Chapter 2

[ GROG ]

Captain Morgan is a lot more than flavor. . . . It reflects an attitude. It’s fun and adventurous. It has a real personality and an appealing proposition—good taste, good times, good fun.

—Laura Goldenberg, U.S. rum category manager for Seagram’s

Captain Henry Morgan was born in Wales in 1635, at the outset of the great British rush to the sugar islands. The son of a prosperous farmer, Morgan had no interest in harrows or furrows and instead went off to seek—in the words of a contemporary—“some other employ more suitable to his humour.” The teenaged Morgan found himself at a Welsh port, where he boarded a ship bound for the West Indies. He eventually disembarked on Barbados, where accounts suggest he found employ as an indentured servant.

His career on the island was evidently short-lived. In 1655, a British fleet manned by some twenty-five hundred sailors and soldiers was dispatched across the Atlantic by Oliver Cromwell, with the aim of expanding the British presence in the islands. The fleet landed first at Barbados, where it took on some four thousand Barbadian colonists to supplement the fighting force. This included a number of indentured servants who were seized over the objections of the planters who had paid for their contracts. Morgan may have been among them; the historical record is sketchy. The fleet then sailed off with high purpose, intent on sacking the wealthy Spanish colony on Hispaniola. The attack did not go well; the British force was all but routed by the Spanish after blundering their assault on the city of Santo Domingo. The British fleet withdrew, and the commanders hastily came up with another plan: strike and capture the lightly defended Spanish settlement on Jamaica, near present-day Kingston.

Here, the British prevailed. The great force scattered the hapless and outnumbered Spanish into the hills and easily took control of the settlement, and thus of the thinly populated island. Although the attack lacked heroism, it marked two historical milestones: It was the first state-financed naval operation by the British in the West Indies. And Henry Morgan had his formal coming out.

Young Morgan rapidly proved himself something of a prodigy in the art of combat. He led raids on Dutch settlements as second in command during the Anglo-Dutch War of 1665 to 1667. Soon after, at the age of thirty-two, Morgan was named head of the Brethren of the Coast, a loosely organized group of privateers. Privateers, unlike pirates, had the official blessing of their government to attack ships flying the flags of the enemy. Privateers weren’t paid by the government but got to keep a generous percentage of the spoils. The arrangement was a good deal for everyone except those attacked. England got an extended navy without putting up any hard cash, and the more rapacious privateers earned far more than a sailor could hope to see in the standing navy. The distinction between privateer and pirate was often vague, since months might elapse between the signing of a truce and word of the peace getting to a captain on a mission of plunder. Even if that word did come through, privateers had little incentive to cease their marauding, since other ships were where the gold was. “To the buccaneers a treaty of peace meant merely a change from
public employment to private enterprise,” as historians J. H. Parry and P. H. Sherlock put it.

Morgan was wildly successful in his engagements, being particularly drawn to Spanish ships and villages, since they were the richest. Since the early sixteenth century, the Spaniards had been wrenching gold from the mines of Mexico and Peru and carting it to well-defended ports to await the sailings of the Armada, which escorted the treasure back to Spain. Morgan built his reputation through ruthless and audacious attacks, including one on well-defended Puerto Príncipe (now Camagüey) in Cuba, and others on several Spanish villages along Lake Maracaibo in present-day Venezuela. Between 1655 and 1671, Morgan sacked a total of eighteen cities, four towns, and thirty-five villages, and captured more than $100 million worth of gold, silver, and trade goods.

Two episodes transformed Morgan from mortal to legend, and both took place in Panama. With its three stout fortresses, Portobelo on Panama’s Caribbean coast was among the best defended towns in New Spain, bettered only by Havana and Cartagena. Morgan knew enough not to attack these forts directly, so in 1668 he quietly landed his force of 460 men on a stretch of undefended coast some distance away. The troops marched overland by night, and then struck at dawn, catching guards by surprise and quickly overwhelming most of the town’s citadels.

Morgan’s appearance in the streets of Portobelo that morning was a surprise, but his reputation for brutality had no doubt preceded him. Coastal residents generally found it to be unwise to withhold information about hidden riches if Captain Morgan knocked on their doors. Those who did would be stretched on the rack, or have flaming sticks tied between their fingers, or a cord twisted around their heads so tightly that their eyeballs popped like grapes from their skins. Other recalcitrants would be hoisted by their wrists with weights tied to neck and feet while being burned with flaming branches. In Maracaibo, an elderly Portuguese man had been ratted out (falsely) by a neighbor as being from a wealthy family. While demanding to know the location of his supposed fortune, Morgan’s men suspended him from the ground by tying his thumbs and big toes to four stakes, then placed a two-hundred-pound rock on his belly and hammered at the cords with clubs, all the while burning him with palm leaves. And he was one of the lucky ones. Some had their feet burned off while still alive; others were said to be suspended by their testicles and battered with sticks until a violent anatomical separation ensued.

In Portobelo, Morgan did little to dull his reputation for ruthlessness. He forced priests and nuns to serve as shields when his men advanced on a fortress that still held out. He calculated that the Spaniards were too pious to fire on their own clerics. He calculated wrongly, and the priests and nuns fell. Morgan still managed to overtake the redoubt and punished the resisters by herding them into a room, packing explosives under the floor, and blowing them into the sky. His demands for a gold ransom to spare the rest of the town were eventually met, and he sailed for Jamaica with a half-million pieces of eight and some three hundred slaves.

