“Remember the Maine! To hell with Spain!”

Some historical background and philatelic connections to Florida

By Juan L. Riera

The battleship Maine was not exactly a battleship, but it has important connections to Florida. The Maine was an armored cruiser or second class battleship which was ordered by the U.S. Navy on August 3, 1886, launched on November 18, 1889, and commissioned on September 17, 1895. It has been suggested that due to the length of time between the times it was ordered and commissioned, the vessel was outdated or useless. On the night of February 15, 1898, the ship sank in Havana Harbor, Cuba. Although the explosion was not the cause of the Spanish-American War, it was a huge step in that direction. Other factors included “yellow journalism” in which newspapers such as the New York Journal, owned by William Randolph Hearst and the New York World, owned by Joseph Pulitzer, constantly published articles calling for war against Spain with illustrations and stories of Spanish brutality in Cuba.

The Maine was built in response to Brazilian battleship Riachuelo, completed in 1883 in Great Britain, and the increase of naval forces in Latin America. Maine was built in response to other factors such as periodic scares by the Spanish navy approaching port cities such as St. Augustine or Key West, leading to evacuations due to fear of attack as well as the “Virginius Affair.” In October 1873, the Virginius, an American flagged ship was caught by the Spanish running guns to rebels in eastern Cuba. The ship was taken to Santiago de Cuba where Captain Joseph Fry, a resident of Key West with his family, was executed with 52 others. The U.S. government protested and in 1874 the U.S. Navy was sent to Key West for possible war with Spain.

The Maine and her nearly sister ship Texas reflected most recent European developments, notably British and Italian naval ships. The Maine was 324 feet and four inches long and a maximum draft of
22 feet and six inches. The ship had a crew of 26 officers, 290 sailors, and 39 Marines and suffered 261 fatalities on that fateful February 1898 night. Two officers and 251 sailors and marines were killed by the explosion or drowning, seven that were rescued died shortly thereafter of their injuries, and one officer later died of “cerebral affection” or shock. Of 94 survivors, 16 were uninjured.

Example of first day covers issued in Key West, Florida for USS Maine.

Additional first day covers (top) and insert card for 1998 U.S. stamp honoring the USS Maine.
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The Texas visited Key West and Dry Tortugas in February of 1898 and between May 21 and August 12 of the same year was involved in the Spanish-American War including battle on the fleet of Admiral Cervera on July 3. In January 1898, the Maine was sent from Key West, Florida to Havana, with a possible stop in Dry Tortugas for coal. On March 21, 1898, a U.S. naval Court of Inquiry in Key West declared that a naval mine caused the explosion.

In February 1898 sailors were buried in Colon Cemetery in Havana, Cuba. Injured sailors were sent to hospitals in Havana and Key West. Those who died in hospitals were buried in Key West. In December 1899, sailors buried in Havana were disinterred and reburied at Arlington National Cemetery. In 1915 President Woodrow Wilson dedicated the USS Maine Mast Memorial, located at Arlington National Cemetery, to those who died. Other monuments include the monument to victims of the Maine in Havana, Cuba, and the U.S. Battleship Maine Monument in the Key West Cemetery and numerous others.

A cofferdam was built around the wreck, the hull was patched up, and the ship was refloated, towed out to sea and sunk. The remains were scuttled on March 16, 1912, and the Maine lies on the seabed 3,600 feet below the surface.

A stamp honoring the Maine was released on February 15, 1998, in Key West, Florida.