

1986

## The Special Service Squadron and the Caribbean Region, 1920-1940: A Case Study in Naval Diplomacy

Donald A. Yerxa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Yerxa, Donald A. (1986) "The Special Service Squadron and the Caribbean Region, 1920-1940: A Case Study in Naval Diplomacy," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 39 : No. 4 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss4/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

# The Special Service Squadron and the Caribbean Region, 1920-1940: A Case Study in Naval Diplomacy

---

Donald A. Yerxa

**S**trategically speaking, the Caribbean Sea has been an American lake throughout the 20th century. With the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, the Caribbean formed a huge strategic pivot for the U.S. Navy and consequently became a keystone in American national security policy. Because the Caribbean lines of communication were so important, the United States forged what amounted to imperial maritime control over the region following the Spanish-American War.\* This thrust the Navy into the two classic and complementary missions traditionally assigned to the naval forces of major maritime powers: policing the empire from internal threats to stability (naval diplomacy); and defending the imperial sphere of influence from external challenges.<sup>1</sup> The overall history of the U.S. Navy's activities in the Caribbean since 1898 is best understood as an attempt to provide external defense and internal control with the ultimate goal of enhancing American national security.

During the interwar years the Special Service Squadron was the embodiment of American naval diplomacy in the Caribbean and, as such, the unit's history forms an excellent case study in the use of naval power to maintain control of a maritime empire as well as of the interaction between the naval and foreign service establishments. Since the operational history of the Special Service Squadron has been written elsewhere, this study is more concerned with the effectiveness of naval forces as an instrument of diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Consequently more attention will be paid to the origins, missions, and patterns of activity than to details of the squadron's specific operations in the Caribbean.

The Caribbean region was politically unstable following World War I. In December 1918, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), William S. Benson,

---

\* By using the terms "empire" and "imperial position," I am suggesting domination by a variety of means (formal annexation, the establishment of protectorates, and informal control) with the net effect of creating an exclusive strategic sphere of influence and an unquestioned American hegemony in the region.

---

Dr. Yerxa earned his Ph.D. in American History from the University of Maine and is on the faculty of Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, Massachusetts.

warned that political conditions in the area would likely compel the Navy into being "a sort of stabilizer in places where the evidence of little power will have a salutary effect upon disturbers of the peace."<sup>3</sup> Benson's statement was prophetic. From November 1918 to October 1919, the State Department called upon the Navy to dispatch warships to Caribbean trouble spots no fewer than 10 times. The Office of Naval Intelligence predicted in December 1919, moreover, that the immediate future for Central America would likely be "fraught with . . . disorder, revolution, and bloodshed"—the classic environment for gunboat diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

The postwar fleet organization was ill-suited for meeting the demands forced upon the Navy by the turbulent Caribbean political climate. No single naval force was responsible for policing the Caribbean area. The Atlantic and Pacific Fleets were responsible only for their respective Central American coasts, and the Atlantic Fleet in turn delegated Caribbean patrol duties to two units—Division 1 of the Cruiser Squadron and the American Patrol Detachment, a wartime carryover. Flare-ups of revolutionary violence resulted in warships being detached from fleet training on a temporary and *ad hoc* basis, an unpopular practice with the fleet commanders. As the frequency of these calls increased in the postwar months, the status of the Navy's diplomatic and policing mission became the subject of an extensive dialogue within and between the Navy and State Departments.<sup>5</sup>

In May 1919, on the eve of his retirement, Rear Adm. William B. Caperton, veteran of both the Haitian and Dominican interventions earlier in the decade, submitted a lengthy report to the CNO, entitled: "The Diplomatic Mission of the Navy." Caperton's report represented something of a valedictory after years of eventful service in Latin American waters. His message was simple. At a time when planning for war dominated naval thinking, however remote the prospects, he stressed the need for maintaining permanent squadrons on foreign stations as a means of cultivating friendly international relations. In particular, Caperton contended that the Navy's diplomatic mission was most crucial in Latin America, where a permanent squadron was necessary primarily for Caribbean police duty.<sup>6</sup>

Caperton's report proved to be seminal, though the Navy did not immediately support his views. While the diplomatic branch "unhesitatingly concur[red]" with the admiral, a planning committee in the Office of Naval Operations rejected Caperton's thesis that the state of world affairs warranted a higher priority for the Navy's diplomatic mission. Of course, a naval presence could have a beneficial effect in some circumstances, the committee members conceded, but placing "vessels on a station for diplomatic purposes only involves an expense. . . which [could] hardly be justified." From their perspective, the only reasonable and economical way for the Navy to fulfill its diplomatic mission was to continue the practice of detaching vessels from the fleet on a crisis-oriented basis.<sup>7</sup>

