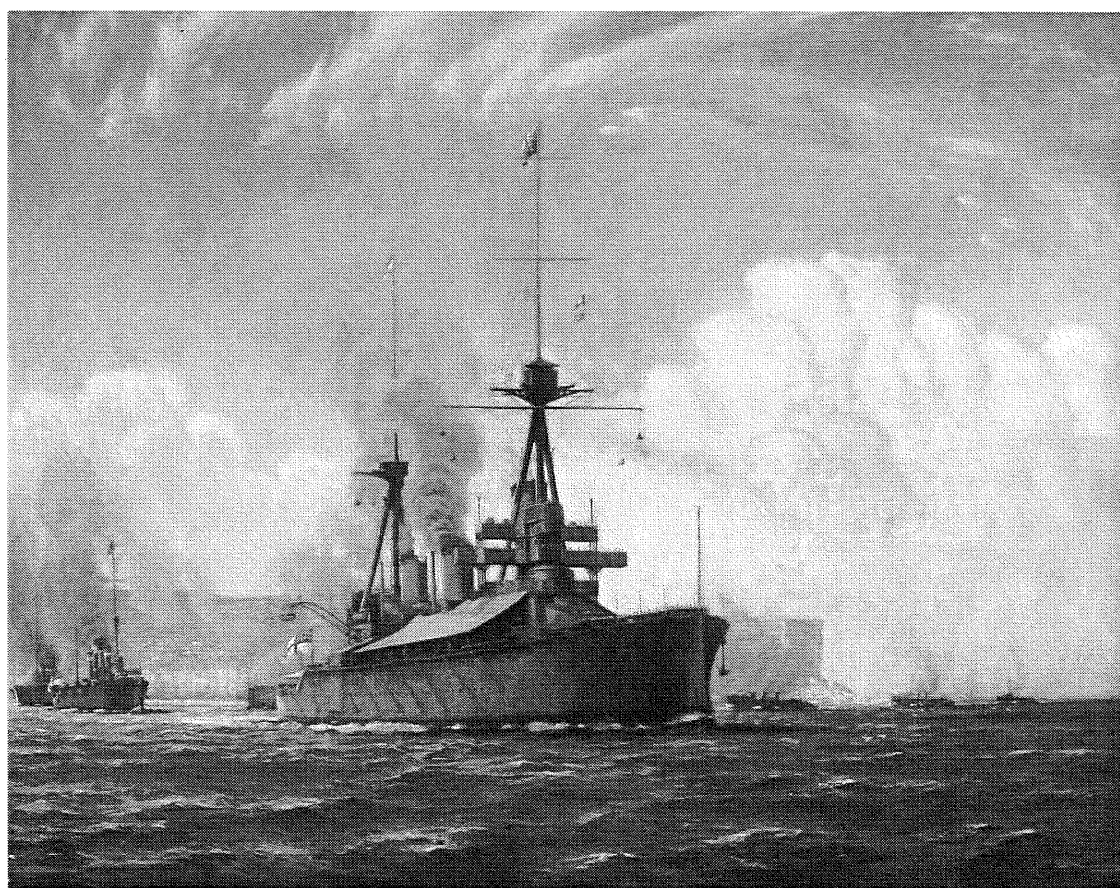


# NAVAL HISTORICAL REVIEW



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# NAVAL HISTORICAL REVIEW

Patron:

Vice Admiral R.J. Griggs, AO, CSC, RAN  
Chief of Navy

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## The Chilean Navy: Two Centuries of Service

By Carlos Tromben-Corbalán, PhD Exon.

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### Independence from Spanish Rule

Even though Chile was settled by Spain in the mid-sixteenth century, its naval history began three centuries later, precisely during the process of independence. During the three hundred years of Spanish rule, there was some exploratory activity toward the southern confines of South America but the crown did not send significant naval forces to the Kingdom of Chile<sup>1</sup> and when English and Dutch privateers started raiding local waters, fortifications were built as the only defensive reaction.

