

Long live the battleship

Battleships, to me, have always been among man's most beautiful and majestic creations. Last year I flew over New York harbor just as the battleship *Iowa* steamed up the narrows, leading an armada of pennant-bedecked cruisers, destroyers and frigates.

It was one of the most thrilling sights I've ever seen and one, I confess, that brought tears to my eyes. Now, like most people, I mourn the 47 sailors lost last Wednesday when a massive explosion devastated the *Iowa's* B turret.

No one yet knows what caused the blast that killed the entire turret crew. The most likely cause is a static electricity charge that ignited a bag of explosive propellant.

I also mourn for the *Iowa*. It's B turret was so damaged it may be permanently out of action.

The 57,540-ton *Iowa* was launched in 1942. Many of the components used in the turret and its three 16-inch guns (or, more properly, rifles) cannot be produced today. It's as if titans had built the *Iowa* and her sisters long ago. Mere mortals of today cannot duplicate their work.

Predictably, the accident is producing demands that the U.S. Navy's four *Iowa*-class battleships be taken out of service. Critics charge they are dangerous white elephants. Not true. Though they are nearly 50 years old, the *Iowa*-class battleships remain the strongest and most powerful ships in the Navy.

It's also important to remember that accidents inevitably happen in the military and — something many of us have forgotten — that a fighting man's mission invariably involves mortal risk.

That's why I'm troubled by the wave of emotion that sweeps across the U.S. and Canada every time military men are killed in combat or accidents. Of course we grieve such losses. But provided they are not caused by negligence, casualties are part of a nation's defences. Unfortunately, one of the great weaknesses of democracies is their inability to accept casualties — as Vietnam so

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clearly showed.

But accidents happen. In 1943, for example, the U.S. lost 23,000 military aircraft in training accidents. Submarines sink and ships blow up or burn.

Luckily, the explosion on the *Iowa* was contained within the turret and barbette and did not reach the magazine. If this had happened, the *Iowa* would have met the same fate as the Japanese battleship *Mutsu* which blew up in 1943 after a fire in its AA ammo magazine. Or the Russian battleships *Imperatritsa Mariya* and *Novorossiysk* which blew up after magazine fires.

Anyone who has ever seen films of the great naval battle of Jutland in 1916 can never forget the terrifying scene of the British battleship *Queen Mary* exploding in a huge cloud of smoke and debris. German shells penetrated its Q turret and then hit the magazine. In moments, the ship and 1,266 men vanished. Or the battle-cruiser *Invincible*, blown in half by a salvo from the *Lutzow* that hit the magazines. Of a crew of 787, only three survived.

A similar fate could have befallen the *Iowa*. Such are the risks of war and peace. But the battleship remains the only ship in the U.S. Navy capable of projecting effective gunnery power and, more important, of sustaining punishment.

All modern warships are little more than floating tin cans packed with electronics, fuel and ammo. They are built more for peace than war. As the Falklands War so stunningly showed, one anti-ship missile is enough to knock out a destroyer or frigate. In future wars, such missiles will be fired in swarms, not singly as the Argentines did.

I've operated naval combat computer simulations and have always been struck by the impossibility of stopping waves of incoming missiles. Some will inevitably hit: 2,000 pounds of explosives packed into a missile the weight of a car, flying at 580-1,200 mph. Only a battleship, with a thick armor belt, can withstand such a hit. And only a battlewagon's big 16-inch guns can deliver heavy shore bombardment to support landings by the Marines.

The *Iowa*-class ships are the last left in the U.S. Navy that have guns bigger than 5.5-inch popguns.

Let's also remember that members of the military are not uniformed bureaucrats. They are paid to kill and, if necessary, die. Theirs is an inherently dangerous profession. Many Canadians think our military is either an employment agency or do-gooders whose only mission is international peacekeeping. We, far more than Americans, have forgotten that soldiers are made to fight, not to type, file or hand out candy to Third World kids.

Democracies that can't bear the anguish of losing their young warriors are nations that also become too weak to defend themselves.

Berry's World



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