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## LEO J. CARY

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### HOW HISTORY IS OFTEN MADE

Events Leading Up to Our Being Exhort-  
ed to "Remember the Maine"—Corre-  
spondent Wants Cartridges, Gets  
a Battleship.

### CAUSE OF EXPLOSION DETERMINED

The Race to Get the First News of the Disclosure to the New  
York Herald and the Amusing Methods Used to Out-  
wit the Spanish Censors at Havana.

The editor of the Sentinel when a schoolboy became familiar with the statement that a pig was really the cause of the war of 1812 between England and the United States, by leading to a dispute over a line fence. However that may be, it is classic history that the beauty of Helen of Troy was the inciting cause of the Trojan war. Just how the misinterpretation of a code dispatch in the office of the New York Herald 24 years ago this spring actually led to the "Remember the Maine" slogan and plunged the United States into a war with Spain is very interestingly told in the following narrative by Walter Scott Merriweather, in his paper, the Mississippi Sun, of Charleston in that state. Mr. Merriweather was a war correspondent at Havana in 1898 and the way he details the incidents of those days makes it evident that he was a good one:

In Stephenson's American History, the one now being used in our public schools, occurs this paragraph: "At Havana there were public demonstrations of ill will toward Americans. Therefore the battleship Maine was ordered to Havana as an intimation that Americans would be protected by their government." The Maine was not sent to Havana as an intimation that Americans would be protected by their government. She was sent there because of a misinterpreted cable message which a newspaper correspondent in Havana sent to his paper in New York. All the correspondent wanted was a box of cartridges. A battleship was sent instead. The battleship was blown up in Havana harbor, and

with Spain ensued and a considerable part of the geography of the world was changed as a result. The writer was in Havana at the time of the Maine disaster, reported that immortal horror to the identical newspaper whose assistant cable editor had misinterpreted the message about cartridges, and makes this coming February 15—twenty-fourth anniversary of the tragedy—the occasion for setting history right. The reason this revealing chapter has not been written before is this: The correspondent who had sent the cable was one of my most valued friends. Under seal of confidence he had told me the entire story. He had planned to write it himself but had thought it inadvisable to do so until some years had intervened. I asked and obtained his permission to make a passing reference to it in an article which I had been asked to prepare describing the scenes in Havana on the night of the Maine's destruction, but the reference did not attract the attention it deserved. More with the idea of supplying my friend with data than employing it myself, I had, as opportunity served, asked the several actors in the drama, each of whom I intimately knew, the parts they had played. Then the man for whom these notes were intended came back from Havana, where he had been stationed as correspondent for the Associated Press, and suddenly died. I felt that his death released the story to me, but just at that time I was plunged into war work as publicity manager for the United States Shipping Board and the episode was forgotten until the calendar brought its reminder that the

twenty-fourth anniversary of the disaster comes on this February 15. Here is the full story: It was early in February, 1898, that I received orders from my newspaper, the New York Herald, to proceed to Havana and relieve John R. Caldwell, in charge of the Herald's Havana Bureau. Havana at that time was a troubled city. The relations between this country and Spain were strained to the breaking point. Riots were frequent and every American in Havana felt that his life was in danger at all times. Caldwell realized it and sought to arm himself. But there was a strict edict against the sale of firearms, one chiefly directed against Cubans, for the island was then in a blaze of insurrection. So, unable to equip himself with the means of self-defense, Caldwell wrote to the Herald and asked that a revolver be sent to him. One was purchased immediately and shipped. But when it arrived there were no cartridges, and the correspondent could no more purchase cartridges than he could purchase revolvers. Meanwhile the situation was growing worse. Instead of writing for cartridges he cabled. The Herald and its Havana correspondent employed a private code. This was necessary because of the strict censorship exercised in Havana by the Spanish. And as it happened the Herald man, Fred Burgin, who was in charge of the code and of Havana cable news, was home sick when this message came clicking into the Herald office one night: "Camera received but no plates. Please hurry by next steamer." "John R. Caldwell." The full name "John R. Caldwell" signified that the message meant more than the words indicated and that the office would have to puzzle it out. Had Burgin been on duty he would instantly have understood that the revolver had arrived but that there were no cartridges. A young assistant got the message and turning to the code book, translated it to mean that the American consul had been attacked. Fireworks ensued. An attack on our consulate in Havana was a spark to set off the long-brewing trouble between America and Spain. The hour was 9:30 p. m. The Havana cable office closed at 9 p. m. and there was no possible way of getting further news that night. The Herald got its Washington Bureau on the phone, and directed that every man be hustled out on the story. John D. Long was then

