JOLLY ROGER
WITH AN UZI

The Rise and Threat of Modern Piracy

Jack A. Gottschalk and Brian P. Flanagan
with Lawrence J. Kahn and Dennis M. LaRochelle

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The Evolution of Piracy

It is generally accepted that piracy became a major problem as soon as, and wherever, maritime commerce existed. In more common parlance that translates to mean that the very first time something valuable was known to be leaving a beach on a raft the first pirate was around to steal it. While history contains no information about such initial waterborne felonies, records of piracy have been found among the Phoenicians and the Greeks.2

As the pirate menace grew, efforts were made to suppress it. Attempts were made by Crete and Athens, and by the Rhodians, who were the first to codify the law of the sea.3 The success of these antipiracy campaigns was neither significant nor permanent. Until Rome became the unquestioned power of the Mediterranean, pirates plundered at will, taking full advantage of the Punic Wars. It is claimed that one of the earliest and best known of pirate victims was a young Julius Caesar who was held for ransom in about 75 B.C. Allegedly, Caesar later captured the pirates
and had them crucified. The story, of course, may not be completely factual—a point that should be kept in mind when dealing with much pirate and related literature and history.

As Rome's naval power grew, its leaders embarked on a serious program designed to eliminate piracy from the Mediterranean. In 67 B.C., Pompey the Great created a maritime patrol force that was successful in reducing the threat of piracy to Roman commerce. The pirates, however, were a truly organized force and more than patrols were needed to provide a permanent and long-range solution.5

It was not until 10 A.D., under Emperor Augustus, that Rome's full naval power was arrayed against the pirates. Effective control, once established, was maintained for almost three hundred years.

PIRATES IN NORTHERN WATERS

The Mediterranean was not the only area of the early world that witnessed pirate activity. For two centuries the Vikings and oceanborne thieves from the British Isles were at work not only on the North Sea and in the Baltic, but on the Elbe and Rhine Rivers, as well. Commerce was so negatively affected that the principal reason for the creation of the Hanseatic League in the twelfth century was the suppression of piracy.

ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Chinese, Japanese, and Malayan pirates operated throughout the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and adjacent waters at least as early as the fourteenth century. By the end of the fifteenth century, piracy had achieved such prominence that it was the target of the Ming Dynasty, which mounted a force against it that included 3,100 warships, 400 armed transports, and more than 30,000 men.6

Japanese pirates, much like their Western counterparts, operated as both legitimate traders and, when times were hard, as pirates. In another similarity, the Japanese pirates were sometimes financed by various warlords and merchants. From earliest times, the waters off Africa and of the Persian Gulf were infested with pirates. They raided coastal settlements, took captives to be ransomed or sold as slaves, and caused havoc on the high seas.

THE MEDITERRANEAN MIDDLE AGES

Sailing from ports along the North African coast, Muslim pirates (known as corsairs by the French) raided the shores of southern Europe and ravaged maritime commerce during the Middle Ages. They, too, seized captives (mostly Christians) and either held those victims for ransom or sold them to the Turks.

During the fourteenth century when the Ottoman Turks were seeking to control the Mediterranean, the North African pirates were allied with them. The glory days for these pirates ended with the Christian defeat of the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Despite this setback, however, the pirates remained a threat until defeated by the Americans at Tripoli in 1805 and, more significantly, by the French conquest of much of North Africa in 1830.

PRIVATEERS AND BUCANEERS

Historians have written more about the pirates who first gained prominence in sixteenth-century England than about earlier ones. The simple reason is that far more is known about them. The names and deeds of pirates such as Henry Morgan, Edward Teach (Blackbeard), and Captain William Kidd are first encountered by most of us in grade school, if not through books, television, and movies. They are the stuff of romantic drama.
Most, but not all, of those who became pirates in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries began their activities as privateers commissioned (mostly by the English) to seek out, seize, and destroy all things having to do with the Spanish enemy. This was a particularly appealing opportunity for those selected to operate under such color of authority. Spanish ships were plentiful and were transporting huge quantities of gold and silver to the New World.

Most of the privateers sailed from ports in England or along the Atlantic coast in their search for Spanish (and, later, Dutch and French) ships. Many privateering veterans (almost all of them Protestant) somehow settled on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean during the mid-seventeenth century. Their principal activity was the hunting and roasting of wild animals. The Spanish considered them as both heretics and illegal inhabitants of lands claimed by Spain as part of its Roman Catholic empire.

Mutual hatred was established early and the “buccaneers,” as they would be called, from the words used by the French to describe “roasters of meat,” soon turned their hunting talents from animals to Spanish ships.

