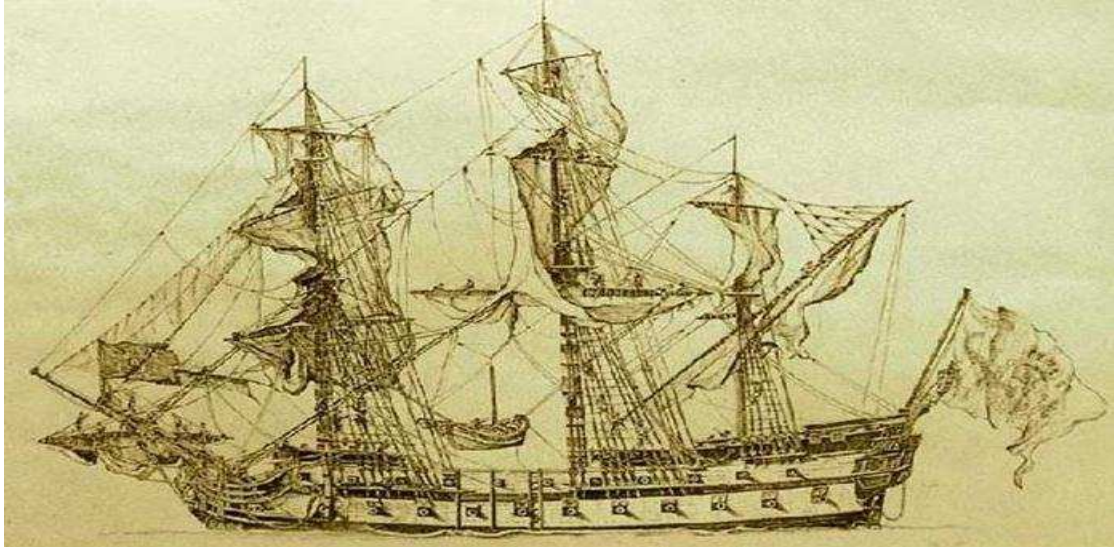


Pilar - The Spanish galleon with a billion secrets...

Written by Andy Owen



It was May 1989 and Philip Masters was enjoying his visit to Seville.

It was sunny and warm - and he found this beautiful city to be an enchanting place.

Philip was a historian at The University of Florida and was in Seville doing some research at the Archivo General de Indias (Archive of the Indias), where more than 40 million documents on the Spanish colonial empire are held.

He had taken an intensive course in Spanish palaeography so he could read original documents in the archives in Spain. As he was searching for a specific piece of information, something caught his eye.

He saw a book of dusty papers at the back of a shelf, held together with a thread.



When he opened the papers and started to read, he quickly became enthralled by the story.

There was something pretty unusual about it...

It was the record of an official inquiry into the Spanish trading galleon *Nuestra Senora del Pilar de Saragoza y Santiago*. Roughly translated, it is "Our Lady of the Pillar of Zaragossa and Saint James".

The Pilar was a very large 300-ton galleon - built in Cavite in the Philippines - that sank in deep water off the Pacific Island of Guam on June 2nd, 1690. It foundered so quickly, that very little of her cargo could be saved.



Thankfully, the crew of 120, and the 43 soldiers and 22 Franciscan missionaries that were travelling as passengers, were all saved.

"I soon realised I had discovered a gold mine of facts on the Pilar," Masters recalled. "I was convinced that the report hadn't been read, let alone studied, since it had first been filed away almost 300 years ago."

Can you imagine that? Being the very first person in nearly 300 years to read a truly fascinating story and discover its astonishing secrets?

The heart beats quicker just at the thought.

The report contained eyewitness accounts from the Pilar's officers and sailors describing the cause and exact place of the sinking. In addition, it included detailed lists of the ship's equipment that was lost after it struck Cocos Reef off the south coast of Guam.

Guam is now a United States territory, just over 1,550 miles east of the Philippines.



But in 1690, it was then an outpost of Spain and a stopping-off point on one of the most lucrative maritime trading routes in history.

In 1564, Spain began its colonisation of the Philippines.

For the next 250 years, Spanish galleons full of silver coins minted from mines in Mexico, Peru and Bolivia, crossed the Pacific Ocean from the Mexican port of Acapulco, with the destination being Manila.

Most of them called at Guam for fresh water.

This was the case with the *Pilar*. It had a shipment of silver swords and artifacts for a trading festival in Manila, together with chests of sombreros, cocoa beans and soap.

It is also said that the *Pilar* was transporting around 1.5-2 million coins.

These silver coins were packed in chests containing 2,500 to 3,000 coins apiece, each weighing about 160 pounds.

The chests were stored low in the *Pilar* and used as ballast to keep the galleon stable while sailing.

As it was heading past Cocos Islands, the bottom of the ship was ripped out after hitting a reef.

She sank quite quickly.

Only one chest of silver was recovered at the time of the sinking.