Chile, a remote colony located within the confines of the Spanish Empire, was forced to trade through Lima (Peru) and this was one of the main grievances of those who began to aspire to create an independent country. The invasion by Napoleon's armies and the replacement of the Spanish monarchy in the early nineteenth century triggered the independence process in several colonies. On the pretext that the king was not in power, a Government organized locally in Santiago took over on 18 September 1810, replacing the Spanish authorities. The movement was later radicalized, and the Viceroy in Lima decided to put an end to this situation in 1814, sending an expedition to Chile. The defeated supporters of this uprising had to cross the Andes to take refuge in Argentina, which gained independence from Spain in 1810. The Argentinean government had developed several initiatives to defeat the Spaniards at

their vice-regal headquarters in Lima, sending unsuccessful expeditions across the Alto Peru (now Bolivia). Finally, it was concluded that the best strategy would be to create an army recruiting Chilean exiles in Argentina and adding troops from that country. This force would cross the Andes to liberate Chile before attempting to expel the Spanish royalists from Peru. The occupation of the Chilean ports would allow an expeditionary force to be sailed to Peru to attack the centre of the Spanish power in Lima.

The plan was completely successful. In early 1817, the army organized in the city of Mendoza, Argentina, under the leadership of General José de San Martín, crossed the Andes and defeated the Spaniards near Santiago. An independent government was then established, led by General Bernardo O'Higgins, the son of an Irishman who had been a Spanish Governor of Chile and a Viceroy in Peru. The young O'Higgins had received part of his education in England, where he had absorbed, from an early stage, concepts such as using naval power to consolidate the emancipation process and international trade to improve the economy of the new country. However, the viceroy whose naval forces dominated the South American Pacific managed to mount expeditions to recover Chile. This increased the interest of the independent Government in Santiago to create naval forces to gain



control of certain areas in order to prevent further Spanish expeditions and also to control the sea routes by which the liberation army should be transported to Peru.

**Birth of the Chilean Navy**

As a result of that process the Chilean Navy was born. When stability in central Chile was reached after the Battle of Maipu, near Santiago, on 5 April 1818, where the last

Spanish expeditionary army was defeated, all the government's efforts led by O'Higgins were applied to create a naval force by acquiring vessels in Britain and United States, and also capturing Spanish ships. Transforming merchant vessels into warships was another way of increasing the naval forces. The first success of the new squadron was the seizure of the Spanish frigate *María Isabel* in Talcahuano on 28 October 1818. Shortly after, Thomas Alexander Cochrane, a Scotsman with a distinguished naval career in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, arrived in Chile. He was hired by the Chilean Government with the rank of Vice Admiral. With him, several other Britons arrived creating the initial officers corps, integrated also with young men born in Chile. The squadron, commanded by Cochrane, soon began operations against the Spanish warships and maritime traffic over a wide oceanic area including Baja California. During its third campaign, the Chilean squadron escorted transport ships carrying the expeditionary military forces led by General San Martín. It landed near Lima beginning a long struggle for Peruvian independence.

The independence of the southern end of South America was almost completed in 1824 and the archipelago of Chiloe - the last area where Spanish forces were present- was incorporated into the Republic of Chile in 1826 through successive expeditionary campaigns supported by the Chilean Navy. The emancipation of the former Spanish colonies was not an easy process. A negative legacy of the colonial past was the absence of strong political institutions, as well as clear boundaries between the new republics and unexplored areas, like the northern and southern regions of Chile. The first was a desert with completely unknown natural resources and the southern end was a maze of islands and channels seldom sailed. All

this posed a huge task to be accomplished by the new navy.