The Spanish remained the principal targets of these “Brethren of the Coast” (another name for the Caribbean-based pirates) until the end of conflict between England and Spain in 1692. When peace was declared, those wanting to remain in the vocation needed to increase their activities and when that occurred, the Golden Age of piracy (1692–1725) began.

Pirate activity began to expand almost immediately after the conflict between England and Spain ended and included attacks on shipping of all nations to include the huge treasure-carrying transports that sailed the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. This territorial expansion from what had previously been principally limited to the Atlantic and the Caribbean required a new base to rest and take on needed supplies. The pirates found this on Madagascar and, over time, it became their domain. But it was harder to be a pirate in the absence of those Spanish treasure ships and without the possibility of holding a privateer’s commission that provided an official blessing for robbery and murder on the high seas.

Fortunately for the pirates, the War of the Spanish Succession, which pitted the English and the Dutch against Spain and France, reopened opportunities for both privateering and piracy. The war, which began in 1701, lasted until 1713. When it ended, pirates and privateers were forced from Madagascar back to the Bahamas in the Caribbean. It was on the main Bahaman island of New Providence that the Golden Age would end, as will be later described.

**Piratical Requirements**

As with anyone who makes a living, criminals have certain fundamental requirements for success. Thus, pirates from the days of the Phoenicians and Vikings to now, wherever they are found, share some needs.

First, it makes no sense for pirates to prowl waterways where the pickings are not known to be very good. In short, if you are ready and willing to undertake the inherent risks of pirating, the rewards must be worthwhile.

Second, the geographic area where pirates prey must be one in which the risk level of detection is acceptable. It is not a good idea, for example, in modern times, to conduct piracy operations in a place such as the English Channel.

Third, if at all possible, there should be safe havens where a pirate can hide, seek repairs, and obtain supplies.

These considerations still apply. The need for both a relatively secluded area of operations and a secure place to
hide is obvious to the pirates who are active in the Straits of Malacca and in the South China Sea.

THE TOOLS AND THE TALENT

The reasons why piracy became so widespread by the early 1700s are many and varied. First, as mentioned earlier, there were many wars involving the British, the French, the Spanish, and the Dutch. The conflicts were, to a large extent, naval ones and, not unlike most wars, their end caused many ships to be laid up and sailors to be laid off. Unemployed seamen often considered the risks of life as a pirate to be more than offset by the potential rewards.

It is also true, all other things being equal, that life aboard many a pirate ship was a good deal better than it was on a merchant or naval vessel. The master of a merchant or naval ship held near-dictatorial powers over his crew. The typical sailor received low pay, endured terrible living and working conditions, and could be lashed for minor infractions. While life on a pirate ship or privateer was also austere, most crew members shared the profits of the enterprise. Moreover, except during actual combat, pirate ships operated largely on democratic principles. Floggings were rarely employed and discipline tended to be lax.

Finally, technology was making piracy easier. Navigation, a science whose development is generally credited to Prince Henry of Portugal, was at least roughly understood by the late fifteenth century. While the modern sextant and chronometer did not arrive on the maritime scene until the eighteenth century, there were some instruments in use such as the cross-staff, sundial, and astrolabe, a primitive sextant. Additionally, charts were more accurate, ship hull designs were improving, and better systems of rigging permitted the increased use of bigger, more efficient sails.

Faster, more-seaworthy ships; better navigation; a moderately well-trained and profit-motivated labor pool; and many ships laden with treasure a thousand miles from their home ports—the ingredients for piracy on a worldwide scale were all present.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF PIRACY

There are, in truth, several other important points that tended to make the Golden Age of piracy different from what had come before it. For one thing, any would-be pirate had to face the initial problem of getting a ship. In ancient times, the vessels used for, in most cases, both trade and piracy, were constructed as group projects and they were relatively simple to build. In the case of the Mediterranean pirates, those who built the boats were essentially part of a government.

By the time of the Golden Age, any good, seagoing ship that was desired by a pirate to sail anywhere in the world, had to be relatively large (hopefully big enough to be considered, at least at a distance, as a harmless merchantman); fast (enough to catch a victim); easy to handle (so as to evade a warship); and able to carry numerous cannon, the purpose of that being obvious. Given this initial requirement, the barrier to entry (using a modern business school term) to the piracy business could be a difficult one to overcome.

In fact, there were only two realistic ways to get a pirate ship or at least a ship able to become such a vessel. The first was to have been a privateer or buy a license to become one, and then have the ship and all supplies provided and financed by the government.

Another way of obtaining a suitable vessel was simply to steal one, generally a fast and well-equipped merchant ship. It was possible to take such a ship from a dock by overpowering the crew or to have enough people on board when it sailed to commit mutiny and take command on the high seas.
The second problem was obtaining guns, powder, and cannon balls. This hurdle had to be overcome immediately. Merely raising a pirate flag was certainly not going to be enough to cause a merchant ship to surrender. There had to be some muscle to go with the threat.

