

The King's Frigate "La Galga" & the 1750 Treasure Fleet

On August 18, 1750 a group of seven richly laden treasure ships left the port of Havana, Cuba on the homeward journey across the Atlantic to Cadiz, Spain. The ships were not part of either of the annual fleets which sailed from Nueva Espana (Mexico) or Terra Firme (South America) but rather had met in Cuba having sailed independently to Havana from other ports in the West Indies. Two of the ships belonged to the Spanish crown and were already in Havana. The rest were merchant vessels; two had begun their journey in Cartagena while the others had set sail from Veracruz some months before. The registered cargo of the seven ships consisted of precious metals; silver and gold in bars, coins and silverware, as well as colonial goods for the European market; hides, tobacco, red and blue textile dyes, wood, cocoa, sugar and medicinal herbs.

The six ships sailed together from Havana in convoy with the King's frigate "La Galga" (meaning Greyhound) providing protection. "La Galga" carried 56 cannons and was a very fast ship quite capable of handling any pirates who might attack the convoy. Her Captain was an Irishman, Daniel Huoni. Huoni was a skilled Captain having sailed on the King's ships since the 1730's.

All went well with the convoy as it sailed north up the Florida Straits and past the Bahamas. On the 25th at 3:00pm the convoy was hit by gale force winds from the north. That evening as the convoy struggled to keep together the wind shifted to the south then southwest. The fleet was soon in the midst of a raging hurricane. For days the ships of the convoy battled the tremendous waves and were scattered apart. The Captain, of one of the ships "Los Godos", wrote a detailed account of the storm in his report to the Crown. In one paragraph of the account he wrote *"We cannot reduce the water with two pumps out of order. We were compelled to dump the cannon, the oven, the boat and large animals – all heads already killed by the pounding seas".* and later *"now we realized that there was no remedy to our plight other than the Virgin Mary, as there was over 11 feet of water in the hold"* and then, *"Just before dawn the mainmast came down. Finding ourselves in a miserable condition, we started dumping more things overboard: chests, mattresses of officers and passengers, any cargo between decks, such as hides, dyewood, meat boxes – and always manning the pumps as our only hope of survival."* Although the Captains of the other ships did not write so detailed an account one can assume they all suffered through the same conditions.

When the storm finally subsided it was 6 days later and the convoy lay in ruins. Three of the ships wrecked along the North Carolina Coast. On one of the ships "El Salvadore", the only survivors were three sailors and a small boy. Nine English ships were also lost along the North Carolina shore in the same storm. Two ships of the original convoy made it to relative safety of the Port of Hampton, Virginia. These were

number of sailors. The prisoners were mostly Englishman and were being held for dubious reasons. They were told they could *"either eat rock and stones or enter on board the Spanish Man of War, which being generously left to their choice, for their healths sake they preferred the latter"*.

"La Galga" went aground 1,200 feet off of the shore of Assateague while attempting to enter an old inlet called Popes Inlet just south of today's Maryland - Virginia line. The prisoners swam for shore and upon reaching it quickly parted company with their captors.

Assateague island was not a hospitable place to be shipwrecked. There was no fresh water, little if any food and terrible swarms of biting insects. Surveyor Henry Lloyd, commissioned by the Governor of Maryland to survey Assateague Island to settle a fishing rights dispute with Virginia, made the following observations and comments in his journal during the survey in June 1826; *"This island must look like it did on the first day of creation. It is a pest-hole covered partially with scrub-pine, brush and patch-grass. The bay is a marsh filled with snakes, birds of prey and swarms of flying insects that attack man and beasts without mercy,"* and *"This place gives all of us a feeling of impending doom. The hot sun and biting insects, a number of human skulls and the sound of owls at night have given real fright to even the strongest of my companions. If Virginia should want this island then, under their claim to the place by the founders, they should, by all means have it."*

The crew left for Snow Hill using Indian canoes taking with them several very heavy chests loaded with treasure. Word of the wreck quickly spread and once the Spanish had left the local people arrived and set about plundering everything that could be gotten from the ship or that had washed ashore. The areas below decks were flooded with the murky waters found along the Assateague shore so it is doubtful that much salvage was done there. Sails were cut off and removed, the decks were pulled up and a load of fine mahogany that was destined for the King's palace found it's way to a Pocomoke merchant.

