

In Line of Battle

The outbreak of the Spanish-American War found the *Ericsson* attached to the Atlantic fleet, a heterogeneous collection of more or less antiquated war vessels, including battleships, monitors, cruisers, and gunboats, in addition to the "Torpedo Flotilla". Among this later class were the *Du Pont*, *Porter*, *Rodgers*, *Foote*, *Winslow*, *Cushing*, and the *Ericsson*, all of modern construction, fast and formidable; and the *Gwin*, *McKee*, and *Talbot*, which were small second-class boats.

These torpedo-boats proved seaworthy craft, fulfilling their respective rôles creditably. The *Porter*, for example, won distinction on a long voyage with the fleet to San Juan. One of the "best of the boats was the *Ericsson*, which was almost the oldest". Having arrived at the New York Navy Yards on June 19, 1896, for completion and equipment which, in spite of all possible haste, required a period of eight months, she was placed in commission on February 18, 1897, Lieutenant Nathaniel Reilly Usher commanding. Her first battery consisted of three eighteen-inch Whitehead torpedo tubes, and four one-pound rapid-fire guns. The total cost of construction at the time

of commission amounted to \$144,142.08. Then followed a period of organization and training of the crew, and from July 7, 1897, to February 3, 1898, she cruised leisurely up and down along the coast of the United States from Boston, Massachusetts, to Mobile, Alabama. During February, March, and most of April, 1898, she was stationed at or about Key West, Florida.

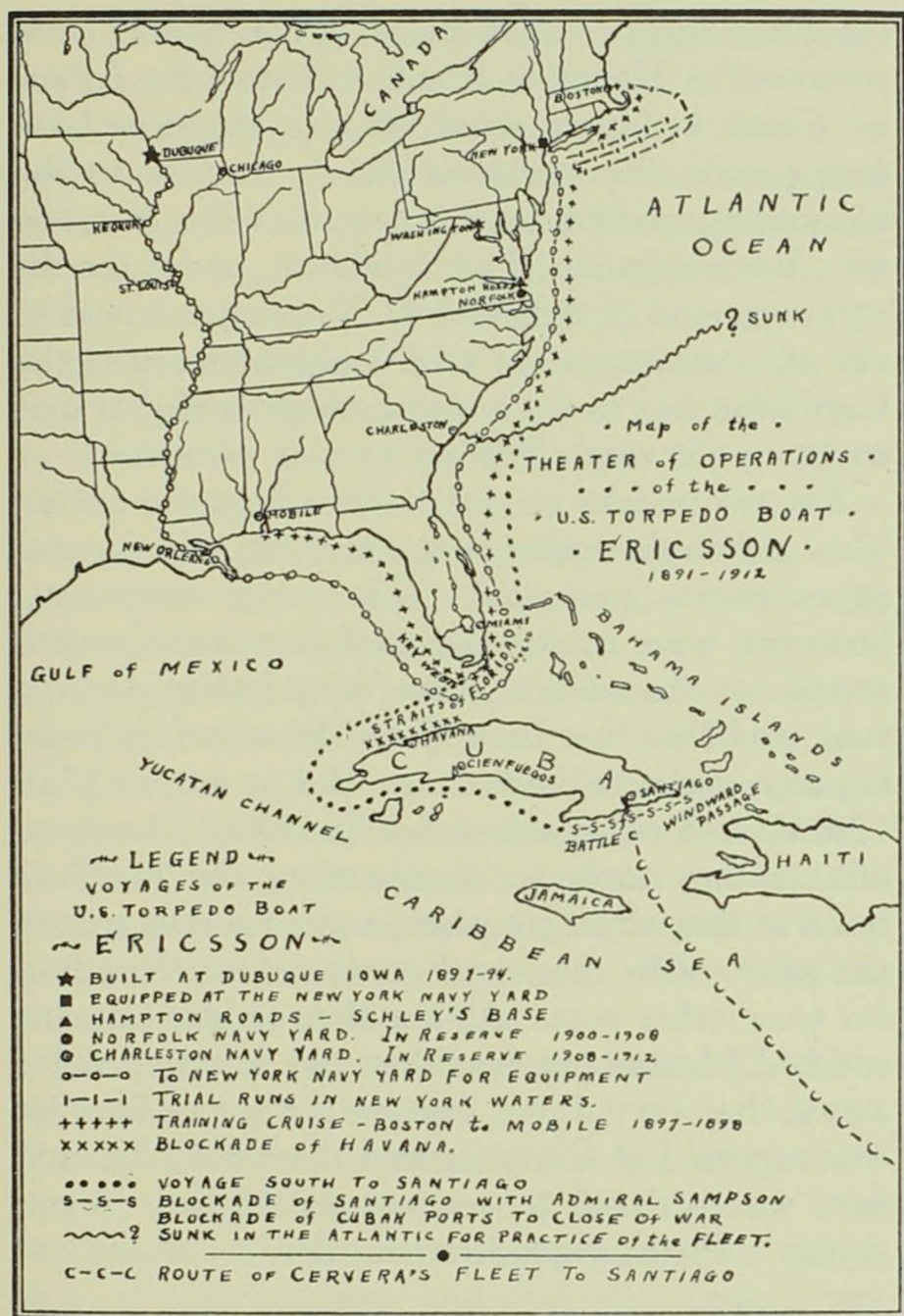
Immediately following the ultimatum issued on April 20, 1898, by our government to Spain, the fleet was concentrated at Key West and ordered to blockade Havana and other Cuban ports. In these maneuvers the *Ericsson* took an active part from April 22nd to June 1st. "She is a long, lean, cigar-shaped craft," wrote a reporter concerning the *Ericsson*, "with lines as fine and as gently curved as ever beautified a vessel. Forward she looks the racer she undoubtedly is, with a long rangy bow providing both the buoyancy and reach and yet offering the slightest friction as she passes through the water. Aft she is gull-like and spare, carrying no material not absolutely necessary to carry her machinery and retain her symmetry of form."

