

**THE HOME SQUADRON UNDER
COMMODORE CONNER IN THE
WAR WITH MEXICO: BEING A
SYNOPSIS OF ITS SERVICES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649353637

The Home Squadron Under Commodore Conner in the War with Mexico: Being a Synopsis of Its Services by Philip Syng Physick Conner

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

PHILIP SYNG PHYSICK CONNER

**THE HOME SQUADRON UNDER
COMMODORE CONNER IN THE
WAR WITH MEXICO: BEING A
SYNOPSIS OF ITS SERVICES**

E
410
275

THE HOME SQUADRON
UNDER
COMMODORE CONNER
IN THE
WAR WITH MEXICO,

BEING A SYNOPSIS OF ITS SERVICES.

(WITH AN ADDENDUM CONTAINING ADMIRAL TEMPLE'S MEMOIR
OF THE LANDING OF OUR ARMY AT VERA CRUZ IN 1847.)

1846-1847.

BY
PHILIP SYNG PHYSICK CONNER.

1896.

NOTICE.

The following memoirs have been carefully prepared from authentic sources,—namely, the correspondence of my father, Commodore Conner, both official and private, together with governmental and executive documents.

P. S. P. CONNER.

PHILADELPHIA, 1896.

Copyright, by PHILIP SYNO PRYSECK CONNER, 1896.

Lib.
Wormman
11-7-35
31267

PREFACE.

At the time when hostilities commenced between Mexico and the United States, the former had no navy on the high seas, and the latter none fitted to prosecute warfare in the enemy's waters.¹ In consequence of this the war was without any strictly naval conflicts. But the want of proper vessels in the American navy was not generally known, and consequently dissatisfaction was felt at the presumed lack of enterprise of the squadron in the Gulf of Mexico, and a portion of the press did not hesitate to censure the same, together with the commander of that force. Subsequently, however, the government—through the medium of the report of the Secretary of the Navy—announced its total want of proper vessels, and appropriate means in general, for active operations in the Gulf. This placed the case in its true light, and the injustice of the criticism was made evident.

While the truth was thus slowly unraveling itself at home, Commodore Conner, in the Gulf, was manfully bearing up against the many combined difficulties there present, and steadily performing the arduous and harassing duties assigned to him. The department, having openly acknowledged the inappropriateness of the means at his command, promised to purchase and dispatch vessels and forces fitted for the special service required, and consequently the commodore laid his plans in expectation of their arrival.

Commodore Conner, as before stated, having borne the brunt of difficulties and misfortune, and yet having passed with safety through the most critical period of the war,—in regard to both military and diplomatic action,—it was to be expected that the government which had not only put this officer in such an embarrassed position, but had, moreover, requested him to remain there, when he could have retired with credit, would afford him every facility in its power to achieve the end desired by placing in his hands those proper means which he had designated and which the Navy Department was preparing. Such, I presume, was the intention of the government; but the lapse of time and subsequent circumstances caused a different result.

Ample reinforcements of vessels, men, and arms were dispatched to the seat of war; but they did not reach the man who had labored so long in that field, and who, in spite of all drawbacks, had gained success, and had initiated that movement which resulted in the seizure

¹ See report of the Secretary of the Navy for the year 1846, in the Addendum to this essay; also Commodore Perry's letter, etc.

of the capital and the complete conquest of the enemy. A much longer time had been consumed in preparing the additional means than was anticipated, and when they did at last reach the field of war Commodore Conner's term of service had expired by some months, and his successor was appointed. Regularity and precision of succession in command are certainly to be approved of,—under ordinary circumstances; but when their immediate enforcement interrupts an officer in the midst of important movements, and deprives him of that favorable result which is just arising as the consequence of years of watching and months of actual toil,—the act cannot be commended. With the new forces came a new commander, bearing orders to report as Commodore Conner's relief, and the last-named officer—in the middle of a siege—transferred the command to Commodore Perry.

