

STATEMENT OF
CAPTAIN RICHARD PHILLIPS, MASTER
MAERSK ALABAMA
TO THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
APRIL 30, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am Captain Richard Phillips. I am a graduate of the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, I have been a member of the International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots Union since 1979, and I am a licensed American merchant mariner. I was the captain of the MAERSK ALABAMA when it was attacked by pirates off the coast of Somalia on April 8th. Thankfully, that episode ended with the successful return of the ship, its cargo of US food aid for Africa and, most importantly, my crew. All of us have returned home safely and for that my entire crew and I are deeply appreciative of the actions taken by the Administration, the Department of Defense and, most specifically, the US Navy, the Navy SEALs and the crew aboard the USS Bainbridge. All of the US military and government personnel who were involved in this situation are clearly highly trained and motivated professionals and I want to use this opportunity to again say “thank you” to everyone involved in our safe return.

I want to thank the management of Maersk and Waterman Steamship Corp. who handled the situation, the crew and our families with great care and concern.

And equally important, I want to publicly commend all the officers and crew aboard the MAERSK ALABAMA who responded with their typical professionalism in response to this incident. The Licensed Deck Officers who are members of the Masters, Mates & Pilots Union, the Licensed Deck Officer and Licensed Engineers who are members of the Marine Engineers’ Beneficial Association, and the unlicensed crew who belong to the Seafarers International Union are dedicated merchant mariners, typical of America’s merchant seamen who are well-trained and who are ready and able to respond when necessary to protect the interests of our country.

I am honored to come before this Committee today to discuss my views on making commercial shipping safer, and worldwide sea lanes more secure from the threat of piracy.

I need to make clear at the outset that I am unable to discuss the incident itself because of the ongoing investigation and pending legal action against one of the pirates. But I’ve had a lot of time to think about the difficult and complex issues of protecting vessel, cargo and crew in crime-ridden waters. So

instead of a recount of the MAERSK ALABAMA incident, the focus of my comments will be my beliefs, based on my years of experience at sea, as to what can or should be done to respond to piracy and to protect American vessels and crews.

I should also say at the outset that I realize that my opinions may differ in some ways from other recommendations you have heard before and may hear today from others on the panel. Nevertheless, I do believe that all of us in the maritime industry understand that it is imperative that we work together to address this complex problem, and I believe we are in general agreement on the main principles of keeping crew, cargo and vessel safe.

First, I believe it is the responsibility of our government to protect the United States, including U.S.-flag vessels that are by definition an extension of the United States, their U.S. citizen crews, and our nation's worldwide commercial assets. So, it follows then that the most desirable and appropriate solution to piracy is for the United States government to provide protection, through military escorts and/or military detachments aboard U.S. vessels. That said, I am well aware that some will argue that there is a limit to any government's resources - even America's. In fact, due to the vastness of the area to be covered – and the areas of threat are continually growing larger - our Navy and the coalition of other navies currently positioned in the Gulf of Aden region may simply not have the resources to provide all the protection necessary to prevent and stop the attacks.

So what other things can be done?

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. I do however want to emphasize that contrary to some reports that I've heard recently, American mariners are highly trained and do receive up-to-date training and upgrading at the private educational training facilities jointly run by the maritime unions and their contracted shipping companies. I believe that discussions are underway now between the industry and government on the details of specific proposals to harden the vessels (the specifics of which should remain secret) and I am confident that we will soon have additional methods for protecting vessel and crew. And while they will be an improvement, there is no way they can be foolproof.

I've also heard the suggestion that all we have to do to counter piracy is "just arm the crews". In my opinion, arming the crew cannot and should not be viewed as the best or ultimate solution to the problem. At most, arming the crew should be only one component of a comprehensive plan and approach to combat piracy. To the extent we go forward in this direction, it would be my personal preference that only the four most senior ranking officers aboard the vessel have access to effective weaponry and that these individuals receive special training on a regular basis. I realize that even this limited approach to arming the crew opens up a very thorny set of issues. I'll let others sort out the legal and liability issues but we all must understand that having weapons on board merchant ships fundamentally changes the model of commercial shipping and we must be very cautious about how it is done. Nevertheless, I do believe that arming the crew, as part of an overall strategy, could provide an effective deterrent under certain circumstances and I believe that a measured capability in this respect should be part of the overall debate about how to defend ourselves against criminals on the sea.

As for armed security details put aboard vessels, I believe, as I indicated earlier, that this idea could certainly be developed into an effective deterrent. My preference would be government protection forces. However, as long as they are adequately trained I would not be opposed to private security on board. Of course, I realize that very clear protocols would have to be established and followed. For example, as a captain, I am responsible for the vessel, cargo and crew at all times. And I am not comfortable giving up command authority to others... including the commander of a protection force. In the heat of an attack, there can be only one final decision maker. So command is only one of many issues that would have to be worked out for security forces to operate effectively.

While there are many new ideas and much discussion going on about how to deal with piracy, I would respectfully ask the Committee to be mindful that the seafarers I've met and worked with over my career are resourceful, hardworking, adventurous, courageous, patriotic and independent. They want whatever help you can offer to make the sea lanes more secure and their work environment safer. But we realize that while preparation is absolutely critical, not every situation can be anticipated. And we accept that as a part of the seafarer's life. So, I will just close with a request for you to please proceed carefully and to please continue to include us in your discussions and debates.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak and I look forward to answering your questions.

