

CLARK OF THE OREGON (July 2009)

By
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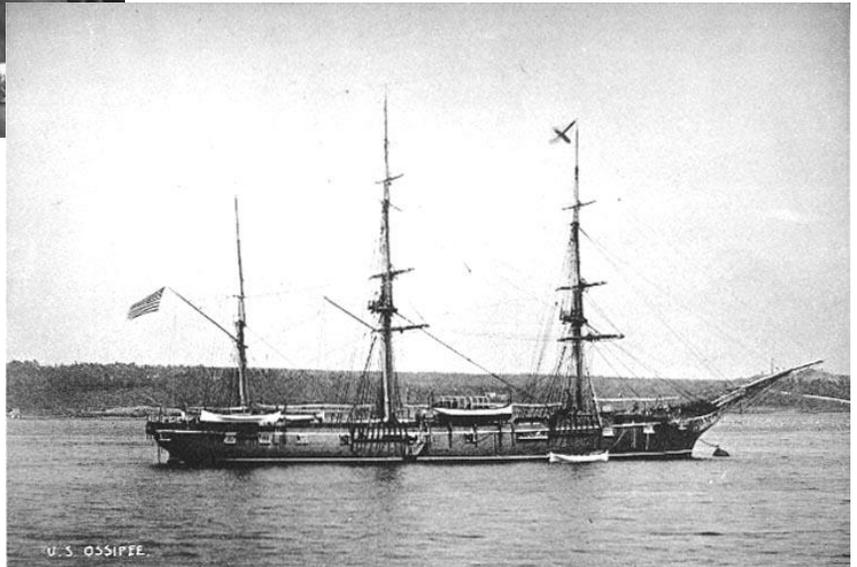


Charles Edgar Clark (*Vermont Commandery, Insignia #9210*) was born in Bradford, Vermont on August 10, 1843. After an unsuccessful attempt to enter West Point, he obtained an appointment to the Naval Academy, entering in 1860. His first ship was the USS Constitution, Old Ironsides, which, at that time, was serving as the school and barracks for the underclassmen. Among his favorite instructors was Alfred Thayer Mahan, who would become world renowned as a naval theorist. While a student, Clark saw the wreckage of ships destroyed by the CSS Virginia in Hampton Roads and traveled to England aboard the USS Macedonian. His academic training shortened by the war,

Clark and his class graduated in 1863, after which he was assigned to serve aboard the sloop-of-war *Ossipee* (left), then assigned to the West Gulf Blockade Squadron under Rear-Admiral David G. Farragut. His major engagement of the Civil War was the battle of Mobile Bay.

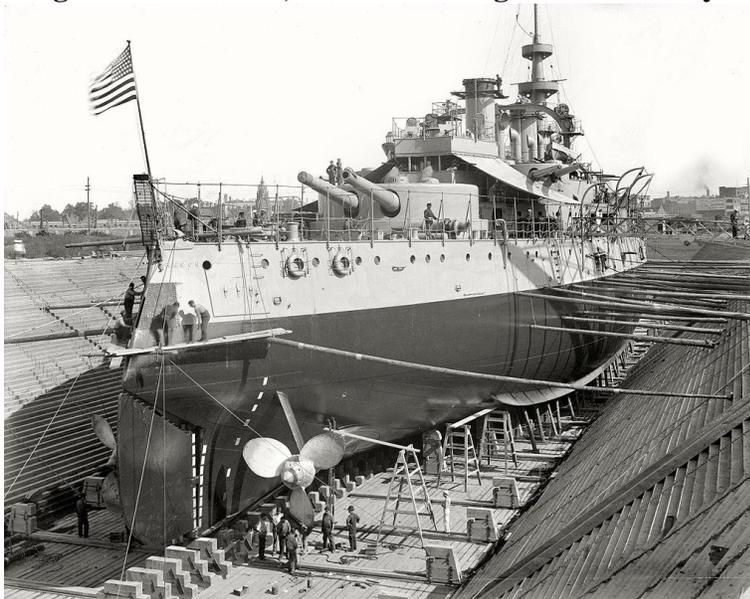
Mobile Bay was a popular destination of blockade runners.

The entrance to the Bay was protected, on either side, by the guns of Forts Morgan and Gaines. The Union plan of attack was to run a fleet past the forts. A Federal fleet within the Bay would end its days as a safe haven for blockade runners and would, effectively, blockade the Port of Mobile at the northern end of the Bay. Once the fleet was within the



harbor, troops would be landed to capture the blockaded forts. This task was assigned to Rear-Admiral Farragut. The date for execution of the plan was August 5, 1864. The plan was to run the fleet past the guns of Fort Morgan. The four ironclads, Tecumseh, Manhattan, Winnebago and Chickasaw would sail between the Fort and the wooden ships. The fourteen wooden ships would run the guns of the fort, lashed together, two by two. The Ossipee would be in the sixth pair, closer to the Fort. The run was successful with only the Tecumseh being sunk. Once in the Bay, the one remaining threat was the Confederate ram, Tennessee. When the Tennessee came out to give battle it was subject to the combined fire of the fleet and the charge of several Federal vessels. The Hartford rammed the Tennessee and the Ossipee was within a few feet of her when its captain noticed the white flag above the Tennessee. It then accepted Tennessee's surrender.

