

Combat Stories of the U.S. Coast Guard

Revenue Cutter *Hudson* and the Battle of Cardenas Bay, 1898

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At a little over three months, the Spanish-American War of 1898 proved a brief engagement as most wars go. However, it served as a reminder of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service's ability to support the country's military in time of war. A predecessor service to today's Coast Guard, the Revenue Cutter Service fought proudly in both Atlantic and Pacific theaters of this conflict, also known to as the War with Spain. While numerous revenue cutters served honorably throughout the hostilities, few distinguished themselves as much as Revenue Cutter *Hudson*.

In March of 1898, after the United States declared war with Spain, an executive order placed *Hudson* and all other revenue cutters under the direction of the U.S. Navy. Shortly thereafter this small cutter received an armament of two six-pound rapid-fire guns and a Colt automatic "machine" gun. Designed to serve harbor patrol duties on the East Coast, the new ninety-five foot *Hudson* proved technologically advanced for its day with all steel plating, a triple-expansion reciprocating steam engine and a tugboat shaped hull.

Despite its special features, *Hudson*'s crew set the cutter apart from the rest of the fleet. The crew of twenty included executive officer, First Lieutenant J.H. Scott, Third Lieutenant Ernest E. Mead, First Assistant Engineer N.E. Cutchin, Second Assistant Engineer T.G. Lewton, Ship's Steward Henry Savage and Ship's Cook Moses Jones. *Hudson*'s captain, Lieutenant Frank H. Newcomb, had been in the service since 1873 and, while still a teenager, served as a Navy officer in the Civil War. Newcomb was the only crewmember that had seen combat action, but he would later write in an after action report that each of his crewmembers performed "in a cool and efficient manner" under fire.

By May of 1898, *Hudson* had been attached to the naval squadron blockading Spanish shipping between Matanzas and Cardenas, Cuba. During the early days of that month, three Spanish gunboats had sortied from Cardenas to harass the American squadron. Due to the threat posed by these enemy vessels, squadron leader and Navy commander, John Merry, decided to destroy them while they were moored in Cardenas Harbor. On May 11th the torpedo boat USS *Winslow* spearheaded the attack with the slower *Hudson* following behind. As soon as *Winslow* entered the harbor, Spanish shore batteries and the gunboats opened fire, disabling the *Winslow* boat and killing or wounding many on board the torpedo boat.

During the battle, crew members of the *Hudson* served with distinction as they manned guns and worked on deck without any protection from enemy fire. Commanded by lieutenants Scott and Mead, the gun crews kept up a steady covering fire at close range as *Hudson* moved in to rescue the crippled *Winslow* and its surviving crew members. At the height of the action *Hudson* kept up a hot covering fire of 135 rounds in the span of twenty minutes. According to Mead, each one of the rounds "shook *Hudson* from stem to

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stern.” As *Hudson* drew nearer to *Winslow*, enemy shells landed all around, and one of them cut down a group of *Winslow*’s crewmembers trying to receive the towline. After half-an-hour under constant fire, the crew of the *Hudson* managed to secure a line to *Winslow* and tow the torpedo boat beyond the range of Spanish guns. The day’s action had resulted in the destruction of two Spanish gunboats, but it cost the lives of several on board the *Winslow*, including the only naval officer lost during the War. *Hudson* had been spared serious damage and departed in the evening for Key West carrying dispatches and *Winslow*’s dead and wounded.

Many men had served with honor that day at Cardenas. Congress awarded three *Winslow* crewmembers the Medal of Honor. On special recommendation by President McKinley, 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 his officers were awarded silver medals. Congress awarded bronze medals to the enlisted crewmembers, including Henry Savage and Moses Jones, who fed ammunition to their respective six-pound gun batteries. This proved the first time in Coast Guard history that African-Americans received medals for heroism in combat operations.

The crew of the *Hudson* performed honorably in the face of intense enemy fire. In a letter written to the Treasury Department a month after the enemy action at Cardenas, Newcomb reported that “Each and every member of the crew . . . did his whole duty cheerfully and without the least hesitation.” The honor and discipline demonstrated by *Hudson*’s officers and enlisted men allowed the crew to work as a team to fulfill the vessel’s mission in spite of the odds against their success.