

Aftermath

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Monday morning when I awoke to find my head still hurting from the blast I had received Sunday, I remembered all too clearly that the Captain had ordered me to go back to the harbor to find the Mass Kit I had dropped during the attack.

As I approached the landing I could hear soft, rhythmic thuds. Looking over to my left, I could see the reason for the noise. Hundreds of sailors with sad, drawn faces were slouching along, their side arms gone and their clothes oil-soaked and torn. The many small boats coming and going were not unusual, but their cargo of dead-tired gobs, stretched every which way in the boats, gave me a chilly feeling.

Everywhere was the feeling of defeat. Most of the dead bodies had been collected during the night, but the odor of burnt flesh clung to the ground like gas. Battleship-row was a graveyard. Five ships lay capsized with their bridges protruding from the water like tombstones.

To find the Mass Kit I went aboard the battlewagon, U. S. S. Maryland. As I came aboard I was stopped by a long line of men who were handling the ammunition by hand because the power belt was broken. Their skin was torn and bleeding from the casings of the shells,

but they were not concerned about themselves. On the fantail the band was blaring out "John Brown's Body," changing occasionally to other war songs. The captain of the ship, sensing defeat all around him, was trying to maintain within his men a fighting spirit.

Unable to find anyone to help me locate the Maryland's motor launch, into which I had thrown the kit, I proceeded to the starboard side. There the heroic action of salvage divers had saved the lives of ten Oklahoma sailors; they had chipped their way through the double bottom of the ship to get to the "lucky bag." The task completed, they had carried the sailors out of a trap that had held them for twenty-six hours.

Finally I spotted the ship's chaplain, who informed me that the launch was blown to pieces, but that a few of the crew were still alive. These men told me that the kit had been thrown over the side as the boat entered a wall of oil fire on its way to rescue survivors of the U. S. S. Oklahoma. When I found the kit, it was oil-soaked and muddy.

The stole, a particular piece of the vestment, with the oil and salt water-stains still plainly visible, now hangs in the trophy case of the Fighting 69th, at Washington, D. C.