

# F D R and Fleet Problem XX

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April 1998



## FDR and Fleet Problem XX

Anyone watching as the *U.S.S. Houston* sailed from San Francisco on that cold, rainy Wednesday, January 4, 1939 would not have been overly surprised if informed that she was leaving to participate in the naval exercises for that year. After all, she had been participating in them regularly for many years. There were several circumstances, however, which would cause the 1939 exercises to be rather distinct from those of previous years.

Perhaps the most important difference was that war clouds were gathering. Germany under Hitler had rearmed, had reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936 and had incorporated Austria into the Third Reich in March 1938. The "peace in our time" that Great Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain thought he had achieved in Munich in September, 1938 by appeasing Hitler in agreeing to the removal of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia would prove to be a mere will-o-the-wisp. Within a few months now the rest of Czechoslovakia would be dismembered with the occupation of the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia" and the creation of the puppet Nazi state of Slovakia. Within a year, Germany would invade Poland, precipitating World War II.

While the major interest of most Americans was still the domestic economic situation, President Roosevelt was becoming more and more concerned with the aggressive policies of Germany and the other axis nations. Indeed, the basic message delivered by President Roosevelt in his annual state of the Nation message to Congress delivered on this same January 4 was summed up in the San Francisco Chronicle's caption to the text of his speech: "Democracy Faces Test, He Asserts". The first three paragraphs set the tone. They read as follows:

In reporting on the state of the Nation, I have felt it necessary on previous occasions to advise Congress of disturbance abroad and of the need of putting our own house in order in the face of storm signals from across the seas. As this Seventy-sixth Congress opens there is need for further warning.

A war which threatened to envelop the world in flames has been averted; but it has become clear that peace is not assured.

All about us rage undeclared wars -- military and economic. All about us grow more deadly armaments -- military and economic. All about us are threats of new aggression -- military and economic.

Both the location where Fleet Problem XX (the technical name for the 1939 naval exercise) would be carried out and the nature of the exercise were influenced by the international situation. For many years these maneuvers had been held in the Pacific. Now, for the first time since 1934, they would be held in the Atlantic. As Time magazine put it:

Never before,...,has the U.S. so frankly marshaled its sea power to deal with specific foes (Germany, Italy) as they would line up in a specific situation. For the armed forces of the U.S. now have something to do besides wait for a war to be declared. To forestall that event, Commander - in - Chief Franklin Roosevelt has put ships and planes to use in world politics -- the "power politics" that up to now has been played only by the Europeans.

As originally conceived, Fleet Problem XX was designed to test Panama Canal defenses. President Roosevelt, however, expanded the scope of the maneuvers to encompass an Atlantic front of 3,000 miles -- extending from Norfolk, Va. down the coast to the Panama Canal and further southward as far as the northern part of South America. The maneuver area over which the ships and planes ranged covered an area larger than the continental United States.

Fleet Problem XX was distinct from earlier exercises in one other very important respect. President Roosevelt had decided that he would participate. When the *U.S.S. Houston* sailed from San Francisco its destination was Norfolk and Key West, where President Roosevelt would board her. He left Washington late Thursday, February 16 by special train to arrive at Florida City early Saturday morning. He then drove over the new Overseas Highway to Key West, made a radio address in the afternoon opening the San Francisco International Exposition and boarded the destroyer *U.S.S. Warrington* for transfer to the *U.S.S. Houston*.

The *Houston*, with its relatively spacious quarters for him, was a ship he knew and on which he could be comfortable. He had boarded her on July 1, 1934 at Annapolis for a 12,000 mile cruise through the Caribbean to Portland, Ore. by way of Hawaii. Also, after his cross country train trip in 1935, he returned from San Diego on her in October. That cruise took him to Cocos Island and then through the Panama Canal. The president had also chosen to be on her for the Fleet Review at San Francisco on July 14, 1938.

Accompanying the President on the *Houston* were Rear Admiral Ross T. McIntire, his personal physician; Captain Daniel J.

Callaghan, naval aide; Colonel E.M. Watson, military aide; and Admiral William D. Leahy, Chief of Naval Operations.

