



Sailor Education and Training: Cutting the Human Cost

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Introduction

Ship pilots report a clear trend on-board the ships that are destined for pirate infested waters. The sailors are increasingly anxious. In spite of the fact that they still face weeks of transit before even entering a high risk area. This is the hidden part of the human cost that global piracy has added to sea transit. It is not only the actual hostages, and their families who suffer; many sailors struggle daily to cope with the overhanging threat of coming under armed attack, facing violent sea robbers or an unknown period as captives in the hands of the professional hostage business in Somalia. The sailors are uncertain and full of apprehension of a situation where armed guards or security escorts are becoming a visible part of sea transit.

The Science of Hostage Taking

Though a hostage-taking is considered a misfortune by some, it is considered a professional business by others. The sailors should be properly prepared for that misfortune and on how to handle the professional piracy business they risk encountering at sea. Educating the sailors helps even out the scales between professional hostage-takers and the men and women who have become their targets.

Professional pirates are subject to professional rules. They exist in a hierarchal structure, subjected to internal discipline and social protocols. They adhere to certain standard operational procedures; during attack, robbery, citadel-breaching and when guarding the hostages. Their interaction with each other and their hostages follow a certain pattern as do the negotiations for a ransom settlement. Proper preparation and the right foundation of knowledge and education can help minimize the level of trauma in connection with pirate encounters. The human cost in connection with hostage-taking has proven less severe when the captured individual has received hostage training or education beforehand.



Sailors need to be trained on how to cope with piracy, thereby giving them the opportunity to influence their surroundings and thus obtain a sense of control of their own situation. One of the keys to coping with capture is for the hostage to obtain a feeling of control and influence on his surroundings.

Hostages report that humiliation, feelings of helplessness and feeling completely under the control of others are among the most distressing issues suffered during captivity. It may even lead to severe psychological trauma, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Another important issue for the hostages is maintaining the unity of the group. Pirates have been known to divide the group of sailors into smaller groups based on nationality, hierarchical positions or religious views and to separate the hostages by means of isolation or by causing internal disputes. Internal disputes or unwillingness to cooperate can have a severe impact on the hostages' morale and resilience. It is therefore of utmost importance for the wellbeing of the crew that all crewmembers cooperate towards strengthening the unity of the group and assist each other using psychological first aid. This serves to ensure that all crew-members are included in the community and that no one is left to sink into depression or apathy. Long-term captivity creates an emotional rollercoaster for the hostages. The group serves as a stable core and as a safety net for the individuals.

Stress management focuses on mental tools and knowledge to help the sailor cope under stressful situations and thereby improve his chances of returning home with as few physical and emotional injuries as possible.

Example: The optimal course of action, when a safe room is about to be breached, and there is no chance of rescue, is for the captain to call for surrender just before the room is overrun by pirates. The captain should calmly inform the pirates that everyone has surrendered and that the crew and ship now belong to them and open the door voluntarily. It is not recommended to remain inside the safe room until the pirates break down the door and enter by force.

The two scenarios may seem similar and the end-state is the same, but the consequences for the crew-members, both the immediate level of aggression they have to face, and their treatment as captives in the long run, are very different.



The higher the level of stress resilience and ability to cope with the capture, the more likely it is for the sailor to wish to return to his work at sea afterwards. The level of trauma is lessened and it becomes easier for the sailor to re-adjust to his normal life after being released.

The hostages need to be armed with knowledge about how pirates work, their current strategies, their hierarchy and cultural norms and ethics, and their general treatment of the hostages. Knowledge and training is the key to reducing stress and to becoming more stress-resilient.

The hostage is prone to two types of stress during captivity: the acute and the long term, accumulated stress. Acute stress is a state of highest alert, connected mainly to abnormal, potentially life threatening situations like extreme violence, aggressive robbery, a pirate attack or hostage taking. Acute stress causes the individual to react instinctually, without first pausing to consider the consequences of his actions. This reflex is meant to help protect us and even save our lives by either making us escape the danger or strike out at the opponent. If you are unaware of the effects of acute stress, and furthermore have no knowledge of how to counter it, it may prove very dangerous in a hostage situation. Neither fight nor flight is an option here and instinctual reactions will only serve to further escalate the danger of situation, not only for the individual but also for the colleagues around him.

Being properly prepared on how to handle stress-reactions and cope with acute and accumulated stress will help the hostage get through his captivity with as little physical and psychological trauma as possible.

Conclusion

Sailors are suffering daily due to the current instability in the seas in South East Asia, off the Horn of Africa, West Africa, among others. The piracy victims are thought of as those who have survived encounters with pirates and sea robbers. Often we neglect to include, as victims, the sailors who put themselves at risk, transiting through areas where they risk violent attack, injury or even death. A sailor transiting through pirate infested waters has a higher risk of being captured than a professional soldier on deployment.¹ Militaries train troops, shipping lines,



charterers and crewing agents now need to prepare and educate sailors to cope with acute stress and fear of capture.

Training and education can help reduce the human cost that is a result of the professionalization of the piracy business. Professionalizing the hostages by teaching them advanced stress management and how to manage their fear and handle pressure in connection with piracy related incidents will help the sailor make the best possible choices in stressful situations to facilitate his and his mates' survival and well-being, and assist them in returning home with as few mental and physical injuries as possible.

This article was commissioned by the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA) on behalf of the second United Arab Emirates Counter Piracy Conference, 'A Regional Response to Maritime Piracy: Enhancing Public-Private Partnerships and Strengthening Global Engagement', organized by the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with global ports operator DP World, held in Dubai in June 2012. The opinions expressed in this paper are the views of the author only, and do not reflect the opinions or positions of the conference organizers. Content may have been edited for formatting purposes.

For more information, see the conference website at www.counterpiracy.ae.

¹ The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) International Maritime Bureau's (IMB) Global Piracy Report:
2010: Pirates took 1181 seafarers hostage
2011: Pirates took 802 seafarers hostage
Military hostages: open sources (all media): In 2010 Less than 50 soldiers were taken hostage while on deployment and also less than 50 in 2011