

FIRST INTO COMBAT

The US Navy at Vera Cruz

by Colin A Owers

Aerial view of Vera Cruz, showing the harbour. The aviation beach camp was located inside the outer breakwater. The island fortress on San Juan de Ulúa, in the centre, surrendered without a shot. :NAHC

IN 1914, UNREST IN MEXICO was heightened by President Woodrow Wilson's refusal to recognise the government of General Victoria Huerta. In response to Huerta's disregard for Americans and American property, a considerable naval force was sent to both Mexican coasts. On 9 April 1914, a boat crew from the *Dolphin* was arrested and marched through the streets of Tampico under guard. Admiral Mayo demanded an apology and gun salute to the US flag. Both demands were refused. On the 21st the President ordered Admiral Fletcher with elements of the Atlantic Fleet, off Vera Cruz, to capture the Custom House. This order was in response to news that a German ship was to unload a shipment of arms for the Huerta government on this date.

Vera Cruz was a typical 19th Century city having evolved over the years. The affluent had pastel-painted buildings with green and pink Spanish balconies which contrasted with the filth and poverty of the docks. Great sections of the port had no sanitation and were harbingers of disease. These were the areas the Navy was going to take and secure.

The entrance to the harbour was guarded by the island

fortress of San Juan de Ulúa, and the Mexican commandant was told that if he interfered with the landings the battleships would reduce the fortress to rubble. He acquiesced. The Marines and sailors landed, seizing the Custom House and other buildings, but the Fleet landing force lost 19 men to Mexican resistance. The occupation turned into a war against a phantom enemy.

On Sunday 19 April 1914 the following telegram had been received by the flotilla Commander at Pensacola:

Flotilla Commander, Birmingham, Pensacola, Fla.

Direct Commanding Officer Aeronautic station report you for service one aeroplane section consisting two flying boats or hydroaeroplanes one spare boat or pontoon two spare motors two hangars tentage for personal and other necessary spares and outfits. Lieutenant Towers in charge with Lieutenant Smith and Ensign Chevalier and ten mechanics.¹

It is worth considering that Pensacola had only been set up as the Navy's training base three months before. The *Birmingham* was immediately inspected for stowage and

On board Mississippi, en-route to Mexico, 1914. A Curtiss Hydro is stowed on the gun turret, with a flying boat visible to the left.

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