

DISASTER OFF BOSTON

When the USS YF-415 exploded, the accident would forever change

Navy regulations of disposing of ammunition at sea. What it would not change was the heroism of the average sailor

BY LISA BERTONE

On 10 May 1944, the *YF-415* departed for the Naval Ammunition Depot in Hingham, Massachusetts, under the command of Chief Boatswain's Mate Louis B. Tremblay, of Marblehead. The ship's orders were to proceed to Hingham and load ammunition that would be disposed of in deep water off Boston. The *YF-415* planned to take on additional crew at Hingham to assist in the disposal of the ordnance. Previously, the ship had made two such excursions to dispose of ordnance and both voyages had been uneventful.

The ship was loaded with approximately 150-tons of ammunition — including obsolete pyrotechnics, black powder, and .50-cal projectiles ranging from 3- to 5-in shell size, among other miscellaneous ordnance. The *YF-415* was loaded to its maximum draft, though some claimed the ship was further weighted down to its gunwales. There was no official protocol, other than a pre-departure briefing from an officer with regard to procedures for the safe handling of the ammunition.

The *YF-415* departed Hingham with five officers, ten men comprising regular crew, and an additional work crew of 16 African-American men from the Hingham ammunition depot to bring the ship's total to 31 souls. While underway, the crew prepared the ordnance for disposal, which involved sequestering projectiles from other explosives in anticipation of disposing of the most dangerous material first. At about 11:30 am on 11 May, the *YF-415* arrived in the disposal area where the crew pro-

The disaster would make front-page news but the facts were quickly covered up.

ceeded to dump nearly two-thirds of the cargo, including much of the black powder and projectiles, uneventfully.

The rockets intended for disposal were normally buoyant and required special preparation to sink them, which called for the containers to be punctured following the removal of the package of matches. These measures would ensure that there was no chance of accidental ignition and that the containers sank as intended. However, the men were instead instructed to jam projectile shells into the rocket containers to make them sink and crush the containers to keep the projectiles from falling out.

Despite orders from the Bureau of Ordnance to only punch holes



Employees working with the Automatic 16-in Powder Stacking Machine during World War II.



Aerial view of Naval Ammunition Depot, Hingham.

in the buoyant containers to ensure sinking, this procedure was not followed.

At no time did any officer, whether at the Hingham Ammunition Depot, or on board the *YF-415*, inspect the rocket containers to ensure the matches had been removed.

At approximately 11:30, the crew began dumping the ordnance. The relatively inexperienced enlisted African-American men were charged with disposing of the rockets. The disposal process proceeded as planned and without incident. However, according to Chief Boatswain's Mate Tremblay, who was observing the disposal operation, he later testified that at about 12:30 pm, he heard a "terrific whoosh," — a fire from an explosion of rockets, which set off a chain reaction of explosives, quickly engulfing the port side of the ship, spreading from amidships to the entire main deck.

The fire aboard *YF-415* raged uncontrollably and attempts to man firefighting equipment were unsuccessful. Many sailors were temporarily trapped in the crew's quarters, located in the forward part of the ship, as intense flames and heat seared the lighter. One crewman, William J. Bradley, though he managed to escape from the engine

room, suffered third degree burns over 76% of his body and later died. Most men drowned in the water while awaiting rescue. One sailor, Seaman Second-Class Yeo Jim was reported to have jumped into a shower during the panic in an attempt to shield him from the fire on deck. He would not leave the crew's quarters despite the efforts of his fellow sailors. They were eventually forced to leave to save themselves. They did not see Jin alive again.

Numerous ships and vessels operating in the area were dispatched to conduct search and rescue operations. The USS *Zircon*, a nearby weather-observing vessel, rescued 14 survivors, four crewmembers of which later died from severe burns, and ten men from the Hingham contingent.

The *YF-415* sank into 230-ft of water. The missing 16 men's bodies were never recovered. Although there was a US Naval inquiry and some news coverage of the accident, the story largely ended there until the

