

Tracking pirates from basement lair

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By Bella English

Despite all the buzz, you can be sure that Captain James Staples will not be going to see “Pirates of the Caribbean 4,” which opened in theaters last week. To Staples, there’s nothing funny or romantic about pirates, even if they look like Johnny Depp.

Staples, who lives in Norwood, was a merchant marine who sailed the waters of the world for three decades and was a ship’s captain for 17. He saw plenty of real-life pirates, and in 2009 a speedboat of Somalis attempted to board his 660-foot ship, the MV Green Bay, in the Gulf of Oman. They didn’t back off until he fired warning shots. (By the way, don’t call a ship a boat. What’s the difference? “A boat is something you can put on a ship,” he says.)

Staples has grown increasingly wary of pirates since 2005, when Somalis began to hijack large ships that were slow, easy targets. “By 2008, it was definitely a business plan by the pirates,” says Staples, who retired last year and has started a pirate security consulting business.

Ransoms, he said, were in the million-dollar range at first, and have gone as high as \$13.5 million, paid recently for a Greek-owned oil tanker, the Irene SL, hijacked off the coast of Somalia in February.

Staples was lucky to have escaped the pirates, and he knows it. A friend and classmate at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Richard Phillips, was captain of the Maersk Alabama when it was seized by Somali pirates in 2009, marking the first time an American ship had been captured by pirates since the early 1800s. Phillips was taken hostage in one of the lifeboats; a US Navy ship rescued him after snipers killed his captors.

In February, four Americans on a yacht were killed after being hijacked off Somalia’s coast. The pirates have grown more brazen and are using rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons on targets.

When Staples and Phillips were at the academy in the 1970s, there was no Pirates 101 course. And, says Staples, many ship lines and governments still don’t recognize the seriousness of the problem.

“I had plenty of pirates running alongside my ship all the time,” says Staples, 55. He sent photos and e-mailed warnings and fears to his shipping company, to no avail. “That’s how vulnerable we all felt, and still do,” he says.

OceanRiver LLC, the maritime security company that Staples runs with several partners, is headquartered in the basement of his home, and the only vessel he captains these days is an 18-foot fishing boat parked in his driveway. A drafting table in his office is covered by a navigation chart of the Indian Ocean with colored stickies showing where ships have been taken. He has marked the Gulf of Aden as a “high-risk area.” The first three months of this year saw 142 pirate attacks, compared with 67 attacks in all of 2010.

“We still have over 800 mariners being held hostage in deplorable conditions, and the world still stands by wondering what to do,” Staples says.

The office reflects his love of the sea, from the ship’s wheel on the door to the life buoy and ship’s barometer on the wall, and the volumes in the bookshelves, such as “Ship Security Plans” and “American Practical Navigation.” The ability of the pirates, many of whom were fishermen, is grossly underestimated by shipping companies and governments, he believes.

Staples has traveled the world speaking on piracy, at NATO conferences, to military groups, at antipiracy workshops. In April 2009, he attended an Office of Naval Intelligence meeting in Baltimore. He told the group that it was just a matter of time before an American ship was taken.

“A high-level vice president at Maersk said it would never happen to an American ship, it would never happen to a Maersk ship,” he recalls. “Twenty minutes later his phone rang and the Alabama was taken.”

Staples’s own phone didn’t stop ringing, either. During the four days Phillips was held, Staples was called by the news media to comment on his friend’s dilemma and piracy. So when he retired a year later, he started a consulting company to confront security issues on the high seas. He has also testified as an expert witness in various lawsuits filed by crew members whose ships had been hijacked.

“The Somali society is the wild, wild West,” he says, and the pirates “are violent and vicious.”

He says he works with former Navy SEALs, Army Delta Force members, and CIA agents to gather intelligence on the pirates and ships taken. He wants governments to change regulations that would allow better security on ships, to get ships’ owners to provide better for the crews, and to get those crews proper medical care when they arrive home after being freed. A big part of what he does, he says, is to set up security training for government organizations such as the FBI, perform safety audits of ships, and help design better security systems on board.

Trying to get ship companies to do the right thing is like “rolling an elephant uphill,” says Staples, who is married and has three sons. “The nature of the business is crisis management.” And companies don’t want to spend the money on enhanced security, he adds.

“The Mayflower had better security than most ships sailing nowadays,” says Staples, who looks the part of an old sea salt with his weathered face and salt-and-pepper beard. “They had muskets.”

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http://articles.boston.com/2011-05-22/news/29571987_1_maersk-alabama-somali-pirates-pirate-attacks