## 62 Naval War College Review

Increased diplomatic demands made on the Navy in the Caribbean area during the remainder of 1919, however, gave some credence to Caperton's ideas. In mid-September, for example, three Pacific Fleet cruisers were either in or returning from duty in Central American waters. Officers engaged in Caribbean police duty began to complain about how the problem was being managed and advocated the creation of a Central American patrol squadron.<sup>8</sup> A step was made in that direction in the fall of 1919 when the Navy assigned nearly all of Division 2, Cruiser Squadron, Atlantic Fleet to Central America's east coast.<sup>9</sup> But a unified area command and organization was still about one year away.

By January 1920, officers within the Office of Naval Operations openly criticized existing arrangements for Caribbean gunboat diplomacy, especially the State Department's practice of requesting warships on what the naval officers believed to be the slightest of whims. That month Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) Josephus Daniels received what on the surface was a typical request from the State Department to send a warship to the north coast of Honduras because of reports of possible revolutionary activity.<sup>10</sup> The request led Captain Charles S. Freeman, a member of the CNO's staff and one of the key personalities in Caribbean naval diplomacy of the 1920s and 1930s, to call for a new policy to curb State's "abuse" of repeatedly asking for warships to bolster the prestige and sense of security of uneasy American consular and diplomatic agents.

Freeman charged that all too often diplomatic and consular officials wired for warships simply on the basis of alarmist rumors. The fact that vessels had been readily dispatched in the past was, according to Freeman, a "fertile source of renewed requests for ships." Once ordered to a trouble spot, commanding officers never received guidance from the State Department as to the "extent to which they desire[d] forceful methods to be applied." And once the Navy arrived on the scene, consular agents often schemed to prolong the vessels' stays "irrespective of the prevailing political situation." Given these circumstances, Captain Freeman recommended that vessels assigned to Latin American duty be furnished with itineraries in order to assume more frequent changes of port. Above all, he hoped that eventually the occasional visit of an American naval vessel to a Latin American port would not automatically raise "the ghost of intervention or 'gringo' absorption."<sup>11</sup>

In May 1920, the Office of Naval Operations decided to create a patrol squadron for service in Latin American waters.<sup>12</sup> Documentation of how the Navy came to this conclusion is scanty, although the decision was a logical consequence of the dissatisfaction with existing arrangements. According to the recollection of Charles Freeman—some 13 years later—there were 4 basic reasons for the creation of the patrol squadron. First, the Navy desired a unified Caribbean area organizational and command structure. Second, and more important, a Latin American squadron, commanded by a flag officer,

would provide the Navy with an independent "means of evaluating the relative necessities in disturbed areas." Third, a new squadron would eliminate the need for detaching vessels from the fleet for periods of uncertain duration. And last, the squadron would halt the tendency to increase the number of ships engaged in diplomatic activity. Freeman recalled that the Navy had strong feelings about the diplomatic branch's practice of raiding the fleet: "The State Department, having access to the fleet organization and being governed only by the interpretation placed upon any given situation by its own officials, tended constantly to increase the number of ships engaged in State Departmental business, wholly disregarding of anything other than the total number of ships in the Navy and the depth of water in Latin American ports."<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Navy Secretary Daniels initiated informal discussions regarding the patrol squadron in June 1920 with Dr. Leo S. Rowe and others in the Division of Latin American Affairs. Because of the State Department's receptivity to the idea, CNO Robert E. Coontz was able to inform the commanders of the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets in late July of the upcoming creation of a special service squadron with the duties of showing the flag in Latin American waters, fostering good relations, collecting hydrographic and intelligence data, and responding to crises in the traditional mode of gunboat diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> It is instructive to note that notification of the squadron to the senior naval officer on the east coast of Mexico was accompanied with warnings not to convey the impression that the new unit was to be of any considerable size, lest consular agents deluge Washington with even more requests for warships.<sup>15</sup> From the very inception of the squadron, the Navy clearly exhibited suspicions that diplomatic and consular officials did not hold to a proper and realistic concept of the purpose and limits of naval diplomacy.

