

## USS KENTUCKY (BB 6) at Vera Cruz, Mexico 1915-1916

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Mexico during 1914 was racked by civil war. The U.S. Government, to protect its citizens, had ordered a number of U.S. Navy ships to Mexican ports to provide aid to American citizens living and working in Mexico. Among the American warships detailed for this duty was the gunboat DOLPHIN. DOLPHIN was stationed at the Mexican port of Tampico, located on the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. On 9 April 1914, DOLPHIN sent ashore nine sailors in her ship's boat to pick up some cans of oil from a warehouse. Mexican soldiers confronted the DOLPHIN crewmembers, arrested the sailors and took them to their officers. Once the officers understood the mission of the sailors, they were set free and an apology issued to the Commanding Officer of DOLPHIN for their being detained. However, Rear Admiral Henry T. Mayo, commanding the U.S. Navy squadron off Mexico, was not satisfied with this unofficial apology and demanded a formal apology from the Mexican government. In addition to this, he wanted the Mexican government to raise an American flag ashore and fire a 21-gun salute. No government could give into a demand of this nature and keep the loyalty of their people. The Mexican government thus refused to comply with this demand.

President Woodrow Wilson, who had been seeking a reason to invade Mexico, seized upon this incident. With the concurrence of Congress, President Wilson ordered the U.S. Navy to occupy the Mexican port of Vera Cruz and seize its Custom House. The Custom House at Vera Cruz was one of the principal sources of revenue for the Mexican government.

On 21 April 1914, U.S. warships, under the command of Rear Admiral Frank F. Fletcher, began to land sailors and Marines to take control of the Vera Cruz Custom House. The Mexican garrison, under the command of General Gustavo Mass, retreated from this landing force, however, naval cadets and some soldiers under the command of Commodore Manuel Azueta elected to defend the port. Active resistance to the American occupation would continue until 24 April 1914 when shelling from U.S. warships finally destroyed the defenders' positions. To support the Navy in its occupation of Vera Cruz, U.S. Army troops, under Brigadier General Frederick Funston, were sent to the city. U.S. Army troops would remain in Vera Cruz until 23 November 1914 when

they were returned to the United States. U.S. Navy ships, however, would remain in the waters off Mexico until 1920.

Among the ships that operated off the Mexican Gulf of Mexico coast was the 11,500-ton battleship KENTUCKY (BB 6). KENTUCKY had been laid down on 30 June 1896 and commissioned on 16 May 1900. She was 375 feet long, with a beam of 72 feet. Her armament was installed to maximize firepower and, as a result, she had twin 8-inch turrets mounted rigidly on top of the 13-inch main turrets plus she carried fourteen 5-inch guns mounted seven to a side. The main armament design was a failure in that the loading arrangements were very inadequate to maintain a steady supply of shells to both the 13-inch and 8-inch guns. In addition, the 8-inch guns had a different ballistic characteristic than the 13-inch guns. Thus, fire control of the two different sized turret guns proved to be impossible when both turrets were firing. Both turrets had to engage the same target or allow more time to be lost in reloading the main guns as the 8-inch guns and the 13-inch guns were swung to fire at different targets.

KENTUCKY sailed from the Philadelphia Navy Yard for Vera Cruz, Mexico, on 11 September 1915 and reached that port on 28 September 1915. She would remain at Vera Cruz until 2 June 1916 except for some rest and recreation at New Orleans during that city's March 1917 Mardi Gras celebration. During KENTUCKY's stay at Vera Cruz, she processed not only her own mail but forwarded mail originating in Mexico destined for a foreign address. The following covers and postal cancellations are from a private museum devoted to commemorating ships named KENTUCKY.



**Figure 1: A legal envelope mailed on 11 October 1915 in Mexico City and serviced on board KENTUCKY on 27 October 1915. The cover carries eleven uncancelled Mexico Correos 10 Centavos stamps and five cancelled \$0.02 United States postal stamps. The letter is addressed to the United States Secretary of State Robert Lansing, but unfortunately, there is no return address to tell who the sender was. Was someone trying to communicate some matter of public or private importance to the Secretary of State?**



Figure 2: Reverse of cover from Figure 1 showing 11 October 1915 mailing date.



Figure 5: Unfortunately someone in the past cut down this envelope, removing the return address and part of the delivery address ("nal Park Bank, New York, USA") plus the rear section, leaving only the stamps and KENTUCKY'S cancellation. The envelope is franked with four Mexico Correos stamps, three of 10 Centavos and one of 40 Centavos. It also carries \$.32 in U.S. postage, consisting of one \$.02 stamp and six \$.05 stamps. The envelope, as noted, is addressed to a bank in New York City and was serviced on board KENTUCKY on 10 February 1915. It carries an auxiliary marking stating, "Received In Bad Condition, N.Y.P.O. 3<sup>rd</sup> Div." Perhaps one of our members can identify the bank.



Figures 3 and 4: A greeting card size envelope mailed on 6 October 1915 in Mexico City addressed to Weimar Germany with four uncanceled Mexico Correos 10 Centavos stamps. The envelope also carries a \$.05 United States Post Office stamp which was serviced on board KENTUCKY on 27 October 1915. Since Germany was at war with the Allies at this time, and the envelope contains no censor marks, I wonder if the envelope was forwarded to Germany or was it held by the U.S. Post Office. The letter was mailed by Bouligny & Schmidt Sucr of Apartado 732, Alfredo Hass & Cir, Mexico City, Mexico. One wonders who was this Carlos Schmidt of Weimar, Germany? Was Carlos a relative of the Schmidt in the return address, or he might even be the Schmidt of the return address. Was Carlos visiting Germany from Mexico when WWI started and did Carlos, in patriotic fever, join the German Army or was he later conscripted? This envelope has a story to tell.



Figure 2: Reverse of cover above.



Figure 6: A postcard illustrating KENTUCKY at the time she sailed with the Great White Fleet on their around-the-world voyage 1907 - 1909. Note the 8-inch gun turret bolted directly onto the top of the 13-inch main gun turret.



**Figure 7:** A cutting of a KENTUCKY cancellation of 18 June 1916 with the notation Veracruz-Philadelphia between the killer bars. KENTUCKY departed Vera Cruz on 2 June 1916 and arrived back at the Philadelphia Navy Yard on 18 June 1916. One can assume this cancellation was prepared for first day service at Philadelphia. Since this cancellation mark differs greatly from that used to service the other cancellations in this article, one wonders if it was supplied to Kentucky by an early cover collector upon arrival in Philadelphia.



**Figure 8:** A cutting of a KENTUCKY cancellation dated 10 April 1916 during the period she was operating off the east coast of Mexico.

During World War I, KENTUCKY served as a training ship in the Chesapeake Bay area. In 1919, she conducted a midshipman cruise to the Caribbean Sea. In 1920, KENTUCKY was laid up at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and in 1924, she was sold for scrap to Dravo Construction Company.

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