

Return to the Thimbles

by Capt. John P. Thompson

After writing "Treasure in the Thimbles" (*Long Island Boating World*, January 2008), a story about my close encounter with Captain Kidd's sunken treasure, several readers asked if I had thought about going back (to the Thimbles) to try to locate that mysterious opening in the rocks where we had seen the teasing glimpses of the golden doubloons. The simple answer to that question is...of course!! I had seen my future an arm's length away within those rocks, and I had experienced many sleepless nights wondering how I would spend the rest of my life living off the pirates' plunder.

So, on Friday evening, May 8, Peter, my long-time friend and dive partner from last year, and I drove to Milford, where my boat was docked, to make sure that we were ready for an early Saturday morning departure. After stowing our dive gear and securing the tanks, we went ashore for a relaxing dinner. Afterwards, we walked back to the boat under a cloudless, black and starlit sky. Knowing that we were going to have a long day ahead of us, without much debate, we both elected to climb into our berths and get a good night's sleep.

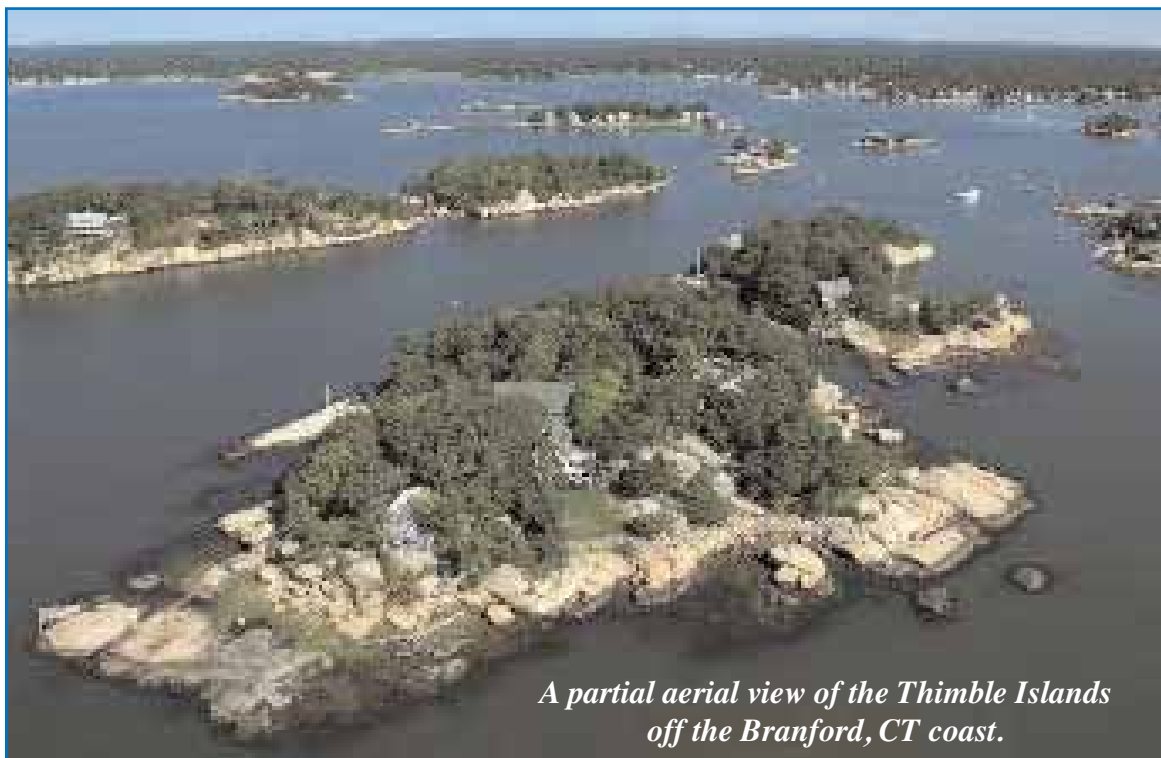
Contrary to earlier predictions, the weather on Saturday morning was overcast, cool, breezy and misty. Despite the rather gloomy start, my brother, Michael, a good guy despite being a sailboater, and Randy, a fellow captain from our dock, arrived right on time at 0630 hours. After stowing their gear, we relaxed over a cup of steaming hot, black coffee and reviewed our plans for the weekend.

