



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



The Battle of Campeche - May 1843

First and *only* time sail bested steam men-of-war!



The Battle of Campeche by Fred Toler
Courtesy San Jacinto Museum of History

The Battle of Campeche was one of the worlds most historic battles in the annals of naval history. First, the Republic of Texas was at war with Mexico. Yucatan was the most rebellious state of the Centralist Government of Santa Anna in Mexico City. The adjoining State of Tobasco ran a close second in its displeasure with their national government. Yucatan entered in to a contract with the Republic of Texas under the presidency of Mirabeau B. Lamar where Yucatan was to pay the Republic of Texas \$8,000 a month for use of some its ships to defend their ports from being blockaded by the Mexican Navy and to defend them against their own government. She was Texas' only ally that actually joined in the fight, much to the embarrassment of the Centralist Mexican government. Had this disruption not held the main force of Mexico's army putting down their uprisings, Texas most surely would have been invaded by a much larger force, again commanded by Santa Anna and the course of Texas retaining its independence and eventually

becoming the 28th State of the United States of America might never have happened.

During the Battle of Campeche the Mexican Navy had two steam vessels in their opposing fleet, the MONTEZUMA and the GUADALOUPE along with several sail vessels. The Texas Navy had only sail vessels, the schooner of war AUSTIN and the Brig WHARTON, and while the battle lasted several days. They were aided at the beginning of the battle by the small fleet of the State of Yucatan under the command of former Texas Navy officer Captain James D. Boylan.

The Mexican Navy had a distinct advantage over the Texas vessels, powered by sail alone. To make matters worse, as can be seen by James Moore's minutes above of the conflict, there was little or no wind, giving the Mexican navy an even greater advantage as they could maneuver at will and the Texas Navy was at the mercy of the elements for power. This also gave the Mexicans the

advantage of staying just out of reach of the Texas Navy's canons.

As can be seen by the minutes below, the Mexican fleet suffered a large amount of casualties, while the Texans losses were minimal. The Mexican's withdrew from the battle during the night of the 16th of May, but they struck a medal for their navy proclaiming a "Great Naval Victory for Mexico". See the end of this page for a picture of the medal.

Historians have been arguing about this sea battle for years, and I am sure it will continue far into the future. But, the fact remains, this is the first and only naval victory where two sail vessels of the Texas Navy, and a "fishing boat navy" of Yucatan, prevailed over the superior steam men of war of Mexico!

Admiral Walter Nass

Minutes of the first action with the Mexican Squadron at the Battle of Campeche taken by James Moore

Texas Sloop of War Austin, }
Off Campeche, April 30th, 1843 }

At 4 A. M., called all hands and piped the hammocks up---at 4 30, called all hands, "up anchor", to stand off until sea breeze set in---at 4 45, as the day broke the enemy hove in sight consisting of the steamers

Montezuma, 7 guns and Guadalupe, 4 guns; brig Yucateco, 12 guns, and Iman, 7 guns, schooners Eagle, 7 guns, and Campechano, 3 guns; we were then standing for the land on the starboard tack, the brig Wharton in company, with the wind about E. S. E.--at 6 35, hove the main-top-sail to the mast to let the brig come up--at 6 40,

filled away--at 6 50, tacked ship and stood for the enemy, trying to get the weather gage of them--at 6 55, made signal 77--at 7 05, hoisted Texas ensign at peak and mizen, English and American ensigns at the fore and broad pennant at the main, when the crews of both vessels gave three hearty cheers, made signal 96--at 7 10, the

Montezuma appeared to be aground, set the fore-sail--at 7 15 the schooners Sisaleno and Independencia and five gun boats from Campeche hove in sight standing for us at the same time the Montezuma succeeded in getting off, when the enemy wore round and stood to the S finding we were coming on them too fast---at 7 30 the enemy wore and stood for us, hauled up the fore-sail---at 7 35 the enemy commenced firing at us, most of the shot passed over, some fell short, but not one struck us---at 7 50 manned our larboard battery and exchanged five broadsides with the enemy's steamers, the sail vessels then on our starboard bow, on the starboard tack, firing at us---at 7 65 enemy's sail vessels tacked to keep out of our reach, when we hove in stays and fired our starboard broadside at them---at 8 the brig passed close under our lee, when Com. Moore, ordered her commander to follow his motion---at 8 10 manned the starboard battery and exchanged three broadsides with the steamers, enemy's shot passing over us---at 8 20 the steamers wore and stood to the S to join the sail vessels--at 8 26, finding our shot did not reach them, ceased firing---at 8 35 the schooners Sisaleno and Independencia with the gun boats commanded by Com. J. D. Boylan, passed us, gave them three hardy cheers which they returned; they then tacked and followed our motinos the Independencia wearing at fore No. 5 of our signal, a private signal between the two squadrons---at 8 40 beat the retreat and piped to grog---at 9 07, the land breeze dying away came too with

