



Seventeen of the twenty crewmembers on the starboard bridge wing following the ordeal. This shot was taken by a crewmember aboard the Guided Missile Destroyer USS BAINBRIDGE. The empty chair is in honor of Captain Phillips. The crew consisted of 5 M.E.B.A. officers, 3 MM&P deck officers and an SIU unlicensed crew of 12. (Photo courtesy of Ken Quinn)

Don't Give Up the Ship!

Quick Thinking and a Boatload of Know-How Saves the MAERSK ALABAMA

“The courage they displayed was incredible. Everyone has a part in this. It’s not the Captain. It’s not me. It’s the whole crew. I’m very proud of them all.”

Chief Engineer Mike Perry

Much of the ship’s crew aboard the MAERSK ALABAMA opened their eyes to a deafening alarm that pierced the calm of a bright and clear April morning. Though it seemed like a bad dream, this kind of alarm didn’t come with a snooze button. Instead, it was accompanied by a P.A. announcement from Captain Richard Phillips informing the crew that pirates were preparing to board.

En route to Mombasa, Kenya with a load of humanitarian food aid cargo, the Maritime Security Program vessel owned by Maersk Line, Ltd and operated by Waterman Steamship was approximately 300 miles off the coast of Somalia on April 8, when a small boat of four heavily-armed Somali pirates finally caught up with them.

Twenty crewmembers, including five M.E.B.A. officers aboard, began executing the vessel security plan they knew so well for a scenario they had recognized as a very real possibility.

“We Knew We Were in Indian Country”

Piracy never really disappeared from the seas from centuries ago when the first water marauders discovered they could get away with robbery at sea. It has always been a threat with varying degrees of intensity. Unfortunately, in today’s world it has become an acute menace with crews on high alert plying through piracy hotspots such as the Malacca Straits. Piracy has doubled this year from the same period in 2008 and the coast of Somalia has become its epicenter as young Somalis begin to understand that piracy can relieve them from the burdens of their impoverished nation. It began mere miles from the shores of Somalia but when shipping

lines began sailing their vessels further away from the coast, pirates amended their plans of attack to keep the ransom money coming. Motherships, often vessels previously hijacked by pirates, are being used to bring pirate skiffs hundreds of miles off the coast to target commercial vessels and fishing boats – anything that will allow them an ill-gotten payday. ALABAMA Chief Engineer Mike Perry knew the risks, and through reports and pirate chatter realized that the level of pirate activity was even more palpable than it was at this time last year. Fortunately, he had a great relationship with the permanent officers onboard and they had worked seamlessly in the past on preparing the crew for emergency situations. Capt. Phillips and First Mate Shane Murphy, both MM&P members, had just gotten back to the ship in the last ten days joining Chief Perry and his 1st Assistant Engineer Matt Fisher, both proud M.E.B.A. members.

“Capt. Phillips is a stickler for drills and safety,” M.E.B.A.’s Dick Mathews, the 2nd A/E aboard the ship noted. “He is the epitome of a safety minded captain.”

The Captain sets the tone aboard the ship and he emphasized the dangers the crew could face on this voyage. “You absorb the culture instilled on the ship,” Mathews pointed out. “I already knew the stuff that he was saying, but it reinforces what you already know to make you act quicker – and quicker is better.”

Indeed M.E.B.A. officers, along with MM&P and SIU crewmembers aboard who upgrade their skills at their unions’ Maryland-based training facilities, are well-prepared for hazards at sea. The Calhoon M.E.B.A. Engineering School in Easton, MD offers a range of courses designed to prepare our members to deal with a number of emergency situations that could take place aboard ship. Among many other offerings, our School hosts valuable training courses on Vessel Security Officer, Small Arms, Government Vessel Operations (Damage Control & CBRD), HAZMAT and Fast Rescue Boat.

“We knew we were in Indian country,” said John Cronan, an M.E.B.A. member serving as 3rd A/E. “Everyone knew that piracy was for real – we train for this.”

A Close Encounter

Though later many in the American media portrayed the incident as the very first attack by pirates against a U.S.-flag ship, many an M.E.B.A. member can describe his or her own close encounter with sea bandits. In fact the MAERSK ALABAMA had been approached by pirates a day before the boarding. The crew had been doing drills which at times could get pretty elaborate under the Captain’s leadership. They had



The MAERSK ALABAMA was on a run from Salalah to Djibouti to Mombasa with a load of food aid cargo when four heavily armed pirates attempted to take over the ship.

done a container fire simulation and a detailed security drill including a piracy scenario. Right in conjunction with the drill, the bridge watch reported a suspicious small craft less than two miles away that was continuing to advance. The Captain sounded the alarm and the ship’s crew began executing the vessel security plan. Mike Perry and the engineers returned to their stations and made sure the ship achieved full power as the ALABAMA sped up and began evasive maneuvers.

However, the sea state wasn’t ideal for the small craft as it struggled to successfully increase its speed through choppy waters. It closed within a mile before finally giving up and turning around. 2nd A/E Dick Mathews later wondered if it was a reconnaissance boat. “Were they looking to see what kind of ship it was? Is it low and slow? What size is the free board? [distance between water and main deck where you could climb up]. Is it easy to attack? Is it a high speed vessel? Is it one we can hit?”



