

For Middle and High School Students of History

Fall 2021

A Partner of HISTORY®

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Jim Belcher Jr. is an honorary survivor of the *USS Indianapolis* and served four years in the U.S. Air Force. As a public speaker and educator, Jim presents a thought-provoking introspection of history based on his family background and life experiences. His stories are of honor, respect, pride, integrity, tolerance and forgiveness. He has helped to initiate the *USS Indianapolis Legacy Organization*.

We Are The Keepers of Their Stories

No. I didn't invent this statement, but I did adopt it after seeing it covering an entire stairwell wall at the National

Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, maybe a decade ago. "We Are the Keepers of Their Stories". That statement in many ways describes my passion and approach to my family and military history. It also pretty much describes my approach to history in general.

But first, if I don't hear the stories, see and experience them, absorb them, how can I possibly share them later? And what caught my interest, lit my fire?

My name is Jim Belcher, Jr. I am the oldest son of retired U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer James R. Belcher and Toyoko Inoue Belcher, a Japanese "war bride". I served four years in the U.S. Air Force, worked a career in Defense Manufacturing in Quality Assurance and retired in 2019. Today, I travel and speak in schools, at veteran events and in public venues on the subject of World War II history and more.

My story really begins in July of 1969. I was twelve years old and at home in Chesapeake, Virginia. Rarely inside the house on a summer, I happened to observe my father sitting at the

dining room table apparently deep in sadness for some reason. He was just home from work and still in uniform. My father was in his last year of service in the U.S. Navy, teaching crypto school at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth.

Knowing better than to interrupt his thoughts, I approached my mother and asked, "Mom, what is wrong with Dad?" She responded, "He was on a ship that sank in the war." Immediately excited, I asked, "What ship?" They had been married fourteen years at this point and I anxiously awaited her answer, but instead what she said really floored me. Mom replied, "I don't know, he never told me."

Intrigued, I waited a few days and finally approached my dad and asked, "Dad, Mom told me you were on a ship in the war and it sank!" He just looked at me, with no real response. So I anxiously asked, "What ship?" With no emotion showing at all he replied, "Indianapolis". I quickly and excitedly followed with, "What happened?" And I will always remember his

continued on page 2...



response. With a puzzled, almost perturbed look on his face he abruptly answered, “It sank”, then he turned and walked quietly away. I was stunned. I was confused. I was hooked on this story, but knew not to pursue it with my father any more than I had.

When school started again after summer break I immediately went to the library and located a book about the *USS Indianapolis*. Remember, these were the days way before computers and the internet. It was Dewey Decimal system, index cards and many, many textbooks. The book I found was titled *Abandon Ship*, written by Richard Newcomb and published in 1958. The first thing I did was read the dedication: “To those who lost loved ones in the *Indianapolis* disaster, may understanding bring peace”. I read the two-page foreword, scanned the photos in the middle, then saw at the back there was a ten-page list of “Survivors”. In alphabetical order and on the first page of the list my father's name literally jumped out at me! “Belcher, James R., Seaman First Class (Radioman), Abbeville, Ala.” I am named after my father. I am James Robert Belcher, Jr. I felt an immediate and strong connection. Of course I dived into reading this book, each page more interesting and amazing, horrifying and sad, tragic and upsetting. And I cried.

My father was not ready to talk about it, but I kept the story in my consciousness . I often wondered why nobody else had heard of this ship. It was, I learned, the greatest disaster by a warship at sea in the history of the U.S. Navy! The entire history!

Yet I found little information about it...until six years later in the summer of 1975, having just graduated from high school, when in our small city theater some friends of mine and I were sitting together watching the film “Jaws”. For those who saw this film, it was a fictional account of a Great White shark over the 4th of July suddenly appearing and stalking boaters and swimmers off the coast of Amity Island, supposedly off Cape Cod, Massachusetts. In the film there is a monologue by Capt. Quint where he points to a spot on his arm and he says it was a tattoo that read, “*USS Indianapolis*”. He then proceeds to tell two characters in this movie in probably one of the most impactful movie scenes ever a brief but visually descriptive synopsis of the *USS Indianapolis* tragedy. If you could have been there you would have noted how my jaw practically hit the floor. Wow! My friends were astounded too, but at that moment it was fiction...just a made up story in a fictional movie. I couldn't wait for the movie to end. Of course, I then for the first time told the story of the *USS Indianapolis* to a group. They were astounded. I couldn't wait to get home and tell my dad.

