

REMEMBER CHARLES SIGSBEE

By

James M. Gallen

William T. Sherman-Billy Yank Camp #65

Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War

JMGallen@Juno.com

(January 1999)

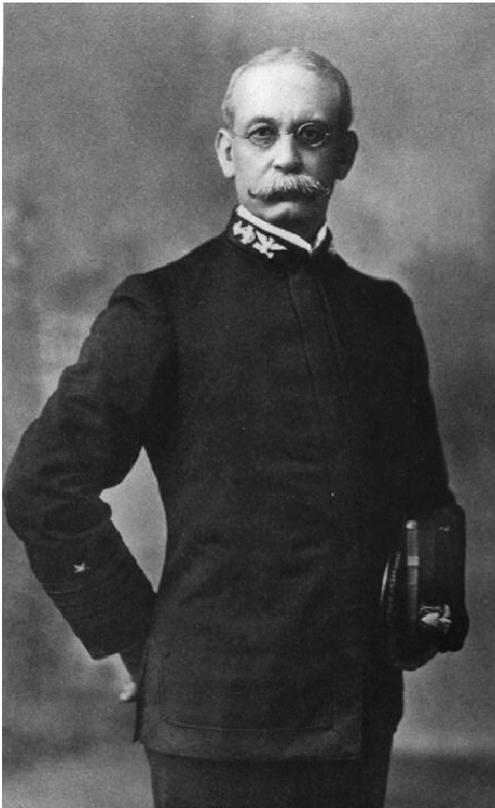
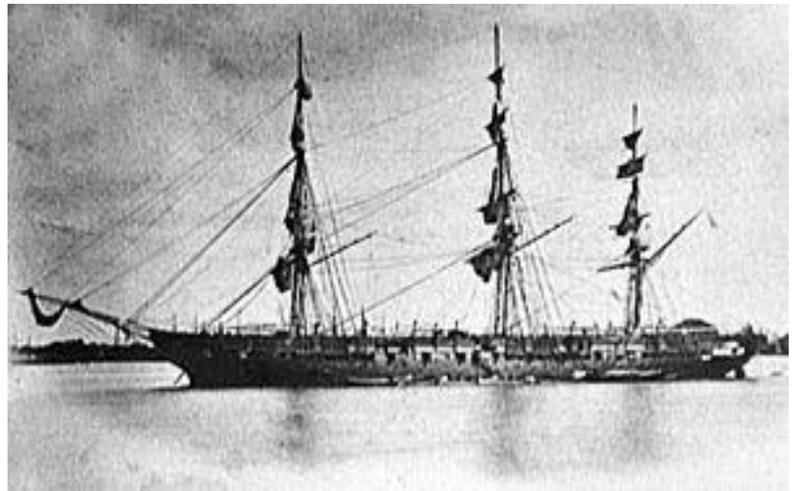


Photo # NH 95096 Capt. C.D. Sigsbee

Charles D. Sigsbee, career naval officer, was born in Albany, New York on January 16, 1845. Upon graduating from the Naval Academy in 1863 he began a career which would be remembered, primarily, for his service as the last Captain of the *U.S.S. Maine* in 1898. At the start of his career he served under the two most famous Union naval commanders of the Civil War. He was first



assigned to the West Gulf Blockade Squadron under Admiral David G. Farragut, serving on the *Monogahela* and *Brooklyn* (pictured). It was aboard the *Brooklyn*, the first of the wooden vessels to run past the guns of Fort Morgan, that Sigsbee took part in the Battle of Mobile Bay on August 5, 1864. Sigsbee was then transferred to the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron under Admiral David D. Porter.

It was in service with the North Atlantic Squadron that Sigsbee participated in the largest naval action of the war, that being the attack on Fort Fisher, North Carolina in December, 1864, and January, 1865. Fort Fisher's significance was that it protected Wilmington as a haven for blockade runners. General Lee warned Colonel William Lamb, Confederate Commander of Fort Fisher, that the Fort must be held at all costs, for without the supplies from the blockade runners, his army could not be sustained and he would be forced to evacuate Richmond.