A team from the amphibious assault ship USS BOXER tows the lifeboat from the MAERSK ALABAMA after the successful rescue of Capt. Phillips.

When the threat receded, everyone returned to the routine of their jobs. “A seaman likes a routine,” said Brother Mathews. “Though there are a couple bumps in the road that we take care of.” The crew was about to face a bigger bump than they’d ever come across before.

The Sea Was Like Glass

Chief Perry approved of the Captain’s preparation of the crew but believed that the level of security could be escalated by a series of additional steps that would aid the crew in times of crisis. With the tendency of pirates to shoot at the bridge – as was the case a week later when the LIBERTY SUN was attacked – Perry understood that an emergency scenario might necessitate that ship controls be routed away from the wheelhouse. Crewmembers could then secret themselves in a secure location on the ship. Perry’s plan had not yet become an official part of the vessel security plan but he began efforts, fully within his jurisdiction, to locate and fortify a suitable area to enable that strategy.

As part of that security-minded idea, the 3rd A/E had already received instructions from the Chief to begin those fortifications to the designated space. On Tuesday, April 7th, after a long, hard day on the job, the engine crew was dirty and tired and ready to knock off for the night. But as he walked out on deck, something inside of 3rd A/E John Cronan was telling him to complete the reinforcement of a hatch on deck. This was a heavy hatch with a

counter-weight that one person could lift with a little effort. It was not yet secured from the inside and Cronan knew that the entrance led to a void space that the Chief had designated for fortification – where a besieged crew could potentially find refuge. Along with SIU’s Miguel Ruiz who was sailing as the GUDE (General Utility, Deck and Engine), John completed welding a padeye to the inside of the hatch so it could be tied off and secured from the inside. The timing was impeccable.

Later that night around midnight, pirates were sighted. The Captain was up most of the night assisting the bridge watch in maneuvering and steering away from them. As dawn approached, a calm day was revealed and the sea reached out beyond the horizon – smooth like glass. The small boat began closing in and when it breached an uncomfortable perimeter the Chief Engineer was summoned. Chief Perry reported to the Engine Control Room and began coordinating with the First Mate on getting more speed out of the 508-foot diesel container ship that is capable of just over 18 knots. But around 0715, all efforts to evade the small boat skidding along the flat seas had failed. The pirates had closed to within one mile of the ship. Captain Phillips sounded the general alarm.



On April 14, the LIBERTY SUN took small arms fire and absorbed several RPG volleys (including this one) in a pirate attack near Somalia. In early May, the M.E.B.A.-crewed MSC ship USNS LEWIS & CLARK was also fired upon by Somali pirates but managed to evade them without taking damage.



The four pirates speeding along the ship's port quarter shortly before the boarding on April 8. (Photo courtesy of Ken Quinn)

Here There Be Pirates

The crew grabbed their equipment, most got their radios and then mustered at their stations. Things were moving quickly. First Mate Murphy was on deck monitoring pirate movements and reporting to the Captain as the crew listened in on their own radios to the developing situation. With the muster and lockdown accomplished and knowing that the crew had completed all phases of the piracy plan, C/E Perry called out to the First Mate on the radio recommending that the rest of the crew report to the Engine Control Room (ECR) where it was safer. The First Mate agreed and the order was passed.

The pirate boat came up on the port side of the ALABAMA amidships, forward of the gangway. A hook was chucked up on deck and a barefoot, AK-47 wielding pirate scampered up the attached rope. Seconds later the pirate was at the foot of the stairs leading up the side of the house towards the bridge where he shot the lock off the security gate. A moment after that, the crew heard the Captain make a chilling announcement as the gun-toting pirate walked into the wheelhouse: "The bridge has been compromised." By then, fifteen of the twenty ALABAMA crewmembers were accounted for in the Engine Control Room. C/E Perry stayed in the ECR but sent everyone else to the secure area he had designated where the crew could barricade themselves inside.

Chief Perry then took main engine control away from the bridge and called 1st Engineer Matt Fisher to take control of the steering gear. "So he had steering, I had engine control," Perry recounted. "I kept the engine running at full and ordered the 1st Engineer to keep swinging the rudder port to starboard to make it harder for the other pirates to get up and to try to swamp their boat."

The gambit worked – but not before the pirates got onboard. However, their vessel was swamped – a fact that dramatically changed the dynamics of the siege on the ship.

M.E.B.A. Second Mate Ken Quinn, who was sailing on the vessel courtesy of the Pass-Through program with MM&P, said that the pirate "who had climbed up the line then made the crew on the bridge go down and pay out the pilot ladder at gunpoint so the other three could climb aboard."

The First Mate was still on deck tracking the pirates' movements and passing on information. He was observing and calling out over the radio about what weapons they had (AK-47s & pistols) along with other details.

