

Remember the *Maine*, 1898

Introduction

On February 15, 1898, the battleship *Maine* exploded in Havana's harbor in Cuba, killing nearly two-thirds of her crew. The tragedy occurred after years of escalating tensions between the United States and Spain and the yellow press and public opinion were quick to blame Spain. While the sinking of the *Maine* was not a direct cause of the Spanish-American War, it did accelerate the breakdown in diplomatic relations between the US and Spain. "Remember the Maine, to Hell with Spain!" became a rallying cry.

The *Harper's Weekly* article featured here represents a more balanced view of the event, noting:

the fate of the *Maine* will continue an unsolved mystery for historians to wrangle over. Meanwhile all that we shall positively know is that the explosion occurred forward, and hence that the seamen rather than the officers were the sufferers; that not more than 26 of the men remained uninjured; 57 being wounded and 246 killed, and that two of the 24 officers are certainly lost. If the disaster were the result of design and not of accident, it is considered probable that the blow would have been dealt the ship on the very spot where the explosion occurred—not because it would be more desirable to destroy the men than the officers, but because the magazine is always a preferable point of attack.

The cause of the *Maine*'s sinking remains the subject of speculation. Suggestions have included an undetected fire in one of her coal bunkers, a naval mine, and sabotage to drive the US into a war with Spain.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and examine the four pages from *Harper's Weekly*. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

Note: It is beneficial for students to be familiar with the term "yellow press" and to have an understanding of the influence of *Harper's Weekly*.

1. Briefly explain what took place aboard the *Maine*.
2. In the second paragraph of the *Harper's Weekly* article, published a little over a week after the explosion aboard the *Maine*, it is noted that "the cause . . . is a mystery, the belief is growing that it was purely accidental." The headline in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* on February 17, two days after the explosion, was: "MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO?" The headline in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* of the same day was: "DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY." How did the *Harper's Weekly* article differ from the headlines in the "yellow press" newspapers controlled by Hearst and Pulitzer?
3. Why is the *Harper's Weekly* article considered a more balanced view of the destruction of the *Maine*?
4. What role did the tragedy aboard the *Maine* play in the decision of the United States to go to war with Spain?

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Image

THE DISASTER TO THE BATTLE-SHIP
"MAINE."

THE country was startled on the morning of February 16 by the news that an explosion had occurred on the United States battle-ship *Maine*, and that in consequence the vessel was a total wreck and most of the ship's company had been lost. When details of the disaster reached us it was found that all the officers had been saved except two. These two were Lieutenant (junior grade) Friend W. Jenkins, of Pennsylvania, and Assistant-Engineer Darwin R. Merritt, from Iowa. The other casualties are mentioned below, in a despatch from Washington.

The *Maine* had gone to Havana under orders from the Secretary of the Navy, and although there was peace between Spain and the United States, there is intense hostility on the part of the extreme Spanish party in Havana towards the United States. The knowledge of this at first caused the feeling that probably some enthusiastic or demented Spaniard had blown up the ship in some undefined way, but our Washington despatch says the cause of the accident is a mystery. But while the cause of the accident is a mystery, the belief is growing that it was purely accidental, and that the explosion came from the inside of the ship.

This explosion occurred about 9.45 on the evening of Tuesday, February 15. The night was intensely dark; the *Maine* was anchored about five hundred yards from the arsenal, and two hundred yards from the floating dock. The American Ward Line steamer *City of Washington* was about two hundred yards away, and a little farther off still was the Spanish cruiser *Alfonso XII*. Captain Sigsbee, who



HON. JOHN D. LONG,
Secretary of the United States Navy.

was in command of the *Maine*, was in bed in his cabin; Lieutenant-Commander Richard Wainwright, the executive officer, was in his own cabin smoking; the crew were asleep—when suddenly without warning came the terrible explosion which instantly killed most of the sailors, the explosion having taken place forward under the men's quarters.

