
PIRATE ATTACK!

The Lessons Learned from a Pirate Attack in the Indian Ocean



Pirate Skiff and Whaler Destroyed
[Picture: ABIS Jayson Tufrey, Commonwealth of Australia]

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Introduction

A pirate attack is quick and deliberate, the pirates are determined and unpredictable, even a well trained bridge team and a well drilled security team may make mistakes in the heat of the moment.

Several incidents in the HRA area have occurred where the ships crew and embarked security team although having trained together have not coordinated effectively during an actual incident which has led to mistakes being made and lives being put at risk.

This paper will discuss a real incident that occurred in the Indian Ocean in recent times, it outlines the steps taken to prepare the vessel and crew for a transit of the High Risk Area (HRA), the armed attack by a pirate action group (PAG), the response by security team and crew and the lessons learned from this incident and other experiences which the author believes are valuable and should be shared with the shipping community.

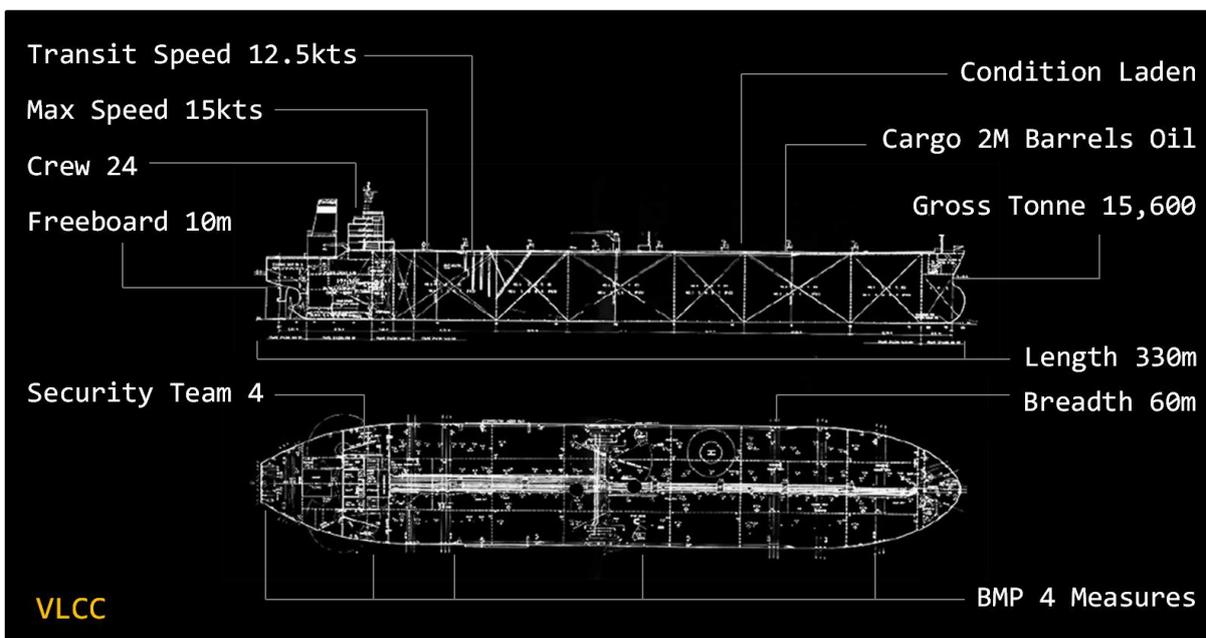
The Vessel

The vessel in question was a Very Large Crude Carrier, transiting from the Arabian Gulf area to the United States with a mixed cargo of various oils.

The 4 man security team (MST) were from a major Private Maritime Security Company (PMSC) joined the ship in the Gulf of Oman, just outside territorial waters, transferred at night by RIB from a floating armoury vessel with 4 boxes containing 4 weapons, 2 semi automatic (SLR) rifles and 2 hunting (sniper) rifles with telescopic sights.



Boarding the VLCC at night



The Route

The original passage plan set by the charterers took the vessel within 180nm from the Somali coast, after some discussion between the security team leader and Master and after permission was gained from the Charterer a small alteration of course was made, and the distance was opened to 210nm from the coast at the closest point.

The Master was keen for his crew to continue to work on deck before the vessel began its crossing of the Atlantic, this was discussed and it was agreed that as long as the team had communications, and logged in and out with the bridge this would be fine as long as the area was clear of any suspicious craft either visually and on radar.



