

## **The Navy's Campaign against the West Indian Pirates**

Between 1790 and 1830, the area encompassed by the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea was one of the most troubled and disordered regions of the world. Political and military turmoil generated by the Napoleonic Wars and the Spanish-American revolutions had virtually eliminated effective government in many of the islands and mainland colonies bordering these waters. Because government officials were either too weak or lacked the resources to maintain law and order on land or on the high seas, piracy and illegal privateering activities in the region flourished.

The number and violence of piratical attacks on American shipping in the West Indies had reached such heights by 1819, that the U.S. Congress was prompted to pass "An Act to Protect the Commerce of the United States, and Crime of Piracy." Signed into law on 3 March of that year, this statute authorized the President to employ the Navy for the protection of American merchantmen and the suppression of piracy. This legislation resulted in the creation of the West Indian Squadron, the Navy's first fighting force dedicated to combating piracy.

A succession of War of 1812 naval heroes—James Biddle, David Porter, and Lewis Warrington—commanded the squadron between 1822 and 1826. These officers had to overcome the

intransigence of local officials, the dangers of an unhealthy climate, and diplomatic restrictions that limited, and at times frustrated, their efforts to contend with a well-armed, elusive foe. Despite a sustained vigorous campaign, the West Indian Squadron's efforts to combat piracy achieved only partial success. It wasn't until the Squadron received the cooperation of the Royal Navy and local governmental officials that the pirate menace was finally eliminated in the West Indies.

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