

How the Spanish Saw the Battle of Manila Bay

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OVERVIEW

Relations between Spain and the United States had grown strained, and after the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in the harbor at Havana, Cuba, the United States declared war on Spain on April 25, 1898. The United States Navy staged a surprise attack in the Philippines in May 1898, destroying the Spanish fleet that lay off Cavite Point in Manila Harbor. A Spanish reporter's description of the naval encounter is excerpted here.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Does the Spanish reporter convey respect for the fire power of the U.S. Navy?
 - How might this reporter's description of the Spanish soldiers' heroism be influenced by his allegiance to Spain?
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THE NAVAL COMBAT AT CAVITE

As the sun rose above the mists and clouds that overhung our shores on the morning of May 1st., the inhabitants of Manila saw with surprise and dismay the enemy's squadron in well-ordered line of battle on the waters of the bay. Who could have imagined that they would have had the rashness to stealthily approach our shores, provoking our defenders to an unavailing display of skill and valor, in which, alas! balls could not be propelled by heart throbs, else the result might have been different?

The sound of shots from our batteries and those from the enemy's ships, which awakened the citizens of Manila at five o'clock on that May morning, transformed the character of our usual peaceful and happy surrounding. Frightened at the prospects of dangers that seemed greater than they were, women and children in carriages, or by whatever means they could, sought refuge in the outskirts of the city, while all the men, from the highest to the lowest, the merchant and the mechanic, the soldier and the peasant, the dwellers of the mainland and those of the coast, repaired to their posts and took up arms, confident that never, except by passing over their dead bodies, should the soil of Manila be defiled by the enemy, notwithstanding that from the first it was apparent that their armored ships and powerful guns were invulnerable to any effort at our command. . . .

Those who comprehended the undisturbed movements of the enemy, seemingly so inoffensive, were filled with rage and desperation, realizing that there was no remedy, and only a choice between honorable death or remaining in impassive cowardice. A soldier of the first battalion of sharpshooters who

saw a squadron so far out of range of our batteries, said, glancing up to heaven, "If Holy Mary would only transform that water into land then the Yankees would see how we could fight;" and a Malay squatting near by exclaimed, "Let them land and we will crush them under heel." Meanwhile the enemy proceeded with speed and safety in perfect formation toward Cavite with a decision born of security. At about 4:45 A.M. absolute silence reigned. All was ready. Ideas of death and danger vanished at approach of conflict, and the battle flags waved proudly from the masts of the national vessels. Majestically (for why should we not admit it), and in perfect order of battle the nine Yankee vessels bore down on our line. The *Olympia* flying the Admiral's flag led the way to Cavite at full speed and behind her defiled the other vessels. As the enemy's squadron approached Cavite the crew of the mail steamer *Isla de Mindanao* heard on board the Spanish vessels the order to clear ship for action, and the three cheers for the king, for the queen and for Spain, and responded with frantic enthusiasm.

At 5:00 A.M. the *Olympia* opened fire, which was instantly replied to by the battery mounted on the angle of the works of the ports, and pursued her way to Cavite, pointing her armored prow at the *Christina* and the *Castilla*, and opening a murderous fire upon both vessels. This was followed by the broadsides of the six vessels that accompanied her. The *Baltimore's* fire took particular effect upon our ships, and this cannonade continued until 7:45 A.M. At this time we saw the *Austria* advance against her enemies with the intention of boarding the *Olympia* and if a tremendous volley had not checked her career of vengeance perhaps both vessels would now be at the bottom of the bay.

The captain of the *Christina* seeing that the efforts of his consort had failed, started full speed ahead to within two hundred meters of the *Olympia*, intending to engage her at close quarters. A hail of grape-shot swept the deck and shelters, filling the ship with dead and wounded. Heroes and martyrs that the motherland will never forget as long as she exists! A thick column of smoke burst out of the forward store-room of the *Christina* indicating that an incendiary projectile, of the kind prohibited by divine and human laws, had taken effect in the cruiser. Without ceasing her fire she retired toward the shore and was scuttled. The indignation of the sailors of the *Christina* was raised to the highest pitch at seeing the *Castilla* on fire from the same incendiary causes.

Our principal vessels were now out of the combat, and as several of the Yankees were badly injured by our vessels and batteries, they withdrew toward Mariveles, ceased firing, and occupied themselves in repairing damages until ten o'clock, when they commenced their second attack, which was to complete their work of destruction. In the second combat the fire of the arsenal was silenced and the cannonade continued upon our ships that were burning in all directions. A gunboat that seemed to have no more daring object than the

destruction of the *Isla de Mindanao* detached herself from the enemy's squadrons and riddled the vessel with balls.

The Spanish vessels that had not succumbed to the flames or the shots of the enemy were run aground, as they could not be disposed of in any other way. This was the last stroke. We could do no more. The combat at Cavite was ended and our last vessel went down flying her colors.

It is impossible to picture the bloody scene presented by the waters of Cavite on that Sabbath morning. We will not attempt a description that would be weak and imperfect and unworthy of the heroic deeds that should be perpetuated in the pages of history. To mention those who distinguished themselves in this combat would be to transcribe the names of the crews from captain to cabin boy. For them our words of praise, for them our congratulations, for the living our laurels, for the dead our prayers, for all our deepest gratitude.

For more than an hour and a half cannonading had continued, keeping in suspense the hopes of those on the opposite shore of the bay, who with their hearts took part in this unequal struggle, in which, as ever, the Spanish sailors went down with their ships rather than strike their colors. Anxiously we asked, "What is going on at Cavite?" From Manila we could see by the aid of glasses the two squadrons almost confounded and enveloped in clouds of smoke. Owing to the inferiority of our batteries it was evident that the enemy was triumphant, and, secure in his armored strength, he was a mere machine requiring only motive power to keep in action his destructive agencies. Only the cheers of our intrepid boarders and the glitter of their cutlasses could have checked this automatic confidence, but alas! we could not reach them. Who can describe the heroic acts, the prowess, the deeds of valor performed by the sailors of our squadron as rage animated them? All who were beneath the folds of the banner of Spain did their duty as becomes the chosen sons of the fatherland. They slacked not their fire nor yielded to superior force, and preferred to perish with their ships rather than live with them in the hands of the enemy.