

# PIRATE ALLEY

*Commanding Task Force 151 Off Somalia*



**RADM TERRY McKNIGHT, USN (RET.), and MICHAEL HIRSH**

**FOREWORD BY JIM MIKLASZEWSKI**

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# PIRATE ALLEY

*For my wife, Lisa  
and for our two wonderful children  
T and Tyler*



*Also, for all the dedicated men and women who have served our nation  
especially those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of freedom.*



*Never give up laughing and loving*

## FOREWORD



Good morning. We're coming to you live from the deck of the U.S. war-ship *Vella Gulf* in the heart of Pirate Alley.

—NBC News, 10 February 2009

By early 2009 piracy off the Horn of Africa had exploded. Pirates in small skiffs and armed only with AK-47s were brazenly hijacking huge merchant ships, seizing cargo and crews, demanding millions of dollars in ransom. Remarkably, these small bands of pirates operated with such impunity that those crowded shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden became known as Pirate Alley.

The story was a reporter's dream. Never in my wildest imagination as the Pentagon correspondent for NBC News did I see myself caught up in a high-seas hunt for pirates. Yet there we were that February, broadcasting live from the Gulf of Aden, using the latest in twenty-first-century portable satellite technology to report on a pirate threat as ancient as seafaring itself.

From the bridge of the guided-missile cruiser *Vella Gulf*, Rear Adm. Terry McKnight had a front-row seat. He had just taken command of the newly formed Combined Task Force 151, an international alliance of naval forces whose sole mission was counterpiracy. In this book McKnight pulls no punches. It's a straightforward, honest account of the daunting challenges, bureaucratic hang-ups, and tough choices facing the international community in combating piracy.

The largely lawless coastal region of Somalia at the very tip of the Horn of Africa remains a perfect breeding ground and safe haven for pirates. And as ransom demands have soared to \$8 million, investors have poured huge sums of money into pirate operations in exchange for a 60 percent share of the take.

For the pirates themselves, the reward/risk ratio is through the roof. Their cut of the ransom in a single hijacking can set them up

for life. Even if captured, they know there's little chance they'll end up in jail. Most pirates are simply disarmed and set free in what military officials derisively call "catch and release." Few countries are willing or able to jail pirates, and in many cases criminal prosecutions and convictions can be difficult.

But the tide is gradually turning. While pirate attacks have dramatically risen over the past several years, successful hijackings are down. Aggressive counterpiracy operations by a multinational mix of naval forces have pirates on the run. And the shipping industry itself has finally stepped up to confront the threat.

The simplest defensive measures—steering an evasive course, posting watch, or stringing razor wire along deck railings—have thwarted countless pirate boardings. But the most effective deterrent is also the most controversial.

Armed security forces are now deployed on board many merchant vessels. Out on the open seas it may be impossible to ever know how many pirates have been killed by these private security contractors. In March 2010 a gunfight broke out between security forces and pirates attempting to board the cargo ship *Almezaan*. One pirate was killed; six were captured. The International Maritime Bureau immediately warned that such action may only increase pirate violence. McKnight himself is torn. He writes that he prefers merchant ships not be armed but then concludes, "No civilian ship with an armed security team on board has ever been successfully boarded."

On our embark aboard the *Vella Gulf* we discovered that hunting pirates can be much like fishing: "You should have been here yesterday." We didn't encounter a single pirate. But we did witness what could only be described as a fresh take on "gunboat diplomacy."

All eyes were on a Russian destroyer, *Admiral Vinogradov*, escorting a convoy of merchant ships through Pirate Alley when the radios on the *Vella Gulf* crackled to life. It was a distress call from a cargo ship about to be attacked by pirates. But the cruiser's SH-60 Seahawk helicopter was already on patrol and could not respond in time. Without hesitation, the skipper, Capt. Mark Genung, barked, "We've got to talk to the Russians." Admiral McKnight was on the radio in an instant. In no time, in a very heavy Russian accent, the commander of the *Vinogradov* responded: "American warship, we will launch our helicopter in ten minutes."

In the end it was a false alarm, but the irony and significance of what had just happened was lost on no one. These former Cold War enemies had cooperated in a joint military operation at sea. Any past rivalries were pushed aside as the Russian Helix helicopter circled the *Vella Gulf*, so close you could see the smiles on the faces of the Russian crew. A grateful Terry McKnight invited the Russian skipper to lunch the following day.

