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The Fighting Captain of the United States Revenue Cutter Service



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The Career of Commodore Frank Hamilton Newcomb, USRC

By William H. Thiesen

In the spring of 1940, when asked by the United States Navy to identify a historic Coast Guard officer who could provide the namesake for a new warship, Coast Guard commandant Vice-Admiral Russell Woesche singled out Commodore Frank Hamilton Newcomb as the best candidate. The only American warship named for a member of the United States Revenue Cutter Service, USS *Newcomb* (DD-586) proved a hard fighter during World War II. The plucky *Fletcher*-class tin can sank a Japanese submarine at Saipan, and also provided fire support at Saipan, Tinian, the Palaus, and Iwo Jima. She also torpedoed the Japanese battleship *Yamashiro* to help defeat the enemy in the Battle of Surigao Strait and sustained five kamikaze hits at Okinawa, killing or wounding dozens of her crew.

Newcomb and her battle-hardened crew exemplified the personality of the ship's namesake whose distinguished career is largely unknown today. Born in Boston in 1846 and the oldest of three children, Frank Newcomb had the sea in his veins. His father, Captain Hiram Newcomb went to sea at the age of fifteen and commanded his own merchant ship before reaching the age of twenty. Frank followed in his father's footsteps sailing on board his father's ship as a boy and at the age of sixteen, he served on board another merchant vessel on a round the world trading voyage. During his formative years at sea, Newcomb saw that the merchant service was a true melting pot of mariners and seamen and came to know men from every sort of ethnic and cultural background.

Described by shipmates as humble, Newcomb began his naval career during the Civil War. In 1863, at the age of seventeen, Frank received an officer's appointment as an Acting Master's Mate on board the mortar schooner USS *Para*, which served in numerous engagements as part of the U.S. Navy's South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. In early 1865, he transferred to the USS *Arethusa*, a coaling vessel homeported at Port Royal, South Carolina, a



A veteran of the American Civil War as a U.S. Naval officer, and the Spanish-American War as part of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, Frank Hamilton Newcomb served for over forty years in the sea services. He was a progressive thinking man and considered to be one of the finest officers of the Revenue Cutter Service. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)

local military hub for the Union and a safe haven for slaves escaping Georgia and South Carolina plantations. Civil War colliers required large crews of coal heavers and many freed slaves, or "contrabands," found work on board vessels such as Newcomb's *Arethusa*.

At the end of the war, Newcomb tendered his resignation and returned to Boston to make a living. First, he tried his hand as a merchant then as an officer in the merchant service, voyaging to Europe and the West Coast. But American merchant shipping saw significant declines after the war and Newcomb failed to enjoy the same prospects and prosperity he had seen as a merchant mariner before the war. By 1869, he began working in the nation's booming railroad industry, including the Alabama & Chattanooga Railroad and later with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe.

