**[Daniel](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/profile/352-daniel/" \o "Go to Daniel's profile)**

* Pyrate Captain
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* 
* Member
* 652 posts
* Gender:Male
* Location:McLean, VA
* Interests:History, pirates, fiction, writing, writing historical fiction about pirates, jokes, games, law.

[Posted December 14, 2012](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=findComment&comment=412512) · [Report post](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=reportComment&comment=412512)

I often imagine pirates as simply sailing the seas, wind in their hair as they scanned the horizon from the foretop, looking for a sail, and just hoping something turned up. And maybe increasing their odds by prowling shipping choke points like the Mona Passage, the Windward Passage, or (at least in the Barbary corsairs' case) the Strait of Gibraltar. But, as Charles Johnson pointed out, scarcity was "no uncommon thing among them." With poverty and starvation very real possibilities, it would help a lot to know in advance where your prey was going to show up.

And at least one source suggests that they did. When George Roberts was captured by Ned Low at Cape Verde in 1722, Low had been tipped off about where to find his victim and what cargo Roberts had on board. He had this information from Roberts' companion Captain Scott, who had earlier been captured on another of the Cape Verde islands.

Benerson Little's *The Sea Rover's Practice* discusses intelligence collection on pages 79-83. He mentions pirates interrogating their prisoners and examining the "Letters, Papers, Bookes, Certificates and Cocquits" on captured vessels. He says people were the best sources: not only prisoners, but also other sea rovers, , friendly or neutral merchants and warships, Indians, fishermen, tutrtlers, logwood cutters, and smugglers. Torture was usually used only to extract information about the prisoners' hidden wealth; for other sources, bribery or false cover stories were much more common. Most pirates were savvy enough to interrogate their sources (prisoners or otherwise) separately, and compare their stories. But, it was common for the interrogators to credit the person who told them what they wanted to hear, rather than the one whose story matched the others best. (As far too many intelligence consumers still do today!)

Little gives the example of Jean Doublet, a privateer, who went into Ostend under an assumed name and talked with a family he knew there, who told him about a rich vessel at Saltash, which had too few crew to run the guns and whose lower deck guns were unreachable because the deck was packed full of cargo. Doublet went to Saltash and talked with the captain, who confirmed the story, and Doublet captured the vessel when it sailed.

Does anyone have more information about pirate intelligence gathering?

[**Elena**](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/profile/11386-elena/)

* A Seadog Looking for Crewmates
* 
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* Member
* 388 posts
* Gender:Female
* Location:Bucharest, Romania
* Interests:historical Age of Sail RPGs, music, reading, foreign languages

[Posted December 14, 2012](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=findComment&comment=412517) · [Report post](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=reportComment&comment=412517)

Well, many tavern wenches (or the lowly prostitutes walking along the docks and having sailor customers) might have gathered intelligence for the pirates too. Listening to what drunken sailors say, or asking them casually just a couple of questions, not to raise their attention, among caresses in bed... then giving the information to their pirate lovers... for cash or not even 

[**Mission**](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/profile/1929-mission/)

* Goat Specialist
* 
* 
* Admin
* 5,081 posts
* Gender:Male
* Location:Monroe, MI
* Interests:Scholarly piracy, designing and creating haunted house rooms and props, movies, abstract thinking, abstruse thinking, obstructive thinking, ideating, random thinking, movies, cartoons, movies, movies scores, cycling, world peace and small furry dogs, movies, writing, drawing, personal skills training, gremlins and, of course, lest I forget, movies.

[Posted December 14, 2012](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=findComment&comment=412521) · [Report post](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=reportComment&comment=412521)

Wasn't it Woodes Rogers captured the two Indians to get information about the port somewhere in South America? I believe they also captured one Spanish ship and learned about a second, larger one that was behind her. Of course, Rogers wasn't truly a pirate.

There was also that group of pirates from one of Johnson's books that went into a port castle pretending to be French merchants or something like that so they could get inside and determine where the guns were before they attacked. I'd cite the references for you, but I don't keep notes on such things. I may not even have the details right.

I'm surprised Little doesn't have this sort of stuff in his footnotes - he's usually pretty good about that sort of thing.

[**Fox**](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/profile/1019-fox/)

* Old Twillian
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* Moderator
* 2,564 posts
* Gender:Male
* Location:Beautiful lush Devon, England
* Interests:Nautical history of the 16-18th centuries and living history based thereon.

Shooting pirates.

[Posted December 14, 2012](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=findComment&comment=412527) · [Report post](http://pyracy.com/index.php?/topic/19007-casing-the-joint-how-pirates-gathered-intelligence/&do=reportComment&comment=412527)

It didn't even have to be choke points that pirates prowled. Merchant shipping was, by and large, very predictable, and mostly followed prevailing trade winds which, of course, meant prevailing trade routes. There were also easily predictable ports of call, such as Sierra Leone in Africa, where many European slavers stopped off. When Davis, Cocklyn and La Buse met in the mouth of the Sierra Leone river it was neither chance nor design, and the coincidence was not that they stopped at the same place, only that they were there at the same time. They only narrowly missed meeting Edward England there as well.

In some cases, even the schedule of merchant ships could be predicted. Treasure convoys from the New World to Spain had a regular pattern, and the 'Pilgrim Fleet' carrying Muslims returning from the Hajj to India usually sailed at the end of the summer. Of all the choke points on Earth, the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb was probably the richest every August.

My favourite bit of serendipitous intelligence gathering gave John Taylor priceless information about a Royal Navy squadron sent to capture him. The commodore of the squadron left a note with some Malagasy natives for the captains of some other English ships, outlining the forces he had available and their projected rendezvouses, as well as his plans on how to find Taylor and other European pirates. When Taylor anchored nearby the Malagasy saw his European ship, assumed he was Royal Navy, and dutifully delivered the letter...