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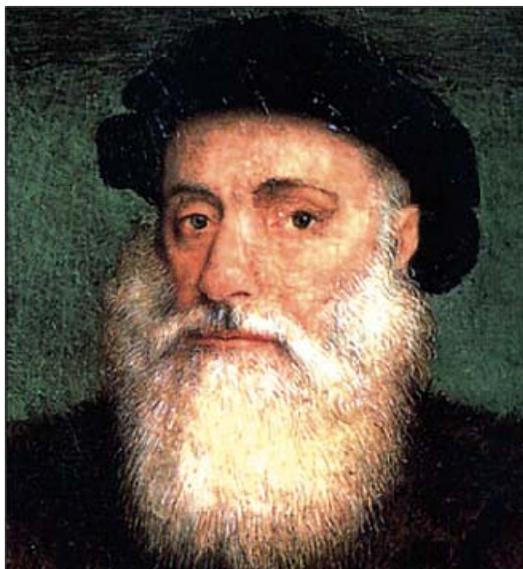
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MANAGEMENT

Vasco Da Gama, The Marathon Explorer

By J. BONASIA, INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

Posted 03/08/2011 02:14 PM ET



Vasco da Gama sailed on his third and final voyage to India in 1524.

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First European to find a sea route from the Continent to India, opening East-West trade. A masterful navigator, he braved hardships and danger alongside his crew.

For decades, Portuguese kings dispatched fleets of ships in search of a fabled spice trade route to India. They also hoped to make contact with fellow Christian communities in the Far East.

From Portugal's Port

Europe was a brutish, medieval place in the 1400s. Plagues ravaged whole regions, and violence was commonplace. Portugal was a relatively poor but scrappy nation compared with Spain, its more glamorous neighboring empire to the east.

Eager to secure Portugal's wealth, King Manuel I appointed 28-year-old Vasco da Gama to lead a new expedition to the so-called East Indies. Gama had proved his loyalty to the crown in 1492 by seizing French ships and subduing pirate raids on Portuguese ports.

Gama's brother Paulo and Nicolau Coelho commanded the two other main ships in Vasco's fleet, which also included a supply vessel. They set sail from Lisbon with 150 men on July 8, 1497.

A decade earlier, Portuguese Capt. Bartolomeu Dias had led an expedition past the southern tip of Africa. But facing harsh conditions, he was challenged and a mutiny nearly broke out. He turned back before reaching India.

In 1492, Spain backed Christopher Columbus' trip west in search of India. When he found North America instead, Manuel worried that his country would fall behind in the race to the subcontinent, which he saw as a hub that could bring Portugal new wealth from spice trading. Portugal's royals also had religious intentions to contact Christians in distant lands.

At that time, Europeans saw no clear path to the Indian Ocean from the North Atlantic. Based on charts from the Dias mission, Gama made a bold gamble to sail down the Atlantic, beyond view of the African coast, then eastward.

Many schoolchildren learn that Vasco da Gama of Portugal was the first explorer to sail from Europe to India and back in 1497-99.

They read that he altered history by creating the first sea trade route between the East and West.

Yet the schoolbooks gloss over the perils Gama and his crew overcame on their two-year trek.

Gama (1469-1524) was an expert sailor who returned to India twice more before dying there.

His initial voyage was the leap, opening up global commerce and sparking the Renaissance.

Gama was a deliberate leader who didn't waste words, says Ronald Watkins, author of "Unknown Seas: How Vasco da Gama Opened the East."

"Vasco da Gama led by example and personal courage," Watkins told IBD. "He was willing to expose himself to danger before others, and that galvanized his crew."

Gama was a son of a minor nobleman in Portugal during its era of discovery in the 15th century.

Gama's Keys



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In this way, Gama enjoyed more favorable winds than by hugging the shoreline. Yet without land for guidance, the navigation was risky. If the pilots weren't accurate in their nautical readings, their ships could be lost at sea.

Gama followed the sun and stars smoothly for three months and 3,370 miles without seeing land. In November, four months on, his fleet made landfall 100 miles north of the Cape of Good Hope and restocked the ships.

