

The Very Inconvenient Truth About Security



There are as many opinions on the reasonable level of superyacht security as there are fish in the sea. Technology, procedures and an arsenal of weapons can be used as security measures, but are we losing sight of the best way to combat danger? Patrick Estebe shares his opinions on where things might be going wrong.

Of late, the yachting community has been slapped in the face with grim news of terrorists killing a yacht owner, the death of a captain and a chef, muggings and kidnappings – all coming after a year of piracy headlining the news. These real incidents, plus a certain admixture of scaremongering, have left many crews with a feeling that the “sky is falling”. But what is the real position? Fear is famously exploited for manipulating people. Governments use it to justify policies, security companies use it to drum up business. How do we separate danger from hype? Let’s take a common sense look at the realities, be guided by the facts and craft an approach that acknowledges real dangers while keeping them in healthy perspective.

In this short article, I will examine – in necessarily broad strokes – current dangers to yachting and how these may spread. Piracy, organised crime, terrorism, and deteriorating environments or societies all demand our attention. Bureaucratic responses to these threats may endanger as much as protect. A so-called “protected corridor”, for example, merely seems to concentrate shipping into venues easily accessible for pirates. ISPS compliance offers peace of mind because *something is being done*; yet, inexorably, piracy grows.

Neither is equipment panacea. Fashionably new thermal imaging offers early warning, a good thing surely. And acoustic devices promise humane repelling of would-be attackers. But one must also be prepared for the ugly eventuality of boarding (should attackers be so uncooperative as to attack downwind or mirror back the signal with some shield or another, for example). Guns, as tricky as international regulations of these may be, are simply indispensable in some situations. When should you have them? Who should use them? When will they cause more problems than they solve? Let’s take a look at these issues noting that the narrow aspect of individual security will be addressed in a future article.

Balancing realities against the manipulation of fear

Where security issues are concerned, we see a common pattern: many people live in denial, but when an ugly event does impinge on their bubble, they overreact with no research or adaptation to ongoing developments in between. Media contributes to this tendency; the mere choice and presentation of news stories tends towards sensationalism. Consider that traffic kills on average 45,000 people in the US and over 3,000 in the UK per year, yet these issues seldom make for splashy headlines. However, when there is a plane crash – a form of transport safer than driving by multiples – it is all over the news.

We have seen some ugly incidents in the yachting community. We may even take them as harbingers of things to come, rather than as mere aberrations. A captain was recently killed in Antigua. The news ruffled many. Yet, with all sympathy for his family and friends, he was not the first person killed there and many present at the same time as him were not killed. We can and should consider threats coolly, adapting our operations accordingly (eg make provisions for thief money as seen in our workshops).

One reality we must face involves the current economic meltdown: painful in developed nations, deadly in already unstable, overpopulated and less structured countries. In all likelihood, we will see situations like that of Somalia spread to many places, such as Indonesia and the Philippines (which have actually been enjoying a lull in piracy for several years). Latin America and the Caribbean are in for a rough ride too as entire segments of their populations will be hungry and thus angry. Travelling will require more than simple threat assessments, as it once did. One will need sensitivity to the “pulse” of the places visited. This is not difficult; many are amazed how their perception can be enhanced by a few days of training. Security remains about composure, awareness, study, adaptation. While fear is what kept us alive for millennia it leads to caution, which

is productive. Neurotic fear, both at the individual level and society level, is a destructive force and a powerful tool in the hands of our opposition.

No fixed pattern, procedure or equipment alone will affect security

A fundamental and often forgotten principle of security is that no fixed pattern, procedure, or equipment by itself will ever bring security.

ISPS An inconvenient truth of at least one security approach is that the problem has grown despite the "solution" – notwithstanding widespread compliance with ISPS, incidents of piracy are on the rise. Indeed, the ISPS with its fixed patterns and procedures seems to control the good guys, not the bad. What do MARSEC levels mean to a pirate?

Very disquieting also is the ability of pirates to track ships in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Does this represent some native talent or is something else at work? Some suspect that the solution has indeed become the problem as the superstructure of bureaucracies enforcing ISPS offers an almost endless source of possible and untraceable leaks.

"Protected corridor" The flexibility and unpredictability of pirates renders the navies' job an unenviable game of whack-a-mole. The "protected corridor" in the Gulf of Aden is intended to reduce the area navies must traverse thus decrease their response time. Ironically, however, the "protected corridor" funnels potential prey into known routes, conveniently concentrating victims for pirates.

Procedures are indispensable, make no mistake. They embody lessons of the past and streamline tasks for efficiency. The great dangers of complacency and predictability lie within procedures, however. One must employ procedures but do so "alive" – alert, aware and open to shortcomings in the procedures themselves as well as changing environments. Frequent emergency security drills for the crew (with the occasional tricky change in scenario) reinforce procedures to the point of instinct. Theory becomes muscle memory. The mechanics of procedure thus instilled by drill, individuals are freed to observe more closely, reason more coolly, respond more acutely.

Equipment

Monitoring Electronic equipment is effective in providing early warning of attack. Traditional CCTV is standard and invaluable in saving manpower, and thermal imaging technology is proving a powerful tool for night observation. Still, what is one to do when intruders get on deck?

Acoustic Equipment This fires a deafening blast of sound and promises a non-lethal means of discouraging boarding. Unfortunately, pirates are proving able and willing to endure mere discomfort, in one case simply ignoring deployment of an acoustic device causing the ship's surprised security contractors to jump for their lives into the water to swim away. So as promising as the technology looks on paper, there is a significant difference between security at the office and security on deck. In a perfect world, acoustic weapons provide a buffer to lethal recourse. However, in the real world of limited budgets, firearms must take priority over acoustic devices. To paraphrase: don't take a megaphone to a gunfight.

Firearms It is my considered opinion that provisions must be made for the embarkation of firearms and ammunition on the understanding that only trained and disciplined personnel recruited by discriminating people will have access and permission to use these. This does not mean that firearms should be onboard at all times, simply that provisions should be made, so they can be there when or where needed but not when or where illegal.

A number of misconceptions exist on the subject of onboard firearms. As a result, many overestimate what firearms can do and underestimate the amount of trouble firearms can cause. As dangerous as they are, firearms are simply indispensable in many cases. But having declared firearms onboard is an administrative hassle and often a serious problem. Having undeclared firearms onboard can lead to unbelievable legal nightmares. Weapon-bearing yachts have been intercepted, for example, and searched for firearms while on innocent passage in European waters causing controversial but very real, complex and expensive legal troubles.

Actually using firearms and managing to make it legitimate is very much akin to "mission impossible". Some fights cannot be won and thus should never be started, and others can be avoided and bring a whole host of issues and problems that should have never been; trigger-happy people bring heavy penalties in each case. It takes great skill and discipline to have pirates dead in the water without any dead pirate. No one enjoys a natural right of immunity when operating firearms – not those actually using them, nor the ship, nor the owner.

All this being said the fact remains that the only way for a private vessel to repel armed intruders attempting to board from either watercrafts or aircrafts is the effective use of efficient firearms.

In summary...

Notwithstanding the sometimes-horrific stories in the media, the yachtie must maintain a cool head and remain alert without being paranoid. Security must not devolve to procedures, technology or weapons – always reactive in nature – but to anticipation, versatility and sustainability.

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