Captain Huoni was distressed upon hearing of the looting and complained bitterly to the local authorities. Governor Ogle in Annapolis ordered the local high Sheriff Scarborough to take possession of the wreck and to stop it's looting. The Sheriff arrived at the wreck and ordered the locals to stop their looting and they ignored him totally. When at the wreck he observed that the ship was still in generally good shape with several cannon and anchors still on the deck. Holes were present in the ship's deck where the boards had been taken and he observed that the lower decks were flooded. He wrote to Governor Olge and apprised him of the situation and of the fact that the locals would not obey him. In addition, he noted the exact location of the wreck as two ship's length north of the (then) Maryland - Virginia line. The Governor angrily wrote back to arrest any man that does not obey you and added the chilling comment *"you shall fail at your peril"*. The Sheriff again went to the wreck and found it picked over. He attempted to reclaim what was taken from the wreck by the locals and

recovered only a small fraction of what was removed.

Captain Huoni could have stayed and protected the wreck with his men but instead left for Norfolk probably because the word of mistreatment of his English prisoners had begun to spread among the local people who were undoubtedly upset by it. Fearing for his safety, the Captain probably reasoned that it was best to leave the area as soon as possible.

A bad storm several months later broke up the ship and is said to have carried the wreck much closer to shore. This ultimately caused Popes Inlet to close with sand because the ship obstructed the currents flowing in and out of it.

The locals never completely forgot about the wreck and the sandbar on the bayside adjacent to the wreck site was called "Spanish Bar". Over time the actual name of the ship was forgotten it being remember only as "Greyhound", but it's legend continued. It was said that the ponies on Assateague came from the wreck and local legends of a Spanish Treasure ship coming aground on Assateague persist in local books including "Maryland's Arcadia" by Reginald Truitt.

Then, in the 1960's, David Horner did extensive research and wrote a book called "Treasure Galleons" which renewed interest in "La Galga". His account of the wreck was fairly accurate except that it mistakenly placed the location of the wreck at the North Carolina-Virginia line instead of the Virginia-Maryland line. His book included a detailed map of the wrong area and undoubtedly many a treasure seeker went in search of the ship more then 100 miles from it's actual location.

Extensive letters and records dealing with the wreck were located in the Maryland archives buried among all of the other archival data. Then in the late 1970's shipwreck historian and Ocean City resident Rick Cook started searching in the archives for information relating to the Spanish wreck said to lye off of Assateague. After seven years of archival research Cook now knew exactly what ship he looked for and in what general area. To date, know one has done a better or more detailed and thorough search of the archival records than Rick Cook.

Timbers and parts of the ship continually wash up on the beach in the area of the wreck and have done so for many years. Cook has assembled an assortment of artifacts believed to be from the wreck including Iron spikes, lead scuppers, knee braces, fire bricks and massive timbers. Finally, Cook believed he found what was the main portion of the wreck just below the MD - VA line. Cook based his positioning on a detailed study of the state line and how it has moved over time. The proof of "La Galga" being in that area came to Cook in 1987 when he interviewed Mrs. Juanita Clements. Mrs. Clements who owned one of the last summer cottages on Assateague Island, had previously found two Spanish Pillar Dollars on the beach dated 1743 and 1746. These coins were minted in Mexico and was the type of coin "La Galga" would have been carrying. Cook's divers worked the shoreline in the area in the late 1980's and they found a large concreted mass just off the beach. Cook concluded that he had finally

found "La Galga".

At the same time Cook was researching the wreck another researcher was searching the same area and had reached a different conclusion. John Amerhein also did exhaustive research in archives in libraries in Virginia, Maryland and Washington, DC. Amerhein did extensive magnetometer work in 1982 along the shore and found nothing of import. Then he decided to check out a theory that the beach had since built out over the wreck and now may actually lie on the landward side of the beach in the marsh. In 1983, on the landward side, using a land magnetometer (and with the help of a psychic), Amerhein located a spot he believed the remains of "La Galga" lay. Amerhein reported his findings to various museums and the federal government to interest someone in excavating his find but found no interest among these groups.

Others have also found artifacts from "La Galga" along the beach in addition to Mrs. Clements, Cook and Armerhein. These include real estate developer Gene Parker and divers "Branch" and "Tree" Kreppel. Of those who have worked on "La Galga", Rick Cook undoubtedly has done the most research and assembled the most convincing evidence to document his finds.