Two years later, Morgan outdid himself by sacking the capital of Panama City on the distant Pacific Coast. He assembled nearly two thousand men and thirty-six ships, sailed to Panama’s Caribbean coast, and then left his fleet behind for a long and grueling march through the jungle. The expedition seemed doomed at times; at one point the men had to boil their shoes to stave off their hunger. Morgan would eventually lay waste to Panama City after a fierce, two-hour battle—the task considerably simplified by the panicked mayor, who torched his own town as Morgan arrived. Morgan made off with four hundred thousand pieces of eight, yet his triumph was bittersweet: He narrowly missed seizing a Spanish ship with five million pieces that had fled into the open Pacific as Morgan’s men appeared at the gates.

What we know about Morgan’s exploits is chiefly due to a remarkable account published by a Dutchman who wrote under the
name of Alexander Exquemelin. He spent eight years with the pirates in the Caribbean, a large part of that with Morgan. His 1678 book, *De Americaensche Zee-rover*, was translated into English and published in 1684 as *Bucaniers of America*, and proved as enduring as it was popular. Although riddled with inaccuracies and exaggerations, Exquemelin’s lavish account is considered the best source of information on Captain Morgan and the habits of pirates. The detail in Exquemelin’s book is so rich and so lavish that it grieves me slightly to make one observation. At no time is rum ever mentioned.

**Today, Captain Morgan** serves as something of a mascot to the rum industry, thanks to the continuing success of Captain Morgan rum, which accounts for about one-third of the billion-dollar premium rum market in the United States. It was introduced in 1945 on Jamaica, where the Seagram Company decided to market a high-end rum made by blending rums from other distillers. In the fall of 1949, Captain Morgan rum was imported for the first time to the United States amid great marketing hullabaloo; in New York, it was touted in newspaper ads with an illustration of a statuesque pirate wearing a malicious grin in front of the Manhattan skyline, as if about to set out in search of Wall Street bankers to hang by the testicles.

The brand caught on. In 1953, Seagram acquired its own rum distillery in Jamaica to supply the growing demand. Captain Morgan rum was then a light rum designed for mixing. (“Lighter, cleaner,” boasted the first ads, “especially designed for the American taste.”) When Americans drifted off in favor of even lighter white wine spritzers and light beer in the 1980s, Seagram set about tinkering with the brand, adding spices and flavorings and reinventing Captain Morgan as a spiced rum. Today, it’s produced and sold by Diageo, the world’s largest producer of liquor.

Although rum and pirates are like smoke and fire (you rarely find one without the other), the marriage was actually the product of the Victorian era (about which more later). The spectacular plunderings of the real Captain Henry Morgan would not have involved rum for a simple reason: It wasn’t a common spirit in the Spanish colonies he raided. While the Spanish did have sugar plantations and a surplus of waste molasses, rum hadn’t taken off as it had on the British islands, because Spanish winemakers and brandy distillers made sure that it didn’t. Afraid of competition from cheap rum, they prevailed upon the Spanish crown to ban spirits exports from the islands. So when buccaneers sacked villages, they found Madeira and Canary wines and brandy in the cellars and storehouses, but little rum. Being pirates and not terribly picky, they were happy to guzzle it down.

After they sacked a village and tortured or sent its inhabitants into flight, Morgan’s men broke into the storerooms and drank with gusto. Following the conquest of Portobelo, Exquemelin wrote, the men “fell to eating and drinking, after their usual manner—that is to say, committing in both these things all manner of debauchery and excess.” The spectacle of drink and mayhem lasted two full weeks. Exquemelin conjectured that a Spanish contingent of “fifty courageous men” could have routed the besotted pirates, who numbered nearly ten times as many. The beleaguered Spanish mustered no such force.

During the long march to Panama City, “fifteen or sixteen jars of Peruvian wine” were uncovered in one village along the way. The men fell upon it “with rapacity” and consumed it without pause. No sooner was the wine emptied than the drinkers began vomiting copiously. Suspecting that the wine had been poisoned, the soldiers sat back moaning and awaited their grim fate. Remarkably, no one died. Exquemelin suspected that the reaction was from drinking too hastily on very empty stomachs.

As the planters of the sugar islands planted more cane and built more windmills to meet the clamor for sugar in Europe, they scrambled to find an outlet for their growing rum surplus. Rum was consumed
eagerly and prolifically by islanders, but local consumption couldn’t absorb all of it, nor did local imbibing provide useful hard currency to pay off overseas debts and expand trade. Moreover, sugar planters had devoted nearly every acre of arable land to sugarcane and produced virtually no food to feed themselves or their slaves. They were much in need of anything edible. So livestock and produce sailed south from the northern colonies, and rum, in turn, began to sail north. “Good Rume and Mallasces . . . is most vendable heare,” wrote a Newport, Rhode Island, merchant to his Barbados agent in the 1660s.

Demand for rum grew steadily. By 1699, the British writer Edward Ward noted that “rum, alias Kill Devil, is as much ador’d by the American English. . . . This is held as the Comforter of their Souls, he Preserver of their Bodies, the Remover of their Cares, and Promoter of their Mirth; and is a Sovereign Remedy against the Grumbling of the Guts, a Kibe-heel [chilblains on the heel], or a Wounded Conscience, which are three Epidemical Distempers that afflict the Country.”

