Rear Admiral William Sampson

(1840 - 1902)

By Jon Ault

General:

William Sampson commanded the North Atlantic Squadron during the Spanish American War. He was in command of the overall squadron when it was engaged in the Battle of Santiago though he was not present for the battle itself.

Biography:

Born in Palmyra, New York, on 9 February 1840, William Thomas Sampson was the oldest of seven children in a family of Scotch-Irish descent. In his youth, he was a dedicated student who spent his spare time assisting his father with such local projects as road-building, bricklaying, and farming. Years later, Palmyra farmer C. D. Johnson recalled, “Will used to hoe corn and potatoes for me when he was a little shaver for two shillings a day, and he went at it with a grim earnestness, and never let up till he finished it thoroughly.” Unable to afford college, Sampson caught the attention of a local man of wealth, William Southwick, who contacted Congressman Edwin B. Morgan to arrange Sampson’s appointment to one of the nation’s military service academies. On 24 September 1857, Sampson entered the United States Naval Academy as a cadet.

The new student was soon assigned to practice in a gun crew under the command of Second Classman Alfred Thayer Mahan. Ordnance technology, along with physics and engineering, consumed Sampson’s interest. Mahan later commented, “At our first meeting, Sampson began as he afterwards continued, putting me through a searching series of questions concerning the matters around him. He clearly, if unconsciously, intended not to wait till knowledge came to him of itself, if he could compel it to hasten.” All through his final three years at the Academy, Sampson ranked first in his class. During his last academic year, in 1860-1861, he also held the rank of commanding officer of the cadet battalion.

The Civil War Years:

The secession crisis then convulsing the nation severely divided the students at the Academy. An ardent supporter of the Union, Sampson often had to quash arguments among his classmates. Akin to his Unionist counterparts at West Point that fateful academic year, he bade farewell to classmates who decided to cast their lots with the departing South. When Federal troop transports appeared off the coast of Maryland in the spring of 1861, pro-secession Annapolis residents surrounded the locked campus of the Academy, threatening the Northern students within. As commanding officer of the cadet battalion, Sampson, assisted by the New York Seventh Regiment and the Massachusetts Eighth Regiment, held back and eventually dispersed the hostile mob.
Graduated with the rank of Midshipman, Sampson reported to the Washington Navy Yard on 29 April 1861. There, serving under Commander John Dahlgren, he assisted with the arming of a small fleet of river steamers pressed into the duty of patrolling the Potomac River and keeping it open. The prewar inventor of smoothbore 11-inch cannon for use in shore batteries and on naval vessels, and also the founder of the full-fledged Ordnance Department at the Washington Navy Yard, Dahlgren was to prove a valuable role model for the young officer. Then, in May 1861, Sampson served for three weeks aboard the POCAHONTAS, escorting Union troop and ammunition transports along the Potomac River and the lower Chesapeake Bay, under menacing Confederate artillery batteries. On 1 June, Sampson returned to New York to serve as one of the Masters aboard the POTOMAC. As the vessel was then undergoing repairs in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Sampson spent the next three months at home in Palmyra, helping his father once again, and seeing to it that part of his Navy salary would pay for his sisters’ education. In addition, he began courting his future wife, Margaret Sexton Aldrich, whom he married in 1863. When the POTOMAC finally departed New York on 20 August 1861, Sampson joined the crew as one of the junior officers, next in rank below one of the other Masters of the vessel, Winfield Scott Schley. For the next nine months, the POTOMAC patrolled the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. From that vantage point, Sampson and Schley witnessed the French, British, and Spanish occupation of the Mexican city of Veracruz in January 1862 in an effort to coerce restitution for damages incurred by foreigen-held property during Mexico’s recent civil war (1857-1860), and the beginning of the French attempt to re-colonize Mexico, which the United States was then powerless to prevent.

After returning from his tour of duty aboard the POTOMAC in the late spring of 1862, Sampson then spent the next two years as an instructor at the Naval Academy, whose campus had been temporarily relocated from Maryland to secure Union territory in Newport, Rhode Island. There, he drilled cadets in handling sails and spars, and in training guns. Among his students at this time were such future luminaries as French Chadwick, Robley Evans, Charles Gridley, Charles Sigsbee, and Charles E. Clark. In the spring and summer of 1863, Sampson, now a Lieutenant, joined Mahan for a trans-Atlantic practice cruise aboard the frigate MACEDONIAN, commanded by Stephen B. Luce. Visiting the British Navy Yard at Spithead, Sampson was profoundly impressed by its modern equipment and the ships it produced. At the French port of Cherbourg, Sampson watched crowds of French citizens cheering their army’s occupation of Mexico City. On the return home, the crew of the MACEDONIAN anticipated an encounter with the famed Confederate commerce raider CSS ALABAMA. Accordingly, Luce repainted the ship to resemble a Spanish vessel, and hoisted the flag of Spain, “a ruse which everyone hoped might enable them to get near enough to the ALABAMA to pour a broadside into her.” Though Sampson diligently drilled the crew in gunnery techniques, they did not meet the enemy vessel. Ultimately, the USS KEARSARGE would gain the distinction of sinking the Alabama off the coast of Cherbourg on 19 June 1864.

In the summer of 1864, a combat command temporarily interrupted Sampson’s teaching career. That August, he joined the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, now under the command of John Dahlgren, as Executive Officer of the ironclad monitor PATAPSCO. Stationed off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, the vessel finally afforded Sampson an opportunity to examine the latest naval technology in depth and to diagnose remaining structural problems. Commissioned in January 1863, the PATAPSCO featured several design improvements over the original USS MONITOR, such as placement of the pilot house above the gun turret, and heavy armor protection for the smokestack. [In its epic duel with the CSS VIRGINIA on 9 March 1862, the original Monitor had suffered severe damage to its smokestack.] However, Sampson discerned additional room for improvement which more research and development could remedy. Further advances in the science of steel metallurgy were needed to create a stronger alloy for hull and armament construction. These vessels also required more powerful engines and compasses that would not be affected by their metal surroundings. To make matters worse for his immediate assignment, the PATAPSCO, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Stephen P. Quackenbush, had been involved in bombarding Confederate forts off the coasts of Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina, since March 1863. The scars of battle were still visible: rivet heads on the turret had been shorn off, the turret was now able to rotate only ninety degrees (rather than the full 360), and only one of its two main guns was still operational. Barnacles encrusted its hull below the waterline, diminishing its speed. There had not been time to take the ship off the line for repairs. Furthermore, for the previous several months, the Confederate Navy had been introducing radical new weapons to contest the Union blockade, including submerged mines and submarines.

The pace of operations in Charleston Harbor increased in January 1865, after General William Tecumseh Sherman’s jujugernaut had taken Atlanta and Savannah and was preparing for its northward advance through the Carolinas. On the night of 15 January, the PATAPSCO was covering picket boats that were clearing Confederate mines, when it fatally struck one of the submerged weapons. The ironclad sank in fifteen seconds, taking sixty-two of her crew members with her. Executive Officer Sampson, who had been piloting the vessel while standing on its turret, had no time to relay Quackenbush’s sudden command to abandon ship. His foot entangled in rope netting, Sampson was dragged down below the surface, but managed to break free. The incident earned him a reputation for calmness under fire. Quackenbush’s report to Dahlgren asserted that “the cool intrepidity displayed by Lieutenant Sampson…deserves the highest praise.” When Sampson described his experience to Lieutenant Mahan the following day, the latter remarked, “When I saw him, he was as unaffectedly and without effort unperturbed as though nothing remarkable had occurred.”

Sampson, the Scientist and Naval Officer:

In the years after the Civil War, the United States Navy endured severe reduction and financial retrenchment. However, Sampson’s career continued to reach new heights. In July 1866, he received a promotion to Lieutenant-Commander, along with Alfred Thayer Mahan, Winfield Scott Schley, and George Dewey. By then, he was serving aboard the COLORADO, a steam frigate that was the flagship of the European Squadron. He impressed shipmate Dewey as having “a most brilliant mind and the qualities of a practical and efficient officer.” Between 1867 and 1871, he once again served on the faculty of the Naval
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To keep pace with their European counterparts, the Academy’s cadets “should be prepared to adapt [themselves] to the great and rapid changes that are liable at any moment to arise in (their) profession.” Sampson personally conducted many scientific experiments, and encouraged his students to follow suit. An early protégé was recent alumnus Albert A. Michelson, whom Sampson hired to teach physics in 1877. In that capacity, Michelson replicated the experiments of French physicist Jean Foucault, who had used a rotating mirror in attempts to measure the speed of light, and devised some of his own experiments for that inquiry. At Sampson’s urging, Michelson began collaborating with astronomer Simon Newcomb, the Director of the Nautical Almanac Office in Washington, DC in the spring of 1878. The following year, their efforts resulted in an accurate measurement of the speed of light. Michelson’s subsequent distinguished career as a physicist would earn him the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1907. In the summer of 1878, Sampson himself traveled to Wyoming on a special scientific expedition to observe a solar eclipse; this expedition’s findings enabled scientists to revise tables in the Nautical Almanac.

