

## Weather

Increasing cloudiness tonight.  
Min. near 50. Friday mostly  
cloudy with scattered showers.  
United States Official Report.

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# Carrier Death Toll 91



ORDEAL OVER — Mrs. Jack Baskind, 373 Auburn Rd., West Hartford, embraces her son, Lt. (jg) Stanley Baskind, as Mr. Baskind watches. Their reunion came at Quonset Naval Station after Lieutenant Baskind came off ill-fated ship, unhurt.



BOTH O. K. — Angelo Menti of Torrington, left, and James E. Shirley, 1630 Main St., share their joy in escaping injury on USS Bennington during disaster that ripped carrier. They got leaves to come home. — (Times Photos by Mort Boardman.)

## Probe Starting With Cause of Blast Unknown

Other News, Pictures  
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Quonset Point, R. I. — (AP) — The Navy counted 91 known dead today and 201 injured, many of them critically, in the devastating explosion-fire aboard the ill-fated aircraft carrier Bennington 75 miles at sea.

The 32,000-ton carrier, a proud bearer of numerous battle honors in World War II, was rocked by the disaster early yesterday while cruising calmly in the post-dawn sunlight.

A violent blast on the second or third deck below the flight deck was followed by searing flames which roared through many forward compartments. Then came at least one more explosion.

Scores were trapped in their sleeping quarters. Escape for many was blocked off. Many suffocated. Many perished in flames.

A FOUR-MAN court of inquiry, headed by Rear Adm. John M. Hoskins, commandant of the Quonset Naval Air Station, was named to begin an intensive investigation today.

Other members of the court are Rear-Adm. E. A. Cruise, commander of Carrier Division 6, with the Bennington his flagship; Capt. J. E. Leeper, commander of Fleet Air Wing 3, based at Quonset, and Capt. R. J. Zanzot, a Quonset materiel officer.

Secretary of the Navy Charles S. Thomas, who flew to Quonset for a quick inspection of the stricken warship, and Capt. William F. Raborn Jr., Bennington skipper for only a month, said there was no indication of sabotage.

Raborn, who makes his home in Oklahoma City, said the cause of the explosion is "a mystery to me."

"All leads have proved groundless," he said. "There was nothing explosive in the area where the explosion took place."

The ship's catapult room is due for a thorough investigation by the inquiry board. It was thought at first that catapult tube oil was ignited just before the first explosion. Last October's blast and fire in the carrier Leyte in Boston was blamed on such an accident.

THE BIG CARRIER was en route back to Newport, across Narragansett Bay from Quonset Point, on a routine training mission.

Aboard were four squadrons of about 130 men each which make up Air Task Group 181, based at the Oceana Naval Air Station near Norfolk, Va. The squadron boarded the Bennington last weekend for the trip to Quonset Point.

The blast shook the Bennington just after the first of the four squadrons had been launched.

"Realizing a serious catastrophe had occurred, we launched the rest of the air group to free the decks for casualty control," Captain Raborn said. The planes, many of them jets, took off for Quonset as surface craft and helicopters were summoned by radio.

The helicopters, operating under the direction of Adm. Hoskins, met the carrier 20 miles from port. As they did in Korea, the copters proved their mettle.

The big "whirl-birds" — two Navy and four Coast Guard — evacuated scores of seriously injured to the Newport Naval Hospital. They would pick up injured on the deck of the carrier, fly to Newport, then return to carry out additional suffering men.

THE HEROIC, mild-spoken medical officer aboard the Bennington, Comdr. Clyde Norman, said that nearly all who perished aboard the carrier were dead by the time rescue parties reached them.

Norman directed the treating of wounded. The other doctor assigned aboard was killed.

"The bodies were removed after we determined they were dead," Commander Norman said. "The more seriously injured were evacuated as soon as the helicopters came. They were put on an elevator and brought to the flight deck. They were sedated and soon to sleep."

ALTHOUGH the exact location of the blast could not be determined immediately it was in the forward part of the ship near the wardroom, in Navy parlance "Officers' Country."