But patrol, blockade, and messenger duty was the most dangerous service afloat and the most uncomfortable work in the whole navy. The cramped quarters and the violent pitching of the

boat made life disagreeable for the crew. The little torpedo-boat, never intended for navigating heavy seas, crossed and recrossed the treacherous passage between Key West and Cuba. Her "low free-board" meant that the men on deck were wet to the skin before the boat had passed the flagship on the way to patrol duty. An officer on the *Cushing* was washed overboard and lost. The brass buttons on the uniforms of the torpedo-boat crews, turned green by the sea water, became badges of high courage and honor.

On the twenty-ninth of April, Admiral Cervera left the Cape Verde Islands, in command of a Spanish squadron consisting of four armored cruisers and three torpedo-boat destroyers, the newest and most feared type of war vessels. This movement on the part of the enemy created grave anxiety all along the eastern seaboard, as nobody in America knew whether Cervera was headed for Cuba or intended to surprise and bombard some important Atlantic seaport, few of which were adequately fortified.

The plan of naval strategy adopted for defense against this double threat was to divide the North Atlantic Fleet into three sections — the blockading squadron which was later known as the North Atlantic Squadron, the Northern Patrol Squadron, and the Flying Squadron. The latter, under



the command of Commodore W. S. Schley, was stationed at Hampton Roads to patrol the Atlantic Coast, ready to ward off any threatened attempt upon the seaboard cities. It was to the blockading portion of the fleet that the *Ericsson* was first assigned. This squadron, under the direct command of Admiral W. T. Sampson, was to cut off communication with Cuba and cruise the Caribbean Sea in the hope of encountering or discovering Cervera's fleet on its way westward.

For two weeks no one knew where the enemy was, although rumors were current and general apprehension prevailed. The navy strategists, however, were reasonably confident that Cervera would have to touch at some West Indian port for coal, probably San Juan, Porto Rico, before making any offensive movement. But as late as May 12th he had not reached San Juan and Sampson, after rather aimlessly bombarding the fortifications at that strategic point, turned westward on the assumption that the Spaniards were heading for some other port. As a matter of fact Cervera reached Martinique, less than five hundred miles away, that very day. Forty-eight hours later he was reported at Curacao, and the whole Atlantic fleet was ordered to concentrate at Key West. Schley's Flying Squadron steamed south and ar-

rived on May 18th, several hours ahead of Sampson's squadron.

It was anticipated that Cervera had orders to coöperate with the Spanish army in Cuba and would therefore attempt to reach Havana, or some port on the south side of the island connected with the capital by rail. Admiral Sampson chose to patrol the north coast of Cuba, in order to intercept the Spanish fleet if it tried to reach Havana by way of the Windward Passage. Commodore Schley was ordered to proceed around the western end of Cuba through the Yucatan Channel to Cienfuegos in anticipation of meeting the enemy, finding him at Cienfuegos which was his most likely destination, or waiting for him there. Starting with the *Brooklyn*, *Massachusetts*, *Texas*, and *Scorpion*, he was joined within the next two days by the *Iowa*, *Marblehead*, and the collier *Merri-mac*. Without encountering any signs of the enemy, Schley arrived before Cienfuegos on May 21st and established a blockade. The *Ericsson* was left behind at Key West.

