

The U.S.N. *Niagara*. From the U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland.

Courtesy Pete De Rose.

Jingo (jin'gó) - A person who boasts of his patriotism and favors an aggressive, threatening, warlike, foreign policy.

(Webster's New World Dictionary)

"We are all jingoes now; and the head jingo is the Hon. William McKinley, the trusted and honored Chief Executive of the Nation's will."

(New York Sun, April 20, 1898)

The U.S.N. *Niagara*: America's Emerging Naval Pride

Mike Parker

As the 19th Century neared its close, the American people were showing unmistakable signs of a desire for a larger stage. Recent events in American political history and in Hawaii, Venezuela, and Samoa, revealed an increasing spirit of imperialism.

The United States had fought no real war since 1865, and no foreign war since 1848.

A new generation of Americans were coming of age. These Americans, hearing of the exploits of the generation, were growing weary of listening to the deeds of their fathers.

By 1897, the country was bursting with untapped potential. The economic panic of 1893 was definitely over. The American feeling of "expand or explode", especially when commercial profits loomed, beckoned.

Cuba had long been restive under Spanish rule and the island had been ripe for revolt significantly prior to 1897. The American tariff of 1894 on sugar had presented Cuba with economic hardship. By early 1895, unhappy Cubans were already under the flag of rebellion. The insurgents, adopting a "scorched earth" policy, devastated the island such that the Spaniards would have gladly pulled out. American investors, caught in the middle, sympathized with the *insurrectos* (sic), and aided them with money paid in the form of "blackmail", to leave their property untouched. This money was of considerable assistance in obtaining weapons for the Cuban cause. Cuban propaganda, disseminated by refugees in the United States, appealed to the American psyche for liberty, democracy, and the banishment of monarchies.

The official Washington position was to maintain a vigilance against any gun running activities for Cuba that were based in the United States. Approximately two-thirds of these expeditions were stopped. Spain, however, did not appreciate Washington's semisuccessful efforts, and charged, with considerable truth, the United States had kept the revolt alive.

While the Cuban Revolution was running its course, the American Congress was in the process of official recognition of the shadowy Cuban government. This act of recognition touched off wildly anti-American riots in Madrid and other Spanish cities. This, in turn, touched off counter demonstrations against Spain in various American cities.



In the background, Grover Cleveland was dead against a war with Spain. Secretary of State Olney was working behind the scenes proposing mediation with Spain. The heated Presidential Campaign of 1896 between McKinley and Bryan diverted attention from Cuba and soon popular enthusiasm for confrontation with Spain was beginning to wane.

In the development stage of major events in a nation's history, there often occur a series of seemingly random occurrences that contribute to a cumulative event of dramatic proportion.

Late in 1895, a wealthy young William Randolph Hearst purchased the staid but failing *New York Journal*. While Mr. Hearst was certainly not the creator of yellow journalism, it can be argued that his style of implementation brought it to new levels of influence in American society. The newly acquired *New York Journal*, with its selective dissemination of facts and viewpoint, was presented a golden opportunity with the Cuban conflagration.

Hearst, among other things, hired artists to enhance the lurid style and imaginative illustrations the *Journal* promoted. Notable among those artists was Frederick Remington, whom he sent to Cuba to draw pictures. Upon his arrival in Havana, the artist allegedly telegraphed: "Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war." Hearst, so the story goes, replied, "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war."¹

Over the next few years, from 1896 to 1898, the *New York Journal* continued to fan the flames. Other newspapers, in a catch-up mode, inadvertently assisted in keeping the American public inflamed. By February 15, 1898, the

mysterious explosion of the United States Battleship *Maine*, in Havana harbor, with the loss of 250 men and officers, was the final catalyst in a supercharged atmosphere.

To an American public wanting answers Spain was found guilty!

THE NAVY

By 1894, the United States had risen to sixth among the naval powers of the world. With Great Britain as the "standard" of the period, the rankings were:

Great Britain	100%	United States	17%
France	68%	Spain	11%
Italy	48%	China	6%
Russia	38%	Austria	5%
Germany	21%	Turkey	3%

Interestingly, the United States had only begun to make any real progress in developing a navy of any significance in the 13 years prior to 1894.

The movement to repair the decay that started after the close of the Civil War began in 1881. The Secretary of the Navy, William H. Hunt, appointed the 1st Advisory Board, to be presided over by Rear-Admiral John Rodgers. Their mission was to determine the requirements of the Navy. This advisory board declared the United States should have 21 battleships, 70 unarmed cruisers of various sizes, 20 torpedo gunboats, and all to be built of steel.

