ARTICLE NO. 326

Vizcaíno sailed as far north as Cape Mendocino, making detailed charts of the coastline.

It was a difficult voyage with most of Vizcaíno’s crew suffering from scurvy because of lack of vitamin C. Sixteen sailors had died by the time he reached Monterey Bay. While he gave new names to many places, the only place he apparently actually explored in detail was Monterey Bay. In fact, he mapped the bay’s coastline so carefully that his maps were used for the next 200 years.

Either they were unimpressed with Monterey, or they accidentally passed by it in the fog. But after three and a half months, Portola’s party came to a perch on a coastal ridge and saw a great swath of inland water. They called it Estero de San Francisco, thinking it an arm of the then Bahia de San Francisco (now Drake’s Bay), so christened by another early explorer in 1595. Though they didn’t realize it at the time, in fact Portola and his party were the first Europeans to glimpse what lies inside today’s Golden Gate, arguably the greatest natural harbor in the world…

The bay appears to have been first carefully explored and mapped by

Vizcaíno reported in his logs that Monterey Bay was a safe harbor, “sheltered from all winds”. As was discovered in subsequent years, however, Monterey Bay really has no natural harbors and considerable effort was expended in the last century to build harbors sheltered from the wind and waves at Santa Cruz, Moss Landing, and Monterey.

Although Vizcaíno spoke highly of the California coast and Monterey Bay as a good port for Manila galleons, he was not allowed a return visit and Alta California was ignored for over a century and a half. European issues as well as a perceived threat to the occupation of the California coast from England and Russia also diverted Spain’s attention at the time.

In the spring of 1769, two expeditions, one commanded by Captain Gaspar de Portolá and a second by Captain Fernando Rivera, set out from Baja California to prepare for the military occupancy of Alta California, with an important objective to reach Vizcaíno’s famous Monterey Bay harbor. The threat of Russia and England along the coast was much stronger at this time, which provide an additional catalyst for the expedition.

The Portolá expedition left San Diego on July 14, 1769, and headed north along the coast. After passing Santa Barbara on August 19, they reached the southern end of the rugged Big Sur coast on September 13, and were forced to make a difficult detour inland through the Santa Lucia Range to the Salinas Valley. Following the river downstream towards Monterey Bay they reached an area between Marina and Salinas on October 1 where they camped.

Portolá and a small group of soldiers headed towards the river mouth. They climbed a low sand hill, known today as Mulligan Hill, near the mouth of the present day Salinas River, but failed to see or recognize Vizcaíno’s harbor “sheltered from all winds”. Mulligan Hill is actually a large old sand dune, and like much of the rest of the central and southern Monterey Bay shoreline, the extensive dune fields bear evidence to a long history of strong winds.

A scouting party explored the Monterey Peninsula, but didn’t find the protected harbor there either. They were also eagerly anticipating meeting a ship, the San José, which was carrying supplies, but which never arrived. A number of men were incapacitated from scurvy and were being carried on litters, which didn’t help matters or morale.

They headed north, reaching the Pajaro River, which they named after a large straw-stuffed bird that was left behind in a deserted Indian settlement. After stopping at Pinto Lake, the expedition reached the area of present day Santa Cruz on October 18, 1769. Finally, after a rugged and very difficult journey up the North Coast, they sighted San Francisco Bay from San Bruno Mountain on October 31.

While San Francisco Bay was soon recognized as one of the greatest natural harbors on the planet, Portolá apparently thought little of San Francisco Bay and was disappointed in not being able to find the Monterey Bay’s harbor.

The expedition turned around, and headed back towards the Monterey Peninsula.

Reaching the Carmel Bay area, the expedition’s animals found lots to forage on but the explorers themselves were reduced to eating seagulls and pelicans. Local Indians may have saved them by bringing them ground corn and seeds

They continued to believe that the San José, the resupply ship they were expecting, would find them. In one last attempt to communicate, they erected two wooden crosses on low hills above the beach, with notes buried at their bases, hoping that the crew would see them and come ashore.

It was now December, however, and the weather was deteriorating so they made the decision to head south. The remaining party, minus several deserters, reached San Diego on January 24, 1770, six months after their departure. The ship that the expedition had been looking for had been forced to return to port in Mexico for repairs shortly after departing. It never reached Monterey Bay, and in fact, was never heard from again.

Portolá was a very determined soldier, however, and he returned that spring and this time he recognized Vizcaíno’s Monterey Bay, although it was never really “sheltered from all winds”.