Tragedy impacted Sampson’s personal life at this time. In 1878, his wife Margaret died. They had had five daughters: Susan, Catherine, Hannah, Margaret, and Olive. After a brief tour of duty commanding the screw gunboat SWATARA of the Asiatic Squadron (1879-1881), he married Elizabeth Burling of Rochester, New York, in 1882. They would eventually have three sons: William, Ralph, and Harold.

Between 1881 and 1884, Sampson and his new family resided in Washington, DC, where he served as Assistant Superintendent of the United States Naval Observatory, and often as its acting head. He instituted several measures to improve the physical plant and its surroundings. First, he ordered a sanitary survey of the swampy area to improve the living conditions for his family and for the observatory’s staff. In addition, he obtained funds to equip the dome of the telescope with a steam engine to rotate it. Although he also sought money to install electric lights in the observatory, these did not materialize until after he left this post. During his tenure here, the Observatory continued development of a new astronomical table that would predict future positions of celestial bodies, and thus improve navigators’ abilities to determine longitudes. To obtain further calculations, Sampson sent numerous expeditions to Florida, Texas, Chile, Patagonia, and South Africa. Relying on the light of an oil lamp, he often spent long nights at the telescope verifying the expeditions’ readings. In 1883, Western Union installed a private wire to the Observatory in order to transmit its time signals to the rest of the country, which divided the nation into five longitudinal time zones. Prior to this innovation, the railroads of the United States had used a bewildering system of fifty-three different time zones. At noon on 18 November 1883, all of the nation’s railroads reset their clocks in accordance with the Observatory’s “standard time.” Soon afterward, government offices and private businesses followed their example.

At the end of his term at the Observatory, in October 1884, Sampson represented the United States at the International Conference on the Prime Meridian, held in Washington, DC. Up to this point, there had been two systems of reckoning longitude, one based on Greenwich, England and the other on Paris, France. Although the United States and Great Britain used the former, France and Latin America (with which United States trade was steadily increasing) used the latter, leading to confusion among the nations’ maritime traffic. President Chester A. Arthur convened the conference to reconcile this discrepancy. At the conference, the French delegation proposed reestablishing the Prime Meridian so that it would not run through a major world power. The British, for their part, advocated keeping the Prime Meridian based in Greenwich. Sampson sided with the British, arguing that the line had to run through an established national observatory that would be in telegraphic communication with the rest of the world, and pointing out that 70% of the world’s mariners already relied on the Greenwich system. In the end, twenty-two of the participating nations voted for Greenwich; France and Brazil abstained, and only Santo Domingo cast an opposing vote.

Sampson’s next assignment brought him back to Newport, Rhode Island, where he served as Inspector of Ordnance and Head of the Torpedo Station from 1884 to 1886. In March 1883, Congress and President Arthur had authorized the construction of the first steel ships for the American Navy, the first official call for naval construction since the Civil War. The first four ships would be the cruisers ATLANTA, BOSTON, CHICAGO, and DOLPHIN (popularly nicknamed the “ABCD Ships” for the first letters of their names). Congress’ determination to minimize expenditure created problems with designing and building them. Unwilling to purchase European plans for similar vessels, Congress handed that responsibility to various bureaus under the aegis of a Naval Advisory Board, which caused delays and confusions. Sampson sat on a board charged with the responsibility of making revisions to these American designs. In addition, Congress awarded the building contracts for all four ships to the lowest bidder, steel plate manufacturer John Roach of Chester, Pennsylvania. Beset by production delays, frequently changing specifications, and a fire at his factory, Roach proved unable to complete the first ship (the DOLPHIN) on time. In 1885, after the DOLPHIN’s steel propeller shaft broke during speed trials (and after Democrat Grover Cleveland began his first Presidential term), the government voided its contract with Roach and sued him for restitution of the money he had

Every branch of a naval officer’s profession furnishes many illustrations of the applications of science, and an officer will better comprehend the application when he understands the scientific principles upon which they are based.
At Newport, Sampson also continued experimenting with spar torpedoes, improving them so that the spar would not break if the torpedo boat were to reach speeds in excess of 18 knots. In addition, he developed a more powerful and reliable warhead, packing it more tightly with guncotton. He conducted numerous tests of submarine mines and cubical torpedoes, and presented the results to the Navy in a detailed report illustrated with photographs. Further, under his watch, the Torpedo Station buildings received electric lights, and the study of electricity was brought into the institution’s laboratories.

Sampson continued to leave his imprint on the education of American naval officers, as well. In 1884, he joined Rear-Admiral Stephen B. Luce and Lieutenant Caspar F. Goodrich on a board that recommended the establishment of a federally-funded post-graduate institution where officers would “bring to the investigation of the various problems of modern naval warfare the scientific methods adopted in other professions.” In its recommendation to Secretary of the Navy William Chandler, the board emphasized that “electricity in its application to torpedoes, chemistry in application to explosives, metallurgy in relation to ordnance and steam as a motive power, are only means to the end of which a navy may be said to exist – success in war.”

With Chandler’s approval, the Naval War College opened in Newport in September 1885.

Simultaneously, beginning in May 1885, Sampson was one of two Navy officers (along with four Army officers and two civilians) to serve on a board, created by Secretary of War William C. Endicott, whose goals were to study and make recommendations for coastal defenses. The board produced its report in January 1886, and Sampson later reprinted his contribution in the Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute in 1889. He began by sounding an alarm that the nation’s defenses had not kept pace with its post-Civil War economic growth:

> In the matter of coast defense, this nation has been for thirty years at a standstill, while others have been steadily advancing, so that now we find ourselves in the rear. That the defense of our coast is the most important end to be secured, no one will question, for the first care of any nation is to secure its integrity and, at the same time, to furnish proper protection for the lives and the property of the people. Without this, accumulated wealth serves but to tempt the cupidities of more powerful nations, and every advantage of thrift and high civilization may, on slight pretext, vanish, or become the possession of a more war-like people. Should our nation continue to increase in wealth and population as it has done in past years, it is sure to become the envy of less favored nations, who will not hesitate to take advantage of any opportunity to humiliate us. We have only to look back at the time when internal strife permitted a foreign nation to avail itself of our distress to gain a foothold where, under less favorable circumstances, she would not have ventured.

Sampson proposed construction of modern fortifications at crucial ports on both coasts and on the shores of the Great Lakes. To arm these forts, he suggested that the federal government set aside money for long-term contracts with American steel companies for the manufacture of heavy artillery, thereby eliminating the need to purchase such weapons from abroad, as well as boosting and improving the domestic steel industry. In addition, he called for the stationing of torpedo-boats, rams, gunboats, and heavily-armed “first class” vessels for coastal defense. In wartime, this would enable the regular Navy to protect American overseas commerce and conduct offensive operations against the enemy. Of the port of New York City, he commented, “I am convinced that if the port of New York were blockaded for even a few months, the loss that would result to the nation might be as great as would be produced in the city by a bombardment.” Accordingly, for that site alone, he recommended three “first class” vessels, each armed with 14” and 10” guns (at a projected cost of $10.5 million), three rams ($3 million), and twenty torpedo boats ($2 million). Other strategic ports were to have similar protection.

In subsequent years, the Army and the Navy adopted some of these measures with varying degrees of success. On the coasts, old forts were modernized and several new ones appeared. However, on the eve of the war with Spain, only 151 guns defended the Eastern and Gulf Coasts of the United States, each with less than twenty rounds; prewar estimates had called for 2,000 heavy guns and mortars. Starting in the mid-1880s, the Navy began construction of small, low-displacement gunboats, beginning with the PETREL and the YORKTOWN. They were able to access coastal areas unreachable by larger vessels, and soon proved able to undertake long voyages to distant ports. (The PETREL would be part of the fleet with which George Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay on 1 May 1898.) In addition, the Navy resurrected and updated designs for rams for harbor defense. Completed in 1895, the ram KATAHDIN resembled her Civil War-era ancestors, but in many respects prefigured the modern submarine, featuring a double bottom that could be partially flooded in order to ready the vessel for combat. Furthermore, the Navy experimented with a new type of ship armed with pneumatic guns. On the “dynamite cruiser” VESUVIUS, commissioned in June 1890, compressed air, rather than conventional gunpowder, served as the propellant for explosive shells, thus reducing incidents of premature explosions. Though there were limitations to these ships’ abilities (the KATAHDIN was unable to reach the required minimum speed of 17 knots, and the VESUVIUS was difficult to steer, and her guns could not be trained or elevated), they would play small but significant roles in the war with Spain. In 1898, the KATAHDIN helped calm the inhabitants of East Coast ports, who feared raids by Spanish cruisers. The VESUVIUS contributed to the naval blockade of the Cuban port of Santiago.

