

**LEFT TO DIE**  
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NARRATOR: On Friday, November 13, 1942, the cruiser USS Juneau disintegrated when hit by a Japanese torpedo just hours after surviving a vicious World War II sea battle.

Most of its 700-man crew were instantly killed.

But 140 were thrown alive into the angry waters off Guadalcanal. Only 10 ultimately survived.

The Navy glorified the crew's heroic deaths. But the scandalous story of how the Juneau crew was left to die is a heartbreaking tragedy of American military errors.

TITLE: LEFT TO DIE: THE TRAGEDY OF THE USS JUNEAU

JAMES SULLIVAN (Son of Albert Sullivan): This is a picture of the five Sullivan Brothers -- my father and my four uncles. They all served together in the Navy on the USS Juneau.

And this is Joe, my Dad Al, George, Frank and Matt. They were known as the "Fighting Sullivans"

NARRATOR: Thomas and Alleta Sullivan of Waterloo, Iowa, were destined to suffer an unprecedented loss in battle of five sons.

**NEWSREEL**

*"Dad, our boys did not die in vain."*

SULLIVAN: My grandfather was a brakeman on the Illinois Central Railroad. They were your typical Irish Catholic family. The boys liked to get in trouble a little bit, but they didn't get in any bad trouble.

My dad, he was the youngest. He was 19 and he was the only one that was married at the time.

Their motto, "We stick together" was true from the time they were little kids.

NARRATOR: After the December, 1941, surprise Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, the Sullivan Brothers decided to join up together, but only if they could serve on the same ship.

SULLIVAN: Initially, the Navy had reservations about them serving together on the same ship, but George wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Navy and that's how they got permission to all be on the same ship together

NARRATOR: The Navy needed men and this would make great headlines and boost recruiting efforts.

**NEWSREEL**

*HEADLINE: NAVY GETS A SHIP A MINUTE*

*Record ship building! Four months ahead of schedule and already in war paint, the 6,000-ton light cruiser Juneau is commissioned at an eastern port. The fighter's crew is a family affair. The four Rogers brothers come from Bridgeport, Connecticut. The five fighting Sullivan brothers hail from Waterloo, Iowa. They'll all ship aboard the Juneau!*

JAMES ROGERS (USS Juneau Crew): After we were on there we had to meet them, so we went and all got together and we couldn't get over it -- five of them and four of us. It was really something.

NARRATOR: Connecticut's four Rogers brothers were all expert boxers, encouraged to do so when they were very young by their father, a reformed mobster and bootlegger.

ROGERS: We were very, very close. We let them know in boot camp, that we wanted to stay together.

When we went aboard the ship we said, "oh this is a beauty, brand new." And it was fast and it had depth charges, torpedo tubes and all kinds of anti aircraft guns.

ORREL CECIL (USS Juneau Crew): She was commissioned on Valentine's Day of 1942.

We had an extraordinary amount of ammunition and of course being a fast ship, why she had more fuel as well.

LESTER ZOOK (USS Juneau Crew): She was thin-skinned so she was gullible when it'd come to torpedoes or anything like that or even bombs hitting her. And that was the captain's initial worry all the way.

NARRATOR: Capt. Lyman Swenson was proud of his sleek new ship, but he was deeply concerned about the safety of its crew.

DAN KURZMANN (Author, *Left to Die*): Captain Swenson was greatly loved by his men and he really loved his men and the one reason is because he had a terrible situation in his family life.

NARRATOR: Swenson's naval career had stalled because of a nasty 1920s divorce and false accusations of family abuse. Finally, after years of loyal service, the Navy gave him command of the Juneau.

ROBERT SWENSEN (Son of Lyman Swenson): His pride was best demonstrated by his -- on a shakedown cruise, he made it a point to call at Annapolis when I was there. And he anchored the ship and invited me aboard of course.

That was on my mother's birthday and he gave me a pair of cuff links that the Australian Navy had given him in 1925. That was the last time I saw him was April 9, 1942.

NARRATOR: For the next several months the Juneau patrolled the South Atlantic running convoys and intercepting merchantmen for illegal cargo searches.

