

Found: California's Oldest Shipwreck

by Robert F. Marx

The romantic saga of the lofty Manila Galleons, which plied the Pacific for centuries, was periodically marred by tragedy. More than 100 of those great Spanish ships that sailed between Mexico and the Philippines were lost in storms, wrecked on unmarked reefs and shoals, sunk under the direction of incompetent navigators, or destroyed by British and Dutch privateers. One of the most notable casualties was the *San Agustin*, lost in Drake's Bay in 1595.

Drake's Bay, 25 nautical miles northwest of San Francisco, is one of the most beautiful sections of the California coast. The great, sweeping bay, framed by soaring bluffs, takes its name from Sir Francis Drake, who careened the leaking *Golden Hind* there in June of 1579 during his circumnavigation of the world.

For centuries Drake's Bay served as a refuge for countless ships, and as a graveyard for many. Recently, as I was to begin the search for the remains of the *San Agustin*, I sympathized with what Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeno, the ship's Portuguese captain, might have felt as he stood on the shore, watching helplessly as a sudden storm caused his galleon to capsize and sink at anchor.

As I stood on the gravelled beach at Drake's Bay, bracing against 40-knot winds and scanning the horizon for my search vessel which was overdue from San Francisco, I suffered a 20th-century version of Cermeno's malaise. I had spent three and a half years securing the California state permits that would allow me to search for the *San Agustin*.



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That blustery day seven television crews and a bevy of journalists huddled against the biting wind, ready to witness the start of the expedition. As the morning wore on, the wind continued to churn up the seas, and the search vessel was nowhere in sight. It was a hell of a start for an expedition I had dreamed of since I was a teenager.

My fascination with the *San Agustin* began in 1950 when I first attempted to find her. As a kid in Los Angeles I dived every chance I had, and once I'd had my fill of spearfishing and grabbing abalone, I joined other early divers looking for gold in the rivers of northern California and for shipwrecks off the coast. The discovery of a few gold coins from a Gold Rush-era wreck convinced me I was ready for bigger adventures.

I scoured libraries for every word about California history and shipwrecks. I was especially intrigued by what I read about Drake's Bay and the *San Agustin*. So I headed north, inspired by several Hollywood type visions of my finding an intact ship: fish nets tangled in the mast and rigging, skeletons on deck and, of

course, a giant octopus guarding treasure chests.

Diving gear was primitive. To brave the cold waters we coated ourselves with axle grease. Our scuba tanks were fashioned from fire-extinguisher bottles, and our regulators and connectors were rigged out of high-altitude oxygen breathing equipment.

I thought the *San Agustin* was a secret. To my amazement the fishermen and dairy farmers on the Point Reyes Peninsula not only knew about the galleon but they also showed me shards of blue and white Chinese porcelain they had found on the beach.

My hopes were high as I started my search off the section of beach the shards had come from. I dived for three days in frigid, murky water without finding my dream galleon. No skeletons, no treasure chests; however, I did find several shards and a handful of musket balls which inflamed my obsession. I vowed to return one day to find the elusive *San Agustin*.

Forty years ago underwater archaeology was non-existent. Few people were

interested in shipwrecks and there was little knowledge of what happens to a sunken ship over time. In 1953, when I found my first Spanish Galleon in the Caribbean, I didn't even recognize it. All I saw were a few cannons and anchors and scattered ballast stones. I assumed a ship had run up on a reef and jettisoned the heavy artillery and anchors before freeing itself.

The handful of encrusted silver coins I found should have told me otherwise, but it was to take another few years of research and exploration before I understood. Now, after almost four decades of work on hundreds of wrecks in more than 50 countries, I am still learning about shipwrecks. I am still fascinated by Spanish Galleons and especially the Manila Galleons, the largest and most richly laden ships on the high seas during Spain's colonial period.

Since the introduction of scuba equipment, divers have found many of the galleons that crossed the Atlantic between Spain and her New World colonies. However, perhaps because most of the lost Manila Galleons sank in the far reaches of the Pacific, little was

known about them until two were discovered in Guam and another in the Northern Marianas Islands.

Manila Galleons began sailing between Acapulco and Manila in 1565 (the same year the Spanish founded St. Augustine in Florida). For almost three centuries, sailing on an annual schedule, the lumbering galleons made the Manila-Acapulco run—the world's longest, most perilous nonstop navigation. The last of these galleons sailed in 1815, the year Andrew Jackson won the Battle of New Orleans.