IMB ICC Chart Showing Incidents in a previous 12 month period

It is likely that the Pirate Action Group was already at sea or preparing to launch from the beach when the vessel entered the HRA. Due to a lack of information sharing, and the poor quality of analysis by intelligence providers this important piece of data was unknown.

BMP 4 Measures

The vessel had transited the HRA area before and BMP4 measures were in place, good citadel had been set up with external communications, razor wire was generally in good order, but with a few gaps in particular around the accommodation ladder bulwark, and further for'd by the manifold connections.

Both deck hoses and fire monitors were available and set up to provide deck wash and jets pointing down from the rails at likely embarkation areas and key points.

RPG netting consisting of chain link fencing along the bridge wings which was very loose and may not of been very effective in an attack, more likely any RPG warhead would bounce off and hit the deck below with maybe a more serious outcome.

Actions taken;

- Full BMP4 inspection conducted with the Chief Officer
- Some improvements made to the Razor Wire
- Hoses and monitors set up to reinforce the gaps in the razor wire

Key Lessons

- Not enough spare razor wire on board to fill gaps
- Some razor wire was old and in poor condition from continuous use

Crew Training and Preparation

Crew training was conducted and a rehearsal staged, but the rehearsal time was given to the crew in advance and so when the drill was conducted the crew were already waiting in the muster area with their life jackets.

The deputy team leader was at the muster point and told the crew that we would need to practice the drill again in the coming days.

The team leader requested a re-run of the drill, in particular as there were going to be crew working on deck, this was refused, and so he asked that the officers brief the crew that no drill would take place.

When the crew were mustered for real later on the transit most believed it was a drill as they had not been told otherwise, and therefore did not muster quickly, and also did not proceed to the citadel but loitered in the cross passage in possible line of fire of the pirates.

Actions taken;

- Bridge and crew briefed
- Watch-keepers briefed
- Bridge team rehearsed
- Crew rehearsed

Lessons

- The rehearsal was not adequate and should have been re run

Life on Watch

Watch routine was set with extra lookouts supplied by the crew, the bridge crew and watch keepers worked well, monitoring radar contacts and other vessels sighted, supported by the MST.

The Approach

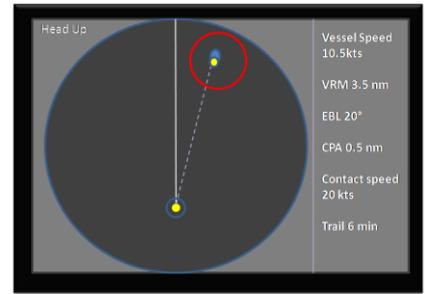
It was just after midday after several days in the HRA and the team leader was handing over the watch to the deputy team leader after a lunch break, they were both stood on the bridge wing about 10metres out over the deck observing out over the sea ahead.

The weather was clear, visibility good and the sea state around 2 – 3 so white horses were evident.

Through binoculars both watch-keepers saw something ahead of the vessel, just off to starboard a break in the waves, unclear and not regular and agreed it was probably a whale.

A few moments after spotting the whale the Third Officer shouted from the bridge door that they thought they saw a skiff just off of the starboard bow, about 3 or 4 miles away.

After a few minutes and through binoculars a Single skiff could be seen and became a little clearer as it made its way towards the vessel through the white horses



Radar Picture 3.5 - 4nm



Example of Skiffs at 3nm

First Contact

The skiff was also confirmed on Radar but could not be tracked yet as it was not consistently painting due to sea clutter.

The contact speed was estimated to be about 20kts, and the vessel speed 10.5kts, so a closing speed of 30kts meant the skiff would be alongside in about 7 minutes

The Master was called to the bridge and in consultation with the security team leader the approach was considered a possible threat

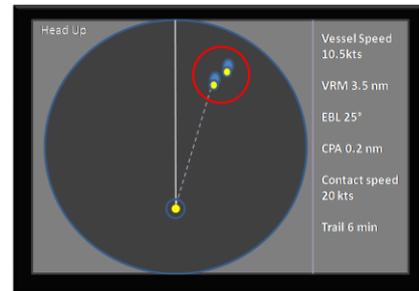
Actions taken;

- Confirmed target visually and by radar
- Confirmed distance/ speed / closest point of approach
- The Master and MST TL evaluated the situation
- Agreed and decide that it was a possible threat and vessel should be put on alert

Vessel Alerted

The bridge team now began to alert the crew, a general alarm was sounded and a tannoy announcement made by the Master, it was later discovered that the crew working on deck did not hear the alarm as the switch was set to internal.

