

WHY U.S. NAVY SHIP SUNK OFF VERACRUZ?

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Historical record

On Dec. 8, 1846 the *U.S.S. Somers*, under the command of Lieutenant Raphael Semmes, capsized and sank off Isla Verde near Veracruz on the eastern coast of Mexico. Of the 76 men on board 32 were drowned, 7 were captured by the Mexican Navy, and the remainder were picked up by British, French and Spanish men-of-war stationed in the area. The *Somers* was a brig that had been launched in New York in 1842. It measured 100'-0" between perpendiculars, had a 25'-0" moulded beam and an 11'-0" depth in hold and weighed 259 tons. Its ten 32-pounder cannonades and top speed of 11 knots were reasons why it was used to help enforce a blockade of Veracruz in the fall of 1846 during the Mexican-American War.

The *Somers*, described as very fast and very much over-rigged, was pursuing a sail that was attempting to run the blockade at 10 am on the 8th when it was hit by a heavy squall. "We were still under topsails, courses, jib and spanker," Lieutenant Semmes would explain in the official report. "I was myself standing on the lee arms chest having just passed over from the weather quarter, and with my spy-glass in hand..." The crew was in the act of shortening the sail when the

squall struck. "It did not appear to be very violent, nor was its approach accompanied by any foaming of the water or other indications...But the brig being flying-light, having scarcely any water or provisions, and but six tons of ballast on board, she was thrown over almost instantly, so far as to refuse to obey her helm..." Semmes ordered the masts cut away but this was for naught as the *Somers* sank to the bottom in ten minutes. A court of inquiry exonerated Semmes from any blame in the sinking and he later became one of the most famous naval heroes in the nineteenth century as a member of the Confederate navy in the Civil War.

It should be mentioned that the historical value of the *Somers* is enriched by an incident that took place on its maiden voyage in 1842. A mutiny was attempted by a group led by Philip Spencer, the son of the Secretary of War John Spencer. The mutiny failed and Captain Alexander Mackenzie, a strict disciplinarian, had Spencer and two cohorts hung after a court-martial was conducted at sea by the officers and captain Mackenzie was later tried by a Navy court martial on charges including murder but was acquitted of all of them. The *Somers* gained a bad reputation among sailors, a traditionally superstitious lot, after this incident since they considered the ship now cursed and haunted by the ghosts of the three hanged men. This reputation was obviously not helped by subsequent events of

¹ Rear Admiral in the Mexican Navy and graduate student in physical oceanography, presented a seminar entitled, "Why U.S. Navy Ship Sunk Off Veracruz?," on March 28, 1990.

1846. On a more positive note, this incident on the *Somers'* training voyage provided the impetus to set up a land-based training facility which became the U.S. Naval Academy. And on a final literary note, Herman Melville heard about the event from his cousin, the second in command on the voyage, and based his novella *Billy Budd* on the *Somers* incident.

The oceanographic circumstances

The *Somers* was a warship lost not in a battle against another ship but in a battle against nature, although pondering the extremely brief span of time between the genesis of the "battle" and the deposition of the ship on the bottom one is tempted to muse that the crew would have preferred a battle of the former type. Recent observations have shown that the combination of winds and currents in the area in which the *Somers* sunk can be treacherous in the extreme at times.

The port of Veracruz is located between Vergara Bay to the north and Mocambo Bay to the southeast. When there are no prevailing eastern winds the currents run from the southeast to the northwest in the nearshore region between Point Antón Lizardo, the farthest eastern point of Mocambo Bay, and the nearshore reefs off Veracruz. A prevailing north wind imparts a stress that reverses the current between Point Antón Lizardo and the reefs. Since there is not enough sill depth in the channel off Point Antón Lizardo to release all the pressure built up by the wind stress, a counter-current is formed between

Point Mocambo and Isla Sacrificios in the northern part of Mocambo Bay. This counter-current opposes the wind direction and also seems to turn and run between Arrecife Blanquilla and Isla Verde.

Current meters were placed at the locations (1870 between Isla Sacrificios and the coast; 1871 between Isla Verde and Arrecife Anegada de Adentro) and drifter buoys were released in different seasons in various locations in the area. Velocities of around 1 knot for the observed counter-current at location 1870 were sustained for several hours during typical north wind events. The counter-current was observed only in the upper 5 meters of the water column during the north wind events as it disappeared soon after the north winds died. Current meter array 1871 measured sustained currents of over 1 knot during north wind events that persisted for at least a day after the cessation of the wind as opposed to the almost instant cessation of the counter-current at location 1870.

In the mid-1800's Arrecife Gallega was not connected to Veracruz as it is today, and thus there was an opening between the port of Veracruz and Vergara Bay to the north. This meant that a prevailing northern wind would also produce and intense eastward current between Veracruz and Arrecife Gallega. This would combine with the counter-current formed between Point Mocambo and Isla Sacrificio to cause an even stronger counter-current opposed to the prevailing wind to flow between Arrecife Blanquilla and Isla Verde. The large waves formed there by the oppo-

sing winds and currents struck the *Somers* when she was in the convergence area and sunk her in ten minutes.

Recent developments

In May 1987 the wreckage of the *Somers* was described by James Delgado, the Head Maritime Historian of the National Park Service, as lying "in 103 to 107 feet of water off Isla Verde, in the approximate location noted by 1847 U.S. charts of Veracruz as being the locale of *Somers* wreck. The vessel lies on her starboard side on a slightly silty sand bottom. The wooden upper works have been eaten by marine organisms, leaving the outline of the hull preserved by the copper sheathing and a thin veneer of copper-impregnated hull timbers. The bow with the stern, is clearly discernable, as is the port side of the hull running aft to the sternpost and the upright but detached rudder. The starboard side of the hull is partially discernable but disappears into the sediment. The hull's form is intact to just about the level of the berth deck; the length was measured at 100.5 feet, a near match for the recorded length of *Somers* between perpendiculars."

This discovery was considered an exceptional find because of both the relatively intact condition of the wreck and the rich historical significance of the *Somers*. The discovery of the wreck has also brought forth some interesting questions concerning international law. The official United States government position is that the *Somers*, having not been sunk

as the result of a hostile action but rather as the result of natural circumstances, cannot be considered a prize of war. Thus all artifacts and personnel on board belong to the U.S. Navy which has never relinquished ownership. The official Mexican government position differs somewhat from this interpretation. They surmise that since the *Somers* is located within the boundaries of Mexico's territorial waters all artifacts recovered are the property of México. An agreement between the two governments has been made to collaborate in scientific and marine archaeological research. Presently the collaboration is between the two Navys, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the U.S. and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) of Mexico.

Questions and answers

Dr. Bass: Who discovered the wreck?

Answer: George Belcher, and art-dealer and deep-sea diver in June 1956, although not reported until November 1987.

Dr. Reid: How deep is the shipwreck?

Answer: Between 103 and 107 feet (around 32 m) in the channel between Isla Verde and Arrecife Blanquilla.

Dr. Ichiye: The cause of this wreck was the torque produced by the winds and currents.

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