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## Documents 1638A

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# The shipwreck of the galleon Concepción in 1638

*Sources: See Bibliography, under 1638.*

### The treasure that was partly mine—A personal tragedy.

In the early 1980s, my historical research led me to the discovery of the site where the rich treasures of the galleon **Nuestra Señora de la Concepción** had lied undiscovered since about 1700. When I lived in Saipan (1982-84), I had even picknicked at this site. Exactly 300 years before me, Father Coomans, a Belgian missionary serving in the Marianas, had written a report from that very beach, where he had witnessed the recovery of some of the bronze cannon by Captain Quiroga and his soldiers. There was no doubt in my mind where the treasure was.

Back in 1981, I had made contact with Walt Poitevent, a treasure seeker and the owner of the American yacht **Ella**. I was then mostly interested in retracing Magellan's steps through the Pacific, and the Philippines. After he saw my first book on Magellan's discovery of the Philippines, and knowing of my knowledge of Spanish, he challenged me to direct my research to the finding of shipwreck sites in the waters of Micronesia, an area which was still untouched. He was to provide the finances for any salvage project, and I was to get a percentage of the gross revenue from the sale of the artifacts. Unfortunately, when I did find the sites of many shipwrecks in the Marianas, and proposed to him the salvage of the **Concepción**, all my letters to his previous addresses came back unopened.

When I read about the treasure of the **Atocha** and the 18-year search for its motherlode treasure by Melvin Fisher, of Treasure Salvors, Inc. of Key West, Florida, I went to see him. We signed a salvage contract. He was to obtain the salvage rights, and do

(Facing page:) **The Wreckage of the Concepción at Agingan Beach.** (From a painting by Roger D. Morris, Apex Collection. With permission of Pacific Sea Resources).

the actual salvage, while I was to be his research partner in this new venture. Unfortunately, time passed, with no progress, until I received the following message from him.

## Letter from Mel Fisher to Rod Lévesque, dated Key West 28 January 1987

Dear Rod:

I plan to go to Guam and Saipan on February 16th, to check out the government and salvage conditions. I am not sure I remember where you pointed out the suspected location site of the **Concepcion**.

I have a fax machine with which you can theoretically send me a set of papers from Africa,<sup>1</sup> Canada or anywhere in the world in a matter of minutes (providing you have a fax at your end). Please note my fax number... and my telex cable number is ... Please let me know roughly where we hope the site location is, then I can go to the government or file an admiralty claim. I will send you a check for ... to get started on locating the manifest or other information. It looks as though I've got the funding to do it.

This year's the year!

Best regards,

Melvin A. Fisher

P.S. You can go with us!

## Telex message to Mel Fisher, dated 6 Feb 87

My wife called from Canada today about your Saipan trip. Am in Accra, Ghana, Africa, heading a United Nations project. My contract due to be extended on 15 Feb until November but not yet signed.

I have sent you two reports last spring but when you did not acknowledge, I kept Report No. 3 which is now in mail. Search area described Page 28 of Report No. 1. See also the topographical map I gave you last year.

One report explains why a manifest is unlikely to be found in Seville. Nevertheless, Report No. 3 mentions many references worth pursuing. Would like to continue research Seville but would have to be convinced that timing is urgent. Could it wait until next December? Understand your Saipan trip might be to acquire rights for now. When would you intend to start actual exploration phase? Next winter?

In Saipan contact my friend ... at ... to learn all about local personalities and best procedures. My telex number in Ghana is ... Answerback is ... Time five hours ahead of Key West. Address: ...

Regards,

Rod

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1 I was then working on a UN project in Ghana.

## Telex from Mel Fisher, dated 18 Feb 87

Received your mailgram. This trip is just to look around and see about contract with Government. Unlikely we will work this year. Will say hello to ... for you. We probably won't start until next year, so maybe we could do some research in January 1988.

Best regards,  
Mel Fisher

### What happened afterwards.

No more messages came from Melvin Fisher. When I subsequently contacted him by phone, I learned that he had not personally gone to the Marianas, but despatched one marine archaeologist from his staff. The latter sent a postcard from Saipan. He reported that some "pirates" were already diving on the site; they had found "yellow fish",<sup>1</sup> and, he was joining them.

The rest of the story about the salvage of the Concepción shipwreck is now history. Little by little, I learned of the success that the team from Pacific Sea Resources were having, through various media, local sources and published sources. The leak of information must have occurred in Key West...

In June 1990, I was in Brussels working on the Bouwens-Coomans papers, when I was contacted by William Mathers' secretary. She said he knew of my research abilities, and wanted me to help with the deciphering of some shipping marks on some of the hundreds of storage jars discovered intact on site. I phoned him in London, where he was at the time to interest Christie's in an auction of the artifacts recovered from the Concepción shipwreck. I did some research on old Filipino scripts when passing through Paris, and mailed him the first report from Mogadishu, Somalia.<sup>2</sup> Anyway, it was already too late to do additional research on that subject, by 1991, as the treasure had already been bought by a Japanese group. The value of the treasure turned out to be roughly what I had estimated it to be.

In 1993, I was in Saipan when a representative of another group, the IOTA Partners, came to get the rights for still more salvage on the same site, among others. I did some research for them, but, as Melvin Fisher would say, the mother-lode is now long gone.<sup>3</sup>

Walt Poitevent, where art thou?

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1 The code word for "gold".

2 I was there on another UN project, but the war was already raging throughout that land. I was lucky to escape alive when the war came to the capital at the end of 1990.

3 The rest of this story is not yet written. I hope I will get better luck with other sites, and other partners.

(Overleaf:) **Path of destruction of the Concepción at Agingan Beach.**  
(Adapted from Pacific Sea Resources, Archaeological Report, 1990, p. 86. With permission of William Mathers).

