

A MODERN SEA FIGHT.

Its Horrors as Illustrated in the Chile-Peruvian War.

The following account of a fight between two modern naval vessels—the two-turret ship *Huascar*, of Peru, and the ironclad *Almirante Cochrane*, of Chili—is taken from 'A Famous Sea Fight' (in the Chilean-Peruvian war of 1879), by Claude H. Wetmore:—

The drummers and buglers were ordered to sound calls, first for general quarters, then for action; and stripped to the waist, the guns' crews crowded into the ill-ventilated turret, where they were to toil and sweat at the great pieces in an atmosphere that the sun's fierce rays, already causing the morning to be close and sticky, would make stifling. Ammunition holds were thrown open, and the long curtains of green felt were slung from the deck beams above to protect the magazine passages, in order that sparks might not fall among the explosives. A dozen men hurried into the main military top to serve the Gatling guns and rifles there. Rubber cloths were stretched over the ward-room table, and fastened in such a manner that the blood of the wounded would flow smoothly and be caught in buckets that were placed at the four corners, for there one science would endeavor to save the lives that another science was trying to destroy. The surgeon and his assistants laid out scalpels, long gleaming knives, and saws. Huge piles of lint were placed on the floor.

The stewards hurriedly passed about coffee and bread, and the sailors in the turret ate their morning meal leaning against the already loaded pieces, and those in the top had pails of coffee carried up to them, which they drank while setting their sights. The hinged bulwarks of the little vessel were let down, and the smooth water rippled only four feet below the *Huascar's* deck. The forecastle and main hatches were battened, but the after companionway was left open, for down this passage the wounded would be taken. Between decks were stationed those sailors not needed in service of the guns, where they would be most handy to assist in the navigation of the ship, the service of ammunition, or to replace the killed. A score of non-combatants were also there. At nine o'clock the *Cochrane* was within three thousand yards, and *Grau*, having given his last glance around, and having signalled the Union to keep out of the enemy's way, entered the conning tower that was to prove his tomb. Not a shot had as yet been fired. These modern ships, carrying guns that could throw a shell from four to five miles, reserved their fire for closer quarters. Five minutes later *Grau* gave a command to the officers in the turret, and a shot from one of the *Huascar's* ten-inch guns whistled over the water. The commander of the *Cochrane* evidently wished for still closer range, and did not reply until three shots had left the turret of the little ship. Finally the answer came in the shape of a broadside, and a shell dented the *Huascar's* protective belt just above the water-line. A moment later the Gatling guns in the tops of both ships were brought into action, and a leaden hail began to patter, while great projectiles were hurled from the large deck cannon. The rapid-firing pieces of the Chilians were trained upon the *Huascar's* turret apertures, while the one in the military top of the latter vessel was aimed at the gun ports of the enemy. Many a man dropped, dead or wounded, hit by one of these shot. For fifteen minutes not much was accomplished by the great gunfire; the heavy shot either fell short of the mark or were buried in the armor. By this time, when the ships were within fifteen hundred yards of each other, a shell from the *Cochrane* entered the *Huascar's* turret, exploded and killed twelve men. But the places of the dead were quickly taken by men from below, the chamber was cleared of the corpses, the guns were loaded again, and the action was renewed. Then the *Huascar* secured an advantage. One of her ten-inch shells forced its way through a casemate on the starboard side of the *Cochrane*, exploded on the deck, dismantled a gun and killed several men. For a few minutes the enemy was in such confusion that not a cannon was fired; and it became almost a panic on board the *Cochrane* when the *Huascar* edged in closer, her sailors cheering as they again discharged the twin pieces.

At this stage of the combat victory perched for a moment on the red, white and red; but even as it did so the commander of the *Cochrane* saw relief which *Grau* had not perceived. In fact, a shot that ploughed into the *Huascar's* side was the first warning the Peruvian admiral had of assistance coming to the Chilians; and, looking to starboard through a peep-hole in the conning-tower, he saw the *Blanco Encalada* bearing down; while veering seaward, only a few cable-lengths astern of the rapidly approaching ironclad, were the *Mitias Conisfo* and the *Covadonga*, evidently starting off to give chase to the Union, by this time well in the offing, and fitted, because of her superior speed, to take care of herself. *Grau* therefore turned his attention to his own ship, which indeed was in sore straits.

