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# Irvin Van Gorder Gillis

## Naval Training for an Uncommon Agent

BRUCE SWANSON

FATHERS AND SONS

**I**n the fall of 1890 fifteen-year-old Irvin Van Gorder Gillis entered the U.S. Naval Academy as a member of the class of 1894. His appointment by Congressman Milton De Lano (1844–1922) of New York had been automatic because of his first-place finish in a rigorous competition examination at the local congressional-district level followed by Gillis' successful passing of the academy's tough three-day entrance test. The decision by young Irvin to pursue a naval career was largely inspired by the example of his father, Commodore James Henry Gillis (1831–1910), who had graduated from the academy in 1854 and was then beginning his fourth decade of naval service. During his naval career James H. Gillis endured nearly twenty-five years of sea duty while serving on twenty-one different ships, of which he commanded seven. James likely inherited his interest in the sea from his grandfather Robert Gillis (1745–1836), who spent time with young James in Ridgway, Pennsylvania. As a teenager in colonial America, Robert had been a merchant seaman on ships engaged in the coastal trade from Boston to Charleston to New Orleans. As Irvin Gillis prepared to report to the Naval Academy in September 1890, he would, only briefly, be reunited with his father who was expected back

at the family residence in Binghamton, New York, following a three-year absence. The elder Gillis was completing yet another long tour of sea duty, this time as commander of the U.S. Navy's South Atlantic squadron, whose homeport was Buenos Aires.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly everything about I. V. Gillis's early life, in fact, reflected the influence of the navy. He had been born in the commanding officer's residence near the navy docks in Erie, Pennsylvania, on 1 January 1875, where, at the time, his father was the captain of the *Michigan*, a gunboat responsible for patrolling the Great Lakes.<sup>2</sup> As a toddler he lived in officer's quarters at the naval base in Newport News, Virginia, where James H. Gillis commanded the barracks ship *Franklin*. From the age of seven until he was ten, he resided in naval housing on the edge of the sprawling Brooklyn Navy Yard. His father, then a captain, commanded the *Minnesota*, a training ship based at New York City responsible for the recruitment and basic training of young boys who would ultimately serve as enlisted men in the U.S. fleet. The *Minnesota* did not spend much time at sea instead conducting the bulk of recruit basic training at anchor off West Twenty-Third Street in the lower Hudson River. On occasion Captain Gillis took Irvin about the ship where he could see firsthand the various drills and evaluations that young seamen were expected to master.

Perhaps the most lasting impression young Gillis formed, however, was witnessing his father in uniform overseeing the daily routine of the *Minnesota*. The elder Gillis, though in his early fifties, very much epitomized the image of a senior officer of that period. He was a lean and handsome man whose deep-set, steady blue eyes had an honest and open look, but also hinted of sternness. He had high cheek bones but the sunken, Lincoln-like jowls and lips were well hidden behind a full, snow-white, extended goatee and heavy, integrated mustache. His wavy, grey hair was worn short with no extended sideburns. Without doubt he carried himself in a proud and dignified manner but also had the rolling gait of a man who had spent much of his life at sea. (For a photograph of James Henry Gillis, see figure 1.)<sup>3</sup>

During this time the Gillis family was comfortably housed in a two-story brownstone bordered by gardens and carefully manicured lawns separating it from the other similarly landscaped officer's quarters. A short



1. James Henry Gillis (1831–1910), I. V. Gillis’s father. Formal, bust portrait, in uniform with two medals above right breast. Photographer [Charles Wallace Chute and Thomas Brooks] Festudio Fotografico de Chute & Brooks, Monte Video and Buenos Aires. [Ca. 1889]. Caption on back: “Son of James Lyle and Cecelia Barry Gillis (second wife), buried at Arlington Cemetary.”  
Courtesy of Bonnie Gillis Waters, Victor, New York.

distance away a fence formed the border to the navy-base property. On walks in company with his father Gillis saw many naval monuments commemorating various stirring moments in naval history. As the younger Gillis grew older, his father probably arranged for visits to the adjacent shipbuilding facility, taking him to see the dry dock, where warships rested on chocks and underwent major overhaul or repair. Such visits would have surely included observing the foundry, engine and machine shops, ordnance buildings, and the forge and blacksmith shops.<sup>4</sup>

At some point in his adolescence, Irvin learned of his father's Civil War exploits, particularly his participation at the Battle of Spanish Fort near Mobile, Alabama, in March 1865. In that encounter James H. Gillis was commanding the monitor *Milwaukee*, which struck a torpedo (mine) and was sunk. Swimming ashore, he then had volunteered to command a naval shore-battery and fought bravely, ultimately assisting in the capture of the fort. For that action he was promoted for gallantry and received a special commendation from Gideon Welles, President Lincoln's secretary of the navy.<sup>5</sup> Another favorite story concerned his father's daring rescue of a group of Argentinean sailors in Montevideo Harbor in August 1868. The evidence of that event was prominently on display at the Gillis home. Awarded by the Argentine government, it was a magnificent medal of steel and gold surmounted by a life buoy in white enamel and a setting sun of gold whose rays were set in diamonds.<sup>6</sup> (See figure 1.)

In the early 1880s Irvin and his family visited the U.S. Naval Academy for the first time to see his older brother Harry (1861–1938), who was a naval cadet at Annapolis from 1879 to 1883. As Harry advanced through his four years, his parents and siblings on occasion were present to observe the respective classes march and drill accompanied by martial music. It was always a dramatic display and likely made a lasting impression on the precocious younger Gillis.

Harry's experience at the academy was a bittersweet one however. In those days many cadets were subject to discharge upon graduation because of a backlog of naval officers. The final determination was based on class standing, and sometimes less than half a class would ultimately gain commissions. In Harry's case he ranked forty-fifth of fifty-four cadets and did not meet the threshold. Great disappointment came in August 1883 when Harry received word that he was to be honorably discharged and given one year's salary of one thousand dollars. (For a



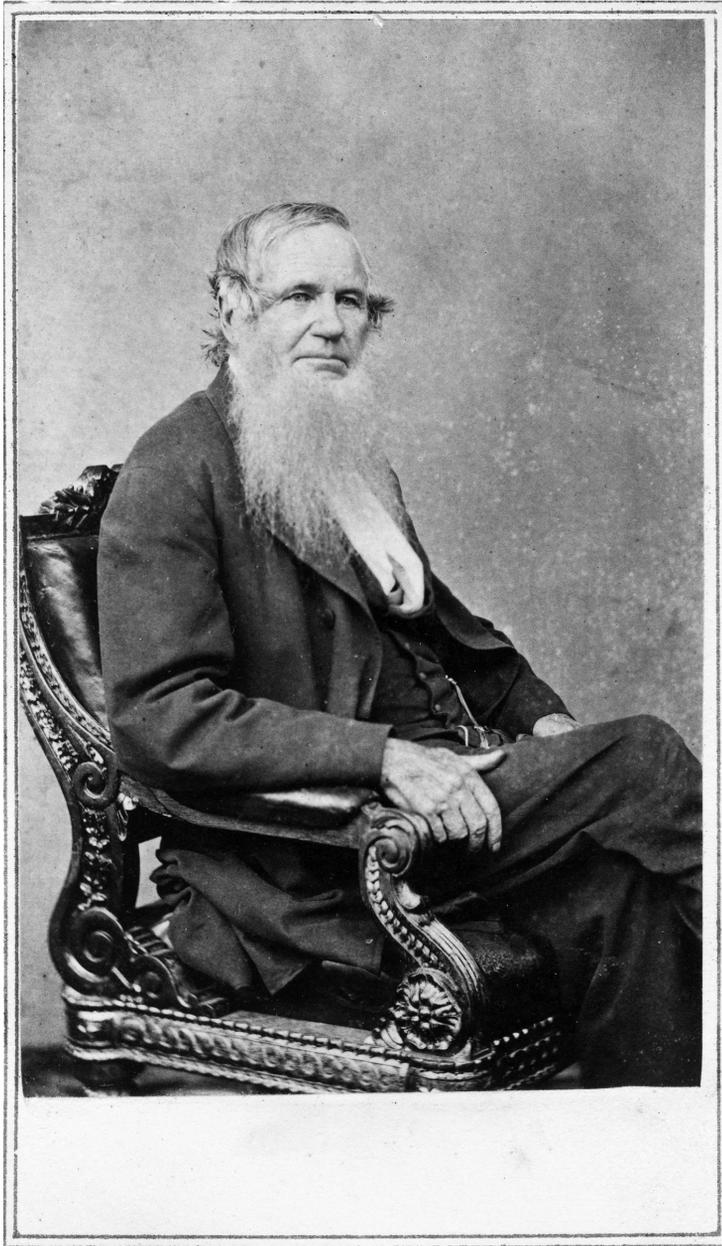
2. Harry Alexander Gillis (1861–1938), USNA class of 1883. Standing formal portrait, in uniform, wearing gloves, hat in right hand, sword in his left hand. *Ca.* 1883. Photographer: F. M. Zuller, Richfield Springs, New York, and U.S. Naval Academy, Maryland. Courtesy of Bonnie Gillis Waters, Victor, New York.

photograph of Harry Alexander Gillis, see figure 2.) As will become evident, Harry's classroom difficulties would not be lost on his younger brother who would excel academically during his time at the academy from 1890 to 1894.

Ironically, Harry was stymied by a ponderous yet demanding promotion system prevailing throughout his father's career, where an officer could expect to be promoted about every ten years if his record was without serious blemish and if he completed the requisite amount of time at sea. Thus, as long as his health was good, an officer could remain on active duty until the mandatory retirement age of sixty-two. This system, coupled with a postwar no-growth policy, produced a surfeit of officers competing for positions aboard relatively few, obsolete ships. As a result there was a paucity of billets open to new academy graduates like Harry.

