

SYNOPSIS

U.S. NAVY SHIPS IN ASIATIC WATERS 1898-1908

Background

Throughout the 1800s, the U.S. Navy had just a handful of ships helping protect American merchantmen and residents in Chinese coastal cities. The Spanish controlled the Philippines, and other nations had a naval presence much larger than America's.

Commodore George Dewey's squadron annihilated the Spanish fleet's larger ships at Manila Bay May 1, 1898. The Philippines declared independence from Spain 12 June 1898. However, the Treaty of Paris gave the United States ownership of the Philippines. Philippine resistance erupted into warfare 4 February 1899 and lasted to 4 July 1902, with some units fighting on until 13 June 1913.

The United States Navy was needed to support Army efforts to subdue the rebels. Dewey's ships had returned to Chinese and Hong Kong waters. Some raced back to the Philippines. U.S. Army troops had captured several smaller Spanish gunboats which were turned over to the Navy and commissioned with their Spanish names.

In China, anti-foreigner sentiment was growing. The United States joined several European nations trying to protect foreign interests in China. The Yangtze Patrol was formed with ships assigned to cruise the river. Following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, Japan began to rise as a naval power and the United States reacted by building a larger presence in Asiatic waters. The period 1898-1908 saw the growth of the Asiatic Fleet to a powerful unit that existed until the outbreak of World War II.

Treatment: This exhibit traces U.S. Navy involvement in Asiatic waters from the Spanish-American War to 1908. The covers shown reflect the wide range of ships involved and the various postal systems used by sailors to send and receive mail. It presents mail from more than 90% of the ships assigned during this period and a wide range of postal systems handling the mail.

Importance: The United States became a naval power in the Asiatic theater during this period and the mail reflects the diverse methods of sending and receiving mail during this expansion period.

Philatelic/Subject Knowledge: These covers came from a wide range of sources and had to be identified through knowledge of the dates each ship was in Asiatic waters and recognition of the tie to a United States ship. Each item is pertinent, and the frankings are correct. Variations for overweight or special services are noted.

Personal Study and Research: There is no one source that provides information on all these ships beyond the data in the *Dictionary of American Fighting Naval Ships* which has but meager information on many ships. The information shown comes from more than 40 years of collecting and research by the exhibitor. The variety of covers shows reflects the exhibitor's knowledge by identifying U.S. Navy material from many countries where the tie is not always obvious.

Rarity: Some of the covers shown may be the only known cover from a particular ship. The mail from many of these ships was not voluminous: 24 ships had crews of fewer than 100 men, only 9 had complements of more than 500, and a goodly number of the men were not literate. There are no censuses for these covers. The mail from this theater and time is difficult to locate. Particularly rare items are enumerated below. The material for this exhibit has taken 40 years to assemble and would be difficult to duplicate.

Condition: The covers shown are the best the exhibitor has been able to locate. The items marked rare may be the only example of the franking or registered mail known from the ship.

Presentation: The three sections of this exhibit are presented chronologically by the year each ship began Asiatic service and alphabetically within the year. General notes are presented in text boxes. Rare and scarce items are noted with color.

Additional thought

With no ready conduit of mail through the United States postal system, the mail might originate from the Philippines, China, Hong Kong or Japan, as well as foreign offices such as the Imperial Japanese Post Office, German Offices in China, French Offices in China, or Russian Offices in China. This also involves locating such mail with competition from collectors of each of these postal areas and recognizing the connection to the U.S. Navy.

Incoming mail TO a sailor is scarcer than outgoing mail as somehow the sailor had to preserve the mail while on ship and transferring to other ships and finally his return home.

Items of particular interest

Frame 1 Page 1 – Cover from Commodore Dewet to his brother in Dewey's hand

Frame 1 Page 15 – PAMPANGA registered - cancel 5 or fewer known

Frame 2 Page 3 – URDANETA had but 15 crew members

Frame 3 Page 6 – IJPO cancels other than Shanghai are Rare – This is Chefoo.

Frame 5 Page 3 – Discovery copy of the MOHICAN registry cancel

References are sparse:

Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships – Basic information on most ships but very inconsistent on detail.

Catalogue of United States Naval Postmarks by Universal Ship Cancellation Society – has some guide to the scarcity of particular naval postmarks.

The exhibitor has used journal articles, general histories, and military histories to glean information on ship assignments.