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SET AND DRIFT



THE GREAT SAMOAN HURRICANE OF 1899

by

Ernest Andrade

Rear Admiral Lewis A. Kimberly, standing on the deck of U.S.S. *Trenton*, gazed for a time at the longboat moving steadily away toward Apia, then he looked briefly at the darkening sky. No indeed, he did not like the look of it. Blacklock, the American Vice Consul, had just left him with the disquieting news that a hurricane was approaching. In a way the news came as a relief, for at least a storm was something a seaman could understand and deal with—not like the crazy-quilt international situation developing in Samoa. With the new train of thought, Kimberly recalled his orders that had brought him to Apia in the first place, a little more than a month ago. It had started when Blacklock had sent an alarmed call for help to the State Department, which had approved the request and transmitted it to the Navy. The Germans, it seemed, were at the root of the difficulty. Since 1885 a civil war of sorts had been going on in Samoa between rival factions supporting and opposing Chief Malietoa. Such local strife was more typical than unusual in Samoan politics, but what made the latest round of bloodletting serious was

the Germans' decision to back one of the factions with diplomatic support and arms. It had all started on a small enough scale, and the Germans had achieved their initial objective of getting their man, Tamasese, to replace Malietoa, who was exiled. Unfortunately, the refusal of several powerful Samoans to accept Tamasese had brought on escalating violence. By mid-1888 the Germans had felt compelled to intervene more openly, sending a squadron of warships to the scene and then bombarding several villages in enemy territory and finally landing a party of sailors to assist in operations ashore. These were ambushed on 18 December with some loss by men led by Mataafa, the chief supporter of Malietoa. Fearing further encroachments and perhaps a German attempt to simply annex the islands and thus to threaten American property interests, Blacklock had then sent his request for assistance.¹ There had been an American naval presence in Samoa since November in the form of the small cruiser *Nipsic*, but that was not enough to deter the much more powerful German force. Hence

Blacklock's anxious request: "Admiral with squadron necessary immediately."² Thus Kimberly found himself in Samoa, with orders to prevent an overt German takeover of the islands. He knew such an attempt was likely, for the German naval commander had declared martial law and the German Government had informed the American that it had been forced into war by the actions of Mataafa.³ At the moment everything was quiet enough, but no one knew when the Germans might attempt some overt action either afloat or ashore. If that happened, his forces were certain to become involved. It was not a welcome prospect.

Abruptly dismissing thoughts of international intrigue from his mind, Kimberly looked carefully about the harbor. *Trenton* was anchored farthest out near the entrance, so he commanded a good view of the bay and the shipping concentrated as far in as the waterfront of Apia itself. Apia harbor was in the general form of a bay with its open end facing north. Near the southernmost part of the harbor, the Vaisinigo River emptied into it, and scattered out along the shore to the west of the mouth of the river lay the town of Apia, a few coral stone buildings marking its commercial center. The river's waters flowed directly into the bay and prevented the formation of reefs near its mouth, but elsewhere along the southern, eastern, and western shores, a reef took considerable space and restricted movement about the harbor. The dangers of that place were aptly described by Robert Louis Stevenson, who was living in Samoa not far from Apia at the time. He said:

The shape of the enclosed anchorage may be compared to a high-shouldered jar or bottle with a funnel mouth. Its sides are almost everywhere of coral; for the reef not only bounds it to seaward and forms the neck and mouth, but skirting about the beach it forms

the bottom also.... Danger is, therefore on all hands. The entrance gapes three cables wide at the narrowest, and the formidable surf of the Pacific thunders both outside and in. There are days when speech is difficult in the chambers of shoreside houses; days when no boat can land, and when men are broken by stroke of sea against the wharves. As I write these words, three miles in the mountains, and with the land breeze still blowing from the island summit, the sound of that vexed harbor hums in my ears.⁴

