

## Living history

What happens every year in Filipstad, Sweden, but only now and then in Stockholm? – The John Ericsson Society reenacts the maritime battle fought between the world's two first armored battleships in the waters near Washington D.C. in March 1862.

Of course all Swedes have learned with pride from our history lessons in school that it was a Swede who liberated all the Afro-Americans in the USA from slavery during the Civil War. Many historians, both Swedish and American, claim this is true, even though they are on the whole aware of all the sacrifices made by thousands of other people during that major conflict. A Swede named John Ericsson undeniably contributed to the Civil War victory by the northern states; it followed his many revolutionary inventions including the propeller and a rotating gun turret. God moves in mysterious ways.

In 1862 the northern states were losing the war, partly because one of the South's rebuilt battleships was blocking the sea entrance to the American capital, Washington D.C.



*"Merrimac" wreaks havoc in Brunnsviken in 2003 – an exploit by the John Ericsson Society.*

The ship attracted a lot of attention, as it didn't quite look like other battleships. It had no sails and no masts, and was powered by a steam engine. Moreover, it was armored, and resembled the modern American Stealth bombers we see on television. It was black, ugly, and clumsy – but murderously effective as a death-delivering weapon. When the Union battleship *Congress* under sail fired on *Merrimac*, as it was called, the bullets were just deflected off the angled armor plating. After a relatively

short battle in the summer of 1862, *Merrimac* sank the huge, magnificent battleship as well as several other ships at the approach to Washington D.C.

The situation looked hopeless for the northerners, and by chance many of the soldiers and officers had gathered on the shores of the sound where *Merrimac* was wreaking its havoc. Even the cannonballs fired by batteries on land bounced off the battleship. *Merrimac* was hard to hit, too, because only a small part of the ship was visible above the water.

John Ericsson, a Swedish immigrant from Filipstad, had already invented the propeller. He had tried to market it in his home country and in England but without success. Nobody would listen to him because, coming from the working class in the hierarchical European society, he had no rank and no connections. It wasn't until he brought his invention to the USA that he could attract any interest. The American Navy commissioned him to build an armored ship that could match the Confederate *Merrimac*, and Ericsson went right to work. His creation came to be called *Monitor*, and it didn't look like anything else the world had ever seen. As the time of the beautiful old sailing battleships is gone and our modern battleships are all variations on the theme that began with Ericsson's *Monitor*. *Monitor* was of course powered by a propeller. Not only that, the target area above the water was very small. The ship also had a rotating gun turret that allowed it to shoot in all directions without having to turn the ship. It was quite simply a completely new way of thinking.



*The John Ericsson Society's copy of Monitor. On the original, only the round gun turret in the middle appeared above the surface of the water. The other towers on the copy are safety equipment required by the Swedish National Administration of Shipping and Navigation.*

While *Merrimac* still shot from the broadside and took 45 minutes to turn, *Monitor* could shoot 360 degrees around its guns regardless of which direction the ship was facing. Thus she could shoot at the same time as she was advancing toward her target, which meant both that the target area was minimized and that there was less risk of the ship being hit, since it was moving as it was shooting. The result was that *Monitor* was technically and militarily superior to *Merrimac*.

In order to understand how revolutionary *Monitor* was for its time, consider the fact that when several of the officers aboard *Merrimac* first saw *Monitor* sailing toward them, they thought that she was a barge carrying fresh water to the fighting troops on land. While *Merrimac* still bore many likenesses to a traditional battleship (and was indeed a modified one), *Monitor* didn't look like any sailing vessel ever seen before.

By working hard and efficiently, the shipbuilders managed to get *Monitor* ready for the barrage from *Merrimac*, and in the beginning of March 1862 a maritime battle began between the two of them. In the end the *Monitor* was the victor. Although *Merrimac* was not sunk, it was forced to retreat, and never again dared to show itself in waters where it might encounter *Monitor*.

After this battle John Ericsson was recognized as a genius and one of the greatest innovators of his time. To this day all military vessels are built on the same principles as the ones John Ericsson used in 1862. In the summer of 2003 the battle was reenacted in Brunnsviken in Stockholm, not too far from the American Embassy, in front of the Swedish King, the Queen, and a few hundred spectators. The spectacle was free, and the drama was unbelievably interesting. The John Ericsson Society was in charge of the arrangements, in collaboration with the Swedish National Maritime Museum.

If you would like to read more about the actual sea battle and John Ericsson, contact *Ystads Antikvariat* at [ystadsantikvariat@swipnet.se](mailto:ystadsantikvariat@swipnet.se) "The antiquarian bookseller" at this superb establishment will gladly help you find pertinent literature.

If you would like to see a recording of the reenactment, or if you'd like more information about *Merrimac*, *Monitor*, and our national hero John Ericsson, go to the John Ericsson Society's website at [www.johnericsson.org](http://www.johnericsson.org) and watch their program.