An interesting fact I took hard notice of, while working alongside present day Cajun/Creole/French maritime officers, was a bit of aloofness. It seemed almost as if they were at times immensely distracted; as if they were pondering some weighty question God had just asked of them, and could care less if your pants - or theirs - were on fire.

Of course, taking into consideration that Jean Laffite and his many captains, chief cannoniers, and other officers existed during times where image and follow-through on customs, etiquette, and attempts at civilized social behavior were supposedly demanded, one would say that bravado was most certainly thick and heavy. It still holds through and true with many present-day maritime officers in the Gulf.

Many a member of The Laffite Society knows well that any cold, hard fact on Jean Laffite and his maneuvers is not quite so easy to compile. However, one trait I have noted of Commandant Laffite was his demanding and receiving of loyalty. Just to possess the abilities as a regular sea captain in Laffite's time was one huge attribute, given the demanding hardships and sacrifices. But - but - to hold the rank of captain in Laffite's roving sea force...hmm.

It would be safe to assume that, upon various occasions, immense workloads were required of Laffite's officers. For not only was the base at Barataria constructed, but the base at Galveston. Slaves from Africa would have known little of carpentry and such. So one can only conclude that this meant the captains and/or "lieutenants" (another name for "mates" or "first officers") would have had to tear themselves away from the dice and wine from time to time.

And, thanks to errant U.S. forces and Mother Nature, both Barataria and Galveston were to be have been essentially reconstructed.

I would say that, of all of Laffite's "employed" sea captains, Captain James Campbell was the prime example of what Jean Laffite found desirable in an officer.

Level-headed. Practical. Daring and intelligent.

To be able to give orders, one must first learn how to take orders. And, after being tempted by the sudden and immense amounts of booty to which Laffite opened avenues, it had to have been quite difficult to remain totally constant to the Commandant's orders and suggestions, while resisting the urge to sail without his valued letters of marque.

Like many good leaders, Laffite did not seem terribly interested in beating submission or cooperation out of his captains. Instead, if one showed more than the normal or expected level of rebellion or independence, Laffite simply appeared to play out just enough line or rope for the man to hang his own damned self. Such was the case of Captain George Brown or Ratti (I tend to agree with the school of thought which holds that this was one and the same person). Studies show that not only did Ratti become gallows carrion, so did sixteen others.

One would dare say that if a modern-day feminist could have attended one of Laffite's gatherings of captains...well. With such a large number of even larger egos, a dirigible in a thunderstorm comes to mind. When not totally ignoring her, they probably would have had her chasing for wine.

Just how the Commandant managed to keep control of his hungry lions is very interesting in itself. Going for each other's throats at one moment. Then pouncing on anything and everything else, at the next.

Moody, hard-headed and unpredictable, many of Laffite's officers were difficult, to say the least. Yet, he knew the value of setting a notable example, and did so.

This, coupled with the fact that Laffite did not mention in his journal of any duels between him and his own men, gives more light as to what his officers were like. Even the rougher diamonds did not care to mess with the boss. Most had obtained their own cutlery skills through...
experience alone, while Laffite underwent expert training at a tender age. One could be wild and one could be dumb. But not both. Not for very long, anyway.

According to the Mirabeau B. Lamar journal, one Captain Marrott(e) was found to have tried to cheat Laffite of captured booty while sailing under his command at Galveston. Accused of such by Captain James Campbell, who had sailed with Marrott(e) on that particular privateering expedition, and strongly and publicly reprimanded by Laffite at a council meeting, Marrott(e) (as Campbell related to Lamar) "spit in Laffite's face," whereupon Laffite made a grab for him, missed, and was restrained by his own men. Pleading with Laffite not to murder the man outright, they cried for him to challenge Marrott(e) to a duel.

Such was arranged to occur on the dueling field at Pelican Isle. With Campbell serving as Laffite's second and a certain Shebal as Marrott(e)'s, Marrott(e) spent an unusually long time preparing himself at the field, only to suddenly state (according to Campbell) that he "felt himself in error and was ready to restore the secreted boxes [prize]." Laffite then grabbed him by the shoulders, turned him right face, gave him a kick and dismissed him.

Aside from showing that Laffite was right-footed with his kicks, this also shows that Marrott(e) either sobered up or came to his senses enough to remember Laffite's dueling reputation.

By "dismissed," one would think that Campbell meant that Marrott(e) was drummed out of Laffite's force and became just another scummy pirate.

However, Laffite, in his journal, states that Marrott(e) made a return "visit" and was killed, along with most of his gang, thus dying for a small prize when many larger ones might have been orderly obtained.

Greedy, selfish, and lazy. Most certainly not all. But enough. Enough to have kept the Commandant's attention.

And, no doubt when a duel between captains was agreed upon, many a remembered blow or kick were in the minds of the crews as they followed the quarreling parties to the dueling fields of Barataria or Pelican Isle.

Wine-guzzling gamblers.

This particular aspect holds true of even their more peaceful counterparts. I have heard a first-hand description of a captains' card game in the bayou where each positioned an ice chest on either side of their seats. One for refreshments and one for money.

Laffite's captains, from records I have read of them, seemed to have dabbled in everything from harems of concubines, to the acknowledged mistress with wife, to almost Quaker-like marital arrangements.

At the base or camp at Galveston or Campeachy, booty and loot and all the expensive trappings that came from the Commandant's off-shore endeavors might have been plentiful, but any approachable females were rare to nonexistent. Many men took up with slave women.

Any free young woman that did courageously travel to Laffite's lairs not only had to watch out for the rougher diamonds, but the mademoiselles des capitains, as well. These lionesses could ably hold their own against half-crazed sons of guns and did not especially care for any piece of fluff with baggage that crossed their patrol paths.

No doubt but that of any duels that Laffite did allow to occur, some bubbled up due to disagreements over these mademoiselles des capitains.

There were times when I watched, either in general amusement or dulled boredom, the antics of some Cajun captains among the females of a foreign bar or business. The flair, the supposed disinterest, then the setting of the hook. Due to age and experience, the married mariners were better equipped to woo secretaries, female police, etc. Yet fidelity nowadays, with some of the attached captains, is a genuine article. So it was a flirtatious look here and there, then back to the boat.

One term or phrase that one may still hear from time to time among certain Cajun/French/Creole boat captains is deux tasses de café, again lending some credibility to Laffite's journal. I only heard the phrase used in a mysterious, off-hand, joking manner. Of course.

There appear to be many varied reasons as to why so many strong-willed and independent men chose to sail, work and fight for Jean Laffite. And, of course, one such huge reason was large and immediate chance of fortune.

I believe another great reason was Laffite's ability to dispense responsibility with authority added to it. By going out of his way to give his officers a say in many affairs, he held such effective control as would make a present-day CEO salivate.