Small boats were clustered both at the mouth of the river and along the reef-lined beach directly in front of Apia. These Kimberly saw briefly, for the objects that claimed his full attention were the warships anchored at various places between his own ship and the shore. *Trenton*, a second-rate wooden screw cruiser of nearly 4,000 tons, occupied an anchorage near the harbor entrance, partly because her size made anchorages farther in inadvisable, and partly because by the time she arrived, other warships had taken up the more sheltered positions inside the bay. Nearest to *Trenton*, and anchored a bit farther inshore, was U.S.S. *Vandalia*, a smaller second rate of about 2,000 tons. This vessel was the other half of the squadron that had been sent out to deter the Germans. The third American ship, *Nipsic*, a small wooden screw cruiser of 1,375 tons, was anchored nearest the shore and fairly close to the mouth of the Vaisinigo.⁵ The German ships lay close together near *Nipsic* and generally between her and the other American ships. There were three German war vessels. *Eber*, a small gunboat, was nearest *Nipsic* and the shore. A bit farther out was *Adler*, another gunboat, and farther out still was the cruiser *Olga*, flagship of the German squadron. To complete the array, still another warship was anchored in the harbor.

This was the British *Calliope*, a second-class screw cruiser of 2,770 tons, which was anchored between the German ships and *Vandalia*, and nearer the western side of the harbor than any of the other ships.

Apia harbor was certainly crowded on this 15th of March 1889, and Kimberly recognized the dangers to all the ships if they lay there exposed to the full force of a northerly gale. He had not been on speaking terms with the German commander since his arrival at Apia, but now he ordered signals to be sent suggesting that all the warships put to sea to ride out the storm. His signals were not acknowledged. Reluctant to leave port while the Germans remained, (perhaps) to cause trouble in his absence, Kimberly decided that his squadron, too, would stay, and he thereupon began issuing orders to prepare his ships for the approaching storm. Topmasts and yards were struck, additional anchors were laid out to windward, and everything likely to blow off the deck was firmly lashed down.⁶ Similar preparations were being made at the same time aboard the other warships in the harbor.

While these preparations were going on, the wind began gradually to increase. All the ships got up steam and as the wind-tossed waves, moving directly from the north into the exposed harbor, put increasing strain upon the anchor cables, the ships slowly steamed upwind toward their anchors to reduce the strain. Now began what amounted to a contest between the strength of the wind and the ships' engines. None of the ships except *Calliope*, and perhaps *Trenton* and *Olga*, had enough power to remain stationary against a wind of truly hurricane proportions, but those commanding and manning the squadrons could not know what strength the wind would finally reach.

Unfortunately, the storm of 15-16 March 1889 was to be one of the most severe that Samoa had experienced up

to that time. All afternoon the wind blew from the northeast without increasing much beyond force five, and many, including Capt. Norman H. Farquhar, skipper of *Trenton*, thought the worst was over. Then shortly after dark the wind hacked to due north and gradually increased. By early morning the wind reached force nine, a full gale, causing severe distress aboard several ships. At this point each ship was engaged in a fight for survival. Engine crews frantically fed coal to the boilers, as the engines were called upon to run propellers at nearly full speed in order to maintain anchorage positions. Deck crews and other hands were kept busy securing material that had come adrift, clearing away wreckage of smashed ships' boats or an occasional piece of rigging, or manning the pumps to keep the bilges clear of the heavy seas that crashed aboard. The ships' commanders shouted orders against the shrieking wind. The ordeal was made worse by the overwhelming sense of loneliness caused by inability of the ships' crews to see any other ships except, perhaps, the one nearest their own, and by the awful knowledge that somewhere astern the reefs lay waiting to claim them if they could not win their battle with the terrible storm.

By early morning on the 16th the storm had reached its peak and continued at gale force the rest of the day. With winds of more than 110 knots and a barometer dipping to twenty-nine inches, Stevenson's description of the bay at the height of the storm is graphic:

Day came about six, and presented to those on shore a seizing and terrific spectacle. In the pressure of the squalls, the bay was obscured as if by midnight, but between them a great part of it was clearly, if darkly visible amid driving mist and rain.... Seas that might have awakened surprise and terror in the midst of the Atlantic, ranged bodily and (it seemed to observers)

almost without diminution into the belly of that flask-shaped harbor; and the war-ships were alternately buried from view in the trough, or seen standing on end against the breast of the billows.⁷