And the discussion that followed with my father opened him up a little to talking about it. It was a start. In seven months I myself was enlisting in the U.S. Air Force. I found myself stationed in Massachusetts and immediately made the link between Cape Cod and our family history, at least the fictional connection. But sometimes fiction becomes reality, right? I had learned the only crewman from the *Indianapolis* that survived that my father knew was from...Massachusetts! Still, with no internet yet, I embarked on a search for John Cassidy, a fellow radioman who survived the sinking. Dad had not seen him since 1945. It was now early 1977. Skipping the long and fascinating story of how I located John, it remains another magical coincidence that I found him in Brewster, Massachusetts. On Cape Cod!

My dad and John were reunited. Then the stars started to align even more. In Groton, Connecticut, the newest nuclear submarine *USS Indianapolis SSN-697* was to be launched. All the living survivors of the *USS Indianapolis* were invited to attend. My dad, John and I (in my Air Force uniform), and three busloads of Survivors and family members witnessed this grand ceremony. But for me, the great honor was to be among heroes...history walking and talking. What an awesome three days.

I tell you this personal story because my path to amateur historian could not be scripted. I started digging into the story of the *Indianapolis*, then World War II, then my mother's stories. You see, my mother was Japanese. When dad reenlisted to serve in the Korean War in 1950 he told his recruiter in Dothan, Alabama, he would serve anywhere but Japan. Dad told me seven weeks later he was standing in Japan! But fate had him meet my mom in December 1952. They married in Japan in 1955 and I was born a dual Japanese-American in 1957.

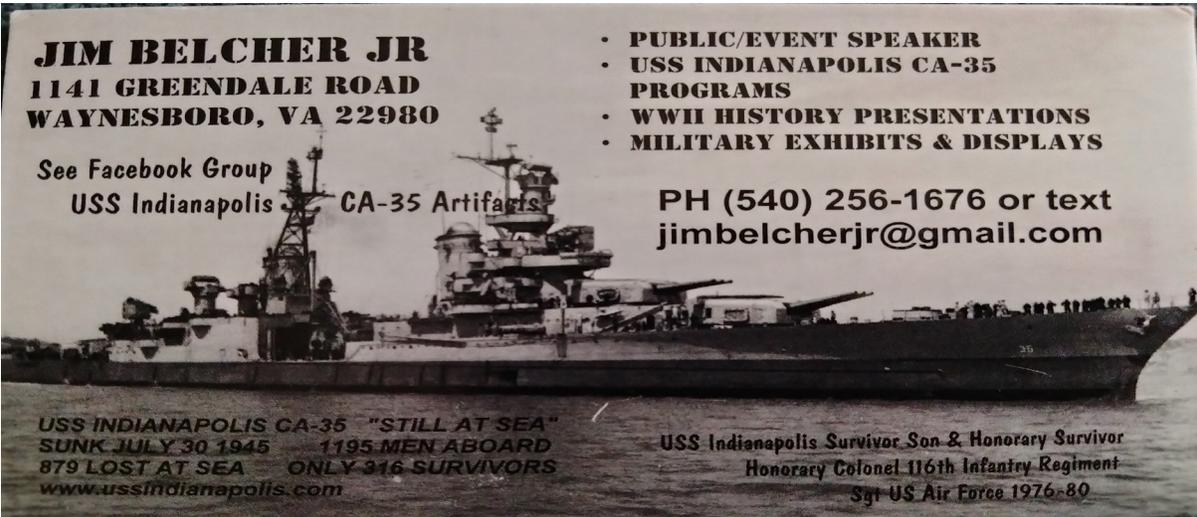
Family stories revealed my grandfather Hajime was reportedly in Nagasaki when the second atomic bomb was dropped. Ironic when you consider my father helped deliver the first bomb. And I also learned my mother's oldest brother, Kazuhiro, served in the Imperial Japanese Army from 1938 to 1945, rising to the rank of Sergeant. In the 1980s I asked him about his time in the Army and he shared his stories with me, and for some reason only me. Years later, in 2003, I met his two adult sons who had never heard their father's wartime stories and I was honored to share them. It was very emotional.

My *USS Indianapolis* story might be unique, but I am not alone. By sharing my story publicly, I am also able to share some of the stories of other *USS Indianapolis* Survivors and lost at sea Gold Star families. I love what you all are doing with the National History Club. I read on your website these wonderful words...“The NHC's main goal is to bring together students and teachers with a real passion for history, helping them learn from each other's ideas, experiences, and stories.”

I fully support that statement. I certainly hope that by sharing my story in schools, at veterans events and other public venues in person and online, and with you here, that it might help fuel that passion for history that I've experienced for almost five decades now.

