



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



The Invincible

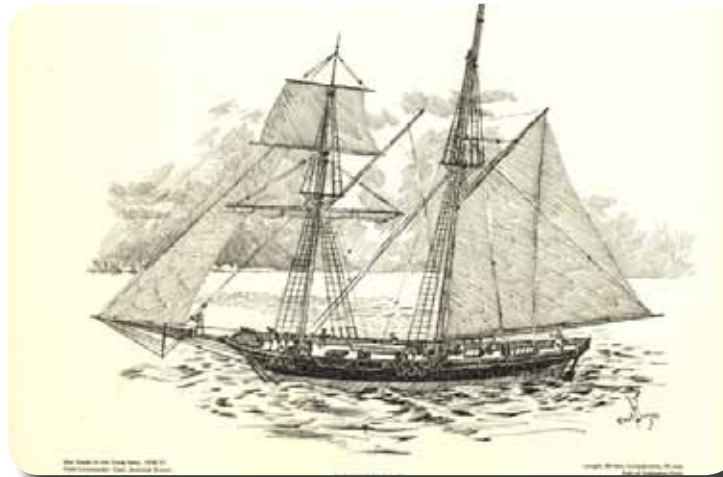
By Wayne Gronquist

In the fall of 1835, with the Mexican Navy blockading Texas ports, the provisional government of Texas responded by issuing Letters of Marque creating privateers to defend Texas waters and the colonist's vital maritime trade. They also created the first Texas Navy, consisting of four ships, the *Invincible*, *Liberty*, *Independence* and the *Brutus*. These two fleets made the victory at San Jacinto possible; and they, along with the third fleet, (Second Texas Navy 1839-1845) maintained Texas independence for the next 10 years by controlling the Gulf of Mexico

The flagship of the First Texas Navy, the *Invincible*, was built in Baltimore and arrived in Galveston for duty on January 1, 1836. The *Invincible*, a Baltimore clipper similar to the US Revenue Cutters, was said to be sharp built and, of course, fast. The Baltimore Tonnage Certificate list the ship as being 83 feet eight inches in length, 21 feet 8 inches in breadth, 8 feet 8 inches in depth and weighing almost 7 tons. Upon her arrival, the *Invincible* was immediately outfitted with 9 cannon, ranging from four- to six-pounders, to an eighteen-pounder at midship. She then joined her sister Texas Navy ships and the privateers to protect Texas shipping by breaking the blockade and driving the Mexican Navy from Texas waters. But the *Invincible*, the Navy's finest, was given an additional

order - find and destroy the *Montezuma*, the Mexican Navy's newest and most formidable warship.

In February 1836, the *Invincible* was delivering volunteers to Copana Bay for Colonel Fannin's command and continuing the patrolling



the Texas coast to engage Mexican ships. On March 6th, the day the Alamo fell, the *Invincible* was in Velasco, having just returned from New Orleans where her weaponry was augmented with two nine-pounders and an additional eighteen-pounder. Within days after the fall of the Alamo, with Mexican eagles and serpents marching in three separate armies across Texas, Captain Jeremiah Brown finally found the *Montezuma* blockading her own port at the mouth of Rio Grande to keep news of the impending Mexican invasion from breaking out.

The *Montezuma* was readying for a 2000 man division invasion of Texas to reinforce Santa Anna's troops when the *Invincible* engaged her and ran her aground, thwarting the invasion.

The *Invincible* then captured the *Pockett* and took her war supplies to Sam Houston, just as her sister ship, the *Liberty*, had done a few days before when the *Liberty* captured the *Pelicano*. The *Pelicano* was laden with barrels of gunpowder hidden in larger barrels of flour. Those supplies, all intended for Santa Anna, and the *Twin Sisters* delivered by the privateers, bolstered the morale of the army

of volunteers so much that they forced Sam Houston to engage the enemy at San Jacinto. Sam Houston had other plans for his army (retreating to the Louisiana border) and but for the victories of the Navy at sea and the assistance of the privateers, the battle probably would not have been fought, and if fought, lost.

