

The Good

# PIRATE

BY AMY SCHOON

In a life reminiscent of a movie script, a swashbuckling UI alumnus fights for justice on the high seas.

What do you call a man who surreptitiously boards stolen sea freighters under cover of darkness, guiding a motley crew of island natives and sea-weathered sailors to steal the ship back for the good guys? A man who hires witch doctors to help him escape? A man who has spent his 59 years as a ship captain, scuba diver, aircraft pilot, flight instructor, surveyor, attorney, writer, musician, and even a high school English teacher?

He must be a fictional character, the stuff of tall tales and action adventure, a Renaissance man larger than life and full of surprises. Is he a Pirate of the Caribbean? A modern-day Indiana Jones?

F. Max Hardberger could be a character created by a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Instead, Hardberger, 72MFA, is the workshop graduate.

Born in 1948 in Louisiana, Hardberger always longed for excitement, immersing himself in sea adventures and mysteries. His real-life childhood actually started out more painful than thrilling: small for his age, he often found his face at the knuckle-end of a fist.

"I wasn't exactly the hero," recalls the Lacombe, Louisiana, resident. "If you wanted to impress girls, I was the guy you'd beat up."

To save the scrappy teen from tormentors, and from his own failing plots for revenge, his parents sent him to a military high school in Tennessee, where he learned discipline and garnered respect.

The son of teachers, he always assumed he would follow the same career path. He graduated from the University of New Orleans in only three years, with a

**The sometimes murky and often dangerous world of international freight shipping provided an outlet for Max Hardberger's hankering for adventure.**





degree in English. Then he taught high school for a year. At a girlfriend's insistence, he applied to the Writers' Workshop, then promptly forgot about it. Adventure beckoned, so he procured an old school bus and drove south. "I wanted to get out into the world, experience cultures, learn about people, absorb whatever I could," says Hardberger, who was in central Mexico when workshop administrators tracked him down. He trekked that clunky bus to Iowa in the summer of 1970 and lived out of it at the Coralville Reservoir. When the frigid Midwestern weather became unbearable for the bayou boy, he moved into a house with some buddies he'd met through writing critiques, local bars, and the anti-war counterculture scene.

Although his writing style and interests differed from other workshop participants, he was accepted by peers and instructors. "The action-adventure writing I loved wasn't the sort of tortured soul-searching that was in vogue at Iowa," admits Hardberger with a laugh.

After graduating from the workshop in 1972, Hardberger wasn't ready to settle down. He traveled to Mexico and Belize, hung out with friends, played drums. He continued sailing, a passion he had picked up in college, and eventually parlayed that interest into work in the offshore oil fields. He earned his captain's license in 1976. Next, he conquered the air, becoming an aircraft pilot. By 1984, he was towing banners, crop dusting, and teaching others.

"Why do I do it all?" Hardberger says. "Sheer desperation. Unfortunately, I'm easily bored. I start feeling restless and want to go somewhere else, do something else."

Asked whether it's exciting, he replies dryly, "Most of my life is major bouts of boredom, interspersed with moments of panic."

For the past 16 years Hardberger has used his sea legs and street smarts in the ship extraction business as a repo man for ocean freighters. He happened into the business in 1991 while he was managing freighters for a Miami wastepaper exporter.

His employer had chartered one of its freighters to a steel hauling company. When the company seized the vessel through a well-placed bribe, Hardberger flew to Venezuela, sweet-talking court officials and convincing members of the ship's crew to help him repossess the hijacked freighter. Hardberger and his followers escaped from house arrest, made their way over barbed wire fencing, and snuck onboard the unguarded ship to cut it loose, fire the engines, and slip away.

Soon after, Hardberger and a friend started his current venture called Vessel Extractions, a company that specializes in dealing with seedy sorts in lawless ports around the world. Some of these antagonists—real-life pirates, unscrupulous businesspeople, and government officials—are involved in civil unrest, political rebellion, corruption, gun-running, and drug-smuggling.

The dangers are real—guns, knives, hired muscle. In some countries, getting caught could lead to several years in jail before a case even got to trial. Then he could end up with a sentence of 20 years of more—assuming he'd made it to trial alive. So why does Hardberger take such extreme risks?