This report was received with the proper attention,

but the real work of building did not start until 1885, when the Navy Department came under the administration of William C. Whitney. The next few years brought the U.S. Navy from an insignificant position to number six in world ranking.

It was under this spurt of growth and activity that the Navy was beginning to flex its newly formed muscle, and Spain seemed to provide a good target.

In classification of tonnage, the U.S./Spain comparisons of major class of ships was as follows:

<i>First Rate</i>	<i>U.S.</i>	<i>Spain</i>
Number of Ships	11	11
Total Tonnage	92,614	82,475
 <i>Second Rate</i>		
Number of Ships	16	20
Total Tonnage	60,883	41,008
 <i>Torpedo Boats</i>		
Number of Ships	22	12
Total Tonnage	3,000 (est.)	7,772

While this listing is by no means complete, American superiority over Spain was clear. Behind these numbers is the fact that the American Navy was of newer construction of modern design, and was made from the best of the new American steel. Most American steel for ship manufacture had previously been imported from Europe; the late 1880s had seen the rise of American mills to remedy this.



2. A group of the personal weapons and accoutrements of Sgt. Rhodes.

OUR STORY

The official listing for the United States Ship U.S.N.²
Niagara States:

<i>Tonnage:</i> 5,221	<i>Length:</i> 274 feet	<i>Beam:</i> 38 feet
<i>Depth:</i> 19 feet, 6 inches	<i>Speed:</i> 12 knots	<i>Crew:</i> 57 Men
<i>Artillery:</i> (2) 6 pounders (4) 3 pounders,		
(2) 37mm & (1) Colt Machine Gun.		

What is possibly the only remaining photograph of the *Niagara* is shown on page 69/16: it was obtained from the U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland by Pete De Rose.

The U.S.N. *Niagara* was of the Protected Cruiser Status; the official listing from the Navy Department reads:

The Third *Niagara*, a steamer, was built by John Roach and Sons, Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1877 acquired by the Navy from Ward Line Steamship Company, 11 April 1898, fitted out as a distillery and supply ship of the Collier Service and Commissioned at New York, 11 April 1898, Commander G.A. Bickness in command.

Niagara departed New York, 25 April 1898, for the Caribbean via Norfolk, Virginia, and Key West, Florida. During the Spanish-American War, she served the fleet off Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. The ship returned to Hampton Roads 26 May and sailed off four days later, again bound for ports of Cuba and Puerto Rico. *Niagara* remained on station in the Caribbean Sea until 24 July when she departed Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for New York,

arriving 3 September. *Niagara* remained at New York until she was decommissioned on 14 October 1898. She was sold for scrap 19 July 1899.

The 57 man complement was comprised of one-third Naval Regulars and two-thirds U.S. Naval Reserve Force from New York. The Marine detachment of 12 men and 1 officer who were also assigned to the *Niagara* were all Regulars from Mare Island, and were in addition to the Navy crew.

And thus, the U.S.N. *Niagara* had a full and illustrious career with the U.S. Navy for a grand total of 6 months, virtually to the day. No record can be found to indicate that the ship ever saw a day of action. Yet this ship is notable among all the ships that served our country during this conflict: the U.S.N. *Niagara* was fully outfitted by private funds from the public; it was intended to be a visible display of the new American Pride in its emerging Navy. It is my belief that this ship provided an outlet for the good citizens of New York to “do something” for the cause. New York, geographically central to the yellow journalistic posturing that held the public in such patriotic fervor, was ready to actively contribute to the war effort. A review of the facts surrounding the *Niagara*’s participation in the War, the hurried commissioning, the short tour of duty, and seemingly no real mission, all present strong evidence that the U.S.N. *Niagara* was an event, staged by the citizenry of New York and supported by the



3. Sgt. Rhodes' Model 1895 Colt and related items.

Department of the Navy, to contribute to the building of America's Naval pride. The individual weapons, and much of the operational effects of the *Niagara* were contributed from private sources. The weapons and equipment were basically patterned from standard military issue of the time, but have been altered to show service aboard the *Niagara*. These items bear no government markings.

