

THE BATTLE OF SANTIAGO

Rear Admiral W. T. Sampson to the Secretary of the Navy

US Flagship NEW YORK, First Rate, Off Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 15 July 1898

I have the honor to make the following report upon the battle with and the destruction of the Spanish squadron, commanded by Admiral Cervera, off Santiago de Cuba, on Sunday, July 3, 1898:

The enemy's vessels came out of the harbor between 9:35 and 10 AM, the head of the column appearing around Cay Smith at 9:31, and emerging from the channel five or six minutes later.

The positions of the vessels of my command off Santiago at that moment were as follows: The flagship NEW YORK was four miles east of her blockading station and about seven miles from the harbor entrance. She had started for Sihoney, where I intended to land, accompanied by several of my staff, and to go to the front to consult with General Shafter. A discussion of the situation and a more definite understanding between us of the operations proposed, had been rendered necessary by the unexpectedly strong resistance of the Spanish garrison of Santiago. I had sent my chief of staff on shore the day before to arrange an interview with General Shafter, who had been suffering from heat prostration. I made arrangements to go to his headquarters and my flagship was in the position mentioned above when the Spanish squadron appeared in the channel. The remaining vessels were in or near their usual blockading positions, distributed in a semi circle about the harbor entrance, counting from the eastward to the westward in the following order: The INDIANA about a mile and a half from the shore; the OREGON in the NEW YORK's place, between these two, the IOWA, TEXAS and BROOKLYN, the latter two miles from the shore west of Santiago. The distance of the vessels from the harbor entrance was from two and one-half to four miles, the latter being the limit of day blockading distance. The length of the arc formed by the ships was about eight miles. The MASSACHUSETTS had left at 4 AM for Guantanamo for coal. Her station was between the IOWA and TEXAS. The auxiliaries GLOUCESTER and VIXEN lay close to the land and nearer the harbor entrance than the large vessels, the GLOUCESTER to the eastward and the VIXEN to the westward. The torpedo boat ERICSSON was in company with the flagship and remained with her during the chase until ordered to discontinue, when she rendered very efficient service in rescuing prisoners from the burning VIZCAYA. I inclose a diagram showing approximately the positions of the vessels as described above.

The Spanish vessels came rapidly out of the harbor, at a speed estimated at from eight to ten knots, and in the following order: *INFANTA MARIA TERESA* (flagship), *VIZCAYA*, *CRISTOBAL COLON* and the *ALMIRANTE OQUENDO*. The distance between these ships was about 800 yards, which means that from the time the first one became visible in the upper reach of the channel until the last one was out of the harbor an interval of only about twelve minutes elapsed. Following the *OQUENDO*, at a distance of about 1,200 yards, came the torpedo boat destroyer *PLUTON*, and after her the *FUROR*. The armored cruisers, as rapidly as they could bring their guns to bear, opened a vigorous fire upon the blockading vessels and emerged from the channel shrouded in the smoke from their guns.

The men of our ships in front of the port were at Sunday "quarters for inspection." The signal was made simultaneously from several vessels, "Enemy's ships escaping," and general quarters was sounded. The men cheered as they sprang to their guns and fire was opened probably within eight minutes by the vessels whose guns commanded the entrance. The NEW YORK turned about and steamed for the escaping fleet, flying the signal, "Close in toward harbor entrance and attack vessels," and gradually increasing speed until toward the end of the chase she was making 16½ knots, and was rapidly closing on the *CRISTOBAL COLON*. She was not, at any time, within the range of the heavy Spanish ships, and her only part in the firing was to receive the undivided fire from the forts in passing the harbor entrance and to fire a few shots at one of the destroyers, thought at the moment to be attempting to escape from the GLOUCESTER.

The Spanish vessels upon clearing the harbor turned to the westward in column, increasing their speed to the full power of their engines. The heavy blockading vessels, which had closed in toward the Morro at the instant of the enemy's appearance, and at their best speed, delivered a rapid fire, well sustained and destructive, which speedily overwhelmed and silenced the Spanish fire. The initial speed of the Spaniards carried them rapidly past the blockading vessels and the battle developed into a chase, in which the BROOKLYN and TEXAS had at the start the advantage of position. The BROOKLYN maintained this lead. The OREGON, steaming with amazing speed from the

commencement of the action, took first place. The IOWA and the INDIANA having done good work, and not having the speed of the other ships, were directed by me, in succession, at about the time the VIZCAYA was beached, to drop out of the chase and resume blockading stations. These vessels rescued many prisoners. The VIXEN, finding that the rush of the Spanish ships would put her between two fires, ran outside of our own column and remained there during the battle and chase.

The skillful handling and gallant fighting of the GLOUCESTER excited the admiration of every one who witnessed it and merits the commendation of the Navy Department. She is a fat and entirely unprotected auxiliary vessel—the yacht CORSAIR—and has a good battery of light rapid fire guns. She was lying about two miles from the harbor entrance, to the southward and eastward, and immediately steamed in, opening fire upon the large ships. Anticipating the appearance of the PLUTON and FUROR, the GLOUCESTER was slowed, thereby gaining more rapidly a high pressure of steam, and when the destroyers came out she steamed for them at full speed and was able to close to short range, where her fire was accurate, deadly and of great volume.

