

EL BUEN CONSEJO

With the Spanish colonization of newly discovered lands in Mexico and South America beginning in the 16th Century, an ever-increasing amount of treasure and trade goods began to flow across the Atlantic Ocean. Exotic trade goods from the Far East and treasure from mines in South and Central America were being shipped back to Spain while European-made products occupied the holds of these vessels on their voyages to New World. Rival European nations as well as privateers and pirates would attempt to seize these richly laden vessels whenever possible. To counter this threat, Spain devised a convoy system whereby merchant vessels sailed along with heavily armed galleons for protection. A group of vessels crossing the ocean in this manner were referred to a flota. For almost 200 years, the vast sums of gold and silver her colonies provided, coupled with her long history of naval and military traditions, made Spain the strongest military power in the world.

In the late summer of 1771, King Carlos III issued a Proyecto ordering the assembly, outfitting and dispatch of a flota to the Western Gulf of Mexico Port of Vera Cruz in the viceroyalty of Nueva Espana (New Spain). Don Luis de Cordoba, an experienced knight and member of the Court, was appointed Captain-General and named as commander. The fleet was to be assembled, inspected, and prepared for the journey at the port of Cadiz during the fall and winter.

She was to be ready to sail for Vera Cruz in the spring of 1772 with all of the cargo destined for the viceroyalty and several hundred passengers. Originally, the fleet was to consist of thirteen merchant vessels convoyed with three warships. By February 1772, there was apparently some concern by the fleet's organizers that the amount of cargo would be too much for those ships to carry and that an additional vessel would be needed.

El Buen Consejo was selected and attached to the fleet under the sponsorship of the Universidad de Cargadores a Indias, a merchant guild in Cadiz. The name El Buen Consejo, translates as The Good Counsel;

however, her full name may have been Nuestra Señora Del Buen Consejo, or Our lady of the Good Counsel. El Buen Consejo was not a merchant vessel, but a warship of about 990 tons, owned and outfitted by the Crown. The warship appears to have sailed to the Philippines twice before her last voyage in 1772. She sailed to Manila in March, under Captain Juan Casenas and returned in July 1767. She set sail for Manila again in January 1768 under the same captain and returned to Cadiz in August 1770.

It does not seem that she crossed the Atlantic again until her last voyage in May 1772. The passengers of El Buen Consejo included more than 50 Franciscan missionaries who were on the first leg of their voyage from Cadiz, Spain to the Philippines. The missionaries had planned to sail to Mexico, then travel overland to the west coast before crossing the Pacific. Instead, their personal belongings and trunks filled with religious artifacts, along with the cargo of the two ships, were dashed upon the rocks and sank to the ocean floor. After numerous delays the flota departed Cadiz, Spain on 29 May. El Buen Consejo was commanded by Don Julian Antonio de Urcullu, a captain with many years of sea experience, but apparently minimal sailing skill and even less luck.

Urcullu had been in command of the ill-fated Terra Firme ship El Nuevo Constante when she was lost on the Louisiana coast in 1766. Very soon after the fleet departed Cadiz, Urcullu apparently separated from the rest of the fleet. On the afternoon of 9 June, El Buen Consejo was joined by El Prusiano, a smaller, more lightly armed ship commanded by Captain Juan Ignacio Iturralde. The two captains agreed to sail together; they also agreed on a general course to follow. Within a few days, they were joined by the smaller Hercules, which stayed with them until almost the end of June when she began to lag behind.

The following is the eyewitness account of the Royal Comptroller (purser) aboard El Buen Consejo. "...the 7th of July was a sad image of possible death for those aboard the two ships. During the afternoon, the two captains discussed the distance to St. Martin. Whereas Iturralde (PRUSIANO) said they were 6 leagues from the Island, Urcullu (BUEN

CONSEJO) insisted they were some 60 leagues away. Then Urcullu said to Iturralde, "Let us continue the same way (they appeared to sail 5 or 6 miles) and at midnight we can bring to ...Iturralde responded, "let us hope we are lucky". And so they sailed until 11:45 that night when Urcullu brought to. This witness does not know what sails he used and he himself went down below at this time.

Unable to sleep, he heard voices at about one in the morning: "we are near land and very close to shore!" Dressing as quickly as I could, I made my way up onto the deck and encountered a state of complete confusion. Urcullu was shouting orders to try turn the bow of the ship away from the bay to which they were being pushed, but the wind was too strong. The ship was increasingly pushed shoreward with each wave and at 1:30 (a.m) her stern hit bottom for the first time. With each passing moment, there was more crunching noise similar to a pine tree as it is splitting or tearing away from its roots. As of this moment, all the witness could think about of was how to expiate his sins and pray for salvation.

The day of July 8th dawned with an air of serenity among those aboard as the skiff and little boat were lowered into the water. By 10:00 in the morning, the first passengers and missionaries managed to step onto the shore of Anguilla. And so it continued throughout the day. This, excepting Urcullu, his officials and some crew who were busy drinking and looting cargo. They did not finally disembark until the afternoon of July 9th.

El Buen Consejo is designated as an Underwater Archaeological Preserve, set aside by the Government of Anguilla for its protection and for public enjoyment. By making this important historical shipwreck site available to citizens and visitors, we hope to encourage an appreciation and understanding of these irreplaceable remnants of Anguilla's maritime heritage. Only with broad public support will it be possible to manage underwater resources and to ensure their continued preservation for the benefit of future generations.

El Buen Consejo's divers must understand that no spear fishing is allowed and the use of dive gloves and metal detectors are prohibited. The conventional wisdom that diver should, "take only pictures, leave

only bubbles” reflects the current attitude toward Anguilla’s unique natural and cultural resources. It’s the first time such development has been tried; AMR did not want to proceed with the usual: excavation, restoration and sale of the artifacts. Instead, AMR has preserved this historical site for the next generations.