A solution to the problem was again found in one of two ways. If the would-be pirate were a privateer, he would have been supplied with the guns and ammunition by the government. If the pirate stole a ship he had to be certain that it was already armed.

Seizing a merchant ship that came complete with guns was, in reality, no harder to do than taking one that did not. Most merchant ships were armed because they were concerned about pirates. In fact, until well into the nineteenth century, ships that plied the waters of Southeast Asia had their hulls painted with false gun ports so as to look like warships, specifically, frigates.

As a final thought on the guns, there is some belief that the gunnery skills of many pirate crews were at least equal to those of some of the naval ships of the time. Most pirates did not want to test their skills in such a one-on-one contest. They felt, with justification, that a navy could afford to lose a battle while the pirates had to win every time.

**PIRATE DISCIPLINE**

Pirate crews generally represented the lower levels of society. Virtually all had experience as mariners. The maintenance of discipline among such a group would have been difficult in any environment but, on a ship, it was only possible through agreement. The captain had to have the crew on his side either through camaraderie or through fear. The only thing that would keep a pirate crew happy and motivated was, of course, realizing the financial rewards they had set out to obtain.

The democratic tone of pirate life was set early in every voyage with the writing out of the ship’s articles. These were signed by all who served aboard the vessel. While each one of these documents was worded differently, the provisions were basically the same as follows:

1. Every man shall obey Civil Command. The captain shall have one full share and a half of all Prizes. (Usually this was actually a double share.)

2. If any man shall offer to run away, or keep any secret from the Company, he shall be maroon’d with one Bottle of Powder, one Bottle of Water, one small Arm and shot.

3. If any man shall steal any Thing in the Company, or gains, to the value of a Piece of Eight, he shall be maroon’d or shot.
4. That Man who shall strike another whilst these Articles are in force shall receive Moses Law (that is 40 stripes lacking 1 on the bare Back).

5. That Man that shall snap his Arms or smoak Tobacco in the Hold without a Cap to his pipe, or carry a Candle lighted without a Lanthorn, shall suffer the same Punishment as in the former article.

6. That Man that shall not keep his Arms clean, fit for an Engagement, or neglect his Business, shall be cut off from his Share and suffer such other Punishment as the Captain and the Company shall think fit.

7. If any Man shall lose a Joint in time of an Engagement he shall have 400 Pieces of Eight: if a limb, 800.

8. If at any time you meet with a prudent Woman that Man that offers to meddle with her without her consent shall suffer present death.14

With such rules the pirates went out to search for ships and treasure.

TARGETS OF PIRACY

The pirates of the Golden Age, like all of the pirates before them, pursued a variety of opportunities. Ships were, of course, the softest of all targets, and for the most obvious of reasons, those that carried gold and silver were the most desired prey of all.

Precious metals including coins were the best kind of treasure but jewels, rum, molasses, spices, and fine silks were among other valuable cargoes. Property other than coins had to be disposed of through land-based fences. There were many merchants, including some prominent American and British ones, who offered their services. The need for such “brokerage” has been a problem faced by thieves ever since anyone started to keep records about crime and criminals.

Other pirate targets were seacoast towns anywhere in the world—the less fortified and the more rich, the better. In the later years of the Golden Age, however, coastal fortifications began to seriously outgun any single naval vessel. These included most ships manned by pirates. Still, if a raid could provide sufficient real treasures of any kind, the risk might be taken.

THE MERCHANT FENCES

Many of the most illustrious families in colonial America were engaged as fences of pirate booty or openly supported pirate activity.13 The names included such prominent ones as Phillips and Livingston of New York, along with others in Philadelphia, Boston, Newport, and Charleston, where piracy was aided and abetted in clear violation of the law.16

These people functioned as both legitimate merchants and illegitimate brokers of stolen property and were necessary to the success of pirates and piracy. They placed a value on the goods that included their fee and, after paying the pirates, they would resell the property at a profit.

THE PERILS OF PIRACY

In addition to the general rigors of life at sea in those days, there was the very real danger of losing one’s life in a heavy storm. But without doubt, the greatest fear of pirates was not of weather but rather of being engaged by a warship. In most cases, the principal pirate nemesis was a naval frigate.

Frigates were not large ships but they were fast. Mounding between forty and fifty guns, they were built to legally raid commerce, to carry messages between ships of the line and between battle fleets and shore commanders, and to destroy pirates.

