

The Lifebelt

In the book 'Finding Your Way', Gary LaFerla tells an amazing story, pieced together from the records of the United States Naval Institute following the Second World War. The USS Astoria had engaged the Japanese during the battle for Savo Island before any other ships of the U.S. navy arrived. During the crucial night of the battle, August 8, the Astoria scored several direct hits on a Japanese vessel, but was itself badly damaged in the process. At about 0200 hours, Signalman 3rd Class Elgin Staples, was swept overboard by the blast after the Astoria's gun turret exploded. Wounded in both legs by shrapnel and in semi-shock, he was kept afloat in the sea by a narrow lifebelt.

At around 0600 hours, Staples was rescued by a passing destroyer and returned to the Astoria, whose captain was attempting to save the cruiser by beaching her. The effort failed, and Staples, still wearing the same lifebelt, found himself back in the water! It was now lunchtime. Picked up again, this time by the USS President Jackson (AP – 37), he was one of 500 survivors of the battle who were evacuated. On board the transport, Staples hugged that lifebelt with gratitude, and studied the small piece of equipment for the first time. He scrutinized every stitch of the lifebelt that had served him so well. It'd been manufactured by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio, and it bore a registration number.

Given home leave, Staples told his story and asked his mother, who worked for Firestone, about the purpose of the number on the belt. She replied that the company insisted on personal responsibility, and each checking inspector had their own personal number which they put on the belt when signing it off. Staples remembered everything about the lifebelt, and quoted the number. There was a moment of stunned silence in the room and then his mother spoke: “That was my personal code that I affixed to every item I was responsible for approving.” Try to imagine the emotions within the hearts of mother and son. The one whose DNA he bore had also been instrumental in his rescue in the waters that had threatened his life.

(Brian Johnston, *If Atheism is True... The Futile Faith and Hopeless Hypothesis of Dawkins and Co.*, Swindon, United Kingdom: Hayes Press Publisher, Resources & Media, 2016, Kindle Book, Location 505 and 516 of 1416)