



Space Invaders

■■■■ **THERE HAVE BEEN A RASH** of home invasion-style crimes in St. Maarten recently where thieves sneaked aboard yachts under cover of darkness, going inside the vessel to steal while crew were presumed to be asleep.

In mid-January 2011, *Dockwalk* received an account from a captain whose vessel was burglarized while docked in St. Maarten. The account and accompanying video surveillance footage of the intruder were posted on *Dockwalk.com* and subsequent replies led to the realization that at least a dozen similar incidents had occurred in the same area. The captain, who wished to remain anonymous, wrote, "Our yacht was in a marina near Isle de Sol. The crew were asleep in the aft of the boat where a man boarded the vessel [via] the swim platform at approximately three a.m. ... The chef was forward in the boat and heard [the burglar] enter, but was too frightened to investigate. [She] locked herself in a bathroom."

The thief went straight to the galley and stole a number of laptops and cell phones before leaving. The captain says that the thief was able to gain access by using a key hidden in an external locker and suspected that the burglar had been watching the boat, as only the crew knew the key's location. Another crewmember was awakened by the intruder and when he went to find marina security, no one was around.

"I reviewed the tape several times as well as the posted comments of the captain," says Chris Simovich of security and protection service Global Strategies Inc. "Our company deals mainly with counter-piracy in some of the hot spots in the world. However, we also provide services to [those] who share the same concerns and threats in private yachting."

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Simovich offers some pragmatic advice. "It's always better to thwart a boarding than have to deal with pirates [or intruders] once they have breached the decks of your vessel – alertness, attentiveness and an effective watch schedule are better than the most sophisticated seaborne security systems. In the sample given, the captain assumes, almost certainly correctly, that the vessel has been surveilled because the location of a hidden key was known to the intruder.

"Surveillance, specifically on a yacht or vessel in harbor, is difficult to detect. At sea, it's not so tough. However, in both cases, pirates/thieves are looking for one thing: weakness. Weakness in crew procedures, security, lighting, location and anything that will give them an advantage. That said, the weakest vessel loses. Pirates want a soft target with the highest chance of success. Part of the captain's job is to appear as invulnerable as possible so that pirates/thieves will pass them over for another vessel with more vulnerabilities."

Simovich next turns his attention to factors on shore. "The vulnerabilities in port go far beyond the anchorage [or dock]," he says. "The crew, owners and guests all share a mandate regarding their collective security. What is done, said and transpires while on land can come back to the water to haunt you. Everyone must be attentive to what they say while in port to vendors, locals, tourists and other travelers. Often, the majority of 'surveillance' is offered up by the very inhabitants of the targeted yacht."

Applauding the chef's improvisation of what he calls a "Citadel Approach," Simovich says, "Large vessels have begun using a strategy in counter-piracy which involves the crew abandoning stations to a safe room with communications and provisions. In the case that was given, the chef identified a possible threat and locked herself safely away. Damn right! She is most likely neither trained nor paid to deal with an armed attacker or multiple assailants. However, a shipboard system that allows all of the crew and guests to communicate possible threats ship-wide is a very desirable addition to any vessel security [protocol]."

"Remember, it's only stuff. iPods, cameras, iPads and even computers are all replaceable: People are not. Many robberies have escalated into murder through confrontation by untrained personnel. Consider the consequences. Even Dirty Harry understood that, 'a man has got to know his limitations.' Don't assume that they are only after the stuff. There is no way to know what is in the mind of someone who has the audacity to board a vessel. You cannot know if their intent is a simple robbery, a kidnap for ransom or a random act of violence."

The need for constant, careful reevaluation of vessel security is an important take-away lesson. "There is, of course, a ton of different scenarios, policies, procedures and gadgets that can be brought to light," Simovich says. "However, most events can be quelled with common-sense policy and procedure. This captain also should be commended for sharing this event as a learning tool for others."

As a final thought, Simovich suggests, "If the vessel security were nowhere to be found during an event like that described, you need to look for new security. At port is when security personnel make their bones, not on the open water. Whether a vessel is considered to be in a secure port or not, it's always more vulnerable than when it's underway." **DW**

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