

National Capital Commandery

Remembering the Maine – the 125th Anniversary

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the explosion on the USS *Maine* that took the lives of 260 US Navy personnel in 1898. The event was the impetus that propelled the nation into the Spanish-American War. The ship's main mast is preserved in Arlington National Cemetery as a monument to those who perished. The monument rises above a field of white marble gravestones – marking the final resting place of 230 sailors from the *Maine* (additional remains fill a cemetery plot in Key West, Florida). The powder magazine explosion was so horrific that, in some cases, individual bodies could not be identified. Many of the graves read: FOUR UNKNOWN – USS MAINE.

It was here, under the monument, on Wednesday, 15 February 2023 that veterans and service personnel gathered to commemorate the tragedy. Five Naval Order companions attended: Captain William Steagall (USN Ret.), Captain John Rodgaard (USN Ret.), Dr. David Winkler (USN Ret.), Dr. Judy Pearson, and Captain James Rojek, Deputy Company Commander of the 3rd Infantry Regiment. Approximately 40 people were in attendance, including representatives from American Gold Star Mothers.

The ceremony began when the Navy Ceremonial Guard paraded the colors and the Navy Band played the National Anthem. Commander Matt Johnson (USN) opened the ceremony and a Navy chaplain led the invocation. The keynote speaker was RADM Sam Cox of the Navy History and Heritage Command.

Admiral Cox reminded the listeners that the USS *Maine* was in Havana Harbor in 1898, protecting US interests while Cubans revolted against Spanish rule. No one knows how the explosion in the powder magazine occurred. Investigations have concluded that it was probably an accident. However, at the time, US citizens suspected sabotage. The event shook the nation in the same manner as the attack on Pearl Harbor or the attacks on 11 September 2001. The rallying cry was “Remember the Maine and the hell with Spain.”

Admiral Cox stated that during that era, approximately 300 sailors died each year in the line of duty – a testament to the dangers of life at sea. He said that the *Maine* monument serves as a reminder of those who sacrificed their lives in the service of the nation and the suffering of their families. “When we expect sailors to live and die for their country, the least we can do is remember them.” With that, a sailor placed a wreath at the base of the monument while a bugler played taps. The ceremony concluded with a benediction and a moment of quiet reflection, as once more, we looked over the vast expanse of white expanse of white gravestones that is Arlington National Cemetery.

Submitted by Judy Pearson, Ph.D.

Photos and Captions:

1. The *Maine* Monument at Arlington National Cemetery
2. A grave stone of the USS *Maine*
3. RADM Sam Cox, keynote speaker
4. Laying the wreath at the base of the monument
5. The wreath