

U.S.S. BENNINGTON (CVA-20)

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From: Commanding Officer, **U.S.S. BENNINGTON (CVA-20)**

To: Secretary of the Navy

Via: (1) Commander Carrier Division TWO
(2) Commander Air Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet
(3) Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet
(4) Chief of Naval Operations

Subj: Awards for meritorious actions; recommendations for

Encl: (1) Description of action and sample citation for CHCARP James W. HURD (Deceased), recommended for the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, plus statements of eyewitnesses

(2) Description of action and sample citations for personnel recommended for award of the Navy and Marine Corps Medal

(3) Description of action and sample citations for personnel recommended for commendation by the Secretary of the Navy with authorization to wear the Commendation Ribbon

(4) Description of actions and sample citations for personnel recommended for commendation by the Secretary of the Navy

1. On 26 May 1954, the **U.S.S. BENNINGTON**, while underway from Norfolk, Virginia to Quonset Point, Rhode Island, was conducting air operations with Air Task Group 181. At about 0615, when approximately 75 miles south of Newport, Rhode Island, the ship experienced a series of violent explosions as a result of a casualty to the port catapult. The forward section of the ship below the hanger deck was immediately engulfed in flame, heat and dense smoke, resulting in the death or injury of 220 officers and men due to concussion, burns or asphyxiation. In addition to the immediate casualties, many men were trapped in spaces whose access was blocked by the smoke and heat, jammed hatches or torn and twisted bulkheads. Had they not been rescued expeditiously, there would have been many more casualties. Immediate and extremely effective damage control operations undoubtedly prevented far greater damage to the ship with even further loss of life.

2. The rescue of the trapped personnel, recovery of casualties, and damage control and fire fighting operations were extremely difficult due to heat, darkness and dense smoke which made hand carried lights of little value. The explosion area was a complete shambles of twisted bulkheads, doors blown off or jammed, furniture, luggage and personal effects strewn about, electrical cables broken or torn loose, and water and oil on the decks varying from one to eighteen inches in depth. In addition, the dangers of these operations were further increased by the fact that the cause of the explosions was not immediately known and the possibility existed of additional explosions. Also, with such complete devastation, safety lines could not be used on rescue party members because they continually became fouled in the debris. Despite these obstacles and with full realization of the dangers that were present, the personnel involved in these operations demonstrated outstanding initiative, competence and tremendous courage. This fact is conclusively proven by their actions and their effectiveness in saving lives, minimizing casualties, and controlling, limiting, and preventing further damage to the ship.

3. It is with sincere respect that the Commanding Officer, **U.S.S. BENNINGTON (CVA-20)** makes the following recommendations:

- a. That a Navy and Marine Corps Medal be awarded posthumously to the officer listed in enclosure (1);
- b. That the Navy and Marine Corps Medal be awarded to the personnel listed in enclosure (2), a total of nine recommendations;
- c. That the Secretary of the Navy commend each of the personnel listed in enclosure (3) and authorize them to wear the Commendation Ribbon, a total of forty-seven recommendations;
- d. That the Secretary of the Navy commend each of the personnel listed in enclosure (4), a total of sixty-three such recommendations.

4. The specific action for which these awards are recommended has been verified by the Board of Awards of this ship and in many cases is a matter of record in the proceedings of the Court of Inquiry convened to investigate the accident. The actions of each individual which resulted in these recommendations and suggested citations in each case are set forth as part of enclosures (1) through (4).

5. In addition to the above, and as a matter of information, the Commanding Officer, **U.S.S. BENNINGTON (CVA-20)**, has commended 112 individuals at meritorious mast and 88 by letters of commendation for meritorious acts of a lesser degree. While this combined number is sizable, it is in reality small when viewed in the light of the tremendous scope of the accident and the numerous acts of heroism performed by a gallant crew.

W. F. RABORN

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