TEXANA: MIKE COX

Two new books on the Texas Navy

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No one knows when and where he came into this world, and only recently has someone found when and where he died. No statue marks his memory. In fact, only a handful of Texas history buffs even recognize his name. But a tough salt named Jeffarguably did as much as Sam Houston to assure Texas' independence from Mexico.

Houston made his contribution on land. Brown made his on water. He served as captain of the flagship of the Texas Navy, branch of the ragtag military that fought and defeated the largest army in the Western Hemisphere in 1836.


Now the small fleet of Texas Navy books has a new flagship, Jonathan W. Jordan's "Texas Navy," and an able, smartly fitted escort of only slightly less tonnage, John Powers' "Texas Navy." The titles suggest one big difference between the two books: Jordan's covers the full Texas Navy while Powers' concentrates on the revolutionary and early independence years.

One story that both authors tell illustrates the importance of sea power during the Texas Navy's history and shows why Brown deserves to be better remembered. In early 1836, Brown — commissioned as master of the schooner-of-war Invincible on March 12, only six days before the Battle of the Alamo — set sail to patrol the Gulf of Mexico to prevent Mexico from resupplying troops in Texas. On Easter Sunday, April 3, the Invincible attacked the Mexican brig Pocket, renamed a short time before as the Bravo.

Brown splintered the vessel with cannon balls and left it beached and ablaze near what is now Chica, Texas.

When one of his Texas tars yelled down from the rigging "Sail, ho," the captain brought the Invincible about to bear down on an approaching vessel. This ship proved to be the American-flagged brig Pocket. Brown captured the ship and found the barreled gunpowder and other war material intended for the Mexican Army...
trying to put down the rebellion in Texas.

With a Texas crew sailing the Pocket, Brown made for Galveston with his prize. Had the badly needed supplies reached their intended destination, the Mexican Army could have continued to fight even after Houston's April 21 victory over General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. Since the Mexicans outnumbered the Texans, most historians believe Mexico would have prevailed eventually.

Jordan doesn't equivocate in his assessment: "The Texas Navy, as much as the Battle of San Jacinto, saved Texas, and thereby altered the history of the American west."

In fact, contrary to popular opinion, the first engagement of the revolution also happened on salt water. Most Texans with a historical bent probably date the beginning of the fighting to the October 1835 "Come and Take It" affair, in which Texans skirmished with Mexican soldiers sent to Gonzales to reclaim a cannon left there for Indian protection. But as Jordan shows in his impressive new work, the shooting started in June 1835, when a Texas sea captain interdicted a Mexican vessel off the mouth of the Brazos River.

The Atlanta attorney and history buff describes this and subsequent sea battles better than many a novelist could. Consider this passage:

The (Texans) took to battle. Smoke built up faster than the light breeze could blow it away as the two schooners traded cannon shots and musket fire in the darkness. Commanders bellowed orders as they maneuvered to cross the unarmed bow or stern of the enemy . . . All the while, spectators ashore strained to catch a glimpse of the ships through the swirling haze of smoke and darkness. They measured the battle's progress through disembodied orange flashes knifing through the black sky, followed by booms echoing over the rippling waters as the cannon's thunder vainly chased the flying projectiles.

Smell the cordite?

Occasionally, Jordan repeats a phrase that would have been fine just the once. Describing the stormy relationship between provisional Texas governor Henry Smith and his "legislature," he refers to the latter as "meddling sheep." That phrase baahs again on page 38, only a few pages after the first usage.

But such lapses are more than made up for by fine turns of phrase, such as his description of the wreckage of a ship destroyed by the Texas Navy as a reduction to "mere driftwood."

John Powers' book is not as well written as Jordan's, but "The First Texas Navy" is just as well-researched and, unlike Jordan maps, Powers, a retired judge living in Austin, has gone to a lot of trouble to uncover mistakes in previous histories of the n offers ample information Jordan's does not (such as the date of Brown's death). He also includes detailed appendices listing ships that called on the Texas coast during the days of the Texas Navy and exacting detail on legal procedures connected vessels and piracy charges against the Texans.

It's a more narrowly focused work than Jordan's, but both books demonstrate that the Texas Navy is an underserved topic in history written large and small.

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