

“The Hearst Stolen Photos Caper”

I think these boys were working for the common purpose of securing the films for the Examiner . . . It was their intention to get them in a perfectly honest way. Then I think, a few minutes later, they reached their last resort and decided to get them any way they could.

--Justice Milton Thorp, San Diego, April 30, 1908

In the spring of 1908, three young reporters from William Randolph Hearst’s Los Angeles *Examiner* stood trial in San Diego for the theft of photographs documenting the arrival of the U.S. Navy’s “Great White Fleet.” It was a crime that puzzled and amused, and revealed the ferocity of competitive newspaper reporting in the era of “yellow journalism.”

President Theodore Roosevelt’s celebrated mission to show the flag and display the might of U.S. naval power had all of southern California excited in the spring of 1908. As the sixteen battleships steamed up the west coast of Mexico toward California, the newspapers eagerly reported every piece of news they could acquire.

On March 12 the fleet entered Magdalena Bay, about 200 miles north of the tip of Baja California. For the next three weeks the secluded bay would shelter the fleet for gunnery practice. “All day long and half the night, the big guns boomed on the target ranges, the great hissing shells tore out across smooth unruffled waters of the bay,” recalled a gunnery officer.

It was a spectacle the newspapers were eager to describe. They got their chance when San Diego photographer Herbert R. Fitch returned from Baja with photographs. On March 17 the pictures appeared in Los Angeles *Examiner*—the first images southern Californians would see of the great fleet in action.

But Hearst’s newspapermen would not celebrate their scoop for long. The next day their bitter rival, the *Los Angeles Times*, gleefully announced that the police had arrested two Hearst reporters. The Fitch photographs, it seemed, had been stolen.

The *Times* described how “special assignment men” from the *Examiner*, William Beard and W. R. Heustis, had been ordered to San Diego to get warship pictures and “not to come back without them.” The two reporters had visited the Fitch studio and tried to buy photographs of the fleet.

When Fitch refused to sell, the reporters departed but allegedly returned that night, broke into the closed studio and took several negatives. They then hurried back to Los Angeles by train, arriving in time for the newspaper to print the photographs the next day. “The entire incident,” the *Times* opined, was an example of “the famous ‘thug’ journalism practiced by Mr. Hearst.”



William Randolph Hearst

Fitch reported the thefts the next morning and the *Examiner* newsmen were quickly arrested in Los Angeles. In the custody of a San Diego police officer, Beard and Heustis were returned to San Diego and jailed. The alleged burglars were released the next day on \$6000 bail, but not before they were joined by a third *Examiner* reporter.

San Diego newspapers broke the story that two days after the burglary, newsman W. H. Talbot visited Fitch to return the purloined negatives. According to the San Diego *Sun*, Talbot had also “begged very eloquently and earnestly, that Mr. Fitch allow Beard to go free as he was young man did not do anything real serious.” Fitch bluntly told Talbot the matter was in the hands of the attorneys. He then called the police who took Talbot into custody for possible charges as an accessory.

But apparently returning the photographs was not the only job on Talbot’s San Diego agenda. When the police allowed Talbot to consult privately with an attorney, the reporter jumped through an office window and climbed down the fire escape. He then made his way to the harbor and tried to board a ship headed out to sea enroute to Magdalena Bay. A police launch caught up with Talbot and returned him to a jail cell to join Beard and Heustis.

The three Hearst reporters went on trial in San Diego on April 20. A crowded courtroom listened intently as Herbert Fitch and his assistant described the late afternoon visit of the reporters to the studio at 1035 6th Street. The men had arrived when “Fitch was in the developing room hanging up his Magdalena films, which act was observed by Beard.” But when the reporter asked Fitch if he had photographs of the fleet he was willing to sell, the answer was no.

