



# Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



- Artwork courtesy Adm. Bruce Marshall

“If the Texas Navy had not been able to keep the crucial supply lines to New Orleans and America open, the Texas revolution would have failed.”

## **Commodore Charles Edward Hawkins (Fleet Commander, March 1836 - 11 February 1837)**

**C**harles E. Hawkins was one of those swashbucklers who brought color and adventure to the navies of the Western Hemisphere to rival any of those of the Old World. Born in New York in 1802, Hawkins left a life on land at age 16, when he joined the U.S. Navy as a midshipman. He served on board the fabled frigates Constitution, Constellation and Guerriere. After serving along the Atlantic coast, he was transferred to the U.S. West Indies squadron which was commanded by another of the U.S. Navy's bright stars, Commodore David Porter. Commodore Porter, a hero of the War of 1812, was court-martialed in 1825, and resigned to join the Mexican Navy, where he had been offered command of the fleet. Porter began recruiting naval officers to serve Mexico, and one he took with him was the young Midshipman Hawkins. Taking a furlough from the naval service, Hawkins resigned his commission and joined the Mexican Navy. As a Mexican commander, Charles Hawkins spent several adventurous years raiding Spanish shipping in the Gulf of Mexico, particularly around Cuba. He sailed the Gulf in his five-gun brig Hermon, and used the abandoned U.S. naval base at Key West as his center of operations. He was arrested by U.S. authorities for violating the Neutrality Act of 1819, but he was released on bail and quickly sailed back to Veracruz for further orders. Soon, however, fortune turned against him. Mexico's naval funds began to dry up, and a wave of distrust of American officers caused Hawkins to resign his commission and move to Texas, where he became a civilian riverboat captain.

As dissent turned into revolution, Hawkins joined General José Antonio Mexia, who was planning an invasion of the Mexican mainland at the port city of Tampico. During the invasion, Hawkins, now a major, served as Mexia's aide, and took part in the attack on the city. The attack failed, however, and Hawkins escaped certain death by hitching a ride on a passing ship bound for Brazoria. From there, he journeyed to San Felipe, where he met General Sam Houston and offered his services as a navy captain to the revolutionary government. Houston recommended Hawkins to Governor Henry Smith, who in turn recommended him to Texas's agents in New Orleans, Stephen F. Austin, Branch T. Archer, and William H. Wharton. The agents hired Hawkins on the spot, and put him in charge of acquiring and fitting out the eight-gun schooner Independence, formerly the U.S. revenue cutter Ingham. Hawkins greatly distressed the cash-strapped Texas agents with his extravagant expenses, but he fitted the schooner out as his flagship and was soon prowling the Gulf for Mexican shipping as a captain without a commission, which he did not receive until March 12, 1836. At the time of his appointment, President Burnet considered Hawkins to be the senior captain of the squadron, so he was referred to for the rest of his life as Commodore of the Texas Navy.

As Santa Anna's army marched relentlessly from Mexico to the Alamo, Goliad, San Felipe and Harrisburg, Hawkins maintained his base of operations at Matagorda, then removed it to Galveston as the Mexican army closed in. He oversaw the naval defense of Galveston until the Texas victory at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, then removed his fleet to New Orleans for repairs and recruiting. A strict disciplinarian, Hawkins was known to put ship captains in irons as quickly as a lowly sailor, and one evening in May 1836, while sailing aboard the warship Brutus, he leveled a cannon and fired it at the Invincible, thinking it might be a Mexican warship lurking in the darkness. He tried to sack Captain William Hurd of the Brutus, but Hurd's crew refused to allow any replacement officers on board, and Hurd remained one of Hawkins' enemies in the service.

After the revolution, Hawkins slowed down his activity, preferring to stay close to port in New Orleans while waiting for the impoverished government to scrape up enough money to pay his men and provision his ships. President Burnet ordered Hawkins to blockade the Mexican port of Matamoros, on the Rio Grande, but the Invincible and Brutus sailed to New York without orders, remaining there until the following spring. The Independence was therefore outnumbered by the newly rebuilt Mexican fleet,

and Hawkins was reluctant to leave his safe berth at the mouth of the Mississippi. His flagship wintered in the Crescent City while Hawkins took up residence at a boarding house on Canal Street. In early 1837, Hawkins caught smallpox, and he died on February 11. Commodore Hawkins was buried with full military honors, leaving command of the fleet to Captain George Wheelwright.

For further reading, see *The Texas Navy in Forgotten Battles and Shirtsleeve Diplomacy*, by Jim Dan Hill, and "Charles E. Hawkins: Sailor of Three Republics," in *Gulf Coast Historical Review*, volume 5 (Spring 1990), beginning on page 93, by Professor James H. Denham. Also, review the Texas Bibliography at this web site. *The New Handbook of Texas*

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