When considering that most pirate ships carried fewer guns and were not built for combat, the outcome of a
confrontation between a frigate and a pirate ship was almost always sure, although not certain. The pirate Blackbeard, for example, managed to fight off the thirty-gun frigate, H.M.S. Scarborough during one famous encounter off the Carolinas during May 1717. It should be noted, however, that Blackbeard’s ship, Queen Anne’s Revenge, mounted forty guns.\(^12\)

A Pirate’s Who’s Who

It can be safely assumed that there were hundreds of pirates who tried to make a living on the ocean during the Golden Age. Some of the most well known or, at least, most interesting pirates who roamed the seas during that period included John Avery, also known as Henry Every; Stede Bonnet; Anne Bonny; Mary Read; and John “Calico Jack” Rackam. (Bonny, Read, and Rackam, as will be seen, must be reviewed together.) Others were William Kidd, Edward Teach (Blackbeard), Thomas Tew, and Henry Morgan. There are, of course, others who could be legitimately added to this admittedly judgmental list.

John Avery, sometimes known as Henry Every, was born in Plymouth, England, between 1653 and 1665. He went to sea at an early age as a member of the Royal Navy, became an accomplished navigator, and subsequently served on several merchant ships including those operating in the slave trade.

It was as a result of these credentials that he obtained the position of first officer aboard the privateer, Charles II. Needing a ship of his own for piracy, Avery led a successful mutiny aboard the ship and renamed it the Fancy.

Avery then embarked on a career of piracy that might have resulted in riches. Eventually, through proper application of funds in the right places, he might even have won a pardon for the bloodless mutiny. Among his first pirate victims, however, were several English ships, a fact that made Avery into a flat-out criminal in the eyes of King William’s government in England.

In August 1695, two treasure ships, the Fateh Mohamed and the Gang-I-Sawai, both flying the flag of the Great Mogul (the Muslim ruler of India), were sighted in the Red Sea. Avery attacked the boats and, in addition to taking gold, silver, and other cargo valued then at approximately 325,000 pounds sterling, he tortured and murdered many of the crew who had surrendered after his display of the red (no quarter) flag. The women found on board the seized ships were considered a fringe benefit and were subjected in several cases to multiple rape.\(^11\) One of those women was reported to be a relative of the Great Mogul.

This incident marked the “high” point of Avery’s pirate career. Despite the mutiny, Avery rapidly became a popular hero, largely because of his courage and the damage he caused to the heathen Muslims. He became the real life model of a play and was the inspiration for a novel, The Life, Adventures, and Pyracies of the Famous Captain Singleton, written by Daniel Defoe and published in 1720.

However, there was still the nagging problem of having pirated an English ship. For this no pardon was offered and Avery remained a wanted man in his home country.

It is believed that Avery did, finally, return to England and after that disappeared into history. There are those who claim that he died a poor man, and there are an equal number who say that Avery ended his days surrounded by the kind of splendor that he could, presumably, well afford.

Stede Bonnet had been a major in the British army and was the owner of a large plantation in Barbados. He was, however, unhappy with his lot in life and, specifically, with his wife. Bonnet began his career in 1716 by purchasing a pirate ship, a rather unusual beginning, and then openly recruiting a crew. He placed ten cannon on a ship that was
designed for a single gun and went to sea." Given just these facts it seems that Bonnet was lucky to get out of Bridgeton Harbor. Perhaps, in the end, crowning there would have been preferred to his hanging in Charleston in 1718.

Anne Bonny was born in Ireland. She was the illegitimate child of an attorney and the household maid. Anne, her father, and (presumably) the maid arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, about 1712. There she married a sailor and went with him to New Providence in the Bahamas sometime in 1716. At some point after that fateful arrival, she became the mistress and pirate associate of John "Calico Jack" Rackam, a linkage that would come to include Mary Read.

Rackam was in New Providence to obtain a pardon and a commission as a privateer. Instead, he and Anne stole a ship and went to sea as one of the most unusual pirate partnerships in history. One of their victims was a small Dutch merchant ship aboard which were several crew members who joined Rackam's vessel. Anne became attracted to a young member of the crew. Later, much to her presumed dismay, Anne discovered (the details on how are sketchy but can be imagined) that the target of her desire was actually another female pirate, Mary Read.

Mary, who was born somewhere in England around 1693, claimed that she was illegitimate and, for obscure reasons had been raised as a boy and subsequently served in the English army and in the Dutch merchant marine. Whatever the facts of her bizarre life, Mary Read sailed into history with Anne Bonny and John Rackam.

In 1720, after their capture near Jamaica, John Rackam was convicted of piracy and hanged. Anne Bonny, using her connections and those of her father with the South Carolina establishment, was released and returned to Charleston. Mary Read died in prison of a fever while awaiting execution.