First Mate Murphy was keeping up the radio talk trying to gather data on the intruders. The Captain would answer questions while seemingly talking about something more innocuous and unrelated. He was able to take advantage of the pirates' limited command of the English language to relay what was really



Aboard the LIBERTY SUN in the voyage before the vessel was attacked. Left to right are M.E.B.A.'s Chief Mate Bill Kenneweg, 1st A/E John E. Booth, 2nd A/E Robert S. Mahler, C/E Tim Harrington, 3rd A/E Thomas Urbik, and an engine cadet in the officer's lounge. All but Mahler were on the voyage when they were attacked. Other M.E.B.A. officers on the fateful voyage included Captain Don Grosse, Second Mate Leland Hall, Third Mate Edward Quinn and 2nd A/E Mark Gimle.

happening. "I'm hearing the First Mate phrasing questions and the captain working in the answer to the questions while he's talking to the pirates – very skillfully," recounted Chief Perry.

Captured with the Captain on the bridge were Third Mate Colin Wright and an Able Bodied Seaman (AB) named ATM Reza. Clifford Lacon, a second AB who was there to relieve Reza, also endured the nightmarish scenario unfolding.

Rude Awakening

Once assembled on the bridge, the four pirates soon discovered they didn't have control of the ship. Capt. Phillips still had his radio and he kept up the chatter to try to keep the crew informed of events.

"Crew of the MAERSK ALABAMA...All crew report to the bridge!" It was the Captain's voice beckoning for the missing crew to come on up to the bridge.

The crew knew better. 2nd A/E Mathews mentioned that it was clear that it really wasn't safe to come up to the bridge. "He's being coerced at gunpoint." Nobody gave themselves up. The 14 shipmates who were stowed away in the secure room could hear the frustration on the bridge as the pirates worked the throttle with no response and spun the ship's wheel to no avail.

"This situation was not what they were expecting," Mathews confirmed. "After we wrecked their plan, they didn't have a Plan B. But we had Plan A, B, C, D, and E..."

Once it was clear all four pirates were aboard, Chief Perry knew they'd be searching for the crew and he implemented the next phase of his plan. "That's when I disabled the engines and controls." He started tripping the electrical boards, then stopped the main engine, disconnected the power to the engine alarm system and plant monitors. "I tripped some other circuit breakers then opened the Diesel Generator breaker. Only the emergency lights were on now."

2nd Engineer Dick Mathews said that Chief Perry had informed the crew about shutting down the ship if such a scenario ever arose. "This was stated during the drill debrief the day before. He's good – he didn't get any argument from me...We were blacked out – no A.C., no lights, no ventilation, no water fountain...the ship was dead in the water."

Perry, a Navy veteran, said that "from a military standpoint, you don't want the enemy to have your assets...You don't want them to have control. I wasn't going to sink the ship but I wasn't going to allow them any comfort." But when you power down a ship that way, the emergency generator kicks in, something Perry wanted to deny the pirates as well. He climbed out of the Engine Room through the emergency escape trunk – a ladder from the Engine Room leading to the main deck. He couldn't know where the pirates were at that time so he was exposed on the deck as he snuck along the side of the ship and eventually knocked out the emergency generator. Only the emergency batteries still remained, generating a distress signal.

“There’s nothing running on the ship so sound travels,” he said. “I’m moving slowly - and I’m ready to run back the other way if I’m discovered. It was imperative that in order to protect the crew the ship had to be black or the pirates would feel comfortable in coming down and finding them.”

“That was the start of their rude awakening,”
3rd A/E Cronan pointed out.

After disabling everything, C/E Perry met up with the First Mate topside and the two of them discussed the situation. Sometime later, in the distance they spied a pirate walking up the starboard side of the ship, then back around down the port side to the house with the Captain at gunpoint – searching for the crew. Phillips was talking loudly so as to warn the crew away. Perry realized that if he had been a little closer it would have been possible for him to tackle the pirate. But as it was, he had to let him go. C/E Perry and 1/M Murphy then worked out a rudimentary communication method using radio clicks or utilizing different channels – in order to pass along coded information.

Soon after, they split up and continued freelancing around the vessel. The sighting of the lone pirate walking around with the Captain inspired Perry to take precautions in case a better opportunity arose.

Sweatbox

Down below it was heating up. The sea temperature was close to 90 degrees as the ship lay dead in the water miles from the equator baking in the hot sun. The pirates had boarded the ship 15 minutes before breakfast opened up and the 14 crewmembers barricaded in “the Hide” were burning with thirst as the temperature soared to 125 degrees. It was a sweatbox, with no ventilation, no water and no light. “We were in a little bit of a pickle,” 2nd A/E Mathews recalled. “We were hunkering down for what was turning out to be a long day.”

The engineers later opened up a “manhole” to go to the bathroom. It was very sanitary and nobody “missed.” They listened to the walkie-talkies to try to figure out what was going on – but mostly they stayed quiet trying to conserve energy.

