

Researchers probe 200-year-old shipwreck off RI

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Researchers lower an underwater robot into Block Island Sound off the Westerly, R.I., coast Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2012, to explore a shipwreck thought to be the USS Revenge, commanded by navy hero Oliver Hazard Perry. The Revenge sank in 1811 after striking a reef. (AP Photo/David Klepper)

(AP) -- For two centuries it rested a mile from shore, shrouded by a treacherous reef from the pleasure boaters and beachgoers who haunt New England's southern coast.

Now, researchers from the U.S. Navy are hoping to confirm what the men who discovered the wreck believe: that the [sunken ship](#) off the coast of Rhode Island is the USS Revenge, commanded by Oliver Hazard Perry and lost on a stormy January day in 1811.

"The Revenge was forgotten, it became a footnote," said Charlie Buffum, a brewery owner from Stonington, Conn., who found the

shipwreck while diving with friend Craig Harger. "We are very confident this is it."

On Wednesday, Buffum and Harger braved the raw weather of Block Island Sound to accompany the researchers as they surveyed the wreck site. The Navy - along with help from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution - is using high-tech sensor equipment to map the site, a first step toward retrieving possible artifacts.

If they're successful, they will illuminate a critical episode in the life of one of the nation's greatest naval officers. Perry is remembered as the Hero of Lake Erie for defeating the British navy in the War of 1812. He was famous for reporting simply "we have met the enemy and they are ours" after the decisive Battle of [Lake Erie](#) in 1813.

Two years earlier, the Revenge and its 25-year-old commander were en route from Newport, R.I. to New London, Conn., when the ship hit a reef in heavy fog. The area is infamous for its rocky, tide-swept reefs that lurk just beneath [shallow waters](#).

When the Revenge struck the reef, Perry ordered the crew to dump some of the ship's canons to lighten the load. The mast was cut. But it wasn't enough to free the ship.

The crew abandoned the Revenge, and not a single man died. But Perry's career was almost scuttled along with his ship.

The South Kingstown, R.I., native was court-martialed, and though he was exonerated, his career languished. Until he was posted to the Great Lakes.

"He was a rising star," said David Skaggs, a professor emeritus at Bowling Green State University who has written a book on Perry. "But

then his ship runs aground. Running a ship aground is not a helpful thing for your career."

Harger and Buffum found the shipwreck six years ago after beer-fueled bull sessions in Buffum's brewery. Both men were experienced recreational divers. Buffum was fascinated by Perry and by shipwrecks off the Rhode Island coast.

They obtained an underwater metal detector and calculated the Revenge's likely resting place by analyzing currents and the location of the reef.

"We knew where he was going, we knew the area," said Harger, of Colchester, Conn. "We sat around in Charlie's brewery talking about where it might have gone."

They dived twice in the area and left empty-handed. The metal detector didn't even turn up a fish hook. The third dive was the charm.

"I look ahead and see this long cylindrical thing," recalled Buffum.

It was a canon.

Harger and Buffum kept their find a secret for five years as they searched the site for more artifacts. They turned up additional canons and other items they believe came from the ship. The wooden timbers had vanished long ago.

They remain convinced they found the Revenge. After all, they said, no other ship carrying canons from that period is known to have sunk in the area.

The Navy won't accept their theory until they have evidence that the

remains laying 10 to 15 feet underwater are indeed the Revenge.

"We were of course interested immediately when we heard," said George Schwarz, an underwater archaeologist with the U.S. Navy's History and Heritage Command, which oversees the identification and management of sunken naval vessels. "If it is the USS Revenge, then it's 200 years old and it's an incredibly important part of American history."

On Wednesday, Schwarz and engineers from Woods Hole used a torpedo-shaped underwater robot to survey the wreck site. The data will take time to analyze, Schwarz said. Depending on the results, the Navy may return with divers to search for artifacts that might bear the ship's name or other evidence of its identity.

Naval shipwrecks remain the property of the Navy, but Schwarz said it's possible that any salvaged artifacts could one day be on display at a local museum.

Buffum and Harger said they're not looking to profit from their discovery, or earn a minor mention in a history book.

"This is just about pure fun," Harger said.

Their find already has inspired the latest addition at Buffum's brewery.

"We've just come out with `Perry's Revenge,'" Buffum said. "It's dark and stormy."

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