to come to terms with surviving a ship sinking. Henley's narrative only brushes by the response and his author spends very little time on the impact of such an experience. Richards covers the response from the perspectives of many people, revealing the diversity

LUSITANIA DISASTER.
Information Wanted.

**Reward
 for
 Recovery
 of the
 Body.**



**Reward
 for
 Recovery
 of the
 Body.**

Wanted any information regarding

Richard Preston Prichard,

Lusitania Passenger, 2nd Cabin D 90.

Aged 29 years. Height, 5 ft. 10 in. Dark brown hair, with high forehead, blue eyes, and prominent features. Very deep dimple in chin. (Probably wearing gold ring on tie, with red and white lava heads inset.)

Any information regarding him on the voyage, or that will lead to his discovery, will be most thankfully received, by wire or otherwise, by

MOSTYN PRICHARD, 7, Brockenhurst Road, Ramsgate.

among reactions. As noted above, he also adds the unique layer of the surviving family's experience.

These three books also speak to the importance that personal narratives, including letters, oral history, or personal memoirs, can add to our understanding of historic events. They say a great deal about the impact of such events (in this case war and sinking ships) on those who experience it first-hand. Without refinement for presentation to the public, the sources present a kind of experiential rawness that official documents do not tend to express, or capture. The quality of writing differs

across the three books with Richards' being the smoothest and easiest to read. Henley's story is very short, but moving back and forth between his own words and those of the author gives a bit of a choppy flow to the book. Beasley's work is that of a person who is not a professional writer, but rather someone struggling to get his thoughts on paper for posterity, realizing they are important. His writing (with his wife's editing) is infused with emotion, and is provocative of personal reflection.

James Beasley's book is populated with 52 images, taken by people on the scene, Beasley himself, and official navy photographs. They give form to many of the men of whom he writes, and the events in which they were engaged (including 'celebrations' ashore and afloat).

Johnson-Allen uses far fewer images than Beasley, only 12, just two of which include himself, (both of which are group shots). Richards' book contains 38 images presented throughout the book of people in the text and of the context around the ship's demise (many from the author's own collection). Only Johnson-Allen's book includes appendices, one a list of survivors of HMS *Truculent*, the other an image of the telegram about the sinking of HMS *Truculent*.

Beasley includes a very short bibliography, with only rudimentary naval histories of the Second World War and James Noles Jr.'s *Twenty-three Minutes to Eternity: The Final Voyage of the Escort Carrier USS Liscome Bay* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010). Johnson-Allen cites the basic archival references without titles or description, URLs of websites, and a set of basic set of secondary resources covering the naval topics discussed in Henley's narrative. Richards supplies thorough end notes along with a brief selected bibliography (the longest of the three books). Richards and Beasley provide a workable index to their books, but Johnson-Allen, lamentably, does not.

Anyone interested in stories of ship sinkings would be interested in these three books. Those focusing on the *Lusitania* may well find new perspectives and confirmation of established fact within the survivors' tales told by Richards. For readers looking for the personal narrative of a naval veteran of the Pacific Theatre during the Second World War, James Beasley's book would be an important addition to their book shelf. Further, historians engaged in using personal narratives to explore historic events could use all three books as samples of method.

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