

USS MAINE

Remember the Maine?

Keynote remarks by Rear Admiral Sam Cox, U.S. Navy (Retired,) Director Naval History and Heritage Command, at the USS MAINE Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery on the 125th anniversary of the ship's sinking, 15 February 2023.

I stood in for an active duty admiral who was called away for something else. Fortunately my uniform still fits.

Remarks:

“Good morning distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is an honor to be here today and speak about the courage and sacrifice of the crew of the USS MAINE that terrible night 125 years ago in Havana Harbor, 15 February 1898. Looking around today, it is hard to imagine that this event was as big a national trauma at the time as the attack on Pearl Harbor or as the terrorist attack on 9/11. (The crowd was small, but dedicated – outdoors in February is not conducive to a big turnout.)

Back in 1987, when I was a young Intelligence Officer lieutenant, I was assigned as the escort officer for Captain (later Rear Admiral) Artal, the Director of Naval Intelligence for the Spanish Navy. Although not part of the official program, he expressed an interest in seeing Arlington National Cemetery and the U.S. Naval Academy, so I volunteered my weekend time to show him and his daughter Laura around. As we were leaving the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, he looked this direction and asked, “What is that?”

I said, “Sir, that is the mainmast of the USS MAINE.” I didn’t feel the need to elaborate and he just acknowledged with a nod.

Later, at the Naval Academy, he noticed an almost identical mast (except even more battered) and asked, “What is that?”

I figured he probably knew, but I answered, “Sir, that is the foremast of USS Maine.”

This time Captain Artal responded, “Well, it is good that we are friends now.”

That was certainly the case in 1987, and today. Spain had joined NATO in 1982 and even before that had been very helpful to U.S. Naval Intelligence during the Cold War.

That was definitely not the case in 1898. Although in his first report back to the Secretary of the Navy after the explosion, the Commanding Officer of MAINE, Captain Charles Sigsbee recommended that, “Public opinion be suspended.” Well, good luck with that. By the next morning the U.S. “Yellow Journalism” papers were

full of headlines like, “Spanish Treachery!” and “Battleship MAINE Sunk by Torpedo or Mine!” Public opinion bordered on hysterical (not in the funny way.) It was only a short time before, “Remember the MAINE! To hell with Spain!” became a rallying call for the subsequent war with Spain. Actually, the destruction of the MAINE was not among the reasons listed in the Congressional authorization for the use of force to free Cuba from Spanish colonial rule, and technically it wasn’t even a declaration of war, but that made no difference to the Spanish who interpreted it that way.

There have been many studies, and many theories, over the years as to what caused the catastrophic explosion. None of them have conclusively proved the cause. The most likely, and plausible, explanation is that an undetected spontaneous ignition of bituminous coal in a bunker (which had happened on other ships and was a known hazard) burned through to the forward 6-inch gun magazine, initiating the explosion. There are, however, some weaknesses to that theory too.

However, if the explosion was caused by any external persons – whether the Spanish, or Cuban revolutionaries or agents of American newspapers trying to provoke a war, or other sabotage – they have covered their tracks exceedingly well. Because in 125 years no conclusive evidence has ever been found that “someone” caused the explosion. Most theories also do not take into account the state of the Spanish economy, or the decrepit state of the Spanish Navy – the last thing Spain needed at that time was a war with anyone, let alone a power on the other side of the Atlantic. In fact, Spanish telegraph traffic was rife with concern that they would get the blame for the explosion, which they most definitely did not want.

So whether you believe the subsequent conflict was a “Splendid Little War,” as some said at the time, resulting in the U.S. recognized as a world power – or whether you believe it was an unnecessary war of Imperial-like aggression to obtain colonies – is not the point. Today, we are here to remember the sacrifice of the crew of the MAINE, who were just doing their duty, and of their families.