The U.S.N. *Niagara* was much more than a spontaneous outpouring of American pride by the citizens of New York. The contributions were indeed made by the average person, but the effort was mainly funded by a group of New York millionaires, who provided the base of contributions and effort. Prominent families such as Rockefeller, Morganthau, Carnegie, and Morgan were all behind this effort. Interestingly, it seems that the leader of this good citizen effort was our old friend, William Randolph Hearst.

And Mr. Hearst never took any halfway measures. The U.S.N. *Niagara* was outfitted as if Hearst himself were going off on a luxury cruise. All the weapons, accoutrements, and general outfitting of the ship was done entirely with first class quality. The Officers Mess was equipped with sterling silver flatware and expensive fine china dinner service. It was all marked "Niagara". The enlisted men suffered no less. Their mess was equipped with flatware of silver plate and dinner service of a top quality porcelain. It was most certainly a significant step above the average kitchen mess normally issued aboard a Navy ship.

It is my belief that Hearst, continuing to sense the power that his two year long story had aroused in his reading public, used his personal wealth, power, and influence to stage the commissioning of the U.S.N. *Niagara*. The subsequent outfitting of the ship was a promotion stunt to assure the continuing interest in the story by the public. Hearst's personal stake in this was to sell papers and gain supremacy over his newspaper rival, the *New York World*, owned by William Pulitzer. By getting the American public to take a personal involvement in the story, he would be the main beneficiary. I do not have any information that indicates whether Hearst took a prominent or backseat role in the public outfitting of the *Niagara*, but I suspect he was not publicly the spearhead. His news stories could do that job for him. He did, however, personally and significantly contribute: all the weapons and accoutrements.

Whatever the speculation about Hearst's motive, the fact remains that the average American citizen was taking a personal interest in the new Navy and in America's position in the world. The commissioning of the *Niagara* was promoting a new pride in the American Navy.

THE ITEMS

The military items utilized for this research were from a single owner and member of the Marine Corps detachment that served aboard the *Niagara*.³ Pvt. Charles Daniel Rhodes joined the U.S. Marine Corps in 1896. His 35 year career was as follows:

1896: Basic Training at Parris Island, then stationed at Mare Island, New York.

1898: Served aboard the U.S.N. *Niagara* for 6 months, then back to Mare Island.

1900: Sent to China, with the American Relief Expedition, and was wounded during the Boxer Rebellion. Also served with Sgt. Dan Daily, the USMC most decorated Marine.

1902: Returned from China.

1903: Part of the "Great White Fleet" sent around the world by President Roosevelt.

1905: Sent to Quantico, VA, as a weapons instructor.

1910: Returned to Mare Island as a Duty Sergeant of the Marine Guard.

1912: Sent to Nicaragua.

1913: Went to Parris Island as a Training Instructor.

1914: Assigned with approximately 100 other Nicaragua Veterans to the Mexican Border to train U.S. Army personnel in guerrilla warfare tactics, under the command of Gen. Pershing.

1915: Served aboard the U.S.S. *Tennessee*.

1917: Sent to France in WWI, served with 5th Marine Regiment, attached to 2nd Division, and received wounds in battle.

1919: Returned stateside to Parris Island as a Training Instructor.

1922: Assigned to the U.S.S. *Ohio*.

1927: Returned for duty in Nicaragua, contracted a severe case of malaria.

1928: Returned to Parris Island.

1931: Received an Honorable Discharge for medical reasons, due to the malaria. Final rank was Marine Corps Sergeant Major.

1936: Died due to complications of the malaria in an old soldiers home in upstate New York.

The 35 year service to our country was rewarded with the following medals:

Expert Rifleman Marine Corps

Spanish-American Medal Marine Corps

1900: China Relief Medal Marine Corps

1912: Nicaragua Service Marine Corps

1914: Army/Mexican Border Service Medal

1914: Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal

1917: Victory Medal w/3 bars

1918: Coeur de Guerre w/2 Palms

1927: Nicaragua Service Marine Corps (2nd issue)

1929: Purple Heart w/2 stars, for injuries received in China, France and Nicaragua

1931: Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal w/4 bars

It is the personal effects of Sgt. Rhodes that provide us with the unique look at the weapons and accoutrements of the *Niagara*. Fig. 2 is a grouping of his weapons issued aboard the U.S.N. *Niagara*.

