

The Sack Of Baltimore

LIKE black sharks scything through the sea towards their prey, the boats of the Barbary corsairs moved soundlessly across the moonlit surface of Roaring Water Bay.

The oars of their stolen fishing smacks moved in and out in perfect time, the blades wrapped in caulking material to muffle even the smallest splash. It was two hours before dawn, and the element of surprise was crucial.

The corsairs landed on the shingle beach, taking care to prevent the wooden hulls scraping hollowly across the stones, and silently assembled along the shoreline.

Nearby, the villagers of Baltimore slept soundly and peacefully – unaware that a small guerrilla army of more than two hundred men was massing for attack just a few yards away from their homes.

They had no reason to be on the alert. The little

harbour town in the southwest of Co. Cork had been invaded before, a generation ago, but in that case the aggressors had been the Catholic troops of King Philip II of Spain. Peace had been made, and that particular threat had passed.

But these invaders were different.

They would have made a terrifying sight – the Barbary pirates, carrying muskets and iron bars to force open the doorways; and the bare-armed Turkish troops in their bright red waistcoats and plumed caps, armed to the teeth with guns and curved *yatagan* sabres.

These soldiers were the legendary Janissaries – a hand-picked elite, highly trained and skilled in the art of war.

Originally formed as a celibate order of religious warriors, they still retained a monkish, contemplative demeanour off the battlefield. But at full charge, their terrifying appearance and loud, crashing war music could strike fear into the toughest troops in Christendom.

‘The famous Janissaries,’ one western diplomat wrote home in awe, ‘whose approach inspires terror everywhere.’

Tonight, however, their foes would mostly be defenceless mothers and children.

The attack had yet to begin, but the fate of Baltimore was already decided.



Morat Rais, alias Jan Jansen, alias Matthew Rice, alias

Captain John, was one of the most experienced pirate chieftains on the Barbary Coast. A veteran of daring raids on targets as far away as Iceland, he had honed his attack strategy to perfection.

His intelligence information was immaculate too. The corsair chieftain had been well briefed in advance, and had personally carried out a reconnaissance of the village earlier in the evening. He had already been shown the homes where the toughest villagers were likely to show most resistance.

His first objective was the lower part of town, an area known as The Cove, where twenty-six thatched cottages were arranged in three concentric arcs around the curve of the shoreline. The inhabitants were mostly fishing folk – seine-netters and workers who salted the fish at the processing works nearby.

At a nod from their captain, the 230 musketeers began to fan out along The Cove, dividing themselves into twenty-six attack squads: one for each homestead.

The villagers were extraordinarily unlucky. Even at this late stage, a warning would have enabled some of them to scramble out of their beds and dash for safety in the darkness of the surrounding woodland. All that was needed was one barking dog, one fisherman glancing out to check his boat moorings, one nursing mother hearing a footstep in the night. But Baltimore was lost in sleep, and no-one stirred.

The Janissaries took up their positions and drew their

weapons. Expert hands applied flame to twists of oiled rope-yarn and passed them around. As the torches flared into life, Morat gave the signal and all hell broke loose.

The people of Baltimore didn't have a chance. They woke up screaming as their flimsy doors smashed and splintered to pieces under syncopated, expert blows from the iron bars. The incendiaries were thrust into the thatched roofs of the homesteads. Flames leapt high into the June night. Within minutes, Baltimore was ablaze.

As the villagers poured out into the street, coughing, eyes streaming, they were confronted by attackers who seemed more like demons than men – the Janissaries screaming and slashing the air with their curved sabres; the Barbary pirates terrifying their Christian victims with the most vicious threats and obscenities they could think of. The tactics were mainly psychological. Like modern-day commandos storming a siege building, they were aiming for 'the two Cs': confusion in their victims and control for themselves. The razor-sharp *yatagans* rarely touched human flesh. Panic and terror were the real weapons here – the objective was to capture live, healthy slaves and keep casualties to a minimum.

But where they encountered resistance, the Janissaries were utterly ruthless. At one household, a villager called Timothy Curlew put up a brave fight. He was hacked to death on the spot, and his screaming widow was dragged into the street to take her place among the captives who were bound for the slave

markets of Algiers.

A second man, John Davis, also made a bold but foolhardy attempt to fight off the invaders. Like Curlew, he was slaughtered instantly as a warning to others.

The nightmare went on and on. At another house, Stephen Broadbrook's heavily pregnant wife and two children were dragged out of bed and herded through the streets like cattle being driven to market.

No-one was spared, not even the elderly and frail. Three old folk were shoved into the stunned, disbelieving line of captives and shunted down to the beach like all the others. At the Gunter home, seven sons were stolen away.

The raid on The Cove was completed with ruthless efficiency. Within a short space of time, a hundred villagers – men, women, old folk, servants, toddlers – were being pushed and shoved down the dirt road towards the beach and manhandled on to the waiting boats.

Morat Rais made sure the first batch of captives was secured, then turned his attention towards the main village of Baltimore.



In his hillside home, William Harris stirred in his sleep. He had an advantage over his fellow villagers in Baltimore – noises from The Cove were hard to hear in the main part of town, but they would drift up clearly to Harris's eyrie.