During this fight the GLOUCESTER was under the fire of the Socapa battery. Within twenty minutes from the time they emerged from Santiago Harbor the careers of the FUROR and the PLUTON were ended and two-thirds of their people killed. The FUROR was beached and sunk in the surf; the PLUTON sank in deep water a few minutes later. The destroyers probably suffered much injury from the fire of the secondary batteries of the battleships IOWA, INDIANA and TEXAS, yet I think a very considerable factor in their speedy destruction was the fire, at close range, of the GLOUCESTER's battery. After rescuing the survivors of the destroyers, the GLOUCESTER did excellent service in landing and securing the crew of the INFANTA MARIA TERESA.

The method of escape attempted by the Spaniards, all steering in the same direction and in formation, removed all tactical doubts or difficulties and made plain the duty of every United States vessel to close in, immediately engage, and pursue. This was promptly and effectively done. As already stated, the first rush of the Spanish squadron carried it past a number of the blockading ships, which could not immediately work up to their best speed; but they suffered heavily in passing and the INFANTA MARIA TERESA and the OQUENDO were probably set on fire by shells fired during the first fifteen minutes of the engagement. It was afterward learned that the INFANTA MARIA TERESA's fire main had been cut by one of our first shots and that she was unable to extinguish the fire. With large volumes of smoke rising from their lower decks aft, these vessels gave up both fight and flight, and ran in on the beach—the INFANTA MARIA TERESA at about 10:15 AM at Nima Nima, six and one-half miles from Santiago Harbor entrance, and the ALMIRANTE OQUENDO, at about 10:30 AM at Juan Gonzales, seven miles from the port.

The VIZCAYA was still under the fire of the leading vessels; the CRISTOBAL COLON had drawn ahead, leading the chase, and soon passed beyond the range of the guns of the leading American ships. The VIZCAYA was soon set on fire, and at 11:15 she turned inshore and was beached at Aserradero, fifteen miles from Santiago, burning fiercely, and with her reserves of ammunition on deck already beginning to explode. When about ten miles west of Santiago the INDIANA had been signaled to go back to the harbor entrance, and at Aserraderos the IOWA was signaled to “resume blockading station.” The IOWA, assisted by the ERICSSON and the HIST, took off the crew of the VIZCAYA, while the HARVARD and the GLOUCESTER rescued those of the MARIA TERESA and the ALMIRANTE OQUENDO. This rescue of prisoners, including the wounded from the burning Spanish vessels, was the occasion of some of the most daring and gallant conduct of the day. The ships were burning fore and aft, their guns and reserve ammunition were exploding and it was not known at what moment the fire would reach the main magazines. In addition to this a heavy surf was running just inside of the Spanish ships. But no risk deterred our officers and men until their work of humanity was complete.

There remained now of the Spanish ships only the CRISTOBAL COLON; but she was their best and fastest vessel. Forced by the situation to hug the Cuban coast, her only chance of escape was by superior and sustained speed. When the VIZCAYA went ashore the COLON was about six miles ahead of the BROOKLYN and the OREGON; but her spurt was finished and the American ships were now gaining upon her. Behind the BROOKLYN and the OREGON came the TEXAS, VIXEN and NEW YORK. It was evident from the bridge of the NEW YORK that all the American ships were gradually overhauling the chase and that she had no chance of escape. At fifty minutes past 12 the BROOKLYN and the OREGON opened fire and got her range, the OREGON's heavy shell striking beyond her, and at 1:20 she gave up without firing another shot, hauled down her colors and ran ashore at Rio Torquino, forty-eight miles from Santiago. Captain Cook of the BROOKLYN went on board to receive the surrender. While his boat was

alongside I came up in the NEW YORK, received his report and placed the OREGON in charge of the wreck to save her, if possible, and directed the prisoners to be transferred to the RESOLUTE, which had followed the chase.

Commodore Schley, whose chief of staff had gone on board to receive the surrender, had directed that all their personal effects should be retained by the officers. This order I did not modify. The *CRISTOBAL COLON* was not injured by our firing and probably is not much injured by beaching, though she ran ashore at high speed. The beach was so steep that she came off by the working of the sea. But her sea valves were opened and broken, treacherously, I am sure, after her surrender, and despite all efforts she sank. When it became evident that she could not be kept afloat, she was pushed by the NEW YORK bodily up on the beach—the NEW YORK's stem being placed against her for this purpose, the ship being handled by Captain Chadwick with admirable judgment—and sank in shoal water and may be saved. Had this not been done she would have gone down in deep water, and would have been, to a certainty, a total loss.

