



Texas Navy Newsletter

The Invincible

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Texas Navy Commodore claims Cozumel for Texas

By: TNA Commander Roy Sullivan

The Texas Navy Commodores were an unusual group, perhaps none more than Commodore Henry Livingston Thompson, captain of the Texas navy sloop *Invincible* (for which this newsletter is named) and a former officer in the Mexican Navy.

After the humiliating surrender of the Texas warship *Independence* (plus the capture of Texas Minister to the U.S. William Wharton) to two Mexican brigs off Velasco in April, 1837, Thompson and new Secretary of the Navy S. Rhoads Fisher decided to redeem their navy's honor. The instrument of redemption was to be an offensive cruise against the Mexicans.

Despite President Houston's express order prohibiting such a cruise, Thompson and Fisher laid their plans for revenge. On June 12 Thompson sailed the *Invincible*, accompanied by sister ship *Brutus*, from Velasco looking for prey. To evade the wrath of his President and Commander-in-Chief, Secretary Fisher signed himself on the cruise as an observer before Houston could locate and arrest him.

Thompson first took his warships to the mouth of the Mississippi River but finding no Mexicans there, headed south to the Yucatan coast where hunting might be better. From Yucatan, the Commodore sailed to Isla de las Mujeres, near Cancun on Mexico's northeast coast. Still finding no enemy, Thompson sent the *Brutus* to Cuba while he sailed to Cankern Island to take on water and provisions.

On his way back to Isla de las Mujeres, so named for the Mayan goddess statues found there, Thompson captured several small island craft, one of them hauling logs. Showing entrepreneurial spirit, Thompson sold the cargo back to the owners for \$600.00 and split the bounty with his crew. Once rejoined by the *Brutus* at Isla de las Mujeres, Thompson headed south to the island of Cozumel, south of Cancun.

Landing on the southwestern tip of the small island on July 13, Thompson was euphoric about what he saw. The white sand beaches glittered in the sun, fruits grew abundantly, there was even fresh water. The lagoon teemed with fish and turtles. It must have looked like fair anchorage and paradise to Commodore of the Texas Navy Thompson.

So he held a suitable ceremony claiming this magnificent island for the Republic of Texas. With Secretary Fisher happily looking on, Thompson erected a forty-five foot pole and raised the flag of Texas. Enjoying but perhaps bewildered by the ceremony, flag, band music and twenty-three gun salute, the gathered natives lustily cheered the strange proceedings and the flamboyant commodore. Thompson then led the newly-minted Texans in a pledge of allegiance to the Republic of Texas.

Thompson later wrote that he had orchestrated "one of the greatest acquisitions to our beloved country that the Admiral aloft (God) could have bestowed on us."

After Commodore Thompson's display of zeal and boldness, the Texas Navy was never the same.

TNA Admiral Butler Receives British Award

RADM John D. Butler, USN (Ret.),
Named Honorary Commander of the
Most Excellent Order of the British Empire

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has conferred the honor of Commander of the British Empire upon retired Rear Admiral **John D. Butler**, USN, in recognition of his contribution to the Royal Navy's Submarine Flotilla.

British Ambassador Sir Nigel Sheinwald, who presented the award Dec. 9 during an investiture ceremony at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., said, "Rear Admiral Butler clearly had an extremely successful career in his three decades with the US Navy. His second calling, as the Vice President of Lockheed Martin's Fleet Ballistic Missile Program, now ensures that his skills, enthusiasm and cutting edge dedication to submarine programmes continue to be fully utilised.



"From a UK perspective, there is no doubt that his personal dedication and hard work has made a difference. His passion and determination have directly led to creating savings in both time and money and it is this, along with the provision of expert advice and support, that deserves to be recognised at the highest level."

Commander of the British Empire is an award in the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, an order of chivalry established by George V of the United Kingdom in 1917 that honors civilians and service personnel for public service and other distinctions.