Many different sources have different numbers of the size of the crew and the casualties on the MAINE, so I will use the numbers by my own historians at Naval History and Heritage Command. The MAINE had a crew of 355 – 290 sailors, 39 Marines, and 26 Officers. Four of the officers were ashore, so there were 351 aboard when the ship exploded at 2140, killing 253 men as an immediate result of the explosion or from drowning. The epicenter of the explosion was in the midst of the crew’s berthing, so casualties amongst the enlisted sailors were very high – only two sailors who were below decks survived. Those who did survive were topside on watch, or sleeping up on deck in the torrid tropical heat. The officer’s quarters were back aft, so only two officers were killed. Captain Sigsbee was probably the last person alive (or not incapacitated below deck) to get off the ship.

Of 77 crewmen who had been blown into or jumped into the water, only 16 were uninjured. (If you do the math, the other crewmen got off in lifeboats.) Many of

those rescued from the water were picked up by boats from the Spanish cruiser ALFONSO XII.

Seven of the rescued crewmen subsequently died from their wounds, some quickly, others lingering in agony for some time. One officer would succumb to “shock” some weeks later for a total of 260 or 261 dead depending on cut-off time. (There would also be subsequent suicides and deaths of despair from lingering physical and psychic wounds, that aren’t counted. The wounded crewman could not have received better care (for the time and place,) because as it so happened the famous nurse Clara Barton was in Havana and assisted with care.

Although MAINE’s arrival in Havana Harbor on 25 January had met with a proper, but somewhat chilly reception from Spanish authorities, all accounts agree that the reaction of the Spanish Navy and medical personnel in Havana during the explosion and the aftermath was beyond reproach, and exactly what one would expect from a professional naval service and medical personnel. More than a few survivors of the MAINE owed their lives to the prompt rescue efforts by the Spanish.

The MAINE’s crew represented a microcosm of America at the time. Although the great majority were Americans, over 25% were foreign-born, mostly from about 14-different European countries. Of those, all but 18 were naturalized American citizens or permanent residents seeking citizenship. Of the 18, 15 were registered, and five were unregistered foreigners (what now might be called illegal aliens or undocumented persons.)

There were about 30 African-American sailors in the crew. There was no way of knowing how many of them died, as the Navy did not keep race statistics and names do not necessarily correlate to race. However, as all of them were enlisted sailors, casualties were probably very high. At that time, as it had been since the Continental Navy in the American Revolution, Black sailors were an integral part of the crew...there was no segregation at the enlisted ranks. This was not because the Navy was a “progressive” institution – it had more to do with how hard it was to recruit anyone, of any race, for a life of danger and hardship at sea. Another factor was that the social standing of any sailors was so low that mixing with Blacks would not offend upper class white sensitivities. And, there were no Black officers as that would have been unheard of at the time.

One of the Black survivors was Mess Attendant John Henry Turpin, who would later also survive the boiler explosion on gunboat USS BENNINGTON in San Diego in 1905 that killed 66 and injured nearly everyone else. Turpin would go on to be a Navy Master Diver (probably the first African-American to do so) and one of the first African-American Chief Petty Officers, before segregation was instituted in the U.S. Navy during the Wilson Administration and Blacks barred from attaining that rank.

There were also nine Japanese nationals in the crew, most as mess attendants. Seven of them were killed and one was badly injured. One of those who died, Isa Sugisaki,

whose name is on the monument right there, had served in the Navy for 14 years and was the first Japanese to serve in the U.S. Navy and might have been the first Japanese to willingly emigrate (as opposed to being shipwrecked) to the United States. Japanese would later be barred from serving in the U.S. Navy in about 1906.

It should also be noted that service in the Navy at the time was inherently dangerous under the best of circumstances. Between this time and the 1930's, about 250-300 U.S. sailors every year would be killed in shipboard accidents – boiler explosions, steam ruptures, powder explosions, crushed by machinery, drowned, other ordnance accidents, and even food poisoning. Although not common, ships in many navies would blow themselves up with somewhat distressing regularity – coal dust and unstable cordite being prime causes. Examples included battleship HMS VANGUARD in 1917 (843 of 845 aboard killed) and even as late as WW II, the Japanese battleship MUTSU blew herself in half in 1943 killing all but 353 of 1,474 aboard.