The new republic also initiated contacts with countries in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Since independence, Chile had developed an incipient trade with Tahiti and Asia, but the first contact with Australia was for an entirely different reason. One of the heroes of independence, General Ramón Freire, had been banished by the Government to one of the islands near Valparaíso but, fearing his escape, he was moved to Sydney where he arrived on board the sloop *Libertad* of the Chilean Navy on 29 June 1836. The general's sojourn in Australia was relatively brief as late next year he was transferred to Tahiti, possibly in one of the many whalers engaged in this activity in those seas.

### **Wars and alliances with neighbours**

Against this background, the existence of an independent Chile was challenged by the creation of a confederation between Peru and Bolivia. This led to the first war of this country with its neighbours. Chile won the victory at sea and on land in 1839 and this political confederation was dismantled. Bolivia could not access Arica, the best port for its needs because it continued under the sovereignty of Peru, so it started using a port further south, separated from its production areas by an inhospitable desert. At the same time, Chilean entrepreneurs had begun to explore that wilderness, in which valuable deposits of guano, nitrate and silver were discovered. This initiated a territorial dispute between Chile and Bolivia while the rivalry between the Peruvian port of Callao and Valparaíso grew. The superior Chilean political stability had allowed Valparaíso to become a port where goods were stored to be later re-exported to Peru and Bolivia, together with Chilean wheat and other agricultural products. European entrepreneurs, mainly British, arrived in

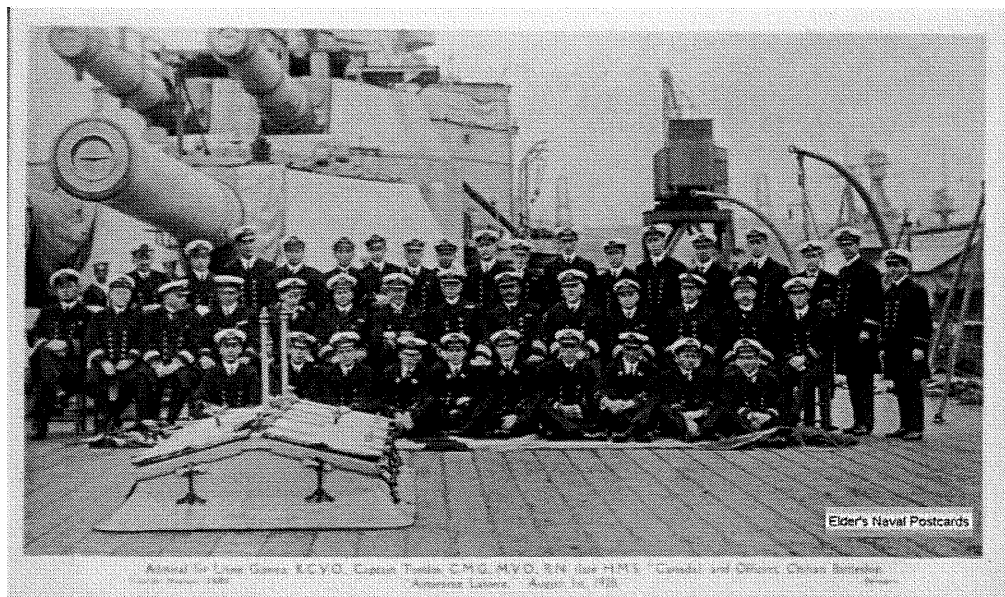
Valparaíso which became the port of entry to the South Pacific through the Cape Horn route. It was a cosmopolitan and constantly growing city. In that period of peace and growth, the Chilean Navy was engaged in the exploration and defence of national interests in remote areas such as the northern desert.

Chile had also managed to consolidate its presence in the southern region, establishing the first colony in the Strait of Magellan in 1843. Later it was moved to Punta Arenas. In this southernmost region, the Chilean Navy supported the settlers and developed a vast hydrographical research project, which was extended later to Antarctica.