Butler currently is vice president for Fleet Ballistic Missile program requirements for Lockheed Martin Space Systems Company. He retired from the U.S. Navy in 2005 after a 31-year military career. Navy assignments included Program Executive Officer (Submarines) for the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition and support to the United Kingdom's Vanguard-class and Astute-class submarine design and construction programs.

His military awards include the Navy Distinguished Service Medal, three Legion of Merit awards, and three Meritorious Service Medal awards.

A native of Texas City, Texas, Butler currently resides in the Washington, D.C., area. He holds a B.S. degree in chemistry from the University of Texas at Austin and a M.S. degree in engineering acoustics from the Naval Postgraduate School.

News Release by R. Mitchell Jeffrey, Jr. Vice Consul of the British Consulate-General Houston.



Admiral Commissions Awarded at the HYC Commodore's Ball



Houston Yacht Club past Commodore **John Nicholson**, Board Member of the Texas Navy Association, presents Vice Commodore **Pat Gibson** and Rear Commodore **Bob Wright** with their Commissions as Admirals in the Texas Navy. The presentation took place at the Commodore's Ball. The Texas Navy in its present form (technically the Third Texas Navy) is an honorary organization created in 1958 by then Governor Price Daniel. Its purpose is to keep and preserve the memory and artifacts of the accomplishments of both the First Texas Navy which was instrumental in gaining the Republic of Texas' Independence from Mexico in 1836 and the Second Texas Navy which saw action defending that independence from 1839 until 1845 when Texas joined the United States. At that time the Texas Navy was merged into the United States Navy.

Texas Navy Goals

2010 - 2011

Investigate how the Texas Navy Association can more actively communicate with other Historical Associations, Texas Historians, Nautical Historians, and political officials to promote and preserve the history of the Texas Navies: through textbooks, videos, sale of ships store items, presentations and displays across Texas, actively recruit new members to the Texas Navy Association who will help us with our mission, i.e. create a Houston/Galveston squadron.

We must follow through in helping new potential TNA members with the necessary paperwork to become Texas Navy Admirals.

Continue to monitor and support the search for the *Invincible*, one of the first Texas Navy flagships. The *Invincible* sank off Galveston in 1837. Ultimate goal is to create a replica *Invincible* that would sail from and be on display in Galveston.

Inventory all known Texas Navy artifacts, documents, and digitally photograph as many items as possible.

Investigate various possibilities for the location of a permanent Texas Navy Museum where all possible physical artifacts and records could be on display or available for further research and/or educational purposes.



The Texas Navy Timeline

...1824...

November: Stephen F. Austin asks Mexico's government to authorize a settlement on Galveston Island as a base for cotton shipments to England, then asked the Mexican congress to authorize a seaport there; no action would be taken on this request until the following year.

...1825...

March 24: The Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas passes legislation providing tremendous incentives to immigrants who settle in that state. Under this and other immigration laws, Stephen F. Austin continues the work of his father, Moses Austin, in creating the largest Anglo-American colony in the Department of Texas.

...1831...

December 15: Jeremiah Brown, merchant captain of the schooner Sabine (owned by Edwin Waller and William H. Wharton) runs past the Mexican fort at Brazoria, on the Brazos River, to avoid the export duty demanded by the fort's commander. Mexican troops fire on the Sabine, but its decks were lined with bales of cotton to absorb the musket balls, and the Sabine makes the run down the Brazos to the open Gulf of Mexico. Waller and Wharton are arrested for evading customs, but two other merchant vessels, the Spica and the Nelson, run the "blockade" before the end of the month.

...1832...

Texian ships Stephen F. Austin, Water Witch and Red River blockade and fire on a Mexican garrison at Anahuac (near Houston) in support of volunteers who free William B. Travis and two other radicals from a Mexican prison. Brazoria, a two gun merchant ship, also supports volunteers attacking Fort Velasco (at present-day Freeport).

...1835

July 26: Mexican Navy Captain Thomas "Mexico" Thompson, an Englishman, issues a proclamation to the citizens of Anáhuac in which he threatens to burn the town, igniting the hatred of the Gulf Coast citizens that results in the seizure of his ship, the Correo Mexicano, later that year.

