

TO THE NEW YORK TIMES
VIA THE NEW YORK TIMES WASHINGTON BUREAU
FROM ROBERT TRUMBULL

REPAIR: VI. (Last of series)

PEARL HARBOR, December 18 (passed by naval censor)---A battleship that has been standing on her head since December 7, 1941, the USS Oklahoma is the center of a cheerful little world of tugs and barges and men clambering about on the vast, rounded bottom, whistling as they work.

But that's outside. Inside the hull is a dismal hell of unutterable confusion. The writer and Keith Wheeler of the Chicago Times spent a long hour in the pitch-black, fetid boiler room of the capsized battlewagon, where everything is so jumbled by the force of Japanese explosive that the fact you're in an upside-down room seems merely an interesting sidelight.

As the climax of our tour to see how the flaming, broken Pearl Harbor of a year ago has been transformed into the magnificent navy yard of today, we were permitted by Rear Admiral William R. Furlong, Commandant of the Yard, to see what has been done to the crippled battleships still left here. The Oklahoma was our last stop.

Commander F. H. Whitaker, salvage officer under Admiral Furlong, and his assistant diving officer, Ensign A. Calhoun, took us out to the Oklahoma in a harbor launch. We pulled alongside a tug, and shortly the four of us were standing at the top of the Oklahoma's curved belly. The ship's bottom lies about

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one-third out of the water, her actual keel over to one side,

Under our feet a hammer chattered. "Oh yes, they're working inside," Commander Whitaker said. "Scaling, and welding in the stiffeners."

He was referring to the preliminary bracing necessary before the 29,000-ton steel mass is pulled over to an upright position, as the first step in her repair.

(The operations already under way for doing this were described in the preceding installment of this series.)

It was Sunday, but days make no difference in Pearl Harbor. Aside from the inside hammering that had tickled my feet, the main activity seemed to be diving. One of the divers pulled himself aboard from the water then, so coated with oil that his dungarees were hardly distinguishable from his bare torso.

The water all around was coated with oil, which was bleeding constantly from the hulk beneath our feet. The heavy black scum not only made the divers' work about the Oklahoma an exceedingly dirty job, but it complicated their problems by shutting out all light, so that they had to work under water by feel. The only way they can get the blackness off their skin and out of their hair is by bathing in diesel oil.

There were showers and other accommodations of the rudest sort on the barge alongside. There the men had their lunches, changed clothes, and made their base generally during the working day.

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"You'll see plenty of oil when you go inside the ship," we were advised by Ensign Carl (Smoky) Keenam. He was right. Ensign Keenam, incidentally, directed the famous rescue on December 8 of 32 sailors trapped in the hull of this ship, a few feet from where we stood.

"If you want to go inside, you'd better put on diving suits," he added.

We had already been told about the compressed-air face masks we would wear to protect us against the extremely lethal hydrogen sulfides and carbon monoxides that permeate the air inside a sunken battleship.

We found that the "diving suits" we were to wear were not the conventional rubber variety, for we were not going into water. These were cover-alls whose purpose was protection of our bodies against the oil and general filth we were soon to encounter. To protect our hair we bound our heads with rags that Ensign Calhoun dug up. Our footgear was heavy rubber boots

Commander Whitaker was to be our escort on this journey into the bowels of the Oklahoma, the first time the trip had been made by laymen. With Ensign Keenam, he led us to an airlock.

The airlock is a tubular structure welded to the hull, and with an airtight door. Going inside the Oklahoma is rather complicated. The water has been partly forced out by compressed air, and to keep it rising again a constant pressure of 10

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pounds to the square inch is maintained. The purpose of the airlock is to allow access to the interior of the ship, principally for removal of water trapped in low corners, and for correction of air leaks.

"Some people," Ensign Calhoun remarked significantly, "Can't take pressure." We allowed that we could.

We entered the airlock, Commander Whitaker, Keenam, Wheeler and I. Calhoun stayed outside as the surface watch, listening in on the two-way telephones with which the masks are equipped. Keenam would stay in the airlock, paying out our air-lines and generally keeping us ship-shape topside while Commander Whitaker conducted Wheeler and me below.

Inside the lock Keenam helped us get on our masks, which we found somewhat cumbersome with their telephone transmitter, and double airtube leading over the shoulder to the supply tanks above. The mask itself is actually little more than a skeleton of the familiar army gas mask, but with much larger eye glasses.

An integral part of the outfit is the canvas belt six inches wide, which you buckle around your waist. This holds the air-hose connection, the adjusting valve, and two small emergency flasks that carry 10 minutes' supply of compressed air.

During the next few minutes I didn't take my hand off my control valve. I was afraid I'd forget where it was.

