



A New Breed of Pirate

Let's do a quick experiment. When I say the word "piracy," what's the first image that pops into your head? Do you think of eye patches, cutlass-wielding buccaneers, and the infamous Jolly Roger hanging from the masthead of some dark brigantine? Or do you get a visual of Internet hackers trading in unlicensed software and illegally duplicated music? Apart from swashbuckling adventure movies with Johnnie Depp and Orlando Bloom, the word just doesn't seem to have much relevance in the twenty-first century. The very concept is so outmoded that we didn't really need the word anymore. We've redefined it as a synonym for copyright infringement and intellectual property theft.

Most people think that real piracy — murder, plunder, and kidnapping on the high seas — went out with Robert Louis Stevenson novels. So it may shock you to learn that piracy is alive and flourishing in the Twenty-first Century. Brigantines have given way to speedboats and flintlock pistols have been replaced by rocket launchers, but marauding thieves are still plying their murderous trade on the world's oceans.

A few days ago, a U.S. [Navy](#) guided-missile destroyer captured a pirate ship in the Indian Ocean, about 54 miles off the coast of Somalia. Responding to a piracy alert from the International Maritime Bureau in Kuala Lumpur, units of the U.S. 5th Fleet located the suspect vessel on January 20, 2006, and shadowed it through the night. At 8:03 a.m. the next morning, USS *Winston S. Churchill* (DDG 81) made her move on the pirate vessel. After numerous failed attempts to establish contact by radio, the *Churchill* began a series of aggressive maneuvers designed to halt the suspect vessel. The ensuing chase dragged on for over four hours before the *Churchill* brought it to a halt by firing two sets of warning shots.

Boarding teams from the navy destroyer seized the suspect vessel, capturing 10 Somali pirates and rescuing the Indian crewmembers who appear to have been their hostages. The boarding teams also recovered a sizeable cache of weapons used by the pirates. According to the statement of

About Jeff Edwards:



Jeff Edwards is a retired U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer, a Naval Warfare Specialist, and an award-winning novelist. He is currently working as a civilian expert consultant to the Naval Mine and Anti-Submarine Warfare Command, the Navy's think tank for high-tech undersea warfare.

His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

His first novel, [TORPEDO](#) won the 2005 Admiral Nimitz Award for Outstanding Naval Fiction, and the 2005 American Author Medal.

Contact Jeff Edwards at:
Author@NavyThriller.Com



an Indian crewmember, the pirates had hijacked the vessel six days earlier near Mogadishu, and had been using it since as a platform for pirate attacks on other merchant ships. The International Maritime Bureau has identified one of the vessels attacked during that period as a Bahamian-flagged bulk carrier the *MV Delta Ranger*.

This was not an isolated incident. Less than a month ago, the tanker ship *MT Steadfast* was hijacked by pirates shortly after leaving the Indonesian port of Palembang with a cargo of vegetable oil. The ship, crew, and cargo were recovered safely due to coordinated actions by law enforcement agencies in South East Asia.

A little more than a month before that, pirates armed with machine guns and rocket propelled grenades attacked the luxury cruise ship *Spirit*. Thanks to defensive action on the part of its crew, the cruise ship was able to outrun the pirate boats, but not before taking damage from rocket fire.

In recent months, pirates have hijacked ships carrying relief supplies from the United Nations World Food Program. The sea lanes near the Horn of Africa have become so hazardous that the UN has begun to describe the situation there as a *plague* of piracy. Ships traversing the area must travel in convoys for protection, and many ship owners are now refusing to send their vessels into the region without armed escorts.

The most recent edition of the International Maritime Bureau's Weekly Piracy Report contains seven documented incidences of piracy in the past two weeks alone. A few of the attacks occurred near the dangerous Somali coastline, but there were also attacks in the Red Sea, Indonesia, Jamaica, and Thailand. As of this writing, one of the cargo ships listed in the report is still being held for ransom, along with her 20-man crew.

The Indian Ocean is a hotspot for piracy. Shipping companies have reported over 35 pirate attacks there in the past nine months. But the problem isn't confined to that area. Other regions under current piracy warnings include Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, the Malacca Straits, the Singapore Straits, coastal Africa, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, Brazil, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Peru.

Suddenly piracy doesn't seem like such an outmoded concept. Real pirates are out there, stealing, killing, and kidnapping with an efficiency that would have brought a tear to the eye of the most ruthless cutthroat to sail the Spanish Main.

But how much impact could any of this really have? Now that we know the situation, it should be a simple matter to avoid the problem, right? All we have to do is transport our freight by air instead of sea. If cargo doesn't travel by water, the pirates won't have anything to attack. There's only one real drawback to this plan. At its absolute maximum capacity, the airfreight industry can handle only a tiny fraction of the cargo shipping needs generated by the global economy. In point of fact, according to the latest tracking data from the U.S. Department of Transportation Maritime Administration (MARAD), nearly ninety-five percent of the world's trade goods are transported by ship. In other words, roughly ninety-five percent of the food, textiles, raw materials, medical supplies, fuel, and building materials in the world are potentially vulnerable to piracy at some point in the shipping process.



That's the bad news. The good news is that a lot of people are working on the problem. When USS *Winston S. Churchill* captured the earlier-mentioned pirate vessel, she was operating as part of a multinational task force assigned to patrol the western Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa region as a deterrent to piracy and terrorism. The International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia was founded specifically to combat the problem. Law enforcement agencies all over the world recognize the growing threat, and they're learning to communicate and cooperate more quickly and more effectively in response to reports of pirate activity. The world is gearing up to take on the bad guys, and — as usual — the United States Navy is in the thick of the fight.

I think most Americans already know that our Navy is heavily involved in the war on terror. Many people are also aware that Navy ships routinely go after smugglers and drug runners. But I have to wonder how many citizens of this country know that the United States Navy is engaged in a fierce and ongoing battle against modern day pirates.

Let's go back for a second to the little experiment we started out with. When I say the word “*piracy*,” what's the first image that pops into your head? If it's Orlando Bloom or Johnny Depp, you might just be living in the wrong century.

For more columns by Jeff Edwards, visit NavyThriller.Com.