

Weather

Fair, cooler tonight. Min. 38-42. Thursday, increasing cloudiness, cool. United States Official Report

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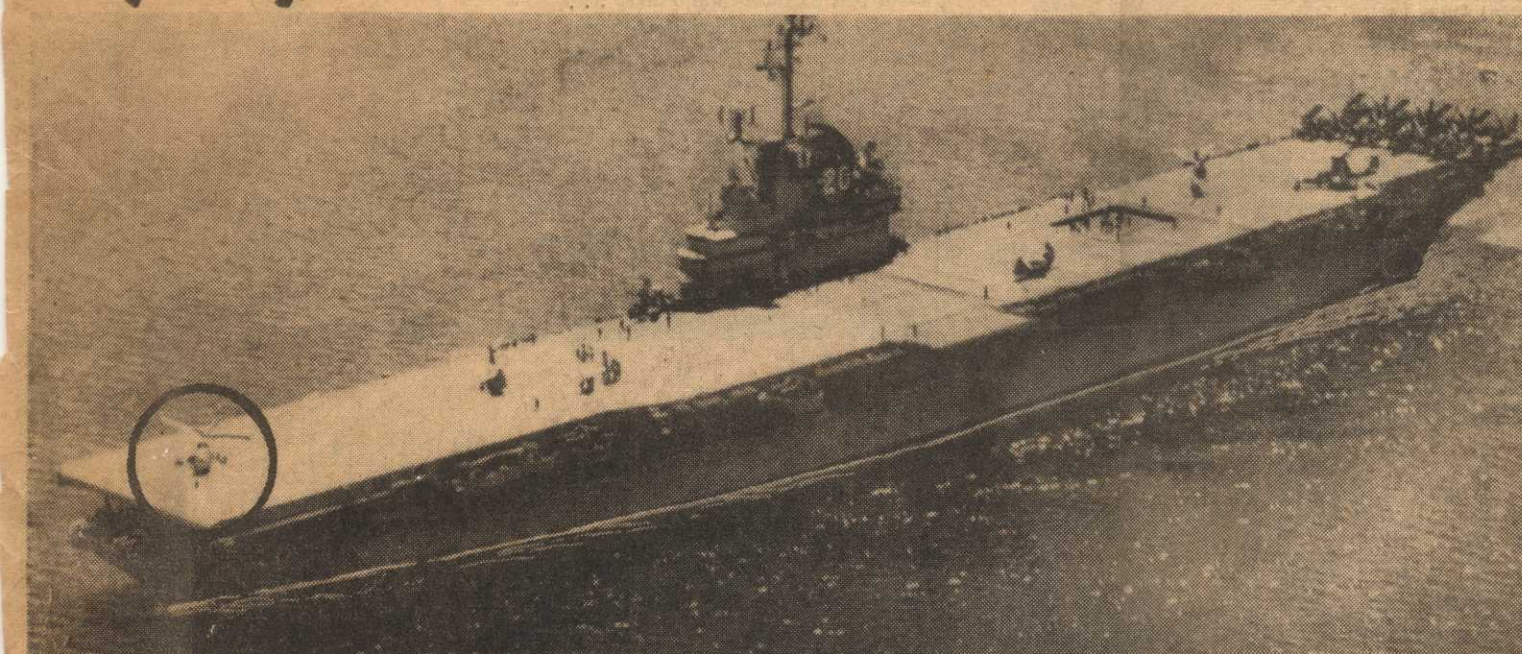
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FIVE CENTS

100 Die in Carrier Fire Injury Toll 125 Aboard USS Bennington



WOUNDED ON Carrier Bennington are removed by helicopter (circle) as stricken ship passes Cananicut Island in Narragansett Bay.—[AP Wirephoto



CAPT. W. F. RABORN JR. Bennington Skipper



MAP SHOWS location of carrier at time of explosions.



WOUNDED crewman of USS Bennington is carried in litter from stricken ship after it docks at Quonset Naval Station, R. I. Shipmates line the railing.—[UP Telephoto

2 Explosions Rip Ship Off Rhode Island Coast

Quonset, R. I.—(AP)—More than 100 men died and 125 were injured early today in two explosions and a fire aboard the aircraft carrier Bennington as she cruised along the eastern coastline. Several hours after the Navy had announced that 79 were killed and 220 injured, the ship's skipper, Capt. William F. Raborn Jr. told newsmen that "more than 100" were killed. The ship was en route from Norfolk, Va., to Quonset Point Naval Station.

