

150 Years Of Defense Activity At Key West, 1820-1970

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A small coral island approximately four miles long (east and west) and two miles wide (north and south), Key West, the last large island in the chain of the Florida Keys, is presently the residence of a United States Naval Base and Air Station. They perform a vital role in the defense of the southeastern section of the United States and in the life of the city of Key West, southernmost city in the United States. The recorded history of this strategic island dates back to the time of Columbus and is rich with tales of piracy, Indian warfare and the daring deeds of Spanish adventurers.

Juan Ponce de Leon acquired the distinction of being the first of these Spanish adventurers to sight this island during his expedition to Florida in 1513. He named the uninhabited island "Cayo Hueso" (pronounced Ky-O Wes-O), meaning bone or grave rock.¹ Later, many other Spanish explorers—some equally as famous as Ponce de Leon; most, however, not so renowned—utilized Key West's safe harbor while on voyages to the Keys, mainland Florida, or more disparate areas of Imperial Spain.

A fertile but deserted island in 1820, Key West possessed a rather infamous history as a pirate haven during the late sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Its commodious and deep harbor combined with its strategic location in relation to the Spanish Main provided a valuable base for the buccaneers. They were so far removed from the center of Florida's Spanish authority in St. Augustine and Pensacola that it devolved upon the lax Spanish government in Cuba to keep a watchful eye on their predatory activities among Spain's ill defended commercial routes, especially those near the Florida Keys. This political division of authority had existed for so long that when the British acquired Florida in 1763, the Spanish made an effort to claim that the Florida Keys belonged to Cuba rather than to the mainland but Spain never contested the issue.²

*This paper is based upon a Master of Arts thesis in history written in 1970 at the University of Miami.

¹Ponce de Leon found a great number of human bones on the island. Since there were no inhabitants on the island at the time of his visit the exact origin of the bones are in doubt. See: Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West: Old and New* (St. Augustine: The Record Co., 1912), pp. 8-9.

²Charles W. Arnade, "The Florida Keys: English or Spanish in 1763?", *Tequesta*, XV, 1955, pp. 41-53.

During the late eighteenth century use of Key West harbor by the pirates or occasionally by the Spanish declined and came to an end by 1800. The pirates, challenged by the formidable might of the powerful British and the fledgling muscle of the ambitious Americans, found safer coves in other "Cayoos" and territories of the decaying Spanish empire. The Spanish, by possessing Havana harbor, had no need for Key West's duplicate but smaller harbor only ninety miles away. The Americans, on the other hand, guided by their expansionist policy, began to include this unique island in their contingent military plans. No other port between New Orleans and Charleston seemed to have so much to offer.

The United States took possession of Key West on March 25, 1822 after Congressional ratification in 1821 of the 1819 Treaty with Spain.³ In little more than one year, Commodore David Porter of the West Indies Squadron established the first Key West Naval Station.

The occupation and surveying of Key West by the American Naval forces signified that the island would not only be an integral part of the United States but also that it would perform a prominent function in the American military posture. As Gibraltar is to the Mediterranean Sea, Key West would be to the Caribbean Sea.⁴

The new base, utilized by both the Navy and Marine Corps, commanded and gave ready access to a large portion of the Caribbean Sea. By providing a safe as well as strategic harbor, it enabled Commodore Porter's squadron to effectively combat the pirates infesting this area. Thus, the Key West Naval Station acquired early national attention by being the focal point of that struggle.

On December 20, 1822, President James Monroe sent an urgent message to Congress asking that a special type force be created which would be capable of pursuing the pirates into shallow water, thereby enabling American forces to attack the buccaneers in their hitherto safe domain. Congress appropriated \$160,000 for the creation of an effective West Indies Squadron and made the destruction of Caribbean piracy one of the young nation's foremost priorities. Commodore David Porter, (1795-1843) experienced with Tripoli pirates during the Barbary Wars and a distinguished veteran of the War 1812, resigned from the Navy Board to take command of the anti-pirate squadron.⁵

³Hubert Bruce Fuller: *The Purchase of Floridas Its History and Diplomacy*, (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1906), pp. 298-323.

⁴*Niles Register*, July 19, 1823.

⁵Porter's career during this period is extensively covered in Richard Wheeler: *In Pirate Waters*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1969), Chapters 7-11.

He utilized deep-draft vessels for heavy combat on the open seas and augmented these ships with eight small schooners that could pursue the swift pirate vessels much further inshore. Porter also added the first steam vessel ever to fight for the United States Navy, a second-hand ferry called *Sea Gull*. It towed the "mosquito patrol" consisting of five rowing barges for close action. The barges *Mosquito*, *Gnat*, *Midge*, *Gallinipper*, and *Sandfly* soon proved to be appropriately named incessant pests to the pirates.

The two thousand buccaneers on the loose in West Indies water pilaged cargoes valued in the millions of dollars and murdered hundreds of innocent traders and seamen. The energetic American commercial interest could not continue to tolerate this depredation if it wished to maintain its vigorous growth. Businessmen and underwriters gave exuberant support to the squadron's forceful measures. Although the British offered assistance in this endeavor, America expressed the desire to fight the deadly contest with the pirates alone and exert its own youthful arms against this most treacherous foe.