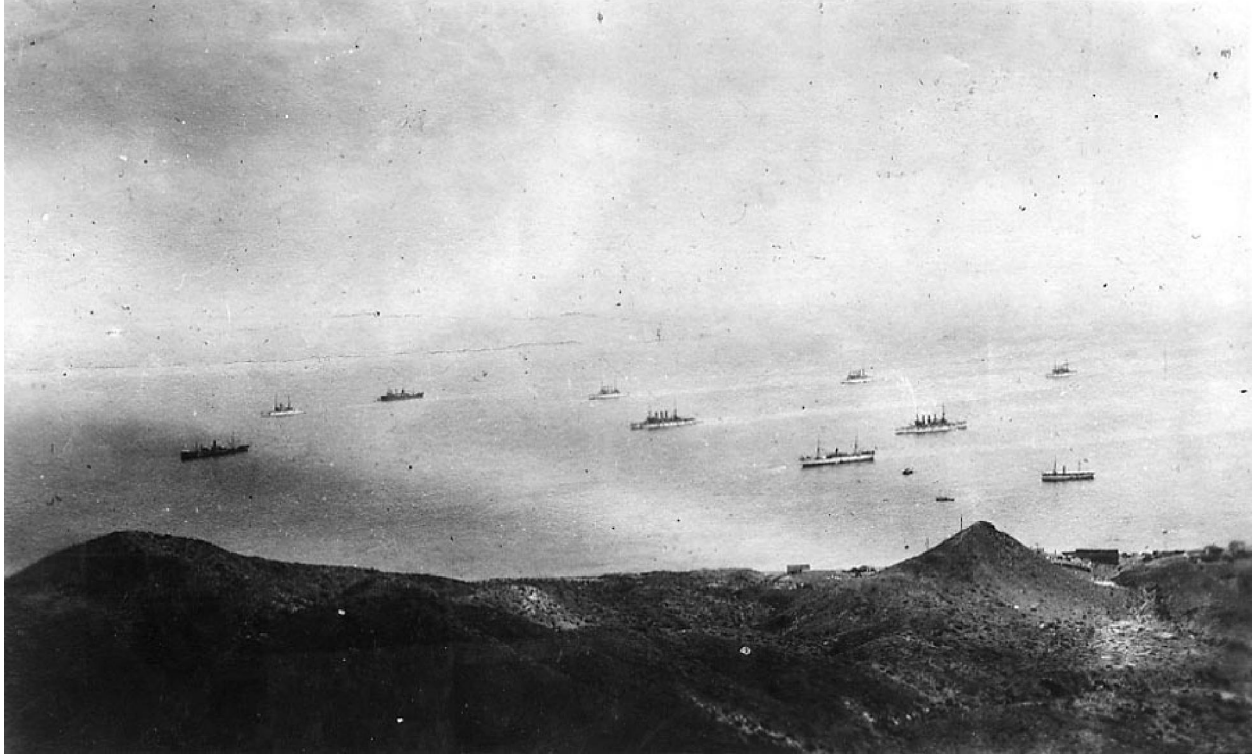
Fitch’s assistant, Miss Hazel Angeir, testified that she had closed the studio that night, carefully locking all windows and doors. When she returned in the morning she found the back door open and burnt matches on the floor of the darkroom. She also saw that four negatives were missing from the drying line.

The highlight of the hearing was the testimony of F. R. Clingman, a train conductor for the Santa Fe. Clingman testified that W. H. Talbot was the man in charge when the *Examiner* reporters first arrived by train in San Diego. He had given \$100 to Beard to get the pictures and “unless he got them he would lose his job in the morning.”

“Just as quick as Beard and Heutis got back,” said Clingman, “Talbot said they were ready to go. I gave the engineer the highball order and we were off in short order. . . I heard them say they had got the films; that they had made the biggest scoop of the age.”

On May 1, Justice Thorp rendered his verdict. There was insufficient evidence, he decided, to show the men had entered the photography studio with the intent to commit larceny. “They took the pictures, not to keep but to borrow for their employers until the next day.” The young men had been badly pressured by their employer to get the negatives and “if they did not get them they were in danger of losing their jobs.”

The decision by Thorp to dismiss the case “was received with much surprise” reported the *San Diego Union* but “both sides seemed satisfied.” The response from the *Sun* was more cynical. Their story headline read: “If You Commit Burglary and Return the Loot You’re Not Guilty.”



The Great White Fleet at Magdalena Bay, Mexico, March 1908. *U.S. Naval Historical Center*

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