In the late summer of 1996, unaware that others had already done so in the past. Sea Hunt began extensive research in local libraries and archives using Accomac legal secretary Brenda Ashby. The preliminary research that she did led to Sea Hunt hiring archival researchers to search the archives in Spain, England and France for any information on the ship. A wealth of documents was uncovered that described the events leading up to and the circumstances of the wreck. The main unanswered question was where was the Virginia-Maryland line in 1750. Sea Hunt asked for help from Mac Rodgers the now retired former head of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission's survey department. He surprisingly reported that parts of the line (in the Chesapeake Bay area) were only finally agreed to in the 1970's and that the state line had moved over the years depending on who was the state surveyor and how aggressive he was. The bottom line seemed to be it could have been just about anywhere over a three mile area.

Before Sea Hunt started surveying the area in the fall of 1996, I interviewed local Chincoteague residents about the shipwreck. One of these people is named Nat Steelman. Nat had been the local oyster warden for the Marine Resources Commission for over 40 years and no one knew the area better. I asked him if he knew anything about a Spanish ship coming aground and he said "yes". He placed a mark on my map that day where he said a portion of the ship lies. Then he went on to say that a piece of the ship was carried up over the beach and into the marsh during a storm in the late 1800's (so the Armerhein theory may also be partially correct). The piece was one of the sides of the ship and he said it was carried up over the beach to the foot of Buffalo Ridge, a small woody knoll that sits back from the beach. He was told this information many years ago from a longtime Assateague resident who was the last person to live on Buffalo Ridge.

Having narrowed the search area to at least three miles Sea Hunt's search vessel "Tidal Wave" began the search of the area in late October 1996. Over \$1,300,000 was spent on the vessel and its state of the art equipment. The Cesium magnetometer (detects subtle variations in the earth's magnetic field) that Sea Hunt would use in the search was 100 times more sensitive than the proton magnetometer that John Amerhein used in 1983. The high resolution sonar on "Tidal Wave" is used mostly by the military and allows the user to see even the smallest objects lying on the ocean floor.

Sea Hunt then began the search of the area with expert help. Paul Mathias, an electronics expert (having just returned from the 1996 Titanic Expedition) fine tuned the instruments. Wes Spiegel, a diver expert in working in poor underwater visibility was on board to handle the diving. For weeks Tidal Wave went up and down the shoreline completing a search grid magnetometer experts refer to as "mowing the grass". We would start at one end of the three mile search area go to the other end, move over 50 feet, and do it again. We continually repeated the process in this manner until the entire area was covered. Even in a small search area hundreds if not thousands of miles must be run to cover an area in this manner. Then this data is fed into a computer which compiles a composite map of the earth's magnetic field in the area. Ferrous metal objects cause disruptions in this field which are plainly visible on the computer generated map even if they are buried deep in the sand. Sometimes even non-ferrous metals such as gold and silver will cause a slight dip in the earth's magnetic field and this can be detected by only the most sensitive machines.

A pattern of metallic objects soon became apparent on the northern end of the search area just south of the Maryland-Virginia border. Experts on board described it as a perfect shipwreck scatter pattern with object beginning 1,500 feet from shore and then moving towards shore in a southwesterly direction. Dozens of hits were recorded some big and some small, but all in the same line heading directly for the old "Popes Inlet". The largest and last hit was just a few hundred feet from shore and 2,000 feet south of the Maryland-Virginia border. EXACTLY WHERE THE OLD OYSTER WARDEN NAT STEELMAN MADE HIS "X" ON THE MAP!!! At the time when Nat Steeleman placed the "X" on the map I thought he was indicating the general area.....not the exact spot in only 8 feet of water and so close to shore! When I told him later of our results he said, *"I told you where it was that first day we talked"*.

Most of the items were expected to be buried deep in the sand but on the chance that something might be sticking up I ran a sonar survey of the area which did show several beams and timbers sticking up off the bottom.

The divers dove the area on the sonar hits and despite the near zero water visibility working the area thoroughly we were able to come up with some ship timbers. Given the type of wooden pegs used in some of these timbers archaeologists have dated these timbers as pre-1820.