Each ship had to fight its own battle. It could receive no aid from any other, but it could easily be hindered by others, for as ships dragged anchor they became unmanageable and increased the danger of collision. Of all the American ships, *Nipsic* was in the most sheltered anchorage and thus stood the best chance to survive. On the other hand, it was also in the most crowded part of the harbor and was likely to be involved in collision. In fact, the main concern through the night of *Nipsic's* commander, Capt. Dennis W. Mullan, was whether he could avoid being struck by *Olga* or *Adler*, both of which were upwind and dragging their anchors in spite of all their attempts to maintain their positions.⁸ The isolation of each ship by the howling wind, the tossing sea, and the pitch-black darkness is clearly shown by the fact that though the ship closest to *Nipsic* at the beginning of the storm was the gunboat *Eber*, no one aboard the American vessel seems to have seen the hopeless struggle and final end of the German ship. Smallest of the warships at Apia and also anchored nearest the reef ahead of Apia, *Eber* was the first to be overtaken by disaster. Her engines unable to prevent the anchors from dragging, she was flung on the reef sometime before dawn. By a quirk of the current and the waves, the ship was first smashed on the edge of the reef, then sucked under its overhang. Five officers and seventy enlisted men, the greater part of her crew, were drowned and many of the bodies never recovered.

Nipsic had done fairly well during the night in holding her position but just before dawn, the German *Olga*, her anchors dragging, drifted down upon the American ship. In the next few

minutes the two ships collided, both suffering considerable damage. In the case of *Nipsic*, the damage, which involved puncturing of the lower section of the smokestack, was vital, for the effect upon the boiler draft made it impossible to keep full steam.⁹ With anchors dragging on the sandy bottom, *Nipsic* drifted stern first toward the terrible reef in front of Apia. Captain Mullan decided to use what power he had left to run his ship parallel to the reef and to beach it near the mouth of the Vaisinigo where there was no reef and the bottom was sandy. At about 0700, *Nipsic* ran aground gently, remaining upright with stern toward the waves and with no significant underwater damage. It was a good beaching. In the next hour or so the crew evacuated the ship, being helped ashore by natives who risked their own lives to form human chains for the crewmen to pass along. As it was, it proved impossible to save everyone. Seven men of the crew were swept away and drowned.

The second American ship, *Vandalia*, suffered an even worse ordeal. Moored near the harbor entrance, this ship was in a far better position than *Nipsic*, with a much greater distance between her and the reef to leeward and with only *Trenton* to windward. For several hours all went well. Shortly after midnight the wind increased and *Vandalia* started to drag anchors. Her captain, Cornelius Schoonmaker, ordered a sheet anchor out to slow the drift. The drift into the harbor continued, however, and by about 0900 a serious danger of collision with the British *Calliope* loomed. At just about this time, an unusually heavy sea washed over the ship, smashing the wheel.¹⁰ Now completely helpless, *Vandalia* could not avoid a collision through her own efforts.

Seeing *Vandalia's* predicament, Henry C. Kane, skipper of *Calliope*, decided to slip his anchors, work past *Vandalia* and get out to sea. He had

already seen the doom that awaited any ship that went too near the reef, for his ship had been moored nearest the German gunboat *Adler*, which had drifted onto the reef about an hour before. Luckily for the *Adler's* crew, the gunboat caught a lucky wave that hurled it onto the reef instead of smashing it broadside against it to be sucked under.¹¹ Thrown onto its side, the ship rested on the reef, where it remains sitting to this day. About 15 of *Adler's* crew lost their lives but the rest struggled ashore with the aid of several Samoans. *Calliope* had the most powerful engines of any of the warships at Apia and was the only one with any chance of getting out of the harbor. Adroitly slipping past the crippled *Vandalia* and actually striking her stern with his jibboom, Kane worked his ship gradually toward the harbor mouth, inching forward into the wind at full power but making a speed of only about two knots. The only obstacle between *Calliope* and the open sea was *Trenton*, but fortunately there was ample room for the ships to clear, although by that time *Trenton's* boilers were flooded and she was beginning to drift into the harbor. Now one of the most dramatic incidents of that eventful day occurred, reflecting the knowledge of everyone at Apia before the storm that if hostilities had broken out between Americans and Germans, the British would have joined forces with the Americans. As the British ship crept slowly past the American vessel, the *Trenton's* crew stood at the rail and cheered. It is doubtful if the cheer was much heard above the roaring wind by those in *Calliope*, but it had a powerful effect nevertheless. Later Captain Kane said, "We were much affected by that proof of good will from another ship at a time when they might well have been thinking of themselves alone."¹²

