

## Piracy against Yachts...an overblown fear.

Warren Blake.

The very thought of piracy against a defenceless yacht on the open ocean raises the heart rate of every yachtsman who sails outside of his homeport limits in S.E. Asia. Such an act of violence would pose a primaevial, implacable threat, one that swarms rampaging aboard, completely hidden from the sight of the whole civilized world, and out of range of any conceivable rescue. The threat would seem even more sinister than that posed by an estuarine crocodile in a similar wilderness, because Man the species has the capacity for cold-blooded murder, unlike his merely hungry reptilian cousin.

Fortunately, pirate attacks against yachts are extremely rare. I have long believed that piracy in the Straits of Malacca, for example, is mostly a well organized affair, with known, specific cargoes of high value as targets, sponsored by well connected syndicates, to use a diplomatic euphemism, who are just not interested in yachts. Sailing close to the Malaysian coast of the Straits is virtually a guarantee of civilized behaviour. I speak from the personal experience of over a hundred passages through, and the reports of countless other yachtsman.

I have stoutly declared that in 42 years of full-time cruising in SE Asian waters I have almost never had a gun pointed at me, the exceptions being during a state of war (see my story "C'est la Guerre!").

I have always maintained, in reassuring anxious parents etc, that the last time a yacht was attacked by pirates was "27 years ago", a rough approximation to the truth of an attack in Southern Thai waters near Langkawi.

Not so long ago, however, a report was circulated that appeared to contradict this last comfortable belief. The International Maritime Bureau, (that body responsible for reporting and investigating piracy) reported the incident as follows:

***On 5 May, 2005, the yacht TEN LARGE, British flag, was attacked at 2 deg. 46'N, 106 deg 12'E, at Ayerabu Is, in the Anambas Archipelago. Eight robbers armed with AK47 machine guns boarded the yacht at anchor. They ordered the crew to remain below decks. They held the Skipper at gunpoint and took cash, stores, crews' personal belongings and escaped.***

This confirmed earlier rumours, and really shook me...an attack on a yacht!...and in a wonderfully scenic Archipelago that I have explored three score times, often with big groups of school children on board! Fortunately I was alerted to a more authoritative account on the

Internet that was written by the victims themselves. Although Dawn the writer, Christopher the Skipper, and Bryan, crewman, were understandably frightened and outraged by the incident, aspects of the account proved oddly reassuring to me. How this can possibly be must be explained later, but first read Dawn Strawford's account:

## ***Worrying Incident Near Ayerabu Island, Indonesia***

***Report from: SAILING VESSEL "TEN LARGE "***

*Captain: Mr Christopher Turner*

*Owner: Mr Bryan Lewis, Ms Dawn Strawford*

*Route: Tioman Island to Port Bintulu. Destination: Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia.*

*"Ten Large" is a 60ft Cutter Rigged Sloop, built in 1999 with a Perkins 135BHP Engine.*

*We left Tioman Island (Teluk Tekek) on Wednesday 4th May at Midday, travelled through the night and sighted Ayerabu Island, Indonesia around 8.00am. 5th May 2005. We decided to take a short stop to make possible repairs. As we neared the Island a boat with a young man (early Thirties) came to our bowt and was directing us to where he thought we should anchor, we kind of followed him in to the bay and thought "Oh that's really nice" a friendly face; he had a long tail type boat with outboard engine. This was at 10.30 am.*

*Whilst we where looking for a good place to set the anchor another boat which we did not see or hear came alongside us. The boat was around 4 meters in length, somewhat like a fishing boat, with an inboard engine. One male was waving a very large gun at us (looked like an AK47 machine gun) I would estimate that there were around 10-12 persons in this boat. We stopped our boat and allowed them to board us, the male with the gun boarded us first followed by 8 others, these where all young males in their thirties. The male with the gun was wearing jeans and a brown and white t-shirt with a marine motif on it, the rest were all dressed in shorts and t-shirts.*

