

IS CRUISE SHIP SECURITY SAILING?

Cruise ships are the giants of the ocean with the largest examples towering 16 storeys and tipping the scales at a quarter of a million tonnes, four times the size of the new aircraft carriers on order for the Royal Navy. Given the number of people being carried, and the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in every ship, a pertinent question is just how safe and secure are these vessels? Especially as so many other modes of transport, from rail to aviation, have been targeted.

Although to date cruise ships have escaped relatively unscathed from terrorism or piracy, the risk has not gone away. In fact, some security experts would argue

the danger is higher than ever before as groups like ISIS continue to change their modus operandi. "What we are seeing is that ISIS is going for incidents that will maximise casualties, maximise the amount of publicity, and the sense of horror," warns Gerry Northwood OBE, chief operating officer at MAST, the maritime security specialist.

Looking in more detail at scenarios where ships have been attacked or had narrow escapes in the past, Commander Mark Gaouette, the author of *Cruising For Trouble* – and former director of security for Princess Cruises and Cunard Cruise Lines – explains in his book that cruise ships are still "soft targets for pirates, terrorists and common criminals". Gaouette cites a number of instances that have shaken up the



SECURITY PLAN

industry. Perhaps the most famous case was the attack on the Achille Lauro back in 1985, which according to Gaouette was hijacked in the Mediterranean and saw a wheelchair-bound American passenger shot dead by the PLO. "After the hijacking," writes Gaouette, "The IMO [International Maritime Organisation] used the Achille Lauro incident to model security provisions for cruise ships in a forerunner of the ISPS Code".

On the terrorism front, Gaouette goes on to highlight the activities of al-Qaeda operatives who masterminded the attack back in 2000 on the USS Cole, the US naval vessel, in the Yemeni port of Aden and others who plotted an attack – which was thwarted – on an Israeli cruise ship in Istanbul and the Queen Mary 2, among others. To date, the worst terrorist attack on a passenger ship remains the 2004 sinking of Superferry 14 North-West of Manila in the Philippines, which led to 110 fatalities. This, reveals Gaouette, was the result of TNT smuggled on board by an operative of the Abu Sayyaf Group.

Piracy too is something that cruise ship operators now have to consider. Just a year after the Superferry 14 terrorist-related tragedy, there was a very close call for passengers on the Seabourn Spirit luxury liner off

the coast of Somalia where the main protagonists were pirates. "No one was killed or seriously injured after the ship was hit by rocket-propelled grenades and fire from automatic weapons launched by pirates in an apparent attempt to board the ship," Gaouette notes. Interestingly, one of the defensive measures deployed by the Spirit's crew – often referred to in media reports as a 'sonic cannon' – was, explains Gaouette, a Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD): "The pirates had fled after being subjected to the LRAD's piercing tone. This non-lethal technology was part of Princess Cruise security model implemented fleet-wide earlier that year".

Returning to the thoughts of Gerry Northwood of MAST about the threats and challenges associated with protecting cruise ships, he singles out a recent multi-million dollar drugs bust when 95kg of cocaine was found in cabin luggage on a Princess Cruises' ship – the MS Sea Princess – as a real wake-up call. At first glance the incident – which was uncovered when the ship berthed in Sydney – although serious, may seem far removed from terrorism, however the point that Northwood is keen to draw out is that if people can smuggle drugs on board, then there is the potential

Port Authority Police provide security for the Royal Caribbean Cruise Ship Quantum of the Seas docked at Cape Liberty Cruise Port, New Jersey



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for explosives and weapons to follow suit: "I have been talking to the people that I know in the cruise ship area and they have all come back and confirmed that they are looking deeper into the problem and making sure that they are closing that particular, potential, gap in their security measures. It is really about people being watchful and realising that they do sit on potentially very vulnerable targets. It could be something smuggled on board by a number of different passengers".

