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Access control at sea
Does 'hardening' of ships require a security integrator's expertise?
By Matt Wickenheiser, contributing editor - 05.14.2009 [email](#)

When pirates boarded the Maersk Alabama cargo ship in April, crewmembers followed procedures that had been drilled into them by their captain. According to published reports, they cut power and shut down all operations on the vessel. Then crewmembers made their way into the guts of the ship, hiding in the interior so they wouldn't become hostages. And, as time goes by, the chances that rescue boats arrive grows greater.

The entire world knows how the story unfolded off the coast of Somalia: Maersk Alabama Capt. Richard Phillips was taken hostage by pirates. The situation stretched over days while the pirates held Phillips on a tiny lifeboat, surrounded by numerous naval ships from different countries. The standoff ended when U.S. Navy SEALs shot three of Phillips' four captors.

After the rescue, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing on April 30, "Confronting Piracy off the Coast of Somalia." Both Phillips and his top boss, John P. Clancey, chairman of Maersk Inc., testified. And both spoke of the concept of emerging techniques to "harden" vessels to piracy--though neither would get into much detail.

"In my opinion, the targets--the vessels--can be 'hardened' even beyond what's being done today and made even more structurally resistant to pirates. In addition, more can be done in terms of developing specific anti-piracy procedures, tools and training for American crews," Phillips told senators, according to a transcript of his remarks.

Access control and security technology in general appears to be part of that "hardening," at least in the super-high-class yacht world. And that presents an opportunity for security integrators to offer their expertise.

Dean La-Vey, director of UK-registered Secure Yacht Limited, said the demand for security on marine vessels has grown by more than 50 percent over the last two years. A big part of that was the introduction of the International Port Security Program (ISPS) by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security after the 9-11 attacks, La-Vey said. The code is aimed at vessels over 500 gross tons, and dictates that there must be a dedicated and accredited Ship's Security Officer and that the ship must have specific security measures and access control in place in order to conform to the code.

"Access control is a major part of the ISPS code; under the code, access control can mean a manual lock and a key. In the last two years, however, more yachts are requiring networked access control systems using proximity," La-Vey told Security Systems News in an email interview. "It allows the captain to restrict access to areas he wants restricted, issue temporarily valid proximity tokens to casual workers, and control all of the system remotely over the ship's network. In addition, if there is a fire or other emergency, the system will automatically unlock all doors and print a muster roll of all onboard."

La-Vey's company has been working on yachts for about eight years, first as a division of Cambridge Technical Services. Three years ago, the yacht company was launched as a separate concern due to demand, La-Vey said. Last year, the firm completed work on a 393-foot yacht and had designs accepted for two ships over 459 feet.

ISPS and increased piracy concerns have increased demand for access control, said La-Vey, and has forced his company to design its own innovative solutions.

"Our first networked access control system was onboard a 58-meter yacht (190 feet) and had a total of 41 controlled internal and external doors. I had to heavily modify the readers themselves as no one had a dedicated marine proximity reader," said La-Vey. "In the end I designed one myself (the Net2 Marine system). We know who is on the boat, where they went, where they tried to go, and the status of every door. We use only the very best electronic locks. It's of no use putting in an access control system with cheap locking mechanisms."

There are some differences between land-based technology and marine tech, said J. Marc Franken, president of Medford, N.J.-based Frankentek Inc.

"The biggest difference is the corrosive environment. The industry does not address this," said Franken in an email interview, while certifying a system on a yacht in the south of France. "There is no salt water-proof readers, or locks on the market that are aesthetically pleasing.

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The regulations relating to installations on shipping are far more stringent than land-based installations, said La-Vey. Shipboard, systems have to be able to interface with all the vessel's emergency alarm systems (fire, general alarm, etc.), he noted.

Also, he said, when using RF proximity access control, installers need to be aware that they cannot simply install a reader through the metal superstructure, as metal dissipates the RF, greatly reducing the read range to almost non-existent.

"You have to do a lot of screening so that the RF comes out of the reader," La-Vey said. "I spend a lot of time correcting this mistake by land-based installers who simply have no understanding of how it works."

La-Vey said he sees a lot more use of access control on vessels over the next two years, particularly on yachts.

"I have two major vessels over 130 meters (426 feet) which won't be in the water for two years and the access control is extensive," he said. "It's not simply enough to just use a lock and key. I have also installed fingerprint readers and an iris scanner on private vessels, and have two orders for new finger vein readers."

There will always be a market on yachts, agreed Franken.

"But for commercial ships, I see no real advantage to access control to prevent piracy," he said. "Let's be honest: Without a bullet-proof bridge or a safe, bullet-proof safe room on board there is no safety from a gun-wielding criminal."

Orlando Wilson, a security consultant with Risks Inc. of Florida, which trains yacht crews on anti-piracy, said most container ships don't currently have access control technology.

"Once they're at sea, they're supposed to be the only ones on there," he said.

Asked about access control as a way to make the interior of a cargo ship more impregnable to pirates, Wilson pointed out one of the big differences between ships and buildings.

"The issue is if you're locked in the safe room and the boat starts to sink, what are you going to do?" he said. "You need some way to escape, a covert external door, a raft or something."

It gives yet another meaning to a captain choosing to go down with his ship.

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