

Pirates, ports & defense

Terrorist attacks on bridges, ports or other maritime assets — there's not been a fear of sea attack like this since the pirate days of lore. These are not the pirates of eye-patches, cutlasses and galleons. They're modern-day pirates, armed with Uzis and commando Zodiac rafts.

"Any kind of attack would be just like a pirate attack," says Steven Bronson, a maritime terrorist expert based in Virginia Beach.

Indeed, in any maritime attack, terrorists would use the same type of tactics and strategies as pirates. And the worst place for such attacks on this side of the globe is Brazil.

Down deep in South America's biggest country, the top port cop in Brazil's largest port rid the docks of the worst pirates in the region.

How he did it may hold lessons for U.S. shore patrols.

Story and photos by Michael Fabey

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IN THE WINTER FOG blanketing the Brazilian South Atlantic, merchant mariners can hear the portside city of Santos before they see it.

Kids' shouts. Samba beats. The muffled din of more than a million people.

The first sight of Santos from the sea is the white fortress of buildings lining the city's beachfront. The green hills of the Sierra do Mar rise up behind, pock-marked by uneven rows of shanties, or *favelas*.

Down by the port, the favelas are called *palo fitas*, and they are the launching point for most pirate attacks along that part of the coast.

The maritime marauders usually strike at night. Silent as panthers, they dress in black or camouflage. They usually approach in sleek, fast commando boats, boarding ships and climbing docks with grappling hooks.

Once aboard, they point their Uzis or submachine guns and demand money and cargo.

By 1996, Santos had become infamous as the most pirate-plagued port in the most pirate-plagued country in the hemisphere. In any given year, there would be almost a dozen attacks, half of which would occur in Santos, according to figures supplied by the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Maritime Security Council and other agencies.

European and U.S. officials issued alerts and demanded action. By 1998, international shipping executives were giving notice.

Clean up, Brazil, or say goodbye to international shipping. "We're telling our ship owners to stay away from Brazil," Ove Tvedt, an officer with the Baltic & International Maritime Council, a trade group, said in 1997.

And it fell upon Percival de Araujo Costa, the Santos port captain, to stop the Santos pirate plague. The Brazilian Navy won't do the job, and the country has no



coast guard, as measured by U.S. standards.

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Araujo needed more officers, more guns and a more

efficient way to get intelligence about his foe.

Getting the first two would mean little if he failed to learn how to pin down the pirates. And that would prove to be the most difficult job of all.

Pirates, after all, had been patrolling Brazilian shores since the Europeans first started bringing gold out of the New World in the 1500s. One of the first reported pirate attacks was by merchant explorer Sebastian Cabot in 1525.

Modern-day pirates started hitting ships and ports in earnest in the early and mid-1990s. That's when Brazil started opening up the country more to international imports like washing machines, computers and sportswear.

It's dangerous business. In the years between 1986 and 1996, nearly 70 people lost their lives worldwide because of ship attacks, seizures, hijackings and related gun battles, according to a study released by the U.S. Maritime Security Council.

The pirates stole money to buy guns and high-speed boats — or they stole these tools of the trade, too — to attack ships for more money and expensive cargo. Sometimes, they'd steal the whole ship.

Pirate attacks are more of a threat in Indonesian waters. But shipping executives have become more worried about attacks during the past decade or so — especially in Brazil.

In 1995, pirates showed their mettle by planning a military commando-style raid on a dock in Rio de Janeiro — attacking portside and at sea at the same time.

But it was Santos that raised the fear and ire of shipping companies.

The port was the first major shipping gateway for the country and one of the first for the Americas. It is located a few hours from Sao Paulo,

one of the biggest cities and manufacturing zones in the world. The region has a potential consumer base larger than New York and nearly as big as Mexico City.

But separating the port from the rest of Brazil is the Serra do Mar, the sea hills, fill of the favelas and home of the pirates.

The thieves use the rain forest-covered hills as observation points. They do recon on the ports to find out



Above: The Brazilian federal police started a special task force to hunt down pirate and stop attacks in the port and along the coast.



Left: From the bridge of a cargo ship, the first view of Santos, Brazil, is a white wall of buildings fronting the city's beachfront.



Pirates launch their attacks from slums in the hills and along the waterfront bordering the port of Santos.

what ships and what trucks carry what cargo. Then they use mobile phones and hand-held radios to notify other operatives which ships and cargo containers to hit.

