



REUTERS

Chile to scour seas for long-lost submarine

By Gideon Long

SANTIAGO, Nov 29 (Reuters) - The search is about to begin for Latin America's first submarine -- a manually operated steel tube equipped with fins and cannons which sank off the coast of Chile 140 years ago.

The "Flach" was designed by a German immigrant to Chile, Karl Flach, and was built to foil Spain's ambitions in the region. It made several successful test voyages in 1866.

But on May 3 of that year, it sank in the bay of Valparaiso, 90 miles (140 km) west of the capital Santiago. The crew -- two Chileans, two Frenchmen and seven Germans, including Flach and his 15-year-old son -- all died.

Three days later, the crew of a British frigate located the vessel and tried to raise it, but it was stuck fast in thick mud, some 165 feet (50 meters) below the surface.

Since then, no one has seen it.

Now, a team of marine scientists have joined forces with the Chilean navy to look for the sub, which they say was the first in Latin America and only the fifth in the world to make a successful underwater voyage.

They have identified an area measuring roughly two miles (3 km) square where they think it lies, and will begin scouring the sea bottom next Monday.

"The submarine is about 12 meters (39 feet) long which, in the vastness of the ocean, is nothing," said Chilean naval commander Patricio Valenzuela. "It's a tiny dot in the sea."

The navy will use sonar and electromagnetic technology to aid their search.

The Flach was a revolutionary vessel in its time.

Topped by two cannons and an entry hatch, it relied on manpower to move. The crew members had to turn handles at the back of the vessel to power the propellers.

Flach built the submarine at the request of the Chilean government to counter the threat of Spain, which went to war with Chile and Peru in the 1860s and bombarded Valparaiso from the sea early in 1866.

"Lots of people before Flach had designed prototypes of submarines, including Leonardo Da Vinci ... but very few had been tested underwater," said Pedro Pujante, a Spanish marine scientist involved in the project.

Only the Americans and a handful of European nations had successfully tested submarines earlier, he told a news conference in Santiago.

Valenzuela said the navy would have to sift through piles of wreckage on the sea floor to find their prize.

"There are between 500 and 600 documented wrecks in the bay of Valparaiso," he said. "Imagine how many there are if you add the undocumented wrecks too."

For Guillermo Steguen, the 85-year-old great-grandson of Flach, the search offers new hope.

"If they manage to find the remains of my great-grandfather that would be spectacular," he told Reuters by telephone from his home near Valparaiso.

"I'll bury him in the family tomb."

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