The Model 1895 Colt [Fig. 3] was probably his Government-issued service revolver, and would not have been normally issued until Rhodes became an NCO. This would make it a post Spanish-American War weapon. It is standard issue and shows much rework as would be expected during the 30 year period Sgt. Rhodes owned this side arm. The frame serial number is 6190, indicating an 1892 date of manufacture. The government inspector markings are very faint, but appear to be the J.T.T. stamping of John T. Thompson, Capt., USA, who inspected from 1896-1902.

The barrel is Model 1895 version, and carries the stamp of P.K. (Paul Keller, 1904-1906). The serial number is not consistent, and appears to be 2381. However, if it is in the 23,000 range, it would be very consistent with the Model 1895 barrel. The cylinder and oiled walnut grips bear the R.A.C. inspection marks of Rinaldo A. Carr (1889-1909). The backstrap is marked U.S. Army, government inspected by Rinaldo A. Carr and carries the Model 1901 butt swivel for lanyard.

The Model 1897 Remington New Model Small-bore Military Rifle was part of the special order weapons for the *Niagara*. These weapons were special ordered from funds provided by Hearst himself. The rifle, shown in Fig. 2 appears to be deluxe finish grade with the name "NIA-GARA" rolled and embossed [Fig. 4] prior to case hardening of the receiver. This weapon was made to special order and was not retro-finished to fill an order.

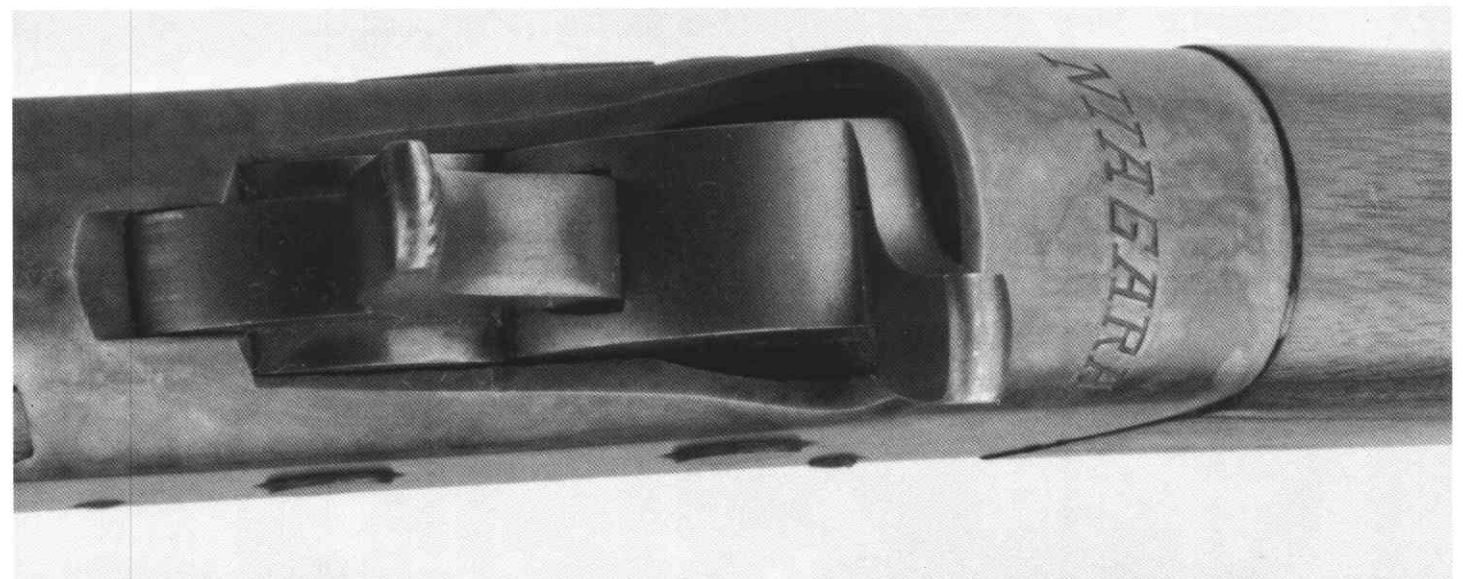
Deluxe case hardening was normally performed on this model; as shown in detail in Fig. 5.

The Model 1897 was intended to modernize the rolling block action. It is generally similar to the earlier models, except the caliber has been reduced to 7mm and an improved steel was used in the breech mechanism. There was also the addition of a hand guard. The Model 1897 was not well received by the Military. It was mainly manufactured in the 7mm cartridge and sold in considerable numbers in Central and South America. This particular weapon is in mint, unfired condition. This is probably the result of the lack of action the crew of the *Niagara* experienced, and the fact that Sgt. Rhodes, as a career professional, kept his weapons in ready condition.

