USS Benevolence: A ship lost at sea, and in time

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Retired United States Navy Corpsman David Holly Sr. poses for a photograph with a picture of the USS Benevolence hospital ship in Union City, Calif., July 13, 2012. Holly was serving aboard the Benevolence on Aug. 25, 1950, when the freighter Mary Luckenbach rammed and sank the ship in a blinding fog a few miles outside the Golden Gate bridge. Twenty-three of the 528 crew members lost their lives that day and Holly suffered injuries to the left side of his body. (Anda Chu/Staff)

David Holly, who joined the Navy at 16 so he could see the world, suddenly couldn't see a thing. Standing watch on the bow of the USS Benevolence as the hospital ship returned to San Francisco Bay after a day of sea trials, Holly was blinded by fog.

He never saw the approaching freighter until it was so close to the Benevolence that neither ship had time to avoid a collision. The force of the impact sent Holly sprawling on the deck. The ships drifted apart, then came together again.

Again Holly went flying.

"The ship was leaning port-wise," recalled Holly, an 80-year-old Arkansas native now living in Union City. "The spirit in me told me to go don a life jacket."



The USS Benevolence hospital ship is seen in this file photo. The Benevolence collided on Aug. 15, 1950, with the freighter Mary Luckenbach and sank in a blinding fog a few miles outside the Golden Gate Bridge. Of the 500 crew members on board, 23 lost their lives that day. (Staff Archives)

Holly did. Then he tried to release lifeboats, to no avail. The 577-foot-long ship continued to roll. "The spirit in me said, 'Jump into the ocean off the starboard side as she's going down," he said, "and swim, swim as fast as you can."

Holly leapt into the frigid water four miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge. He doesn't recall how long he swam. But when he looked back, the Benevolence and his 527 shipmates were nowhere to be seen.

1950 tragedy

On Aug. 25, it will be 62 years since the Benevolence slipped beneath the waves 25 minutes after its collision with the SS Mary Luckenbach. News of the accident went viral, which in 1950 meant generating buzz on AM radio and being splashed across the front page of newspapers all over North America. But soon enough, the remarkable story -- of 23 tragic deaths, of the near-miraculous rescue of 505 hypothermic survivors, of haunting images, of investigation and blame-fixing -- seemed to disappear into the fog whence it came.

"People don't know about it," said Peter Sears, of Lincoln in Placer County, a 19-year-old sailor when the Benevolence sank from under him. "Very few people remember. You've got to be old."



The Benevolence, commissioned near the end of World War II, quickly compiled a distinguished record. It was part of the Allied flotilla in Tokyo Harbor during the surrender of Japan. It remained off the coast of Japan for six months, processing liberated prisoners of war. In 1946, it participated in nuclear weapons testing at Bikini Atoll. It was mothballed the following year.

With escalating hostilities in Korea came a renewed need for hospital ships. The Benevolence was dispatched to Mare Island to be refurbished. On a cool Friday morning, manned by a hastily assembled crew, it was sent to Oakland to take on

supplies, then head out the Golden Gate.

"They didn't tell us anything," said 81-year-old Bob Packwood, of Camarillo in Southern California, a Navy medical corpsman that day. "We assumed it was sea trials. Some guys thought we were headed overseas."

The shakedown assignment, which Holly said took them 35 miles out to sea, went well. The ship was loaded with engineers and shipyard workers and a full medical crew, but no patients. As the Benevolence made its way home, it was enveloped in an all-consuming fog.

The ship's radar was on, but didn't pick up the SS Mary Luckenbach. An inquiry would reveal that the Luckenbach's radar, which had been malfunctioning, was turned off. Holly, one of three men stationed on the bow, was on the port side, just fore of where the Luckenbach broadsided the Benevolence.

The next thing he knew, he was floating alone in a chilling sea.