The force of the explosion was great enough to shake the whole city water-front, put out the electric lights near the shore, and throw down many telegraph and telephone poles. The officers knew at once from the force of the explosion that the ship was wrecked, but, after the manner, we are proud to say, of American naval officers, they behaved with the coolness and courage which the terrible circumstance demanded. Lieutenant-Commander Wainwright, the ship being in perfect darkness, struck a match and hurried at once to the Captain's cabin, where he found Captain Sigsbee thrown from his berth, but uninjured. The Captain's first order was given to a seaman to flood the magazine containing about five tons of gunpowder. The man jumped away, did his work, but never returned.

Almost immediately after the explosion a great flame broke out from the *Maine* and illuminated the dark harbor. In the mean time, the city having been aroused by the noise, the people rushed to the water-front to learn its cause. They do not seem to have been long in doubt, and everything possible was done by the Spanish officers on shore and on the war-ship in the harbor to aid the survivors. The harbor was lighted up not only by the glare of the *Maine*, but by a number of search-lights and electric lights, and boats were at once lowered from the Ward steamer and from the *Alfonso XII*, and hastened to the *Maine*. The boats from the Spanish ship carried away thirty-seven of the wounded men, and those from the *City of Washington* twenty-four. With the men who were carried to the *Alfonso XII*, went the ship's chaplain, the Rev. J. P. Chidwick, who rendered both spiritual consolation and physical aid.

Captain Sigsbee seems to have been among the coolest of all the brave men who were working to save the lives of the wounded and to secure a refuge for those who had not been injured. Of the ship's company of 353 not more than 48 escaped without injury. Boats from the *Maine* that were not wrecked were filled with wounded, who were carried to Havana, where they were cared for in the hospital, all the available forces of the city being employed in taking care of the injured. General Blanco himself was at the head of the forces who cared for the Americans. Captain Sigsbee was the last man to leave the ship, and stepped into a boat only when he had seen that every living man who could be reached had been taken out. After this he went in the launch to the *Alfonso XII*, and tendered his thanks to the Captain and his officers for their help. From there he went on board the *City of Washington*, where he arrived at midnight, and met Consul-General Lee and others.

The news of the disaster came from various sources. Captain Sigsbee himself reported at once, and with characteristic forethought begged that the public judgment should be suspended until an inquiry could be had into the cause of the accident. He seems to have realized that the sensational newspapers and the Jingoism would make the most of the accident to inflame the passions of the people against Spain. This they did, with all their malignant ingenuity. A special cabinet meeting was held at Washington, but it was wisely decided that nothing should be said of the disaster until the government was in possession of some evidence as to the cause of it.

Captain-General Blanco cabled to Madrid and to Washington, and Señor du Bosc, Chargé d'Affairs of the Spanish Legation at Washington, called at once at the State Department to express his sympathy. Flags have been half-masted on the public buildings of Havana, as well as on the public buildings of this country. Resolutions of

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sympathy have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, and the feeling is that the men who perished by this disaster are entitled to that sympathy and affectionate remembrance which men who fall in battle for their country always receive.

The news of the disaster is horrifying the whole civilized world, and expressions of sympathy for the sufferers, for the nation, and for the navy, and of admiration for the manly and intelligent conduct of Captain Sigsbee, have been received at our foreign legations and at Washington from the Queens of Great Britain and Spain, the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Connaught, from Emperor William of Germany, from President Faure of France, and from the Spanish cabinet, which in the midst of the excitement has also sent to the President a disavowal of sympathy with the contents of Minister De Lome's letter. The disaster has also been made the subject of remarks in the British House of Commons, where John Dillon asked the First Lord of the Admiralty for information. The tone of the remarks of British officers and public men, including Lord Charles Beresford, has been most friendly towards this country; and Lord Beresford was especially eulogistic of the conduct of Captain Sigsbee and generally of the officers of the American navy, with many of whom he is well acquainted. This is also characteristic of the remarks of the English newspapers, who seem to be as much gratified and as proud of the conduct of our officers as if they had been officers of their own navy.

