The Wreck of the *SS Tarpon*

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ABSTRACT

The wreck of the *SS Tarpon* lies approximately eight miles off the shore of Panama City, Florida. She sank in a gale in 1937, and in 1996 was designated Number Six of seven State of Florida Underwater Archaeological Preserves. In 1996, Dr. Michael Faught and Captain Keith Plaskett mapped the wreck, and a commemorative plaque was donated by The Friends of Tarpon and was placed on the site by the US Navy. Several manta ray anchors were also added to the site but were never included on an official map. On March 31, 2001, Rachel Horlings and Marc Galloway led a project to map these features, as well as to further document the site. They were assisted by the Florida State University (FSU) ANT 4131 class and obtained support and suggestions from the Florida Bureau of Archaeological Resources. This report summarizes the results of the 2001 fieldwork.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank several people for their assistance in making this project a success: Della Scott-Ireton and Roger Smith from the Bureau of Archaeological Research for their help in researching the *SS Tarpon* and getting the project underway; Dr. Michael Faught from Florida state University for his support and leadership and for assisting in making the funding for the project available; John Kiwala of the FSU Academic Diving Program for his site supervision and help with gear; and Ron Boyce, Captain Jerry, Hal Lacey and John Minton of the Panama City Marine Institute for their service and use of the vessel *Guardian Angel II*. Thanks also for all who participated in the project, including ANT 4131 students Mike Arbuthnot, Stephanie Dale, Brian Dean, Zuli Gokay, Ron Grayson, Willie Hoffman, Doug Lewis, Brian Marks, and volunteers Melanie Damour and John Ireton, who all worked so hard to make it a productive venture.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

SS Tarpon is one of seven shipwreck preserves in the state of Florida. Until Hurricane Opal in 1994, the ship was relatively intact and sitting upright on the bottom. After the hurricane, the sides of the ship split, and debris and parts were scattered. Dr. Michael Faught and Captain Keith Plaskett mapped the wreck for the Florida Bureau of Archeological Research (FBAR) in 1996 and produced an *Autocad* map. A brochure was made for prospective divers to be able to locate the wreck, but an underwater guide for them to orient themselves on the wreck was still needed. In 1996, the Friends of Tarpon made and donated a commemorative plaque and monument, which was placed at the site by the US Navy. The bronze plaque is 1.2m by .7m on the face and weighs approximately six tons. Its inscription reads: "A twin screw steamer, built in 1887 and owned by the Pensacola, St. Andrews and Gulf Steamship Company, *Tarpon* faithfully served the Gulf Coast for over 30 years until she sank here in a gale on September 1st, 1937." They deposited it at the site, but during the operation, its exact position in relation to the wreck was lost. There were also several *manta ray* anchors driven into the surrounding area so that dive boats could use them to anchor off and dive the wreck, but their precise locations needed to be determined. Attached to the mooring anchors were set floating mooring buoys, however these mooring buoys were missing at the time of our project.

Marc Galloway and Rachel Horlings, in conjunction with Dr. Michael Faught of the Anthropology Department at Florida State University, and Della Scott-Ireton and Roger Smith of the FBAR arranged a project to do further research on the site. The two main goals of the FBAR were to establish the position of the commemorative monument on an official map and to determine the number of *manta ray* anchors present and map them onto the site map. After these two goals were accomplished, the secondary goals included photographing the plaque and site, some clean up, performing a biological survey, and assessing the overall condition of the site, including the mooring buoys. Subsequent to the field portion, a map with the new data was to be generated, as well as an underwater guide.

Guardian Angel II and her captain (Captain Jerry Weber) were procured from the Panama City Marine Institute (PCMI) with funding from the Project in Underwater Archaeology (PUA). The boat's crew was John Minton and Hal Lacey. The field workers assisting with the project were mainly staff and students of the ANT 4131 (Techniques of Underwater Archaeology) class at FSU, as well as several volunteers. Dr. Michael Faught was the Principal Investigator on site, while Della Scott-Ireton was the representative from the FBAR (Figure 3). John Kiwala, Dive Locker Supervisor of FSU's Academic Diving Program (ADP), was the project Dive Supervisor (Figures 4& 5). Dr. Dan Marelli, University Diving Officer of FSU-ADP, was also present as a nitrox instructor at the site. Marc Galloway and Rachel Horlings organized the project (Figures 4 & 5), and Chris Horrell (Figure 5) and Katie McClure (Figure 2) were the teaching assistants in charge of the ANT 4131 class. Also on board were volunteers Melanie Damour and John Ireton.

