

Awaiting berth



The laden product tanker was drifting 20 miles outside a West African port where they would discharge their cargo.

There had been pirate attacks in the area so the Master had ordered preventive measures to be implemented as per the Ship Security Plan.

Two ABs were assigned to the poop deck and forecastle but they were also to monitor the main deck. The crew prepared the deck and attached a single coil of barbed wire on the poop deck, forecastle and on the railing around the vessel; locked all doors and turned on all the outside lights. The Chief Officer noticed that a couple of lights were broken amidships and told the Bosun to repair them the next day.

The agent had called the Master and informed him that the berth would be occupied for another two days and would be in contact when the berth was ready. After midnight the Second Officer was on watch and was monitoring a dedicated VHF channel that the local navy was broadcasting on. The main engine was kept running so the vessel could manoeuvre instantly, and two ABs carried out regular patrols on deck.

Shortly after midnight a small boat slowly approached the vessel. It stopped amidships by the broken lights where the freeboard was only 2 metres. They put a ladder on the railing which had

a carpet attached to protect them from the barbed wire and climbed on board. None of the ABs saw the small boat approaching. The boat did not give a stable echo reading on the radar as it was made of wood and the choppy sea interfered.

The five men who climbed on board were pirates and armed with machine guns. They made their way to the poop deck and surprised the AB on watch. The pirates demanded that the AB should take them to the bridge or they would kill him. The AB unlocked the door into the accommodation and led the pirates to the bridge. When the pirates had secured the bridge they asked for the Chief Engineer to be brought to the bridge. He was beaten when he arrived and told that he would be killed if he tried to sabotage the engine and that any engineer would be killed if they tampered with the engines.

The Second Officer was told to show two of the pirates to the Master's cabin and the other three remained on the bridge with an AB and the Chief Engineer.

The Master was forcefully woken up, beaten and forced to open the safe and give all the money to the pirates. When the Master was taken to the bridge, ten more pirates had arrived. A larger vessel was drifting alongside which looked like a fishing boat.

One of the pirates identified himself as the leader and explained to the Master that all the crew should be summoned to the mess room. If anyone resisted or tried to sabotage anything on the vessel he would be killed. All the crew, except the Master, were placed in the mess room and their hands were tied. The Master remained on the bridge.

One of the Ship Security Alert System (SSAS) buttons was under a radar console but the Master was not close to it and was too scared to push it. The pirates took control of the vessel and sailed it for ten hours when they stopped beside another smaller tanker. They started a ship-to-ship operation and when the other tanker had been loaded it sailed off. The other two pirate boats had followed and were drifting alongside the vessel.

The pirates took the Master to the mess room and tied him to a chair. He finally freed himself and when he got to the bridge he realised that the pirates had left, because both pirate boats were gone. He called the office and informed them what had happened.

What can we learn?

- Best management practices should be followed and need to be adapted to every different area the vessel is visiting. It is essential that a piracy risk assessment for the trading area has been completed as described in 'Best Management Practices to Deter Piracy 5 (BMP5)' and 'Guidelines for Owners, Operators and Masters for Protection Against Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea'.

- It is not common for pirates in the Gulf of Guinea to use ladders, but in this attack ladders were used to board the vessel, so preventive measures should be analysed and implemented. Physical barriers which increase the height will make it more difficult for the pirates to attach the ladders. A proper risk assessment need to be completed.

- It is imperative that all required equipment is working condition. In this case a number of floodlights were broken.

Ships operating in the Gulf of Guinea area are strongly urged to plan according to the following

- Arrive at the Pilot Station, Port, Anchorage or STS Area 'just in time'. Plan transit times with consideration to safe speed and maintaining distance offshore or use an offshore waiting area. Consider higher transit speeds where the risk/threat assessment is high.

- Rendezvous – where possible, avoid waiting and slow steaming. Consider offering several alternative rendezvous points and advise rendezvous points at the last minute. If waiting, keep well off the coast (up to 200M). Do not give away waiting positions. Do not drift and keep engines ready for immediate manoeuvres.

- Vessels should proceed within the 200M range at full speed.

- Anchoring - where practicable, a prolonged stay at anchorage is to be avoided.

- Minimize use of VHF and use e-mail or secure satellite telephone instead. Where possible, answer only known or legitimate callers on the VHF, bearing in mind that imposters are likely and may even appear in uniform.

- The greatest risks of piracy are at night and these need to be factored into all planning. Where possible, operations should start and end during daylight hours.
- The use of privately contracted armed guards on board is banned in Nigerian waters.
- If using an armed escort, due diligence on the company providing this service must be conducted to ensure strict adherence to the MOU issued by the Nigerian Navy and Nigerian Maritime Administration & Safety Agency (NIMASA).
- Shipowners and managers must have a means of verification that hardening measures are available and in place on vessels prior to entering the GoG area.
- Spot checks for verification at ports within the GoG area are an additional option to consider.
- Nigerian naval armed guards can protect merchant ships utilising patrol boats to escort ships in the region.
- Maintain all-round visual lookouts & good radar watch.
- Report to MDAT-GoG (the Maritime Domain Awareness for Trade – Gulf of Guinea, operated jointly by French and UK Navies); watchkeepers@mdat-gog.org and Emergency Tel: +33(0) 298 22 88 88.
- The MDAT-GoG will liaise directly with the navies in the region in the event of an attack. If a ship does not report to the centre then there is likely to be a delay in the response from the regional navy. Alerts and warnings will be issued by MDAT-GoG and they will also contact vessels in the immediate vicinity of an incident.

MEDIA ALERT!

If news reaches journalists, media interest in this incident will be high and indeed should be expected. It is likely to have been sourced from any of the following: Nigerian Navy, local agents, other vessels, the pirate gang themselves, or loose chatter from the crew –not least on social media. The incident adds to the pattern of tanker product theft in the region – and if it brings the total number of attacks to a numerical milestone (10, 50, 100 etc.), this will add to the interest from editors.

Recommended actions:

- Carry out immediate monitoring for social media chatter.
- Draft a holding statement.
- Establish close communications with the families of those on board and provide reassurance as to the steps that are being taken - they must trust the company and not try to raise awareness of the incident by speaking to the media or politicians.
- Identify and prepare a company spokesperson.
- Consider internal communication to back office staff.
- When possible, the Master of the vessel should be briefed to deal with any media interest. The Nigerian Navy has sometimes forcibly brought journalists on board merchant vessels to talk to the Captain as a publicity stunt.