Between the wars Clark was assigned to a series of duties in the Pacific, Japan, Annapolis, New England and, for a period, as a lighthouse inspector on the Great Lakes. Clark's shining *one moment in time* would come after he assumed command of the battleship Oregon on March 15, 1898. The Oregon was the only battleship assigned to defend the



Pacific coast. As such, it was the only vessel available to provide support to Commodore Dewey in his operations against the Philippines. As the greater threat was to the U.S. East Coast, Clark was ordered to sail the Oregon to Key West to join the Fleet in operations against Cuba and the Spanish Fleet under Admiral Pascal Cervera. This started Clark and the Oregon on their epic race which brought them to center of the nation's attention.

The Spanish Fleet under Admiral Cervera posed the only threat of

attack to the United States. After sailing from Spain to Cape Verde, Cervera remained there until pushed to sea by the Portuguese, who had declared neutrality. The location of the fleet became a source of concern along the Atlantic and Gulf Seaboards. In an age before satellites, aircraft and radio, rumor took the place of reliable information about the location of Cervera. Speculation was plentiful. Cervera was reportedly seen off Nova Scotia, Maine, Newport and Long Island. Ocean liners on their runs between Northern Europe and Boston and New York reported spotting the Spanish Fleet. Bombardment of the Coast from New England to the Gulf was anticipated. Valuables were moved inland from Boston and the Governor of Massachusetts refused to let the National Guard leave the state. It was to meet this threat that Clark and the Oregon left San Francisco on March 19, more than a month before the declaration of war, with 1,600 tons of Welsh coal, stores for six months at sea and a crew that was short 94 men, including 27 from the boiler room/coaling force.

In its race to the potential theatre of operations, the Oregon barely averted another Maine disaster. While proceeding toward Peru, the crew noticed smoke and heat in the forward coal bunker. A damage control team managed to douse the fire which had begun by spontaneous combustion.

The Oregon received its share of press coverage. *The Scientific American* speculated that Cervera would try to intercept the Oregon and destroy it before it could join the fleet. That possibility was also on Clark's mind. He had formulated a plan under which he would, upon contact with the enemy, run away from the Spanish, causing their pursuing ships to become separated. He would then attack the Spanish ships one at a time and single-handedly destroy Cervera's fleet. We will know how such an encounter would have turned out. By May 1, Clark had reached Rio de Janeiro. On May 25, Oregon, ready for battle, joined the fleet at Key West, after a voyage of 15,000 miles in 67 days, averaging 12 knots per hour. The Oregon left Key West to join the blockade of Havana.

Cervera's fleet was located in the harbor of Santiago in Southeastern Cuba. The Oregon was transferred to Santiago on June 1. On June 10, the Oregon provided cover for the Marine landings at Guantanamo Bay. The climactic naval battle of war occurred when the Spanish fleet attempted to break of Santiago Harbor. When the first ship of the flotilla exited the harbor, the Oregon held its place as one of the five battleships guarding the exit. The Spaniards got past the U.S. fleet and a race began as the Americans attempted to catch up with and destroy the enemy. At this point the speed of the Oregon and the leadership of Captain Clark became decisive. The high-grade Welsh coal with which the Oregon had loaded in San Francisco propelled it to 16 knots. Oregon's chief engineer had, at the expense of less bathing water for the crew, avoided using corrosive brine in the boilers. Clark, who had assumed command of an untested crew, had, during the trip around Cape Horn, molded the crew and ship into a fighting machine. As the temperature in the boiler room reached 150 degrees, Clark sent beer from the officers supply to the boiler crew. During the chase, Clark raised the message *Remember the Maine!* to which the Brooklyn responded *We have!* When the Oregon closed to within range of the Spanish ship Colon, it opened up, forcing Colon's captain to run her aground. After the battle, Spanish prisoners saluted the Oregon with the cheer, *Bravo, Blanco Diablo!* Among the Americans it had earned the nickname of the *Bulldog of the Fleet*.

Time did not well serve the memory of either the Oregon or Charles Clark. The Oregon went on to serve in the Philippines and to transport troops to the Boxer Rebellion and, in 1920, to Vladivostok. In 1925 it began 16 years of service as a floating memorial in Portland. It returned to action as a floating ammunition carrier in the Pacific in World War II. She was ultimately reduced to scrap iron Japan in 1956.

Charles Clark held shore assignments until his retirement in 1905. He died on October 2, 1922 in Long Beach, California. The amazing voyage and war record of Clark and the Oregon were soon lost from public memory. It is, however, a story worth remembering.