As *Calliope* slowly steamed out of the harbor to safety and away from the tragedy taking place there, *Vandalia*

continued to drift helplessly, stern first, down toward the reef in the inner harbor, in spite of her anchors and the efforts of her laboring engines. By this time the only ship left afloat in the inner harbor was *Olga*, severely damaged and nearly unmanageable. Schoonmaker then tried to take his ship in to beach it on sandy bottom near *Nipsic*. Steering with a makeshift rudder and sails, *Vandalia* slipped between *Olga* and the reef but the engines were not strong enough to stop the ship's leeway toward the reef. Schoonmaker then tried to bring the bow around into the wind but failed, and the stern struck the reef shortly before 1100. The engines were then shut down and all the crew called on deck. The ship gradually veered around broadside to the reef and settled to her gunwales upon a rocky shelf. Heavy seas swept over the men huddled aboard, and several who tried to get to the shore, about 200 yards away, were drowned. Others were washed overboard and lost, including Captain Schoonmaker. The executive officer, taking command, then ordered the men into the rigging where they clung, drenched and exhausted, for the next 8 hours.

The last American ship, the cruiser *Trenton*, also fought a losing battle with the storm. Larger and more powerful than the other American warships, *Trenton* stood well to her anchorage during the night, and her officers were confident that she would ride out the storm successfully as long as some unforeseen accident did not occur. But shortly after dawn on 16 March, the wind rose and the storm reached its peak. The two unforeseen disasters occurred. Huge seas broke over the ship, carrying away the wheel and smashing the rudder. At about the same time, the seas began entering the ship through the hawse pipes. Later both Admiral Kimberly and Captain Farquhar commented upon what seemed to them a faulty design that placed the hawses

too low. Bad design or not, the hawse pipes took in water in large amounts, and the crew was quickly set to work to plug the holes with spare canvas, mattresses and whatever else was handy. It did no good, for the surging seas washed out the plugging materials as fast as they were put in.¹³ At about 0930 the water gained so much headway that it put out the boiler fires, leaving the ship without power. During the next hour the anchor chains, under the strain of the hull's deadweight, parted, and *Trenton* began to drift helplessly into the harbor, but not before *Calliope* was able to slip past and head out to sea.

Without a rudder and with no power, Admiral Kimberly and the others on the doomed ship could only watch helplessly as they bore down slowly upon the German cruiser *Olga*, which up to this point was managing to hold its own and was the only warship still afloat in the inner harbor. *Olga's* captain tried manfully to avoid colliding but it proved impossible. Both ships were severely damaged by the collision. It made little difference to *Trenton*, which was going to be wrecked anyway, but in the case of *Olga* it turned a hitherto successful effort into a critical situation. Perhaps remembering what *Nipsic* had done a few hours earlier, the German captain slipped his anchor cables and headed for shore with what power he could muster, while *Trenton* drifted past on its way toward the waiting reef. *Olga* was successfully beached on sandy bottom near the mouth of the Vaisinigo, a little distance north of where *Nipsic* lay, and all the German crew were rescued.

Kimberly watched the German captain's seamanship and silently applauded it, as he had Kane's exploit several hours earlier. By now it was late afternoon and though the fury of the gale had weakened a bit, it was still impossible to avert disaster. As *Trenton* moved to within a short distance of the reef, marked clearly by the heavy surf

