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James O'Donnell

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I will start quite simply – just like the man who I call a “Real and Present Day Hero” - lives his life. However, to me and many others – he is larger than life itself. My hero's name is James O'Donnell. He was born July 8, 1920 in Indianapolis Indiana. Little did anyone know that the name Indianapolis and the birth name James O'Donnell would some 24 years later go down in history as the story of the USS Indianapolis and its 317 survivors unfolded. He is still making history and making Americans proud and appreciative of the freedom we have today – 89 years later. Here is the story of the only “survivor” of the USS Indianapolis that was born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Mr. O'Donnell, as I respectfully will refer to him, was raised and graduated from Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. He has lived on the Eastside of Indianapolis, Indiana all his life and is well known, loved, and respected by the Irish Catholic families as well as others in that area. It was there that he and his wife, Mary, of nearly 67 years lived and raised their family of 4 children and it is there that they continue to enjoy their 11 grandchildren. It was also there that Mr. O'Donnell served and retired from the Indianapolis Fire Department as a lieutenant after serving 35 years.

It is hard to put into words the accomplishments/contributions of this man. His heroic acts have spanned a lifetime. They are two-fold. First there is the hero James O'Donnell (Better known as Jimmy) a “water-tender” in the No.2 Fire Room B Division who survived the sinking of the USS Indianapolis by a Japanese torpedo that blew it to the bottom of the Philippine Sea. This was not a glamorous job – and one that Mr.

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O'Donnell didn't particularly choose to do – but that is where they needed him – so that is what he did. That is just the way he is “put together.” Later there is the hero James O'Donnell who risked his life everyday as a firefighter for the city of Indianapolis. In every sense of the word – an Indianapolis hero!

The first time I met Mr. O'Donnell was in a school classroom. He and his wife Mary were coming to my mom's classroom where she is a third grade teacher. I was 11 years old. My mom called my school and told them I would be absent that day. I was worried about the work I would miss at my school and have to make up but my mom assured me that meeting Mr. O'Donnell would be worth it. It was that day after listening to him tell the class what the USS Indianapolis's mission was and how that mission ended that I began to really understand what the phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance “For liberty and justice for all” means. Before I heard him speak they were just words that I absent-mindedly repeated on command when prompted. Now I see the image of my Mr. O'Donnell every time I say those words. It was a history lesson that took me right there. He has become a symbol to me of what life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are all about.

The day I heard him speak I learned that in 1945 the USS Indianapolis was involved in World War II. She was assigned a very secretive and maybe the most important job of the war. At the time, the sailors didn't even know what their mission involved. All they knew was that they were picking up crates in San Francisco and

delivering them to the island of Tinian. Unbeknownst to them they had delivered the most powerful weapon in the world – the atomic bomb, the bomb which eventually ended WWII and gave America back their freedom. As they were heading back to Guam after their still unknown delivery, two Japanese torpedoes struck the USS Indianapolis. It took only 12 minutes for the ship to sink. Mr. O'Donnell was one of 1,196 aboard .About 900 survived the initial attack and made it to the shark infested, oil filled waters. At the end of 5 days Mr. O'Donnell and 316 sailors were finally rescued and lived to tell this heroic tale. The purpose of him coming to talk to the school kids was to tell the story of bravery, tragedy, and triumph, as well as to keep their legacy and that of the USS Indianapolis alive.

Mr. O'Donnell brought along the bills he had in his pocket that day. They were saturated with oil. He said their eyes and skin were burning from the oil and salt as well as the burning hot sun during the day. At night the water turned so cold they could hardly stand it. There was no food or water and many became dehydrated and delusional. Some of his fellow sailors simply couldn't take the horrors of watching as others were eaten alive by sharks and they simply took off their life vest and escaped their misery. He said he continued to pray hour by hour. True to Mr. O'Donnell's character – he refused to give up hope. That is the quality he shared with the other 316 survivors. That hope and faith was also shared with all of us in that classroom that day. He taught us that freedom does indeed have a price and not to ever take freedom for granted.

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The number of survivors has dwindled due to death. Mr. O'Donnell knows that it is urgent to tell as many people as possible about the catastrophe he and the other 316 faced. Over the past few years he has helped lead efforts to resurrect a national Memorial dedicated to the memory of the USS Indianapolis. He knew that this would not be easy. A million dollars was going to be needed. This means he would be forced to revisit and speak about his horrific experiences that fateful day in 1945. Not easy for a quiet humble man who was a hero in one of the best known WWII stories. On August 2, 1995 the monument was unveiled in downtown Indianapolis.

As I watched him speak that day – I saw tears in his eyes as he talked about those who did not make it. When I saw him speak I saw “America the Beautiful”. I saw strength and courage. I saw “God shed thy grace on thee”. As I complete these words about my hero I can also go downtown in Indianapolis and see a statue of the likeness of my hero and Indianapolis' hero Mr. James O'Donnell. The statue was dedicated in his honor this past Monday December, 7th 2009. As he accepted this honor with tears in his eyes he said, “It should represent the whole bunch of us.” Like he said in that 3rd grade classroom, I'm not a hero – we left the heroes out at sea.” Mr. O'Donnell you are my hero. You have taught me to keep my hope and dreams alive. You have touched my mind, my heart, and my soul. You have given me my freedom! Thank you!