



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



The Search for two Ancient Adversaries

The Texas Navy works to discover the wreck of the first Texas Navy flagship *Invincible* and the Mexican Man-of-War *Moctezuma* - two ships that faced each other in battle in 1836.



The discovery of an ancient shipwreck at Boca Chica Beach on Padre Island in deep south Texas, thought to be the Mexican Man-of-War *Moctezuma*, promises to hold many treasures for archeologists and Naval historians alike. The *Moctezuma*, a 20-gun Mexican Man-of-War, was destroyed by gunfire from the Texas ship *Invincible* when she ran aground. Interestingly enough, the *Invincible* was also destroyed, a year later, while she sat stuck on a sand bar. The *Invincible*, however, was destroyed by the ocean, not enemy gunfire.

The *Moctezuma* had two 68 pound and eight 32 pound Paixhan guns. The Paixhans used a hollow shell that burst upon impact scattering shrapnel in a deadly "shotgun blast" effect, which was effective when used against troops on an exposed deck, but not sufficient to cause any real harm to the hull of a ship. The

Invincible, built as a slaver in Baltimore, carried only eight guns, but made up for her smaller guns with superior ordinance. The battle was short and brutal. The *Invincible* made two passes, guns blazing and within a short time the Mexican craft was in flames. The crew, wet and tired from the short swim to shore; could only stand by and watch, as the now abandoned pride of the Mexican Navy burned to the waterline.

MOCTEZUMA DISCOVERY

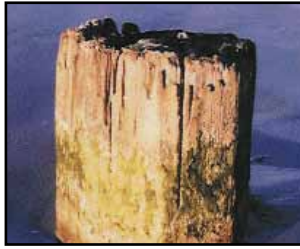
The timbers of the ship's hull are shown sticking out of the sand. In the center is clearly seen the main mast of the ship, shaped in an



octagon. Mounted on one of the timbers is a small metal plate with a wooden peg inserted.

The wreck was discovered by members of the Lower Rio Grande Power Squadron of the United States Power Squadrons, and the site has since been secured by the Texas General Land Office.

In March 2005, Texas General Land Office Director of Archives, Texas Navy Admiral Jerry Drake, began making plans for the first organized archeological trip to the wreck site. "Since my training is in archeology, I am very excited about this find" said Drake. "I have some theories about Republic of Texas era warships, and this should help prove or disprove them. It's a very exciting time for the Texas Navy."



Detail of the Main Mast

Field Report

– Shipwreck Site, Boca Chica, Texas, May 10, 2005
filed by Admiral Jerry Drake, M.A.

Overview

On May 7, 2005 my wife Vickie and I visited the site of the shipwreck discovered by members of the United States Power Squadron on Boca Chica beach. The wreck is located in the



proximity of the Texas-Mexico border, on the Texas side of the boundary. (NOTE: All references to specific coordinates have been omitted from this report.) The wreck was quite easy to find, although the location itself is remote. Boca Chica appears to be sparsely visited and those visitors that do penetrate to the area of the wreck seem to have taken only a passing interest in it.

The wreck is situated in a region of shifting sand dunes, many of which are in excess of twenty feet in height. The beach in this area appears to be highly unstable. The wreck was exposed on the day we visited, but a photograph sent to Admiral Walter Nass by a USPS member taken in February shows the wreck to have been almost completely buried at that time.

The wreck is situated at the tide line. It is tilted at a slight incline toward the ocean with the bowsprit oriented south, aligned with the beach. A large portion of the wreckage is present. The exposed timbers appear to correspond with the ship from a level just above the water line down. It is not known how much of the vessel is still intact below the sand. However, the timbers that are visible are notable for their remarkable state of preservation. Short of chinking, the various exposed ribs of the ship are fully intact.

Of particular interest is the forequarter of the vessel, which still has a portion of the bowsprit intact. On the day we visited this was the most heavily exposed portion of the wreckage. The timbers making up the bow are in extraordinary condition and remain tightly grooved.



The wreck itself appears to be stable. Marine life and exposure to the open air have caused some damage to the exposed timbers, but overall the exposed material is in an excellent state of preservation. Accurate coordinates were plotted for the

site, so even if it were to be fully reclaimed by the beach it can still be relocated.