Cat and Mouse

Chief Perry made his way to the pitch black Engine Room and slowly groped through the dark to the Machine Shop where he collected some nylon zip ties – in case he was able to subdue one of the pirates. Not wanting to tip off the intruders he kept his flashlight off. “I had to think like a blind person,” Perry



A Discovery Channel reenactment of a pirate with a gun to the back of an actor portraying Third Mate Colin Wright. They filmed on the M.E.B.A.-crewed Keystone RRF vessel CAPE RISE in Norfolk, VA. Two different specials on the incident premiere in the month of June – one on Discovery Channel and the other on The Learning Channel (TLC), which is part of the Discovery network.

remembered. “I was counting steps, feeling for familiar points and navigating the obstacles. There was slight illumination from the indicator LEDs on the few control panels around the Engine Room that gave me reference points as I moved about.” He gathered his equipment and took note of vantage points in the engine area where he could hide and possibly launch an attack.

It was like a haunted house, pitch black with creaking noises from the thermal expansion. “It was very creepy,” said Perry. Around 10 a.m., Chief Perry suddenly heard voices and Capt. Phillips, accompanied by a gun toting pirate, entered the space. The pirate walked in a mere ten feet away from where Perry was hidden but enough piping and equipment prevented the Chief’s discovery. Perry noted, “They made it halfway around the Engine Room. I heard the Captain say, ‘see this is the Engine Room – there’s nobody here’ – and they turned and left.”

On the radio the Captain, like a carnival barker, continued to keep the crew informed of their movements as the pirates went through the state rooms in search of the 16 hidden crewmembers.

Around 11 a.m., Perry called 1st A/E Matt Fisher via the hand-cranked sound powered phone system. He needed clarification on whether the crew wanted to relocate to another part of the ship. A quick poll revealed that the crew felt safer together in the secure location. Fisher then went with Chief Perry to collect water. They were just filling up some jugs when the same Engine Room door opened again. Fisher and Perry grabbed the water



3rd A/E John Cronan is greeted by President Don Keefe shortly after the crew arrived at Andrews Air Force Base in the early morning hours of April 16.



C/E Mike Perry at the Calhoun School filming a segment for the Discovery Channel special on the ordeal. The show premiered on June 21. At center is Producer/Interviewer Christina Bavetta. Associate Producer Korin Anderson is at far right.

and dashed back to the secure room. The Chief left the water then stepped outside the room as the door was relocked.

“I did a gut check,” Perry recounted. I made up my mind that I would never give in to these pirates – that I would never allow myself or my crew to be captured and abused. It’s not that I’m brave – I’m just not going to allow that to happen.”

“One Down!”

At least two shadowy figures marched into the Engine Room, flashlight beams dancing around. Perry recognized the voice of ATM, the AB who had been on the bridge when the pirates stormed in. This time, the search was more thorough and Perry watched the lights as they went into the Engine Control Room, storage rooms and Machine Shop to root out the crew.

“Then the light disappeared and I scooted down a corridor just in time to see them come out of the Machine Shop – I’m at a right angle to them and I quickly moved down the passageway,” Perry said.

There was a large vertical stanchion between the Machine Shop and the parts room about 35 feet away in an area the pirate had already searched, and Perry decided to dart over there by the light of the distant flashlights. He stepped out of the darkness and began his dash when the pirate moved to his left and a beam of light shone right on the advancing Chief Engineer. He’d be seen!

The Chief turned around and zipped back down the way he came. The pirate began his pursuit screaming after Perry all the way. The Chief ran around the corner, stopped and said a quick prayer – knife in hand and ready to strike. “He’s getting

closer – coming fast,” Perry recounted. “I see his face coming past the corner. I lunged up at him – shoving my right hand with the knife at his throat. I grabbed his right hand with my left assuming there’s a gun there – and squeezed it for all it’s worth pulling it up so it can’t come at me...The knife is at his throat, it’s very sharp with a serrated hilt. All I had to do was pull it back and I could have cut his throat wide open.”

The pirate’s left hand reached up to the blade trying to keep it away from his throat. For his efforts he received a nasty slash on his palm. But the pirate was overpowered and he was going into submission. He started yelping in fear and Perry realized he wouldn’t have to take it another step. “I pushed him down and drove him to the deck. In the process I slammed him into the equipment behind. I can’t see anything – it’s pitch black.” Over the radio, Perry could hear one of the other pirates yelling “we see you – we’re coming.” He couldn’t possibly know if this statement was true and was waiting for the gunfire. “In my mind there was someone else out there in the darkness,” he said.

I called out, “ATM! ATM!” He needed help to get the pirate’s weapon away from him. But when the pirate had come after the Chief, ATM naturally turned the other way in a bid for freedom. Now ATM could hear the Chief calling out to him and slowly navigated himself back through the dark. ATM helped roll their new captive over and along with the Chief they tied the pirate’s hands up with the nylon ties. Minutes after the takedown, Perry hollered to the crew in the secure room who had heard the commotion. They opened up and Second Mate Ken Quinn, Bosun William Rios and others grabbed the pirate, later revealed to be Abduwali Abdukhadir Muse, the ringleader. Quinn remembers Abduwali as a small guy who he



The crew relaxes after pulling into Mombasa. Second Mate Ken Quinn is at right. Behind him are 1st A/E Matt Fisher looking at the camera and 2nd A/E Dick Mathews. In the background are GUDE Miguel Ruiz and Steward Assistant Mario Clotter. (Photo courtesy of Ken Quinn)



A photo of the captured pirate Abduwali Muse aboard the MAERSK ALABAMA shortly after the takedown. (Photo courtesy of Ken Quinn)

could lift with one arm. The pirate was bleeding profusely and the Chief asked the Second Mate to attend to the wounds with some clean rags that were in “the Hide.” No longer a hostage, ATM now joined the crew and their new prisoner in the secure room. Mike Perry pulled out his radio and announced, “One down!” He remained outside the secure room peering around in the darkness.