By the early eighteenth century, the most popular West Indian destinations for northern colonial merchant ships were Antigua or Barbados, since rum was most easily obtained in trade there. In 1738, “philadelphia merchant Robert Ellis instructed the captain of the ‘Sarah and Elizabeth’ to consider selling his cargo at St. Kitts if a good price could be had for his cargo, but added he would “rather you dispose of it at Antigua for you'll be more likely to get rum there.” More than 90 percent of rum exported from Barbados and Antigua eaded to mainland North America; on other islands, rum exports to the northern colonies were often 100 percent, since no market had yet merged in England or Europe. Export figures from 1726 to 1730 show that the most important rum exporter was Barbados, which shipped 680,269 gallons of rum to the northern colonies; this was allowed by Antigua with 235,966 gallons, and St. Kitts and Mont-
serrat, which together shipped about 14,000 gallons of rum. Benjamin Franklin, the publisher of the Pennsylvania Gazette, printed up 228 words and phrases that were slang for being drunk. These included “cock’d,” “juicy,” “fuz’d,” “stiff,” “wanble crop’d,” “crump-footed,” “staggerish,” and one other: “Been to Barbados.”

The pirates, increasingly disappointed by the spoils of the waning Spanish empire, gradually moved north to harass British traders. When they found rum, they consumed it with gusto. After the pirate George Lowther captured a ship in 1722 en route from Barbados to Boston, he took pains to inventory his haul: five barrels of sugar, six slaves, a box of English goods, and thirteen hogsheads of good rum.

As the eighteenth century progressed, rum came to displace wine in accounts of pirate debauchery—and to be associated with disorder and mayhem on the seas.

“I soon found that any death was preferable to being linked with such a vile crew of miscreants,” wrote Philip Ashton, a ship’s captain captured by pirates in 1724. “Monstrous cursing and swearing, hideous blasphemies, and open defiance of Heaven” appalled him deeply, as did one other bad habit: “prodigious drinking.”

Captain George Roberts of London was overtaken by the Boston pirate Ned Low. The psychopathic Low was precisely the person you would prefer not to meet on the high seas; he reportedly forced one captive to eat his own ears freshly sliced from his head and another to eat the fresh-plucked heart of a fellow sailor. Low evidently took a small liking to Roberts. Not only did he not force him to eat his own organs, he served him claret and a rum punch mixed up in a two-gallon silver bowl.

Roberts’s account of the ordeal suggests an uncommon interest in rum on the part of his pirate captors. They passed their idle time boasting, then “drinking and carousing merrily, both before and after dinner, which they eat in a very disorderly manner, more like a kennel of hounds, than like men, snatching and catching the victuals from
ne another.” At night, after Low had turned in, Roberts stayed up rinking with the other men to maintain their good favor. “We took a ram of rum,” Roberts reported, “and enter’d into discourse with one another, on different subjects; for as a tavern or alehouse-keeper davors to promote his trade, by conforming to the humours of every customer, so was I forc’d to be pleasant with every one, and ear a bob with them in almost all their sorts of discourse, tho’ never contrary and disagreeable to my own inclinations; otherwise I should have fallen under an odium with them, and when once that happens to be the case with any poor man, the lord have mercy upon m, for then every rascally fellow will let loose his brutal fancy upon m . . . artificially raised by drinking, passion, & c.” Low kept Robertsptive ten days before setting him adrift in a boat.

Pirate life wasn’t all anarchy and the snatching of food. Pirates were often bound by charters they signed when they joined a crew—inriute constitutions that governed life aboard the ship and dic ined the distribution of the spoils. Some of these even codified the les of drinking. The charter of Bartholomew Roberts, better known Black Bart, had a provision stating that each man “has equal title to fresh provisions or strong liquors at any time seized, and may use them at pleasure unless a scarcity make it necessary for the food of all vote a retrenchment.” (Curiously, Roberts himself was a teetotaler, d his ship’s charter also prohibited drinking below deck after eightock in the evening. His sobriety may have helped his career; he utured some four hundred vessels and is generally regarded as one the most successful of pirates.) During one string of attacks in the 1st Indies in 1720, Roberts and his crew captured so much liquor at an observer wrote that “it was esteemed a crime against Province not to be continually drunk.” Two of his crew members were led to be particularly dissolute; Robert Devins was always in his as and scarcely fit for any duty, as was reported at his trial after he s captured. And crewman Robert Johnson became so thoroughly incapacitated that at one point block and tackle had to be employed to remove him from the ship like a sack of yams.

The de facto capital of the British pirate world was Port Royal, Jamaica’s chief port, situated across the harbor from present-day Kingston. After the British vanquished the Spanish in 1655, enterprising colonists established a makeshift town on a long sand spit at the mouth of the harbor. Jamaica would eventually become a sugar superpower, but the island economy was founded on trade, much of it illegal, with Port Royal serving as an entrepôt for contraband goods and treasure seized by privateers and pirates.

Port Royal made an especially appealing base for pirates since island governors were happy to turn a blind eye to their activities. The pirates were a useful nuisance. They brought in gold and silver to buoy the local economy—so much that the notion of establishing a British mint was considered in 1662—and served as an ad hoc naval defense force at no cost to the governor. With its abundance of captured gold, Jamaica was an inviting target for French or Spanish marauders. But a harbor teeming with heavily armed pirate ships manned by predatory seamen greatly reduced the odds of such an attack.

