

**SILAS WRIGHT TERRY**  
**The Brazilian Naval Mutiny**  
Ricky Dale Calhoun

Autumn 1893 found the cruiser *Newark* undergoing repairs in dry dock at the Norfolk Navy Yard after the long deployment to bring the Columbus caravels from Spain to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Captain Terry no doubt expected to spend the winter with his family and perhaps visit Cadiz over Christmas, since the *Newark* was scheduled to be under repair until spring. Terry was then 52 years of age, with the first streaks of gray starting to show in his dark hair. Mason Terry, his son, was then a young man 18 years of age and about to embark on his own career. Daughter Eleanor was a slim, black-haired girl of ten, and was no doubt already showing the vivaciousness and adventurous nature that would characterize her when she became a young woman. Events five thousand miles away were to prevent the Terry family from spending Christmas together, however.

In the spring of 1888 Brazil became the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery when its parliament passed an emancipation law backed by Emperor Dom Pedro II. The next year former slave owners, who were angry because they had not been compensated, backed a military coup d'état that overthrew the monarchy and declared Brazil a republic. General Floriano Peixoto soon seized power. Peixoto maintained the fiction that Brazil was a constitutional republic but ruled as a military dictator.

On Sept. 6, 1893, the Brazilian navy commanded by Admiral Custodio José de Mello, a monarchist, revolted against Peixoto. The rebellious fleet seized control of Rio de Janeiro harbor, but army troops manning the harbor forts remained loyal to Peixoto. Next day, communications with Brazil fell silent when the Peixoto government restricted access to the undersea telegraph cable that connected Rio de Janeiro to the rest of the world via London. Even foreign diplomats were not permitted to communicate with their capitals.

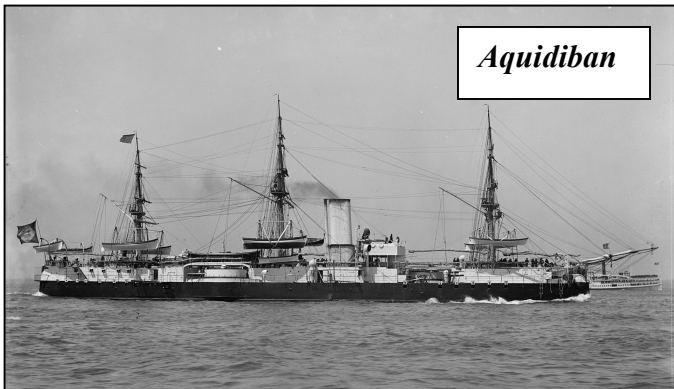
The attempted naval coup d'état became a standoff and mini civil war fought within the confines of Rio de Janeiro harbor. Admiral Mello threatened to bombard the city if the government did not meet his demands, foremost of which was that Peixoto give

up power. On Sept. 13, Mello opened fire on the harbor forts. Peixoto allowed foreign diplomats to notify their respective governments of the situation. Thomas L. Thompson, the U.S. Minister, sent an urgent telegram to Washington requesting that warships be sent to protect Americans. Representatives of the European Great Powers made similar requests to their governments.

Captain Terry was ordered to hurry up the *Newark*'s repairs and get underway to Rio de Janeiro as soon as possible. After a week of frenzied work by the Norfolk Navy Yard to get the ship ready, the *Newark* departed on Sept. 25, 1893, with Rear Admiral Oscar F. Stanton aboard. A large quantity of ammunition was placed aboard the *Newark* in anticipation that the ship, along with the *Charleston*, which was already in Rio de Janeiro harbor, would cooperate with the European navies in a multi-national effort to control the situation.

Upon entering Rio de Janeiro harbor on Oct. 22, 1893, Admiral Stanton, who had not been adequately informed of the situation, made a serious diplomatic mistake. As the *Newark* passed the Brazilian battleship *Aquidaban*, which was the flagship of the Brazilian navy and was flying the Brazilian national flag, Stanton ordered that salutes be exchanged in keeping with standard naval etiquette. Stanton's salute to Admiral Mello's flagship was taken as an insult by the Brazilian government. The incident and Stanton's subsequent inaction in the face of escalating harassment by the rebel fleet ultimately led

to his being relieved of command.



