

Episode 34 - By the Vanquished

There are – at the least – dozens of works written about the life of Admiral Sir Henry Morgan. Everything from hard factual academic history to wildly inaccurate romance novels. He's influenced characters like Captain Blood, become the face of many Caribbean resorts and even become the mascot for a brand of rum familiar to college students the world over.

He's probably the second most well known real world pirate, after Blackbeard. All this because a surgeon who knew how to write happened to be on two of his voyages, and held a grudge against his old boss.

But Alexander Exquemelin, as biased and inaccurate as he was, wrote a compelling narrative about the Admiral. And it sold. Every other Admiral of the Jamaica station, even those who raided up and down the Spanish main, aren't really remembered. The governors of Jamaica, whose correspondence we still have in many cases, aren't really remembered.

Now, Morgan was more successful than any of those others. He sailed farther, commanded more men, raided bigger cities. But more than anything, I think we remember him because we all love a good story. And Captain Morgan delivers, but we only know it today because of a Dutch ship's surgeon.

There are dozens, even hundreds, of fascinating tales of Caribbean piracy – maybe even more than that – which we'll never know. We won't know them because there was no one to write them down. What got me thinking about this was a captain named Francis Witherborn.

Nearly every biography of Henry Morgan mentions him. His name is in dozens of books at least. But only as a footnote, a brief aside. He was Morgan's shipmate on the voyage to London.

I talked last time about the conversations they must have had which we'll never know. I'd still love to hear them, but upon reaching England Witherborn's story fades away. Morgan, a landowner and pillar of the community, was given a mattress in a wealthy manor. Witherborn... well, we don't know. Not exactly.

See, he was a nobody. Just a scoundrel from far away with no family or friends, and he didn't have anyone writing books about him. You know that old saying, history is written by the victors?

This is Episode 34 – By the Vanquished

Today I'd like to talk about the real people that fought at Panama. I'd like to tell the stories of the men on the ground, marching and fighting and dying. Tales from the women and children trapped inside the walls, or on the run. Tales of the Amerindian guerrillas and their ambushes against the Buccaneer army.

Unfortunately, those stories are hard to come by. They were all a bit busy at the time, and nobody thought to jot down how they were feeling. Thankfully Exquemelin wrote his account or we'd know far less than we do today, but what I wouldn't give to have one journal from one man on that voyage. We'll never know the name of most of those that sailed with Morgan.

See, a few years after Panama, when the dust had settled, a new crop of pirates will emerge from the ashes. We know their commanders names, and a fair amount about them.

What we don't know is what they were up to before their names became infamous. They didn't just pop up one day on the docks at Tortuga, all 'hello! I'm just a poor lad from Bristol here to seek my fortune. Mind if I take command of your ship?'

No, they worked their way up through the ranks of the Brethren of the Coast, sailing and fighting and navigating. Some of them steered clear of Morgan and his crazy schemes, but 2,000 men marched on Panama, most of the buccaneers in the Caribbean at the time.

But what we actually know about most of them is nil. Not their name or their nationality, not where they were born or how they die.

For the few we do know something about, well, unless you're Admiral Morgan there isn't much. For example, that Captain Francis Witherborne? He was probably at Panama, but we can't be sure. He wasn't mentioned by Exquemelin, nor was he listed as a captain on the list of ships and captains in the official report.

But still, he was probably there. However, despite being mentioned in all those books about captain Morgan, all that's said of him in any record goes as follows:

From the Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America & The West Indies vol 7:

March 20 Jamaica *Minutes of a Council of War held aboard H.M.S. Assistance. For the trial of Captain Francis Witherborn for piracy. That having notice of the Peace, he took command of the bark Charity to continue privateering, that he consorted with Yhallahs and fled when chased by the Assistance; that he took a Spanish canoa, and his mate Thomas Wright took another canoa which is still out privateering; that there were articles of consortship between Witherborn and one Captain De Mangle, a Frenchman, obliging each other to continue privateering; and that he would not have surrendered if not forced. To which Witherborn only made this defence, that his men governed him, that his mate Wright had greater influence over them than he had, and that the articles were only to blind the Frenchman. Upon consideration of the whole matter all were of opinion that having committed piracy and broken the articles of peace, Captain Witherborn ought to suffer death according to the law.*

4 April 1672 – Jamaica

“Orders and instructions from Sir Thos. Lynch to Capt. John Keene, of H.M.S. Welcome: To receive on board Coll. Henry Morgan as his Majesty's prisoner: to receive from the captain of the Assistance, Capt. Francis Witherborn, and keep him prisoner until he receive his Majesty's orders.”

