

Pirates' Playground

A Joint meeting with Southampton Master Mariners' Club and The Nautical Institute Solent Branch held at the Clubroom on 18th May 2011.

The subject of the joint meeting was a presentation entitled "Pirates' Playground" given by Ms Annabel Clarke AMNI Bsc, recounting her experience of pirate attack in the Indian Ocean and describing the developing anti-pirate precautions as utilised on the vessels in which she served. Her first transit of the area in question was as a deck cadet on MV Mahinabank, a multipurpose general cargo vessel operated by Andrew Weir Shipping for Swires on a round the world service and carrying twelve passengers. On this occasion in November 2008, precautions consisted mainly of extra lookouts in order to provide a 360 degree lookout with additional crew members from all departments supporting the deck department and fire hoses were rigged so that they could be operated from the bridge. By later standards this seems rather minimal but there was a heightened feeling of alertness and tension throughout the vessel. On this and subsequent occasions the normal work of the vessel was suspended as the anti piracy measures assumed priority. Although the transit was uneventful, one vessel was captured nearby, highlighting the sense of risk felt by those

on board.



Annie explains the deployment of the timber baulks

clear and abort their attack or risk sinking their skiff although the deck party was under fire. The pirates then dropped back before attempting a second attack which received the same treatment. Fortunately the pirates withdrew after that. Annabel was full of praise for the Master who displayed great leadership skills, keeping his crew together and motivated at this time of great stress. The vessel entered the Gulf of Aden next day and joined a convoy for the transit.

Having obtained her OOW certificate, she then joined MV BBC Asia, a heavy lift tramp operated by Leda Shipping of Germany for a voyage from the Gulf to the Far East and thence Europe, again transiting the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. She described the increased anti-piracy measure becoming more prevalent with the increase in attacks. A large amount of equipment was supplied by the Company in Singapore and so the crew were able to establish a secure citadel and make the decks and accommodation as inaccessible as possible for any pirates managing to get on board. Razor wire was deployed along the ship's side, over the deck cargo and at any possible access points where pirates could climb to the bridge. Many openings had bars welded across them and doors fitted with strong-backs and additional securing devices. The citadel was organised and equipped so that the vessel could be conned from within for a limited period of time, hopefully until military help arrived. In the event of an attack all crew members were to go to the citadel with the exception of the Master and senior deck officers who were to remain on the bridge but evacuating to the citadel in the event of a successful boarding. Realistic drills were held so that all procedures were practiced and well understood. However the measures posed considerable restrictions and difficulties in moving around the vessel and it was not easy to reconcile priorities of normal access with security. The vessel joined a convoy escorted by Chinese warships and had an uneventful passage although there were attacks in the area. After Annabel was relieved in Port Said, the ship was to return to the Far East and being fully loaded had minimal freeboard. On this occasion they were to embark armed guards and she remarked that as no ships had been attacked once the presence of armed guard was evident, she would have felt much more confident. On all the transits described, the vessel reported to the UKMTO so that progress could be monitored.



This slide shows the pirates close alongside

The floor was then opened for questions and discussions and Annabel stated that in general, seafarers felt that the situation and the risks were not generally understood by the public. Many interesting points were raised by the audience including the fact that whilst the official "risk" zone has been extended, the enhanced payment to ship's crews is only applicable in the IRTC, the corridor in the Gulf of Aden, ironically where the crews now feel most secure as naval presence has virtually eliminated successful attacks. The meeting concluded with a general consensus that there is too little press coverage so that the public remain largely unaware of the serious level of piracy and its effects and that politicians should be urged to push for more effective action against piracy worldwide..