

**PROTECTING U.S. FLAG SHIPS
AGAINST PIRACY**

by

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In the past six years there have been over 1700 pirate attacks worldwide. In 2008 there were 115 attacks off Somalia's coast with a success rate of approximately 40 percent. In 2009 attacks along the Somalia coast and in the Gulf of Aden averaged 2-3 daily. The April 8, 2009 attack on the U S flag Maersk Alabama; the heroic defense of the ships by its crew, and later the rescue of her hostage Captain, focused international attention on the problem.

In response to the Maersk Alabama attack President Obama vowed to "halt the rise of piracy in that region." His strategy is to cooperate with other maritime nations in defeating piracy but left unclear is how and at what cost. At present, some 20 warships of various nations are patrolling Somalia/Gulf of Aden waters.

Suggested here is the World War II armed guard model wherein the operation of a merchant ship was left to its crew while the defense of the ship was tasked to naval armed guard personnel. The typical Liberty ship was armed with a five inch gun on the stern, a three inch gun on the bow and six 20 mm anti-aircraft guns. The total ship's complement was 41 merchant mariners and 20 naval armed guards. When the navy armed guard was under staffed merchant seamen and ship's officers would fill the void. Routinely merchant seamen served as backups to navy gunners.

Today the average merchant ship has a crew of 20-25 (the Maersk Alabama had a crew of 20). Instead of separate armed guards, navy or merchant, argued here is that a part of the regular merchant crew be trained as armed guards. In addition to their regular shipboard duties, five or six of the crew would weapons capable, that is, trained to use the weapons carried on board as well as trained in ship defense tactics.

Seamen would be trained at existing maritime training schools such as the world recognized Paul Hall Education Center operated by

the Seafarers International Union at Piney Point, MD. The necessary training of ship's officers could easily be done at any one of the six state maritime academies. e.g. Maine Maritime Academy.

The cost of this option would include negotiated compensation with the relative maritime unions, cost of defensive weapons, cost of training, overtime cost of additional watch standers when the ship is in known pirate waters, and the upgrade of the ship's radar capability and internal communication system. A not insignificant benefit of an armed guard would be lower insurance costs.

The decision of whether to have an armed guard as part of the crew on a particular voyage would be made by the ship owner. Obviously, ships trading in secure waters would not need such protection

If the above option is a reasonable option then it should be compared to other options in terms of cost and sustainability. These include (1) a land invasion of Somalia and afterwards an occupation force. (2) convoying merchant ships in pirate waters, and (3) the present option of multi-nation naval forces, mostly American, patrolling pirate threaten waters.

The difficulty with the above three options is that the United States would be expected, as in past similar situations, to be the lead player and bear the brunt of the cost, even though American flag ships operating in the region constitute a small part of the total tonnage at risk. Simply stated, this is a case where America should go it alone and protect its own shipping at a fraction of the cost of participating in a large, multi-national, bureaucratic (what to do with a captured pirate?) and very expensive naval presence in the area.