

BOOKNOTES

TEACHERS GUIDE

thematic connections

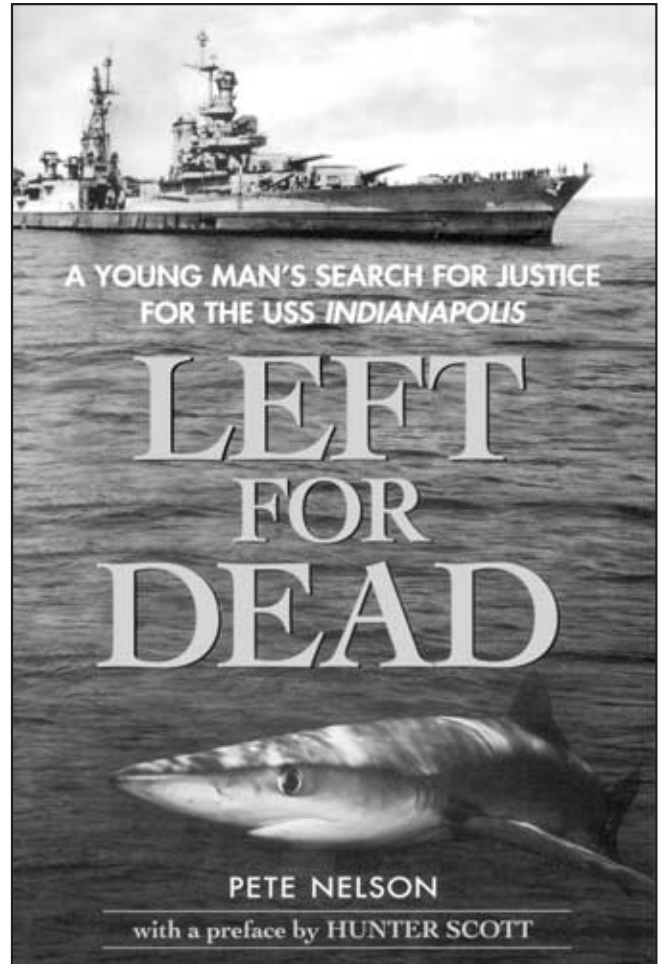
Survival • Courage
Hope • Perseverance

Grades 7 up

about the book

This nonfiction work explores the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis*, one of the greatest sea disasters in naval history, and a young man's quest to seek the truth and to reverse the court-martial of the ship's captain.

It only took 12 minutes for the USS *Indianapolis* to sink when the Japanese torpedoed it on July 30, 1945. More than eleven hundred sailors were thrown into shark-infested waters. Those who survived the sinking fought to stay alive for four days before the Navy even knew they were missing. Only 317 sailors made it, but the tragedy didn't end there. The government needed a scapegoat, so it blamed the ship's captain, Charles Butler McVay III, for the disaster and court-martialed him. Eventually McVay committed suicide in 1968. In 1997, Hunter Scott, a sixth-grader in Pensacola, Florida, dedicated his history project on the theme of Triumph and Tragedy, to the USS *Indianapolis*, and to getting the U.S. government to reverse the court-martial of Captain McVay. It took several years for Hunter Scott to accomplish his mission, and on July 11, 2001, Captain McVay was exonerated. This was a triumph for McVay's family and the surviving sailors.



Delacorte Press hardcover • 0-385-72959-6

*Political interest can never
be separated in the long run
from moral right.*

—Thomas Jefferson,
quoted in *Left for Dead*

pre-reading activity

Ask students to read a brief overview about the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis* at the Survivors Organization Web site. (See back page.) Have them think of questions that they would like to ask the survivors of this tragedy. After sharing the questions in class, combine the ones that are similar and post the questions on a bulletin board. Encourage students to search for the answers to their questions as they read the book.