Capt. Raborn had highest praise for all personnel aboard the carrier, which carries a normal complement of 2,800.

Navy Secretary Thomas praised the courage of the injured and the "wonderful organized effort" aboard the Bennington.

Thomas expressed sympathy for the Bennington's men and their families. President Eisenhower also sent a sympathy message from the White House.

## Luck Holds for Baskind, Circus Fire Survivor

## West Hartford Officer Describes Escape Through Smoke on Carrier

By RICHARD L. HULL  
Times Staff Writer

Quonset Point, R. I. — When the fire alarm sounded aboard the Aircraft Carrier Bennington a few minutes after 6 a. m. Wednesday, Lt. (jg) Stanley M. Baskind of West Hartford never heard it.

Seconds later, however, he was groping through the smoke to wake up his two roommates, Lts. Leonard Fuhrer and Irving Itzakan, with the general quarters bell ringing full blast through the ship.

"We headed for the fo'c'sle up forward and made it up to the flight deck. I felt the second explosion, and there was another after that," said Baskind. "I just had my pants on and it was freezing. We had to wait while they cleared the flight deck."

As soon as they could make it aft, the three officers ran down to the third deck, but couldn't get to their battle stations. "We carried stretchers from the second and third decks to the hangar deck," Baskind said. "There were men with their skin all peeled off, others were singed black. "When the helicopters began coming we put the worst cases aboard. Some of them we had to remove again because they died, and the space was needed for the living."

IT WAS EVENING when Lieutenant Baskind related his experience, and he was among the men and officers who waited at the recreation hall at the vast Quonset Point Naval Air Station to contact wives and parents.

His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Baskind of 132 Auburn Rd., West Hartford, arrived to find their son unhurt after the third such incident in his life. Lieutenant Baskind escaped from the circus fire in Hartford in 1944, and last year was aboard the Bennington when a boiler exploded on the ship, killing 11 crewmen.

There were some 2,800 men aboard the Essex Class carrier Bennington when the explosions occurred below the flight deck just forward of the superstructure, blasting through some 200 feet of the floating airbase. Most of the men escaped to help their shipmates.

But by 10 a. m. when the first casualty list was released to the crowd of waiting newsmen at the Public Information Office, 91 were listed as dead and identified.

Among them was Alexander Hubetsel of 10 Division St., Bridgeport, the only Connecticut man among the dead on the first list.

Within a few minutes the list of critically and seriously hurt was distributed, and five names were added to that list a few minutes after midnight.

By 12:30 a. m. Lt. Comdr. Bernard Solomons, First Naval District public information officer, announced that another 17 names would be added to the list of the dead.

The names of those with minor injuries at the base hospital and at Newport Naval Hospital hadn't been made up. But a few hours earlier it had been announced that the injured numbered 201.

ALTHOUGH NEWSMEN had been permitted to go aboard the carrier earlier in the day, by late afternoon the ship was closed to visitors, and no

further visiting was allowed at the hospitals because many of the burned and injured men were suffering from shock.

Meanwhile, the search continued in the ship for other bodies and survivors. It was reported that as late as 9 p. m. that more dead, and a few more injured men, had been found.

As the sun went down, only 12 hours after the explosions had been heard and felt by crew members, there was nothing in the appearance of the huge, gray ship to indicate a naval tragedy.

The damage was not visible from the dock as the Bennington tied up. There were no crowds, except for the reporters and photographers who came from newspapers, wire services, radio and television stations to relay the story across the country.

A bugle sounded the call to chow for the crewmen left aboard. Orders were given from the public address system for the work crews. Men leaned against the ship's rails, talking, watching the cameras.

Then, slowly, a long line of hearses and ambulances began to drive down the cement quay and undertakers in black suits went with sailors aboard the ship.

For an hour or so they helped the sailors with the grim task of carrying their dead shipmates down the scaffolding gangways to the waiting vehicles which drove off, one by one.

