

The Washington Post

Answer Man takes a voyage into the history of another ship once here, but now gone

By John Kelly
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Saturday, January 8, 2011; 7:31 PM

When I was a kid in the 1950s, I recall a sizable ship permanently moored on the Severn River, adjacent to the Naval Academy in Annapolis. Visitors could tour the old craft and - I believe - were told that it had been captured by the Navy during the Spanish-American War and brought to Annapolis as a floating classroom, or maybe it was to serve as quarters for enlisted personnel. At some point years later, the ship was apparently taken to points unknown. I am wondering if you have ever heard of the ship and, if so, whether it was, in fact, a trophy of the Spanish-American War.

- Joe O'Connell,

Gaithersburg

The Reina Mercedes (named for the first wife of *King Alfonso XII*) was indeed a trophy from the Spanish-American War. Launched in 1887 at Cartagena, Spain, the 280-foot cruiser was a somewhat obsolete vessel by the time the "splendid little war" unfolded in Cuba and the Philippines 11 years later. Slow and unarmored, it nevertheless served as the flagship of the Spanish Navy in Cuban waters.

Subjected to regular artillery fire from the U.S. Navy, it was struck at least eight times. Fearful that the U.S. fleet would sail into Santiago Harbor, the Spanish commander ordered the Reina Mercedes towed and sunk in the channel as a blockade ship.

Its crew dutifully obeyed and, although under fire from two battleships, they successfully set the scuttling charges. The [Reina Mercedes](#) started to sink where intended, but when a mooring line was severed by a shell, it drifted, leaving the harbor open.

When the Spanish surrendered July 17, 1898, the Reina Mercedes became U.S. property.

It wasn't the most seaworthy of prizes. Perhaps if the U.S. Navy had known it would get it as a trophy, it wouldn't have put so many holes in it. Nevertheless, the ship was raised and towed to a repair yard in Norfolk. As it eased into Norfolk's harbor on May 27, 1899, accompanied by 36 tugboats festooned with flags, thousands of people lined the waterfront and cheered.

The Navy decided to make the Reina Mercedes a non-self-propelled receiving ship or station ship.

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This is basically a building. After stints in Portsmouth, N.H., and Newport, R.I., it was towed in 1912 to Annapolis, where for four decades it performed many functions: enlisted barracks, temporary headquarters for the Midshipmen Boat Club, lodging for the Naval Academy band. It served as the quarters for the commander of the naval station and his family. The *Reina Mercedes* was the only U.S. ship in which dependents were permitted to live.

Some old midshipmen may remember the *Reina Mercedes* as the place they were banished to when they got in trouble. As a Post story reported in 1912: "It was found that the midshipmen when confined to quarters had opportunities of mingling with their schoolmates which prevented the punishment from being as serious as it was wished." Delinquent underclassmen could still attend class and drills but had to return to the *Reina Mercedes* to sleep.

In 1957, the Navy decided the old ship was beyond repair, and it was sold for scrap to Boston Metals Co. of Baltimore. The bell from the ship was presented to the Spanish ambassador to the United States. The wheel and another bell were displayed at *Reina Mercedes Hall*, a naval station building named after the ship which had served as a building.

In 1968, another piece of the *Reina Mercedes* turned up: the ornately carved figurehead from the bow. Featuring a Spanish coat of arms and weighing 1,000 pounds, it was installed on a wall in the lobby of the new *Tecumseh Apartments* in Annapolis. Apparently, said *Jim Cheevers*, senior curator at the Naval Academy Museum, one of the developers of the apartments was a retired naval officer. "He went to the scrap yard and bought the figurehead back," Jim said.

During a lobby renovation in the 1990s, the *Tecumseh* - now condos - asked the Naval Academy if they wanted it.

"I went over and took a look at it and was amazed at the size of it," Jim said. It was lowered into a boat and motored back to the naval station.

Jim thinks it must be in storage some place.

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