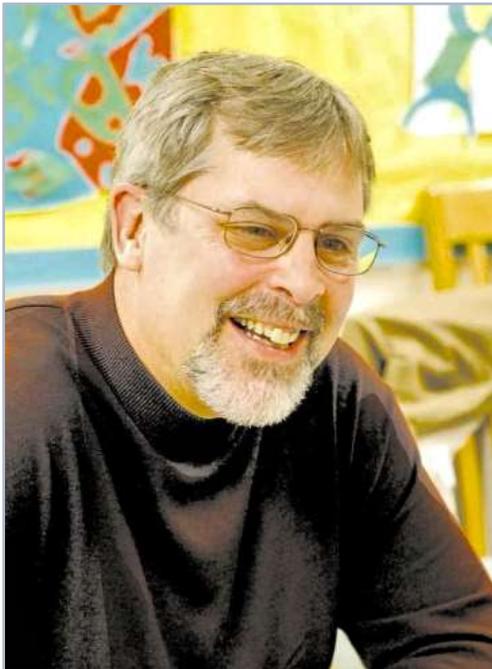


CAPT. PHILLIPS VISITS HIS ALMA MATER

By Ellen Knight¹

Though denying that he is a hero, Capt. Richard Phillips was given a hero's welcome, including three standing ovations, when he returned to Winchester, his native town, Nov. 17, 2009. He came back to tell his story of Somali piracy as a benefit for the WHS Class of 2010 and the Winchester Hospital Oncology Center.

"I was someone doing his job, not a hero," Phillips said. But, though he corrected the media statement that he had offered himself as a hostage in place of his crew, the story he told was extraordinary and changed no one's opinion, as class president Matt Marotta put it, that "his courage is a model for all Americans" and he is "truly an American hero."



Capt. Richard Phillips, as photographed during his return to Winchester by Bill Ryerson

"It was hot," Phillips said as he began his address to the audience. "I was nervous. Heck, I was scared. I didn't know how it would all turn out—but enough about my wedding day." And so, with sparks of humor lightening a tense tale of piracy on the high seas, Phillips held captive a large audience in the auditorium of the McCall Middle School.²

The gravity of his experience was never lost as Phillips repeated three important lessons:

1. You are much stronger than you think.
2. The only time all is lost is when you give up.
3. A dedicated and motivated team can overcome any problem.

How did he end up in a lifeboat with pirates? It began, Phillips said, while he was driving a cab in Arlington. One day he began talking with a merchant seaman he was driving into Boston. The man said he liked it. A few months later, Phillips' brother suggested he could enter the Mass Maritime Academy, and he enrolled.

"I took to the sea. I was hooked." After graduating in 1979, he served on various types of merchant ships and became a captain in 1991. The captain, he said, is not a member of the crew. "He is a representative of the owner and is responsible for everything."

On March 30 this year, he took command of the *Maersk Alabama*. "I was dealing with pirates from day one," he said to the *Daily Times*.³ "In our area, piracy is actually on the rise. It's not a matter of if but when," he told his audience.

Security was lax when he took over, he said. He held a surprise drill, from which he passed on two lessons—small items that may be ignored can eventually become big crises we have to face and many problems are not the result of one decision but a chain of decisions.

With the attitude, hope for the best but prepare for the worst, he trained his crew. “Training gets you through what you’ve done before. Creativity, flexibility, and imagination get you through what you haven’t encountered before.”

PIRATES

On April 3, all of that came into play. In the early morning, surrounded by a vast sea, a voice came on the radio, “Somali pirates coming to get you.” The crew spotted them. They changed course. The pirates changed course. The crew maneuvered and sped up. The pirates kept coming on. “We understood the severity of the situation. The crew frankly was terrified.”

When the pirates were two miles away, Phillips’ crew set up flares and began locking down. As the boat closed on them, they set off flares in hopes the pirate boat would catch on fire. “I shot flares at the pirates’ boat—they were shooting bullets. My training did not include dodging bullets.” But, he told the audience, “Somewhere inside us we find the strength to do what must be done. I am sure you would do the same.”

The pirates came alongside firing AK-7s. “Thanks to the planning, most of the crew is hidden. Because of the training, doors that should be locked are locked.” One by one, using a ladder they hooked onto the ship, the Somalis boarded the *Alabama*. “I’m sure they did not go through training,” Phillips commented. At first the pirates were happy because the ship was American and they thought there was going to be a big pay day. But the pirate boat was damaged and began sinking. The pirates were on board the *Alabama* with no way to escape.

Thus, Phillips said ruefully, he became the first U.S. captain to be captured by pirates since the 1800s.