Captain William Kidd makes the list because it is probably true that his name (and that of Blackbeard) would be most quickly identified with piracy by most people. And that is a curious fact because even though Kidd was hanged as a pirate, he may not really have been one.

In 1695, the East India Company, chartered by the English government and operating merchant ships throughout the Indian and Pacific oceans, was growing increasingly unhappy over the pirate menace. The company's ships were proving to be in constant danger and cargoes were being seized. It was, in short, a condition that was not good for business. King William, then engaged in yet another English-French war, did not want to reduce his naval forces by sending warships into what might well prove to be a long, costly, and frustrating campaign against pirates. In a moment of royal creativity, William conjured up a scheme that featured the licensing of a privateer whose job it would be to seek out and destroy pirates, many of whom were now using Madagascar as their base of operations.

At the instigation of the king, Thomas Livingston, a wealthy New Yorker, and Richard Coote, the Earl of Bellomont (and newly appointed colonial governor of New York), put together the necessary financing for such an antipirate project. They offered the post to Captain Kidd. A rough, semiliterate man, Kidd lived in New York and knew Livingston. Kidd was a shipowner, merchant, and former privateer of some note. Scottish-born in 1645, Kidd had emigrated to the colonies and married a wealthy young woman in New York.

In 1695, Kidd was bored, was available, and wanted a commission in the Royal Navy. He viewed this position as a possible avenue to that desired goal.

In August of that year, Kidd went to London and, to everyone's happiness, cut a deal with Livingston and Bellomont.
Then, as a newly appointed privateer and provided with a ship, Adventure Galley, mounting thirty-four guns, Kidd set out to seek and destroy French ships and capture pirates.

But Kidd’s mission was difficult and the voyage troubled. Probably through error, he attempted the seizure of a vessel that turned out to be under English command. As frustration mounted among the members of his crew, so did confrontations with Kidd. One of those led to his striking a crewman on the head with a bucket and causing his death. On top of this, Kidd encountered a pirate on Madagascar whom he had known years before. Even though their relationship was edgy, Kidd failed to arrest him.

Despite all of these factors, Kidd set sail for home. Only after dropping anchor at Arguilla for supplies did he learn of his undesirable status. Kidd promptly sailed for New York and what he assumed would be the protection of both Livingston and Bellomont, the latter having taken up residence there as royal governor.

Kidd’s faith in both Bellomont and Livingstone is yet another example of his poor judgment. Upon arrival in New York, he found that Livingston refused to see him at all. Bellomont met with him and had him arrested. It appears that during Kidd’s mission and absence, politics in London had raised its head and Parliament was now seeking to investigate the whole antipiracy scheme. Kidd was left to twist in the wind and that, in the end, became a literal, as well as a figurative, statement.

After his arrest, Kidd was sent to London for trial. He was held in Newgate prison from April 1700 to March 1701 when he was finally called to testify before Parliament concerning what would undoubtedly, in the present day, be dubbed “Kidd-gate.”

Instead of taking a deal in which he would admit piracy in exchange for a pardon based on his testimony about the affair, Kidd was uncooperative. He was then tried and convicted of piracy as well as for the murder of the crew member.

The execution was even more traumatic for Kidd than for most on the gallows. On 23 May 1701, he stepped off the plank at the Wapping Execution Dock and the rope broke. The second attempt at hanging was successful. Kidd’s body was then tarred for preservation, placed in an iron cage, and displayed at the head of the Thames as a grim warning to all who might be tempted to engage in piracy—at least against the king’s ships or those that fell under his protection.20

Edward Teach, known in popular lore as Blackbeard, was a murderous, sadistic, and probably psychopathic pirate who began his career as a privateer during the War of the Spanish Succession. Teach somehow wound up in Nassau about 1715. His exploits during the next three years were legendary and included the blockade of Charleston, South Carolina; seacoast raids from Virginia south into the Caribbean; the taking of scores of ships; and corrupt dealings with officials who, for a share of pirate booty, often provided pardons. But what makes Blackbeard of even more interest is how he died.

In November 1718, Teach and his crew were finally caught off Cape Hatteras by a British Navy expedition led by Lt. Robert Maynard. In hand-to-hand combat with pistol and cutlass, Maynard killed Teach and, as a symbol of total victory, cut off the pirate’s head and threw the body into the water. Teach’s head was then placed on the bowsprit of Maynard’s ship as a trophy.21

Capt. Thomas Tew was born and spent a good part of his life in Newport, Rhode Island. Another, and significant, part of his existence was spent as a privateer in the services of the English government. To this man may well go the honor of being the seafarer who opened the Golden Age of piracy.
The privateering activities of Tew and others in colonial America must be measured against the political climate of the times. The hated Navigation Acts, which went into effect in 1651, blocked all colonial trade with any nation other than England. As a result, many highly desired imports were denied to the colonial population.