Description of the Wreckage

From the amount of wreckage exposed it was easy to get an idea of the size of the vessel. The length of the exposed wreckage is 80 feet (24.384 meters), with a beam of 20 feet (6.096 meters.) A large wooden beam is situated roughly amidships and is perpendicular to the remainder of the wreck.

This beam has a diameter of 19 inches (48.26 centimeters) and appears to be the mainmast. The mainmast, although circular, is rough-hewn, giving it a slightly octagonal shape. Members of the Power Squadron described finding an iron bolt jutting out from the base of this mast, although it was not visible during our visit. An attempt to excavate to the level of the bolt proved futile due to wave action.



There are two additional perpendicular beams nestled side by side to the forequarter of the vessel.

Each beam is square, measuring 7 inches by 7 inches (17.78 centimeters by 17.78 centimeters). The two beams nestled together create a rectangular shape measuring 7 inches by 14 inches (17.78 centimeters by 35.56 centimeters). It is tempting to

refer to this structure as the foremast, but its rectangular shape and close proximity to the bow make this designation problematic without further investigation. However, in all likelihood this structure is some sort of mast support.

The bow, itself, is in an excellent condition. A portion of the bowsprit is still present and is situated well above water level. The ribs in this area of the vessel are the best exposed and have remained in good condition despite being open to the elements.

The aft quarter of the ship is not as well exposed as the fore. It is



possible to observe many of the ship's ribs to the larboard side, but the starboard ribs are almost completely buried.

None of the rudder compartment is visible. A search was made for the remains of a spanker mast, but probing with a trowel proved fruitless. It is unlikely that a ship of this size, however, would sport a spanker mast.

On the day of our visit 34 ship ribs were exposed. The ribs alternated between 4 inches by 5 inches (10.16 centimeters by 12.7 centimeters) and 5 inches by 6 inches (10.16 centimeters by 15.24 centimeters). Additional ribs were located on both the starboard and larboard sides with only a slight amount of excavation by trowel.

The wreck is oriented with the bow facing south, paralleling the line of the beach. It is inclined slightly toward the sea, such that

the beams to larboard remain under water. The ship is located at the tide line and may only be visible during low tide.

Environmental Conditions

The overall material condition of the wreck is good. Wood below the water line remains quite firm. The timbers of the ship appear to be wicking water from the ocean into the extremities of the exposed timbers, helping the timbers remain moist and, therefore, high in saline content. Those sections of timber that have begun to fully dry, especially in the exposed ribs to starboard at the bow, have taken on a spongy consistency.

The wreck is buried too deeply to be easily preyed upon by treasure hunters. Additionally, the heavy law enforcement presence on Boca Chica provided by the U.S. Border Patrol makes unobserved pilfering impossible.

Other than the sun and heat, the greatest enemy of this wreck appears to be biological organisms. Moss, barnacles, and various species of mollusks infest the exposed timbers, especially on the



larboard side and around the mainmast. Removal of a few areas of infestation via trowel exposed clear damage inflicted by the presence of these various life forms.

Surprisingly, wave action does not appear to be a contributing

factor to the deterioration of this vessel. Physical erosion appears to be mitigated and there was no clearly observable damage due to the presence of the wreck at the tide line.

Is it the Moctezuma?

There is no physical evidence at the site of this wreck to confirm that it is the Mexican schooner-of-war Moctezuma. However, there are some tantalizing clues. This ship is clearly a schooner, as opposed to a cutter, ketch, yawl, or other light vessel known to have been in use on the Texas coast. Although the historic literature has yet to provide a description of the Moctezuma, it is known that it was boasting a crew of 77 when it was captured by USS Grampus on August 28, 1832. This crew component is consistent with a vessel the size of the Boca Chica wreck.

Additionally, the Boca Chica wreck is in the correct location to be the Moctezuma. Invincible engaged Moctezuma near the mouth of the Rio Grande and apparently ran the ship aground. The location and orientation of the Boca Chica wreck is consistent with the published accounts of the engagement, although additional research is needed in order to gain a better understanding of how the events took place.