The pirates, who had easily avoided capture by Spain's and England's deep-water vessels, became rapidly terrorized as Commodore Porter's assortment of twenty-two craft and 1,100 men began to prod them out of their once safe Cuban and Florida Keys hideouts. In shallow water or on becalmed days the Americans ran the pirates ashore, burned their ships and shacks, ransacked their caves, recovered much booty and sometimes allowed a few pirates to live long enough to be later tried and hanged. Now, for the first time in these waters, the pirates were being effectively and mercilessly hunted, captured and killed. Their former methods were ruthlessly and pitilessly applied to them. In hand-to-hand combat with American sailors and marines, the buccaners proved to be no match. Some terrified pirates, threatened with being fatally treated to the wrong end of a musket, rope or cutlass, panicked and attempted to escape their fate by throwing themselves overboard, hoping to swim to a safer area, only to drown in the swirling waves or be consumed by the awaiting sharks.

In a series of stirring and overwhelming victories, Porter's squadron of gallants succeeded in routing out nearly all the nefarious buccaneers at their last and most important stronghold on the Isle of Pines off the Cuban coast. Commerce once more could traverse the Caribbean unmolested except for an occasional reckoning with nature's capricious wrath. The city of Key West now commenced its development into a prosperous American possession with a nationally prominent naval base in its harbor.

In the midst of the victorious year, 1823, yellow fever first introduced

its troublesome and frightful spectre. The marines stationed on the island, in hurriedly constructed sheds, were not adequately protected from either the insects or the elements. By late July the fever struck with severity. This proved to be an ominous portent. At first, the fever grievously affected only the marines but quickly spread to the sailors and officers of Commodore Porter's fleet docked in the ill-fated harbor.⁶ The Key West Naval Station reported forty-eight deaths before the yellow fever epidemic abated in October. The West Indies Squadron returned to the Key West Naval Station in January, 1824, hoping that the lethal malady would prove to be an isolated miasma cured through swamp drainage and land filling. By the end of May, however, Commodore Porter ruefully informed his Washington superiors that the dreaded fever, in spite of divers precautions, had reappeared and he had no other recourse but to return his men to the healthier northern waters by the middle of June. The previous year's experiences repeated themselves to a lesser extent this time, due to Porter's propitious withdrawal, with prolonged suffering for some crew members and the loss of twelve able seamen.⁷ This terrifying menance continued to harass the inhabitants of Key West for the next seventy-five years until the discovery of its elusive cause and subsequent eradication.

Because of the virulence of its first occurrence and recurrence, yellow fever accomplished what the pirates failed to do. The existence of the Key West Naval Station ended in 1826 when Lt. William Farragut disposed of the buildings and dispersed the personnel. Pensacola became the site of a new naval station and the center of activity for the West Indies Squadron. A coaling and supply station remained on the island for a time. During the Indian Wars of the 1830's and 1840's in Florida, Pensacola sent several expeditions to Key West for short tours of duty, but the Department of the Navy did not re-establish a naval station on the island until 1856.

While the Navy feared to remain in Key West, the Army showed less hesitation in establishing an outpost on the island. After lengthy negotiation, the Federal government acquired land from the island's proprietors. In February, 1831, Major James M. Glassel arrived on the island in command of a garrison consisting of two companies of infantry, and encamped on the newly purchased acreage. The War Department began its occupation of the island by building only temporary structures to house men and supplies. Army officials in Washington, D.C., decided to conserve scarce funds by abandoning the impermanent outpost in 1834. But due to the Indian uprisings in Florida in late 1835, General Winfield Scott deployed,

⁶E. Ashby Hammond, "Notes on the Medical History of Key West, 1822-32," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 94-95.

⁷U.S., *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 270, 19th Cong., 1st sess., p. 232.

on January 29, 1836, a detachment of troops to reoccupy Key West and also sent "150 stand of arms, together with the necessary ammunition" to re-establish the military post.⁸ Semi-permanent quarters were again constructed for the accommodation of the troops. Formulation of plans for the erection of permanent fortifications in Key West augured well for the future of its military establishment. To strengthen the Florida coasts, the War Department decided in February, 1845, to commence the construction of a permanent fortification on the southwestern portion of the island.⁹

In comparison to the other sections of the United States the Gulf and South Atlantic states seemed the most open to aggression during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The weakness of the military defenses of this neglected area could no longer be endured. Spain and England had taken steps to strengthen themselves on their side of the Gulf. The time had now come for the United States to secure its own possessions. In view of any possible danger from these powers, the fortification and occupation of Key West as a military and naval station was deemed most important to the nation's security and would become particularly so in time of war.¹⁰

Captain George Dutton of the United States Army Corps of Engineers began directing the construction of the Key West fort in June, 1845. He employed many German and Irish immigrant artisans and mechanics recruited in New York City. Key West slaves, hired out to the United States government by their owners, supplied much of the heavy and difficult unskilled labor.

The army built the fort in the form of a trapezoid designed to mount 314 guns and house 1,500 men. Despite many difficulties such as the destructive force of hurricanes, recurrence of yellow fever and at times the insufficiency of available funds, the fortification slowly assumed its fore-ordained shape.

