

'THE PIRATES CAME AT US WITH SWORDS... WE PUMMELLED THEM INTO THE DECK!'



IN THE last ten years, Somali pirates have murdered almost 100 sailors, attacked thousands of vessels and plundered over £250million in ransoms. Carl Mason is one of the men who's paid to stop them. Here, in his own words, is an insight into one of the world's deadliest jobs...

"I've always protected people for a living"
"I spent ten years in the Royal Marines, then I spent some time as a bodyguard – working for Oasis. Then I was a military advisor to a shipping company during the Gulf War, advising the commander on the risk of Exocet missiles in the Strait of Hormuz. One guy I knew in the same job was paid £20,000 to lower himself down and pull out an unexploded missile by hand!"

"My first pirate-hunting mission was like something out of a spy thriller"
"In 1994, I was working for a maritime company, taking stowaways on boats back to Africa. I got a phone call saying one of our boats had been hijacked by ten African pirates near Singapore – they'd stabbed one of the crew and tossed him overboard. My team came up with a ruse that we'd say we were insurance brokers, in suits and ties, who'd been sent by the shipping company to negotiate with them. Unarmed, we dumped the cash on the table. Then the back-up crew smashed the doors in and started bashing them with baseball bats. Someone chucked me a bat

and we were going at them – bats vs swords – pummelling them into the deck."

"It wasn't until recently that the world needed full-time pirate hunters"
"I heard about the role in 2008 and approached a maritime company to ask for work. They only employ ex-Marines, paratroopers, Navy and special forces. I had an interview and two days later, I was defending ships carrying all sorts of cargo – rice, liquid gas, even people. If the liquid gas gets hit, it's like a nuclear bomb! I hadn't been in the job long before we came under attack."

"Piracy's a huge industry in Somalia"
"In the past, there have been up to 15 pirate-training camps in Somalia – possibly trained by ex-Foreign Legion. There even used to be a pirate stock exchange in Somalia – local people could buy shares in a pirate ship, buying them RPGs etc in return for a share of any loot. The pirates themselves are doped up on a drug called khat, and will stage mock executions or beatings to get what they want. They can come from all over Africa – Nigeria's a hotspot."

"I'll never forget the first time my ship came under attack"
"With two others, I was guarding a 28-man crew chemical ship on a mission through the Gulf of Aden to Djibouti. We were part of a 12-boat convoy with a military escort, so I felt pretty protected. But one day, I woke up and our captain had changed course. I immediately smelled a rat. Suddenly, we were being attacked from all sides. The pirates had AK-47s and RPGs. We had just ten flares and a high-pressure hose!"

"When they started firing at us, it was like a movie"
"The pirates eventually got on board. We could hear them firing bullets off the metal doors and celebrating on the bridge, so we shimmied along a tiny lip to jump into the sea but there was a pirate guarding our path. He caught us just as the last of us reached the stairs – bullets were ricocheting all around this staircase and then into the water as we dove in. It was like a movie – the bullets hitting the water and going past us. We swam into the clear – all the time thinking about sharks – and then a German helicopter fished us out of the water."

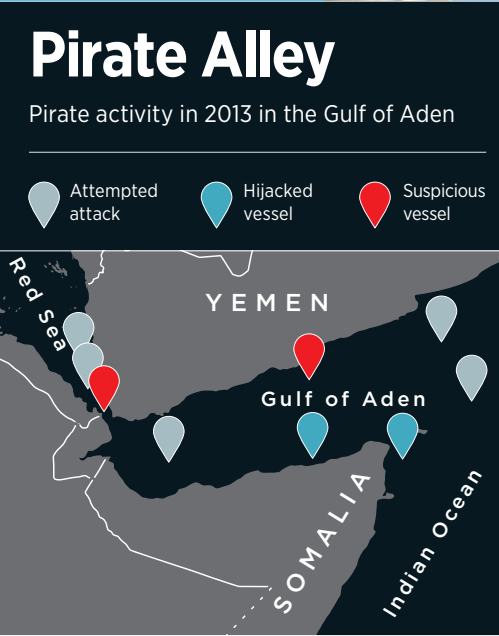
"Pirates don't care about the cargo, it's about the ransom"
"It isn't necessarily the cargo they're interested in – if they can take any commercial boat, they know they'll get at least £1m ransom for it. Shipping companies usually just give them the money and then a helicopter will dump the cash on the boat and fly off. The pirates will then escape on their boats."

"Most modern vessels are better equipped for attacks"
"At-risk boats will now have razor wire, weapons and panic rooms for crews to hide in. Guards might have AK-47s, Dragunovs, MP4s, MP5s, sniper rifles. On my first mission, we trawled the streets of Singapore, looking for guns, but we couldn't find any. We boarded unarmed and ended up having knives held to our throats."

"Attackers are easier to fend off than you'd think"
"Pirate speedboats are faster than the ships but, as they often use ordinary ladders, it's hard for them to get on. At the same time, if you fire a distress flare, then warning shots, often they'll disappear if they see you have guns. If they do board, you can lock the crew in the panic room, hold the pirates at

bay and call for assistance. When pirates attack, they'll fire some shots first at the bridge to get the captain to stop. My advice is always don't stop – go full steam ahead!"

● *Pirate Hunter*, written with Kris Hollington, is out now published by Guardian Shorts (guardianshorts.com), priced £1.99.



Piracy in Somalia accounts for 25% of incidents worldwide

Nuts meets Carl "Rocky" Mason – real-life guardian of the seas!

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