For a time after the battle, Santa Anna was kept prisoner aboard the Invincible for his own safety, and the Texans enjoyed a brief peace. But the war didn't cease (both sides renounced the treaty) and within two months the Mexican Navy sailed into Capano Bay with three ships full of supplies for the Mexican armies that weren't at San Jacinto. All three ships were captured by the Texas Mounted Riflemen, who became known as the Texas Horse Marines. The Texans had bought themselves still more time.

By the summer of 1836, the plight of the Texans worsened, as more Mexican warships resumed the blockade of Texas ports. The Texas Navy and the privateers continued to battle the Mexican Navy, but they were battling a far superior force. In April 1837 the Independence gallantly fought two larger, more powerful Mexican Navy ships. She was eventually captured in full sight of many Texans, including the Secretary of Navy, S. Rhodes Fisher, who watched the battle from shore. The Liberty had earlier been captured by New Orleans creditors, leaving the Texas Navy with only two remaining ships, the Invincible and the Brutus.

Fearing invasion by sea, Sam Houston (now president of the Republic) ordered his Navy to stay in Galveston to protect the city. Navy Secretary S. Rhodes Fisher and his two new captains, Henry L. Thompson (Invincible) and James D. Doylan (Brutus), knew that Houston's order amounted to a strategic disaster, so they decided to defy Houston's orders and take to sea to engage and divert the enemy from Texas waters. The entire fleet, two ships, then began a daring 77 day raid of Mexican port towns and villages. They captured dozens of paragues, at least six Mexican merchant ships, and generally raised enormous havoc and grief in Mexico. Eluding and diverting the larger Mexican Navy, the Invincible and Brutus even went to Isle Megeres and Cozumel for supplies, and R&R, and claimed them for the Republic of Texas. The offensive successfully diverted the Mexican

Navy for two and half months by forcing the superior Mexican navy to stay at home to protect their own ports and shipping.

The Texas Navy returned to Galveston triumphantly on August 26, 1837 with several prize ships. The Brutus towed a prize ship crossing the bar into Galveston Bay, while the larger, heavily laden (with booty) Invincible anchored outside the bay, only to see two Mexican brigs, the Lubardo and the Vencedor del Alamo chasing a Texan supply ship headed for Galveston. That ship, the Sam Houston, successfully made it into the Bay while the Invincible, set her sails, exchanged signals with the distant Brutus in the Navy yard, hoisted her colors and stood out to engage the two larger Mexican warships. In her haste to join the battle, the Brutus slipped her rudder and ran onto the shoal leaving the Invincible to carry on the daylong battle alone. Captain Thompson's own account of the battle says he inflicted great damage on the enemy and fired his guns until they were too hot to fire anymore and then tried to lure the enemy onto the bar only to slip his rudder as he crossed the bar causing the Invincible to run into the shoals. Both darkness and a storm were approaching and the two damaged Mexican brigs set sails for home. The ensuing storm broke up the Invincible and over the next 48 hours she sunk below the water and ultimately below the sand where her nine cannon (possibly more) and a storehouse of other historical artifacts lie today.

The National Underwater and Marine Association (NUMA) began searching for the Invincible in 1985. That 20 year search has eliminated a large area and resulted in redefining the search area or high probability zone. In 2004 the Texas Navy Association joined NUMA in a joint venture to locate the Invincible. Last year the joint venture completed a Marine Magnetics (Canadian company) magnetometer survey of the new high-probability area which resulted in the discovery of several promising targets. These targets will be surveyed by Innovatum Inc., a Houston-based corporation, which specializes in locating pipelines for oil companies. When completed, the Innovatum survey will enable us to know which of the targets is likely to be the Invincible. Test excavations of the promising target(s) will be conducted soon with the cooperation of the Galveston Sheriff's Dive Team, the Texas A&M at Galveston Marine Archeology Department and a Houston Commercial Diving School. Discovery and

recovery of the artifacts from the flagship of the first Navy of the Republic of Texas is hopefully near at hand. Curation of the Invincible's artifacts will ultimately be at the Texas Navy display at the Texas Sea Port Museum.

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