



# Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



COMMODORE HENRY LIVINGSTON THOMPSON  
2nd Commander of the Texas Navy & the Yucatan Expedition of 1837

by William P. Haddock

EMERGING FROM THE SHADOWS OF HISTORY, Henry Livingston Thompson led the Texas Navy on one of its most spectacular and controversial campaigns during his brief tenure as the second commander of the Texas Navy during the summer of 1837. For the damage inflicted on the Mexican Navy, shipping, and coastal towns, including the raising of the Lone Star flag on Mexican soil, the Texas Navy, with its tiny fleet and daring sailors, under the leadership of Commodore Thompson, would become known south of the Rio Grande as los diablos Tejanos—the Texan devils.

## Early Life

OTHER THAN BEING REGARDED BY HIS COMPATRIOTS as a competent sailor and ship owner, not much is known about Thompson's life prior to his service to the Republic of Texas. In 1832, he was the master of three small merchant vessels registered at New Orleans: the Ohio (a 44 ton schooner), the Annette (a 44 ton schooner), and the William A. Tyson (a 61 ton schooner). A year later, he purchased the Empress, a 59 ton schooner. His involvement in merchant shipping may have taken him as far as Chile, where he received a delivery of Chilean cotton and seeds. It is also believed that Henry Livingston Thompson was the "Thompson" who was listed as the master of the Colonel Fannin, the merchant schooner that carried volunteers, military supplies, and government communiqués to Velasco and Galveston in August and November of 1836.

## Appointment as Captain in the Texas Navy

ON DECEMBER 1, 1836, PRESIDENT SAM HOUSTON appointed Thompson as a captain in the Texas Navy, and the Senate confirmed the appointment the same day. However, there was no vessel for Captain Thompson to command. All of the ships of the Texas Navy were being overhauled either in New York (the Invincible and Brutus) or in New Orleans (the Liberty), because no ship repair facilities existed in Texas. Ultimately, the young Republic could not afford the repairs. The Liberty was sold at auction. The Invincible and Brutus avoided the auctioneer's gavel when Samuel Swartwout, a New York land speculator and fund-raiser for the Texas Revolution, personally paid the bill for their maintenance. The Invincible and Brutus returned to Galveston in April 1837, and President Houston named Captain Thompson as commander of the Invincible and of the fleet. The time was then ripe to implement an audacious plan, devised by Secretary of the Navy, S. Rhodes Fisher, and Commodore Thompson that would become one of the most celebrated and controversial adventures of the Texas Navy.

## **The Balance of Power in the Gulf**

THE BATTLE OF SAN JACINTO (APRIL 21, 1836) decisively settled the Texas Revolution on land, but open warfare continued at sea between the navies of Texas and Mexico. The Mexican Navy routinely blockaded Texas ports, and the smaller ships of the Texas Navy would emerge from their ports, at great risk, to break the blockades. As late as April 17, 1837, Secretary Fisher witnessed, from the beach near the mouth of the Brazos River, the battle that ensued between the Independence and two Mexican brigs, the Vencedor del Alamo and Libertador, which resulted in the loss of the Independence.

Moreover, the Mexican government repudiated the Treaties of Velasco and was planning a major campaign into Texas during 1837, including a massive invasion by sea. By the spring of 1837, an army of some 10,000 troops was stationed at Matamoros, waiting for the time when Mexico had adequate naval resources to mount its invasion of Texas.

President Houston and the Congress were at odds over naval strategy. About the only consensus was that it was unacceptable for Texas' ports to be blockaded and that the Texas Navy should break any blockade and keep open the vital trade routes between Texas and New Orleans. The Congress and the general public favored aggressive action against Mexico, including operations in Mexican waters against the Mexican Navy and commerce from other nations consisting of war materials. President Houston, however, believed that if Mexico was not provoked, Texas would be left alone. Thus, he believed that the Texas Navy should maintain a purely defensive posture in Texas waters. Moreover, he felt that the Republic should not risk its few naval assets against a "vastly superior force" with operations outside of Texas waters.

Outside the immediate threat of the Mexican Navy, the Republic also was vying with the United States, Great Britain, Spain, and France to maintain a naval presence in the Gulf to achieve their

strategic purposes. Texas was interested in protecting the virtual ocean highway that existed between New Orleans and the Texas coast while trying to limit the flow of war materials into Mexico. Great Britain and France were officially neutral in the conflict between Texas and Mexico and were using their navies to protect merchant commerce between their countries and their trading partners.

