PIRATE ALLEY

Commanding Task Force 151 off Somalia

RADM TERRY McKNIGHT, USN (RET.), AND MICHAEL HIRSH

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For my wife, Lisa
and for our two wonderful children
T and Tyler

Also, for all the dedicated men and women who have served our nation

especially those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of freedom.

Never give up laughing and loving

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FOREWORD

> Good morning. We're coming to you live from the deck of the U.S. warship *Vella Gulf* in the heart of Pirate Alley.
>
> —*NBC News, 10 February 2009*

By early 2009 piracy off the Horn of Africa had exploded. Pirates in small skiffs and armed only with AK-47s were brazenly hijacking huge merchant ships, seizing cargo and crews, demanding millions of dollars in ransom. Remarkably, these small bands of pirates operated with such impunity that those crowded shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden became known as Pirate Alley.

The story was a reporter's dream. Never in my wildest imagination as the Pentagon correspondent for NBC News did I see myself caught up in a high-seas hunt for pirates. Yet there we were that February, broadcasting live from the Gulf of Aden, using the latest in twenty-first-century portable satellite technology to report on a pirate threat as ancient as seafaring itself.

From the bridge of the guided-missile cruiser *Vella Gulf*, Rear Adm. Terry McKnight had a front-row seat. He had just taken command of the newly formed Combined Task Force 151, an international alliance of naval forces whose sole mission was counterpiracy. In this book McKnight pulls no punches. It's a straightforward, honest account of the daunting challenges, bureaucratic hang-ups, and tough choices facing the international community in combating piracy.

The largely lawless coastal region of Somalia at the very tip of the Horn of Africa remains a perfect breeding ground and safe haven for pirates. And as ransom demands have soared to $8 million, investors have poured huge sums of money into pirate operations in exchange for a 60 percent share of the take.

For the pirates themselves, the reward/risk ratio is through the roof. Their cut of the ransom in a single hijacking can set them up

for life. Even if captured, they know there's little chance they'll end up in jail. Most pirates are simply disarmed and set free in what military officials derisively call "catch and release." Few countries are willing or able to jail pirates, and in many cases criminal prosecutions and convictions can be difficult.

But the tide is gradually turning. While pirate attacks have dramatically risen over the past several years, successful hijackings are down. Aggressive counterpiracy operations by a multinational mix of naval forces have pirates on the run. And the shipping industry itself has finally stepped up to confront the threat.

The simplest defensive measures—steering an evasive course, posting watch, or stringing razor wire along deck railings—have thwarted countless pirate boardings. But the most effective deterrent is also the most controversial.

Armed security forces are now deployed on board many merchant vessels. Out on the open seas it may be impossible to ever know how many pirates have been killed by these private security contractors. In March 2010 a gunfight broke out between security forces and pirates attempting to board the cargo ship *Almezaan*. One pirate was killed; six were captured. The International Maritime Bureau immediately warned that such action may only increase pirate violence. McKnight himself is torn. He writes that he prefers merchant ships not be armed but then concludes, "No civilian ship with an armed security team on board has ever been successfully boarded."

On our embark aboard the *Vella Gulf* we discovered that hunting pirates can be much like fishing: "You should have been here yesterday." We didn't encounter a single pirate. But we did witness what could only be described as a fresh take on "gunboat diplomacy."

All eyes were on a Russian destroyer, *Admiral Vinogradov*, escorting a convoy of merchant ships through Pirate Alley when the radios on the *Vella Gulf* crackled to life. It was a distress call from a cargo ship about to be attacked by pirates. But the cruiser's SH-60 Seahawk helicopter was already on patrol and could not respond in time. Without hesitation, the skipper, Capt. Mark Genung, barked, "We've got to talk to the Russians." Admiral McKnight was on the radio in an instant. In no time, in a very heavy Russian accent, the commander of the *Vinogradov* responded: "American warship, we will launch our helicopter in ten minutes."

In the end it was a false alarm, but the irony and significance of what had just happened was lost on no one. These former Cold War enemies had cooperated in a joint military operation at sea. Any past rivalries were pushed aside as the Russian Helix helicopter circled the *Vella Gulf*, so close you could see the smiles on the faces of the Russian crew. A grateful Terry McKnight invited the Russian skipper to lunch the following day.