The crew couldn't know at the time, but the pirates' hostage count on the bridge had been cut in half. Minutes before the leader was captured, the four Somalis were becoming increasingly aggravated by their lack of ship control and inability to locate the crew. Weapons were trained on Third Mate Colin Wright and the pirates threatened to shoot him if the crew didn't reveal themselves. A break in this intolerable situation came when Abduwali apparently sent Wright off with orders to locate the crew and get them to give themselves up. The Third Mate then quite logically scampered off the bridge and found a safe haven to stash himself.

At that point, Abduwali announced that he would find the crew himself and rounded up ATM to shuttle him around the ship. In what must have been one of the more convincing speeches of our times, ATM apparently persuaded Abduwali to leave his pistol behind. “I'm a Muslim – you're a Muslim,” ATM allegedly told the pirate. “I know where they're at but they won't come out if you have a gun.” That's when the two of them came down through the house where Chief Engineer Mike Perry was lurking in the dark.

Back in the Hole

Cronan and the ABs had been guarding the door to the secure room, each with a piece of equipment they could use as a weapon. When they opened up for ATM, they brought the prisoner into the hole with them and got him situated. “He was babbling – preparing to meet Allah,” said Mathews.

The Chief Engineer was communicating by radio with Capt. Phillips and learned that the three remaining pirates needed to know if Abduwali was alive. The crew held up the walkie talkie to Abduwali's face and let him spit out a few syllables.

When the pirate was pulled into the room, Second Mate Ken Quinn lowered his gaze and made a startling revelation. “I looked down at his feet and he was wearing my shoes.” This was a result of the pirates' search of the state rooms that proved otherwise fruitless.

Harkening back to his training in the Calhoun School's Vessel Security Officer course, 2nd A/E Dick Mathews made sure that the prisoner was searched adequately. “There's a couple things I trained for in [Vessel Security Officer Instructor Jack Menendez's] class that I employed that day on the ship,” Mathews noted. “I didn't even have to think about it.

3rd A/E Cronan said, “We absolutely treated him humanely. There were two sides to our treatment. First, sympathy – ‘Oh, poor little pirate’ but then we were firm with him. We let him know that we weren't playing. We were excited. The adrenaline was up. But we treated him a lot better than he would have treated us.”



1st A/E Matt Fisher with wife Kelly who is also a sailing member. Brother Fisher noted, "it's hard to tell pirates apart from fishermen. We try to avoid things that don't look right. You can't tell until they turn and start coming after you. But when they start shooting at you, you definitely know."



At the Gaylord Hotel in Maryland after the crew returned stateside. M.E.B.A. Dick Mathews (2nd A/E) is at far right with ATM Zahid Reza (AB), his wife Elizabeth and son Isa.

"Now we knew we had something," Cronan stated, "We had a big fish."

"But we were worried about him going into shock," Mathews added. "You can't appreciate this kind of hot in the engine space. You can get acclimated to a high level of stress but this was ratcheted up beyond the normal."

The pirate wanted a drink but the crew had run out of water and offered him a Sprite instead. Declining the soda at first he repeated "watah, watah" in broken English. "He's kind of picky," thought Mathews. "Maybe he wants to see the rest of the menu."

At first Abduwali was guarded closely but they soon realized they could afford to loosen up his bindings a little. Soon enough, everyone quieted down and returned to their particular places to wait out the crisis.

As the morning dragged on, Shane Murphy communicated with the crew through the rope scuttle on deck that led down below. They briefed the First Mate quickly on their situation and expressed their need for food and water. The First Mate eventually came back and stuffed a black garbage bag down the rope scuttle. This was all the untouched food laid out for breakfast. "We had cut watermelon, mango, pineapple, honeydew melon, cantaloupe, a lot of juicy stuff," said

Mathews. "This was an A+...I could have kissed the guy."

It was hovering around 11 a.m. and the crew was beginning to succumb to the heat. "We started scarfing it down," Mathews said. "Some of us could barely stand – we were depleted."

They informed 1/M Murphy they needed a first aid kit. Not too much longer he was back with a "Go Bag." Second Mate Ken Quinn employed his medical training and patched up the pirate then took Abduwali's photo for posterity.

"We're Gonna Win This"

Back in the darkness of the Engine Room, Chief Perry began to collect himself. He was exhausted but was readying himself for what might be coming next. But despite his fatigue, he understood that the crew of the MAERSK ALABAMA was stronger now. "We're excited – we're gonna win this," he said. "We knew we had them on the run. The First Mate was collecting radios and food, doing surveillance – we're communicating."