“You’ve got to be able to take emergencies head on,” Phillips said. There were four pirates. There were Phillips, his first mate, and a sailor. No sign of anyone else. The ship was not moving. They ordered him to make the ship go. “I told them they broke it.”

“Where’s the crew,” they asked. “I don’t know. I’m here with you,” he answered. “Get them or we’ll shoot you,” they threatened. But the crew was trained not to follow his orders without the safe word. The only other crew member the pirates saw was one who “didn’t get the memo,” knocked at the door, and came on the bridge.

Five times, Phillips said, they went searching for the crew. At one point when they separated, one pirate was taken hostage by his crew. “For thirteen hours they threatened me and demanded information.”

GETTING OFF THE ALABAMA

While the *Alabama* kept drifting, “I’m clear on my responsibility, protect my crew, protect my ship, protect my cargo. I found a strength in me I didn’t know I had. I kept talking with the pirates.” He offered to give them the rescue boat and their missing man, but the rescue boat had broken down so it had to be the life boat.

“I did not surrender myself as a hostage. My responsibility was to get them off my ship. I should have been last off the ship, but the way to protect the crew, the ship, and the cargo was to get them off.”

The pirates could not get going without a crew member, someone who would be exchanged for the Somali prisoner. “I decided the crew member would be me.” He said he knew he could be held, but instead of worrying about four things—the crew, ship, cargo, and himself—“I just had to worry about me.”

He did not surrender, he said, or do anything he viewed as an act of heroism. “This was my strategy, my action plan, my duty.”

The pirates accepted the deal. “They got the boat, their man, and me.” And the next lesson he learned was, “Never trust a pirate.” They kept him in the lifeboat.

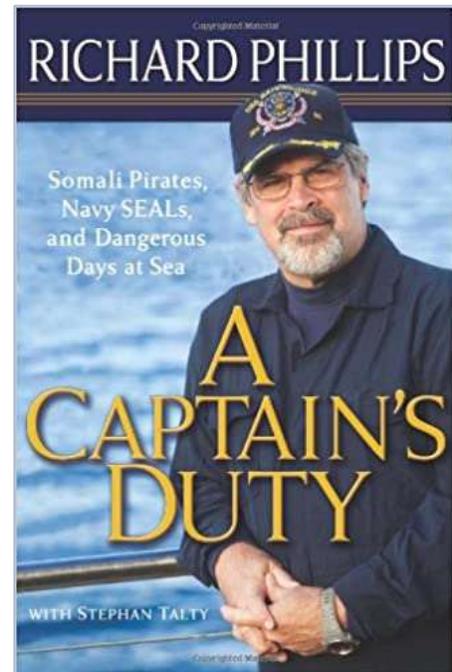
ALONE WITH SOMALI PIRATES

“I thought I was on my own,” Capt. Richard Phillips said about the five days he was held captive by Somali pirates. “I was convinced no one was riding to the rescue.”

He was also completely ignorant of the media maelstrom which focused international attention on him and which led this week to his returning to his native town of Winchester to tell his story.

Once they were on the lifeboat, he said, “I loved seeing their faces when the lights of the *Alabama* came on, and the ship they couldn’t get to go was under way, following them.” The crew of the *Alabama*, which the pirates had searched for repeatedly but could not find, took back control of their ship.

But tense, even brutal times followed for Phillips and along with them an “extraordinary lesson”—“we are all stronger than we realize.”



“A lot happened on the boat,” he said. It was “indescribably hot,” and he was drenched in sweat. The pirates began playing mind games with him. “I vowed I would not give up. I could play mind games and be their adversary.”

“My first plan was to wait for the right moment and jump off that damn boat.” There was no chance the first day. “I had to be flexible and wait.”

Later a chance did come when two pirates were sleeping, one dozing, and one put down his gun to heed nature’s call. “I dove into the water.” But screams from one pirate woke up the others. Though he listened for footsteps and dove under the boat to come up the other side and elude them, when an AK-47 was fired by his head, he gave up.

Back on the boat he was beaten and kicked and trussed up, his hands bound so tight they swelled painfully. He still has scars and bruises, along with the knowledge, “It’s amazing what happens when you refuse to give up.”

SURVIVAL & RESCUE

When the Navy showed up, Phillips said, “It surprised the heck out of me and the pirates.” Things got worse. “The atmosphere changed.” They started incantations and threatening to shoot him. He thought at one point he had been shot because he felt blood running down his head, but they said they had just hit him in the head. (“We had no problems communicating,” he said. The pirates spoke “a form of English.”)

