

from
**THE “MAINE”: AN ACCOUNT OF
HER DESTRUCTION
1898**

----- *Captain Charles D. Sigsbee* -----

During the second Cuban war for independence, President William McKinley stationed the U.S. battleship *Maine* near Cuba to protect American lives and property. On February 15, 1898, it exploded in Havana harbor, killing 266 people. After widespread press coverage mistakenly blamed the explosion on Spain, public outcry forced a reluctant McKinley to declare war. The *Maine*'s captain, Charles D. Sigsbee (1845–1923) published this personal account of the incident in 1899.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Distinguishing Fact from Opinion

What does this eyewitness account reveal about the explosion of the *Maine*? What other kinds of evidence should a historian use to understand what happened and what it meant?

At taps (“turn in and keep quiet”), ten minutes after nine o’clock, I laid down my pen to listen to the notes of the bugle, which were singularly beautiful in the oppressive stillness of the night. The marine bugler, Newton, who was rather given to fanciful effects, was evidently doing his best. During his pauses the echoes floated back to the ship with singular distinctness, repeating the strains of the bugle fully and exactly. A half-hour later, Newton was dead.

I was inclosing my letter in its envelop when the explosion came. The impression made on different people on board the *Maine* varied somewhat. To me, in my position, well aft, and within the superstructure, it was a bursting, rending, and crashing sound or roar of immense volume, largely metallic in character. It was followed by a succession of heavy, ominous, metallic sounds, probably caused by the overturning of the central superstructure and by falling debris. There was a trembling and lurching motion of the vessel, a list to port, and a movement of subsidence. The electric lights, of which there were eight in the cabin where I was sitting, went out. Then there was intense blackness and smoke.

The situation could not be mistaken: the *Maine* was blown up and sinking. For a moment the instinct of self-preservation took charge of me, but this was immediately dominated by the habit of command. I went up the inclined deck into the starboard cabin, toward the starboard airports, which were faintly

relieved against the background of the sky. The sashes were out, and the openings were large. My first intention was to escape through an air-port, but this was abandoned in favor of the more dignified way of making an exit through the passageway leading forward through the superstructure. I groped my way through the cabin into the passage, and along the passage to the outer door. The passage turned to the right, or starboard, near the forward part of the superstructure.

At the turning, some one ran into me violently. I asked who it was. It was Private William Anthony, the orderly at the cabin door. He said something apologetic, and reported that the ship had been blown up and was sinking. He was directed to go out on the quarter-deck, and I followed him. Anthony has been pictured as making an exceedingly formal salute on that occasion. The dramatic effect of a salute cannot add to his heroism. If he had made a salute it could not have been seen in the blackness of that compartment. Anthony did his whole duty, at great personal risk, at a time when he might have evaded the danger without question, and deserved all the commendation that he received for his act. He hung near me with unflagging zeal and watchfulness that night until the ship was abandoned.

I stood for a moment on the starboard side of the main-deck, forward of the after-superstructure, looking toward the immense dark mass that loomed up amidships, but could see nothing distinctly. There I remained for a few seconds in an effort to grasp the situation, and then asked Anthony for the exact time. He replied: "The explosion took place at nine-forty, sir." It was soon necessary to retire from the main-deck, for the after-part of the ship was sinking rapidly. I then went up on the poop-deck. By this time Lieutenant-Commander Wainwright and others were near me. Everybody was impressed by the solemnity of the disaster, but there was no excitement apparent; perfect discipline prevailed.

The question has been asked many times if I believed then that the *Maine* was blown up from the outside. My answer to this has been that my first order on reaching the deck was to post sentries about the ship. I knew that the *Maine* had been blown up, and believed that she had been blown up from the outside. Therefore I ordered a measure which was intended to guard against attack. There was no need for the order, but I am writing of first impressions. There was the sound of many voices from the shore, suggestive of cheers.

I stood on the starboard side-rail of the poop and held on to the main-rigging in order to see over the poop-awning, which was bagged and covered with debris. I was still trying to take in the situation more completely. The officers were near me and showing a courteous recognition of my authority and responsibility. Directions were given in a low tone to Executive Officer Wainwright, who himself gave orders quietly and directed operations. Fire broke out in the mass amidships. Orders were given to flood the forward magazine, but the forward part of the ship was found to be under water. Inquiry

as to the after-magazines and the guncotton magazine in the after-part of the ship showed a like condition of those compartments, as reported by those who had escaped from the ward-room and junior officers' quarters. In the captain's spare pantry in the after-superstructure there was spare ammunition. It was seen that this would soon be submerged, and that precautions in respect to the magazines were unnecessary.

