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STAYING ALERT

YACHTS ARE LUCRATIVE TARGETS FOR WOULD-BE THIEVES. BUT WITH PROPER CREW AWARENESS, YACHTS CAN REMAIN SAFE IN VOLATILE WATERS.

BY SHAW MCCUTCHEON

TELLING FIVE CREWMEMBERS to stand several feet apart and close their eyes, yacht security specialist Patrick Estebe of AffAirAction pointed two unloaded revolvers at them. The crew 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 crewmember 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.”

In today’s world, yachts are generally considered very safe, yet with their global cruising capabilities, security has to remain at the forefront. What systems can be installed to detect and repel intruders? What sort of threats, from common burglaries to pirate attacks, is a particular yacht likely to encounter? And how does one train crew, more focused on yacht maintenance and guest services, to become an effective deterrent? 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 warn away intruders, safe rooms, etc., but just as important as the high-tech equipment is the human element — it takes crew to interpret and react to the threat to make a yacht truly safe.





Patrick Estebe of AffAirAction simulates an exercise where crew are trained to sense an attacker's actions.

The Approach

Security experts take widely differing approaches to these questions. Some, such as Joe LaSorsa, a former Secret Service agent now specializing in yacht security, focus on creating a secure safe room that the guests and crew can retreat to. Such safe rooms would have food and communications gear to call for help, but in a remote location, help may not arrive for hours or days. Instead, LaSorsa suggests an armed crew be 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. And sometimes a weapon can raise the stakes in a confrontation, with possibly fatal consequences. In 2001, sailor Sir Peter Blake was killed by thieves on his boat at the mouth of the Amazon River. Estebe believes Blake would be alive today if he hadn't pulled out an old bolt-action rifle, which subsequently jammed. Instead of just stealing things — the thieves' probable intent — they responded by shooting him. For many captains, such risks aren't worth the trouble of keeping guns aboard.

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Setting Boundaries

Other security firms employ a softer approach to the issue. Brian Peterman, CEO of Command at Sea International, a Washington, D.C.-based firm, suggests a layered approach to yacht safety. The most important layer is keeping people off the boat in the first place. Here, onboard devices can be the most effective.

Estebe, who in 1997 commanded a special forces security team accompanying two yachts owned by Microsoft magnate Paul Allen up the Amazon River, employed huge lights on the mast that harshly illuminated any boat within a quarter-mile. Bad guys don't like light, and the tactic also gave the crew time to prepare a response.

Peterman's second layer is onboard systems to identify people making it through the first layer. Here, the 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 to steal something, alarms will sound off, lights will turn on, monitors will show his location 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, which would instantly lock down the whole boat inside and out.

Of course, how a yacht determines the right level of security depends on its size and where it's likely to go. If a mid-sized vessel will cruise only in the Mediterranean, the U.S. or the Caribbean, likely threats would be simple robberies, easily thwarted with alarms, sensors and minimal crew training. The captain of one 170-foot charter vessel said 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," he says. "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 is a yacht that plans to cruise high-risk areas, such as Somalia, Central America and parts of Asia, a more sophisticated approach is required. The biggest yachts might include not only a ballistic-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 say 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 yacht of greater size. Estebe's company, AffAirAction, offers two-day crew seminars to teach what he

siders 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 tactic is especially useful on the high seas, when a nearby vessel may call out a distress signal, forcing the yacht by international law to stop and help. It might be a ruse, and having the crew placed where they can send a silent message that the yacht is prepared for any eventuality 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 — problems familiar 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.

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calls a “relaxed, choiceless alertness.” In threatening situations one must be aware of everything that's happening all around, but not to start thinking too much... not to make 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.”

Estebe recounted an incident involving a yacht that ran aground off the coast of Africa. As a group of locals approached the vessel with weapons, the man had a choice: either to bring out his own guns and start shooting — a lopsided fight that he felt he'd probably lose — or escape in a tender. He chose the latter and escaped.

The essential idea, he adds, is to detect intent before anything bad happens. Crews 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 without purpose 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 quickly left.

Confidence is an important ingredient here. “If the crew is confident and alert, a silent signal is sent to out-

Really Bad Guys

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 essential mystery of the vessel itself. Bad guys like the familiar, and they know what a freighter is like, what protection devices it has (or does not have) and how the crew will respond.

But yachts are very private, unknown entities to these people. “The average criminal looks at one of these things, and they don't know what to make of them,” says Capt. 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 were yachts. The International Maritime Bureau, which keeps such figures, said 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 received the message that hassling a big yacht isn't worth the trouble.

It would be nice if the average knockabout, 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. **DW**