The huge craft came into this port shortly after noon today, her decks lined with tired crewmen, their faces blackened by smoke. Ensign Robert Grant of Brooklyn, N. Y., his own ankles bleeding, told newsmen "all I can say is, God, I'm lucky to be alive." He was directing the evacuation of the casualties as he spoke. Grant estimated the first of two explosions occurred about 6:15 a. m. today. He said: "I was in the forward hangar bay when I heard general quarters alarm sounded. I listened for a moment and suddenly it dawned on me that there was no report that this was a drill."

THE DISASTER probably was the second worst in naval peacetime history. There were 178 men missing or killed in 1952 in a mid-Atlantic collision between the destroyer Hobson and the carrier Wasps. A shift of helicopters carried many of the seriously injured ashore to the Newport Naval Hospital across the bay from here as the 32,000 ton Essex class carrier moved toward port. There was no immediate explanation of the explosions, but one report said high octane gas was involved.

GRANT SAID the fire evidently was caused by two explosions, one before the general quarters alarm was sounded and one afterward. Grant said: "Five guys went to the hatch and I saw them pulling on it. The hatch seemed to be stuck. Suddenly a terrific explosion shook the ship and blew the hatch in. The five guys just vanished." Grant said the hangar suddenly filled with smoke and that there must have been 30 or 40 men around, some choking and some coughing and others "just plain screaming." "I think," he said through grim lips, "this was worse than war." Grant said some one formed a chain. He went on: "We all gripped another's hands and the lead man made his way to an opening to the starboard side forward. I guess plenty of the guys made it out. "I must have been unconscious when I got out. Someone must have dragged me up. When I regained my senses all I could say was: 'Thank God, I had my clothes on.'"

GRANT'S HAIR and eyebrows were singed. He had no socks on, so his ankles got seared by flame. "My ankles are raw and bleeding," he said, "but that is nothing, nothing at all compared to what happened to some of my buddies." Grant said the fire crews risked their lives in going deep into the forward lower deck to fight the blaze. "They fought it almost as soon as it started and were still fighting it at the time the carrier docked at Quonset." The carrier reached port at 12:31 p. m., more than six hours after the estimated time of the explosions.

SECRETARY OF NAVY Charles Thomas flew from Washington to meet him and begin the Navy's investigation. From Washington President Eisenhower sent his personal and official condolences to the officers and crew of the carrier and to their families, many of whom waited anxiously for the big ship to dock.

Ashore, the Navy mobilized help rapidly. Ambulances were rushed to dockside here. All available helicopters were pressed into service shuttling casualties from the broad flight deck of the carrier to the Newport Naval Hospital.

RELATIVES of men aboard the craft began gathering at dockside minutes after word of the tragedy was heard here. The Navy gathered them into the base theater and served coffee and sandwiches. In stretcher after stretcher, the burned and injured were gently but rapidly, carried by shipmates from the Bennington to waiting ambulances which wheeled in and out with precision. Some of the men were in poor condition and in various stages of dress.

CAPT. RABORN described the accident to reporters in the Bennington's No. 1 ready room.

Washington —(UP)—Rep. Edith Nourse Rogers (R.-Mass.) told the House today she thinks sabotage was involved in the disaster on the Bennington.

He said about 100 are now dead. He added: "We just completed our first successful launching of the first of our air groups when suddenly an explosion shook the forward part of the ship down on the second or third deck."

"Realizing a serious catastrophe had occurred we launched the rest of the air group, to free the decks for casualty control." The Bennington was about 75 miles south of Newport when the blast occurred at 6:20 a. m., the captain said. "I am mighty proud of the way the crew of the fighting Bennington handled this very serious casualty catastrophe. They displayed remarkable feats of heroism and I can only say that as the truth of the story comes out you can judge for yourselves and be proud."

