

I Sailed With Chinese Pirates



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I SAILED WITH CHINESE PIRATES

PART ONE

THE Hong-Kong Governor-General's secretary, Captain Whyte, had a very frank opinion about journalists, especially journalists interested in the pirates of Bias Bay.

Bias Bay is located only sixty-five miles east of Hong-Kong, and it is inhabited by the most infamous gang of high-sea pirates that infest the South China coast. Why they have been permitted to pursue their "trade" unmolested during modern times is a matter not to be discussed at this point.

I had been assigned by a group of American and European periodicals to gather all possible information regarding these pirates and their activities. The Colonial Secretary very kindly opened his files for my inspection, and after several days of painstaking scrutiny of documents, telegrams, police reports and photographs I emerged from this stack of official blood-and-fire stories with a conviction that the bandits of Bias Bay certainly must know their job. On the other hand, I had got the impression that the pirates of Bias Bay were only tools of somebody higher up-somebody in Canton, Amoy, Swatow, or perhaps even in Hong-Kong.

The pirates undertake their "jobs" after weeks of preparation. During this time they travel back and forth as passengers aboard the steamers which they have selected for robbing. Finally, after supplies of arms and ammunition have been smuggled on board, and the ship is well out at sea, at a given signal from the leader

they attack the crew. One group storms the bridge, another attacks the engine-room, and a third keeps the passengers at bay. The piracy invariably occurs near Bias Bay, where the ship is brought and the cargo unloaded into waiting *sampans* and junks. The rich passengers, both white and Chinese, are taken ashore to be held for ransom.

During the last ten years an average of three ships a year bearing British or foreign flags have been pirated by this gang. How many Chinese ships and junks they have attacked is not known.

For almost one hundred years all the ships pirated on their way to or from Hong-Kong had invariably been brought to Bias Bay, stripped of everything valuable, and afterwards released. Until lately the ships' officers seldom put up an effective resistance, and for a number of years the sea-rovers did not consider the piracy business very risky. On the contrary, it was a comparatively safe and a very remunerative undertaking.

To gain the control of a ship and her officers the pirates follow a method which can hardly be improved upon. The bandits, from ten to sixty in number, board the ships as passengers, some as third class and some, the leaders and a few trusted men-going as first class passengers. This arrangement gives them access to all parts of the ship, with the exception of the bridge, which is usually protected by grilles and a heavy iron net reaching all the way around the ship's superstructure. The entrances through these grilles are guarded by Indian sentries who stand behind steel-armoured plates. These guards are armed with guns and pistols.

The arms of the pirates are, almost without exception, smuggled on board by someone exempt from the minute inspection to which the police subject all other Chinese travellers.

In the case of the piracy of the S.S. *Sunning*, on 15th November, 1926, the excerpts from the official report show clearly the method:—

There seems to be no doubt that the pirates all boarded the vessel at Amoy, and that their weapons were taken aboard for them by some of the stevedores, who, though not on the ship's articles, are invariably allowed to travel on these ships, and have permission to sell goods, *i.e.* fruit, cigarettes, cakes, tea, and act as hawkers to the passengers. These men have every opportunity for smuggling.

With the ship under way, the arms distributed, the leaders stationed at strategic points all over the ship, the pirates await the opening of one of the doors in the grilles or the change of the guards; then there is a shrill whistle, or a shot, or perhaps a hellish beating of the gongs. It is the signal for the attack.

During their years of more or less undisturbed buccaneering the pirates have developed an intelligence service which supplies them with correct information regarding ships' locations and their cargoes—whether they are carrying gold, silver specie, bar silver, or other valuable cargo, such as opium or silk. Whenever there has been a piracy, and the loot has amounted to, say, \$60,000 to \$100,000, the individual pirates who have been caught have not possessed much loot beyond a few articles taken from the passengers, and in rare cases a few hundred dollars in money. Invariably the stolen property is delivered to the leaders, who see that it promptly disappears inland, where it can never be accounted for; the ships are then permitted to return to Hong-Kong, or to continue on their voyages.

Many facts seem to bear out the existence of an entrenched central organization. It appears, however, that on one occasion the pirates of Bias Bay decided to do business on their own account, and a very curious thing happened. Had it not been for the fact that one man was murdered and another wounded, the affair would have been an appropriate comic opera subject.

On 3rd October, 1924, the steamer *Ning Shin* was pirated, and, as usual, brought to Bias Bay, where the cargo, consisting of thirty cases of silver bars, value 97,000 taels (the par value of a tael is about 34 cents U.S. currency [1930]), was brought

ashore and divided among the pirates. Very much to the Hong-Kong authorities' surprise, the Canton officials immediately responded to the usual request from Hong-Kong to round up the bandits. They dispatched troops to the Bias Bay area. The commander of this expedition against the village of Nim Shan, the home village of pirates, was a certain Yung Fai Ting. The raid resulted in the rounding up of all the pirates and the recovery of most of the silver, but the pirates were released on payment of a large sum, and all the silver was appropriated by Yung Fai Ting, who apparently acted on orders from the central body. One of the pirates was ultimately caught by the British police, and he admitted that their leader had been a certain Lam Tsoi Sau. He said the pirates had gone to Hong-Kong, where they had stayed on the Hung Ong boarding-house before leaving for Shanghai, where they purchased the arms used in the raid. He further testified that he had received forty pieces (bars) of silver, forty dollars in one-dollar coins, and some serge. The number of pirates had been eighteen; they had come from different villages near Bias Bay. He deeply lamented the interference of the "greedy" Chinese commander.