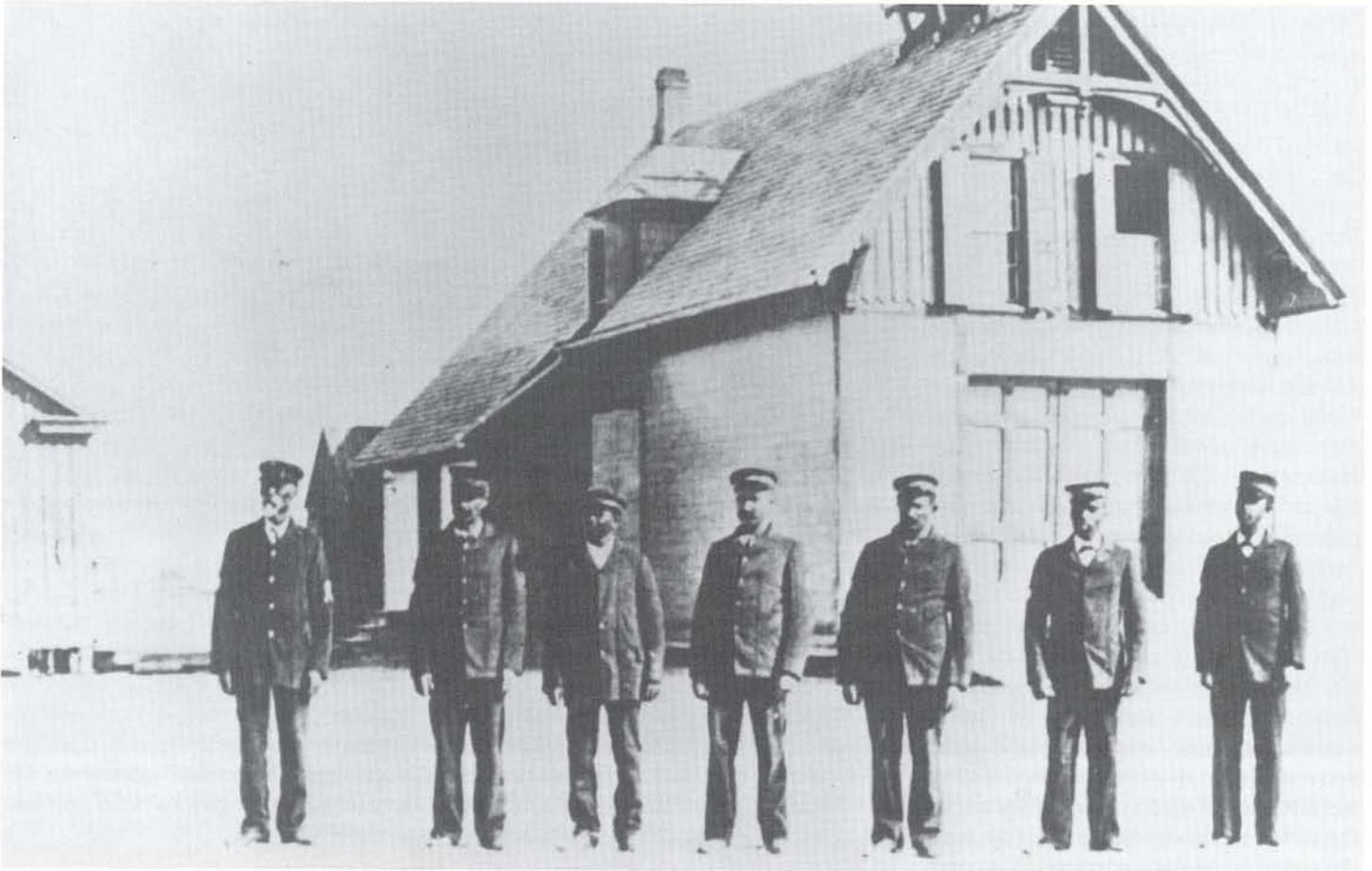
By the early 1870s, Newcomb had had enough of life on land and returned to the sea. He applied for an appointment with the United States Revenue Cutter Service

and in 1873, received a third lieutenant's commission in that service. Newcomb spent the rest of the 1870s serving as a junior officer on board cutters *Petrel*, *Crawford*, and *Johnson*, achieving the rank of second lieutenant in 1878.

Newcomb first made a name for himself beginning in 1879 when he received an appointment as an Assistant Inspector for the United States Life-Saving Service. During the late-nineteenth century, the Life-Saving Service suffered from corruption in certain areas and its superintendent, Sumner I. Kimball, chose to appoint officers from the Revenue Cutter Service as his inspectors to help minimize local cronyism and political patronage within the service. Regarding Newcomb's appointment, the *Wilmington* (North Carolina) *Post* commended Superintendent Kimball as an "excellent judge of character" for such a "wise and judicious" selection.

For the next three years Newcomb helped oversee the Sixth District, which

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This is the company of the Pea Island Live-Saving Station on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. At Newcomb's direction and insistence, the company was manned by African-Americans. The idea of having any African-Americans in the Life-Saving Service, much less integrated companies in the South, met fierce opposition. Newcomb, however, pressed hard on the issue and put together one of the finest outfits in the service. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)

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included Life-Saving Service stations from southeastern Virginia south through the treacherous Outer Banks of North Carolina. In April 1879, when Newcomb arrived at his new duty station in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, he found a firestorm of political and racial tensions among crew members of the life-saving stations and the local communities located adjacent to them. Newly franchised African Americans enjoyed appointments to federal jobs like never before. At the same time, the hardscrabble lifestyle of coastal residents meant that even seasonal jobs, such as those with the Life-Saving Service, were highly sought after. A handful of families that traced their ancestry back through generations presided over the Sixth District's area and nepotism often found its way into local Federal appointments.

