

1715 Fleet

Throughout the decades, people have been lured to this coast of Florida in search of treasure from the 1715 Fleet. Treasure salvors in boats, metal detectorists on the beach have all researched the history of the Fleet and the Queens Jewels. I first became interested back in the early 1990s, watching the salvor boats blowing holes in the ocean floor just off the beach at Turtle Trail. Then in the early 2000s purchasing my first of several metal detectors from KellyCo, driving up from West Palm Beach on the weekends to hit the beaches of the Treasure Coast.

Both movies and a television-documentaries have been made about treasure hunting the 1715 fleet and most recent, a short film will be released in September named the "Queen's Jewels".

1715 Fleet the history

The King of Spain, had sent two separate fleets to the New World, one the "Tierra Firme" commanded by General Don Antonio de Echeverz y Zubiza which sailed to Cartagena and the other the "New Spain" commanded by General Don Juan Esteban de Ubilla headed to Vera Cruz. They would meet in Havana and sail to Spain in a combined Fleet carrying the wealth accumulated over the past three years.

Mid-March 1715, the Terra Firme fleet arrived in Havana, heavily laden with silver and gold coins from Bogata, chests filled with emeralds from the Muzo mine and gold jewelry from Peru. Echeverz was ready and waiting for Ubilla,s delayed New Spain fleet. Ubilla's fleet was stuck in Vera Cruz awaiting the arrival of pack mule trains from Acapulco, Spains outlet to the Pacific. The mules would transport silks, ivory and Kang Hs'l porcelain from the markets of Manilla and Canton which finally arrived allowing Ubilla to arrive in Havana the first week of May. After the rendezvous, they had planned to replenish stores and water and return to Spain. But urgent word had arrived from Spain, as the King had remarried, they were to wait for the Queens dowry, eight chests of jewelry, an emerald ring weighing 74 carats, a heart made up of 130 matching pearls, a rosary of pure coral and many items of jewelry fashioned from gold, most of which was undocumented. These were stored in Ubilla's personal cabin and was later to be known as the "Queens Jewels", Due to the delay, it became the death warrant of the 10 ships and the 700 sailors that perished.

After delays, the Plate fleet finally set sail with the morning tide of Wednesday, July 24th, slowly passing El Morro Fortress, which guarded the harbor of Havana. As senior military officer, Ubilla would lead the convoy, Echeverz for the protection of the fleet, brought up the rear in his war galleon.



On July 29th the wind had calmed, but the swell had grown stronger, by the next morning, they had been at sea a week. By afternoon the winds had picked up and by nightfall had reached 70 knots. Waves crashing over the decks carrying away cargo. By nightfall, the winds were gusting at over 100 knots, above the sound of the winds, the sound of the breakers on the reefs which line the Florida coast, could be heard. The fleet was scattered, all were resigned to shipwreck.





Antoine Dare the captain of the Grifon, a French ship that had joined the fleet to return to Europe, had played a hunch and steered off to the East of the original course allowing room for the weather, it would be the only ship to survive.

By dawn July 31st, 1715 all eleven of the Spanish ships had wrecked, some capsized in deep water, others broken apart on the reefs and one ship washed ashore intact.

Wreckage and bodies were scattered for 30 miles along the Florida coast.

The Spanish attempted to salvage the treasure until 1719 with only 30% recovered dealing with, the hazards of sharks, Indians and Buccaneers, it proved too much for them.

Seven hundred lives and more than 14 million pesos in registered treasure were lost in one of the worst maritime disasters of all time.

Treasure Hunting the beginning

It all began back in 1948, a building contractor named Kip Wagner was walking along the beach South of Sebastian Inlet when he found 7 Spanish silver coins. He then borrowed a metal detector and over the next several months discovered another 40 coins. In 1949 he spent the summer trying to salvage a wreck site off the beach with a dragline to pull ashore fragments of wood, metal spikes, ships fasteners, a cannon carriage, unbroken bottles and a Spanish copper coin, a maravedi dated 1649. During the next ten years he continued to walk the beaches finding 100s of silver coins and non-dating later than 1715. Wagner later discovered the camp the Spanish salvors made to recover the treasure after the storm, now the location of the McLarty Treasure Museum. He discovered ceramic and pottery shards, nails, musket balls, a pair of cutlasses, coins, chunks of silver and a gold ring with six small diamonds.

Believing there was a wreck just off the beach, he made a small surfboard with a glass window to view what was beneath the surface and in the shallow water discovered he sighted five iron cannons. Returning with dive equipment he located more cannon, anchors and a cluster of silver coins fused together. After discovering another wreck site North of Ft Pierce inlet with piles of ballast stones, Wagner then formed a team of divers and an owner of a 21 ft boat to begin salvage work on the site. After recovering a few thousand silver coins, the team formed the Real Eight company with Wagner as president. In mid-August 1960, 11 pure silver wedges were found and they dubbed the site the "wedge wreck". In 1961, Wagner was ready to return to the Sebastian Inlet site which they dubbed the "cabin wreck", finding large clumps of silver coins and hundreds of loose coins scattered over the bottom. The 1962 season brought hundreds of silver coins, artifacts including muskets, silver forks and a silver plate. In November during a storm Wagner and his nephew Rex Stocker went to the cabin site, Wagner found corroded silver coins, Stocker found a gold chain 11ft 4.5 inches long with a dragon 2.5 inches long.

After hearing of the 1715 fleet finds, Mel Fisher who had worked wreck sites off California and the Caribbean, came to Florida to meet with the Real eight team. He offered to join forces with the Real Eight and bring a group of professional divers to work the wrecks full time. They agreed to split what they found with the Real Eight group fifty-fifty. Fisher formed the Treasure Salvors, Inc and moved to Florida in 1963.