ZOOK: Once we reached the battle zone after August and when we went through the canal into the Pacific, we took part in bombarding a few of the islands, but typically we traveled with the fast carrier task forces.

NARRATOR: After seeing battle action in September and October, the Rogers brothers decided it was prudent to separate.

ROGERS: My brother Joe went to the captain and said, "this is not a good idea for the four of us to be on one ship." He says, "I think we should split up." So the captain says, "all right,"

NARRATOR: In early November, the Sullivans also decided to separate.

ROGERS: Al the youngest one -- I went to him and I says, "did you hear we're transferring, two of us, Joe and myself?" So, Al says, "you know Jim, we've been talking. My brothers and I have been talking and we're going to do the same thing when we come back in again for more supplies." So they just never got back.

#### **NEWSREEL**

*"This is Guadalcanal. The marines took it, then held it. The Japs counterattacked time after time, and failed."*

NARRATOR: By November 1942, the Marines had held the island -- and its strategic Henderson airfield -- for three months.

On the afternoon of November 12th, the Juneau was part of a task force supporting the landing of Army troops to relieve battle-weary Marines, when U.S. pilots reported a large group of enemy ships north of Guadalcanal.

The so-called Tokyo Express was coming down with two battleships leading a 17-ship force to bombard Henderson Field on a massive scale never before attempted. It was to be a pivotal battle.

ZOOK: And all we people on the station, combatants -- cruisers and destroyers -- reported then for duty and we formed a battle line to go and meet the oncoming Japanese.

NARRATOR: In the dark of night, and without benefit of radar, thirteen American ships engaged the Japanese in a surprise meeting off Savo Island. They merged -- almost collided -- into a confused melee of ships.

FRANK HOLMGREN (USS Juneau Crew): The Japs' ships were on both sides and we were in the middle and they were firing one side into the other even if they messed up they were probably hitting their own ships, that's how close we were.

KURZMANN: It was an extraordinary battle, which some experts have said is perhaps the most incredible battle in the history of the U.S. Navy. And right in the middle of this battle was the USS Juneau.

NARRATOR: The 34-minute battle was the opening salvo in a series of savage encounters that became a turning point for the war in the Pacific as the Japanese withdrew.

During that first engagement the Juneau took a torpedo hit in its forward engine room, killing all 19 men inside.

ZOOK: It caused electrical failures and it broke our keel it was later determined. And it, it took down our maneuverability - no end.

CECIL: Then the captain turned around headed for open sea so we wouldn't get in the way of the other ships. Why there was more or less a sigh of relief that we gotten away with what we had.

ZOOK: Then we lost track of the battle. It was going on behind us. But the next morning, at daylight, a ship -- group of ships -- was coming up behind us. They were friendly.

NARRATOR: The ships were the 5 other survivors of the 13 American ships in the previous night's battle. All but one had sustained serious damage. The flagship USS San Francisco suffered the most.

CECIL: We received the blinker message from the San Francisco that they needed medical assistance if any was available, so as few casualties as we had had, they sent the junior medical officer and 2 other pharmacists mates and myself to the San Francisco.

DAN KURZMANN (Author, *Left to Die*): The ships were heading toward - or limping you might say - toward base. When a lone submarine in the area aimed its torpedoes at the USS San Francisco, which was a flagship, but the torpedoes missed and it hit the Juneau by mistake so to speak.

GIBSON: We were about 3,000 yards from the Juneau when it happened.

NARRATOR: Victor Gibson was standing watch on the bridge of the San Francisco.

VICTOR GIBSON (USS San Francisco Crew): All at once I saw two torpedoes coming kind of from our port side towards right across the front of our bow and then when they got by us I went to the starboard side and the one that was closest to the San Francisco, it looked to me like that was the one that went on over and hit the Juneau and pow! Fifteen or 20 seconds, the Juneau was destroyed.

CECIL: She was there one minute and I looked away for a second and I looked back up and all there was was a cloud of smoke with a big explosion. And when the smoke cleared, there wasn't anything on the water. Couldn't see any survivors at all.

