

THE WRONG STRONG BOX

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
ROLAND HANEWALD

DIVING IS FUN, ISN'T IT? MANY YEARS OF DIVING ARE EVEN MORE FUN, RIGHT? ASK SOMEONE – ME – WHO HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN GALLEON-WRECK HUNTING AND ALL KINDS OF SALVAGE ACTIVITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES WHAT HIS FUNNIEST ADVENTURE WAS AND I'LL TELL YOU THIS ONE...

It involves the quest for the Spanish galleon *Encarnación*. This hapless vessel, thus the records, had come to grief in the central Philippines in 1649. She had carried a full load of silver coins while enroute from Acapulco to Manila and was thus a juicy tidbit worth looking for.

Way back in 1968 – long, long ago – I found myself detailed to an exploratory expedition of the Philippine National Museum - an irresistible adventure for the dashing young lad I was then. Local divers had located a wreck in San Bernardino Straits, the channel separating the islands of Luzon and Samar, and everyone believed it to be the one of the *Encarnación*.

Tidal currents in the passage attain speeds of up to eight knots. "Numerous swirls and eddies are found in the channel, the water seeming to boil up from beneath, the center of the eddy in some cases appearing at least a foot higher than the edge..." This is what the United States Coast Pilot for the Philippine Islands has to say about the place. Just the right location for my first commercial diving assignment.

Worse yet, the old navy boat I was assigned to kept dragging her anchors and often found itself in perilous positions, with the wildly gyrating divers in tow. When things came to a head, the captain ordered a large block of reinforced concrete for mooring the vessel and this heavy object was lowered right upon the wreck. Following that, and with the installation of a bamboo raft, diving became less strenuous and enabled the team to determine the type of the wreck, which was totally flattened out by the tides. After a broken name plate inscribed, "...verpool 187..." was retrieved at 130 feet, works were suspended.

This wreck was obviously not the one of the *Encarnación*. Unable to lift the heavy concrete block, which stuck fast in the ground, we also gave up on that and left it where it was.

Dissolve now, as they say in the movies, to a date nearly twenty years later. I was having a chinwag with Demps, an American acquaintance of mine who was also engaged in wreck-hunting. We talked about this and about that, and finally Demps mentioned a mysterious wreck in San Bernardino Straits. In 1982, he



Salvage work in the Philippines

The author, still dashing, in 1968



A bamboo platform made underwater work much easier

told me, his group had located a promising site there and he'd outfitted a big expedition to work on it. The first object the divers came across was a massive block half buried in the sand. Excitement spread like wildfire. The divers hacked about the block and found a cemented mass – coralline calcification, they figured. The interior of the object apparently contained

metal, because it made the detectors respond. The strong box of the *Encarnación*! Treasure!!!

Word of the sensational discovery soon reached the presidential palace, which was still occupied by Ferdinand Marcos then, a man who, as it turned out later, loved gold and silver very much. When the huge casket was finally dragged ashore after ages of back-breaking work, Kokoy Romualdez, brother-in-law of the president, and some heavily armed soldiers were already lying in wait to receive the treasure trove. 'On behalf of the Philippine Government', of course.

Amid breathless silence workers began hammering at the block. Funny, it seemed to have no door. And the deeper the chisels progressed into its recesses, the more it became apparent that the whole thing was just concrete and some steel bars. In a huff, Kokoy Romualdez boarded his helicopter again and fluttered off. Demps and his divers stared at the result of all their toil. How had that confounded concrete block got upon the wreck?

"Do you know?" Demps asked me in a tone as if enquiring about the origin of the Universe.

"Sure," I said as lightly as I could. "I was one of those who put it there."

Demps's jaw went slack. "You?" And I told him the whole story. Thank God he didn't cry. But he was mighty close to it.

Eventually he got in touch with British authorities to find out more about the strange wreck. Replies did not take long to come. According to both the Customs House in Liverpool and the Consortium Salvage Ltd, a private research institution in London, the vessel in question was beyond doubt the *Taurida* of 875 tons gross and two steam engines, built in Liverpool in 1874 and lost in the Philippines a few years later.

At least one of the countless wrecks in San Bernardino Straits has thus been identified. But it's been quite a bit of work.

And the *Encarnación*? She, as per historical evidence dug up later, was driven upon the beach in 1649 and her whole silver cargo salvaged...

The end of the line: Recovery of the *Taurida*'s anchor



Ascending from a promising site