Northwood stresses that cruise ship operators also need to remain vigilant given the large volume of stores and food coming on board: "Every single item needs to be checked, every single consignment of meat. There are huge volumes of it to feed all of the passengers and crew. The same goes for baggage. On a cruise ship, unlike an airliner, you really can arrive with the kitchen sink, so the ability to have larger containers coming on board in which the packaging arrangements could be adapted to hide away explosives or weapons is much greater than for aircraft".

He reflects on the lessons that have been learnt from airport security, which can help ship owners to navigate a course through these challenges: "We have seen where vulnerabilities have been exposed that have allowed aircraft to be brought down by terrorist bombs, with workers being nobbled at the point of baggage handling to allow a bomb to get on board". Northwood explains that the last thing anybody wants to see is terrorists finding a way to smuggle a bomb on board that sits low in the hull: "Then you create a situation like the Costa Concordia disaster with catastrophic damage to a ship occurring in deep water". He is also concerned about the potential for terrorists to get weapons on board when there are thousands of people in one place.

A crumb of comfort that Northwood offers for those thinking of travelling on cruise ships is that there has not been a successful attack of any scale since the Achille Lauro: "That is actually a marker that the cruise ship industry has taken security seriously to a much greater degree than the rest of the shipping industry". The second explanation he outlines for the lack of incidents is that this is still an environment that is alien to the terrorists: "The average terrorist doesn't go on cruise liners and they prefer to take targets they are comfortable with. We have seen a number of wider maritime incidents like the USS Cole – and there was an oil tanker in the Gulf which was bombed – so it is not that they are not prepared to do it, it is a question of how".

In terms of my own experience, a trip on a cruise ship in the Western Mediterranean this summer was a real eye opener in terms of the attention being paid to security checks both in the port terminals themselves prior to embarkation, with airport-style security screening of passengers and carry-on luggage; smart cards provided and pictures taken and stored of all passengers for cross-referencing on embarkation. From all of this activity one security-related element that really stood out was on the French leg of my journey, which featured a close-in escort provided by a French Maritime Police launch as we sailed out of Marseille, with the police ushering small craft venturing too close to a safe distance.

Peter Bennett – from Covenant, the security risk



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management consultancy – puts the presence of such a high-visibility escort into the context of the broader threat landscape. "The follow on from the surge of terrorist attacks in mainland Europe was a real concern over aviation, maritime, and major transport hubs, so, as part of this, we are finding more high-visibility patrols around ships at the port facility interface where they are most vulnerable," he says. Another consequence of this is that water-based special-force training is high on the agenda, whether that be delivering a deterrent or being ready for an intervention, specifically a rapid response to an attack on a ship.

Away from the water, Bennett brings another cruise ship vulnerability to the surface that can impact on passenger safety and security, specifically the fact that, while ships visit many interesting places around the world they dispatch a large proportion of their passengers on day trips: "They [passengers] go off in buses and that creates a target in itself and potential opportunities if the screening of passengers who are returning is not done properly or if there is an insider element." A case in point here was, sadly, the targeting of tour groups at the Bardo National Museum in Tunisia.

Gerry Northwood from MAST reveals that some ships now, openly, have armed patrols when they are going through high-risk areas like the Indian Ocean. The way this is handled can vary from the discrete, where there is screening to keep the guards hidden from passengers, to the more overt.

On a connected point, the move by the French Government to put armed sea marshals on ferries over the summer, which caused ripples in some quarters, has been applauded by Professor Anthony Glees, director of the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham, who believes such a deployment is long overdue: "I think that it is a very realistic idea and it should have been done before. We know that terrorists have tried to hijack ships as well as aeroplanes in the past".

For security experts like MAST's Northwood, the issue for cruise line operators is not so much whether they are taking security seriously – as there is much agreement that they are – but rather their ability to remain nimble so that they can keep up to speed with the task of ensuring they close off any dangerous vulnerabilities before it is too late.

French coastguard gendarmes' maritime motor launch is poised ready to strike at the first sign of threat

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