Selected Resources in the Naval Historical Center on the Asiatic Squadron and the Asiatic Fleet in East Asia, 1865-1942

Martha L. Crawley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol1985/iss76/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of East Asian Libraries by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The United States Navy long maintained a presence in the Far East. In 1822 the Pacific Squadron was established to cruise to Asia to protect American trade and to show the flag. Following British and French examples, American warships sailed along the Chinese coast while Japan was still locked away from foreign contact. The name of the command was changed to the East India Squadron in 1835. Commodore Matthew Perry brought his East India Squadron into the forbidden home waters of Japan in 1853, and trade began with merchants of the Empire. During that famous voyage the Squadron also visited Shanghai, Canton, and Hong Kong, showing the flag wherever American merchantmen plied the sea.

The East India Squadron routinely cruised East Asian waters until the American Civil War diverted the Navy’s resources in 1861. From 1861 to 1865 ships occasionally visited Asia, but not as a squadron until 1865, when a new Asiatic Squadron was formed.

From 1865 to 1883 the new Squadron visited Chinese and Japanese ports, as well as harbors in other areas of Asia, India, and Africa. In 1883 it no longer covered East Africa and the western Indian Ocean, but still covered a huge cruising area. Places that were under the firm colonial control of European powers, such as India, got few visits, while China and Japan saw frequent calls by American ships. In China, they visited Chefoo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. In Japan the usual ports of call were Nagasaki, Kobe, and Yokohama. Korea remained closed to American trade until a treaty was signed in 1882 by representatives of that country and by Commodore R.W. Shufeldt. American naval ships were then able to make occasional visits to Korea.

Due to foreign policy needs, in 1907 the Asiatic Squadron was disbanded and its ships were sent to South American waters. However, with the growing power of Japan and the continuing unrest in China, Americans in the Far East desired a renewal of a strong naval presence. In 1910 a larger Asiatic Fleet was formed which included heavy cruisers. The Yangtze Patrol, first established in 1903, was reformed with more gunboats than before. This force cruised East Asia until it was overtaken by war with Japan in December 1941.

Much of this rich history is documented by sources in the Naval Historical Center. Students of China and Japan can find views of these countries' customs, scenery and life from the descriptions of American Navy men. In addition planning materials trace the reaction of the Navy to growing Japanese military power. Finally, the end of the fleet in East Asia in the very early months of World War II is vividly described. First, I will consider the
descriptive material in the Naval Historical Center; next I will outline sources for study of plans of the U.S. Navy for operations in the Pacific against Japan and of the final days of the Asiatic Fleet.

The Naval Historical Center, located in Building 57 in the Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C., collects information on naval history and makes it available to the public. A general description of the branches of the Historical Center and of many other repositories that hold material on naval history is in U.S. Naval History Sources in the United States (Washington: G.P.O., 1979) by Dean C. Allard, Martha L. Crawley and Mary W. Edmison. Three branches of the Center that hold materials relating to the Asiatic Fleet and Squadron will be discussed in this paper: the Navy Department Library, the Operational Archives Branch, and the Curator Branch. Unless otherwise noted, these sources are in English.

The Library, which is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, holds about 150,000 volumes, mostly published works. I will not describe published books generally available, but rather reference materials that are hard to find in non-specialized libraries. Useful sources for the study of the Asiatic Fleet are the Secretary of the Navy's Annual Report, the Navy Register, and the Navy Directory. The secretary's annual report is a comprehensive account of the activity of all of the fleets, forces, and naval shore commands. The general movements of the Asiatic Fleet and any special visits or incidents that might have occurred in Asian countries would be noted here. In addition, reports of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, the Bureau of Navigation, and other bureaus to the Secretary of the Navy are compiled here through 1940. While the entire period from 1865 through 1932 is amply covered, the reports from 1933 through 1940 are very brief. The Library holds only short pamphlet reports of the Secretary, and none for the bureaus, for 1941 and 1942. The Register is a list of naval officers and their duty stations for the entire period except for 1941 and 1942. Those last two years list the officers but not their current assignments. The Directory is an outline of naval commands which also lists officers and their assignments from 1908 to 1940. A full picture of the composition and leadership of the Fleet for each year can be found here. For our period, there is ample coverage for the Asiatic Fleet in these three main sources. The Navy Library provides duplicate copies of these sets, if available, on inter-library loan.