Between 1886 and 1890, Sampson was the Superintendent of the Naval Academy, one of the youngest officers to ever hold that position. Again, he strove to modernize the physical plant for the student’s benefit. He replaced gas lighting with electric lighting throughout the campus, renovated the dormitories, enlarged the library, and purchased several acres of adjoining land for use as drill and athletic fields. Prior to his arrival in this capacity, students had received practical training aboard the USS
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for use as a coaling station. In addition, hostility between the indigenous royal family under Queen Liliuokalani and wealthy white American sugar plantation owners was reaching a boiling point at the time. The McKinley Tariff of 1890 had, among other things, abrogated an 1875 reciprocity treaty by which these planters could export Hawaiian sugar to the United States without paying any duties. Shipments of sugar to the mainland had since declined. Though the white Americans comprised a small minority of the islands’ population, they began to plot the overthrow of the royal family and to seek

The Chilean crisis defused, the SAN FRANCISCO then sailed westward to Honolulu, arriving at the Hawaiian archipelago in

March 1892. Concerned about the limited coal endurance of his and other ships, Sampson hoped to enhance American control

over Hawaii for use as a coaling station. In addition, hostility between the indigenous royal family under Queen Liliuokalani and wealthy white American sugar plantation owners was reaching a boiling point at the time. The McKinley Tariff of 1890 had, among other things, abrogated an 1875 reciprocity treaty by which these planters could export Hawaiian sugar to the United States without paying any duties. Shipments of sugar to the mainland had since declined. Though the white Americans comprised a small minority of the islands’ population, they began to plot the overthrow of the royal family and to seek

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FRANCISCO sought to ease the situation, inviting the Queen and other members of the royal family aboard and attending state

dinners ashore. In June 1892, however, Sampson was recalled to the Washington Navy Yard, to replace Commander William M. Folger as Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance. Ironically, on 16 January 1893, the white planters, aided by the American Minister John L. Stevens and crew members from the BALTIMORE, intimidated the Queen into relinquishing her throne and established a

provisional government that requested annexation by the United States. Their quest would remain in limbo until the war with Spain underscored the islands’ strategic value.

For the second half of 1892, William Folger remained the titular head of the Bureau of Ordnance, allowing Sampson to serve as Inspector in order to educate himself on the technological advancements that had occurred since he had last served in the

Bureau. That autumn, Sampson oversaw the installations of furnaces, overheard cranes, and giant lathes capable of

constructing 12” guns in a new gun factory at the Washington Navy Yard. Fatigued by years of political fighting, Folger was

taken aback by Sampson’s single-mindedness. He later recalled, “We talked of little else than ordnance, its history, and

present conditions. (Sampson) read little but scientific works and periodicals. I do not recall ever seeing him read a novel, and

he cared little for historical subjects or general reading. This side of his temperament and taste was often a source of regret to

me, as it left us without resource in conversation after discussion of the shop.” In January 1893, Sampson replaced Folger, and would remain at the Bureau until June 1897.
As Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, Sampson supervised the manufacture of gun mounts for capital ships and approved shell casings manufactured by Winchester. He sought solutions for the knotty problems presented by the use of brown powder, which varied in quality and created much smoke and residue when it worked properly. In 1895, he wrote, “the difficulty of obtaining a satisfactory brown powder for the larger calibers, as well as the many inconveniences attendant upon the use of brown powder, emphasize the importance of developing a smokeless powder for all calibers.” European ordnance experts had developed a smokeless powder made from a nitroglycerin base. Sampson’s Ordnance Bureau developed and tested a smokeless powder made from a much more stable guncotton base. By 1895, the formulas for “Smokeless K” were sufficiently perfected for use in small caliber ammunition for the vessels of the North Atlantic Squadron. Brown powder remained the primary explosive for large caliber ammunition, however. In addition, Sampson created large reserves of ammunition and wrote a new gunnery drill manual, which emphasized target practice and rapidity and accuracy of fire.

Sampson also influenced gun and turret design during these years. He advocated the development of electric-powered mechanisms for turning the ships’ turrets. Steam-powered mechanisms caused the turrets to move jerkily. Moreover, leaks in the steam joints could dampen the powder, rendering it useless. Finally, the use of steam could raise temperatures inside powder-handling rooms to dangerous levels. At Sampson’s urging, half of the turrets of the new cruiser BROOKLYN were made electric on an experimental basis. Though he wanted to extend this improvement to battleships, as well, inter-bureau disputes over jurisdiction for this task delayed progress. Sampson experimented with different types of ammunition hoists for the battleships, equipping the battleship MAINE with a steam-powered mechanism, the battleship TEXAS with a manual device, the OREGON with a hydraulic machine, and the battleship MASSACHUSETTS with an electric hoist. As Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, Sampson also approved Ensign Joseph Strauss’ designs for superimposed, double-decked turrets (8” guns above, 13” guns below), which proved to be impractical. Further, he conducted firing tests to see how well the large turrets, and the crew members inside, could withstand the concussions. On 16 May 1896, Sampson and Secretary of the Navy Hilary A. Herbert witnessed a firing test using a dummy turret of identical size as those then being installed on the INDIANA class battleships (with 13” guns). Prior to firing, a dog was placed inside the turret, in the space that would be occupied by crew members. They fired three shots of progressively larger sizes and powder charges. Afterward, they found that the rollers on which the turrets were built were adequately withstood the concussion; the recoil had caused only a slight rotation of the turret. The dog emerged from the crew compartment unscathed, although there had been fragments of steel that had showered down inside.

Meanwhile, Sampson also maintained a keen interest in improving the American steel industry’s capacity to produce armor for the Navy’s ships. Until recently, there had been no armor plate factory in the United States. In 1887, the Navy Department had awarded a contract to the Bethlehem Iron Works of Pennsylvania, requiring them to build an armor plant. However, delays in experimentation and in importation of the parts needed for the 125-ton forging hammer brought progress to a standstill. Consequently, when the new battleship MAINE was launched in 1890, the Bethlehem factory which was supposed to provide its armor remained unfinished. That year, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Tracy responded by also securing a contract with Bethlehem Steel’s competitor, Andrew Carnegie, appealing to the Scottish-American magnate’s patriotism. Carnegie Steel soon added its own armor factory to its mills in Homestead, Pennsylvania.

A major breakthrough in the science of metallurgy portended a new era for warship construction. In 1888, as construction of the “ABCD ships” was finally nearing completion, a New Jersey native named Hayward Augustus Harvey patented a revolutionary new method of hardening the surfaces of nickel steel plates. The so-called “Harvey Process” entailed additional carburizing of one side of a sheet of steel plate under high heat and pressure, and then subjecting it to rapid chilling. The result created an especially resilient surface. Moreover, this advance obviated the need to equip hulls with increasingly thicker belts of armor, which had increased the ships’ displacements and decreased their fuel efficiency. On 27 June 1890, Secretary of the Navy Tracy conducted ballistics tests on the new face-hardened armor at Fort Severn Proving Ground in Annapolis. The tempered steel proved to be superior to any other armor previously developed. Of the tests, the Army and Navy Journal remarked that “the substance of the metal appears to seize upon the projectile and hold it fast, thereby closing the very shot hole that it opens.” Impressed, Tracy immediately stockpiled a supply of Canadian nickel and established a new proving ground at Indian Head, Maryland. By the time Sampson assumed leadership of the Bureau of Ordnance in 1893, Bethlehem Steel and Carnegie Steel were both using this process to manufacture armor plating. Abroad, other navies soon followed suit. Once the process was perfected, Sampson proposed increasing the sizes of individual plates, since the fewer the number of plates on a given ship, the stronger its overall armor protection.

For all its advantages, Sampson soon discerned some problems with the Harvey Process. It became apparent that, after treatment, the steel plates were so impenetrable that shipwrights could not bore holes into them for bolting them to the ships’ frames. If they bored holes into the sheets prior to the treatment, the holes often failed to line up with the frames, since the Harvey Process caused slight warping. In 1894, Sampson addressed this difficulty in a paper which he presented to the American Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers. He also brought this issue to the General Electric Company, which developed a special torch that could soften spots in the treated steel where the holes were to be drilled. Moreover, even with both Bethlehem and Carnegie Steel in production, the manufacture of the Harveyized steel was slow and expensive. The labor strike at Carnegie Steel in 1892, and the national economic downturn beginning in the early 1890s did not bode well. Sampson did not receive armor from Carnegie for testing until May of 1893. By the following October, only half of the armor for the battleship MAINE had been forged.

To make matters worse, in the spring of 1894, an informant from Pittsburgh revealed that the manufacturers had plugged holes in the treated steel plates with lesser metal, and that they had subjected plates selected by the Ordnance Inspector to additional treatments, unbeknownst to the Navy, thereby potentially compromising the plates’ strength. Sampson headed a board that investigated these charges. In June 1894, he testified before a subcommittee in the House of Representatives that
the plugged holes were not intrinsically serious defects, as the plates had still withstood the ballistics tests. However, the additional treatments did create flaws. Sampson recommended that Carnegie Steel be fined an amount equal to 15% of the price of armor that was delivered during the previous fiscal year. Because the plates still passed the ballistics tests, though, President Grover Cleveland reduced the penalty to 10%.