“I don’t think anyone solved a crisis by losing it, so I stayed calm.” Using such tricks as fake executions like pointing a gun at his head and pulling the trigger over and over, click, click, click, more than 75 times, “they tried to control me.” While they tried to mess with his mind, Phillips said, “I played with them, too. As long as I was in the game, I had a chance.” He smiled and laughed at them to unnerve them.

“Part of me truly believed I was going to die.” He said things in his mind to his family. “I believed I had been blessed with a good life.” He thought about seeing his father again and what he would say to him. He prayed. “I didn’t pray to be rescued. I prayed for patience and strength.”

And so it went on in intense heat for three more days. “I could see the Navy presence and hear helicopters. The pirates were getting more and more tense.” Eventually, the leader decided to leave.

“I didn’t know about the negotiations. All I knew was I wasn’t going to give up.” He knew the effect it would have on his wife, who would play over and over in her mind that, instead of walking him inside the airport as usual, she had just dropped him off. “I vowed I would never give up. I might die but not because I gave up.”

Later, the pirates loosened his knots. “Suddenly I got up and said I wouldn’t take it anymore. I gave them instructions about what they could do with themselves.” As he started to go, dragging two of them who grabbed him, there were shots from an AK-47. They told him to sit down. “They were worried about how the Navy would react. If I was not alive, the Navy would storm the ship.”

The pirates went to talk to the Navy. “I heard a shot. I dove down. I thought the pirates were shooting each other. I’m yelling, ‘What the hell are you guys doing.’” There were more shots. He was sprayed by debris from the bullets. One of the pirates near him fell.

Suddenly there was nothing. Then a voice saying, “Are you all right?”

“When I was hoisted up to the *Bainbridge* deck, I realized I made it.” Three pirates were dead, the fourth in Navy custody.

“Thank God for the SEALs,” he told the *Daily Times*. “They are the heroes,” he told everyone.

“The one reason I’m here today,” he said, “is the military.” Referring back to the three lessons he started his talk with, he said “a dedicated motivated team can overcome any problem.” He took the occasion to honor the military “for what they do for us at home.” Two days after his talk, he went to Virginia to be reunited with and publicly thank the crew of the *USS Bainbridge*.

Concluding what he had to say to his Winchester audience, Phillips said, “We are all captains, riding on shifting waves” and read from “See It Through” by Edgar Albert Guest which begins,

When you’re up against a trouble,
Meet it squarely, face to face....
When it’s vain to try to dodge it,
Do the best that you can do;
You may fail, but you may conquer,
See it through!

AUDIENCE Q&A

Did he think of grabbing a gun when he had a chance? Yes, “for a split second, but then I realized I don’t know how to use an AK-47.” But he does now.

Did he eat? “Not much,” he answered. “I wasn’t hungry.” Besides, “the food in the lifeboat is not very good. The Navy gave us Pop-Tarts, which I hate.”

Is security any better now? “Security has to be improved,” he said, but with a million square miles of ocean it’s not possible for the military. “You have to give us tools to protect ourselves.” If the mother ship had made it to the *Alabama*, he said, it would have been another story. He said people and ships are still being held hostage. “No one’s safe, if they run into pirates.”

Asked about arming ships, he said that there is no one silver bullet to stop piracy and noted that the pirates also attack military ships. However, he said that now some merchant ships do take weapons or a security force. Arming ships, Phillips cautioned, does involve uncertainties with how people will react, liability issues, and training.

As it so happened, the next day the *Alabama* with a new captain again came under attack by pirates off the coast of Somalia. This time they thwarted the attempted hijacking, according to a Navy statement, through a security team on board who used evasive maneuvers, long-range acoustic devices, and small arms fire.

Asked about his family, Phillips said he was impressed with how his family at home in Underhill, Vermont, handled the crisis. "I just had four pirates. They had to handle the media."

What was his cargo? It was food for relief efforts, some of which was going to Somalia. It would have been a severe loss for the relief organizations, he said, but the cargo was discharged without serious delay. In answer to another question, he said he was not distressed to see his ship leave because he knew it was going on to complete its mission.

What about the pirate in custody? He was the leader, Phillips said, and the smartest because he sensed what was coming with the Navy and got off the boat. (He was then in New York awaiting trial at some time.)

What happens with the ransom money? Phillips said this was not his area of expertise but said there is a hierarchy in which the pirates are just the front men and do not get the big money.



Capt. Phillips with (l-r) his sister Nancy McCormack and wife Andrea at the McCall School in 2009, photo by Bill Ryerson

What was the safe word? He said it had to be something most of the crew would remember, so he chose "dinner time" or "supper time."