Shortly before the creation of the patrol squadron, two Latin American specialists from the Office of Naval Operations, Captains Lusius A. Bostwick and Charles Freeman, prepared another important position paper that further revealed the Navy's approach to naval diplomacy in the Caribbean. The officers' primary concern was an improvement of the Navy's image in the Caribbean. So often, they argued, inhabitants of Caribbean ports viewed American warships as "harbingers of evil and birds of ill omen," carrying with them the implicit warning: "Keep order or we'll make you. . . ." Bostwick and Freeman cautioned that the mission of showing the flag should never degenerate simply into "shaking the fist." In repeating the recommendation made earlier by Freeman that American warships avoid prolonged visits to Caribbean ports, the officers used a familiar analogy: "If a policeman keeps moving on his beat, the community recognizes that protection is being afforded. If he is placed, without invitation, before a particular house and reports upon the operations of its occupants, whether good, bad, or indifferent, he becomes thoroughly objectionable." Although the Secretary

of the Navy never formally adopted the Bostwick-Freeman recommendations, CNO Coontz enthusiastically endorsed the report, and it came to express the Navy's unofficial view.<sup>16</sup>

The Navy Department officially created the Latin American patrol on 25 September 1920 and designated it the Special Service Squadron, though it would irreverently be dubbed the "Central American Banana Fleet."<sup>17</sup> The primary stated mission of the new squadron was "to promote friendly relations and to contribute to the growth of a better understanding between the United States and the other republics of the Western Hemisphere." Commanding officers of the nine vessels originally assigned to the squadron were instructed to conduct all dealings with Latin Americans "in a spirit of special courtesy and friendliness."<sup>18</sup> Freeman's recollections in 1933, when he was himself serving as squadron commander, once again provide more insight. According to Freeman, the State Department was made to understand from the beginning that the "basic function of these ships was not to be protection *per se* of American interests, but rather promotion or support of such interests by continuous friendly intercourse."<sup>19</sup> The circumstances leading up to the creation of the Special Service Squadron as well as its actual operations pointed, nevertheless, to another, perhaps even more important, mission: protection of American citizens and their interests by policing the Caribbean area. From the outset, the squadron attempted to enhance U.S. relations with Latin America, while it employed the coercive techniques of gunboat diplomacy in the Caribbean. The simultaneous pursuit of seemingly contradictory missions—goodwill cruising and gunboat diplomacy—was not entirely successful and gave the Special Service Squadron a schizophrenic character that it never completely shed.

Gunboat diplomacy and military intervention overshadowed goodwill cruising for most of the squadron's 20-year history. On no fewer than 51 different occasions during the peak period of gunboat diplomacy (1920-1934) did the State Department request that vessels assigned to the Special Service Squadron respond to situations of political unrest and revolutionary violence in the Caribbean. Most of these incidents were in and of themselves trivial, but collectively they formed a pattern of coercive naval diplomacy. Political turmoil, actual or rumored, of which there was much, would trigger an anxious consular or diplomatic official to wire the State Department for a naval presence to provide a calming influence. The State Department's Division of Latin American Affairs would assess the situation and almost always ask the Navy to dispatch a warship.<sup>20</sup> A gunboat or aging cruiser of the Special Service Squadron would steam to the trouble spot and stay until the turmoil subsided. In a few cases, e.g., Honduras in April 1925 and Nicaragua in May-August 1926, landing parties established "neutral zones" in port towns to protect American and foreign lives and interests. After relative calm returned, the person(s) responsible for the original request of the warship

would dutifully notify the State Department of the tremendous restraining effect produced by the naval presence, for the time being anyway.

The general pattern of naval diplomacy was twice interrupted by more significant and prolonged operations: Nicaragua, 1926-1933 and Cuba, 1933-1934. The so-called second Nicaraguan intervention is well chronicled elsewhere, but it should be noted here that while the Nicaraguan affair was a departure from the routine pattern of American naval diplomacy in the Caribbean, it followed another pattern of naval activity already well established in these tropical waters.<sup>21</sup> Twice before, in Haiti (1915) and in the Dominican Republic (1916), the Navy had mounted and supported major military interventions in the Caribbean. The Navy did in Nicaragua what it had already done before in Hispaniola. In all three episodes, warships landed Marines at coastal towns; in the case of Nicaragua, where the capital city is inland, Marines also reinforced the already positioned legation guard in Managua. The occupied towns then served as staging areas for riverine and interior pacification operations, while the Navy interdicted the coastline to isolate the insurgency from maritime resupply. Eventually, pacification efforts were assumed by American-officered and supported indigenous national guards, and political legitimacy was sought by holding general elections under U.S. supervision.