"Keep the air coming so it will whistle out the side of

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the mask, past your ears," Commander Whitaker advised. "If you want to know whether you're getting enough, take a deep breath. If the inhalation collapses the mask against your face, you aren't."

I tried. I wasn't.

Keenam closed and dogged down the airtight door to the lock. Another airtight door in the floor led down into the hull. This would not be opened until the air inside the lock had the same pressure of 10 pounds to the square inch.

"When the pressure goes up, your ears may hurt," Commander Whitaker cautioned. "If it gets too bad, hold up your hand and I'll ease the pressure."

It was dark in the lock, but it would be darker below. Keenam handed us heavy square battle lanterns. More impediments I thought, how do divers get any work done while toting around all this stuff? Experience, I guess. Get used to anything.

Now there was a ghostly colloquy by phone between Keenam and Calhoun outside---the usual check-up routine. Then Commander Whitaker turned the master valve, and compressed air hissed into the chamber. The hiss grew sharper, and rose to a roar, and we watched the pressure-gauge needle showing the ratio of pressure in the airlock to that in the hull. When the needle came to zero, meaning no differential, we would open the hatch.

My ears pained now, but not badly. I found that this discomfort passed in a few moments.

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Keenam knelt and pulled at the dogs on the hatch leading downward. In a moment now we would look on the bared inside of a historic catastrophe.

The hatch clanged open. Wheeler and I peered eagerly over the edge, pointing our torches down into the opening.

We knew that now the deadly gases might be rushing around us from the cavern below. I hoped that we wouldn't explore so far that my airlines might be fouled.

Commander Whitaker eased himself over the lip of the hatch and went down. I couldn't help thinking of the confusion we would find---letting our bodies down, but really going up, as the ship is charted.

I followed carefully, for it was the most complete darkness I had ever experienced. Our powerly lamps made a narrow beam which the blackness seemed to squeeze.

There is a ladder going down. As I maneuvered awkwardly with my burden of lines, air flasks, heavy boots and light, I began to understand what I had been told about the condition of the Nevada, California and West Virginia when the first divers went inside.

Now we were on the ladder, three of us, Wheeler at the top. We were passing through the lower-most blister in the Oklahoma's hull---her protective double bottom.

We came to a stop on a grating---underside of it, of course. We swung our lights about, trying to identify the confusion in

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which we found ourselves. Rent and burned steel lay all around fallen beams, a terrible conglomeration of nameless things, all covered with black slime.

Commander Whitaker motioned to another ladder leading farther down (up) into the ship, and asked a question. We couldn't understand him very well through the masks, but we gathered that he was asking us if we wanted to go on down. We nodded yes.

Getting around down here was mostly a hands-and-knees matter. And there was no avoiding scraping yourself against the filthy, oil-coated heaps of rubbish all about.

As my lines kept catching on the misshapen corners of steel and jugged everywhere, and my bustle of air flasks kept banging into things as I tried to undo my troubles, I marveled again that divers get around in such a hell-hole to cut, and weld, and fix bracings.

We reached another lop-sided catwalk, and were in the great fire room. A huge dead boiler appeared to be in good shape beneath the dripping oil, but I couldn't see all of it in the oppressive darkness.

Swinging my light around, I saw that this tomb-like room was like a kettle, and it was heaped half full of the dank stuff that lay everywhere, looking like nothing so much as garbage. It was undoubtedly stinking horribly.

We stood precariously, Wheeler and I, swinging out torches

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about, inspecting every cranny. The boilers, various doors and catwalks were the only familiar things I could see. It was a sight to break a man-o-wars-man's heart. Navy ships, so traditionally neat, to end in this incredible filth. There was no place to move except at the greatest risk of plunging down. We started back up.

As we mounted the ladder the clang of heavy metal falling broke the deathly quiet. Wheeler and I discussed it through our masks, and looked for the Commander.

We waited a moment, uncertain, then saw him crawling about below. We continued up, wondering what had fallen, and what the Commander was doing.

Back in the airlock---myself relieved---we found that our air-lines had knocked down into the shaft Keenam's lamp which we had set on the floor, and the Commander had gone down to recover it.

Out on deck (the bottom, that is) I for one was glad the experience was over. We had seen progress, though, with our own eyes, on this immense job of turning and saving the Oklahoma. We had been down inside her only 40 feet, which was 12 feet below the level of the bay outside---but water in the ship had been blown out still 12 feet more below where we had been.

I thought again, as I showered and rubbed down in diesel oil and showered a second and third time, of the men who work every day in that cess-pool, and who will make the Oklahoma shine again as Wheeler and I saw other ships shine after they had come up from the bottom.

(end story---end series)