

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

August 2019

Steve Johnson, Editor

The Russian Fleet in San Francisco Bay, 1863 - Part 1

While tensions were high between Britain and the United States during the Civil War, America had one dependable friend in Europe — Russia. This friendship went all the way back to the Revolutionary War, when Russia refused Britain's request to send troops to aid them in their fight against Americans — and Russia was one of the first nations to recognize the United States as an independent country. It was the Czar, a friend of former ambassador to Russia John Quincy Adams, who in 1814 helped to negotiate the treaty ending the war of 1812. By 1834 Russia had received the first “most favored nation” trading status from our government, and in the 1850's Americans were looking favorably on the new Czar, Alexander II, for his democratic reforms. When the Crimean War started in 1854, the American

Dates to Remember

- **Aug. 15 San Francisco Civil War Round Table**
6:30 pm Lecture “California & the Civil War”
- **August 17 Living History Day at Fort Point NHS**
10 am to 5 pm
- **September 14 Living History Day on Alcatraz**



Czar Alexander II of Russia

press and government took the side of Russia, and in San Francisco a crowd gathered in 1855 to show their support by serenading the Russian consul. Once our Civil War began Russia — unlike Britain and France — did not give aid to the Confederacy, and Americans believed Russia was our only European friend. Given this background, it is easy to understand the willingness of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells to agree to allow two Russian naval squadrons to spend the winter in the United States, one in New York and the other in San Francisco. Ostensibly they were to undergo repairs at the Brooklyn and Mare Island naval stations, but there were other motivations as well. The Russians did not want their fleet to be frozen in at their naval bases in case war broke out again with Britain (a possibility at the time). And for the United States, having an naval ally in ports on both coasts was a possible deterrent in case war broke out against the British. In September 1863 the vanguard of the Russian Pacific fleet, the *Novick*, sailing for San Francisco, unfortunately met the

fate of many ships who sailed along the California notorious for its fog — it hit a sandbar near Point Reyes and heavy waves began to smash it to pieces. One sailor drowned but the rest of the crew got to shore and managed to rescue much of their belongings and supplies. Some of the officers travelled overland and with the help of locals were rowed to San Francisco.

As news of the disaster spread, the revenue cutter *Shubrick* was dispatched to aid in the recovery of the crew and whatever remained of the ship. By the time it arrived, at 11 pm, the *Novick* was a total wreck. Its crew of 160 officers and men and recovered supplies were brought aboard the *Shubrick*, which then sailed for San Francisco. Days later the Russian crew held a dinner for the crew of the *Shubrick* at the Stevenson house as a public expression of their thanks for being rescued, and for their warm reception by the citizens of San Francisco.

Next month: Why San Franciscans warmly welcomed the Russian fleet, and what happened during their stay.

(N.B. Information in this article is from the book reviewed below)



Originally a lighthouse tender, the *Shubrick* was pressed into service as a revenue cutter and was stationed in the bay to intercept foreign ships entering the harbor. It also served as a rescue vessel.

Book Review: “Friends in Peace and War - the Russian Navy’s Landmark Visit to Civil War San Francisco” by C. Douglas Kroll (2007, Potomac Books, Inc., Dulles, VA)

This book is much more than the story of the Russian fleet’s stay in San Francisco during the Civil War — itself a fascinating story. The author also delves into the larger picture of what was going on in the 1850’s and 1860’s among the major powers at the time, which puts the friendship of the United States and Russia in context. The British response to the blockade of Southern ports, the French takeover of the government of Mexico, and the visit of the British warship *Sutlej* in 1863, are all part of the narrative to explain the reason for the Russian navy’s presence in America at the time. The author also spends time discussing the importance of Alcatraz in defending San Francisco, the role of the Mare Island naval shipyard, and the effect of hundreds of Russian sailors on the city during their stay. The author has extensive notes, a large bibliography, an index, and many illustrations and photos.



Fort Point Living History Day August 17
Re-enactors will bring history alive at Fort Point on Saturday, Aug. 17. FOCWA members are invited to assist at our information table during the day, and participate in the festivities — lectures, flag ceremonies, exhibits, and greeting the public. Hours are 10 am to 5 pm.

Board Minutes Minutes of the July board meeting are posted in the Communications section of our website. Next board meeting will be September 14th on Alcatraz during Living History Day.

“California and the Civil War: Securing the State” This lecture by Bob Burch, sponsored by the San Francisco Civil War Roundtable, is especially recommended because the story of California during the Civil War is barely mentioned in textbooks and history books. Bob will focus on the Union’s military response to Confederate threats to California. The lecture will take place at the Gold Mirror restaurant, 800 Taraval Street, San Francisco, at 6:30 pm. Social hour at 6 pm. See their Facebook page if you are interested in having dinner beforehand. Lecture starts around 7 pm. <https://www.facebook.com/pg/SanFranciscoCivilWarRoundTable/posts/>

Alcatraz Living History Day Saturday, September 14 Our fall Living History Day has been scheduled for September this year, when we usually have warm summer weather on the island. As usual, we will be providing lunches for the rangers, re-enactors, and FOCWA volunteers that day. If you are planning to volunteer (we can always use help) please contact the editor at parksvolunteer425@gmail.com



On Living History Day, FOCWA provides tours of the remains of Fort Alcatraz as well as the old citadel, below the main cell house. Members also display exhibits of medical instruments and household items of the 1860’s. Visitors planning to attend should make reservations weeks in advance through alcatrazcruises.com