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High-Seas Repo Man Max Hardberger

By William Lee Adams



Max Hardberger on a dock in Mobile, Ala., in 2009

In sea ports the world over, a small bribe paid to a local official allows "white collar pirates" to seize ships from their legitimate owners. To recover the multimillion-dollar vessels, aggrieved ship owners call on Max Hardberger, a maritime lawyer turned high-seas repossession man. In his memoir *Seized*, which came out in the U.S. on April 6 and in Britain on July 1, he recounts his dangerous battles with Haitian rebels, Caribbean pirates and even the Russian mafia. The sea captain recently spoke with TIME about the murky world of ocean shipping, and how prostitutes and voodoo doctors from Greece to Guatemala have helped him retrieve ships.

How many people do what you do?

Not many. I'm the only person I know of who has a company that does this.

Who hires you?

Most of my clients are ship owners whose ships have been seized in some corrupt port. A smaller percentage of my clients are mortgagees whose ships have been taken by their owners who have not been paying their mortgage.

Are you recovering these ships from One-Eyed Willie types?

Not usually. These guys are wearing suits, and they're in boardrooms or comfortable offices arranging the whole thing. They're not like the Somali pirates who have to get out on boats and take ships by force. These are people who have an in with their own government or courts. They lure a ship to their country. The ship owner has no idea that something is unusual when his ship has been chartered for a cargo. These pirates are able to offer more for a particular voyage than the market would normally provide, because they expect to get a \$10 million ship out of it.

Can't the ship owners just call the police?

The problem is this: the pirates bribe the judge, the judge issues a seizure order, and then the local police and port authority are charged with enforcing the seizure order. Under international maritime law, once the ship has been sold at auction — Liberia, Ghana, Haiti; it doesn't matter where — you cannot go behind it and question

that auction even if it's known that the ship is stolen. A maritime auction extinguishes all history, including debts and prior ownership.

What kind of intelligence do you conduct before making your move?

I have to go into the port where the ship has been seized. I have to find out what the ship's conditions are, who is on board, the attitude of those people on board, who is watching the ship on the shore and what kind of physical obstructions we have. Has the ship been sabotaged to prevent it from being taken out? Is there enough fuel on board for us to take it?

How do you outwit the guards and henchmen?

I'll use anything I can, short of violence. If there's a single guard on board, I'll trick him. I once fooled a couple of guards into thinking the ship was sinking and they gladly got off. Once they got off, off we went with the ship.

In your book, you mention that prostitutes add a lot of value to your missions.

Every port I've ever been to has plenty of prostitutes, and they're good actresses. I'll hire the best-looking girl I can find. Then she'll go to the ship and tell the guard, "My roommate is at night school. When you get off, let's go to my place," or "Nobody is watching. Let's go into this warehouse there." The women receive a fee [from me for distracting the guards] — \$500 will save a South American prostitute many hours on her back.

What resources have you drawn on in Haiti?

In Haiti, everybody believes in voodoo, even the Haitians who say they don't. Voodoo priests are a valuable resource in Haiti, and they're reasonably priced. I once hired a voodoo priest for \$100 to control an area where I needed to keep people away. I had the priest go out on the soccer pitch. He spread his magic powder and bones around, and everybody saw him do that. Sure enough, no one went down to that soccer pitch. Even my Haitian fixer says he doesn't believe in voodoo, but whenever the priest arrives, he makes himself scare.

When do you like to operate?

At night. It's obviously harder to see the ship, and everything is looser at night. There are fewer people at the office and at the port, and there are fewer people watching. Also, I like to do it on Saturday nights, especially during holidays. I try to time it for the dark of the moon. I'll use weather, overcast days or heavy rainstorms. Those are all good for me.

You once had to outsmart a warship that was chasing you. How did you escape?

I managed to get into a rainstorm. I planned on that. I was in the Dominican Republic, and I had done my surveillance and could tell from their ship's antenna that they had old radars. Old radars have trouble seeing through rain. Once I got in the storm, I couldn't see them, so I knew they couldn't see me.

You're currently negotiating with filmmakers who want to make a movie about your life. How do you feel about the prospect of hitting the big screen?

It's just money. I have no illusions. The final product will have no relationship to me except that they might use my name. They are going to hire someone young and handsome. Thank God.