

The Looming Maritime Threat

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By Captain James Staples

Below is a fictionalized retelling of events that transpired during the maritime terrorist attack on merchant vessel M Star.

The hum of the diesel engine, combined with the high frequency whine of the radar sets, continuous chatter on the VHF radio and DSC alarms going off every few minutes. So far just another normal watch in the Persian Gulf on a haze filled night. Its' 00:30 in the morning and you have just relieved the watch, the ship is heading back to Japan with 270,000 tons of crude oil. The air conditioning units are struggling to keep the wheelhouse cool with condensation pouring down the windows.

The haze is so thick it reminds you of a New England fog on Georges Bank. Visibility is poor it's a half mile at best. Traffic is minimal and high speed small craft dart back and forth as they smuggle their goods from Iran to the Arabian peninsular. You have plotted all potential risk targets and it now looks safe to ease into the traffic lanes. The Straits of Hormuz are just ahead and you know once you clear Hormuz you will be homeward bound. As you start to shape up for the lanes you notice that the fast container ship over taking you on the port side close aboard has altered her course.

You grab the binoculars to have a look when suddenly a bright burst of light catches your attention on the starboard side. The vessel is violently rocked, books fall from their shelves and engine alarms register on the panel as audible alarms start to sound. The bridge phones start to ring as you try to figure out what just happened. You check your position to reassure your self that you have not struck something or run aground and the vessel is where she is supposed to be.

The quartermaster lets you know he has steering and you can still hear the hum of the engine so propulsion is still intact. You have made this transit two dozen times and all seems as it should be. The radar sets show no evidence of collision; the container ship is well clear and continuing on. The violent shaking of the vessel has awoken the Captain who is now on the bridge and taking command. The watch officer tries to figure out what in the world just happened.

The passage way below the starboard bridge deck has sustained damage and the starboard lifeboat is missing. The engine room reports plate indentation on the starboard side above the water line. What has just happened? The alarms are ringing and the crew is mustering. Is any one hurt or missing? How much damage have we sustained? Are we sinking? Are we on fire? Just a few of the questions going through the Captain's mind at that time early in the morning.

In the aftermath as the vessel made her way to Fujairah for a full investigation; news reports already started hitting the airwaves. We heard reports of a rogue wave, maybe a collision with a submarine and a few reports of a possible terrorist attack which the owner has suggested. Piracy was even mentioned as a possible motive at one point. As I spoke with maritime organizations that day my opinion at that time was the possibility of a terrorist attack was probable. I was very skeptical of the rogue wave scenario and it certainly did not look like collision damage from a vessel at sea speed.

Real Threats of Maritime Terrorist Activity

The maritime industry must look at the real possibility that the terrorist network will eventually be successful on an attack with water born improvised explosive device (IED) on a merchant vessel. Terrorist have attacked the U.S.S. Cole, M.V. Limburg and now the M.V. M Star. We know of the failed attack on the U.S. Navy vessel "The Sullivan's". We do not know all the attempted attacks and failures on merchant vessels and I would guess we will never know.

As we saw with the world trade towers, attempts were made and failed until that fateful day Sept. 11, 2001. Terrorism succeeded that day and changed the world forever. At what point do we as a maritime industry look at the threat of a terrorist event and move in the direction of keeping mariners and vessels safe from possible water born IED. Many articles state that maritime experts have actually said tankers are hard to hit when moving and almost impossible to sink.

Of any targets at sea, a moving tanker is a very slow easy target when she is in a laden condition. With limited maneuverability and her turning radius large and slow. Granted she is double hulled, but as we saw with the M.V. M Star the terrorist went after her engine room area where most vessels are not double hulled and can be holed very easily. The engine room is a very large floodable space.

The well planned water born attack will have multiple small, high speed vessels laden with very high explosive shaped charges that will not only severely damage the vessel causing major stability problems, fire, flooding, but will also cause a spill of enormous proportions. The attack will happen in a choke point as we saw with the M.V. M Star or as the vessel makes an approach to a port or offshore loading facility similar to the M.V. Limburg. We have already had loss of life in the attack against military and merchant vessels.