Frustration marked Sampson’s final months as Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance. In 1897, while the battleships KEARSARGE and KENTUCKY were being built, the Navy encountered further problems with the two steel companies. In an effort to break into the European market, Bethlehem and Carnegie Steel had sold an order of armor to the Imperial Russian Navy at the bargain price of $250 per ton. For providing the two new American battleships with armor, they then charged Congress $552.07 per ton. When the Senate proposed a bill limiting the price of armor to $300 per ton, the manufacturers balked. As a result, work on the two vessels came to a halt, and a general postponement of new construction ensued. As historian Richard S. West, Jr. observed, “If Sampson at this juncture had not taken strenuous measures to build up a reserve supply of guns, armor-piercing projectiles, and gunpowder, the Navy would have been unable a year later to arm and equip its large auxiliary fleet of merchantmen and passenger craft.” At the same time, international pressure forced the Navy to stop forging 13” guns (the largest caliber of the pre-Dreadnought era). Twelve had already been made at the gun factory in Washington; one remained at the Indian Head Proving Ground, and the others armed the three Indiana-class battleships (INDIANA, OREGON, and MASSACHUSETT). With the largest American battleship to date still in production (the IOWA), Sampson could only provide 12” guns for that vessel.

When the IOWA was launched on 15 June 1897, Sampson was named as its first commander. The Midland Monthly reported on the crew’s optimism, and said of their Captain, “(he) is a grave and thoughtful man, the type you would instinctively trust in time of danger, clear-headed and cool, foreseeing emergencies and fully prepared to meet them.” Despite the high cost of ammunition, the dynamic new Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt, called for squadron maneuvers and gunnery practice. On 7-8 September 1897, the cruiser BROOKLYN joined the IOWA for these tests off the Virginia Capes. Roosevelt witnessed the tests from the deck of the IOWA. Though the concussions from the firings damaged glass and wooden fittings on the battleship, Sampson impressed the Assistant Secretary of the Navy as “one of the most level-headed and dependable men in the Navy.”

Up to this point, engineers among Navy officers had been of a lower echelon than the traditional line officers, which made promotion more difficult for them. This created an atmosphere of jealousy and resentment that jeopardized morale among the Navy’s leaders. In October 1897, Roosevelt appointed Sampson to a personnel board that recommended bestowing full membership in the Line Officers’ Association on the engineers; as Sampson remarked, “Every officer on a modern war vessel in reality has to be an engineer, whether he wants to or not.”

Spanish American War:

Meanwhile, relations between the United States and Spain were quickly deteriorating due to the troubles in Cuba and the Philippines. In December 1896, Sampson had served on a panel that had developed contingency plans for a possible war with Spain. At 9:40 PM on 15 February 1898, the battleship MAINE exploded in Havana Harbor, killing over 260 members of her crew. President William McKinley and the Navy responded by creating a Court of Inquiry to determine the cause of the disaster. Sampson, perhaps because of his expertise in ordnance, served as its president. Between 21 February and 21 March 1898, the Court of Inquiry examined the wreckage and heard testimonies from surviving crew members, divers, Captain Charles Sigsbee, and Consul General Fitzhugh Lee. On 21 March, the Court presented its findings to the government.

The state of discipline on board the MAINE was excellent, and all orders and regulations in regard to the care and safety of the ship were strictly carried out. All ammunition was stowed in accordance with prescribed instructions,
and proper care was taken when ammunition was handled. Nothing was stowed in any of the magazines or shell rooms which was not permitted to be stowed there... The temperatures of the magazines and shell rooms were taken daily and reported. The only magazine which had an undue amount of heat was the after 10-inch magazine, and that did not explode at the time the MAINE was destroyed... The coal bunkers were inspected daily... The fire alarms in the bunkers were in working order, and there had never been a case of spontaneous combustion of coal on board the MAINE... There were two explosions of a distinctly different character, with a very short but distinct interval between them, and the forward part of the ship was lifted to a marked degree at the time of the first explosion. The first explosion was more in the nature of a report like that of a gun, while the second explosion was more open, prolonged, and of greater volume. This second explosion was, in the opinion of the Court, caused by the partial explosion of two or more of the forward magazines of the MAINE... The outside bottom plating (of the wreck) is bent into a reversed V shape(\). In the opinion of the Court, this effect could have been produced only by the explosion of a mine situated under the bottom of the ship at about frame 18 (of the hull) and somewhat on the port side of the ship. In the opinion of the Court, the MAINE was destroyed by the explosion of a submarine mine, which caused the partial explosion of two or more of the forward magazines.

Three days later, on 24 March, Sampson replaced Montgomery Sicard, who was afflicted with malaria, as Commander of the United States North Atlantic Squadron, the most prestigious post in the Navy, and acquired the rank of Acting Rear-Admiral. Although there were several officers senior to Sampson (including Winfield Scott Schley), Secretary of the Navy John D. Long concurred in his Assistant’s estimation of Sampson as an “accomplished, efficient, competent, all-around naval officer.” (According to war correspondent Richard Harding Davis, the new commander more closely resembled a “calm and scholarly professor of mathematics” than a combat leader.) Accordingly, Sampson transferred to the flagship of the squadron, the armored cruiser NEW YORK. In later years, some would challenge Sampson’s sudden promotion on the eve of war. James Parker, a federal and state lawyer who had served in the Union Navy during the Civil War, and who would later serve as one of Schley’s legal advisors after the war with Spain, asserted that Sampson’s promotion illegally circumvented Congress’ 1862 “Act for the Reorganization of the Navy,” which had created the ranks of Commodore, Rear-Admiral, Vice-Admiral, and Admiral for the United States Navy, and specified the criteria for elevation to those ranks. (Prior to 1862, the highest official rank in the Navy had been Captain; the rank of Commodore had been largely symbolic.) Contrary to the 1862 Act, Parker claimed, Sampson had not “eminently distinguished himself by courage, skill, and genius in his profession,” had not been recommended to Congress by the President by name for its thanks, and had not received the thanks of Congress for distinguished service. Moreover, President McKinley had, in effect, appointed Sampson to his new rank and assignment without the advice and consent of the Senate. Finally, Parker contended that, in March 1898, the United States was still technically at peace, and, according to the 1862 Act, “during peace, vacancies in the grade of Rear Admiral (Parker stated that there were no such vacancies in that month) shall be filled by regular promotion from the list of Commodores, subject to examination according to law.” Sampson had thus skipped the rank of Commodore. In contrast, George Dewey held the rank of Commodore at the time of his victory at Manila Bay on 1 May 1898. Parker concluded that “(Sampson’s) promotion was a fundamental wrong that was sure to revenge itself, as it did, by results.”

Notably, Sampson’s health began to falter at this time; according to historian James C. Bradford, he may have been suffering the beginning symptoms of Alzheimer’s Disease at the outbreak of hostilities. In the American Army and Navy of 1898, regular medical checkups, results of which could force early retirement, were mandatory only for junior officers. The stresses of the coming months would exacerbate his health problems.

In early April 1898, before the Spanish-American War began, Sampson presented the Navy Department with a plan for the bombardment of the coastal batteries surrounding Havana, Cuba, and capture of the city, to be put into action immediately upon the outbreak of hostilities. Following the Navy’s conquest of Havana, American soldiers could then occupy it. As historian Ivan Musicant notes, “The enormous political and military fallout of so singular a victory early in the conflict could not be overestimated – if it could be done.” Sampson’s replacement in command of the IOWA, Captain Robley Evans, heartily supported this plan, and continued to defend it in later years:

Our officers who had been in Cuba recently knew every fort about the city (of Havana) and the number and caliber of guns in each, and with this information in our hands, we knew just what we had to meet. Sampson believed, and we agreed with him, that the thing to do, as soon as war was declared, was to strike quick and strike hard, but such was not to be our good fortune...I have always thought that we could have captured or destroyed Havana two days after the declaration of war, and it is my belief that this of itself would have ended the struggle in a very short time, and that Admiral Pascual Cervera’s fleet would not have crossed the Atlantic.

One postwar analysis of Havana’s coastal defenses indicates that the city would have been an easy target for the North Atlantic Squadron, corroborating Evans’ assertions. Many of the guns arming the surrounding forts were antiquated, “numerous old bronze guns of the 18th century, rifled with three heavy grooves, and practically as innocuous as pop-guns in such a defense.” Although there were more modern pieces, including Krupp 12” guns and 8” howitzers, these were manned by untrained crews. Finally, the topography of the land around Havana was “such that each battery could have been taken from the southwest and west in flank at short range and destroyed (by small contingents of Marines) without its being able to return a shot.” Consequently, according to this article which appeared in the Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute...
However, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long demurred, refusing to expose the squadron’s ships to any shore fire until after the destruction of the anticipated Spanish naval power in the vicinity. On 18 April, Commanding General of the United States Army Nelson Miles further quashed the idea in his own plan submitted to Secretary of War Russell Alger. As the war clouds loomed, the Army did not yet have the manpower or materiel for a major invasion of Cuba. Moreover, Miles and other senior Army officers, concerned about the onset of the Cuban rainy season (or “sickly season,” to use Alger’s terminology), preferred to wait until the autumn for such an operation, using the intervening months as a time for recruiting, training, and equipping the soldiers. In the meantime, Miles proposed sending a small initial force of not more than six thousand troops, to be commanded by Brigadier General William Rufus Shafter, to rendezvous with the Cuban rebels once the American Navy had established its supremacy in the waters surrounding the island. On 20 April, President McKinley and his Cabinet opted to pursue Miles’ plan. While the Army assembled its preliminary invasion force and prepared for its main effort, the Navy would blockade designated areas on the northern and southern coasts of Cuba and engage any Spanish vessels it encountered. As Sampson’s Chief of Staff, Captain French Chadwick, later recalled, “The intensity of disappointment brought (Sampson) by (this) disapproval can only be understood by those who are acquainted with Sampson’s unbending purpose when his will was once fixed.” News that Cervera’s fleet departed from the Cape Verde Islands to begin its transatlantic voyage at the end of April forced cancellation of the initial invasion; as the Spanish Admiral’s intentions and destination were then unknown, the American Navy could ill afford to use its vessels to convoy Shafter’s men from their base at Tampa, Florida to Cuba. In early May, buoyed by reports of Dewey’s victory at Manila Bay, the McKinley Administration decided to increase Shafter’s expeditionary force to fifty thousand men, and briefly considered sending it to seize Havana. Temporarily abandoning his concerns about Cervera’s approaching fleet, Long offered to provide transport for these troops. However, the Army’s state of unreadiness precluded this invasion. Impatiently, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt complained to Captain Evans, “If only the Army were one-tenth as ready as the Navy, we would fix that whole business in six weeks before the sickly season was under way, but what will happen now, I don’t know.” The difficulties of coordinating Army and Navy operations would intensify as the war progressed.