Seeing aid at hand, the men on the *Cochrane* redoubled their efforts, and when the

Blanco had ranged along to port the horror of it began, and the engagement resolved itself into a marine carnage; for the *Huascar* lay between the two fires, the *Cochrane* to starboard, the *Blanco* to port, and both so near that the gunners in the turret of the little ship could see the faces of their adversaries as the latter sighted the pieces on the Chilean boats.

The turret rapidly became so crowded with the bodies of the dead that the steam training-gear of the iron round-house was clogged and useless. As the men struggled to remove the tumbled corpses of their comrades, blood became smeared over their chests, and it mingled with the sweat which dripped as they toiled in quarters that resembled a baking charnel-house, through which filtered steam and smoke, while a nauseous odor rose from the bodies and the heated guns. The sun beat down upon the wild scene through air so calm that after the white smoke had belched from the guns, it rose in pillars and clung to the mastheads.

From the first of the battle the encouraging voice of *Grau* had come to the men in the turret through the speaking-tube from the conning-tower; but when the *Blanco* crowded into the thick of it, and great shot struck the *Huascar's* sides as regularly as blows of a battering ram, the orders of the commander were no longer heard. The officer in charge of the turret called to his superior. There was no answer, and when Commander *Elias Aguerre* ran up the narrow little ladder that led to the tower, he stumbled over the dead body of his admiral. A shell had struck the conning-tower, and had taken off *Grau's* head as neatly as if the decapitation had been by the guillotine. This shell also killed *Lieut. Ferre*, the admiral's aide. There was only time to push the corpses aside, and the new commanding officer pulled back the tube-flap to give his directions; but as he did so the *Huascar* staggered, keeled over, then shook in every plate, while a concussion more terrific than any so far told that a shell had entered the turret and burst there. When the fumes had cleared away so that a person could speak, a midshipman called out that one of the great guns had been dismounted, and twenty men killed. The survivors tumbled the bodies through the hatch that opened into the deck below, thus releasing the clogged machinery; and as the corpses rattled down other men rushed up, throwing off their clothing as they jumped into the pools of blood to seize hold of the gear and swing the remaining gun into position, that it might train upon one of the ships—they could no longer make out which, nor did they care—and it was discharged, hauled in, loaded, and discharged again.

Once more all was silent in the conning-tower. *Lieut. Palacios* hastened there, but before he could enter he was compelled to push three bodies out of the way. He had barely given his first command when a bullet from the well-aimed rifle of a marine in an enemy's top lodged between his eyes. Then the fourth to command the *Huascar* that day, *Lieut. Pedro Garezon*, took the place, and as he did so he called through an aperture, telling the quartermaster to put the helm to port; for he had determined to ram one of the adversaries, and sink with her if necessary. Over and over spun the wheel, but the *Huascar's* head still pointed between the Chilians. 'Port? Port, I say!' screamed the commander.

'She won't answer,' come back the sullen reply from the only one of four quartermasters alive; the bodies of the others were lying upon the iron grating at his feet.

'A shot has carried away the starboard steering gear, sir,' reported an ensign; and he dropped dead as the words left his mouth.

The *Huascar* now lay drifting in a hell of shot and flame, but all the while the red, white and red fluttered from the peak. One by one in twos and threes, the men in the turret dropped at their posts; and at last the remaining great gun was silent, its tackle literally choked with dead. The turret could not be turned for the same reason. Corpses hung over the military top; corpses clogged the conning-tower.

With coats and waistcoats off, the surgeons had been laboring in the ward-room upon the wounded, who, shrieking in their agony, had been tumbled down the companionway like so much butchered beef; for there was no time to use stretchers or to carry a stricken comrade to a doctor's care. Steam and smoke filtered through the doorways, and the apartment became stifling. While they were sawing, amputating, and bandaging, a shell tore into the ward-room, burst, and fragments wounded the assistant surgeons, the chief of the medical staff having been killed earlier in the conflict. Those unfortunates who were stretched upon the table awaiting their turn under the knife, and those who lay upon the floor, suffered no more pain; they were killed as they lay groaning. This shell tore away ward-room and stern cabin, and hardly a trace was left of the bulk-head. After that what little surgery was done was performed in the coal bunkers.

Huddled in a passageway near the engine room were a score or more of non-combatants—stewards, pantrymen and stokers. They were in a place that was lighted only as flashes came from the guns, it was filled with

powder-smoke, and clouds of steam that drifted from below told that the *Huascar* had been struck in a vital spot—her machinery. Suddenly they heard a crash, followed by the rending of the deck, and the little ironclad swayed as if she had struck a reef. Some one passed the word that the maintopmast had been shot away. As it came down it brought living men to be dashed to death, also corpses that had been hanging over the sides of the military top.

