

EXCERPT

Chapter 7 “Pirates of the Bay of Bengal”

unreal: Adventures of a Family’s Global Life, by Phil McDonald

Unwrapped canvas sails generated an enormous tug at our boat, and with a strong creaking sound we were off. Our captain was at the rear of the ship manning the huge wooden rudder and shouting out orders.

Saline sea breeze washed against my face while I helped with the rigging. I was having a blast with my newfound Muslim friends. For an unforgettable moment in time, I was part of their team, and a team needs each other. Us against the elements, or so I thought.

On our left, a series of islands came into view and our crew became eerily quiet. Like Meerkats stretching their necks, everyone looked to the islands. I noticed the other ships had all eyes on the islands. On each boat, a sailor had climbed up the main mast and hung on with one arm and peered through binoculars with the other. Across the waters, I felt tension building among the sailors.

The captain motioned Mohammad over for a serious discussion. Then Mohammad came to me with a grim, unsettled look.

“The captain says you shouldn’t be here. He wants you to go into the cabin right now, close the windows, and stay inside until we say come out.”

“Why?”

“The big island on our left is a known pirate’s place. He is afraid if they see a white guy from a rich country they will come rob us. The sailor on the mast above us said there are three ships waiting to attack.”

Surely Mohammad was mistaken, or so I thought. The captain wore a face covered with worry. He turned towards me and his piercing stare said it all. Pirates still existed. The island on our left was a real pirates’ cove. And everyone knows pirates are bad people—murderers and thieves on ships.

“But what about Farouk?” I asked.

Farouk, one of the sailors, sick with malaria and locked in our cabin, acted strange.

“He won’t hurt you. He’s just going out of his mind from his high temperature.”

Before Mohammad unlocked the cabin door, he paused.

“One more thing the captain said. If the pirates get to us, don’t try to escape by jumping into the sea. The waters are full of sharks. Better to take your chances with the pirates.”

Pirates or sharks. What a heck of a choice. With all the wise advice from the captain, I entered the cabin only to hear Mohammad padlock the door behind me. In his own world, Farouk didn’t even notice. I lay on my borrowed captain’s cot.

After a few seconds, I cracked open the captain's little foot square window. I searched the horizon until I saw the islands. Sure enough three ships in a row faced us. All at once their sails fell and filled with wind. I couldn't believe my eyes. "Holy crap," I mumbled to myself.

At that moment, a shout from a distant mast set everything in motion.

"Pirates are coming! Pirates are coming!"

A flurry of shouting, running, and grunting commenced outside my cabin. Farouk remained oblivious. I looked again through the little window to see the three pirate ships headed towards us in hot pursuit.

This was not a movie scene of Tom Hanks fleeing Somalian speedboats. With wooden sailing ships chasing our fleet, it was more like Pirates of the Caribbean. I lay stunned with disbelief. For a very long minute, the impact of real danger was just too unreal.

All the sheer, fanciful wonder I had as a child about pirates on the high seas instantly left my mind. I was stuck on a wooden sailing ship about to be attacked by real pirates.

Genuine fear quickly replaced my thrill of anthropology. For my sailor friends, this was the real world, their world, every week of their life. Chased by pirates on the open seas in the twentieth century.

Farouk, unaware of the ship's peril, sat next to me. Delirious from malarial fever, he held a covered glass jar full of giant cockroaches. He meticulously called out his names for each one. He looked over at me, pointed to one in the bottle, and laughed hilariously. Then in a soft voice continued talking to his roaches.

Soaked with sweat from his fever, he broke into convulsions, which threw the bottle to our feet. Within seconds, the bottle rolled across the cabin floor and gave the tumbling roaches the ride of their life.

I laid him down on his blanket, then tried to hold him down and comfort him. It was no use. I left him writhing and shaking so I could look out the little window.

Between keeping an eye on the approaching pirates and the other eye on mad Farouk, I didn't know what to do. Chaos reigned, inside and outside the cabin. Sailors outside were chanting, praying, and calling on Allah for deliverance.

I peeked through the little window. The pirates were gaining on us. I looked for a place to hide my Seiko watch, a birthday gift from my wife. My desperation mounted with each passing minute. And yes, I joined in with prayers of my own.

Farouk's convulsions subsided, leaving him in a semicomatose condition. No one on board had malaria medicine. I left the roach bottle at the other end of the cabin alone until its constant rolling back and forth started to drive me crazy.

I scrambled over to the roach bottle, snatched it, and stuffed it into bedding. Again I looked for a place to hide. Perhaps there was a trapdoor. Maybe I could hide in the hold. No trapdoor. The only door to the cabin was locked from the outside. The windows also locked from the outside. I was inside, trapped.

Thick floorboards were all nailed down. No tools to pry them up. Anxious as a cornered rat in a room, I ran back to the little window to see what was happening. For a while it looked like our ship was going the same speed, which meant the pirates were no longer gaining on us.

Then, out of the blue, a gust of wind came up from behind and thrust us into a faster pace. I again looked out my little window. After a few minutes I saw the pirates give up and veer off.

From dozens of ships a roar of victory resonated across the waters. We continued cruising at top speed, the boat creaking and stretching, until the pirates fell off the horizon. The captain unlocked the padlock, opened the door, and welcomed me out. He celebrated by taking a group picture of Mohammad and me with the crew.

