

a call to arms?



The decision to arm merchant ships may carry some risks. But it also appears to be our best hope for keeping crew members out of harm's way.

IN ITS NOVEMBER 2009 ISSUE, *DC VELOCITY* PUBLISHED AN article about maritime piracy by Earl Boyanton, who recently retired from an executive post at the U.S. Department of Defense. The story led with an account of the April 2009 *Maersk Alabama* incident—the attack by armed Somali pirates, the retaking of the vessel by its unarmed crew, and the hostage crisis that ensued.

While working with the author on the development of the article, we learned that since the April attack, Maersk Line had made at least one important change to its operating policy. By the time the article was published, the *Maersk Alabama* had become an armed merchant ship. We made a deliberate decision to omit that detail out of respect for the safety of the people on board the ship.

But the news leaked out anyway. On Nov. 18, the *Alabama* was attacked again, and news services around the world reported that armed guards on the ship had repelled the attackers. So now we can talk about the difficult decision made by Maersk Line's leadership—a call that was controversial in some camps but which many argue was the right one.

The firestorm over fire power

Maersk is not alone in arming its ships. In late October, Spain authorized fishing vessels to carry guards armed with military weapons. About three weeks later, reports surfaced of a Spanish



fishing boat that fired shots to repel an attack. France also allows its commercial vessels to sail with armed marines aboard, and there have been reports of their success in driving off attackers.

Even so, the notion of arming merchant ships continues to spark controversy. Opponents include the United Nations, which outlined its position in a circular issued in June by its International Maritime Organization. “The carrying and use of firearms by sea-

farers for personal protection or for the protection of a ship is strongly discouraged,” the organization said. It went on to warn ship operators to consider carefully the “possible escalation of violence and other risks.”

There is no mention of crews playing guitars and singing “Kumbaya” in the face of an attack. But to my mind, the United Nations’ guidance clearly leans in that direction.

On the other end of the spectrum is the U.S. military, which recommends the use of armed guards on merchant ships when transiting high-risk areas, and even goes so far as to call deploying armed security teams a “best practice.”

“Due to *Maersk Alabama* following maritime industry’s best [anti-piracy] practices, such as embarking security teams, the ship was able to prevent being successfully attacked by pirates,” said Navy Vice Adm. William E. Gortney, commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and U.S. 5th Fleet, in a press statement. “This is a great example of how merchant mariners can take proactive action to prevent being attacked, and

why we recommend that ships follow industry best practices if they’re in high-risk areas.”

Speaking to the idea of using less lethal options—like sound blasters—to repel attackers, Vice Adm. Gortney was a little more colorful. “A well-placed round from an M-16 is far more effective,” he said.

The U.S. military has long been aggressive in confronting piracy—so long that the battle against maritime pirates has been enshrined in a line from the Marine Corps Hymn: “From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli ...” The “shores of Tripoli” refers to the Barbary States, where almost 200 years ago, the U.S. Marines went ashore to eliminate a group of incorrigibles who would not leave the nation’s merchant ships alone.

To arm or not to arm?

When you are faced with a decision like this regarding arms, nobody else can make the decision for you. You have to face it, and you have to own it. I understand this from personal experience. While on assignment in Iraq, I once asked some civilians to go out to make a pickup. It was a peaceful activity in a decidedly unstable area. The unarmed convoy was attacked, and somebody died.

So, while I understand the lofty sentiments that support the argument for not arming merchant ships, I cannot get past the thought of those crewmen who risk their lives carrying our goods. I salute the shipowners for proving once again that the U.S. Merchant Marine is not to be trifled with, and I congratulate Maersk’s management for standing up and making what I believe to be the right call. □

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