Between the sacking of Stanton and the arrival of his replacement, Rear Admiral Andrew E. K. Benham, Terry found himself operating in cooperation with an international fleet of fourteen American,

British, French, German, Austrian, Portuguese, and Italian warships. The international fleet was composed mostly of second-rate cruisers and gunboats, whose captains were following the lead of Admiral Giovanni Magnaghi of the Royal Italian Navy. Admiral Magnaghi, because he was senior officer present, held the leadership position by virtue of

naval etiquette but had no formal command authority over the multi-national fleet. Magnaghi's flagship *Giovanni Bausan*, an armor protected cruiser that carried a main armament of two 10-inch guns, was also the only ship present capable of doing battle with the British-built Brazilian battleship *Aquidaban*. Terry, who had gained fluency in Portuguese during his earlier service with the European Squadron in Lisbon, handled the tense negotiations with the Brazilian government and rebels.

The international cooperative arrangement continued after Admiral Benham arrived with the cruisers *San Francisco*, *New York*, and *Detroit* on Jan. 12, 1894, but with Benham taking the initiative. Benham was a more energetic, assertive officer than Admiral Stanton or the European naval commanders. He was in no mood to tolerate the steadily increasing harassment from the rebel fleet, and the combined firepower of the American cruisers was a match for *Aquidaban*. After his ships were struck by misaimed gunfire on four separate occasions, including an incident in which the *Newark's* launch was fired upon, Admiral Benham decided to put on a show of force. On Sunday morning, Jan. 28, 1894, Benham ordered his crews to battle stations and in *San Francisco* led *New York*, *Charleston*, *Newark*, and *Detroit* in battle line formation in a circle round the harbor past the forts and the rebel Brazilian fleet.

Five American merchant ships were trapped in the harbor. The rebels would not permit them to unload their cargoes and the Brazilian government refused to let them leave until they did so. Admiral Benham notified port authorities and the commanders of the rebel vessels that he intended to escort the American merchant ships to the docks to unload on Monday. Admiral Saldanha da Gama, who was in operational command of the rebel fleet, warned that if the merchant ships attempted to dock he would fire on them. After learning of da Gama's threat on Sunday afternoon, Admiral Benham sent Silas Terry to deliver a blunt warning to the Brazilian commander: If the Brazilians fired on the American ships "the fire will be returned."

Shortly after daylight on Monday morning the American squadron again went to battle stations. There was no question in anyone's mind that if the Brazilians opened fire Admiral Benham intended to sink the entire Brazilian navy. The British, French, and Italian warships moved out of the way. According to newspaper reports, Captain S. Hofmeyer, commander of the German gunboats *Arcona* and *Alexandrine*, notified

Admiral Benham that his ships would assist the Americans in the event of a battle. *San Francisco*, *Charleston*, and *New York* moved into positions to engage the *Aquidaban* from three directions.

Nerves were tense as the American merchant ship *Amy* raised her anchors and started for the Saudre Piers followed by the *Good News* and *Julia Rollins*. The *Detroit*, under command of Capt. William H. Brownson, moved into position to engage the Brazilian monitor *Trajano* and the gunboat *Guanabara*, the two ships that were guarding the approach to the piers. *Newark* followed behind the *Detroit*. Terry had his ship's guns trained on two Brazilian tugboats that it was feared might try to ram the *Detroit*. As the *Amy* passed the Brazilian ships a rifle shot was fired toward her from the *Guanabara*. Capt. Brownson fired a return shot from one of the *Detroit*'s 6-pounder deck guns. The cannon shot struck the *Guanabara* a glancing blow near the bow. The monitor *Trajano* then fired on the *Detroit* with her turret guns but the shells splashed short of the American ship. Capt. Brownson responded by firing a broadside at the *Trajano*. One shell hit the *Trajano*'s stern near the rudder. The American shells did no major damage and caused no casualties but convinced the *Trajano*'s captain to break off the fight. Admiral da Gama, looking down the barrels of three American cruisers' 6-inch guns at close range, prudently decided not to open fire.

Although several days passed before the final outcome became obvious, Admiral Benham's demonstration broke the blockade of Rio de Janeiro and ended the Brazilian naval rebellion. The incident gave the European Great Powers a glimpse of the newly acquired capabilities and global reach of the U.S. Navy and introduced their naval officers and diplomats to one of that navy's rising stars, a captain from the backwoods of western Kentucky.