For the men and ships of the North Atlantic Squadron, blockade duty proved to be monotonous, grueling, and only partially successful. There were not enough American ships to completely seal off the southern ports of Cuba through which the Spanish forces received supplies. Public fears of a possible Spanish naval attack on the East Coast of the United States necessitated detachment of the fastest cruisers from the blockading fleet; commanded by Captain Schley, this “Flying Squadron” soon acquired the battleships MASSACHUSETT and TEXAS (thus sacrificing speed for firepower), and spent the early weeks of the war languishing in the port of Hampton Roads, Virginia. Moreover, the ships that were on blockade duty frequently encountered mechanical difficulties. Perhaps still wishing to strike a bold early blow within the constraints of his operational parameters, Sampson, on the first day of the naval blockade of Cuba, 22 April, detached the NEW YORK from the rest of the fleet to pursue the Spanish merchant vessel PEDRO which attempted to flee out of the port of Havana. In his absence, command of the fleet devolved upon Evans. Though Sampson captured the Spanish ship and returned to the fleet the following day, postwar critics, notably James Parker, argued that this constituted dereliction of duty at the outset of the conflict: “Thus the great fleet was in effect abandoned by its newly made Rear Admiral Commander-in-Chief, and the inauguration of the war with Spain was left by him, to Captain Evans.” Further, Parker asserted,

Suppose that during the time that the Commander-in-Chief was out of sight and signal distance a Spanish fleet or torpedo boats could have emerged from Havana and made an attack on our fleet; suppose that, with Evans in command as “senior line officer on the spot,” a great victory had been secured by our fleet: would the honor of such victory have belonged to Sampson, the Commander-in-Chief, who in his flagship had gone off chasing possible prizes, or would it not have been properly given to Evans, “the senior line officer on the spot,” in actual command? There can be no doubt as to the answer to that question; and those who know “Fighting Bob” [Evans] know that from his well-known disposition to “claim everything” in sight, he would have been prompt and vociferous in claiming, and properly claiming, all the credit and honor that belonged to the commanding officer of the victorious fleet.

Sampson surmised that Cervera, upon reaching the Caribbean Sea, would likely use the fortified port of San Juan, Puerto Rico as a coaling station prior to engaging the American ships. Estimating that the Spanish admiral would reach San Juan by 8 May, Sampson proposed to bring the bulk of the North Atlantic Squadron to Puerto Rico to intercept him. On 4 May, the NEW YORK led a task force of two battleships (IOWA and INDIANA), two monitors, and two other cruisers on what proved to be an arduous eastward journey. Poorly suited for deep-sea maneuvers, the monitors required towing by the larger vessels, and the towlines broke on several occasions. En route, Sampson received conflicting and unfounded reports regarding Cervera’s strength and location. Finally, at dawn on 12 May, the American ships reached San Juan. Not finding the Spanish fleet there, Sampson ordered his ships’ largest guns to concentrate on Morro Castle, “one of the most imposing seventeenth-century fortifications built by the Spanish to protect their American empire,” which by then also was armed with several modern breech-loading rifles and howitzers. Stray shots hit the nearby Spanish barracks and other buildings in the town of San Juan. Though tempted to force the town’s surrender, Sampson lacked the manpower to garrison it, and he was only too aware that Cervera was his main target. Accordingly, he began the return voyage to Havana later that day. Though this bombardment of San Juan caused little material damage, news of it likely deterred Cervera from using that port.

Vague and contradictory reports regarding the Spanish fleet continued to reach Sampson until 15 May, when he finally received a cable from Long that Cervera’s ships had been sighted near Curaçao, the Dutch-held island off the coast of
Venezuela, heading north. Rendezvousing with Schley and the Flying Squadron at Key West, Florida, on 18 May, Sampson assumed that Cervera’s destination was the southern Cuban port of Cienfuegos, which, unlike the port of Santiago, had a direct rail link with Havana. Accordingly, on 19 May, he sent Schley to Cienfuegos. At approximately the same time, Cervera’s ships arrived in the harbor of Santiago. Captain Victor Concas, commanding Cervera’s flagship INFANT MARIA TERESA, had decided that Cienfuegos was a “veritable rat trap, very easy to blockade, (and) with no fortifications to amount to anything.” Once he received confirmation of Cervera’s destination, Sampson relayed this updated information to Schley. Arriving at Cienfuegos on 22 May, Schley was initially skeptical of this information, but finally sailed for the harbor of Santiago, reaching it on the afternoon of 26 May. Sampson himself came to Santiago with the remainder of the North Atlantic Squadron on 1 June. The Spanish fleet’s presence made the city of Santiago the focal point for subsequent strategic planning for the United States Army and Navy.

Relations between Sampson and Schley, already tense due to the confusion over the final location of Cervera’s fleet, suffered further as the two disagreed on what to do next. On 27 May, prior to his arrival, Sampson had proposed blocking the enemy ships in the harbor. He had ordered Captain William Folger of the cruiser NEW ORLEANS to escort the collier STERLING into the channel leading into the harbor of Santiago, with the intention of sinking it to create a barrier. Schley, who was the “senior officer on the spot” at the time, did not implement this plan, believing that the passage should only be blocked if the American ships planned to abandon Santiago without engaging the enemy fleet. When he reached Santiago on 1 June, Sampson renewed his efforts. This time, he chose the collier MERRIMAC, commanded by Captain James M. Miller, for the dangerous mission. Impressed with the plan proposed by Richmond P. Hobson, Sampson appointed the young Assistant Naval Constructor to replace Miller in command of the vessel. Hobson suggested affixing ten 8” shells containing a total of 780 pounds of gunpowder to the MERRIMAC’s hull below the waterline. When the collier reached the narrowest part of the channel, an electric magneto generator would detonate the explosives. James Parker, always ready to criticize Sampson’s wartime conduct, later opined that James Miller “will no doubt to his dying day regard his treatment (by Sampson) as the refinement of cruelty”:

One can imagine the intensity of the interview, on board the flagship (USS NEW YORK), between the Admiral and Captain Miller, when Miller learned that it was proposed to deprive him of the only chance for distinction that was likely to come to him, and to supplant him by a young naval constructor who was not even a line officer.

It was not to be a smooth or successful operation. Hobson discovered to his dismay that the American fleet lacked electric magneto generators. As a result, his crew would need cell batteries to explode the charges, which posed a much greater danger and a much greater possibility of malfunction. He unsuccessfully pleaded with Sampson for the use of two warheads from the NEW YORK’s arsenal of self-propelled torpedoes as a “safe-safe” measure; Sampson asserted that “two hundred pounds of guncotton on the inside would blow everything to the devil.” At 4:30 on the morning of 2 June, Hobson and his small crew made their first foray toward Santiago Harbor, only to be recalled by Sampson, who believed that the approaching daylight put the mission in jeopardy. Incredibly, Sampson then detached the NEW YORK in pursuit of another Spanish merchant vessel for several hours, leaving Schley as the senior commander in the area. (Again, Parker later asked, “Suppose that, while the Commander-in-Chief was off chasing that possible prize, with Schley left as 'senior officer on the spot,' Cervera had taken the opportunity to try and escape, and that his destruction had been complete, whose would and ought to have been the glory and credit of that destruction? There can only be one name given in reply, and it would not be ‘Sampson.’”)

Returning the Santiago later that day, Sampson and his Chief of Staff Captain French Chadwick argued with Hobson about the best time for the operation (unlike Sampson, Hobson favored the daytime, for ease of navigation), and again denied Hobson the use of the warheads from the New York’s torpedoes. At 12:30 on the morning of 3 June, the MERRIMAC made its second approach to the narrows of Santiago Harbor. A Spanish picket boat soon detected the collier, and fire from shore artillery destroyed the MERRIMAC’s steering gear and anchor chain. Enemy fire also shattered the cell batteries, enabling the crew to detonate only two of the ten charges. According to historian Ivan Musiant, “If only Admiral Sampson had allowed (Hobson) to carry the warheads packed with guncotton, he could have blown the whole ship up right there.” As it was, lacking its anchors, the MERRIMAC drifted into the harbor before finally foundering. Cervera’s own launch, with the Admiral aboard captured Hobson and his cohorts, who were taken to the REINA MERCEDES before being incarcerated at nearby Morro Castle.