Washington, however, was not nearly as excited as everyone aboard the *Vella Gulf*. The lunch date with the Russians was approved, but orders came down through the chain of command that “Miklaszewski and his cameraman” had to be off the ship before the Russians arrived. Seems that news video of American and Russian commanders embracing at sea might fight the hard-line positions the two sides had taken on such issues as missile defense in Europe, Iran’s nuclear program, and human rights in Russia.

Nevertheless, this counterpiracy mission may offer some unintended opportunities in military-to-military relations. In its latest report on the emerging military threat from China, even the Pentagon acknowledges that the Chinese navy’s participation in counterpiracy operations is a positive step forward.

Despite progress on several fronts, there’s no illusion that piracy will ever be eliminated or even reduced to the point where once again the potential threat can be ignored. The ultimate solution to the explosion of piracy off the Horn of Africa would be the elimination of those safe havens in Somalia. But in a country that’s struggling to end more than twenty-five years of civil war and that faces a growing threat from al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, pirates are well down on the list. Until then, vigilance remains the watchword.

—Jim Miklaszewski



## PREFACE



Why write a book about Somali piracy? More precisely, why did I write such a book? The answer is surprisingly simple. I was bitten by the piracy bug while working the mission in the Gulf of Aden. Pirates are fascinating, and I don't mean the Disney kind, although Johnny Depp is a very cool customer. But at times, I felt like Peter Pan chasing Captain Hook in the Neverland of Somalia.

I'm definitely not trying to romanticize what pirates do because, as a mariner, I find their actions reprehensible. But it does take guts. Most of these pirates come from the hill country of Somalia; they've never been to sea. A lot of them can't even swim. Yet, in the spirit of the pioneers who opened the American West, they get into tiny boats and head out on one of the earth's great oceans, oftentimes hundreds of miles toward the unknown, gambling their lives on very long odds. In the early days, no more than a third of those who set out actually captured a ship. Today, with merchantmen carrying teams of armed guards, the success rate has dropped significantly. And I suspect that the pirate death rate has risen, although no one has publicly said so. Yet they continue to venture forth because, I suspect, they see it as the only way to break away from generations of hopelessness and poverty.

When I was out there, I was in the catbird seat. I had the equivalent of a field box at Yankee Stadium to watch the game. When I came home and then retired, I discovered that I missed it. As I said, I'd been bitten by the bug. So I began reading everything I could get my hands on about Somali piracy. And because a retired flag officer usually gets his calls returned, I took advantage of the situation and started calling the experts, just to chat.

Eventually, I became friends with a small handful of people for whom keeping track of Somali piracy is a way of life. I discovered that I'd just scratched the surface. So I read more, spoke more often about the topic, and then it dawned on me: there are probably many people out there fascinated by the subject who don't have the access that I do. Don't have the firsthand experience that I do. Even among my expert

friends, there isn't anyone who can say that they actually chased and caught pirates, who personally saw them on the high seas, experienced the cognitive dissonance of both admiring their fortitude and condemning their actions. That's what led to this book.

I hope you enjoy *Pirate Alley* as much as I relished going to sea and chasing those feisty buccaneers.

## PROLOGUE



I can tell you the precise date, place, and time the event occurred that I believe caused the U.S. Navy to get serious about Somali piracy. It was Friday, 1 June 2007, at 1015 hours at latitude 01°50' N, longitude 50°06' E, a position in the Indian Ocean 205 miles off the coast of Somalia, roughly 140 miles north of the Equator.

That's when MV *Danica White*, a twenty-two-year-old, 200-foot bulk carrier hauling a thousand tons of drilling supplies from Dubai to Mombasa, was hijacked by pirates. She was making six knots against a southerly wind and current. The five-man crew was oblivious to the fact that the ship was being trailed by fifteen pirates in three boats. Although the master had been warned about pirates before leaving port, he set no special watch, and none of the crew saw the pirates climb over the stern rail. The ship's freeboard was less than five feet. The only thing missing was a "Welcome Pirates" doormat.