Santiago, on the southeastern coast of Cuba, also offered an alternative port of refuge for the Spanish fleet, but since this place was then cut off from General Blanco's army, it did not seem likely that Admiral Cervera would go there. Being short of coal, however, and unable to obtain a sat-

isfactory supply at Curacao, Cervera determined to touch at Santiago, hoping that he might be able to refuel and slip out again before being discovered by the Americans. Shortly after daybreak on May 19th, lookouts stationed on the Morro (a fortified hill) guarding the entrance to the harbor at Santiago de Cuba sighted the vessels of the Spanish squadron. The entire fleet, short of rations, coal, and water and manned by a crew whose morale was at a very low ebb, slipped haltingly into the harbor under the protection of the fortress, whose garrison, themselves illy supplied with provisions of any kind, was in poor position to succor their almost destitute comrades. If his force had been in better condition, Cervera might have reached Cienfuegos before Schley and established contact with the army.

Meanwhile the Navy Department notified Sampson that spies had reported the presence of the Spanish fleet at Santiago and suggested that he order Schley to that port. But Sampson hesitated. When Schley finally reached the vicinity of Santiago, a scout cruiser told him that nothing positive was known about the Spaniards, whereupon he headed back around Cuba bound for Key West! Two days later, however, he reversed his course and returned to Santiago. It was not until the end of May that the American naval forces

were concentrated before the harbor of Santiago and established a close blockade. Cervera's fleet was effectively shut in, unable to escape or to fight advantageously.

In the meantime, about the first of June, the *Ericsson* was assigned to duty as a convoy to the transports bearing General W. R. Shafter's troops from Tampa, Florida, across the channel to Cuba. This duty having been successfully discharged, she, together with other vessels, was transferred to duty with Admiral Sampson's squadron at Santiago. The blockade proved to be a monotonous task. For several weeks the Spaniards made no apparent effort either to attack or escape. One episode, however, enlivened the situation, when Lieutenant R. P. Hobson made a gallant though unsuccessful attempt to bottle the enemy's fleet in the harbor by sinking the disabled collier *Merrimac* across the mouth of the channel.

And so the blockade wore on throughout the month of June. The duties of various members of the fleet became perfunctory and routine. Early on Sunday morning, July 3rd, the *Massachusetts* left her station with the fleet, and headed for Guantanamo to coal. The morning routine was in progress. The engineers were utilizing the respite of daylight for overhauling their machinery and cleaning the boiler tubes. At about nine

o'clock the flagship *New York* left the line, accompanied by the *Ericsson*, and proceeded slowly down the coast towards Siboney, east of Santiago, where Admiral Sampson was to land for the purpose of conferring with General Shafter on the best measures to be adopted for the relief of the hard-pressed expeditionary forces.

On the preceding evening six columns of smoke had been noticed above the hills, far back in the land-locked harbor. As this had occurred before, it aroused no undue anxiety. Nevertheless the lookouts on the *Iowa*, stationed directly opposite the mouth of the harbor, were on the alert. About the time the *New York* left her position, a sailor on the *Iowa* observed smoke moving toward the mouth of the harbor, and at 9:15 called the attention of several officers to it. Eager eyes soon confirmed their suspicions, whereupon the *Iowa* fired the alarm gun and hoisted signal No. 250, "the enemy's ships are escaping." This was about 9:30. As quickly as possible the blockading fleet closed in, according to the prearranged plan. The *New York* heard the signal and returned to the fight, though too late to take a prominent part. Cervera's flagship, the *Maria Teresa*, first emerged from the mouth of the harbor and headed west along the shore, followed immediately by the *Vizcaya*, *Cristobal Colon*, *Almirante Oquendo*,

and finally the dreaded destroyers, *Pluton* and *Furor*.

The details of the remarkable battle which ensued are well known. One by one the great ships of the Spanish squadron steamed out of the harbor and ran the gauntlet of American fire. The *Teresa*, having faced the first attack, was soon ablaze and had to be beached about six miles west of the Morro. Ten minutes later the *Oquendo* met a similar fate. The *Indiana* and the *Gloucester* pounced upon the destroyers so furiously that the *Furor* was sunk and the *Pluton* was run ashore almost immediately. On down the coast fled the *Vizcaya* and the *Colon*, trying to outdistance their pursuers. The *Indiana* dropped behind, and the *Iowa* was ordered back to guard the transports, but the *Brooklyn*, *Oregon*, and *Texas* kept up the chase. At eleven o'clock the *Vizcaya* turned ashore about fifteen miles from the Morro, and two hours later the *Colon* surrendered thirty miles farther west. Not a single vessel escaped.

Fate prevented the *Ericsson* from distinguishing herself as the engine of destruction she was reputed to be. By the time she arrived upon the scene, the major part of the engagement was over.

As the *New York* and the *Ericsson* passed the mouth of the harbor, however, the shore batteries,

which had previously been directing their fire on the *Gloucester*, turned to them as better targets. Though both vessels were going at full speed as they drew near the entrance, the guns of the *Morro* almost got their range. "Several shells struck near us, short or beyond, and two burst overhead and over." The *Ericsson* was not struck, however.