After his raids, Captain Morgan and his men would sail to Port Royal to whore and drink and spend their money. The more carelessly they could rid themselves of their gold, the happier they were. “Wine and Women drained their Wealth to such a Degree that in a little time some of them became reduced to Beggary,” reported pirate chronicler Charles Leslie. “They have been known to spend 2 or 3000 Pieces of Eight in one Night; and one of them gave a Strumpet 500 to see her naked.” Morgan “found many of his chief officers and soldiers reduced to their former state of indigence through their immoderate vices and debauchery.” Then they would pester him to get
up a new fleet for further raids, “thereby to get something to expend anew in wine and strumpets.”

The port was ungoverned at the outset, and in short order became ungovernable. Literate visitors engaged in a sort of informal competition to best describe the sheer hellishness of the place. It was the “most wicked and sinful city in the world,” wrote one British man of the cloth. Another English clergyman, eager to begin the Lord’s work in reforming the city, instantly abandoned his hopes of salvation. “This town is the Sodom of the New World,” he wrote, and “the majority of its population consists of pirates, cutthroats, whores, and some of the vilest persons in the whole of the world.” He left aboard the same ship that brought him.

Edward Ward took the prize for the most colorful description, describing Port Royal as “the Dunghill of the Universe, the Refuse of the whole Creation, the Clippings of the Elements, a shapeless Pile of Rubbish confusedly jumbl’d in to an Emblem of Chaos, neglected by Omnipotence when he form’d the World into its admirable Order. . . . The Receptacle of Vagabonds, the Sanctuary of Bankrupts, and a Close-Stool for the Purges of our Prisons. As Sickly as a Hospital, as Dangerous as the Plague, as Hot as Hell, and as Wicked as the Devil.”

Port Royal had a density of taverns that made the tippling houses of Barbados appear woefully inadequate. Even discounting the unlicensed and undocumented rumshops—of which there were surely many—Port Royal had one legal tavern for every ten male residents. In one month—July 1661—the local council granted forty licenses for new taverns and punch houses. A governor of Jamaica noted that the Spanish often wondered why the British were always suffering from extravagant illness, “until they knew the strength of their drinks, but then wondered more that they were not all dead.”

All sorts of liquor could be had in Port Royal. The reasonably well off drank Madeira wine, and the “servants and the inferior kind of people”—wrote one visitor in a letter in 1664—drank rum. Another visitor wrote that kill-devil was the “main drink sold in the taverns,” but other popular pirate drinks included buxom or bombo, a mix of rum, water, sugar, and a bit of nutmeg.

(Modern archaeology has done little to contradict the idea that Port Royal residents lived in a state of constant pottedness. In the early 1970s, the archaeologist Robert Marx excavated a portion of Port Royal now underwater. A thick mantle of silt covered everything, but he uncovered hundreds of “onion bottles,” so called because they consisted of a round bulbous bottom attached to a long tapering neck and were traditionally used for putting up rum. Sadly, no potable rum was recovered.)

Port Royal offered sanctuary to Captain Morgan between his raids in the late seventeenth century, and in retirement it became his home. After he quit attacking the Spanish, he was lionized as a hero in England. Knighted, he returned to Jamaica as lieutenant governor and acquired a plantation in the nearby parish of St. Mary, eventually amassing twelve hundred acres. Now nostalgic for the Welsh countryside he was once eager to leave, Morgan named his estate after his old home, Llanrumney. He constructed a handsome house atop a hill, equipping it with stout stone walls and shutters thick enough to repel bullets. Morgan had acquired many enemies, and for them he was ready.

After giving up his post in 1682, Morgan mounted a vigorous defense of his sullied name. He sued two English publishing houses for libel when Exquemelin’s account of his exploits was translated into English, collecting just £410 but winning the retractions he sought. One publisher, William Crooke, wrote that Morgan did not torture a fool on the rack, did not torture a rich Portuguese citizen, did not force a Negro to kill several prisoners, and did not engage in “the hanging up of any person by the testicles.”

Most of all, retirement meant that Morgan could now frequent the rumshops more often, regaling all with tales of his past adventures. But soon his health declined, and even visits to the rumshops became
too taxing for him. He was confined to his estate, where he spent his
days drinking with the few friends who hadn’t abandoned him. Each
morning began with a bout of vomiting. His legs were so swollen that
he couldn’t walk. He was unable to urinate and often weak from diar-
rhea. The naturalist Hans Sloane described him as “lean, sallow-
colored, his eyes a little yellowish and Belly jutting out or prominent.”
Captain Morgan’s later life goes unmentioned in the marketing ma-
terial for his namesake rum.

On August 25, 1688, Captain Henry Morgan died at age fifty-
three. He was given a state funeral and a twenty-one-gun salute; a brief
amenity was declared in Port Royal to allow outlaws to surface and
pay their final respects. Morgan was buried in the Port Royal ceme-
tery.