According to the report prepared by the Danish Maritime Authority (DMA), "Suddenly, the master heard screams coming from the outside. First he thought that it was the ordinary seamen who were joking around. Then he heard a few crashes and realized that somebody was pulling the door to the wheelhouse. . . . Suddenly, there were 10–15 men with weapons in the wheelhouse. The master put his hands up in the air and said they could take whatever they wanted and that the crew would do as they said." One of the seamen told the DMA that shots were fired; the cook said a machine gun was pointed at the back of his head when the pirates told him to locate the rest of the crew. The report says that the pirates had boarded the ship from three fiberglass boats, one large boat with an inboard motor and two smaller boats with outboard motors, all of which were then towed behind *Danica White*, which was now headed toward land.

It was that heading that made no sense to the watch team aboard USS *Carter Hall*, which picked up the ship on radar, read the automatic identification system locator information, and determined that *Danica White* was supposed to be heading due south to Mombasa, Kenya, not transiting a course perpendicular to its intended line of travel. *Carter Hall*, an amphibious assault ship operating as part of Combined Task Force

150, the multinational coalition established to support the fight against terrorists in the Horn of Africa, was in the area to maintain a covert over-the-horizon watch on already-hijacked ships anchored off Somali pirate villages.

The skipper, Cdr. Jim McGovern, had his OPS (operations) officer contact the task force commander, a French admiral, as well as Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. His orders were to remain covert, outside the radar range of the ship. Just seeing another vessel on radar from their position about twenty-five miles off the Somali coast was unusual, much less seeing one closing on the beach. Most merchantmen were staying several hundred miles offshore to avoid the pirates. McGovern said crewmen spotted the ship early on Saturday afternoon, when they had been looking forward to a relaxing steel beach party. The transition to alert status was stark. "I thought to myself, no days in the Navy on deployment finish the way they start."

To McGovern and his team, it looked as though they were watching a hijacking. That supposition was confirmed as fact after a call was made to the shipping company's office in Copenhagen to tell the owners that the U.S. Navy had just observed *Danica White* headed toward Mogadishu with three boats in tow. "Is this correct?"

The company sent a private "captain's message" to *Danica White*. No response. Copenhagen then notified *Carter Hall*, according to the Danish report, "that *Danica White* was not supposed to head towards Mogadishu, and that it seemed not to be under the shipping company's control."

Initially, McGovern was ordered to maintain covert surveillance. *Carter Hall* brought up all engines and, making twenty-four knots, flanked the hijacked vessel, staying outside of her radar range. Then McGovern got orders to move in. "We started to close the ship; it maintained the same course and same speed the entire time. They didn't even flinch."

McGovern told me that his staff had been put through antipiracy classroom scenarios at Tactical Training Group Atlantic, so there was no question they were trained to handle the situation. He gave the conn to his executive officer (XO), Cdr. Nathan Strandquist, an excellent ship handler, and had his OPS officer, Lt. Tina Dalmau, handle communications with higher headquarters. That gave the skipper the ability to be hands on with the gun crews.

*Carter Hall* called *Danica White* on bridge-to-bridge radio. "The master said the men on board were Somali fishermen and he's helping them out. We knew they weren't fishermen—unless they were fishing with

AK-47s.” There was at least one armed man on the bridge wing, and others were very quickly taking strategic positions on the ship. McGovern said, “When you think of Somali pirates, you think of a ragtag band. That’s not what I saw. I saw guys that maintained muzzle discipline—at no time did anyone point a gun at our ship, even when we were firing at them.”

When *Carter Hall* and the hijacked ship were still about an hour from reaching Somali territorial waters, the task force commander began asking McGovern to take more aggressive action. While preparing to do so, the skipper got another request from TF 150. “They wanted to know if we could ram the ship. Or shoulder it.”

“I’m thinking, easy for you to say,” McGovern recalls. Instead, he ordered his XO to get as close as he could to *Danica White* and see if they could force the pirates to change course. “We came up close, then crossed the bow. My ship handler said it wasn’t the closest maneuver he’d ever done to another ship—but it was pretty close.”

He’d already mustered his boarding team members and, despite rough seas, said they could have put a boat in the water without a problem. In fact, he was asked if they could board the ship. “I said, ‘We could, but I think it’s risky—and here’s why.’ The pirates had guys in well-covered high positions that could have easily engaged the boarding team. Would they have done that? I don’t know.”