The USS Cole had a well trained crew on board; she had the added advantage of being a combat vessel and built for that reason. She was built to be able to sustain an impact explosion and survive to fight another day. She sustained heavy damage and 17 sailors lost their lives that day. Merchant vessels do not have that luxury and it is that reason that we must look at this new threat and take it seriously. The Limburg did not sink, although she was a total loss and only one sailor perished. The tanker M Star was fortunate. She sustained some plate damage and minor injuries, but just as we witnessed with the towers in 1993, the towers had sustained damage in the lower levels with multiple injuries in previous attempts.

Remaining Vigilant and Adequately Prepared

Did we ever think, imagine or anticipate that a frontal attack from the skies with civilian airlines would ever happen? A few in the intelligence networks knew this was possible and could happen as it eventually did. Yet we still were not prepared for what happened that fateful day.

Attacking merchant vessels by water born IED is a real threat. It is an imminent threat and must be taken seriously. It has been suggested and printed (Wall Street Journal September 11th 2010 edition) that Al-Shabab has gotten into the pirate business and has set its goals on attacking merchant vessels as Sea Jihadist. Some experts will say this is happening some will say that there is no connection between piracy and terrorism.

This possibility exists and we should be preparing for it now. With the recent trial in the United States involving the U.S.S. Ashland, we still have debate over what a pirate is. A judge threw out the charge of piracy against the first individual to be brought to trial. If we cannot even prosecute one pirate on piracy charges or even decide what a pirate is then how can we say that terrorists are not involved in piracy?

Terrorist Agenda

Are pirates' just pirates or do they also smuggle weapons, drugs, and people? To think that a terrorist organization would not be involved in this somewhere would be irresponsible. With the

possibility of terrorist involvement, we as an industry can no longer guarantee the safety of a crew as they are being held hostage off Somalia or at sea. We must look at the terrorist-pirate threat as a way to support their fanatic way of life as other money generating enterprises dry up for the terrorist organizations.

How long can the owner and operator expect merchant seaman to transit this part of the world before the mariner actually does boycott? What would it take to shut down the Straits of Hormuz or Bab-el-Mandeb? Have extremist thought about this? These are some of the pending questions I ask myself on a regular basis.

A well known terrorist Said Ali al Shiri a Gitmo released terrorist also known as # 372 and member of Al-Qaeda Arabian Peninsular (AQAP) has stated that they should reclaim Bab-el Mandeb and attack shipping. The Arabian Peninsular is filled with Yemeni Mujahedeen, with the likes of Anwar Al Awalaki, and Nasser Abdul Karim Al-Wuhayshi, to mention a few unsavory characters.

These entire terrorist groups are capable of putting together an attack on vessels that would cripple shipping and possibly shut down the Suez Canal, hurting Egypt and the region economically. The straits of Bab-el Mandab see over 3 million barrels of oil pass through it every day. The straits are narrow with heavy traffic and the possibility of water born IED make it probable. Whether it happens or not only time will tell, but these extremist are patient, persistent and resilient until they complete their mission.

Yemen is the new center of the universe for al-Qaeda and future instability could expand lawlessness in the region. It's only getting worse and the instability will only draw al-Qaeda affiliates and allow them more room to operate. The Navies of the world can not stop piracy, how can they ever be expected to stop a terrorist attack?

Most owners and operators take the chance and risk being involved in doing business in that part of the world. They only rely on the Best Management Practices. The industry has published the Best Management Practices 3 (BMP) an evolving document believed to help ward off a pirate attack. BMP are a very good idea and I applaud industry for putting Best Management Practices into play. BMP are simply just good seamanship which the majority of well trained and competent Masters would do anyways.

What BMP fails to do in today's world with the current threats faced is to protect the mariner from a waterborne attack as we have witnessed with the recent attack on the tanker M Star and the past attack on the M.V. Limburg. So we must ask ourselves what kind of changes are in store for the mariner in the next few years concerning terrorism and piracy? Safety, training and security will and should always be at the forefront of each mariner and ship owner's voyage to alleviate the looming threat of maritime terrorism and piracy. We need a solution before we have another major world event.

<http://www.idga.org/maritime-security/articles/the-looming-maritime-threat/>