A war against Spain, taking place mainly in Chilean waters (1865-1866), led to an alliance between Chile and Peru to fight against the mighty fleet sent by Spain to recover Peruvian unpaid debts dating from the independence period. This war against a common enemy delayed the conflict between Chile, Peru and Bolivia for the possession of the desert resources and the control of the maritime trade. The war against Spain ended with the bombardment of Valparaíso and Callao in 1866 by the Spanish squadron, which afterwards departed South American waters for the last time. It had achieved little except the enmity of the countries that had been born due to the Spanish geographical discoveries and territorial conquests which in turn led to the disappearance of important pre-Columbian cultures. This war led the Chilean authorities to think about the importance of having a standing naval force for the country's survival, because in the era of steamships it was not possible, as in the past, to improvise merchant ships as warships. The new type of propulsion required a higher degree of logistical support ashore.

The treaties signed in 1866 and 1874 tried to settle the boundary disagreements between Chile and Bolivia. The disputed





*Chilean battleship Almirante Latorre c.1920*

*Early postcard*

desert had acquired economic importance in that period. In those areas assigned to Bolivian sovereignty by the treaties, people and companies were mostly Chilean, and this was a source of constant friction. The 1874 Treaty established that in the area under Bolivian sovereignty no increase of taxes would be charged to Chilean companies located there. However, Bolivia decided in 1878 to apply a new tax to a company exporting nitrate, arguing that the current concession contract had not been approved by Congress as established in the constitution. This provoked a reaction from the Chilean government, which argued that the tax violated the 1874 Treaty. Bolivia also reacted by ordering the closure of the Chilean company for refusing to pay the tax. Chile then directed its naval forces to provide a presence off Antofagasta, Bolivia's main port in the territory assigned to Bolivian sovereignty since the treaty of 1866. The 1874 treaty provided for arbitration in case of disagreement but the two countries did not appeal it; Chile declared it null and

void in February 1879 and occupied the territory that had been under Bolivian sovereignty since 1866.

### **War of the Pacific**

The actions initiated by Bolivia led to the beginning of a tri-national conflict since Peru was linked to this country by a secret treaty signed in 1873 and because there was a large commercial rivalry between Chile and Peru since Valparaiso had become an important port in the area affecting Callao's standing which had been obtained during the colonial period. This conflict, which in the literature is known as the War of the Pacific, began in March 1879 and lasted four years. The first phase was essentially a maritime one. Chile and Peru fought to gain a sufficient degree of sea control in order to move land forces by sea, avoiding the desert separating the two countries. Bolivia could not participate in these types of operations because, despite having exercised sovereignty over a coastal area, it lacked a maritime heritage and did not have a navy.

The Chilean fleet consisted of two armoured ships of the same class (*Cochrane* and *Blanco Encalada*), each armed with six 250-pound<sup>2</sup> guns plus four wooden hull corvettes and two gunboats armed with smaller calibre weapons. A few transport ships completed the fleet. The most important Peruvian ships were an armoured turret ship of a class similar to a monitor named *Huascar*, fitted with two 300-pound guns, an armoured frigate with two swivel 150-pound guns armed also with twelve 70-pound and four 32-pound guns (*Independencia*), two wooden corvettes with 100, 70 and 40-pound guns (*Unión* and *Pilcomayo*) plus two armoured monitors with two 500-pound guns each. The latter two ships (*Manco Capac* and *Atabualpa*) had been built during the American Civil War but they had very low speeds and their characteristics were unsuitable for the theatre where operations would be carried out. Thus they were placed in Arica and Callao as floating coastal batteries.

The Chilean squadron was stronger in artillery and its training was adequate, but the ships were not in good condition and they were operating far from Valparaíso, their main logistics base. The Peruvian forces would operate closer to their ports where logistical support was available. But they were not in a high degree of readiness as their officers had participated in recent political disputes and were therefore of doubtful reliability. In the initial operations, started in April 1879, the Chilean logistical deficiencies were evident. At the beginning, the Chilean squadron blockaded Iquique, the port used by Peru to export nitrate, the main source of wealth for this country. With this action the Chilean Admiral Juan Williams hoped the Peruvian squadron would leave Callao and thereby fight the squadron under his command. After a victory, the Chileans would be able to establish an adequate degree of sea control so as to enable land

operations of the army stationed until then in Antofagasta.