Two hostages had been freed and the ringleader was captured. Ship control was out of the pirates' reach and the crew had capsized the speedboat. "Now they're really demoralized," said 2nd A/E Mathews. "They wouldn't have the \$3 million ransom they were cheering about when they first boarded... We're starting to win – so we're feeling pretty good."

But the crew was due for another terrifying moment. Around 3:00 p.m. they heard footsteps overhead and the fifteen shipmates in the hole went deathly silent. The pirates were walking overhead with Capt. Phillips still chattering away. The Somalis tried to open the hatch but the padeye and the securing line held fast and thwarted their attempt. One pirate then took a flashlight and peered down the small rope scuttle used to handle mooring lines. The crewmembers could hear the distinctive sound of a pirate sliding back the action on his AK-47. But nothing caught the pirate's eye during his quick search and the Captain kept things moving, continuing his banter, "Oh no, no, no – that's just the rope scuttle – let's go get that fuel."

Waving the White Flag

"As the day went on the pirates became desperate to get out of there," 1st A/E Matt Fisher noted. They were completely flustered. The three remaining pirates had lost their leader and they were being hunted. "We were a harder target than they ever experienced," Cronan confirmed.

Around this time, Chief Perry assisted by 1st A/E Fisher in communication with the First Mate stole up to the bridge seeking to free another crewmember. Their search was initially unrewarding. But later on the bridge wing, after the 1st A/E returned to the secure room, Chief Perry discovered the unguarded AB Clifford Lacon, who had spent his day being threatened with a gun in his face. He sent Clifford down below to join the rest of the crew.

The pirates had decided to cut their losses and vacate the premises. The three pirates had gone to the emergency generator compartment to get fuel – to use in the Man Overboard (MOB) rescue boat, an idea suggested several times over the day by First Mate Shane Murphy. "We had discussed a strategy of giving the pirates a way out of their situation," Chief Perry noted. It took about an hour to get the boat ready to launch and Capt. Phillips was recruited to make it happen. The Captain then called from the B deck MOB boat station that he was going to launch the boat with the three pirates and that the crew should have the Somali prisoner ready for an exchange.

From Out of the Grave

All but three of the 17 shipmates in the overheated secure room had been suffering there since around 8 in the morning. As the afternoon rounded out and the evening hours approached, the suffocating heat had begun to take its toll. "These people were in severe heat stress," said Chief Perry. "In heat stress mode it's hard to move and think logically. They were pretty whooped."



At the Salute to Congress Award ceremony are (l-r) Secretary-Treasurer Bill Van Loo, President Don Keefe, ALABAMA C/E Mike Perry, First Mate Shane Murphy, Second Mate Ken Quinn and MM&P President Tim Brown.

"We were scary close to passing out," said 2nd A/E Dick Mathews.

Chief Perry called his M.E.B.A. engineers out of the room and the four of them began the process of bringing the ship back to life. They got the emergency generator and emergency air compressor going. They restored the lighting and recovered the Engine Room from a dead plant. The plan was to have all electrical power back online and the Main Engine at the ready so that the ship could be fired up right after the exchange. They could then pull away and prevent another attempt on the ship.

The Captain and First Mate were working out the details of the exchange. "It all sounded good and we had hope," Chief Perry recalled. "There were constant reassurances back and forth with the pirates on what was about to take place."

The engineers soon established electrical power at the boat launching winch which needs the juice to lift the crane arm down and launch the boat.

Once the pirates were off the ship in the MOB boat along with the Captain around 5 p.m. – the Chief gave the signal for the rest of the crew to come out of the secure room. It was a jolt to the senses when the Chief fully understood the hell that these crewmembers had been through for over eight hours. With muscle tone degrading, they were all suffering intense muscle cramps and had begun breaking down.

They emerged one by one, some could barely walk and many collapsed in a heap. "They were like the walking dead coming out of their graves," Chief Perry recalled. "This was a very dangerous situation. Every one of them should have been in the hospital hooked up to I.V.'s. I was looking at dead people."

“The Chief was fearing for us,” said 2nd A/E Mathews. “I saw him get quite emotional when it dawned on him that he’d had to order us into a place that was possible death for some of us – especially the older guys.”

They were brought into the Control Room where there was some ventilation and partial power. Many of them dropped to the floor and laid there.

But there was no time to rest. Things were happening quickly and every man was needed to keep the momentum going. Topside, the three Somalis were beginning to make demands as the ship readied for the hostage exchange. The pirates wanted the crew to accommodate them with more fuel and food.

“I had to order these people to go to work,” Chief Perry recounted. “One by one as the task came up I assigned it to the crew – and one by one each of them stood up – asked me to repeat it – then climbed up the ladder and did it. Not one person said they couldn’t or wouldn’t do it. It was amazing. They were all in danger. The courage they displayed was incredible. Everyone has a part in this. It’s not the Captain. It’s not me. It’s the whole crew. I’m very proud of them all.”

