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Swedes on the *U.S.S. Monitor*

Nils William Olsson

Recent reports in the nation's media have carried the news of the successful recovery of the anchor of the *U.S.S. Monitor*, the iron-clad which successfully bested the Confederate ironclad *Merrimack* at the Battle of Hampton Roads, VA on March 9, 1862. The *Monitor*, designed by the famous Swedish-born inventor, John Ericsson, was completed in a record 100 days at Greenpoint, Long Island as a counter measure to the rising might of the Confederate Navy. The vessel sank off Cape Hatteras, NC in a storm Dec. 31, 1862, while being towed to Beaufort, NC, to join the blockade of the Confederacy. Since the day of its loss, it had been the subject of much speculation, as to its whereabouts. Ten years ago the *Monitor* was located, lying on the ocean floor near the Cape. Attempts to try to raise her have been virtually abandoned due to her fragile condition. During World War II the *Monitor* was mistakenly identified as an enemy submarine and was badly damaged by bombs from U.S. Navy ships. Aside from the salvaging of minor items, the recent recovery of her 1,500 lb. anchor was a major achievement. Additionally it was possible to get sensational pictures of her, resting on the ocean floor, due to a lull in the usually tempestuous weather conditions at the site. Encrusted with barnacles and rust, the anchor is now being preserved and treated at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC. The University is one of the sponsoring institutions, which is headed by the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration in Cape Hatteras, which had organized the current exploratory operation.

Though, as mentioned above, it is highly unlikely that the entire ship can ever be raised, it is hoped that the characteristic round turret of the vessel, affectionately named "the cheese box on the raft" during the Civil War, and now separated from the hull, can be brought up intact to the surface. This may be the object of the next expedition, now tentatively planned for 1985.

The Battle of Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862 signalled the end of the era of wooden ships. The lesson learned from the encounter was to reverberate around the world, the harbinger of a new age for the ironclads.

In the wake of the enormous interest engendered by the locating of the *Monitor* and the salvaging of her anchor, the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources is seeking genealogical information on the officers

and crewmen of the vessel. Among the officers and crew were also a few Swedes as well as one Norwegian, whose names are listed below. If any SAG reader can provide additional genealogical information on any of these Scandinavian crewmen or their families, he or she is cordially invited to submit such information, which in turn will be turned over to the U.S.S. Monitor Project in Norfolk, VA. Readers should forward such information to the editor of SAG, whose address is listed on the inside of the front cover of this journal. Even the slightest bit of new material is important in adding to the genealogical, as well as biographical information concerning these individuals. The ultimate purpose of the U.S.S. Monitor Project is to discover and publish heretofore unknown facts concerning these crewmen.¹

Scandinavian Crewmen aboard the *Monitor*

1. Anderson, Hans, born in Fjärås Parish, Halland län in Sweden in 1824. He died in Brooklyn. From his hand we have an eyewitness account of the *Monitor Merrimack* encounter as follows:

“I was born in Fjärås, Sweden, in 1824 and came to America in May 1846. In 1856 I joined the U.S. Navy as an able seaman serving on the frigates *Falmouth* and *Congress* for three years. In the Christmas season of 1861 while in New York I saw the *Monitor*, fitted, ready for service. I volunteered my service and was accepted as a member of the crew.

We left New York on March 6, 1862, with thousands gathered on both sides of the East River to see the ‘Cheesebox on a raft’ off to fight the rebels. We had a crew of fifty-four on board, including eight or nine officers. I was acting quartermaster. On our arrival at Hampton Roads we heard sounds of battle and Captain Worden ordered the decks cleared for action. This was Saturday evening and we lay all night alongside the frigate, *Minnesota*, which had run aground.

On Sunday morning I saw the *Merrimack* approaching and reported promptly to the deck officer, Charles Weber. I recognized the *Merrimack* because I had been present at her launching. As soon as Captain Worden received the news, he ordered full steam ahead.

The *Merrimack* began firing on the *Minnesota*, and we in turn fired on the *Merrimack*. The first shot seemed to glance off the side of the *Merrimack*, but the second broke her flagstaff and the next went clear through her superstructure. The *Merrimack* now turned on us and one shot hit the pilot house, severely wounding Captain Worden. Next the *Merrimack* steamed straight for us in an attempt to ram the *Monitor* but we had no difficulty in withstanding the blow.

Since the *Merrimack* seemed to be filling with water, we thought this was our opportunity to give her the coup-de-grace. There were two Swedes on board beside myself. They were Charles Peterson

and a man named Sylvester. Peterson was at gun number one and I was at number two. I said to Peterson, 'Let us put in two cannon balls so as to get results.' Peterson agreed and the resulting shots made holes in the *Merrimack* through which one could drive a horse and wagon.

