

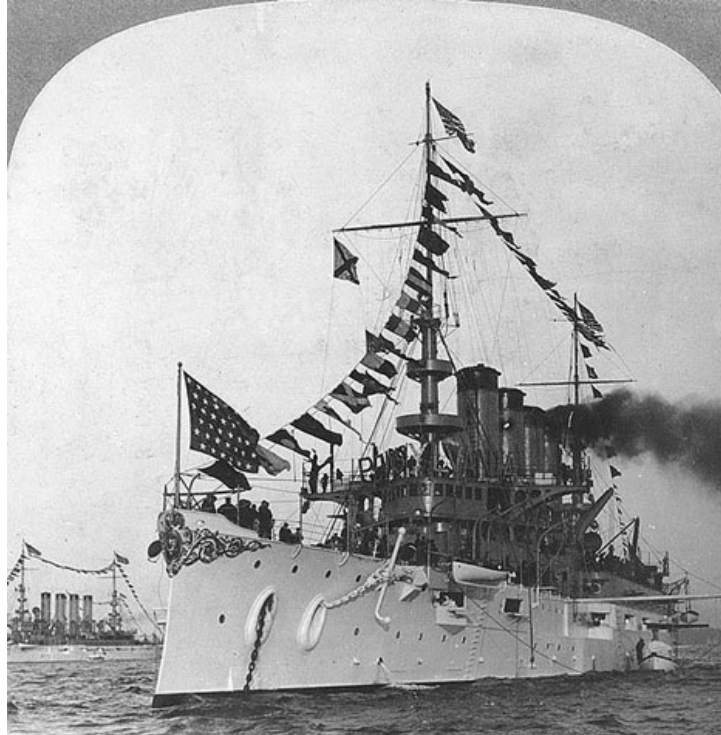
DEATH SHIP

By Dennis A. Wilson



Mysterious Photo from "Unknown" file at GCHS

In the unknown persons and places file at the Cunningham are many photos of people waiting for a name and of events waiting for explanation. This is one of those photographs: A gathering of men, women and children stand beside a long raised mound covered with crosses. Each cross bears a name and a U.S. flag. In the foreground a marker reads "QUADRO No. 24" which in portuguese means " frame or box no. 24." I was able to read two of the names on the crosses; I.D. Renfro and W.L. Foegley, and from that came this story. How it relates to Grant County, and why the photo is here remains a mystery.



The USS Pittsburg was launched on April 18, 1903. It was first named the Pennsylvania, an armored cruiser, displacing 13,680 tons with a compliment of 41 officers and 850 men. In early 1911 the ship was fitted with a wooden platform 120 feet long and 30 feet wide for an attempt at landing a plane on a ship. On January 18, 1911 Eugene Ely landed his Curtis pusher biplane on the Pennsylvania, the first airplane landing on a ship. The future was obvious and in time the carrier would become the backbone of naval power.



The Pennsylvania was renamed the USS Pittsburg on August 27, 1912 to free up the name USS Pennsylvania for a newer and bigger battleship. For the rest of her service life, the ship was designated ACR-4 USS Pittsburg. The ship was decommissioned July 10, 1931, used for bombing practice, and then sold for scrap. The story told by our mysterious photo involves the activities of the USS Pittsburg in the year 1918. That was the year of the great influenza pandemic, the “Spanish Flu” which swept the world through 1920 and killed at least 50 million.

The Spanish Flu had made its first appearance in Rio de Janeiro in mid September of 1918. In October the Pittsburg docked there. The ship’s captain, George “Blackjack” Bradshaw, knowing of the epidemic in the city, allowed working parties to go ashore and gave liberty to many crewmembers. The Pittsburg at that time was also the flagship for rear admiral William Caperton who wrote about the sickness on board. Admiral Caperton, writing to the Fleet Surgeon about the crew of the Pittsburg said, *“On Board the ship the sick list reached a total of 663 (which was 80% of the crew on board), with a final death toll of 58. The efforts of all hands were devoted solely to the care of the sick, and practically the whole ship was given over to them.”* The first two flu cases on board occurred October 7th. The first to die was Seaman E. L. Williams on October 13th. Caperton later wrote: *“By ... the 11th, there were 418 cases of influenza in the flagship, so that her activities for any duty were becoming handicapped. The seriousness of the situation was cabled to the Department. On the 14th of October 644 cases had been admitted to the sick list, with about 350 more light ones not listed. One man died the day before. On the 15th three had died, the Commanding Officer, his heads of department and two members of my staff were sick, while the disease raged unabated in Rio where conditions defied description.... Conditions in the ship were rapidly becoming worse. More than half of the hospital corps were ill, and help was commandeered from all ratings and from the junior officers of the line. And the drizzle and the rain which had set in during the early days of the epidemic continued fitfully, rendering it difficult to find room for the cots of the sick who had been kept on deck in the open, during the good weather. Ashore people died like flies, and many lay in the streets for two or three days waiting interment, even a hole in the corner of a trench. By the 18th, twelve of the 48 pneumonia cases had died in the Pittsburg. Further caskets could not be obtained ashore, at any price, and the burial of our men became an urgent necessity. On the 21st of October 16 bodies were taken from the Pittsburg and landed for burial in the Sao Francisco Xavier Cemetery. Notwithstanding the previous arrangement with cemetery authorities for the opening of 20 graves, the funeral cortege arrived at the cemetery and found no graves prepared. Those destined for us had been used by others. We were finally compelled to dig the graves for our own dead shipmates. Conditions in the cemetery beggared description. Eight hundred bodies in all states of decomposition, and lying about in the cemetery, were awaiting burial. Thousands of buzzards swarmed overhead.”*