Four years later, on the morning of June 7, 1692, the first of three
fierce earthquakes hit Port Royal. In a matter of minutes, 90 percent
of the city was destroyed, most of it gulped down by an unstable
earth. Houses that once lined cobblestone lanes were suddenly below
water as the ground opened up and swallowed whole city blocks. A
tsunami followed, sweeping the ships into the rubble of the city.
Washed up on the ruins like little arks, grounded ships served as sac-
tuaries in the coming weeks, until the port could begin to rebuild.
About two thousand people were killed in the first moments after
the quake; the fresh dead floated in the harbor with the old dead, as
cemeteries opened and disgorged corpses. Captain Morgan’s remains
may have been among them. Just as his life began with mystery, so,
too, it concluded.

Pirate activity in the Atlantic peaked around 1720, when some
fifteen hundred to two thousand pirates were estimated to be plying
the waters between New England and the West Indies. Pirates were
not viewed as colorful outlaws but a worrisome drag on the expanding
commerce trade between the mainland colonies and the islands.
Pirates went from the hunters to the hunted. Some sailed off to ran-
sack ships in the Indian Ocean, with Madagascar the new Port Royal.
Those who remained were hunted down by fleets commissioned by
colonial governors, then hanged in mass executions.

Between 1716 and 1726, an estimated four hundred to six hun-
dred Anglo-American pirates went to the gallows. In 1718, eight
pirates “swung off” at one hanging in the Bahamas. In July 1723,
twenty-six pirates were hanged in Newport, Rhode Island, on a single
day. England passed a law that harshly punished even passing contact
with pirates, making it a capital offense. Six turtle fishermen were
hanged in 1720 when they had the misfortune of being caught shar-
ing a rum punch with the pirate John Rackham.

Captured pirates ascending to the noose were offered a last chance
to repent their wayward life, and some experienced gallows conver-
sions. Before being executed in 1724, John Archer said that the “one
wickedness that has led me as much as any, to all the rest, has been my
brutish drunkenness. By strong drink I have been heated and hard-
ened into the crimes that are now more bitter than death unto me.”
John Browne, hanged at Newport in 1723, instructed all youth to
obey their parents, to “beware the abominable Sin of Uncleanliness,”
and, above all, “to not let yourselves be overcome with strong drink.”
(These deathbed entreaties have the whiff of the temperament
movement about them, and one suspects the heavy hand of an editor.)

Others, no doubt a majority, failed to experience such conver-
sions, demanding another dram of rum up until the moment the rope
went taut. William Lewis, who was hanged in the Bahamas, bedecked
himself in red ribbons for the occasion and “scorn’d to shew any Fear
to dye but heartily desired Liquors enough to drink with his fellow
sufferers . . . and with the Standers by.” Captain William Kidd—who
was either a pirate or privateer, depending on whom you believe—
asserted his innocence until hanging day. Few reports of Kidd’s execu-
tion fail to mention he was much inebriated as he was marched
through teeming crowds to the gallows at the Execution Dock in Lon-
don. Drunk, Kidd dropped through the hatch, whereupon the rope
broke. Dazed and befuddled, he sprawled on the ground, then was marched up the steps again and fitted with a new rope. This time the rope held. When the twitching stopped, Kidd's corpse was taken down and hung along the Thames to be pecked at by crows, a warning to those considering a similar path.

The pirate most associated with rum was undoubtedly Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard. A privateer during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), he turned pirate and harassed merchant ships plying the seas between Virginia and the Caribbean. Already tall and muscular, Blackbeard further cultivated his appearance to give fright. He had eyebrows like small shrubs, and in a time when beards weren't common, he let his grow and would braid it and tie it up with colorful ribbons, which he would "turn about his ears." As a final flourish, he would tuck slow-burning, smoky fuses made of hemp cord, saltpeter, and lime under his hat, and ignite them during battle, moving about in a wreath of acrid smoke, like an emissary from the underworld. In one eighteen-month period, he captured some twenty ships.

Blackbeard's fondness for rum was legendary. He and his crew would make stops on islands between harrying raids for feasting and indulging in massive quantities of drink. "Rum was never his master," wrote his biographer, Robert Lee. "He could handle it as no other man of his day, and he was never known to pass out from an excess." Among his cocktails was a potion of gunpowder mixed with rum, which he would ignite and swill while it flamed and popped.

Blackbeard's career ended, as pirate careers often did, with extravagant bloodshed. He had set himself up in November 1718 along the Outer Banks of North Carolina, using Ocracoke Island as a base for his ship, the Adventure Galley. Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia found the harassment of traders increasingly intolerable and sent out a pair of naval sloops, the Pearl and the Lyme, to put an end to it. On the evening of November 21, the two ships came upon the Adventure Galley at anchor with Blackbeard and about two dozen of his men aboard. The sloops dropped anchor as the sun set and prepared for a morning engagement.

Blackbeard and his men readied for battle the way they knew best: They drank heartily. Some days earlier, Blackbeard had written of a melancholy predicament in his ship's log: "Such a day, rum all out:—Our company somewhat sober:—A damned confusion among us!" He overheard talk of insurrection among his men, and at length, succeeded in sacks a ship with "a great deal of liquor on board, so kept the company hot, damned hot; then all things went well again."

At first, all went well on the morning of November 22. The dawn encounter began with missteps by the Virginia sloops, which ran aground on sandbars that Blackbeard knew to avoid. Freed after tossing ballast and water casks overboard, the government sloops resumed pursuit and caught up with the Adventure Galley.