Like most of the settlers in Baltimore, Harris would have planned to rise early, at around five or six in the morning. Right now, at just after two, he was in the deepest part of his sleep cycle. We don't know how long he lay there, slipping in and out of consciousness, until he realised that the faint shouts and screams drifting up from The Cove were real and not just a nightmare.

Harris jumped up from his bed and stared out into the night. He probably couldn't believe his eyes: flames were leaping high over the houses of The Cove, and the air was acrid with the smoke from the smouldering thatch.

Looking down the road towards the lower part of town, he could see the exotic red uniforms of the invaders. Harris must have blinked and rubbed his eyes at the sight of the turbans, the plumes, the baggy pants and the curved slippers. Incredible as it seemed, there could be no doubt about it – the soldiers were Turks.

William Harris grabbed his musket and fumbled in the darkness to prepare his powder. He was under no illusions about the gun's ability to fight off an army of Janissaries. But if the town were really facing attack, this could be the only warning system they had.



Down at The Cove, Morat Rais played it safe before moving on to the next phase of the attack. He didn't expect serious resistance, but, like every good general, he made a priority of safeguarding his retreat. Sixty of his

musketeers – more than a quarter of his entire force – were stationed in ambush at a strategic high point along the path leading back to the beach. If everything went wrong, at least their escape route would be kept open.

Taking 120 to 140 men, he marched up the track to the main village of Baltimore. It wasn't much bigger than The Cove: there were around thirty houses laid out in rows in a neat square formation outside the walls of a sixteenth-century castle, and a further ten homes arranged in an 'L' shape inside the perimeter.

The raiders fanned out around the streets as before, but this time it was different. Forty houses were smashed open, but only ten captives were found. Something, or someone, had alerted the villagers to the danger. Furious, the pirates began ransacking the houses and looting anything of value.

Then Morat Rais heard something that made him stop short and call a halt to the attack. From the hillside above him, he could hear gunfire. Several musket shots were fired, and then the captain heard one of the most unnerving sounds in his world – the tattoo of a military drum.

Morat Rais paused to take stock of the situation. He had been assured that there was no military presence anywhere near the area – the nearest British soldier was in Kinsale, fifty-four miles away. But the pragmatic pirate chieftain had survived in this hazardous trade long enough to know that you never took anything for

granted. If there really were soldiers on the hillside, they would have the advantage of altitude as well as familiarity with the territory. Morat assessed the risk, glanced around the deserted houses, and decided they weren't worth the gamble.

Shoving their ten dejected captives ahead of them, the pirates and Janissaries marched back down to the beach to conduct an organised withdrawal.

The Barbary captain had been fooled by one of the oldest tricks in the book. There was no army on the hillside above him: just a few pathetic escapees, dashing upward through the scrub and undergrowth, barely noticing the brambles tearing at their exposed flesh, or their bare toes stubbing on the sharp rocks. They were the lucky ones – at least they were free.

Nearby, William Harris loaded up his gun for another shot into the night sky. A neighbour, alerted by the quick-thinking Harris, stolidly continued to batter out a military tattoo on his drum. With his single musket and a few balls of shot, Harris had succeeded in turning back one of the most formidable fighting forces in the world.

Three days later, his achievement would be recognised with a mention in despatches to the Privy Council in London. But despite his resourceful actions, he had succeeded in saving only a small proportion of the villagers.



Backlit by the hellish orange glow of their blazing homes,

the captives must have felt like abandoning all hope as they were ferried out of their friendly harbour towards the silhouetted hulks of the pirate ships.

The corsairs had seized a pitiable cargo of victims: nearly four-fifths of their captives were women and children. They were forced into two stinking fishing boats that Morat Rais had captured earlier, and, in this almost Stygian atmosphere, there would have been a deafening cacophony of noise: children screaming for their fathers, wives crying for their husbands, old people praying hopelessly for a deliverance that would not come.

But as the journey continued and the panic subsided, there would have been a more muted sound – the eerie keening of dozens of voices whimpering in abject terror.

For nearly everyone in Christian Europe, the worst fate imaginable was to be captured by the Islamic pirates and sold into slavery on the Barbary Coast of North Africa. They had heard all the stories a dozen times: stories of hideously inventive tortures and scientifically concentrated beatings; stories of living deaths at the galley oars; stories of malicious random cruelties and horrific sexual assaults. All these images had been implanted in their heads and for many years had disturbed their sleep. Now, in an almost literal sense, they were living through their worst nightmares.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. In these parts, capture by Barbary slave traders had been a risk faced mainly by those at sea. Never before had such a concentrated force of Turkish troops and North African corsairs had the audacity to stage an actual *invasion* of the King's territory.

With this in mind, some of the captives would have whispered words of comfort to each other. The authorities would never allow this outrage to happen. And wasn't there a Royal Navy man of war – *The Fifth Whelp* – patrolling the coast and ready to pursue the pirates at a moment's notice?

If someone could have told them, as their blazing homes disappeared from view behind the headland, that a mixture of corruption and bungling would keep the Navy warship idle in harbour for several days, they wouldn't have believed it possible.

If they'd been told that 107 of them would be taken all the way to the notorious slave city of Algiers, and abandoned there for more than a decade by the indifferent authorities in London, they would have been thrown into the depths of despair.

However, it's safe to say that not one of those captives could ever have imagined the astonishing way in which their lives were to be changed under the crescent moon.