

‘The Great White Fleet’ of the U.S.A.

The early years of the 20th Century were to see great changes in the navies of many nations. Britain was still the most powerful navy afloat, as she had been for centuries. The impact of steamships led to the building of larger and more powerful ships and fleets.

United States navy captain and author Alfred T. Mahan argued that all world powers were also naval powers and that a nation’s success was dependant on the strength of their navy. But it was the U.S.A. president Theodore Roosevelt who is remembered for saying to congress on December 2nd 1902 ‘A good navy is not a provocation to war, it is the surest guarantee of peace’.

Roosevelt’s vision to increase America’s prestige abroad was to send 16 battleships, with their escorts, on a 43,000 mile voyage around the world, calling at capital cities where America had an interest.

On the 16th December 1907, the fleet sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia. All the battleships were painted white, with gilt scrollwork on the bows. The fleet gained the popular name ‘The Great White Fleet’, echoing Herman Melville’s ‘Great White Whale’ (Moby Dick!)

The fleet sailed south calling at Trinidad, but the British Station gave the Americans a frosty reception. In South America visits to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, Punta Arenas in Chile and Callao in Peru was followed by a two month stay over in San Francisco. On July 7th 1908 they sailed across the Pacific to New Zealand and Australia. Then it was north to China & Japan (China was a diplomatic failure, but links with Japan improved).

They sailed down the South China Sea and into the Indian Ocean to Ceylon. Passing through the Suez Canal, they arrived at Port Said, Egypt, on January 3rd 1909. A final refuel stop at Gibraltar before returning across the Atlantic saw them return to Hampton Roads on February 22nd 1909.

President Roosevelt reviewed the fleet, under the command of Rear Admiral Charles S. Sperry. It was a great occasion.

On February 9th 1906 at Portsmouth, King George V had launched the most advanced, powerful battleship in the world, the Royal Navy’s ‘Dreadnought’ – ‘Fear God and dreadnought’! She instantly rendered all other battleships obsolete. The winds of change had started to blow yet again.

Allan Derham

Battleship ‘Connecticut’