The above did not happen because the Peruvian squadron, being weaker, did stay under the protection of Callao's forts. Admiral Williams had to perform an action similar to that successfully attempted by Admiral Cochrane half a century before: attack the enemy force in Callao, its main naval base. In its slow navigation from Iquique to Callao, the Chilean naval force failed to sight a division of the Peruvian squadron sailing southwards. The Peruvian warships were protecting transport ships designed to carry men and supplies to strengthen Arica. On arrival at Callao, the Chilean vessels found that the main purpose of the operation could not be achieved because of the absence of the enemy ships and the whole operation had to be cancelled. Meanwhile, the Peruvian division, upon arriving at Arica, received news by telegraph that the blockade of Iquique was supported only by the corvette *Esmeralda* and the gunboat *Covadonga*. Both ships were not part of the operation against Callao due to the propulsion troubles of the corvette and the weakness of the gunboat.

### **Battle of Iquique**

Early on 21 May 1879 the Chilean vessels observed two ships approaching from the North which were identified as the *Huascar* and *Independencia*. The disparity between the two forces was evident. Arturo Prat, who commanded the force as the commanding officer of *Esmeralda*, gave the first orders to the *Covadonga* and to his ship's crew, through a motivated and inspired speech in which he committed his men to keep fighting until the end. He knew that the chances of success were slim but surrendering would allow the Peruvian naval force to sail southwards to attack the shipping and the Chilean Army based in Antofagasta without fighting with the rest of the Chilean squadron since it was

*Chilean Fast Attack Craft**Amarda de Chile*

sailing north from Iquique. Once the combat started, two different actions took place because the Chilean gunboat *Covadonga* left the port and took a southerly course, closely pursued by the frigate *Independencia*, while *Huascar* entered Iquique to attack the corvette *Esmeralda*, affected by severe propulsion system problems. At first, the shots of the Peruvian ship were ineffective. Further damage to the population was feared because the Chilean corvette was very close to the coast. Nor did *Huascar* dare make a ram attack, because it was feared that *Esmeralda* was protected by mines, as suspicious activities had been seen on previous days.

Two events forced *Esmeralda's* commanding officer to leave his favourable position. Land guns protected by coastal features began firing and *Huascar* received information about the absence of a minefield. This allowed the armoured ship to approach the wooden hulled corvette. In its slow northward movement, the Chilean ship began to receive more accurate fire from the guns placed ashore. However, it resisted

tenaciously leading *Huascar's* commanding officer, Captain Miguel Grau, to decide a ram attack to end the combat.

Commander Prat manoeuvred his corvette conveniently despite the propulsion deficiencies, avoiding a ram penetration amidships. *Huascar's* bow slid alongside without penetrating the port side of the *Esmeralda*, leaving its forecastle, immediately below the corvette's poop, exposed for a few moments. This led Commander Prat to order the men near his combat position to follow him over the deck of the armoured ship. He was obeyed by a marine sergeant and a sailor. The first one was wounded immediately, while Prat headed towards *Huascar's* midships where he was killed by a rifle shot. Given *Huascar's* armoured design, his entire crew remained protected under deck or in the tops. The death of her commanding officer was seen from *Esmeralda*, but it did not stop the fighting. However, its propulsion system was definitely stopped by the shooting at close range from *Huascar*, due to the poor state in which it was at the beginning of the actions.



This also allowed a new ram attack. This time the starboard side was struck, accompanied by 300 pound shots at close range, which caused heavy casualties. The corvette was already flooding when a third ram attack sent this ship to the bottom after four hours of fighting and with almost half of the crew killed.