Newcomb had always believed in merit-based promotion for deserving personnel no matter what their ethnic or cultural background. The senior inspector for the Sixth District, Lt. Charles F.

Shoemaker (U.S. Revenue Cutter Service) and Superintendent Kimball felt the same way. With white Life-Saving Service crew members often refusing to serve with blacks in racially mixed "checkerboard" crews, Newcomb championed the cause for a station manned by an all-African American crew. For this crew, he selected the Pea Island Life-Saving Station, located on the Outer Banks north of Cape Hatteras. He appointed a former slave, the distinguished Civil War veteran and locally recognized waterman Richard Etheridge, as the station's head keeper.

In 1880, the newly formed African American crew began service at Pea Island despite white opposition. Newcomb worked diligently behind the scenes to ensure the establishment and success of this crew. Within a year of instituting Pea Island's African-American crew, arsonists burned down the station. To prevent sabotage a second time, Newcomb camped out at the station site during construction of a new building. For the next seventy years, an

African American crew served at Pea Island participating in many dramatic rescues, including the 1896 Gold Life-Saving Medal rescue of the schooner *E.S. Newman*. While no one should diminish the accomplishments of Pea Island's courageous life-savers, it was Newcomb who risked his career and reputation to fight for the station's African-American crew in a racially charged postwar South.

Late in the 1890s, Newcomb found himself in the midst of a new sort of conflagration. During much of the 1880s and 1890s, Newcomb had served nearly continuously on Revenue Service cutters at stations along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and in Alaskan waters. In 1891, he received promotion to first lieutenant and in September 1897 he assumed command of the cutter *Hudson*, which was home-ported in New York Harbor. In the succeeding months, tensions mounted between the United States and Spain reaching a crescendo in late February 1898 with the sinking of the USS

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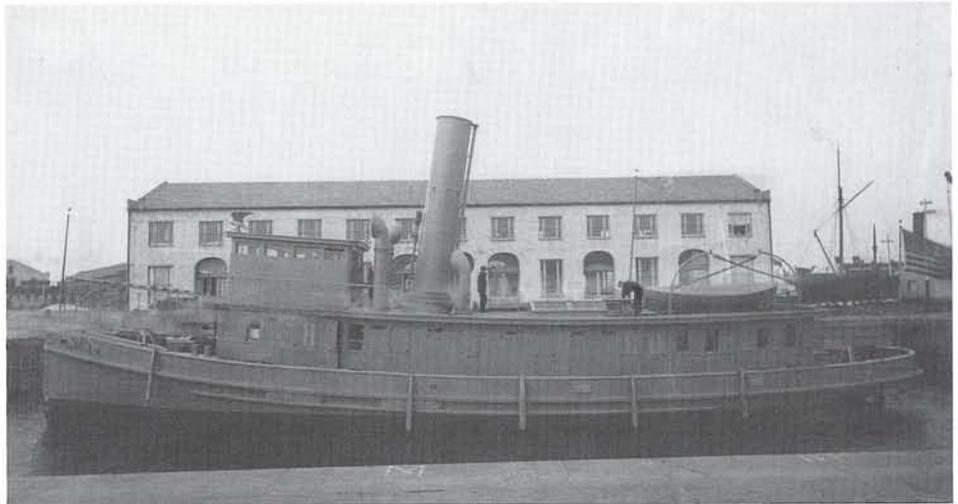
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Maine in Havana, Cuba.

