

HMS Swift: Scientific Research and Management of Underwater Cultural Heritage in Argentina

Dolores Elkin

*Directora, Programa de Arqueología Subacuática (PROAS)
Instituto Nacional de Antropología
Argentina*

History and Discovery of the HSM Swift

It was 6 pm on the 13th of March 1770 when the British sloop of war *HMS Swift*, based at Port Egmont in the Malvinas/Falkland islands, sank in the Deseado estuary, currently Santa Cruz Province in southern Argentina.

The *Swift* had an overall length of 28 meters and a beam of 8 meters and was armed with fourteen six-pounder cannons and twelve swivel guns. A few days earlier, under the command of Captain George Farmer and with a crew of nearly a hundred men, the *Swift* had left the British base with the purpose of conducting geographical surveys in the region. However, according to the historical documents, strong and persistent winds drove the ship towards the continental shore. The captain decided to enter the Deseado estuary, a natural and well sheltered harbor which had been visited by sailors and explorers since the 16th-century.

An uncharted rock hidden by the high tide caused the stranding and the subsequent sinking of the ship. Except for three unfortunate men, all the crew were able to reach the shore. They survived in extremely precarious conditions, subsisting by hunting and collecting local wildlife.

After some time they made a brave decision: six volunteers and one officer would row back to Port Egmont for help in one of the *Swift*'s cutters. Unbelievably, they succeeded in the enterprise, and one month after the loss of the *Swift* they were rescued by *HMS Favorite*, another sloop of the British squadron.

Figure 1: One of the display cases of the *HMS Swift* exhibit at the Mario Brozoski Museum in Puerto Deseado (Chris Underwood/Instituto Nacional de Antropología)



More than two centuries later the challenge of trying to find the remains of the *Swift* was faced by a group of high school students from Puerto Deseado. They agreed that if the shipwreck was ever found, all its contents would be kept in the town as part of the local historical heritage.

These enterprising young men discovered the remains of the *Swift* in 1982 in an extraordinary state of preservation. A large proportion of the ship's wooden structure was still in place and the artefacts included a wide range of items made of ceramic, porcelain, glass, wood, leather and other materials.

The site was soon declared historical heritage of the province of Santa Cruz and a new museum was created in the town of Puerto Deseado, named Mario Brozoski in honor of one of the young divers who had found the site. Since then all the artefacts recovered from the *Swift* are kept at this museum, where part of the collection is always on display.

The Archaeological Research

The first professional archaeological interventions on the *Swift* site began in January 1998, when the underwater archaeology team of the Argentinean National Institute of Anthropology, under the direction of this author, became responsible for the scientific component of the *Swift* Project. The Mario Brozoski museum would retain its role regarding the conservation and management of the collection.

Several research themes are being addressed by our team. One of them is the way in which the archaeological remains reflect the social hierarchies within the crew. For that reason it was decided to begin the excavation at the stern of the site, where the officers' cabins were located. Numerous pieces of Chinese porcelain, as well as other high quality glass and metal artefacts were found in this area. The team has yet to excavate in an area more likely to be associated with the lower ranks of the crew that may well reveal less prestigious material.

Another topic under study is the diet on board the *Swift*. A very interesting find which sheds light on this subject is a penguin egg, which indicates that the crew collected and consumed local resources in order to augment the supplies provided by the Royal Navy Victualling Board. Other food-related items found in the site include condiments such as pepper and mustard seeds.

We are also addressing some research lines which require the contribution of specialists in ship construction and marine biology. In the first case the main goal is to study the way this ship was built, and some differences have already been detected between the original plans of the ship dating from 1762 and the actual archaeological remains which lie on the seabed. The most significant of these is the modification of the main deck and the addition of a third mast.

The purpose of the study of the site's natural environment is to understand and monitor the impact of factors such as water



Figure 2: Several components of a wooden piece of furniture recovered from the captain's main cabin at the *HMS Swift* site (D. Vainstub/Instituto Nacional de Antropología)



Figure 3: Wood fragment recovered from the *Swift* showing the severe damage caused by the action of marine borers (D. Vainstub/Instituto Nacional de Antropología)

currents, marine biological agents and sediments. Sadly, there is clear evidence of the attack of marine wood borers in many of the timbers which are part of the ship's structure and furniture.

Gradually the archaeological and interdisciplinary research conducted at the *Swift* is contributing to our knowledge of several aspects of this 18th-century vessel and its interaction with its surrounding environment.

The *Swift* project has also provided opportunities for training and exchange of expertise for students and professionals from a number of countries. This is an important component of the project and to date people from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, England, France, Holland, Mexico, United States of America and Uruguay have participated in the various field seasons conducted at the site since 1998.

Among these international experiences it is worth noting the involvement of British institutions and nationals in the *Swift* project illustrating one of the fundamental principles of the UNESCO convention which is to encourage collaboration

between the coastal state and the state of origin of the ship. In 2001 the British Embassy in Argentina sponsored the participation of a professional conservator from the Mary Rose Trust in England in one of the field seasons conducted at the *Swift*, providing a significant input of expertise into the treatment of waterlogged wooden artefacts. The British Embassy also provided a grant which allowed the purchase of chemical products and equipment for the conservation laboratory in the Mario Brozoski Museum.

In 2003 the Nautical Archaeology Society, a UK based organization, together with the Argentinean Embassy in London jointly sponsored the participation of this author in the NAS annual conference in Portsmouth, and in the following year NAS Training organized and sponsored a field season at the *Swift* which included the participation of nine English archaeology students and avocationalists supervised by a maritime archaeologist from NAS, who has subsequently become a formal member of the archaeological research team of the *HMS Swift* Project and the Underwater Archaeology Programme of the Argentinean National Institute of Anthropology.

Threats and Challenges

Being an archaeological site which is clearly protected by law (both at a provincial and national level), the *Swift* is placed in a favorable position, particularly in comparison to the situation faced by most of the underwater cultural heritage in South America, which is often subject to commercial exploitation.

Nonetheless, several issues pose threats to this site. One is the constant development and growth of the nearby harbor, which either directly or indirectly has a negative impact on the wreck site. This is mainly due to the increasing construction work, environmental contamination and heavy traffic, all of which alter the delicate equilibrium of the *Swift* and its surrounding environment.

Another limitation has to do with the conservation resources. Although the project has a part time conservator employed by the Mario Brozoski Museum, the enormous potential of this site in terms of quality, quantity and diversity of archaeological materials which are present exceeds the capacity of both the human resources and the laboratory infrastructure. The progress of the archaeological excavation must therefore adjust to these limitations, and given the combination of the harbor development and the fragile condition of the ship's timbers, we cannot help feeling that the clock is ticking.

Nevertheless, 2006 finds the *Swift* project and Argentinean underwater archaeology in general in a quite promising situation, with increasing legal, technical and financial resources assigned to them. The Argentinean National Research Council (CONICET), the Secretariat of Culture and the Municipal Government of Puerto Deseado are currently sponsoring several aspects of the *Swift* project. Other underwater archaeology projects are being sponsored by the first two institutions, and the current research being conducted on the Dutch vessel *Hoorn* also involves the collaboration with several institutions from the Netherlands.

The *Swift* project exemplifies many of the fundamental principles and spirit of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. The project has a number of clearly defined goals: scientific research, training, exchange of expertise at institutional and private levels, as well the dissemination of information to the public through the museum and publications. This integrated approach has led to the *Swift* project becoming emblematic throughout the region and internationally.

Further Reading

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