

MV MAERSK ALABAMA

Situation: Pirates take ship captain hostage off Somali coast.

On 8 April 2009, Somali pirates boarded and attempted to take control of the M/V Maersk Alabama, a US-owned container ship. While their effort to seize the vessel failed, the incident began a five-day hostage ordeal for the ship's captain.



While piracy is usually not classified as terrorism, the attack upon the M/V Maersk Alabama illustrates several important maritime security principles along with hostage survival strategies. Additionally, the attack demonstrates the current volatility in a region that DOD Service Members commonly deploy to or transit through. Seaborne IED attacks have also been used against western targets by terrorists in the past, including the failed attack on the USS SULLIVANS and successful attacks on the USS COLE and French Supertanker M/V Limburg.

Prior to going into a high threat area, you should research and gain an understanding of common tactics and techniques used by criminals and terrorists. If your situation may make you vulnerable to a similar type of attack you should develop additional protective measures to reduce your risk.



On 8 April 2009, the M/V Maersk Alabama was sailing off the Somali coast bound for Mombasa, Kenya. The US container ship was carrying 17,000 metric tons of cargo, including relief supplies for Kenya, Somalia, and Uganda.

NATO and the USG had previously issued advisories that vessels should not sail within 600 nautical miles of the Somali coast unless they have business in East

Africa. On the day of the attack, the M/V Maersk Alabama was only 240 nautical miles away from the Somali port of Eyl sailing towards Mombasa, Kenya to deliver food aid on behalf of USAID.

The pirates used a small speedboat to carry out the attack. However, the crew of the M/V Maersk Alabama saw the small craft approaching and implemented anti-pirate procedures.

They transferred bridge controls and most of the crew to the engine compartment which can be sealed off from the rest of the ship. The M/V Maersk Alabama accelerated to 18 knots to while some crew members manned water hoses to make boarding more difficult.

Eventually, four pirates armed with AK-47s scaled the side of the ship and took three crew members hostage. Two hostages were eventually freed by fellow crew members who injured and captured one of the pirates.

If you are going overseas, you should carefully read any governmental advisories on the area you are going to and use the information to reduce your exposure and risk.

Only the Captain of the ship, Richard Phillips, remained a hostage of the pirates. The ship's crew tried to arrange a prisoner exchange, but after releasing the pirate they held, the other pirates refused to release Phillips. Instead, the pirates forced Phillips into a covered lifeboat and took to the sea.



Thus began a five-day hostage ordeal for Captain Phillips. Conditions on the lifeboat were extremely unpleasant. Phillips lost appetite in the heat, sanitation was poor, and sleep was difficult. Phillips was encouraged by the arrival of the USS Bainbridge and negotiations for his release began. The Bainbridge also took onboard the pirate injured in the struggle with the M/V Maersk Alabama crew.

Initially, the pirates did not bind Phillips, but kept him at gunpoint. On the third day, while two of the pirates slept, Phillips pushed the third pirate overboard as he was leaning out to urinate. Phillips thought of using the pirate's AK-47 to subdue the others, but since he did not know how to operate firearms he dove in the water instead. Phillips dove underwater twice and swam as far as he could toward the USS Bainbridge, but when the pirates began shooting at him, he returned to the life boat.

The decision to attempt an escape is a difficult one. Consider your chances of success and the probable outcome if you remain in place.



After his attempted escape, the pirates hardened their attitude toward Phillips and they bound his feet. They also argued among themselves. When the seas became heavy, the pirates agreed to be towed by the USS Bainbridge.

Phillips heard gunfire and thought the pirates were shooting at each other, so he crouched low to avoid being a target. In fact, the Captain of the USS Bainbridge had ordered Navy Seal snipers on the

fantail to open fire on the pirates. US Navy Seals then shimmied down the tow line, confirmed that all three pirates were dead, and rescued Phillips.

Captain Phillips was found to be in good health. The fourth pirate, Abdul Wali Muse, who was already aboard the Bainbridge for medical treatment, was brought to the United States for trial. Muse was the first person charged with piracy in a US court in over 100 years. In May 2010, Muse pled guilty to hijacking, kidnapping and hostage-taking. In February 2011, Muse was sentenced to almost 34 years in federal prison.

Hostage-taking is a common tactic practiced by both terrorists and pirates. It is important to understand how to avoid being taken hostage if possible, and what to do if taken hostage. If you are held hostage and there is a rescue attempt, drop to the ground and remain still. Do not attempt to assist your rescuers. Also, be aware that authorities may handcuff hostages while their identification is verified. If you are in a maritime environment remember that hostage escape attempts are highly risky – death by drowning in rough seas, dehydration, or hypothermia is more likely. Waiting for rescue, remaining still and close to the floor during any rescue attempt maximizes your chances of survival.