

A TREASURED ADVENTURE

by Marie Coady

When Marie Pappas' husband, Pete, came to her with a scheme to search for sunken treasure, she saw a light in his eyes that had been absent for years. Pete had been a plumber, working seven days a week and devoting his life to her and their children. But responsibility weighed more heavily on Pete than most men, and he had worried himself into an ulcer. Now, at fifty-seven, Marie felt it was his turn to realize his dreams. She was determined to keep the glint in his eyes glowing. The next four years were full of adventure as well as disappointment for Pete, but he never again suffered from the ulcer that had plagued him for years.

As Marie sat recently rereading the contract her husband and two brothers had signed with Mel Fisher, the now famous treasure hunter, she shuddered. "When I read this again, it scares me. We took an awful chance."

It all began when Marie's brothers, John and Tom Connolly, got together with Pete and formed Connolly Salvage, Inc. Marie's brothers had gotten excited about treasure hunting after seeing Mel Fisher on TV asking for investors to help him continue his search for the Spanish galleons Atocha. and Margarita.

The Atocha and Margarita, traveling with an armada of twenty-six ships went down in the shifting sands off the Florida Keys in 1622. Although the hull of the Margarita had been located, some of its treasure still lay on the ocean floor. As for the Atocha, it was so overburdened with gold, silver and jewels, it lagged behind the fleet, laboring through hurricane winds and wild seas. Inevitably, it crashed onto a reef, broke apart and staggered to its final grave, spilling 47 tons of treasure and 254 passengers in its wake and leaving a trail that Mel Fisher believed would lead him to the mother lode.

With Tom Connolly rooting out investors at home, Connolly Salvage, Inc. signed their first contract to search for the Atocha in 1980 at sites located earlier by Mel Fisher. Aboard the Arbutus, one of Fisher's salvage ships, Pete and John Connolly assembled a team of divers and an experienced captain, then set out to search the Marquesas Keys some forty miles off Key West. In the hull of the Atocha was believed to be a treasure so valuable it would be the most important discovery in salvage history.

That was the hook that carried Pete and Marie Papas on an unforgettable adventure.

Marie joined her husband aboard the Arbutus , a 180 feet of rusting metal. It had no electricity and had to be towed to the site and then anchored over the treasure that constantly eluded them. At night, Marie could hear crackling sounds, "When I walked by the hold I could hear what sounded like electric

wires sparking and crackling. I thought it was electricity, but remembered that the boat didn't have electricity. I asked Pete 'What's that noise?'"

He told her it was the boat's hull slowly deteriorating by a process called electrolytic corrosion. As the sea swished through its rusting hull, the salty brine activated the corrosion process. Marie's worrying ended with the morning sun as the boat buzzed with the activity of divers getting ready to dive for gold and each day held the suspense of finding the mother lode.

Connolly Salvage's second contract in 1983 put them aboard the Virgalona, a forty foot wooden vessel in somewhat better condition. During Marie's first night aboard a violent storm blew up. Since the barge had left earlier, Marie had no choice but to ride out the storm.

"We all slept on deck. Crew on the bow. The storm came up from nowhere. One crewman came off the bow teetering along the narrow passage around the wheel house. He only lost his mattress, but for a minute I thought he was going to go over the side. Pete made me go down stairs. I could see the water coming through the cracks in the hull. Then the generator quit and the motor conked out. Soon after that the pumps quit. That meant the sea was pouring in, and it wouldn't take long for it to sink us. Pete was in the bowels of the boat repairing the pumps. His plumbing experience came in handy. He was there all night and when he came up he looked like a tar baby covered with grease and oil from head to toe, but the pumps were working again."

Most nights they lay anchored without running lights. One night they heard the engine of a large vessel getting closer and closer. Someone turned on a flashlight, but Pete told them to turn it off. It seems drug runners were common out there in the ninety mile channel between Cuba and Key West, and this was one of them looking for the mother ship to drop off her goods. They remained quiet till it passed. Groups of Cuban refugees appeared often on the horizon, sometimes in boats but more often in makeshift rafts. One group claimed to have a sick passenger and wanted Pete to take him onboard, but everyone voted against it. Crew familiar with those waters knew it was full of modern day pirates, and you couldn't take a chance of letting strangers on board. Instead, Pete called the Coast Guard and waited with the refugees until the sick man was taken on board a cutter.

Pete and Marie returned to Woburn in 1984 and built the dream house they planned to retire and grow old together in. They returned to Key West in the 1985 for the annual division of the treasure at Mel Fisher's office. Coincidentally, that was the very day the news came over the short wave radio that the hull of the Atocha had been found. The mother lode was valued at \$400 million dollars and Pete had missed becoming a part of it by only a few months. Mel Fisher invited Pete and Marie on board his boat and took them to the site of the Atocha and let them share in the excitement.

A few years later, Marie began to notice a change in Pete. His judgment was getting bad, and he seemed unsteady on his feet at times. Soon after Pete was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He died shortly after, never striking it rich, but having had the time of his life. According to Marie, "After all, you can't take it with you. All that matters is the ride."

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