

The War against Spain in the Philippines in 1898

by *Richard Meixsel*

Before learning of Commodore George Dewey's destruction of the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay on the morning of May 1, 1898, few Americans knew anything about the Philippine Islands. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning *In the Days of McKinley*, Margaret Leech tells the story of the newly elected president apologetically informing one supplicant for a consular post that no appointment remained except to "a place called Manila, somewhere away around on the other side of the world [though] he did not know exactly where, for he had not had time to look it up." When Dewey had left for Nagasaki, Japan, to take command of the United States Navy's Asiatic Squadron in December 1897, President McKinley was said to have admitted that "he [still] could not have told where those darned islands were within two thousand miles."^[1]



The Battle of Manila Bay, (delivering the last broadside). (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

The Navy knew little of the Philippines, either. Dewey's aide Nathan Sargent would later write that on the eve of the war "no ship of our service had been there for years [and] the latest official report on file in the Office of Naval Intelligence concerning them bore the date of 1876."^[2] It was not quite so uninformed as its commander in chief, however. The "new navy" ideology of the late nineteenth century stressed preparing for war in time of peace, and officers at the Naval War College (founded in 1884) had been developing plans for war with Spain since 1894. Their focus, like everyone else's, was on the Caribbean, but they did not ignore Spain's possession in the Far East. An attack on Manila would divide Spanish resources and prevent a concentration of force in the Western Hemisphere. The city's capture might also serve to ensure that Spain accepted American demands for a postwar indemnity. But other officers wanted the Asiatic Squadron to ignore the Philippines and instead sail west to prey upon Spanish shipping in the Atlantic. A June 1897 revision of the Navy's war plan restored an attack on the Philippines but included no suggestion that the seizure of Manila would be but a prelude to acquiring an American colony in Asia.^[3] Dewey's victory would nourish that idea.

Whatever the war plans' authors might have envisioned, nothing had been done to prepare the Asiatic Squadron for combat. Dewey discovered that the four ships of his command—one a mere gunboat and another a Civil War-vintage paddle-wheel steamer—did not hold even a peacetime supply of ammunition. Dewey's flagship, the cruiser *Olympia*, was scheduled to return soon to the United States. On his own initiative, Dewey ordered the ships to concentrate at Hong Kong. About 600 miles (roughly three sailing days) to the northwest of Manila, it was, as Sargent would put it, "the nearest port to his quarry." If the United States went to war, neutrality laws would deny the squadron access to supplies and facilities at the British colony or in Japanese ports, so Dewey established a base at Mirs Bay, adjacent to Hong Kong but in Chinese waters. (Dewey reasoned that China could not enforce a declaration of neutrality.) By April 1898 his squadron had been reinforced by two locally purchased supply ships, the revenue cutter *McCulloch*, and three additional cruisers. Should the Spanish naval commander in the Philippines, Admiral Patricio Montojo, keep his fleet intact and decide to give battle to the Americans, the outcome

could hardly be in doubt. Dewey's six warships heavily outweighed and outgunned the unprotected cruisers and gunboats that made up the Spanish naval squadron in the Philippines.[4] For this reason, Dewey's real claim to his countrymen's adulation lay not in his success in the subsequent battle in Manila Bay but in the initiative he had shown in preparing the squadron for action.

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Meanwhile, McKinley had signed a Congressional resolution, on April 20, 1898, that demanded Spain's withdrawal from Cuba and authorized the use of force to achieve it should Spain prove uncooperative. When Spain declared war on the United States on April 23, the United States responded with a declaration of war on April 25. The Navy immediately cabled Dewey to "proceed at once" to the Philippines.

Instead, Dewey remained two days at Mirs Bay awaiting the arrival of American consul Oscar Williams from Manila. Only on the afternoon of the 27th did the Asiatic Squadron sail, after Williams brought word that Admiral Montojo had gone to Subic Bay, a large harbor about thirty miles north of Manila Bay from where he might strike at the passing American squadron. As it turned out, Montojo had returned to Manila, and early on the morning of May 1, Dewey found the Spanish squadron anchored off Cavite (a peninsula that jutted into the bay just south of Manila). At 5:40 a.m., Dewey famously ordered, "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley." [5] By noon, not one of the enemy ships remained afloat and 161 Spanish sailors were dead. No American ship had been seriously damaged; no American sailor had been killed.