The inevitable “black market” for such goods, no matter how obtained by the merchants to sell and the consumers to purchase, offered fine opportunities for privates. Much of this merchandise came from Spanish ships in the Caribbean.

But, as noted, the end of the war between England and Spain in 1692 put privateering in a state of disarray. At least that is how it affected some. Captain Tew was not one of them.

Tew was hired as a rather special kind of privateer by a group of officials and merchants operating in Bermuda. The scheme was a secret one, presumably unknown to the royal government in London. Under its provisions, Tew was granted a privateer’s commission by Bermuda authorities. He was sent out not only to seek French ships and to raid French locations, but also, far more importantly, to sail into the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea in search of treasure ships belonging to the Great Mogul. It was on this mission that Captain Tew set sail from Bermuda in December 1692 in the seventy-ton sloop, Amity.

In carrying out this mission, Tew was a much-heralded success. In April 1693, he attacked a huge treasure ship and rather easily captured its cargo of silks, ivory, spices, gold, and silver. A year later, Tew and Amity, after a refitting on the island of Madagascar, sailed into Newport harbor much to the delight of that city’s merchants and consumers.

The success of this voyage, which in the view of many historians opened the Golden Age of piracy because of the new treasure potential that now beckoned in the waters of Asia, was unfortunately a siren song for Tew. He set sail again to attack the Great Mogul’s ships but, in September 1695, he was killed aboard the Amity during an attempted assault.22

Finally, one cannot omit Henry Morgan from the list. Born in Wales, Morgan was an early privateer who took his position most seriously. In what would be recorded as one of the most ferocious attacks in history, Morgan raided Panama in 1671. He burned and looted churches, destroyed forts, warehouses, and homes; and generally raped and murdered his way through the town in search of gold or anything else of value.

The Spanish labeled Morgan a pirate but the English government honored him with a knighthood and later named him lieutenant governor of Jamaica.23

The Pardons and the End

One of the things that made piracy attractive in the Golden Age was that most pirates were not brought to justice. Many, particularly the members of pirate crews, were usually able to make a successful case that they had been forced into their actions. While this statement was usually untrue it was often accepted. Additionally, many pirate captains escaped punishment because the government (usually that of Great Britain) was convinced that they had performed a valuable service to the Crown. However, the argument had virtually no weight if piracy was conducted against an English ship.

Many of the pirates, Morgan being only one, stole so much that they ended their lives peacefully as rich men who beat the system. They are among the not inconsiderable group in history to which the old adage “crime does not pay” brings forth a cynical snicker.

In 1718, Woodes Rogers, a British naval officer and the governor general of the Bahamas, backed by significant military support (including former pirates) on New Providence, offered pardons to those engaged in piracy.
While it is true that some of those who accepted the royal pardons returned to their plundering ways, most of the approximately two thousand who accepted the offer did not. The back of piracy was effectively broken.

The pardons, of course, were not the only factor that caused the demise of the Golden Age of piracy. The ability of naval forces to control piracy was increasing; the number of merchant ships that could be seized was becoming more limited as they carried less treasure and even more guns. And, surely not to be ignored, it was becoming more difficult to find merchants who would double as fences in the major port cities. The risks for them, too, had grown beyond the level of acceptability.

The clock had run out on the Golden Age of pirates.

THE "MODERN" AGE

Piracy did not die when its Golden Age ended. Naval campaigns were mounted against it by most of the major seafaring nations including the United States, into the middle of the nineteenth century.24

The waters of Southeast Asia, to include the Straits of Malacca, the Philippine Sea, and the South China Sea, have never been free of the piracy scourge. Only World War II provided relief from pirates and they returned to the waters of the area immediately after the conflict ended. In recent years, piracy has increased not only in Southeast Asia but also around the world and with particular ferocity off the coasts and in the harbors of both Africa and South America.

There is another part of this crime and one where the cost cannot be truly determined except in terms of medical expenses and accompanying lost time—calculations that belong in the realm of the number crunchers. The real cost, in human terms, is found in the sheer numbers of wounded and murdered people as well as in the trauma sustained (and often carried for life) by the surviving victims of pirate attacks.

Any examination of the activities of modern-day pirates and their increasing propensity to bloody violence leads to one inescapable conclusion and associated solution. Pirates, wherever they conduct their dirty trade, are criminals. Like all criminals, their behavior can range from the petty to the most felonious. By no measure can pirates and piracy be considered as merely some kind of seaborne annoyance.

Pirates, as has been known from the first days of maritime crime, richly deserve punishment ranging from imprisonment to execution. As illustrated by some of their comments contained in this chapter, they are proud of their endeavors and culture. They must be made to understand that there is a price to be paid for it either in summary fashion when running afoul of some naval or law enforcement agency or, less dramatically, at the hands of a criminal court.