The Manila Galleons served as the umbilical that bound the Philippines to Spain. It was their routine comings and goings that gave some substance to the Spanish dream of domination in the Pacific. The people of Spanish America know them as the China Ships, for they brought cargos of silks, spices and richly varied treasures from the East. To those in the Orient they were the Silver Argosies, laden with silver pesos minted in Mexico and Peru that served as the standard of value in Far Eastern commerce centers.

The galleons were immense vessels,

with five to ten times the cargo capacity of the Atlantic galleons. Some weighed over 2,500 tons, with a crew of 500. Most were constructed in the Philippines and some were built in (what are today) Cambodia and Thailand. They were built so solidly that, during a Dutch attack at the Manila seaport of Cavite, more than 8,000 cannonballs were fired at an anchored galleon but failed to cause serious damage or even penetrate the hull.

Three or four galleons sailed in each direction annually, in accordance with Spanish laws that limited the number of sailings so as not to flood the European market with Oriental goods. The westward voyage was generally pleasant with only an occasional storm unsettling the crossing that routinely lasted 8-10 weeks. But the eastward voyage from Manila to Acapulco was known as the most treacherous navigation in the world. Because winds in the Philippine latitudes are easterly, the Manila Galleons had to beat their way as far north as Japan to reach the belt of westerly winds that carried them across the Pacific to the coast of California. Then they worked their way down to Acapulco.

The westward trek lasted 4-8 months. Of the 300-600 persons sailing on each galleon, an average of 100-150 perished enroute from epidemics, scurvy, starvation, thirst or the cold. In 1657, all 450 aboard one of two Manila Galleons sailing jointly succumbed to a smallpox epidemic. On the companion ship about half the crew and passengers died.

Notwithstanding the great risks to life, ships and property involved in the Manila Galleon trade, the potential financial gain made it worth the gamble. The ships sailing from Acapulco carried manufactured goods needed by the colonists in the Philippines; they also carried great amounts of silver specie and bullion from the mines of Peru and Mexico to pay for the cargos taken on in Manila. The Spanish crown limited the amount of silver sent to Manila to 500,000 pesos a year, but the restrictions were flagrantly disregarded. An average of 3-5 million pesos reached Manila each year, and in the banner year of 1597 an astounding 12 million pesos reached the Asian port.

Cargos transported from Manila to Acapulco were of a more exotic and varied nature. Treasures were collected in Manila from throughout Asia. The

chief item was silk from China and Japan—in lengths, finished apparel, embroidered religious vestments, silk-en tapestries and bed-coverings. Fine cottons from the Mogul Empire of India and carpets from Persia comprised a good part of the cargos during the latter part of the trade.

The galleons also carried great amounts of Chinese porcelain wares, rugs, precious spices and drugs, gems, carved ivory, jade, sandalwood and exquisite works fashioned by Asian craftsmen—religious items of wood, ivory and precious metals.

A considerable amount of gold jewelry was exported to Mexico despite a ban on its importation from the Orient. In a large consignment confiscated at Acapulco in 1767, documents listed hundreds of rings (many set with diamonds and rubies), bracelets, pendants, earrings, necklaces and a number of gold religious articles, including a cross studded with eight diamonds.

When the galleons tied up at Acapulco, the goods were sold at a fair that drew traders from as far away as Peru. These traders would transport their purchases over land to Panama City and

sail home later in the year on the ships of the Armada of the South Seas. Mexican merchants took their goods over the mountains by mule train. Agents representing merchants in far off Seville also used mules to carry Spain-bound merchandise to the Caribbean port of Veracruz to board the New Spain Fleet.

On July 5, 1595, four galleons were dispatched from Manila enroute to Acapulco, their holds crammed with treasure. The smallest ship was the *San Agustin*. Conflicting contemporary accounts place her size between 200-700 tons; sources agree that she carried 130 tons of precious cargo in silks, porcelain, spices and objects made of gold, silver, ivory, jade and ebony.

The three largest ships were to proceed directly to Acapulco. The *San Agustin*, meanwhile, had orders to sail along the coast of California scouting for safe havens where other galleons could stop to make necessary repairs and take on fresh water and firewood before continuing on to Acapulco. Aboard the *San Agustin* was a prefabricated launch to be used for actual exploration of the coast.

