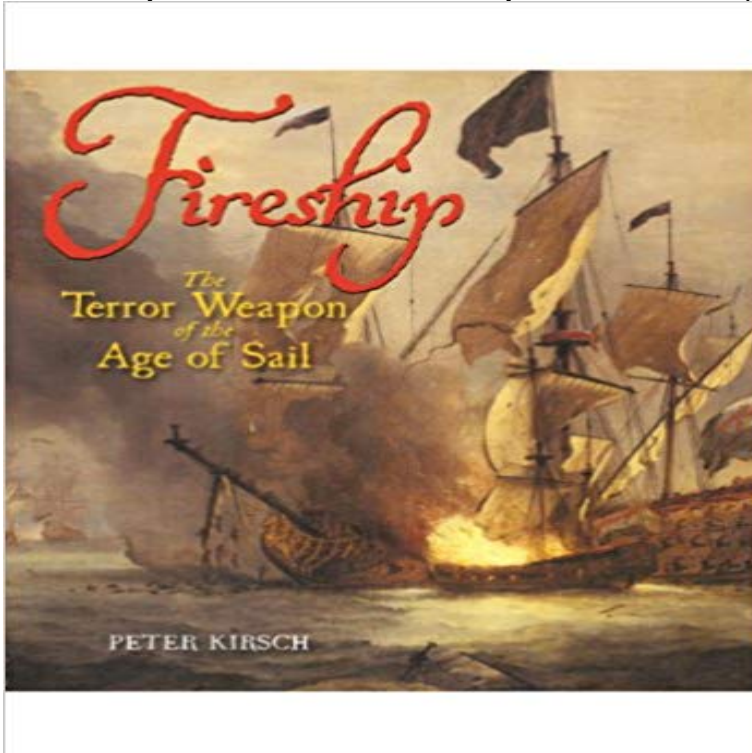


Fireship: The Terror Weapon of the Age of Sail



The fireship was the guided missile of the sailing era. Packed with incendiary (and sometimes explosive) material, it was aimed at its highly inflammable wooden target by volunteers who bailed out into a boat at the last moment. It often missed, but the panic it invariably caused among crews who generally could not swim and had no method of safely abandoning ship did the job for it - the most famous example being the attack off Gravelines in 1588 which led to the rout of the Spanish Armada. Although it was a tactic used in antiquity, its successful revival in the Armada campaign led to the adoption of the fireship as an integral part of the fleet. During the seventeenth century increasingly sophisticated fireworks were designed into purpose-built ships, and an advance doctrine was worked out for their employment. Fireship reveals the full impact of the weapon on naval history, looks at the technology and analyses the reasons for its decline. This is the first history of a potent, much used but little understood weapon.

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