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BEFORE WEAPONS, SAFE ROOMS AND MONITORING EQUIPMENT, THE FIRST STEP IN YACHT SECURITY IS SITUATIONAL AWARENESS.

TEXT BY SHAW MCCUTCHEON ILLUSTRATION BY DAN BROOKS

TELLING FIVE CREWMEMBERS to stand several feet apart and close their eyes, yacht security specialist Patrick Estebe pointed two unloaded revolvers at them. They had to detect, by energy alone, whether the gun was pointed at them or somewhere else. Defying the odds, the responses were correct a majority of the time.

This exercise was part of a crew-training seminar on a 242-foot yacht in Palm Beach, Florida. What Estebe was demonstrating was a major element in keeping a yacht safe from bad guys: detecting intent before the actual threat exists. What each crew-member felt was similar to what one feels when someone from behind is looking at them—a vibe that intrudes on your space, and which may require a response.

“Security is about anticipation,” Estebe explains. “It’s not about outgunning people, outmuscling them or outnumbering them. It’s about anticipating what they will do. And if you can do that, you’re still in charge.”

A yacht can possess a wide variety of security systems, ranging from infrared and visible-light monitors, pressure-sensitive sensors embedded in the decks, deafening sound systems, to safe rooms and more. But just as important as the high-tech equipment is the human element. It takes those aboard to interpret and react to the threat to make a yacht truly safe.

THE APPROACH

Experts take widely differing approaches to yacht security. Some, such as Joe LaSorsa of J.A. LaSorsa & Associates, a former Secret Service agent now specializing in yacht security, focus on creating a safe room to harbor guests and crew. While such safe rooms are stocked with food and communications gear to call for help, in a remote location help might take hours or days to arrive. Therefore, he also suggests an armed crew

trained to repel boarders. “If you have a substantial crew with weapons on board you should be okay if the crew is trained properly and if they also have appropriate electronic warning mechanisms,” he says. “If you don’t, you’ll be relegated to employing local security to be on board or to be on the dock to be observing and monitoring the yacht while it’s docked.”

Keeping weapons on board, however, can complicate a vessel’s travel, especially in foreign ports. Many port authorities require arriving vessels to declare weapons, which can involve a time-consuming process while guests wait to go ashore. Sometimes weapons are confiscated until the yacht leaves. (One security expert recommends keeping two sets of weapons aboard—one for declaration and one kept hidden.) And sometimes weapons can raise the stakes in a confrontation, with possibly fatal consequences. In 2001, world-famous sailor Sir Peter Blake

was killed by thieves on his boat in the mouth of the Amazon River. Estebe believes he’d be alive today if he hadn’t pulled out an old bolt-action rifle, which subsequently jammed.

Instead of just stealing things—their probable intent—the thieves retaliated by shooting him. For many captains, such risks aren’t worth the trouble of keeping guns aboard.

Other security firms employ a softer approach. Brian Peterman, CEO of Washington, D.C.-based Command at Sea International, suggests a layered approach to yacht safety. The most important is keeping intruders off the boat in the first place. At this stage, onboard devices can be the most effective. Peterman likes the Long-Range Acoustic Device, or LRAD, which focuses a 30-degree beam of ear-splitting sound to people up to a half-mile away. It also can be used to send unfriendly audible messages.

In 1997, when Estebe commanded a

Special Forces security team escorting two high-profile superyachts up the Amazon River, he employed huge mast-mounted lights that harshly illuminated any boat within a quarter-mile.

Peterman’s second layer is onboard systems that identify those who make it through the first security layer. At this stage, camera monitors, deck sensors, underwater lighting (with sensors that can distinguish scuba divers from fish) and audible alarms come into play. If an intruder comes aboard during the night, alarms will sound, lights will turn on, monitors will detect him and the crew will be awakened to repel him. Peterman notes one common weakness of many large yachts—the lack of an integrated set of door locks that can be triggered from a single location to instantly lock down the entire boat.

Of course, a yacht’s size and its cruising area will help determine the right level of security. Likely threats to a mid-sized vessel cruising the Mediterranean, the U.S. or the Caribbean would be simple robberies, easily thwarted with alarms, sensors and minimal crew training. The captain of one 170-foot charter vessel says he relies on warning systems and training the crew to be alert, but if the intruder gets aboard, his policy is to retreat and let the guy get whatever he wants. Peterman concurs: “We don’t want to put [the crew] into harm’s way if we don’t have to. If there’s a choice between getting somebody hurt to protect a thing, most people will let the thing go.”

On the other hand, if the vessel has plans to cruise in high-risk areas like Somalia, Central America and parts of Asia, a more sophisticated approach is required. The biggest yachts might include not only a ballistically protected safe room, but also a full-time security team with a control room and appropriate berthing and weapons storage.

THE BEST DEFENSE

Ultimately, however, experts agree proper crew training ensures the best protection, and here a small crew running a 100-foot yacht can be just as effective as a larger force on a superyacht. Estebe’s company, AffAirAction, offers two-day crew seminars to teach what he calls “relaxed, choice-less alertness.” In threatening situations one must be aware of everything that’s happening all around, but not to start thinking too much—not making a “choice” about how to respond before the actual need arises.

