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## *From the Archives*

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### “The Precious Little Craft”

J. OVERTON

Vera Cruz and its castle are in view, twelve miles off. This morning Commodore Connor took the general and his officers on a steamer and reconnoitered.

When one and one half miles from the castle, the enemy opened some 68 pounders and mortars upon the precious little craft. Shells flew about, doing no harm save depriving some of the raw ones of their appetites. Had one struck the steamer she undoubtedly would have been disabled.

The craft mentioned was the small steamer *Petrita*, and she was more precious than the observer quoted above knew. In addition to Connor, the passengers were General Winfield Scott and several officers from his staff, including Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Johnston, Captain Robert Lee, and Lieutenants Pierre Beauregard and George Meade.

In early March of 1847, an American fleet with several thousand soldiers, sailors, and marines was steaming off the coast of Vera Cruz. A year into the Mexican War, US forces had accumulated a series of victories, but the Mexican government refused surrender or settlement. An invasion of central Mexico, and taking of its capital, were deemed necessary, and the route chosen was the same Cortez had used 300 years earlier. After months of planning, the invasion force had arrived.

Vera Cruz was considered by many the best-defended city in North America, with its thick walls and imposing offshore castle San Juan de Ulua, and US forces had never conducted a large-scale amphibious attack. General Scott, commander of the operation, had come to rely on many West Point-educated officers (most of whom had never experienced combat), and called them his “little cabinet.” They accompanied him and Connor on the *Petrita* to examine the city’s defenses and choose invasion landing sites.

A *Petrita* passenger saw the Mexican gunners on the fortress sponging their cannon and remarked, “We will have shot presently.” Shells first landed short of the vessel, then well beyond it, and some exploded overhead. Connor teased the Mexicans for several minutes with his lack of action, finally ordering the vessel to a safer position when it seemed their accuracy was improving. George Meade, writing home after the incident, remarked “one shell, hitting the vessel . . . might have been the means of breaking up the whole expedition.”

One can speculate endlessly on the changes to the Civil War, and America, if not for the Mexican gunners’ poor aim, or bad luck.

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