

**A GLIMPSE OF HELL: THE EXPLOSION ON THE USS  
IOWA AND ITS COVERUP**

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At 9:53 a.m. on April 19, the center gun in Turret Two, [USS *Iowa*] blew up. The fireball that surged from the open breach was between 2,500 and 3,000 degrees traveling at a velocity of 2,000 feet per second and at a pressure of 4,000<sup>2</sup> pounds. Forty-seven sailors were killed.

A botched investigation began mere hours after the explosion . . . Evidence was literally tossed overboard. Material as big as two, 2700-pound projectiles simply vanished. Testimony was doctored. Test results were fabricated or misinterpreted. Supposedly reputable institutions turned out suspect autopsy reports and issued conclusions that were scorned by independent medical examiners. Pop psychology supplanted reality.<sup>3</sup>

The Navy began its investigation into the explosion on the battleship USS *Iowa* by appointing Admiral Richard Milligan as the investigating officer (IO). Captain Miceli, his technical advisor, Commander Swanson, his legal advisor, and the Naval Investigative Service (NIS) assisted him. Despite his mandate to determine the cause of the explosion, Admiral Milligan was specifically precluded from opining about the possible misconduct of deceased sailors.<sup>4</sup> Admiral Milligan, nevertheless, concluded that Gunner's Mate Clayton Hartwig intentionally caused the explosion. His report, as well as the NIS report, depicted Hartwig as a probable homosexual who placed a homemade bomb in the breech of a loaded sixteen inch gun to commit suicide because he was depressed over the breakup of a relationship with a fellow shipmate.

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2. CHARLES C. THOMPSON II, *GLIMPSE OF HELL: THE EXPLOSION ON THE USS IOWA AND ITS COVERUP* (1999).

3. *Id.* at preface.

4. *Id.* at 142.

*A Glimpse of Hell* by Charles C. Thompson II chronicles the events leading up to the explosion and the investigation that followed and spends 403 pages attempting to prove that the investigation was flawed. The title of Thompson's book explains his purpose: *A Glimpse of Hell: The Explosion on the USS Iowa and its Cover-up*. Thompson concludes that the Navy embarked on a vast cover-up of the cause of this incident and precipitated a smear campaign of Hartwig and his alleged paramour, Gunner's Mate Third Class Kendall Truitt, through intentional leaks to the media. Thompson began his investigation into this incident at almost the same time as the Navy. He devoted ten years to the project, reviewed over 25,000 documents, and conducted 143 personal interviews of survivors and family members of the deceased.<sup>5</sup> Thompson obtained much of the information he used from Freedom of Information Act requests to the Navy, and used the documents he received as the framework for the text. The amount of time and effort Mr. Thompson put into researching this subject and his passionate writing style indicate that he is truly committed to his thesis.

Although there are faults with aspects of *A Glimpse of Hell*, it is still a book worth reading. This review addresses the three strengths of the book: insights into the role of judge advocates, insights into leadership, and insights into the human dynamic. Following this discussion, this review addresses the two weaknesses in *A Glimpse of Hell*: lack of organization and lack of objectivity.

Judge advocates can learn a great deal about leadership and their role in avoiding a leadership disaster by reading *A Glimpse of Hell*. Judge advocate involvement from the inception of an investigation of this magnitude is crucial. Not only must the judge advocate participate; he must render sound advice and be the voice of reason. Commander Swanson, the legal advisor for Admiral Milligan, knew that potential evidence was being destroyed and potential witnesses were not being interviewed. Yet, he did nothing. When faced with numerous media leaks of often-erroneous information, he should have acted to stop the leaks. Additionally, Thompson asserts that both Admiral Milligan<sup>6</sup> and Captain Miceli<sup>7</sup> had conflicts of interest and, therefore, had an incentive to conclude that the explosion was

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5. *Id.* at 404.

6. *Id.* at 142 (stating that he knowingly participated in unauthorized firing experiments on board the *Iowa* while serving as the Battle Group Commander prior to the explosion).

7. *Id.* at 162 (asserting responsibility for the improper storage and reblending of the powder used in the 16 inch guns on board the *Iowa*).

not an accident. The legal advisor must be vigilant to these potential issues and act to limit any potential problem.