PIRATES AND THEIR BLOODY CULTURE

The following account is provided by a modern-day piracy victim.

I was roused at 0330 hours at the sound of rapid blasts on the ship whistle, followed by a phone call from the watchkeeper to say we had intruders on board on the foredeck, I went immediately to the bridge and was advised by the second officer that gunshots had been heard and he believed (that) the chief officer had been hit.23

Except for the modern wording of the above recital the incident would seem to belong to a page in a logbook from the early 1700s. Most people would not believe that the entry was written only about a decade ago.
Modern pirates do not fit the Errol Flynn or Douglas Fairbanks images of Hollywood fame and glory. Instead, they are bloodthirsty slime creatures who inhabit the port areas and waterways of much of the underdeveloped and newly developing areas of the world. Their rocket launchers, bolo knives, and automatic weapons are real and used with little, if any, provocation.

Piracy occurs today in many parts of the world and although all nations have agreed to discourage and punish it, pirate acts are on the rise with every passing year and at an alarming rate. Unfortunately, it is probably true that as long as there is waterborne trade, pirates will be lurking in the shadows. Despite the fact that innocent merchant crew members are themselves attacked when pirates strike, it is also true and far more unfortunate that little is being done to stop it. There is, sadly, no real monetary profit to be gained in stopping piracy attacks on people, a fact coupled with another—Americans and others around the world simply do not recognize that piracy really exists as a menace. The truth sometimes comes into focus stained with human blood.

In 1980, one member of the House of Representatives was sailing off the Bahamas near Pipe Cay when he and his son sighted a yacht that was adrift. A closer examination revealed the body of a man draped over the gunwales, a seat cushion caked with dried blood, a quantity of spent cartridges on deck, and numerous holes in the hull, presumably made by a shotgun. Cash that had been on the boat and the owner’s firearms were missing.

This incident, an attack on the high seas, flies directly in the face of the previously mentioned belief that the crime of piracy disappeared into the mists of history.

Most modern pirates are well armed and highly organized, and employ significant planning. Much like their predecessors, they attack targets that they consider to be generally unprepared.

There should be no mistake about the fact that pirates are still plying the seas, and some harbors—especially on the ports of Brazil—and that the numbers of pirate strikes and the ferocity that mark them are increasing at an alarming rate.

A 1986 publication of the International Chamber of Commerce chronicled over three hundred incidents of piracy in the period from 1961 through 1986. By comparison, a 1989 edition of the same publication noted over seven hundred incidents from 1981 through 1987. These numbers do not include attacks against boat people that take place in the waters of Southeast Asia. In Thailand alone from 1981 through 1988, there were almost one thousand such documented attacks. Overall, pirate attacks during the last decade have resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries plus thefts of stolen property measured in the millions of dollars. Refugees have been attacked, yachts have been seized and looted, crew members and ship passengers have been murdered, and numerous kidnappings have occurred for the purpose of collecting ransom money.

The danger posed by pirates is acutely felt by seafarers whether on commercial ships, sampans in the South China Sea, fishing boats in the Caribbean, or pleasure craft. Whether items stolen are a vessel’s equipment or its cargo, mariners themselves are almost always among the targets of pirate attacks.

It is reasonable for seafarers to expect to sail seas that are safe from pirates and thus the trauma of a piracy attack can leave a mariner scarred for life both physically and emotionally. Fear, coupled with a feeling of impending, but unpredictable, doom is felt by all who are attacked by pirates. A Filipino seafarer wrote about his experience as the victim of a pirate attack.
I quickly jumped out of bed and opened the door. I was astounded to see two strangers, faces covered with handkerchiefs, each with a handgun, a .38 revolver and a .45 automatic, poked right into my face. How were they able to come on board? We were attacked by a group of armed men who unbelievably came onboard unnoticed while the ship was running at full speed.  

The Pirate “Code”

One pirate recently told a reporter: “We have a special torture for prisoners. We hang them on a branch by their feet and burn them alive. Then we eat their ears.” 28 Another one said, “To kill is to eat. My rifle is my life. I despise my victims. Every time I attack, I feel like chopping their guts out.” 29

No matter how seriously these pirate statements are taken there is no question, if one is to accept the reports provided by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), that violence during the course of pirate attacks is on the rise.

There seems to be one primary cause for the sharp rise in pirate activity, namely the general downturn in the international economy. The secretary general of the International Maritime Organization has warned the maritime community to exercise extra levels of vigilance because of that fact. It has been assumed that economic problems in several regions of the globe could increase the propensity for piracy—particularly where it has been historically endemic.