Give-And-Take

Throughout the trip, the pale-skinned explorers had to barter with dark-skinned strangers who spoke no Portuguese. Gama became a master of interpreting foreign customs, from African tribes to Muslim and Hindu traders.

And like many contemporary ship captains, he took hostages and slaves when it served his ends.

After rounding the African cape, the Portuguese fleet turned north and reached the mouth of the Zambezi River in Mozambique. There the men found friendly Bantu natives in grass huts who helped with more supplies.

Further north they anchored off Mombasa, where they barely escaped from jealous traders and angry Muslims who sought to destroy their Christian ships. Surviving that, Gama contracted the services of a skilled Indian pilot.

Gama was far outnumbered by brutal adversaries wherever he landed. His success stemmed from a readiness to instill fear in enemies through brazen attacks or deceptions. When reaching land, he told his men to deceive the locals by claiming their ships had been separated from a big Portuguese fleet that was due to arrive any day.

Rough Streak

Gama could be ruthless when needed, says George Haley, an author and professor of international business at the University of New Haven in Connecticut. When two Arab pilots were bribed to help destroy Gama's fleet, he had them bound and tortured with boiling oil to force a confession about their backers and motives. "Gama's strategy was to hit back hard at those who opposed him," Haley said.

The expedition faced continual hardships. Living quarters below deck came to stink of human waste. In warmer climates, the crew had to lift ship hulls from the water and clean them of wriggling worms that burrowed into the wood.

During storms, crew members strapped themselves to the ships so they wouldn't be swept overboard by giant waves. Another major problem involved stocking enough fresh water and food. The men mostly lived on a bland diet of salted meat or fish, stale hardtack biscuits and warm beer.

Scurvy was a dreaded disease for sailors who lacked the vitamins from fresh fruit and vegetables. The stricken suffered from bruising skin lesions, with their gums swelling over their teeth.

In the worst cases, sailors cut the swollen black gums from their mouths with knives and disinfected their wounds with urine. Dozens of crew members died from scurvy on the return trip.

Gama finally reached Calicut, the hub of India's spice trade, in May 1498. At first, the Europeans were welcomed by the Hindu leader Zamorin. He liked the competition for Muslim traders, who conspired to hold down spice prices.

Yet many in Calicut grew offended when the Europeans failed to give Zamorin any valuable gifts, like gold or precious jewels.

Still, the two sides did business through the summer. The Europeans traded glass beads, brass, coral and striped fabrics for pepper, cinnamon and nutmeg.

By the fall of 1498, Gama decided to set sail for home at the worst possible time. The monsoon winds were blowing onshore. After crossing the Indian Ocean in just 23 days upon their arrival, the crew took 132 days to cross back.

The return to Portugal was grueling. Gama's beloved brother Paulo died on the way, along with many others. Due to so many deaths, the remaining sailors fit onto two ships and burned the third boat.

When the weak survivors crept into Lisbon's harbor in 1499, they were greeted as national heroes. The voyage had lasted 23,000 nautical miles, a longer distance than circling the globe at the equator.

King Manuel rewarded Gama with a lucrative pension, making him an admiral and count of the royal court. The explorer soon married and had children.

In 1502, Manuel assigned Gama a second Indian mission, lasting one year. The king wanted to break the stranglehold of Muslim traders who still shipped lucrative spices, silks and gems overland to Europe through the Middle East and Venice, Italy. This time, Gama had to attack his adversaries in Calicut with cannon fire because locals had turned against Portugal as a threat to their trade and culture.

Once More

In 1524, Gama made his final voyage to India to become the Portuguese viceroy there. He soon contracted an illness, possibly malaria, and died on Dec. 24 in Kochi. Five centuries later, many still regard him as the greatest of Portuguese.

"Vasco da Gama displayed tremendous courage and was not afraid to change the rules to his advantage when things were going against him," Haley said. "He was absolutely dedicated and ferocious in carrying out his duties to the king."

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