Figure 1 Location of *SS Tarpon*

The project was scheduled for two days; however, we accomplished our goals within one day. March 31, 2001, we left the dock at the Panama City Marine Institute at 0900 (EST). The weather at the time of departure was approximately 70°F, and conditions were calmer than anticipated with swells of one to two feet, so we proceeded to dive. Water temperature was 62°F with about 25 to 30 feet of visibility the first dive and 20 to 25 feet on the second. Because the water was cold, the divers were chilled by the time their dives were over. Some chose to sit out the second round (Figure 6). Divers were divided into buddy pairs according to experience and familiarity with the project and wrecks in general. There were two groups of divers so the dives were staggered throughout the day. *Guardian Angel II* was tied off at the bow of the remains of *Tarpon*, the tip of which was separated slightly from the rest of the wreck (Figure 9).

The wreck lies at a depth of 100 feet, so dives were limited to 25 minutes for the first dive and 20 for the second. As a result of limited time, each diver's task was planned before beginning the dive.

Figure 2 Katie McClure and Willie Hoffman

Figure 3 Della Scott-Ireton assisting a diver

Figure 4 Marc Galloway and John Kiwala
Ron Grayson in background

Figure 5 Rachel Horlings and John Kiwala
Chris Horrell in background

The goals of the first dive teams were to locate the plaque and any *manta ray* anchors that were in place at the site. The plaque and three *manta ray* anchors were located, and a line was run from the anchor line of *Guardian Angel II* to the plaque to mark it for the next dive teams. Della Scott-Ireton and John Ireton cleaned off the face of the plaque. Dr. Faught also located the north datum pin/rebar from the 1996 mapping project, which is located north of the boiler, on the west side (Figure 9: Datum 2001-6). Another dive team reported a second datum pin at the stern (Figure 9: Datum 2001-4).

The divers on the second dive accomplished mapping in several of the *manta ray* anchors and reported a fourth. The bow anchor where *Guardian Angel II* was tied off to was 4.28m at 330° from the bow section (Figure 9). The anchor on the north side (starboard) of the wreck is located 11.96m at a heading of 75° (255°W) from Datum 2001-6 (Figure 9). Measurements on the wreck are generally accurate to within plus or minus five centimeters of accuracy.

Figure 6 Crew resting and warming up between dives

After a two and a half hour surface interval, the first teams of divers returned to the water. The stern *manta ray* anchor was mapped in and is located 6.3m at a heading of 140° (320°W) from the stern (Figure 9). The plaque was mapped in by triangulating with two known (already mapped) points on the wreck (Figure 9). The first of the two points was a circular object located approximately amidships (Datum 2001-1) at 11.48m (Figure 9). The second measurement was taken from the south corner of the west side of the main engines (Datum 2001-3) at 8.9m (Figure 9). The plaque is facing west and is positioned so the top of the plaque was at a heading of 330°W. There is a *manta ray* anchor just west of the plaque, approximately 2m from the west-northwest corner. This anchor's location is estimated on the map, and it is recommended that its position be remeasured (Figure 9).

A large, unidentified piece of machinery (Figure 9-J) had been separated from the wreck to the south (Figure 9). It was also mapped by triangulation. Measurements were taken from points on the main engines in the aft part of the ship, one from the east side of the main engines (Datum 2001-3), at the same place where the first measurement was taken to map in the plaque, and the other from the north side of the main engines (Datum 2001-2), about 8 feet above the hard bottom (Figure 9). The first measurement was 5.4m and the second was 7.3m.

The last dive teams mapped in the stern *manta ray* anchor. Brian Marks (a student in the 4131 class) noted that the *manta ray* anchor is located at a distance of 6.78m at a bearing of 100° from the hub of the prop in the stern (Figure 9: Datum 2001-4).