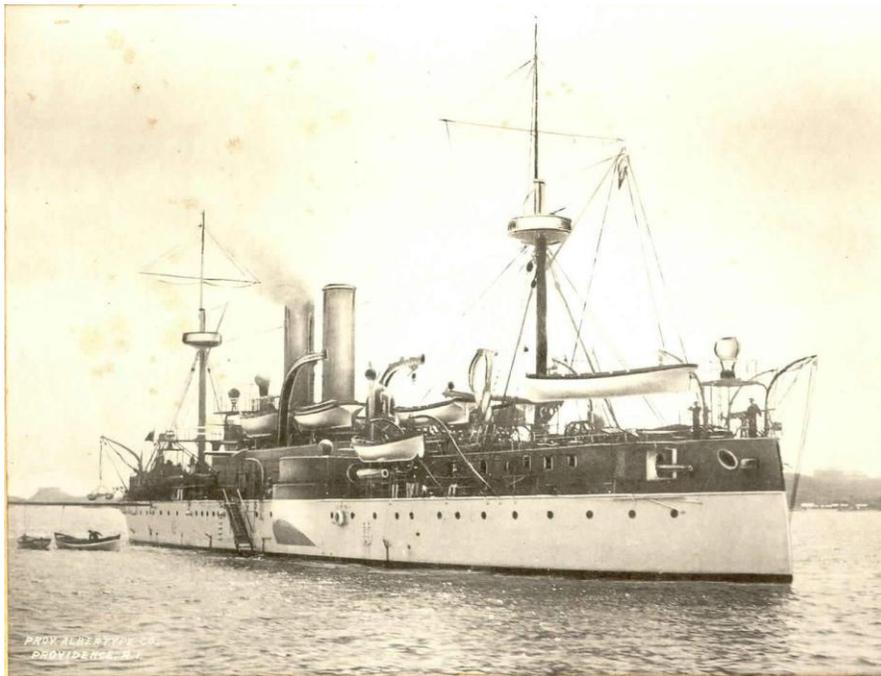
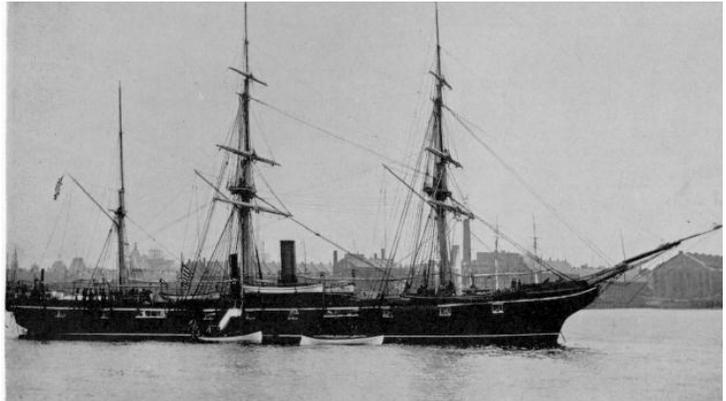
The assault of Fort Fisher took place in two attempts. The first, unsuccessful, attempt took place on December 24-25, 1864. It was planned to consist of a naval bombardment, followed by a land assault. The initial attack took place when the former blockade runner, *Louisiana*, was loaded with 200 thirty-five tons of gun powder and was run close to the Fort where it exploded shortly after midnight on the morning of the 24th. The only damage done was to destroy the ship. At daylight, Porter's ships began an intense bombardment. Bombardment was recommenced on Christmas morning. Troops under the command of General Ben Butler were landed and reported that the fort was virtually undamaged by the naval fire. He then evacuated his troops and returned to Hampton Roads. General Grant then replaced Butler with Major General A.J. Terry.

The second attack on Fort Fisher began with the landing of General Terry's troops on January 13, 1865. Admiral Porter employed different bombardment orders in the second attack. In the first attack, the navy had conducted a general bombardment of the Fort. In the second attack, each of the 44 ships was assigned specific targets and ordered to shell them until destroyed. A force of 1,600 sailors and 400 marines were landed on the morning of January 15 for an assault on the Fort from the seaward while the army attacked from the landward. Heavy naval bombardment was commenced until 3 p.m. when the troops were ready for the assault. The Confederates mistook the sailor and marine attack as the main attack and concentrated their defenses upon it. This permitted the army to succeed in taking the fort by 9 p.m. Fort Fisher was the most fortified position taken by amphibious assault during the Civil War. As he

predicted, General Lee was able to hold out only three months after the fall of Fort Fisher.

During the years after the war, Sigsbee was assigned to duty in the Asiatic and European squadrons as well as an instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy.

During his service with the Hydrographic office, ships under his command discovered the Sigsbee Deep, the deepest spot in the Gulf of Mexico. He invented a number of deep-sea sounding and sampling devices. He commanded the *U.S.S. Kearsarge (right)*, which had sunk the *C.S.S. Alabama*, in 1885-86. In March, 1897 he was promoted to Captain and given the command of the *U.S.S. Maine*.