August 27: Colonel James Fannin, who was later massacred after surrendering to Santa Anna at Goliad, predicted that once applications from "old & gallant officers" were accepted and letters of marque and reprisal were issued, "we will have afloat a sufficient naval force to guard our coast and cripple their trade from the Campeachy banks to N. Orleans the land party will, thus closed in, be an easy prey."

September 1: The first shots of the Texas Revolution are fired by the armed schooner San Felipe at the Mexican revenue cutter Correo Mexicano off Velasco, at the mouth of the Brazos River. During the battle, the Mexican ship takes three casualties and attempts to flee to open sea, but a calm stalled the Correo Mexicano the next morning, and the Texian steamship Laura towed the San Felipe into



firing position. The *Correo Mexicano* surrendered without a fight. The Mexican crew, including its English captain, Thomas "Mexico" Thompson, were taken to New Orleans for trial on piracy charges, where they were eventually acquitted and sent back to Mexico. The incident enrages the Mexican government, which moves ahead with plans to reinforce its garrisons in Texas and send Santa Anna to Texas at the head of 6,000 men.

October 26: Galveston's *Telegraph* and *Texas Register* reported that the privateer *San Felipe* arrived from New Orleans bringing arms, ammunition, and most importantly, heavy artillery, for the Texian army.

October 31: The General Council, the provisional legislative body of the Texas revolutionary government, makes the first effort to authorize letters of marque and reprisal to privateer captains who wished to operate against Mexico.

November 1: Silas Dinsmore, Jr. and John G. McNeel press the armed schooner *San Felipe* into Texas service on behalf of the Matagorda Committee of Safety.

November 3-14: "Consultation" of municipalities in Texas sets up a provisional government, including a governor, lieutenant governor, and a "General Council," to take power after the Consultation adjourns on November 14. This provisional government would be the revolutionary government of Texas until nominally March 2, 1836, when independence was declared and an ad interim government was established. (As a practical matter, however, the provisional government only effectively government until mid-January 1836.)

November 8: Augustus C. Allen (one of the founders of the city of

Houston) petitioned the provisional government, in whatever form it was established, for letters of marque and reprisal, which would allow Allen's armed ships to cruise the Gulf of Mexico and capture Mexican merchant shipping.

November 9: Schooner *San Felipe* trades shots with the Mexican warship *Veracruzano* off Bird Island, near Matagorda. Her cannon were recovered on November 13 and placed on the privateer *William Robbins*, which was placed under the command of the *San Felipe*'s former captain, William A. Hurd.

November 15: Provisional government's Committee on Naval Affairs reports that the Mexican war schooner *Veracruzano* was prowling Texas waters of the Gulf, and noted that more requests for letters of marque were being submitted to the provisional government.

November 16: In his first address to the General Council, provisional governor Henry Smith urged the Council to pass legislation allowing him to issue letters of marque to qualifying sea captains.

November 18: General Council's Committee on Naval Affairs drafts legislation to provide for letters of marque and reprisal, and urges that Texas create its own naval force for protection of its coast, recommending that two 12-gun schooners and two 6-gun schooners.

November 19: Reports reached Matagorda of the capture of the merchant vessel *Hannah Elizabeth* by the Mexican war schooner *Bravo* while transporting arms and ammunition to the Texas insurgents. Samuel Rhoads Fisher of Matagorda leads a group of armed men aboard the privateer *William Robbins*, and the small force sallies to the scene to find the *Hannah Elizabeth* under the



command of a Mexican prize crew from the Bravo, which had been blown out to sea by a fierce norther. Fisher's force quickly recaptures the Hannah Elizabeth, along with the lieutenant and eleven sailors and marines aboard her. Her civilian cargo was sold at Matagorda, and the prize money was divided among the captors, sparking a heated protest by the cargo owners. This protest was taken up by Colonel James Walker Fannin, commander of the Texas volunteers in the south, who was a political enemy of Fisher and the William Robbins' owner, shipping entrepreneur Thomas F. McKinney.