Meanwhile the gunboat *Covadonga* was sailing due south, very close to the coast, taking advantage of its shallow draft and pursued closely by *Independencia*. The Chilean ship barely passed over a very shallow area, while the Peruvian frigate hit the rocky bottom and was stranded with no chance of escaping. A blaze ended its participation in the war while the gunboat, damaged by gun fire, managed to avoid combat with the *Huascar* which appeared on the horizon having finished its combat against *Esmeralda*. The result of this combat, which occurred on 21 May 1879, was favourable to Chile in the sense that it lost an old ship not important for future operations while Peru lost a valuable armoured frigate. This loss accentuated the Peruvian inability to control the maritime areas where the future wartime operations would take place. The behaviour of Commander Prat and his men during combat aroused enthusiasm throughout Chile and aided the call to arms in order to achieve victory.

The war continued in its maritime phase with the reduced Peruvian sea power trying to execute sea denial operations with some partial successes. Once the Chilean squadron managed to overcome its logistical problems, an operation to capture *Huascar* was initiated achieving success in Punta Angamos, north of Antofagasta, on 8 October 1879. From this action, Chile gained enough sea control to enable landings of its military forces in Peruvian territory. Bolivia was forced to withdraw from the conflict after the initial Chilean victories. After successive campaigns, the Chilean

Army occupied Lima and most of the important areas of this country. The Chilean Navy provided gunfire support in battles fought in coastal areas and blockaded Callao and other ports until they were occupied. The war ended with a truce and treaty with Peru (1883) and Bolivia (1884). Later, peace and border treaties were signed with Bolivia (1904) and Peru (1929). Peruvian and Bolivian territorial losses led to a Chilean extension up to a line about 20 kilometres north from Arica.

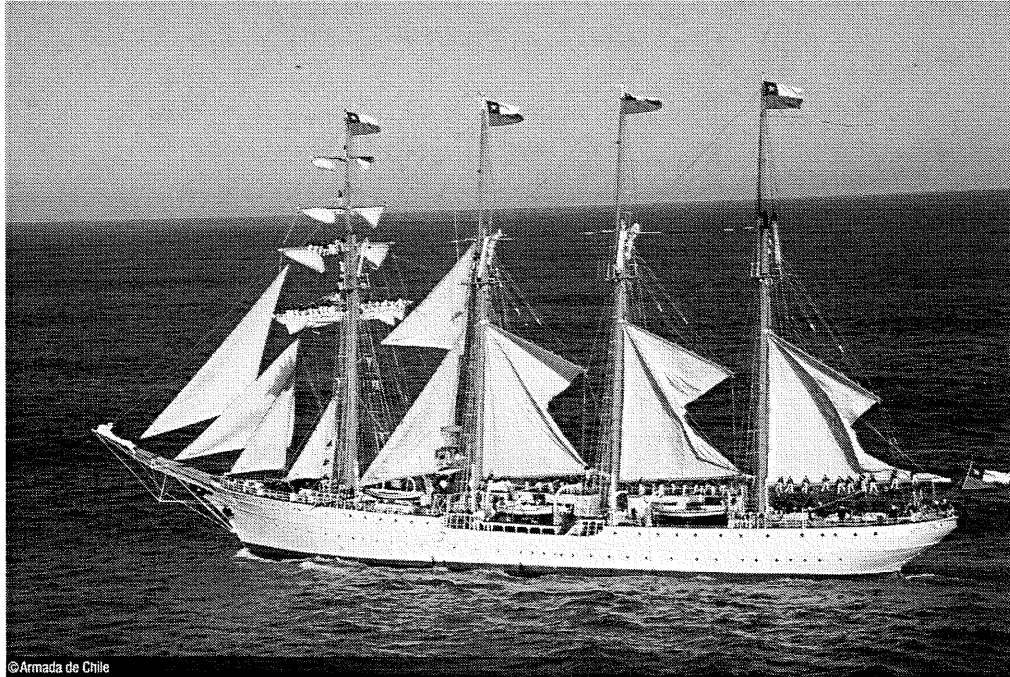
The lessons of this war were very clear. Chile, with island 'characteristics', was isolated by a desert from Peru and by a huge mountain range running from Argentina and Bolivia. Both geographic features represented significant obstacles for terrestrial communications, leaving the sea as the main way of contacting the rest of the world. This led the authorities to strengthen the naval power, especially as the border disputes with Argentina, Peru and Bolivia went through periods of crises.

