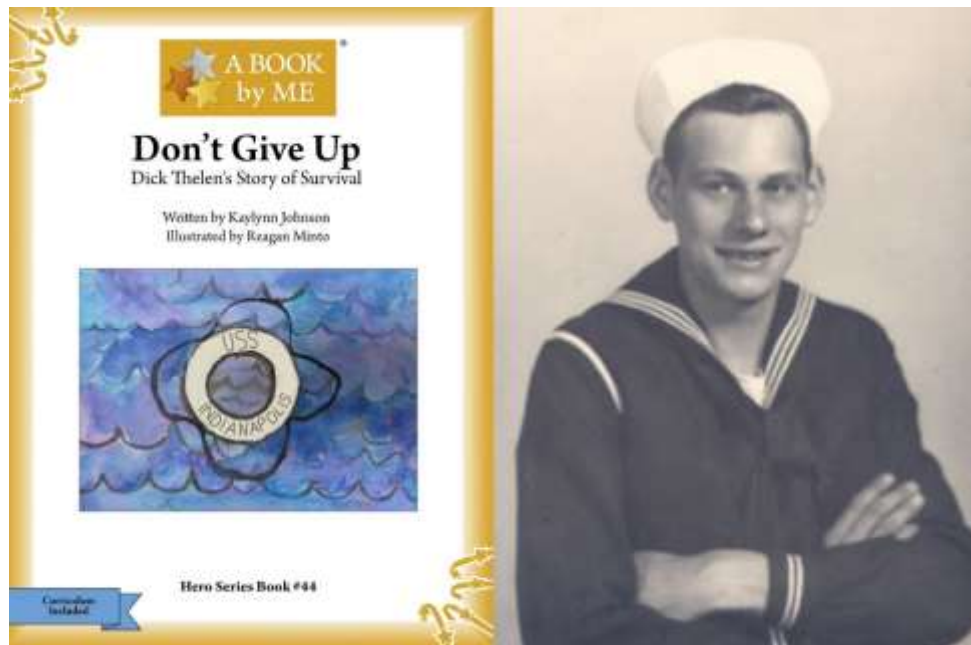




# *Don't Give Up* Readers Theater

Based on the book by Kaylynn Johnson and Reagan Minto  
This title found in Social Justice Superstars book set  
at [understandingworks.org](http://understandingworks.org)



#survival

Dick was 17 years old when he went off to fight for his country. Before he left for the war, his father said, "Dick I want you to come home alive." Young Dick had no idea his father's words would come back to him over and over as he fought for his life. He was in the U.S. Navy aboard the USS *Indianapolis* when the Japanese sank the ship. It was the Navy's worst tragedy at sea with only 317 survivors. Dick was at sea in shark infested waters with nothing to eat or drink for five days.

Cast:

[Kaylynn Johnson](#) (author)

[Edgar Harrell](#) (U.S. Marine)

[Reagan Minto](#) (illustrator)

[Secret Crate](#) (with bomb parts)

[Lorraine Thelen](#) (Dick's sister)

[Captain McVay](#) (*USS Indianapolis*)

[Dick Thelen](#) (Navy veteran)

[Torpedo 1](#) (Japanese bomb)

[Welder](#) (Dick's fellow worker)

[Chuck Gwinn](#) (pilot)



Reagan Minto and Kaylynn Johnson  
holding Dick Thelen's Navy photo

## Scene 1

### Story Introduction

**Kaylynn:** I had the opportunity to write a remarkable story about Dick Thelen. Some stories are unbelievable and our friend Dick has one of those. He was in the Navy during World War II. America and her Allies had won the war in Europe but we were still fighting the Japanese. Dick was mistaken when he thought it was going to be easy. He ended up having the fight of his life.

**Reagan:** In order to illustrate Dick Thelen's story, I learned all about his amazing life. Dick's parents were Rose and Harry Thelen from Lansing Michigan. He had a sister named Lorraine and a brother named Carl. Dick became our friend when my cousin and I created a storybook about him. He told us that because he grew up during the Great Depression, his family didn't have a phone in their home, and most of the roads in Michigan were only dirt back then. I'll let some of those who knew Dick when he was younger continue this story.

## Scene 2

### In the Navy

**Lorraine Thelen:** My brother Dick went off to war and our family was nervous. During World War II, all of us knew someone who had lost a son, a brother or a nephew in the war. Thousands of men have died for the freedom we enjoy as Americans. My father told him, "Dick, I want you to come home alive," but he had no idea how my brother would have to fight to keep that promise.

**Dick Thelen:** Off I went to war at the age of 17. I joined the Navy simply because I liked water. My job title was gunner's mate and one day we were told to stand in line and count off "one, two". The "ones" were sent to the USS *New Jersey* and the "twos" the USS *Indianapolis*. I went with the "twos."

**Welder:** I'm a welder in California and I've been working on repairs for the Navy on a ship called the USS *Indianapolis*. These repairs were needed because an enemy aircraft crashed into her. That had to be frightening for the men on board this ship. A boy named Dick Thelen has been ordered to work with me holding a fire extinguisher in case there were troubles. Soon he and others will be off to sea.

