

US Navy in the Pacific—1842 to 1942

Vistas very own naval historian and illustrator, Nick DiNapoli, presented a three week program on the purposes and activities of the US Navy in the Pacific from 1842 to 1942. This program was conceived by Nick as follow on to his earlier efforts on 10 Significant Naval Battles to the West, his program on Claire Chenault and the Flying Tigers in China during World War II, and his participation on Jim Pattillio's class on the Pacific War.

The first session discussed the history of the Opium Wars and the shameful and cynical exploitation of China by the Western powers, including the United States, which used opium as the medium of exchange. Although some thought was given to protecting US missionaries working in China as a justification for the presence of Western navies, the most significant driving force was that Westerners wanted Chinese tea, silk and porcelain dishes, but what did they have to trade in exchange. Of course there was always metals, silver and lead, or good woolen cloth, but the highest valued product was opium which was (and still is) grown extensively in the Indian subcontinent (controlled by the Portuguese and English) and Burma. The ruling powers in China, the Manchus, wanted to discourage opium trade, but the demand was overwhelming and many a fortune was made as a result of the addiction of the Chinese population. By 1900, as much as 80% of the male population of China between the ages of 18 and 60 was addicted to opium. The fortunes of many prominent European and American families were based on this opium trade, including the Kerry's of Massachusetts and the Delano's of New York. In defense of their country, there were several military skirmishes at sea involving western navies and the Chinese, but they were no match for the steam ships and the cannons. Each war ended in defeat for the Chinese and the granting of further Treaty Ports which opened up China to trade with the West. Duty by western ships on the Yangze River was common, but quite difficult due to the wide fluctuations in the water levels of the river, strong currents and uncharted bottoms.

Japan was opened to trade in 1854 by the power of western ships and cannon lead by Commodore Perry. After much frustration, Lord Hotta of the ruling Shogunate was convinced by Counsel General Townsend Harris that foreign trade was the fastest way to bring Japan into the modern world. Orderly Japan became the favorite choice of duty for sailors and marines in the Asiatic fleet because of its orderly people, beautiful geishas and girl-sans and wonderful coal and ports. Eventually there were naval battles between China and Japan. The ships were all European, but the high level of corruption, graft and indifference on the part of the Chinese Navy made it a one sided battle in favor of highly disciplined Japan.

Commodore George Dewey was new commander of the China Station at the time of the Spanish American War. He steamed to Manila Bay to destroyed the Spanish fleet at anchor, right between the land forts which were the main protection for the bay. Four Spanish boats were surrendered and used in the Yangze river patrol. The Flying torpedo boat assault of the Spanish never materialized. The victory was complete and before the European powers could get their ships to Manila Bay, so the victory and spoils entirely belonged to the US. The US Navy desperately wanted the use of Manila Bay for its

Asiatic Fleet and kept the Europeans at bay. Although our allies for a short time, Filipino rebels quickly became disenchanted with the US presence and began a guerrilla war against US occupation. The old Spanish families preferred the US to the rebels and control by the US lasted until the start of World War II.

The second session dealt with the end of the Manchu's, the rise of local war lords, the Navy's protection of international trade concessions and the aggression of the Japanese which led directly to World War II. Some of this history was captured in the films, "55 Days at Peking", "The Sand Pebbles" and "They Were Expendable". The Boxer Rebellion was the inevitable result of the failure of the Manchu's to rule China in an acceptable manner. The Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists demanded all foreigners be killed or driven out of China. Their anger was focused on the foreign legations at Peking which stood just outside the walls of the Forbidden City, and the railroads. The legations were surrounded and asked for the fleets to send relief up the river to Peking (50 miles from the port of Taku. The Boxer's intended to fight the relief column at Taku and up the river. After heroic battles, about 7000 Boxers and 200 of the foreigners were killed but the siege was broken. In 1912, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen declared himself President and was accepted by the West. He was eventually succeeded by Chiang Kai-Shek. However, outside of Canton, no one in China really knew who he was. He made various deals with local War Lords, including Yuan Chen, who eventually sent Sun Yat-Sen into exile and declared himself emperor of China. He died within a year, and there was no one in charge. The war lords fought each other and eventually Chiang emerged as the most acceptable to the West. The Japanese assassinated a war lord in Manchuria and then used the incident to invade Manchuria, effectively the start of World War II. As the Japanese advanced into China proper, they took control of the coast and the cities along the coast. Shanghai was a large center for western businessmen and governments. The Western navies were used to protect the foreigners in Shanghai. Eventually, the pressure on the Westerners became so great that they were evacuated before the Japanese armies. The "Panay" was sunk by Japanese aircraft while it was escorting foreign concessionaires out of Nanking.

The third session spoke of the total demise of the Asiatic fleet and the terrible war plans devised in Washington for the defense of the Philippines and the defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific. Prior to Pearl Harbor, the US Asiatic Fleet began a limited withdrawal to Manila. Japan moved forward in its plans to control the Chinese east coast. US Marines and the US Fleet were pulled out of China immediately prior to December 7th. Upon notice of the Japanese attack, Admiral Hart pulled the Asiatic fleet out of Manila to a predetermined position in Indonesia where it was completely destroyed in several battles with the superior Japanese fleets and air power, ending 100 years of US Naval presence in Asiatic waters.