Of the abortive attempt to blockade Cervera’s fleet, Parker later surmised, “Its best success was its complete failure.” He condemned the tactic for what he perceived to be a lack of boldness on Sampson’s part:

One cannot help the feeling that it was a new procedure on the part of an Admiral in the Navy of the United States, to put any obstruction whatever between his ships and the ships of an enemy. Imagine, if one can, Admiral (David) Farragut...at Mobile Bay endeavoring to block up the narrow channel for the same purpose. Imagine, if possible, Admiral Dewey endeavoring to block up the entrance to Manila Bay, to keep Admiral Patricio Montoya’s fleet in, and, necessarily, to keep his own fleet out. Imagine (Admiral Horatio) Nelson endeavoring to block up the channel leading into Toulon, to keep the French fleet in there! Imagine any of these things! Impossible!

During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, the Imperial Japanese Navy attempted three times to use the same means to trap the Imperial Russian Far Eastern Fleet in the harbor at Port Arthur between February and May 1904, using several sacrificial vessels on each occasion. These efforts proved to be costly failures, due in large part to defensive fire from the Russian fleet and surrounding fortresses, with several Japanese sailors killed or captured as a result.

Unsuccessful in obstructing the narrow channel leading into Santiago Harbor, Sampson then used his fleet to guard the outside of the harbor for the next month. To prevent Cervera from leaving, he arranged his ships in a semicircle within six miles of the harbor’s entrance. At night, they would advance to within four miles of the harbor. For the night patrols, Sampson
Sampson undoubtedly shared his crew’s chagrin at missing the main part of the battle with his health suffering from the stress of command (he had been bedridden prior to his attempt to meet with Cervera himself later stated that his crews could not navigate through the tortuous channel at night because of the blossing flashes of light. Less effective were the periodic naval bombardments of the city of Santiago, its fortifications, and the Spanish fleet, which Sampson oversaw. One such assault, on 7 June, slightly damaged the cruiser REINA MERCEDES, the cruiser VIZCAYA, and the torpedo boat destroyer FUROR, killing seven people aboard the REINA MERCEDES (including her Executive Officer) and wounding eleven more.

Significantly for the United States’ policies toward Latin America and Cuba in particular from 1898 to the present day, Sampson dispatched the protected cruiser MARBLEHEAD and the auxiliary cruiser YANKEE forty miles eastward to Guantánamo Bay on 7 June to pave the way for American occupation of this strategic inlet for use as a repair and coaling station (thus eliminating the blocking American ships’ need to return to Key West for those purposes). There, the MARBLEHEAD and the YANKEE drove the defending Spanish gunboat (the SANDOVAL) ashore and leveled Fort Toro. Crew members from the auxiliary cruiser ST. LOUIS then severed the telegraph cables in the bay. On 10 June, battalion of Marines deployed nearby to drive off the Spanish garrison in the city of Guantánamo, eighteen miles inland from the bay. By 14 June, the Marines, with assistance from Cuban rebels, expelled the Spaniards from the area, incurring slight casualties in the process. Ivan Musicant discerns an additional significance for the history of the United States Marine Corps in this operation:

> With the rise and growth of the new Navy, the continued existence of the Corps had been thrown into doubt. There was no longer a legitimate need for the small detachments of Marines that served on battleships and cruisers to keep discipline, and they were much resented by the crews as taking up space better filled by sailors. But the skirmish at Guantánamo Bay opened new vistas of actions to seize forward bases for the fleet, a mission that remained with the Marine Corps through World War II.

The arrival of the United States Army’s expeditionary force under General Shafter at the southern Cuban ports of Daiquirí and Siboney on 22-23 June 1898 created new challenges for Sampson. Boding ill for relations between the two commanders, Sampson had echoed the Navy Department’s impatience with the Army’s slow mobilization and deployment in a cable to Secretary Long on 7 June:

> If 10,000 men were here (assaulting Santiago), the city and fleet would be ours within 48 hours. Every consideration demands immediate Army movement. If delayed, city will be defended more strongly by guns taken from (enemy) fleet.

Throughout the Army’s campaign in Cuba, communications between Sampson and Shafter were problematic, making operational coordination extremely difficult. To an extent, neither commander was to blame. As naval historian Commander Louis J. Gulliver later noted in 1939, “In neither service in that era was the necessity understood for a personal staff to command in chief afloat and ashore, organized, trained, and efficient in the co-operative endeavors that obtain as a matter of course in joint operations today.” However, each man had a different strategy for capturing Santiago, and, excepting two brief occasions (on 22 June and 3 July), they never conferred with one another, opting instead to exchange telegrams and telephone messages. During the climactic fighting for the San Juan Heights overlooking the city of Santiago on 1 July, the NEW YORK, along with the auxiliary cruiser SUWANEE and the armed yacht GLOUCESTER, supported a feint attack on the coastal Spanish position at Aguadores, several miles southward of the main engagement. The noise from his ship’s gunfire on Aguadores deafened Sampson in one ear. After the American troops captured the San Juan Heights, Shafter urged his naval counterpart to force entrance into the harbor to hasten the surrender of the enemy fleet and garrison. For his part, Sampson, only too aware of the threat of Spanish mines in the area, asserted that, before he could enter the harbor, the Army would have to neutralize the enemy forts guarding its entrance, and then a naval task force would have to clear the mines from the vicinity. In an attempt to break this deadlock, Sampson detached the NEW YORK from the fleet and steamed toward the Army base at Siboney to confer with Shafter on the morning of 3 July.

As fate would have it, during Sampson’s absence from the blockading force (at which time the battleship MASSACHUSETTS also sailed eastward toward Siboney), Cervera finally attempted to break out of Santiago Harbor. Pressured by Captain General Ramón Blanco (the overall Spanish commander in Cuba) to make a sortie before the besieging American land forces could occupy the city of Santiago, Cervera had held no illusions about the outcome of an encounter with the American fleet. Beginning at 9:35 that morning, the remaining American ships, under Schley’s command, furiously attacked the enemy squadron. Hearing the intense gunfire, the crews of the NEW YORK and the MASSACHUSETTS hastily reversed course, hoping to participate in the fighting. Sampson’s ship arrived in time to fire the killing shots into the FUROR, which, despite being previously disabled, had been closing in on the GLOUCESTER. Subsequently, the NEW YORK joined Schley’s flagship, the armored cruiser BROOKLYN, and the battleships OREGON and TEXAS in pursuing the sole remaining Spanish warship, the cruiser CRISTOBAL COLON. At shortly after 1 PM, the COLON, in range of the OREGON’s 13” guns, struck her colors and ran aground.

His health suffering from the stress of command (he had been bedridden prior to his attempt to meet with Shafter on 3 July), Sampson undoubtedly shared his crew’s chagrin at missing the main part of the battle with Cervera’s fleet. Aboard the...
Of course, both officers and men of the NEW YORK were naturally disgruntled. It must have been a terribly hard thing to them to feel that after five weeks of waiting they had been cheated out of a chance to take a shot at the Spanish fleet or to help in the entire destruction that five of their sister ships had accomplished. It was hard, of course, to think that the man who had planned and schemed so successfully as to keep the fleet in all of these five weeks, and who had perhaps spent many a sleepless night plotting methods for their destruction, had only been able to see the wrecked hulks lying along the Cuban shore as he followed up the chase.

Sampson unwittingly sowed additional seeds of discord as he approached Schley’s ship after the battle. After receiving an effusive signal from the bridge of the BROOKLYN (“This is a great day for our country!”), Sampson responded with a terse “Report your casualties.” Nonplussed, Schley reported the small number of American casualties (one dead and two wounded), and continued sending congratulations to the other ships that had contributed to the victory. In a subsequent telegram to Washington from the base at Siboney, Sampson did allow himself some elevated prose (which conspicuously omitted Schley’s name): “The fleet under my command offers the nation as a Fourth of July present the whole of Cervera’s fleet.” In Sampson’s home town of Palmyra, New York, the local citizens gave him a 100-gun salute on the Fourth of July.

Despite his absence from much of the battle, Sampson was able to glean several reasons for the American victory of 3 July from his observations and from other officers’ reports. He explained them in an essay which appeared as a chapter in William A. M. Goode’s With Sampson Through the War, published in 1899. (Goode had been the Associated Press correspondent aboard the NEW YORK during the conflict.) Although Cervera had taken the initiative, and although the keels of all the involved ships were extremely fouled by then (which diminished their speed capacities), the Americans had brought to bear “three first-class battleships, one second-class battleship, two armored cruisers and two improvised torpedo boat destroyers” against the Spanish force of “four armored cruisers and two torpedo boat destroyers.” Adding to the Spaniards’ woes was the prevalence of wood fittings on their ships. Wooden decks covering the steel decks, wooden doors and bulkheads, and wooden ornamentation were “totally unnecessary, (and) made (Cervera’s warships) liable to destruction by fire… (they) all proved food for the fire from our explosive shells.” (Notably, Sampson then admitted that many of the American ships, with the exception of the IOWA, also had had this dangerous flaw, but asserted that, prior to hostilities, the commanding officers had “ruthlessly” torn out much of their vessels’ wood fittings.) Sampson here proclaimed that “if the war teaches a lesson more important than any other, it is to dispense with all wood in the future construction of our ships.”