At sunup the next morning I was relieved to see a clear sky and no pirates. On cue, our flotilla set sail for the final leg to Chittagong. But more bad news. The lifesaving wind gust that freed us from pirates the day before suddenly returned. A tropical depression was upon us. By noon, the sky behind us turned pitch black.

Streaks of lightning sparkled across the sky. The wind grew stronger by the hour, pushing us faster towards our destination. Faster than normal. An occasional gale force wind smashed into our wooden ship. Each time it gave us pause.

All the sailors, including Mohammad and I, were again gripped with fear. This time not from criminal pirates but from an angry sea. In silence, each of us hung on to a rope. The swells in the sea soon felt like a roller coaster.

For the second day in a row our captain had a pained, worried look on his face. Fortunately, the storm brought strong wind in front of it, permitting us to stay ahead. The loud, creaking grunts, groans, and moans of the stressed vessel brought new concern.

Could our ship come apart? If it did, would I drown before a shark found me? Strange thoughts flow through your mind when imminent death confronts you.

Minutes seemed like hours. Soon audible Muslim prayers to Allah were heard. I prayed silently, even though I was screaming out to God on the inside.

The port city of Chittagong appeared over the horizon. With a steady hand, our captain steered us closer to land. What a glorious sight. But would we make it to the dock before the fury of the storm overtook us?

Before entering into Chittagong harbor, we lowered the big sail, slowing us down. Boosted by the storm surge, the ship's forward momentum coasted us into port. Crucial to the captain, the ship must get to the dock as quickly as possible.

He gave the signal to lower the rowboat. Mohammad and I said a quick goodbye, climbed overboard and timed our jump into the bobbing rowboat. A minute later, our tiny boat bobbed up and down again as we climbed onto the dock.

The storm intensified, bearing down on us with strong gusts of wind. Now onshore and rain hitting us in the face, we split up. Mohammad spent the night at his parents' house while I stayed at a guesthouse. Once the storm passed, he would return to the ship for our belongings.

Overnight the storm passed through and by morning calm settled over Chittagong. At the arranged time, Mohammad and I met up, piled our gear into the hospital van, and made our way out of the city. On the drive back to the hospital compound, I could tell Mohammad had something to say.

“Mohammad, what’s on your mind?”

“Praise be to Allah we made it safely to port. The 200 ships behind us got destroyed by the storm. All were lost. I told you it could be a dangerous trip.”

He looked towards me and glared. I knew what I had to do.

“You were right. I should have listened to you.”

He gloated as I acknowledged his wisdom. After a long pause, I asked, “How is Farouk?”

“Farouk died last night. The doctor said nothing could be done. It was Allah’s will.”

In mournful solitude, we looked out the windows at storm debris. Farouk, so young, had his whole life in front of him. My sailor friends were religious but not Muslim fanatics. Just working their job, doing their prayers, and living out their happy life. Farouk’s life was cut short.

Islam is fatalistic. Whether good, bad, happy or sad, whatever happens, it is Allah’s will. Even still, I might have saved Farouk’s life with a few strong antimalarial pills. I vowed from then on to never travel in remote areas of the developing world without antimalarial, antibiotics, and antifungal medicine.

PRINCIPLE # 10: “Be Prepared”

Never travel in remote areas of the developing world without antimalarial, antibiotics, and antifungal medicine. It could be the difference between life and death.

My ocean voyage was an incredible adventure I would never forget. Although dangerous, the time on the ship revealed more evidence for my research. The sailors were from the same village, a village of all Muslim sailors. A further confirmation of my project premise that socially, at least, Muslims did have a *de facto* caste system in the rural countryside, just like their Hindu counterparts.

Over the next few days, Muhammad and I finished summarizing our research. His last day we walked to the hostel across the road from the hospital. He checked out of his room, and we talked for a few minutes before his bus to Chittagong arrived.

While waiting, we did the Bengali thing of apologizing before saying farewell.

“Thank you for allowing me to help with your research. If I have done anything to offend you, please forgive me,” said Mohammad.

“Thank you for all your help in learning your culture and doing the research. If I have done anything to offend you, please forgive me,” I responded.

Brakes squealed as the bus came to a stop. We embraced and he got on the bus. Once seated, he waved a final goodbye and left for home. I never saw him again and often wondered if he ever lived a happy life.

Before returning to the States, I sat down with the two American medical doctors who supervised my research. Both had lived in Bangladesh at least fifteen years and were surprised by my findings of the segregation of villages by occupation.

The lead doctor asked a different question.

“Phil, what else did you learn while you were out here?”

“I learned how important cultural sensitivity is. That happened when we entered villages while the men were gone and the women were in the pond bathing. Because they were in the water fully-clothed, I thought they were swimming. My mistake almost got us killed.”

PRINCIPLE # 11: “Ignorance is not bliss, it’s dangerous”

Every culture has values, mores, and roles, especially related to gender interaction. Violating these is deeply offensive, even dangerous.

I then said, “I also learned how dangerous the ocean could be.”

“When we heard 200 ships behind you were destroyed by the cyclone, we made a policy as an organization that no one would be allowed to take the trip to Chittagong on a *nokha*. Ever. It’s way too dangerous,” said the other doctor.

Both doctors felt I needed more education beyond my masters degree if I wanted a career in cultural research and international development. I agreed, emphasizing I desired to do more than conduct anthropological research. I wanted to make a difference in people’s lives. Before I could launch my overseas career, I would need specific training in international development.

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