*The male with the gun asked our Captain to go below decks with him, which he did, this male could speak no English and the only word he uttered was passport, we produced all of our passports for him, he looked at one for a second and then proceeded to the Aft Cabin with the Captain. All he could say was dollars, dollars you have dollars. We told him we didn't have dollars, the captain offered to him cigarettes in the hope that they would leave, he took the cigarettes but still insisted on money. The male had been onboard now for some 20 minutes or so, the other 8 males were walking around on deck or sat in the cockpit with Bryan and myself.*

*The captain then gave him around 300.00 Ringgits which was all we had close to hand, we did not want to open any cupboards or drawers, due to the fact that the male with the gun was following the Captain at all times. The male was still not satisfied with this amount and then showed it to the rest of the males onboard, they muttered something in Indonesian, and the male (with gun) came back below decks, Bryan followed him this time, to see if it was possible to get him to leave. We think that this agitated him or unnerved him because he proceeded to smash our saloon table with the butt of the gun, as he did this one of the other males immediately came below and again they where muttering in Indonesian together. The male then spotted our hand phones which he took, but they still wanted more money, I gave to them my handbag, I opened the purse and showed them all the money in it around*

*250.00Ringgits, I gave it all to them and explained that was it, no more money, he could see the purse and all its contents on the table, he took the money and showed it to the others (some of it). They stayed onboard at least another half hour picking up sunglasses, cigars, cigarettes lighters etc anything that was on show they took, but they did not take the fishing rods, outboard engine, or other big things that were above decks.*

*I did have a digital camera in the saloon, which they could see, but they did not take it or show any interest in it. I have pictures of us arriving at the island. They had a few more looks below to see if we had anything else and then decided to leave. They shook hands with us all before they left, the male with the gun called back to the fishing type boat which came alongside, they all departed happy and jolly as if it was just another day at the office. However the first young male who directed us into the anchorage, followed us for about 1 mile before he turned back to the island.*

*The coordinates where the event took place are: 02.46.064N and 106.12.285E.*

*Dawn Strawford, SY "Ten Large".*

This account contradicts the facts in the IMB statement in two respects: although eight men came on board, only one was armed. Further the man with the gun smashed it against the table, he did not quite "hold the skipper at gunpoint". But there are other, more subtle, aspects to such an incident that reassure me.

I believe I have been involved in at least a dozen such incidents, **in their incipient stages**, over the past four decades in the waters of various SE Asian nations. I have learned that I must attempt to handle these initial, slightly threatening, encounters with an air of robust, welcoming joviality, a broad smile, and with firm, but exquisitely polite questions or admonitions. I see immediately that I must explain such a pompous claim!

When a boat with armed men approaches my ship, I attempt to pre-empt their boarding by force with a sturdy and jovial invitation to "Come on board! Have coffee with me!"...in Indonesian of course....then "Selamat datang!" (Welcome!) as they grasp the railing to haul themselves aboard to shake my proffered hand. This is an attempt to create a social situation, rather than a confrontation. Should they begin to climb aboard with their weapons, I lower my voice, widen my smile, put up my hands palm out in a very gentle motion to stop, and say, "Ma'af, Tuan," (Forgive me, Sir!)", please, do you mind, no guns, the children will be frightened!" This polite, but firm attempt to defuse an armed boarding has worked perfectly on three or four occasions.

Several times when one more confident man has stepped up anyway with his gun, I have asked firmly if he is "Polisi?", and if he answers yes, I ask, very politely, "Since you are not in uniform, Sir, you will not mind me asking to see your official identification?" If he does show me an official card, I purposely repeat his name out loud a couple of times, thereby quite obviously

imprinting it in my mind, and in the minds of all within hearing, and then invite “Kolonel Achmad bin Iskander!” to join me for coffee with his men. This has worked well too, and the “Kolonel” (actually only a Sergeant) leaves his gun, and his men on deck, drinks coffee with me below, peruses my Sailing Permit for Indonesian Waters ( a vital document!), offers advice on a good place to anchor close to his police post (we will avoid that one!), graciously accepts a case of beer, or two cartons of smokes “for your men, of course!”, and departs with a “Welcome to Indonesia!” Indonesians find it hard to be nasty to a “nice guy”, especially one who firmly expresses his rights in the Indonesian language.