When the *Vizcaya* "struck her flag", the *Ericsson* was close astern of her, preparing to launch a Whitehead torpedo. It is to the credit of the gunner and her commanding officer, Lieutenant Usher, that the death-dealing missile remained undischarged, thus sparing many lives. Instead, she drew off and headed after the *Colon*.

Lieutenant Usher's report of the battle to the commanding officer of the fleet on July 5th best describes what followed. "As the *Ericsson* was hauling away from the *New York* in the chase, signal was made, interrogatory, No. 2872, 'Request permission to continue the chase.' The flagship hoisted negative and by wigwag signal directed the *Ericsson* to pick up men in the water astern. Turned with port helm and found and picked up one man afloat on a piece of wreckage, and then returned to the chase, and *New York* in the meantime chasing fast after the *Colon*. As we came up with the *Iowa*, lying about 2 miles

seaward of *Vizcaya*, the *Ericsson* was hailed and directed to go inshore and rescue the crew of the *Vizcaya* from the burning vessel. Ran close alongside the *Vizcaya* and sent small boat to her, boats from *Iowa* pulling in also at same time. Explosions from the ammunition on board the *Vizcaya* began about this time and her guns, which had been left loaded, were fired one after the other by the flames. The *Vizcaya* was on fire fore and aft, but the mass of the fire was aft, and the position of the *Ericsson* was perilous in the extreme and only the urgency of the occasion caused her to remain. Rescued 11 officers and about 90 sailors and marines from the vessel, many of them sorely wounded. The Spanish were no sooner taken on board than they urged immediate withdrawal of the *Ericsson*, but this vessel remained until all alive had been taken from the *Vizcaya* by the *Ericsson's* small boat and the boats from the *Iowa*. One of the *Vizcaya's* large cutters was also used. The *Ericsson's* deck was then crowded with prisoners, most of them naked and many of them wounded, and she returned to the *Iowa*, towing the *Vizcaya's* cutter, also filled with prisoners. These were all put on board the *Iowa*, and the *Ericsson* was by her directed to verify the information given by the *Resolute*, which came up from eastward, and signaled, 'Enemy's ships to east-

ward'. Spoke *Resolute*, which reported that she had made out an enemy's battle ship off Siboney; then spoke transport *Comal*, which had only seen the signal displayed by the *Resolute*; then spoke *Harvard*, which reported having made out an enemy's battle ship; requested *Harvard* to notify *Iowa*, and proceeded under full speed to eastward. Off vicinity of Siboney sighted *Indiana* and an Austrian battleship. The *Indiana* signaled *Ericsson* to come within hail, and directed that we proceed under full speed to westward to notify our vessels of presence of Austrian battleship *Infanta Maria Theresa*, which, desiring to go into Santiago, had been referred to the commander-in-chief in view of the existing conditions. Proceeded as directed until up with *Iowa*; reported to *Iowa*, and that our coal was almost gone, and that we were using salt feed in the boilers, the vessel only carrying two hours' fresh feed at full power, and the *Ericsson* then having been over four hours under full power. Received permission to return to eastward, and proceeded until signaled by *Harvard* to come within hail; by her was directed to tow her boats to and from the burning wrecks of the *Maria Teresa* and *Oquendo*. This was accordingly done until no more persons remained to be rescued from the vessels, the remaining prisoners being all ashore on the beach. Received permis-

sion from the *Harvard* to proceed to eastward. About 6 p. m. spoke *Iowa*, and received permission to go to Guantanamo for coal and water, at which harbor *Ericsson* arrived at 9:45 p. m., and reported the victory to commanding officer U. S. *Massachusetts*, the senior officer present.

"There were no casualties on board this vessel."

Thus in the course of a few hours came and passed the climax in the career of the *Ericsson*, one of the best, most popular, and most feared vessels of her class in the entire navy. Singularly, fate decreed that she should never discharge a single torpedo at an enemy's ship or destroy a human life. On the contrary, this vessel, though potentially a dreaded engine of destruction, actually became an apostle of mercy, saving many lives by the dauntless courage of her crew and her ability, on account of her shallow draught, to run in close to shore where larger vessels dared not go.

The *Ericsson* remained in Cuban waters until August 10, 1898, assisting in the blockade of Cuban ports, when she set sail for the United States, arriving at New York harbor on August 23rd. Meanwhile, peace having been reëstablished, she was placed out of commission on September 21st, and was so disposed throughout the years 1899 and 1900. In 1901 she was entered upon reserve at the Norfolk Navy Yard, and attached to the

"reserve torpedo flotilla" until 1908. In 1909 she was transferred and remained on reserve at the Charleston Navy Yard until 1912, when on April 5th she was placed out of commission, being stricken from the navy list on the following day, April 6, 1912.

Some time subsequently the *Ericsson* was employed as a target for practice of the fleet. Although available records do not disclose the date or place of her demise, she now lies somewhere at the bottom of the Atlantic.

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