

Kathryn Palmer



**Granddaughter of L. Peter Wren,
Lt. Commander of the USS Bassett APD-73, Rescue Boat
2016 Recipient of USS Indianapolis/Gwinn “Angel” Scholarship**

The following is an essay in response to the following question: How has being a child/grandchild/great-grandchild of a USS Indianapolis Survivor (or LAS) affected your life? Please include details of your specific Survivor’s experience that you can obtain through a person interview with either him or another relative (his wife, siblings, etc.).

My grandfather was an incredible man. From an early age, he dealt with and overcame extraordinary circumstances. He was born in upstate New York on June 13, 1920 with his fraternal twin. He was named Leon Peter Wren and his twin Leo Paul Wren. Unfortunately, his mother passed away when he was only 4 years old and his father left the boys after that. So Leon Peter and Leo Paul were raised in a Catholic orphanage in Buffalo, New York. At the orphanage, the nuns would jokingly call the twins “Bill” and “Bob” since the boys weren’t particularly fond of their names. Later on in life, my grandfather went by the name L. Peter or LP for short.

LP always stood out as the tallest in the orphanage. With long, lanky limbs, he was destined to become a swimmer. He found his sea legs quickly and went on to win a state championship in the 100-meter breaststroke when he was 16. Although LP loved being in the pool, he and his brother also studied hard in school. By the time they were ready to graduate, both brothers had excelled academically and in sports. They were both awarded scholarships to attend Michigan State University.

LP kept swimming in college and his brother was on the wrestling team. However, amidst the time of his college studies, World War II broke out. LP was compelled to join the Navy, knowing that his swimming talents would be put to best use there. He entered the US Navy on December 28, 1941. He was commissioned as a line officer from Columbia University in April of 1944 and assigned to the USS Coates in the

Atlantic Fleet. In April of 1945, he was transferred to the Pacific on USS Bassett APD-73.

On July 30, 1945, the USS Indianapolis was sunk by torpedoes from a Japanese submarine. On August 2nd, the USS Bassett was in the Philippine Sea frontier when the information first came in that there were men floating in the water. LCDR Wren was assigned as a boat officer on the Bassett. Nothing could prepare him for the scene of the USS Indianapolis. As they arrived on the scene, LP was shocked at what he saw. Hundreds of half-dead men were floating in the water. Sharks were encircling and picking them off. It was unclear to LP who these men were. Their faces were covered in oil from the sinking. Were they U.S. sailors or were they the enemy? But without a second thought, LP pulled men onto his boat. He was surprised at the heavy weight of the sailors. They were delirious after being in the water for 3+ days and could not climb into the boats on their own accord. The rescuers were pulling dead weight from the water. They were pulling half-dead men from the sea.

As LP described it, the scene was pitch black except for one huge spotlight coming from a nearby vessel. The spotlights were not used frequently in the middle of the night, because it could signal to the enemy your boat's location. However, this was an extraordinary situation, which called for extraordinary measures. Every sailor involved in the rescue of the crew of the USS Indianapolis put his life at risk to save his fellow sailor. LP didn't even know if these sailors were enemies, but helping them was the right thing to do. He spent hours pulling people into his boat, but they didn't come so easily. Not only was their lack of strength debilitating for the rescuers, their delirious state of mind made it difficult to convince them to get on the boat. With what little strength the severely dehydrated sailors had, they fought LP's attempts to bring them aboard. He was forced to be creative. LP would tell the sailors that they had "girls" on the ship and that if they came aboard, they would get to see them. This tactic worked quite well on the survivors. Another trick my grandfather used was to tell the sailors to hold onto the "conga line" as he pulled them in, using a life buoy. Once aboard, LP asked the survivors "Where does the Dodgers' baseball team play?" with hopes of confirming American sailors under their oil-covered faces. As LP described it, they would generally spout a few cuss words at him before eventually responding "Brooklyn, New York."

After his role in the rescue of survivors of the USS Indy, LP Wren was released from naval service in April 1946. He immediately returned to Michigan State University and continued working on his degree. He graduated in 1948. Shortly after graduation, LP got a job in Richmond, Virginia as an insurance salesman. He met his

wife, Helen Marie Stumpf, and they were married soon after. He was recalled for the Korean War and served from January 1951 to December 1952. He completed over twenty years with the Fleet Reserve and retired as a Lieutenant Commander. LP served as president of the US Navy League in Richmond and organized the Naval Sea Cadet program there. His involvement with the USS Indianapolis tragedy inspired him to write about it. He wrote his first book, *Those in Peril on the Sea*, in 1999. It was very important to him that personal accounts be shared and the sailors honored. After the book was released, many sailors who were there wrote to him with their personal stories. At first, he simply enjoyed hearing multiple perspectives on the event. But after more and more people wrote to him, he decided to publish another book. My grandfather wanted to preserve the oral history of the men who were there on the scene. He compiled everyone's stories along with his own into his second book, *We Were There*. He lived a long and happy life. L. Peter Wren passed away in October of 2015.

Being L. Peter's granddaughter and hearing his story has stuck with me throughout my life. I attended several lectures he gave about his experience and his story was passed down throughout my family. When I think about the tragedy these men faced, I think of courage, perseverance, and valor. The courage of the sailors to carry out their dangerous mission, the perseverance of the survivors holding out beyond hope, and the valor these men possessed to help each other in the face of tragedy. I hope to echo these characteristics in my life. I am in graduate school studying to be a physical therapist. I want to help people who are injured return to their daily lives, whether that's an athlete returning to his or her sport or a spinal cord injury patient relearning how to walk. In my own way as a physical therapist, I want to pull people who are hurting and in need onto my boat.

Kathryn (Kate) lives in Johnson City, TN, where she is pursuing a Doctorate degree in Physical Therapy at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.