**Edgar Harrell:** My name is Edgar and I'm a United States Marine. Like all young men I know, I'm proud to serve my country. Patriotism is high among young people my age. Currently my orders are to help load secret cargo on board the *USS Indianapolis* and be part of the team who guard this crate until it's delivered to an island in the Pacific Ocean.

### Scene 3 Aboard the *USS Indianapolis*

**Dick Thelen:** They are in such a hurry for us to leave to the Pacific theater. I hear there is a top-secret mission, and for some strange reason there are Marines on board our ship. It's my first voyage but the older sailors say this isn't typical.

**Secret Crate:** Very few people know my contents. Scientist have been working in New Mexico, Washington state and Tennessee on the world's first atomic bomb. Parts to that bomb are safe inside me and will be delivered to an island where an aircraft called the Enola Gay will soon drop a bomb on Japan to end this horrible war. Some of the men on board this ship will never know the importance of their mission.

**Kaylynn:** Even the ship's captain didn't know what was in that crate. Dick and the ship's crew were curious about it but most of the talk aboard ship was about the high speed the ship was traveling. They were in a big hurry for a very important reason.

**Reagan:** Once they arrived to the island called Tinian, they unloaded the top-secret crate and off they sailed toward Guam.

**Captain McVay:** I was relieved to drop off that crate and go on to our next business. I received a report that things were quiet in the seas and that the Japanese were on their last legs of the battle. I was confident there was nothing to worry about. I was wrong.

**Dick Thelen:** On Monday July 29, 1945 I needed some rest so I folded a blanket and laid down to catch some sleep before my 4 a.m. shift. I would soon be wide awake when the unthinkable happened.

## Scene 4

### Attack on the *USS Indianapolis*

**Torpedo 1:** Commander Hashimoto, Captain of the Japanese submarine, was in the waters near the *Indianapolis*. He had a different idea of how this night would end. His country was on the verge of defeat and he wanted to take a prize for his emperor. That prize was the *USS Indianapolis*. His orders, "Fire one!" was closely followed by, "Fire two!" I was headed straight toward the American ship with another torpedo close behind me.

**Dick Thelen:** I flew in the air, and I couldn't tell you if I went two feet in the air or twenty feet but I flew. Our ship sank in twelve minutes, and I found myself covered in diesel fuel bobbing in the water. I didn't realize that I would still be floating in the water for five days with no food or fresh water to drink.

**Kaylynn:** Dick told us that he later learned that about 900 men were in the ocean. The men in the water tried tying their life jackets together, but the waves tore them apart.

**Reagan:** Dick sent a chill up our spines when he told us he saw sharks swimming around and begin picking off sailors one by one. Dick said he was terrified when sharks sized him up a time or two. He thought the fact that he was covered in diesel fuel may have kept them away from him.

**Edgar Harrell:** I was floating in the water along with Dick and many others. Some drank the poison salt water and started hallucinating. By Wednesday we began to wonder if we would ever get rescued. It felt hopeless but we hung on for our lives.

**Dick Thelen:** I was with a group of 20, and soon only twelve were still alive. It would have been easier to give up and slip down into the waters, but I kept thinking of the promise I made to my dad. I was not going to give up hope.

## Scene 5

### Ocean Rescue

**Chuck Gwinn**: I'm a pilot serving in the Pacific. It was Friday morning and I was adjusting my antenna and suddenly I saw bodies bobbing on the water. At first I thought it was the enemy and then I realized it was Americans. I sent a message in code, "ducks on the pond," to get help for the men.

**Dick Thelen**: Soon a ship called *USS Doyle* picked some of us up. I couldn't stand or walk on my own, so two sailors helped me shower the diesel fuel off. That was the start of my healing that would take weeks physically and much longer emotionally. I couldn't go see the movie "Jaws" when it came out for obvious reasons. I also wouldn't go see the "Titanic" when it was released in the theater. I'd seen one ship sink and that was enough.

**Edgar Harrell**: There were 317 of us who survived. Later we would all gather in a survivor reunion group. That group became very special.

**Dick Thelen**: By some miracle my neighbor Jerry Mitchell survived as well. There were 98 from Michigan aboard the *Indy*; 27 survived and 71 were lost at sea. As I got older, I began speaking about the sinking of the *USS Indianapolis* to adults and to school children. That helped me heal, and I especially loved getting letters and pictures drawn by children.

## Scene 6

### Remembering the Sacrifices

**Kaylynn**: Dick told us about the dream of having a memorial to those Michigan survivors and those who were lost at sea. My cousin Reagan and I decided to get involved in the fundraising for that effort so people from our state never forget the sacrifices these sailors made for our freedom.

**Reagan**: If your school acts out this skit please collect change for the memorial fund, or you can hold a bake sale and add that money to the donation. There are many other ways you can raise money, too. Send a check to the VFW and know that every dollar adds up! Let's do this kids!

**Dick Thelen**: This memorial is very special to me, as I remember the 71 men from our state who were lost at sea and the 27 of us who survived. I want kids from across our state and across our nation to see this as it stands for freedom. The memorial to our great ship will be near the state capital in Lansing, Michigan. I would appreciate it if you would send a check to:

VFW 701  
123 N Rosemary Street  
Lansing MI 48917

to help make this happen.