Sometimes, it's easy for pirates to get an operative a job at the port to scope out the docks. It's easy enough, too, to buy shipping manifests, which show what cargo is on what ships.

"I see my manifests in the hands of pirates," said Celina B.T. Carpi, a Brazilian shipping executive. "What can I do?"

The pirates hide their stolen treasures in the back streets, dirty alleys and criminal networks of the favelas. It would be easier to root a jungle full of weeds than track down the pirates and their booty in these hillside shantytowns.

And port cops like Araujo have no jurisdiction in the favelas.

"That is for the local police," he explained. "I am responsible for the ports. I cannot go into the favelas, the *palo fitas*."

So he set out to get his intelligence in other ways. And he worked on getting the extra officers and equipment, too, through some unorthodox channels.

For example, Araujo and his team needed a fast boat to chase after

pirates. So the port police commandeered one — confiscating one of pirate's own sports boats captured during an attack attempt.

"To catch these thieves, we need the right tools," Araujo said during an interview in 1999.

He's a soft-spoken man, whose voice matches his large grandfatherly face. He looks more like a man who'd be bouncing a grandchild on his knee than bouncing a pirate off a port pier.

And the port captain has done that more than once. He's fought pirates in hand-to-hand combat, pistol duels and other battles.

He's trained for such work. He's the product, he says, of his country's jungle warfare college as well as other training in tactics at the U.S. Marine base at Quantico and at Camp Lejeune.

And as Santos became a pirate war zone in the mid- to late 1990s, Araujo hunkered down for a battle.

"I met with some of the Europeans about this," he said. "We wanted to do something about all of this as much as they did."

Foreign ships were not the only victims. The pirates attacked a local ferry carrying an armored car.

The police began recruiting opera-

tives on the docks. They would use foreign sailors coming through the port to get intelligence — or to plant false information. Pirates and other thieves often get information from sailors in nearby bars and brothels.

It all paid off in January 1998, when a team of pirates attacked the Shell International Trading oil tanker M.T. Isomeria, which lay anchored in the still night at a terminal on what sailors called "Mosquito Island."

The ship was discharging butane and propane as a small craft approached, according to police reports and interviews. The little boat eluded a night patrol by hiding in a dark pocket by a bridge column in the bay between the *palo fita* and the port piers.

Armed with Uzis, the pirates easily took control of the ship. They put a pistol to the head of Second Officer Deborah Harrison, threatening to kill her. Then they directed her to take them to the cabin of Capt. John Peace. The captain's cabin, the shipping community knows, is where the ship's cash is kept.

The ship's third mate managed to escape, dodging a stream of bullets. The pirates locked up two male ship officers and took Harrison hostage.

The terminal night watchman called in the shots. Araujo and his team had been on alert — they had heard through their network that an attack was coming soon.

Araujo arrived with one team at the terminal by land. Other squad members motored up in the patrol boat.

The pirates grabbed another hostage, a young cadet on the ship. They shoved Harrison and the cadet down the gangway, planning to use them as human shields.

Araujo and his squad had different ideas.

Thus began the firefight — four heavily armed pirates against pistol-packing police. The battle had just begun when one port cop at the end of the pier ran out of ammo. Another officer braved the bullets to race up the pier and toss his partner more rounds.

When the shooting was done, one pirate was dead and two shipboard sailors were injured.

The other casualty — pirate attacks in Santos.

No one, not even the black marketers — who relied on the pirates' contraband for new stock — wanted to talk about the seaside thieves.

As the 1990s came to an end, so did pirate attacks in Santos — at least for a while — after the Isomeria incident.

Araujo attributed the end of pirate incidents as much to more efficient port operations as to his own team's successes. New port operators moved cargo more quickly than ever through the port, meaning ships spent less time there.

"The port is faster and better," Araujo said in 1999.

To curb pirate attacks at other ports, the Brazilian federal government started a special task force. But that group started in Rio, not Santos.

Araujo said he wasn't concerned that it was Rio that got the new task force — and the resources that went with it.

But the lack of concern for Santos, he said at the time, could create worse problems there.

"I am not getting what I need to fight this problem," he said again in late 1999.

He retired shortly afterward.

The attacks started again in Santos within months of his departure.

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