The other 2 members of the Maritime Security Team (MST) were called to the bridge on the teams VHF.



Radar Picture at 3.5nm

The bridge watch-keeper then announced that he had spotted a second skiff behind the first, on closer inspection this looked more like a whaler larger and heavier in the water.

The team leader and deputy team leader (DTL) took up station on the starboard bridge wing and fired a white parachute flare towards the skiffs, the DTL fired the flare whilst the team leader observed through binoculars, no obvious reaction was seen.

30 seconds later a second flare was fired, this time the lead skiff seemed to slow to allow the whaler to catch up. After 10 – 15 seconds perhaps discussing tactics both boats began to speed up again, the skiff heading directly towards the VLCC and the whaler on a less direct course that would see it pass within .5nm of the vessel.

The Team Leader and Master both agreed that this was very likely an attempted attack, and the Master gave his permission to load the weapons and invoke the rules for the use of force.

Actions taken;

- Crew alerted
- MST mustered on bridge
- 2 white flares fired towards the skiffs
- Master and TL face to face
- Vessel engines increased to full

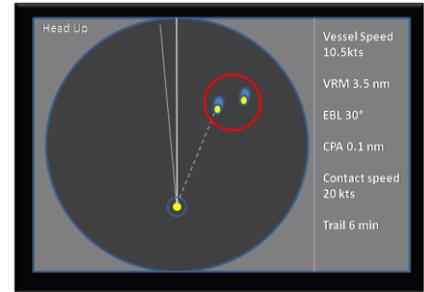
Key Lessons

- The Master made the announcements and alarms himself rather than a member of his bridge team
- The tannoy should have been set to whole ship
- The ships horn should have been sounded

Suspicious Approach

The team leader quickly briefed the last 2 members of the team, and supervised them loading their weapons.

As the threat was only on the starboard side the two MSTs with sniper rifles were posted onto the starboard bridge wing, one central and one at the end, approximately 22 meters from the bridge door, the DTL was posted to control them whilst the TL stayed on the bridge coordinating with the Master.



Radar Picture at 2nm

The Master informed the team leader that the crew were all mustered and accounted for below

Actions taken;

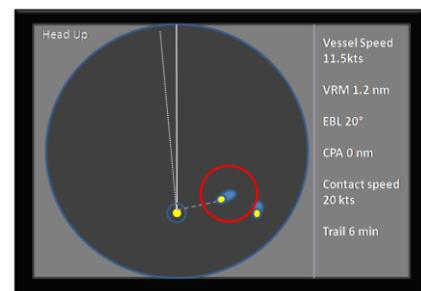
- MST load weapons
- Crew on deck called on VHF to muster in the accommodation
- Accommodation locked down from external access
- Vessel increases speed and begins turn to port and into wind
- Crew confirmed mustered below

Key Lessons

- The bridge team should have put helmets and body armour on
- The crew should have mustered in the Citadel and not in the accommodation cross passage

Aggressive Approach

As the vessel turned to port it placed the approaching skiff further off to starboard, the team leader had to leave the bridge to be able to observe the skiff and control the team, there were at least 4 persons seen on the lead skiff which was now bearing down on the vessel in a way that the team leader classified as an aggressive approach.



Radar Picture at 1.2nm

The attacking skiff was now closing rapidly, covering about 100 meters / yds every 10 seconds.

Both team members were moved to the end of the bridge wing, and held their weapons above their heads to demonstrate they were armed.

On the bridge attempts were made to warn the skiffs via VHF 16 that the vessel had an armed team and would fire on them, the ships horn was sounded and the vessel continued to turn.

Actions taken;

- UKMTO called via satellite phone

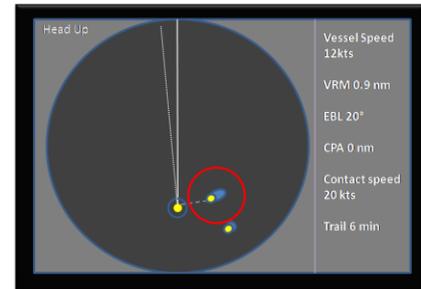
- SSAS activated
- MST show weapons from the bridge wing
- Bridge attempts to hail skiffs on VHF 16 but no response
- 5 blasts sounded on the ships horn
- Vessel continues turn to port

The Attack

First Warning Shot

The attacking skiff could now be clearly seen heading directly towards the bridge wing.

