

= John Henry Turpin =

John Henry " Dick " Turpin (20 August 1876 ? 10 March 1962) was a sailor in the United States Navy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries . Turpin was one of the first African American Chief Petty Officers in the U.S. Navy . He is also notable for surviving the catastrophic explosions of two U.S. Navy ships : USS Maine in 1898 , and USS Bennington in 1905 .

= = Early life and career = =

Turpin was born on 20 August 1876 and enlisted in the U.S. Navy in New York City on 4 November 1896 .

= = USS Maine = =

He was a Mess Attendant on Maine when it exploded in Havana under mysterious circumstances on the night of 15 February 1898 . Turpin was in the pantry of the wardroom when the explosion occurred , and felt the ship " heave and lift " before all went dark . He worked his way aft and climbed out of the wardroom on the captain 's ladder and up onto the deck . He dove overboard and was rescued by a motor launch . Turpin was one of 90 out of the 350 officers and men aboard Maine that night to survive the explosion .

According to an obituary that appeared in the Los Angeles Times , Turpin (whose next ship assignment was not reported) saw action in China during the 1900 Boxer Rebellion .

= = Bennington explosion = =

By mid @-@ 1905 , Turpin had been assigned to the gunboat Bennington . When that ship was raising steam for a departure from San Diego , California , on 21 July 1905 , she suffered a boiler explosion that sent men and machinery into the air and killed 66 of the 102 men aboard . Turpin reportedly saved three officers and twelve men by swimming them to shore one at a time . Eleven men were awarded the Medal of Honor for " extraordinary heroism displayed at the time of the explosion " , but Turpin was not among them .

= = Later career = =

In 1915 Turpin worked as a diver in efforts to raise the sunken submarine USS F @-@ 4 in Honolulu , Hawaii . He became qualified as a " Master Diver " - most probably the first African @-@ American sailor to do so . Turpin was also credited with being involved with the development of the underwater cutting torch .

Turpin served on several other ships before leaving active duty service in 1916 .

After the United States entered World War I in April 1917 , Turpin was recalled to service . On 1 June 1917 , he became a Chief Gunner 's Mate on the cruiser Marblehead , which made him among the first African American Chief Petty Officers in the U.S. Navy . Turpin served at that rank until he was transferred to the Fleet Reserve in March 1919 . In October 1925 , Turpin retired at the rank of Chief Gunner 's Mate .

During his time in the Navy , he was the Navy boxing champion in several different weight classifications throughout is Navy career and was a boxing instructor at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis , Maryland .

= = Later life = =

After his retirement from the Navy , Turpin was employed as a Master Rigger at the Puget Sound Navy Yard in Bremerton , Washington ; he was also qualified as a Master Diver in his civilian duties .

During World War II , Turpin tried to return to active service but was denied an account of his age . He volunteered to tour Navy training facilities and defense plants to make " inspirational visits " to African @-@ American sailors .

= = Death = =

Turpin died in Bremerton , Washington on 10 March 1962 . He was survived by his wife Faye Alice . At his funeral , his pall bearers were six Navy chief stewards .

= = Awards = =

Good Conduct Medal
Navy Expeditionary Medal
Spanish Campaign Medal
China Relief Expedition Medal
Nicaraguan Campaign Medal
Mexican Service Medal
Victory Medal