The *Maine* (left) had been commissioned on September 17, 1895. With her four 10-inch guns and rated speed of 17 knots, she was considered a second-class battleship, but, definitely, heavier than any cruiser. Sigsbee and the *Maine* kept their rendezvous with destiny when they sailed into Havana Harbor on

January 25, 1898. Although the visit was *friendly*, the purpose was to pressure Spain to moderate its suppression in Cuba. All knew that the presence of the *Maine* could lead to an incident, but from whom, no one knew.

On February 15, 1898, the time for an incident to be remembered had arrived. The *Maine* had been in Havana for three weeks and was scheduled to leave shortly to celebrate Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Although Counsel General Fitzhugh Lee, (former Major General, CSA) initially considered the presence of the *Maine* a source for concern, he had grown complacent as time passed without incident. At 9:40 p.m. all complacency was shattered. Just as Sigsbee was finishing a letter to his wife, he was disturbed by two roaring explosions from port side forward. As smoke filled his cabin, he went to an outer deck where he gave orders to assemble a damage-control team and to flood the ship's magazines.

The initial suspicion was that the *Maine* had been struck by a mine and was under attack from the neighboring Spanish vessel, *Alfonso XII*. It was quickly determined that *Alfonso* was not involved in the explosion. The sinking of the *Maine* left 265 sailors dead or missing.

The explosion was the subject of a naval court of inquiry, sitting in Key West. Sigsbee maintained that his ship had been destroyed by a Spanish mine. The Court's conclusion was that all safety procedures had been observed and that no fault or negligence on the part of the crew was involved. The court felt the disaster was caused by "*the explosion of a mine situated under the bottom of the ship at about Frame 18 and somewhat on the port side of the ship.*" This was believed to have caused the explosion of the two forward magazines. The Spanish report on the explosion noted the absence of a visible geyser of water at the time of the explosion, or dead fish with ruptured bladders on the surface afterward. The Spanish concluded that the explosion was internal, probably caused by spontaneous combustion, a common problem among ships of that era.

The destruction of Sigsbee's ship gave rise to the cry *Remember the Maine!* which was to be the battle cry of the yellow journalists clamoring for war and for the warriors who followed. Sigsbee was called as a witness before hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in which he testified to his belief that a mine had destroyed the ship.

The American press was quick to assess blame against the Spanish government, while speculation against the Cuban insurgents was also aired.

The weak point in the charge against the Spanish was that it did not have any reason to want American involvement in a war against the insurgents in which the Spanish already had the upper hand. The insurgents had a stronger motive to destroy the *Maine* in the hopes that the American press would blame the Spanish and thereby encourage American intervention. The proposition that the insurgents had the ability to carry off a successful attack on the *Maine* was, however, questionable. The *Maine* disaster has been the subject of several studies, including a more recent one being that by Admiral Hyman Rickover in 1974. He concluded that the explosion occurred in the 6-inch reserve magazine, caused, probably, by a fire in bunker A-16. Rickover wrote:

There is no evidence that a mine destroyed the Maine. President McKinley was unfortunate in the commanding officer of the Maine...there is no evidence he [Sigsbee] took more than routine measures in Havana to safeguard his ship from an accident. Perhaps it is also significant that the Kearsarge and Texas while under his command were inspected and found dirty.



After the conclusion of the court of inquiry, Sigsbee was given command of the cruiser *St. Paul* (left) with which he participated in blockade duty off Cuba. On May 25, *St. Paul* captured a British collier heading for Santiago and spotted the Spanish fleet in port. Sigsbee's last major operation in the Spanish American war occurred on June 22 when *St. Paul* destroyed the destroyer *Terror* and cruiser *Isabella II* of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

After the Spanish American War, Sigsbee served as chief intelligence officer of the navy from 1900-03. He was promoted to Rear Admiral in August 1903 and commanded the League Island navy yard at Philadelphia in 1903-4, the South Atlantic Squadron in 1904-5, and the 2nd division of the North Atlantic Fleet in 1905-6. In June-July, 1905, he commanded a special squadron detailed to carry the remains of John Paul Jones from Cherbourg, France, to the Naval Academy aboard the *Brooklyn*. He retired in January, 1907. Among his retirement

writings was *The Maine, an Account of her Destruction in Havana Harbor, 1899*. He died in New York on July 13, 1923.