

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



RAISING 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 discuss the carnage of that bloody Sunday morning. But the aftermath within the base itself? A few shadowy references filter through here and there, but the histories rush on to other battles and later exciting events. However, 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 an 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

Devastation complete — little remains visible of the *Oklahoma* while USS *Maryland*'s to the right.

in her rebuilding as they were in her refloating.

The *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



Well-attended launch of the USS *Oklahoma* on 23 March 1914 at the New York Shipbuilding Company, Camden, New Jersey.



Freshly modernized, the USS *Oklahoma* steams past Alcatraz prison during the 1930s.

Photographed in 1937, the gun captains and pointers for *Oklahoma*'s number four turret take some time for a photo to send home to the folks.

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 Battle-ship 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

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. The armor reached thicknesses of 18-in and 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-in/45-cal guns, but mounted in only four turrets, thus reducing the number of turrets needed and eliminating unnecessary armor duplication. Her secondary battery of 20 5-in/51-cal QF 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-ft by 95-ft 3-in by 28-ft 6-in.

The *Oklahoma* did not have the *Nevada*'s turbines, but rather used the traditional triple-expansion reciprocating engines built by NYSB. She could still meet her designed speed of 20.5-kts. The most important feature of the powerplants in this class was their exclusive use of oil for fuel.

