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## George Dewey

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About this Person

**Born:** December 26, 1837 in Montpelier, Vermont, United States

**Died:** January 16, 1917 in Washington, District of Columbia, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Admiral

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Full Text:

American naval officer George Dewey (1837-1917) was the celebrated victor of the Battle of Manila Bay in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War.

George Dewey was born on Dec. 26, 1837, in Montpelier, Vt. After attending the local public schools and a private military academy, he entered the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, graduating third in his class in 1858. He entered active service with the rank of lieutenant.

During the Civil War, Dewey saw hard combat at New Orleans, the opening of the Mississippi River, and the capture of Ft. Fisher. At war's end he had the rank of lieutenant commander and the respect of superiors who controlled his professional destiny.

During the 1870s and the early 1880s Dewey held routine assignments. As chief of the Bureau of Equipment and then as president of the Board of Inspection and Survey, between 1889 and 1897 Dewey played an important part in the construction of the new fleet of armored, steam-propelled steel warships.

In October 1897 with the backing of Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Dewey, now a commodore, was assigned to command the fleet's Asiatic squadron. Anticipating war with Spain, Roosevelt wanted an able officer who could aggressively carry out a plan for an attack on Manila, capital of the Spanish-held Philippines.

When Congress declared war in late April 1898, Dewey sailed for Manila with six light cruisers and an assortment of auxiliary vessels. On May 1, after a daring night run past the batteries guarding the harbor entrance, he attacked a Spanish squadron in Manila Bay that was similar in strength and composition to his own. When the firing ended, Dewey's force, without losing one man or ship, had sunk or set afire every Spanish vessel. This one-sided victory paved the way for the American conquest of the Philippines, and it transformed the obscure naval officer into a popular hero who was rewarded with parades, banquets, and triumphal arches upon his return to the United States.

Dewey's first wife had died in childbirth in 1872, and in 1899 he married Mildred McLean Hazen, a longtime friend. A brief Dewey presidential boom flared and fizzled. Promoted to admiral of the Navy, Dewey assumed the presidency of the newly created General Board of the Navy in 1900. During the next 15 years under Dewey's aggressive leadership, the Board became the nation's most influential military planning agency, working out basic war strategy and guiding the enlargement of the fleet. A few weeks before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Dewey suffered a stroke that removed him from active duty. He died in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 16, 1917.

## FURTHER READINGS

*The Autobiography of George Dewey* covers his career to 1899. The most thorough biography is in Richard S. West, Jr., *Admirals of American Empire* (1948). A full-length study is Laurin Hall Healy and Luis Kutner, *The Admiral* (1944). For the Manila campaign see French Ensor Chadwick, *The Relations of the United States and Spain: The Spanish-American War* (2 vols., 1911). John A. S. Grenville and George Berkeley Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy* (1966), contains new information on Manila and

on Dewey's work with the General Board.

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Spector, Ronald H., *Admiral of the new empire: the life and career of George Dewey*, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.

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