Figure 7 Doug Lewis surfacing

Figure 8 Divers approaching the boat after a dive

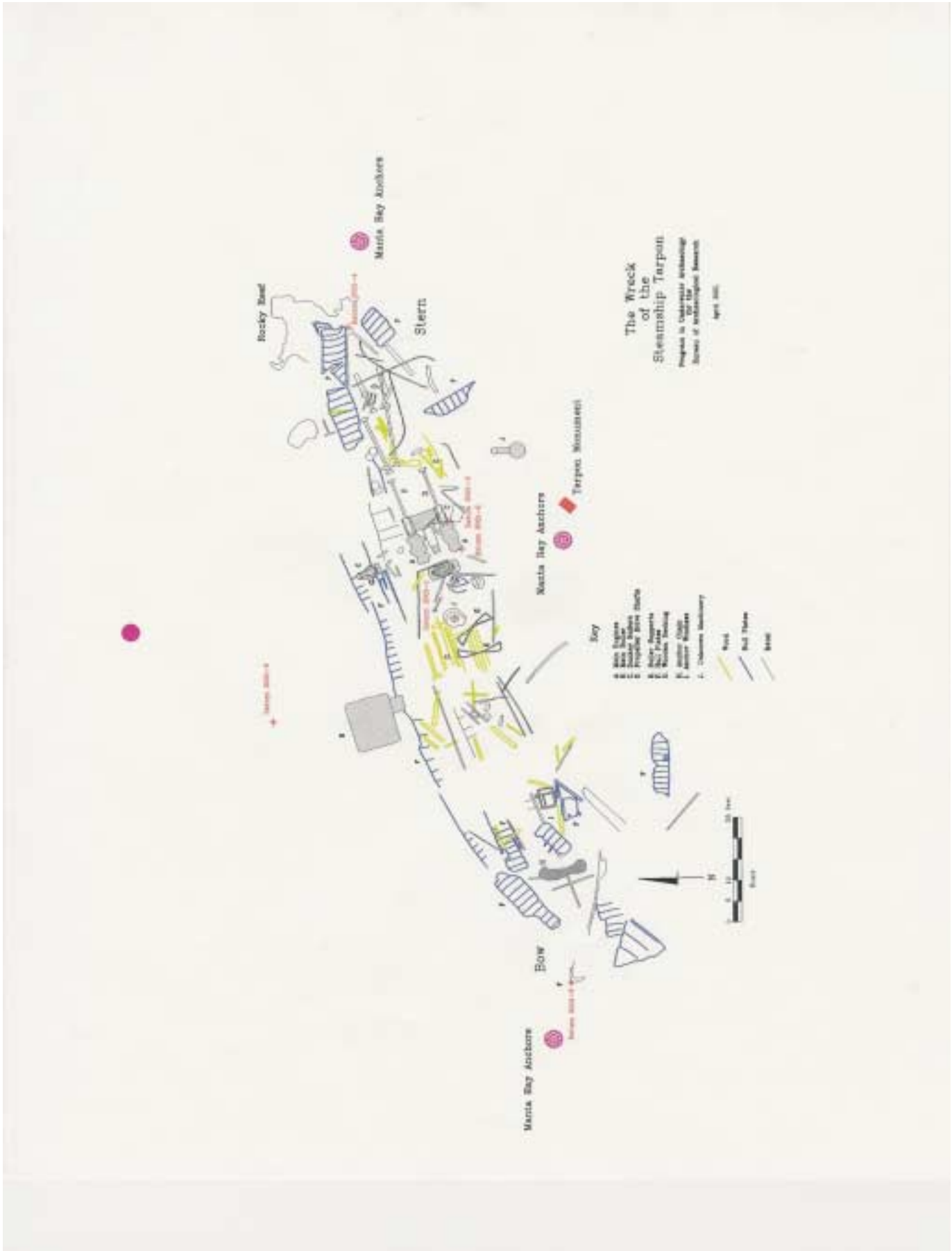


Figure 9 Map of the wreck of *SS Tarpon*

Throughout the day, various divers took pictures of the wreck and people working, but only a few of them turned out very successfully due to backscatter from the particulate matter in the water and a flooded camera (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Diver working at bow of wreck

A comparison of the map with the current state of the wreck suggests that there have been some significant changes and movement of some parts of the wreck in the years since the mapping had originally been done. The stern end seems to have deteriorated significantly, and many pieces shifted toward shore.

