U.S. Navy Researchers Investigate 200-year-old Shipwreck

U.S. Navy researchers with the Navy History and Heritage Command's (NHHC) Underwater Archaeology Branch (UAB), along with staff from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, began exploring what is believed to be the 201-year-old wreckage of the USS Revenge, Feb. 14 off the coast of Rhode Island on Watch Hill Reef.

Lost at sea on a stormy January day in 1811, the Revenge was commanded by Oliver Hazard Perry, one of the Navy's greatest naval officers and best known for defeating the British navy in the War of 1812.

A pair of divers, Charles Buffum, a brewery owner from Stonington, Conn., and Craig Harger, a carbon dioxide salesman from Colchester, Conn., discovered what they believed were the ships remains more than six years ago, but waited before contacting the NHHC's UAB until they were more sure of their find.

One objective of the UAB is to conduct archaeological research on sunken US military craft on behalf of the US Navy. Through undertaking archaeological research, as well as encouraging external collaborations, the Branch has significantly contributed to the understanding of the Navy's and the nation's underwater cultural heritage.

Using a sophisticated autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) from Woods Hole, Navy researchers will attempt to map the wreck site and possibly expand the site by locating nearby pieces of the ship as well, explained George Schwarz, an underwater archaeologist with the NHHC.

Schwarz said divers would return at a later date to explore the site and a subsequent archaeological investigation would determine whether the vessel is indeed the Revenge.

If the remains are indeed that of the Revenge, the location would be deemed a protected U.S. Navy site and no artifacts could be removed.

Buffum, who has long been fascinated by Perry and by shipwrecks of the Rhode Island Coast, said he and Harger have been looking forward to the trip that could confirm that the ship is in fact the Revenge.

"It's been a long time coming, but it's been a fun process. We hoped to do this in the warmer months, but we'll take what we can get. The people from Woods Hole said the robot doesn't care how cold it is," said Buffum, whose brewery recently released Perry's Revenge Ale to celebrate the discovery.

While clear conditions offer excellent visibility for the researcher, especially since the wreck sits in just 10 feet of water Buffum and Harger are glad to assist the team with locating the ship.

"We're just tour guides," said Harger. "We'll show them where it is. We have as much experience on that reef as anyone, we dive it so much."

Prior to contacting the NHHC, Buffum and Harger said they found six cannons as well as an anchor, but because the wreck could belong to the Navy, the two men did not salvage any items.

Sailing through heavy fog en route from Newport, R.I., to New London, Conn., the Revenge, a 14-gun schooner, hit a reef off Watch Hill on Jan. 8, 1811.

Despite efforts to free the vessel from the reef, the crew had to abandon ship. No lives were lost, but Perry's career nearly ended. The 25-year old commander was court martialed, and though exonerated when blame fell on the ship's pilot, Perry's career options were limited. The formerly fast-rising captain could not get command of a ship battling the British along the

Eastern seaboard. He had to settle for the less glamorous position of commanding a fleet of warships in the Great Lakes.

Under Perry's command in 1813, that fleet defeated the British navy at the Battle of Lake Erie, a major naval confrontation during the War of 1812, the battle is seen as a turning point in the war and helped change the course of U.S. history.

In his post-battle report to his superiors, Perry wrote the now famous line: "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

Perry's career rose from the depths and now, 200 years later, divers and researchers hope the Revenge will also become more than a footnote in history.

For more information about the Naval History and Heritage Command, please visit www.history.navy.mil and www.ourflagwasstillthere.org.