I regard this complete and important victory over the Spanish forces as the successful finish of several weeks of arduous and close blockade, so stringent and effective during the night that the enemy was deterred from making the attempt to escape at night, and deliberately elected to make the attempt in daylight. That this was the case I was informed by the commanding officer of the *CRISTOBAL COLON*.

It seems proper to briefly describe here the manner in which this was accomplished. The harbor of Santiago is naturally easy to blockade, there being but one entrance, and that a narrow one, and the deep water extending close up to the shore line presenting no difficulties of navigation outside of the entrance. At the time of my arrival before the port, June 1, the moon was at its full, and there was sufficient light during the night to enable any movement outside of the entrance to be detected; but with the waning of the moon, and the coming of dark nights, there was opportunity for the enemy to escape, or for his torpedo boats to make an attack upon the blockading vessels. It was ascertained with fair conclusiveness that the *MERRIMAC*, so gallantly taken into the channel on June 3, did not obstruct it.

I, therefore, maintained the blockade as follows: To the battleships was assigned the duty, in turn, of lighting the channel. Moving up to the port, at a distance of from one to two miles from the Morro—dependent upon the condition of the atmosphere—they threw a searchlight beam directly up the channel and held it steadily there. This lightened up the entire breadth of the channel for half a mile inside of the entrance so brilliantly that the movement of small boats could be detected. Why the batteries never opened fire upon the searchlight ship was always a matter of surprise to me, but they never did. Stationed close to the entrance of the port were three picket launches, and, at a little distance further out, three small picket vessels—usually converted yachts—and, when they were available, one or two of our torpedo boats. With this arrangement there was at least a certainty that nothing could get out of the harbor undetected.

After the arrival of the Army, when the situation forced upon the Spanish admiral a decision, our vigilance increased. The night blockading distance was reduced to two miles for all vessels, and a battleship was placed alongside the searchlight ship, with her broadside trained upon the channel in readiness to fire the instant a Spanish ship should appear. The commanding officers merit the greatest praise for the perfect manner in which they entered into this plan and put it into execution. The *MASSACHUSETTS*, which according to routine was sent that morning to coal at Guantanamo, like the officers had spent weary nights upon this work, and deserved a better fate than to be absent that morning. I inclose, for the information of the department, copies of orders and memorandums issued from time to time relating to the manner of maintaining the blockade.

When all the work was done so well it is difficult to discriminate in praise. The object of the blockade of Cervera's squadron was fully accomplished, and each individual bore well his part in it—the commodore in command of the second division, the captains of ships, their officers and men. The fire of the battleships was powerful and destructive, and the resistance of the Spanish squadron was, in great part, broken almost before they had got beyond the range of their own forts. The fine speed of the *OREGON* enabled her to take a front position in the chase, and the *CRISTOBAL COLON* did not give up until the *OREGON* had thrown a thirteen inch shell beyond her.

This performance adds to the already brilliant record of this fine battleship, and speaks highly of the skill and care with which her admirable efficiency has been maintained during a service unprecedented in the history of vessels of her class. The *BROOKLYN*'s westerly blockading position gave her an advantage in the chase which she maintained

to the end, and she employed her fine battery with telling effect. The TEXAS and the NEW YORK were gaining on the chase during the last hour, and had any accident befallen the BROOKLYN or the OREGON would have speedily overhauled the *CRISTOBAL COLON*.

From the moment the Spanish vessel exhausted her first burst of speed the result was never in doubt. She fell, in fact, far below what might reasonably have been expected of her. Careful measurements of time and distance gave her an average speed from the time she cleared the harbor mouth until the time she was run on shore at Rio Tarquino of 13.7 knots. Neither the NEW YORK nor the BROOKLYN stopped to couple up their forward engines, but ran out the chase with one pair, getting steam, of course, as rapidly as possible on all boilers. To stop to couple up the forward engines would have meant a delay of fifteen minutes, or four miles, in the chase.

Several of the ships were struck, the BROOKLYN more often than the others, but very slight material injury was done, the greatest being aboard the IOWA. Our loss was one man killed and one wounded, both on the BROOKLYN. It is difficult to explain this immunity from loss of life or injury to ships in a combat with modern vessels of the best type, but Spanish gunnery is poor at best, and the superior weight and accuracy of our fire speedily drove the men from their guns and silenced their fire. This is borne out by the statements of prisoners and observation. The Spanish vessels, as they dashed out of the harbor, were covered with the smoke from their own guns, but this speedily diminished in volume and soon almost disappeared.

The fire from the rapid fire batteries of the battleships appears to have been remarkably destructive. An examination of the stranded vessels shows that the *ALMIRANTE OQUENDO*, especially, had suffered terribly from this fire. Her sides are everywhere pierced and her decks were strewn with the charred remains of those who had fallen.

The reports of Commodore W. S. Schley and of the commanding officers are inclosed.

A board appointed by me several days ago has made a critical examination of the stranded vessels, both with a view of reporting upon the result of our fire and the military features involved, and of reporting upon the chance of saving any of them and of wrecking the remainder. The report of the board will be speedily forwarded. Very respectfully,