Although the convoy was buffeted by

numerous storms, they made one of the fastest recorded crossings, reaching California 106 days after leaving the Philippines. Sailing south from landfall at Cape Mendocino, the *San Agustin* anchored at Drake's Bay on November 6, 1595. The jubilant crew was delighted by the local Miwok Indians who rowed out to greet them, bearing gifts. Captain Cermeno took an armed party ashore and began to explore the surrounding territory's dramatic cliffs and austere scrub lands.

During one of the last days of November, Cermeno and most of the crew were on the beach when a fierce squall struck. Within minutes the galleon disappeared beneath the waves with about ten men aboard. Only a few pieces of the *San Agustin* rigging washed ashore. The survivors had only the clothes on their backs and no provisions. They did have the launch, however, and after scrounging for provisions, they set sail for Acapulco, 2,000 miles to the south, reaching the Mexican port of Chacala two months later.

Today the *San Agustin* offers a unique resource for studying Pacific maritime history. Her approximate location has

been known for a long time. Porcelain shards and other artifacts still wash up on the beach and archaeologists have found them in local Indian middens. While I was working on so many other shipwrecks I never forgot the galleon in Drake's Bay; in 1986 I began the process of applying to the state of California for permission to find and salvage the *San Agustin*. In comparison to my teenage attempt, I now had the benefit of decades of underwater archaeological experience, advanced technology, and necessary resources. Years of research in Spanish and Mexican archives led me to documents that detailed the bearings Cermeno made when his ship sank, and I had narrowed down the wreck site to within a few hundred yards. So I embarked on the *San Agustin* project with high hopes.

But I have spent the last four years mired in what amounts to a jurisdictional dispute on who controls the waters of Drake's Bay—the state of California or the federal government. Drake's Bay lies in both the Point Reyes National Seashore and a National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration Marine Sanctuary, so the federal government claims control of the *San Agustin* site. On the other hand, the state of California claims rights to the wreck. A tug of war has been going on and my project is caught in the middle, within a maze of permitting procedures and public hearings.

Last spring the way was cleared by the state of California to conduct a magnetometric survey of the bay. NOAA consented, stipulating that the seabed itself not be disturbed. The National Park Service, while not permitting us to "mag" within a quarter mile of shore, let us launch our small mag boat from an area in the park. Scott Ellis, *San Agustin* project manager, Don Beacock of Stinson Beach and I were ready to begin in June (one of the area's windiest months.)

I was apprehensive as we started the search. In addition to worrying about rough seas and the overdue search vessel from San Francisco, I was concerned about the critical piece of equipment—the proton magnetometer, which would indicate locations of iron objects beneath the seabed. The mag was new; I had allotted a couple of days to test it, but the airline carrying it from Toronto, where it was manufactured, to San Francisco, mislaid it for a week.

It finally turned up in Tokyo, and by the time we received it we were unable to test it. But we were fortunate to have the assistance of Robert Gaal, a vastly experienced geophysicist with the California State Lands Commission. The new machine worked like a charm. In fact, within half an hour of beginning to mag I was convinced we had located the long-lost galleon. I hadn't been that excited since I had found my first gold coin 39 years earlier.

I was certain the wreck lay exactly where Cermeno's account had placed it, and where I had found musket balls and shards in 1950. We continued magging an area encompassing several square miles around the hot spot. We found hundreds of anomalies but determined them to be of relatively recent vintage.

I believed the wreck was buried anywhere from several feet to 50 feet under the seabed. Scott Ellis, Ken Castle (another diving friend) and I used metal detectors to scour the bottom. We got a number of "hits" with the detectors, but lacking permission to disturb the bottom we couldn't follow up to see what they were. Visibility was a dismal six inches, so bad we were convinced that if any of the great white sharks for which Drake's Bay is so notorious were cruising around, they wouldn't be able to see us.

I look forward to excavating the *San Agustin* as soon as possible. California officials are eager for the project to proceed and are currently working to resolve conflicts with NOAA and the park service. We hope to continue with the project this spring.

Although the vibrantly colored silks and pungent spices packed in the galleon's hold have long since disappeared, the wreck will yield other precious cargo, not the least of which may be new knowledge of galleon construction and fitting, as well as an abundance of 16th-century maritime and personal artifacts. There is so much to be learned from the *San Agustin*; I think the people of California and people everywhere will share the excitement of bringing to light such a fascinating time capsule.

The discovery of the San Agustin makes Robert Marx's 58th major archeological exploration. A specialist in Marine Archeology and Naval and Maritime History, Robert is one of the foremost authorities in these fields.