thematic connections

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

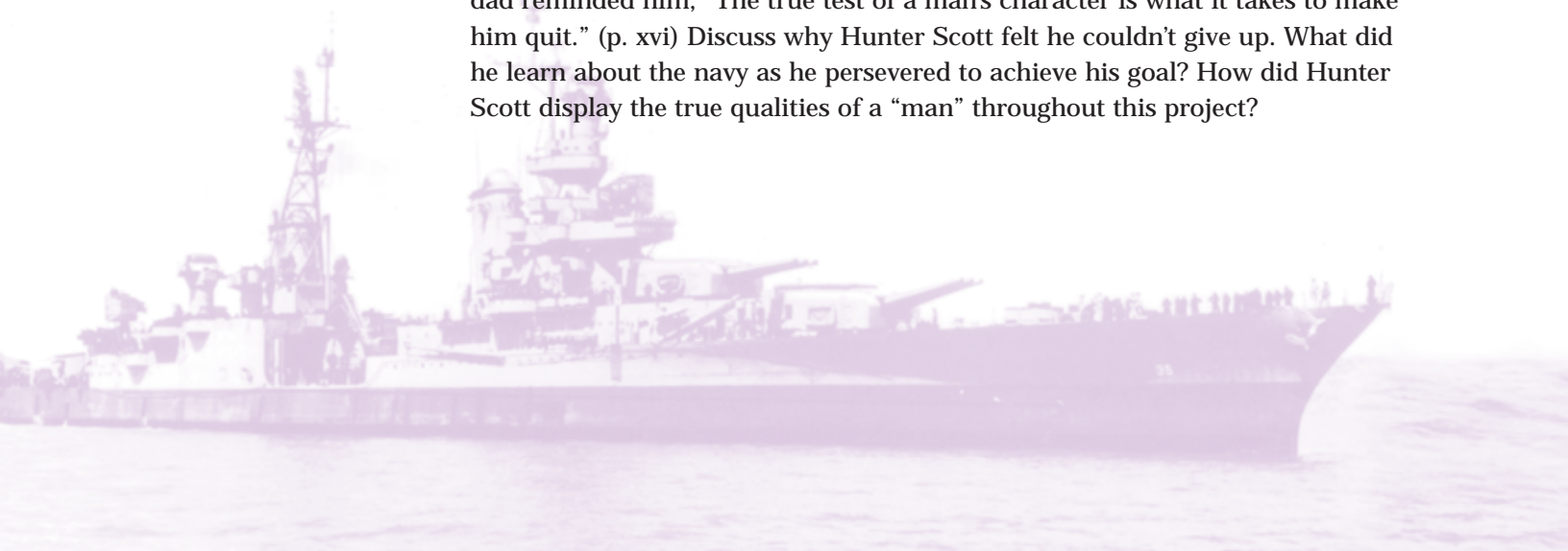
SURVIVAL—“[Morgan Mosley, one of the survivors,] said in a life-or-death situation, a person’s mental and spiritual condition determines whether he will survive.” (p. xv) Discuss what some of the veteran sailors did to help the mental conditions of the younger ones. Engage the class in a discussion about the greatest threats to the survival of the men. How is survival in the ocean more challenging than survival on land? Captain McVay committed suicide 24 years after he was court-martialed. Discuss why he gave up on life.

LEADERSHIP—“Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage and sternness.” (p. 101) Ask the class to discuss how McVay exhibited these leadership characteristics. Describe McVay’s relationship with his men when they were in the water. Discuss how some of the men on the life rafts died because of a lack of leadership. How is leadership essential for survival? Define the term *scapegoat*. How did the navy make McVay, as captain of the ship, a scapegoat for their mistakes? What are Hunter Scott’s leadership qualities?

COURAGE—Think about the ordeal that the men went through while they were in the water. Debate whether it took more courage to live or to die. How have the survivors continued to show courage? Discuss how it took courage for Hunter Scott to go before the Senate Armed Forces Committee on behalf of Captain McVay.

HOPE—Hunter Scott says, “My dad says all young people need dream builders in their lives. . . . I have learned never to let anyone destroy my dreams.” (p. xv) Who is Hunter Scott’s dream builder? How did the navy destroy Captain McVay’s dreams? How did the survivors of the USS *Indianapolis* see Hunter Scott as their last hope in getting Captain McVay exonerated?

PERSEVERANCE—There were times when Hunter Scott felt defeated in his efforts to get the government to reverse Captain McVay’s court-martial. His dad reminded him, “The true test of a man’s character is what it takes to make him quit.” (p. xvi) Discuss why Hunter Scott felt he couldn’t give up. What did he learn about the navy as he persevered to achieve his goal? How did Hunter Scott display the true qualities of a “man” throughout this project?



connecting to the curriculum

LANGUAGE ARTS—Read the following quote, “Knowing *how* the men in the water died is not the same thing as knowing *why* they died.” (p. 101) Ask students to write a short essay titled “Why They Died.”

