

# OLYMPIA

## *Icon of the American Navy*

by John Brady

Imagine an era of discovery in communications media, a period with new technologies emerging at a rapidly accelerating pace, with the ability to share information increasing exponentially decade by decade. Imagine the power of new technologies with the ability to distribute stories, be they true or false, at a tremendous rate. Those in control of such technologies would possess incredible power. They could sway elections, propel relative unknowns to stardom, agitate for war or peace, drive public opinion to suit their purposes for good or ill. Imagine the 1890s. America had an established telegraph network, a telephone system under construction, and radio in development. Photography, not yet mass-produced in printed publications, soon would be. Moving pictures began to attract the era's top business and artistic talent. Coupled with equally accelerating developments across science and engineering, all of this innovation had a phenomenal impact on society.

In the post-Civil War era, the US Navy was decidedly not a national priority. After the build-up to blockade and conquer the South, the Navy was allowed to atrophy,

with no new ships designed or built, and the existing fleet was minimally maintained. A seniority system of promotion that discouraged change exacerbated the situation. The United States was preoccupied with western expansion and railroads. With oceans on two sides serving as formidable barriers to any foreign aggression, there was no immediate need for a power-

ful navy. As the American navy deteriorated, those of other nations advanced, attempting to take advantage of emerging technologies. During this transitional period, it was not merely that the ships were outdated, the industries needed to produce them did not yet exist. It was an era in which vessels could become obsolete faster than they could be constructed, and there was no certainty as to which materials, armament, or strategies might emerge victorious when put to the test.

This situation began to change in the 1880s, and by the 1890s a full-blown technological revolution was sweeping through American naval shipbuilding and training programs. As the United States was on the verge of establishing itself as a global power, in 1888 Congress authorized the construction of seven new cruisers. When the protected cruiser *Olympia* was launched from Union Iron Works in San Francisco on 5 November 1892, she would be the heaviest of the seven and represented the new modern US Navy. By the time she was commissioned early in 1895, she had already become well known because she was one of the first ships that came close to being on par with ships deployed in the navies of Europe. She was fast, powerful, and well protected.



*USS Olympia, ca. 1895–1901*

PHOTO BY K. LOEFFLER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



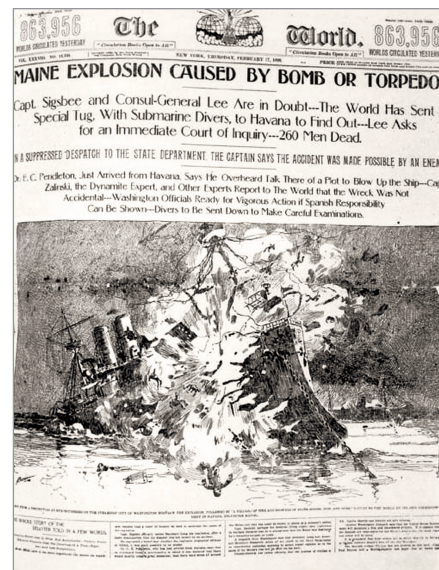
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She was also in line with the naval doctrines popularized by Alfred Thayer Mahan, the leading naval strategist who had become famous and influential in naval and political circles the world over. His theories of sea power and the recognition of the importance of large-scale decisive victory would drive naval strategy through the next sixty years, leading his followers into both triumph and disaster. His theories—and then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt's adherence to them—were what drove the strategy that would play out in the 1898 Pacific theater. In time Mahan's theories would lead to the tremendous Japanese victory at Tsushima Bay in the Russo Japanese War (1904–05) and, ultimately, the crushing Japanese defeat at Midway 37 years later. Mahan's fame

may now be relegated to the disciplines of naval history and strategy, but through the first half of the 20th century, his ideas drove world events. He saw the ability to amass and project power to win a decisive battle far from the home shores as the key to naval success. The irony of *Olympia's* role in all of this is she was built to be a commerce raider but became famous for leading a fleet into a battle that played out Mahan's theories in miniature. For all the attention the Battle of Manila Bay would get, it was not a grand battle in the sense of Trafalgar or Midway. It was, rather, a clarion announcement that America had become a player on the world stage.

