

THE NAVY VS. THE HURRICANE

THE GREAT SAMOAN HURRICANE OF 1889 PROVED TO BE A TURNING POINT FOR THE UNITED STATES AS WELL AS THE NAVY

BY GENE T. ZIMMERMAN

On 30 November 1889, the Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy was presented by B.F. Tracy to the President and Congress of the United States. In his very opening remarks, Tracy noted that the United States would still fail to be a naval power when its current construction program was complete. He duly noted that the four leading naval powers were England, France, Russia, and a feisty Germany. In distress, he said that the nation “as far as its capacity for defense is concerned, will be at the mercy of states having

less than one-tenth of its population, one-thirtieth of its wealth, and one-hundredth of its area.”

He might well have added “and always at the mercy of the weather while we send out sailors to sea in underpowered sailboats.” He probably thought it, but a man in his position had to be tactful when speaking to congressmen. Instead, he told them, “The severest disaster which has befallen the Navy in recent years took place at Apia, Samoa, on 16 March 1889.

“During a hurricane

on that date, two vessels — the *Trenton* and *Vandalia* — were totally wrecked, and the *Nipsic* was run on shore to save her from total destruction — nothing that skill or experience could suggest was left undone to avert the catastrophe, but the vessels, with old-fashioned engines and defective steam-power, were wholly unable to withstand the fury of the hurricane.

“The loss of the *Trenton* and *Vandalia*, two of the best of the old wooden fleet, is a serious blow to the Navy in its present condition. The escape of the British ship *Calliope*, by steaming out to sea and safety during the hurricane, illustrates the value of high-powered engines in war vessels.”

What had brought about this disaster known then as “The Samoan Hurricane?” Obviously, the weather was the moving force in the actual destruction of the vessels in the harbor, but a number of opposed political, commercial, and technological interests were the reasons that this particular US Navy squadron happened to be facing off with a German squadron in Apia Harbor.

A man named Alfred Krupp



There would be no fighting between American and German ships after the hurricane. SMS *Adler* was photographed and beached on her side. Note the holing caused by the rocks

had developed the cast steel gun, and Prussia had taken advantage of it at the Battle of Essen and with his artillery had won the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. Then, a proud German state was formed under Wilhelm I, King of Prussia.

From a collection of petty kingdoms had come a powerful state and the Germans found the wine of success to be heady. No longer would they be laughed at, rather they would become the leaders in industry and political power. German agents, with success, moved into Europe, the Americas, Africa, and into the Pacific. And it was in the Pacific that they ran headlong into another young industrial power — the United States of America.



Looking southwest in Apia Harbor with USS *Nipsic* beached in the foreground. Beyond her stern is USS *Trenton* and the sunken *Vandalia* is in the center.