The Department of War, on October 8, 1850, named the Key West fort in honor of the hero of the Mexican War and the then President of the United States, Zachary Taylor. At an estimated expenditure of \$1,500,000, Fort Zachary Taylor (together with its even more expensive sister fortress on Garden Key) would enable the United States to defend its southern coast with a minimal long term expense. Fort Taylor secured the Key West harbor for visiting navy and merchant vessels traveling among the Gulf and Atlantic ports.

⁸U.S., *Territorial Papers of the United States: Florida Territory*, Vol. XXV, p. 231.

⁹Ames W. Williams, "Stronghold of the Straits: Fort Zachary Taylor," *Tequesta*, XIV, 1954, p. 4.

¹⁰U.S., Congress, House, *Report on Fortification of Key West and the Dry Tortugas*, 28th Cong., 1st sess., Vol. III, April 2, 1844, House Doc. No. 407, pp. 1, 2, 15-19.

In 1856, the Department of the Navy re-established a United States Naval Depot or storehouse in Key West. The construction of buildings began in that year. By April, 1857, when the walls were ready to receive the roof, work on the storehouse was suspended because Congress failed to provide any funds. It remained in this uncompleted state for several years until after the Civil War had begun, when it was finally finished.

Annual appropriations by Congress for Fort Taylor varied from \$75,000 to \$150,000. The original estimate had long been exceeded but Fort Taylor seemed far from ever being ready for activation. Not until Christmas Day, 1857, did Captain Edward G. Hunt (the fort's engineer) finish the fortification's magazines and store the ammunition. At the start of Civil War neither Fort Taylor nor the Naval Depot had completed their building programs. Congressional fiscal austerity, caused chiefly by southern filibustering against expenditures being allocated to martial endeavors during President James Buchanan's administration, brought about the unpreparedness of these installations. The failure to appropriate sufficient funds for these works occasioned material shortages to occur. The continued visitation of the yellow fever menace resulted in numerous suspensions of work, especially during the perilous season from mid- to late-summer. Hence, when war finally did break out between the northern and southern states, Key West was ill-equipped to perform its assigned role.

The turmoil that affected the nation at this time soon engulfed Key West in its divisiveness, since its citizens also were divided in their sympathies. These last hectic ante-bellum years spurred Captain Hunt to feverish activity in order to ready Fort Taylor. Soon, however, it would be apparent to all that this fort which the government so hastily constructed had become obsolete as a defense against the new ordnance developed shortly before and during the Civil War.

The prompt action of Captain John M. Brannan enabled the Union forces to retain possession of Fort Taylor against the island's Confederates. Brannan, as senior ranking officer on the island and commanding a detachment of forty-four men of the First Artillery stationed at the Key West Barracks, quietly and secretly move his squads across the island and into the hitherto unoccupied fortification. When the disunited city awoke on the morning of January 15, 1861, and discovered Brannan's coup, resident excitement ran high. The southern sympathizers were turbulent and threatened to storm the fortress but they never made a concerted, determined attempt to expel the Federal garrison.¹¹ So Key West's Fort Taylor be-

¹¹Vaughn Camp, Jr., "Captain Brannan's Dilemma: Key West in 1861," *Tequesta*, XX, 1960, pp. 31-45.

came one of three southern forts to continue under the authority of northern forces for the duration of the Civil War.¹² As a consequence, the Key West Naval Base was the only one of its kind in the South not seized by the Confederacy. At Pensacola Federal forces held Fort Pickens and neutralized Confederate taking of the city and the naval base.

After President Abraham Lincoln's proclamation of a blockade of southern ports on April 19 and 27, Key West Naval Base became designated as headquarters of the Gulf Blockading Squadron under Flag-officer William Mervine. In September this squadron was split into East and West sections. The East Gulf Blockading Squadron retained Key West as its headquarters throughout the War between the States.

The navy relied heavily on the facilities at Key West during this epic conflict. No other port in the United States contained as many different types of vessels. Not only were warships utilizing the large Key West harbor to help the blockade of southern ports but Commanders Farragut and David Dixon Porter organized their separate squadrons into a fleet of bomb vessels and armed steamers preparatory to taking possession of New Orleans and its defenses on the Mississippi River, a most important maneuver for the Union cause.

Merchant vessels seeking a safe harbor to rendezvous on their way to northern ports also stopped in Key West. In addition, 299 captured blockade runners coming from London, Havana, Charleston, New Orleans and other ports and carrying thousands of tons of supplies for the beleaguered South were brought to Key West docks, certainly a significant factor in deciding the Civil War's victorious outcome for Lincoln's government. These captured vessels and contraband cargoes were condemned by the Federal District Court and then sold by Judge William Marvin to the highest bidders. Judge Marvin distributed half of the proceeds of these forfeiture auction sales to the crews who seized the blockade runners and retained the residue for the U.S. government. Commander Mervine soon complained that the selling of prizes by the Key West District Court had "become a great evil." Confederate intermediaries, he pointed out, always stood ready to buy all the light-draft, swift sailing ships offered for sale. These agents then sailed the recently purchased vessels to Nassau or Havana, registered legal title to British subjects and employed them again in the evasion of the blockade.¹³ In several instances this resulted in Union forces capturing the same ship two or three times.