In addition to these the Library holds a microfilm set of the letters received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commanding Officers of Squadrons. These films, the originals of which are in the U.S. National Archives, are available via inter-library loan and provide detailed information on the experiences of the Asiatic Squadron from 1865 to 1885. Ten reels of this 300 reel set cover the Squadron for this period. The Library also holds microfilms of the Annual Reports of the fleets, including four reels of Asiatic Fleet reports for 1920 to 1941, which are also available on inter-library loan.

These basic sources are supplemented by a number of other items of use in the study of the Asiatic Fleet. For example, two Center for Naval Analyses Reports by Stephen S. Roberts, An Indicator of Informal Empire: Patterns of Cruising on Overseas Stations, 1869-1897 (Alexandria, Va.: The Center, 1980) The Decline of the Overseas Station Fleets: The United States Asiatic Fleet

-10-
and the Shanghai Crisis, 1932 (Alexandria, Va.: The Center, 1977) provide very useful data on the movements and activities of the Asiatic Fleet. A dissertation held in the Special Collection entitled "Sailors and Diplomats: U.S. Naval Operations in China, 1865-1877" by Charles C. Chadbourn, III (Ph.D. thesis, University of Washington, 1976) is also available on microfilm. These are examples of specialized works that can be obtained via inter-library loan channels. Other dissertations and publications such as the Asiatic Fleet Regulations are located in the Special Collection and do not circulate but may be consulted at the Library.

One item of special interest located in the Library's Rare Book Room is Robert J. Patterson's diary kept on board the U.S. Ship *Jamestown* of the East India, China, and Japan station from 1862-1865. This handwritten diary includes an account of the author's experiences in Asia, including his trip on the chartered steamer *Ta Kiang* in 1864 on an expedition in the Japanese Island Sea. Also included in his diary are descriptions of Jeddo, (i.e. Edo) Japan and of Woosung, China. This fascinating rare item also does not circulate but may be read at the Library.

Another site for research at the Naval Historical Center is the Operational Archives Branch, located two floors above the Library. This Branch, where the reading room is open from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, holds about 10,000 linear feet of unpublished documents on naval history. Although most of these files date from 1939, there are certain collections of general interest to the student of the Asiatic Squadron and Fleet. The Early Records Section has biographical files of officers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Navy. This section also has folders on various operations in Asia and on the Fleet in general. In addition, the diaries of Glen Howell, a naval officer who was stationed in China in the 1920s, are located in this section. Howell's multi-volume diary includes a detailed picture of the life of a young officer in China.

Several other collections, such as the Records of the General Board, contain scattered references to the Asiatic Fleet. The General Board records are indexed. The Oral History Collection of the U.S. Naval Institute contains the reminiscences of many officers who were on the China Station. The oral memoirs of Captain Henri Smith-Hutton, Captain Stephen Jurika, Jr., Rear Admiral George Bauernschmidt, Rear Admiral Kemp Tolley, and others include descriptions of China and Japan. The card index to these oral histories contains numerous references to China, Japan, and the Asiatic Fleet. Although these bound volumes are open for research at the Operational Archives, some require the permission of the interviewee for citation or quotation.

Further descriptive material on the Asiatic Fleet, particularly in China, is located in the official and family correspondence of Admiral Willard Brownson, Commander of the Fleet in 1906, and in the files of the last two Fleet Commanders, Admiral Harry E. Yarnell and Admiral Thomas C. Hart. The correspondence and subject files of these admirals are most illuminating. These collections are conveniently described by checklists.

