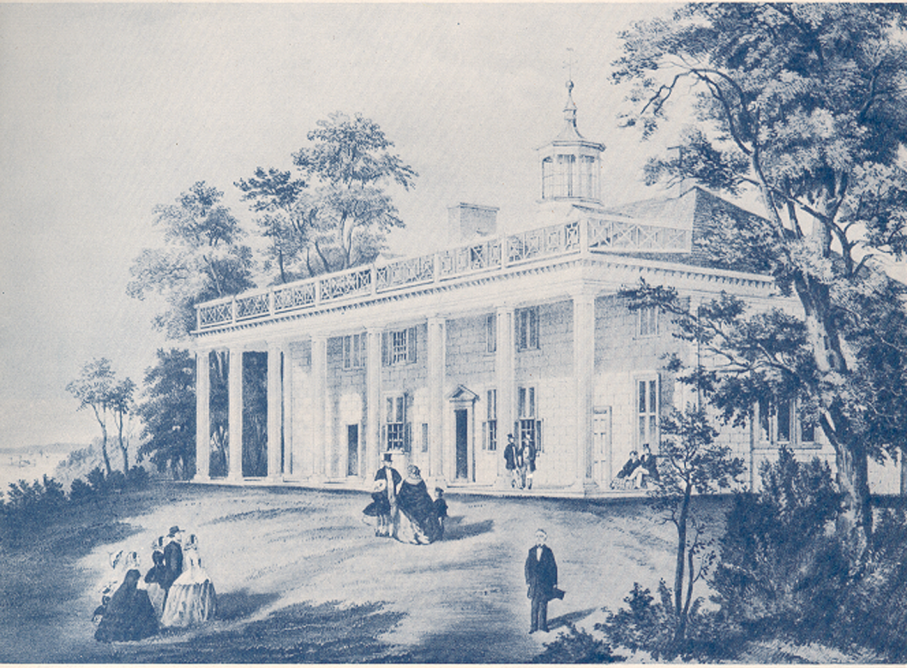
NAVAL HONORS *to* GEORGE WASHINGTON



Navy Department
Naval History Division
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Ships Passing Washington's Tomb

When a ship of the Navy is passing Washington's tomb, Mount Vernon, Virginia, between sunrise and sunset, the following ceremonies shall be observed insofar as may be practicable: The full guard and band shall be paraded, the bell tolled, and the national ensign half-masted at the beginning of the tolling of the bell. When opposite Washington's tomb, the guard shall present arms, persons on deck shall salute, facing in the direction of the tomb, and "Taps" shall be sounded. The national ensign shall be two-blocked and the tolling shall cease at the last note of "Taps," after which the national anthem shall be played. Upon completion of the national anthem, "Carry on" shall be sounded.

(Art. 2185, U. S. Navy Regs, 1948).

ORIGIN OF A CUSTOM

Navy ships on the Potomac passing George Washington's tomb at Mount Vernon pay tribute to the memory of our first President in one of the Navy's oldest ceremonies. Ships of the Navy follow a prescribed and inspiring ceremony; private vessels toll their bells as they pass the channel leading to the Mount Vernon wharf.

Commodore Charles Morris, United States Navy, relates the earliest known account of the ceremony. In May of 1801 three men-of-war of the United States Navy passed up the Potomac River to the new Navy Yard in the District of Columbia. Commodore Morris, as a young midshipman, was on board the two-year old frigate U.S.S. CONGRESS (36 guns, Captain James Sever). In his autobiography he states:

> The ship was delayed by head-winds so that we did not reach Washington till late in May. We passed the frigate UNITED STATES in the lower part of the Potomac. About 10 o'clock in the morning of a beautifully serene day, we passed Mount Vernon. Every one was on deck to look upon the dwelling where Washington had made his home. Mrs. Washington and others of the family could be distinguished in the portico which fronts the river. When opposite the house, by order of Captain Sever, the sails were lowered, the colors displayed half-masted, and a mourning salute of thirteen guns was fired as a mark of respect to the memory of Washington, whose life had so recently closed, and whose tomb was in our view. The general silence on board the ship and around us, except when broken by the cannon's sound, the echo and re-echo of that sound from the near and distant hills, as it died away in the distance, the whole ship's company uncovered and motionless, and the associations connected with the ceremony, seemed to make a deep impression upon all, as they did certainly upon me. When the salute was finished the sails were again set, the colors hoisted, and we proceeded up the river. The frigate NEW YORK had preceded us, without saluting, but we found her grounded on the bar at the entrance of the eastern branch of the Potomac, and the CONGRESS, passing her, was the first ship of war that reached what has since become the Navy Yard at Washington. The frigates NEW YORK and UNITED STATES joined us a few days afterwards.