“My entire philosophy is to manage; to defeat people without fighting them...you only have to outwit them, but to outwit them you must keep your wits about you,” he says. The essential idea, he adds, is to detect intent before anything bad happens. Crew should develop a sixth sense of what’s going on in the moment and what might happen a few moments into the

future. The captain of one superyacht recounted a situation on a crowded pier in the French Riviera when the crew noticed a couple of men loitering on the pier. Sensing they weren’t up to anything good, the captain pointed directly at the men from the yacht’s bridge, as if to say, “We’re watching you.” The men then quickly left.

Confidence is an important ingredient here. “If the crew is confident and alert, a silent signal is sent to outsiders who are on board,” notes Estebe. “You can put the crew in strategic spots on the yacht where they can see in several directions, and when

a visitor comes aboard they can be watched from these vantage points.” This is especially useful on the high seas. International law mandates a vessel must stop and assist a nearby craft that sends a distress signal, a tactic that would-be criminals could use to stop a yacht. Deploying the crew

can send a silent but clear message that the yacht is prepared for any eventuality, which can mean the difference between a fight and a peaceful conclusion.

Estebe’s training seminar teaches such situational awareness, adding lessons on how to handle common, low-grade threats such as an obstreperous drunk or a visitor refusing to leave the boat, known problems in urban marine settings. The lessons include tactics familiar to many law enforcement and military personnel such as learning various pressure points on the body to subdue the bad guy.

Pirates or drug runners hijacking a yacht present a different problem, say the experts, likely requiring the use of weapons by people trained in how to use them. Ironically, perhaps the best protection a yacht has from these types is the vessel’s essential mystery. “The average criminal looks at one of these things and they don’t know what to make of them,” says Captain Pat Trainer, who once took a 160-foot Feadship around the world. “They don’t know what to encounter on these boats. They’ve never been on them.”

Significantly, of all the reported piracy incidents of the past several years, only a handful involved yachts. The International Maritime Bureau, which keeps such figures, says that in 2008 there were nine yachts attacked; in 2009 there were six; in 2010 only one; in 2011 there were four attacks (compared to 439 ships attacked altogether that year); and in 2012 no yachts were threatened. It seems as if the pirates have gotten the message that hassling a yacht isn’t worth the trouble.

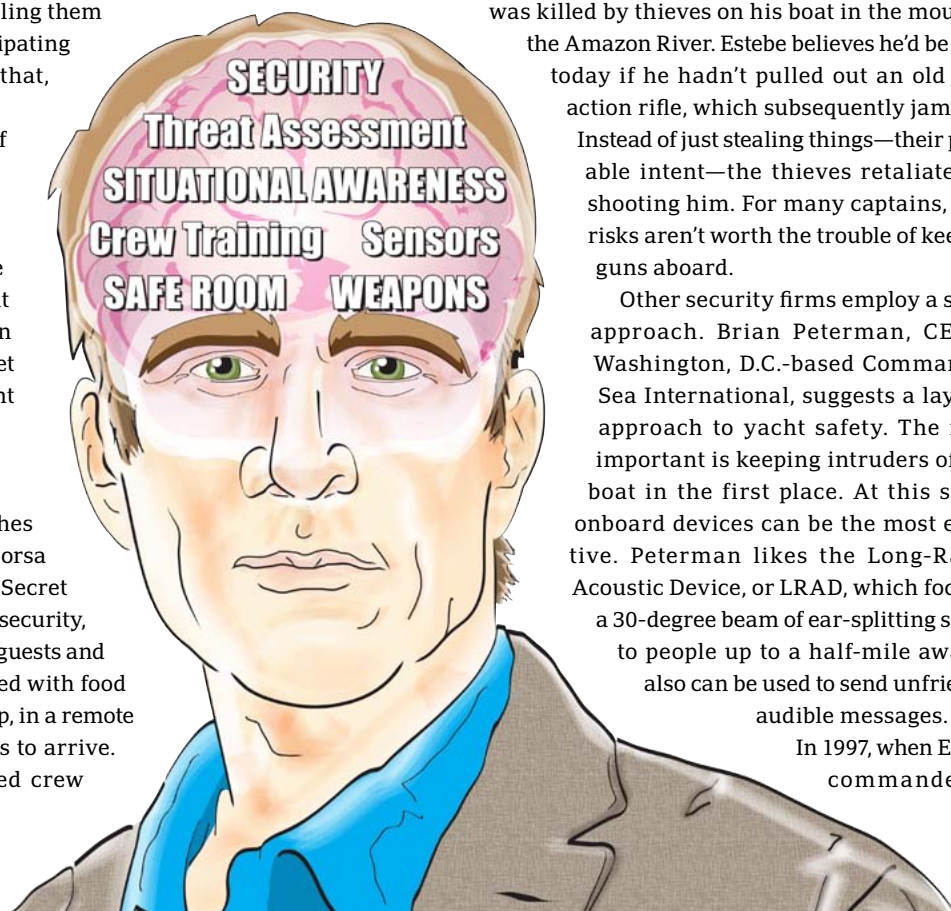
It would be nice if the average dockside criminal also got the same message. That’s probably too much to ask, but at least the yachting community is getting better at figuring out how to handle them. ■

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— PATRICK ESTEBE, AFFAIRACTION



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