One other prominent reminder of the family's rich tradition of service provided an example for young Irvin. It was his grandfather James Lyle Gillis's (1792–1881) cavalry sword that had been willed to his father.<sup>7</sup> Irvin's grandfather had enlisted during the War of 1812 as a volunteer from Hebron, New York, but, because of his leadership qualities, he gained a commission as a lieutenant of cavalry under General Winfield Scott. From 1812 to 1814 he participated in a number of battles including Ft. George, Chippewa, and Lundry's Lane. In the last encounter, which took the most lives of a battle in the war, Irvin's grandfather was badly wounded and taken prisoner but subsequently escaped in Montreal. He was soon recaptured and transported to a more secure fortress in Halifax where he remained until the end of the war when he was released in a prisoner exchange. Upon his death in 1881, it was reported that James L. Gillis was one of the last surviving veterans of the War of 1812.<sup>8</sup>

James Lyle Gillis led a most robust and colorful life. Following the War of 1812 he pioneered the Ridgway, Pennsylvania, frontier area north of Pittsburgh operating a tannery and sawmill. He went on to become a judge and then entered politics at the state level and was subsequently elected to the U.S. Congress for the single term 1856–1858. Prior to the Civil War, President Buchanan appointed him Indian agent for the Pawnee Nation in Nebraska. He was a life-long freemason and had once been arrested but later acquitted in the famous 1829 murder case of William Morgan, who had publicly revealed certain secrets surrounding freemason rituals.<sup>9</sup> (For a photograph of James L. Gillis, see figure 3.)



3. James Lyle Gillis (1792–1881), I.V. Gillis's paternal grandfather. Formal portrait, seated in ornate chair. Photographer [Alexander Gardner (1821–1882)], Corner 7th & D Streets, Washington, DC. Courtesy of Bonnie Gillis Waters, Victor, New York.

## EDUCATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

On 6 September 1890 Irvin Gillis reported aboard the training ship, *Santee*, which was permanently assigned to the Naval Academy. He and his classmates underwent a three-week intensive indoctrination program that was intended to familiarize the cadets with shipboard life as well as to break any bad habits learned in civilian life. (For a photograph of a young Irvin V. Gillis, see figure 4.) At the end of the period the class moved back on land and into their stark living quarters at Bancroft Hall where they prepared to commence the academic year. The *Santee* experience had demonstrated to all that they had entered a new world where members lived by a rigid set of rules, moved about with precise military bearing, and communicated in their own curious jargon. Floors were decks; walls, bulkheads; bathroom, heads; and stairs were ladders. Directions were now given in standard naval argot. Left was port and right was starboard.<sup>10</sup>

Once at Bancroft Hall, another set of slang soon mastered was designed to make the class aware that it was now part of an exclusive fraternity peculiar only to naval cadets. For instance, a perfect mark was termed “a four,” to do a thing well was “a biff,” to fail was “to zip,” “sux” meant not difficult, and “bilge” meant to be dismissed or dropped. If something was swell or good, it was just “doggy,” to study was “to bone,” and awkward cadet was called “a squid,” a cadet lieutenant or petty officer was “a buzzard,” a senior or first classman was “a firsty,” a firsty without office or rank was “a clean sleever.” The chaplain was known as “Holy Joe,” and anyone in the Engineer Corps was known as “a greaser.”<sup>11</sup>

Commencement of the academic year also marked the beginning of hazing, which had always been a problem but by the time Irvin arrived at the academy had become more mental than physical. Whole paragraphs had to be memorized and recited faithfully even as cadets were braced at attention and the eyes of an upper classman burned at them like a mad, feral animal. One such can incantation had been imputed to be the words of John Paul Jones:

None other than a gentleman, as well as a seaman, both in theory



ENSIGN IRVIN V. GILLIS, U.S.N.

4. Ensign Irvin V. Gillis, Naval Historical Center, Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, DC. NH49320.

and practice, is qualified to support the character of commissioned officer in the navy; nor is any man fit to command a ship of war who is not capable of communicating his ideas on paper, in language that becomes his rank.<sup>12</sup>

Another favorite to be shouted out perhaps at meal time was from Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*: "I am not covetous of gold, but if it be a sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul alive."<sup>13</sup>

A further ritual involved the assignation of nicknames, which more often than not were unflattering. In the 1894 Naval Academy yearbook, *The Lucky Bag*, Irvin was dubbed "Splint," a variety of bituminous coal known for its dull, stony appearance. "Splint" Gillis it was then for four years. *The Lucky Bag* also listed Gillis as being only five feet five inches tall and weighing but 125 pounds. In fact, the yearbook tells that Irvin's keenest desire at graduation was to be taller. "Splint" was apparently a teetotaler. While most of his fellow cadets listed their favorite drinks as ones containing some form of alcohol, Splint Gillis listed his as sarsaparilla.<sup>14</sup>

Irvin's straight-arrow qualities were also evident in his accumulation of demerits over his four years at the Naval Academy. During that time he received sixty-three demerits and most were awarded for a variety of petty infractions. The majority were for talking in formation. His biggest single infraction, however, was for ten demerits, which he received in his third year for being disrespectful to a coxswain of a small boat. As a measure of comparison Gillis received but nine demerits in his final year while the worst offender in the class, Arthur Kavanaugh of Nebraska, received 172.<sup>15</sup>

Despite his youth and diminutiveness, Gillis was an outstanding student and had no apparent difficulty with recitation that stymied many cadets.<sup>16</sup> Three hours each day, five days a week, and one hour on Saturdays, he was required to meet with instructors and review the subject matter assigned from the previous day. For mathematics the recitations were principally conducted at the blackboard in the development of formulas, propositions, and the solving of problems. In history or English the recitations were often oral, but sometimes written, with the instructor correcting the cadet where necessary for style, grammar, punctuation, spelling, choice of words, and, as well, factual mistakes. At

the end of each session the instructor would award a numerical grade with 4.0 being the highest.<sup>17</sup>

By the time he became a “firsty,” Gillis achieved the rank of cadet lieutenant, being one of only eight naval cadets to be awarded that title. It meant that he had charge over a division of his fellow classmates, twelve cadets in all, who were divided into three four-man crews. As such, Gillis enjoyed special privileges but also had the authority to issue orders to his division that were to be considered official and obeyed. This carried over to drills and practice exercises where his three crews might man a naval gun, form an infantry landing-party, or crew a small boat. (For a photograph of I. V. Gillis as midshipman, see figure 5.)

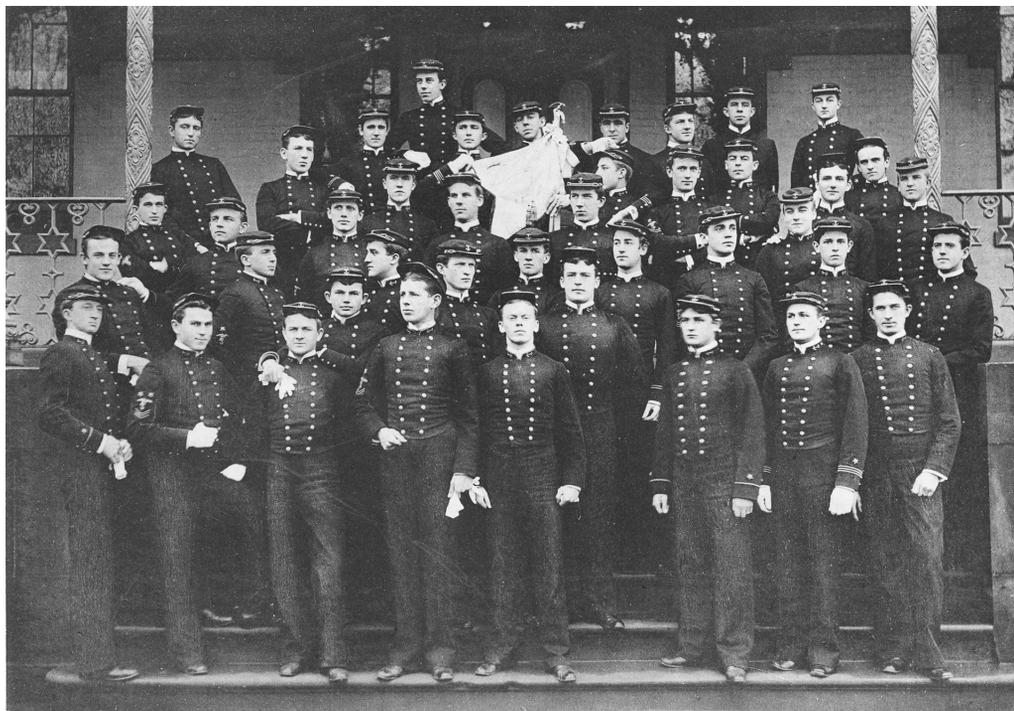
A serious family crisis occurred in the late summer prior to Irvin’s final year. On 2 August 1893 Lydia Gillis died following a stroke. She had lingered for two weeks as family members rushed to her bedside in Alexandria, Virginia.<sup>18</sup> Her death, at the relatively young age of fifty-seven, came just two and one-half months after Commodore Gillis retired, having been relieved by George Dewey as a member of the Lighthouse Board.<sup>19</sup>

Following his mother’s interment at Arlington National Cemetery, Irvin returned to the Naval Academy to resume his final year. In June 1894 he graduated with honors, finishing third in his class with a four-year grade-point average that exceeded the coveted eighty-fifth percentile. Despite his mother’s death and concern for his father, he managed to finish second in the annual examination given in June 1894. Of the nine academic groups, he finished first in four: ordnance and gunnery, navigation and surveying, navigation practice cruise, and least squares/applied mechanics. He also had the distinction of finishing first in his class in mathematics three of the four years.<sup>20</sup> (For a photograph of the United States Naval Academy, Class of 1894, see figure 6, and for a formal portrait of I. V. Gillis in uniform, see figure 7.)