Raw Deal

When the MOB boat launched, it made it about 200 yards and then the motor conked out. It wouldn’t restart. Phillips, his Captain’s instincts taking over, directed the pirates to paddle the boat, which they did, along the port side of the ship. A line was passed to them and they made fast.

After some back and forth on the radio between the Captain, the pirates and the First Mate, it was decided that the crew would deliver the covered lifeboat to the pirates and get ready for the swap. Stowed on rails at a sharp angle, the boat required that someone crawl inside in order to launch it. The First Mate called for volunteers and Bosun William Rios responded along with 3rd A/E John Cronan. 1/M Murphy looked at them as they strapped themselves in. “You don’t have to do this,” he said, and offered to relieve either man. Both refused. Inside the lifeboat Cronan and Rios sketched out a rough endgame to the day’s events. The 3rd Engineer was hiding a ball-peen hammer and the Bosun had a homemade shank up his sleeve along with a pocket knife. “I was going to crack one with a hammer,” Cronan said. “Rios was gonna get the other. We were hoping Phillips would grab the third pirate. If not, one of us would bear hug the other and jump overboard.”



Secretary-Treasurer Bill Van Loo, along with representatives of the MM&P, SIU and AMO, testified before the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee on May 20 concerning piracy.

The First Mate closed the door and WHOOSH! – they shot into the water. Both men jumped up, inflated their jackets and began motoring over to the MOB boat at the port quarter. Capt. Phillips made fast with a small line and when they opened the door to enter the open lifeboat they walked a triangle around the three pirates with full intent to do some harm.

3rd A/E Cronan says that Capt. Phillips must have sensed their intent and sent out signals aimed at halting their violent plan. He continued talking and barked out directions about the boat operations and hostage exchange. His attitude and words defused the situation and Cronan and Rios pulled back on their plan. Cronan said he could see and smell the fear on the pirates after everything had gone wrong for them – they were having a bad day and were only too willing to separate themselves from the MAERSK ALABAMA as they left the MOB and boarded the lifeboat.

But it had been a long day for the crew as well and minds weren’t thinking as clearly. The hostage swap plan was never perfected.

The First Mate ordered the crew to bring Abduwali topside. There was a full moon, clear skies and the sea was flat. Abduwali climbed down the pilot ladder and the First Mate frantically waved and called out to the Captain to climb up to the ship. Abduwali finished his descent and joined his comrades in the lifeboat. “Where’s the Captain?” Dick Mathews inquired. “Wasn’t he supposed to climb up the pilot ladder?”

Captain Phillips was still in the lifeboat. A crucial part of the plan had gone awry.

“Now they’ve got no reason not to spray us down,” Cronan remembered thinking alone with Rios in the broken boat. “They’ve got their man and our man and they’re pissed off.” Cronan and Rios looked at each other both thinking, “Oh, crap!” “They’ve got at least 3 AKs and I’ve got a little plastic paddle,” said Cronan.

But the pirates didn’t use their weapons. The two mariners quickly paddled their way to the pilot ladder and climbed up as fast as they could.

The crew refused to dwell on the botched exchange. Cronan pointed out, “Everybody was tired. It was the end of a long day. We could have done better, but hey, we could have done a whole lot worse.”

The Twenty-Strong Crew of the MAERSK ALABAMA

Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (M.E.B.A.) Officers

Chief Engineer – Mike Perry
1st A/E – Matt Fisher
2nd A/E – Dick Mathews
3rd A/E – John Cronan
Second Mate - Ken Quinn

Masters, Mates & Pilots (MM&P) Officers

Captain – Richard Phillips
First Mate - Shane Murphy
Third Mate - Colin Wright

Seafarers International Union (SIU) Unlicensed Crew

AB – ATM Zahid Reza
AB - Clifford Lacon
AB - Hector Sanchez
AB - Andrew Brzezinski
AB - Mohamed Abdelwahab
Bosun – William Rios
Electrician – John White
Qualified Man Engine Dept. (QMED) – Jimmy Sabga
General Utility, Deck and Engine (GUDE) – Miguel Ruiz
Steward – Richard Hicks
Cook – Husain Salah
Steward Assistant (S.A.) – Mario Clotter



Capt. Phillips, testifying before a Senate Subcommittee, called for force protection aboard ships transiting through piracy hotspots. He is seen here with Liberty Maritime Corp. President and CEO Phil Shapiro who praised his crew aboard the LIBERTY SUN who were fired upon by pirates. “These men and women are all trained to the highest levels of seamanship and technical skill by our country’s service and maritime academies and by the continuing education systems of their unions.”

Escape to Nowhere

The crew spent the rest of the night shadowing the lifeboat holding out hope they could find a way to bring the Captain back to the fold.

