

JOHN MILLS BROWNE—SURGEON GENERAL, U. S. NAVY  
(1888-93)

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JOHN MILLS BROWNE, the thirteenth Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, and the ninth to hold office as Surgeon General, was born in Hinsdale, New Hampshire, on May 10, 1831. He graduated from the Medical School of Harvard University in 1852, and was appointed an Assistant Surgeon in the Navy on March 25, 1853, from New Hamp-

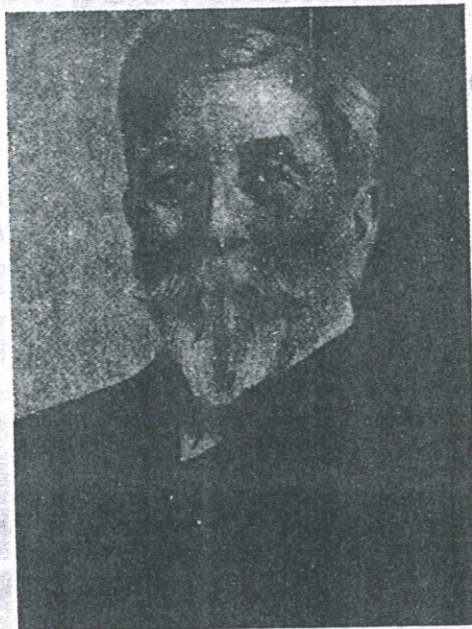
shire. His first duty was in the store ship *Warren* at Sausalito, California, across the bay from San Francisco. This ship, in September, 1854, was anchored at Mare Island and became the residence of the first Commandant of the Navy Yard, Commander David G. Farragut. The future Surgeon General of the Navy was thus the first medical officer of the Mare Island Navy Yard.

His next service included surveying duty on the Pacific coast of the United States and experience in an Indian war on the shores of Puget Sound. In the summer of 1857, his own ship, the *U.S.S. Active*, was employed with *H.B.M.S. Satellite* in establishing the western end of the Northwest Boundary.

He was promoted Passed Assistant Surgeon on May 12, 1858 and while serving on the *U.S.S. Dolphin* this ship captured the brig *Echo* off Cape Verde, Cuba, loaded with 300 negro slaves intended for sale in Cuba. The prize was brought into Charleston, South Carolina and the slaves were eventually sent to Liberia. In 1859, Dr. Browne was on the *U.S.S. Constellation*, flagship of the African squadron and was on board her the night of September 25, 1860, when a big sailing bark, the *Cora*, was captured off the mouth of the Congo River with 705 slaves. These slaves were also sent to Liberia.

He had been commissioned Surgeon shortly after the beginning of the Civil War and was soon ordered to the *U.S.S. Kearsarge*, Commander John A. Winslow, commanding. He was on her as senior medical officer when on

Sunday morning, June 19, 1864, she sank the famous Confederate sea raider, *Alabama*, under Captain Raphael Semmes, off Cherbourg, France.



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This battle is one of the most celebrated single ship duels in the history of naval warfare. The experiences of the surgeons on both ships included plenty of excitement. On the *Alabama* a heavy shell from the *Kearsarge* crashed into the wardroom, and carried away the table on which Assistant Surgeon Llewellyn was operating. The battle lasted from 10:57 A.M. to noon when the *Alabama* ceased fire and attempted to run ashore but soon sank. During the fight 28 heavy shells struck the *Kearsarge*. One, 68-pounder shell, passed through the bulwark on the starboard side of the quarterdeck exploded and wounded three men, one of them mortally. Dr. Browne said of

this man, William Garvin, that "Lying on his mattress, he paid attention to the progress of the fight, so far as he could by the sounds on the deck, his face showing satisfaction whenever the cheers of his shipmates were heard; with difficulty he waved his hand over his head and joined in each cheer with a feeble voice."

Following the sinking of the *Alabama* the *Kearsarge* made a cruise to the South Atlantic and West Indies in search of the Confederate steamer *Florida* and then returned to the United States. After a period of temporary duty at the Navy Yard, New York, he went to the Navy Yard, Mare Island, California, the Yard which he had seen established under Farragut in 1854 and in 1869 he was in charge of the construction of the Naval Hospital, Mare Island. From 1872 to 1876 he was Fleet Surgeon of the Pacific Fleet. He then served as President of the Medical Examining Board in Washington, D.C. He was a member of the Board of Visitors of the United States Naval Academy and also a representative at the International Medical Congress held in London in 1881. Doctor Browne was a man of distinguished appearance and what is unusual in a physician was a gifted orator. He was particularly well known as an after-dinner speaker. He was an ideal man to act as the representative of the Navy at the meetings of such societies and we find him again at the International Medical Congress at Copenhagen in 1884.