Two more requirements remained before Irvin would gain his commission. He had to satisfactorily complete the customary two-year cruise aboard a U.S. Navy warship and then pass a final examination for promotion back to Annapolis. Within days following June Week, he received his orders to report aboard the armored cruiser *New York*, the flagship of the North Atlantic Fleet. The assignment carried a special honor. Only the top few of a class would be ordered to the North Atlantic



5. Midshipman Irvin V. Gillis, Naval Historical Center, Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, DC. NH49319.



Lithotype Printing Co., 111 Nassau St., N. Y.

THE CLASS OF NINETY-FOUR.

6. United States Naval Academy, Class of 1894, *Lucky Bag* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Academy, 1894). I. V. Gillis is in the second row, fifth from the right (standing on the second step up with his right shoe visible. Photographer: Linotype Printing Co., New York. Courtesy of Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College, Newport, RI; and U.S. Naval Academy Special Collections and Archives, Nimitz Library, Annapolis, MD.



7. Irvin V. Gillis. Standing formal portrait, in uniform, gloves in right hand, sword at left side. *Ca.* 1894. Photographer: F. M. Zuller, Richfield Springs, New York, and U.S. Naval Academy, Maryland.  
Courtesy of Bonnie Gillis Waters, Victor, New York.

Fleet, which usually contained the newest, most-modern naval ships.<sup>21</sup> The *New York* was but three years old and represented a fast class of heavily armored cruisers. It also carried rifled, breech-loading guns as well as torpedoes.

Once aboard, Irvin and seven fellow classmates soon found themselves under the baleful eye of Captain Robley Evans. The commanding officer of the *New York*, Evans was a charismatic, somewhat bellicose officer who in 1891–1892 had acquired the popular nickname, “Fighting Bob” when he faced down a hostile Chilean-government challenge in the port of Valparaiso.<sup>22</sup> He also was known affectionately as “Gimpy Bob,” due to a pronounced limp resulting from several Civil War gunshot wounds he received while leading marines in the assault on Fort Fisher in December 1864. Nearly all of the officers in the fleet knew the story of how Evans had aimed his pistol at the doctor who was ready to amputate both legs, calmly informing him, “If [you] or any one else entered my door with anything that looked like a case of instruments, I meant to begin shooting, and that (the doctor) might rest perfectly sure that I would kill six before they cut my legs off.” The legs remained attached for the rest of his life, but Evans endured constant pain and had to move about with the use of a cane.<sup>23</sup>

His colorful past notwithstanding, Evans was also highly respected by his peers for his naval expertise and his penchant for detail. He was a “hands-on” commanding officer who, despite his handicap, frequently moved about his ship chatting with enlisted men while carefully observing various drills and shipboard evaluations. He demanded perfection and took great pride that his crew aboard the *New York* could close all water-tight doors within thirty seconds after the general alarm was sounded.<sup>24</sup> Although one might think Evans a plain old “seadog,” he also moved easily in higher circles. He maintained friendships with many influential politicians, including Theodore Roosevelt, Grover Cleveland, and William McKinley. He also was well-connected with international royalty as well as ranking European naval officers. And due to a previous tour as the navy’s equipment officer, Evans had made many friends in the upper echelons of private industry.<sup>25</sup> As will later be evident, Gillis’s exposure to Evans as a young naval cadet would have lasting benefits as their paths would frequently cross in the future.

For Gillis the primary purpose of the so-called “middie cruise”

was to carefully observe the shipboard routine as well as to participate actively as a member of the crew. One important duty was that of standing watches both in port and underway as a junior watch-officer. He might also act as messenger relaying word from the officer-of-the-deck to the embarked Admiral Richard Meade to Evans himself.<sup>26</sup> Underway he would be allowed to use a sextant and practice celestial navigation, comparing his results in fixing the ship's position with that of the *New York's* navigator. Other activities involved observing the frequent gunnery exercises. The ships, in company with other vessels of the North Atlantic squadron, would often steam together to the two training areas on the East Coast where they would also practice maneuvering drills at different courses and speeds. Much time was spent in practicing two new techniques—live firing of torpedoes and flashing-light signaling.<sup>27</sup>

In the summer of 1895 the *New York* and several sister ships were chosen to represent the United States at Kiel, Germany, for an international naval pageant that included seeing the opening of the Kiel Canal.<sup>28</sup> It was grand event and a highlight of Gillis's summer that year. Gillis got to see and visit the newest warships from nearly every major country in the world. On one occasion the German emperor, Wilhelm II, paid a visit to the *New York*.<sup>29</sup> The *New York* also visited England and Denmark before returning home early in the autumn.

In April of 1896 Gillis returned to Annapolis where he took his final examinations before commissioning. Having passed easily, the following month he was granted two-months' leave. During that time he received notification of his official promotion to ensign effective 1 July of that same year and orders to report for duty aboard the United States first battleship, the USS *Texas*, which had been in commission for less than a year.<sup>30</sup>

#### OLD HOODOO<sup>31</sup>

During his six "apprentice" years Gillis was probably too preoccupied with his academic and postgraduation-cruise requirements to take full notice of the changes taking place in world naval circles. However, the visit to Germany gave him a new perspective on the growing emphasis being placed on the construction of more-heavily armored and more-lethal warships that were simultaneously becoming larger and faster.

Moreover, by the time Gillis was commissioned, he, like most officers, had become familiar with the writings of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, who, in 1890 had introduced the world to a new vision which posited that the combination of mercantile imperialism and naval power could make a nation prosperous and great.<sup>32</sup> The naval review at Kiel confirmed that the age of navalism had begun.

In America, Mahan's disciples, led by Theodore Roosevelt, had successfully lobbied for a naval-building program as well as a more expansive policy. A jingoist spirit was beginning to pervade the land as speeches and news editorials preached a more bellicose and aggressive patriotic message. When the British Navy landed troops in British Guiana in 1895 because of a boundary dispute with Venezuela, America demanded that the Monroe Doctrine be respected, and a war scare swept the country. Roosevelt was quick to declare: "Let the fight (with England) come if it must. I rather hope that the fight will come soon. The clamor of the peace faction has convinced me that this country needs a war."<sup>33</sup> The British eventually agreed to arbitrate, and the storm passed.

When Gillis returned to Annapolis in the spring of 1896 to be examined for promotion, the press was also reporting that a group of hawkish congressmen and senators was already urging intervention in Cuba and the sending of a fleet there to protect American interests. For Gillis, who was eager at long last to embark upon his naval career, the future seemed to offer bright prospect for action and adventure.

The *Texas*, as America's first battleship, represented a considerable technical challenge as well as an expensive item of naval hardware. To protect its investment, the navy department undoubtedly picked the *Texas's* officers with care. It was commanded by Captain Henry Glass, and the executive officer was Lieutenant Commander J. D. J. Kelley, both of whom had been ordered to the *Texas* from the new cruiser *Cincinnati*, which under their hand had attained a high degree of proficiency and discipline. Similarly, Gillis's selection was primarily based on his high standing at the Naval Academy as well as on his high marks while aboard the *New York*.

Once aboard, Gillis was assigned duties as Glass's aide and also was designated the ship's signal officer in charge of communications and responsible for that group of enlisted men making up the ship's signal division. Very soon he also became qualified to stand deck watches both

underway and in port.<sup>34</sup> As the captain's aide Gillis had a unique inside look at the day-to-day decision making that took place in the running of the ship. The position undoubtedly made him popular in the wardroom for he most certainly was privy to the ship's schedule and operational orders. These were always important bits of information that provided lively gossip about what to expect with respect to the ship's future ports-of-call.

As in the course of much of his career, Gillis would encounter officers and enlisted men who had served with his father, and his service aboard the *Texas* was no exception. Lieutenant Commander Kelley, for example, had commanded the *Tallapoosa* in Rear Admiral Gillis's South Atlantic Squadron in the late 1880s. Kelley, in fact, was a most unusual person and one of the earliest "activist" officers who had written articles on naval affairs as well as on the need for a strong commercial-shipping industry. He was a close friend of James Gordon Bennett, the influential publisher of the *New York Herald*, and upon retirement in 1901, Kelley would become the *Herald's* naval editor and later served on the paper's board of directors. Like Mahan, Kelly was a devout navalist and in the early 1880s had authored a number of articles in support of a strong, modern navy. He likely encouraged the officers of the *Texas* to be current on all manner of naval topics.

The honeymoon aboard the *Texas* was a brief one for Gillis. On 16 September 1896 she ran hard aground at Newport, Rhode Island, while still undergoing sea trials. The mishap was caused by miscommunication over engine signals from the bridge to the engine room via the *Texas's* new engine-order telegraph-system. Although the ship continued to operate after being freed by tugs, the hull had been weakened, and the *Texas* subsequently went to the Brooklyn Navy Yard in early November for inspection and repair. It was soon discovered that sixty-one compartments below the water line were leaking. The worst was yet to come however. On 9 November a faulty seacock valve led to massive flooding below decks, and the ship, still moored to the dock, sank to its gun deck. The flooding created yet another serious problem. The water that rushed in was highly polluted and contained solid-waste particles. The crew had to be evacuated ashore to avoid a typhoid epidemic, and it took several weeks to clean and sanitize the ship. For a brief period

in late November it was doubtful that the *Texas* would ever again be ordered to sea.