And here I think it necessary, for the proper understanding of the subject, that I should go into detail regarding it, for the reason that because Commodore Conner resigned supreme command at almost the very hour of victory, it has been supposed by some that he was *superseded*,—that is, peremptorily displaced for having in some way displeased the Navy Department, a mistaken idea; but, under the circumstances, not an unnatural one to those who merely saw the act without knowing its cause. But let me relate that act, give its circumstances, and then explain its true cause, which, although unfortunate for Commodore Conner, arose from no fault of his and cast no deserved cloud upon his reputation; but, on the contrary, added to it proof of fidelity to promise, and of *immediate obedience to command*,—that very essence of discipline and loyalty. In the beginning I must say that the term of command in the navy was limited to three years,—that is, a commodore was given command of a fleet for three years, and there he remained for that period, unless illness, death, or misconduct cut it short; if the latter, he was at once "superseded;" but if the whole term was served out satisfactorily he was "relieved" of his charge by a successor or "relief," as called, generally a junior officer, for thus a regular and just sequence of the honor of chief command came to all in proper time. Such was the rule; but, like others, it had its exceptions, one of which was that when the department found that an officer was particularly well fitted for the place he was in, or thought that by displacing him he would lose the reward of his labors, it suspended the rule and kept him at the post as long as possible. Now this was Commodore Conner's position; he had so well filled the place that, when he might have retired with credit, the secretary (Mr. Mason) requested him not to depart. Acquiescing, he remained in the Gulf, did all that could be done in the first year of the war with the inadequate means afforded, underwent popular abuse for not doing more than could be done, and then laid the foundation of our complete victory by effecting the descent on Vera Cruz. Under these

circumstances it is not surprising that, although by the spring of 1847 his term of command had more than expired, and his appointed successor (Commodore M. C. Perry) had been waiting for some time to relieve him, the government hesitated to issue the order of relief,—hesitated because it wished him to receive the just reward of his long, unflagging, and faithful services,—to wit, the surrender of Vera Cruz. Of course, I mean so far as the navy was concerned in that victory; how far that was, may be judged when we remember that, but for the heavy guns of the naval battery, the walls of Vera Cruz might never have been breached, for the army's siege-train failed to come, and unless the navy had landed the army it never would have got ashore on *that* coast. "Without its [the navy's] aid our army could not have landed and would have had to retire ignominiously" (Admiral Porter, in "Our Navy," p. 3, vol. i., *The United Service Review*, January, 1879). The landing was done solely under the command of Commodore Conner; the battery, put into action by Commodore Perry, was planned in advance by the former. But to return to the subject of the surrender. It was thought that this would occur in February, and, indeed, it would then have taken place, had General Scott been on hand; but his army did not join Commodore Conner's fleet until March. This delay proved too much, for the President, seeing no end to the war, informed of the promise to Perry, and becoming alarmed by reports of Conner's failing health, at length ordered the secretary to suspend the rule no longer, but to dispatch Perry to the Gulf as Conner's relief. This was done, Perry reaching Vera Cruz on the 20th of March (1847), and, as it happened, right in the middle of its siege he at once presented his orders and, on the next morning (21st) at 8 o'clock, received from Conner the command of the squadron.

Thus it is seen that the relief of Commodore Conner, in the middle of a siege, was not an intentional rebuke on the part of the government, but arose from chance, the accidental arrival of Commodore Perry at that particular time. Many wondered at this sudden surrender of command, and expressed surprise that Conner, as the senior officer, had not deferred the act until after the fall of Vera Cruz; indeed, I have been told that some of his officers, indignant that one so deserving of the prize should lose it, urged him to this course; but he firmly refused it, deciding to make the transfer of command at once; because he had told Perry that, although he could not *voluntarily* leave his post in the face of the enemy, he would at once resign if so ordered by his government,—fidelity to word and immediate obedience to orders forming his first duty. True, it is but a simple duty of daily practice; but there are occasions when the act rises to one of noble resignation and submission, and this is one; for at the first word from his government, Commodore Conner, in the hour of assured victory, laid down supreme command, and silently

resigned the promised laurels. Here is an act unparalleled in our history, a living proof that loyalty animates our service,—a shining model for future time. (See the Order of Relief, and note thereto, in this essay.)

Within a few days from the transfer, the brave and able successor had the gratification of receiving—on the part of the navy—the surrender of the city of Vera Cruz together with the castle of San Juan de Ulloa, and subsequently of accomplishing—with the newly arrived reinforcements—all that his predecessor had intended, but had been unable to fulfill in consequence of the want of sufficient and appropriate means.

