Remember the Maine

By: Will Johnson

The battle cry for the Spanish American War which started in 1898 was “Remember the Maine”.

The United States warship by that name had entered Havana harbor on January 25th, 1898. On February 15th, at 9.40 pm an explosion ripped the Maine apart. Only 88 men out of a complement of 26 officers and 328 sailors and marines had survived. All 22 black sailors on board died among them the star pitcher, William Lambert.

This incident led to the Spanish American War in which the United States ended up with Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines as conquests of war and lingering doubts as to whether the Maine had been sacrificed for political purposes to gain more territory for the United States. The newspapers of the day questioned the official report from the Navy about the sinking of the battleship.

The victims were later buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C.

The Mast of the Maine forms the centerpiece of the monument to the victims of the Maine. On a visit to that former plantation of General Robert E. Lee, I saw the monument. On the monument I saw the name of Charles F. Hassell and took a photo of the section of the monument with that name on it. Interestingly enough the thought crossed my mind: “I wonder if he has any Saba connection?” On my return to Saba I wrote about the trip in my newspaper the “Saba Herald”. Some old timers came forward, and told me that he was a brother of Isaac Hassell from “Over-the-Peak” and that he was an uncle of Fred Hassell and Ferius Hassell. Some years later Mr. Lenny Hassell who was married to Nan (Joanna Johnson) sent me documents which he had obtained from the Navy Department. All of these documents were relating to the death of Charles F. Hassell, as well as to the subsequent pension of $12. per month which his mother Johannah used to receive from the United States government. The House Over-the-Peak, known as “Isaac’s House” was actually built from the money Johannah received when her pension was regulated. In those days a carpenter would build a good size house for $30.—and for a large wooden house $120.—Not per day mind you. He built the entire house for that price with his handsaw and hammer. And delivered the house in six weeks.

The report of death contains the following information, which should be of interest to our readers.

Name of deceased: Charles Ferius Hassell.

Born on Saba, July 1st, 1863 (the same day as the emancipation of the slaves. A freedom child, he later lost his life in an event which caused the Spanish-American war). Rank: Gunners Mate, 3rd class. Date of death February 15th, 1898. Place of death: Havana. Cause of death: Asphyxia ex submersion. The document states further: “I hereby certify that Charles F. Hasell, Gunners Mate 3rd class, U.S. Navy, died while attached to the U.S.S. “Maine”. Death occurred in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, on the night of February 15th, 1898, as the result of an explosion and the sinking of the U.S.S. “Maine”. Record of deceased: Naïve of Saba, West Indies, Age 34 years, 7 months, Height 5 feet 10

His mother Johannah, was 70 at the time of his death. That same year an application was made on her behalf by the local Kings Council and Notary, Engle Heyliger Simmons for a pension. Also the Government schoolmaster Mr. R.L. Hassell, wrote a letter on her behalf to the Commissioner of Pensions. A general affidavit had the following information: Moses Johnson and Lovelock Hassell had appeared before the Notary and declared the following: “that they had been personally acquainted with the person Charles F. Hassell, native of this island, son of Johannah Hassell, late Gunners Mate on the U.S. ship “Maine”, from his earliest youth, that he never married on this island, and that to the best of their knowledge and belief was never married in any other place, and that at his death he left no widow nor minor child.”

Mrs. Johannah Hassell, was taken care of by Henry Johnson Hassell (“Henny Plunkie”) a Captain and owner of the house which used to be the main building of the Captain Quarters Hotel. She died on April 30th, 1913 and was around 85 years of age.

Also taking part in the Spanish American War from Saba was Capt. Lawrence Johnson, who was in the United States Navy and Waldron E.R.O.P. Simmons as well.

In Havana once in the museum which used to be the Governor’s mansion I saw there, part of the wreckage of the “Maine”. I told the guide that I hoped she did not mind that I touch that cold hard steel, but I needed to do so to communicate with a fellow islander who had lost his life on that man-of-war. The National Geographic Magazine in February 1998, one hundred years after the disaster carried an article on the sinking of the “Maine”. With this article is included a photo of part of the crew. There are two black men in the middle of the photograph on the right of the photo. The one with the round hand resembles some of the family of former days here on Saba. The photo is in the Library of Congress and was taken by the Detroit Publishing Company.

In a time when Sabans were dependent on the sea many were lost on foreign shores and we end with a stanza from the Recessional of Rudyard Kipling: Lest we Forget.

God of our fathers, known of old –

Lord of the far-flung battle line –

Beneath whose awful hand we hold

Dominion over palm and pine –

Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,

Lest we forget, lest we forget!

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THOMAS J. HARTY  
COAL PASSER

CHARLES F. HASSELL  
CORSAR'S MATE, THIRD CLASS

CHARLES HAUCK  
LANDSMAN

HOWARD B. HAWKINS  
ORDINARY SEAMAN

ALBERT E. HENNEKES  
GUNNERS MATE, SECOND CLASS

BENJAMIN H. HERRIMAN  
APPRENTICE, FIRST CLASS

ALFRED J. HOLLAND  
ORDINARY

GUSTAV HOLM  
BOATSWAIN'S MATE, SECOND CLASS

FREDERICK C. HOLZER  
ORDINARY SEAMAN

WILLIAM J. HORN  
FIREMAN, FIRST CLASS