From time to time, groups of sailors left the ship and hurried up the dock toward the base to get in touch with their folks, to let them know they were not among the unfortunate.

AS THEY LEFT they paused, stopped by reporters, to add some detail to the story of the Bennington tragedy.

"Three more minutes and

it would have been me. I'm going to call Mom now," one sailor said as he hurried past.

"I seen a Marine with a bulkhead pushed right through his skull. It's pretty well fouled up. I'll tell you that — Aw, I don't even want to talk about it," another said. Then he hurried past.

Two Connecticut crewmen stopped longer, willing to talk with a newsmen from their state.

James A. Shirley of 1630 Main St., Hartford, said he was on the flight deck when he saw the smoke.

"I went to break out the hoses and then I heard the explosions down below. I went below to help get the men out but there was no fire when we got there," he said.

"It was very dark and the smoke was thick, and we could hear men calling for help, but we had to get auxiliary lights to find them, and then we brought the stretchers."

"I don't know how long we worked down there. It was until we had the men out of the danger area," he added.

ANGELO MENTI of 80 Joseph St., Torrington, was also on the flight deck at the time. (Capt. William F. Raborn Jr. told newsmen that 40 planes were launched after the fire broke out.)

"I saw the smoke and we kept on clearing the planes until they were launched and then I went down and carried up two men," said Angelo.

"One of them had his clothes completely blasted off and they were both pretty badly burned. Some of the men were sleeping and never knew what happened. I know one man who got out of a place alive where 20 others were killed."

Another Connecticut man, John Egleston of Lakeville who was still wearing the red jersey and helmet of a fighter squadron maintenance man,



BADLY BURNED — Lt. Comdr. Shelly Pitman, Casper, Wyo., seriously injured in fire and explosion on board USS Bennington, is cared for at Quonset Naval Station Hospital. — (UP.)

he said he saw a white puff of smoke "come rolling down a passageway. Then everybody helped out where he could." He crouched on the floor at the telephone office waiting to call home.

Elits Cletes, a yeoman from Sioux City, Iowa, said the blast occurred right next to the section where he was sleeping, filling his compartment with smoke.

"I heard two explosions, and it's a funny thing, they didn't make much noise. It was a sort of whoof," he said.

"I WENT TO MY station to man the phones to the damage control center, but it was knocked out. They set up another center. My commanding officer was killed," he added.

He said he was on the Bennington when the boiler exploded off Cuba, but that was a minor incident compared to this. "The crew did a wonderful job considering that about half of them have come aboard in the last few weeks."

Joseph Blanick of McKeesport, Pa., one of the injured, told a reporter he was manning an intercom with six other men. "There was a flash down the corridor. We tried to get out but it was too hot when we reached the door," he said.

"When we saw we were trapped, without saying anything, everybody went back to the telephones and called all the areas we believed were damaged and relayed the information to the damage control center."

"I talked with one of the men who were trapped. It was awful to have to hang up on them, but we had to keep the information moving."

"Then steam started coming in with the smoke and it got so bad we had to do something. The last thing I remember was reaching for a vent. I don't know how I got out," he said. Blanick was seriously burned on both arms.

WHILE NEWSMEN waited for the lists of those who were known to have died, and those badly hurt, chaplains of three faiths called men from the ship to the recreation hall a mile away to be reunited with friends and relatives as they arrived on the base.

It was the duty of the chaplains, too, to inform other relatives that telegrams would be waiting for them at home, and to offer what comfort they could.

The telegrams were going out all evening from a second floor office of the headquarters building, and not until they had been completed were the lists mimeographed and handed to the waiting newsmen.

Meanwhile, in a hallway, teletype machines were set up to send out the news as soon as it was available. There were small mishaps which delayed the transmission of late news stories. Once, for instance, a coin dropped in a soft drink dispensing machine stopped all six teletype machines just as the first casualty list was going out. Damage was quickly repaired.

Telephone lines were jammed, and crew members from the Bennington had first choice of phones.

Shoe Box, W. H., open every night 'til 9.—Adv.