At approximately 700m under direction from the Team Leader the first warning shot was fired, the shot landed about 20m to the right, and 10 metres ahead of the approaching skiff, the splash from the round was clearly seen through binoculars from the bridge wing.



Radar Picture at 0.9nm

Actions taken;

- First warning shot fired at around 700m
- Clear Splash seen 20m ahead on skiffs Port Bow

Second Warning Shot

It was now clear to see 4 -5 persons on board the approaching skiff, no weapons were identifiable at this time, but there was a tarpaulin down the centre of the skiff covering equipment.

About 20 – 30 seconds later a second warning shot was fired at about 450m, the shot landed in about the same place and the team leader clearly saw the occupants of the skiff look toward the column of water.

Actions taken;

- Second warning shot fired at 450m
- Clearly seen by pirates who looked at splash
- Skiff continued to approach at speed
- Deputy team leader took up a prone position to the back of the bridge

A Brief Lull

Shortly after the second shot the attacking skiff turned broadside on and stopped about 250m from vessel and below the bridge wing facing in the opposite direction to the ship.

It was now clear that there were 6 Pirates on board, the coxswain remained sitting, and at least 3 of the rest stood looking at the ship.

The two MSOs with the sniper rifles are standing next to each other with the team leader in between but behind.

The team leader told everyone to hold fire and wait, the belief amongst the team when asked after the incident was that there would be no further response from the pirates.

The Master of the vessel was seen at the bridge doorway asking for an update, the deputy team leader requested that he go back in.

Actions taken;

- MST told to hold fire and watch
- Master informed verbally the skiffs were close alongside

Key Lessons

- Due to the distance from the end of the bridge wing and the bridge, and the noise of the wind with the vessel increasing speed and turning verbal communications between the Master and Team Leader were impossible
- The security team were on a different VHF channel from the bridge, the bridge were to have a radio on the same channel but someone had taken the radio or put it on charge

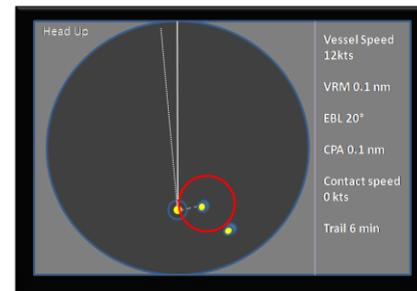
Pirates Open Fire

After a few seconds at least 2 probably 3 of the Pirates open fire, firing on fully automatic with their AK47's directly at the ship.

The team leader directs return fire, the left hand MSO being directed to fire at the skiff engines to disable them, and the right hand MSO firing over the heads of the pirates hoping to get them to give up under accurate sustained fire.

Fire from the pirates is inaccurate and probably hitting the ships hull with no effect.

During the engagement 4 rounds are fired into the skiffs engines, disabling them, and 5 rounds are fired over their heads, 3 from the bridge wing and 2 from the deputy team leader at the back of the



Radar Picture at 200yds



The attacking Skiff (library photo)

bridge with an SLR. The deputy team leader then fires a shot into the hull of the skiff, and almost immediately the pirates drop into the bottom of the boat.

Actions taken;

- Repositioning of team as the situation changes
- Assessment of the risk to the vessel and team
- Control of disabling fire and winning the fire fight

After Action

The pirates were now laying down in the bottom of the boat, and as the distance opened the whaler was seen coming alongside to the skiffs assistance.

The security team was told to observe and monitor and guards posted on both bridge wings.

A call was made to the UKMTO to give a brief account of the action and current situation, and an follow up report was written and submitted.

Actions taken;

- UKMTO updated by phone
- After action report submitted
- Vessel Speed increases to 14.9kts
- Vessel re routed to the East

Naval Response

Immediate Follow Up

After a short time an e mail was received from CTF 151 which showed pictures of the skiff on the beach in Somalia taken from a reconnaissance aircraft, asking for confirmation whether it was the same craft.



Skiff on beach (CTF 151)

The maritime security team confirmed that it was likely that it was the same skiff.

Sometime later a further e mail was received from a CTF 151 Warship with a grainy picture asking for confirmation whether it was the same vessels.



The pirate action group whaler and skiff under tow (CTF 151)

The team confirmed it was, the second picture received the next day showed the group under surveillance by the naval forces and the team leader was told that a boarding would be conducted the next morning.



