

- **A nightmare comes true: tales of captivity – Round Table**

## **Somalian pirate hostage drama**

Captain Colin J.N.Darch.

### The attack.

As Master of the tug “Svitzer Korsakov” with an Irish Chief Engineer and four Russian crew I was proceeding from St.Petersburg to Singapore, when, on the afternoon of 1<sup>st</sup> February 2008 we were attacked by Somali pirates, seventy miles off the coast.

Five armed men approached very fast in a white six metre skiff driven by a 48hp Yamaha outboard engine. The Russian Chief Mate sounded the ship’s general alarm, pressed the hidden button to activate a tracking device in England, and put out a MAYDAY call on the VHF. I switched control from automatic to manual, increased engine revolutions and propeller pitch to maximum, and was thus ready to use the six thousand horsepower of thrust through two 360 degree azimuthing pods to manoeuvre violently to prevent the pirates from coming alongside.

Each time they approached I thrust the stern strongly towards them and they sheered away. At the second attempt they fired their Kalashnikovs but as there was no broken glass we judged these to be intimidating rather than lethal. This violent manoeuvring was very effective with wild white water all around us. At one point their bowman with ladder was swept into the sea and obliged to swim. I briefly considered reversing over him but at this stage I merely meant to keep them off, not kill them.

Then a second boat appeared with four more gunmen, and the two boats attacked from both sides. My anger increased and I decided to smash one boat and hope the other, after rescuing colleagues, would give up or be too overloaded to be a threat to us. But before this happened they managed to get on board, and I brought the ship to a standstill.

### Relations with the pirates.

The first on the bridge was “Captain Omar Hassan” who spoke no English and his interpreter who explained they would hold us until a ransom was paid, and we would be well treated. They further explained that they had no government for 17 years, no education health police coastguard or other services, and had decided to form “militias” of approx. 10 men to capture and ransom ships to raise income.

As one boat was partly swamped they cast it off but attempted to lift the other on board using the ships crane driven by one of our Russians. However they badly mismanaged this and the sling broke and the boat with three engines, ammunition etc went to the bottom. They were mostly soldiers not seamen.

They required us to control the ship so we more or less continued our routine of watches with those off watch able to use their cabins, bathrooms and messrooms.

They took all mobile phones, cameras, and laptops, 700 euros of company cash from my briefcase and personal money, and some clothing to replace what went down with the boat. Our cabins were a total mess.

On Sunday morning we anchored off the village of EYL where a further dozen or so gunmen came aboard plus a young “Mullah” who prayed on behalf of all. They also got a supply of khat which after that they never lacked.

I was instructed to call my Dutch employers on satellite phone and they gave me a name and Copenhagen number to call, the shipowner being Danish, at the same time informing me that our wives were being cared for. The call to Copenhagen became a daily ritual at 1400 my time, 1200 Denmark.

The initial demand was for several millions of dollars in cash with threat of death to the crew if not paid quickly. Copenhagen's response was that they would try to raise some money. I will not go into detail about these negotiations which I imagine follow a common process.

5<sup>th</sup> Feb US warship arrived causing initial panic but thereafter only issued verbal threats and random shots which troubled no one.

After two relocations including losing port anchor finally anchored off Gabbac when I was slapped and pushed.

8<sup>th</sup> Mohammad Abdul Ali, schoolteacher appears on board, to takeover interpretation.

#### Attempted escape.

12<sup>th</sup> Feb 0015 all hands assembled in steering flat after blacking out the ship, all except Fred barricaded ourselves in Aft Peak ballast tank to await storming of ship by Americans. No rescue coming we surrendered at 1900. Not punished but lost all privileges and struggled to regain trust.

#### Ransom agreed; deteriorating conditions aboard.

15<sup>th</sup> Fred and Farrah work out a new deal, ransom demand reduced to 900, 000 dollars. This must have cut the negotiating time considerably., but Fred never given thanks. More relaxed atmosphere on board, occasionally allowed to cabins, unless warship movements raised tension, such as deploying small boats. Still sleeping on bridge, all 6 of us.

18<sup>th</sup> Feb. Passed on threat of “Plan B” to run ship ashore, shoot Russians, ransom me and Fred from the ashore.

21<sup>st</sup> Feb. Both parties agreed on 678,000 dollars to be paid. Next problem how to exchange the money? No bank accounts or passports. Like factory worker syndicate , won lottery but lost ticket.

Filthy conditions on board, frequent diarrhoea, camels milk, goat, weed everywhere, dirty clothes, not allowed freedom to clean up. Shortage of water, Fred and Russians falling out over water pumping etc. Difficult to keep relations between us all civil.

23<sup>rd</sup> Feb Got permission for two seamen to sleep in cabins.

For many days pirates tried to get help from overseas Somalis to collect the money, in vain. Plan B again in vogue.

9<sup>th</sup> March. Sent long uncensored E-mail explaining our lives balanced against the expectation of money, without which our lives are worthless, pirates impatient, costing them daily. Suggested cash delivered by sea.

10<sup>th</sup> March Owners planning sea delivery.

17<sup>th</sup> March cash delivered by very brave men. Pirates afraid to take cash ashore, all night calculating and dividing cash. Evening most of pirates left, proceed up coast with final seven to be landed off Beila.

18<sup>th</sup> March 1018 last pirates departed, headed for Salalah.

19<sup>th</sup> evening. Boarded by party from US warship who explained why they had not rescued us when in the ballast tank.

20<sup>th</sup> March arrived Salalah.

### Conclusion.

Families well looked after by all parties. I'm especially grateful to local police Detective Superintendent of Hostage Negotiations Unit.

We were very well treated in Salalah, and hotel provided in Dubai where joined by wives; lost cash reimbursed, even clothes provided.

I have carried out several more ship deliveries, but not near Somalia. I would recommend such defences as razor wire, but not arming merchant ships.

Personally don't feel any post piracy stress or trauma. Men are not born pirates, it is circumstances caused by political failure which encourages the growth of piracy.