Sea Hunt then learned of Dale Clifton who is a professional coin hunter and was said

to have searched the beach in the area of "La Galga" after major storms. I contacted Dale Clifton and found that he had indeed been collecting coins from the "La Galga" site just opposite the main mag hit 2,000 feet down the beach. Fortunately, Mr. Clifton had not sold the coins and had them available for inspection. He had collected approximately 25 coins in total, all were Spanish and dated prior to when "La Galga" wrecked, except one coin dated 1751.

So is there still treasure on "La Galga"? A researcher and writer who wrote about "La Galga" in the late 1960's placed the value of the remaining treasure on the ship at forty million dollars. Sea Hunt's archival researcher in Spain, Victoria Staples Johnson believes the ship to be carrying only a small amount of treasure most of which was salvaged at the time by the crew. Mrs. Johnson can also find no record of a later official salvage attempt by the Spanish. Rick Cook's research has led him to believe that the ship was carrying several chests of coins two of which were dropped overboard accidentally when the crew was abandoning ship.

A copy of the ship's manifest shows the ship "officially" was carrying mahogany for the King's palace, snuff, raw tobacco, cigars, 900 pesos in taxes being sent to the King, 119 castellanos of gold in three small chests, 218 castellanos of goldware, 30 marcos of silverware. In addition, a priest on board was carrying 4,800 pesos in gold doubloons and various treasures of silver and gold including "badges of the inquisition" and two 75lb pouches of cocoa.

What the ship was "officially" carrying means goods that were declared and the royal tax of 20% had been paid on. It was not unusual for ships to be carrying many times the amount of their registered cargo and smuggled goods. One Spanish ship captured by the English was found to contain ten times the treasure listed on its manifest. This is what enabled the captains of these ships and others to amass great wealth. A deposition from one of the English prisoners on "La Galga" said the ship was carrying "a large amount of silver ingots and some gold". The report from the Sheriff said the crew was able to salvage several very heavy chests of treasure from the wreck but certainly no great amount of the cargo. Silver ingots typically weigh about 70 lbs. each and because of their weight are kept low in the ship in the area of the ballast. It would have been nearly impossible to transport a large amount of silver ingots in Indian canoes.

Sea Hunt's hypothesis is that there may indeed have been smuggled goods aboard the ship. We know that the ship was flooded below decks when the ship went aground. The chance of salvaging heavy items such as silver ingots through two or three flooded decks was slight. The fact that coins and other artifacts frequently wash up on the shore indicate that there is something left from the ship. A beam that washed ashore on the beach in December of 1996 (see photo) had what appeared to be silver oxide (silver oxide is created from the oxidation of silver in the salt water) impressed on it that could have been from a silver ingot.

Captain Huoni told the officials in Snow Hill, Md. that he had recovered what treasure

there was on the ship. But what else would he have said! Like the Captain of the "Los Godos" who did not trust the English officials in Hampton, little would have been gained by Captain Huoni telling the local officials that there was still treasure on the ship. When the captain was back in Spain making his report to the Spanish authorities, he certainly was not likely to reveal that there had been contraband or smuggled goods on "La Galga".

One fascinating fact was the discovery of a single coin dated 1751 in the area of the "La Galga" wreck site. This coin was minted a year after "La Galga" wrecked, so how did this single Spanish coin, dated just one year after the wreck, come to be lost on the this the extremely remote "La Galga" site area. Sea Hunt's theory is that Captain Huoni or someone else arranged for a private salvage operation. This salvage was to recover what contraband or smuggled treasure remained in the flooded lower decks of the ship. The 1751 coin was probably lost by one of these salvors. What possibility was there that a salvage attempt would have been successful? Very little, as the ship was dashed to pieces by a storm two months after the wreck. Further, anything sitting on the ocean bottom quickly sinks in the sand until it reaches the clay layer of marsh mat generally 15 feet below the ocean floor. Any salvor using the technology available at that time would have been helpless to deal with the deep sand and the near zero underwater visibility.

The only thing that can be stated for certain, regarding what might remain on the Galga, is that the priest traveling on board "La Galga" was able to ultimately recover at the "Depositaria de Indias" in Seville, Spain, only a little more than half of the gold doubloons and some of the silverware he carried. The others items he carried were lost.

