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# Treacherous Passage

Bill Mills

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## TREACHEROUS PASSAGE

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# Treacherous Passage

*Germany's Secret Plot against  
the United States in Mexico  
during World War I*

BILL MILLS

POTOMAC BOOKS

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*For Michelle and Darcy*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book had an unusual inception. While researching my previous work, *The League*, a history of the American Protective League—the Justice Department’s volunteer detective force during World War I, I came across a thrilling account about a German raider called the *Alexander Agassiz* that was captured by a U.S. Navy gunboat off the coast of Mexico. According to the writer, the *Agassiz* was seized as the result of a conversation overheard by an undercover operative in a San Diego restaurant.

Years later, while searching through the records of the U.S. National Archives, I discovered that this period account of the *Alexander Agassiz* affair was fiction, either invented by the author or the result of reliance on inaccurate records. Delving deeper into the background of the episode I found truth more amazing than fiction, a tale of soldiers of fortune training a German Mexican army to invade the United States, sunken warships reclaimed from the sea for battle, a formidable German trading house dedicated to profit and subversion, heroes and turncoats, drama on the high seas and in high court. The more that I learned about this forgotten true-life adventure, the more fascinated I became, and soon began writing the manuscript that developed into *Treacherous Passage*.

Many talented individuals assisted in gathering the material for this book. Researcher-translator Manuel Osuna was invaluable in tracking down records in Mazatlán, Mexico, and providing Spanish translation. Manuel is an uncompromising and determined researcher. When a key publication from the 1920s was discovered missing at a city archive, Manuel tracked down a college professor who had a photocopy of the document and sent me a copy of the photocopy! Heather Smedberg in Special Collections &

Archives at the UC San Diego Library located extensive documentation on the early history of the *Alexander Agassiz* and the Marine Biological Station in the Scripps Institution of Oceanography Archives. Annegret Wilke of Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (Political Archive of the German Foreign Office in Berlin) gave generously of her time to locate German government records related to Fritz Unger's appointment as honorary consul in Mazatlán. Rebecca Livingston did an outstanding and exhaustive job combing through State Department and Military Intelligence records on Dr. Paul Bernardo Altendorf held in the National Archives at College Park Maryland. Archivist Jennifer Albin was extremely helpful in locating the complete court records of the *Alexander Agassiz* Prize Court Trial at the National Archives at Riverside, California.

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For the assistance provided by all of these individuals I remain deeply grateful.

# Prologue

“The *Morelos* Will Be Ours”

The mutiny on board the federal gunboat *Tampico* began over love for a woman. It was said that twenty-four-year-old Lieutenant Hilario Malpica, the ship’s executive officer, had fallen for a brown-eyed beauty whose family was devoted to the Constitutionalist cause. For weeks, Malpica had secretly plotted to take over the Mexican warship for the Constitutionalist rebel forces. His opportunity came on the night of February 22, 1914, when half the ship’s company had been granted shore leave to celebrate the Carnival at Guaymas. Aided by Rabatet, the paymaster, and engineering officers Estrada and Johnson, Malpica took charge of the remaining crew members, then boldly informed Captain Castellanos and Chief Engineer Smith that their ship was under mutiny, and invited them to join the rebel forces. The invitation was rejected out of hand.

“If you make no resistance you will not be harmed,” Malpica told them evenly, “and at the first opportunity you will be handed over to the federal government.”

His former superiors acquiesced, and the rebels gained their first naval gunboat without a struggle. Now fully in command, Malpica gave orders to set course for Topolobampo on the Gulf of California in northwestern Mexico, a port that had recently been captured by the Constitutionlists.

As the *Tampico* steamed away from Guaymas, Malpica was presented with an incredible opportunity. The federal gunboat *Guerrero*, unaware of the mutiny on her sister ship, cruised directly across the *Tampico*’s bow. Standing at the helm, Malpica directed his crew to ram her at full speed. The *Tampico* was a modern steel-hulled gunboat equipped with a ram bow, and its impact on the unsuspecting *Guerrero* would have been

truly devastating. Unfortunately for the mutineers, however, the *Tampico's* steering gear broke down in the effort and she was forced to turn away, continuing on course to Topolobampo.