¹²The other two southern located forts were Garden Key's Fort Jefferson and Pensacola's Fort Pickens.

¹³U.S., *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, (Washington: The Government Printing Office, 1894-1897), Series I, Vol. 17, p. 52. Hereafter cited O.R.N.

The Key West Naval Depot became activated, after thirty-five years of disuse, on June 3, 1861, and 500 men were stationed at the base. The army and navy commanders began quarreling on June 8, which ruined the prior hearty and cordial cooperation in their relations at the start of the Civil War. Major William French at Fort Taylor and Commander Mervine at the Naval Station exchanged heated letters. The relations within the military establishment on Key West remained strained until Commander Mervine was transferred in August.¹⁴

Although the possibility of naval attacks upon Key West by the Confederacy diminished, intervention by European powers into the American Civil War on the side of the southern states seemed to be increasing. The Chief of Engineers, General Richard Delafield, directed that every effort be exerted to ready Fort Taylor for action. The difficult diplomatic situation prompted acting Rear-Admiral Theodorus Bailey, commanding the East Gulf Blockade Squadron in 1862, to warn Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, that "should our relations with England or France, or both, result in hostilities at any time, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that an early and powerful effort would be made to seize upon this place (Key West)." Admiral Bailey averred that "the military importance of holding this gateway to the Gulf of Mexico can hardly be overestimated, and . . . the occupation of but few places in the country would occasion such serious inconvenience, more especially with the present rebellion on our hands."¹⁵ Fortunately, the threat from Europe did not materialize, for the military on Key West were ill prepared to furnish a stout resistance against a forceful and tenacious foe. Yellow fever epidemics, destructive hurricanes, labor and material shortages, and just plain boredom undermined the vitality of the Union forces stationed on the island of Key West.

Warfare necessitated innovation in defensive safeguards. To supplement Fort Taylor, Captain Hunt received from the War Department plans and directions for erecting two Martello Towers on opposite ends of the island. These towers were not authentic "Martello Tower" types since they were to be square rather than circular in structure. Both towers were to be built simultaneously and as quickly as possible because they were considered to be equally vital to the complete defense of Key West. Plans for two additional towers were formulated but the idea never reached fulfillment. The continuing development of ordnance with heavier firepower made the Martello towers obsolete. Work on them halted shortly after the war ended and the original two towers were never completed.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Vol. 16, pp. 541-544.

¹⁵*O.R.N.*, Series I, Vol. 17, p. 530.

The ordnance mounted in unfinished Fort Taylor and in the halfbuilt towers was never called into action. The Confederate States could never launch a naval offensive strong enough to capture Key West, its fort and towers or the invaluable harbor. As a blockading and coaling station and as a base to protect the seagoing trade of the area, the military quartered on Key West played an important role in the War for Southern Independence.

Relations between the citizens of Key West and the military deteriorated completely when orders were received in February, 1863, to evict anyone who had kinsmen fighting for the rebel cause. The proscribed townsmen were to forsake the property they possessed in Key West and be placed behind Confederate lines, even though they themselves might be strongly pro-Union in sentiment. Fortunately, these orders were rescinded, but it would be a long time after this incident before friendly intercourse between the civilians and military again resumed.

Yellow fever struck in 1862 and 1864. Medical science was helpless in providing a cure and every precautionary measure failed. Only if a fever victim survived the dreaded black vomit phase of the disease could the patient expect to recover. Many overcame the fever's debilitating effects. Many others succumbed. Military personnel seemed most susceptible since the majority of those affected were unacclimated northerners stationed on the Key West army and naval bases.

Upon the cessation of Civil War hostilities, the fifteen ships maintained in Key West harbor by the United States Navy dispersed to other bases. For the next thirty years little occurred in naval construction activity at the Key West Naval Station. The Army withdrew all its troops from Fort Taylor in 1870 and it became merely a storehouse under the care of watchmen and custodians. The harbor served only as a coal depot and supply station for passing ships.

In 1875, Key West saw a brief flurry of military activity. President Ulysses S. Grant prepared for possible intervention in the revolution then raging in Cuba. The revolutionists against Spanish authority sought the assistance of the United States and President Grant was eager to provide it. He assembled a fleet in Key West harbor and began having marine units readied for combat operations. European diplomats, however, actively discouraged President Grant in this undertaking. He acquiesced to their vehement objections by dispersing the ships and troops.

The Department of the Navy sent Lieutenant Robert E. Peary, a recent Annapolis graduate (who would later be the first explorer to discover

the North Pole), to Key West in 1881. Lieutenant Peary's first order was to inspect the naval pier being built in the Key West harbor. Because of difficulties with the contractor, Peary took over and completed the pier himself, thus saving the government \$24,000. During his stay Lieutenant Peary contracted yellow fever. Fortunately, he recovered quickly with no impairment to his health or abilities.