The pirate action group whaler and skiff under tow (CTF 151)

Apprehension and Arrest

A group of Somali pirates was stopped in its tracks by an international operation led by a British commander, the Royal Navy has announced.

The pirates were caught by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) counter piracy task force - Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 - in an operation involving ships from several nations, including Britain, after recent attacks on two vessels in the Indian Ocean.

The CMF is a multinational naval partnership of 29 nations, which promotes security, stability and prosperity across approximately 2.5 million square miles of international waters, encompassing some of the world's most important shipping lanes.

Its counter piracy task force's operation was coordinated by Royal Fleet Auxiliary replenishment ship RFA Fort Victoria, which traditionally provides crucial supplies for Royal Navy and coalition warships east of Suez, and supported by Australian ship HMAS Melbourne; South Korean destroyer ROKS Wang Geon; European Union flagship HMLMS Johan de Witt, and a Seychelles-based maritime patrol aircraft from Luxembourg.

The task force, whose commander is Royal Navy Commodore Jeremy Blunden, had been searching for the pirates since they attacked and exchanged gunfire with the supertanker Island Splendor on October 11.

Three days later a Spanish fishing vessel was also attacked by what was suspected to be the same pirates.

Commodore Blunden, commander of CTF 151, said: "This is an excellent result. My multinational counter piracy forces swiftly located and dealt with this Somali pirate group, sending a clear message that piracy no longer pays."

But he said the maritime community should stay vigilant of the threat and follow "Best Maritime Practice" to reduce the likelihood of a pirate attack.

Royal Australian Navy Commander Brian Schlegel, commanding officer of HMAS Melbourne, added: "It is clear that there are still pirates out there determined to generate income from taking merchant ships hostage.

"Mariners have been served a timely reminder of the perils of transiting the Somali coastline."

Ellen Branagh, The Independent, Monday 21 October 2013



Pirates arrested [Picture: ABIS Jayson Tufrey, Commonwealth of Australia]



Pirates arrested [Picture: ABIS Jayson Tufrey, Commonwealth of Australia]



Whaler and skiff destroyed by CTF 151 [Picture: ABIS Jayson Tufrey, Commonwealth of Australia]

Key Principles and Lessons Learned from this and Other Transits

There were many lessons learnt from this incident, previous transits and vessel inspections some of the key areas that are not always discussed are below.

Routing through JWC area

- Conducting a good voyage risk assessment is key for all involved including charterers at the early stages
- Lack of real intelligence analysis from major intelligence providers just open source regurgitation of incidents (In this incident the PAG was already a suspected pirate group and was at sea)

Know your vessel

- How would you get on board?
- What are the wake characteristics of the vessel at your transit and maximum speeds
- Where is the best place for a skiff to come alongside?
- Is it protected by razor wire in good condition with secure anchor points?
- Can you observe the whole area of likely boarding from the bridge wings?
- Are the fire monitors or hoses effective, do you know what they are supposed to do and will they hinder a coxswain making an approach or affect his craft stability and engine / electrics?
- Adjusting the radar to detect small targets at range

Crew Training and Rehearsals

- Training and rehearsals are important are they taken seriously at all levels
- The bridge team should be rehearsed and practiced on a regular basis
- Rehearsals and drills should be repeated if they did not achieve their aim
- Bridge cards, aide memoires and clear written procedures at hand are a must in times of crisis

Command and Control

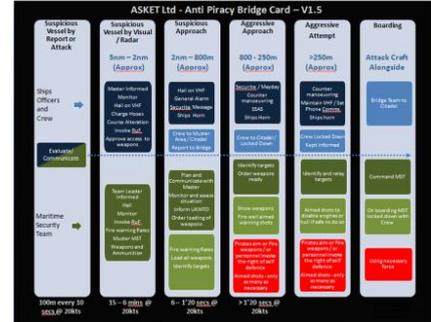
- Communications between Master and maritime security team should be discussed, what if we cannot talk to each other?
- Communications with UKMTO are important, the details provided should be clear and communications should remain open

ASKET Anti Piracy Bridge Card

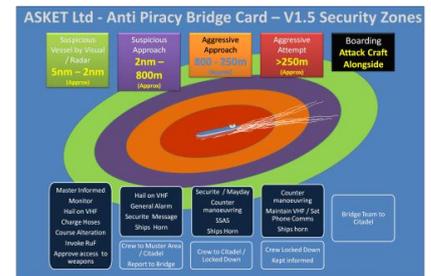
The ASKET Anti Piracy Bridge Card has evolved over a period of 5 years, and is designed to provide a Vessel Master and Bridge Team with a quick reference guide for use in a piracy situation, to compliment the Ships Security Plan, BMP4 and other relevant guidance.