NARRATOR: But there were survivors. Of the Juneau's 700-man crew, about 140 were thrown clear into the water, many of them suffering with terrible wounds.

ENTRIKIN: This was without a doubt the most horrifying thing we'd ever seen.

NARRATOR: B-17 crew chief William Entrikin was on a routine search mission when he saw the Juneau explode.

WILLIAM ENTRIKIN (B-17 Crew): People were clinging to anything that they could cling to and of course they were all well covered with bunker sea and oil, and black as tar and hardly recognizable as human beings.

KURZMANN: A lot of them just died right there you know in the water, they drowned, they- because the- there was nothing to hang on to. There was hardly any debris left. So there were maybe a hundred men or so who got aboard these three rafts.

NARRATOR: Signalman Lester Zook was a seasoned crewmember of the Juneau.

ZOOK: We could look and see our other ships going away. I mean, they were just- split out right away. But there was due cause for that. We were in the torpedo junction.

NARRATOR: Frank Holmgren was 19 when he joined the Navy, despite not knowing how to swim.

FRANK HOLMGREN (USS Juneau Crew): And they kept going and I heard the guys start saying "they ain't gonna come back" and the other ones said, "oh yeah, they're gonna come back and pick us up." And the next thing we know - they're gone.

NARRATOR: After the task force's two admirals were killed in the night battle, Capt. Gilbert Hoover, commanding officer of the USS Helena, assumed command.

KURZMANN: Captain Hoover, had refused to send a radio signal for help for these men because he'd been given orders not to, not to use the radio because of the possibility that the Japanese would pick up the signal and he was convinced that no human being could have survived after that hit. So he decided rather than go back and look for survivors, that the ships should continue on toward base.

LESTER ZOOK (USS Juneau Crew): They're not going to stay there and get destroyed themselves, but they will come back that night and look for us. Then when the next day we didn't see 'em again, it's still - it's still no point of getting hardly nervous you know about it, because the planes could have reported us like they should have and probably did, so a- rescue is imminent.

NARRATOR: But the plane circling overhead would not be the survivors' salvation.

ENTRIKIN: As we left the survivors and went over toward the departing ships, we saw of course that they were heavily damaged and we circled them and as we circled them we began to get blinker signals from one of the ships. We didn't know it at the time but it was the Helena.

ROBERT SWENSEN (Son of Lyman Swensen): Captain Hoover sent a message about the Juneau being sunk and the possibility of survivors in the water and he got acknowledgment from the aircraft that the message was received and that they would relay it to Naval Headquarters. And he was satisfied that there would be an air-sea rescue operation.

WILLIAM ENTRIKIN (B-17 Crew): We decided to go to Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. We had to get on the surface somewhere if we're gonna tell somebody what had happened. When we got to Guadalcanal and we were actually on our final approach to land when we got a red light flashed at us from the tower which forced us to go around. We were in the midst of an air raid alert.

NARRATOR: Lieutenant Bob Gill was the pilot of Entrikin's B-17. When they couldn't land, he decided to finish their daylong mission.

ENTRIKIN: So by the time we would have been back, another five hours had elapsed clearly. And it was five hours that nobody had looked for the - for the, for them. And nobody knew to look for them.

NARRATOR: Gill returned to base and reported that the Juneau survivors were in the water.

DAN KURZMANN (Author, *Left to Die*): And the intelligence officer to whom he reported didn't seem to care much. And he didn't -- he just didn't really give a damn and he put it in his routine report that there were some men in the water, gave the general location. And it was just a routine report and it was reported as I think number 3 or 4 in the daily bulletin about, you know, what the pilots had sighted during that day, and nobody acted on it. And this happened day after day. As a matter of fact, on the third day after the sinking, the same pilot went off on another mission.

ENTRIKIN: And we find these guys again and there's a few of them left in the water. And a few more days And we're down to maybe 30/40 guys by now. And through all of this Gil never followed up to go see "what the heck happened to my report - you got so many men, you don't want to pick 'em up, or you know, what the heck are you tryin' to do?"