A man with a gun and no uniform in Indonesia is almost certainly an off-duty policeman or soldier. Military style weapons are kept in the hands of the military. He has come out in a boat with his comrades, or hangers-on, to check out this interesting foreign yacht, officially to ensure papers are in order, and privately always in curiosity at a strange arrival, perhaps with the thought of foreign girls in bikinis. His whole cultural background confirms in him the expectation that he should be paid, “in dollars!” by the visitors to allow them to proceed, and even richly paid by rich foreigners. He does not come aboard planning armed aggression and forceful plunder.

However, if a timid, and culturally innocent Skipper and crew meekly allow many men with weapons on deck, cravenly offer valuables in a seeming desperate effort to avoid prosecution for some supposed crime, then the same officer will be emboldened, and demand more and more, and even wave his weapon about aggressively. A fairly routine situation has been converted almost into “armed piracy” through lack of understanding.

Now I can hear most readers, especially Dawn Strawford, crying “Hold on a minute!....” True enough, my description of “armed piracy caused merely by misunderstanding” may not be true of what happened on “Ten Large”. I can only repeat that I have seen various levels of intimidation many times, once leading nearly as far as that on “Ten Large”, and that all of them could be defused to some extent by a firm response backed by cultural understanding.

But just a moment!...what if there were eight men all with AK47's, and what if they were not eager to identify themselves as police or soldiers? Almost certainly then, in an Indonesian context, these men would be up to no good...just possibly real, bloody pirates...but also possibly political dissidents, or lately, wild-eyed religious militants...but that is another story! I can only repeat that I have never seen such a scene in 41 years of full time cruising, largely in Indonesian waters.

But!...but!...how can cruising yachtsmen from far-off countries be expected to know local languages, or be conversant with local cultures, since they have not spent four decades studying such stuff? Granted! Perhaps I can suggest that Indonesian, and its sister, Malay, are very easy languages in which to pick up a few greetings, a few polite questions.

My son Philip, who works for a marina in Singapore catering to visiting yachts, endeavours to mention a few cultural niceties to the would-be cruisers he meets in his speaking tours of Australian marinas. Something like this should be a regular briefing for all sailing through Indonesia!

One unapologetic suggestion from this Kiwi to other Aussie and Kiwi yachtsmen: for nearly all Asian cultures, the cheerful, robust Aussie comes across as huge, loud and demanding, even when he is on his best behaviour! Slow down a bit, speak softly, wait patiently, loom a little less large over the head of every local, speak softly, bow your head slightly in greeting the senior man, smile broadly, speak softly, learn to say "Thank you, Sir!" at least, and softly, in the language of every country you plan to visit...but...this is not so easy!...be pleasantly firm about your rights under international norms!

I believe my primary reason for writing this for publication is an attempt to reassure cruising yachtsmen that the motives of armed men who board your boat are probably not piratical, they are more likely to attempt a bit of crude shakedown under the guise of checking your papers!...and this may cost you a carton of cigarettes. They may even be helpful, as has sometimes happened to me....but then, I speak the language!

I still have little fear of Pirates in the million square miles of Paradise in S.E.Asia that are my cruising grounds!

*Two of my older guests sit sedately under umbrellas on an islet in the Anambas Archipelago.  
The place where the yacht TEN LARGE was boarded, Ayerabu, is dimly visible in the background*



Captain Warren Blake,  
Schooner Four Friends,  
famblake@singnet.com.sg