The construction of the naval pier is typical of the activity undertaken by the military in Key West during this quarter century. Small repairs were made to the government docks, barracks and fort but no major construction. In 1883, the Navy began to dredge a channel that would be fifteen feet deep at low water. This would help save large vessels time in plying between Key West and the Gulf ports. Except for this single endeavor, the Key West area was far down the list of governmental military priorities.

Everything connected with the permanent defenses at Key West was dependent upon annual appropriations for maintenance and repair. Without this constant funding they rapidly went to decay. After the Civil War the same conditions prevailed in most of the permanent defenses of the United States. It was not until 1889 that the Departments of War and Navy realized that the United States was becoming increasingly helpless against "the attack of any third-rate power possessing modern iron-clad vessels armed with heavy rifled cannon."¹⁶

By the year 1892, both departments had reassessed the value of Key West in their military planning. After years of neglect, they had come to realize that: "Changes in methods and means of warfare have only increased its strategic value. It is and will remain the most important coaling station which the United States can possess within its borders."¹⁷ Since Key West contained a secure harbor for vessels of any draft, the naval authorities regarded its possession as vitally important not only as a coaling station but as a repair base as well. Key West harbor was considered to be of extreme value as a fulcrum in all naval operations involving the West Indies.

The Department of the Navy bought additional land in 1895 so as to enlarge the Key West Naval Station's capacity in the event of a conflict with Spain. Construction of more coal sheds continued as a further precautionary measure. The worsening relations between the United States

¹⁶U.S., War Department, *Report of the Secretary of War, Chief of Engineers, House Ex. Doc.*, 1889, 51st Cong., 1st sess., pp. 4-5.

¹⁷U.S. Department of the Army, *Key West Barracks, Florida, Office of the Chief of Military History*, p. 2.

and Spain had awakened the army and navy authorities to the necessity to reactivate their bases in Key West. Battery "H", of the Third Artillery commanded by Major James R. Merrick, arrived in 1896 to garrison the reconstituted army post. Key West was expected to bear a prominent part in the defense of the United States' position in the Gulf of Mexico.

The task of making Fort Taylor serviceable proved to be so formidable that it was not finally ready for combat until 1899. Key West's population could not provide all the laborers required for the immense job so recruitment of workers began in other Gulf cities. However, only the contractors and merchants of Key West benefitted much from the army engineers' construction and repair activities. The army enlarged the city's only active post, Key West Barracks, and prepared the post's hospital for an expected large number of war casualties. The army did not, however, perform a major role in the military utilization of Key West during the Spanish American War.¹⁸ But the naval station became the most important in the nation.

The battleship *U.S.S. Maine* left Key West for Havana harbor on January 25, 1898, to stand by to remove United States citizens if revolutionary hostilities threatened them. The United States White Squadron arrived in Key West the next day. For the next few weeks it was within sight of the island so that the eyes of the gunners on land as well as those on the ships could be sharpened. Then a torpedo boat, the *Ericsson*, came full speed alongside the flagship and maneuvers abruptly ended. It informed the squadron that the *Maine* had blown up in Havana harbor. The warheads went on the torpedoes. On Sunday, February 27, the White Squadron went out of existence as the seamen slapped on black paint and then war-time grey. On April 22, the fleet steamed for the troubled island of Cuba.¹⁹

In Key West, the impact of the *Maine* disaster was poignantly personal. The ship had for sometime been in and out of Key West harbor. Officers and men had had an active part in the island's social life. While the nation flamed with discussion fed by the highly combustible journalism of the times, Key West buried many of the *Maine's* dead, some in a mass grave and others in lots with a simple "Unknown" on their small markers.

Since the vessel had taken on 280 tons of coal at the naval station but a sort time before leaving for Havana, Commandant James M. Forsyth at Key West Naval Station received orders to explore a possible cause of the mysterious explosion of the *Maine*. Commander Forsyth was to in-

¹⁸William J. Schellings, "Key West and the Spanish American War," *Tequesta*, XX, 1960, p. 23.

¹⁹Albert Manucy, "A Handbook of Fort Jefferson History," (Unpublished manuscript, deposited in Everglades National Park Library, May, 1942), p. 54.

investigate the plausible theory that explosives might have been planted by a saboteur in the coal pile at the Key West Naval Station from which the *Maine* had received her last load of fuel. His log book calmly noted: "Commence to examine anthracite coal pile. Carefully removing it with shovel under close personal inspection." Five volunteer inspectors watched the tedious turnover. Three days later, the log simply stated: "Finished overhauling anthracite coal pile, found no sign of anything suspicious."²⁰

The actual cause of the explosion was never discovered and the United States Naval Institute briefly concluded its report: "The *U.S.S. Maine* was destroyed by a mysterious explosion in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, February 15, 1898. This hastened the declaration of war with Spain. Of the crew of 354, only sixteen escaped injury or death."²¹

On April 23, the first shot of the Spanish American War was fired in full view of watchers along Key West's shore. The *U.S.S. Nashville* fired a shot across the bow of the Spanish steamer *Buena Ventura*. Her captain, ignorant of the newly declared war, raised the Spanish flag and was promptly taken captive and his ship, the war's first prize, was brought to Key West.²² A few days later, the Key West Naval Station was lighted by electricity for the first time.

