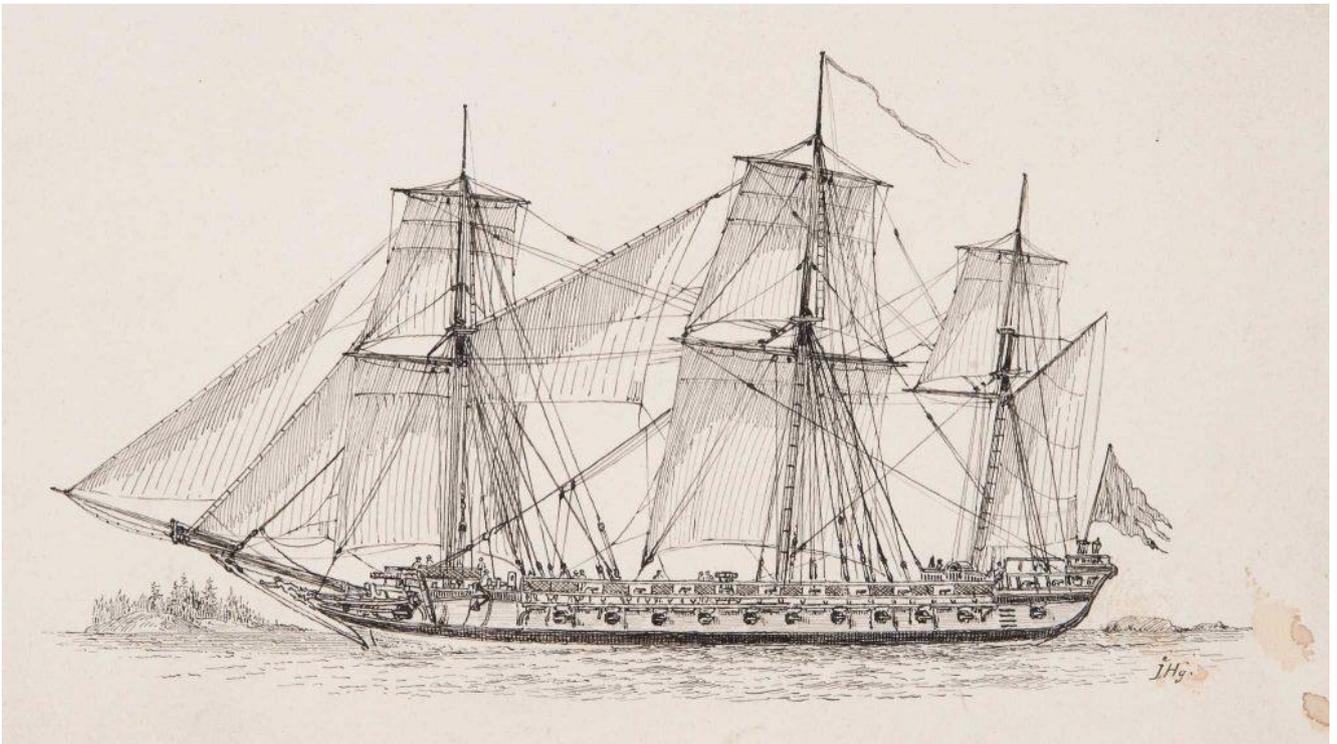


The Black Horse and Ironside - The personal account of Nils Bruncrona of the first Battle of Svensksund

Marcus Lepola 2019.

Captivating personal accounts occasionally emerge from the pages of history. One such story emerges from the diary of the Swedish Lieutenant, Nils Abraham Rabbe, later knighted Bruncrona. Bruncrona was a veteran of the War of Gustavus III and was taken prisoner during the first battle of Svensksund in 1789. Bruncrona was born in Uppsala, Sweden in 1763. His father held a position at Uppsala University as professor of law. His father died early and the whole family had to move to Finland to live with a relative in Sagu parish. Nils enrolled in to the Swedish Army fleet at an early age. He also partook in two expeditions to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. In 1789 he was adjutant on board the admiralty ship Björn Järnsida (Ironside), a turuma frigate named after a famous Viking warrior. The Ironside was under the command of Count C.A. Ehrensvärd. Bruncrona kept a journal during the war and the following article is mostly a rendering of his original accounts written in Swedish complemented with the battle report by Prince Nassau-Siegen.