Under the terms of Sea Hunt's exploration permit from the state of Virginia, Sea Hunt reported the results of its search to the state and requested an exclusive permit to attempt the salvage of what remains of "La Galga". The wreck site appears to have no physical integrity and pieces of the wreck are scattered over a fairly large area and generally buried deep in the sand. This fact and the near zero visibility underwater will make recovery of the ship very difficult.

In 1987 Congress granted the States ownership all shipwrecks that lie within three miles of their shore. Virginia had to date never granted anyone a license to salvage any ship lying in its waters under this new law. Extensive negotiations were conducted with the State to work out an acceptable arrangement. The Commonwealth's main concerns were that the environment not be affected by such an operation and that proper archaeological safeguards are to be in place to protect anything that may be found of historical importance. Finally, in late March 1997, the Commonwealth issued Sea Hunt an exclusive permit to salvage the ship agreeing on a 25% share for the State and a 75% share for Sea Hunt. The State of Virginia receives first choice of items that it wants that may have special historical or archaeological significance. One of the conditions of the permit is that recovery operations could not be conducted within 1/2 mile of the shore during the Assateague's busy summer swimming season.

Sea Hunt plans to begin recovery operations on the "La Galga" site in the fall of 1997 and may begin a more detailed electronic survey of the site in late summer. The precision of Sea Hunt's electronic search gear is already the best available with a positioning accuracy of around 9 feet and a sensitivity 100 times greater than a standard proton magnetometer. To work the difficult Galga site most efficiently an even higher level of precision is needed. Using a variety of different technologies and combining them effectively together, Sea Hunt is now striving to improve the precision of its surveys to less than 3 feet. This will be accomplished using a more sophisticated satellite tracking system for more accurate positioning. Better computer software has been written just for this task and by putting sonar pingers on the towfish accuracy will be significantly improved. The towfish is the electronic instrument for gathering undersea data that is towed about 200 feet behind the boat. Most programs assume that the fish is directly behind the boat but this may not always be the case because of side currents or when making a turn. The sonar pingers will allow the computer to calculate the fish's position within 1 inch.

Sonar pingers will also be placed on any items located and also on the divers. In zero water visibility the computer operator on the ship will be able to see the location of the divers and the artifacts at all times. Using wireless underwater communication gear he will be able to literally talk the diver to exactly the work area sought on each dive.

If artifacts of interest can be located from the "La Galga" Sea Hunt plans on offering to donate some to the Assateague National Seashore for them to display in the park. Millions of people visit the Park and would have the opportunity to view them. Sea Hunt would also like to work with the State of Virginia and arrange for some of the artifacts to be displayed in schools throughout the state.

Ben Benson
Sea Hunt, Inc.
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(OMIT)

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P-37-39 Exploration of the Island-Assateague, June 27-30, 1826

I was accompanied by Dr. Furnell and five of my men on the journey through the Island known as Assateague. We rode north and had four mounts on which to carry the necessaries to provide us with sustenance for five days travel.

This island must look much as it did on the first day of creation. It is a pest-hole covered partially with scrub-pine, brush and patch-grass. The bay is a marsh filled with snakes, birds of prey and swarms of flying insects that attack man and beasts without mercy, raising huge boiles on the skin after inflicting their venom. There is some game on the island and thousands of crabs that scamper about on the beaches burying themselves in the sand. There is great evidence of tragedy here as ^{the} remains of ships and water casks ^{are} covering the beach.

We have thus far, in our travels made a count of 45 small horses no larger than a large hound, many appear to be blind and these have a sense which permits them to follow the herds even though they are without sight. Their origin is a mystery and Doctor Furnell, who frequented the island nine years has no knowledge of them. There have been, as stated, many shipwrecks here the good doctor informs me that so many corpses have been removed from the beaches and taken for Christian Burial on the neck that the point on the beach where the coffins are barged is known as coffin point by the residents. There are stories of people vanishing from the island and I have no doubt that they have been taken in the sink-holes and quag-mire that does exist on the island.

The place gives all of us (and especially our ^{(MAY WANT TO OMIT) NIGGER} ~~people~~) a feeling of impending doom. The hot sun and biting insects, a number of human skulls and the screech of owls at night have given real fright to even the strongest of my company. If Virginia should want this island then, under their claim to the place by their founders, they should, by all means, have it.

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