Hong-Kong was, as a matter of fact, a sea-rovers' nest before the advent of the British, and so was Macao. And both cities have had large numbers of pirates among the Chinese population ever since. There is probably no official record for the whole of the last fifty years of how many and what ships have been pirated and brought to Bias Bay, but there is a list of piracies during the last, say, twenty or thirty years. It is by no means complete, as it has been well-nigh impossible to ascertain the number of Chinese ships that have been attacked and looted, but the record of the British and other foreign ships is fairly complete. This list makes rather interesting reading, and proves that the piracy question cannot be a matter of slight concern.

Following is the list, since 1921, of the ships and the dates when pirated, also the losses in money, jewellery, property of the ship or the

passengers. The reader's attention is drawn to the losses in lives and wounded:

YEAR.	DATE.	NAME OF VESSEL.	LOSSES IN DOLLARS (HONG-KONG CURRENCY)
1921	Jan. 22	Steam launch <i>Kung Hong</i>	22,000
	Dec. 15	S.S. <i>Kwong Lee</i>	120,000
	Dec. 18	Steam launch <i>Wah Sun</i>	21,000
1922	May 22	Steam launch <i>Wah Sun</i>	5,000
	Oct. 4	Steam launch <i>San On</i> (Weapons were brought on board in a clock.)	Total amount not given, but the passengers lost all their jewellery, money and clothing.
	Nov. 19	S.S. <i>Sui An</i> (The captain and a passenger wounded. Two Indian guards killed.)	34,000
1923	Oct. 23	S.S. <i>Sunning</i>	20,000
	Dec. 27	S.S. <i>Hydrangea</i>	23,389 } in cargo. 10,000
1924	Oct. 3	S.S. <i>Ning Shin</i>	(97,000 taels in bullion.)
1925	Jan. 13	S.S. <i>Hong Wha</i> (The pirates thought that ship carried bullion, and came as passengers from Singapore.)	53,360
	Dec. 18	S.S. <i>Tung Chow</i>	30,000 (bullion). 10,000 (other values).
1926	Feb. 5	S.S. <i>Jade</i>	82,000 (bullion).
	Mar. 6	S.S. <i>Tai Yau</i>	Unknown.
	Mar. 25	S.S. <i>Hsin Kong</i>	Unknown.
	July 13	S.S. <i>Kwang Lee</i>	Unknown.

YEAR.	DATE.	NAME OF VESSEL.	LOSSES IN DOLLARS (HONG-KONG CURRENCY)
	Aug. 21	S.S. <i>Sandviken</i> (Norwegian registry.)	Unknown.
1926	Oct. 1	S.S. <i>Hsin Fung</i>	Unknown.
	Nov. 15	S.S. <i>Sunning</i> Killed: one European passenger, one Annamite passenger and four pirates (three shot, one drowned). Wounded: Chief Engineer, five Chinese and three pirates (later executed in Hong-Kong). Missing: four Chinese from the compradore's staff. Seven pirates in a drifting boat apparently drowned.	The whole ship burned and severely damaged.
	Dec. 22	S.S. <i>Heng An</i>	Unknown
1927	Jan. 2	S.S. <i>Yuan An</i>	Unknown
	Jan. 27	S.S. <i>Seang Bee</i>	Unknown
	Mar. 22	S.S. <i>Hop Sang</i> (It was after this piracy that the British finally lost their patience and raided the Bias Bay villages, independently of the Chinese authorities.)	Unknown
	May 6	S.S. <i>Feng Pu</i>	10,000
	July 19	S.S. <i>Solviken</i> (Norwegian registry.) The Captain murdered in his cabin; eight Chinese kidnapped.	20,400 (in gold bars.) 22,900 (cargo stolen.)

YEAR.	DATE.	NAME OF VESSEL.	LOSSES IN DOLLARS (HONG-KONG CURRENCY)
1927	Oct. 21	S.S. <i>Irene</i> Killed: one Chinese steward. (This piracy was intercepted by the British Submarine L4, command-ed by Lieut. Halahan, recently knighted for this deed. The submarine tried to stop the ship, but was finally forced to send a shot through her hull, setting the vessel on fire. However, he rescued the ship and her 238 passengers. Many of the pirates were brought to justice, but several of them were drowned jumping overboard when the submarine approached the pirated ship.)	—
1928	Sept. 29	S.S. <i>Anking</i> Killed: The Chief Engineer and one Chinese quartermaster. Wounded: The Master of the ship.	80,000
	Dec. 12	S.S. <i>Wong She Kung</i>	5,000
1929	Sept. 20	S.S. <i>Delhi Maru</i> (Several of the Indian guards shot.) This is the first ship of Japanese registry that has ever been pirated in South China.	As yet unknown

YEAR.	DATE.	NAME OF VESSEL.	LOSSES IN DOLLARS (HONG-KONG CURRENCY)
1929	Dec. 8	S.S. <i>Haiching</i> Killed: Third Officer F.F. Woodward, one Indian guard, seven male and two female Chinese. The killed pirates are at the moment of this writing not accounted for, but are supposed to have been at least ten. Several children drowned. Wounded: Chief officer Robert Perry, one quartermaster, one guard and twenty Chinese, including two members of the crew.	The ship burned and badly damaged. Most passengers lost all their property.

The piracies on the West River and along the coast above Bias Bay all the way up to Shanghai are not accounted for in the above list, although most of them could undoubtedly be traced as instigated by the same common source.

Of all the piracies that of the S.S. *Sunning* was probably the most spectacular and interesting, because the officers not only fought against overwhelming odds but actually *recaptured* the ship, although with heavy losses in dead and wounded.

Let us take a look at the files of the confidential reports on this case lodged in the Colonial Secretary's office:—

Piracy of S. S. *Sunning*, 15th November, 1926. Butterfield and Swire, Agents.

Left Shanghai with one hundred Chinese and two European passengers and general cargo on Friday, 12th November, for Hong-Kong