

The 1618 Wreck of the *San Martín*, *Almiranta de Honduras*

By Dave Horner

Edited by Cori Sedwick Downing

On September 12, 1618 a hurricane hit a Spanish treasure fleet in the Gulf Stream two days after it had left Havana. Many of the 31 ships in the *Plata Flota* were sunk in the high winds and seas, and only a few, including the *Capitana*, navigated by General Tomas Raspuru, succeeded in reaching Spain. One of the largest vessels in the homeward-bound convoy was the *San Martín*, more commonly known as the *Almiranta de Honduras*, as she had taken on the majority of her cargo in the Honduran port of Trujillo. She was a 300-ton Vizcayan-built ship armed in Seville and provided with a company of soldiers when chosen as the *almiranta*. Her cargo contained indigo, hides, cochineal (a red dye from an insect found in Mexico), gold, and silver. Fleets were regularly organized to escort such products back to Spain. The *San Martín* also carried a quantity of silver coins to purchase supplies for the soldiers.

News of the great storm and of the disaster it wrought was sketchy and spread over many months. Four ships made it back to Spain while others limped into ports in Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, and Cuba. A total of fifteen ships were never accounted for. Most of the ships sank either on the western reefs of the Bahamas or along the coast of Florida thanks to swirling winds that changed directions. The *San Martín* sank near Wabasso Beach, Florida after being spun around back into the Gulf Stream. For most of the night, the ship was pummeled by gigantic seas and those souls on board were certain they would sink in this extremely deep water; however, when dawn broke, they found themselves being swept uncontrollably through mountainous breakers pounding the Florida shoreline.

The governor of Spanish Florida, Juan de Salinas, learned that a ship had wrecked halfway down the east coast, and he sent an expedition of twenty soldiers led by Captain Alonso Diaz from the capital at St. Augustine. They found 53 survivors who were naked and starving. After providing them with food and water, Captain Diaz reconnoitered the shipwreck and later wrote that the ship was found off the bar and covered with water. The hides, indigo, and cargo were spoiled from the sea. Rough water and bad weather prevented any salvage. Later, two expeditions by the Spanish salvaged one 2000-pound cannon which they brought back to St. Augustine in the hold of a ship, "after much effort." In addition to the general cargo, the *San Martín* carried two large bronze cannons of 3200 pounds each and eight cast-iron guns of 2200 pounds each.

The location of the remains of the *San Martín* was originally discovered by the Real Eight Company when they were searching for wrecks of the famed 1715 Spanish fleet in the 1960s. The site became known as the "Green Cabin" wreck because it was offshore across from a faded green beach cottage. After working the site a short time, they found a few coins, but they passed over the wreck because it was not 1715 in origin and they moved farther south along the coast where they made the first of their big treasure discoveries. Some years later Dave Horner became interested in the wreck for the very reason the Real Eight Company abandoned it: It was a century earlier and could yield historically important information (at the time, it was the earliest known shipwreck in Florida). Finding a little treasure certainly would be nice as well, Horner reasoned.

After being encouraged to pursue the wreck by his friend, Lou Ullian (one of the original Real Eight members), Horner met with officials from the Florida Department of State, Division of Archives, History and Records Management, Bureau of Historic Sites and Properties. The State granted him a lease on the site in the spring of 1979. After obtaining exclusive rights, Horner agreed to a proposal from Indialantic attorney, Fred Denius, to supply the salvage boat and divers for a percentage of the deal.

Work started in early May with a magnetometer survey of the area. As anomalies were recorded on the magnetometer, a color-coded buoy would be dropped on the spot. Multiple readings proved to be five large cannons in one pile with two anchors approximately 100 feet away and considerable debris scattered in between. Now it was time for the divers to go to work! Aboard the salvage boat, an old 31-foot Chris Craft dubbed Big Time Action (BTA), was captain and chief diver John Brandon, divers Jim Solanick and Richard Turner, and recording secretary and diver Cathy Balfour.

In the cannon pile, they found huge thirteen-foot guns partially camouflaged by coral and sea fans. Strewn around the bottom were assorted sizes of pale green and beige ballast rocks. Off to starboard was a very old anchor with a six-foot shank and four-foot spread between flukes. Beyond it in deeper water they encountered another old anchor with a nine-foot shank and a six-foot spread between the flukes. This must have been dropped in a desperate effort by the ship's crew to stop the ship from pounding into pieces on the Florida reef during its final moments.

Most of the prime scatter area was between 200 and 300 yards off the beach. Water depths ranged from twenty to twenty-five feet. Underwater visibility on a good day might be as much as twelve feet, but more often a diver could see only a few feet, and when sea conditions were unfavorable, only a few inches.

The Explorers Club in New York City awarded flag number 73 to Horner for his summer expedition in search of the treasure of the *Almiranta de Honduras*. On June 2, he dove with the crew after rigging the flag on the BTA's antenna on the flying bridge. This was in keeping with the mission of the Explorers Club whereby "any member in good standing may apply for the privilege of carrying the Explorers Club flag on an expedition intended to further the cause of exploration and field science. The flag has been carried on hundreds of expeditions since 1918: to both poles, to the highest peaks of the greatest mountain ranges, to the depths of the ocean, and to outer space."

According to Dave, "we were on the bottom struggling against the current to maintain our balance. The blower was clouding visibility with all kinds of sand and coquina coral debris. Occasionally, an unidentified encrusted object would appear and we would set it aside. Suddenly, what looked like a burst of yellow went by with the current. Then, another quick stream of golden particles filtered through the already cloudy water. Could this have been some of the gold dust reputed to have been aboard? How fast it appeared and vanished! If there was more, and it was gold dust, how would we ever manage to collect it?" The logistics of this subject, with recommendations of everything from large magnets to strainer bags, dominated the crew's conversation for the rest of the day.