Commander Swanson's biggest problem, however, is that he not only advised the IO, he also performed the legal review of the investigation report at a higher command.<sup>8</sup> This clearly presented a conflict of interest for him and prevented an objective legal review. An objective review would probably have determined that Admiral Milligan had exceeded the scope of his authority when he concluded that the explosion was an intentional act by Clayton Hartwig, a conclusion precluded by his appointing orders.

Service members can gain valuable insight into leadership from reading *A Glimpse of Hell*. The most striking comparison of leadership styles is between Thompson's portrayal of Captain Seaquist and Captain Moosally. Captain Seaquist relinquished command to Captain Moosally over a year before the explosion. Captain Seaquist was well trained for a position as skipper of a battleship because he had commanded three other warships.<sup>9</sup> He had a reputation as a natural and gifted ship handler and his abilities, along with his affable personality, inspired confidence in his subordinates. According to Thompson, Captain Seaquist never attained the rank of Admiral because he was not a politician.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, Thompson portrays Captain Moosally as the consummate politician. He received command of a battleship because of his political savvy and not his ship-handling abilities.<sup>11</sup> Captain Moosally almost rammed four Navy ships, mired the *Iowa* in mud, dumped 20,000 gallons of fuel oil in the harbor, and almost had a gunnery accident during the eleven months preceding the explosion.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Captain Seaquist, Moosally ruled with an iron fist and a scorched-earth mentality. Subordinates obeyed him out of fear, not respect. During his first speech to the officers of the *Iowa*, Captain Moosally bellowed: "I'm the coach, and you're the team. You can forget everything you learned under Larry Seaquist. I'm calling the plays now. If you guys are out to screw me, you can forget about it!"<sup>13</sup> He also distributed a twelve-page memorandum entitled "My manifesto," which prescribed a loyalty oath, leadership traits, and tactics.

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8. *Id.* at 285.

9. *Id.* at 25.

10. *Id.* at 34.

11. *Id.* at 35.

12. *Id.* at 58.

13. *Id.* at 45.

Regardless of whether Thompson's portrayal of these two leaders is factually accurate, he demonstrates two extreme leadership styles that should prompt readers to analyze what style is more effective and to examine their own leadership style.

In addition to exploring the cover-up theory, another strength of the book is the portrait Thompson paints of the survivors and family members' ordeal. *A Glimpse of Hell* is filled with insights into the human dynamic. Thompson's focus is primarily on the family and friends of Clayton Hartwig. He captures their anguish and anger as their son, brother, and friend was transformed from victim to homosexual to mass murderer. Thompson masterly weaves the angst felt by the families of those killed on the *Iowa* into the book and chronicles the camaraderie and support that developed among the families. Despite the publicity the Navy's theory received, most of the surviving relatives stood behind the Hartwigs in their attempt to clear their son's name. These subplots offer glimpses not into the hell the sailors faced, but into the human dynamic of caring and compassion.

Although Thompson states his thesis clearly in the subtitle, the book's organizational development is haphazard. It is impossible to state with certainty what occurred in Turret Two or what prompted Navy personnel to cover it up. Unfortunately, Thompson's tactic of sprinkling all possible explanations for the explosion and the ensuing cover-up throughout the text leaves the reader waiting for his theory of what occurred and why the Navy wanted to cover it up. Thompson engages in circular logic by asking the reader to conclude that a cover-up existed because he has provided so many possible reasons for it. This leaves the reader frustrated because it would have been possible to offer one plausible explanation.

The reader can piece together both the probable cause of the explosion and the probable reason for the cover-up by sifting through the book. The *Iowa* had been out of service for over twenty years when the Navy recommissioned it. The overhaul of the ship was incomplete, either because of fiscal or time constraints.<sup>14</sup> The powder, which was over forty years old, was improperly blended and stored.<sup>15</sup> The ship's gunners were undertrained and understaffed.<sup>16</sup>

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14. *Id.* at 26.

15. *Id.* at 51.

16. *Id.* at 67.

Based on the Navy's subsequent tests<sup>17</sup> and actions,<sup>18</sup> the probable scenario emerges. The gunner, untrained and inexperienced, rammed the powder, volatile because of improper blending and storage, into the gun too fast causing the powder to ignite prior to the closing of the breech. The probable theory behind the cover-up, besides simply the self-preservation perspective, is the political ramifications of an accident of this magnitude on the already controversial battleship program. The political ramifications coupled with the embarrassment of admitting that the four recommissioned battleships were floating time bombs fostered an atmosphere in which truth was a victim.