Despite this political situation, Secretary Fisher was determined to avenge the loss of the Independence. Weighing the pros and cons of a mission that would break the Mexican blockades and force the Mexican Navy to defend Mexico's ports, Commodore Thompson and Secretary Fisher decided that they must proceed, and proceed they did on June 11, 1837, after spending the previous day escorting the merchant schooner Texas, with its cargo of supplies for the army, to Matagorda.

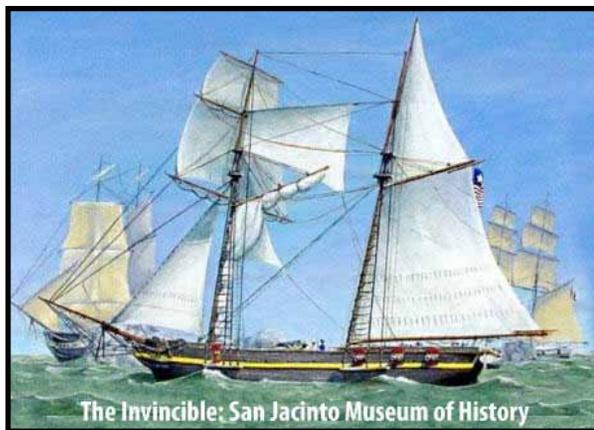
### **A Campaign that Became Legend**

COMMODORE THOMPSON COMMANDED THE FLEET from his flagship, the Invincible, and Secretary Fisher decided to accompany his fledgling navy on its mission. Secretary Fisher served only as a volunteer, keeping Commodore Thompson completely in command. His stated reason for volunteering was to help control mutinous sailors who had been sitting idle in Galveston.

Historians believe his true motivation was a combination of adventure-seeking and attempting to distance himself from the inevitable wrath of President Houston. Secretary Fisher's stated reason for volunteering most likely represented his motivation, because his orders to Commodore Thompson stated that President Houston authorized the mission. The orders stated, in part:

[When you are satisfied that the Discipline and trim of your fleet may justify, you move south and seek the enemy wherever you may think you can find him and I will here observe that the present cruise will in all probability fix the character and reputation of our

navy. . . . His Excellency is rather conscious that we are running an improper risk and required some persuasion to indulge him to extend his consent to the present cruise.

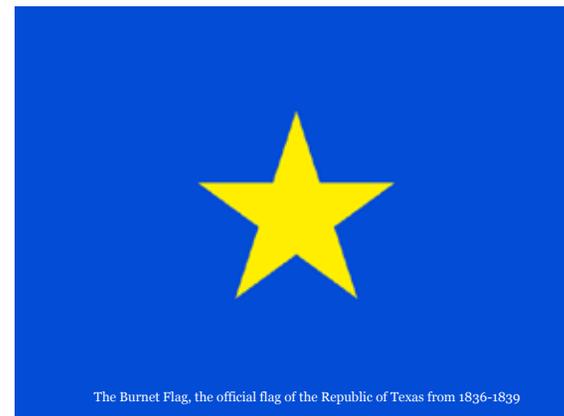


Sailing toward the Mississippi River passes, the fleet set out on what would be an unsuccessful search for Mexican vessels that were interfering with the vital trade route between New Orleans and Texas. By July 1, the fleet separated. The Invincible sailed directly to Mujeres Island (6 miles off the east coast of Yucatan and 600 miles south of the Mississippi River passes), and the Brutus sailed to the same destination via Cape Antonio (near the westernmost point of Cuba). By July 7, both ships would rendezvous at Cancun Island, where the crews gathered wood, caught sea turtles to supplement the food stores on their ships, and refreshed their water supply from the island's wells and springs.

### **Raising the Lone Star Flag on Cozumel Island**

ON JULY 12, THE FLEET SAILED FOR COZUMEL Island, a sparsely populated island about 30 miles in length and 12 miles from the mainland. Commodore Thompson was taken by the beauty of the island with its "delightful soil, pure water, and a forest abounding in the finest kinds of timber, logwood, mahogany, Spanish cedar and abundance of fruits of various kinds." On July 13, he took possession of the island, in the name of the Republic of Texas, by raising the "Single Star Banner of our country" to a height of 45 feet near the

beach. Captain James D. Boylan, commander of the Brutus, ordered the firing of a 23-gun salute. He then swore in a new alcalde (mayor) who swore his loyalty to Texas. Captain Boylan noted that the few inhabitants "expressed their good feelings for us at the same time swearing allegiance to our cause." This was because Yucatan was in rebellion against the centralist Mexican government.