The mutiny on the gunboat *Tampico* was a minor act in a drama being played out across revolutionary Mexico in 1914. The year before, after a confused period of street fighting and artillery duels between loyalist and rebel army factions in Mexico City that would become known as *La Decena Trágica* (the Tragic Ten Days), General Victoriano Huerta had seized control of the government in a coup d'état. The democratically elected president, Francisco Madero, and his vice president, José María Pino Suárez, were driven to the outskirts of Mexico City at midnight and executed. Now established as "president," Huerta ruled the country with an iron fist. When a courageous senator from the state of Chiapas, Belisario Domínguez, gave a public speech denouncing Huerta as a tyrant, Domínguez was brutally murdered, his bullet-ridden body found weeks later in a roadside ditch. In the Mexican congress, Huerta was harshly castigated for the crime. In retaliation, Huerta dissolved the congress and ordered 110 congressmen to be arrested and hauled off to prison. Despite these repressive actions, Huerta's military dictatorship had the support of powerful factions in Mexico, including the hacendados, large landowners who wanted to retain their vast landholdings from populist confiscation, the Mexican Army, and initially, the church.

Outside Mexico City, opposition grew quickly against President Huerta, *El Usurpador*, "the usurper" who had murdered Madero. The governor of the state of Coahuila, tall and dignified former senator Venustiano Carranza, demanded the immediate ouster of Huerta and restoration of the Constitution of 1857, which had guaranteed Mexican citizens freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. Carranza proclaimed himself "Primer Jefe" (First Chief) of the Constitutionals, and named Alvaro Obregón, a rancher from Sonora, as commander in chief of a Constitutionalist army in the northwest. Obregón proved an able organizer and military strategist, raising a powerful army that captured one federal town after another. Also allied with Carranza in the north was bandit-turned-revolutionary Pancho Villa, who transformed a ragtag group of

disaffected workers from rural mining camps, haciendas, and villages into a sizable army that pursued Huerta's forces like a desert horde. In southern Mexico, Emiliano Zapata, who for years had been leading a campesino revolt against the hacendados who had stolen their land, similarly turned his followers against the Huerta government. By early 1914, less than a year after Huerta had assumed power, over 70 percent of Mexican territory was controlled by the Constitutionalist forces. Now with the mutiny on the *Tampico*, the revolution had advanced onto Mexican waters as well.

Steaming across the Sea of Cortez toward Topolobampo, Malpica knew that when word reached Mexico City that the *Tampico* had gone over to the Constitutionals, the Huertistas would be hunting for him. He knew exactly who his pursuers would be—just as they knew *him*, for at the youthful age of twenty-four, Malpica had already served aboard most of the ships in the small Mexican navy. He understood the strengths and weaknesses of each gunboat just as he understood those of the officers who commanded them.

Hilario Malpica Rodríguez Saliva had entered the Heroica Escuela Naval Militar, the Mexican military naval school, as a cadet at the age of fifteen. After completing his studies, Naval Cadet Malpica was posted to the training boat *Yucatán* where he learned to maneuver a ship, and then to the gunboats *Bravo* and *Morelos* where he mastered the art of naval gunnery, before receiving his assignment on board the *Tampico*.

After Huerta seized power, the warships of the Mexican navy were dispersed to the regions of the western and gulf coasts, which were confronted with the greatest amount of rebel activity. The *Tampico* had been sent to northwestern Mexico where fighting was constant. Serving with distinction under fire, Malpica had been awarded the Medal of Naval Merit for valor, and was promoted to lieutenant. His superiors considered Malpica to be an intelligent and resourceful officer. He was particularly good at naval gunnery. They were qualities that would be sorely tested in the weeks ahead.