Theodore Roosevelt was prescient in politics and understood how to use the power of the media. When the battleship

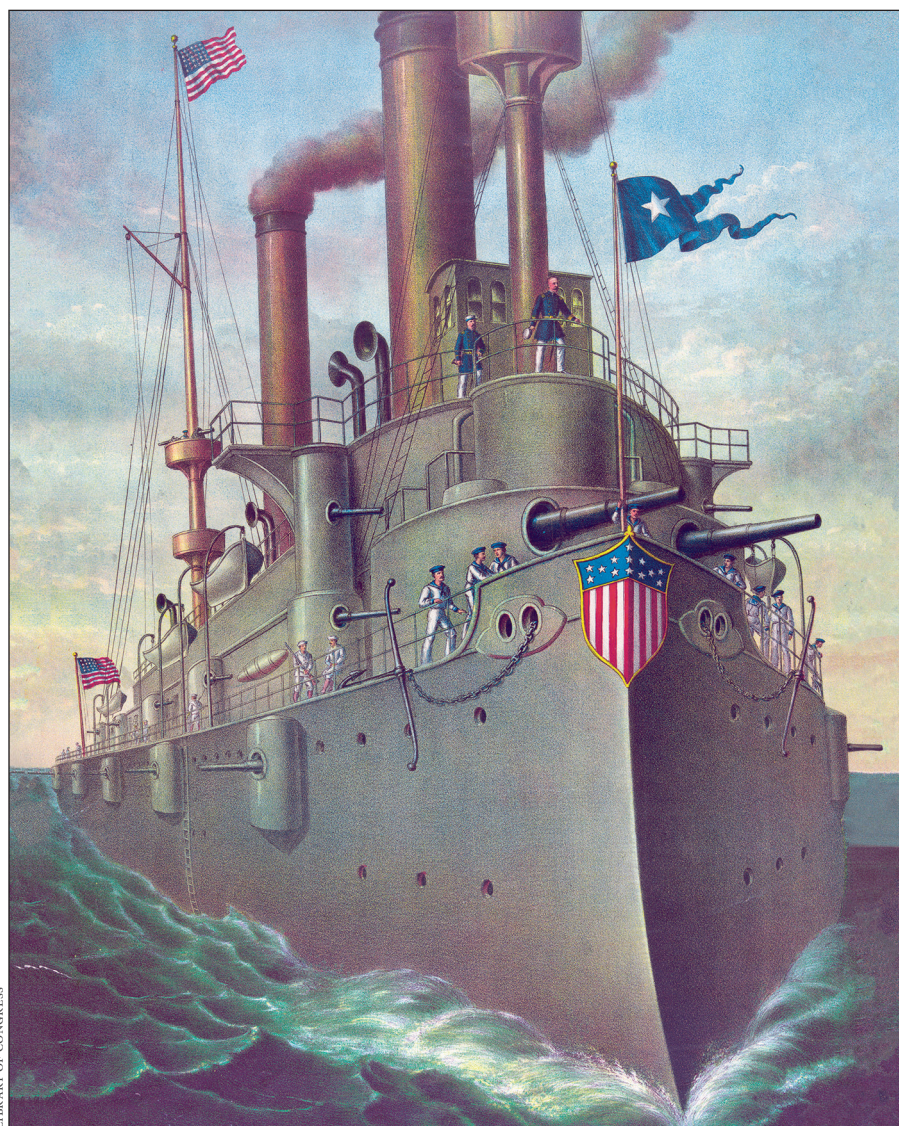


*The front page of the World on 17 February 1898 was one of many newspaper headlines that sensationalized the news of the loss of USS Maine in Havana Harbor, spurring the nation on to a war with Spain.*

USS *Maine* blew up in Havana harbor, Roosevelt had already positioned George Dewey as commander of the Pacific Fleet. Dewey was in the right place at the right time to issue the orders leading to the Battle of Manila Bay. As *Olympia* steamed through the warm Pacific waters towards the Philippines, political passions were boiling back home. A rush to judgment had condemned the Spanish for the explosion that ripped apart the *Maine* and killed more than 260 members of her crew. In response, newspapers of Hearst and Pulitzer competed in stridency, demanding revenge, and calling for their version of justice. This was the heyday of yellow journalism. Those politicians inclined to caution were swept aside in a pell-mell rush of patriotism. With the media in full cry demanding that something be done, Theodore Roosevelt and George Dewey were the men to do it.