ASSESSMENT

There are copious amounts of fishing line present throughout the wreck, which poses a significant hazard to any visitors on the wreck, as well as to the wildlife at the site. We experienced entanglement problems, as could recreational divers. There are also numerous lead weights strewn around the wreck, both near and on the structure. Some of the cargo of the ship was beer, so there were originally many beer bottles on and surrounding the wreck. There are some bottles visible now, but there is a high probability that many of the exposed bottles were looted from the site (Figure 15).

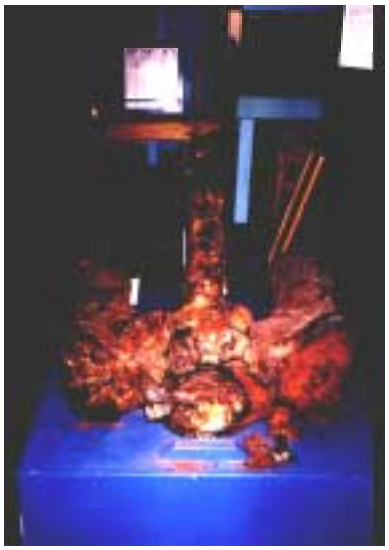
The sinking of the *SS Tarpon* is well known in the Panama City area and has been viewed by many visitors in the past. Despite its history and status as a State Preserve, it was difficult to locate someone knowledgeable about the visibility and condition of the site when Panama City dive shops were contacted. According to James Main (a.k.a. "Captain Logan") of Captain's Choice Charters, the combination of the depth of the site and the condition of the wreck results in reduced traffic to the site. Hal Lacey of the Panama City Marine Institute corroborated this statement, also commenting on the fact that he had not visited the site in over ten years. When other dive shops in the area were contacted, we were hard pressed to find any that included *Tarpon* dives among their

regularly scheduled dives, or options for dives. As is evidenced by the excessive fishing line, the site is obviously well known to fishermen, but apparently to few others.

The wreck of the *Tarpon* has been visited for many years, and as a result, many of the objects that were on the ship have been brought to the surface. Some of them are well preserved, and others have not faired so well. Some of these artifacts have been placed in the Museum of the Man in the Sea in Panama City. Included in the exhibit is a scaled model of the ship as she looked during her working days, as well as a detailed history and a manifest from the ship. Not all people on board were included on this manifest because several of them were roustabouts.

Figures 11 & 12 Images of the model of *SS Tarpon* in the Museum of Man in the Sea

There is a sample of the beer bottles that once were so numerous at the site, as well as several other, smaller items. The main anchor of the ship is also included, but its condition is rapidly deteriorating due to exfoliation as a result of not having been properly conserved (Figures 13 & 14). The display at the museum is overall very informative and a worthwhile visit.



Figures 13 & 14 The exfoliating anchor of *SS Tarpon* in the Museum of Man in the Sea

Figure 15 Beer bottles from the wreck in the Museum of Man in the Sea

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As planned, the *manta ray* anchors, the plaque, as well as the unidentified piece of machinery were mapped in, and a minimal amount of clean up was done on the site. Dr. Dan Marelli and Marc Galloway were responsible for the biological survey that was done. Observations by divers were also discussed and compiled. There was little time to try to deal with the floating mooring buoys, and it was decided, mainly by Della Scott-Ireton, that they were not an important feature of the site. Photographs of the site were taken, but as a result of mechanical problems and large amounts of particulate matter in the water, the results were poor.

Reports from divers indicated that significant changes have taken place as a result of storms. It is recommended that further measurements be taken and mapped and a more complete report on the overall condition of the wreck be compiled. There is some discrepancy about exactly where the north *manta ray* anchor is located, and we

recommend that it, as well as the *manta ray* anchor near the plaque, be remeasured and their positions confirmed on the map. We also recommend that more dives be made to properly photograph the plaque in situ, as well as to document the rest of the wreck.

The problem of the mooring buoys and access to the *manta ray* anchors remains. The anchors are now on the map of the wreck, but their accessibility to newcomers on the wreck is still limited. Perhaps the concept of the mooring buoy should be explored once again, maybe using a chain to anchor them to the *manta ray* anchors, or something that will be more visible and have easier access. The buoys themselves would have to made of a more sturdy material and be maintained on a regular basis. It is a serious detriment to have ships anchor to the wreck itself, because it could further disturb the wreck. We anchored there of necessity, but now that the *manta ray* anchors are marked on the map, this should be kept to a minimum.

