

The Australian - Hunt on for pirate treasure in wreck

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LONDON: The wreck of a British warship captained by the swashbuckling 17th-century privateer Sir Henry Morgan has been discovered off the coast of Haiti, but the frigate has yet to give up the secrets of her treasure. HMS Oxford, sent by the British government in 1669 to defend Jamaica, was destroyed in an explosion that killed 350 sailors while Captain Morgan dined in his cabin. Captain Morgan - a national hero to the Welsh, a pirate captain to others - escaped, but the vessel, said to be laden with booty from his expeditions, with treasure reputedly stuffed inside one of the cannons, was sunk. A team of divers who pieced together the ship's location from contemporary accounts believe they have identified the remains of the 46-metre-long Oxford. The divers braved 10m waves and the chaos surrounding the removal of Haiti's former president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, to complete the expedition. They have discovered cannons, drawer handles, muskets, musket balls and powder barrels. Archaeologists will this week be invited to carbon date the findings and confirm the wreck is the Oxford. But Rick Haupt, 54, a German diver who leads the Oceans Discovery team, believes the ship has more secrets to give up. "There must be treasure down there," he said. "Why was Morgan so desperate to recover his ship?" Captain Morgan was a licensed privateer with a reputation for using rape and torture to terrify the wealthy into handing over their possessions. He returned to Haiti six years after the blast to search for his lost ship. Its remains were discovered three years ago by Mr. Haupt. "When I saw the whole reef littered with cannons and thousands of artefacts tumbling from the deep it was the most extraordinary sight in all my years of diving."