In February 1897, however, the ship was at last ready and headed for Galveston, Texas, for a belated ceremony celebrating its being not only America's first battleship, but also the first to bear the name *Texas*. Upon arrival at Galveston it once again ran aground, but the sandy bottom treated the ship more kindly than had the rocks off Newport. Though embarrassed, Captain Glass quickly freed the ship, and the banquet went on as scheduled. Departing Galveston several days later, the *Texas* went to New Orleans where it and the *Maine*, America's latest battleship, represented the U.S. Navy at Mardi Gras. The *Texas* subsequently returned to the East Coast where it commenced operations with the North Atlantic Squadron.

The gala banquets and parades notwithstanding, the atmosphere aboard the *Texas* soon changed to gloom. Between the groundings and the dockside sinking, various members of the *Texas*'s officer cadre became the subject of two Naval Courts of Inquiry. When the findings were handed down, Letters of Censure and Reprimand were issued to several officers. By now the *Texas* had a bad reputation, and navy men in the fleet had begun calling her the USS *Hoodoo*. Few wanted to see any duty aboard what they believed to be a jinxed vessel.

Gillis was not affected by the legal inquiries, but he and two other senior lieutenants found an outlet for relieving their frustrations. In late September 1896 the Navy Department had issued a circular letter requesting proposed changes to the fleet's tactical-signal book, which, with the advent of new battleships and cruisers, had become outdated. It contained a vast set of signals to be employed during action or emergency situations as well as during routine tactical maneuvering. Captain Glass had passed the letter down to the officers directly involved in the ship's communications, which obviously included Gillis. Within several weeks a detailed list of proposed changes was jointly submitted to Captain Glass by Gillis and the two other lieutenants. It was a reasoned and comprehensive report covering a variety of signaling situations principally related to the new and evolving tactics requiring ships to maneuver in concert from line, column, and echelon formations. Gillis further marked himself as an improviser of solutions when he submitted precise instructions for

the care and inspection of the ship's double bottom. The instructions were intended to prevent a future accidental flooding of below-deck space such as that which had occurred in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

By late summer of 1897 the *Texas* was once again back in dry dock undergoing extensive modifications. This time she had to have her bow- and stern-torpedo mounts removed as they could not be fired without risking danger to the ship. There were other problems as well. The *New York Times* reported on 30 September that twenty crew members had deserted while she was in dry dock.<sup>35</sup> The *Times* indicated that the main reason for the desertions stemmed from the ship's being "uncomfortable" because the engine room and crew's living quarters were excessively hot and impossible to cool.

The problem was greater than matters of comfort, however. The navy's building program was already straining its ability to provide trained enlisted men to operate the increasingly complicated equipment. Many sailors were foreign born and not well educated. Moreover, the excessive amount of time spent in navy yards for repairs and upkeep was often too much of a temptation for men who often drank to excess. Ship's logs were replete with instance of desertion or absence without leave. As a result, the ship's brig was invariably provided with a steady supply of transgressors. For young division-officers like Gillis, the challenge of leadership was difficult and often discouraging. As his tour came to an end, however, Gillis had met his first test. He distinguished himself as a smart, capable young officer by receiving from Captain Glass the highest mark of "excellence" in all graded categories in his Report of Fitness.<sup>36</sup>

"NOTHING IN HIS COMPOSITION BUT NERVE."<sup>37</sup>

Just one week prior to the desertions on the star-crossed *Texas*, Gillis had received his orders to the *Porter*, a torpedo boat that was in port at New York also undergoing modifications and repairs. For Gillis the duty on the *Porter* must have been an exciting prospect because he knew he would have a much broader range of responsibilities on this much smaller ship. In fact, he was to be the ship's second in command under Lieutenant John C. Fremont, Jr., son of the famous explorer, politician, and military officer. Gillis's primary duty on the *Porter* was that of chief engineer, a demanding assignment because the *Porter*, like the *Texas*, was

also a new, experimental class of ship. The ship had been in commission for less than a year, and several design and technological challenges were readily apparent. Heading the list were propeller-shaft and -blade problems. The high speeds for which they had supposedly been designed caused the shaft and blade to twist or break when the ship was put to maximum limits. Secondly, the ship had two steam reciprocating-engines fed by three coal-fired boilers capable of developing 4000 horsepower. At higher speeds the vibration and pounding of the reciprocators caused many pieces of auxiliary machinery to break free from their deck fasteners. The *Porter* was cramped, dirty, and noisy with minimal space left over to provide comfort for the crew. When the *Porter* was underway, some slept on deck, but this could often be quite hazardous as these craft were poor sea keepers in all but the calmest conditions.<sup>38</sup> The main weapon system also had serious problems. The torpedoes were inaccurate and went off course at high speed. Even during stationary firing, a torpedo had a tendency to go off course when it hit a small object or if its propeller struck the tube at discharge. Eventually the torpedo problems were solved through a series of experiments with a new steering mechanism.

All of this activity had gone on throughout the summer of 1897 at Sag Harbor, New York, often under the critical eye of Theodore Roosevelt, then the assistant secretary of the navy, who maintained his home Sagamore nearby. In fact, it was Roosevelt who had pushed hard for the creation of a “mosquito war-fleet,” which if successful, would spawn the creation of others to be used in defense of the coastal waters of the United States.

In January 1898 a six-month shakedown cruise for the flotilla was ordered. It was to proceed down the East Coast using the inland waterway, and then via the Gulf of Mexico it was to go up the Mississippi to St. Louis. It proved to be a tiring and stressful trip as all systems had to be tested under a variety of sea conditions. One vessel of the flotilla, the *Foote*, had severe problems and averaged only a slow twelve knots against her contracted speed of thirty knots. She soon became known as the “Footless” among the other torpedo-boat crews. The *Porter*, meanwhile, performed so well that it was recognized as the best ship from a reliability and efficiency standpoint. Early on, Fremont gave credit to Gillis in the latter’s Report of Fitness with the highest mark of “excellent” in all graded categories. He also added the following remark: “Ens. Gillis has

shown exceptional zeal, intelligence, and resourcefulness in performing the various duties required of him during the cruise of this vessel.”<sup>39</sup>

The ships never made it any further than Key West. War fever was now running high in the United States over mistreatment of Cubans by Spanish colonialists. Outrage in America was fueled in no small part by the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, and James Gordon Bennett. In some months they had run stories of atrocities in Cuba, both real and imagined. As the *Porter* pulled into Key West for upkeep and repair, Captain Fremont had orders to ready the ship for partial duties.

Toward the end of *Porter*'s upkeep period, the *Maine* was reported sunk in a furious explosion while it lay at anchor in Havana Harbor. An inquiry was ordered, but the headlines screaming “Remember the *Maine*” were an obvious call for America to teach the Spanish a lesson. On 26 April 1898 President McKinley finally declared war. The *Porter* was quickly underway from Key West, and upon its arrival at Havana the battle squadron commander, Admiral William Sampson, who was embarked aboard the *New York*, immediately assigned the *Porter* close-in patrol duties. Her first chance at action came within a few days when she intercepted and captured the Spanish schooner *Sophia*, loaded with rum and sugar. Everyone aboard celebrated because there was a bounty on such ships, and the *Porter*'s crew stood to divide up a fair sum of prize money.

Less than a day after the *Sophia* was captured, the *Porter* became involved in a clandestine effort to gather information ashore per the direction of Admiral Sampson. Sampson had become friendly with Sylvester H. “Harry” Scovel, a reporter for Pulitzer's *New York World*. Scovel had already earned a reputation as one of the most celebrated correspondents covering the war, having been the first on the scene in Havana Harbor within minutes of the sinking of the *Maine*. His subsequent stories captured the attention of the world with his lurid descriptions of the event and suspicions that the ship had been a victim of Spanish sabotage. Scovel also had a long history of writing articles about Spanish atrocities against the Cubans and had excellent connections with General Maximo Gomez, the chief of the Cuban insurgents. Moreover, Scovel directed the efforts of a small group of other reporters ashore whose job it was to spy on Spanish activities in Havana, as well as to provide Scovel with

scoops over his rivals from other newspapers. Scovel's maneuverings had not escaped Admiral Sampson's attention, and he asked Scovel to provide him with badly needed intelligence ashore. It fell to the *Porter* to act as Scovel's transport for the dangerous mission.

The first story Scovel filed from the *Porter* appeared in the *World* on 28 April 1898 and featured Ensign Gillis. Apparently, the *Porter* was to land a boat ashore to pick up one of Scovel's reporter-spies, operating under the pseudonym Holmes, with the hope that "Holmes" could provide much-needed updates for Admiral Sampson as to the situation in Havana. Scovel's description of the event read in part:

For hours the *Porter's* officers watched. The moon was not yet risen; coast and sky were of the same inky black. The loom of the shore a few hundred yards distant, although obscuring the coastline, did not obstruct the view seaward. The *Porter* could be seen, and any moment the nearby Cojimar field artillery might begin puncturing the thin-skinned, valuable, almost defenseless torpedo boat.

Holmes was to be waited for three hours. The officers watched longer and then reluctantly gave up.

On the night of the 24<sup>th</sup> the hour set was "soon after dusk as possible."

Again the swift *Porter* ran into the shaded bay. The moon enabled them to find it easily. This was the second trial.

The officers, to give Holmes every chance to reach them and the admiral every chance to learn the facts about Havana's sealed interior, decided to go right to the beach.

Ensign Gillis took an eighteen-foot boat, four willing jackies swept the oars and the sandy beach was almost touched.

Gillis signaled. No answer.

It is now known that this point was patrolled that night.