Most of the sources already listed are the reminiscences, papers, or reports of officers. A collection that provides documentation on the lives of both officers and enlisted men in Asia is the China Repository. This is a collection of memoirs, letters, scrapbooks, and photographs donated by Navy men
who served in China. The coverage for the 1920s and 1930s for the Yangtze River Patrol is particularly full. Manuscript items are held in the Operational Archives Branch, while photographs are kept in the Curator Branch, which will be described later. Certain donations to the China Repository are of particular interest. Seaman Cephas Smith's "Letters from the Orient" is a rare set of letters that he printed and bound on board USS Black Hawk of the Asiatic Fleet. These were sample letters describing shipboard life and local customs in China, Japan, and other places that the ships visited. Each letter had a blank space in the salutation so that a sailor could send it home as a letter to his family.

Another important entry in the collection is Radioman First Class Henry J. Poy's two folders of reminiscences of life as a Chinese-American born in Seattle, stationed on board USS Huron, Isabel, and Pampanga. Mr. Poy, who had the advantage of speaking Chinese, describes events on the Yangtze and other Chinese rivers, and in the cities of China in 1923 and 1924. The letters and journals of Rear Admiral Kemp Tolley describe the life of a junior officer in China in the 1930s. Another series in the collection are the papers of Commander Roy C. Smith, Jr., commanding officer of USS Noa during the famous Nanking Incident of 1927. The newsletter of the Yangtze River Patrol Association provides interesting anecdotes of members of that group who shared many years experience on the Yangtze Patrol. It would be impossible to list here all of the entries found in the checklist to the China Repository. A visit to the Historical Center would reveal all of these entries to the researcher.

Many of the donations to the China Repository are photographs. To consult them, a researcher should visit the Curator Branch of the Historical Center, where paintings artifacts, and photographs are held. I will describe here the relevant photographic collection only. The Photographic Section is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. Here, as in the China Repository manuscripts, the 1920s and 1930s, and particularly the Yangtze River Patrol, are heavily represented. Photographs of daily life in Shanghai and in other cities, as well as scenes of life on board ship in the Asiatic Fleet, are plentiful. Mr. Poy’s memoir is supplemented by his photo album located in this Branch. Interestingly, in addition to the photographs of China, Mr. Poy took pictures in Yokohama and Tokyo of the aftermath of the great earthquake of 1923, when his ship went to Japan to render assistance. There is an excellent card index to these photographs which contains approximately 2,500 references to China, 800 references to Japan, and 1,000 references to the Asiatic Fleet. The curators can rapidly locate photographs by subject, provide catalog information to the researcher, and provide copies for sale.

As shown above, the Navy Library, the Operational Archives Branch, and the Curator Branch have many sources which describe life in the Asiatic Squadron and Fleet, particularly in China. Other parts of the Center, such as the Ships' Histories Branch and the non-profit Naval Historical Foundation, also contain some relevant materials that could be of use and should be consulted when visiting the Center. For example, the Ships' Histories Branch, which publishes the Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, has information on many Asiatic Fleet ships.
The rest of this paper concerns the holdings of the Center on American war plans against Japan and on the withdrawal of the Asiatic Fleet in the face of Japanese might in 1941 and early 1942. I will concentrate mainly on the Operational Archives Branch. The U.S. Navy began planning for war in the Pacific in the late nineteenth century. In the War Portfolios of the General Board Records, plans and intelligence reports to be used in a war against Japan are present as early as 1897 with the "Plan of Campaign against Spain and Japan." Japan was given the code "Orange" in war planning. War Portfolio No. 2, Ref. No. 5-1, contains an Orange War Plan of 1914 with supporting reference material. The War Portfolios are described in a checklist. The best source for the rest of the Orange plans are the Strategic Plans Division Records. These files, described in a detailed checklist, have numerous versions of the Orange Plans and supporting studies. These include some Joint Army-Navy Plans as well as Navy Basic War Plans. The Navy Basic War Plan Orange (four volumes also known as WPL 13,14,15 and 16) is available for purchase on microfilm from the Operational Archives. The rest of the planning material is available for consultation in the Branch.

In 1939 the Army and Navy began planning for a war of a coalition of allies against a coalition of Japan and her partners. These plans were called the Rainbow Plans. In May 1941 the first version of the Navy's Basic War Plan Rainbow 5, which was eventually used to fight the war, was promulgated. Finally, fleet and lower level plans are filed in a collection called Operational Plans. There are some, although not many for the 1939-1941 period for the Asiatic Fleet.

