A high level of current interest in activities of the Laffites after they left Galveston prompted a search of late issues of the 1822 National Advocate (New York). This newspaper yields the story of the USS Alligator and her commander, Lt. William H. Allen, whose death during a battle with pirates off Cuba inflamed Americans causing the United States to declare an all-out war against piracy in the West Indies in late December, 1822. The aftermath of this man’s death no doubt caused considerable problems for Jean Laffite and other Colombian corsairs in the Gulf. Strangely although the death of the highly venerated Lt. Allen touched off a war, little has been written about him since. What follows is an early 19th century version of the 20th century Cuban crisis, involving pirates who preyed on ships in the Cuban and Florida waters.

Several different pirates, mostly of Spanish origin, had been plaguing the Gulf Coast near Florida and Cuba for years, but the activity intensified to a fever pitch during the summer and fall of 1822. This activity culminated on November 9 when the USS Alligator, a 198-ton schooner commanded by rising naval star, Lt. William H. Allen, successfully attacked a nest of Cuban pirates off Matanzas. Lt. Allen was mortally wounded by shots to the head and chest but survived for four hours. This one officer’s untimely death sparked a fury among the American public that has not been seen since.

The Alligator didn’t go to the Matanzas area seeking a battle, although she was part of the US West Indies Squadron. Lt. Allen and his crew were escorting a couple of American ship masters to Havana so they could raise money for the ransom of their vessels and two other Americans who had been captured earlier by two piratical schooners near Key Romain. On arriving near Matanzas, Lt. Allen learned the pirates responsible for capture of the two vessels were nearby in the channel, along with several captured prizes. The Alligator drew too much water to clear the channel, so two boats were manned by Lt. Allen and his men; their intent was to board the suspected main pirate vessel. The battle began and although Allen was critically wounded early in the fray, he remained alert urging his men to “do their duty.” After a short contest, the pirates abandoned their vessels and swam to shore. Their vessels were captured by the Alligator and escorted into Matanzas. Each of the captured pirate vessels had one gun amidships, with 40 well-armed men, and considerable plunder on board.

The Alligator’s losses in addition to Lt. Allen were two of her sailors killed, and three crew members badly wounded. The pirates lost several men in the battle and others drowned endeavoring to escape.

Lt. Allen was buried with full military honors at Matanzas. In a letter from Matanzas published in the Cuban papers, F. Adams wrote:

The gallant Allen is no more!...He arrived just in time to save five sail of vessels, which he found in possession of a gang of pirates, 300 strong, established in the Bay of Lejuapo... (he was) attacking their principal vessel, a fine schooner of about 80 tons, with a long 18 pounder on a pivot, and 4 smaller guns, with the bloody flag nailed to the mast...it is certain that the pirates are but little weakened by this contest, and there is reason to fear that our commerce with this island (Cuba) and New Orleans will be almost annihilated, unless an effectual force is stationed here to prevent it.

Due to long traveling distances, news was slow to reach Washington and New York from Cuba, and the dispatches about the Alligator’s battle and Allen’s death were not published in the National Advocate until November 30--21 days after the event occurred. Deeply stung and shocked by this fatal attack on a US naval officer in Spanish territory, American authorities in Washington acted quickly. Within a month and a half, Congress authorized a bill against piracy in the West Indies and appropriated $160,000 for the construction and outfitting of steam vessels for the suppression of
piracy, under the leadership of veteran mariner Commodore David Porter, who resigned his post in the Board of Navy Commissioners in order to accept the job.  

The depth of public sentiment in the United States at the time may be seen in this excerpt of a speech made by Mr. Condict of New Jersey before the House of Representatives:

The premature death of the gallant and lamented Allen has excited a spirit of indignation though out our calls loudly for retributive justice from the lawless barbarians...The most effective restraint which you can impose upon the barbarities is to furnish to them the spectacle of a few dozen of their leaders suspended by the halter, from the yard-arms of some of our public ships.