Turuma-class frigate. Jacob Hägg. Swedish Maritime Museum, OB766.

Preparing for battle

In the early morning of the 24th of August, 1789, Bruncrona returned to the Ironside. He had been working all night, overseeing the sinking of three scuttle ships in the narrow of Svensksund as a defensive measure. The work had to be done in haste and there was no time to block the second entranceway, the narrow passage between the Island of Tiutinen and Majanssariand. As Bruncrona returned to the Ironside, he found his friend, Captain Karl Johan von Hohenhausen upset and in tears. Hohenhausen was upset because of a dream he had, which had convinced him

that he would die the same day. In his dream he saw a black horse stand above him. The horse was snorting heavily foaming from its mouth. Three droplets of the horse's foam dropped on Hohenhausens throat and four on his heart. Hohenhausen perceived the dream as a foreboding of his death and was worried how his wife and two sons would manage without him. Bruncrona tried his best to console Hohenhausen and then had breakfast and a short nap.



Nils Bruncrona 1827.

Under fire

At 8:30 AM the Swedish ships moved to the line of battle. Ironside was in position in front of the narrows of Svensksund. By 3PM the Ironside started to get hit by increasing amounts of cannon fire from the enemy boats pressing from the south. At this time Baron Fleetwod was hit in the leg with shot and Baron Sjöblad and reverend Festin were both shot dead while standing on Ironside's deck. At 4 PM two Russian boats belonging to the Balle squadron, were taken captive by the crew of the Ironside. The commanding officer on one of the boats turned out to be an Englishman. He lay dead grasping his sword, surrounded by the corpses of twenty of his crew. Only three men had survived the barrage of fire delivered by the guns on board the Ironside. Bruncrona was ordered to retrieve the three surviving prisoners and then tow away the more severely damaged Russian boat. At this point a lieutenant of the Upland corps, count Dohna, who accompanied Bruncrona, was hit by a cannonball. The cannonball ripped off one of Dohna's legs and he quickly bled to death.

No hope

A small glimmer of hope arose when a Russian vessel that tried to sail through the unblocked narrow in the east, ran aground, halting two more Russian galleys which were quickly destroyed and sunk by Swedish cannon fire. Believing that the advancement of Russian fleet approaching was now halted, the Swedish line was ordered at 5:30PM to regroup at a more Westward position and capture the detachment of Russian vessels commandeered by Balle. At the time half of them had surrendered and the rest were retreating. At 6 PM several small Russian vessels pressed

through the Majasaari-Tiutinen narrow and the situation took a turn to the worse for the Swedes. The Russians pressed on from the east and the first Swedish ship to be taken was Ivar Boneless, after it had been crippled by a barrage of Russian salvo.



Björn Ironside with the yellow/blue admiralty flag at the Battle of Svensksund 1789. Johan Tietrich Schoultz. O 03932, Swedish Maritime Museum. Identifier O 03932

