

THE LOSS OF THE HOLSTEIN

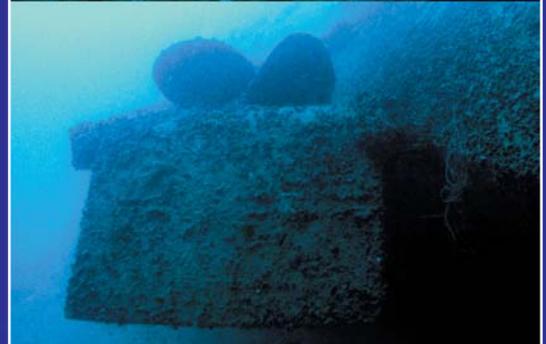
Text and photography by Michael Barnette

With advances in modern technology, mankind has successfully thwarted many of Mother Nature's attempts to sink sea-going vessels. Improved weather forecasting, real-time satellite imagery, and radar allow mariners to avoid most threatening storms. Yet, ever so often, Mother Nature spawns a tempest and ambushes unsuspecting vessels unfortunate enough to cross her merciless path. One such storm occurred off Florida in early October 1992.

The rapid two-day blitzkrieg raced through the Gulf of Mexico, pouncing on the freighter *Holstein*. The *M/V Holstein* was a 1,859-ton, 255-foot long freighter built in 1962. On October 2, 1992, she departed Pensacola carrying a cargo of 2,000 tons of bagged corn flour. Later that day, she encountered a rapidly building storm packing brutal 90 mile-per-hour winds. Besieged by 30-foot seas, the freighter began to founder approximately 100 miles off the Florida west coast.

It was reported that a bulkhead on a bunker tank stove-in, leading to her sinking in under one hour. Forced to abandon ship, the 14 crewmembers were alarmed to find a 14-year old Haitian stow-away. Initially, the boy did not want to jump ship. "I had to make him jump off the ship and then jump off after him and make sure he did not drown," stated crewman Carlos Ortega. "I had to grab him by the neck to keep him out of the water. I did not have time to think about anybody but the boy."

Fortuitously, the U.S. Navy mine countermeasures ship *U.S.S. Defender* was en route from Key West to Pensacola to test navigational equipment when it picked up a distress signal from the sinking freighter. With the *Holstein* quickly sinking, the *Defender* sped for





the freighter's location. As they approached the last reported position of the distressed vessel, the *Defender* noted a slick on the surface of the water created by the *Holstein's* cargo of corn flour. During the sinking, countless bags of flour broke open that tinged the dark Gulf a lighter shade of blue, creating a trail directly to the location of the sunken *Holstein*. Approximately an hour after the initial distress call, the *Defender* spotted a flare in the early morning hours of October 3. Some of the survivors were found in a lifeboat, others clung to an overturned raft, while one crewmember was located clutching four bags of flour. A U.S. Coast Guard helicopter rescued three other crewmembers.

The final resting place of the *Holstein* was marked with a continuing stream of flour bags that leaked up from the wreck for months following the sinking, thus explaining its local name, "Flour Wreck," that fishermen bestowed upon her. The freighter came to rest on her starboard side in 200 feet of water. Due to both the wreck's depth and its distance from shore, the *Holstein* is rarely visited by divers.



For those that possess the necessary skills and experience and who are willing to take the long journey to the wreck, the *Holstein* is a fantastic dive. As the freighter is a fairly recent addition to the seafloor, the wreck is intact and in excellent condition. The port side hull is first encountered at approximately 160 feet. A thin veneer of sediment and marine growth covers it, but the lines of the vessel are still readily apparent. Surfaces of the vessel not directly exposed to current, such as the now vertical deck, are heavily encrusted with oysters and other invertebrate species. Two large masts stretch out from the wreck and run parallel over the sand into the distance. Swimming into the gaping maw of the large forward cargo holds, divers can still find the remains of numerous flour bags that once comprised the *Holstein's* cargo.



Heading aft, the bridge and superstructure are eventually encountered. The vessel's running lights, as well as numerous cage lamps, can be found on the exterior bulkheads of the superstructure. Several of the forward facing bridge windows have been knocked out, allowing easy entrance into the bridge. Unfortunately, the bridge is largely gutted and in massive disarray: the interior bulkheads have deteriorated and collapsed down to the starboard side of the wreck, with only curtains of wire and cable remaining. Gauges and other artifacts can be found amongst this litter, but much of the equipment is modern and cheaply manufactured. Because most divers typically ignore the *Holstein*, artifacts in other areas of the ship are abundant; only a small handful of individuals have penetrated the freighter's interior.

Railing still adorns the perimeter of the wreck. Swimming towards the stern, numerous hatches permit access to the interior. Divers can follow rows of port-holes aft until eventually encountering the large single screw on the terminus of the sloping hull. Crossing back over to the upper decks, machinery and booms provide a unique scene near the fantail, while large hawser lines float 50 feet upwards from the wreck. These lines used to float on the surface for several years, which helped to expedite the location of the wreck.

While the wreck itself is relatively new to the local marine ecosystem, it supports healthy assemblages of fish species. Schools of circling amberjack accompany divers during their visit, while large gag (grouper) and red snapper can be found around the base of the wreck. A few solitary Goliath grouper have been observed, unusual given the extreme distance from their typical shallow, preferred habitat. Also of note are numerous queen angelfish and swarms of butterfly fish that present the illusion that one is visiting a shallow tropical reef instead of a deep shipwreck over 100 miles out in the Gulf of Mexico.

*Michael C. Barnette is the Founder and Director of the Association of Underwater Explorers (<http://uwex.us>), a coalition of divers dedicated to the research, exploration, documentation, and preservation of submerged cultural resources. Employed as a marine ecologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), he recently published *Shipwrecks of the Sunshine State: Florida's Submerged History*, which offers an extensive and comprehensive cross-section of Florida shipwreck narratives.*