The signals of the previous evening had been seen, and Holmes either could not approach the beach or had attempted it and been captured. Gillis held to the shore for an hour, then, after his return, the *Porter's* electric masthead light itself shot the white beams in proper intervals; but no Holmes.<sup>40</sup>

Over the next five days Scovel remained aboard the *Porter* as it

continued its vain attempt to contact “Holmes.” Admiral Sampson finally instructed the *Porter* to land Scovel at Caibarien on Cuba’s north shore. Once the mission was completed, the *Porter* received orders to link up with the flagship *New York*, which was in the process of organizing an expedition to San Juan in hopes of intercepting Admiral Pascual Cervera’s fleet, which was reliably reported to be heading there from Cape Verdes. Battle plans were drawn up as the *Porter* ferried the commanding officers of the San Juan expedition back and forth between their ships and the *New York*. One of those passengers was Robley Evans, then the commanding officer of the battleship *Iowa*.

On 11 May the ships of Sampson’s squadron commenced a bombardment of San Juan, and the *Porter* was ordered to remain close by the harbor entrance looking for any sign of Admiral Cervera and his fleet. On one occasion the *Porter* came under heavy fire from shore batteries but was not hit. After three hours Sampson withdrew, disappointed not to have found Cervera. The *Porter* was ordered back to Key West for refueling and some rest for the tired crew.

Upon arrival at Key West the *Porter*’s crew had a sobering moment when it saw the battered and broken *Winslow*, one of her sister torpedo boats. Following the declaration of war, the *Winslow* had been the war’s first serious casualty when she was struck by fire from shore batteries on 11 May at Cárdenas. Her captain, Lt. John Bernadou, had been badly wounded, and her executive officer, Ensign Worth Bagley, and five crewmen had been killed instantly. It had taken a herculean effort by the revenue cutter *Hudson* to tow her to safety all the while receiving fire from Spanish guns ashore.

Returning to Cuba in mid-May, the *Porter* took up picket duties protecting the larger force of U.S. combatants, which began to form up at Santiago where Admiral Cervera and his fleet had finally been discovered. During this period a near catastrophe was averted by the *Porter* and the *New York*. Gillis had the night watch, and at two o’clock in the morning on an especially dark night with rain squalls, he had spotted a large unlit ship in the gloom. He woke Fremont, and it was decided that, since they were located well to the east of Havana, the ship could not possibly be one of the U.S. blockaders. Preparations for battle were quietly passed to the crew as the *Porter* began a stealthy approach from

astern of the mystery ship. Within a short time the torpedo boat was able to come within yards of the vessel, and Fremont later noted that “excitement on the *Porter* was at a fever heat, and the enforced silence and the nervous tension were hard to bear.”<sup>41</sup>

Fremont decided to make sure that the ship was Spanish and turned on his night signal. It produced no answer. He tried again and this time fired his forward gun in warning. The response was immediate as the target showed a light signal but fired at the *Porter*. The signal, however, was the wrong one, and the *Porter* rang up full speed for a torpedo attack. At the very last moment the ship was identified as the *New York*, Sampson’s flagship. Both ships now slowed and via megaphone exchanged apologetic explanations. It was later confirmed that the *New York* was the ship in error for having responded with incorrect recognition signals.<sup>42</sup>

A few days after the *New York* incident, the *Porter* was again involved in an incident that soon became the talk of the fleet. On 4 June while patrolling near the mouth of Santiago Harbor, the *Porter’s* lookout spotted two torpedoes floating dead in the water. It was decided to try to recover them in the hopes that considerable technical intelligence could be gleaned once they were thoroughly subjected to examination back in the United States. The *Porter’s* log entry for of the event, which bears the signature of Ensign I. V. Gillis, Navigator, was succinct and laconic in the extreme. “During fore noon saw two Schwartzkopf automobile torpedoes floating in water. In attempting to pull them up one sank, but secured the other and took it on board. It had war head and nose on.”<sup>43</sup> (For the 4 June 1898 log of the *Porter*, see figure 8.) Lt. Fremont, in an article published the following November, treated the incident with somewhat more detail:

These torpedoes were still extremely dangerous. Any ship striking the forward end of one would have fared exactly as if the torpedo had run into her. It was therefore necessary either to destroy or recover these machines. Recovery was preferable, of course, but extremely dangerous in the heavy sea running, unless they could be rendered harmless by the removal of the firing pin or war-nose. There was a gallant attempt to do this by a young officer [Gillis] attached to the *Porter*, who jumped overboard and wrestled with the torpedo single-handed, while

LOG of U. S. Torpedo Boat

"Porter"

J. B. Fricourt, Lieut.

U. S. N., Comd'g.

Date: *Saturday, June 4, 1898.*

H.	K.	COURSE	WIND	WEATHER	REMARKS
1					<p><i>Spoke several vessels of squadron with messages from commander in chief. During forenoon saw two Schwatze Kopf anti-submarine torpedoes floating in water. I attempted to pick them up one Sunday, but secured the other and took it on board. It had not been used here on.</i></p>
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8			S.E.	f.c.	
9					
10					
11			S.E.	f.c.	
12					
1					<p style="text-align: center;">DYNAMO.</p> <p><i>Running from midnight to 6 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to midnight.</i></p>
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8			East	f.c.	
9					
10					
11					
12					

COAL AT NOON: On hand, *31* tons; expended during preceding 24 hours, *8* tons. Distance run *30* miles.

POSITION AT NOON: *Off Santiago de Cuba - 2000 yds.*

EXAMINED and found to be correct.

*J. B. Fricourt*, U. S. N. Navigator

8A. Log of U.S. Torpedo Boat Porter for 4 June 1898.

Saturday, June 4, 1898.

HER.

REMARKS.

Spoke several vessels of Squadron with messages from commander-in-chief.

During forenoon saw two Scherzer Kopf auto-mobile torpedoes floating in water. In

attempting to pick them up one sunk, but secured the other and took it on board.

It had not been used and was on.

DYNAMO.

Running from midnight to 6 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to midnight.

; expended during preceding 24 hours, 8 tons. Distance run 3.0 miles

ago to Costa Rica by

and to be correct.

J. G. Lillie, Ensign, U. S. N. Navigator.



9. Drawing by [Henry] Reuterdahl (1871–1925), in J[ohn] C. Fremont, “Torpedo Boat Service,” *Harper’s New Monthly* 97.582 (November 1898), p. 836.

trying to unscrew the firing pin. One of these torpedoes was lost during these operations, sinking despite all efforts to recover it. The other was taken on board the *Porter*, where it remained an object of curiosity to all until, on our arrival at New York, it was transferred to the torpedo depot at Newport.<sup>44</sup> [See figure 9 for a Henry Reuterdahl drawing of Gillis defusing the torpedo.]

The incident quickly made the rounds among the blockading ships and, following the war, was retold in several books and magazines. One of these even contained full-page artist’s renderings that depicted Gillis grappling with the torpedo in heavy seas.<sup>45</sup> (See figure 10.) Another, in the best tradition of pulp novels of that era, provided this highly embellished description:

Gillis clutched the rail firmly and prepared to make the jump. “Don’t do it, Gillis; she’s got her war nose on!” exclaimed the Captain, reaching for his ensign.

“I’ll fix that, sir,” replied Gillis, leaping into the sea before his superior officer could restrain him.<sup>46</sup>

The piece continues in equally hyperbolic detail, ending finally with this:

No more daring deed has been done during the war, and Rear Admiral Gillis (retired), of the United States Navy, who is the father of the boy and resides in Delhi, N.Y., can well be proud of the youth. He was graduated at Annapolis from New York and went to the front to serve his country and his flag at any cost.

Captain Fremont sums Gillis up in the few words: “He has nothing in his composition but nerve.” The war is surely building up a new generation of heroes, and Ensign Irving [sic] Van Gordon [sic] Gillis stands in the front rank.<sup>47</sup>

Following the torpedo-recovery incident, the *Porter* was directed to an obscure bay where it participated in providing covering fire for marines who had established a beachhead at the village of Guantanamo. She was still there when word came that Admiral Cervera was attempting to run the blockade. Fremont quickly made for Santiago but arrived too late. The Spanish fleet had been intercepted by the U.S. blockading force and destroyed. The war was all but over.

On 19 July 1898 the *Porter* arrived in New York and began an extended period of upkeep and repair. The next day a *New York Times* reporter came aboard and interviewed Gillis, who was acting officer-in-charge. With obvious pride in his ship and his own role as chief engineer, Gillis stated,

[T]he *Porter* has proved herself in every emergency and in all weathers a staunch, swift, and at all times a capable boat. Our water-tube boilers have given us our speed whenever wanted, but we come up here now for a little professional attention—much less, however, than might be expected when a vessel has been so long in service without docking or overhauling.<sup>48</sup>

Gillis’s assessment notwithstanding, a closer inspection of the *Porter* revealed a need for an extreme overhaul of her engineering plant. The Brooklyn Navy Yard had higher priorities with many of the fleet’s capital



*"The brave young officer had plunged into the shark-infested sea."*



*"A few sturdy strokes, and Gillis reached the side of the torpedo."*

- 10A-C. Sequence of drawings by F. W. Burton of I. V. Gillis's 4 June 1898 retrieval of a torpedo, in W. B. Northrop, "Capturing a Plunging Torpedo," *English Illustrated Magazine* 47 (February 1907), pp. 531-533.

ships also in need of repairs resulting from extended operations during the war. As a result it was decided to place the *Porter* out of commission while she awaited her turn. Gillis was granted a short, week's leave in August before receiving orders to once again report to the *Texas*, which was also at the navy yard undergoing repairs.