### Civil War

In 1891 a bloody Civil War interrupted the traditionally stable Chilean republican life. A majority in Congress declared that the executive branch of government was not fulfilling its constitutional obligations and this led the naval squadron to rebel against President José Manuel Balmaceda. The rebels were able to organize an army in northern Chile due to the sea control provided by the squadron. The Congress forces transported by sea disembarked near Valparaiso and defeated the government Army, proving once again the importance of sea control.

### The Twentieth Century

Border problems with Argentina led both countries to invest resources in strengthening naval forces. Chile was mainly supplied by British-made ships, bought when



*Chilean naval training ship Esmeralda*

*Armada de Chile*

a crisis was imminent. This approach has been criticized for the lack of good planning leading to a heterogeneous fleet.

Once WW I started, the German Pacific squadron, commanded by Vice Admiral Count Maximilian von Spee, called at Easter Island in order to replenish his force without communicating the state of war in which his country was involved. Then he continued his journey to operate against the French and British maritime traffic along the South American coast. However, near the Chilean port of Coronel, on 1 November 1914 the German squadron faced a British force under the command of Admiral Sir Christopher Craddock. The Germans were victorious, calling briefly at Valparaiso to sail soon after to attack the Falkland Islands. There, a powerful British force was waiting to reverse the result of the Battle of Coronel. The entire German squadron was sunk except the cruiser *Dresden*.

This ship took refuge in the channels of the southern end of Chile. For fear of being detected, it sailed to Juan Fernandez Archipelago where it was discovered and attacked by a British naval force and was scuttled by its own crew.

The twentieth century was a period of peace for Chile. Nevertheless, several territorial crises with Argentina occurred up until 1978, when a real danger of war was evident and this was only subsequently mitigated by the intervention of the Holy See. A mediation process was then initiated ending in a treaty that delimited the southern maritime areas. The Chilean Navy had a deterrent role during much of that period. During peacetime periods in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the Chilean Navy has devoted its best efforts to open routes through the maze of channels and islands in the southern region, which avoid the stormy waters of the southern end

of the South American Pacific. Likewise, considerable resources were also devoted to the Antarctic exploration.

In 1901 the first voyage of the training ship *General Baquedano* included a visit to Sydney which was repeated when later opportunities presented themselves. The training ship *Esmeralda* made its first visit to Australia in 1961 and called at this country on several other occasions, the last one being in 2012. The permanent relationship with the countries of the Pacific Rim was underlined through visits of training ships.

Before WW I, Valparaiso was visited by HMS *New Zealand* between 17 and 24 September 1913 as part of a world tour. It was a battle cruiser of the Indefatigable class whose construction was funded by the country to which she owes her name. The following year, HMAS *Australia*, of the same class, arrived to Valparaiso. The reasons for this first visit are as follows. The cruiser was operating in the Pacific Ocean with other Australian and Japanese ships, due to the presence of German units in the area. After the Battle of the Falklands, which highlighted that the German threat in the Pacific Ocean had been stopped, the Admiralty ordered *Australia* to transit the Panama Canal and start operations in the Atlantic Ocean. The crossing could not be performed because of the closure of this transoceanic route. For this reason, the cruiser was required to circumnavigate South America, entering Chilean waters to anchor in Valparaiso on 26 December 1914. Two days later, *Australia* passed by Coronel where on 1 November it paid homage to the fallen in the battle. When passing through the Magellan Strait, one of its propellers struck a hidden obstacle, forcing a call at the Falkland Islands.

