



## The Star-Ledger

### Patrolling the world's dire straits

For German warship in Mideast waters, war on terror intersects with war on piracy

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BY CHRISTOPHER ALLBRITTON

For the Star-Ledger

ABOARD THE FGS BREMEN -- As the steel hull of this German warship slices through the gray-blue waters of the Gulf of Aden, Capt. Andreas Jedlicka keeps a close eye on the horizon.

Jedlicka, a tall, taciturn man with an economy of movement born from years of living in tight quarters, says nothing. Behind him, officers and crew talk quietly among themselves as they parse the green dots and blurry images on the radar screens and infrared monitors.

The waters they patrol are some of the most dangerous in the world, infested with pirates, traversed by jihadis and trafficked by smugglers.

No ship is immune.

The Federal German Ship Bremen, a 25-year-old frigate, is here to fight the war on terror. The 430-foot-long vessel is one of the 10 ships in Combined Task Force-150, the maritime adjunct to Operation Enduring Freedom, launched by the United States after 9/11.

The German sailors represent one of 10 countries whose fleets patrol international waters worldwide under the banner of fighting terrorism -- a rarely seen and rarely mentioned part of the war.

On a map, the sea lanes linking Africa, the Middle East and Europe snake between three of the world economy's main choke points: the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el Mandeb, where the southwest tip of the Arabian Peninsula stretches to nearly touch the Horn of Africa. More than half of the world's crude oil and 95 percent of the cargo trade between Asia and Europe pass through these narrow gaps in the continents, making them tempting hunting grounds for maritime predators. Since 2002, the waters under CTF-150'S watch have seen 126 actual or attempted attacks against ships.

Is this attempt No. 127? With no warning, two speedboats have appeared off the starboard side.

In less than a minute, about a dozen sailors wearing bulletproof vests race to positions on the upper deck and man 50-caliber machine guns. The Bremen picks up speed, hoping to disrupt the smaller boats' pursuit with its massive wake.

Chief Petty Officer Beatrice Dongas, the ship's 35-year-old chief gunnery officer, peers down the barrel of the gun at the tiny ships as they run alongside the Bremen. Each speedboat carries about 10 men, all in black wet suits and carrying automatic weapons.

"The moment they turn in from a parallel course, we fire a warning shot," says Lt. Cmdr. Christian Scherrer, the Bremen's operations officer and third in command, as he stands amidships, watching the speedboats.

But on this day in early March, no warning shots are fired because the "pirates" are actually French Special Forces on a training mission testing the Germans' reactions. The commanders knew about the drill, but few of the crew had any idea what was unfolding.

The speed boats never get closer than a couple of hundred yards. Scherrer is quick to explain "if they get come within 150, 200 (yards), we take them out."

Deep inside the Bremen, in the long, central corridor the sailors call "Broadway" -- a narrow, gray stretch of steel adorned with valves, poster boards and pipes -- two small snapshots appear on a bulletin board.

They show a ship, much like the Bremen, with a 35- by 36-foot hole blasted in it at the waterline, its edges black and folded inward from the force of a powerful explosion.

It's the USS Cole, which was attacked in 2000 by al Qaeda suicide bombers while it was on a routine fueling stop in the port of Aden in Yemen. Seventeen sailors died and 39 were wounded. The photos are a constant reminder of the dangers in this corner of the world.

"We put that up to keep the guys focused," says Scherrer, pointing to the photographs. "So they know what can happen."

## AMONG THE DHOWS

The task force is responsible for a 2.4 million-square-mile patch of ocean that covers the Arabian Sea, the northern Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Gulf of Aden. Put another way, the ships must cover an area about the size of the continental United States.

There are 14 nations around the 7,480-mile-long area of operations, but it is Somalia -- lacking a central government for most of the past 15 years -- that offers the best haven for pirates and smugglers.

On their patrols, ships like the Bremen must share the waters with thousands of small, rickety fishing and cargo boats. These vessels, called dhows, transit the waters every week, crewed mostly by 15 to 20 Pakistani fishermen who spend up to 30 days at sea.

The Task Force's work tends to be tedious, and the Germans have yet to find anything alarming when boarding a ship. Their batting average should not suggest things are always quiet in the region.

On Feb. 25, the MV Rosen, a World Food Program ship, was hijacked by pirates northeast of Somalia. The Rosen is now being held inside Somalia's territorial waters near the village of Dhigdhiley, a WFP spokeswoman said.

Because the captured ship is so close to shore, the pirates are off limits to the task force, says Lt. Commander Brian "Grassy" Meadows of the Royal Navy, spokesman for the Task Force.

Meadows could not provide statistics on the number of boardings, seizures or confiscations the task force has carried out, saying that information was classified.

But more than drugs or weapons, the movement and trafficking of "people of particular interest" in the region are what most concerns terrorist-hunters.

Which is why in January, Ethiopian troops -- with American support -- invaded Somalia and routed the Union of Islamic Courts, which the United States considers an al Qaeda affiliate. CTF-150 commanders moved the USS Ramage, a guided-missile destroyer, and the USS Bunker Hill, a cruiser, to the waters off Somalia to halt any fleeing Islamists.

At the time, the task force's commander, Commodore Bruce Williams of the Royal Navy, said, "Coalition forces will continue routine operations in this unstable area as long as the need exists for our presence."

## SHOOTING DOWNWARD

The Bremen constantly must adapt to new enemies.

Where it originally was designed to battle the submarines of the Soviet navy, it today must be prepared for a swarm of explosive-laden speedboats the jihadis favor.

Already, the German frigate has added its own speedboat, to board suspect ships; two helicopters, for air operations; and a number of 50-caliber machine guns located on the upper decks that can reduce a small vessel to driftwood in seconds.

And unlike the heavy weapons it also sports -- such as a 76mm cannon on the front deck and Sea Sparrow and Harpoon surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles -- these low-tech machine guns can be angled downward to target vessels that once could get beneath the big guns' angles of fire.

That's important in a place like the Suez Canal, the narrow confines of which make for a perfect ambush opportunity, Scherrer says.

"Anyone passing on a camel with a SAM-7 missile could take a shot," he says, referring to the nearly ubiquitous, Soviet-era shoulder-mounted missile launcher. "In Suez, you're a sitting duck."

Such concerns raise the more delicate question of whether this is a war the Germans and others want to

be fighting.

Germany and France loudly opposed the American invasion of Iraq, yet both take part in the CTF-150, which is under command of the United States' 5th Fleet -- currently supporting that war from the Arabian Gulf.

So how do the Germans feel about taking part in an open-ended operation so far from their traditional North Atlantic?

"We don't do America's work," says Chief Petty Officer Rebecca Steinhardt, 23, the ship's weapons controller. "Since the 11th of September, there were terrorists found in Germany, so it's everyone's war."

For Scherrer, the struggle is about patriotism. "We do not expect to find Osama bin Laden on every dhow," he says.

Germany's economy depends on global trade, particularly shipping from Asia -- most of it passing through the CTF-150's area, Scherrer says. So in his eyes, the Bremen is defending Germany and the sea lanes it relies on.

At the end of the day, however, the sailors in the task force are trying to secure the lines of trade that connect the world's developed economies -- 80 percent of world trade is shipped -- against an enemy that would like nothing more than to break those links.

Disruption to the trade in this part of the ocean would devastate the world's economy, making the conflict here a highly strategic -- if largely unheralded -- battle.

"The kind of war that is happening here," Jedlicka says, "is a silent war."

Christopher Allbritton is a freelance journalist who spent two days aboard the FGS Bremen earlier this month. He may be reached at [callbritton@mac.com](mailto:callbritton@mac.com).

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