"FROM COUPLER-FLANGE TO SPINDLE-GUIDE  
I SEE THY HAND, O GOD."<sup>49</sup>

Returning from a week's leave in early August 1898, Gillis once again reported for duty aboard the *Texas*, which was moored at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Like the *Porter*, the *Texas* had also just returned from Cuba where she had seen much action and received considerable battle damage at Santiago. If Gillis had any doubts about returning to the *Texas*, they were quickly dispelled. The ship, having acquitted itself well in the war had, at last, shed its bad luck image. At the same time Gillis was preparing to report back aboard the *Texas*, the *New York Times* recorded the following on 2 August:

The *Texas* looking every inch the fighting machine that she is, lay at the cob dock in the Brooklyn Navy Yard yesterday, almost over the spot where she sank in the soft mud not many months ago and brought discredit on herself. But if there were any who were ashamed of her and had called the old ship a "hoo-doo," they were not in evidence. There wasn't a man in all her crew yesterday who wasn't proud of her, proud of her sons, her bent deck plates, and her grimy look.<sup>50</sup>

The *Texas* also no longer held status as a first-class battleship. The U.S. Navy's construction program, aided and abetted by a sympathetic Congress, had moved into high gear by the late 1890s. At the close of the Spanish-American War the navy listed in its inventory eight new, first-class battleships that now formed the core of the first U.S. fleet. Meanwhile, many new cruisers, and a miscellany of other smaller combatants had also been added. Even more ships had been approved for construction and would join the fleet in the next several years. The *Texas*, now labeled a second-class battleship, also had a new commanding officer,

Captain Charles D. Sigsbee, who had graduated from the Naval Academy in 1863. Sigsbee had had the misfortune to have been the commanding officer of the *Maine* when it exploded in Havana Harbor in February 1898. Surviving, he had to endure a difficult Court of Inquiry following the incident that left his reputation tarnished when it was determined that he had not taken adequate precautions to protect his ship.

In the immediate post-Spanish-American War period, a major deficiency within the expanding navy was a lack of qualified officer engineers. In order to make up for the shortage, commanding officers had to assign line officers to engineering duties, a move that did not always produce the best of results. Many simply did not have the expertise to operate machinery, diagnose or troubleshoot problems, or understand how to maintain or improvise repairs of the increasingly complicated engineering systems. The *Texas* was no exception. Captain Sigsbee, taking note of Gillis's mathematical and technical talents, assigned him to stand engine-room watches.

Gillis did not seem to mind being a "greaser." He easily grasped the concept of steam propulsion and electricity and was evidently comfortable with getting his hands dirty working on the array of auxiliary machinery, boilers, condensers, and generators that were necessary to drive a ship through the water. He very much epitomized the maxim coined by Theodore Roosevelt several years earlier when he was assistant secretary of the navy, "Every officer on a modern warship has to be a fighting engineer."<sup>51</sup>

Following a three-month repair and upkeep period, the *Texas* resumed its routine duty with the North Atlantic Squadron. The next nine months proved uneventful, until Gillis received orders in July 1899 to report for examination for promotion. On 1 August 1899 he received word that he had passed and was promoted to lieutenant junior grade. He also received orders to proceed home to await reassignment. In Irvin's final report of fitness, Captain Sigsbee rated Gillis excellent in all categories and stated that he was "a highly intelligent, well-equipped and zealous officer of all round aptitude, including engineer's duties." Sigsbee also added that he was "glad to have him" under his command and that he considered Gillis "very fit" to be entrusted with hazardous and important independent duties.<sup>52</sup>

“AND THE *MAINE* HAS BEEN REMEMBERED IN THE GOOD,  
OLD-FASHIONED WAY”<sup>53</sup>

On 11 September 1899 Gillis received word that he was to become the commanding officer of the *Porter*, which was scheduled to be recommissioned the following month. In the interim he was to proceed to the torpedo station, Newport, Rhode Island, for a two-week concentrated weapons-training program on the latest torpedo developments, including propulsion, guidance, and power-generation systems.

At the end of the refresher training period, the torpedo-boat flotilla, now at Newport had been alerted to proceed to New York City on 26 September to take part in the huge naval review to honor George Dewey and the other participants of the Spanish-American War. Gillis was given the high honor of commanding the *Winslow*, which had been repaired following its distinguished action in Cárdenas Harbor in May 1898. The *New York Times* had highlighted the fact that the *Winslow* would have a venerable place in the naval review, stating on 30 August that “the gathering of representatives of the navy will be the largest ever seen in the waters surrounding New York. Prominent among men will be the plucky little torpedo boat *Winslow*, on which the first blood shed in the Spanish-American War was spilled.”<sup>54</sup>

On 29 September the five-boat flotilla slowly moved in column up the Hudson River alongside several dozen battleships, cruisers and gunboats. The main attraction, however, was the hero of Manila, Admiral George Dewey, embarked aboard the cruiser, *Olympia*, which steamed proudly at the head of the column of gleaming white and buff vessels extending from 110th Street to 69th Street. The next day a massive parade of thirty-five thousand soldiers and sailors from the ships marched down Fifth Avenue to the site of the proposed Dewey Arch on 23rd Street. Several hundred thousand people, waving signs proclaiming “Dewey for President,” turned out greeting the admiral. Alongside Dewey and receiving equal adulation was Theodore Roosevelt, beaming proudly before another sea of signs and cheers that honored “Teddy, the Rough Rider.” Meanwhile, all of the naval officers and squadron commanders who had commanded the major warships, as well as senior army officers who had engaged the Spanish, were driven along the parade route in a procession

of more than forty horse-drawn carriages. The day soon dissolved into a round of patriotic speeches and songs constantly interrupted by loud hurrahs and applause. The pageantry, parades, and banquets continued for nearly two weeks, gratefully concluding for the worn-out participants in mid-October.

“LIEUTENANT I. V. GILLIS READ HIS ORDERS AND  
ASSUMED COMMAND.”<sup>55</sup>

Following the naval review Gillis remained in New York until taking command of the *Porter* on 10 October 1899. Without doubt this was a singular achievement for the twenty-four year old Gillis. The ceremony was in fact a double one, for the *Porter* was also officially recommissioned at the same time. The *Porter's* log entry, as approved by its new captain, offers an interesting contrast between the sublimity of the event and the challenge of command that lay ahead:

Tues., 10 October 1899, Navy Yard, NY

At 3:05 p.m. this vessel was placed in commission, and the ensign and pennant hoisted by Captain Frank Wildes, U.S. Navy, representing the commandant (of the New York, Navy Yard), Rear Admiral John W. Philip. The crew was assembled, and Lt. I. V. Gillis read his orders and assumed command.

Following punishments assigned:

J. M. McAlevy (oiler), W. J. Powell (oiler), G. H. Reintarg (FIC)  
(All) drunk and unfit for duty on board ship. (Assigned) five-nights confinement in double irons.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike his previous tour of the *Porter* with Lt. Fremont, Gillis was the only officer aboard, and of the twenty-six enlisted men in the crew, twenty were older than he. A variety of languages and accents was in evidence for nearly half the crewmen were first generation immigrants representing England (one), Ireland (five), Germany (two), Norway (one), Denmark (one), and Sweden (one). Gillis, of course, was the only person aboard who had previously served on the *Porter* and was intimately familiar with its engineering and weapon-system idiosyncrasies.

It was fortunate that Gillis had a strong engineering bent because during the year he commanded the *Porter*, he probably spent as much time

below deck in the engineering spaces as he did topside. What seemed to be an endless number of minor repairs and system failures required constant attention. In fact, the *Porter's* log resembles more an engineering record than a traditional deck log. For example, in the summer of 1900 the following entry, signed off by Gillis, in part reads as follows:

Steam on "b" boiler. Cleaned furnaces and ash pans of all boilers. Renewed joints in main feed line over "B" boiler and two joints in superheater feed pipe in after engine room; remade front joints near "b" blower engine. Overhauling crank pin and crosshead brasses of starboard main engine.<sup>57</sup>

When a nonengineering item did appear in the log, it often was in reference to some disciplinary matter. In July 1900 while in Newport, Rhode Island, the log makes note that a certain W. P. Bell "returned on board 4 hours overtime," and Gillis wasted little time meting out a severe punishment. He reduced the offender to 4<sup>th</sup> Class.<sup>58</sup>

Gillis's tour as commanding officer of the *Porter* was, for the most part, uneventful as he followed a routine operating-schedule for the torpedo-boat flotilla. The boats generally headed south for the winter to Norfolk, Charleston, or Key West where they conducted periodic maneuvers and trained naval militiamen. In early spring they would rendezvous at Annapolis and exercise in the Chesapeake Bay. The *Porter* did dock in Annapolis where naval midshipmen were introduced to the various weapon and engineering systems aboard the ship. Some training was again conducted for local naval militiamen. From Annapolis the ships would head to New York where they would undergo repairs and upkeep at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

The highlight of the year occurred in early summer when the boats returned to their home base at the Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island. In 1900 Newport was at the forefront of the Gilded Age, and many famous mansions already lined Bellevue Avenue. In fact, the officers and men of the flotilla were well known about Newport and often attracted much attention when they conducted high-speed runs in Narragansett Bag for the benefit of people like the Vanderbilts, Whitneys, Astors, and Belmonts. These operations also had an official sanction since Admiral Dewey also was in residence at Newport and was a popular figure at various supper parties and banquets hosted by Newport's elite.

Gillis and his fellow commanding officers also enjoyed participating in various festivities such as yacht racing and carnivals sponsored by the wealthy members of the “cottage colony.” The Torpedo Station and the torpedo-boat captains also responded in kind by sponsoring “at home” dances for many of Newport’s more influential citizens. One newspaper article described these events as “delightful entertainments” that had become a popular feature of the Newport social scene.<sup>59</sup> Sometimes the social whirl required the torpedo boats to ferry various government dignitaries or senior navy officers about Narragansett Bay. On 5 September 1900 Gillis had the honor of welcoming Admiral Dewey and his wife aboard the *Porter*. His assignment was to convey them from their cottage at Narragansett to Newport, where the following day the admiral was to preside over the navy’s newly created General Board.<sup>60</sup>

On the operational side Gillis also performed duties as an instructor, both at the Naval War College and the Torpedo Station, on the subject of torpedo operations and tactics. His superior, Commander Newton E. Mason, who headed the Torpedo Station, rated him highly as an instructor, commenting in Gillis’ Report of Fitness that he delivered a “very fine performance.”<sup>61</sup> Mason went on to become a rear admiral and subsequently headed the navy’s important Bureau of Ordnance.