Building a case for the Boca Chica wreck as the Moctezuma will require additional primary source research, which is currently under way, and the return of the Carbon14 dating results. Dating will take approximately sixty to ninety days, during which time research into the historical record will be completed.

Submitted,

Jerry C. Drake,
Admiral, Texas Navy

Posted: October 6th, 2005

Exploring the Wreck of the Moctezuma

Jerry C. Drake, Admiral, Texas Navy

In the business of historical research, the discovery of a new, tantalizing piece of evidence can often lead to more questions than answers. The discovery of a shipwreck lying in the beach at Boca Chica, Texas is just one such clue. Originally found some years ago after the tidal surge from a tropical storm laid the wreck bare, through the efforts of the members of the United States Power Squadron, the wreck has been carefully documented in photographs since the time of its initial exposure.

The wreck itself is laid bare at the water line and runs parallel to Boca Chica beach. It is literally a ship in a desert. The wreck appears to be that of a schooner with a length of 80 feet and a beam of 20 feet. According to the Texas Historical Commission, it is one of many such wrecks that litter the Texas coast and one of two wrecks located on Boca Chica. However, it is precisely the location of this particular wreck that raises such intriguing questions.

In early April 1836, while the war with Mexico still raged, the Texas Navy Ship *Invincible* encountered the Mexican Navy Ship *Moctezuma* near the mouth of the Rio Grande. After an exchange of fire, the *Moctezuma* was run aground. It is intriguing to think that Boca Chica's ship in a desert might be the remains of that ill-fated Mexican schooner-of-war. That possibility is very much worth exploring.

The wreck itself has given up few clues as to its identity. Although portions of it are exposed, little can be gleaned from the visible remains. The wreck is certainly the right type of vessel and in the right place to be *Invincible's* former prey. However, those facts in no way confirm this wreck as being that of *Moctezuma* but they do

make it well worth additional study.

The adventures of the Texas Navy will be a hot topic at the 2006 Annual San Jacinto Symposium. Author Jonathan W. Jordan will provide a lecture based on his new book *Lone Star Navy: Texas, the Fight for the Gulf of Mexico, and the Shaping of the American West* and I will be giving a talk and photo presentation entitled "A Ship of Tides: Searching for the Wreck of *Moctezuma*" based on my investigation of the *Moctezuma's* history and the wreck at Boca Chica.

During that forum we will undoubtedly explore many of those tantalizing pieces of evidence that makes studying the Texas Navy such a fascinating subject!

Please note that all shipwrecks found along the Texas coast are important, legally protected archaeological sites. Collecting of artifacts at such sites is strictly prohibited by law.

Search for The Invincible

Meanwhile, the search for the Texan *Invincible* continues, directed by the National Underwater And Marine Agency (NUMA) and the Texas Navy Association. The *Invincible* was lost off the coast of Galveston on August 27, 1837. After a battle with the Mexican brigs, Libertador and Iturbide, the *Invincible* attempted to run into Galveston Harbor, but due to the shallow tide, snagged her rudder on the harbor bar and ran aground. She was then quickly pounded to pieces by the breakers until her hull completely disappeared.

The problem with the search, as always, is a lack of data pinpointing the wreck site. On an 1853 chart a wreck is shown on the beach just east of what is now Stewart Beach Park and slightly west of some abandoned condominium buildings. This chart also shows the wrecks of the *Zavala* and the *Brutus*, so there is a possibility, however slim, that this marked wreck is the *Invincible*.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Texas Archeological sites and artifacts are protected by State Laws for their preservation, so future generations of Texans can enjoy them and learn from them. **IT IS A CRIME** to alter, deface or remove anything from a Texas Archeological site.

Other Ports of Call related to this subject.

[Medical Supplies purchased for the *Invincible* \(from the Texas State Archives\)](#)

The Invincible

Commanders
Capt. Jeremiah Brown
Aug 27, 1837
Mar 1836-Apr 1837

Capt. Henry L. Thompson
Apr-Aug 27, 1837
Flagship, Apr-Aug, 1837



Commissioned: 18 Jan 1836
Class: Schooner
Compliment: 70'
Length: 75'
Tons: 125
Guns: 2-18 pounders
2- 9 pounders
4-6 pounders
Disposition: Wrecked
Painting by Fred Toler