Blackbeard fought with his accustomed vigor, firing volleys of shot and old iron from a cannon, which killed the captain of the Lyme and dismantled the ship. The crew of the Pearl, undaunted, closed in on Blackbeard. According to newspaper accounts, the pirate taunted the sloop as it neared, calling the crews "cowardly puppies," then hoisted aloft a drinking glass (of "liquor" in some accounts, "wine" in others) to Lieutenant Robert Maynard of the Pearl, yelling, "Damnation seize my Soul if I give you Quarter, or take any from you." Maynard hollered back that he expected no quarter, nor would he give any.

Blackbeard leaped aboard Maynard's ship with ten of his men, assuming that his volleys had decimated the crew. He was in for a surprise. All but two of Maynard's men were hiding beneath the decks with weapons readied; when they swarmed onto the deck, Blackbeard and his men found themselves outnumbered. They fought fiercely. Maynard's fingers were wounded by a slash from Blackbeard; his men swarmed to his aid. One of Maynard's men, a stout Scottish Highlander, landed a blow that sliced Blackbeard on the neck. At this, the pirate called out, "Well done, lad!" The Scotsman wasn't finished. According to the account in the Boston News Letter, the Highlander...
replied, “If it not be well done, I’ll do it better.” With that, he gave him a second blow, which cut off his head, “laying it flat on his shoulder.” Blackbeard went down not only headless and lacerated with horrific gashes, but with five bullets in him.

Blackbeard’s head was suspended from the bowsprit of the captured Adventure Galley, which Maynard sailed back to Williamsburg, Virginia. He turned over the head, the sloop, and the pirate’s effects to his commander.

That wasn’t the end of Blackbeard’s head. After serving as an ornament suspended from a tall pole at the entrance to Hampton River, a grisly memento to would-be pirates, the head was taken down. The skull, it’s been widely reported, was later adorned with silver plate and crafted into the base for a bowl from which rum punch was served at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg. People still claim they know of people who knew of other people who once drank from it, but no one really knows what, at last, came of Blackbeard’s head.

If you come across a pirate and he bellows for “grog,” he is, in all likelihood, not a real pirate. Grog was invented well after the decline and fall of piracy, becoming an improbable symbol of order, rather than disorder, on the high seas. To understand how this happened, we must switch to the other side: the British navy ships that were the bane of pirates.

Rum was first officially doled out to British navy sailors in 1655, during the triumphant British assault on Jamaica. We do not know why, but we can surmise. Drinking water was exceedingly difficult to store on long ocean voyages, especially in the tropics: It would become algae-ridden and musty in its casks. Beer was a reasonable alternative: The modest alcohol content kept it from fouling, but the taste tended to go off, and sailors commonly groused about “stinking beer.” French brandy and Spanish wines, especially rosolio and mistela, were popular. (Sailors took to calling the latter “Miss Taylor.”) But these were difficult to provision with any consistency to ships stationed in the West Indies.

Then there was rum. This new spirit was increasingly abundant on the islands, especially in Antigua and Barbados, as more sugar planters imported stills to convert their waste molasses into a marketable commodity. Rum had the merit of remaining sweet almost indefinitely in a cask and improving in flavor over time as the wood of the cask tempered the harsher qualities of the sharp-edged distillate. It also had the advantage of being more potent than beer or wine and so required less room for storage than its lower-alcohol kin.

Another push to distribute rum aboard British navy ships came from the island planters, who envisioned the growing British navy as a lucrative market. By 1769, the Society of West India Merchants had organized themselves sufficiently to commission the writing and printing of three thousand copies of a booklet entitled An Essay on Spirituous Liquors, with Regard to Their Effects on Health, in Which the Comparative Wholesomeness of Rum and Brandy Are Particularly Considered. Rum, it should come as no surprise to hear, was found the more wholesome. A decade later, the naval provisioning office was officially authorized to contract for West Indian rum to replace brandy in ship stores. It was among the earliest, but by no means the last, instance of the sugar and rum industry organizing to ensure its economic good health. Island plantation owners could cooperate when need be, and they would do so most effectively in ensuring their own interests at the expense of the northern colonies in the run-up to the American Revolution.

An overly fertile imagination is not needed to understand the broader appeal of a midday dram of rum to the common seaman. The naval sailor was typically in his mid-twenties (the average age in the early eighteenth century was twenty-seven), and he was likely from a poor family, for the well-off tended not to embrace the great risks and endless unpleasantries of life at sea. The life of an eighteenth-century mariner could be appallingly bleak—stuck in cramped quarters with
unhygienic men, many of whom no doubt suffered from ailments of the lower gastrointestinal tract. A sailor’s private quarters consisted of just enough space below decks in which to sling a hammock, plus a small trunk in which to stash possessions. As Marcus Rediker has pointed out in his study of eighteenth-century seaman, life at sea was rarely a matter of man against nature. It was man against man aboard floating prisons. “Their isolation was communal,” he wrote. “They could escape neither their loneliness nor each other.”