20 August 1672 – Whitehall (in response to the taking of a Spanish ship)

“his Majesty has great reason to believe that this violence has not been done by any of his subjects of Jamaica, but by some of those privateers who have refused to submit themselves, and take not only Spanish vessels but English also, and that her Catholic Majesty may be assured of the King's resolution to cause the Peace to be observed with all strictness in America, and in pursuance of his Majesty's commands the Governor of Jamaica has taken one Capt. Witherborne, condemned him as a pirate, and sent him here, where he remains a close prisoner.”

And that's it. He was tried, condemned as a pirate, transferred to the assistance alongside Sir Henry, and kept as a prisoner. That's his story, as far as we can accurately know. But can you imagine what his life must have been like? What a book or movie based on him would be?

Imagine it. He was a poor boy. Maybe an orphan. Or, no, born to a violent drunken father. His mother was kind and loving, but died when he was very young. To escape his father's rages he ran from home at 10. He made his way to the docks, begging for food and stealing what he needed. For three years he lived that way, sleeping rough and eating what he could scrounge. He'd grown big for his age though, and quick witted, so

he soon caught the eye of a captain, who made him ship's boy on his vessel.

The ship was a slaver, bound for the Americas which young Francis had always dreamed of. But the journey was a nightmare. He felt for the slaves and the captain was a cruel master.

When they reached Barbados Francis jumped ship and ran for town. He went back to his life of stealing and scraping, and before long he fell in with a rough crowd. They drank at the local taverns and robbed men sleeping off their own drink.

One night a group of hard looking men came in with swords and muskets, and ordered a round of drinks. They drank and laughed and sang and fondled the barmaids, but no one seemed to mind. They stepped wary though.

One man, drinking and carousing a shade less than the others approached Francis and his mates. He bought them all drinks and sat down to chat. He was quartermaster of a ship in the harbor, and he was looking for men. They were privateers, and it was hard work, but paid better than working a merchantman.

So Francis found himself on board their vessel, scrubbing the decks and training under a gunner. He was a big lad after all.

In Tortuga it became clear that they weren't really privateers at all, just buccaneers with a French commission. Francis didn't mind. He earned good pay and had a say on board.

So Francis roved. For years he sailed and attacked ships and raided villages. Even venturing into the gulf to attack Campeche alongside Captains Diego and the Brazilian.

Then word came to Tortuga of a raid, but not just any raid. The biggest the West Indies had ever seen. Captain Morgan had called the ships in, and word was they were going to take Havana, or maybe Cartagena.

Francis was quartermaster now, with two dozen men under him. He'd fought across the Spanish main, and seen hard times and fortunes. But Morgan? The man was a legend. His raids were the biggest and richest in the world. Even bigger than l'Ollonais.

So his ship sailed with Morgan to attack Panama. It wasn't exactly glorious though. It was hard marching on the main, and hungry work. Men were getting sick and starving even before they were attacked.

They took the city though. They expected to be rich men and retire, but in the end they

received only L10 silver. It was an insult. Then Morgan and his cronies sailed back to Port Royal.

The ship held an election there at San Lorenzo, and they made him captain. He'd always done well by them, even when their captain – and Morgan – led them to disaster.

But the boys were greedy. They felt robbed by Morgan and wanted to take every ship they encountered, without returning to Tortuga for a commission. It was foolhardy and dangerous, but everyone had a vote, and the men refused to return home empty-handed.

Mostly it well. They took canoes and two barques. They took logwood and dye and silver. Then, on the horizon, sails. They were large, and looked English cut. Francis warned of the danger, but his men saw only gold on board.

It was a frigate out of Port Royal, and carrying soldiers and navy men. So, Francis was captured, put in chains and tried in the harbor of Port Royal. Then, in the hold of the ship that would take him back to England to face his fate, walked “Admiral” Henry Morgan.

Of course, none of that actually happened. I just made it all up. Or, then again, maybe it did. We don't know, and we can't know at all conclusively. But the aftermath of Panama saw hundreds and hundreds of men with stories that sounded something like that.

I can't tell those stories though. The only stories I can tell belong to the few whom we do know about.

For example. Do you remember, like forever ago, when we talked about Diego the Mulatto? The young man that sailed the bay of Campeche seeking revenge for his ill treatment at the hands of the Spanish?

If not, well, he was a young man that sailed the bay of Campeche seeking revenge for his ill treatment at the hands of the Spanish. Now that happened back in 1633. But it's very possible he was actually at Panama and sailed as a captain under Morgan.