the starboard anchor, with springs on the chain, two fathoms water, thirty fathoms chain, the City of Campeche bearing S. E. distant seven miles; piped to breakfast---9 30 nearly dead calm, ship's head S. E. the enemy's squadron on our starboard beam, the brig Wharton on our larboard beam, the Yucatan vessels on our larboard quarter--at 11 15 to two steamers approaching us, we beat to quarters, the Yucatan vessels commenced firing upon the enemy, the steamers fired several shots at them and us; sprung the ship with the larboard spring to bring our starboard battery to bear on the enemy---at 11 27, a light breeze springing up, from the N. and W. slipped the anchor with thirty fathoms chain, putting a slip-buoy on the chain, filled away on the starboard tack and exchanged several broadsides with the steamers---at 11 35 a sixty-eight pound shot from the Guadaloupe cut the after-shroud of the mizzens-rigging about eight feet above the dead-eye, (Com. Moore holding the shroud at the time) passed between Com. Moore and Lieutenant Gray, would have killed both of them, but that one dodged to the right and the other to the left, passed through the poop deck into the cabin, and pass out the stern about two feet above the transom---up to 11 40, continued firing at the enemy, but finding our shot did not reach them, and they having the weather gage of us, we kept off for Campeche, the men being completely exhausted, but in good spirits, having been at quarters and working ship, with scarcely any cessation, nearly the whole of the previous twenty-

four hours---11 45 Com. Boylan sent a pilot on board---at 12 15 the ship struck lightly but continued to go ahead a little---at 12 20 the brig Wharton passed under our lee when Com. Moore ordered her commander to steer for Campeche---at 12 30 finding the ship remained aground, made signal 146 to brig Wharton---at 12 40 the ship floated when we steered on our course---at 1 P. M. the steamers fired several shot at us which we returned, but as our shot did not reach them, we ceased firing, when the enemy's vessel hauled off and stood to the southward and westward.

JAMES W. MOORE,
Secretary
E. W. MOORE,
Commanding Texas Navy

5th May.

On repairing the injury under No. 1 port the sixty-eight pound shot was found lodged in a part of two timbers, and the plank was put on leaving the shot where it lodged.

E. W. Moore

Comments of Commodore Moore on the Battle

While the carpenters were at work repairing the damages sustained during the action of the 16th May, I procured from the Governor of Yucatan the schooner Independencia,

being the largest of the gun-boats, and mounting two guns---a long twelve and a long nine pounder. This vessel I placed under the command of Lieutenant A. G. Gray, (1st Lieutenant of the Austin,) and ordered him to proceed in the direction of Telchac, for the purpose of intercepting any supplies

that might be on the way from New- Orleans for the Mexican squadron, and if possible to capture officers of Barragan's division, who were about leaving with troops for Tampico. This I most ardently desired, with the hope of being able to exchange for some or all of my countrymen who were in chains and

slavery in Mexico. Before reaching Telchac, the Independencia fell in with the American schooner Glide, with provisions designed for the enemy, (or which in all probability would have fallen into their hands,) and returned with her to Campeche.

Letter from Commodore Moore to Secretary of War and Marine G. W. Hill after the Battle of Campeche

Texas Sloop of War Austin }
Off Campeche, May 20th, 1843 }

Sir.---I wrote last per schooner Republican on 10th instant, and take advantage of the American schooner Rosario, which vessel sails to-night, for New Orleans, to report that on the morning of the 16th, we stood out at daylight to attack the enemy's two steamers and schooner Eagle; the two brigs and the other schooners and steamer Regenerador, being up at Telchac.

I herewith enclose a copy of the minutes of the action, and the Surgeon's report of killed and wounded.

The brig Wharton was in position and kept up a brisk fire whenever the medium guns could be used with effect. A long twelve pounder on board of her, obtained since our arrival here, was fired sixty five times, and frequently hit the enemy. The fire was directed at this vessel nearly the whole action--not one shot struck the Wharton, and but very few were fired at her.

It would be impossible to particularize the conduct of any one under my command--- every officer and man on board both vessels did his duty nobly.

Many of our shot struck the Guadalupe, and one shell shot struck abaft her wheel-house on the larboard side, and must have done great execution. I fired very few of them owing to the distance they kept from us---it was a running fight from the time we fired the first gun, and the distance that we sailed, endeavoring to close, was not less than fourteen miles. A fisherman came alongside yesterday who had been on board the Guadalupe, (at which vessel the greater part of our fire was directed,) and stated that the number of killed on board of her was forty seven, and that thirty were so badly wounded as to require amputations. From the Montezuma we have heard nothing. On the 18th, the Regenerador joined the other vessels in the offing, and this morning the two brigs also appeared.

We are at anchor now about seven miles apart, our rigging and sails are repaired, and carpenters are at work, repairing where shot struck us. In a few days we will be in as fine a condition as ever, and the first favorable breeze another attack will be made upon the enemy.

I have the honor to be,
Very respectfully,
Your obedient servant,
E. W. MOORE,
Commanding Texas Navy.

Hon. G. W. Hill,
Secretary of War and Marine.

This medal was struck by the Mexican government after the Battle of Campeche and is in the National Museum of History, Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City, Mexico. The picture comes from the book "Commodore Moore & the Texas Navy" by Tom Henderson Wells." (1960; The University of Texas Press in Austin)