In the mean time, although, as we have said, some of the Jingo's and the sensational newspapers have done their best to promote ill feeling by spreading abroad



REAR-ADMIRAL SEGISMUNDO BERMEJO Y MERELO,
Spanish Minister of Marine.

every suspicion and every rumor hostile to Spain that springs from excited imaginations or half-information, there have been much self-restraint and a strong and praiseworthy disposition on the part of the public to wait for an investigation and to hope that the explosion resulted from accident.

As time went on, the sympathy manifested by the Spaniards in Havana for the victims of the disaster seemed to allay the excitement stimulated in the public mind by sensational newspapers, every one of whose rumors indicating that the explosion had been caused from without, by some one from the shore or in the harbor, having been proved to be a wilful and malicious untruth. Not only had General Blanco turned over the public hospital to the use of our officers and men, but a plot of ground in the cemetery of Havana was given to them for the burial of their dead. On Thursday nineteen of the dead sailors were buried, with great ecclesiastical, naval, and military ceremonies. Fifty thousand people crowded the streets of Havana and paid respect to the dead. The Bishop of Havana, General Parrado, and Admiral Manterola took charge of the arrangements, by order of the Spanish government. The bodies, having first laid in state, being covered with floral and other emblems presented by officials of Havana and by private citizens of the city and of the United States, were carried to the cemetery, escorted by General Parrado—General Blanco looking at the procession from the balcony of his palace—and by foreign consular officers. Consul-General Lee, Captain Sigsbee, Lieutenant-Commanders Wainwright and Cowles, and all the officers and men of the *Maine* surviving accompanied the remains, General Lee, Captain Sigsbee, and Lieutenant-Commander Wainwright being chief mourners. All bodies washed ashore since the funeral have been or will be buried with only a private service.

The government had by Friday, February 18, made arrangements as to setting divers at work for the purpose of ascertaining the cause of the disaster, in aid of the investigating officers, and it was further determined that the inquiry should be made by Americans alone, and without the co-operation of the Spaniards. Congress appropriated \$200,000 for the work of saving as much property as possible from the sunken ship, and bills were introduced for the relief of the survivors, who lost all their personal effects on account of the suddenness of the disaster. It was found impracticable to preserve any of the remains for transportation to the United States. Congress has appropriated money to pay the surviving relatives of the dead seamen the amount of pay these men would have received during the next twelve months. The President, with the first official confirmation of the news of the disaster, ordered a cessation of all official receptions, dinners, and other festivities at Washington, and as Lent is so near at hand the season may be said to have been brought to a close. The Spanish cruiser *Vizcaya* reached the outer harbor of New York on February 18, and anchored off Staten Island on Sunday, February 20. She is closely guarded by federal and city authorities.

The Department has appointed the following officers to investigate the cause of the disaster: Captain W. T. Sampson of the *Iowa*, Captain F. E. Chadwick of the *New York*, Lieutenant-Commander W. P. Potter of the *New York*, and Lieutenant-Commander Adolph Marix of the *Vermont*.

The following comes to us from Washington, and gives the feeling and opinion of the Navy Department on the matter:

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Tecumseh was sunk by a torpedo when she entered the harbor of Mobile. Some who have combated that theory have insisted that the ship was overturned by the shifting of her guns; others have gone so far as to assert that her own spar-torpedo was in some way twisted back upon itself and blew a hole into her prow. In like manner he believes that the fate of the *Maine* will continue an unsolved mystery for historians to wrangle over. Meanwhile all that we shall positively know is that the explosion occurred forward, and hence that the seamen rather than the officers were the sufferers; that not more than 26 of the men remained uninjured, 57 being wounded and 246 killed, and that two of the 24 officers are certainly lost. If the disaster were the result of design and not of accident, it is considered probable that the blow would have been dealt the ship on the very spot where the explosion occurred—not because it would be more desirable to destroy the men than the officers, but because the magazine is always a preferable point of attack, just as, when ships are in action, it is the great guns which attract the fire of the enemy, and not the conning-tower, although the tower shelters the captain, while only a subaltern stands behind the guns.

