

# Raising

*In one of the greatest salvage operations ever conducted, the mighty battleship Oklahoma was raised from her grave at Ford Island, but her new life was shortened — seemingly through her own will*

# OKLAHOMA

BY GENE T. ZIMMERMAN

There are many works that relate the story of Pearl Harbor. Most tell of Japanese preparedness and American slackness, and all talk about the carnage on that bloody Sunday morning. But the aftermath within the base? A scant few vague references filter through here and there, but the histories rush on to other battles and later exciting events. But the aftermath was a grueling affair. Salvage and repair parties began work within hours after the attack was

over, and for a long time, the fear of a second invasion lingered.

The restoration of Pearl Harbor to a first-class naval base required an exhaustive

effort over many months. Some efforts would require years. And interspersed with such efforts were the normal affairs of a naval base actively engaged in a war. Probably the most monumental salvage project ever faced by the Navy occurred during this period — the raising of the USS *Oklahoma*.

Those taking a quick look into their history books will not find much enlightenment concerning the *Oklahoma* during the battle, and even less about her salvage. The better works do indicate that she was salvaged and eventually sold for scrap, but none explain why she was not decommissioned until late 1944 if she was intended for the scrap yard from

the start. Why was she the only salvageable battleship that didn't return to the fight? The reasons are not so much in her rebuilding as they were in her refloating.

USS *Oklahoma* (BB-37) was one of two *Nevada*-class battleships authorized in 1911. Her keel was laid on 26 October 1912, at the Camden, New Jersey, yard of the New York Shipbuilding Corporation. Launched on 23 March 1914, the vessel went into commission at the Philadelphia Navy Yard on 2 May 1916, with Capt. Roger Wells commanding.

The *Nevadas*, as a class, were not much greater than their predecessors, the *Texas*-class, but this was due to a new arrangement of armor and armament. Considered super-dreadnoughts by 1914 standards, these vessels introduced the American version of an "All or Nothing" armor concept. Deck armor was three inches while turret armor was 18 inches or 16 inches on the face and nine inches on the rear. Armor on the barbettes was 13.5 inches. The tower was protected by 16 inches of armor with eight inches on the roof. The tonnage of the armor amounted to 7664-tons which is not inconsiderable for a standard displacement of 27,500-tons.

Like the *Texas*, she had ten 14-inch/45 guns, arranged in two triple and two twin mounts, thus reducing the number of turrets needed to four and eliminating unnecessary armor duplication. As built, her secondary battery of 21 5-inch/51 guns was considered adequate to deal with any destroyer or torpedo boat that might get through her escort.

In addition to this armament, she carried four submerged torpedo tubes. Her dimensions were 583-feet by 95-feet 3-inches by 28-feet 6-inches. Crew consisted of 864 officers and men.

The *Oklahoma* did not have the *Nevada's* turbines, but rather used twelve Babcock & Wilcox boilers driving two dual-acting, vertical triple-expansion reciprocating engines built by NYSB. They provided 24,800 horsepower and she could still meet her designed speed of 20.5-knots and design range of 8000 miles. The most important feature of the powerplants in this class was their exclusive use of oil for fuel.

The *Oklahoma* joined Battleship Division Six in the western Atlantic and remained there until mid-1918. By the summer of 1918 it had become obvious to the Navy Department that they would have to reinforce the Allies for both political and strategic reasons. Thus, both the *Nevada* (BB-36) and the *Oklahoma* (BB-37) left Norfolk, Virginia, on 13 August 1918, for Ireland, and arrived at Berehaven, Bantry Bay, on 23 August. There, they remained for the duration.

With the cessation of hostilities, the three battleships at Berehaven joined Battleship Division Nine at Portland, England. The Battleship Division then proceeded to escort President Wilson's transport, the *George Washington*, to Brest, France. In December the battleships left Brest for the United States. They arrived in New York harbor on 26 December 1918, where the Secretary of the Navy Daniels reviewed the fleet. A short period of Fleet exercises ensued, and the *Oklahoma* left for France in May 1919. On 29 June 1919, she sailed from Brest, France, escorting the *George Washington* back to the United States.

Though her secondary battery had received a major modification prior to the outbreak of the Great War, it was deemed advisable to render further modifications and alterations to her fighting tops. This short overhaul ended and she returned to the Fleet in 1920.

USS *Oklahoma* as many would like to remember the mighty battleship — first her 14/45 main battery guns during exercises in the early 1920s. Next battleship in line is USS *Nevada* (BB-36). (National Archives)