Although Thompson thoroughly researched this book, his presentation of the material leaves the reader constantly reviewing previous sections to keep track of its characters. He does not describe the events chronologically. Instead he orders the book primarily by the interviews he conducted. The large number of people involved, and the need to determine when a particular action or inaction occurred, make his theory difficult to follow to a logical conclusion. The reader would have benefited if Thompson had included a cast of essential characters, along with a brief synopsis of their significance.

Additionally, a list of important dates and their significance would help the reader flush out the cover-up theory. The intentional cover-up theory depends on the information possessed and the timing of actions taken by the Navy. A chronological listing of information is imperative for a reasoned opinion that an intentional cover-up existed, as well as for determining when it began, and who was aware of it. Without dates listed in chronological order, it is impossible to determine when the homosexual theory emerged. At least initially, it is possible to look at the Navy's actions in the light most favorable to the Navy and theorize that it conducted a thorough investigation. Consequently, determining when the homosexual theory emerged is critical in delineating the onset of the cover-up.

Another theme throughout *A Glimpse of Hell* is that the media coverage aided the Navy's cover-up attempt. Through intentional leaks, the Navy used the news media to perpetuate the theory that Clayton Hartwig

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17. *Id.* at 235.

18. *Id.* at 209 (replacing all the powder on board the *Iowa* with powder that had not been stored on barges). See also David Evans, *Navy Apologies for Cockamamie Story*, CHI. TRIB., Oct. 19, 1991, at E12 (painting a yellow caution stripe next to the rammer handle on the 16 inch guns).

was a homosexual to support its conclusion that he, and not defective powder or lack of training, caused the explosion. Thompson takes the media to task for its acceptance and subsequent reporting of this theory. He implies that the intensity of the media coverage had more to do with the allegations of homosexuality than the forty-seven sailors who lost their lives. He lambastes the media for losing its objectivity, particularly when the reporters disbelieved the Navy's theory. He attributes one reporter as having said, "You have to report the fact that NIS is doing an investigation, even if it's a lie, because it's news."<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, Thompson is also guilty of losing his objectivity. He denigrates the Navy at every opportunity, not only for its handling of the investigation, but for its politicism as well. Although Thompson is a former Navy officer, he makes subtle references in the preface of the book to absurdities he experienced during his own training in 1966.<sup>20</sup> He depicts practically every senior officer in the Navy as a politician more interested in saving his career than telling the truth or doing the right thing.

Furthermore, Thompson appears to lack objectivity because he characterizes individuals that support his theory as outstanding sailors, clearly knowledgeable in their jobs, and upstanding individuals. He characterizes those individuals who didn't support his theory as terrible sailors and incompetent leaders. It appears from his interview list that he failed to interview many of those individuals that may have disagreed with his assessment of the conduct of the investigation or the cause of the explosion. It is simply incredible that almost the entire crew of the USS *Iowa* at the time of the explosion was inept, or that almost all senior leadership in the Navy participated in an intentional cover-up. Yet this is how Thompson portrays it. Perhaps Thompson is right in his assumption that the media gave this story so much play because of its prurient aspects. Perhaps his years as a producer for *60 Minutes* or subsequent instances where the Navy has shown a propensity for covering up other incidents have colored his views.

Overall, Thompson achieves the purpose of his book, despite flaws in his methodology. Readers of *A Glimpse of Hell* will find it hard to come away unpersuaded that: Clayton Hartwig did not commit suicide by inten-

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19. THOMPSON, *supra* note 2, at 215.

20. *Id.* at 10 (indicating that while he was a student at the Naval Amphibious Warfare School, he had to memorize things such as how many direct hits by 16 inch high explosive shells could demolish a reinforced bunker when the Navy had not battleships armed with 16 inch guns on active duty).

tionally blowing up Turret Two on the USS *Iowa*, the Navy's assertion that he committed this act while depressed because of a failed homosexual relationship is absurd, and the Navy promulgated this theory to cover-up the real cause of the explosion. Readers will appreciate the true tragedy of this incident. Forty-seven men died, Clayton Hartwig was made the scapegoat of the Navy's bureaucracy, and the 1500 survivors of the accident were made victims when they should have been made heroes.<sup>21</sup>

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21. *Id.* at 367 (comments by Captain Moosally during his change of command ceremony on 4 May 1990).