F. E. LEUPP.

The latest news received from official sources at the Navy Department up to noon of Monday, February 21, left the disaster to the *Maine* as much a mystery as ever. The Department had ordered an investigation by the use of divers and every other available means, and that the work be pushed with all the speed compatible with accuracy. Out of this fact grew a report, which was discredited at the Department, but widely circulated elsewhere, that one of the divers employed had discovered a percussion hole in one of the outside plates on the *Maine*, under the magazine, indicating that the explosion was caused by a torpedo striking the ship from without.

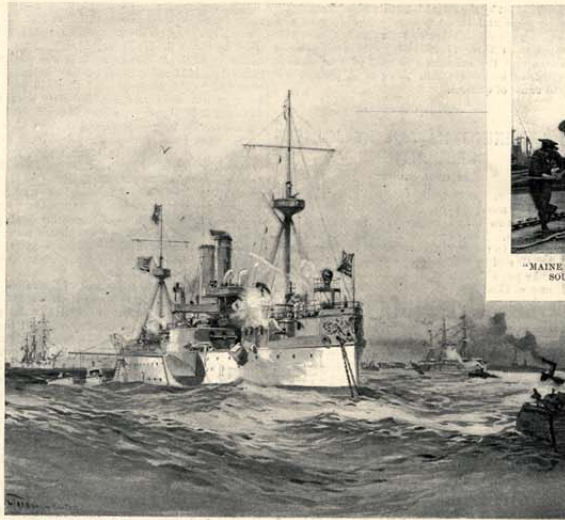
The theory entertained by the Secretary of the Navy is that the disaster was the result of pure accident. Even if a torpedo had blown a hole into the ship and exploded the magazine, the direction of the explosion might not be ascertainable, for, in the judgment of experts, the explosion inside would be quite likely to widen the hole through which the missile entered and reverse all the signs. Little hope is entertained, therefore, of obtaining positive proof as to the source of the disaster. As one old sea-dog expressed it, the historians of the civil war are still quarrelling as to whether the



LIEUTENANT FRIEND W. JENKINS, U.S.N.
Killed in the Explosion on U.S.S. "Maine."

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German School Ship "Charlotte." Spanish Flag Ship, "Albatros." "MAINE" SALUTING SPANISH FLAG-SHIP ON ARRIVING IN THE HARBOR OF HAVANA.



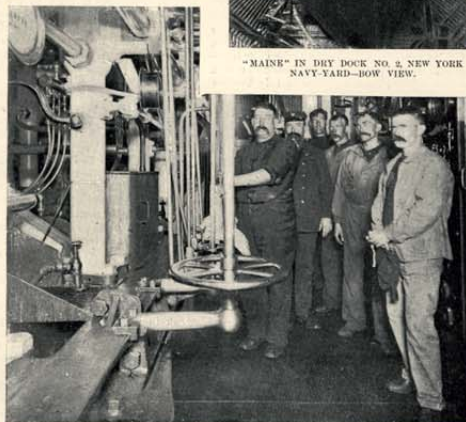
"MAINE" LEAVING THE NEW YORK NAVY-YARD FOR THE SOUTH—HAULING ASHORE THE MOORING-CHAINS.



"MAINE" IN DRY DOCK NO. 2, NEW YORK NAVY-YARD—BOW VIEW.



OFFICERS AND MEN OF THE SPANISH FLAG-SHIP HASTENING TO THE RESCUE—(Drawn in Accordance with Havana Despatches.)



IN THE ENGINE-ROOM OF THE "MAINE."



IN THE MAGAZINE. Each tightly sealed Copper Tank contains a Half-Charge.



THE "MAINE'S" FORWARD TORPEDO-TUBE.

LOSS OF THE UNITED STATES BATTLE-SHIP "MAINE" IN HAVANA HARBOR, FEBRUARY 15, 1898.

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