Sampson also discerned qualitative differences between the opposing crews. According to him, the American sailors, unlike their adversaries, approached the battle with a “perfect confidence and determination which the Spaniards found impossible to resist.” The Americans had received more thorough training in marksmanship and in judging distances between moving ships of two enemy fleets:

The constantly varying distance of the enemy requires the gun-sight to be adjusted accordingly, or shots will be wasted, as the shells of the Spaniards were. It was reported to me that many of the Spanish sights were found after the battle to have been adjusted to a ridiculous range, as if the Spanish gun captains had been given a range by their officers as they came out of the port when they first began to fire, and, in their excitement, had forgotten to keep them adjusted as the distance changed…. This theory receives support from the fact that the majority of the enemy’s shells passed over our ships… There is nothing in a target practice that our sailors are taught more carefully to watch than the changing of distance.

Finally, Sampson argued, Cervera’s command decisions sealed his fleet’s fate. The American blockading fleet’s use of searchlights prevented a nighttime escape attempt: “Many of the captured prisoners (after the battle) freely expressed their opinion that it was impossible to pilot their ships out through the narrow channel with such a powerful light shining in the eyes of the officers.” Having been forced to act in the daytime, Cervera did not scatter his ships upon leaving the haven in Santiago; rather, “they all pursued the same course,” making their destruction easier.

The elimination of Cervera’s fleet, and an unofficial truce between the opposing land forces, did not ease relations between Sampson and Shafter. The basic problem persisted. Shafter, unwilling to incur further casualties to his expeditionary forces, and fearful of the threat of disease among them, urged Sampson to force his way into Santiago Harbor to hasten the Spanish garrison’s surrender. Aware of the enemy mines strewn in the harbor, Sampson maintained that Shafter’s men would first have to seize the surrounding shore batteries, and then a naval task force would be dispatched into the harbor to clear the mines; only after that would he send his capital ships in. (The Spaniards had already cleared several of the mines, to allow Cervera’s ships to exit.) With Cervera defeated, Shafter grew shriller. On 4 July, the day after the battle, he exhorted his naval counterpart: “Now if you will force your way into that harbor, the town will surrender without further sacrifice of life. My present position has cost me 1,000 men… no wish to lose more. With my forces on one side and yours on the other — they have a great terror of the Navy — we shall have them.” That night, in a desperate attempt to block the harbor’s entrance, the Spanish garrison sought to scuttle the REINA MERCEDES (which had remained behind). However, fire from the American ships sank her before she could reach the channel. News of the impasse reached Washington. On 5 July, Secretary of the Navy Long relayed to Sampson a directive from President McKinley (a copy of which also went to Shafter via the War Department) demanding that the two commanders “confer at once for cooperation in taking Santiago after the fullest exchange of views.” At the same time, mindful of the sudden German naval presence in Manila Bay after Dewey’s victory of 1 May, and of the existence of a third Spanish fleet, under Rear-Admiral Manuel Cámara, which was in the Mediterranean and apparently bound for the Philippines, Long urged Sampson not to risk losing any of his armored vessels to enemy mines.
His illness perhaps exacerbated by these contradictory messages, Sampson was unable to meet with Shafter (who was himself in poor health) on 6 July. In his stead, he sent Captain French Chadwick, his Chief of Staff. There, Chadwick relayed Sampson’s proposal for the final attack on the Spanish garrison. The two American commanders would send a letter to the Spanish garrison’s leader, General José Toral, emphasizing his isolation and American control of the surrounding waters. He would have three days to surrender unconditionally. Beginning on 9 July, in the absence of capitulation, Sampson’s fleet would resume bombarding Santiago. In addition, the Navy would gather its Marine contingents (including the one occupying Guantánamo) and land them at Cabañas Bay, west of Santiago Harbor. Supported by the American fleet and Cuban rebels, they would assault the batteries west of the harbor while Army units captured the eastern batteries. When Toral refused to accede, Sampson provided the Army with ten 3-inch rapid-fire guns and shelled the town again on 10 and 11 July. The naval bombardment of 11 July inflicted serious injury on Santiago, damaging or destroying nearly sixty houses. That afternoon, under another flag of truce, Shafter and Sampson sent Toral another demand for surrender, this time offering to ship Spanish prisoners of war home at American expense if he cooperated. While Toral awaited authorization from Blanco and Madrid, the Americans positioned themselves to seize the batteries flanking the harbor.

Once again, Shafter complained in writing about Sampson’s unwillingness to force entry into the harbor. In return, Sampson expressed his resentment of the implication that the Navy refused to assist the Army:

> The Navy has been placed in such an invidious and false position before the country through the very unwise publication of General Shafter’s telegrams, that I think this matter should be made clear to the public. General Shafter’s telegrams reflect on the Navy. I wish the Department and the President to understand that the first requisite to opening the harbor of Santiago is the occupation of the forts and entrenchments at its entrance guarding the mine fields and that the general has never made a move to do this, although before his army landed, he stated that such was his primary object. If the general chooses to ignore the sea approaches and to attack Santiago to the east and north, that is his affair, but it should be clearly understood that this attack does not influence the situation at the harbor entrance from which his left flank is distant not less than four miles. I have been ready at any time during the last three weeks to silence the works, clear entrance of mines, and to enter the harbor whenever the Army will do the part which the proper conduct of war assigns to it. To throw my ships to certain destruction upon mine fields would be suicidal folly, and I have not the force to form a landing party strong enough to insure the capture of the forts.

This strategic dispute also echoed anew in Washington, in a tense meeting between Secretary of War Russell Alger, Secretary of the Navy John Long, and Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. Accused by Alger of not assisting the Army sufficiently, Long later angrily noted in his diary,

> We have furnished him transport to carry his men, on account of his own neglect in making provision for transportation. We have landed them; have helped him in every way we can; and have destroyed the Spanish fleet. Now he is constantly grumbling because we don’t run the risk of blowing up our ships over the mines... and capturing the city, which he ought to capture himself.

The deadlock finally ended on 16 July, when Toral received authorization from Madrid to surrender the garrison unconditionally. (If he had surrendered without the permission of the Spanish government, he would have faced arrest and court-martial.) The official surrender of Santiago occurred the following day. However, animosities persisted between the American Navy and Army commanders. Sampson had demanded the right to contribute to the drafting of the surrender agreement (as it would raise “questions of importance, involving both branches of the Service”), and to participate in the surrender ceremony. Specifically, Sampson wanted the Spaniards to remove the mines from Santiago Harbor and to dismantle the guns in the flanking batteries. Arguing that Sampson had not credited the Army in his report of the naval battle of 3 July, however, Shafter refused to include Sampson or his representative Chadwick in the proceedings. The articles of surrender to which Toral submitted did not include any of Sampson’s concerns. Although Sampson was eventually invited to sign the articles of capitulation, this slight still rankled. Writing to Secretary Long, he complained that

> The Commander in Chief, or any other officer of the squadron which had been acting to the best of its powers in assisting in the reduction of the place, was not asked to be present. This may have been a mere oversight, but it is of course to be regretted that any such should take place. Had the Navy been withdrawn after the action of the 3rd, after which all the fleet’s operations were to aid the Army, all the shipping referred to would have escaped and our Army become the besieged instead of the besiegers, as of course the REINA MERCEDES and the [Spanish gunboat] ALVARADO would have been free to destroy or drive off the transport fleet. I do not think the Commanding General quite appreciates how necessary a part our forces were to the reduction of Santiago and the surrender of its garrison.

To make matters worse, Shafter balked at turning over surviving Spanish ships in the harbor to Sampson, wishing to refer this question to Alger instead. In response, Sampson sent prize crews to seize the ALVARADO and five Spanish merchant vessels after American and Spanish naval crews finally cleared the mines from the harbor. Finding the ships already occupied by Army personnel, Sampson’s crews awkwardly coexisted with them until President McKinley intervened on Sampson’s behalf on 19 July. The six Spanish ships were then escorted to Guantánamo Bay, where their crews were treated as prisoners of war (as most of the men on the merchant ships were enlisted in the Spanish Naval Reserve), and the vessels themselves cleaned and disinfected. Ironically, Sampson soon returned the five merchant vessels to Shafter for use in transporting his troops back to the United States. (The gunboat ALVARADO went to Annapolis, where midshipmen would use her for seamanship drills for the next several decades.)
Meanwhile, Sampson had also responded to strategic concerns beyond Santiago. Because of Rear-Admiral Cámara’s fleet’s presence in the Mediterranean, Sampson designated an “Eastern Squadron,” a detachment from his armada, that would sail for the Spanish Atlantic coast if Cámara’s ships passed the Suez Canal. The threat from Cámara dissipated in early July, when British authorities refused to allow him to take on coal at Suez. After the Cuban campaign, Sampson also participated in the invasion of Puerto Rico. Notably, this offensive, too, was fraught with rivalry between the Army and Navy. Army troops had commenced landing on Puerto Rico’s southern coast on 25 July, and quickly advanced northward. On 4 August, Sampson championed the idea of a naval assault on the capital city of San Juan (on Puerto Rico’s northern coast), independent of Army assistance. When Commander of the Army Nelson Miles (who also led the invasion of Puerto Rico) learned of the naval plan, he quashed it with a cable to Alger. According to historian David Trask, “The suspicious commander feared the navy trying to cut the army out of what minor glory remained to be accumulated in the war.”