On the second day of April, *Hudson* slipped her moorings in New York and steamed down the East Coast to Virginia and the Norfolk Naval Shipyard to take on arms, armor, and ammunition. The ninety-four-foot *Hudson* had a tugboat design, drew ten feet of water, and had a top speed of twelve knots. However, she proved technologically advanced for her day. She was the service's first steel-hulled cutter and she was powered by a triple-expansion reciprocating steam engine. Designed to serve harbor patrol duties on the East Coast, *Hudson* included a complement of three line and two engineering officers. She also carried eighteen enlisted men, including two warrant officers, a cook, a steward, and a boy.

In the months leading up to the Spanish-American War, the Norfolk Navy Yard was tasked with outfitting and arming the American fleet and consequently the facility was bustling with activity when *Hudson* arrived. Soon after *Hudson* moored at Norfolk, the shipyard's commandant visited the cutter and asked Newcomb how soon the cutter could get underway. Newcomb answered, "As soon as we get food and coal." The commandant yelled back, "Why, you have no guns and your protecting plates are not finished." To which Newcomb replied, "I know that, but we could go." *Hudson* later received an armament of two six-pound rapid-fire guns located fore and aft and a Colt automatic "machine" gun on top of the aft deckhouse. She also had a layer of 5/8ths-inch armor bolted around her pilothouse and the deckhouse. On April 21, Congress declared war with Spain and with the Revenue Cutter Service on a war-time footing and oversight of cutters transferred from the Treasury Department to the Navy, Newcomb found himself serving in the U.S. Navy once again.

On Saturday, April 23, after fitting out at Norfolk, *Hudson* steamed south toward Key West, Florida, a staging area for U.S. naval operations around Cuba. Off the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the cutter met with a severe storm, including hurricane force winds, thunder, lightning, mountainous seas, torrential rain, and hail the size of "hen's eggs." The storm nearly washed away the cutter's pilothouse, but the new armor plating held everything together against the heavy seas. After the storm, Newcomb

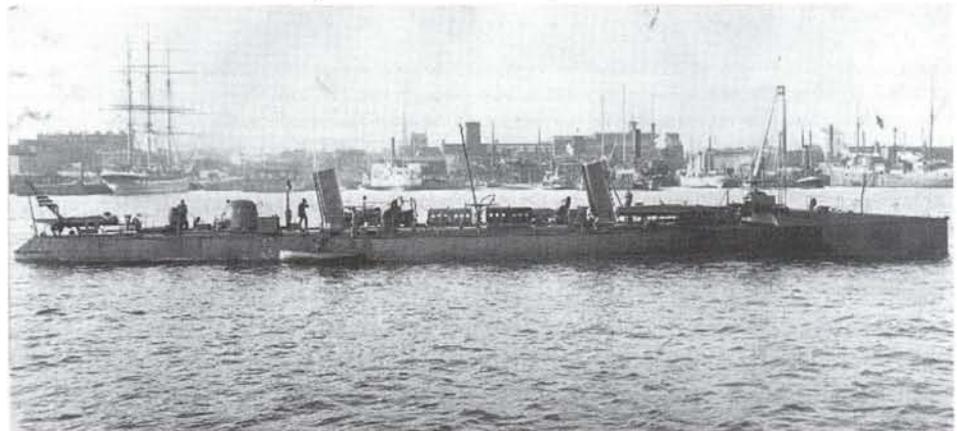


The USRC *Hudson* normally patrolled the waters of New York City. The Navy called her into service for the Spanish-American War and ordered Newcomb to bring the cutter to the Norfolk Navy Yard (shown above at the Yard) to be outfitted for war. (NHHC photo)

steered *Hudson* up the Cape Fear River and moored off Wilmington, North Carolina, to make repairs and re-stow her gear and supplies.

