NEWSLETTER
Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

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The British Squadron in the Pacific Northwest, 1845-1865

The presence of the British in the Pacific Northwest started with the Hudson Bay Company and its lucrative fur trade. The British government was content to let the affairs and protection of the company's trading posts around the Columbia River be the responsibility of the company, with occasional visits by a British warship. But by the 1840's things began to change. Russia had expanded its territory into the eastern Pacific, France was sending exploratory ships into the Pacific, and American immigrants were beginning to come into the Oregon territory in increasing numbers. The British government felt it necessary to protect its commercial and political interests, so it began to increase its presence by sending more navy ships into the area. By 1845 the British Pacific squadron had one ship-of-the-line, two frigates, ten sloops, one brig, and one store ship. Steamships were now replacing sailing ships, and a reliable source for coal was needed. Expeditions found abundant coal on Vancouver Island and a good harbor at Esquimalt Bay, just west of Victoria, on Vancouver Island. This became the base for the Pacific squadron.

By 1846 tensions were rising over the Oregon territory, both claimed by Britain and the United States. President Polk had been elected partly because of his expansionist views of annexing all of the Oregon territory, up to the Alaskan border. This was unacceptable to the British, and there was talk of war, though neither side really wanted it; Polk was already about to engage in a war with Mexico. Finally, the Oregon Treaty was signed which set the boundary at the 49th parallel. But the partition through the San Juan Islands was vague, and both countries had a military presence there.

In 1859 an American shot a pig belonging to a British farmer which had come into his potato patch along the ill-defined border on San Juan Island. Rumors started among the American settlers that the American was threatened with arrest, and they requested military intervention. Soon a detachment of 60 soldiers was sent from Fort Bellingham under the command of George Pickett to protect the Americans. When this news reached the British, they sent two warships from Esquimalt to reinforce British troops on San Juan. Matters could have escalated had it not been for Rear Admiral Robert Baynes of the Royal Navy, who would not prevent the American troops from landing, as the colony's governor had insisted - this would have surely caused a military engagement and possible war. The situation soon de-escalated with a visit by General Winfield Scott, who proposed a joint occupation of the island by 100 troops each, which was agreed upon. It wan't until 1872 that the San Juan islands were determined to be American territory.

However, this short-lived crisis did result in the strengthening of the Pacific squadron, which varied between thirteen and sixteen warships. When the American Civil War began in 1861, the Queen sent a proclamation in May to all British naval forces were to show no preference to Union or Confederate ships, and that strict neutrality was to be observed to both governments. Nevertheless, Sir Thomas Maitland, Commander-in-Chief of the British fleet, had plans to blockade San Francisco if Britain became involved in the conflict, to prevent American ships from becoming privateers.

English Camp NHS on San Juan Island

The increase in naval strength of the British squadron alarmed the commander of the American fleet, who may have thought that the British were preparing to enter the conflict. He knew that if war came the object of the British would be the shipyard at Mare Island — there was no such facility at Esquimalt — not to mention the ships and gold that could be seized as war prizes. At the same time, the American consul at Victoria began to watch closely for any possible Confederate privateer using Esquimalt Bay for shelter or supplies. In fact, in early 1865 when the Confederate raider *Shenandoah* appeared in the north Pacific, the British naval commander gave orders to disarm that ship if she appeared in Esquimalt Bay. The British realized that her presence could endanger their neutrality. Neither British nor American warships ever sighted the *Shenandoah*, despite its capture of 36 American whaling ships in Alaskan waters.

The visit of Rear Admiral Kingcome to San Francisco Bay aboard his flagship *Sutlej* in 1863 may well have been a reconnoitering mission to evaluate the defenses of the American forts. He certainly found out when Fort Alcatraz fired on his ship after it failed to follow protocol and anchor off the south end of the island.

All this emphasizes the many tensions which were present between the British and Americans during this time, and explains why the forts in San Francisco were heavily armed, ready for any possible threat from the British navy.

Living History Day on Alcatraz

On May 11 FOCWA sponsored a Living History Day on Alcatraz, with the support of the National Park Service. Members John Nevins, Brad Schall, Don Wilt, Constance Smith, Steve Johnson, and Frank Avila were present to help organize the event, conduct tours, set up exhibits, and provide lunch for the band and re-enactors. All the fort tours had at least 60 people, the exhibitors were busy the whole day, and the presence of the band both surprised and pleased the visitors. We were especially pleased to have emeritus members Brad and Don come to the event; they fascinated visitors by showing them what a Union soldier typically carried with him when marching. And many people stopped to listen to the band as they played tunes popular in the 1860's.

Brad and Don display the items in a haversack: a period comb, toothbrush and tooth powder, small bible, eating utensils, tinware, hardtack, candles, matches, bag of coffee, and socks. Each item came with a story

Frank Avila describes the various medical tools used during the Civil War, to the delight (or horror) of the visitors.

The Third U.S. Artillery Band plays popular tunes of the 1860's to the visitors as they step off the boat on Alcatraz

Resources
"The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of North America 1810-1914" by Barry Gough, 1974
"The Army of the Pacific, 1860-1866" by Aurora Hunt
Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pig_War_(1859)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oregon_boundary_dispute