On April 2, 1888 he was appointed Surgeon General of the Navy by Presi-

dent Cleveland and held office until May 10, 1893. His Assistant Chief of Bureau at first was Surgeon W. K. Van Reyphen who had been in the Bureau in that office since 1884 and left in 1892. He was followed by Surgeon J. C. Boyd who continued as Assistant to the Chief of Bureau until 1900.

As showing the rate of promotion in the Medical Corps of the Navy in the period from just before the Civil War to the 1880's the dates of Surgeon General Browne's promotions to the various grades are given below:

Assistant Surgeon, May 26, 1853.

Passed Assistant Surgeon, May 12, 1858.

Surgeon, June 19, 1861.

Medical Inspector, December 1, 1871.

Medical Director, October 6, 1878.

The decade between 1880 and the end to Dr. Browne's tenure of office in 1893 saw the end of sails and of wooden hulls in our Navy. Steam was first the auxiliary of sails. After a time steam became the main motive power and sails were retained as an auxiliary of steam. By the end of the century, the sail had completely disappeared from warships and the wooden hull had been replaced by steel. The new steel cruisers, *Atlanta*, *Boston*, and *Chicago* were launched and the famous "White Squadron" organized. Many new features of ship design affecting naval hygiene, the introduction of better ventilation, heating, lighting, larger berthing spaces, refrigeration, more adequate supply of distilled water and larger and better

located sick bays were problems that were dealt with very largely in the administrations of Surgeons General Taylor, Wales, Gunnell and Browne.

During the twenty years following the Civil War, the Medical Department of our Navy did much for the development of naval hygiene. In addition to the policy of publishing the medical statistics of the Navy, one of the most important contributions to modern preventive medicine, several medical officers made studies and published works that had great influence on the evolution of modern naval hygiene. Two of the most important were Medical Director Joseph Wilson, Jr., and Albert H. Gihon. Both of these men wrote excellent books on naval hygiene and greatly stimulated interest in the subject, both here and abroad. Such important subjects as ventilation, water supply of ships, quarantine, epidemic diseases, and the proper precautions to observe in foreign ports and tropical countries to prevent diseases among the crew of the visiting ships; seasickness, poison fish and reptiles, alcoholism, venereal diseases, clothing, recreation and the "moving of wounded men on ship board," received great attention. This last feature was the beginning of the development of the excellent methods used by our Navy in the transportation of sick and wounded, a field in which the Medical Department of the Navy has excelled, and the methods adopted are probably the best in the world.

Two other notable men in the Medical Corps during this period were James Markham Ambler, lost with the

*Jeanette*, Arctic expedition in the *Lena Delta*, and one of the heroes of Arctic explorations, and James D. Gatewood. Ambler was one of the first students of the subject to suggest that the absence of certain substances in foods was the cause of the disease, a view confirmed by the later discovery of vitamins. Gatewood wrote a treatise on naval hygiene used by our own and a number of foreign navies, and was the pioneer in the scientific studies of the Navy ration and the installation of the central galley on board ship.

One of the most notable events in the history of the Navy occurred in 1889. This was the hurricane at Apia, Samoa, March 15 and 16 of that year. The loss of life included 4 officers and 39 seamen and marines lost in the *U.S.S. Vandalia*, which with the *U.S.S. Trenton* was wrecked. There were none lost in the latter ship, but 7 men were swept overboard and drowned from the *U.S.S. Nipsic*. The German war ships *Eber* and *Adler* lost over 100 officers and men and were total wrecks. A temporary hospital was established on shore in a church and mission house turned over for that purpose by the local missionary of the London Missionary Society which had a branch in Samoa. This hospital was operated by the Fleet Surgeon until it was practicable to return the patients, some sixty injured and sick, to the naval hospital at Mare Island.

A bacteriological laboratory is so much a matter of course today that it seems a little strange to look back to Dr. Browne's statement in 1892 that "During the last few years bacteriology

has assumed such prominence that the determination of the nature of the organisms of which it treats has become almost indispensable to scientific diagnoses." He then goes on to say that as a result of this, complete microscopical outfits are to be supplied to the naval hospitals at New York, Philadelphia and Norfolk and that all the other hos-

pitals will receive them eventually. These were the first microscopes issued to the naval hospitals.

Dr. Browne retired from office May 10, 1893 and his death occurred in Washington, December 7 of the following year. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