This meant that there were between 1.5 and 2 million silver coins incorporated within the *Pilar*'s wreck site, estimated to be worth well over \$1 billion in 1991.

Probably three or four times that now, at the very least.

Masters was well versed in maritime history.

He knew that Manila was a key hub for Spanish trade with Asia. The silver was exchanged there for porcelain, jade and jewellery from China, plus silk and works of art from Japan, precious stones from India - and spices from South East Asia.

These prized goods were then taken by the galleons from Manila north-east towards Japan, before turning east into the trade winds that carried them to the coast of California and back to Acapulco.

Much of the treasure was taken overland from Acapulco to the east coast of Central America for shipment in galleons to Spain across the Atlantic.

Spain controlled large silver and gold deposits in the Americas and was a superpower on a scale not seen since the Romans.

Spanish influence was massive - and for over 200 years the silver piece of eight and its smaller denominations, was the standard currency for trading on the Chinese coast.

This was the kind of coinage that was almost certainly on the Pilar.



When he finished reading the report, Masters was very excited.

What a story! And, he was pretty certain that he was the only one that knew about it.

A potential fortune waiting to be discovered and claimed.

He left the building and walked around the corner to a small Venta he knew quite well.

He ordered a glass of wine and two small tapas and sat at a table outside, to consider his next steps.

Clearly, he couldn't move forward with this on his own. He would need help.

Over the next few weeks, he decided to share the information on the Pilar, with a selected number of trusted friends and colleagues.

As soon as he did, the excitement grew.

And what made the story even more interesting - if that was possible - was the early discovery that the Pilar apparently sank and slipped onto the ocean shelf at depths of only 30 to 87 feet.

No depth at all for a salvage operation.

A new company – Pilar Project Ltd - was quickly formed in 1991, with its sole objective to find and salvage the sunken galleon.

The salvaging rights to the Pilar were awarded to a marine archaeologist Duncan Mathewson and associates John Bent and Andy Matroci.



Duncan Mathewson

A deal was structured giving the company an exclusive contract for the project.

The Guam government, were to enjoy 25% of any salvage proceeds, with the salvagers getting the rest.

However, everyone associated with the project, were soon to find out, that to salvage the main body of the Pilar wreck, was not going to be as simple as had been envisaged.

It became slow and frustrating, as diving can only be carried out from May to August because of the risk of typhoons and rough seas during the rest of the year.

The funding also came under pressure as an exercise like this was pretty costly.

They soon found they were burning through the initial investment very quickly.

Also, there was a lengthy and costly court challenge to the contract, which was ultimately unsuccessful, but it greatly delayed the survey work.

But it couldn't be ignored as the potential rewards were so enormous and they had, after all, started to make a bit of progress.

More people became involved. A new group of mainly Australian investors agreed to join the party – and committed a further \$500,000.

This enabled them to bring in the 16 Gross-ton M/V Wind Cheetah that could be used as a platform for operating a remotely operated vehicle (ROV), as well as providing accommodation and transportation for the crew.

They now had significantly more sophistication and expertise in the search operation, with some of the most advanced underwater sensor technology available at that time.



This would detect metal, magnetic and unusually bulky objects on and beneath the seabed. It was expected, that with this state-of-the-art equipment, they would soon locate the elusive and money-spinning heart of the wreck.

At the time, Rod Hartley, a director of Maritime Archaeological Investments, said that he and others now backing the project, were convinced that its silver cargo was still intact and had never been pilfered.

"The Cocos Reef is within sight of Guam and the American Coast Guard," he said. Even if the wreck was found, you can't just sneak in and out. You'd need to be there for weeks. Such a salvage operation can't be done illicitly and you can't hide a million coins from the world's numismatic market."

Mr. Hartley said that the discovery of an ancient anchor and some musket balls on the seabed in a relatively short period, had increased his confidence that the main cargo of the galleon would soon be found.

But it soon became clear, that it was not going to be that simple...

In fact, it was going to be a continuing frustration, which continues to this very day.

It was reported in 2001, ten years after the salvage operation first started, that over 2,000 artifacts thought to have been from the *Pilar* had been recovered.

These included 36 Spanish silver coins minted in Mexico City, Lima and Potosi in Bolivia before 1690, the year the galleon sank.

In addition, cannon and musket balls of different calibres have been brought up, together with five pieces of timber believed to be part of the hull.



Plus, iron pins and fasteners, lead hull sheathing, pottery shards and nearly five tons of ballast stones have been recovered.

But even though the shipwreck is still there, the treasure has never been found.

The salvagers have now long gone and turned their attention to other wrecks in the area.

Sadly, Philip Masters died in New York in 2007, aged 70.



But Pilar is still there. She is a very proud lady. And she refuses to give up her riches.

I doubt if she ever will....

She's happy to be a local legend and welcomes nosy holiday divers from time to time.



She's even happier to have beautiful tropical fish patrol the area of the wreck site.

They made it their habitat a long time ago.

It was part of a deal they struck with her.

And, as part of that deal, they are not telling anyone where the coins are...