The great loss of life was not then fully realized. Our eyes were not yet accustomed to the darkness. Most of us had come from the glare of the electric lights. The flames increased in the central superstructure, and I directed Lieutenant-Commander Wainwright to make an effort to play streams on the fire if practicable. He went forward on the poop-awning, accompanied by Lieutenant Hood and Naval Cadets Boyd and Cluverius, making a gallant inspection in the region of the fire, but was soon obliged to report that nothing could be done. The fire-mains and all other facilities were destroyed, and men were not available for the service.

We then began to realize more clearly the full extent of the damage. One of the smoke-stacks was lying in the water on the starboard side. Although it was almost directly under me, I had not at first identified it. As my eyes became more accustomed to the darkness, I could see, dimly, white forms on the water, and hear faint cries for help. Realizing that the white forms were our own men, boats were lowered at once and sent to the assistance of the injured and drowning men. Orders were given, but they were hardly necessary: the resourceful intelligence of the officers suggested correct measures in the emergency. Only three of our fifteen boats were available—the barge, the captain's gig, and the whale-boat. The barge was badly injured. Two of these were manned by officers and men jointly. How long they were gone from the ship I cannot recall, but probably fifteen minutes. Those of us who were left on board remained quietly on the poop-deck.

Nothing further could be done; the ship was settling rapidly. There was one wounded man on the poop; he had been hauled from under a ventilator on the main-deck by Lieutenants Hood and Blandin just as the water was rising over him. Other boats, too, were rescuing the wounded and drowning men. Chief among them were the boats from the *Alfonso XII*, and from the steamer *City of Washington*. The visiting boats had arrived promptly, and were unsparing of effort in saving the wounded. The Spanish officers and crews did all that humanity and gallantry could compass. During the absence of our boats the fire in the wreck of the central superstructure became fiercer. The spare ammunition that had been stowed in the pilot-house or thrown up from the magazines below was exploding in detail. It continued to explode at intervals until nearly two o'clock in the morning.

At night it was the custom on board the *Maine* to close all water-tight compartments except the few needed to afford passageway for the crew. They had been reported closed as usual that night. Down the cabin skylights the air

could be heard whistling through the seams of the doors and hatches, indicating that even the after-bulkheads had been so strained as to admit the water into the compartments. Presently Lieutenant-Commander Wainwright came to me and reported that our boats had returned alongside the ship at the stern, and that all the wounded that could be found had been gathered in and sent to the Spanish cruiser and the *City of Washington* and elsewhere. The after-part of the poop-deck of the *Maine*, the highest intact point above water, was then level with the gig's gunwale, while that boat was in the water alongside. We had done everything that could be done, so far as could be seen.

It was a hard blow to be obliged to leave the *Maine*; none of us desired to leave while any part of her poop remained above water. We waited until satisfied that she was resting on the bottom of the harbor. Lieutenant-Commander Wainwright then whispered to me that he thought the forward ten-inch magazine had been thrown up into the burning material amidships and might explode at any time, with further disastrous effects. He was then directed to get everybody into the boats, which was done. It was an easy operation; one had only to step directly from the deck into the boat. There was still some delay to make sure that the ship's stern had grounded, and still more because of the extreme politeness of the officers, who considerately offered me a steadying hand to step into the boat. Lieutenant-Commander Wainwright stood on one side and Lieutenant Holman on the other; each offered me a hand. I suggested the propriety of my being the last to leave, and requested them to precede me, which they did. There was favorable comment later in the press because I left last. It is a fact that I was the last to leave, which was only proper; that is to say, it would have been improper otherwise; but virtually all left last. The fine conduct of those who came under my observation that night was conspicuous and touching. The heroism of the wounded men I did not see at the time, but afterward good reports of their behavior were very common. The patient way in which they bore themselves left no doubt that they added new honors to the service when the *Maine* went down.

Source: *The "Maine": An Account of Her Destruction in Havana Harbor* by Captain Charles D. Sigsbee (New York: The Century Co., 1899), pp. 63–73.