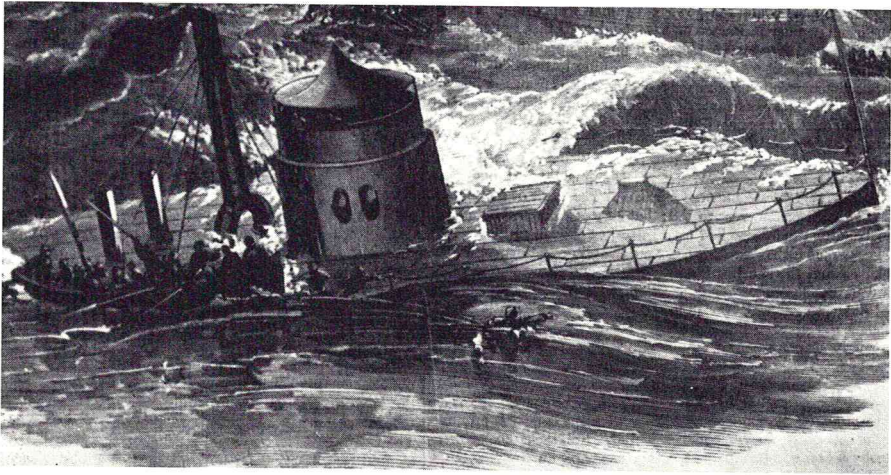
The *Merrimack* was unable to continue and withdrew to the protection of the shore batteries. At the same time Lieutenant Green ordered the *Monitor* to withdraw, much to the disappointment of the crew who appointed me spokesman to try to have the order rescinded. Lieutenant Green did rescind the order but the *Monitor* made no headway, which may be explained by the fact that the lieutenant was in the engine room.

The *Merrimack* was in a sinking condition and was ready to hoist the white flag but found it unnecessary since the *Monitor* had already withdrawn. It was a shame that Captain Worden was wounded, since otherwise we would have sunk the *Merrimack* or perhaps have been sunk ourselves.

On Monday President Lincoln, Naval Secretary Welles and Captain Ericsson came aboard and with tears in their eyes thanked each one of us."²

2. Frederickson, George of Philadelphia, ensign and acting master; missing at sea Dec. 31, 1862, probably at the time of the sinking of the *Monitor*. Though the *Monitor* Project does not list his nationality, Nels Hokanson claims that he was a Swede.³
3. Harrison, Henry, seaman. He was b. in Sweden and enlisted in New York. He is not on the Hokanson list.
4. Peterson, Charles, gun loader. The *Monitor* Project does not give his nationality, but Hans Anderson in his account as well as Hokanson state that he was a Swede.⁴
5. Stocking, John, seaman and boatswain's mate. He was carried off by a wave Dec. 31, 1862 when the *Monitor* sank off Cape Hatteras. He is not listed in the *Monitor* Project account, but Hokanson and the Whites state that he was one of the original crew of the *Monitor*. Hokanson claims he was a Swede.⁵
6. Sunstrum, Mark Trueman, fourth assistant engineer; resigned Nov. 10, 1865. The *Monitor* Project does not list his nationality but Hokanson claims he was a Swede and spells his name Sundstrum.⁶
7. Sylvester, Charles F., seaman. He was b. in Sweden and enlisted in New York. Both Hans Anderson in his account and Hokanson concur that he was a Swede.⁷
8. Tester, Abraham (Abram), first class fireman. He enlisted in New York, at which time his nationality was given as Swedish or perhaps English. He was a machinist in civilian life. He is not on the Hokanson list.
9. Williams, Peter, quartermaster and ensign. He was born in Norway in 1831. He enlisted from Pennsylvania and was subsequently decorated with the U.S. Medal of Honor.⁸

In his definitive work, *The Swedish Heritage in America*, Allan Kastrup states that the *Monitor's* captain, John Lorimer Worden, was of Swedish descent. Mr. Kastrup claims that Worden's name was originally the Swedish *Värdig*, meaning worthy. It has not been possible to verify this statement.⁹



The end of the *Monitor* off Cape Hatteras.¹⁰

As can be seen from the above list, the information on the Scandinavians who served aboard the *U.S.S. Monitor* is both sketchy and in some instances contradictory, depending upon which source is cited. Readers are therefore urged to submit corroborating data in order to enable the *Monitor* Project to proceed with its publication plans.

¹ An appeal from the *U.S.S. Monitor* Project with a complete list of all the known names of the officers and crewmen, who served aboard the *Monitor* is to be found in *The Genealogical Helper*, Vol. 37, No. 4, July/August, 1983, p. 150.

² Nels Hokanson, *Swedish Immigrants in Lincoln's Time* (New York, 1942), pp. 187, 189.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 189.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187; William Chapman White and Ruth White, *Tin Can on a Shingle* (New York, 1957), pp. 56, 147.

⁶ Hokanson, *Swedish Immigrants*, p. 187.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 189.

⁸ Peter Williams, seaman, USN, was b. in Norway 1831. He enlisted from Pennsylvania. He was given the U.S. Medal of Honor April 3, 1863 with the following citation: "Serving on board the *U.S.S. Ironclad Steamer Monitor* at Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862. During the engagement between the *U.S.S. Monitor* and the *C.S.S. Merrimack*, Williams gallantly served throughout the engagement as quartermaster, piloting the *Monitor* throughout the battle in which the *Merrimack*, after being damaged, retired from the scene of battle". — *Medal of Honor Recipients 1863–1973*, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate, Oct. 22, 1973. 93rd Congress, First Session, Committee Print No. 15.

⁹ Allan Kastrup, *The Swedish Heritage in America* (St. Paul, MN, 1975), pp. 307–308.

¹⁰ White and White, *Tin Can on a Shingle*, facing p. 147.