Instead of launching the visit, board, search, and seizure team, they were given authorization to fire warning shots, and did so using a GAU minigun mounted on the bridge wing. McGovern said they put out about five hundred rounds, tearing up the water fifty yards in front of the pirated ship. Zero effect.

Daylight was running out, and they were now getting uncomfortably close to the twelve-mile territorial limit. That’s when they got authorization to sink the three skiffs towed out behind *Danica White*. They maneuvered into position and opened fire on the trailing skiffs with their 25-mm chain gun and the twin-50s. McGovern said they were about five hundred yards away and the moonlight was pretty good when they began shooting. “It took us a while to get dialed in. We engaged the first skiff, the line breaks, there’s a small fire and it began to sink. Then the second skiff, we fired for maybe twenty seconds. The forward skiff had a bunch of fifty-five gallon drums on it. It was three shots—*Boom! Boom! Boom!* And the thing exploded. By that time the gunner had dialed in the elevation and range—he just nailed it. It was pretty spectacular—like New Year’s Eve.”

But the pirates never slowed down, never changed course. And the navigator on the *Carter Hall* bridge was counting down the distance to Somali territory. It was about three miles away and they were doing eight knots.

That's when the notion of disabling fire, which had been mentioned by the ship's owner, was discussed with higher headquarters. McGovern did not see it as a reasonable solution to their problem. "We could have tried to go to disabling fire. At that point, if you can't get them off the ship, they'd have five hostages. Firing at the ship was a non-starter. From a preservation of human life perspective, it doesn't make sense. The last thing we want to do is harm an innocent sailor. Sure, we could have tried disabling fire, but at what cost? Now you have a ship that's got no propulsion. You've got ten to fifteen bad guys and five good guys. You've seen in the past what happens when the bad guys get antsy, get defensive. They kill the hostages. To escalate it any further than that may have resulted in loss of life of innocent mariners." He was referring to the tragedy during an attempt by Navy SEALs to rescue four American hostages held aboard their sailboat, *SV Quest*.

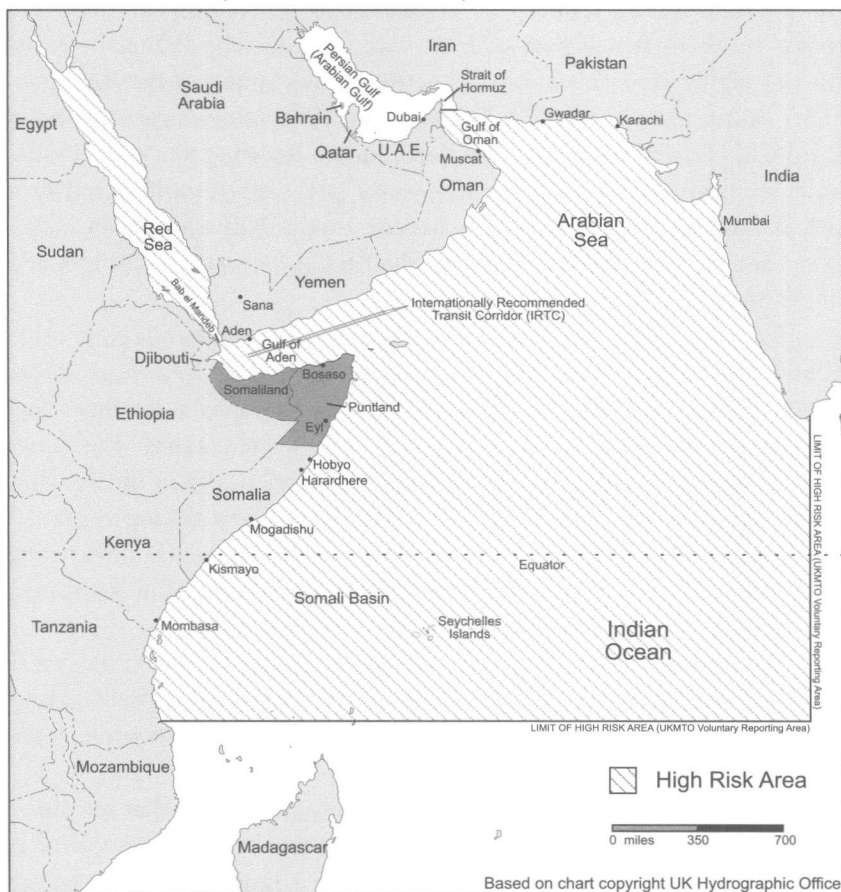
Captain McGovern's recommendations were never questioned by his command. He said, "Their response was always measured; their handling of the situation and the escalation of it was spot on."