Murder at Sea

Seafarers face many different types of threat from pirates. The most fearsome, of course, is bodily harm. One handwritten message given by pirates to the captain of the Baltimore Zephyr just before he was shot to death was: “I need your all money if you do not like hurt no speak follow order also you take crew money [sic].” 30

In that incident both the captain and the first officer were murdered, and the pirates then emptied the ship’s safe, taking several hundred dollars. Three other seafarers were thrown overboard. The pirates then left the ship as it plowed unspotted through the night for miles before the few crew members left aboard finally regained control.

Crew members are not the only people at risk. The highly publicized attack on the cruise ship Achille Lauro in 1985 resulted in the murder of an American passenger, Leon Klinghoffer. It should be noted that the killers in that case were not considered pirates under the law but terrorists because their principal motivation was political. It is a definition that seems strained and, as noted in chapter 2, may be in the process of change.

Terror and Loss

Mariners, by necessity, live where they work. When pirates board a ship they are invading not only the seafarers’ workplace, but their homes as well. Although a May 1998 attack in Indian waters on the liquid petroleum gas tanker World Sky resulted merely in the loss of some of the ship’s equipment, the crew who discovered the pirate intruders also (and quite justifiably) felt violated, helpless, and unsafe. The same was true of the crew of the Nivana, which was attacked in September 1998 in Jamaica, another case where the ship’s equipment was stolen.

On 9 March 1998, the Gebruder Winter was attacked off Brazil by a band of armed pirates who locked up the crew and ransacked the rest of the ship. The master was beaten and forced to open the ship’s safe, the contents of which were then stolen along with items from various containers aboard the vessel. 31

Because a ship must serve as a crew member’s home for several months at a time, individuals frequently bring with
them items of high sentimental value as well as other personal items. When the Cape Sable was attacked by pirates off Hong Kong in April 1997, one crew member was stabbed when he resisted their stealing over $17,000 in crew wages, a laptop computer, a video camera, and other electronic equipment. In an attack on the Leina in July 1997 off Indonesia, the master and chief officer were tied up and robbed of cash and personal items. Such losses leave seafarers devastated. Life away from home is hard enough. The loss of items such as wedding bands, wristwatches, and other jewelry and personal goods can make life at sea almost intolerable.

Sometimes, even when pirates are captured by authorities, the seafarers on board become victims twice, once from pirates and then from the law enforcement authorities. According to reports on the hijacking of the Petro Ranger in April 1998, Chinese police held the Australian master and twenty members of the crew prisoner aboard the ship for two weeks after being freed from Indonesian pirates who had taken over the vessel. While detained, the master and crew were forbidden to have any contact with the outside world.

As an aside, and indicative of the continuing and repetitive dangers faced today, the Petro Ranger, according to IMB reports, had been attacked by pirates in November 1997. In that incident, the pirates were repulsed.

The crew of the ill-fated Virgin Pearl was far less fortunate than the mariners of the Petro Ranger. In April 1998, the Virgin Pearl disappeared while returning from its maiden voyage to Indonesia.32 On 4 April, the Philippine Coast Guard received a report that the ship was sinking but that its crew of fifteen (along with nine passengers) had been rescued by a Japanese merchant vessel.

The first sign that something was wrong came when a check of the Japanese ship's name showed that no such vessel existed. Later, the bodies of two crew members were found floating in waters off Malaysia. The victims, according to official reports, had been severely mistreated before they were murdered.

Several months passed with no further word regarding either the Virgin Pearl or any possibly remaining survivors. In August, the owner of the ship received word from an individual referred to only as a "pirate emissary" that the twenty-two survivors were alive and well and being held captive in Sabah, Malaysia. Not without surprise, a ransom of one million pesos—the equivalent of $24,000—was demanded. Subsequently, two unsuccessful attempts were made to rescue the victims. As of this writing, the fate of these victims remains a mystery.

A Need for Solutions

While it may be true that the economic losses sustained by shipowners; by merchants who use the ships; and by the insurance companies who provide coverage for hulls and cargoes, have not reached high enough levels to generate much interest in the piracy problem—the costs in human terms have already done so and the price could go much higher.

Again, we can estimate the numbers of personal injuries, deaths, and cases of psychological trauma sustained by those who serve aboard merchant ships and we can do so with some good degree of accuracy. By contrast, the number of fishermen, boat people, and others who fall victim to pirates is far more difficult to calculate.

The time has long since arrived when pirates and terrorists must be made to pay for their crimes and in a manner that will, to use a very popular (although overly used and often meaningless) phrase, send a message. However that message is conveyed it must be one that cannot be misunderstood by the marine miscreants who prowl the oceans, harbors, and rivers of the world.