"The nature of the explosion at the moment is undetermined. The general location is in one of three or four major items of equipment. "The best information now is (that it occurred) possibly at the five-inch fuse magazine. "This is completely unconfirmed and until we do get information I can only say it was a serious explosion at the third level on the port side. "It killed about 100 of our people, 125 others are injured and about 25 or 30 of them are more than minor injuries. "The cooperation of the shore activities in furnishing helicopter service bringing doctors and corpsmen at sea and at the dock has been magnificent. "One of our two doctors apparently was killed and the other, Comdr. Clyde Norman, did a heroic job to take care of the injured."

CAPT. RABORN SAID he was on the bridge supervising the air launching at the time of the explosion. In explaining the possible cause of the explosion he said fuses activate a shell—and make it go off. The fuses are kept separately from all other magazines, the captain said, since they are highly explosive. After the initial shock of the explosion, Captain Raborn said the men aboard the ship took quick action. From the bridge "we set up our communications for overall supervision. "The first task was to rescue trapped men including those cornered by smoke. This was done with the ship's damage control organization in the van of the rescue effort."

Captain Raborn said that about 20 aircraft had been launched before the explosion occurred. He did not give the number launched after it. The interview was interrupted when Capt. Raborn went down the gangway to greet Secretary of the Navy Thomas who arrived at the ship at approximately 1:25 p. m.

THE BENNINGTON had an illustrious career in World War II.

The Bennington, 11th of the Essex class, was launched after Pearl Harbor, participated in the destruction of an entire Japanese convoy off Okinawa. She also played a major role in the sinking of the Japanese battleship Yamato.

Norfolk, Va.—(UP)—The aircraft carrier Bennington sailed from Hampton Roads Monday after a two-day stop here to pick up Air Task Group 181 for shipboard training.

About 500 Navy airmen are attached to the group based at nearby Oceana, Va. It includes Fighter Squadrons 21, 34 and 41 and Attack Squadron 42. Anxious wives and relatives of the airmen began calling Atlantic Fleet headquarters here and radio stations in Norfolk as soon as word of the fire at sea spread through this area.

Survivors Tell Own Stories of Bennington Fire

Aviation Electrician's Mate Third Class Francis Toth of Phoenixville, Pa., joined the Bennington crew three days ago. Here is his story and other eyewitness stories of the disaster as told to United Press.

By FRANCIS TOTH Quonset Point, R. I.—(UP)—About 6 o'clock this morning I was forward near the engine room on the fourth deck when I smelled smoke.

At first I thought it was a routine fire drill. Everyone did. Then I heard guys yell "fire" and I entered the engine room. All I could see was fire and smoke. It looked like hell in there. I started pulling out bodies. Everyone I pulled out was dead. I think a lot of the dead boys were in the engine room.

The fire swept upwards on the port side through the officers' quarters. A lot of officers were killed right in their bunks. We fought the fire for four hours before we got it out. There wasn't any panic. Everybody stuck by their jobs.

By BRUNO COSTANTINI Seaman, of Detroit

I was sitting in the mess hall when I heard two blasts and smoke pouring into the room. I was just putting my chow down on the table—that was about 6:15 a. m.—when I heard the first blast and saw the heavy smoke. I dashed up forward where the fire was, to see what I could do. There was smoke everywhere. A lot of the men were still in their racks (bunks) when it happened.

A lot of officers were burned, as well as seamen. I dashed up to the hangar deck and began helping to pull men out. I guess I must have pulled out about 10. Rumors say the fire was near a generator. But I don't know. All I know is that I heard the blast and saw the smoke and everyone started shouting.

By CAPT. W. F. RAYBURN Skipper of the Bennington

I was standing on the bridge. We had just launched 18 fighters. We were 75 miles south of Newport and the last plane had just cleared the deck at 6:20 a. m. when there was an explosion. There also was a lot of smoke. The explosion was forward on the portside, two or three decks below. I realized that it was a catastrophe. So I launched the rest of the air group to clear the decks. I'm mighty proud of the way the crew acted. They displayed remarkable feats of heroism.

The nature of the explosion is at the moment undetermined. It was possibly a five-inch fuse magazine although that is completely unconfirmed. The explosion killed about 100. And 125 others were injured, and of these 25 to 30 have more than minor injuries. One of our two doctors aboard was killed. Dr. Norton did heroic job.