

# Ship That Inspired 'Billy Budd' Found Off Mexican Coast

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By Dale Champion

The wreck of the star-crossed U.S. Navy ship Somers, whose maiden voyage was the inspiration for Herman Melville's "Billy Budd," has been found in the waters off Veracruz, Mexico, where it sank 141 years ago, a San Francisco exploration group said yesterday.

Expedition leader George Belcher said yesterday that the sailing ship was located last year in 110 feet of water five miles off the Mexican port.

Battered by gale winds, the Somers capsized and sank, with a loss of 39 lives, on Dec. 8, 1846, while chasing a ship attempting to run the U.S. blockade of Veracruz during the Mexican-American War.

Disclosure of the find, he said, was delayed until yesterday to allow time for U.S. and Mexican authorities to work out an accord declaring the shipwreck a historic site, protecting numerous artifacts from plundering by treasure hunters.

In its short years of naval service, Belcher said, the brig Somers gained the reputation as a "cursed ghost ship" and has a memorable place in American history because of an episode on its maiden voyage in 1842.

During the training cruise to the coast of Africa, midshipman Philip Spencer, the 18-year-old son of Secretary of War John Canfield Spencer, and two other crewmen were tried and hanged at sea on charges of planning what may have been the only mutiny attempt in

U.S. naval history.

Herman Melville, whose cousin was second in command of the Somers, became obsessed with the case, which raised a storm of controversy at the time. He used it as the basis for his classic story of injustice at sea, a symbolic tale of the battle of good and evil.

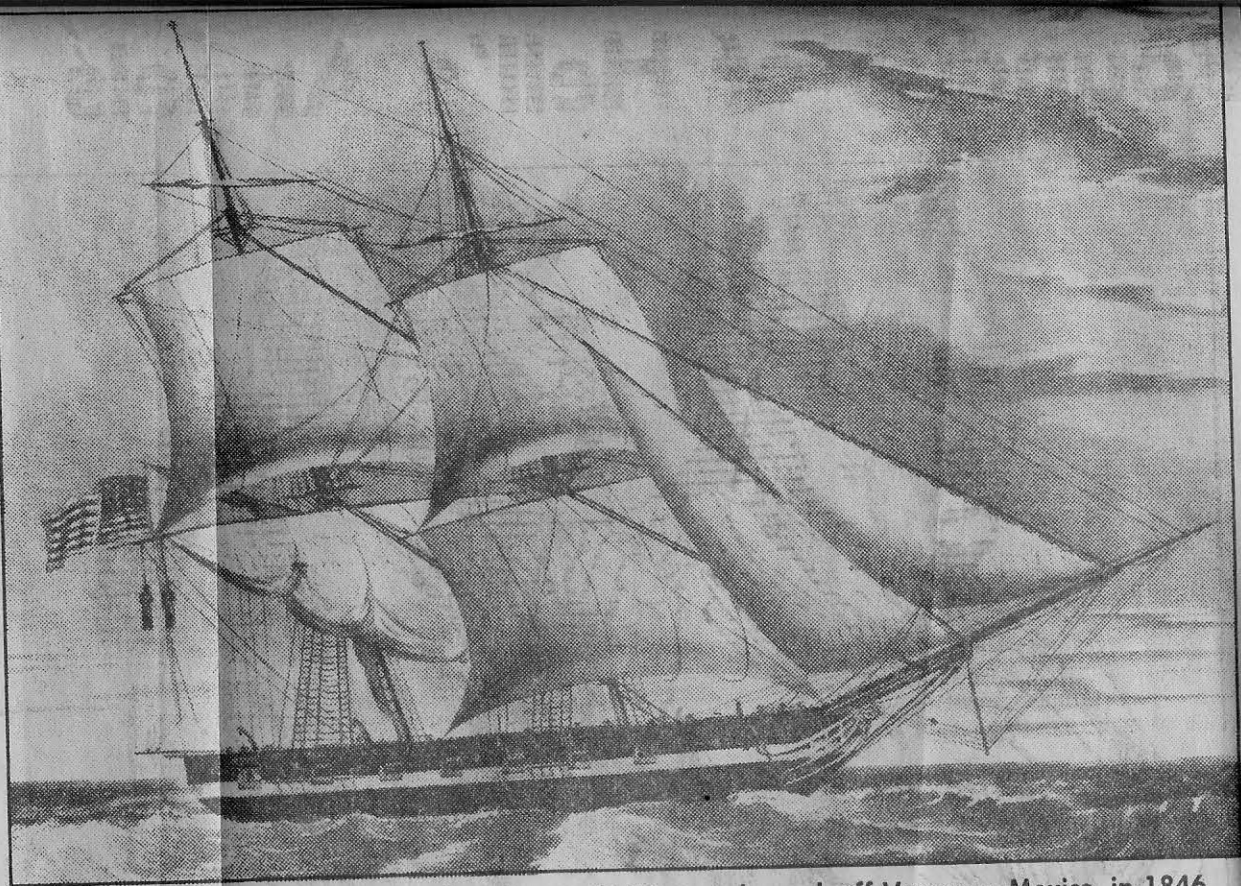
Belcher, whose exploration group spent three frustrating years and \$35,000 on locating the remains of the Somers, said "it was a dream come true, finding one of the most famous or infamous ships in U.S. naval history."

He said divers with the expedition found the remains of the Somers' 10 large canons, the ship's windlass, binnacle, chronometer, chinaware, a wine glass and numerous other objects. "Everything is heavily encrusted with marine organisms," he said. "Of course, the wooden parts of the ship have disappeared from rot and boring worms."

Belcher, a 46-year-old San Francisco art dealer, had been invited by Governor Acosta Lagunes of Veracruz state to organize and conduct a survey of historic shipwrecks in the vicinity of the port city on the east coast of Mexico. In the process Belcher sought out the site of the Somers.

Using sophisticated detection equipment, Belcher, his brother Joel and magnetometer expert Daniel Koski-Karell discovered the wreckage of the Somers on June 2, 1986.

Belcher and others of his expe-



The U.S. brig-of-war Somers, seen here in an old lithograph, sank off Veracruz, Mexico, in 1846

dition party joined National Maritime Historian James Delgado to announce the finding of the Somers at a news conference aboard the ferry boat Eureka, part of the National Maritime Museum's collection of historic vessels, berthed at the Hyde Street Pier in San Francisco.

Delgado, who went to Mexico

and made several dives to check out the wreck of the Somers himself, praised the efforts of the exploration group.

"It's a tremendous archeological site," Delgado said. He also applauded the fact that Belcher and his associates, rather than seeking plunder, hope to recoup the cost of

their exploration through selling videotapes of their dives and the story of their mission for a TV documentary.

Delgado said there was no intention, for the time being anyway, to attempt to recover any of the artifacts of the Somers from their resting place in the Gulf of Mexico