It was originally designed by the author as a leave behind guide for the Master after conducting vessel security audits and training, and was subsequently used to assist the Master by providing him a reference guide for when unarmed and later armed teams embarked his vessel.

The card is a free resource available from ASKET Ltd and also on the ASKET Maritime Security App along with over 50 pages of resources available on the App Store and Google Play.



ASKET Anti Piracy Bridge Card



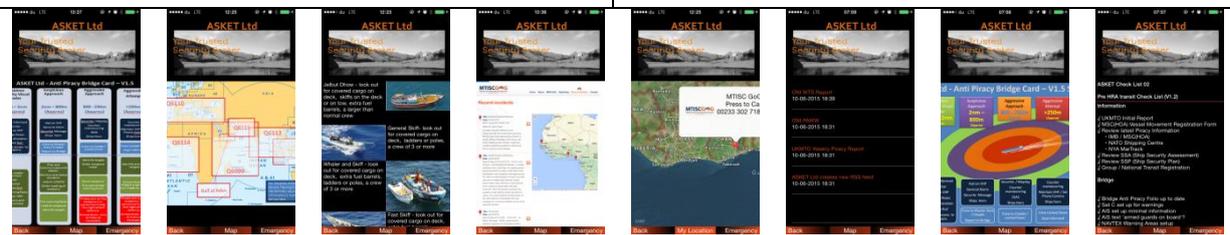
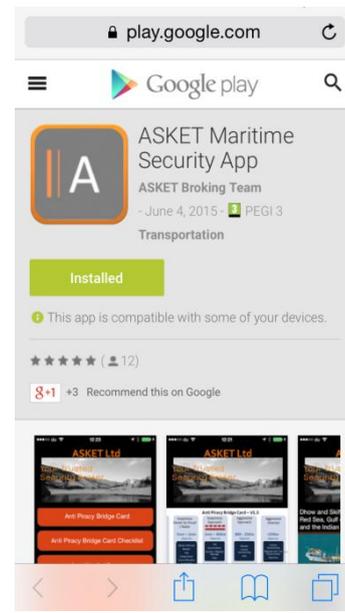
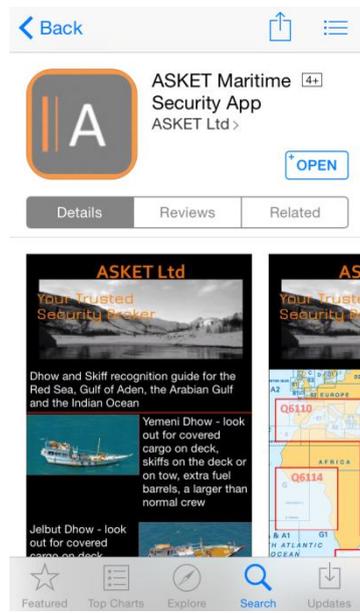
ASKET Bridge Card Security Zones

ASKET Maritime Security App

ASKET Ltd was established in 2013 to work with and for the shipping industry, our vision was to set up an independent brokage and be able to support an industry being hammered by costs of manpower, time, insurance and armed guards.

Our aim was to use our knowledge gained from all sides of the industry to take the pressure away from the risk managers and CSO's, and in turn help to ensure the safety and well being of the seafarers that keep our world turning.

To support our aim ASKET have developed a Maritime Security App, free to download via the App Store and Google Play its the first of its kind, and provides risk managers with a simple and easy to use tool containing check lists, short cuts to emergency numbers, competent authorities and other useful information and tools.



Summary

The industry learns from its mistakes, lessons learnt from near misses or accidents are investigated internally or externally and lessons learnt then distributed for the benefit of the community at large, however due to the sensitivities associated with security this does not seem to happen as freely when a security incident or lesson is learnt, BMP 4 is a very good but relatively old document in a dynamic and evolving world.

The threat against seafarers will remain whether at anchor, in harbour or transiting through a high risk area, it is only through being proactive that we can mitigate as much as possible the risks to the crews and vessels.

At ASKET we are working hard to do our part, and the more companies that use our services the more we will put back in to support the industry and our seafarers.

SB

Authors full name available on request