NARRATOR: For the badly wounded men in the water, the hot days and cold nights brought more horror, agony, despair and death.

ZOOK: We finally ended up with about three rafts and life nets. You had to lay prone on the life nets, but in the life rafts you could either sit on the gunnel or you could stand up in the life raft.

FRANK HOLMGREN (USS Juneau Crew): The next thing you know the guys were startin' to goin' out of their heads a little bit. Thought they could jump off the raft and go down and get some food off the Juneau and I think, I think that was about the third day.

KURZMANN: The situation was just horrible. They didn't have anything to eat. Nothing to drink except salt water and a lot of them drank salt water and went mad.

LESTER ZOOK (USS Juneau Crew): Now the people on the nets were the injured people. They couldn't stand up, they couldn't support themselves or whatever - they were - mangled legs or arms or skulls. And so they were put on the nets. And then so each morning - this may ghoully, but each morning we would roll the dead people off the nets and the same sharks stayed with us all the time. And they were- they were - satisfied to get their feeding each morning.

KURZMANN: Soon the place was just full of sharks and men were being eaten alive left and right.

HOLMGREN: They just went out of their heads one time and sharks took 'em. They would have all been alive today if we were picked up right away.

NARRATOR: Gunner's mate Wyatt Butterfield had always dreamt of being a hero and rushed to enlist when the war broke out.

WYATT BUTTERFIELD (USS Juneau Crew): Well I think of those guys. It didn't bother me when they were- when I saw it happen. I got used to seeing 'em getting eaten up and torn apart. As I got older -- it hit me.

As I say, as I got older I realized what they- how much they really suffered. When I was young, like I say, I got used to watching it for 7 days and it was like an everyday occurrence. When it did happen, I - I knew it was going to happen anyway, so- no big deal. We saw it yesterday. We saw it again today.

NARRATOR: The only officer among the 10 men who ultimately survived was Lieutenant Charles Wang. He had been the first officer to be assigned to the ship prior to its launch.

ZOOK: Wang had a broken leg so he couldn't maneuver at all. Then a plane come over and dropped a package. In this package was a rubber boat and certain survival gear. And we thought we could see land. Well it was obvious that Wang was no good to us there -- if he got to land he could do something from his stature of the Lieutenant JG and he took two people with him.

KURZMANN: They started moving toward an island which is about fifty miles away and they really went through hell for several days - storms and sharks and just about everything was threatening them. They finally managed to get to a beach of the island and they were fearful though when they got on this beach that there could be cannibals- they heard stories of cannibals on these islands.

The enlisted men went off to look for food and water, Lieutenant Wang was left there, you know in the sand with his bleeding leg, and he was sleeping and when he awoke he looked into the faces of these natives and he thought "my God here I go to the cooking pot."

It turned out of course that they were friendly and he was saved together with the two other men. They were very, very lucky indeed. They were three of the ten men who managed to survive.

NARRATOR: Finally, after two days, Capt. Hoover returned to base and reported to Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, the Commander of the South Pacific fleet. It was incredibly the first time Halsey had heard of the Juneau incident. He was furious.

ROBERT SWENSEN (Son of Lyman Swensen): Halsey wrote Hoover a letter which pointed out that radio silence should have been broken because the force that Hoover had had been already recognized by the enemy, ... And that was what resulted in relieving Capt. Hoover.

NARRATOR: Halsey ordered an air and sea search for the survivors. But, it wasn't until November 19th that a PBY search plane found the remaining Juneau crew.

FRANK HOLMGREN (USS Juneau Crew): We had Zook up there, we were holding him, he's givin' all that flag stuff there and the darn plane looked like- it was! Takin' -- goin' off. "Christ" we was saying "he's gotta see us." And all of a sudden it turned back again.

LESTER ZOOK (USS Juneau Crew): He dropped a life jacket and in the life jacket was a canteen and a couple of chocolate bars and a book. And in the book was this note from him and it said, "Cheer up lads. Help is on the way. There should be a destroyer here to pick you up tomorrow. I have orders not to land."