Those words on the wall at the Air Force Museum continue to inspired me...“We Are the Keepers of Their Stories”. I ask, if not you, then who? ■

For information on how to contact Jim Belcher:



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See Facebook Group
USS Indianapolis CA-35 Artifacts

- PUBLIC/EVENT SPEAKER
- USS INDIANAPOLIS CA-35 PROGRAMS
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Access to the NHC network, which includes chapters in 45 states and over 18,000 members, is a great benefit of joining the NHC. We encourage you to read about other chapters in your state or across the country and explore new opportunities! To explore specific sites click on the bolded text to be redirected!



Caddo Parish High School (LA) visiting Poverty Point in Pioneer, Louisiana. Poverty Point is a World Heritage Site and is over 3,000 years old. It served as a nexus of Native American gatherings and trade near the Mississippi River.



The Cobb County Local Chapter (GA) took a tour of Pickett's Mill. The Battle of Pickett's Mill (May 27, 1864) was fought in Paulding County, Georgia, between Union forces under the command of Major General William Tecumseh Sherman and Confederate forces led by General Joseph E. Johnston during the Atlanta Campaign of the Civil War.



Moline High School (IL) recognized the 20th anniversary of 9/11 by writing the names of the victims on flags (12 on each flag) and putting them in front of the school building in the shape of the Twin Towers.



The Cannon School (NC) had a special Veterans Day service project, where they watched *They Shall Not Grow Old* and wrote 185 holiday cards for veterans at the local VA hospital.



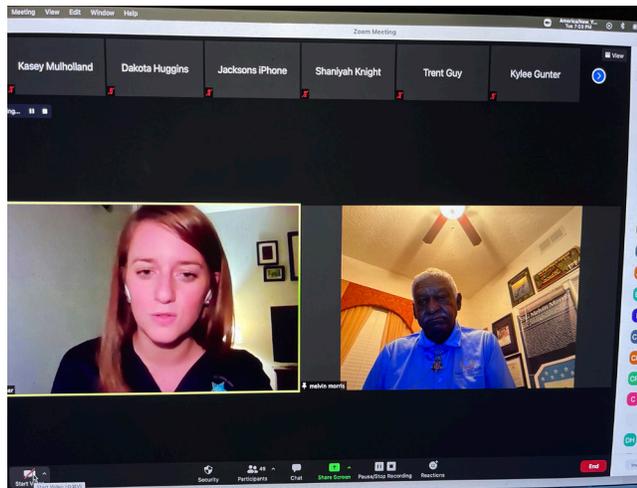
Sullivan High School (IN) senior Finn Steele's military collection—including a U.S. Army Sailor's Cap from WWII, a French Cavalry helmet from the 1830s, and more—on display in their school!



Heritage Christian Academy (MI) on their first field trip of the 2021 school year at the Holland Museum in Ottawa County, Michigan. Here they learned about the early Dutch pioneers who ventured into the land around Black River Lake, including a Dutchman named Van Raalte who found the first settlement in the area (with the exception of the Ottawa Indians).



Rainier Jr/Sr High School (OR) assisting the Oregon Chapter of the Lewis and Clark Heritage Trail with a commemorative sign recognizing Lewis and Clark at the Twilight Eagle Sanctuary near Astoria, Oregon.



The NHC continued with our Speakers Series in November, where we had Medal of Honor recipient Melvin Morris speak to student members all over the U.S. about his service during the Vietnam War.



Manhasset High School (NY) heard from Darryl St. George (a former teacher at their school) via Zoom on Veterans Day about his time in Afghanistan as an Army medic in 2010/2011.



Houston County High School (GA) has posted a bulletin board in the social studies building of holiday traditions throughout the world for November/December that they researched.



North District Middle School (SC) students Joshua Sparks (left) and Dylan Tubbs (right) being recognized as National History Scholars Society recipients with Advisor Shane Broome.

TCR HISTORY CAMP



The **Concord Review History Camp** is an intensive workshop in historical research and writing for secondary students. In each two week session (both online and in-person), two experienced instructors will coach students to compose a first draft of an historical research paper on a topic of their choice.