Commodore Thompson would later claim his actions at Cozumel Island were designed to force Mexico to withdraw its forces from the Texas coast; however, in the Navy Department's view, Thompson actually intended to make Cozumel a territory of the Republic, which the Mexican government would have seen as a provocation of war. On July 17, the fleet anchored off the western shore of Contoy Island. The landing party "found domestic animals but no inhabitants altho [sic] there were recent marks of people having been in the houses." They were delighted to find pens full of turtles. Leaving Contoy Island on July 19, the fleet rounded Cape Catouche and continued west to Silan, a distance of about 100 miles. On July 21, a landing party went ashore at Silan, escorted either by Indians who were recruited at Cozumel or Mujeres or by a crew of a captured canoe. The fleet captured numerous "canoes" in the early course of the Yucatan campaign. Canoes were the chief vessels used for coastal trade around the peninsula and were not necessarily small craft. Some reached 32 feet in length and measured up to 9 feet in beam. These vessels also may have had up to two sails; however, in

this configuration, the canoes were not very maneuverable. John Lloyd Stephens, and explorer and archaeologist, wrote in 1842, that getting one of these canoes to come about was like maneuvering a 74-gun ship.

### **Raising the Texas Navy Flag at Silan**

DURING THE RAID ON SILAN, ALL OF THE LOCAL inhabitants fled to the mountains, but witnesses recalled seeing a flag raised bearing “a white star and red and white bands.” The fleet then sailed down to Telchac, where the Brutus seized the merchant schooner Julia and two canoes.



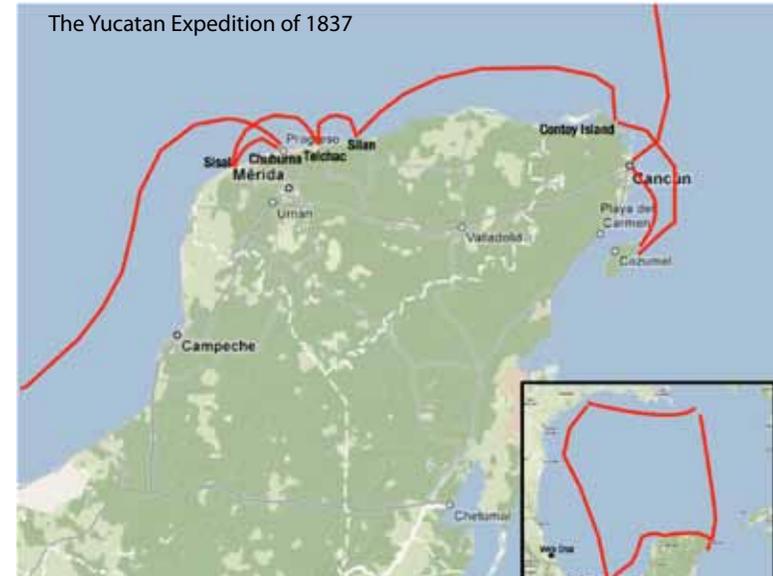
Continuing westward another 32 miles, the fleet arrived at Sisal on July 22. The Brutus captured two merchant schooners, the Union from Mujeres and the Invincible from Campeche. The Union was set free after the captain ransomed his vessel for \$600, and the Mexican Invincible was set free after its cargo was seized. Additionally, the Brutus burned 18 canoes and five pirogues in Sisal’s harbor.

### **Hostile Reception as Chuburna and Sisal**

THE FLEET THEN ANCHORED OFF CHUBURNA ON JULY 24. There the landing party was met by a squad of Mexican cavalry, and gunfire was exchanged. After receiving hostile gunfire, the landing party then burned two nearby towns, most likely San Andres and Cheventun. Later in the day, the Brutus captured the Mexican

schooners, Aventura and Telégrafo.

The Brutus next sailed to Sisal to investigate conditions there. Upon receiving a favorable report, the Commodore decided the two ships should go there. On July 26, Commodore Thompson sent a captured canoe into Sisal harbor, under a flag of truce, with a messenger to demand payment of \$25,000 to prevent the



destruction of the town. Leaving the captured vessels, Aventura and Telégrafo outside, the Brutus and Invincible entered Sisal’s harbor, flying flags of truce. The fleet was greeted by a 24 pound cannon shot fired from the old Spanish fort. The Brutus and Invincible anchored, lowered their flags of truce, and hoisted the colors of the Texas Navy. The Brutus fired two rounds at the port, but the shots fell short. The fleet, lying in calm waters, then called upon their oarsmen to tow the Brutus and Invincible closer to shore under a regular fire from the shore. Finally the Brutus and Invincible brought their starboard guns to bear on the port and began firing. The subsequent artillery duel lasted 2 hours, 40 minutes. Neither Texas vessel sustained any serious damage before Commodore Thompson ordered a withdrawal.

