

YACHT PIRACY IN THE GULF OF ADEN

27 January 2000

On 27 January 2000 at approximately 0730 UTC, the skipper, Stephen Phillips, spotted a small boat dead ahead, at position 13 degrees 03'N, 048 degrees 41'E. The weather conditions were light winds approximately 10 knots, slight seas to 5m, clear skies, and good visibility.

The yacht 'Gone Troppo' had been sailing at speeds in the range of 3.5-4.5 knots on a bearing of 268 degrees for a couple of days. Immediately upon spotting the small boat, we changed course to a more northerly direction and started the motors to increase the boat speed. In spite of these efforts the small boat continued to close on our position until it was just ahead of 'Gone Troppo' where it slowed. As we drew abeam of the boat shots were fired into the hulls of 'Gone Troppo'. One bullet penetrated a timber moulding on the bridge deck and one bullet passed through the forward section of the dagger board casing on the port side, through a cupboard door, then out of the other side of the port hull across into the starboard hull, through a cupboard door, and hit the skipper's wife Gail in the leg. Gail was standing at the chart table making 'Mayday' calls on the HF radio at this time. Stephen was in the port hull but immediately went above deck into the cockpit area and waved his hands above his head to stop the shooting and the men on the boat indicated that they wanted the sails to be dropped.

Gail made a Mayday call on the VHF radio but had no response and then went above decks.

After the sails were lowered, four men boarded the yacht and one waved the gun and shouted at Stephen and Gail to move forward to the Trampoline at the front of the boat, which they did. One man sat on the aft port side and held a gun while 3 men proceeded to try to remove the HF radio from its installed position and then ransack the boat. They then indicated to Stephen that they wanted money. He went back inside the boat and showed them his wallet. He then assisted them to remove the HF radio, two solar panels and the HF tuner antennae. They kept asking for money so Gail went and got her purse which they had not found and gave it to them. They removed the money.

They appeared very nervous and anxious to be gone and so after loading the items, which they had selected, they re-boarded their vessel and cast off. They headed in a south-easterly direction for a mile or two and then stopped. Stephen and Gail had noticed a large amount of water on the port hull floor and thought that a bullet had penetrated below the water line. After investigation it was found that a bullet had severed the pipe from the freshwater header tank.

As the Pirate's boat was now nearly out of sight, they hoisted the mainsail again and commenced sailing again on the 268-degree course. Mayday calls were made on the VHF radio continuously for the first hour after the attack and then every half-hour thereafter. No response was received until another yacht 'Fourth Time' was spotted at 1415 UTC. They responded to calls on the VHF and as they had a Satcom-c facility on board they sent a message to the authorities in Djibouti and also to Sams Shipping Agent in Aden to advise them of the incident. They sailed over closer to 'Gone Troppo' and once they were assured that they could do no more to help, they proceeded on their course.

At 1730 UTC contact was made with a ship and as we had not received confirmation from 'Fourth Time' that the faxes had been received, Stephen asked the ship to contact the authorities to advise them of the incident as well. This they said they would do and they called back shortly afterwards requesting additional information, which we gave. He then said that he would forward the information and confirm that it had been received if we were still in VHF radio range. No confirmation was received by us.

We continued sailing towards Aden and made good progress as the winds had strengthened. By 1730 UTC on 28 January we were approximately 80 miles from Aden in position 12 degrees 50'N and 46 degrees 14'E. when Stephen spotted a small craft on the radar screen approximately 15NM away on the port bow. No lights were seen. Altered course away from the vessel by 70 degrees and increased to 7.5 knots. Distance increased to 2 miles and it was now off our port quarter, but the vessel then altered course and remained in that position. After 30 minutes we re-altered course back to original course and the small craft re-established its position at 2 miles and same course. During this time there were the lights of a number of ships on the horizon and visible on the radar. Two calls were made to the unlit vessel and no response was received.

Calls were then made to all ships giving position and nature of problem. After two calls a response was received from a ship. The ship undertook to plot our position and maintain close radio watch on the VHF. Stephen advised him that we had already been attacked by pirates and that his wife had been injured, and that if the unlit vessel approached he would fire red parachute flares. The ship undertook to maintain a constant visual watch in our direction as well. Immediately following this conversation the unlit small vessel moved away from 'Gone Troppo' on a course opposite to our course. We lost radar contact when it was just over three miles distant. Fifteen minutes later the ship radioed to make sure that everything was OK and we advised him that we had lost radar contact with the small unlit vessel. He advised that he had informed other ships to keep a watch out for us.

We continued to Aden arriving at 0900UTC 29 January 2000 and proceeded to advise the authorities who indicated that they were unaware of any incident.

It is worth noting that the day before the attack we were overflowed by a grey aircraft and that it flew up behind us and then banked off to the south before passing our position. The boat carrying the pirates was wooden, about 25-28 feet long with a wooden gunwhale and painted blue. It had no deck or superstructure but had tree branches around the gunwhale sticking up to maybe support a shade canopy. It had an inboard motor. The pirates were dark in skin colour and they wore western style clothing of shirts and trousers. One man was older maybe in his 50s and one was in his 30s. The others were in their 20s. They were clean shaven and had frizzy hair.