The Nicaraguan intervention differed from the others primarily in the tenacity of the revolutionary resistance and the sophistication of counter-insurgency techniques. The Sandinistas used modern hand-carried weapons and employed classic guerrilla tactics, while American pacification operations were enhanced by the effective use of aircraft in the variety of missions that have since become commonplace in counterinsurgency warfare: reconnaissance, aerial resupply, medical evacuation, and tactical support of ground operations.<sup>22</sup>

During the prolonged Cuban crisis of 1933-1935 that eventually saw the rise to power of Fulgencio Batista, the Special Service Squadron was radically transformed in size and operational horizon. Revolutionary turmoil led Franklin Delano Roosevelt to expand the squadron to 30 warships and a makeshift regiment of Marines. Charles Freeman, by 1933 a rear admiral, commanded this sizable force in an effort to make a very clear gesture to the Cubans that Americans residing in the troubled republic would be protected. The squadron's activities were rather straightforward. Freeman assigned most vessels to the harbors of Cuba's major ports: Havana, Matanzas, Cienfuegos, and Santiago. Other vessels steamed off the coast and from time to time visited lesser ports. Though the need for significant numbers of warships lessened in 1934, the Special Service Squadron maintained a presence in Cuban waters through to August 1934 and remained on call in St. Petersburg until mid-March 1935. The squadron's police duty in Cuban waters proved to be the climax of its gunboat diplomacy mission. It also was a pivotal event in the squadron's other mission, goodwill cruising.

The frequent requests of warships at Caribbean trouble spots were an early and ongoing source of friction between the naval and diplomatic branches. In October 1922, for example, Squadron Commander Rear Adm. William C. Cole, complained that his force was chasing after shadows in Honduras. Cole noted that, "Every rumor, however improbable or impossible, is accepted, believed and passed on."<sup>23</sup> By 1924, both the Navy and State Departments expressed concern at the abuse of requesting warships for inappropriate reasons. To remedy the situation, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes set down guidelines for the requesting of Navy vessels. Consuls and diplomatic representatives were discouraged from communicating directly with the Special Service Squadron except in a "very serious emergency actually and imminently imperiling American lives"; otherwise, requests for naval presence had to be made through normal State Department channels.<sup>24</sup> When in 1925 a consul at LaCeiba, on Honduras' north coast asked the commanding officer of the cruiser *Denver* to land Marines, the Secretary of State sternly demanded a full report on the situation. While the State Department upheld the consul's decision, the incident revealed a reluctance to permit field representatives to request warships upon the mere hint of trouble.<sup>25</sup>

During the 1930s, the Navy's longstanding mission of gunboat diplomacy was on the wane in the Caribbean. The historic policy objectives of Caribbean security and American political dominance of the region remained unchanged; gunboat diplomacy simply became more and more irrelevant to the Caribbean situation. The United States consciously tried to shed its interventionistic image in the Caribbean as the nation's Latin American policy became more and more associated with a good neighbor approach. Another factor was the emergence of dictators in many Caribbean nations (e.g., Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Somoza in Nicaragua, Ubico in Guatemala, and Batista in Cuba), who by their tight hold on power eliminated many of the outward signs of political instability. As the decade progressed, these military strongmen enabled the Navy to transfer its concern away from chronically unstable political conditions in Caribbean republics and toward the more potent threat of fascist aggression in Latin America. The practice of anchoring aging warships of limited military value in tropical harbors to discourage revolutionary activities appeared almost quaint by 1940, when Catalina patrol bombers and modern destroyer groups anxiously searched the Caribbean for Nazi surface and subsurface raiders.<sup>26</sup> Simply put, the mission of external defense had supplanted that of internal policing.

