Out 2 Sea

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PIRATES

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Inside the Security Business

with Orlando Wilson

If you've sailed on the high seas, especially in the Indian Ocean, you've likely had contact with a security professional. As part of our piracy issue, we sat down with Orlando Wilson, a maritime security expert at Risks Incorporated, to give you an inside look at the security business.

Orlando Wilson is the author of several books on security, counter-terrorism and piracy. View all of his works by clicking here.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Wilson believes there are some key similarities between security professionals and merchant seamen: Both work for several months in a row and get to enjoy long stretches of "down time" in between jobs.

Security professionals also work, at least to some extent, in a freelance capacity. And while they may be affiliated with a security company, they aren't tied to a particular job for long, just like mariners. Security professionals don't, however, get to reap the benefits of union membership like mariners do.

Wilson gained his tactical experience as a member of the British army, which he joined when he was 17. He often wishes his colleagues had similar training experiences.

"These days everything is about certificates. Back then it was who do you know, who can give you a reference. And to be honest, things were a lot better back then because it was more to do with quality rather than certifications," he said.

The current emphasis on certificates began, according to Wilson, in the early 2000s, when larger corporations got more involved in the security business following the start of the Iraq War.

Currently, all maritime security contractors have to pass the ship security officer (SSO) test before they can serve on a ship. But Wilson says this test is minimal, and SSO certification courses typically involve just three days of weapons and supervision training.

"These guys are walking away with their SSO qualification, and they're apparently firearms trained," Wilson said, somewhat sarcastically.

He contrasts this with his military training, where new infantry members spend two weeks learning their weapons before even firing a shot. Ideally, he wants to see maritime security professionals come into the industry with similar experiences, or at least have some background working on ships.

Although there are many qualified people in the industry, loose international training standards mean merchant mariners can't always be certain that the security guard on their ship is competent with a weapon.

In addition to widespread lack of experience, Wilson notes another factor that affects the maritime security business: international weapons laws. Most countries don't allow ships to bring weapons into a port. This means security contractors then have to create a garrison anchored in international waters and usually consisting of several tug boats strung together. Here, they wait for ships seeking protection to come pick them up.

While this approach has helped stop Somali piracy, the political landscape in the Gulf of Guinea region - the most active piracy area today - presents significant challenges to maritime security.

In this region, "if you're caught with firearms, you have big, big problems," Wilson said. "If you're found to be shooting at a pirate vessel off Nigeria, then it wouldn't surprise me if their Navy or police will come after you, and it's going to cost you a lot of money to solve that problem."

Given these challenges, Wilson noted that it's often best to train a ship's crew to look after themselves. With many ships deploying barbed wire and heeding protocols like BMP4, using weapons should only be a last resort.

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