In February 1914, the Federal navy of Mexico had three warships patrolling the country's western coast: the gunboat *Guerrero*, at a displacement of 1,850 tons, almost a small cruiser, the 1,260-ton gunboat *Morelos*, and



the smallest vessel of the lot at 980 tons, the *Tampico*. In addition to being larger than the *Tampico*, the *Guerrero* and *Morelos* were faster and better armed, carrying twice as many cannons. Operating in tandem, they would be a formidable, perhaps unbeatable opponent. The *Tampico*'s survival would depend heavily on Malpica's skill as a commander, and on his luck.

The *Tampico* steamed into Topolobampo harbor on the afternoon of February 24, 1914. While the crew took on coal and provisions, the former captain and chief engineer of the gunboat were placed on board the SS *Herrerias*, a steam-powered freighter headed south for Mazatlán, a coastal town still in federal hands. Malpica established contact with the governor of Sinaloa, Felipe Riveros, who relayed word of the *Tampico* mutiny to "Primer Jefe" himself, Venustiano Carranza. The rebel leader responded to the news of the ship's capture by promoting Malpica to Capitán de Navío, and announcing his official appointment as commander of the Constitutionalist gunboat.

As the days slowly passed in peaceful Topolobampo, the mutineers busied themselves preparing the *Tampico* for the inevitable battle to come.

They would not have long to wait.

Shortly after dawn on March 2, a large ship was spotted on the horizon. The federal gunboat *Guerrero* steamed into view and then anchored in a sheltered position just outside the harbor. The next morning, the gunboat *Morelos* appeared and moored next to the *Guerrero*.

The new arrivals brought a fleet of onlookers in their wake. In 1914, the west coast of Mexico teemed with warships from America, Britain, Germany, France and Japan, sent to protect their country's interests in Mexico from revolutionary unrest. The U.S. Navy alone had assigned sixteen ships to patrol the Mexican coast, and one of these, the cruiser USS *New Orleans*, was under orders to follow the gunboat *Guerrero* and report her every move to Naval Operations.

For three weeks, the *Tampico* remained sheltered within the safe confines of Topolobampo harbor, only venturing out of her secure anchorage for a few brief skirmishes with the two federal gunboats. The impasse continued until March 31, when the *Tampico* built up steam, raised anchor, and boldly proceeded down the channel. The *Guerrero* got under way at

once and took up a position at the mouth of the harbor, with her broadside facing the *Tampico*. At a range of nine thousand yards the *Guerrero* opened fire and the *Tampico* instantly responded. It was the opening salvo of an intense, if erratic, artillery duel, in which each gunboat released volleys of 4-inch and 6-pounder rounds in the general direction of their adversary. For over two hours the roar of cannon fire echoed across the channel, with geysers of white water erupting from a seemingly endless succession of missed shots.

After three hundred shells had been expended, the firing suddenly ceased. With darkness fast approaching, the *Tampico* came about and headed back into the harbor, while the *Guerrero* returned to her anchorage outside the bar. Unknown to her adversaries, the *Tampico* had been struck seven times during the lengthy engagement—two 4-inch shells had passed through the officer's quarters, one 4-inch shell struck amidships, and four 4-inch shells hit her bow, one below the waterline. Incredibly, none of Malpica's mutineers had been injured. The *Guerrero*, in turn, had been struck three times, resulting in no significant damage.

A few days later, suspecting that the *Tampico* was aground, the gunboat *Morelos* made a cautious reconnaissance inside the channel to assess the smaller boat's condition. They discovered the *Tampico* sunk on the south side of the waterway near Shell Point, with waves rolling across the length of her deck. The gunboat had already been stripped of armament for the rebel forces—just two 4-inch cannon and one 6-pounder remained on their mounts.

With the *Tampico* no longer a threat, the *Morelos* departed for Mazatlán, a federal town that was under siege by the Constitutionalist armies, while the *Guerrero* steamed off to patrol the coast between Guaymas and Mazatlán and provide assistance to Huerta's troops where needed.