The Special Service Squadron's other mission of goodwill cruising, while less important, was much more controversial and became the source of a prolonged controversy between the Navy and State Departments. Naval historian Robert G. Albion has quipped that one reason for the friction "was the State's desire to protect the legation and consulate liquor stocks from



inroads which had become intense after [Secretary of the Navy] Daniels abolished the wine mess aboard the warships."<sup>27</sup> More importantly, the dispute centered on State's desire to make the Special Service Squadron its own private naval force, operationally directed not by the squadron commander or CNO, but by State's Division of Latin American Affairs.<sup>28</sup>

The issue first emerged after the cruiser *Cleveland* made what Squadron Commander Henry F. Bryan considered routine courtesy visits to Curacao, Colombia, and Venezuela in December 1920. The Division of Latin American Affairs complained that since the visits had diplomatic importance, the State Department should have received prior notice of the *Cleveland's* itinerary. The Navy reacted sharply. If every visit of a warship to a foreign port was to be considered a diplomatically significant event, the Navy would lose all control over deploying its vessels in peacetime.<sup>29</sup> Secretary Daniels was not prepared to curtail the Navy's freedom of operation, but he did reassure Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby that he would inform the diplomatic branch of any naval visits that "might possibly embarrass the facilities of the particular port and in other cases where special circumstances render it advisable." Under Secretary Norman H. Davis responded that the State Department still considered courtesy visits as having diplomatic importance and that the Navy should advise State whenever such visits to foreign ports were planned.<sup>30</sup>

Navy and State's differences over goodwill visits remained essentially unsettled. The squadron commander submitted in advance detailed itineraries for his vessels to the Office of Naval Operations for review. Unless a courtesy visit assumed a "diplomatic character," the Navy did not forward squadron itineraries on to the State Department. Problems arose, however, because there was no consensus on the meaning of the term "diplomatic character." Consular and diplomatic officials often complained, moreover about the inconvenient timing of squadron visits.<sup>31</sup>

Representatives of both departments conferred on 16 May 1922 and agreed, according to a State Department memorandum, that the Navy "would always consult the State Department before allowing naval vessels to make any visits of courtesy in any Latin American port."<sup>32</sup> CNO Coontz's understanding of the arrangement differed slightly in that he considered only visits to Central American ports to require State's approval; nevertheless, the squadron commander thereafter submitted detailed itineraries for goodwill cruises to the Navy Department, which in turn forwarded them, sometimes with modifications, to the State Department for review.<sup>33</sup> The Navy virtually conceded operational control over the Special Service Squadron to the State Department. In July 1922, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. stated that the squadron's vessels were "maintained for the sole purpose of being in readiness to comply with any wishes of the State Department."<sup>34</sup>

During the period of 1926 to 1935, the goodwill mission was nearly eclipsed by the squadron's involvement in the Nicaraguan intervention and the Cuban crisis. Except for some modest courtesy visits to Central American ports in 1932 and 1933, the vessels of the Special Service Squadron made virtually no goodwill cruises. Efforts by Squadron Commanders Arthur St. Clair Smith, Clark H. Woodward, and Charles F. Freeman, in 1931 and 1933 to prod the State Department to permit the squadron to show the flag throughout the Caribbean were unsuccessful.<sup>35</sup> During Woodward's brief 5-month tenure as squadron commander, the force only ventured from its base in Balboa to nearby Panamanian ports. Both Woodward and his replacement, Rear Admiral Freeman, understandably questioned the need for a squadron that was gradually being removed from the mission of gunboat diplomacy by a foreign policy that stressed good neighborism, while at the same time being prevented from engaging in goodwill cruising.

By the summer of 1933, the Special Service Squadron reached its lowest ebb. Materielly, the squadron had decreased from a credible force of between five and nine ships in the 1920s to a minimal unit of three vessels. Physically cramped and uncomfortable, enlisted men suffered from the tropical heat and a higher than normal rate of venereal disease.<sup>36</sup> Operationally, the squadron had been reduced by the State Department to a moribund status of being simply on call in the Canal Zone. With the unit's commanders even questioning the squadron's purpose, it appeared that the Special Service Squadron might fade away, a relic of an earlier era of naval diplomacy.

The Cuban crisis revived the squadron and shook it out of operational lethargy. More importantly, the existence of the Special Service Squadron was confirmed in the minds of the Navy and State Departments' hierarchy. The squadron still served a useful purpose, the same purpose that was responsible for the unit's formation in 1920. In the patrol squadron the Navy had the organizational structure to meet unexpected emergencies in the Caribbean without entirely disrupting fleet schedules and deployment. And the State Department still had a naval force at its disposal in the chronically unstable Caribbean region.

