

TERROR ON THE HIGH SEAS

THE MAERSK ALABAMA HIJACKING AND PIRACY DURING THE 21st CENTURY
BY KELLY BELL



The *Maersk Alabama* is just one of hundreds of similar ships that ply the world's seas on a daily basis.



Maersk Alabama Capt. Richard Phillips (right) with Cmdr. David Fowler, executive officer of USS *Bainbridge* (DDG-96).

So far it had been an uneventful voyage, but at 3:00 on the morning of 8 April 2009 the radio aboard the cargo ship *Maersk Alabama* crackled loudly and a heavily-accented voice came through the ether on international hail and distress Channel 16, "Somali pirate! Somali! I'm coming to get you!"

American Captain Richard Phillips was not terribly surprised. Piracy along the Somali coastline was nothing new. Steaming out of Djibouti with a humanitarian cargo of food and sundry relief supplies bound for the Kenyan port of Mombasa, he realized from the start that this load would make his ship a plum target for buccaneers. Taking the threat seriously, he changed course and increased speed. The only other ship in sight was a full seven

miles away and did not alter its own course and speed, soon dropping over the horizon. Seeing nothing else untoward on the surrounding seascape, Phillips went to bed.

At 7:00 am, a crewman informed him that a small skiff was approaching at about 20 knots. With the *Maersk Alabama* a full 300 miles off the Somali coast, this tiny conveyance, holding four men, was unlikely to have come all the way from dry land. It must have launched from a larger "mothership" somewhere in the vicinity. Typical strategy for contemporary pirates. Phillips pulled the cord to the intruder alarm, sounding a piercing whistle to let the invaders know he would not surrender his vessel peacefully.

His men unlimbered a fire hose that spewed 100 pounds of pressure per square inch — sufficient to flatten a man. Phillips directed his radio operator to contact the United Kingdom Trade Organization and report the unfolding situation, instructing his radioman, "Tell them this is real, and leave the phone line open when you finish so they can monitor what's happening." He then deployed the closest thing he had to a firearm and commenced shooting illumination flares at the skiff.

By this point, the attackers were close enough for him to get a good look at them as they sprayed the freighter's hull with AK-47 bullets in an attempt to make the crew into surrender. Thin young men in tattered T-shirts, shorts, and rubber sandals were aboard the skiff. Although there were only four of them, their heavy armament made them a dire threat as their shooting forced the crew to abandon the water hoses.

Firing the last of his 18 flares, Phillips could readily see the dilemma he faced. Should he meekly give up control of his vessel and lead his crew to the "safe room" designed to give the ship's complement a steel-reinforced refuge in this sort of situation? If he went with this option they would be protected but would also be prisoners, helpless to prevent



Maersk Alabama is home-ported in Norfolk, Virginia.



Loaded with containers, *Maersk Alabama* sets sail.



Artist concept on how high-pressure jets of water could be used to defend against pirates. In the case of *Maersk Alabama*, this type of defense did not work