Commodore George C. Remey, with Lt. John H. Shipley as flag-lieutenant, arrived in Key West on May 7, aboard the monitor *Miantonomah*. Even though the war had begun three weeks earlier, no preparations of facilities had been made for a senior land based naval officer at Key West.

Commodore Watson arrived in Key West at the same time Commodore Remey did. Although junior in rank to Remey, Watson had been appointed to command the blockade forces. Confusion reigned, temporarily, at the naval station with the presence of two senior commanders afloat in the harbor. Inevitably, confusing instructions were issued. The captain of the *Merrimac*, Commander James M. Miller, received such conflicting orders. Not knowing whether he should remain in port or leave, Commodore Remey heard Commander Miller's exasperated declaration: "I am between the devil and the deep sea!" "Which am I?" asked Commodore Remey with a quiet smile.²³ He straightened the matter out and issued

²⁰Oliver Griswold, *The Florida Keys and the Coral Reef*, (Miami: The Graywood Press, 1965), p. 54.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²"Navy Has Roots in Key West," *Key West Citizen*, November 9, 1969.

²³Commander Reginald R. Belknap, "The Naval Base at Key West in 1898," United States Naval Institute, *Proceedings*, B. C. Allen (ed.), (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute), Vol. 41, No. 5, Sept.-Oct., 1915, Whole No. 159, pp. 1454-1455.

instructions that only his office would control the movements of navy vessels within the harbor.

The Key West Naval Station's organization consisted of the Commodore and two staff officers; the commandant of the Naval Station, a lieutenant and a boatswain at the base; one pay officer with one pay clerk and three tugs. The sloppy security situation that prevailed at Key West at this time is measured by the protection given to the top secret cipher code. The one copy of the code belonged to the commandant of the naval station, James Forsyth, and he kept it in his house under his bed. The house stood open day and night and, as the commandant had no family, access was quite easy for a stranger. Since there was no orderly or other guard on the premises it would have been very simple for an intruder to injure or shoot the commandant and escape with the code.

The establishment of the base office occurred just as all forces began moving toward Key West after the bombardment of San Juan. The demands placed upon the office inundated its small staff. A large requirement for coal had to be anticipated and provided. Provisions, water and other supplies had to be furnished. Prize vessels were being brought in daily. Blockading vessels were in and out continually. A night patrol offshore had to be maintained. Some Spanish prisoners incarcerated in Fort Taylor needed to be cared for. Several times it was necessary to procure on sudden notice a convoy for minor expeditions intent upon landing supplies and men for Cuban forces. All the while a steady stream of information flowed in and out. The eager and insistent press correspondents, whose plaint "Cu-be, or not Cu-be, that is the Key Westion,"²⁴ were everywhere about and had to be placated. In addition, local disturbances in Key West sometimes went beyond the ability of the local police to cope with necessitating the use of marine patrol squads. Bureaucratic short cuts were definitely needed, hence, throughout the existence of the base administration, all its business was transacted with a minimum of actual paper work.

Security in Key West harbor was somewhat erratic. Since there were no harbor regulations day or night, little control could be maintained over anchorage. Vessels not belonging to or serving the navy came and went at will at any hour. Base Commander Remy not only did not have effective control over any but naval vessels, but naval movements were hampered by local civil authorities. State quarantine laws were enforced which required all incoming vessels, regardless of ownership, to wait and pay a fee to the state quarantine officer. This, and other local irregularities, and the probability of having to enforce strict sanitary measures in the

²⁴Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

event of yellow fever breaking out, caused Remy to urge in the strongest terms that Key West be placed under martial law. Secretary of the Navy, John D. Long, replied that he and the Secretary of War, Russel A. Alger, ardently agreed and urged affirmative action upon the request. President William McKinley, however, would not authorize the application of martial law stating that it might be construed as an unfavorable reflection on Key West and the Florida authorities.

Troops from the Marine Corps had last been in Key West in 1826. In 1898, they established a second marine base. On April 22, just two days after Congress made war inevitable by declaring Cuba to be a free and independent nation, Colonel Robert W. Huntington's marine battalion boarded the *U.S.S. Panther* and started on their journey to Key West. At the Key West marine camp they made their final preparations for the invasion of Cuba. Some 623 enlisted men, twenty-three officers and one navy surgeon formed the new battalion. Forty-six of these marines remained on Key West as provost marshals under Captain Harry White until September 8 when the strength of the camp was reduced to one man, First Sergeant Clarence E. Vadow. The sergeant looked after the property that had been left behind.

Key West served a very significant function as a naval base during the war with Spain; more in fact, than it appeared ready to render. The lack of fresh water presented the most immediate and continuing problem. There also arose several other reasons for dissatisfaction with the island: 1) it lacked ready and easy communication with the mainland, and 2) the constant danger from yellow fever epidemics and other tropical diseases. Despite these drawbacks Key West was acknowledged to be of greater strategic value than all the seven naval yards and stations at New Orleans, Pensacola, Charleston, Port Royal, Guantanamo, San Juan and Culebra combined. However, the war ended before Key West could be upgraded into a first class base. At the end of the war, the Key West Naval Station returned to a state of peacetime quiet and remained inactive for almost twenty years.