The Remington knife bayonet [Fig. 6] is also standard issue with the Model 1897, and was finished in a high polish.

The Mills belt [Fig. 2], marked Anson Mills Feb 1:81 on the rear of the buckle, and bearing all the Mills & Orndorff patent dates on the clasp, is also of special order; the red piping on the edge is unique. In order to special-thread this design, the normal production had to be halted, and these were done in a special run on the looms. To the best of my knowledge, these cartridge belts are the only example of this design worn by actual military personnel on active duty. This was never a standard issue design.

The pistol holster and cartridge case [Fig. 2] are of standard military pattern, but bear no military markings. They are in "fan finish", and both have the prominent markings of "NIA-GARA" in the usual location of the government issued insignia.



4. The breech of Sgt. Rhodes' Remington rifle showing *Niagara* engraved on the top of the frame.

All the "NIAGARA" marked items are in virtually new and unused condition. These items are some of the best examples I have been able to locate. There are many examples of ship board items that have been found that bear this name, such as the silverware, dinner ware, and life preservers. When the U.S.N. *Niagara* was sold for scrap in 1899, I believe that Francis Bannerman was there to place his bid in on the military items. As late as 1927, the Bannerman Catalog contained items from the *Niagara*.

The U.S.N. *Niagara* is a unique story in recent American History. The personal effects of Sgt. Rhodes have provided us with only a small look at the artifacts that surround that story. There is much more to be discovered and be told.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dan Parker and Russ McIlwain for their assistance and special insights provided to me during the preparation of this story. Their extensive knowledge of the period was invaluable and their liberal dispensing of that information is greatly appreciated. I also wish to thank fellow gun collector Dave Dennison for his expert photography as presented in this article.

NOTES

1. *W.R. Hearst, J.K. Winkler* (New York, 1928), p 144.
2. The designation U.S.N. (United States Navy) is used throughout this article as the proper designator for ships commissioned by the Navy. According to research information, the modern designation "USS" did not come into usage until World War I. At that time, all U.S. ships were given flag status protection against foreign hostilities on the high seas. After W.W.I., the designation USS was reserved for only those vessels actually commissioned for the United States Navy.
3. The personal effects of Sgt. Rhodes were obtained from his niece, who resided in Northern Michigan, by my father, Chester Parker. Sgt. Rhodes' niece was quite elderly at the time and indicated to my father that no one in her family had any interest in the military items from her uncle. It is fortunate for us that these items remained intact, along with the recollections of Sgt. Rhodes' niece, and are now available for us to shed some light on this relatively obscure event in our nation's recent history.



5. The side of the rifle shows the apparent deluxe case-hardened finish.

RESEARCH SOURCES, BIBLIOGRAPHY
& SELECTED READINGS

Pictorial History of Our War with Spain for Cuba's Freedom, Trumbull White, Freedom Publishing Company, 1989.

Life of William McKinley, edited by Rt. Rev. Samuel Fallows, LL. D., Regan Printing House, Chicago, Illinois, 1901.

A History of Cuba and its Relations With the United States, Phillip S. Foner, vol. II [1845-1895], New York, 1963.

The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays, Richard Hofstadter, New York, 1966.

American Naval Preparations for War with Spain 1896-1898, John A.S. Grenville, *Journal of American Studies*, vol. II, 1968.

The Kansas Press and the Coming of the Spanish-American War, Harold J. Sylvester, *Historian*, XXXi, 1969.

W.R. Hearst, J.K. Winkler, New York, 1928.

The Remington Historical Treasury of American Guns, Harold L. Peterson, Specialize Publishing, 1966.

Military Uniforms in America Modern Era From 1868, Military Historians, Presidio Press, 1988.

U.S. Martial & Collectors Arms, Steven L. Fuller, Military Arms Research Service, 1971.

Bannerman Catalog of Military Goods 1927, DBI Books, 1971.

World Bayonets, Anthony Carter, Arms & Armor Press, 1984.

Book of Colt Firearms, Robert Q. Sutherland & R.L. Wilson, Robert Q. Sutherland, 1971.

Seaweeds Ships History Service, Charleston, West Virginia.



6. The highly finished and polished Remington knife bayonet.