"I didn't see nobody," he said.
"I started crying for my mother and father. I said, 'Lord, please let me die.' And out of the fog came a wooden case of blood



Retired United States Navy Corpsman David Holley Sr., shown in Union City on July 13, 2012, was serving aboard the USS Benevolence hospital ship on Aug. 15, 1950, when the freighter Mary Luckenbach rammed and sank the ship in a blinding fog a few miles outside the Golden Gate bridge. (Anda Chu/Staff)



The USS Benevolence is shown lying on its side in 75 feet of water in this archives photo, the red cross on its hull visible through the waves. The Benevolence collided on Aug. 25, 1950, with the freighter Mary Luckenbach in a blinding fog and sank a few miles outside the Golden Gate Bridge. Of the 528 crew members on board, 23 lost their lives that day. (Archives)

plasma. The spirit said, 'Wrap your body around that box and just hold on."

Unbeknown to Holly, the water was churning with nurses, cooks and corpsmen.

"We were playing hearts down in quarters," said Arlis Hunter, then a corpsman and now an 82-year-old retiree in Brownsville in Yuba County. "We got out of there as quick as we could."

Enormous swells

Packwood was in the chow line when the collision occurred at 4:55 p.m. He grabbed a life jacket, and then encountered a veteran officer.

"He said, 'I've been on two ships that sank, and this son of a bitch is sinking,"
Packwood said. "I went out the starboard side."

Once in the water, a group of nurses formed a circle and, as they rose and fell in the heaving sea, sang "Merrily We Roll Along" and recited prayers.

"The swells were enormously high," said Packwood, who attached himself to a raft. "It was foggy and getting dark."

The fully loaded Luckenbach drifted away from the crash point and dropped anchor, initially unaware, its captain would later testify, of any damage to the Benevolence. Ultimately the Luckenbach would take on 85 survivors, including Holly. A distress signal raised an armada of Coast Guard craft, Army and Navy tugs, and a variety of private vessels and fishing trawlers. Would-be rescuers puttered slowly through the fog, looking -- "By guess and by golly," one fisherman said -- for survivors.

"The tide was going out," said Hunter, who lost 11 pounds in the 41/2 hours he was in the water. "When they picked me up, we were 12 miles out."

Holly, whose left side was injured, remembers getting aboard the Luckenbach and seeing four of his crewmates lying on the deck, foaming at the mouth "like dogs," dead of salt water ingestion.

The scene was chaotic at Fort Point and Fort Mason, where survivors were delivered.

"Every ambulance in the Bay Area was there, or at least that's how it seemed," Sears said. "You walked off the (rescue) ship and the Red Cross gave you a carton of cigarettes and the services gave you booze."

The 71-foot-wide Benevolence lay on its side in 75 feet of water in the middle of a shipping lane -- photos showed the red cross on its hull eerily visible through the waves -- for 16 months, during which an official inquiry found both captains at fault for excessive speed.

When the Navy deemed salvage impossible, the Benevolence was blown up in a series of three explosions between Thanksgiving and Christmas of 1951, one of the great tragedies in Northern California maritime history ripped stem from stern and consigned the status of an undertold story.

"When it comes to maritime history, they're all undertold," said Ted Miles, a historian with the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. "If it had been in full commission as a hospital ship, it could have been a lot worse. It was a real piece of luck."

Holly speaks regularly before church and senior groups, trying to keep the Benevolence alive. The past few years, he said, the left side he injured in the tragedy wakes him up at night. He thinks of two of his buddies who died.

"I'm just wondering if (Gilbert) Young, who's dead, and (Eugene) Harris, who's in that ocean dead, and all the rest of them who died," Holly said, "want me to make sure that people know they died for this country. And to let people know: Don't forget me."

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The Daily Review, Aug. 26, 1950. (Staff Archives)

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The San Mateo Times, Aug. 26, 1960. (Staff Archives)



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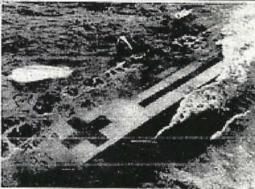
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