November 22: General Council passes a bill establishing a navy and authorizing letters of marque, and sends it to Governor Smith for his signature. Although he favors a privateer law, Smith vetoes the bill two days later, stating that the requirements for service were not stringent enough. Smith recommends that the naval bill be made a separate piece of legislation from the privateer law.

November 25: Governor Smith signs into law the General Council's bill creating a Texas Navy. That same day, the schooner Invincible is registered in Baltimore under the ownership of Henry H. Williams, brother of Samuel May Williams, who is in the United States acquiring a fleet of warships for the Texas cause.

November 27: Revised privateer bill, passed on November 26, is signed into law by Governor Smith.

November 30: Silas Dinsmore, Jr. of Matagorda receives the first set of official letters of marque, authorizing privateer operations in the Gulf of Mexico.

December 1-6: Letters of marque and reprisal, which permit

“privateering,” or legalized acts of piracy, are issued by the Provisional Government to Silas Dinsmore, Robert Potter (Texas' future Secretary of the Navy), Ira R. Lewis and the Matagorda Committee of Safety, and other unnamed would-be privateer captains.

December 7: Stephen F. Austin, William H. Wharton and Branch T. Archer are appointed by the Texas revolutionary government as commissioners to the United States. They are to, among other things, purchase warships for the fight against Mexico.

December 9: Local shipping magnate Thomas F. McKinney informs the General Council, Texas' revolutionary legislative assembly, that the Mexican warship Moctezuma is patrolling the central Texas shoreline, requiring an armed fleet to oppose her.

December 13: San Antonio falls to a Texas volunteer force led by Colonel Francis Johnson and Benjamin Milam. (Milam is killed in the assault.)

December 16: Provisional Governor Henry G. Smith informs the General Council: “Our sea coast for years has produced nothing but a scene of fraud, corruption and piracies, to the unfortunate, who either by misfortune or design have been drawn upon our shores. So well have we already established our character abroad for having a piratical coast, that it is with difficulty insurance can be effected, and always at an unusual high rate, and frequently not at all. This stage of things has grown entirely out of our disorganized situation, not having the proper laws enacted to restrain the vice.”

December 17: Committee on Naval Affairs commissioners appointed to sort out the legal mess caused by the November 1835 capture of the Mexican prize ship Hannah Elizabeth (an American



schooner captured by the Mexican warship Bravo the previous month), concludes that the captors – Captain William A. Hurd of the privateer William Robbins, and Samuel Rhoads Fisher, the local militia commander (and future Texas Navy Secretary) – acted illegally in selling off the Hannah Elizabeth's cargo in Matagorda without a legal condemnation proceeding.

December 19: General Sam Houston recommends Charles E. Edwards to Texas' agents in New Orleans for a commission in the Texas Navy, as a distinguished officer who “entered the Mexican Navy, under Commodore Porter and is familiarly acquainted with the coast of the Gulph.” Twelve Mexican prisoners captured by the privateer William Robbins, who had been held in Matagorda for two weeks, are transferred to the home of S. Rhoads Fisher. They are held at Fisher's home for two more weeks before being paroled to return to Mexico.

December 26: A group of 26 New Orleans shipping and insurance company officers write U.S. District Attorney Henry Carleton, complaining about the presence of the Texas schooner Brutus, which was fitting out with six cannon “and one large one on a pivot, for the purpose of capturing Mexican vessels.” This complaint, and the investigation it sparked, would keep the Brutus in port until January 1836, when Carleton's investigation turned up no direct evidence of an intent by the Brutus to do anything more than defend its cargo if attacked. (On its first voyage, this “merchant vessel” carried seven cannon and over one hundred marines to guard its negligible cargo of fifty barrels of miscellaneous “merchandise.”)

(Timeline cont'd in next issue)

Nautical Quiz

Binnacle: A case near the helm that supports the ship's compass. The round balls on either side are solid iron. Can you guess what they are for? (Answer on last page)



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Quiz
Answer:

No, they weren't for balance. That would never work on a ship. They were actually to disburse static electricity from the compass. Sea air can become electrically charged.

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