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Weapons — Boarding Axes

A boarding axe is heavier than a hatchet, but lighter and shorter than a felling axe used for cutting down trees. The shaft was long enough to allow two-handed use with a metal strip to protect the wood (called a langet). British and later American models retained a chisel shape, but a curved blade was common on axe blades of other countries.

The boarding axe plays an important role on the schooner Providence. It is a key asset employed by Jon Swift during weapon training and fights. One of the main reasons for this was the availability of the axe.

Sailing ships of the time maintained a supply of boarding axes onboard. Obviously, naval vessels carried far more than did merchant vessels. It was on a naval vessel that Swift first used an axe. Sailing ships maintained a supply of axes onboard to assist in fire-fighting, wood gathering, and general repairs. It also proved a handy weapon to use against enemies attempting to board the vessel – hence the name.

Fire is a risk on any wooden ship. Tall ships always had numerous combustible materials present, intensifying the fire threat. Axes provided a tool to break open doors or knock holes in a deck or wall to allow escape, release smoke or ventilate. The ships wooden construction often left seams or gaps in decks filled with oakum. The axe's thin blade and spike allowed better penetration into those gaps.

In a storm, rigging, masts, spars or yardarms often became compromised and needed quick action to cut away before inflicting further damage. The axe was ideal in such circumstances.



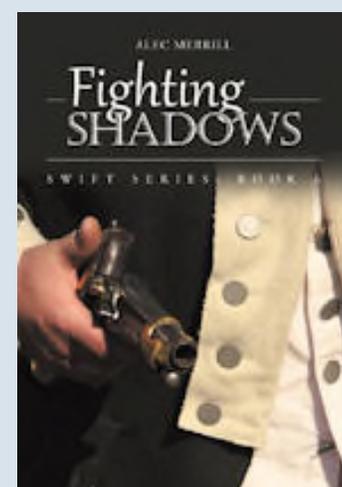
In a naval engagement, axes were readily available for damage control and for combat. When cannon fire damaged rigging, prompt use of the axes ensured the problem didn't get any worse. If hot cannon balls landed, they rapidly embedded themselves. The only method of getting them out was to chop them out with a boarding axe.

Assaulting an enemy ship, called boarding, required sharp edged weapons to cut through enemy anti-boarding nets and lines. At lower levels, sailors used the boarding axe to chop through enemy gun ports to gain access. Once on board, the axes helped smash through barricaded doors or other strong-points. As weapons, they inflicted grievous wounds. A sailor needed little training to swing an axe, a point not lost on naval commanders.

Each ship required a store of wood to use in the galley. Ships often anchored along a coast and sent wood parties inland to chop wood. Felling axes dropped the tree, while sailor used boarding axes to split and chop that wood.



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