

# *Captain Phillips*: A hijacking drama unfolds

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19 October 2013

*Directed by Paul Greengrass; screenplay by Billy Ray, based on the book by Richard Phillips & Stephan Talty*

Based on events that took place in April 2009, *Captain Phillips* tells the story of US merchant marine captain Richard Phillips (Tom Hanks), whose vessel, the MV Maersk Alabama, is boarded and taken over by a small band of pirates off the coast of Somalia.

The four pirates, led by Skinny (Barkhad Abdi), assault the freighter from a tiny skiff and intend to steer it back to shore, ransom its crew and sell its cargo for millions of dollars. Once on board, however, they find the crew has disabled the engines and hidden themselves well. Skinny's threats to start shooting the officers on the bridge fail to flush the crew members out. Meanwhile, the pirates learn the freighter's cargo is mostly valueless, and the ship has only \$30,000 cash in its safe.

Measures taken by the crew result in one pirate being wounded and Skinny seized at knifepoint, while Phillips is held by the Somalis. The two sides make a deal to exchange Skinny for Phillips, while the Somalis will take the cash back to the mainland in the ship's lifeboat. At the last moment, they pull Phillips into the lifeboat and head toward Somalia with the captain as hostage. Much of the film's drama takes place among the five men in a claustrophobic setting. A lethal confrontation with the US Navy will decide their fate.

British-born Paul Greengrass has previously directed *Green Zone* (about the Iraq war, 2010), two of the *Bourne* films (2007 and 2004), *United 93* (about the September 11 events, 2006) and *Bloody Sunday* (about the British army massacre of Irish civil rights protesters in 1972, 2002). For the most part, his work exemplifies the unwillingness to take a strong stand in relation to major historical events. *United 93* in particular reveals some of the same flaws as *Captain Phillips*. Both cultivate an appeal that is oddly unspecific and

carefully avoid making any criticisms that might offend anyone. The new work will accommodate chauvinist cheering for the US Navy as easily as pleas for humanitarian aid to Africa.

The film is based on an autobiographical account co-authored by Phillips, *A Captain's Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALs, and Dangerous Days at Sea*, who wrote it with Stephen Talty after returning to the US, being heralded as a hero and meeting Barack Obama.

Certain former Maersk Alabama crew members have alleged that the real-life Phillips was sullen and arrogant, as much as invited the pirate attack and did little to protect his crew. Nine members of the crew launched a \$50 million lawsuit only days after their rescue, charging Maersk with "willful, wanton and conscious disregard for their safety."

Greengrass' *Captain Phillips* is a competently made film in terms of its surface and plot. The subject matter is dramatic and the filmmakers have created a largely gripping and suspenseful work. The acting (the Somali performers are all amateurs from Minnesota) is very effective and the technical talent involved obviously skilled. But while the film is not unwatchable or unappealing, it doesn't strike one as a memorable or significant film after it's over.

One of the biggest problems with *Captain Phillips* is that both lead characters are more or less presented without history, background or development. Each ends up merely incarnating a type: Phillips the prudent, aging New Englander and Skinny ... simply the Somali.

In the film's opening sequence we see Phillips and his wife (Catherine Keener) at their home in Vermont. However, beyond his weariness with far-away assignments and concern for his children's career prospects, nothing is made of his life that is not immediately relevant and related to his ordeal off the Somali coast. His frenzied attempt to write a will and a note to his family as he apparently faces death, near the

end of the film, come across as unexpected and out of place.

The problem is magnified in the case of Skinny. We learn virtually nothing about him, apart from his pirating, save in one brief scene. He wakes up in a small fishing village, grabs an automatic rifle and proceeds to recruit men for his mission.

Skinny is a pirate, and in Greengrass' film this is seemingly all he is; nothing else defines him. Without knowing who he is as an individual—not just as a Somali and a desperate criminal—one cannot bring oneself to either love or hate Skinny. It is, after all, to find out about people, not job titles, that we watch any movie at all.

The treatment of Somali poverty in *Captain Phillips* may be well-intentioned, but it ultimately never assumes great meaning or significance within the film. The result is that since the life experiences of the Somalis mean relatively little to the filmmakers and even to the performers, through no fault of the latter, they do not deeply affect us either.

The second half of the movie devolves to a point that is rather close to open cheerleading for the US Navy. Though it never quite reaches that point, it speaks to the shortcomings of the filmmakers' perspective that the Navy appears as a savior: the cavalry come to save the day.

One also senses, in spite of—or perhaps due to—the high quality of the acting, something of an exploitation of this talent. Without being cynical about it, one feels that Tom Hanks, right on cue, has been delivered up for another “Oscar moment.” It isn't that there is anything obviously false in Hanks' performance, but when Hollywood has no way to deal with tragedy other than unfocused and overwhelming personal expressions of emotion, it tends to become clichéd, even obnoxious.

The film, as noted, is not without its positive aspects. There is, for example, the chilling communiqué to the naval captain charged with resolving the hostage situation that the pirates and Captain Phillips must be prevented from reaching the Somali mainland at whatever cost—Phillips, in other words, may have to be sacrificed so that the government does not lose face.

The story in *Captain Phillips* is a tragedy, but the filmmakers were unwilling, perhaps unable due to their own limitations and the pressures exerted on them, to present it as such. The position of the pirates is never

fully explained. They almost certainly face being shot no matter what they do—or being locked in an American prison for the rest of their lives, a prospect perhaps at least as terrifying.

In *Captain Phillips* the pirates' fate may be sad, even horrifying, and yet it seems as though it is inevitable, even necessary. Whatever their pretensions, the filmmakers extend a sympathy to the Somalis that is not much more than skin-deep.



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