The President's participation in Fleet Problem XX was as a close observer of the two opposing, maneuvering fleets. During the course of the naval exercise there were only three men who received detailed reports on everything that was being done by either side: Admiral Bloch, chief umpire for Problem XX; President Roosevelt; and Admiral Leahy, CNO. The president would follow the progress of the fleet problem on a large chart, with Admiral Leahy available to point out any tactical blunders in the fleet movements.

We can never do more than speculate about whether President Roosevelt, as he worked with Admiral Leahy, thought back to the years when he had been Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the Wilson administration. In 1914, shortly after the start of the first World War, the position of Chief of Naval Operations was created specifically because of concern about Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels's lack of competence. Some quotes from one history of the U.S. Navy will illustrate what lay behind that concern:

"Narrow minded and provincial, Daniels knew next to nothing about Naval affairs or international politics..."

"By any measure, however, Daniel's failed the most meager test of an executive. He was indecisive, refused to lance the boil of chaos that characterized the department's archaic administrative structure, and depended almost wholly on his energetic assistant secretary, Franklin D. Roosevelt..."

"As a result of this lack of leadership, American naval policy was in a shambles when World War 1 broke out in Europe."

Being on the *Houston* kept the President close to the action, including scouting operations, air - force operations and the final battle when the two opposing fleets met.

The basic setup for Fleet Problem XX was for a "white" attacking force, forming itself somewhere in the mid-Atlantic, to try to penetrate a "black" defense. The attackers could try to gain a foothold anywhere from Venezuela's eastern boundary to Norfolk, Va. Alternatively, they might try to get through into the Caribbean and attack the Panama Canal.

Taking part in Fleet Problem XX were 134 ships, 600 planes, 3,210 officers and 49,445 enlisted men.

The "black" force was given a slight edge because a Navy study had just recently concluded that a combined Italo-German fleet would outnumber the U.S. in destroyers and submarines only.

As the defending force steamed to sea, they would have been in cruise formation. Essentially this was a column with an arc of scouting planes in front, then a block of cruisers followed by a destroyer screen. The body of the column was made up of battleships with a destroyer torpedo screen along each side. Between the torpedo screens and the battleships were aircraft carriers on one side and submarines on the other.

Also part of the defense arrangement were four centers: Norfolk, Va.; Key West, Fla.; Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and Saint Thomas, V.I. Four air patrol circles, each with an effective radius of 700 miles, were based on these centers. As a look at a map will show, these four circles overlap and together cover the coast from Norfolk to Venezuela as well as the Caribbean.

For President Roosevelt, two weeks at sea on blue water with a touch of wind fanning him as he watched maneuvers and the chance to do some fishing was exactly what the doctor ordered. Literally. He had come down with an attack of the grippe about a week before and the trip was part of Admiral McIntire's prescribed treatment.

The President, when he boarded the *Houston*, was a "flag officer" and his quarters were those prescribed for the use of an admiral. They consisted of a large cabin and, opening off it, two smaller ones. The large cabin was furnished with several chairs and a table. Here the President would sit and read, eat his meals and do any entertaining. He would work on his stamp collection here also.

One of the small cabins was the President's bedroom. It had a bed, a metal chest, a chair and that rare amenity on a warship - a private bath. The other small room served as an office with a desk, chair and steel cabinets.

President Roosevelt rarely ate alone. Keeping him company might be a secretary taking dictation, a member of the presidential party or one or more Naval officers. His meals were served from the officer's mess and he paid from his expense account the regular amount charged all officers - about \$1.25 a day at that time.

Although Fleet Problem XX, as such, was declared officially in progress on February 20 with a "declaration of hostilities", preparations had begun much earlier. The main fleet units had started moving from their base at San Diego and through the Panama Canal late in December of the previous year. Guantanamo served as the rendezvous point as the several portions of the Pacific and Atlantic Squadrons came together to receive their orders. From there

the "white" and "black" fleets spread out into the Atlantic to take up their stations and await the official opening.

On the morning of February 20, as fleet maneuvers were starting, the *Houston* was steaming eastward to join the fleet war game. The *Houston* briefly visited Guantanamo Bay, but President Roosevelt did not go ashore. She circled the bay and then continued on.

By February 22, the contending fleets had come into contact. As the radio message from the *Houston* put it:

Reports of the initial operations of the opposing fleets indicate that several sharp engagements resulted from contacts of scouting and detached groups with consequent probably minor changes in subsequent operations.