NARRATOR: The next day, November 20th -- seven days after the sinking --another PBY piloted by Lieutenant Lawrence Williamson again spotted the survivors.

Headquarters suggested that he circle and wait for a rescue ship.

WILLIAM ANDERSON (PBY Crew): But it was getting late and Mr. Williamson decided that he'd go on down because we were running short on fuel.

NARRATOR: William Anderson was Williamson's plane captain.

ANDERSON: Well, we landed by this raft 'cause it had five people in it. The other two rafts only had one each so we thought we'd pick up the ones with the most survivors and hopefully when we got down we'd be able to pick up the others, but when we were in the water we couldn't see a thing. I guess we were lucky to land close to the ones we picked out.

And I was helping them up, taking them by the hand, pulling 'em up the ladder one by one. And I slipped into the water. And because of my fear of sharks that were in the area I got out so fast I don't think I even got wet.

HOLMGREN: As bad as I was, laying there in that thing, it took off and I could swear to God he was submerging instead of going up. I had to pull myself up and look through that window. Yep. -- That's about it. And we met the rest of them on Gilbert Island. Yeah, that was about it.

NARRATOR: On the following morning, the last two survivors were picked up by a destroyer. They were the sole survivors on each of their rafts.

Arthur Friend had had part of his buttocks ripped off by a shark the day before his rescue.

Allen Heyn suffered multiple injuries, which were to plague him the rest of his life.

All but 10 of the Juneau crew were lost, including 2 Rogers brothers and all 5 Sullivans.

JAMES ROGERS (USS Juneau Crew): My brother Joe was coming back from loading the motor launch with supplies. He says, "the Juneau got hit." So I says, "Jesus it got hit?" I says, "what about Pat and Lou?" He says, "I don't know." He says, "they say it's almost the whole crew that went down." So that's when he went to the captain and he says, "can I go on the beach to the hospital and see if my brothers are killed or what?" So he went and then he come back and he told me, "Jim," he says, "Jim, both of them went down." And we couldn't take it for a while, but then we decided that those are the things that was gonna happen and we should be thankful that we did make the swap and get off.

NARRATOR: George, the oldest Sullivan brother, had survived the blast. For the first 5 days he went from raft to raft, seeking his dead brothers among the oil-caked survivors, calling out their names day and night.

KURZMANN: Finally on the 5th day he went mad and he figured that he could swim to an island and he jumped into the water and three sharks leaped for him and that was the end of George Sullivan, the last of the brothers.

#### **NEWSREEL**

##### *FIVE HERO BROTHERS MISSING IN ACTION FIGHTING THE JAPS*

*"The home that lost 5 brothers in the sinking of the cruiser Juneau. George, Francis, Joseph, Madison, and Albert Sullivan. They insisted on serving together.*

*Wife of the youngest and their son Jimmy. And the brother parents, Mr & Mrs. Thomas F. Sullivan."*

NARRATOR: Jim Sullivan is the only child of the Sullivan brothers.

JAMES SULLIVAN (Son of Albert Sullivan): To tell you the truth I don't know how they handled it, but of course there were a lot of news people there, a lot of military people stopped in.

#### **NEWSREEL**

*"As I give you these purple hearts, I can say only that the Navy is as proud of the Sullivan parents as it is of the Sullivan boys."*

*"They gave 5 sons. Let's buy an extra war bond."*

SULLIVAN: And then almost immediately they were on a war bond drive and I think that's probably how they were able to keep their sanity because it kept there- kept 'em busy.

My grandmother, she got everybody's attention. My grandfather, he kind of stood back in the background. He served as a father figure to me and I'm sure I served - or took the place of the sons that he lost. I was closer to him than anybody I've ever been to in my life.

NARRATOR: The Navy command arranged for the Sullivans to speak at 235 bond rallies and defense plants nationwide during a 4-month tour. Sympathy for the Sullivan family quickly turned into a national call to arms.

While promoting the Juneau crew's heroic fate, the Navy suppressed the full story of its failure to quickly rescue the Juneau survivors. The tragic details stayed buried until 1994 -- 52 years after the sinking.

CREDITS