Drink offered brief escape. The officers and crew would drink to relieve the tedium of shipboard life and to smooth over tensions. They drank to forget life between the decks, to warm up to their fellow crewmen, and to toast to the king, their wives, their mistresses. One seaman wrote in 1723 that he “never had any great fancy for fuddling,” but tippled more “for the love of my company than for the drink.” Also, rum was safe and relatively palatable, whereas the food on board was neither. “Good liquor to sailors,” wrote Woodes Rogers, an English privateer and later governor of the Bahamas, “is preferable to clothing.” In Tobias Smollett’s novel *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), rum was called “Necessity.” Nothing rang better in a sailor’s ear than the call to “splice the main brace”—the euphemism for doing out rum. This is attributed to the hard work needed to repair a parted main brace, or the stoutest of the running rigging, and seamen who accomplished the task were typically rewarded with a double ration of rum.

For a captain stationed in the West Indies in the early eighteenth century, balancing morale and discipline was made all the more difficult by the distribution of rum rations. Tipsy sailors were more likely to be injured—it’s difficult enough to scramble about the rigging in a galloping swell or blustery wind when stone sober, never mind while drunk. And rum could inflate the passions and cause smoldering frictions between seamen to combust.

Rum-induced crises did not go unnoticed by Admiral Edward Vernon of the British Royal Navy. The admiral was well educated, much admired by his men, and possessed of an uncommon competence. (Lawrence Washington, George Washington’s half brother, named his Virginia estate after him, and George kept the name Mount Vernon when he inherited the plantation.) Vernon served in the West Indies between 1698 and 1712, commanding a sixty-gun ship, and by 1739 had been elevated to vice admiral. That happened to be the year that England declared war on Spain—the so-called War of Jenkins’ Ear—which was triggered when the master of a British merchant vessel had his ear cut off by a vengeful Spanish captain.

Vernon regarded rum as a competitor for his men’s affections, noting that its charms often led to men permanently abandoning their posts. Vernon wrote in a letter to the Admiralty that some five hundred seamen had vanished from Jamaica “since being in my command; which I believe to have all been seduced out and gone home with the homeward bound trade, through the temptations of high wages and 30 gallons of rum, and being generally conveyed drunk on board their ships from the punch houses where they are seduced.”

Vernon assailed the “pernicious custom of the seamen drinking their allowance of rum in drams, and often at once.” This resulted in “many fatal effects to their morals as well as their health, which are visibly impaired thereby.” What’s more, rum, quaffed straight, caused a “stupefying [of] their rational qualities, which makes them heedlessly slaves to every passion.” Distributing copious amounts of potent rum, Vernon realized, was not a formula for building a navy that would dominate the maritime world.

The alcoholic content of early rum is unknown to us because it was unknown to those who consumed it. Not until 1816 was the Sikes hydrometer invented, which made it possible to measure the percentage of alcohol in liquor. Before that, alcohol content was determined by mixing the spirit with a few grains of gunpowder and then subjecting the concoction to the focused rays of the sun under a magnifier. If the gunpowder managed to ignite but the liquid didn’t flare up, this was said to be “proof” of its proper alcoholic content.
What was Vernon to do? Eliminating the rum ration would likely give rise to mutinies or, at the least, a sullen crankiness among seamen who had learned to live from tot to tot. So Vernon fashioned an alternative strategy: He would dilute the rum.

In an order issued at Port Royal in 1740, Vernon called for rum served to naval crews to be “mixed with the proportion of a quart of water to every half pint of rum,” resulting in a concoction that was one part rum to four parts water. To ensure that the effects on the men could be reduced, Vernon decreed that this diluted rum was to be served over two sessions daily, rather than at once, as had been the custom. Between ten in the morning and noon, the first tot was to be diluted, and the second between four and six in the afternoon. Because the mixing of rum and water left itself open to shortchanging by dishonest pursers—and the general belief among seamen was that very pursers was dishonest—Vernon’s edict required that mixing occur on deck, “and in the presence of the Lieutenant of the Watch, he is to take particular care to see that the men are not defrauded in aving their full allowance of rum.” (The writer Edward Ward reserved a special wrath for the pursers: “The worse Liquor he keeps, the more he brews his own Profit,” Ward groused, and “he shall draw more Gain from wretched gripe-gut Stuff, in one Forenoon, than a dozen Ale-wives from all their Taps, on a Day of Thanksgiving.”)

The order for diluted rum was circulated throughout the fleet, and the new drink made its way from the West India station throughout the Royal Navy over the next two decades. By 1756, the daily distribution of watered rum was codified in the Admiralty’s naval code.

The new, less-potent ration needed a name. It was no longer rum, and it no longer had the kick to be called kill-devil. An ingenious solution presented itself to some anonymous seaman. Vernon had a knack for wearing a coat made of a material called “grogram,” a woven fabric stiffened and weatherproofed with gum. Vernon’s nickname among sailors was “Old Grogram,” and so his new rum was dubbed “grog.” The name stuck.

In grog, one also finds evidence of a proto-West Indian cocktail, an early precursor to the daiquiri and the mojito. Vernon’s 1740 order to distribute grog rather than “neat” rum included a provision that allowed crewmen to exchange their salt and bread allotment for “sugar and limes to make grog more palatable to them.” Although the order was likely issued with the sailor’s palate, rather than his health, in mind, it had an unexpectedly tonic effect. Scurvy had been devastating sailors for years with bleeding gums, sore joints, loose teeth, and a slow healing of wounds, but it was still a great medical mystery. Rum was issued as a preventative, but later experiments, starting in 1747, identified the cause as a deficiency of ascorbic acid—found in citrus fruit, among other things. By 1753, the Scottish surgeon James Lind had proved that a regimen of juices from lemons, limes, or oranges would keep scurvy away. Two years later, the naval regulations called for a half-ounce of lemon or lime juice per day “to be mixed with grog or wine.” English sailors became known as limeys. And so Vernon, by luck or instinct, was well ahead of the movement toward citrus.