Despite decades of planning, when war actually came in the Far East, the results to American forces were devastating. As early as 1937 the Asiatic Fleet suffered the loss of USS Panay, a Yangtze gunboat sunk by the Japanese. The Board of Investigation report of that sinking is located in a fully indexed general reference "Command File" in the Operational Archives Branch. This report is also available for purchase on microfilm. Further information on the Panay sinking and on the Sino-Japanese War in the late 1930s can be found in the memoirs in the China Repository. Photographs of that war are indexed in the Curator Branch, photographic section. Many of these show the activities of Chinese military units as well as of the Japanese forces that were fighting in China. In addition, scenes of the bombing of Shanghai from Japanese airplanes show an early use of this method of warfare. Certain rare items in the Special Collection of the Library also cover the coming war in Asia, such as American Forces in Shanghai (Shanghai, s.n., 1939), which is a yearbook of the Fourth Marines containing photographs of the Sino-Japanese War.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor began the open conflict on 7 December 1941. The Library holds the extensive Congressional Hearings on Pearl Harbor which are available on inter-library loan. The report of the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet is filed in the Operational Archives and is available for purchase on microfilm. The Curator Branch also holds photographs of the damage inflicted by the attack. From December 8, 1941, until February 15, 1942, elements of the Asiatic Fleet fought against overwhelming odds as the Japanese fleet won victory after victory. In autumn of 1940 the Fleet's headquarters were moved from Shanghai to Manila, although the Yangtze Patrol gunboats remained in China. On December 8, 1941 one of
those ships was taken by Japan, one given to the Chinese, and the rest sailed through Japanese-held waters to the Philippines, which itself was soon attacked. On the 26th of that month, Admiral Hart and his fleet headquarters staff escaped by submarine to Java to join the fight there with the ABDA (American, British, Dutch, Australian) Command. On the 4th of February he was relieved of his duties as Commander-in-Chief of the Asiatic Fleet, which then ceased to exist as a separate entity.

The story of this gradual retreat is told in numerous sources. A small collection of messages and of folders on ships and squadrons of the Asiatic Fleet and the Asiatic Defense Campaign is available in the Operational Archives. These items comprise about three linear feet of material and are not indexed. In addition to these records, another excellent source for that unsuccessful campaign is the diary of Admiral Hart, the last Commander-in-Chief of the Asiatic Fleet. His daily account of defeat as parts of the fleet withdrew from China and the Philippines to Indonesia and Australia is a valuable document. Admiral Hart also wrote a short summary, "Narrative of Events" covering December 8, 1941 to February 15, 1942 which is filed here and in the Library's Special Collection.

A major collection in the Operational Archives are the records of the Japanese Navy and Related Documents. Acquired from a variety of sources and including the filming of Japanese documents captured after the war, they contain translations prepared by various intelligence commands and some material in Japanese. The bulk of this collection dates from after the period covered by this paper; however, a visitor using the four volume checklist in the reading room of the Archives can glean materials on the Sino-Japanese War and on early months of World War II.

The best source of official detailed accounts of the early battles in the Far East are the action reports filed by fleet, task force, and ship commanders. These are fully indexed by geographical area and by the command originating the report. Individual reports are available for purchase on microfilm. In addition, the war patrol reports filed by submarine commanders recount the daring rescue missions and other exploits of the subs during the last days of the Asiatic Fleet. War diaries, a major source for World War II events, though often not very detailed for the first few months of the war, can include some useful information on this period.

In February 1942 the Asiatic Fleet ceased to exist when the long tradition of its cruising in East Asian waters was ended by total war. Scholars interested in the rich heritage of the U.S. Navy in Asia should visit the Naval Historical Center to consult the wealth of information on Asia, on war planning, and on the outbreak of war against Japan. Inquiries may be addressed to the Naval Historical Center, Building 57, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, DC 20374. Our archivists, librarians, historians, and curators would be glad to assist you, should you visit the Center.