In February 1935, CNO William H. Standley ordered the squadron to leave St. Petersburg, Florida, where it had been based during the last phase of the Cuban crisis, and to return to the Canal Zone to reinstitute goodwill cruises throughout the Caribbean.<sup>37</sup> Standley's directive signaled a major shift in the operational focus of the Special Service Squadron. The unrelenting efforts of Charles Freeman were influential. Prior to and during the Cuban tour of duty, he pressed the Navy Department to return the squadron to its original mission of cultivating friendly relations by showing the flag.<sup>38</sup> From 1935 to 1939, the mission of goodwill cruising received primary attention, and two new gunboats joined the squadron in 1937-1938 to assist in courtesy visits. But the practice of sending newly commissioned warships on shakedown cruises

to Latin American ports made the squadron's routine goodwill activities somewhat superfluous.<sup>39</sup>

The outbreak of war in Europe and the subsequent creation of the Neutrality Patrol fundamentally altered the operations of the squadron. Under the Navy's Basic Neutrality Plan, the squadron commander was charged with the task of guarding the Panama Canal Zone and policing the Caribbean.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, on 5 September 1939, the squadron initiated patrol duties to augment the forces of the 15th Naval District at the Canal Zone. The Navy attached two extra destroyers to the squadron in December so that the unit could patrol both the inshore waters near the Canal's termini as well as conduct some limited offshore neutrality patrolling in the Caribbean and Pacific. The most noteworthy event in this otherwise routine duty was the trailing of the German steamship *Havelland* by the gunboat *Erie* for over three months. In addition to its patrol work, the squadron assisted the Army in testing its defenses of the Panama Canal by conducting mock attacks against several installations.

With its original missions supplanted by neutrality patrolling and related activities, the Special Service Squadron lost its *raison d'être*. The Navy Department abolished the unit on 17 September 1940 and reassigned most of its warships to the 15th Naval District. With the following terse sentence, the controversial 20-year career of the Latin American patrol force ended: "Records, files, and information incident to operations and activities of Speron [the Navy designation for the Special Service Squadron] will be transferred to custody [of the] Commandant Fifteenth Naval District."<sup>41</sup>

The concept of naval diplomacy has been the subject of a rapidly expanding body of literature, mostly of a political science orientation.<sup>42</sup> Many of these studies are jargon-laden and use historical examples to flesh out typologies of naval diplomacy, some very elaborate.<sup>43</sup> More important for the naval historian, however, is the analysis emerging from several of these studies on the value and limitations of naval forces as instruments of policy. In brief, warships possess many basic characteristics which make them highly suitable diplomatic instruments. Chief among these are controllability, flexibility, mobility, the symbolic value of warships, and the absence of so-called collateral complications such as resident populations at sea and territoriality. Warships, however, have their limitations as instruments of diplomacy. Naval diplomacy is inherently unpredictable, since its efforts are indirect and governed by the perceptions of those under its influence.<sup>44</sup>

The history of the Special Service Squadron in the Caribbean provides an excellent example of the utility and limitations of naval diplomacy. The squadron was a relatively effective instrument of diplomacy for much of its brief existence primarily because its missions were supportive of the general foreign policy posture of the United States, not because it was independently effective.<sup>45</sup> The actual military power of the squadron, was in fact, quite

limited except for the few cases when the force was augmented by fleet units. But like most instances of naval diplomacy throughout history, the actual warships were less important than the far greater power of the navy and nation they symbolized. As such, the Special Service Squadron was most effective in its mission of gunboat diplomacy when one or more warships were deployed in deliberate attempts to influence the political life of troubled Caribbean republics on a short-term basis. With the fading of that mission during the 1930s, the squadron lost its primary reason for existence.

Goodwill cruising was likewise a very symbolic activity. Its intent was to cultivate friendly relations with the hope of accumulating diplomatic capital.<sup>46</sup> But here the Special Service Squadron was far from being effective. As naval analyst Kenneth Booth has noted, "one man's goodwill visit may be another man's gunboat diplomacy."<sup>47</sup> In the case of the squadron, the perception problem was acute. Called upon so frequently to be the instrument of coercion and intimidation, the force was unable to be perceived as the symbol of friendship and good neighborliness. The operations of the Special Service Squadron never erased the perception that the arrival of an American naval vessel was "largely a negative gesture."<sup>48</sup>

Apart from being the mere instruments of diplomacy, naval forces and their strategic and operational requirements impose important influences upon national policies. Again quoting from Booth, "the simple image of the functional relationship between the foreign policy purpose and the naval 'instrument' is too clinical, too ideal." In some situations, the "naval tail may wag the foreign policy dog."<sup>49</sup> In the case of the Caribbean, the vital importance of the area as the Navy's strategic pivot placed demands upon the Nation's foreign policy to exert a substantial degree of control over the region. Thus a complicated set of foreign policy and strategic interrelationships were operative. The Special Service Squadron was indeed the "State Department's Navy." But the Nation's foreign policy was dedicated to maintaining American hegemony in the Caribbean, in large part to support the basic naval strategy of the United States. The squadron served, therefore, as the naval agent of American imperial control, just as units of other great naval-maritime empires had done throughout history.

