Under the Brave Black Flag: Pirates and Mutineers

"TO LIVE AND DIE A PIRATE KING": A HISTORY OF PIRACY

The outlaw, society's outcast, operates outside of the community of men. Despised, feared, hunted, uncertain what his fate shall be at the same time sometimes admired, even respected, as the grand adventurer unafraid of risk and danger. Robin Hood, Jesse James, the famous Highwayman galloping down the road cape flying behind him are but a few images that evoke the heroic outlaw.

On the high seas, where the drama of human life is intensified, the outlaw evokes an even greater aura of romance. On deck, beneath a black flag adorned with skull-and-crossbones, the bronze-skinned adventurer looms in epic stature: a gold hoop through one ear, a red bandana about his head, a sword at his hip, and a black patch covering an eye—the pirate!

Historically, the pirate is probably as old as his brethren on land. As soon as man took to water, someone else followed to steal what he had caught or found. The Bible makes reference to pirates, referring to them as "princes of the sea," a group of the most positive human beings who might be hardly be referred to as a princely occupation. As a youth, Julius Caesar was captured by pirates and held for ransom while other captives from his ship were bound back to work and sold as slaves. Not to be Captured by Pirates, (the next article). Later, as Emperor, Caesar subdued bands of pirates in his attempts to conquer Britain. Flutarch tells how during civil strife, piracy flourished. His story is one of the most original and graphically described of any popular form. As a result, the story of piracy has been told from many viewpoints: the pirate's life, his adventures, his battles, his traps, his sneaks.

Piracy flourished wherever sea commerce existed. Madagascar, the Red Sea, the northern European waters—all had their share of piracy. From 798 A.D., onward, mention is made of Viking pirates raiding coastal communities where they would rape and sometimes marry local women. Their seed was sown southward through the British Isles, down to Normandy; by 912 they reached as far south as Spain and the Mediterranean. In 1214 the Hanseatic League was formed by European trading cities, and it made a great effort to suppress robbery and plunder at sea. However, many of the men hired to fight piracy themselves succumbed to the lure of adventure and fast money.

As a rule piracy has flourished throughout history during unsettled times, in times of war, and when colonial governments were too weak to enforce regulations to the letter. The mid-sixteenth century, for example, became a heyday for piracy. Queen Mary of England was more concerned with her soul than with the growing number of her subjects' property. Trading communities banded together to fight and defend themselves against onslaughts from the sea. Later these same defenders took to plundering non-English ships that traveled near their coastlines. By the time of Queen Elizabeth I, piracy was widespread and nearly respectable. Privatizing (a word first recorded in the thirteenth century), where private vessels were commissioned by the government to plunder ships of hostile nations—abandoned, so long as a portion of the plunder was turned over to the Crown.

Elizabeth treated pirates as a privileged class. All exonerated, always escaping punishment, pirates were used by the Virgin Queen to build her navy and provide her with defense and manpower in her battles against Spain. From Drake, who himself captured the Golden Hind, and returned with a vast fortune from the Spanish settlements, his escapades were rewarded with knighthood. Drake went on to lead the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and that event ushered in the era known as the Golden Age of Piracy. The seventeenth century began with peace, that peace by King James was anxious to preserve. The tax pirate had ensnared the greatest fleets with purple sails, silver oars, and expert pilots. They preyed upon merchant corn ships, and it finally took Ponpey the Great and 500 ships to quell them. Appropriately Rome's scourge of piracy was not heeded at first. Only when it became a persistent and great danger were steps finally taken against it. This fact was to be repeated throughout history.

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CAESAR IS CAPTURED BY PIRATES.

Piracy, said to be the world's oldest profession following prostitution and medicine, is recorded as early as 20 years before Julius Caesar's day, but the Roman emperor was the most typical of ancient men to be captured by pirates. In 78 A.D., his ships dominated the Mediterranean, many governments, faced with the threat of piracy, banded together. Gaius Julius Caesar had been exiled from Rome for supporting the party of his uncle, Marius, and decided to journey to Rhodes, where he planned to take elocation lessons from the great orator Apollonius Molon. But a pirate galley seized his ship off the coast of Caria in Asia Minor. Caesar and the other passengers were taken ashore, hustled near the town of Phocamussa while the pirates tried to raise ransom money for them.

Caesar bided his time reading and practicing with his sword, even writing poetry. In a few days, he sent 50 talents the pirates demanded for his ransom. All the while he showed the strength, arrogance, and boldness that was to characterize him for the rest of his life. Yet when he vowed on leaving that he would have their lives for his kidnapping, the pirates thought him insane. No one had ever threatened them before: they were virtually immune to prosecution in this corner of the world.

On his release young Caesar promptly persuaded the legate of Miletus to provide soldiers and ships for him to launch an expedition against his pirate captors. Sailing immediately, he reached Phocamussa late at night when the drunken pirates were sleeping off the effects of their victory celebration. Stealing upon them he marshalled before their campfires, he captured the entire band without a struggle.

