

The Scourge of Piracy

BY JEREMY N. SMITH

Inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago, the great island group between China and Australia, came late to high seas hijacking, but proved quick learners. Pirates sailed in ninety-foot-long vessels, known as *prahus*, each manned by over one hundred rowers. On board, weapons included brass guns, swivel guns, handguns, spears, and swords. Chiefs, dressed in scarlet tunics with armor coats and feather headdresses, commanded as many as two hundred such ships in a single raid. Prisoners—slaves—made the greatest part of their plunder.

From about the time of the American Revolution until August 24, 1849, the practical end of the age of piracy, any merchant ships to and from Asia ignored the *prahus* at their peril. Yet, as important as knowing who eliminated the Malay pirates is knowing who inspired them.

"A complete history of piracy from its earliest days would be an impossible undertaking," says Philip Gosse, author of *The Pirates' Who's Who*.

In the five hundred years prior to the last *prahu* raid, Gosse explains, piracy had passed through three major stages. First, poor coastal inhabitants banded together in isolated groups to attack individual merchant vessels. Next came organization and consolidation. Successful pirates assimilated or eliminated small competitors, forming far-flung, heavily-armed organizations—call them the first private, for-profit multinationals.

In the last stage, these organizations, "having virtually reached the status of an independent state" (one Captain Misson, fifty years before the French Revolution, founded a pirate republic dedicated to liberty, equality, and fraternity), allied with individual nations against their enemies.

"What had been piracy," Gosse says, "then for a time became war."

Deciding who and who was not a pirate now differed from one nation to another. Sixteenth century Spaniards knew raider-crusader Francis Drake as a pirate. His British countrymen, by contrast, revered him as a patriot, explicitly commissioned to plunder by the Crown.

Enlightenment ideals and new technology threatened this arrangement by the end of the 1700s. Europe and the United States increasingly saw more advantage allying with each other than mercenary ship captains. Steamships and telegraphs, mean-

while, connected each traveling merchant to all others. Out-organized and no longer able to surprise, pirates suffered. At last, August 24, 1849, the British navy concluded its century-long effort to extinguish piracy with an all-out attack on the northern coast of Borneo. The Malay pirates' last stronghold lost men and ships by the tens of thousands.

Individual pirates, of course, persist. Late this March, for example, USS Cape St. George, a guided-missile cruiser, and USS Gonzalez, a guided-missile destroyer, spotted "a suspect vessel" twenty-five nautical miles off the central eastern coast of Somalia in international waters. "As boarding teams prepared to conduct a routine boarding of the suspect vessel," reported U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Public Affairs, "the two Norfolk, Virginia-based Navy ships noticed the group of suspected pirates were brandishing what appeared to be rocket-propelled grenade launchers."

The pirates opened fire, which the Navy returned in self-defense. American sailors killed one pirate and captured twelve, confiscated their rocket launchers, and returned to work without injury. The International Chamber of Commerce, which reported thirty-five attacks off Somalia last year, ranks that country the world's second-largest piracy threat. Number one is Indonesia, of which portions of the Malay Archipelago are a part.

Gosse calls "absurd" the popular tendency "to pretend that all pirates were either heroic or good humored, or that their practical extinction has not been to the benefit of mankind." Save applause or pity for the more deserving, he says. "[Pirates'] virtues are more easily appreciated when they are dead."