Secretary of the Navy. The word that the American consulate in Havana had been attacked was telephoned to him by the Herald's Washington Bureau. There was a rapid telephonic conference with the State Department and the White House and along about 11 o'clock a wire was sent to Rear Admiral Montgomery Sicard, commanding the North Atlantic Fleet, then at anchor off Dry Tortugas, to detach a vessel of his command and send it to Havana forthwith, the reason being that an eminently trustworthy newspaper had cabled the report upon the American consulate. In a conversation I had with Captain Sigbee some years later, he described his midnight visit to the flagship, his orders from Admiral Sicard to proceed to Havana at once, the admiral adding he did not know what conditions he would find upon arrival. He did not hamper the Maine's commander with any instructions, leaving all to his discretion. Captain Sigbee returned to his ship, gave the necessary order for spreading fires under the boilers and to get under way as soon as steam could be made ready. Awnings were rolled up and sent below, and awning stanchions which might have interfered with gun fire were removed, along with their ridge poles. Now with the Maine under way and churning her way to the harbor where her destruction was destined to involve two nations in war, let us leave the doomed battleship for a moment and take up the narrative from the Inglaterra Hotel in Havana. It was at an early hour in the forenoon when a messenger from the cable office knocked on the door of Mr. Caldwell's room and handed him a cablegram. It was from the Herald and read: "Rush story you bulletined on Cuban cane crop—we want it for main section." Not having sent any bulletin on the Cuban cane crop, Mr. Caldwell realized at once that this was a code message and turning to his code book found the first part of it conveying the tidings that "A United States man-of-war has been ordered to Havana." He was puzzled a moment over the rest, for there was nothing in the code book anyway resembling it. Then it flashed upon him that the use of the words "main section" was employed to tell him the name of the vessel that had been ordered to Havana, otherwise the Maine. Directly across the hall was the room the former Confederate general, Fitz Hugh Lee, then United States Consul General to Havana. The correspondent met the general in the hallway. "The battleship Maine," the correspondent said, "is on her way to Havana." "Impossible," Gen. Lee replied, "the government would never send a warship here unless I asked for one and that I have not done." At that moment came the thud of guns. Hurrying to the balcony the two saw the Maine entering the harbor and bulks of white smoke drifting from her saluting battery. As a newspaper correspondent who reported the blowing up of the Maine and as one who remained in Havana during the sittings of the American Naval Court of Inquiry, a body whose verdict was that the Maine had been destroyed as the result of an outside explosion, I have frequently been asked my opinion as to the cause. That the Court of Inquiry was convinced that the Maine had been blown up by a mine planted by the Spaniards in Havana harbor, I have never for a moment doubted. That they did not say so in as many words was doubtless due to reasons other than those contained in the fact which they considered. Here they are: The relations between America and Spain had been strained to the breaking point. It was at this moment of severe tension that an American battleship entered the harbor. At her anchorage inside the harbor she commanded the entire situation, there not being a single Spanish gun that could be brought to bear against her, all of these being in the batteries that overlooked the sea approaches. A Spanish pilot brought the Maine into harbor and designated the buoy to which she was to make fast. If, under the circumstances the Spaniards had not laid a mine under that predetermined buoy in order to dominate any foreign warship making fast to it, they would have been incredibly shortsighted. There has been much talk of an inside explosion. But the keel of the Maine was found within 18 inches of the surface. No inside explosion could have driven that part of the underbody upwards. The reference to the finding of the Maine's keel so near the surface of the water recalls another bit of unwritten history. On the heels of the disaster all correspondents stationed in Havana became receiving more or less frantic cables from their home offices telling how imperative it was for the American public to be informed at once whether the Maine had been blown up by a Spanish mine, or whether, as