This brings up another issue, that of public awareness of the site. Fishermen know that it is there and frequent it, but few others. The depth of the wreck and its position so far off shore seem to be the major deterrents, but there seems to simply be little interest in the site itself. Perhaps if there were more outreach to the local communities, informing them of the significance of the wreck in history and its status as a State Preserve, people would be more willing to make the trip.

Following production of this report, an artistic representation of the map is scheduled to be made. The map of the site should also be made into an underwater guide for potential divers.

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Appendix I

SS TARPON

The *SS Tarpon*, built in 1887, was originally intended for use as an icebreaker. Built in Delaware by Pusey and Jones for the Naugatuck Valley Steamboat Company, she was originally known as the *Naugatuck* and was 130 feet in length. She ran from the Derby area in Connecticut to New York City via the Naugatuck and Housatonic Rivers. After a competing railroad forced the Naugatuck Valley Steamboat Company out of business, Henry Plant purchased *Naugatuck* for use as a spare vessel to be substituted into service as needed.

Captain Albert N. Haig took delivery of *Naugatuck* in October 1890 and delivered her to Tampa, the terminus of Plant's railroad empire. Sent back to Pusey and Jones' in September 1891, 30 feet were added to her length, and 12 berths and cabins were added. On November 20, 1891, *Naugatuck* departed for her career in Florida and was renamed *B Tarpon* on December 28, 1891. When not in service as a substitute vessel, *Tarpon* ran in local Plant service from Tampa to the Bradenton, Florida area. *Tarpon* was later employed on both the Manatee River and on the run to Mobile on occasion. By 1897, *Tarpon's* schedule had her leaving Port Tampa daily, except for Sunday, at 7:10 am. After this departure, stops were made at Palma Sola, Palmetto, Bradenton, Adam's wharf, and Manatee with the trip terminating at Ellenton on the Manatee River by 11:30 am.

Upon Henry Plant's death, the Peninsular and Occidental Steamship Company was formed. Better known as the P and O, the company was dominated by Henry Flagler. P and O acquired several of Plant's former steamships, including *Tarpon*, which was sent to Philadelphia for sale in 1902. In December 1902, *Tarpon* was purchased by the newly formed Pensacola, St. Andrew's, and Gulf Steamship Company. She was put into service in 1903 under her Captain Willis G. Barrow and made weekly runs between Mobile, Pensacola, St. Andrew Bay (Panama City), Apalachicola, and Carrabelle (Figure 16).

After 20 years as the captain of *Tarpon*, Barrow made his thousandth trip to St. Andrew Bay, having missed only one voyage due to weather. Barrow and *Tarpon* had gained the reputation for keeping a strict schedule despite the weather, and were reliable and trusted for transporting both passengers and goods. By the time Barrow had been captain for 30 years, he had strengthened his reputation, completing 1500 trips. On August 30, 1937, after passing her annual inspection and an official dry-dock survey, *Tarpon* was loaded in Mobile for the next trip east.

While Barrow had a reputation for dependability for transporting goods, it was his habit to load the *Tarpon* with as much cargo as he could fit. He also failed to paint the legally required loadline on the hull of his ship, despite continual reminders from inspectors in Mobile. When *Tarpon* left Mobile she carried a load of 200 tons and 31 people, but was only licensed to carry 20 people and 5 roustabouts. On the evening of August 31, she departed Panama City with a load of flour, sugar, canned goods, iron, and beer.