By Thursday, May 5, *Hudson* finally arrived in Key West and on May 9 *Hudson* took up her assigned duty station off the coast of Cuba. Likely due to her

reconnaissance, he found a third channel that contained no mines, but was passable only at high tide with shallow-draft vessels. Newcomb developed a plan to capture the gunboats by sending shallow-draft warships through the un-mined channel. Through the squadron commander Commander J.F. Merry on board the gunboat USS *Machias*

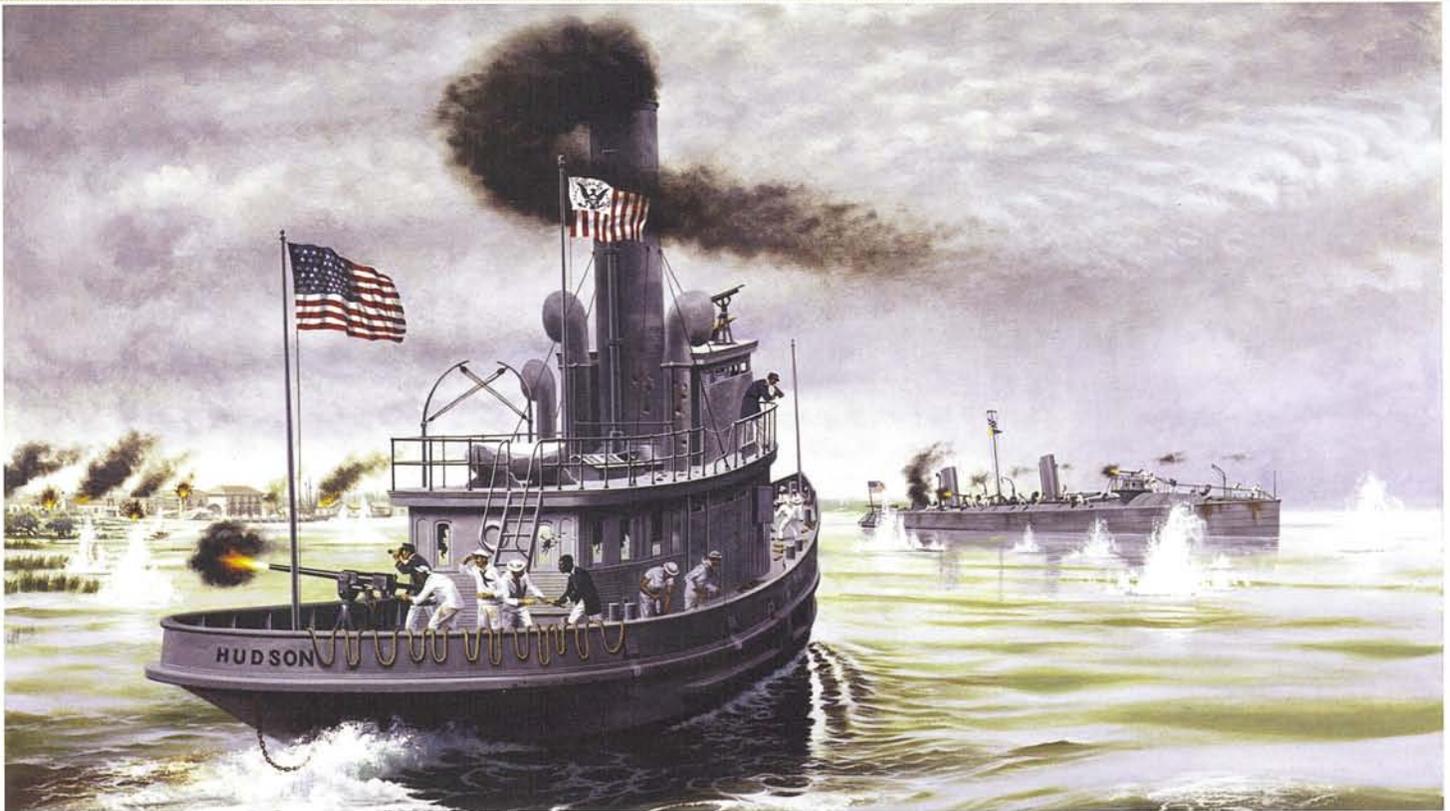


The torpedo boat USS *Winslow* (TB-5) cruises the Delaware River in 1898. Like all other U.S. Navy torpedo boats of the time, the hull of the Norfolk-based torpedo boat was always painted a distinctive olive green color. All other Navy ships were painted either white in peacetime and slate grey in war time. (HRNM photo)

relatively shallow draft of ten feet, the naval command assigned *Hudson* to enforce the blockade between the ports of Cardenas and Matanzas. On May 10, Newcomb used *Hudson* to reconnoiter the approaches to the bay, which was defended by three Spanish gunboats. Newcomb tried his best to draw the gunboats out for a fight, but they refused to steam outside the safety of the bay. Newcomb later found that the two main channels into the bay were blocked with debris and considered steaming his way through it, but feared the presence of underwater mines. After further