Throughout the early history of Key West medical science proved unable to cope with the dreaded and resurgent yellow fever disease but conquered it immediately after the Spanish American War. The breakthrough came when it was discovered that yellow fever and malaria were carried by the anopheles mosquito. It then became possible to control and finally eradicate this scourge. Perhaps because of the strict quarantine maintained by the Florida State Health Department, the dread yellow jack struck none of the overcrowded military installations in 1898. It was typhoid fever that killed twice as many soldiers and sailors as did combat.

The fever and fear of it had retarded Key West's development to the end of the century.

After the termination of the Spanish American War the War Department closed down its installations in Key West except for Fort Taylor, which was allowed to decay and become largely a storage area, no longer a vital stronghold for defense.

Except for the commissioning of the Key West Naval Radio Station in 1907, the navy did not build any improvements to the aging base until 1914. With the beginning of World War I considerable construction activity once more commenced on the Key West Naval Station. It became headquarters for the Seventh Naval District during the First World War, charged with the task of supplying and maintaining forces afloat and assigned the mission of keeping German submarines from operating in the Gulf, especially preventing them from utilizing Mexican oil supplies.

The preeminence of Key West's location as the country's southernmost naval base, with its rapid access to the open sea lanes for surface ships and submarines, its ideal weather conditions for flying, all proved invaluable in making the naval station an around-the-clock, around-the-year training and experimental area for the navy. The implements for modern three dimensional warfare started to make their debut; traditional surface forces were augmented by seaplanes, submarines and blimps.

The commissioning of the Key West Naval Air Station occurred on December 18, 1917. Located on the northern edge of the City of Key West, its primary use was for anti-submarine patrol operations and as an elementary flight training station. Aircraft utilizing its facilities included small twin cockpit training seaplanes and observation dirigibles. Twenty-five to thirty aircraft operated from the base at one time. Lieutenant Stanley V. Parker of the Coast Guard, the first commanding officer of the Air Station, became the first aviator to make a flight from the base. This event occurred on December 22, 1917, in a Curtiss N-9 seaplane. After being deactivated at the conclusion of World War One, the Naval Air Station slowly sank into comparative inaction. The releasing of its personnel, the destruction or dismantling and removal to other locations of most of its buildings signified that from 1920 to 1940 only sporadic employment of the remaining facilities could be made.

The activities at the Key West Naval Station after the First World War also gradually diminished. On June 30, 1932, the naval base was closed to a bare maintenance status and the headquarters of the Seventh Naval District moved to Charleston. The only occupant of the defunct base was the Navy Radio Station with personnel of seventeen men. Dur-

ing the station's idle years, W. P. A. workers carried out the maintenance duties.

The threat of war in Europe during 1938-39 forced military attention again upon this outpost overlooking the unprotected Caribbean. Early in 1939, several visitors inspected Key West as a prelude to reopening its dormant naval station. Among these notable visitors between February 14-18 were President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Admiral Leahy, then Chief of Staff, and Admiral Cook, Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics. By March, units of the Patrol Wing began flying into the old air base with increasing frequency, mooring their planes overnight beside the still standing but badly decomposed 1918 ramps and refueling facilities at the Key West Naval Station.

With the outbreak of World War Two, President Roosevelt declared a state of national emergency on September 8, 1939. Three days later, the Key West Naval Station closed its facilities to visitors and all private yachts, including the smaller pleasure boats, docked in the submarine basin were ordered to vacate the area immediately. Commander Granville B. Hoey arrived in Key West on November 1 to reopen the station, in January, 1942, the Seventh Naval District reestablished its headquarters in Key West. Construction of a temporary air base on the original World War One site, expected to take from four to six months, began at this time.

During the war years the naval station spent \$31,384,538 on new construction alone. In addition, the navy acquired 3,200 acres for anticipated expansion. Between December 7, 1941, and V-J Day, 1945, 14,000 ships logged into Key West or adjacent anchorage. Merchant vessels forming convoys accounted for 43% of this huge total. The naval station had the primary function of supporting other naval activities in the Key West area and repairing and overhauling numerous escort vessels that convoyed merchant shipping in the Caribbean area.

Reestablishment of the Key West Naval Air Station occurred on December 15, 1940, by order of the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox. It served both as an operating and training base for fleet aircraft squadrons. The station eventually developed to care for over 4,000 personnel and three squadrons amounting to nearly fifty planes.

Throughout the war years living conditions for the navy's sea and air personnel proved to be harsh with few offsetting comforts. Water, sewage, housing, civilian medical facilities and the limited opportunities for recreation afforded by the city of Key West presented many difficulties. The navy finally solved its chronic water shortage by constructing a pipeline to the deep water wells of Homestead, Florida, and then pumping the water

to Key West. For the first time Key Westers no longer needed to depend upon the erratic rainfall and distilling plants for fresh water. The navy did have trouble, however, importing fresh meats and vegetables which could only be bought at a premium in Miami, 170 miles away. The nearest naval hospital was located 700 miles away in Pensacola. Mosquitoes plagued the islanders in the summer months. Fortunately, no malaria epidemics occurred and only an occasional case of dengue fever was reported in the town.²⁵ Working and living conditions gradually improved as increasing funds were allocated for expansion and construction of permanent facilities.