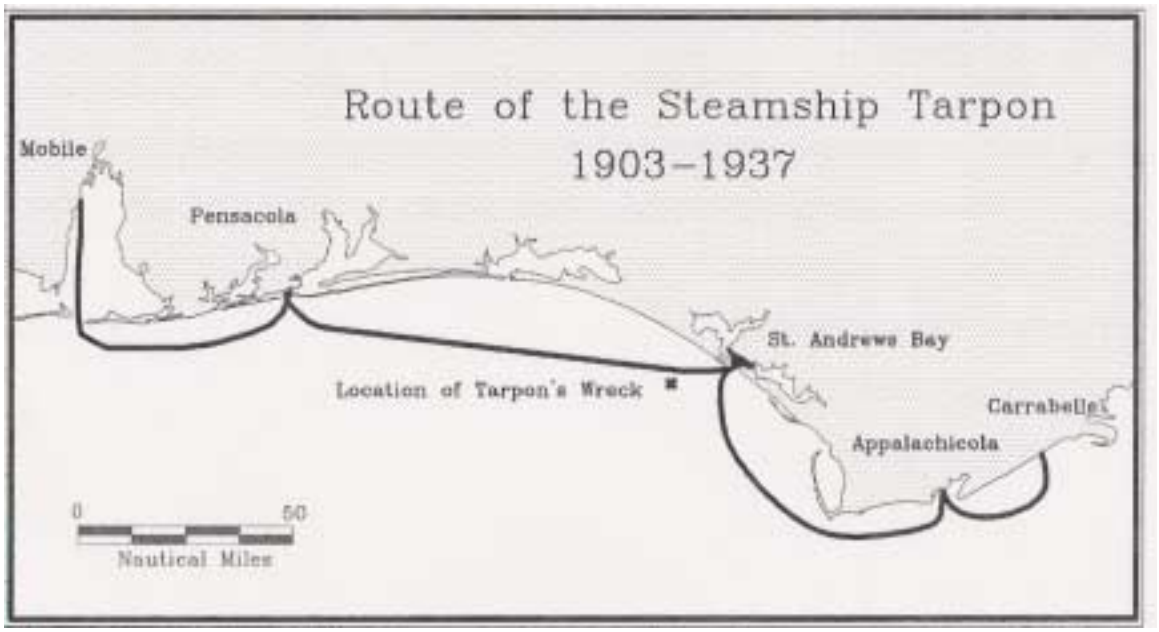

Figure 16 Route of the Steamship *Tarpon*

Despite forecasts of calm seas, *Tarpon* ran into heavy wind and developed a leak in the bow. Around 2:00 am, as the seas grew rougher, the leak worsened and the ship began to list to port because her pumps could not keep up. An even keel was regained when first mate L. E. Danford ordered flour barrels jettisoned from the port side and *Tarpon* proceeded to go back on course. The winds reached gale force shortly before dawn, and water was pouring through the wooden bulkheads as *Tarpon* began listing to starboard. As more cargo was about to be jettisoned, the crew realized that the ship could not be saved, and Danford turned *Tarpon* to shore hoping to beach her before she sank.

Upon emerging from his cabin, Barrow ordered the ship set back on course and more cargo be jettisoned. When Barrow finally gave the order to abandon ship, *Tarpon* was already settling into the sea by her stern. *Tarpon* was about 8 miles from shore with no radio, and she did not fire distress flares. Due to the late order to abandon ship, only one lifeboat could be launched, but even this capsized and drowned the cook's wife, as well as most of the African Americans on board (Mueller: 1987). Eighteen people are believed to have lost their lives including several unidentified roustabouts trapped in the cargo hold, as well as the 81-year old Captain Barrow. Oiler Adley Baker managed to survive and eventually swim to shore west of Panama City after 25 hours in the water. Baker hitchhiked into town and notified the Coast Guard who rescued the remaining survivors. Two African Americans also managed to reach shore unaided (Mueller:1987).

A Marine Investigation Board placed full blame on Captain Barrow, suggesting that he should have been forced to put a loadline on his ship. The Board also recommended that all vessels traveling out of sight of land be required to carry a radio.

It is interesting to note that, though *Tarpon* was heading east, she rests on the bottom with her bow facing west.

(Adapted from the FBAR *SS Tarpon* guide, report, and various materials from the state archives.)

Appendix II

BIOLOGICAL SURVEY

NAME	AGE	NUMBER	OBSERVER
Amberjack	Juvenile	10-50 (school)	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Batfish	Mixed	10-20 (scattered)	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Blue Angelfish	Mixed	10-20 (scattered)	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Comb jellies	Mixed	Many scattered	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Damselfish	Mixed	Many scattered	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Grouper	Juvenile	5-10 (school)	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Hogfish	Mixed	Many scattered	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Morey Eel	Undetermined	1	Rachel Horlings
Sea Cucumber	Undetermined	About $1/10m^2$	Galloway/Marelli/Faught
Sea Turtle	Undetermined	1	Della Scott-Ireton
Spadefish	Mixed	Large school	Galloway/Marelli/Faught