It was in the fourth year of his command that Commodore Conner transferred his pennant. His had been a period of anxiety, of watching, waiting, and harassing duties,—void of adequate reward,—of long separation from his family. He had left home a strong man, ruddy with health, his brown hair unsilvered by care: he returned gray and wasted almost to a shadow by mental anxiety, physical pain,¹ and the effect of the climate of the Gulf.

Upon his arrival at his house in Philadelphia, the Councils of that city and Washington sent him congratulations and thanks for services rendered. The citizens of Philadelphia, also, entertained him at a public dinner, while the Society of the Cincinnati elected him an honorary member. The government—which had approved all his acts, and which had already tendered him its thanks for services—now renewed its acknowledgments, while the President, as a special mark of approbation and confidence, sent him an invitation to accept the important office of chief of the Bureau of Construction, Equipment, and Repair. Commodore Conner, however, was forced to decline this compliment and to repair to Florida, his long sojourn in a tropical climate, coupled with his harassing duties, having rendered him unfit to withstand the labor of office, together with the rigor of our winter. Although a high position, the bureau now opened but a comparatively limited field for action, for, owing to the executive skill of Commodore Morris, all of the reinforcements and means suggested by Commodore Conner had been dispatched to the Gulf, where Commodore Perry was demonstrating their efficiency.

¹Commodore Conner was at times subject to that agonizing disease,—*Tic Douloureux*. It probably originated in the shock given to his nervous system by the severe and dangerous wound he received at the capture of H. B. M. ship "Penguin," in the second war with England.

VESSELS TAKEN, PLACES ATTACKED, OCCUPIED, OR CAPTURED BY
THE FORCES OF COMMODORE CONNER.*List of Prize Vessels.*

"Nonata," "Coosa," "Telegraph," "Amado," "Laura Virginia," "Tabasco," "Tonante," "Plymouth," "Petrita," "Tabasquina," "Rentville," "Desada," "Campeche," "Union," "Isabel," "Mahonese," "Pueblana," "Ormingo," "Amelia," "Creole" (the last named burnt, by Lieutenant Parker, under the walls of San Juan de Ulloa; a gallant act, but, nevertheless, a sad mistake. Like many acts so performed (that is, by a subaltern acting on his own responsibility and without reference to his commanding officer), it interfered with the latter's plans. Indeed, the burning of the "Creole" seems to have been most disastrous; the secret correspondence carried on by means of her, through which Commodore Conner was kept informed of the state of the enemy, and also the chance of carrying San Juan by escalade under cover of the coming and going of this vessel between the castle and the fleet, very suddenly ended. Nothing but the gallantry of the act could be openly spoken of, for other comment would have exposed my father's secret agent in Vera Cruz to the danger of immediate execution; but the private letter of an officer in my father's secret reveals the disappointment and chagrin caused by this sudden ending put to benefit and "great expectations").

Places attacked.

June 8, 14, and 15, 1846.—The fort at the bar of Tampico. The works shelled and the forces employed in their construction driven off by Commander Saunders of the "St. Mary's." He also sends his boats into the river to cut out some vessels; but finds the current too strong to row against.

August 7 and October 15, 1846.—Alvarado. On both occasions, after trial, Commodore Conner finds that the river, chiefly from natural causes, cannot be entered by his flotilla so as to deliver an attack in proper force, if, indeed, it can be entered at all. Hence, not being able to enter, he is forced to withdraw entirely from before the place, because on that coast there is no safe anchorage. Thus the forces of nature preserved Alvarado.¹

¹On the first occasion, there were no steamers of sufficiently light draught of water to cross the bar and tow in the gunboats, the strength and rapidity of the current, increased by recent rains, rendering the use of sails or oars impracticable, as the vessels would be delayed too long under the fire of the land-batteries,—if, indeed, they could have made any progress at all against the current; moreover, the weather threatened to be tempestuous, rendering a delay in the bight of Alvarado extremely dangerous.

At the second attempt to enter the river, though two small steamers were present, their power to successfully stem the current, with the gunboats in tow,