That a war with Spain might involve sending American soldiers to the Philippines had occurred to no one in the United States Army, but Dewey lacked the manpower to occupy Manila, and President McKinley quickly ordered the War Department to assist him. In sharp contrast to the well-known chaos that would characterize the 5th Army Corps' departure from Tampa for Cuba, Major General Wesley Merritt moved the men of the Department of the Pacific (later redesignated the 8th Army Corps) expeditiously aboard chartered transports the 7,000 miles across the Pacific from San Francisco. By the end of July, nearly 11,000 soldiers—mostly national guardsmen from western states, since the bulk of the regular army had already been assigned to the Cuba expedition—had reached the Philippines without incident.[6]

They saw little action. Dewey negotiated an informal agreement with Governor-General Fermin Jaudenes that Manila would be surrendered "after a certain amount of [token] resistance had been offered." On the morning of August 13, 1898, while the Navy bombarded the city's outer defense works, two Army brigades attacked the city from the south. The American soldiers (and possibly the Spaniards they faced) were unaware of Dewey's understanding with Jaudenes. Six Americans were killed and ninety-two wounded before the demands of "Spanish honor" had been met and the brief period of fighting came to an end.[7] Unbeknownst to the belligerents (because the undersea cable Dewey ordered severed on May 2 had yet to be repaired) the two governments had signed a protocol in Washington, DC, late on August 12 agreeing to an immediate cessation of hostilities.

The American occupation of Manila brought the war against Spain in the Philippines to an end. The relative ease with which the Americans won only partly reflected the superiority of their arms and capabilities; in addition, the United States was not Spain's only enemy in the islands. A revolt against Spanish rule had begun in 1896. Confronted by insurrections in its major Caribbean (from 1895) and Pacific colonies, Spain had given priority to holding Cuba and had devoted few resources to suppressing the uprising in the Philippines. A December 1897 truce had sent Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the Filipino revolutionaries, into exile in Hong Kong, but the fighting had never really ended. Thus the Americans appeared in mid-1898 to confront a much-diminished and dispirited Spanish force. And

viewing the Filipino insurrectionists as engaged in the same endeavor as himself, even if not as formal allies, Dewey allowed Aguinaldo to come back to the islands aboard the *McCulloch* in mid-May 1898. Soon Filipino forces had ended Spanish authority throughout much of the archipelago. Only Manila remained to be taken.

Fearing the insurgents more than the Americans and realizing that Spain could send no further assistance, the Spanish in Manila were not prepared to put up much of a fight against Dewey and the arriving American Army. For their part, the Filipinos remained wary of the Americans' intentions, but they agreed to make room for American soldiers to occupy positions south of the city and then, reluctantly, to stand aside as the Americans took Manila. But Aguinaldo's patience was not unlimited. The Filipinos had a government, an army—that had seen much more fighting than had the 8th Army Corps—and a determination to see their country independent. The United States' purchase of the Philippines from Spain in the Treaty of Paris that formally ended the Spanish-American War in December 1898 made another longer-lasting and far-bloodier war—the Philippine-American War (1899–1902)—inevitable.

[1] Margaret Leech, *In the Days of McKinley* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 138, 162. Though sometimes referred to as “Admiral Dewey” at the time of the battle, Dewey was promoted to rear admiral only after his victory. He then became the Navy's senior officer when Congress advanced him to the rarely awarded “Admiral of the Navy” grade in March 1899.

[2] Nathan Sargent, comp., *Admiral Dewey and the Manila Campaign* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Foundation, 1947), 7.

[3] David Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 72-80. Since the early nineteenth century, the Navy's few ships had been distributed mostly to protect American commerce in what was known as the squadron system of deployment. There was a West Indian (later merged with the Home) Squadron, a Pacific Squadron, the Mediterranean Squadron, and so on. The Asiatic Squadron had been formed in the 1870s, assuming the duties previously performed by the East Indian Squadron. Doing away with the squadron system in favor of forming a battleship fleet capable of taking “command of the sea” was a major goal of naval reformers in the new navy era.

[4] Sargent, *Manila Campaign*, 9; Trask, *War with Spain*, 100. The fighting ships of Dewey's squadron consisted of the gunboat *Petrel*, an unprotected cruiser, the *Concord*, and four protected cruisers, the *Olympia*, *Baltimore*, *Boston*, and *Raleigh*. The seven Spanish ships that would participate in the battle included five gunboats and two unprotected cruisers. In the terminology of the day, a “protected” cruiser was a large warship with an armor-plated deck. An “unprotected” cruiser had a wooden deck. An “armored” cruiser—both navies had them but not with their squadrons in the Far East—had an additional belt of armor protecting the ship's hull as well as an armored deck. The terminology was evolving; the *Olympia* was not that dissimilar in size and armament from a “second-class battleship” that had earlier blown up in Havana Harbor, the USS *Maine*.

[5] Charles V. Gridley was the *Olympia*'s captain. Dewey had arrived in Japan to find Gridley in poor health but had allowed him to remain with the ship until after the battle. Captain Gridley then left for the United States but died en route.

[6] Graham A. Cosmas, *An Army for Empire: The United States Army in the Spanish-American War* (1971; reprint, Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1994), 194–197.

[7] James A. LeRoy, *The Americans in the Philippines* (1914; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1970), 1:231–44; Trask, *War with Spain*, 412–422.

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