Sources vary on how many of MAINE's crew ended up buried where. Of those who were originally buried in Havana (in accordance with Spanish law) 165 were eventually disinterred and brought to Arlington and buried in section 24 near this monument. Of those 63 were identified and 102 were unidentified. When MAINE was subsequently raised in 1911 (before being ceremoniously scuttled off Cuba in 1912) about another 75 sets of remains were recovered; of those another 66 were buried here at Arlington and about 25 are at a cemetery in Key West. If you do the math, these numbers don't add up. The reality is that in an event of such explosive force followed by prolonged immersion in tropical water (and marine life) - when dealing with a wrist-bone there, a partial ribcage there, and a crushed skull over there, it is exceedingly difficult to determine which sets of remains ended up in which casket, and sometimes remains were comingled despite best efforts.

The suffering of the crew, or their families, did not end with their immediate survival. Many were so horrified and haunted by what they saw, that they suffered acutely from what we now know as post-traumatic stress, for which back then there was little understanding nor treatment. The Secretary of the Navy was deluged with letters from desperate and despondent families, wanting to know if their loved one was alive or dead. Some families had lost touch with their relatives, knowing only that they were in the Navy, and inquiring if they were among the dead; in some cases they were.

There was no social security or even Navy Relief back then, and few if any sailors could possibly afford any kind of insurance. So, generally, if a sailor was killed or died, his family was pretty much on their own or dependent on private charity. Because the MAINE was such a high-profile event, the Navy was able to obtain funds to care to some degree for the families, which was also an impetus for the foundation of the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society in 1904.

So, before I close, I would like to on behalf of the United States Navy express deep appreciation for the care that the Office of Army Cemeteries and Arlington National Cemetery give to this monument and the graves of our fallen sailors. Thank you.

I would also like recognize the leaders and members of the Naval Order, who have diligently and with great dedication stood the watch at this memorial even in years that don't end with a zero or five. My mission as the Director of Naval History and Heritage Command is to ensure that the U.S. Navy never forgets the valor and sacrifice of our sailors lost in battle or at sea, and the sacrifice of their families. I deeply appreciate help from any quarter in that regard.

So to close, the important thing is not so much to remember the MAINE, as it is to remember the crew of the MAINE.

Thank you all for taking time to be here.

Not in my remarks, but a Sea Story – for the heck of it. A year after the visit of Captain Artal to Washington, I accompanied Captain Harry “the Scrounger” Price (one of the more colorful characters in Naval Intelligence) to Madrid on a classified project he was working with the Spanish Navy. At some point we met up with by-then Rear Admiral Artal, who waved me into his car, leaving Captain Price and the U.S. Naval Attache (also a Captain) to follow in the chase car. The car had a driver and an apparent bodyguard in the front while the admiral and I sat in the back.

It had been awhile since Basque Separatists had assassinated Spanish general officers and admirals, but it was obvious they were still taking the threat seriously as the car took a very circuitous route to our destination.

At one point the car was going like a bat out of hell down what seemed a narrow alleyway, with walls on each side. As Admiral Artal was telling me how his daughter Laura was going to be marrying a U.S. Navy F/A-18 pilot, all of a sudden a garbage truck backed out into the road blocking the way (kind of like the scene from the 1994 movie “Clear and Present Danger.”)

Even as the brakes were still squealing, the Admiral whipped a pistol out of his jacket, as had the driver, while the guard had some kind of Uzi-like submachine gun pointing at the truck's cab. I was thinking, “Ooh, boy. This is not how I envisioned my career ending.”

Fortunately, sometimes a garbage truck is just a garbage truck. The Admiral said, “Sorry about that,” as he tucked his pistol away, and we sped along on our merry way.