According to an erroneous tradition, this custom was inaugurated by a squadron of British men-of-war in 1813. Admiral Sir George Cockburn of His Britannic Majesty's Navy, aboard his flagship the SEA HORSE after he had raided and burned the city of Washington during the War of 1812, ordered the ship's bell tolled as she came opposite Mount Vernon. Bushrod Washington, nephew of George Washington and proprietor of Mount Vernon from 1802 until his death in 1826, was an interested observer as the British squadron advanced in battle formation toward Fort Washington on the Maryland shore opposite Mount Vernon. He states in his letter to Chancellor de Saussure, dated Mount Vernon, November 29, 1814 that:

> I am happy to have it in my power to say that I escaped in person and property all kind of injury and loss. The squadron lay at this place some days in its ascent and on its return, and yet I do not believe that during the whole time a single barge approached this shore. This distinguished forbearance I owe to the generous feelings of Commodore Gordon for a place which had once been the residence of my venerated Uncle. He expressed to one of the Alexandria commissioners, who was deputed to stipulate for the safety of that town, an anxious desire to visit this spot, but was so delicate as to declare his

resolution not to do so, presuming that my official situation would render such a step peculiarly embarrassing & disagreeable to me. He further added that he would commit no act of hostility injurious to this place even although the militia should make their appearance on it. I have much reason to thank him for such sentiments & conduct, and should it ever be my good fortune to see him in peace here or elsewhere, I should be proud to give him proofs of my gratitude.

Bushrod Washington makes no mention of formal tribute paid to George Washington by the vessels of the British squadron passing or repassing Mount Vernon.

While the gun salute when passing Mount Vernon was discontinued some time before specific honors to Washington's tomb were prescribed, the memory of our first President is honored in accordance with Navy Regulations by a 21-gun salute fired at noon on each twenty-second of February by all vessels and naval stations equipped with saluting batteries. This regulation has come down intact from 1818 except for one change in 1865 of the number of guns required since 1818 (it was a 17-gun salute then). *The Regulations for the Navy of the Confederate States* called for similar honors on Washington's birthday:

Salutes on the 22d of February, &c

On the anniversary of the declaration of independence of the Confederate States, and on the twenty-second day of February, the anniversary of the birth of Washington, a salute of twenty-one guns shall be fired at meridian from vessels in commission and navy yards.

(Article 25).

There is an instance on record when Union warships lying off the Confederate-held fort at Pensacola, Florida, joined with the fort in firing the salute. During the Civil War, Mount Vernon was by spontaneous consent of those on both sides of the great contest neutral ground. Soldiers were requested to leave their arms outside the gates, which they did, and men in blue and men in gray met fraternally before the tomb of the Father of their divided country.

CEREMONIES FOR UNITED STATES
NATIONAL ANNIVERSARIES AND MEMORIAL DAY

1. On the 22d of February and the 4th of July every ship of the Navy in commission, not under way, shall full-dress ship. At 1200 each saluting ship, and each naval station equipped with a saluting battery, shall fire a national salute of 21 guns.

3. When the 22d of February, the 30th of May, or the 4th of July occurs on Sunday, all special ceremonies shall be postponed until the following day.

(Art. 2187, U. S. Navy Regs, 1948).

PASSING HONORS BECOME OFFICIAL

In 1906 when the Yacht MAYFLOWER rendered passing honors with President Theodore Roosevelt embarked, he was much impressed. Finding upon inquiry that the honors were not official, he immediately prompted the issuance of the following order prescribing the ceremony to be observed by all vessels of the United States Navy passing Mount Vernon between sunrise and sunset:

> Marine guard and band paraded; bell tolled and colors halfmasted at the beginning of the tolling of the bell. When opposite Washington's Tomb, buglers sound taps, marine guard present arms, and officers and men on deck stand at attention and salute. The colors will be mastheaded at the last note of taps which will also be the signal for "carry on."
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> *(General Order No. 22, June 2, 1906).*

Today's honors are the same except that the playing of the national anthem was prescribed in 1913. The tolling of the ship's bell is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of this ceremony, which is observed during daylight hours while the tomb and adjacent areas are abeam.

"We but keep to the traditions of Washington, to the traditions of all the great Americans who struggled for the real greatness of America, when we strive to build up those fighting qualities for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, no refinement, no culture, no wealth, no material prosperity, can atone."

From WASHINGTON'S FORGOTTEN MAXIM, *an address by Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, before the Naval War College, June, 1897.*

The manner of rendering these honors varies, depending on the size and complement of the ship. Insofar as practicable, it calls for parading the full guard and band, playing the national anthem, half-masting the national ensign and tolling the bell.

Most smaller naval ships do not have bands or buglers nor do they have a regularly detailed guard. However, any naval vessel has a bell and a national ensign. Usual practice when cruising off Mount Vernon is for all hands not on watch to be stationed topside.

As a naval ship passes Mount Vernon, the crew forms up on deck with the tallest man nearest the bow and attention is sounded. When opposite the tomb "hand salute" is signalled. Meanwhile the ship's bell is struck eight times at five-second intervals. As the bell begins to toll, the national ensign is lowered to half-mast. At the end of the tolling, the ensign is raised to the peak; two blasts on the whistle indicate "end of salute," and three, "carry on."