The Black Horse cometh

To make matters even worse the Swedes were running out of ammunition and several Swedish vessels had no choice but to surrender. The galley Cedercreuz was the second ship to strike its colours and at 7:30 PM the crippled hemema frigate Oden surrendered. The fleet commander Ehrensvärd, realised the gravity of the situation and ordered the retreat before he himself debarked the Ironside accompanied by major Cronstedt and captain Wallberg. Two more Swedish ships were taken by the Russians at which point the surrendered Russian vessels from the Balle squadron re-joined the battle and began to fire at the Ironside. The ship was now taking fire from the east and from the south. Gunsloops tried to tow the Ironside away in the cover of darkness but the ship ran aground. Ironside was being bombarded by an total of 30 Russian galleys firing balls, angels, shells and grapeshot. The sails and masts as well as the cabin and the mid-battery were blasted to pieces. The sails caught fire and the commanding officer remaining, Baron Fleetwood ordered the remaining guns to be loaded with angles in a last, desperate attempt to escape. No sooner was the command given before a Russian angle hit the Baron, cutting him in half. At 12:30 AM Hohenhausen, who was now the commanding officer, proceeded to strike the colours. In the darkness as he was assisting the ship's boy to lower the rear lantern, he was hit with three grapeshot in the chest and died instantly, as he had foreseen, to the grief and amazement of Bruncrona.

Flying Russians

No sooner had Hohenhausen expired as an explosion ripped through the air and the bodies of 20 Russians fell on to the deck of Ironside. They were soldiers of the elite Preobrazhensky Regiment who moments earlier had been on a small gunboat that had come alongside in an attempt to board the Ironside. A piece of burning cloth from the sail had apparently fallen down on a keg of gunpowder, resulting in the fatal explosion. The commanding officer, Babarkin, had miraculously survived the explosion but was severely injured. The explosion had ejected swords, bayonets and crowbars from the boat which were now stuck in to the hull of Ironside. Now even Bruncrona was injured as a grapeshot hit him in the shoulder. By 1:40 AM the firing ceased and a gun sloop containing the boarding party of 20 grenadiers from the Moscow regiment approached the Ironside. As the first of the Russian grenadiers climbed on to the deck of the Ironside a Swedish corporal from the Uppland regiment proceeded to greet him by grabbing the Russian with one hand by the collar and the other one between the legs and hurling him overboard and drowning the unfortunate man in the process. The Swedish corporal failed to repeat this procedure with the next grenadiers who were more prepared and were able to overpower the stubborn corporal.



Drummer of Preobrazhensky regiment uniform. Wikimedia Commons.

Captivity

The boarding party proceeded to collect all articles of spare clothing from the Swedes, and threw them in a heap onto the sloop. The Swedish officer's swords were collected and handed over to the Russian adjutant leading the boarding party. Bruncrona felt a deep melancholy as he stood

on deck wounded and covered in blood and filth, surrounded with the stench of blood and gore of his fallen friends. In the light of the burning mast and sail, the bodies of fallen Swedes and Russians floated past in the dark waters of Svensksund.

The following day the fire was put out and the Swedish captives had to clean the ship's deck and dispose of bodies by throwing them in to the sea. 80 soldiers and crewmembers of the Ironside were either dead or severely wounded, 14 had minor wounds. No sooner had the cleaning of the deck started as the prince Nassau-Siegen came aboard the Ironside and was horrified of the bloodied scene on board and the nonchalant way the bodies were being disposed of. Nassau-Siegen soon debarked and the ship's doctor Christian Alrutz was able to care for the wound in Bruncrona's shoulder. All deceased officers on board the Ironside were now wrapped in flags and the bodies were sewn inside bags of sailcloth, weighted down with a 24 pound cannon ball. The body bags were released in to the sea without any ceremony. All surviving Swedish officers received an invitation to dine with Nassau-Siegen, but Bruncrona was unable to attend the dinner due to a rising fever. The Prince Nassau-Siegen made sure Bruncrona received some wine and food the following day at his quarters.

On the 1st of September the captured officers were transferred on to the Minerva. The Minerva along with 13 damaged Russian vessels sailed for Cronstadt on the 4th of September and arrived at the destination on the 11th of September. The prisoners were placed in a schoolhouse in Orianenbaum where they remained for the duration of their captivity which would last a full year. Bruncrona was given his sword back on the 2nd of September 1790 and he returned to Sweden where he would remain and have a long career as marine officer and as a pilot chief.

Sources;

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Svensksund AD1790 – *Kadotettu Ruotsinsalmi*



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