There was a cry of Fire! and all hands rushed to stations—perhaps two men to a boat's crew, one to a pump gang.

'D—the fire!' shouted *Lieutenant Garezon*. 'Repel boarders!'

They were metamorphosed by this order from fire-fighters into warriors again, and formed a line of bleeding men, their clothing in rags, and, ranged in company front, stokers elbowing marines, pantrymen leveling rifles in union with midshipmen, awaited the coming of a fleet of the enemy's boats, which, crowded with marines, were forcing their way through the water towards the wounded, staggering *Huascar* that lay like a log, motionless.

But fired raged between decks, and flames flared up the after companionway; and when the boats had crowded around, like threshers attacking a whale that had been struck to the death, the few survivors were compelled to yield to the force of numbers and the Chilians swarmed the ironclad's deck. As they mounted in the red, white and red, tattered and torn by bullets, still fluttered its rags at the peak.

The victors had barely got control of the flames when word was brought to the officer commanding the boarding party that the prize was sinking. He examined her sides, and as there was no great injury below the water-line he summoned Chief Engineer *MacMahon*, and accused him of scuttling the ship. The latter laughed defiantly. The officer cocked a revolver, placed it at his head, and threatened to shoot if the man did not tell what he had done. Only then did he admit having opened the sea-valves, and the Chilians, rushing below, were only able to close them just as the blood stained water lapped the slippery deck.

There is no authentic record of the number slain, but the accounts in Callao were that of two hundred men on the *Huascar* nearly one hundred were killed, and of the remainder only half escaped without injury. The Peruvian dead were thrown into the sea as the *Blanco Encalada* took the battered, blood stained *Huascar* in tow.

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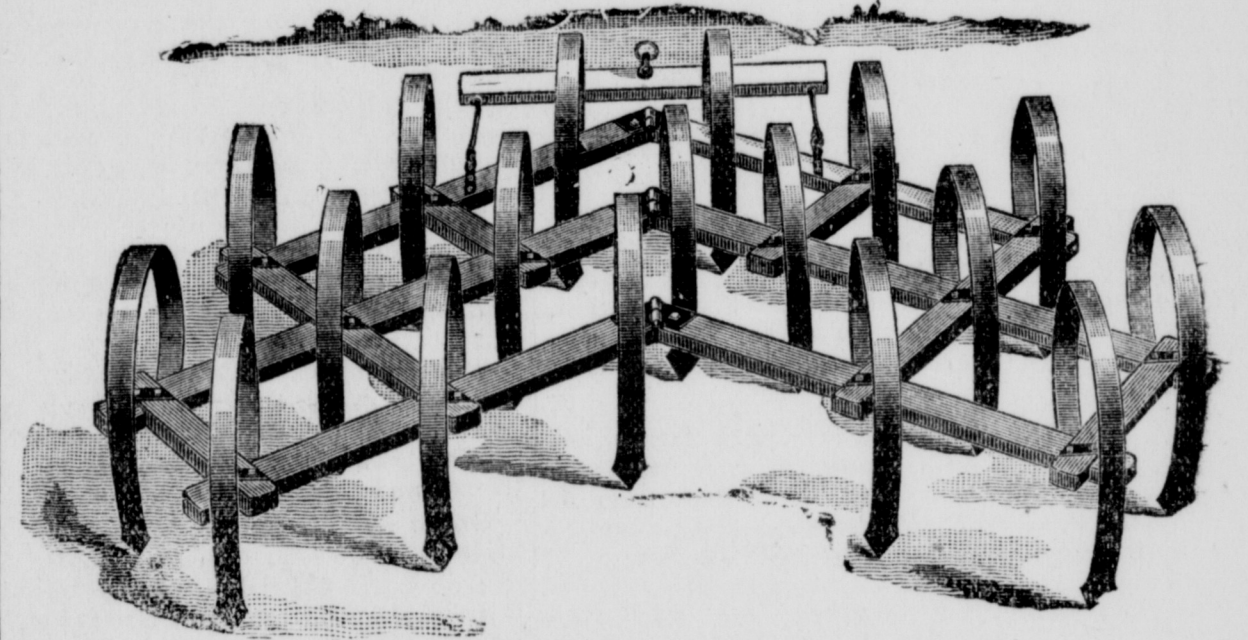
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