Civilian personnel on board naval vessels customarily uncover and place their hats over their hearts.

"Washington Visits the French Fleet," from the painting by Percy Moran.

"Whatever efforts are made by the land armies, the Navy must have the casting vote in the present contest."

Washington to Admiral de Grasse in 1781

WASHINGTON AND THE NAVY

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

That George Washington was a leader of astonishing aptitude is established beyond question by his voluminous official and private communications which by very frequent references to naval affairs clearly unfold his development as a great naval genius. The baffling opposition of British sea power through five of the most trying years which ever beset a commander-in-chief led him to conclude, in 1780, that 'In any operation, and under all circumstances, a decisive naval superiority is to be considered as a fundamental principle, and the basis upon which every hope of success must ultimately depend.' This was no offhand statement, but formally set down in a 'Memorandum for concerting a plan of operations with the French Army,' to be delivered by Lafayette to General Rochambeau and Admiral de Ternay.

Substantially the same wise concept was reiterated many times to various correspondents, notably to Franklin, when a Commissioner in Paris, to Colonel Laurens when sent overseas on a special mission to seek French aid, and to Admiral de Grasse preliminary to and during the Yorktown campaign. This classic campaign in grand strategy and joint military-naval operations was the crowning proof of Washington's superlative naval genius. It was chiefly his in its main conceptions. At every stage of its execution, from long before the sailing of the French fleet out of Brest, through its stay in the West Indies, to its arrival in the Chesapeake, and then during the active and critical weeks until the final surrender of Cornwallis, Washington's was the master mind; planning, coordinating, advising, pleading, directing.

These facts can be recognized without in the least detracting from the superb spirit of cooperation of Admiral de Grasse and General Rochambeau, nor from their own exceedingly high professional attainments, which led them to fall in with Washington's suggestions at no small sacrifice to their own forces and to independent French projects.

The supreme test of the naval strategist is the depth of his comprehension of the intimate relation between sea power and of a nation's overall war effort and purposes. He should never lose sight of the truth that basically all effort afloat should be directed at an effect ashore, either directly upon military operations or indirectly upon national purpose, economic strength, capacity and will to fight. History abounds in examples of naval effort misdirected because the naval mission was too restricted in its military outlook.

More frequent still are the historical cases of army commanders failing to appreciate the vital importance of the naval element. The cause of American independence was indeed fortunate in having combined in Washington the rare qualities of a great general and a great naval strategist.

AS PRESIDENT

President Washington, in his speech to both Houses of Congress on 7 December 1796 concerning the treaties with Tunis and Tripoli recommended the gradual creation of a Navy stating:

> To an active external commerce, *the protection of a naval force is indispensable.* This is manifest with regard to wars, in which a state is itself a party. But, besides this, it is in our own experience, that the most sincere neutrality is not a sufficient guard against the depredations of nations at war. *To secure respect to a neutral flag, requires a naval force, organized, and ready to vindicate it from insult or aggression.* This may even prevent the necessity of going to war, by discouraging belligerent powers from committing such violations of the rights of the neutral party, as may, first or last, leave no other option. From the best information I have been able to obtain, it would seem as if our trade to the Mediterranean, without a protecting force, will always be insecure, and our citizens exposed to the calamities from which numbers of them have but just been relieved.
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> These considerations invite the United States to look to the means, and *to set about the gradual creation of a Navy.* The increasing progress of their navigation promises them, at no distant period, the requisite supply of seamen; and their means, in other respects, favor the undertaking. It is an encouragement, likewise, that their particular situation will give weight and influence to a moderate naval force in their hands. Will it not then be advisable to begin, without delay, *to provide and lay up the materials for the building and equipping of ships of war; and to proceed in the work, by degrees, in proportion, as our resources shall render it practicable, without inconvenience;* so that a future war of Europe, may not find our commerce in the same *unprotected* state, in which it was found by the present.

(GOLDSBOROUGH'S *The United States Naval Chronicle.* WASHINGTON, 1824)

General Orders to the Officers of the Navy and Marines

The President with deep affliction announces to the Navy, and to the Marines, the death of our beloved fellow Citizen George Washington, Commander of our Armies and late President of the United States, but rendered more illustrious by his eminent virtues, and a long series of the most important services, thanks the honors which his grateful Country delighted to confer upon him —

Desirous that the Navy and Marines should express in common with every other description of American Citizens, the high sense which all feel of the Loss our Country has sustained in the death of this Good and Great Man, the President, directs that the Officers of the Navy, in our own, and foreign ports be put in mourning for one week, by wearing their colours half mast high, and that the Officers of the Navy, and of the Marines, wear crape on the left arm, below the elbow for Six months. Navy Department 20th December 1799

(Signed) Benj: Stoddert