which broke upon it, a quirk of the current began to move the ship eastward, more nearly parallel to the reef instead of converging upon it. The new course brought *Trenton* down upon the sunken *Vandalia*, with the drenched survivors of her crew still clinging to the yards and rigging. It was now about nightfall, and more than twenty-four hours after the storm had fully developed, the wind was noticeably weakening, and along with it, the heavy seas were gradually slackening. However, it was only a relative relief, for the surf beating upon the reef still made it hazardous for anyone to try to reach the shore. In such circumstances the crew of *Vandalia* must have viewed the massive bulk of *Trenton* drifting slowly upon them as a grand sight, for it represented at least a hope of safety. For his part, Kimberly was not overly concerned. Both ships were past saving now, and in the weakening storm there was no real danger in another collision that could not be avoided anyhow. The stern of *Trenton* bumped the wrecked *Vandalia*, almost gently, then the current slowly swung the bow of the larger ship around until the two hulls were parallel. There, exposed to the slowly diminishing waves, but protected from the reef by the hull of *Vandalia*, *Trenton* filled with water and gradually settled to the bottom. Being a larger ship, her upper decks remained clear and thus provided something of a haven. During the next couple of hours the *Trenton's* men assisted the exhausted *Vandalia* survivors from their exposed places and together everyone remained aboard *Trenton* the rest of the night.

By dawn of the next day, 17 March, the surf had abated still more, though still far higher than normal. Parties of natives and survivors from *Nipsic* formed human chains and assisted the crewmen aboard *Trenton* to come ashore, so that during the morning everyone made it ashore safely. *Trenton*

had lost only one crewman during the entire fearful experience. Kimberly, Farquhar, and their men were happy to reach firm land and expressed their thanks to the natives who had helped them. In his report Kimberly made special mention of the efforts of the Samoans on behalf of the Americans, and he singled out in particular, Seumanutafa, one of the more important chiefs who had been instrumental in organizing rescue parties and who had exposed himself to considerable danger in his efforts. Seumanutafa and a number of other natives were later awarded medals by a grateful Navy Department.

During the storm, beset by anxiety and crises, Kimberly had had no time to think about international conflict or the potential German "enemy," and presumably neither had the German commander. Both had had their hands full with problems of survival. Yet now the hostile attitudes that had brought all these men to Samoa and their ships to destruction began to reassert themselves. Political realities had intruded upon the devastated scene even earlier, as Samoans opposed to Seumanutafa, a supporter of Mataafa and the deposed Malietoa, bent their efforts to rescuing Germans rather than Americans. The crew of the *Olga* in particular was given special attention by these natives, and a camp for the German survivors was set up north of the Vaisinigo River and well away from Apia itself and the American camp, which was established near the mouth of the river close to the beached *Nipric*. There is no evidence that during the storm Germans or Americans were particularly concerned with helping each other. Both groups had lost many men; according to Kimberly, the American loss from three ships was four officers and forty-seven enlisted men,¹⁴ while the German loss, which was not made completely known by them, could not have been less than

ninety officers and ratings.

For days after the storm, the reef gave up bodies washed ashore, while Samoan divers brought up others that had been securely wedged either in wreckage or in the reef itself.

The experience of that terrible storm remained with the survivors for the rest of their lives but its effects were not restricted only to them, nor to those at Apia. News of the disaster quickly spread throughout the world. It had a sobering effect upon nearly everyone, and induced many to view in a new light the circumstances that had created the international crisis at Samoa in the first place and had brought together at Apia the warships whose wreckage now lay scattered along the shore. *The New York Times* expressed in an editorial a widely prevailing view, one not generally held before the disaster:

The loss of three American naval vessels, with so many of their officers and crews, is a national damage greater than there is any reason to expect that all the trade we can do with the islands in the course of the next half century can at all compensate. Serious as that disaster is, it is slight compared to what might have resulted from keeping up the absurd fiction that we have Samoan "interests" that need looking after.¹⁵

In other words, the presence of the squadrons at Apia might have brought hostilities and perhaps war over objectives not worth the price. As it was, the damage caused by the storm was too high a price to pay.

Shortly after the storm, the view that the Great Samoan Hurricane was an act of God that prevented war between Germany and the United States appeared and rapidly gained credence. It even appeared in history books written long after the event. Leaving aside the question of Divine intervention, it is unlikely that there would have been a war. Hostilities might indeed have

developed, because in the highly charged situation at Apia it is quite possible that Americans or Germans might have begun shooting at each other. But there would have been no war. Both the American and the German Governments had been concerned about the Samoan problems for nearly 2 years, and a conference at Washington in June 1887 had failed to adjust differences. The serious events involving intervention in Samoan affairs by the local German authorities in late 1888 and early 1889 led both governments to agree that a conference on Samoa should be reconvened as soon as possible. Their agreement came in mid-February, about a month before the hurricane. Responsible leaders on both sides did not believe Samoa worth a war between the two countries.¹⁶ American naval officers were also urging caution upon their government, inasmuch as they believed the American Navy was no match for the German.¹⁷ This being the case, it was highly unlikely that news of a clash between the squadrons in Samoa would have precipitated a war. At worst it might have delayed the time when serious negotiations over Samoa would begin.