"The easy answer is that I do it for the money. But it really makes me mad when innocents get victimized," he fumes. "A lot of times when we seize a ship, the owner hasn't even paid the crew in weeks. These people have families starving back home. It makes me feel good, acting on the side of the right. I like seeing justice done."

One of the most sensational retrievals came in 2004 in Haiti, after a ship's owner died and payments on its \$3.3 million mortgage stopped. The mortgage holder attempted to seize the ship, but the group chartering it went into cahoots with corrupt officials and took ownership in a sham auction.

Posing as a customer wanting to buy fuel on the black market, Hardberger lured some of the ship's guards to shore and into the clutches of off-duty Haitian police he had recruited. Then, the ship repo man and his crew boarded the ship with torches to cut the anchor chains. Fearing that the port manager would rat him out, Hardberger hired a witch doctor to ensure the only local area with cell phone reception was off-limits to superstitious locals. His ploy worked, and he chalked up another successful extraction.

During the time he has been in the vessel extraction game, traveling from the war-torn jungles of Central America to Russia, Hardberger estimates he has gone on about a dozen such dangerous, dark-of-night recaptures. Even though he insists that most of the work and negotiations to retrieve a freighter involve boring phone calls and paperwork, the *L.A. Times* featured him in March 2007. He also starred in an episode of the Learning Channel's *Repo Men: Stealing for a Living*.

This month, he began filming a History Channel reality TV program set in the Caribbean that follows his exploits as a freighter superintendent, handling cargo disputes, interactions with local officials, and other aspects of everyday life in some of the world's hellhole ports.

As if that's not exciting enough, top Hollywood producer Frank Marshall—the man behind the Indiana Jones and Jason Bourne films—has obtained the rights to Hardberger's life story and aims to turn Captain Max into a big-screen legend.

Ironically, if you ask Hardberger who should portray him in the movie, he's stumped. He doesn't watch contemporary movies; instead, he's partial to post-World War II Italian cinema, books by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, and a cunning game of chess.

adventures. Or perhaps, like many retirees, he'll opt for a place in the sun.

Of course, Hardberger's idea of an island retreat is Haiti, where he owns property and has many friends. He devotes much time and energy to the poverty-stricken, dangerous island, trying to help clean up the corruption that, in many cases, makes his day job necessary in the first place.

Wherever Hardberger goes and whatever he does next, it's guaranteed to make a hell of a story. Just not the kind you'd probably find in the Writers' Workshop library.

**Amy Schoon** is a freelance writer in Iowa City. Any comments about this article? E-mail [tina-owen@uiowa.edu](mailto:tina-owen@uiowa.edu).

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**Max Hardberger, 72MFA**

Insisting that he's an "anti-pirate," Hardberger refuses to work for anyone he considers to be on the wrong side of the law. Despite his dangerous line of work, he tries to avoid violence. He doesn't carry a weapon, and no, he's never killed anyone.

Still, he's feared for his life more times than he cares to admit. He might shrug off the praise for landing a Hollywood movie deal, but he grudgingly acknowledges that his life can seem a bit dramatic. "When you're in the dark, scaling 40 feet up the side of a ship, I guess that is sort of swashbuckling," he says. "Even if you don't have a knife in your mouth."

While his life may read like a tall tale, it hasn't always been storybook sweet. Dedication to his jobs meant Hardberger wasn't always around for his wife, daughter, and son. His marriage lasted 23 years, until he and his wife divorced in 2004. In June 2005, his 20-year-old daughter, Karla, died from an undetected congenital heart problem. Later that year, Hurricane Katrina wiped out nearly all his possessions—including his Honda Shadow 1100 motorcycle, his prized drum sets, and a personal library of 6,000 books.

Two days after the storm, Hardberger returned to New Orleans to help rescue stranded ships.

All the buzz about telling his story on screen makes him itch to do more writing of his own (over the years, he's produced a number of fiction and non-fiction works). He's closing in on 60, so perhaps he'll retire and pen some more

**A strict personal code of honor guides Max Hardberger in his risky work reclaiming stolen ships.**



PHOTO: MAGNUS SUNDHOLM