German submarine activity paralleled the vast program of construction and territorial expansion on the part of the Key West Naval Base and Air Station. This Nazi menace to Gulf and Caribbean shipping lasted throughout 1942, until the summer of 1943. In early 1942, daring German submarines slipped in close enough to Florida to sink allied shipping within sight of land. The peak of this implacable adversary's activity was reached in May when underseas raiders torpedoed forty-nine ships off the Florida coast. It is believed that only two submarines per month came over from Germany, but that as high as nine were operating in the Caribbean area later. To combat this threat, Patrol Wing Twelve was commissioned in September, 1942. The patrol established its headquarters in Key West. By March, 1943, the air station supported one squadron of eighteen planes and two smaller squadrons having twelve planes each. All three squadrons furnished air coverage over the adjacent waters. These planes effectively combatted the German threat and by December, 1943, the Nazi Submarines had sunk their last merchant ship in the Caribbean area.

The last month of 1943 also saw the establishment of Fleet Air Wing Five as a training unit in Boca Chica to provide anti-submarine warfare and other types of training for land and sea based aircraft. Anti-submarine training has remained a primary function at Boca Chica field ever since.

Another event of this period involved combined land, sea and air maneuvers conducted by the navy and army throughout Florida in November and December, 1943. This coordinated testing finished up in Key West. Boca Chica's planes employed sacks of flour to simulate bombs. Only a few ill consequences occurred. One small craft, for example, had its fresh paint job smeared by a wayward flour bag.

On February 8, 1945, Naval Auxiliary Air Station Boca Chica was designated a full fledged naval air station. But this was short lived be-

²⁵"Golden Anniversary," Naval Air Station, Key West, (An unpublished manuscript from the Public Affairs Office, Key West Naval Air Station), p. 6.

cause one month later the Boca Chica and Key West Naval Air Stations were merged once more under the present designation of United States Naval Air Station, Key West.

At the conclusion of World War Two, the Key West Naval Station did not undergo retrenchment as did many other installations. It continued to be maintained as a training and experimental site since the excellent climate permitted year around use of the facility.

During the Second World War, sand bags and modern ordnance improved Fort Taylor's usefulness as an active coast artillery installation. Two years after this violent and destructive conflict terminated, the army left Key West entirely and transferred its surplus property, including Fort Taylor with its land, to the navy's jurisdiction. Today, Fort Taylor is used by the navy as a storage area for scrap metal which has undoubtedly helped to preserve this relic of a bygone age.

The United States Naval Station became established under flag rank on April 1, 1948. During the following years the Naval Operating Base settled into the quiet tranquility of her important task of anti-submarine warfare training. For the next fourteen years the navy carried on its usual "peacetime" activities, until October 22, 1962, when, for the first time in one hundred years, the United States was presented with a threat to its mainland. The Cuban crisis erupted.

Reconnaissance planes had revealed Russian construction of offensive missiles in Cuba only ninety miles from Key West. Several weeks before President John F. Kennedy's announcement of a "quarantine" blockade, military activities in Key West started building up. Military units, personnel and equipment were repositioned by classified movements. Almost continuously flights arrived from or departed for Cuban surveillance. An immediate and substantial increase in military personnel quickly filled all available space in the naval base's quarters. Each of the military services found representation in the expanded service population of Key West. Some departments doubled and others almost trebled their work load. Adjacent waters swarmed with ships and army units moved into the area, notably the Sixth Missile Battalion. Security measures during this crisis were as tight as at any time in Key West history. Not one ship nor submarine remained moored in the harbor, a sight never seen before. The sounds of the reconnaissance patrol squadrons zooming overhead could be heard day and night, but few of the citizens of Key West evacuated the city.

President Kennedy lifted the quarantine on November 20. Six days later, he with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and many top ranking officers of

the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force held a highly classified meeting on the Key West Naval Station to review military installations and forces stationed on the island during the Cuban crisis. They represented the largest group of Flag and General officers ever to visit a naval base at one time in the history of the United States.²⁶

After the Cuban missile crisis had settled down to a matter of watchful waiting, the majority of temporary military personnel were redeployed. The Key West Naval Station and Air Base resumed normal routine. Normal, at present, consists of an average of 3,000 officers and men on constant alert to maintain our preparedness should another threat to the continental United States develop suddenly.

Key West is among those particular places in history which served as a staging area or embarkation point for great events occurring elsewhere. Dramatic actions, such as the crusade against Caribbean piracy, the Civil War blockade, the war against Spain, the World War Two anti-submarine activity and the 1962 Cuban "quarantine", catapulted Key West into the forefront of national attention. This Gibraltar of the Caribbean continues today to maintain a vigil over our southeastern coast and its strength helps to deter potential adversaries from embroiling the United States in another destructive conflict.

²⁶"Your Navy in Key West," (1969 Unofficial Guide published by Boone Publications, Inc.), p. 6.

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