(PG-5), he presented the plan to the fleet commander Rear Admiral John Watson on board the flagship USS *Dolphin*. Merry would later take much, if not all, the credit for planning this raid in after action reports. In his own reports, the humble Newcomb did not take any credit for himself. Only through the histories written by Newcomb's crew are we made aware of the cutterman's tactics and planning.

On Wednesday, May 11, the day after pitching his proposal to Admiral Watson, *Machias* and the Norfolk-based gunboat
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With Newcomb barking orders from the bridge, the company of the cutter USRC Hudson, provides covering fire with their six-pounder guns en route to rescuing the disabled Winslow. Each of the guns fired 145 shells during the action. The cutter was successful in reaching and towing the disabled torpedo boat out of harm's way. (1989 USCG painting by Doug Ellis)

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USS *Wilmington* (PG-8) and Norfolk-based torpedo boat USS *Winslow* (TB-5) appeared outside Cardenas Bay to help carry out Newcomb's plan. The *Machias* drew too much water to enter the bay and participate in the attack on Cardenas, so she laid down a bombardment of the barrier islands to eliminate any Spanish snipers near the shallow entrance to the bay. Afterward, *Hudson*, *Wilmington*, and *Winslow* slowly steamed through the narrow passage toward Cardenas Bay. Between noon and 1:00 p.m., the vessels had entered the bay and *Wilmington's* captain, Commander Coleman Todd, sent *Hudson* in search of the gunboats on the western side of the bay and ordered *Winslow* search the eastern side of the bay. While *Hudson* carried out her survey, *Winslow* and *Wilmington* met about 3,500 yards offshore from Cardenas, where Commander Todd had spied the gunboats moored along the city's waterfront.

Todd next directed *Winslow's* commanding officer, Lt. John Baptiste Bernadou, to investigate the situation with *Winslow*. Armed with torpedoes and three rapid-firing one pound guns, drawing only five feet, a top speed of nearly twenty-five knots, compared to *Hudson's*

twelve, *Winslow* seemed perfectly suited to capture or destroy the Spanish gunboats. Originally stationed at the Norfolk Navy Yard, *Winslow* was the fifth of the *Footeclass* of swift torpedo boats. *Winslow's* crew included twenty enlisted crew and the dashing Bernadou. *Winslow's* executive officer, Ensign Worth Bagley came from a distinguished North Carolina military family that included brother-in-law Josephus Daniels, future Secretary of the Navy during World War I.

As often happens in combat, the original plan of attack proved useless after the battle began. Bernadou had ordered *Winslow* to

steam toward the waterfront in reverse, probably to make full use of the stern-mounted centerline torpedo tube. But as soon as *Winslow* reached a distance of 1,500 yards from the wharves, Bernadou found himself within the white range buoys used for aiming enemy artillery and the Spanish defenders surprised the torpedo boat with salvos from heavy artillery hidden along Cardenas's waterfront, in addition to one-pound guns blazing from the moored gunboats.

The firefight quickly escalated. Having witnessed the shelling, *Hudson* steamed

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Famed Naval artist Henry Reuterdahl painted this image of the Battle of Cardenas as seen from USS *Winslow* (TB-5). It shows the *Hudson* in the center and *Wilmington* (PG-8) off to the right. (1898 painting by Henry Reuterdahl)

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at top speed from the eastern shore and received permission from Commander Todd to engage the enemy along with the *Winslow*. By 2:00 p.m. the battle was on between the Spanish gunboats and artillery on one hand, against *Winslow*, with her one-pounders; *Hudson*, with her six-pounders; and the distant *Wilmington*, with her heavier four-inchers. During the gun duel, *Hudson*'s Assistant Engineer Nathaniel E. Cutchin oversaw the rapidly changing engine operations, while Second Lieutenant James Hutchinson Scott and Third Lieutenant Ernest E. Meade commanded *Hudson*'s six-pound guns.