As it was, the news of the destruction of the two squadrons probably brought the negotiators together in a more chastened mood and may have helped to create attitudes more conducive to reaching some kind of effective agreement. The new conference, held at Berlin between 29 April and 27 May 1889, produced an agreement to

establish a tripartite supervision of Samoan affairs by the United States, Great Britain and Germany acting together. More significantly, Germany agreed to cease its support of any particular faction in Samoan politics, thus allowing the Samoans to work out a new political equilibrium.¹⁸ This agreement effectively ended international conflict over Samoa.

Meanwhile in Samoa, the naval commanders set about trying to provide for their men and to salvage as much of their materiel as possible. Both *Nipsic* and *Olga* were eventually refloated and restored to service, but the other ships were total losses. Of course, the lives lost could not be restored. Kimberly was deeply troubled by the loss of his men and his ships, and both he and Farquhar asked that a court of inquiry be established to fix responsibility for the disaster. After deliberation, the Navy Department told him it did not consider that he or any one else could be held responsible. Because the extreme violence of the storm could not have been foreseen, Kimberly's concern to remain at his post was the overriding consideration, and his decision to do so was therefore the correct one. "To convene a court of inquiry under these circumstances would seem to imply a doubt on the part of the Department where no doubt exists."¹⁹ So Kimberly was absolved of blame in the matter, and could at least serve out the last 3 years of his career freed from a burden of guilt over the loss of so many good men.

NOTES

1. Clara Schieber, *Transformation of American Sentiment Toward Germany* (Boston: Cornhill, 1923), pp. 59-61.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

3. Charles C. Tansil, *The Foreign Policy of Thomas F. Bayard* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1940), pp. 106-107.

4. Robert L. Stevenson, *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (New York: Scribner, 1892), pp. 244-245.

5. Particulars of the American ships are in Frank M. Bennett, *The Steam Navy of the United States: A History of Growth of the Steam Vessel of War in the U.S. Navy, and of the Naval Engineer Corps* (Washington: Naval Institute Press, 1896), pp. 637-647, 668-669, Appendix B.

6. "Report of Rear-Admiral L.A. Kimherly," *Navy Department Annual Report. 1889* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1890), p. 95.
 7. Stevenson, pp. 250-251.
 8. "Report of Commander D.W. Mullan, Commanding U.S.S. *Nipsic*," *Navy Department Annual Report. 1889*, p. 104.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
 10. "Report of Lieut. Jas. W. Carlin, Executive Officer of the *Vandalia*," *Navy Department Annual Report. 1889*, p. 105.
 11. "Capt. Henry C. Kane's Report to Parliament," Parliamentary Paper 5732 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1889), p. 4.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 5. See also the account of a member of the crew of *Trenton*, John H. Lloyd, "The Last Cruise of the Old *Trenton*," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, September 1927, p. 951. A good collection of photographs of the damaged ships after the storm is also in this issue, pp. VI, XVI.
 13. "Report of Rear-Admiral L.A. Kimherly," p. 96.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
 15. *The New York Times*, 5 April 1889, p. 4.
 16. The diplomatic give-and-take on the Samoan question is covered in Tansill, pp. 68-119. See also Otto du Stolberg-Wernigerode, *Germany and the United States of America during the Era of Bismarck* (Reading, Pa.: Henry Janssen Foundation, 1937), pp. 258-260, for Bismarck's reaction to events in Samoa.
 17. Tansill, pp. 102-103.
 18. Alice Felt Tyler, *The Foreign Policy of James G. Blaine* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1927), pp. 233-244.
 19. Benjamin F. Tracy to Kimherly, 27 April 1889, *Navy Department Annual Report, 1889*, p. 123.
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