---

### Notes

1. Clark G. Reynolds, *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires* (New York: Morrow, 1974), pp. 3-7.

2. See Richard Millett, "The State Department's Navy: A History of the Special Service Squadron, 1920-1940," *The American Neptune*, April 1975, pp. 118-138; Donald A. Yerxa, "The United States Navy and the Caribbean Sea, 1914-1941" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maine, 1982), chaps. 5, 7.

3. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) William S. Benson to Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) Josephus Daniels, 19 December 1918, Daniels Papers, Box 66, Library of Congress (hereafter LC), Washington, D.C.

4. Unsigned Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) Memorandum, mid-December 1919, Record Group (hereafter RG) 38, Box 588, National Archives (hereafter NA), Washington, D.C. During 1919 and 1920, all five Central American republics experienced governmental turnovers by coup or revolt.

5. Millett, p. 119; American Patrol Detachment Regulations, January 1919, RG 45, Subject File (SF): IR, Box 164, NA; see Rear Adm. Charles S. Freeman to CNO William H. Standley, 15 July 1933, RG 80, Confidential Correspondence, Box 183, NA; Agent "B" to ONI, 25 October 1910, RG 38, Box 576, NA; CINCLANT Adm. Charles J. Badger to SECNAV, 12 July 1914, Daniels Papers, Box 59, LC.

6. Rear Adm. William B. Caperton to CNO Robert E. Coontz, 12 May 1919, RG 45, SF:UP, Box 580, NA.

7. Acting Secretary of State Frank L. Polk to SECNAV Daniels, 21 June 1919, 811.30/50, RG 59, Decimal File, Box 7495, NA; OPNAV planning committee to CNO Coontz, 28 May 1919, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 2, NA.

8. CINCPAC Adm. Hugh Rodman to SECNAV Daniels, 20 and 27 September and 6 October 1919, and COMCRU DIV 2 PACFLT Rear Adm. Spencer S. Wood to SECNAV Daniels, 3 October 1919, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 2219, NA.

9. CINCPAC Rodman to SECNAV Daniels, 1 November 1919, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 2219; OPNAV planning Committee to CNO Coontz, 30 September 1919, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 4, NA.

10. Secretary of State Robert Lansing to SECNAV Daniels, 14 January 1920, 815.000/2146, RG 59, Decimal File, Microcopy M-647, Roll 9, NA.

11. Freeman's Memorandum for CNO Coontz, 21 January 1920, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 355, NA.

12. See the memorandum of Captain Lusius A. Bostwick for CNO Coontz, 5 May 1920, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 52, NA.

13. Commander, Special Service Squadron (COMSPERON) Freeman to CNO Standley, 15 July 1933 and 8 January 1934, RG 80, Confidential Corresp., Box 183, NA; Freeman's memorandum for CNO Coontz, 13 July 1920, RG 80, Secret and Confidential, Box 52, NA.

14. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby to SECNAV Daniels, no date and unsent, appended to 813.00/962, RG 59, Decimal File, Microcopy M-672, Roll 3, NA; CNO Coontz to CINCLANT Adm. Henry B. Wilson and CINPAC Rodman, 24 July 1920, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 51, NA.

15. CNO Coontz to Capt. Arthur S. Smith, 13 August 1920, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 71, NA.

16. Bostwick and Freeman, "Administrative Plans Estimate: United States and Latin-American Policy as Affected by and Affecting the United States Navy," 10 September 1920, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 52, NA. CNO Coontz Memorandum for SECNAV, 17 September 1920, Daniels Papers, Box 73, LC. Notations appended to the copy of the Bostwick-Freeman "Estimate" sent to CO, U.S.S. Denver, 26 October 1920, RG 45, SF:UE, Box 763, NA.

17. See Gordon F. Ogilvie, "Remember the Rochester," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 1971, p. 69.

18. CNO Coontz to COMSPERON Rear Adm. Henry F. Bryan, 25 September 1920, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 2204, NA.

19. COMSPERON Freeman to CNO Standley, 15 July 1933, RG 80, Confidential Corresp., Box 183, NA.

20. Twice in 1926, the State Department rejected requests by the American Legation in Honduras for a naval presence at LaCeiba.