The Sampson-Schley Debate:

The wartime discord with Schley and Shafter would plague Sampson for the rest of his life. Controversy brewed over who deserved the credit for the destruction of Cervera’s fleet. In the days immediately following the naval battle of Santiago, reporters attached to the American forces noted that Sampson’s initial report of the victory failed to mention Schley by name, and speculated about possible dissension between the two commanders. Although some newspapers sided with Sampson (the Atlanta Constitution, for example, trumpeted as its headline “Sampson Burns and Sinks Cervera’s Ships” and asked its readers “Now, what ‘Dewey’ think of Sampson?”), many hailed Schley as the true hero. On 6 July, the Baltimore American, which was owned by Schley’s friend General Felix Agnus, declared Schley the victor and accused Sampson of “not having the grace even to mention Schley’s name.” William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper, the New York Journal, printed an editorial that pointed out that Sampson was seven miles away from the harbor when the battle began and asserted,

It was Schley who originally bottled up Cervera in Santiago harbor. He ran the Spaniards to earth, kept guard over them until Sampson joined him, and now has exterminated them as a fighting force. Schley is as much the hero of Santiago as Dewey is of Manila.

Regarding the strategic dispute between Sampson and Shafter, pro-Schley journalists even alleged that Schley had favored forcing an entry into Santiago Harbor, the Spanish mines notwithstanding. (Schley later denied this.) On 5 August, Mahan strove to come to Sampson’s rescue with a letter to the New York Sun:

> With the wise and stringent methods laid down by the Admiral, it would not in the least have mattered, as things happened, with such ships and such Captains, had the Commander-in-Chief and the second in command, either or both, been seventy miles away... Few things in the observation of the writer have been more painful than the attempt of a portion of the press and of the public to rob Sampson of his just and painfully won dues.

As the war of words raged, Secretary Long likewise took up Sampson’s cause, lamenting,

> I can think of nothing more cruel than a depreciation of the merit of the faithful, devoted, patriotic Commander-in-Chief, physically frail, worn with sleepless vigilance, weighed with measureless responsibilities and details, letting no duty go undone; for weeks with ceaseless precaution blockading the Spanish Squadron; at last, by the unerring fulfillment of his plans, crushing it under the fleet which executed his commands; yet now compelled in dignified silence to be assailed as vindictively as if he were an enemy to his country.

In a rare moment of circumspection, one newspaper, the Springfield Republican, blamed much of the strife on overzealous journalists in an editorial on 9 August:

> It arose largely from the determination of the slap-dash writers to get a brilliant hero out of the Santiago battle at any cost. Sampson’s careful, thorough, and comprehensive leadership would not do at all. The hero must be a dashing and devil-may-care officer, “standing on the bridge,” and fearlessly heading the line of battle against the enemy fleet... It was then reported that Schley would have led the fleet into the harbor before Cervera came out could he have has his way. This confirmed his title to the heroship of the whole affair, and placed Sampson in the light of a halting, shrinking, feeble commander, whose fleet had finally achieved victory in spite of him by a stroke of luck and the gallantry of the officers under him.

The debate also divided the upper echelons of the Navy, officers of which testified in 1901 during an official Congressional investigation into this and other questions of Schley’s wartime actions, including his slowness to respond to the reports that Cervera’s fleet had entered Santiago Harbor on 19 May 1898 and the near collision of his flagship, the battleship Texas at the outset of the battle of 3 July. In December 1901, the investigation’s findings, with the approbation of Secretary Long and President Theodore Roosevelt, vindicated Sampson. However, the officers and men Navy would remain divided in their loyalties to the two commanders for years to come. Furthermore, after two years of postwar argument, Congress failed to approve Long’s promotions of both Sampson and Schley to the rank of full Rear-Admiral, since the Secretary of the Navy had proposed advancing Sampson eight numbers, and the more popular Schley only six numbers.

The Final Years:

This unfortunate conflict with Schley, along with worsening health problems, marred Sampson’s otherwise pleasant final years. After receiving a hero’s welcome when his postwar fleet sailed to the harbor of New York, Sampson returned to Cuba,
Thayer Mahan delivered an eloquent summation of his friend and colleague:

In March 1909, the chapel at the Naval Academy unveiled a memorial window in tribute to Sampson. At the ceremony, Alfred had constructed and armored, equipped with guns he had built.” At this “grand climax,” Sampson was “as much in the (Sampson’s) own genius had devised and set in motion; that is, it was won by officers whom he had drilled, on ships that he

Spanish War, every gun built for the Navy was designed and constructed under the supervision of Sampson, and the large portion of the guns used at

Chief of the Ordnance Bureau. Ninety-five percent of the American guns used at the

In the years that followed, Sampson’s adherents repeatedly emphasized that, though Dewey and Schley had reaped much of the glory of victory in the naval war of 1898, it was Sampson who had laid the foundations for their successes. In the words of naval historian Carroll Alden, Sampson had proven his mettle as “the great builder and organizer” of the Navy at the end of the nineteenth century. He had zealously championed a scientific education that would better serve American officers in a technologically evolving Navy. Further, the American Navy of 1898 owed much of its firepower to Sampson’s prewar tenure as Chief of the Ordnance Bureau. Ninety-five percent of the American guns used at the naval battle of Santiago, as well as a large portion of the guns used at Manila Bay, had been forged under Sampson’s direction: “From 1892 until the outbreak of the Spanish War, every gun built for the Navy was designed and constructed under the supervision of Sampson, and the large guns were all upon his personal design.” For Alden, the triumph of 3 July 1898 was “the logical fruition of plans which (Sampson’s) own genius had devised and set in motion; that is, it was won by officers whom he had drilled, on ships that he had constructed and armored, equipped with guns he had built.” At this “grand climax,” Sampson was “as much in the background as is a dramatist at the initial performance of his play.”

In March 1909, the chapel at the Naval Academy unveiled a memorial window in tribute to Sampson. At the ceremony, Alfred Thayer Mahan delivered an eloquent summation of his friend and colleague:

(Sampson) was an example to be followed, a stimulus to exertion, an assurance of sustained and worthy effort. Despite the bitter mortification that deprived him of immediate participation in the battle (of 3 July 1898), the conditions of which he had compelled and in all essentials planned, there is and will be, in instructed military opinion, no dispute of his claims to complete personal achievement of that which was committed to him to do… If the baubles of triumph were denied him, if even the nation failed for the moment to
recognize his full deserts, he had, and he knew he had, the absolute and affectionate confidence of those who most closely knew the facts... In professional classification, Sampson from the first belonged by natural bent, and subsequently, by force of circumstances, to the modern type of scientific, progressive officer. He had little in common with that older and very excellent class which is the product of continuous association with the atmosphere and environment of the ocean and the ship of war... Whether the circumstances of his life, interrupted by calls to sea, permitted Sampson to attain the full accomplishment of the man of science, I am not fitted to judge; but his natural inclinations and his sympathies all lay in that direction. He found his inspiration in men like Lord Kelvin rather than in the naval warriors of olden time; and the scientific appliances of ships of war appealed to him more than the incidents of the deck, or even of command.

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William Thomas Sampson (February 9, 1840 – May 6, 1902) was a United States Navy rear admiral known for his victory in the Battle of Santiago de Cuba during the Spanish–American War. He was born in Palmyra, New York, and entered the United States Naval Academy on September 24, 1857. After graduating first in his class four years later, he served as an instructor at the Academy, teaching physics. In 1864, he became the executive officer of the monitor Patapsco of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron William Sampson commanded the North Atlantic Squadron during the Spanish American War. He was in command of the overall squadron when it was engaged in the Battle of Santiago though he was not present for the battle itself. Biography: Born in Palmyra, New York, on 9 February 1840, William Thomas Sampson was the oldest of seven children in a family of Scotch-Irish descent. Rear-Admirals Schley, Sampson, and Cervera: A Review of the Naval Campaign of 1898, in Pursuit and Destruction of the Spanish Fleet Commanded by Rear-Admiral Pascual Cervera. New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1910. Paterson, Thomas G., J. Garry Clifford, and Kenneth J. Hagan. William T. Sampson last edited by fables87 on 10/23/18 06:04AM. View full history. No description. General Information. Super Name. William T. Sampson. William T. Sampson. Real Name. William Thomas Sampson. Real Name. Real name for this character.