The fact that his command was now underwater did not weaken Malpica's resolve to defeat the enemy gunboats. The immediate problem was simple enough—the *Tampico* would have to be raised and restored to battle-ready condition. The warship remained submerged in the harbor until a deep-sea diving outfit could be located and men sent down to plug the holes in the gunboat's armored hull. When it was watertight, compressed air was

pumped inside and the *Tampico* was brought to the surface. The gunboat was towed to the Topolobampo dock, where the ship's officers directed the repairs needed to return the salvaged vessel to serviceable condition. It would take months of hard work before she would be fit to sail again.

While Malpica's men struggled to make the *Tampico* seaworthy, the crew of the federal gunboat *Morelos* were having troubles of their own. The port city of Mazatlán had been under siege by the Constitutionalists for nine months when the *Morelos* steamed into its dangerous waters in May 1914. Over ten thousand rebel troops encircled the beleaguered city and terror gripped the population. Every inhabitant capable of leaving had fled to safer ground in the neighboring towns and villages. The city's water supply had been cut early in the siege, and now citizens and federal garrison troops alike relied on water from cisterns and public wells to survive. Food remained available only because federal gunboats kept the port open for supply from the sea; without the Federal navy, Mazatlán would have been starved into submission long ago.

The harbor was a hazardous anchorage at the best of times. From the south, it was exposed to the open ocean, while along the north and middle harbor, shifting currents formed hidden shoals and sandbars that made passage treacherous. As the *Morelos* steamed warily past the Faro Lighthouse into the inner harbor, suddenly, without warning, the unthinkable happened—the gunboat ran aground on a submerged shoal. To make matters infinitely worse, it grounded a few hundred yards from Isla de las Piedras “Stone Island,” a towering mass of land near the mouth of the harbor, within easy rifle range of the Constitutionalist troops. Concern turned quickly to alarm. No matter what the federal sailors tried, the heavy gunboat remained hard and fast on the rocky shoal.

Observing the situation from a distant vantage point, General Obregón, the Constitutionalists' commander, released a message to the press: “The *Morelos* will be ours.”

Shortly after five o'clock on the morning of May 5, Cinco de Mayo, a detachment of rebel riflemen took up positions among the rocks and cactus at the top of Manzanillo Point, the heights of Piedras, and opened fire on the stranded warship. A fusillade of bullets ricocheted off her armored superstructure and zinged through the air. “The *Morelos* answered with

her six-pounders. The shots (being) fired by her could be seen to strike at various places along the face of the bluff, each kicking up a cloud of dust.” The exchange between the rebel riflemen on the heights and the gunboat’s artillery below continued throughout the day, as casualties began to mount on the motionless warship.

Frank Smith, a young Marine aboard the USS *California* watching the spectacle from a distance, observed: “As the firing continued after dark, the *Morelos*’s projectiles, in striking the rocky surface, would flash fire, and could be seen to dart in every direction. An occasional projectile would strike a granite shoulder and ricochet vertically into the air . . . The rebels made their share of the noise, although with smaller (field) guns than the Federals were using. Following each boom of the guns of the *Morelos* could be heard the cracking of hundreds of rifles . . . The *Morelos* ceased firing after a time, though an occasional rifle shot could be heard throughout the night.”

The next morning, the duel between the Constitutionalist riflemen on the crest of the ridge and the gunners on the *Morelos* resumed. Artillery from the Federal fort Reynaldo Díaz on the opposite side of the harbor joined the fight, firing over the *Morelos* and driving the rebels from the crest of Piedras. But with each lull in the cannonade, the riflemen regained their positions and raked the *Morelos*’s decks with a shower of bullets.

On the morning of May 7, a new combatant joined the battle, when the federal gunboat *Guerrero* steamed into the east side of the harbor and trained her guns on the ridge. “After an hour or two of intermittent firing [from the *Guerrero*] without any apparent damage except for one shot which went high and demolished a building in the city, she then moved out of range of the rebel’s field guns and anchored. There was considerable firing by the Federal fort, the *Morelos*, and the rebels during the day and evening, but [by] the following morning all was quiet.”