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Spain was contending, she had come to her undoing through the explosion of one of her own magazines. Day by day these messages became more urgent. But what were the correspondents to do? Pending the arrival of the American Naval Court, the Spaniards had established a cordon around the wreck and no one was allowed near it. The Court of Inquiry, headed by the late Rear Admiral Sampson, arrived on the light-house tender Fern, and began its hearings on board that vessel. But that did not help the hazy correspondents, none of whom were allowed on board. There was no risk the correspondents would not have ventured to have obtained some inkling of the cause. But they were confronted with obstacles impossible to overcome. Such was the situation when there came one night a hurried knock on my hotel door, the hour being about 10 o'clock. Even after the lapse of all these years I do not feel free to reveal the name of this caller. But I may say that he was an officer attached to the flagship New York and that he had been sent to Havana to superintend the work of the divers engaged in examining the wreck. I had been shipmates with this officer before leaving the navy to take up newspaper work, and we were warm friends. As he hurried into the room I saw he was intensely excited. He first swore me to secrecy, exacted a promise that I would not reveal the source of my information, and then without much ado told in one breath what all the world was on tiptoe to know. "The keel of the Maine," he said, stepping to the door and closing it, and speaking low and fast, "is within 18 inches of the surface. We found it there tonight. Mr. Poyelson was with me and he has positively identified the keel plates." Wilfrid Van Ness Poyelson was one of the constructors who had built the Maine and had been summoned as an expert to go over the wreck. I knew his reputation as a highly competent and thoroughgoing officer, and I knew any information my caller gave me could be entirely depended upon. Here was the biggest piece of news that could have emanated out of Havana at that time, the answer to the urgent question which editors were cabling to their Havana correspondents. The fact that the Maine's keel had been hoisted up until it was within 18 inches of the surface meant only one thing, that the battleship had been blown up by a mine placed beneath the keel and had not been destroyed by the explosion of one of her own magazines. It meant war. But how was this portentous news to be gotten past the Spanish censor? The rule of closing the cable office at 9 p. m. had been changed and the office was wide open at all times. But Madrid and Washington were keeping it busy and there was very little that correspondents were allowed to send, that little being subjected to the closest scrutiny by the censors. I had a dispatch boat in the harbor, which had been used for the carrying of despatches to the telegraph office at Key West, but she could render no help in this emergency, for by the rules of the port no vessel could leave between the hours of sunset and sunrise. There was nothing in our secret code book by which this information about the Maine's keel could be conveyed, and while on my way to the censor's office I evolved several messages, meant to deceive him, and yet be clear to the editor for whom it was intended, but rejected them all as unsuitable. The one I finally submitted, read as follows: "In important story which will be filed from despatch boat in Key West tomorrow, please note that main story is mine." The censor, a Spanish colonel, and whose knowledge of English was disappointingly complete, read the message attentively and then inquired if

I thought it necessary to pay high cable tolls in order to claim credit for a despatch that had not yet been sent. I endeavored to assure him that unless I took this precaution the despatch might be credited to someone else in the bureau. Whereupon the colonel grinned, said I could tell that to some of the American marines, added that he didn't like the use of the word "mine" anyway and that the editor might add an "e" to the word main, and reach some wholly erroneous conclusion, that is, erroneous from the Spanish viewpoint. I proffered this altogether too adroit colonel a cigar and took a turn down the corridor, in an effort to think up something else. I knew this particular censor would be going off duty at 11 o'clock, and I was trying to be ready for the next one. From the hotel news stand that day I had bought a copy of Life and had read therein Kipling's poem, "The Destroyers." I thought that might help, and going back to the hotel, got the copy and when the relief censor came on presented him with this: "American colony in Havana much interested in Kipling's poem Destroyers appearing in current issue of Life. Naval contingent assert technical accuracy of last verse impossible to improve upon." After reading that tribute to Kipling's poem, the censor asked me if I had a copy of Life with me. I told him I did not. Whereupon he summoned an orderly and told him to go to the hotel and get one. The last verse of the poem reads: "The strength of twice three thousand and horse That serve the one command; The hand that heaves the headlong force, The hate that backs the hand; The doom-bolt in the darkness freed, The mine that splits the main; The white hot wack, the 'widering speed— The Choosers of the Slain!" As the crux of the situation was magazine or mine, I very well knew that my office would at once hit upon that pregnant line, "The mine that splits the main," as containing the message I was trying to get to them. The orderly returned with the copy of Life, the censor took it and turning to the last verse of the poem read down to those fateful lines. "Very clever," he said, as he handed back the dispatch. Baffled in all efforts to get the story through that night I went on board our despatch boat and set out for Key West as soon as the harbor rules permitted, and filed enough on the Key West wire that evening to occupy a full page of the Herald of the next day. I refer to this merely to bring in the sequel. On the day of my departure from Havana, another of the correspondents got an inkling of what I had heard the preceding night. Having no despatch boat he had to trust wholly to the cable. Knowing from experience how hard it was to get anything past the censor, he wrote a purely descriptive story, the crowds on the Prado, the brilliant sunshine, sea breezes droning through the palm trees, the shimmering bay and buzzards roosting on the keel of the Maine. As all of it was extremely complimentary to the scenery and the climate, the censor let it go. But when it reached the New York office, the cable editor failed to catch the significance of the line "buzzards roosting on the keel of the Maine," and as the paper had no room for flowery description, it was assumed that the Havana man had become over enticed with aguardiente, and the despatch was spiked. A realization of what the correspondent was trying to tell his office came when the Herald's full page account was published on the ensuing morning. The Daily and Sunday Oregonian at \$5 for nine months and better is an attractive offer. At the regular rate nine months would cost \$8.