At 0735 hours, we cast off the lines, pulled in the fenders and slid away from the dock, making our way through Milford Harbor and heading toward Long Island Sound. Since it was still early in the season, our boat was alone as we passed through the harbor waters. A few minutes later the sun broke through the clouds, warming the early morning chilly air. Once past the rocky shores of Welche's Point, we turned to a heading of 083, which would bring us to the mouth of the channel for the Thimble Islands.

We followed the markers into the channel before turning between Red Point Rocks to port and High Island to starboard and then headed almost due north to our intended anchorage between Potato Island and Governor's Island. Using the coordinates on my GPS from our previous visit, we dropped the anchor in 12 feet of dark grey-green water. Once anchored, we pulled out the charts, which I had enlarged to show better detail, and went over the plans for our dives.

With almost two full days at our anchorage, other than our desire to find the pirate's hidden treasure, there really was no reason to rush. Planning, patience and persistence were the operative words for our activities. We had agreed previously, since Peter and I had some familiarity with the bottom conditions from our earlier dives, to split up, with Michael and me diving together and Peter teaming with Randy. Invoking the captain's prerogative, I elected to take the first dive. Since the water still held its chill from the previous winter, we needed full 3/3"-thick neoprene wet suits with booties, three-finger gloves and hoods to compensate for the 39-degree water temperature, but even with the thick wet suits, it took several minutes before the trapped water warmed to our body temperatures.

Early spring often presents some of the best diving conditions in Long Island Sound since the water is still relatively clear of summer algae growth, thus providing exceptional eight- to ten-foot visibil-



A partial aerial view of the Thimble Islands off the Branford, CT coast.

ity. Today was no different and the visibility was indeed excellent. Releasing the air from our buoyancy compensators, we slowly descended into the relatively calm waters of the Thimbles. Halfway to the bottom, we stopped to equalize the pressure in our ears and begin our first dive.

Surprisingly, even though we used the GPS to fix our position, everything somehow looked different as if everything somehow had changed since we were last here. Heading towards the sloping rock face at the west end of Governor's Island, we started looking for the elusive opening in the rocks. Up and down the rock face we poked and felt for any possible openings, only to find nothing. Checking our air pressure gauges, it was clear that our bottom time was coming to an end and we would have to surface in less than ten minutes. While making our way back around the sunken point of the island, a flash of reflecting sunlight caught our attention, but we were disappointed to find that it was only the sun reflecting off the bottom of an old galvanized pail.

With a high level of frustration and the lack of any meaningful success on our first dive, we surfaced and returned to the boats. Back on deck we pulled out the enlarged charts and marked the area that we had just covered. We also marked the area where we thought Peter and Randy should focus attention during their upcoming dive.

An hour later they returned to the boat and reported that their dive had not produced any success, so we re-marked the charts to highlight the areas that we had searched already.

After lunch we went over the charts and laid out plans for our afternoon dives. At 1410 hours, Michael and I suited up and prepared to re-enter the water. While the air had been warmed by the early spring sun, the water still held a chill that didn't want to quit. Once in the water, we settled to the bottom to resume our search of the sloping rock face. Our time passed all too quickly and again without success. We surfaced and returned to the boat to find that Peter and Randy had already begun to get suited for their final dive of the day. We quickly briefed them about our search area and the next area where they should go. About an hour later, they surfaced and swam to the boat. Their expressions told the whole story...nothing!!

Upon waking on Sunday morning, we were greeted by the sun, rising from behind Governor's Island...truly a beautiful sight. Being the first one awake, Peter had already brewed coffee and had it ready for us, as one by one we wandered into the galley for our caffeine fix. Over coffee and pastries, we laid our plans for the day. Recognizing that we wanted to be back in Milford by sunset, we scheduled our dives and the return trip accordingly. With no clouds to block the sun, the early morning chill was quickly replaced by warming air temperatures.

Donning their wetsuits, Peter and Randy prepared for their first dive of the day and they splashed at approximately 0930 hours. When they surfaced just over an hour later, they told us that they had seen an opening in the rocks about 150 yards to the northeast of our anchored position, but weren't able to explore it since they were running low on air.

With renewed enthusiasm and now some purpose, Michael and I quickly suited up and prepared for our dive. After entering the water and settling to the bottom, we took a compass reading and headed directly to the area that Peter and Randy had marked on the charts. What we saw was a small two- by three-foot unnatural opening in the rocks. Grabbing our dive lights, we took a look inside the chamber. Being careful not to stir up any accumulated silt, I reached inside and felt a woven cloth-like bag. Pulling it outside the opening, we carefully looked inside and to our amazement, it contained a handful of gold coins. We really had found Captain Billy Kidd's hidden treasure.