Eventually the bodies of 41 of the 58 dead were buried in the Sao Francisco Xavier Cemetery. In Rio de Janeiro, at least 30,000 died from the influenza. From the website shown below I got a partial list of the 41 buried in Rio de Janeiro. http://freepages.military.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cacunithistories/USS_Pennsylvania.html

G. C. McCoy, CBM, USN	E. C. Crubo, 1 st MUS, USN
W. L. Foegley, CMM, USN	L. A. Hart
E. H. Lillegard, OE(R), USN	R. T. Chow
G. E. Williams, CWT, USN	J. E. Kemp
Kreh, CY, USN	W. M. Smith
Bond, BM1c, USN	H. Coffin, SEA, USN
A. Percifield, BMKR, USN	B. C. Stuart, SEA, USN
I. D. Renfro, WT, USN	U. S. Houser, SEA, USN
F. J. Kruzka, WT, USN	J. S. McCarter, SEA, USN
H. M. Pinkston, WT, USN	F. Brunner, SEA, USN

From this list I was able to identify the photograph from our file by matching the names. In the spring of 1920, with the help of Rear Admiral Henry F. Bryan, the crew of the USS Pittsburgh erected a 20 ft tall white granite monument which read: **“Erected by the crew of the USS Pittsburgh, in memory of their shipmates who died from the influenza, October-November 1918.”** Perhaps this photo was taken at that time.

On page 171 of the **Annual Report of the Surgeon General, U. S. Navy, for the fiscal year 1919 to the Secretary of the Navy** the following is written:

“All but 42 of these bodies were embalmed and shipped to the United States. On January 30, 16 standard metal caskets were received on the U. S. S. Cyclops and the U. S. S. Pueblo brought 12 more in November. The cost of metal-lined hermetically sealed caskets with shipping box is \$750 United States gold on this station. Our metal caskets are in store in Bahia, Rio, and Montevideo. Forty-two bodies have been interred in the San Francisco Xavier Cemetery in Rio. All but one of these were victims of the influenza epidemic, the exception being the body of the enlisted man attached to the U. S. S. Cyclops who was drowned and due to the long immersion in the water was so badly decomposed that shipment to the United States was impossible. The 41 victims of influenza are interred in the same plot of the cemetery, each grave marked with a simple wooden cross on which the name of the deceased is stenciled, and in addition each grave is numbered in accordance with the cemetery regulations. A plan of the plot, designating the individual graves has been forwarded to the bureau and one given the cemetery and a third copy is in the files of the consulate at Rio.”

On May 30, 1919 The Indianapolis Star carried the following story: *“Washington, May 29, - Bodies of forty-one former members of the crew of the Pittsburgh are buried in Rio Janeiro in a plot purchased by the navy and on which has been erected a marble monument inscribed with*

the names and ratings of the men. Memorial ceremonies at the graves tomorrow will be directed by Rear Admiral Henry F. Bryan, head of the American naval mission to Brazil."

"RIO JANERO. Sept 27 - The American scout cruiser Richmond arrived here last night, having encountered heavy weather and rough seas on the last part of her trip from Buenos Aires. When the Richmond leaves for the United States she will carry the bodies of the forty American sailors and marines, members of the crew of the U. S. S. Pittsburgh, who died in Brazil in the influenza epidemic of 1918. The bodies will be taken aboard without formal ceremonies. "

And so I come back to this photo, tucked away in our file of unknowns for decades with no marking or annotation of any kind. Why is it here? Perhaps someone reading this will know the full story of its presence in Grant County. Perhaps that part of the story is lost forever.

Sources

1. **"CR-4 USS Pennsylvania / USS Pittsburgh" a website, by Joe Hartwell at: http://freepages.military.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cacunithistories/USS_Pennsylvania.html**
2. **"Study suggests 1918 flu waves were caused by 'distinct' viruses", by Robert Roos
News Editor, Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, University of Minnesota at: <http://www.cidrap.umn.edu/cidrap/content/influenza/panflu/news/sep2911panwaves.html>**
3. **"Thirty thousand Die of Flu in Rio De Janero" in The Oxnard Courier , Oxnard, California , Friday, December 06, 1918, Page 8**
4. **"Remember Dead in Brazil" Article in the Indianapolis Star, Friday May 30, 1919, page 2**
5. **"Annual Report of the Surgeon General, U. S. Navy, for the fiscal year 1919 to the Secretary of the Navy" Google Books page 171**
6. **"Richmond To Bring Home Sailors Bodies" AP news story in The Danville Bee, Danville, Virginia, Thursday, September 27, 1923, page 1**