Spanish sentiment in Cuba was not so touched. In the December 5th National Advocate, an article from the Charleston Courier was cited in which it said:

The death of Capt. Allen was received and published at Havana on Nov. 14. The American vessels in port immediately hoisted their colors half mast and were followed by vessels of every other nation in port, except the Spanish! The piratical vessel taken by the Alligator was well known to have been fitted out at Regla, in the harbor of Havana. This accounts for their not regretting the loss of Capt. Allen.

Lt. Allen's fellow naval officers demonstrated their feelings about the matter by wearing black crepe on the left arm for 30 days:

In testimony of the high respect entertained for their late brother ...whose private worth and professional skill endeared him to all, and whose untimely fate will long be remembered and lamented as a public calamity by his friends and countrymen.

In an odd twist of fate, Lt. Allen's own ship, the Alligator, did not survive him by many days. On November 19 while convoying the five former prize ships back to the US, the Alligator foundered on Caryford Reef in the Upper Keys. Despite all efforts to dislodge the vessel, nothing could be done, so the crew set her on fire November 23 and sunk her rather than let pirates salvage the ship. Her coral-encrusted wreck may still be seen by divers off Alligator Reef near Florida. The Alligator Lighthouse nearby was created to help other ships avoid the pirate-hunting schooner's fate. To pursue the war against piracy, the US built four special steamships at a cost of $40,000 each. The necessity of building the special "pirate hunter" vessels was delineated succinctly in this editorial on piracy and solutions to the problem in the December 18, 1822, National Advocate:

Two or four steam vessels of war kept cruising on that line of coast (Florida and Cuba), drawing about six feet of water, and alternately relieved, will afford a permanent exemption from piratical depredations...A steam brig of 250 tons, mounting a 24-pounder on a swivel or pivot, and 6 small guns, and manned with 50 men, can carry sufficient coal for a cruise of 20 days; and coal can be sent to neighboring ports for a constant supply. A steam vessel can overtake a pirate in any weather, with any wind, and on any tack; can fight any force take any position, and keep off boarding by throwing hot water from her engine.

If information that a pirate is in the neighborhood reaches a ship of war, she has to encounter currents, adverse winds, and other delays, which afford time for the pirate to escape. Not so with a steam vessel: she reaches the pirate, or cuts off his retreat in 24 hours after learning the latitude where the pirate cruizes.

Order one steam vessel to cruise for a week between Cape St. Antoine and the Tortugas; another to stretch off and on the Florida Gulf and the Great Bahama Bank; keep a third to the windward of Cuba, and the fourth off Havana and Nicholas Channel, alternately relieving each other, and changing their cruising grounds, and they cannot fail to intercept every piratical vessel; and at a trifling cost will be a permanent and secure guarda costas, and worth all the frigates in the world.
Commodore Porter went to work with his West Indies Anti-Piracy Squadron in early 1823, operating from a base in the Key West area. He and his ships soon had the pirates nicely swept from the seas, but his over-vigilance in pursuit landed him a court martial after he seized a fort in Fajardo, Puerto Rico, because it had sheltered pirates. Naval authorities said he had been involved in hostile acts against a friendly power (Spain). Porter received a light sentence.

After Porter’s squadron rid the Gulf of pirates, a new industry emerged, based largely in the area of Key West: wrecking. Unlike piracy, this was legal and regulated, with men rescuing or salvaging ships stranded on the reefs. These “wreckers” earned a percentage of the salvaged cargo similar what the former pirate crews got from their captains. Piracy had adapted to the times.

Endnotes

1. Laffite Society member and author, Pam Keyes, purchased a batch of 1822 National Advocate newspapers that were the personal copies of then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, as noted near the mastheads in writing. They represent quite an historic account of the war against piracy. This batch of 100 papers came out of the collection of the Library of Congress. This article grew out of this interesting collection.


3. Congress appropriation, National Advocate, (December 17, 1822).

4. Porter resigned, National Advocate, (December 12, 1822).

5. National Advocate, (December 9, 1822).

6. Both the Alligator Lighthouse and Alligator Reef were named after the ship.

Commodore Porter received a six month suspension following the 1825 court martial. Particulars about his court martial are in Robert Beale’s "A Report of the Trial of Commodore David Porter of the Navy of the United States, before a General Court Martial Held at Washington in July, 1825" Washington City, 1825.