

REPORT ON A PIRACY ATTACK ON FOUR AUSTRALIAN AND ONE US YACHT
IN THE GULF OF ADEN 9 MARCH 2003.
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This morning 9 March 2003 at 8 am Yemen local time we were in close company with 4 other yachts at 13 11 N and 48 40 E approximately 50 miles off the Yemen coast and 100 from Somalia in the Gulf of Aden:

Penyllan Peter & Jan Metherall from Melbourne
Sea Dove Rod and Karyn from Brisbane
Gypsy Days Brian and Margaret Horwell from Melbourne
Narena Bruce and Cheryle Matthew from Phillip Island
Imani Mark and Doreen, Maya and Tristan from Sausalito California

We spotted three fast moving motorized dhows coming across our track from the direction of Somalia towards the Yemen coast. I was just about give a routine position report in to a NET on the SSB radio where by chance Mike, the skipper of BAMBOLA, a yacht attacked near here a week ago, was describing his attack. I broke in to his conversation and asked for a quick description of the boats that attacked him and his response described the ones approaching us. Open boats, possible old ship's lifeboats about 20 meters long, probably made of wood or GRP judging from their radar echo .. (only visible on radar within 1.5 miles) and inboard powered. They were covered with bright blue and orange plastic sheeting possibly to conceal their identity or the identity of their cargo.

By this time we had formed a very tight group and had increased speed to the maximum we could sustain as a group ... 6-7 knots. One of the three approaching boats had diverted and was heading directly for us from our port quarter. When he was about half a mile away we heard shots fired. We immediately called mayday ... Karyn on Sea Dove using VHF and I called the skipper of the yachts SKIVE and of BAMBOLA on the SSB NET who were in direct communication with the German Navy HQ in Djibouti. Bambola was anchored in Djibouti. They informed us that they had already alerted the German navy of our situation after my first call and that help if needed would take several hours. I issued a formal Mayday via the Net to be immediately relayed to the German Navy in Djibouti who presently have responsibility for the Coalition Force patrolling the Gulf of Aden. We repeatedly called Mayday on other channels but got no immediate response.

The boat was only very slowly overtaking us and as no further shots were fired an anxious ten or fifteen minutes followed as the attacking craft gradually drew closer astern and we coaxed more speed from our engines. The other two companion vessels did not seem to take as enthusiastic part in the pursuit, both appeared heavily laden with people. All this time Karyn and I and some of the others kept up a barrage of Mayday calls and updating of the contacts that we had managed to make by the various radio frequencies.

A Panamanian registered freighter the ROYAL PESCADORES answered one of Karen's calls and said that he was turning towards our position. We saw him abeam on our

southern horizon. Then a US warship called and said he would be in our position in 3 hours.

Finally the attacking boat gave up the chase and turned for the Yemen coast, possibly because of the obvious long chase he was in for to overtake us, also because we were a close bunched group of five yachts, and also because he was heavily laden with "passengers". The appearance of the merchant vessel ROYAL PESCADORES heading in our direction must have also been a deterrent.

At 9.12am a Coalition Orion 4-engined navy aircraft made contact, flew over and then headed down the coast AHEAD OF US! (The pirates were astern) On his second pass fifteen minutes later we managed to indicate to him the direction in which they had fled and he did a run in that direction. He then returned, asked if we needed any assistance, and departed. At 1050 he returned and asked for details of the yachts involved, reported that had had seen many local small vessels but could not identify our attackers. BAMBOLA believes that he was stalked in the pre-dawn darkness by them following his lights and then attacking at dawn. We were lucky in that we saw them first and were off and running when they reached us.

We made contact with a US frigate known as COALITION WARSHIP 992 who came to us late in the evening to check on our welfare. They are equipped with at least one helicopter. We gave them details of the group of four yachts that included POLLUX (NZ) and TALINGA TOO (Adelaide) that were following us two days behind and said that we believed that there were many yachts still to come from the Salalah area. They said that they planned to patrol the problem area "for several days" and would welcome calls from yachts on channel 16.

We believe that our attackers were involved in the business of people smuggling from Somalia to Yemen. The three boats were like ships lifeboats and were overcrowded with passengers. The boats were clearly on a fast passage ACROSS the gulf and therefore across our course. We believe that the blue and orange plastic sheeting that shrouds the boats is probably to shelter and hide the cargo of occupants. We also believe that they are likely the same ones that attacked BOMBALA a week ago at 18 31 n 48 24 E. A line drawn through the two attack points might give an approximate indication of their regular track ? We have researched similar incidents and found that there have been five other similar attacks on yachts involving boats answering the same description within 30 miles of our position, and a plot of their positions indicates that the vessels probably trade between the Somali coast near Bosaso and the Yemen coast near Bir Ali approximately 50 miles SW of Al Mukalla.

Thankfully we have escaped that attack unscathed and will pass the worst "danger zone" by tonight. We have 2-3 days to go before we enter the "Gates of Sorrow" at the southern end of the Red Sea and head for the relative safety of Eritrea. As you can imagine our adrenaline is up, we are pleased that we all handled things well under pressure, and very grateful that we have been so lucky.