The 1963 season for the Real Eight group was a rough start, but ended with thousands of silver coins, a silver crucifix, a gold chain with a pendant, whole bowls and cups later identified as K'ang Hsi china. The Treasure Salvors got off to a late start with a fifty-foot salvage vessel, starting at another wreck Wagner had located while flying down the coast, the Sandy Point wreck. By Christmas they had recovered 1,200 silver and 3 gold coins.

In 1964, using a magnetometer, the Treasure Salvors had located more wrecks and Fisher had designed the "mailbox system" a piece of metal that would deflect propeller wash downward, forcing the clear water to the bottom, blowing away large quantities of sand. In ten feet of water it could blow a hole 10 ft in diameter and 6 ft deep and in 30 ft of water the hole would be 30 ft diameter in the same amount of time. Later came the "prop wash" a similar system, it consists of a metal tube bent in an elbow, which is inches wider than the propeller and points vertically toward the sea floor. The blaster is twice as efficient as the "mailbox system" although nowadays they call this the mailbox system. This system revolutionized underwater excavation and accounted for the success of the Treasure Salvors and the Real Eight over the following years.

A few miles South of the wedge wreck, they discovered another wreck the dubbed the "Colored Beach Wreck", where they recovered 6,000 silver coins, 3,500 gold coins, 2 gold discs weighing 7.5 pounds, gold chains, medallions, rings and other jewelry. Today, the local detectorists call this ring beach, due to all of the 1715 rings found along that beach. In 1965 the Real Eight crew went full time, recovering in one week more than 50,000 silver coins, 21 silver wedges, 10 large

silver discs weighing between 44 and 105 pounds. By now both the Real Eight and the Treasure Salvors were working side by side at the wedge wreck recovering a large clump of silver coins weighing 125 pounds, sixty pounds of loose silver coins, two silver plates and a chest containing three thousand silver coins. In 1971 a young boy diving for golf balls near the Rio Mar golf course discovered another 1715 wreck where Fisher recovered \$2,000,000 in treasure. Mel Fisher went on to recover \$3,000,000 in one year from the Corrigan wreck which has proved to be one of the best producing wreck sites in current times.

Mel Fisher's maritime attorney used the English admiralty law to take possession of these wreck sites, if anyone wanted to work a site, they would have to sub contract from the Fisher family because his rights under admiralty law were grandfathered into the new federal shipwreck law. later Fisher moved his operation to the Florida-keys, where he discovered the Atocha, but that's another story.

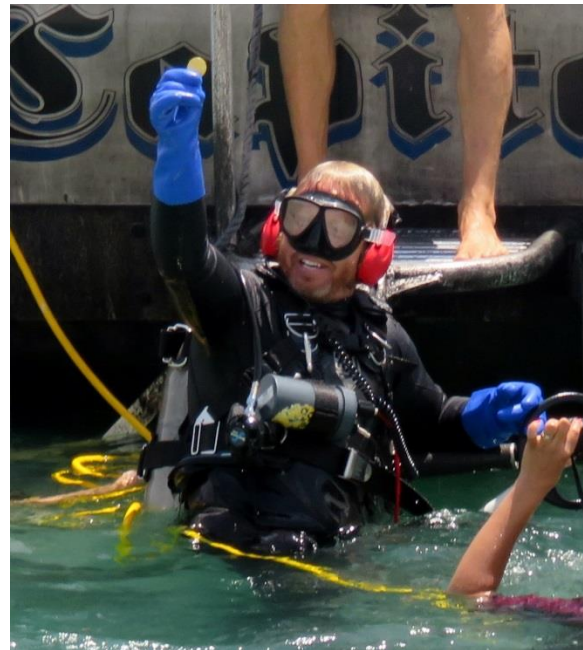
The following years thousands of gold and silver coins and other objects have been discovered from the 1715 wrecks, the rights to the wrecks were sold by the Fisher family, to the Queens Jewels, LLC owned by Brent Brisbane.

300-year Anniversary

During July 28th through the 29th I attended the 300th Anniversary Conference on the 1715 Plate Fleet in Vero beach, Florida. The following day, I metal detected the Corrigan's wreck site, it was a hot calm day and not very productive, so I decided to walk up the beach and watch the Capitana treasure salvor boat anchored close to the beach. It was by far the closest I had seen any boat to the shore, there was a Japanese film crew making a documentary about the treasure hunting taking place. Aboard were Brent Brisbane, Captain Jonah Martinez, divers Dan Beckham and Bill Bartlet. It didn't take long before excitement started onboard the Capitana, gold coins were being found, Jonah came ashore with a few gold coins to show the few onlookers, myself and a few others.



Then something really amazing happened, Bill Bartlett surfaced with the first of the Royals, a special 8 Escudo, perfectly minted for the king of Spain. All of the coins found were in perfect condition, trapped for 300 years in the crevices below protected against the wave action and finally being recovered.





Other than the Japanese film crew, I was the only one documenting this historic event taking place on the anniversary of the loss of the 1715 fleet. A total of 350 coins recovered that few days at a worth of \$4.5 million.

Conclusion

The story of the 1715 Fleet still amazes me, I continue to research the fleet, metal detect the beaches in search of my first Escudo and answers to many of the mysteries that remain. But I am content for now finding musket balls and other artifacts along the way.

Remember this, only 6 of the 11 ships have been found, the names of these ships in some locations have yet to be verified and an estimated \$47 million in silver coins, millions in gold coins and jewelry have not been found, to include the Queens Jewels.

Looking forward to seeing you out on the beach some day!

Fred Banke