As in any other small community, USS *Olympia* had its own newspaper, the *Bound-ing Billow*. This shipboard-published paper echoed the themes of the homeland, and provides insights into the day-to-day life aboard an American naval vessel. The

*USS Olympia in battleship gray charging into Manila Bay, with Commodore George Dewey depicted forward of the bridge.*



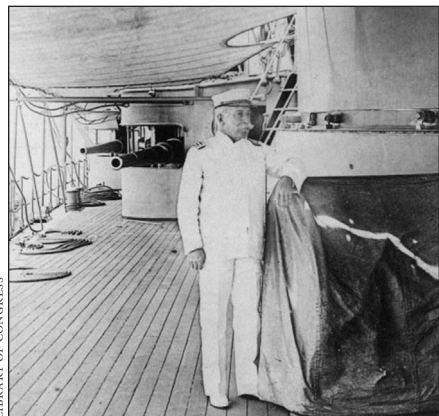


*Bounding Billow* credited the explosion of the *Maine* to “some foul fiend, whose death a thousand times over could never atone for the loss of so many human lives.” It goes on to note that thousands were rallying around the flag even as *Olympia* was preparing to go to war. “...the tug *Fame* came down from Hong Kong bringing Consul Williams, late of Manila, and several newspaper men, who stated that war had been declared on the 24th and we were happy.” The claims printed in the *Bounding Billow* echoed the sentiments of much larger publications back home.

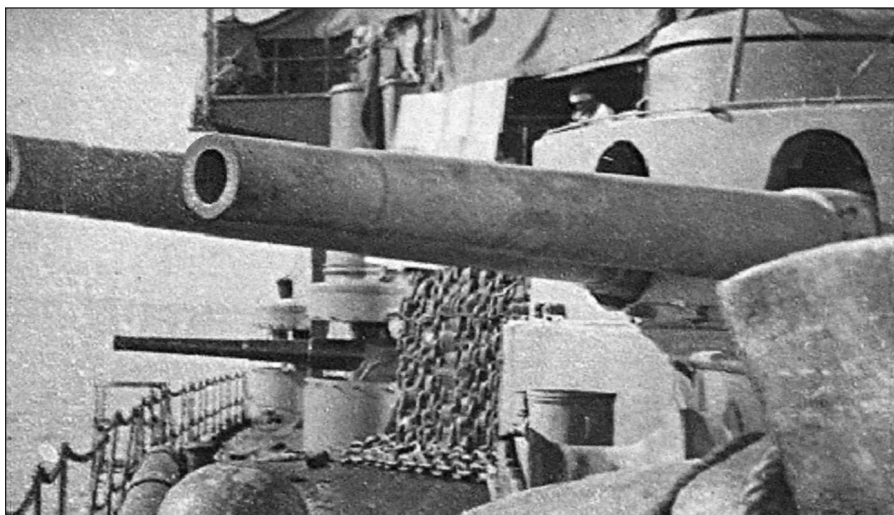
As *Olympia* steamed through a quiet sea towards Manila Bay, she was already well known for being at the cutting edge of America’s naval build-up at her commissioning, but she was not yet famous. On that night she was at her most inconspicuous; her white and buff paint scheme, with the details picked out in black had been painted over with wartime gray. Her crew took pride in their ship; she was fast and better armed than anything her adversary could bring to the fight. Her ship’s company knew that everything that could be done in preparation for war had been done: ammunition replenished, coal bunkers fully loaded, chains hung around the casemates as a sort of chain mail protection, surgeries prepared for casualties, personal possessions stowed in the more protected areas of the ship. *Olympia*’s crew, keyed up though confident, felt they were ready for battle.

