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# Benjamin Snell and His Gold Medal

Erik Wikén\*

An answer to the question posed in the March issue of *SAG* concerning Benjamin Snell (that was his name, *not* Suel) and his gold medal consists of a short description of a catastrophe which in 1846 struck the Royal Swedish Navy, when the *Carlsrona*, a corvette, in the evening of 30 July was struck by a hurricane in the Florida Straits and immediately went to the bottom.<sup>1</sup>

The corvette began its journey in Karlskrona 9 Aug. 1845, being under the command of Erik Gustaf af Klint and a crew of 131 men. After a brief stop in Tangier, the journey continued to South America, where stops were made in Montevideo, Uruguay, Buenos Aires, Argentina and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. On 2 March 1846 the vessel arrived in Gustavia, the port of call in the Caribbean island of St. Barthélemy, then under Swedish hegemony. Here the corvette remained a month. The vessel then departed for Havana, Cuba, via St. Croix in the then Danish West Indies and arrived in the Cuban port 24 March. The corvette set sail from Havana in the morning of 30 April. Toward evening the skies in the northwest began to darken, and while the sails were being taken in, the ship was struck by "the most terrible squall of hurricane proportions, so that the vessel with an even and unbelievable speed, lasting not more than three or four seconds capsized with the tackle submerged in the water. Here she lay for one minute, perhaps two, when the stern of the ship sank, followed immediately by the fore part of the vessel." A sloop was launched in which finally 17 persons were able to scramble on board—all others perished. Not until the morning of 3 May were the 17 shipwrecked mariners saved by the American bark *Swan* under the command of Captain Benjamin Snell. The bark was owned by Thomas A. Morgan of Philadelphia and was en route to its home port from New Orleans. On 11 May the shipwrecked sailors were able to go ashore, now under the command of the *Carlsrona's* second-in-command, Lieut. Commander Fredrik August Tersmeden. The Swedish-Norwegian consul in Philadelphia helped the survivors to proceed to New York, where they via a Swedish merchant ship returned to Sweden.

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The gold medal *Illis quorum*, which the Swedish King Oscar I bestowed on Captain Snell, was presented to him 1 March 1847 by the Swedish-Norwegian minister in Washington. Snell's letter of appreciation dated 8 March 1847 has been preserved.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of 1847 an American brig, *Sun* was shipwrecked off the coast of Karlskrona. The brig was under the command of Petre Laroche and when it was learned that he had been first mate aboard the bark *Swan*, when it the year before had rescued the survivors from *Carlskrona*, the Naval Officers' Society of Karlskrona arranged a banquet for Laroche 16 Feb. 1848. The officers had collected a sum money for which they had purchased a pocket chronometer in gold which was presented to the captain with the inscription "In Memory of 3 May 1846." Lieut. Commander Tersmeden, who had not been able to attend the event, presented Laroche with a sterling silver salver, with a drawing of the corvette engraved on the box containing the gift.

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<sup>1</sup>The tragedy is fully covered in O.R. Sylvan, *Korvetten Carlskronas sista resa* (Stockholm 1945).

<sup>2</sup>The Archives of the Swedish Legation in Washington for 1847 in the Royal Archives (*Riksarkivet*), Stockholm.

<sup>3</sup>*Najaden* (Karlskrona), 17 Feb. 1848. The brig *Sun* was sold 22 Feb. 1848 at auction in Karlskrona. - *Carlskrona Weckoblad*, 23 Feb. 1848.



An Artist's Perception of the Swedish Corvette *Carlskrona* Battling a Hurricane.