In 1910, when Chile was celebrating its first hundred years as an independent country, the Government decided to strengthen its sea power by ordering the

construction of two super-dreadnoughts and six destroyers in Great Britain. This plan was thwarted by the onset of the Great War. Only two destroyers were delivered before the war started, while the first battleship, almost ready, was seized by Britain, joining its fleet under the name of HMS *Canada*. At the end of the conflict, this ship joined the Chilean naval forces under the name of *Almirante Latorre*. The second battleship had been converted into an aircraft carrier (HMS *Eagle*) and continued in service with the Royal Navy. In compensation for the use of all these ships, Chile received a set of aircraft and submarines and a refund in money for the ship not delivered.

At the end of the 1920s, British shipbuilders were commissioned by the Chilean Government to build six destroyers and two supply vessels while the battleship *Almirante Latorre* was modernized in Devonport shipyard. Soon afterwards, the Chilean economy was hit hard by the global recession and the free fall of the nitrate prices, its main export. The process of strengthening the naval forces had to be postponed. Shortly before the Second World War, the Chilean economy had improved allowing plans for a fleet update but the start of that conflict thwarted these plans. Chile remained neutral, declaring war on Japan only in the last year. However, it cooperated with naval forces to patrol its own waters to ensure the export of raw materials that were important to the Allied war effort (copper and nitrate).

### **The Current Era**

After WW II, the United States replaced Great Britain as a provider of warships to South America, including Chile. Under this new reality, some frigates, corvettes and landing craft plus some auxiliary vessels were added and, shortly after, two Brooklyn class cruisers plus some destroyers and submarines revived the naval forces. Most of

these ships were bought as surplus material from the recently finished conflict. With a larger inventory of ships, it was possible to devote more of them to support underpopulated and remote areas and to perform hydrographical and oceanographic research over a vast region. It was also possible to better comply with the international commitments of safeguarding human life at sea, controlling pollution and protecting fishing areas. American influence was very strong in the 1945-1975 period but later Chile returned to Europe to renew its fleet and, at the same time, it started a local shipbuilding activity resulting in the production of auxiliary and patrol ships.

The present Chilean naval forces consist of a Type 22 and three Type 23 frigates, two L class and two M class frigates, two 209 and two Scorpene class submarines and seven missile boats. There are also several amphibious landing and transport ships plus an icebreaker and maritime patrol ships. The Naval Aviation force is equipped with anti-submarine and rescue helicopters plus fixed wing maritime patrol and transport aircraft. A Marine force distributed in three naval bases is an important part of this naval service. The maritime authority is part of the Chilean Navy and is present in all the important ports, equipped with patrol boats and aircraft. The Navy is also responsible for the national tsunami warning system.

In a few years, the Chilean Navy will celebrate two hundred years of uninterrupted service. The challenges of the first century of its existence were the consolidation of the national independence and the territorial integrity against extra-continental threats. The border disputes due to the inaccuracies in the borderlines left by the Spanish past were a source of crisis and even wars. At present, the situation has improved and naval resources have a role in deterrence against external threats and

support of isolated maritime areas. Since Chile is a signatory country to international agreements, the naval forces participate in international exercises and activities. The latter has led to the interaction with navies of the United States, France, Australia, New Zealand and neighbouring countries. It also participates in UN peacekeeping operations such as in Haiti and other places.

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### Footnotes

- 1 The Kingdom of Chile was a term commonly used in this period, while formally the Capitanía General de Chile was part of a Vice Royalty
- 2 At that time guns were categorised by their pound rating, the weight in pounds of the shell that they fired, rather than by their bore: 300 lb equivalent to 10 inch, 250 lb to 9 inch, 150 lb to 8 inch, 70 lb to 6.4 inch and 40 lb to 4.75 inch.