Commodore Thompson had the Aventura burned after releasing its 40 prisoners. The fleet then sailed for the Alacrane Islands, some 80 miles north-northeast of Sisal. En route, the Invincible captured the schooner Abispa. Thompson then sent the Abispa and Mexican Invincible, under the control of his officers, to Matagorda for adjudication. The first time that a Texan would learn about this campaign would be when these vessels reached Matagorda and stories of the Navy's exploits were published in the Telegraph and Texas Register.

### **Capture of the Eliza Russell**

ON AUGUST 3, THE BRUTUS CAPTURED THE 180 TON British me chant schooner, Eliza Russell. This vessel was carrying a cargo from Liverpool to Sisal which consisted of civilian merchandise consigned by Liverpool merchants David and Thomas Willis to Julian Gonzales- Gutierrez, a Mexican merchant in Merida. Commodore Thompson ordered a prize crew to take the Eliza Russell to Galveston for adjudication.

This incident would begin a diplomatic and legal dispute between the Texas and British governments— a dispute that President Houston wanted to avoid at all costs—since Great Britain was only one of a small handful of countries to recognize the Republic of Texas. Moreover, President Houston did not want to provoke the Royal Navy and cause it to increase its presence in the Gulf of Mexico, since Great Britain also had diplomatic relations with Mexico.

The dispute was over the nature of the cargo carried by the Eliza Russell. Papers revealed that Gutierrez had title to the consigned goods; thus, they were Mexican property, although not contraband of war. Thompson's sailing orders only authorized him to seize neutral powers' ships that were carrying "contraband of war." Before the dispute was settled, the Royal Navy would treat any ship flying the Texas flag as a pirate ship. Ultimately, the Texas government settled the dispute by paying \$4,000 to the British government.

On August 12, the Mexican mail schooner, Correo de Tobasco, was captured, and the government communiqués provided highly useful intelligence, revealing that the Mexican Gulf Fleet was anchored at Vera Cruz and that the Independencia, General Terán, and General Bravo were to sail east. The fleet then spent three days sailing the sea lanes between Vera Cruz and Frontera in an unsuccessful attempt to intercept the Mexican ships.

The fleet then sailed to Chilpetec, where the prisoners were ordered to replenish the fleet's food and water supplies. The fleet then sailed toward Vera Cruz, but gave it a wide berth, since much of the Mexican Gulf Fleet was anchored there. Nonetheless, in the passage around Vera Cruz, the Brutus captured the Rafelita.

As the mission ended, the fleet returned to Galveston with the captured Correo de Tobasco and Rafelita in tow; however, the Rafelita was lost at sea

### **The Final Battle of the Invincible**

THE FLEET RETURNED TO GALVESTON ON AUGUST 26. Just past high tide, the Brutus, towing the Correo de Tobasco, sailed across the treacherous sand bars off of Galveston and continued into Galveston harbor. The deeper draft Invincible anchored overnight outside the harbor, so it could cross the sand bars at high tide. The next morning, the Mexican brigs, Iturbide and Libertador, which were pursuing the Texas fleet, came into sight. Commodore Thompson sailed the Invincible out from the sand bar to engage the Mexican fleet. Meanwhile, in attempting to come to the Invincible's aid, the Brutus ran aground and sheared off its rudder, rendering it useless in battle.

The battle between the Invincible and the Mexican fleet lasted the day with the Invincible and the Mexican fleet criss-crossing the mouth of Galveston Bay, exchanging gunfire. In the evening, as the tide was receding, Commodore Thompson tried to draw the two larger Mexican ships close to shore in an attempt to cause them

to run aground. Instead, it was the Invincible that drifted aground near what is believed to be the present day Stewart Beach. There are conflicting reports whether the Invincible was grounded after suffering catastrophic damage to its masts or losing its rudder on a nearby sandbar. Over the next 48 hours, the Invincible was destroyed by the pounding of the sea, and the Mexican fleet withdrew to Matamoros for repairs.