21. See William Kamman, *A Search for Stability: United States Diplomacy Toward Nicaragua, 1925-1933* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 83-99; Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 246-260; Neill Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Chicago, Ill.: Quadrangle Books, 1967).

22. Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, pp. 246-260.

23. COMSPERON Rear Adm. William C. Cole to CNO Coontz, 3 October 1922, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 2204, NA.

24. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes to the American Legation at Tegucigalpa, Honduras and the American consuls on the north coast of Honduras, 5 September 1924, 815.00/3317a, RG 59, Decimal File, Microcopy M-647, Roll 16, NA.

25. Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg to the American consul, LaCeiba, 20 April and 2 June 1925, 815.00/3678 and /3707, RG 59, Decimal File, Microcopy M-647, Roll 18, NA.

26. See CNO Harold R. Stark's comments on the obsolescence of gunboat diplomacy in 1940 in his memorandum to F.D.R., 2 June 1940, Strategic Plans Division Records, Series IV: Serial Files, Box 79, Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.

27. Robert G. Albion, *Makers of Naval Policy, 1798-1947* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1980), p. 329.

28. The German Cruiser Squadron underwent a similar test of wills with the German diplomatic corps in China from 1897 to 1914 and with the same result. See Dwight R. Messimer, "Gunboats and Diplomats," *The American Neptune*, April 1980, pp. 85-99.

## 72 Naval War College Review

29. OPNAV memorandum for CNO Coontz, 12 January 1921, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 34, NA.

30. SECNAV Daniels to Secretary of State Colby, 15 January 1921 and Under Secretary of State Norman H. Davis to SECNAV Daniels, 1 February 1921, RG 80, Secret and Confidential Corresp., Box 34, NA; for an excellent theoretical discussion of the political significance of routine naval visits, see James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919-1979* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), p. 30.

31. Memorandum for Secretary of State Hughes, 11 May 1922, 811.33/413, RG 59, Decimal File, Box 7507, NA.

32. Under Secretary of State William Phillips to Dr. Dana G. Munro, 16 May 1922, 811.33/414, RG 59, Decimal File, Box 7507, NA.

33. CNO Coontz to COMSPERON Cole, 5 June 1922, RG 45, SF:OC, Box 308, NA; CNO Coontz to COMSPERON Cole, 19 June 1922, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 2204, NA.

34. Acting SECNAV Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. to Under Secretary of State Phillips, 22 July 1922, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 621, NA.

35. COMSPERON Smith to CNO William V. Pratt, 26 June 1931 and COMSPERON Freeman to CNO Standley, 15 July 1933, RG 80, Confidential Corresp., Box 183, NA; Division of Latin American Affairs Memorandum, 11 January 1933, 811.3310/337, RG 59, Decimal File, Box 4996, NA.

36. See COMSPERON Smith to SECNAV Charles F. Adams, 5 August 1932 and 28 January 1933, *Annual Reports of Fleets and Task Forces of the U.S. Navy* (Washington: NA), Microcopy M-971, Roll 15.

37. CNO Standley to COMSPERON Freeman, 11 February 1935, RG 80, Confidential Corresp., Box 183, NA.

38. COMSPERON Freeman to CNO Standley, 15 July 1933 and 8 January 1934, RG 80, Confidential Corresp., Box 183, NA.

39. COMSPERON Rear Adm. Yancy S. Williams to CNO William D. Leahy, 4 April 1938, RG 80, Secret Corresp., Box 256, NA.

40. Navy Basic Plan, Neutrality W.P.L., 30 September 1935, Strategic Plans Division Records, Series IV: Serial Files, Boxes 79 and 80, Operational Archives, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C.

41. OPNAV to COMSPERON Rear Adm. H. Kent Hewitt and Commandant, 15th Naval District, 17 September 1940, RG 80, General Corresp., Box 2195, NA; Millett, "State Department's Navy," pp. 134-138.

42. See Peter M. Swartz, "Contemporary U.S. Naval Strategy: A Bibliography," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 1986, supp., pp. 46-47.

43. See Edward N. Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Sea Power* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 3-11.

44. See Kenneth Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 33-35; James Cable, *Diplomacy at Sea* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985), pp. 48-49.

45. Booth, p. 66.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

48. ONI agent report, 15 February 1927, RG 38, Box 588, NA.

49. Booth, pp. 85, 96.

