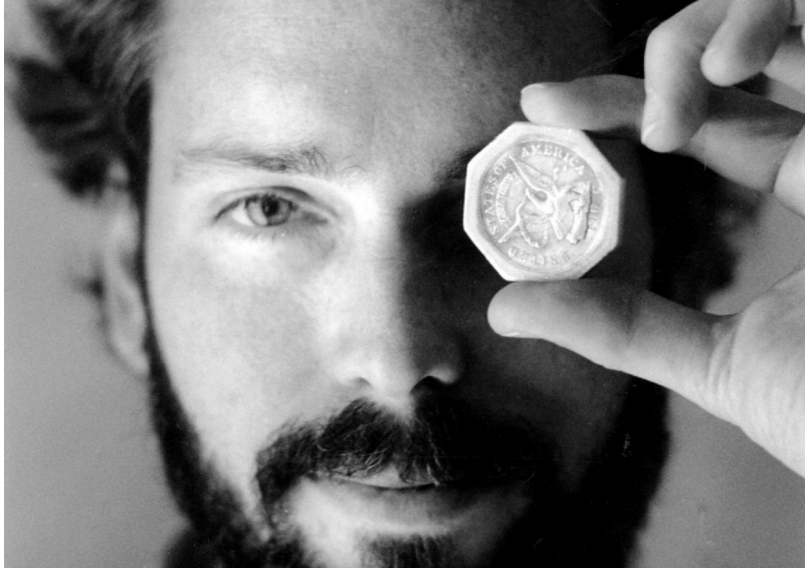


Tommy Thompson

Fugitive treasure hunter who found fabled 'Ship of Gold' captured in Florida hotel



- 1 A fugitive treasure hunter is involved in a legal fight over what has been described as the greatest lost treasure in American history. He has been arrested in Florida after more than two years on the run, authorities said. The US Marshals Service found Tommy Thompson in a hotel in Palm Beach County and arrested him on Tuesday, said Brian Babbist, a senior inspector in the agency's office in Columbus, Ohio, where a federal civil arrest warrant was issued for him for failing to show up to a key court hearing.
- 2 Mr Thompson made history in 1988 when he found the sunken SS Central America, also known as the Ship of Gold. In one of the worst shipping disasters in American history, the SS Central America sank in a monster hurricane about 200 miles off the South Carolina coast in September 1857; 425 people drowned and thousands of pounds of California gold were lost, contributing to an economic panic. Mr Thompson and his crew brought up thousands of gold bars and coins from the shipwreck. Much of that was sold to a gold marketing group later in 2000 for about \$50 million. The 161 investors who paid Mr Thompson \$12.7 million to find the ship never saw returns from the sale. Two of them sued him.
- 3 The legal battle is ongoing, and those close to Mr Thompson say it was his downfall. Gil Kirk, former director of one of Thompson's companies, told *The Associated Press* last year that Thompson never cheated anyone. Mr Kirk said proceeds from the sale of the gold all went to legal fees and bank loans. "He was a genius, and they've stolen his life,"

Mr Kirk said of those who sued. Mr Thompson went into seclusion in 2006, moving into a mansion called Gracewood in Vero Beach, Florida. Six years later, after the arrest warrant was issued, Thompson vanished. When the property's caretakers searched it soon afterward, they found prepaid disposable cellphones and bank wraps for \$10,000 scattered about, along with a bank statement in the name of Harvey Thompson showing a \$1 million balance. Harvey, according to friends, was Mr Thompson's nickname in college. Also found was a book called "How to Live Your Life Invisible." One marked page was titled: "Live your life on a cash-only basis."

- 4 Columbus attorney Rick Robol, who at one time defended Mr Thompson's company, has said there's no proof Thompson stole anything. He said he's been concerned about Thompson's well-being, which is why he called the arrest "the best thing that can happen for everybody." No criminal charges have been filed against Mr Thompson, but Mr Babtist said the treasure hunter will likely be ordered to be held in custody until he appears before an Ohio judge to give an accounting for the gold's sale and his actions. "I don't imagine he will get out on bail because he's already been a fugitive and knowingly evaded law enforcement," Mr Babtist said. "I don't know what kind of means he has as far as money goes, but I'm sure they don't want to take any chances with him leaving the country or absconding again."

telegraph.co.uk, 2015