Once the salvage operation was in full swing, hopes ran high. Each day was a new opportunity to find treasure. The captain had instructions to stay anchored on the site as long as the weather was fair thus eliminating his wasting time by running back and forth through Sebastian Inlet. But, the crew always observed cocktail hour back on land. Things proceeded slowly and there was little to report. In the meantime, Dave Horner was busy building his Popeye's Famous Fried Chicken franchise in Central Florida and could only occasionally dive with the crew.

By mid-July, when Horner took his family north to his father's Virginia Beach home and the divers hadn't found anything more than the cannons and anchors, he met with Fred Denius. They agreed on a secret code should there be a big find while Horner was away. "If anything significant is discovered, call me immediately. If I'm not available, use the code name 'Hot Dog' and I'll know it's important for me to get back to you quickly," said Horner.

One night while Horner and his wife went out to dinner and his father, also named Dave, who was hard of hearing, stayed home, the telephone rang. His dad picked it up and someone on the other end asked, "Is this Dave Horner?" He replied, "Yes" (which was true).

"Hot dog, Dave, hot dog!" came the response, to which the father answered, "What? What are you saying?"

"Hot dog, Dave, hot dog!"

"Who is this and what do you want?" the mostly-deaf father asked.

"Is this or is this not Dave Horner?" the other party inquired.

"Yes, this is Dave Horner," Dave's father again answered.

"Then, damn it Dave, hot dog, hot dog, hot dog!"

The father hung up the phone.

When Horner returned from dinner, he asked his father whether there were any phone calls while he was away. His dad replied, "Not really. Just some nut who called me a hot dog." It took a couple of minutes for Dave to remember just what those words meant and when he reached Fred Denius in Florida, Fred was sitting on his living room floor amidst a pile of blackened pieces of eigh, now delirious with treasure fever. The BTA had anchored near a reef, but the divers hadn't found anything. As they tried

to shift the boat, one of the anchors became lodged. Jim Solanick went overboard to dislodge the anchor and spotted several oxidized silver coins exposed on the reef. The crew immediately positioned the boat and blower over this area, and from the hole the blower created, they found 797 silver coins. Apparently they had uncovered the remains of a chest that had settled on the reef after the big galleon had struck it and broken itself apart. They also brought up badly worn fragments of coins, some silver slag, and a gold ring with a missing stone. This discovery took place on July 18, a banner day for the team.

Unfortunately, bad weather kept the BTA and its divers onshore for four days after that. When the seas finally allowed them to return to the Green Cabin site, Captain Brandon anchored about 200 feet southwest of the cannon pile. The crew dug from sun up to sun down and exhausted their compressed air. For their day's toil, they had recovered another 506 silver coins, many fragments, bottle stoppers, several bowls, and various pottery. The boat must have been as tired as the divers because once in port, its propeller fell off.

Other mechanical problems kept the salvage vessel in port for the rest of the month. August proved to be a poor month for finds and finally two tropical storms brought the season to an end.

Under the State of Florida's underwater leasehold laws, everything the crew found that season would be tagged and hauled off to Tallahassee for preservation and safekeeping. Robert Vickery, a representative from the Florida Department of State, Division of Archives, History and Records Management, Bureau of Historic Sites and Properties, and Sonny Cockrell, the state archeologist, carted off barrels full of pottery, encrusted objects, spikes, pikes, cannonballs, barshot, blue lumps of indigo, bone, lead sheathing, and of course, silver. In accordance with the salvage agreement with the State, a "division of spoils," whereby the salvagers would receive 75% of the find, would eventually take place, but this could take years.

In a bizarre twist, another admiralty matter unfolded that fall, possibly jeopardizing Horner and company's chance at a payday.

Treasure hunter Mel Fisher, upset that the State was attempting to take jurisdiction over his discovery of the galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* some forty miles southwest of Key West, began filing admiralty claims against every known treasure site along the Florida east coast. The "Green Cabin" wreck was one of them. When Dave Horner asked the State for protection, he was told that the matter would have to be settled in court. At best this could mean years of arbitration; at worst, Fisher could force the State to release to him all of the valuables recovered from all wreck sites. Fortunately, Dave and attorney Fred Denius, among others, were able to press the State for an immediate division and final settlement. The historic distribution took place in the vault of a local bank on December 20, 1979.

In all, over 3000 silver coins and numerous artifacts were recovered. The gold ring was the only item of gold found. It was probably on the finger of one of those who perished in the storm over 300 years before. All the coins were from the reign of Philip II (1556-1598) and Philip III (1598-1621). Many of the coins were heavily oxidized, pitted, or worn from the abrasive action of the sand and many years on the bottom of the sea. Other coins were easily recognizable as coins, and a surprising number of them still retained their original design. A few of the prime specimens retained their dates, partial dates, and/or mint marks.

At the time of the shipwreck of the *San Martín* in 1618, Spain was the richest country in the world, and Spanish treasure galleons the wealthiest vessels for their size and time. While it was not a salvage operation of the size and scope of others before and after it, at that time the *San Martín* was the earliest documented shipwreck ever salvaged off the east coast of Florida. Other shipwrecks have yielded earlier coins from the reign of Charles I and his mother, Joanna, the parents of Philip II. Still and all, the *San Martín* was a happy find that didn't make anyone rich but sure gave them some good stories to tell.