Now that's 38 years after he went on the account. If we generously say he was 15 when he left to go buccaneering, well that was 1630. Three years to get a ship and a crew together, then attack Campeche. If that's the case he would have been at least 56 years old, and almost certainly older.

But there was a Diego with Morgan on his voyage to Portobello that also Captained the San Juan at Panama. Exquemelin called him the Pirate of Campeche – which was our Diego's hunting ground, and he was referred to by a first name only.

Not typical of even pirate Captains, but the norm for bastards born to a slave with no last name.

See, it's this last name problem that confuses the issue. There was our Diego el Mulatto active in the 1630s. There was also another active in the 1640s, and finally a Diego that sailed with l'Ollonais and Morgan. They could have been three separate men, but I choose to believe they were all one very talented, lucky and long lived pirate. And some historians agree with me, or at least accept the possibility.

Regardless, we do know the fate of the Captain Diego who sailed on Panama. Probably. He called himself Diego Grillo by then and sailed out of Tortuga in the early 1670s. I'll quote Bennerson Little, a U.S Navy SEAL who writes about pirate military tactics.

“Pirates Pillaged Plundered P83p2”

See, that last bit about killing only the Spaniards aboard, that's what most strongly suggests that's the very same man that sacked Campeche in a quest for vengeance against Spain exactly 40 years earlier.

But Diego that was the last of Diego's exploits. There aren't any verifiable accounts, as with most of Diego's life, but two months after taking his last Spanish prize he was captured and ended his life at the end of a Spanish gibbet.

Now Diego was captured alongside another buccaneer, one that I've never mentioned despite being neck deep in many of the raids we've talked about over the last few months. His name was Jan Lucas (Loo-cosh)

And his story, well, honestly it's better than the made up story I told earlier. He was born in Amsterdam in 1644. As a teenager he took a job on a Zeeland fluyt headed for St. Kitts.

He worked on merchantmen crisscrossing the leeward islands for years. In 1666 he was at Barbados with a convoy. The convoy was bound for St. Kitts with relief supplies when they were struck by a hurricane.

His fluyt was one of only two ships to survive the storm, limping her way to Monserrat. In October he joined another convoy, this time more successful, carrying women and children and slaves away from the war to the peace of Jamaica. From there he joined a logwood cutting expedition, which was one of Port Royal's more profitable ventures.

His ship was waylaid on their return voyage however, by none other than the infamous

Francois l'Ollonais.

Now, of course l'Ollonais took the logwood for himself, but Jan and his companions had nothing to worry about. They were logwood cutters from Port Royal after all.

They joined him. For nine months Jan Lucas sailed with his crew under l'Ollonais. Jan himself might not have had much experience buccaneering, but he was an accomplished sailor, and made a name for himself.

They took Spanish vessels, saw l'Ollonais commit unspeakable atrocities, and made themselves a pretty penny.

Unfortunately they would lose it. This was the voyage on which l'Ollonais ran afoul of a storm and wrecked at Cabo Gracia a Dios. Here he and Jan Lucas parted ways.

L'Ollonais went to be eaten and Jan built a craft and hugged the Mosquito coast until he came upon some logwood cutters that gave him a lift back to Jamaica.

He arrived home to Port Royal in 1669. A mere few months later, the Spanish attack Jamaica, and Governor Modyford gives Morgan the right to issue letters of Marque.

One of these went to Jan Lucas, who was known as a brave and reliable captain. He was given a brigantine that sailed as auxiliary to Morgan's own flagship, *The Satisfaction*.

After Panama, with his pockets feeling a little light, he put to sea with Captain Diego and set sail for the Gulf where they raided the Yucatan coast. About a month before Diego was captured, Jan Lucas was taken, and hung on that same gibbet to await his friend.

Now these three men were far from the only buccaneers to end their days at the end of a rope. Their stories aren't even particularly extraordinary. They're almost typical really. See, England and Spain both were doing all they could to combat piracy in the days following Panama, and they became exceedingly good at it.

But some men just couldn't go back to a life of legitimate labor. They didn't know any other way of life than buccaneering, and so they kept at it, and it killed them.

But there were other types of stories as well. Stories that began at Panama, and continued on, that didn't end swinging at the end of a hangman's noose. And yet, these stories, in their own way, had nearly as tragic an end. Next time we'll continue our look at the aftermath of Panama through the eyes of some of these lesser known pirate captains like John Bennett, Jan Erasmus Reyining, and Jelles Lecat.