They wondered if out in the dark, fifty more of the pirates’ friends could be assembling for a second assault on the ship. Every precaution had to be taken to prevent a reboarding. The crew doubled the lookouts and engineers began working topside to assist in the effort. Chief Perry worked out of the wheelhouse as assistant deck officer and ordered the 3rd A/E to get lashing gear. “I want a big pile of heavy metal. In case they try to storm back up we can bombard them.” There was a lot of hollering through the night from the crew in the direction of the lifeboat — mostly: “Let the Captain go!” or “Just let him jump in the water and you can go!” Cooks became lookouts, engineers became food runners. They never abandoned Captain Phillips and not a man ever whimpered about it.

That evening, the First Mate was in communication with the Navy and a search plane spotted them. When the USS BAINBRIDGE showed up on the scene around midnight they took over the situation and ordered the ALABAMA

to stand down. But it wasn’t until the next morning that an 18-person armed team was put on the ALABAMA and the crew could finally get the sense that they were safe.

Back Up to Speed

The rest of the story has been well reported by the world media. Capt. Phillips remained a prisoner aboard the lifeboat from Wednesday evening until Sunday afternoon when sharpshooting Navy SEALs liberated him from his would-be coffin.

It was painful for the entire crew when they were ordered onto Kenya the next afternoon leaving the Captain behind. Days later they could celebrate in the Port of Mombasa when they got the news that Captain Phillips had been rescued. The entire crew had endured the ordeal intact.

Brotherhood of the Sea

“We maintained our discipline and we stuck together,” said Cronan. “We didn’t have to retake the ship because we never surrendered it...We’re American seamen, we’re union members. We stuck together and we did our jobs...I saw acts of courage and bravery from my shipmates that truly made me proud to be an American merchant seaman.” 1st A/E Fisher noted, “It’s close quarters on a ship – kind of like

a family. You pull strength from each other. You don't want to disappoint your shipmates. You're expecting them to do their jobs and they're expecting you to do yours. Everyone pulls together..."

Chief Perry said, "I've heard soldiers talk that way – they don't do things in the heat of the moment for the country or flag – they're doing it for the guy that's next to them – we all did it because we wanted our crew to be free."

"When we were going through this whole thing we were just all trying to protect each other," Second Mate Ken Quinn pointed out. "There were 20 of us, and we were all just trying to look out for each other the whole time. That's all we did...it was all about the brotherhood of the sea."

Up in Arms over Piracy

America was further alerted to the dangers of piracy a week after the ALABAMA incident with the attack on the Liberty Maritime Corp. vessel LIBERTY SUN crewed by M.E.B.A. deck and engine officers. The SUN took small arms fire from Somali pirates chasing them in a speedboat and absorbed several volleys from rocket propelled grenades.

Since the ALABAMA saga wound down, much effort has been expended in protecting American crews transiting dangerous waters. Maersk and other companies have put armed teams on ships in piracy hotspots as a stopgap measure. But the maritime unions have been insisting that government force protection teams need to be placed on U.S.-flagships. "When a vessel flies the U.S.-flag," the letter signed by M.E.B.A. and other maritime unions read, "it becomes an extension of the United States itself, regardless of where in the world the vessel is operating." M.E.B.A. officials and

members of the MAERSK ALABAMA including Chief Engineer Mike Perry and Capt. Richard Phillips have also testified before Congress and called for armed team protection. Arming mariners has also been discussed as a secondary solution. This has not been ruled out, but the many legal and liability issues surrounding its implementation diminish its likelihood.

The U.S. military has initiated a review to look "broadly and widely and deeply" at the overall strategy on piracy off the coast of Somalia. In addition, the State Department has announced a series of diplomatic initiatives to address the root causes of piracy. Congress continues to consider the problem. Certainly there is no easy catch-all solution that will suddenly cancel out this crisis. But while a policy is formulated, the men and women of the U.S. Merchant Marine have been offered no immunity from the devious plans of international pirates. Our mariners continue to sail through piracy hotspots every single day. Currently, there are over 200 seafarers of varied nationalities being held hostage by pirates.

18-year old Abduwali Muse is now in New York facing multiple charges in what is believed to be the first U.S. piracy prosecution in over a century.

You Bet I'm Going Back to Sea!

Most of the ALABAMA mariners took long vacations following the ordeal and absorbed their newfound stardom as the national media descended on them. At this writing, many are already on a ship and most of the others are making plans to go back. 1st A/E Matt Fisher returned to the MAERSK ALABAMA three weeks later and shipped out sailing as relief Chief Engineer.



M.E.B.A.'s Bill Moreno, Chief Engineer on the MSC Ocean Tug USNS CATAWBA, assisting the hijacked Ukrainian RO/RO FAINA, which had just been released by pirates after four months of captivity following a ransom pay-off. The CATAWBA crew donated clothing and food and collected \$2,500 to give to the crew since the pirate captors had ransacked the ship and left them with almost nothing.

Throughout America's history, the sacrifices of our merchant mariners and their families have been invaluable to our nation's defense and our economy. Our Union is very proud of the Officers and crew of the MAERSK ALABAMA -- who have provided direct evidence on a national stage – of how our highly skilled U.S. merchant mariners continue to successfully navigate the complexities and inherent dangers of working aboard ship.

This article is dedicated to every M.E.B.A. mariner – past and present – who never got enough credit for doing a helluva job.