Recognizing the hopelessness of their position on the stranded gunboat, with no chance of reinforcement or supply, the crew of the *Morelos* had lowered their flag under the cover of darkness and taken to the boats, abandoning their dead on the bullet-swept decks.

A team of rebel soldiers in canoes made their way to the grounded warship and set it afire with oil-soaked rags. After they departed,

“the bridge and foremast became a pillar of flame. Quickly the flames crept aft along the decks of the *Morelos*. Intermittent reports and sharp gleams of light told that the fire had reached the ammunition. The sounds became more distinct, and presently combined in a furious din of cannonading, as if the dead gunners had arisen and were once more at the battery. For several hours the fire burned until the bridge and foremast fell in a great roar of flame and sparks. But for some strange reason, the fire reached no further aft than amidships. It halted at the funnels.” The gunboat *Morelos*, once the pride of the Mexican navy, was a blackened hulk on the glistening blue waters of Mazatlán harbor.

Obregón’s prophesy—“the *Morelos* will be ours”—had come true.

The destruction of the *Morelos* filled Malpica and his men with renewed energy to complete the repairs on the refloated *Tampico*. Only one federal warship now remained to challenge their control of the west coast of Mexico—the *Guerrero*.

To speed the *Tampico*’s return to service, the young captain decided to take the gunboat on a short voyage to Altata for an extensive overhaul. But despite weeks of expedient repair work, the ship was still far from seaworthy. Although the hull was watertight and the vessel remained solidly afloat, shell holes received during the last engagement had been plugged with makeshift leak-stoppers. Her 4-inch guns were in deplorable condition, with the breech blocks loose on their hinges, the barrel rifling dangerously eroded, and the sights, wobbly and out of alignment. The guns were now more dangerous to the crew than to any enemy. The boat’s main engines, rusty and coated with grime, were only capable of operating at their slowest speed. Hundreds of holes in the boiler piping had been “corked” with wooden plugs. The generator had been ruined by saltwater while the ship sat submerged and there was no electric power on board; the compartments below were now illuminated by kerosene lanterns. The *Tampico*’s deck was littered with broken cases, bales of hay, damaged wooden fittings, and scattered rounds of ammunition. Three cows added to the disorder, wandering aimlessly through the debris, occasionally depositing manure onto the clutter.

On June 14, 1914, the *Tampico* departed Topolobampo harbor under the power of a single boiler for Altata, where Malpica planned to retube

the ship's boilers, rebuild the machinery, and set out after the *Guerrero*. Once his nemesis had been destroyed, the *Tampico* could eliminate the merchant steamers trading with the federal strongholds of Guaymas and Mazatlán, cutting their supply of provisions and forcing them to surrender.

The gunboat had traveled only thirty miles from Topolobampo when disaster struck. A team of inexperienced firemen tending the only functioning boiler shoveled too much coal into the firebox and ruined it. With its boiler burned out, the *Tampico* was at the mercy of the elements, helplessly adrift on the rolling sea.

The next day a large ship was sighted to the east. It approached to within two miles of the idle gunboat and abruptly stopped. To the great relief of the men on board the *Tampico*, it was the destroyer USS *Preble*, one of the American warships that had been dispatched to observe naval activity along the waters of revolutionary Mexico. A launch was lowered from the *Tampico*, and Rabatet, the former paymaster, motored over to the *Preble* and presented Malpica's compliments to Lieutenant J. H. Klein Jr., the destroyer's commander. Rabatet optimistically described the current state of the *Tampico* for the American officer, telling him that repairs would be quickly completed and by sunset the gunboat would be on her way to Altata. Rabatet then saluted and returned to his ship.

A few hours later, a second boat from the *Tampico* visited the *Preble*, this time with chief engineer Johnson and his assistant Estrada aboard. They told Klein the sorry truth that the crew had been unable to repair the boilers. The *Tampico* was now at the mercy of the sea, and if assistance was not provided, the ship would gradually drift ashore.

