



Naval Power in the Conquest of Mexico

C. Harvey Gardiner

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In this account of the naval aspect of Hernando Cortés's invasion of the Aztec Empire, C. Harvey Gardiner has added another dimension to the drama of Spanish conquest of the New World and to Cortés himself as a military strategist. The use of ships, in the climactic moment of the Spanish-Aztec clash, which brought about the fall of Tenochtitlán and consequently of all of Mexico, though discussed briefly in former English-language accounts of the struggle, had never before been detailed and brought into a perspective that reveals its true significance. Gardiner, on the basis of previously unexploited sixteenth-century source materials, has written a historical revision that is as colorful as it is authoritative.

Four centuries before the term was coined, Cortés, in the key years of 1520–1521, used the technique of "total war." He was able to do so victoriously primarily because of his courage in taking a gamble and his brilliance in tactical planning, but these qualities might well have signified nothing without the fortunate presence in his forces of a master shipwright, Martin López.

As the exciting story unrolls, Cortés, López, and the many other participants in the venture of creating and using a navy in the midst of the New World mountains and forests are seen as real personalities, not embalmed historical stereotypes, and the indigenous defenders are revealed as complex human beings facing huge odds. Much of the tale is told in the actual words of the protagonists; Gardiner has probed letters, court records, and other contemporary documents. He has also compared this naval feat of the Spaniards with other maritime events from ancient times to the present.

Naval Power in the Conquest of Mexico as a book was itself the result of an interesting combination of circumstances. C. Harvey Gardiner, as teacher, scholar, and writer, had long been interested in Latin American history generally and Mexican history in particular. During World War II, from 1942 to 1946, he served with the U.S. Navy. As he relates: "One day in early autumn 1945, while loafing on the bow of a naval vessel knifing its way southward in the Pacific a few degrees north of the Equator, my thoughts turned to the naval side of the just-ended conflict, and in time the question emerged, 'I wonder how the little ships and the little men will fare in the eventual record?' Then, because I was eager to return to my civilian life of pursuit of Latin American themes, the concomitant question came: 'I wonder what little fighting ships and minor men of early Latin America have been consigned to the oblivion of historical neglect?' As I began later to rummage my way from Columbus toward modern times, I seized upon the Mexican Conquest as the prime period with pay dirt for the researcher in quest of the answer to that latter question."

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