George Dewey was still a commodore that night. Though he had served with distinction under Farragut in the Civil War Battle of New Orleans, he was not yet famous. His reputation as a forward-think-

*Commodore George Dewey aboard Olympia.*



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*Olympia prepared for battle, chains draped around the casemates (in view under the guns).*

ing, aggressive naval officer, however, was known to Theodore Roosevelt. For the moment, that was fame enough, leading to this posting as commodore of the Asiatic Squadron with the expectation that he would be bold when the time came. Dewey was confident and prepared. In their gray livery, that fleet was all deadly, serious business.

The outcome of Manila Bay is well known as an overwhelming victory for the new American navy, leading to the acquisition of overseas territories in both the Atlantic and Pacific. The triumph trumpeted in headlines from coast to coast. Commodore Dewey and his flagship became overnight sensations. This fame would last, as Dewey was rewarded with multiple promotions, and his ship managed to survive all others of the era, becoming the very symbol of the American Navy during her service period.

Even so, the importance of communication, or, in this case, the lack thereof, became instantly apparent when Dewey cut the undersea cables to prevent their use by the Spanish, and thus also himself. With this move, he set back connections with the Philippines by several years for the Americans, and by decades for the Spanish. The only way messages could be delivered was to send dispatches via ship to Hong Kong and then telegraph them to the United States, delaying communication by a

week, even as the ship and her commander achieved instant notoriety. The interval also gave Dewey considerable latitude in decisions affecting the long-term fate of the Philippines.

Illustrations of the battle followed the headlines, each executed with varying degrees of skill and artistic license in the age of the block print in newspapers and magazines, and the lithograph and etching in other kinds of mass-produced media. The



*(right) Battle of Manila Bay as depicted on a popular chromolithograph published 21 June 1898, just seven weeks after the event.*



cry “Remember the *Maine*!” accompanied by an illustration of that ship gave way to “Fire when ready Gridley!” accompanied by an image of Dewey and his flagship. These images were ubiquitous in the United States, appearing in businesses and homes, and for the moment the country could not get enough of its newfound status on the world stage, lead where it might.

Dewey himself benefited from promotion to Rear Admiral and eventually to Admiral of the Navy, the highest rank ever achieved by a naval officer. At the close of the war, more details of the battle emerged, keeping Dewey and *Olympia* in the headlines for a long time. One of these came from Joseph L. Stickney, a journalist who was on board *Olympia* and at Dewey’s side during the battle. Stickney published a detailed account of the conflict and its aftermath in *Harper’s Magazine*, burnishing Dewey’s reputation. His report also offered insights into the competition among imperialist nations as a contingent of the German navy hovered in Manila Bay.

Rear Admiral Dewey and *Olympia* would remain in the Philippines for another year, supporting ground efforts against the Spanish and suppressing a bid



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for Philippine independence. In the Age of Imperialism, the new world power was not about to part with its fresh acquisitions. That conflict was not covered extensively in the press or the history books, though soon-to-be-famous Americans played a significant part, notably William Howard Taft and John J. Pershing.

Returned to her white-and-buff peacetime paint scheme, *Olympia* would carry her conquering hero home by way of the Suez Canal, with stops along the way for coal, diplomacy, and the opportunity to bask in national glory. In Naples, Italy, noted photographer and journalist Frances Johnston visited the ship, sent by Bain News

Service. In a series of posed images, Johnston depicted an idealized impression of shipboard life. Some of these images would eventually appear in *Cosmopolitan* and the *Ladies Home Journal*.

The voyage home culminated in grand parades in the harbor and on the streets of New York.

Both parades were spectacular and well documented with films by the Edison Manufacturing Company. In one film, the fleet steamed past Grant’s tomb before there were any tall buildings behind it, providing an excellent view of all New York’s watercraft in that era. The shoreside parade featured imposing plaster triumphal arches;



the patriotic outburst faded before these could be immortalized in bronze or stone, and they have disappeared. After the celebrations, *Olympia* repaired to Boston for another parade, followed by a refit that would take two and a half years to complete. Because of the rapid advancement of naval technology, there was much to be done to upgrade the ship. For example, the electrical system was expanded to power a wide range of equipment formerly powered by steam, and the ventilation system was improved.