"Can you tow us the eighty miles to Altata?" Johnson anxiously inquired.

"We cannot," Klein replied, "I have received orders to observe strict neutrality."

The Mexican officers begged Klein to send a radio message to the American admiral requesting approval for the *Preble* to tow their ship to Altata. Johnson also relayed an invitation from Captain Malpica, asking the American commander to come aboard the *Tampico* to meet with him. Klein sent the radiogram to the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet as requested, and a few hours later departed on a launch for the *Tampico*.

In his official report, Lieutenant Klein described his visit to the Mexican gunboat:

At about 5:30 p.m., I boarded the *Tampico*. Captain Malpica excused himself for not having called, pointing to bandages on his left foot. [Malpica's foot had been injured two weeks earlier, and as a result he could only hobble about.] During my conversation with him I gained a very favorable impression of his ability and determination. He spoke a little English, and, with my poor scraps of Spanish, we managed to piece out a very fair conversation. He seemed very grateful for my having forwarded his request for a tow to the commander-in-chief, and was anxious for me to inspect his ship thoroughly, to see for myself in what a pitiful condition she was. Accompanied by the executive and the chief engineer, I inspected the ship from truck to keel.

I was most anxious to see her, but as the inspection progressed I grew more and more depressed. It was impossible to see such a helpless vessel, completely at the mercy of the wind and sea, totally unfit to steam or remain afloat, much less commence the unequal struggle with the *Guerrero* which was imminent and inevitable, without a feeling of pity for these poor fellows. Above all, I could not suppress a feeling of admiration for this brave man, which increased at the end of the inspection, when upon asking Malpica what he would do if the *Guerrero* appeared, he defiantly answered: "I'll fight her and sink her if she will only come within range of my guns." These words could only come from either a fanatic or a remarkably determined man.

Before I left, he insisted that I have a drink with him . . . He seemed loath to have me go, and made me promise that I would come aboard at noon the next day to sample a cocktail for which he claimed exceptional virtues.

Lieutenant Klein returned to the *Preble* and watched the *Tampico* with deep apprehension, wondering whether Malpica would be alive the next day to keep their drinking engagement. Hours later, the destroyer's radioman intercepted a message from the USS *New Orleans* stating that the cruiser was now trailing the *Guerrero* on a southerly course. Based on the direction

and speed that was given, Klein determined that the powerful *Guerrero* would pass the present location of the *Tampico* at 7 a.m. the next day.

Few of the men aboard the *Preble* slept soundly that night, knowing the surprise that lay in store for the helpless *Tampico*, but also aware that they could not warn her without violating the orders from the U.S. naval command to assist neither side.

At dawn two ships were seen rapidly approaching from the north, the Mexican gunboat *Guerrero*, followed by the *New Orleans*. The *Guerrero* soon spotted the smaller *Tampico* at anchor and cleared for action. The *Tampico*, in turn, hoisted an enormous Mexican national ensign to the gaff and also made ready for action. The *Guerrero* and *Tampico* would face each other flying the *same* national colors.

True to his vow, Malpica fired first, releasing a salvo at the *Guerrero* from his 4-inch guns that fell four hundred yards short at a range of eight thousand yards. The *Guerrero* responded with a single 4-inch shell that landed one thousand yards *over* the *Tampico*. For the next thirty minutes the two ships exchanged artillery fire with equally poor results. Some of the *Tampico*'s shells dropped halfway to the *Guerrero*, likely the result of ammunition that was defective from having been underwater for several months. To the American observers, the *Guerrero*'s point of aim, in turn, appeared to be "the Gulf of California," with the distance of its shell bursts from the *Tampico* sometimes measured in *miles* instead of *yards*. (After one particularly bad shot by the *Guerrero*, a quartermaster aboard the USS *Preble* was heard to say, "Those boobs on the *Tampico* will starve to death before the *Guerrero* hits her.")