According to an eyewitness account, Spanish guns blazed from half-a-dozen directions, but they were difficult to spot because the enemy used smokeless powder and the Americans were blinded by their own black powder ammunition. To help



In recognition of his heroic deeds at Cardenas, Congress singled out Newcomb and awarded him a gold medal entitled the "Cardenas Medal of Honor." His company received silver and bronze versions of the medal. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)

Lt. Newcomb navigate the shallow bay and see his way through the fog of *Hudson*'s guns, Second Assistant Engineer Theodore G. Lewton mounted the deckhouse behind the pilothouse and helped Newcomb direct the cutter's movements. As Newcomb later wrote, "Each and every member of *Hudson*'s crew . . . did his whole duty cheerfully and without the least hesitation." The ship's boy, sixteen-year-old Moses Jones of New

Bern, North Carolina, fed ammunition to the aft gun while Ship's Steward Henry Savage passed up shells from the magazine. Savage, a veteran of the Civil War, shouted up to Engineer Lewton, "Hot time in the old town tonight, Mr. Lewton!"

By now the battle was hotly contested, with Spanish gunners closing the range of the *Winslow*. As the battle raged, accurate enemy fire disabled *Winslow*'s steering gear and one of her engines. Lt. Bernadou called out to the passing *Hudson*, "I am injured; haul me out." In addition to the battle damage, a strong breeze was pushing the torpedo boat toward the Spanish batteries and into shoal water too shallow for the ten-foot-draft *Hudson* to navigate. Newcomb reacted quickly, steering *Hudson* through the muddy shallows toward *Winslow* while the cutter's propeller churned up brown water. *Hudson* steamed as close as she could while Ensign Bagley and a number of crew members stood on *Winslow*'s deck to receive a heaving line from Lieutenant Scott. The intensity of the enemy fire increased and Bagley yelled out, "Heave her. Let her come. It's getting pretty hot here." But by the time the vessels closed enough for Scott to heave the line, an enemy shell exploded among *Winslow*'s men, mortally wounding three men and instantly killing a fourth as well as Ensign Bagley. Bagley had become the first American military officer killed in the Spanish-American War.

Despite the enemy shelling, strong winds and shallow water, *Hudson*'s crew managed to secure a three-inch hawser to the *Winslow* and tried to tow her out of range. The hawser snapped due either to the strain or enemy fire, but Newcomb determined to succeed a second time, exclaiming, "We will make it fast this time." Newcomb plowed further into the mud, backing and filling to carve a path to the stricken *Winslow*. *Hudson*'s crew tied the torpedo boat alongside the cutter in tugboat fashion and Newcomb finally hauled the torpedo boat out of range of the Spanish guns.

The men of the *Winslow* and *Hudson* served with honor during the Battle of Cardenas Bay. *Winslow* withstood eighteen shell hits. Her smokestack and ventilator were shot down, her armored conning tower was disabled, and her hull holed just above the water line. The enemy killed five of her crew, including Ensign Bagley, and wounded several more. Suffering from a



Lieutenant John Bernadou served as Winslow's first commanding officer. Before the war, Bernadou served as an intelligence analyst and as a weapons officer at the Navy's Torpedo Station in Newport, Rhode Island. (NHHC photo)

serious shrapnel wound, Bernadou was transferred with the other wounded to the *Wilmington* for medical attention. Congress recognized three of *Winslow*'s crew with the Congressional Medal of Honor for their heroism. Despite the fierce fighting experienced during the day, *Hudson*'s work was not finished and Newcomb received orders to ferry *Winslow*'s dead and wounded to Key West. That evening, *Winslow*'s casualties were loaded onto the *Hudson* and Newcomb steamed the cutter to the fleet's base of operations, arriving at 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

During the summer, *Hudson* continued to serve as the guard ship for Cardenas Bay, stationed farther east than any other blockade vessel. While blockading the approaches to the bay, *Hudson* captured three vessels carrying stores to the enemy at Cardenas and destroyed a fourth. In addition, *Hudson* landed two detachments of Cuban insurgents and their equipment inside the bay to reinforce the insurgents surrounding the port city. *Hudson* also fired on a suspected Spanish torpedo boat. The vessel proved to be a hulk filled with explosives by the Spanish in hopes of destroying an unsuspecting U.S. Navy vessel. The explosives ship was later destroyed by the USS *San Francisco*.