How does he feel about going back to sea? "I've been at sea 30 years," he said. In that time he has had to deal with a variety of emergencies. "I'm not ready to retire. For me it's doing what I know."

There being rumors about a movie in the future, he was asked who he would like to see play him. "I've said all along Danny DeVito." His wife, he added, wants George Clooney "and she wants to play herself."

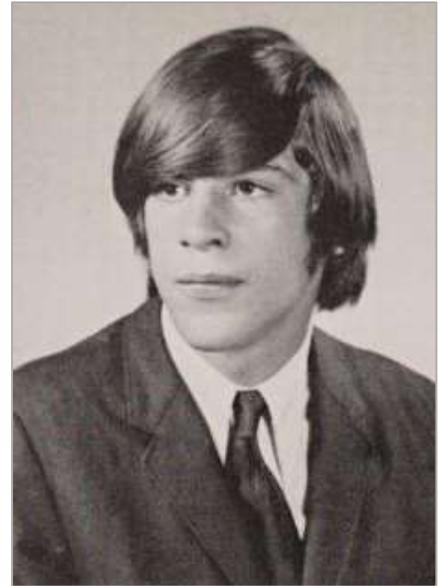
WINCHESTER A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE

“Winchester was a great place to grow up,” said Capt. Richard Phillips told the *Daily Times Chronicle*. “Winchester was a true community. Most everybody knew each other. It was a small town back then.”

“What a great advantage you have attending school in Winchester,” he told the senior class. “It was a great time for me,” the graduate of WHS Class of 1973 said with a distinctly Massachusetts accent.

If there was anything in town Phillips knew, it was the school system. His parents, James Phillips and Virginia Shattuck, were both educators, as a result of which, he said, “I knew all the teachers, and they knew me. I knew I had to toe the line.”

Though he was actually born in a maternity hospital in Manchester N.H. due to his mother’s choice of doctor (the source of his middle name Perry), Phillips’ parents were residents of 6 Park Road. They family, which included four sisters and three brothers, later lived on Wilson Street.



Yearbook photo
1973



“I had the greatest childhood,” he told the *Daily Times*. “I spent most of my time around sports. I played baseball, basketball, football, and soccer and played with Pop Warner and the Little League. There were always plenty of people around and sports going on.”

In his book, *A Captain's Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALs, and Dangerous Days at Sea* (2010), he revealed that there were also tough times in his childhood. "I grew up in a neighborhood with its share of milquetoasts and bookish nerds. But it was also full of guys... who had no problem smacking you in the face as a way of testing what you were made of.... I was known for being someone who didn't back down from a fight."



He characterized himself in his book as "a wise-guy," even in sports. "I loved sports, but I bucked against the restrictions." He actually quit the football team "just because the sport had stopped being fun" before the final game "against our archrival Woburn." He watched the game as part of the band in which he played saxophone. "I'd made the band leader deliriously happy" though "Coach Marshall hated me after that."

"Growing up in Winchester, Massachusetts," Capt. Richard Phillips confessed in *A Captain's Duty*, "there were plenty of people who doubted I'd get farther than the corner bar."

He discarded the unlikely-to-succeed outlook when he left off driving a cab in Arlington, entered the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, and ultimately became a captain of multimillion-dollar cargo vessels, traveling around the world.

After returning home from his experience as a captive of Somali pirates, some people suggested a parade, but he said, "I'm not that type. I wanted to do something good with this temporary fame."

Though Phillips left Winchester after graduation and his seven siblings all dispersed to other areas, during the tense days of his ordeal in April 2009 there were many in town who remembered him or his family. On Easter morning, at St. Mary's, the parish church of Phillips' family, yellow ribbons were passed out among the congregation. Later that day, the news came that he had been rescued.

When asked to return to Winchester to speak, Phillips agreed to do so as a benefit for WHS Class of 2010 and the Winchester Hospital Oncology Center. “I wanted to do something local,” he said. “I do identify with Winchester.”

He chose to give part of the proceeds to the hospital because his father died of prostate cancer. “I was living in Winchester then. I remember many late night emergency visits.”

On his return to Winchester, Phillips was greeted by some who knew him in former years and many who did not. All were happy to welcome him home.

¹ This article © 2020 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Nov. 23 and 24, 2009, and Oct. 7, 2013. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² During Phillips’ freshman and sophomore years, Winchester High School occupied the building now used for the McCall Middle School. He graduated from the building on Skillings Road.

³ Reporters from the *Daily Times Chronicle* and *Winchester Star* each had an exclusive 15-minute interview with Phillips prior to his speaking.