While all this was going on, images of the ship appeared everywhere in prints destined for parlors and in advertisements for everything from snake oil to music boxes; models were built, and poems composed. The Navy knew a promotional opportunity when it saw one, and as part of her refit decorated the ship in a manner befitting an icon in the gilded age. *Olympia* received a figurehead and stern ornamentation designed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens and bronze bas relief between the guns of her forward turret by Daniel Chester French, two of the leading sculptors of the era. Inscribed in bronze across the forward side of her signal bridge, the date and place of the battle have become part of her identity. *Olympia* had become a star in popular culture and was decked out accordingly.

Her fame and her interior layout as a flagship led *Olympia* to be chosen for prominent assignments throughout her service period, even after becoming obsolete as a warship. She seemed to have a knack for playing a role in major world events. Serving as the flagship of the North Atlantic squadron and later as a training vessel for the midshipmen at Annapolis, she was very prominent socially as well as militarily. Naval officers, who were expected to move comfortably in society as well as at sea, had ample opportunities to hone both sets of skills aboard the cruiser. All of this added to the ship's luster, brightening her image as the hero of Manila Bay.

While *Olympia* is one of the first modern warships, she is the oldest steel naval vessel afloat and still contains a great deal



of her original woodwork, giving her the warmth and a bit of the grandeur of her age. The officers' quarters feature the paneling and furnishings of a comfortable late 19th-century private club. The ship was very well suited to social gatherings, as well as the more serious sides of naval diplomacy. Between her military duties and social obligations, *Olympia* was a regular host to the "who's who" of early 20th-century society.

Though the attention garnered by the Spanish American War tapered off, there were occasional reminders, capitalizing on the ship's fame. One of *Olympia*'s gunners, Lew Tisdale, published *Three Years Behind the Guns* in 1908 to acclaim. His book offers an enlisted man's view of life aboard, as well as an account of the battle, which Dewey himself complimented. The book sold well.

World War I returned the ship to a purely military role. During a refit that saw her weaponry upgraded, her figurehead and stern ornamentation were removed; both now reside at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. The ship, painted wartime gray once again, saw service in the North Atlantic, and in Murmansk and the Adriatic after the war. Though stripped of her decorations, she retained her status and, as a final honor, was chosen to carry the body of the Unknown Soldier home from France.

*Olympia* was never the most powerful ship in the Navy. She had not been considered fast for some time, and her technology was long out of date. Still, up until the end of her service period, she maintained her

*Olympia band playing on deck, 1899.*







*USS Olympia arrived at the Washington Navy Yard 9 October 1921 carrying the casket of the Unknown Soldier.*

role as the symbol of the United States Navy. This final assignment put the ship in the limelight once again, albeit a somber light. The ship, famous for celebrating the glories of a nation entering the world stage, now marked the pain and sacrifice resulting from that role. Her voyage home, as well documented as the glorious parades in New York, now helped a nation mourn the severe losses of global war. It was a fitting way to end her naval service and an assessment of the costs of global power, as well as the terrible side of technological achievement.

The suffering that is at the back of any wartime campaign was now at the fore. Honoring the Unknown Soldier was about recognizing sacrifice. After World War I, there could be no doubt about what war meant. The battles and scope of that conflict dwarfed the Spanish American War. WWI also showed the consequences of nationalism combined with mechanized warfare as clearly as possible. In the end, *Olympia* became the emblem of where arms races might lead. She also came to represent something of the age that had just come to a close. From our vantage point, *Olympia* is a valuable reminder, not of naval might, but of the power of symbols, of the value

of rapid communication systems, and of the importance of using those things wisely. When asked about the importance of saving the ship, one must remember that she stands for both the good and the bad. She represents how a wave of patriotism can give way to internecine conflict; she is a vehicle to see how the media can manipulate opinion in ways that appear right in the short term, but may have disastrous consequences. *Olympia* represents the accomplishments of technical achievement and its price. She is still a symbol of the modern world, but now she is recognized for her light and dark sides. Both are critical to her story, and to our history. *Olympia* is still a star, but a much more complete one all these years after her first commissioning 125 years ago. ⚓

*John Brady is the president and CEO of the Independence Seaport Museum.*



*U.S.S. Olympia,  
Boston Navy Yard,  
Feb. 5, 1902.*

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