A few weeks later, a hurricane known as Racer's Storm (named after the Royal Navy schooner, HMS Racer, which first observed the storm off eastern Yucatan), destroyed the Brutus along with every ship in the harbor and every building in Galveston, except the old Mexican customhouse.

### Investigation & Relief from Command

COMMODORE THOMPSON NEVER COMMANDED another ship of the Texas Navy—not because the Invincible was lost while under his command, but because upon reaching shore, his crew immediately started charging him with cruelty in the treatment of his own crew and of captured sailors and appropriating captured cargoes for his own personal use. The validity of these charges has always been questionable, since the junior officers and sailors

operated in a state of near mutiny.

On September 17, he was relieved of his duties, and the Navy Department initiated an investigation into his conduct in connection with the Yucatan expedition and the loss of the Invincible. The department sent him a deposition consisting of eight questions, which Commodore Thompson answered on September 20. On September 24, the department sent Thompson a letter expressing its disapproval of all but one of his answers. The only answer that was not disputed regarded the purpose of the Yucatan campaign itself: "To pursue the enemy."

The same day, the Navy Department sent Commodore Thompson copies of sworn charges made by six officers of the Invincible charging him with inattention to duty, conduct unbecoming of an officer, oppression, and failure to stand by the vessel. Commodore Thompson replied on September 30, requesting a court-martial as to all charges. The only problem was the law required that the jury could consist of no fewer than five members, and no more than half of the members could be junior to the officer being tried. Because there were not three commissioned officers with the rank of captain, a court-martial could not be held, and President Houston dismissed Commodore Thompson from naval service effective October 7, 1837.

### The Texas Navy Fleet

Commanded by Commodore Thompson

Ship	Invincible	Brutus
Commissioned	Jan. 18, 1836	Jan. 25, 1836
Wrecked	Aug. 27, 1837	Oct. 6, 1837
Type	Schooner	Schooner
Displacement	125 tons	128 tons
Length	75 feet	90 feet
Crew	70	40
Armament	2, 18 lb. cannons 2, 9 lb. cannons 4, 6 lb. cannons	1, 18 lb. swivel 9 smaller guns

## **Death**

COMMODORE THOMPSON DIED INTESTATE IN Houston on November 1, 1837. General Thomas J. Rusk delivered the grave side eulogy that was heard by what was described in the Texas Telegraph as “the largest and most respectable assemblage of citizens which has ever attended a similar occasion in this city.” He was survived by his wife, Abigail H. Royal Thompson, a widow he married in New Orleans in 1825, and their daughter Rebecca Amanda Thompson, age ten.

## **Historical Assessment**

THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING COMMODORE Thompson also engulfed Secretary Fisher. President Houston had him impeached. Although the Senate acquitted him of any wrongdoing, the Senators requested that he resign on the ground that the breach between himself and the President was so wide that he could no longer serve effectively.

Despite the controversy surrounding it, the Yucatan campaign was a strategic success, because it kept Texas’ ports free of Mexican naval blockades and took the continuing naval battle deep into Mexican waters. This allowed men, mostly individual adventurers, and munitions to pour into Texas so that the young Republic could secure its defenses against the gathering threat of a Mexican invasion. Moreover, it established Texas’ naval power in the Gulf of Mexico and would make it essential for any enemy to take into account the naval aspect of any future invasion.

By the time the campaign ended off the shore of Galveston, the effects of the Panic of 1837 began impacting the economies of

Texas and Mexico. In Mexico, the resulting unrest required the use of the army, which was stationed at Matamoros, to crush internal rebellions. Then, the Pastry War (November 1838–March 1839) between France and Mexico resulted in the destruction of the Mexican Navy at Vera Cruz.

The Texas and Mexican navies would not engage in hostilities again until 1840.

## **Naval Terminology**

Commodore – According to naval customs of the era, an officer of the rank of captain who is also assigned the command of a fleet, a role normally reserved for an admiral, would be referred to as “commodore.” This is particularly true when there is no separate rank of commodore as existed during the days of the First Texas Navy, (January 1836–October 6, 1837).

Schooner – Sailing ship with two or more masts with the foremost mast shorter than the main mast and having a gaff-rigged lower masts.

Brig – Sailing ship with two masts with square-rigged sails and an additional gaff sail on the mainmast.

Canoe – The canoes commonly used in the sea around the Yucatan peninsula for carrying cargo were of varying sizes. Some reached 32 feet in length and measured up to 9 feet in beam. These vessels may also have had up to two, square-rigged sails.

Pirogue – A canoe made from a single tree trunk.