But part of his vow remained unfulfilled. Caesar had sworn that the pirates would be executed, and now he discovered that they had the protection of Junius, the powerful praetor of Asia Minor, who had agreed to leave the pirates alone if they kept their hands off Roman ships of commerce. Caesar located the praetor in the field. Far from his offices at Pergamum, the site of ancient Troy, excited by a struggle presumption, yet somewhat fearful of Caesar's possible political influence, Junius gave the future ruler of Rome only a vagrant opportunity to join him. The decision was not too difficult. Many a sailor, bored with the humdrum existence aboard a merchant vessel, jumped at the chance for excitement and easy money. This last reason, probably more than any other, was the most popular excuse for turning pirate.

Many pirates began their careers as privates, in a form of legal piracy. In fact, privateering was described during this period as being "a nursery of pirates." Privateering came about because in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries nations could not afford to maintain large regular navies. When war did break out, they were forced to increase their naval strength to meet the challenge of an enemy, yet remain within reasonable bounds.

The life of a pirate was filled with adventure and danger. Pirates were a loose, lawless group of men who operated out of small, unmarked ships. They preyed on merchant ships, robbing them of their cargoes and forcing the crew to serve as slave labor. Sometimes they would even capture entire ships, taking the crew as prisoners.

There were few realistic preparations for a pirate life. Dr. Hugh F. Rankin, a history professor at the United States Naval Academy, pointed out that "When one thinks of such things as clothing, food, and weapons, it is easy to see that the carefree, free-wheeling lifestyle of the pirates was far removed from the lives of ordinary seamen."

"In the end, it was not the lack of resources that prevented the pirates from forming a crew, but the lack of a ship that prevented them from doing so. Without a ship, they could not roam the seas and gain the experience necessary to become effective pirates."

"The lack of resources was particularly evident during the first few years of piracy. The pirates were forced to rely on whatever ships they could find, and these ships were often of little value."

"In the end, the lack of resources was the biggest factor in the failure of piracy as a viable form of warfare. Without the resources to support a large fleet, the pirates were unable to maintain their operations and were eventually forced to give up their efforts."
dies to pull it over even more.

Careening was necessary because of the tendency of barnacles and other marine life to attach themselves to the bottom of a ship. The accumulation of parasites acted as a drag and prevented the vessel from slipping easily through the water. In tropical waters there was also the threat of worms which attached themselves to the hull, and the constant need of fumigating the hold with tiny holes through the wooden planking. Careening made the task of scraping the bottom much less difficult. After the bottom of the ship had been scraped clean, the hull was treated with a coating of tallow and sulphur.

It was sometimes necessary to careen a ship as often as three times a year. This was especially true of vessels operating in tropical waters. While this operation was being carried out in the shallow waters of some sheltered cove, the pirates would pitch camp on the shore. A temporary latrine would be constructed by throwing up earthworks. This would allow them to catch and netting. The pirates were keen to avoid any such difficulties as they might pose.

There was little consistency in the selection of names for pirate ships. The favorite seems to have been Revenge. Captain Kidd’s ship was called the Queen Anne’s Revenge, while another pirate, Richard Worley, named his vessel the New York Revenge or Revenge. Perhaps this was their way of re-echoing the quality of ship which had caught them so coldly in the past. Many expressive

names were sometimes selected, among them: Delight, Adventure, Black Jake, Bravo, Sudden Death, Flying Horse, St. Helen’s Delight, Good Fortune, Night Rambler, Flying Dragon, and Snap Dragon.

Stede Bonnet’s Royal James implied political affiliations. Many born poetic or religious names entirely out of keeping with their sinister purpose. Among these were the Happy Deliver, Most Holy Trinity, Blessings, Mayflower, Liberty, Childhood, Merry Christmas, and Morning Star. It would seem that pirates sometimes confused the names of their ships as jokes upon their intended victims.

The captain of a pirate ship was in most instances elected to his position by the other crew members. If they later decided that he was not the proper person for the job, they would reduce him in rank simply by holding another election. If the former captain should object to his removal, there were other methods of getting rid of him. He could be shot, stabbed, thrown overboard, or marooned on some desert island. One pirate crew went so far as to elect 13 different captains in the shortest space of several months. And the captain was not always the most important man aboard ship. In many crews it was only during the course of a battle that he had supreme authority. Then it was his duty to direct and lead the fighting. But as with all rules, there were

The officer of next importance was the quartermaster. He also was elected by the crew members. It was his duty to look after the interests of the men. On some ships, the captain was not allowed to make an important decision without the consent of the quartermaster. This was the pirate way of preventing a captain from assuming too much authority. It was the responsibility of the quartermaster to decide just what was the proper distribution of the captured prize. In doing this, he had to determine the amount of cargo space in his own ship and how easily the captured articles could be sold without too many questions being asked. It was also his duty to supervise the sale of all plunder and to divide the proceeds among the crew.