One further event in the fall of 1900 occupied the torpedo-boat commanders. A major naval war game had been planned for the last week in September and would involve many major units of the North Atlantic Squadron as well as the several army forts that guarded the entrance to Narragansett Bay. The basic idea behind the war game was to test the readiness of Newport to defend against a large hostile fleet attempting to force an entry at night into the bay, destroy the various defending units, and then support the landing of soldiers and marines ashore. Though never stated, the hostile force plainly represented the British Royal Navy. Interestingly, the navy’s only operational submarine, the *Holland*, would be part of the defending fleet. The entire torpedo-boat flotilla, comprised of six boats, was assigned to the hostile force. The war game proved to be a bust for Gillis and the *Porter*. His assignment was to enter Narragansett Bay via the west passage while avoiding detection by the spot lights from Fort Greble on Dutch Island. In an audacious maneuver, Gillis attempted to make a slow-speed approach well inside the main channel in the shallow waters on the island’s western shore. However,

the *Porter*, which drew only four feet of water, ran aground on the mud flats and was detected. With no apparent damage to the ship, Gillis freed the *Porter* within several minutes but was declared “out-of-action” by the umpires and forced to return to the Torpedo Station.<sup>62</sup>

Less than eight weeks after the war game, Gillis received new orders to the gun boat *Annapolis*, which was at Norfolk preparing for an extended deployment to the Far East. He was to be the ship’s navigator. Cdr. Mason’s final fitness report on Gillis was again most complimentary as he rated the young officer “excellent” in all categories.”<sup>63</sup>

#### NOTES

*Editor’s note: Bringing the first chapter of Bruce Swanson’s manuscript on Irvin Van Gorder Gillis to print required this editor’s relying on many people to whom she extends her heartfelt thanks. Foremost among these is RoseAnn Swanson, Bruce’s widow, Navy-wife extraordinaire, and ever-inventive entrepreneur, whose grace, verve, and vocal talents demonstrated throughout her life continue undeterred despite the deep sadness of losing her beloved mate of forty-seven years. Meghan A. Snyder, the second of RoseAnn and Bruce’s four children, saw to it that Bruce’s long-hand manuscript for the first chapter of his book was typed and available for him to read when he returned home from the hospital for his last brief stay. Meghan later sent me the electronic file for this chapter for publication.*

*Bonnie Gillis Waters, a fifth-generation descendant of Robert Gillis and Robert’s first wife and Irvin Van Gorder Gillis’s second cousin twice removed (I. V. Gillis was a third-generation descendant of Robert Gillis and Robert’s second wife), lives on her great-great-great grandfather’s property in upstate New York and is the Gillis family archivist and genealogist. Bruce and Bonnie spoke and wrote frequently exchanging information about I. V. Gillis, and Bonnie provided several family photographs that appear in this issue of the journal.*

*Dorthea V. Abbott, Librarian of the Special Collections and Archives Division of the Nimitz Library at the U.S. Naval College, Annapolis, sent photocopies of materials related to I. V. Gillis held in that collection. Head of the Naval Historical Collection, Evelyn M. Cherpak, and Reference Librarian, Alice K. Juda, at the Naval War College, in Newport, Rhode Island, supplied photocopies of Gillis-related items in the college’s collection. Laura Waayers, Historical Services Manager, of the Naval Historical Society, provided five high-quality images of I. V. Gillis and of his father held in this vast collection of public-domain, navy-related materials.*

1. The chronology of James Henry Gillis’s naval service is contained in U.S. Navy, Record of Officers, Record Group 24, National Archives, Washington, DC.
2. A description of the *Michigan*’s patrol duties of the Great Lakes and its lay up during winter quarters is taken from “Cutters on the Lakes,” *New York Times*, 13 February 1899, p. 9.
3. Another photograph of James Henry Gillis, I. V. Gillis’s father, probably also taken in the late 1890s, may be found in Lewis Randolph Hamersly, *Records of Living Officers of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: L. R. Hamersly Co., 1902). The Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, DC, preserves a

copy of this photograph as record NH78450 and notes that James Henry Gillis was appointed to the Navy on 12 October 1848 and retired in May 1893.

4. For information on the Brooklyn Naval Yard, see <http://www.officersrow.org/history.htm>. Accessed August 2007. See also *1939 WPA Guide to New York City* in [http://www.brooklyn.net/neighborhoods/navy\\_yard\\_01.html](http://www.brooklyn.net/neighborhoods/navy_yard_01.html); and “The National Navy Yards,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1885, p. 14.
5. “Boys in Naval Service,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1882, p. 3.
6. See Russel H. Bastert, “A New Approach to the Origins of Blaine’s Pan American Policy,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 39.3 (August 1959), pp. 375–412. For more on James H. Gillis, see Commodore [James H.] Gillis, “My First Cruise,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), 30 July 1893, p. 12. See also U.S. Navy, Record of Officers (James Henry Gillis), Record Group 24, National Archives; Obituary of Rear Admiral James H. Gillis, U.S.N., Retired,” *Army and Navy Journal*, 11 December 1910, unpaginated; and Obituary of Commodore James Henry Gillis, *New York Times*, 8 December 1910, p. 13. See also Lewis R. Hamersly, ed., *Who’s Who in Pennsylvania* (New York: L. R. Hamersly Company, 1904), p. 263; and John McIntosh Kell, *Recollections of a Naval Life* (Washington, DC: The Neale Company, 1900), pp. 97–98, 102, and 108.

On James Henry Gillis’s service in South American waters, see E. G. Squier, “The Great South American Earthquakes of 1868,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 38.227 (April 1869), pp. 603–624. See also reports of the USS *Powhatan* and USS *Wateree* concerning the earthquake and tidal wave of 13 August 1868 at Arica, Peru, available at <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/powhatan.htm>.

7. In the possession of Irvin Gillis Murray (an artist who goes by Gil Murray), a grandson of I. V. Gillis’s sister Caroline, is a sword that he reports once belonged to James H. Gillis, possibly the sword mentioned here. Irvin Gillis Murray, telephone conversation with the editor, 9 July 2009.
8. All basic family genealogical information is from various decennial U.S. census reports available at Ancestry.com.
9. For more information on James Lyle Gillis, see the “The Late James L. Gillis, The Patriarch of Elk County,” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, 30 July 1881 and the *Philadelphia Times*, 29 July 1881. Extracts of the *Pittsburgh Daily Post* article by Henry Souther were reprinted in Elk County Historical Society, *The Elk Horn* (Summer 1968 and Fall 1968). See also William James McKnight, M.D., *A Pioneer Outline History of Northwestern Pennsylvania, 1780–1850* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipincott, 1905), pp. 497–508 and 718–723 for Souther’s tribute in its entirety; *History of the Counties of McKean, Elk, Cameron, and Potter, Penna., with Biographical Sketches* (Chicago: J. H. Beers, 1890), p. 727; and *Portrait and Biographical Album, Henry County, Iowa* (Chicago: Acme Publishing Company, 1888), pp. 202–205. This last source provides the following description: “After taking up his residence in Mt. Pleasant, Judge Gillis became one of the noted men of the young city. Of a lofty and stately carriage, his dignified form was noticeable whenever he appeared upon the streets. His stirring and eventful life had made him familiar with all classes of society, and his urbanity endeared him alike to all.”

10. Ginger M. Doyel, "Plebe Summer 1904," <http://usna.com/History/PlebeSummer1904/1/1.htm>. This article offers a glimpse into the content of examinations given to Naval Academy students in that era. This article appeared in print as follows: "Plebe Summer 1904," *Shipmate* (July/August 2004), pp. 32–35. The website is open only to graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy. Ginger Doyel kindly supplied information about its publication in the print version of the USNA alumni magazine.
11. For more on the selecting and training of naval cadets, see "Selecting Naval Candidates," *New York Times*, 19 October 1890, p. 10. The method for selecting naval candidates differed between northern and southern states where the latter conducted no competitive examinations. This article indicates that on one occasion a southern U.S. Representative had "thundered out" on the floor of the House of Representatives, "We in the South, Sir, select our men for West Point and Annapolis as we would pick out blooded stock for the race course." See also, "Train Naval Cadets," *New York Times*, 18 September 1892, p. 10.
12. John Paul Jones statement, ca. 1777, quoted in Walter G. Richardson, ensign, U.S. Navy, "Life and Study at the Naval Academy," *The New England Magazine* 14.3 (May 1893), p. 305.
13. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act 4, Scene 3. Also quoted in Lieutenant J. D. Jerrald Kelly, U.S. Navy, "The United States Naval Academy," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 77.458 (July 1888), p. 173.
14. *Lucky Bag* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Academy, 1894), p. 146. The definition of "splint" is from Benjamin E. Smith, ed., *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* (New York: The Century Company, 1909), p. 1256.
15. *Record of Naval Cadets, Class 1894*. Special Collections, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland.
16. *Lucky Bag*, 1894, pp. 66–68.
17. *Record of Class Appointed in 1890*, Special Collections, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy. See also Richardson, "Life and Study at the Naval Academy," p. 312.
18. "Commadore Gillis's Wife Critically Ill," *Washington Post*, 2 August 1893, p. 1; and "Mrs. Gillis is Dead," *Washington Post*, 3 August 1893, p. 1.
19. U.S. Navy, Record of Officers, RG 24, National Archives.
20. *Record of Class Appointed in 1890*, Special Collections, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy. "Class of '94, Naval Academy: About the Men Who Are To Be Graduated," *New York Times*, 4 June 1893, p. 2.
21. Gerald E. Wheeler, *Admiral William Veazie Pratt, U.S. Navy* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1974), p. 12.
22. A full eyewitness accounting of the incident is contained in Robley D. Evans, *A Sailor's Log* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1908), ch. 21–23.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 385.
25. Much of the detail on whom Evans knew is contained in various sections of Evan's own memoirs, *A Sailor's Log*, *ibid.*, and *An Admiral's Log* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1910).
26. Wheeler, *Admiral William Veazie Pratt, U.S. Navy*, p. 15.
27. Evans, *A Sailor's Log*, pp. 391–392.