Contacts between scattered light forces have been numerous out in the Atlantic Ocean well to the eastward of the West Indies.

The decisive naval battle would not be fought for a number of days yet. In the meantime, the President had to attend to official and personal mail and to sign some executive orders and commissions. Accordingly, the *Houston* put in to the harbor of Charlotte Amalie on Saint Thomas on February 23. A late afternoon tea with the Governor and his wife closed the day and the *Houston* put to sea again in the evening.

After about a week of scouting and skirmishing by planes, destroyers, cruisers and submarines, a major engagement of the fleets - the high point of the maneuvers - took place on February 26/27. At 1 P.M., February 27 Fleet Problem XX was officially terminated. By the evening, President Roosevelt on board the *Houston* was headed for Culebra, a small island about 50 miles southeast of Puerto Rico, for a top level review with Admirals Leahy and Bloch "...to discuss the conduct of and lessons from the carrying out of the problem."

The President returned home on March 3, disembarking the *Houston* at Charleston, S.C. Part of an editorial in the New York Times welcoming him home said:

No doubt his interest in the navy has found a deep satisfaction in the mimic wars of Black and White. He has had speech with divers hearty sea dogs. The trade winds and the sun have refreshed him; and he would have been happy on the Ark if Noah had collected postage stamps instead of animals, two by two. He must have had a good time; and slowpokes who wonder at him merely betray their sluggardly desire to be left to their repose. If the *Houston* struck "choppy

seas" on the way home, sailor and statesman are equally used to riding those arrangements in salt water.

President Roosevelt was the first president to be an observer at the Navy's annual maneuvers. He was also the only "reporter" to cover Fleet Problem XX. Seated in the admiral's cabin of the *Houston*, he held a press conference on March 3 to explain the highlights of the war game. Following are some excerpts from the New York Times report on the press conference:

...The President began his dissertation with the warning that it was difficult to explain the maneuvers in such a way as not to give the layman a false impression. To understand the objectives it was necessary to completely forget all about potential enemies, natural geography and the differences between land and water.

...Neither side had won in what was generally supposed to be a simulated test of the Administration's continental defense policy... Nor was either side supposed to be the victor.

However, it was evident from some of Mr. Roosevelt's remarks that the war game had proved even more than the satisfactory maneuverability of the warships participating and that the defense of something more than a theoretical coast line from invasion was involved.

The President remarked that the operations had always been directed at the inner defense of the Caribbean and the strategic area to the south of the West Indies on which the security of the United States from an Atlantic attack is supposed to depend.

...many lessons had been gained in the sense that the units of the fleet had been tried out in ways and under conditions entirely different from those employed in maneuvers of past years...Each unit of the battle forces had a definite relation to the other and this relationship had never been tested before on such a large scale.

No one had won...because no one wins at the kind of exercises that were involved...After eliminating potential enemies and natural geographies, the easiest way to look at the problem was to assume the existence of a stretch of land 2,000 miles long with certain islands located off its coast and an imaginary contour. Then it was well to picture a hostile fleet with a mission of attack starting about 1,500 miles away from the continent with its adjacent islands.

As for the objectives of the invading fleet, they might be to land an army, establish an air base or a naval base, or destroy the defending fleet units of their air, supply or patrol bases. In destroying defending fleet units the idea was to weaken the main battleships and render them vulnerable to attack.

...the President pointed out that if the hostile forces could destroy the defending scouting, air and destroyer units, they could make a better attack than otherwise would be the case. Under this theory, raids and counter-raids by both sides went on day after day. Hence a decision as to which side had won was automatically impossible.



The President said he had been entirely satisfied with the performance of both the "white" and "black" fleets. He had been particularly impressed with performances of destroyers and destroyer leaders...

Not the least important question the manoeuvres had helped to answer was the problem of refueling at sea and the conditions under which it could be accomplished satisfactorily...The number of tankers required to complement the number of ships involved in the recent operations had long been a problem to those responsible for the nation's floating defenses and this was now answered...

The President returned to Washington to address a joint session of Congress on March 4 to celebrate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the first meeting of Congress. The fleet sailed to New York City to participate in the World's Fair.