Other officers and men were usually appointed by the captain and the quartermaster, although in some ships these also were elected by the crew. Among these were the lieutenant, who acted as second in command to the captain. He had no regular duties but was to take over the command if the captain should be killed in battle.

There was also the sailing master, a most important person. His responsibility was the navigation of the ship and the supervision of the trimming of the sails. Next in importance was the boatswain, or bosun, the bosun acted in the capacity of foreman, for he was in charge of the deck hands and the upkeep of the ship and all supplies. The gunner was another very busy man. Not only did he have the care and repair of the weapons on board, but he was also to instruct the crew in the proper use of the weapons. It is also possible that various other minor officers on board ship whose duties were more specialized, including the carpenter, the sailmaker, and the surgeon.

Pirates were extremely touchy. This, in turn, made the problem of discipline one of the most difficult on board ship. The whip was the primary instrument of punishment, but the quartermaster was the only officer with the power to flog a member of the crew. There were other methods by which a dispute could be settled. If two seamen wanted to fight a shipboard, the quartermaster was supposed to make an attempt to persuade them to settle it peacefully. If he was unsuccessful, he would then take them ashore to the nearest land. Each was given a cutlass and pistol, and they were instructed to settle their differences by a duel. The first of these quarrellers who drew blood, if only by a nick, was declared the winner.

More serious offenders were tried before a pirate jury. If found guilty, one might be "killed by hand." This meant tying one rope under his arm and another to his feet. Then he would be thrown overboard and cut down by the crew with a cutlass. The merchant ship had to pay the pirate who had been killed by a deduction from the price of the goods. The pirates were badly cut by the barnacles clustered on the bottom. If the jury decreed death, little time was wasted. The guilty seaman was tossed

with little or no food and water. Alexander Selkirk, whose adventures inspired Daniel Defoe to write Robinson Crusoe, was a privateer who was marooned by his captain on Juan Fernandez Island. The idea of the privateer was one of the most exaggerated notions concerning piracy. Much more money has been spent searching for pirate gold than has ever been found. In the first place, most pirates were of such spendthrift nature that they seldom accumulated enough treasure to bury. Their future was so uncertain that there was little use in saving their ill-gotten gains. There are few instances of any pirate ever dying a rich man.

All in all, the picture of piracy is not a pretty one. The life of the average buccaneer was a life of hardship, brutality, and danger. And that life was short. When they died, few people took time to mourn their passing. Seldom did a pirate die in bed of natural causes. The end usually came with a terrible suddenness, in the midst of battle, shipwreck, in a tavern brawl, of scurvy and tropical fevers, or of other diseases. Even if he was fortunate enough to escape these hazards, there was always the gloom with his hangman’s noose. All nations punished piracy by hanging. Sometimes when captured at sea, pirates were not even allowed a trial or hearing of any sort. Swift justice came at the end of a rope swung from the yardarm. In other cases, those crew which fought the most fiercely could expect the least mercy. To discourage further opposition, the pirates made sure that stories of their atrocities were spread throughout the seaports of the world. This explains why the pirates were often able to take, without too much effort, larger and better-armed vessels than their own. Re-memorizing the tales of the prowess of pirates, other sailors were often unwilling to risk death and torture just to save a merchant’s cargo.

Sometimes the practice was to release the prisoner and then, after the captured cargo had been transferred to the pirate vessel. If the captured ship was more to the pirate’s liking, the prisoners were given their old vessel. Upon some occasions, the captives would be put ashore in a spot where there was a good chance of their being picked up by some passing vessel. Often the crews of the surrendered merchant vessel would be offered the opportunity of signing aboard with the pirate crew. Many did.

The plunder taken off the North American coast by these sea rovers would in most cases be taken into some colonial port and sold. The merchants on whose behalf the privateer had worked were welcomed aboard. They had only done this to provide a way for getting around the payment of the customs duties of the despised English trade laws, but the pirates always sold their goods cheaper than anyone else. Thus

quartermaster to divide the proceeds. Upon nearly every occasion it was soon gone, spent carousing and merrymaking in the nearest tavern. This brought in additional profits to the local merchants. The idea of the privateer was one of the most exaggerated notions concerning piracy. Much money has been spent searching for pirate gold than has ever been found. In the first place, most pirates were of such spendthrift nature that they seldom accumulated enough treasure to bury. Their future was so uncertain that there was little use in saving their ill-gotten gains. There are few instances of any pirate ever dying a rich man.

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ON PIRATE PHILOSOPHY

Pirate Captain Charles Bellamy summed up the anarchist philosophy of many pirates when he described a captured merchantman captain who refused to join him under the black flag. Roamed Bellamy, "Damn ye, you are a sneaking puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by laws which rich men have made for their own security,