

Making sea-sure

With the threat of piracy and now terrorism ever present, Editor Adam Gristwood speaks to **Captain Donald Bunn**, Maritime Liaison Office, Bahrain, about the dangers faced by seafarers...

The security of transport routes is of paramount importance to global prosperity. This concept has long been understood by seafarers, who face unique vulnerabilities as they go about the business of international trade. The recorded history of piracy at sea stretches from the time of the ancient Greeks, and unfortunately right up to the present day. Today also brings a new risk factor – terrorism. The terrorist attack on the USS Cole demonstrated that even a well defended floating target could be reached by a committed terrorist: a worrying thought given that a large proportion of the world's trade, particularly in oil and gas, passes through dangerous waters in slow-moving and poorly protected vessels.

The Arabian Gulf has become a focal point of security efforts in recent years, as a current of fairly constant political friction has run through the region for decades, intensified by the present situation in Iraq. The United States, as part of its strategy to maintain stability in the region, operates the Maritime Liaison Office (MARLO) in Bahrain, providing a communications link between the US Navy and commercial seafarers in this busy trade route. Officer-in-Charge of the station, Captain Donald Bunn, feels that the commercial importance of the Gulf is a unifying factor in what is often characterised as a fragmented region: “The biggest area of concern is the stability in the region such that they can exercise and engage in their business. Here at NAVCENT, one of the previous commander's bylines was ‘peace, stability and prosperity’, and I think that these work co-operatively. If you do not have the stability, businesses will shy away from investment; whatever they are insuring, whether it is through Lloyds or whether it is through the P&I clubs, they don't like the uncertainty that comes with a less than stable region. It is hard to gauge the risk in such an environment, so the key concern is not only the peace but the assurance of some level of stability. With that comes the willingness to engage in business in this area and make the investment – these are very expensive assets we are talking about for the top tier companies. Every country in this region has an interest, a concern and a stake in making sure the region stays stable, because that's their future.”

As with all modern security activity, information superiority is critical. This is not without its challenges; the Gulf is visited by crews of many nationalities, in ships of varying modernity, and MARLO is working to tie together these dis-



parate threads to build a complete, regularly updated picture of maritime activity in the area, and thus enable effective security operations. As Captain Bunn explains: “Information allows us to know what's happening, where it's happening, who's participating. Once we have a picture of what is going on, then we can make plans and conduct operations to counter the activities of the bad guys.”

One area of particular concern is the varying level of understanding of maritime law amongst crews, and Bunn and the MARLO team are anxious to clarify what qualifies as piracy: “In the maritime industry, there is a concern about the definition of armed attacks in territorial and international waters - there are some legal differentiations between armed attacks and piracy: if it happens on the high seas, it's piracy; if it happens in somebody's territorial waters, the legal definition of piracy doesn't apply, but it is still armed attack against commercial vessels.”

Despite the clear benefits of co-operating in the interests of trade security, acquiring information from commercial operators is somewhat more difficult than it would seem. “I understand the business concerns about providing some of this information,” says Bunn. “There is some proprietary information that is at stake here; if your competitors know what is happening to you, that might give them an edge. Even if you are telling your insurance carrier, they might want to keep it quiet. Depending on the financial arrangements that they make to resolve the issue, it could encourage increased activity.”

Few pirates would be foolhardy enough to willingly tangle with the overwhelming firepower of naval forces, and naval



assets can be successfully deployed to apply pressure on areas of concern. However, even in the times of enormous surface fleets, it proved impossible to police large areas of sea entirely. So, in modern times of less expansive and more focused naval fleets, personal security responsibility amongst crews can determine whether a pirate or terrorist attack will be successfully executed. There are many simple, common-sense steps that can be taken to protect a ship – from weaving razor wire into the anchor chain to deter boarders, to maintaining an alert and well-manned watch in dangerous waters. Even in Somalian waters, considered to be amongst the most troubled in the world, these measures can make a real difference, not so much in deterring attacks altogether, but in ensuring a good resolution for the commercial boat and its crew.

Bunn concurs with the paramount importance of good security awareness and procedure: “Ultimately the final responsibility for your own safety and wellbeing is yourself. Pay attention to the information that is out there – there are a tremendous number of sources of information. Mine would be US-centric, but there are international non-governmental organisations – the IMO, the IMB, the ICC, the piracy reporting centre, various coastal states. There are organisations that put out information for free. There are also organisations that have information for their members – for a price. But my encouragement has always been for the shippers, the ships’ crews, for the owners and operators of these vessels and the agents to pay attention to the information that is out there. For example, the warning is to stay X miles off the Somali coast – you make yourself aware of the information, and, when you are transiting a potentially dangerous area, have a prudent watch, have an alert watch, supplemented with basic countermeasure to piracy – something as simple as having your fire hoses charged and being aware of any close approaching small boats.”

Some have suggested that crews be allowed to go further to reduce the odds of pirate attack, and arm themselves. I put

this contentious issue to Captain Bunn: “I get a lot of questions about whether or not the crews should be armed. IMO and a lot of other organisations discourage that – I know the insurance carriers discourage that, and importantly, it is not the merchant mariner’s primary responsibility. He is an engineer, he is a deckhand, he is a communicator, but he is not a mercenary – that is not his job and that is something that we don’t encourage.”

Reported pirate attacks are running at a high level, and it is unquestionably a dangerous time to be making freight journeys through areas like the Straits of Malacca, the Somalian coast or the Gulf of Aden. It’s certainly a complex problem, touching on all manner of issues, from developing world governance to naval expansion programmes, long-term solutions to which seem unlikely. Looking short term, I asked Captain Bunn what he feels is required in his area of responsibility to eliminate the pirate threat: “My key concern, and a priority for me, is constantly broadening the breadth and the depth of communications between the coalition forces and the commercial maritime industry – for them to know why we are here, what we are doing, how we do it, why we do it, and for us to get to know them better, to know their operations, to know what their concerns are. They have information, they see things, they know things, and they experience things. If it affects them, then it probably affects the stability and security of the maritime environment.”



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