NBC Nightly News featured Hunter Scott on a segment called “The American Spirit” on August 1, 1997. Ask students to use information in the book and other pertinent references from the library or Internet to write a script for the NBC feature story on Hunter Scott. Select appropriate music to use throughout the segment.

SOCIAL STUDIES—Refer students to www.discovery.com/exp/indianapolis/captain.html and ask them to view the video clip of Captain McVay and Japanese sub commander Hashimoto at McVay’s court-martial. Ask students to research what happens in a court-martial trial. What types of questions were asked of McVay? Why was Hashimoto questioned?

The United States entered World War II when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The tide of the war turned at the Battle of Midway. Ask students to research major battles involving the U.S. during World War II and construct a time line of these events.

There were approximately 350 ships that were lost during World War II, but Captain McVay was the only captain court-martialed. Have students find out about some of the other ships that were lost and have them plot the site of each sunken ship on a world map.

MATH—Ask students to use an almanac and find out the total number of service men and women who lost their lives in World War II. Have them construct a graph that compares the war casualties by branch of service. Which branch of service suffered the most casualties?

SCIENCE—Many of the survivors suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to find out the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. How is it treated? Discuss whether post-traumatic stress might have been a factor in Captain McVay’s suicide.

S.O.S. messages were sent from the USS *Indianapolis*, but the men didn’t know whether these messages were received. Have students research how technology has changed methods of communication for the military today. What scientific tools are used to locate sunken ships?

CAREERS—There was a time when Hunter Scott felt that he would choose a navy career. He changed his mind after his quest to exonerate Captain McVay was over. Ask students to brainstorm possible career choices for Hunter Scott based on what they learned about him in the book. Students may also want to examine the qualifications necessary to receive an appointment to the naval academy.



Hunter Scott
hard at work.

vocabulary/ use of language

Ask students to write down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context of the book. Such words may include: *vindicate* (p. xvii), *strafe* (p. 11), *noxious* (p. 66), *derelict* (p. 72), *exsanguination* (p. 74), *egomaniac* (p. 122), *autonomous* (p. 139), *attenuate* (p. 141), *attrition* (p. 149), and *internecine* (p. 156).

related titles

by theme

Flags of Our Fathers: Heroes of Iwo Jima

James Bradley with Ron Powers

Adapted for young people by Michael French

Survival • Courage

Grades 8 up / 0-385-72932-4

The Last Mission

Harry Mazer

Survival • Courage

Grades 7 up / 0-440-94797-9

Under the Blood-Red Sun

Graham Salisbury

Survival • Courage

Grades 5 up / 0-440-41139-4

internet resources

USS Indianapolis CA-35 Survivors Organization www.ussindianapolis.org

This site provides a brief overview of the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis*, a survivor's story, and the demise of Captain McVay.

USS Indianapolis www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq30-1.htm

The official site of the Department of the Navy. The Naval Historical Center answers frequently asked questions about the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis*.

Discovery Channel: USS Indianapolis—The Final Voyage www.discovery.com/exp/indianapolis/voyage.html

This online time line of the final voyage of the USS *Indianapolis* also discusses the fate of Captain McVay.

Letters, Poems Etc. <http://members.tripod.com/IndyMaru/indymaru8.htm>

This site provides poignant letters and poems sent to family and friends from sailors on the USS *Indianapolis*.



Photo Credit: Mark Rea

about the author

Pete Nelson is the author of 18 books of fiction and nonfiction and has written for numerous magazines. His most recent book, *That Others May Live* (Random House, 2000) tells the story of the Air Force's pararescue jumpers. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife and son.

Hunter Scott, who wrote the book's preface, is the boy whose history fair project finally changed history. It took him five years to get the U.S. government to reverse the court-martial of Captain Charles Butler McVay III. He was only eleven years old when he started his crusade to right a wrong and rewrite history. It would take him five years and lead him to some of the most powerful people in Washington, D.C. This is his story, and the story of the sailors whose incredible courage and sacrifice inspire us all.

on the web

For additional online resources, author bios, teachers guides, and more . . .

Visit our **FREE** online site
Teachers @ Random

Be sure to sign up for our online newsletter!

www.randomhouse.com/teachers