2009

Cuba, U.S. Naval Blockade of

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Cuba, U.S. Naval Blockade of
Start Date:  April 22, 1898
End Date:  August 14, 1898

As early as March 23, 1898, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long produced a plan to close the ports along the western half of Cuba’s northern coast. On April 18, Rear Admiral William T. Sampson, commander of the North Atlantic Squadron, issued a memorandum concerning ship dispositions for such a blockade. In early 1898, the U.S. Navy possessed 96 ships of varying qualities and capabilities. However, the navy’s ability to enforce a blockade of Cuba was augmented substantially by a $50 million emergency congressional appropriations bill passed on March 9. That bill authorized the purchasing or leasing of additional ships from private sources and other government agencies, including the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service.

Sampson’s squadron began the process of implementing the blockade on April 22 when his ships sailed from Key Est, Florida for Cuba. Although the blockade officially commenced on the morning of April 23, it took time to fully implement because of delays in providing adequate numbers of ships as well as the requisite logistical support for the fleet, such as coal, food, and fresh water. Sampson was hard-pressed to cover 2,000 miles of Cuban shoreline with just 26 ships. The
shortage of ships prevented him from maintaining a continuous blockade of it until June 28. By late June, Sampson was able to close off the southern ports as well, preventing the Spanish from obtaining supplies from Mexico and Central America. Eventually his squadron grew to 124 ships. Still, his naval assets were spread perilously thin given the long shorelines and distances involved, and occasionally ships were absent on other duties. Additional ships were continually added to enforce the blockade, the most famous of these being the battleship Oregon, which steamed from its Bremerton, Washington, home port around South America to reach Key West.

The blockade was carried out according to international law, with ships having left Spain prior to the war being declared immune from search. Spanish vessels that were docked in U.S. ports when the war was declared were given until May 21 to leave and were permitted to take on enough coal to reach their home port. However, inconsistencies in blockade enforcement did occur. On August 8, 1898, a Navy Department official reported that three neutral nations were filing complaints with the U.S. State Department about their vessels being seized and expressing concern about potentially costly damage claims that ship owners could file against the United States.
The blockaders intercepted ships in transit to Cuba, seized contraband goods consistent with maritime law provisions, and engaged in several battles with Spanish ships. The first of these clashes occurred on April 27 when U.S. ships were fired upon and responded by shelling Punta Gorda at Matanzas to prevent construction of Spanish artillery batteries there.

Further combat actions occurred on May 11 when U.S. warships cut the cable to Madrid at Cienfuegos. Later that same day hidden Spanish batteries at Cárdenas attacked several U.S. ships including the torpedo boat *Winslow*, which was seriously damaged.

Another U.S. squadron, commanded by Commodore Winfield Scott Schley, was ordered to leave Charleston, South Carolina, for Key West to prepare to intercept a Spanish squadron under Rear Admiral Pascual Cervera y Topete, believed to be headed to Cuba from the Cape Verde Islands. Schley’s squadron arrived off Santiago on May 26. These reinforcements enabled a southern front to be added to the U.S. naval blockade. In the Meantime, however, Cervera’s ships had managed to make it to Santiago de Cuba unhindered. Sampson then administered a tight blockade of Santiago. On the morning of July 3, 1898,
Spanish forces attempted to break out of a harbor there, producing a running battle in which all the Spanish ships were either sunk or scuttled.

Assorted other engagements between U.S. and Spanish forces occurred at various locations in Cuba, including west of the Isle of Pines, Barracoa, and Manzillo, which resulted in Spanish ships being destroyed or captured along with some modest U.S. uses. The war ended with a cease-fire agreement on August 12, 1898, although American naval assets remained in the area for a considerable time thereafter. The naval blockade was officially lifted on August 14.

Despite some inconsistency in execution and enforcement, the blockade was relatively successful in cutting off Spanish forces from supplies and reinforcements. A number of blockade runners did make it through the blockade, the most famous of these being the Montserrat. Many others were either destroyed or captured, however. Significant credit for the blockade’s military successes stems from effective planning and training exercises conducted by the U.S. Naval War College and Office of Naval Intelligence in the years before the war and to legislation in 1890 and 1892 authorizing new naval construction. The blockade did cause some hardship for the Cuban civilian population in the way of
food shortages and clothing, and a scarcity of kerosene, but its relatively short
duration prevented these shortages from becoming more severe.

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See also
Cárdenas, Cuba; Cervera y Topete, Pascual; Cienfuegos, Naval Engagements off; Fifty Million Dollar Bill; Long, John Davis; Manzanillo, Cuba, Actions at; Naval Strategy, Spanish; Naval Strategy, U.S.; North Atlantic Squadron; Oregon, USS, Voyage of; Punta Gorda, Cuba; Sampson, William Thomas; Santiago de Cuba, Battle of; Schley, Winfield Scott; Spain, Navy; United States Navy; United States Revenue Cutter Service.

Further Reading
Trask, David F. The War With Spain in 1898. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.