

# Captain Phillips (2013)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours 14 min.

Our Advisories (1-10): Violence 4; Language 2; Sex-Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*Incline your ear to me;  
rescue me speedily.  
Be a rock of refuge for me,  
a strong fortress to save me.*

*Psalm 31.2*

“Based on a true story,” director Paul Greengrass’s film starts out calmly, but soon has us leaning forward as the suspense increases with the taut action. Screenwriter Billy Ray’s adaptation of the book by Richard Phillips and Stephen Talty, *A Captain’s Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALs and Dangerous Days at Sea*, is guaranteed to hold your interest, even though you know the ultimate outcome already. It is the battle of wits between two determined men that distinguishes this at-sea thriller.

Mr. Greengrass has said he wanted to make more than just a thriller, but also show the contrast between the haves and have-nots, To a limited degree he does at the beginning: we see Captain Phillips (Tom Hanks) on an April day in 2009 leaving a comfortable Vermont home with his wife Andrea (Catherine Keener) to go to the Burlington airport where he will take a plane to Oman to join his ship and crew. On the coast of Somalia Muse (Barkhad Abdi), a thin man clad in worn clothing, looks over a gang of Somalis eager to be chosen for his crew of pirates. He in turn is under orders from a local warlord to capture something big. Later, in a brief conversation with Phillips, Muse will explain that he switched

from fishing to piracy because non-Africans had over-fished his home waters. There are virtually no legal jobs available in the failed country's slack economy—according to a 2012 UN Development Programme the unemployment rate for men between the ages of 15 and 64 is 54%, and that for youth 14 to 29 is 67%!

In the Oman port Captain Phillips inspects his American-owned ship, a cargo container, *The Maersk Alabama*, and then puts out to sea, bound for Mombasa, Kenya. The ship is transporting 2400 tons of cargo, including relief supplies of food and medicines. The captain briefs his crew about the danger of the area they will traverse, about two hundred miles off the Somali coast, and puts them through a practice drill. This soon turns into the real thing when on their radar screen Phillips sees two blips heading toward them. The blips are two motorized skiffs launched from a decrepit trawler serving as the mother ship. As they speed along, the small craft are soon visible through binoculars. The chase over the next few hours is not as speedy as the careening car chases of fictional thrillers, but it is just as suspenseful, with the unarmed merchantmen at first fending off their attackers with their fire hoses. The little boats almost capsize in the large waves created by the ship, so the worried leader in one of them turns back. Muse gives up only when the old motor of his boat breaks down.

With the motor repaired back on their mother ship, Muse resumes the chase the next day, this time succeeding in boarding their prey. Capt. Phillips has ordered the crew to hide in the engine room, so he and his bridge crew wait for the arrival of their captors. The machine gun toting pirates shoot away the various locks of the doors and rush in. Muse, the only pirate speaking English, says, "Captain, relax, nobody gets hurt. No Al Qaeda here. Just business." Thus begins the battle of wits between the older Phillips and the ex-fisherman. Keeping his calm, the Captain tries several

ruses, and at one point the crew members in the engine room manage to seize one of the pirates when his bare-footed companion steps on the glass shards they have spread before the doorway and he has to retreat to the bridge for medical aid. Also, Captain Phillips tries to get Muse to settle for the \$30,000 stored in the safe, but the pirate refuses. The ship, cargo, and lives of the crew are worth millions, and he will settle for nothing less because he knows his warlord will punish him severely if he accepts such a paltry offer.

In all the scenes the brilliance of Tom Hanks is matched by that of the nonprofessional Barkhad Abdi, leader of the group. His looks and his voice convince us that he would do anything to get what he is after. Also quite good are the other non-professional actors, Faysal Ahmed as the hot-headed Najee, and Barkhad Abdirahman as Bilal who is the nervous driver of the enclosed lifeboat in which they hope to make it back to their home with Phillips as their hostage. (The three actors were found among the large Somali population in Minnesota.)

Compared to the sequences shot on the huge 500+ foot *Alabama*, those filmed in the confined space of the lifeboat are claustrophobic inducing. Muse has had to contend not only with the various lies and ruses of Captain Phillips, but the also with the aggressive Najee, who shouts and screams, often questioning his leader's acts. The latter almost loses control of himself when a US Navy destroyer and helicopters show up.

There follows the tense negotiations with the military, the Naval captain under orders not to allow the lifeboat to reach Somalia. Captain Phillips complicates matters for his captors by managing to dive overboard. Even though he is recaptured, this no doubt affects Muse as he argues with Najee whether or not to trust the Naval negotiator who has told them that the elders of his village are aboard and want to meet with him. The intense ending induces feelings of relief mixed with sadness. Anyone with half a heart will have begun to extend at least a small measure of sympathy to the villains because the

film has made it clear that they too are victims of a worldwide system of haves and have-nots. They are not the cardboard faceless stooges that audiences cheer the death of in the usual thriller. Surely there was rejoicing in heaven over the release from captivity of the American, but also there must have been some tears for those, who as Phillips in one of his pleas says (in effect, as I don't recall the exact words), "You don't have to die!"

As with another survival film *Gravity*, this film is a secular work apparently written and directed by two men who would not think of praying, even under duress. Their depiction of the Americans is understandable, with recent studies showing that up to 20% of Americans would answer a religion poll as "None of the above." But the depiction of Somalis who do not mention the Prophet or Allah is not excusable. Of course, this is a minor qualm. What happened to Captain Phillips is not only extraordinary: he himself is extraordinary—from the calm way he handles himself on the ship trying to save the lives of his crew; to his sorrowful concern in the lifeboat that his captors were needlessly throwing their lives away; to the last scene when, safe aboard the destroyer, he lets out all the feelings he has held inside, this movie provides us with not only two hours plus of thrills, but an occasion to admire the resourcefulness of the human spirit.