

Who Was Bouchard?

From articles by Jan Seigel

Andre Paul Bouchard was born in France in 1780 and grew up during the French Revolution. By the time he was 19, his father had died, and Bouchard became provider for his mother and two younger brothers.

Bouchard's life at sea began when he decided to join the French Navy and served in a number of campaigns against the British. However, he soon became discontented. His mother remarried a very cruel man, and Bouchard saw no future for himself in France. Not sure where he would go, he spent some time in the United States and eventually found his way to Argentina.

Once he arrived in Buenos Aires in 1809, Bouchard reinvented himself. Andre Paul disappeared, and he chose to be called by his younger brother's name Hippolyte (using the Spanish spelling Hipólito) thus keeping emotional ties to his homeland. The European flavor in Buenos Aires, the multitude of cultures made Bouchard feel welcome, and he quickly picked up the Spanish language.

By this time, Napoleon had invaded Spain. French rule in Spain was not well received in Buenos Aires, and the locals wanted independence from European rule. Since the Spanish king had been deposed by the French, the Viceroy in Buenos Aires, having been appointed by the Spanish king, was considered to lack any political authority. It was the perfect climate for a new political order. Without a shot being fired, on May 25, 1810, the local assembly deposed the Spanish and set up Primera Junta, the first assembly independent government of Argentina. The new government lacked any military authority, and all of the naval leaders were Spanish loyalists. So, a call was made by the Assembly for any able-bodied men with naval experience to come forward.

This is what Bouchard had been waiting for all his life. As a non-commissioned sailor in the French navy, he now positioned himself as captain and commanded his first ship, "25 del Mayo" named for the new government. Hipólito Bouchard was 30 years old.

His first outing as captain did not fare well. He was attacked by a Spanish ship, lost control over his crew, abandoned the ship, and was subsequently put on trial as a coward. Fortunately, he was found 'not guilty' as it was determined that the Spanish fleet was too strong for this new navy. In 1812, Bouchard joined the crew, not as captain, and took part in the Battle of San Lorenzo in which he secured a Spanish flag and was, therefore, granted Argentine citizenship.

On March 8, 1812, Bouchard married Norberta Merlo, daughter of a well-connected merchant family. In 1815, he was given a corsair license to fight the Spanish. (Corsair is the Spanish word for pirate. According to the Oxford English Dictionary a corsair is "a person who sails in a ship and attacks other ships in order to steal from them especially one given permission by a government to attack an enemy ship".) The first outing as a corsair was a successful raid on the Peruvian coast which resulted in the capturing of Spanish ships and booty. This time Bouchard returned to Buenos Aires a hero.

On July 9, 1816, the government proclaimed the independence of Argentina. One of the Spanish boats that Bouchard had captured was refitted and renamed La Argentina. This would be Bouchard's flag ship as he began his two-year round-the-world voyage on July 9, 1817.

International slave trade had been outlawed by Britain, the United States and Argentina. Slave ships could now be attacked for supplies and their slave cargo could be freed. Bouchard was not concerned about the fate of the crew. He was known to have sunk ships with the entire crew still on board, and also executed "pirates" from captured ships. He was not alone in these practices.

His voyage would take him from Madagascar to Java, Sumatra, Borneo, the Philippines, the Hawaiian Islands and eventually California. Some freed slaves stayed on as crew, and Bouchard also hired new men at the various ports at which they made stops. While some of the plunder was kept as booty, much of it was used for supplies and repairs to La Argentina because of constant battles with enemy ships.

By 1818, the Pacific Ocean was crowded with sailing ships, so it came as no surprise that a watchman at the tip of the Monterey Bay sighted two Argentine ships heading for the coast of California. Monterey had enough time to prepare for the "raid". However, the fort was not able to hold back Bouchard and his men. After a short battle, the Argentine flag flew over Monterey for six days. During that time, Bouchard's men stole cattle and weapons and burned much of the fort and surrounding town. The residents remained unharmed.

Bouchard then proceeded to Santa Barbara, but the fort appeared more heavily defended and was not attacked. The story goes, however, that the local unit was in reality not that well fortified but rather a small group of soldiers that repeatedly showed themselves in different uniforms to trick Bouchard into believing there were more men.

Word was sent down the coast to San Juan Capistrano that Bouchard was on his way. The missionaries quickly took valuable church artifacts away from the Mission to hide. According to Pam Gibson, in *Two Hundred Years in San Juan Capistrano*, on December 16, 1818, Bouchard's men "marched in with a flag of truce and a message that the town would be spared if supplies would be provided." Santiago Arguello, a soldier charged with defending the town, replied with a message saying "not to expect a warm welcome." Bouchard's ships needed the supplies and, angered by the note, ordered a raid on the town the next day. Arguello fled the town, and in an account by one of the ship's commanders: "we found the town well stocked with everything but money and destroyed much wine and spirits, and all the public property, set fire to the kings stores, barracks and governor's house and about two o'clock we marched back although not in order as many men were intoxicated."

Bouchard finally arrived in Valparaiso, Chile, after a successful raid in Mexico. He arrived with four ships, but the Chilean government put him on trial for piracy. The trial ended with Bouchard getting back his ships, but the Chilean government confiscated all artillery from the ships and all booty. Bouchard returned to Buenos Aires with four worthless boats.

In 1820, bankrupt and with no ships, Bouchard went to Peru to fight for their war of Independence. Strangely, it was in Peru that his naval career was most successful, and he rose in rank to Vice Admiral. He was paid in property. Upon retirement, he opted to stay on his plantations in Peru. He forgot about his family in Argentina. He started corresponding with his family in France. He changed his name back to Andre Paul. He became the owner of slaves who complained about his behavior towards them. On July 4, 1837, five slaves murdered him on his own property. He was 57 years old.

Andre Paul Bouchard became a patriot in both Argentina and Peru. The rest of the world regard him as a pirate or privateer.