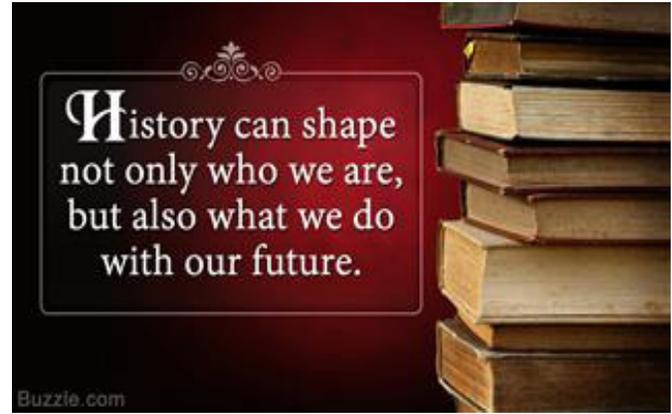
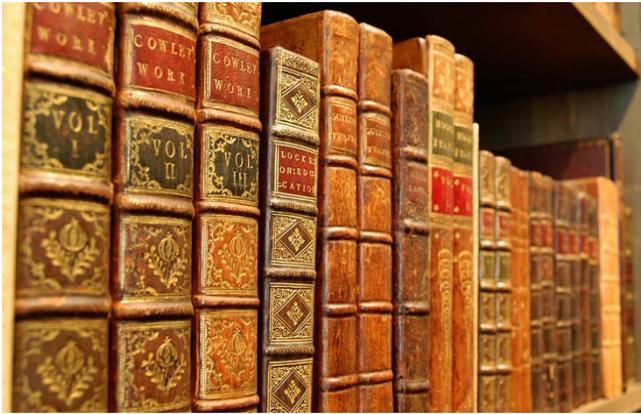
Instructors work one-on-one with students, coaching them through the research and writing process: formulating productive research questions; finding and making discerning use of primary and secondary sources; taking accurate notes; analyzing evidence, formulating a provisional narrative and testing it with more research; marshaling evidence to support one's position or narrative; puzzling together a narrative structure for one's essay; documenting evidence with University of Chicago-style source citations; writing and rewriting. Space is limited and to find out more please visit this page on our website.

The Concord Review is the only quarterly journal in the world to publish the academic research papers of secondary students. Since 1987 it has published 1,427 history essays from students in 46 states and 43 other countries. TCR was recently featured in a column by Jay Mathews in *The Washington Post*. For more information on how to attend a Summer 2022 camp, please visit their **website!**

“I learned so much from those two weeks and am so glad that I had the opportunity to do such. I grew in my writing and research abilities immensely, and cannot imagine who I would be without having had this intensive venture into history. The program showed me how to research and convey my ideas effectively—a skill that I was lacking before the program. My writing has improved 1,000 fold because of these two weeks; likewise, the program furthered my love for writing and history...*The Concord Review* and its summer program have played such big roles in my life, and I am so glad that I was able to interact with such amazing teachers and like-minded peers. I hope that I can spread my love of history and inspire others through my paper when it is published!

* Grace Lu, Douglas S. Freeman High School (VA), Summer Camp Attendee

The NHC is proud to have the support of over 60 college history departments! We hope that any of our members who are interested in majoring in history in college will visit a college's website listed down below to find out more about the history department and its offerings.



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|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| American University | Marquette University | Texas Christian University |
| Baylor University | Massachusetts Institute of Technology | Union College |
| Boston University | Messiah College | University of Alabama |
| Brandeis University | Mount Holyoke College | University of Arkansas |
| Carnegie Mellon University | Northern Illinois University | University at Buffalo |
| Coe College | Northwestern University | University of Chicago |
| DePaul University | Oberlin College | University of Cincinnati |
| Drew University | Ohio State University | University of Colorado |
| Georgia Tech University | Princeton University | UMass Amherst |
| Gettysburg College | Rhodes College | University of Mississippi |
| Grand Valley State University | Rice University | University of North Carolina |
| Franklin & Marshall College | Rochester Institute of Technology | University of Pennsylvania |
| Harvard University | Rollins College | University of Rhode Island |
| Hofstra University | Santa Clara University | University of Tulsa |
| Indiana University | Skidmore College | University of Utah |
| James Madison University | Southern Methodist University | University of Vermont |
| Johns Hopkins University | Southwestern University | University of Wyoming |
| Lawrence University | Stanford University | Vanderbilt University |
| Louisiana State University | Suffolk University | Vassar College |
| Loyola Marymount University | Swarthmore College | Wake Forest University |
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NATIONAL HISTORY CLUB

The NHC would like to express our gratitude to the following people and organizations who make our important work possible...

John Abele	Smithsonian Institution
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George Washington's Mount Vernon	The Concord Review
The HBE Foundation	The History List
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HarperCollins Publishing	Bill Haponski
History News Network	Elizabeth Jones
History 500	William Jordan (Professor, Princeton)
Laurel Hill Cemetery	John Lane
Museum of Florida History	Howard Loken
National Council for History Education	Rod McCaslin
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National World War I Museum	Guy Rogers (Professor, Wellesley)
National World War II Museum	Gary Rowe
Omohundro Institute of Early American History	Henry Seng
Organization of American Historians	Art Snyder
Parkview High School (GA)	Rick Sperry
Penguin Random House	Lisa Wingate

The National History Club is a 501(c)(3) organization that relies on grants and donations to support efforts. If you are passionate about history and would like to contribute to our mission of promoting history at the secondary level please contact **Robert Nasson** (rnasson@nationalhistoryclub.org).