28. *Ibid.*, ch. 30. See also “Making Ready for Kiel,” *New York Times*, 29 April 1895, p. 8.
29. Evans, *A Sailor’s Log*, pp. 384–386.
30. Record of Officers, 1829–1924, Naval Academy, roll 7, vols. 12 and 13, Irvin Van Gorder Gillis. See also Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People’s Navy* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 209.
31. See text this section and the text at note 50 below for the source of this reference.
32. See Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1911), *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890).
33. Theodore Roosevelt (Police Commissioner of New York City) to Henry Cabot Lodge (U.S. Senator from New York), December 1895, in Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit: A Study of Our War with Spain* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), p. 38.
34. “Report on the Fitness of Officers,” Form B, Ensign I. V. Gillis, attached to the U.S. Battleship *Texas*, National Archives. Captain Henry Glass filed this report for the period 1 January–31 March 1897 and described Gillis’s duties as “Captain’s aide and signal officer entire period,” ranking him “excellent” in five categories and “good” with respect to his health. Glass further specified that Gillis “was frequently put in charge of the deck at sea and in port; duty performed excellently” and that he “translates French and Spanish.”
35. “Repairs to the *Texas*; Twenty of Her Crew Deserted While She Was in Dry Dock,” *New York Times*, 30 September 1897, p. 12.
36. [Missing from similar materials that the author gathered is the report on fitness, which should be dated around August 1897 and signed by Captain Glass.]
37. This phrase describing Gillis’s daring in retrieving a torpedo may be found in James Rankin Young and J. Hampton Moore, *History of Our War with Spain* ([Philadelphia, Pennsylvania], [National Publishing Company], [1898]), pp. 597–599, esp. p. 599. In the Young and Moore book, Gillis’s name is misspelled as Irving Van Gordon Gillis. For this phrase, worded somewhat differently in a quotation attributed to Captain [John Charles] Fremont, see [James William Buel], “The Courageous Act of Ensign Gillis,” *Hero Tales of the American Soldier and Sailor as Told by the Heroes Themselves and Their Comrades* (Philadelphia: Century Manufacturing Company, 1899), p. 302.
38. For general information on the development of torpedo boats and their weaponry, see Richard V. Simpson, *Building the Mosquito Fleet: The U.S. Navy’s First Torpedo Boats* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2001). Specific reference to the *Porter* may be found on pp. 62–73, 90–92, 99–107, 134, and elsewhere throughout the text. Numerous photographs of this boat, one of the largest torpedo boats in the U.S. fleet, are included. Page 106 shows the Frank Cresson Schell drawing of Gillis’s capture of a torpedo, and page 107 reproduces the Henry Reuter dahl drawing of the same event from John C. Fremont, “Torpedo-Boat Service,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 97.582 (November 1898), pp. 829–837, esp. 837. Captions for both these drawings misspell Gillis’s name as Irving V. Gillis.

39. "Report on the Fitness of Officers," for Ensign I. V. Gillis, attached to the USS *Porter*, for 23 September 1897 to 31 December 1897, and signed by Lieutenant Commander J. C. Fremont. In another report, Fremont identified Gillis's duties as that of executive and engineer and commented, "Duties on the *Porter* were extremely trying and were well performed by this officer." See "Report on the Fitness of Officers," for Ensign I. V. Gillis, attached to the USS *Porter*, for 1 January 1898 to 15 August 1898, and signed by Lieutenant Commander J. C. Fremont.
  40. [Sylvester H. Scovel], "Brave *World* Correspondent May Be Killed or Captured," *New York World*, 28 April 1898. This article is also quoted in Darien Elizabeth Andreu, "Sylvester H. Scovel, Journalist, and the Spanish-American War" (PH.D. diss., Florida State University, 2003), pp. 270–271.
  41. John C. Fremont, "Torpedo-Boat Service," illus. by Henry Reuterdaahl, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 97.582 (November 1898), p. 832.
  42. *Ibid.*, pp. 830–832. For a long narrative of this near catastrophe between the *Porter* and the *New York*, see James Rankin Young and J. Hampton Moore, *Reminiscences and Thrilling Stories of the War by Returned Heroes* (Philadelphia: J. H. Moore, 1899), pp. 275–283.
  43. See "Log of U.S. Torpedo Boat *Porter*," J. C. Fremont, Lieut., USN, Commanding, Saturday, 4 June 1898, signed by Lt. I. V. Gillis. National Archives, ARC ID 581208.
  44. John C. Fremont, "Torpedo-Boat Service," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 97.582 (November 1898), pp. 829–837, esp. p. 837. The text of the account of the retrieval of the torpedo does not mention Gillis by name, though the caption to a drawing by Reuterdaahl on p. 836 reads, "Ensign Gillis attempting to unscrew the war-nose on a Spanish torpedo."
  45. W. B. Northrop, "Capturing a Plunging Torpedo," illus. by F. W. Burton, *English Illustrated Magazine* 47 (February 1907), p. 533. Northrop misspells Irvin Van Gorder Gillis's name as *Irving Van Gordon* Gillis (p. 531) and states his age as twenty-seven instead of the actual twenty-four years of age (p. 534).
- Two modern publications reproduce a drawing, attributed to F[rank] Cresson Schell (1857–1942), of Gillis's capture of the torpedo. Both books incorrectly write the artist's name as F[rank] *Cressan* Schell. See Lionel D. Wyld, *The Navy in Newport* (Dover, New Hampshire: Arcadia Publishing, 1997), p. 37, where the caption reads, ". . . the heroic capture of an armed Schwartzkopf torpedo by Ensign Gillis of the *Porter* during the Spanish-American War." Wyld offers no source for this drawing. See also, Richard V. Simpson, *Building the Mosquito Fleet*, pp. 105–107, esp. p. 106, cited first in note 37 above. The latter work offers a brief summary of the various accounts of Gillis's recovery of the torpedo and notes that the missile is held in the collection of the Naval War College Museum, Newport, Rhode Island.
46. James Rankin Young, *History of Our War with Spain*, p. 598.
  47. *Ibid.*, p. 599.
  48. "The *Porter* at the Navy Yard: She Comes Here for Overhauling and Repairs—Ensign Gillis Talks of Her Experiences," *New York Times*, 20 July 1898, p. 5.
  49. Rudyard Kipling, "M'Andrew's Hymn," *Rudyard Kipling's Verse, Inclusive Edition*

- 1885–1918 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1919), pp. 137–145.
50. “Texas Tars Our Guests; Cigar Stores and Restaurants Will Supply Their Wants and Will Accept No Pay; Repairs Begun on the Ship; No One on Board Knows Whether She Will Be Here Five Days or a Month—Into the Dry Dock To-day,” *New York Times*, 2 August 1898, p. 12.
  51. Roosevelt as assistant secretary of the navy. Quoted by Admiral George Melville, engineer in chief of the U.S. Navy. See “Engineers in the Navy; Admiral Melville Says They Are Decreasing in Number—Changes Needed,” *New York Times*, Wednesday, 18 October 1901, p. 8.
  52. “Report on the Fitness of Officers,” Form B, Lieutenant Junior Grade I. V. Gillis, attached to the USS *Texas*, National Archives. Captain C. D. Sigsbee filed this report for the period 1 July–22 August 1899.
  53. Unattributed, “Our Hero,” *Poems of Dewey and The Philippines*, in Joseph L. Stickney, *Admiral Dewey at Manila and the Complete Story of The Philippines: Life and Glorious Deeds of Admiral George Dewey* (Chicago: Imperial Publishing Company, 1899), p. 373.
  54. “The Dewey Naval Parade; Greatest Marine Pageant in the History of the City to Take Place,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1898, p. 4.
  55. “Log of U.S. Torpedo Boat *Porter*,” Lieut. I. V. Gillis, USN, Commanding, Tuesday, 10 October 1899.
  56. *Ibid.*
  57. “Log of U.S. Torpedo Boat *Porter*,” Lieut. I. V. Gillis, USN, Commanding, Tuesday, 10 July 1900.
  58. “Log of U.S. Torpedo Boat *Porter*,” Lieut. I. V. Gillis, USN, Commanding, Monday, 2 July 1900.
  59. “The News of Newport,” *New York Times*, 29 June 1900, p. 7.
  60. “Log of U.S. Torpedo Boat *Porter*,” Lieut. I. V. Gillis, USN, Commanding, Wednesday, 5 September 1900.
  61. See “Report on the Fitness of Officers,” Form A, Lieutenant I. V. Gillis, commanding the *Porter* at Naval Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island, filed by Commander N[ewton] E. Mason for the period 3 May–30 June 1899.
  62. See “Naval Attack on Newport,” *New York Times*, 25 September 1900; “Naval Manoeuvres End,” *New York Times*, 26 September 1900; and “The Newport Manoeuvres,” *New York Times*, 27 September 1900.
  63. See “Report on the Fitness of Officers,” Form A, Lieutenant I. V. Gillis, commanding the *Porter* at Naval Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island, filed by Commander N[ewton] E. Mason for the period 1 July–29 September 1900.