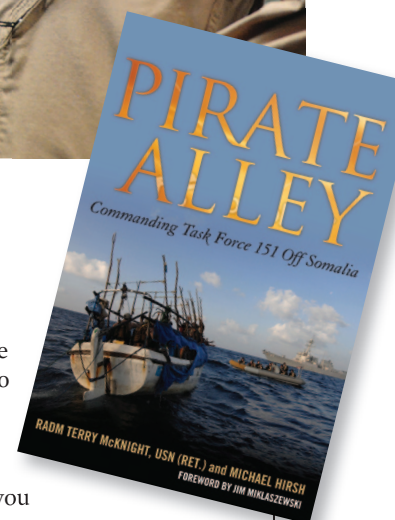




Clockwise from left: Rear Admiral Terry McKnight; Admiral's call aboard the USS San Antonio, Gulf of Aden; *Pirate Alley*.



## Pirate Hunter

How a Virginia boy joined the Navy to fight the Cold War and wound up chasing Jack Sparrow.

—EDITED FROM AN INTERVIEW BY  
LISA ANTONELLI BACON—

**I**N THE EARLY DAYS OF PRESIDENT Obama's first term in office, news coming out of Eastern Africa centered on tales of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, where loose bands of ragtag Somali bandits were hijacking merchant vessels and cargo ships at a rate of about four dozen a year, disrupting trade and costing billions of dollars. By the end of 2008, Somali piracy had become such a problem that some two dozen countries mobilized to execute defense tactics to make the Gulf's sea lanes safe again.

Rear Adm. Terry McKnight was the first to command Task Force 151, America's contribution to the multinational anti-piracy effort in the Gulf. One month after the task force's formation, McKnight and his sailors captured the first pirates. And a game of hot potato began that would extend well beyond McKnight's six-month command of the task force.

Three days after McKnight's tour ended, Capt. Richard Phillips was kidnapped off the cargo ship *Maersk Alabama*, and the freshly retired McKnight was pulled back in to become one of the central faces and voices in the national media of the role played by the American military in the Somali pirate debacle.

Since then, the groundwork laid by McKnight—who is today vice president of government relations in the Washington operations office of Cobham plc, a British defense contractor in Arlington—and those who followed has paid off. In 2011, only 25 of

176 hijacking attempts were successful. And in 2012, Somali pirates were able to commandeer only seven ships. Now, it seems, Somali piracy has just about run its course. A movie ("*Captain Phillips*," starring Tom Hanks in the title role) has been made about the *Maersk* incident, and McKnight has written a book about the broader subject, *Pirate Alley: Commanding Task Force 151 Off Somalia*, published last October by Naval Institute Press.

The Norfolk native and VMI graduate's retelling of how the task force evolved reveals how, for a time, a small number of disorganized fishermen-turned-buccaneers confounded some of the world's best navies.

**WHEN I WAS ASSIGNED** in November 2008, the task group I already had was going to deploy in January back to Bahrain, where I had been in 2007. But rather than sitting in Bahrain and doing stuff from there, they said, "We're going to put you on a ship and tag-you're-it. When you get there, you're going to take a couple of briefs and go to the Gulf of Aden." Nobody had any idea how it would go.

**THE UNITED NATIONS PROVIDED** support, but had no authority. I had a Turkish ship and a Danish ship and a British ship working for me. There were others, fluctuating around 25 ships.

**THERE WERE SOME** obvious things we needed to do, like get a Somali interpreter. In the U.S. Navy,

we do some great things, but we make some things harder. It takes a long time to get security clearance to get a Somali interpreter. The Danish Navy just put an ad in the newspaper in Denmark and said, "If you speak Somali, show up."

**AT FIRST, THIS WAS JUST** a pick-up game. Just go out there and pick up pirates. Then they said, "Don't pick up pirates! What are you going to do with them?" If they attack a merchant ship that is flagged in Panama, registered in the Marshall Islands and crewed by people from Malaysia, who's going to prosecute the pirates?

**THERE WAS AN INSTANCE** where pirates attacked a Dutch ship, and the Dutch said they wanted to prosecute. But there were no roads to get them to the Netherlands, so the Danish ship that captured them took them to Bahrain. They got them airplane tickets, put them in a van, drove them—handcuffed and in prisoner uniforms—to the Bahraini airport, where the airline pilots said, "Not on my plane." So the Dutch military had to send a plane for them.

**THEN PROSECUTING** them became a regional thing. Kenya raised their hand, so we had a memorandum of understanding with them that they would prosecute the pirates. We started sending pirates down there until they said they had so many we had to stop. Now catching pirates is mostly catch-and-release: Capture them, take their weapons, put them back in their skiffs and send them on their way.

**WHEN I JOINED** the Navy, it was the Cold War. We were going to have this big sea battle, and everyone was going to die. Fast-forward 30 years, and I'm chasing pirates. It became fun.

**UNTIL I GRADUATED** from VMI, I was the square peg in the round hole. I didn't want to join the Army because I didn't want to wear a helmet or carry that backpack. When I got in the Navy, I became the square peg in the square hole.

**IT'S ALL BASED** on the people who work for you. I had such good people, I could have played golf every day and looked good.  
*AdmiralAndThePirates.com*