Over time, the dispensing of grog became more fixed and ceremonial. The pseudonymous Jack Nastyface (a common nickname for a cook’s assistant) wrote in 1805 that the time around noon was “the pleasantest . . . of the day,” since that’s when the “piper is called to play Nancy Dawson or some other lively tune, a well known signal that the grog is ready to be served out.” The purser would haul to the open deck a premeasured portion, with each of the crew allotted one-half cup of rum per session. The mixing water would be tested to ensure it wasn’t salty. If it passed muster, the grog would be blended and promptly doled out, often to the cook, who would in turn distribute it to his messmates below decks. The ritual would be repeated in the late afternoon.

Even diluted, the grog ration was still equivalent to about five cocktails per day, assuming an ounce and a half of rum per cocktail. That’s an agreeable amount by any standard. Perhaps too agreeable.
As the navy became more professional and the temperance movement gained a foothold, grog rations fell further into disfavor. In 1823, the ration was cut in half, and then halved again in 1850—effectively slashing the rum allotment by three-quarters in less than three decades. The nineteenth-century writer and sailor Richard Dana, author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, groused that cutting back rations was a curious way to promote the idea that "temperance is their friend," since it "takes from them what they always had, and gives them nothing in place." In fact, the navy did provide some compensatory reward, often greater rations of tea, cocoa, and meat, as well as a token increase in pay.

And there was other good news: As the quantity of rum diminished, its quality improved. The navy's longtime blender and supplier of rum, E D & F Man, decided to appeal to the more discerning tastes of officers, and British naval rum developed an almost cultish following among navy men. The exact blend codified by the Admiralty in 1810 was a highly guarded secret. (It was, broadly, a blend of heavy rums from Guyana and Trinidad, leavened with three lighter rums.)

The British custom of serving up daily tots persisted into the twentieth century, a feral habit that resisted eradication even as it fell out of favor with crewmen. By the 1950s, only about a third of a hundred thousand British sailors opted for their daily grog rations. As navy operations become more complex and computers and advanced weapons systems demanded more mental acuity than hauling tar buckets, questions surfaced about the wisdom of distributing rum to sailors on duty. The advent of the Breathalyzer didn't help: A British newspaper unsportingly pointed out that sailors could be legally drunk after consuming their allotted grog rations.

By 1970, it was hard to ignore the clamor to eliminate the Royal Navy's daily rum ration. The House of Commons debated the matter; the secretary of the navy, sensing a looming defeat, lobbied for just compensation. In lieu of rum rations, a lump sum of £2.7 million was donated to the Sailor's Fund, which paid for such things as excursions for sailors in foreign ports and improved equipment for discotheques on naval bases.

July 31, 1970, is known in British naval circles as Black Tot Day—that last day rum was officially rationed out to sailors. On British navy ships around the globe, sailors wore black armbands and attended mock funerals. Among the more elaborate affairs was a ceremony aboard the HMS *Fife*, a guided-missile destroyer then in port at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. It was the closest ship to the international date line and thus the last in the Royal Navy to serve rum. The crewmen mustered on the top deck, tossed back their rations, and heaved their glasses overboard, along with the whole rum barrel. The historic moment was marked with a twenty-one-gun salute. And so ended a 325-year tradition.

Naval rum had a second, somewhat debased life. In 1980, the Admiralty Board voted to release the secret formula for the blend to Charles Tobias, an American entrepreneur who believed that it would find a ready market among retired sailors and a public intrigued by its lore. In exchange, Tobias pledged to pay ongoing royalties from rum sales into the Sailor's Fund. The rum was called Pusser's, slang for "purser." This heavy, flavorful spirit is still manufactured and sold throughout much of the world.

**There is one** further matter to address. Where did the most famous rum-related phrase come from, and what does it mean? You know the one: "Yo-ho-ho and..." Well, if you don't know how it goes, flip to the cover of this book. The phrase goes back to at least August 1881, the month that a thirty-one-year-old writer settled in with his young family at a holiday cottage in Braemar, Scotland. His name was Robert Louis Stevenson, and his fame at the time had as much to do with his family— noted lighthouse keepers—as for anything he had written. One stormy, rain-lashed afternoon, Stevenson came upon his twelve-year-old stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, drawing a fanciful map of a make-believe island.
“Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the Devil had done for the rest
Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!”

It’s a dark and odd little rhyme, evidently composed by the author—although some have speculated that it was based on a traditional sea chantey, now lost. Although it doesn’t make much sense, it fired the public imagination, becoming the nineteenth-century equivalent of an Abba song, something that becomes lodged in one’s brain quite against one’s will. Ten years later, Young E. Allison, the American editor of a trade journal called the *Insurance Field*, stretched those lines out into a much longer narrative poem entitled “On Board the Derelict.” A decade after that, Allison’s poem became the basis of a Broadway play and anchored itself in the popular imagination. To this day if you say “yo-ho-ho” to any native English speaker, the odds are that they’ll complete it.

Pirates and rum would never be separated again.