

Pirates

Piracy, even then was becoming a problem. Anywhere where ships had to slowly move in confined waters, or where they lay at anchor, was an attraction. Pirates were active around West Africa, the Malacca Straits, Indonesia and China. Even the really big tankers (such as ourselves) were not exempt. Today it is not unknown for a complete ship and crew to just disappear, then a year or two later the same ship reappears with a new name, a new crew, a different port of registration and new owners. The ships are practically untraceable, and have only been found through some dangerous adventures by insurance investigators and a lot of luck. It is well known that virtually every ship has large quantities of cash on board to pay bills in ports where cash dollars open doors and reduce prices. This tends to be a magnet for gangs of armed thieves. Real pirates though are interested in the ship or its cargo, not the cash. An extra twenty thousand dollars in cash is just a sideline. Even a small tanker or coastal trader has several million dollars worth of oil or products on board, which can easily be pumped or otherwise transferred into smaller ships or ashore. The ship itself is worth another million or more. With this sort of money, human life has no value at all. The advent of high speed boats, cheap weapons and finance from the Mafia, drug dealers or unscrupulous governments make it even more attractive. Also many countries just do not have the will or resources to combat such gangs.

We experienced a "pirate" attack off Singapore whilst at anchor, though they were, luckily, more petty thieves than pirates. They were discovered by the 3rd mate when he heard noises whilst making himself a sandwich after the 8 - midnight watch. One threw a knife at him and ran off to where their boat was tied up. The third mate wisely ducked behind a bulkhead and shouted. The thieves only made off with a typewriter and a mechanical adding machine, but they were OURS! We had some sailors patrolling the deck, and they came running when they heard the 3rd mate shout. Luckily none of us was hurt, but one of our AB's (a tall heavily built guy) threw a heavy cast iron scupper plug at one of the pirates. It hit him on the head when the boat was trying to make its getaway. (They had trouble starting their outboard motor.) He never moved afterwards, and was probably severely injured if not killed. Despite multiple radio requests, the police only came out the next day, and even then were not really interested. The Captain gave the AB a telling off for losing a scupper plug (but not very seriously) then commended him for his actions.

No British ships carry weapons. We are all instructed in case of hijacking or piracy, not to show any resistance, and give them what they want. Easier said than done when it's your HiFi or watch that's being taken! About the only ships who do not often get molested are Russian. They are almost always heavily armed with automatic weapons, and have people trained in their use. I have served with one Captain who has been tied up and robbed of the ship's cash three times by thieves. He had taken to carrying a hand gun with him, but admitted he was not sure if he would ever really use it. The majority of modern pirates back off when confronted with a watchful crew. There are however some, more heavily armed, who are not averse to shooting, and will kill or maim without compunction.