To their disappointment, the crew members of *Carter Hall* could do nothing more than watch the hijacked ship head to the pirate's anchorage. They turned away at twelve and a half miles and stayed offshore for the remainder of the night. McGovern had sought permission to follow *Danica White* into Somali waters but his request was denied.

From where I sit—from where I sat—that troubles me. Never mind that there was no effective government in that country. Never mind that there was really no one to ask for permission. Never mind that our warship was in hot pursuit. It was just like that damned kid's game, olly olly oxen free! They got past the line without being tagged. They're free to go. Who was going to get angry with us if we went into territorial waters to try and save those hostages? The nonexistent government of a failed state?

But *Carter Hall* had fired some serious weaponry in an effort to break up that hijacking, and in my mind, that represented a real commitment to the fight. I figured the diplomats and politicians would work out the niceties sooner or later; at least our navy could use the gear we'd been issued to begin dealing with this scourge.

## Anti-Piracy Planning Chart Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Arabian Sea



This map, issued by UKMTO, the British Maritime Trade Operations antipiracy office in Dubai, designates the high-risk area for Somali piracy, which now includes much of the Indian Ocean. Over three years, the high-risk area has expanded from less than three times the size of the Gulf of Mexico to an area roughly equivalent to the size of the entire continental United States. The U.S. Navy Office of Naval Intelligence issues a weekly report on pirate activity, including a specialized weather and Sea State forecast that suggests what areas will likely be more vulnerable to attack from pirate skiffs. It also provides information about vessels currently being held for ransom. Readers interested in tracking pirate activity may check the site at [www.oni.navy.mil/Intelligence\\_Community/piracy.htm](http://www.oni.navy.mil/Intelligence_Community/piracy.htm).

Five months later, on 28 October 2007, those niceties still hadn't been worked out, but our playbook changed. Somali pirates hijacked the Japanese-owned tanker MV *Golden Nori* traveling from Singapore to the southern Israeli port of Eilat with a cargo that included 40,000 tons of highly explosive industrial benzene. War rooms at the Pentagon, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), and I'm guessing in the Situation Room at the White House quickly began thinking "BOOM!—we've got a 400-foot-long self-propelled floating bomb potentially headed to the Bab el-Mandeb choke point between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, or to the southern end of the Suez Canal."

Someone called an audible, and when the pirates took the ship inside Somali territorial waters, they had company. Both the USS *Arleigh Burke* and the USS *Porter* shadowed *Golden Nori*. News media at the time speculated that the hijacking was a terrorist event in the making. The *Times* (U.K.) online provided this breathless update: "Laden with its highly flammable cargo of benzene, the *Golden Nori* floats like a ticking bomb off the coast of Somalia. The pirates who have hijacked her are threatening to kill the crew if their \$1 million (£490,000) ransom demand is not met, while two U.S. warships train their cannons on the vessel."

The strategy adopted in that case was to target the skiffs that were bringing supplies out to the pirates aboard the captive ship. The Puntland government sent militia to the pirate-friendly port of Bosaso while negotiations were being conducted.

What no one said in that case—at least not aloud—is that we didn't have the legal authority to pursue *Golden Nori* into Somali territorial waters. It would be another thirteen months, 2 December 2008, before the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1846, which acknowledged receipt of consent from the so-called Transitional Federal Government to "enter into the territorial waters of Somalia for the purpose of repressing acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea, in a manner consistent with such action permitted on the high seas with respect to piracy under relevant international law; and use . . . all necessary means to repress acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea."

Three weeks after Resolution 1846 was unanimously adopted, I received orders from the chief of naval operations to stand up Combined Task Force 151. The fight was on. It was going to be Terry and the Pirates.



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