Even though we were both overtaken with the excitement of the moment, according to our plan we released a weighted inflatable float to mark the location of the opening so that we could move the boat over the spot for future dives. While the excitement of the find caused us to use more air than normal, we still had enough bottom time to reach into the chamber carefully and retrieve more bags of gold coins before it was time to return to the surface, using our mesh dive bag to hold the bags of coins. Upon surfacing and swimming to the boat, we gave Peter and Randy a "thumbs up" and pointed to the float off in the distance. Climbing back on board, we hoisted the mesh bag onto the swim platform and proudly

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displayed our newly-found treasure. Our dive mates were equally excited and high-fives and congratulations flowed freely. Anxious for their turn to dive, they waited patiently as we prepared to move the boat closer to the inflated marker. Once we were close, we carefully dropped the anchor, giving us plenty of scope to ensure that we stayed well away from the rock face.

With the anchor set, Peter and Randy got dressed and ready for their dive in near-record time. They weren't in the water more than 15 or 20 minutes when they surfaced just off the stern and said that they couldn't find the opening. They had followed the line from the marker to the bottom and searched the whole area, but couldn't find anything. We pulled out the charts and showed them exactly where the opening was. I decided to suit up again to make sure we hadn't drifted. Finding the same, sloped rock face, I looked all over for the opening, but it was nowhere to be found. It hadn't been a dream; we did indeed have five bags with perhaps 25 coins in each one. The more immediate question was where the opening had gone. Nearing our reserve level, we needed to surface. What had happened to the opening? We would have to ponder that question later.

While our pre-trip discussions with Jamie, Randy's attorney wife, all had been "what if's", those "ifs" now had become reality and we needed to ensure that all of the required legal procedures were followed. Previously, Jamie had indicated that she had done some initial research and found that a search of claims filed with the Coast Guard and the Secretary of State under the U.S. Maritime Salvage Act of 1903 uncovered nothing that would compromise our claim, if we actually found something.

Wanting to avoid any issues with the Coast Guard, Homeland Security or Customs when we returned to Milford, Randy called Jamie on his cell phone and told her what we had found and that she should prepare the necessary salvage documents to ensure that our treasure was not confiscated when we returned. She reminded Randy that it was Sunday afternoon and she would need at least a couple of hours to prepare the necessary documents and then find a judge to execute then in time for our return. Meanwhile, we made ready for our return to Milford,

which I estimated would take about an hour. We couldn't help wondering what Captain Kidd's crew thought when they had left their plunder behind. Surely, they could have not imagined that some 120 years later four middle-aged boaters would find it.

Finally, after what seemed to be an all-day boat trip, we entered the inner harbor. The final 15 minutes passed sooo slowly before we finally turned and backed into the slip. As promised, Jamie was waiting on the dock with two uniformed officers from the US Coast Guard.

When the boat was secured to the dock, Jamie came aboard with the two Coast Guardsmen. Jamie recapped what she had learned during her research and limited knowledge of coastal and salvage law. Petty Officer Brett confirmed that Jamie's assessment was accurate and suggested that until the recovered treasure was formally cleared by the state's Attorney General's office, the pirate's treasure be held by the Coast Guard in a secure government facility.

Anxious that we were entering into the government's "twilight zone", we asked the officer if he had any idea how long the clearance of title might take. He indicated that the recovery of pirate's treasure was not an everyday occurrence so couldn't be absolutely sure, but expected that everything could be resolved satisfactorily in about 10 working days. We waited until two uniformed federal agents arrived and came on board to take temporary possession of the 102 gold coins. After signing the requisite federal transfer documents, the officers departed with the two unnamed and silent federal agents.

The silence was broken when Jamie told us that during her hurried research, she learned that the gold coin, described earlier to her, had a potential value of between \$15,000 and \$18,000 each, meaning that we had uncovered and recovered a pirate's treasure worth somewhere between \$1.5 and \$1.8 million dollars.

To celebrate this latest news, Peter went below and brought up a bottle of Chardonnay and one of Pinot Noir, along with five glasses. We toasted our good luck and each began to dream about our next nautical adventure.....on our new boat.

This story and his earlier story, "Treasure in the Thimbles", are works of fiction.



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