

# Editorial

## Whatever Happened to Piracy?

In addition to protecting the coasts, Canada needs the navy to protect the shipping on which the country relies. Inherent in this is that the Canadian navy takes some responsibility for helping to ensure good order and safety at sea. This involves ensuring that sea lanes remain open and that cargo travels without disruption to meet manufacturing deadlines and to fill the shelves of our stores.

A decade ago, the movement of ships began to be disrupted in crucial shipping lanes, and navies got back in the business of countering piracy. Piracy became a hot topic, in particular piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the busy shipping lanes that pass by the country. A variety of navies, including Canada's, joined counter-piracy operations, and for the first time all five veto-holding UN Security Council members worked together to resolve an issue. In 2013 there were three international naval task forces conducting counter-piracy operations in the region – Combined Task Force 150 (part of *Operation Enduring Freedom*), Combined Task Force 151, and the European Union's *Operation Atalanta*. Other navies participated in counter-piracy operations outside of these groups, but coordinating with them to a varying degree.

But those days have passed – in 2016 we rarely hear about Somali piracy. What happened? There has been a marked decrease in pirate attacks (and attempts) off Somalia since 2012. According to the US Office of Naval Intelligence, the numbers have decreased from a high of 151 attacks in 2011, when pirates reportedly earned up to \$4 million per ship, to only nine ships attacked in 2013, none of them successfully. There were no successful attacks in 2015, and none thus far in 2016.

There are many factors that have combined to lead to the decrease in piracy off Somalia. First, the international naval presence upped the ante for pirate groups by deterring attacks and making it more difficult to operate with impunity. Second, shipping companies began to harden ship defences by employing armed security guards and fitting their ships with razor wire, water cannons and high-tech equipment (e.g., lasers and long-range acoustic devices) to make it harder for pirates to board the vessel. Third, ships took measures to sail in convoys, avoid the area as much as possible and increase speed as they traveled through the region. Fourth, international organizations and regional agencies formed to coordinate and exchange information so that pirates were tracked and best practices were shared. Fifth, better governance in some parts of

Somalia – especially Puntland and Somaliland – meant that state entities became more effective at shutting down or forcing pirates out of their safe havens. Sixth, efforts at marine capacity-building in Somalia may have started to pay off. Seventh, several prominent Muslim leaders in Somalia declared that pirate activity was un-Islamic, which may have motivated some pirates to leave the business (perhaps to join the Islamic forces of Al-Shabaab).

Whatever the cause or causes, this is good news for ships passing through the region. It is also good news that some areas of Somalia have succeeded in establishing a modicum of rule of law. There are reports that Somali fishing has increased – the waters off the coast are now full of fish since little international fishing has occurred there over the past decade. However, there are other reports that pirates have found a way to regain lost revenue by switching to 'escorting' or 'protecting' foreign fishing fleets, for fees, as they fish in Somali waters. It would be a bitter irony indeed if this is the case, as one of the reasons why the piracy arose in the first place was in protest at uncontrolled foreign fishing in Somali waters. History could repeat itself after the international naval presence is gone and local fishermen again become angry about foreign fishing.

While piracy off Somalia has decreased – almost disappeared – this doesn't mean that piracy has been eliminated as a threat to shipping. As attacks off the East coast of Africa decrease, incidents in Southeast Asia and West Africa (particularly off the coast of Nigeria) have increased.



*The Ghana Navy is involved in operations to counter piracy and drug smuggling in the Gulf of Guinea, 19 February 2014.*

The Gulf of Guinea is the new hotspot of piracy, leading in terms of both number and severity, according to the International Maritime Bureau, and the group Oceans Beyond Piracy. The attacks on the West coast of Africa are different than those off Somalia. For example, they tend to occur closer to shore, often in territorial waters so they aren't legally classified as piracy at all but rather armed robbery at sea (although I'll use the words piracy/pirate here). As well, unlike Somali pirates who seized ships for ransom, the attacks off Nigeria generally involve theft of cash and cargo. They often target oil tankers; they take over the ship, rob crew members and/or siphon out the fuel. Then they leave. This is a faster type of crime – instead of holding on to ships and crews for months waiting for a ransom to be negotiated and paid, these pirates can be done in a matter of hours, and sell the oil quickly on black markets.

The attacks in the Gulf of Guinea are different in other ways as well. First, they tend to be more violent as attackers have no incentive to keep crew members healthy. Second, the ships they attack are vulnerable as they are in the area to load/unload and can't use high speed or avoid the area – they tend to be attacked either at anchor or heading in or out of ports. Third, the Nigerian authorities won't allow armed guards in port so ships either have to remove the guns or remove the guards just when the ship is most vulnerable.

Despite Nigeria having a (more-or-less) functioning government, almost none of the attackers are apprehended. Indeed, there are credible reports that politicians and the military are either in on the game or are paid to look away. Since attackers aren't apprehended and prosecuted, many victims are unwilling to report attacks for fear of retribution when/if they meet the attackers again.

Since 2015 the attacks in the Gulf of Guinea have begun to change. The price of oil has dropped substantially so the profit from oil stolen from tankers has gone down as well. To make up this revenue shortfall, attackers have started to take crew members for ransom.

There was a change of government in Nigeria in 2015, elected with a stated focus on ending corruption. There is thus some hope that the attacks will decrease. The President is a former member of the military and may be inclined to support an enhanced coast guard and/or navy. However, the decrease in the price of oil has hit Nigeria extremely hard so government finances are in disarray. As well, the military budget is focused on the army which is heavily involved in trying to counter the violent extremism of Boko Haram. So, it seems unlikely that maritime forces will be a major focus of the state, although there has



*Boarding a pirate vessel off the coast of Somalia, 2014.*

been enhanced naval cooperation and capacity-building among navies in the region. Furthermore, it's problematic that the attacks may have political undertones in that they are tied to longstanding grievances in the Niger Delta. That makes it difficult to avoid the messy internal politics of Nigeria when addressing the problem.

It seems unlikely that the new piracy hotspot will receive the same international attention as the old one. Most Western countries don't want to expend the funds for another counter-piracy effort. The Gulf of Guinea doesn't have global strategic importance like the Gulf of Aden/Somalia, or Southeast Asia. Furthermore, European navies are focused on the Mediterranean and countering massive population movements by sea, the United States is keeping an eye on China in the South China Sea, and everyone is concerned about terrorists, not pirates. There is ongoing concern, however, as there was a few years ago in Somalia, that pirates, terrorists and criminals could form an unholy alliance based on the money to be made in smuggling drugs, immigrants and weapons. There may come a time when Western states conclude that there is a serious threat posed by piracy in the Gulf of Guinea – and navies, including Canada's, might find themselves back in the counter-piracy business. I guess we'll find out. 🍷

Dr. Ann Griffiths  
Editor, Canadian Naval Review