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When asked in 1940 to provide a name for a Fletcher-class destroyer, Coast Guard commandant Russell Wasesche forwarded Newcomb's name without hesitation. The destroyer enjoyed a very active operations career in World War II. During the 1945 Okinawa campaign, the ship suffered several kamikaze strikes, however the crew kept the ship afloat and she survived the war. (NHHC photo)

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One night while on duty at Cardenas, the Spanish liner *Montserrat* attempted to break through the blockade at nearby Matanzas. Signal rockets shot up from the American guard ship and *Hudson* poured on the steam to assist. *Hudson* made her best speed ever with flames shooting out of her smoke stack, but *Hudson* arrived too late and the *Montserrat* made the safety of the Cuban harbor. It was rumored that the Spanish ship carried a cargo of war munitions and pay for the Spanish troops, and thus Newcomb tried to devise a way to capture the moored vessel while patrolling outside of Matanzas.

At 4:00 a.m. on Monday, May 16 Newcomb declared, "I think that we will take a look at the *Montserrat*." In the darkness of the early morning, Newcomb quietly steered his cutter under the walls of the fort overlooking the harbor, just inside the white ranging buoys of enemy artillery. Day broke just as *Hudson* approached *Montserrat* and the sun lit up the cutter. Completely exposed by the light and vulnerable to Spanish artillery, Newcomb ordered *Hudson* out of the bay at full speed. He had, however, confirmed the identity and location of the steamer for the fleet's commander.

Hudson continued her patrol operations through July and by mid-August, at the conclusion of the brief war, the cutter returned to a rousing welcome at her

homeport of New York City. In a special message to Congress, President William McKinley commended *Hudson* for rescuing the *Winslow* "in the face of a most galling fire" and Congress recognized *Hudson*'s crew with specially minted medals for their valor. A joint resolution provided Lt. Newcomb with the war's only gold medal awarded by Congress and the Revenue Cutter Service advanced Newcomb seven points in the promotion system, fast-tracking him to the rank of captain by 1902. Congress awarded *Hudson*'s line and engineering officers silver medals, and awarded bronze medals to the enlisted crew members, including Ship's Steward Henry Savage and Boy Moses Jones. This proved the first time in Revenue Cutter Service history that African Americans received such medals for heroism in combat.

By 1900, Newcomb had reached the age of fifty-four and served in a variety of service roles for the next decade. Highlights of his final ten years included assignments as Supervisor of Anchorages (an early version of captain of the port) for New York Harbor, and Superintendent of Construction of Life-Saving Stations for the Atlantic Coast and Great Lakes at a time when dozens of such stations were erected on those shores.

In 1910, after forty-six years of service, Frank Newcomb retired at the mandatory age of sixty-four. He concluded his career with

the rank of captain commandant, a flag rank by today's standards, and in 1927, received the rank of commodore on the retired list. In 1943, Newcomb died of natural causes and was interred with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. From his birth in Boston to the christening of a World War II warship in his honor, the story of Frank Newcomb had spanned a century. It also involved three of the nation's sea services, or possibly four if one includes the U.S. Navy, the Revenue Cutter Service, the U.S. Life-Saving Service as well as the modern Coast Guard.

Throughout his career, Newcomb achieved success through modesty and humility and dedicated his life to the betterment of others regardless of their background or station in life. In addition to his role in saving *Winslow* in the Battle of Cardenas Bay, Newcomb also played an important part in instituting Pea Island's African American crew, helping pioneer the role of minorities in the Coast Guard. Newcomb's courage and determination prevailed not only in the field of battle against a foreign enemy, but also in the struggle for racial equality against entrenched cultural norms and political forces in his own country. His career and life proved a testament to the Coast Guard's core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty. 