Eventually the *Guerrero* closed in on the stationary *Tampico*, launching shrapnel shells that struck between the smoke stack and forward bridge. Flames instantly erupted from the quarterdeck and soon spread across the entire ship. With no pressure in the water mains, there was no hope of the crew extinguishing the fire, and preparations for abandoning ship began in earnest.

The *Tampico*'s gas-powered launch and one "pulling boat" came around her bow to the starboard side where a number of crewmen leapt on board, then motored to the port side where other sailors did the same. The flames on the quarter deck had flared up and a large volume of smoke enveloped



the 4-inch gun on the after deck. In spite of this, the gun crew defiantly released a few final rounds, while one of the gunners stood up on the burning poop deck and waved a large flag.

The gasoline launch and the pulling boat quickly came about and headed toward shore, hoping to reach the safety of shoal water. The *Guerrero* set off in pursuit at full speed to intercept them. After a chase that lasted half an hour, the *Guerrero* caught up with the two boatloads of men. With no chance of escape, the *Tampico*'s sailors pulled their boats alongside the *Guerrero* and a ladder was lowered for them to climb into captivity.

Captain Malpica stood at the bow of the lead boat in full view of the men on board. Malpica was a man of great honor and pride, unable to accept the dishonor of having failed in his mission to vanquish the federal navy for the Constitutionals, and of failing the woman that he loved. He scanned the faces of the men lining the deck above him. Then with chin held high, Malpica removed his revolver from its holster, calmly raised it to his head, and pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp report and he crumpled to the deck.

The men aboard the *Guerrero* stared down at Malpica's lifeless form in stunned disbelief. The federal gunboat immediately half-masted her colors, and the two American warships followed suit. The commander of the *Guerrero* sent a radio message to the captain of the *New Orleans*, thanking the Americans for lowering their colors "in honor of Malpica." Captain Irwin of the *New Orleans* and Lieutenant Klein of the *Preble* called upon the commanding officer of the *Guerrero*. In a later account of the visit, Klein wrote:

We met the captain and the executive officer, and had a short talk with them. They showed us the two holes in the *Guerrero*, which had done no damage to either ship or personnel. There was no gayety or any feeling of exultation aboard that ship; to the contrary, a funereal air seemed to pervade everybody and everything. They were very sorry that the battle had had to be fought, and especially regretted the death of Malpica. As they said, Malpica had been respected and admired by all the officers of the *Guerrero*, many of whom had previously served with him. They were profuse in their praises of his courage and ability and mourned

his loss as that of a true friend instead of a defeated enemy. The captain of the *Guerrero* stated that the prisoners would be treated kindly and I doubted very much if he would turn them over to the Federal authorities when he reached Mazatlán.

Across the water, the flaming wreck of the *Tampico* gradually listed to starboard. Clouds of steam soon rose from the stricken vessel as seawater reached her boilers. The gunboat rocked sharply to starboard, and the bow came up vertically, then she sank by the stern in 130 feet of water. When the *Guerrero* steamed off, trailed by the two American warships, all that remained of the *Tampico* were a few bits of floating debris bobbing on the dark blue waves.

Malpica's body was taken to Maztlan, where the captain of the *Guerrero*, Ignacio Arenas, and his crew purchased a plot in perpetuity in the city cemetery for their fallen comrade. Lumber was scarce, so the men cut up tables and used the wood to craft a fine coffin for Malpica, which they lined with black canvas. At the top of the casket they painted a poem to lost sailors of the sea, and at the foot they inscribed the legend "Armada Nacional—R.I.P."

In Mazatlán harbor, the blackened forecastle of the gunboat *Morelos* protruded from the water like a silent monument to the sea battles of the revolution, and the valiant odyssey of Hilario Malpica. It remained there for three years, until another group of men became determined to use a salvaged warship to challenge a powerful adversary.

For the story of the *Morelos* had not ended with her sinking, it had only begun . . .