Washington, however, was not nearly as excited as everyone aboard the *Vella Gulf*. The lunch date with the Russians was approved, but orders came down through the chain of command that "Miklaszewski and his cameraman" had to be off the ship before the Russians arrived. Seems that news video of American and Russian commanders embracing at sea might fight the hard-line positions the two sides had taken on such issues as missile defense in Europe, Iran's nuclear program, and human rights in Russia.

Nevertheless, this counterpiracy mission may offer some unintended opportunities in military-to-military relations. In its latest report on the emerging military threat from China, even the Pentagon acknowledges that the Chinese navy's participation in counterpiracy operations is a positive step forward.

Despite progress on several fronts, there's no illusion that piracy will ever be eliminated or even reduced to the point where once again the potential threat can be ignored. The ultimate solution to the explosion of piracy off the Horn of Africa would be the elimination of those safe havens in Somalia. But in a country that's struggling to end more than twenty-five years of civil war and that faces a growing threat from al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, pirates are well down on the list. Until then, vigilance remains the watchword.

—Jim Miklaszewski

CHAPTER 2

Finally, Terry Meets the Pirates

Things were tighter when my staff and I moved to USS *Vella Gulf* (CG-72), making her the second of four flagships during my command of CTF 151. When you see the numbers, it's easy to understand what I mean. *San Antonio* was built to carry a compliment of 669 sailors and Marines, including 66 officers. *Vella Gulf*, commissioned in 1993, was a much older ship, a *Ticonderoga*-class Aegis guided-missile cruiser designed for a crew of 360 with accommodations for only 33 officers. Even with my staff trimmed way down for sea duty, we were going to displace a lot of folks, and while we all knew that the mission comes first, it was still on my mind when we made the transfer.

The skipper of *Vella Gulf*, Capt. Mark D. Genung, was seeing the flip side of that equation. He knew we were coming off *San Antonio*, a relatively spacious, almost-new ship that not only had accommodations for a flag staff but had lots of room in which planning and ops staff could work, and it was going to be a tight squeeze to make things function smoothly on his much smaller cruiser.

Even so, there was a tangible change in mood when we got to the *Vella Gulf*. Unlike *San Antonio*, this ship had been fighting pirates for a while. So their heads were in the game from day one. The commanding officer (CO) said to me, "Okay, this is how we've trained; this is how we do it." He was essentially in Condition 3 counterpiracy operations. A quick explanation: Condition 1 is general quarters—you're under attack, you're taking shots. Condition 2 is a modified state; you're in a stressful situation, you may even be under attack, but you can't have the whole crew constantly in a high state of readiness, so you're kind of 50/50. Condition 3 is what you'd call wartime steaming—when you're in an environment going after somebody. This is your mission and

this is what you can do. Condition 4 is steaming from Norfolk to Fort Lauderdale—no stress, maybe doing some training. *Vella Gulf* was in Condition 3, fully engaged, weapons systems manned, and helicopters flying almost every day. It was a true Condition 3 counterpiracy operation, and I loved it.

It's worth taking the time to tell the story of how the *Vella Gulf* prepared for the antipiracy mission because it's a great example of how a superb commander anticipates things to come. On the ship's previous deployment to the eastern Pacific, Genung was satisfied with the work his crew had done capturing drug smugglers. He had a great air detachment from the "Proud Warriors" of HSL-42 under the direction of its officer in charge (OIC), Lt. Cdr. Matt Bradshaw, as well as a very strong visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) team, but he was concerned that their skills would atrophy between the time they left the United States and began patrolling Pirate Alley several months later.

Since there were limited formal instructions for capturing pirates and embarking them on the ship, Genung's crew began coming up with its own techniques and procedures. Genung described the problem this way. "How do I capture a bunch of pissed off, probably narced-up, and probably heavily armed suspected pirates and get them off by small boat where you can't segregate them from each other, and then bring them back to the ship, all the while not getting any of my sailors hurt?"

It's well known that the pirates are young, often stoned on khat—a narcotic leaf they chew to get high and ward off seasickness—and armed with automatic weapons. Not a great combination. So Genung's plan involved not only the logistics of capturing the pirates and getting them onto his ship but also figuring out what happens if there's a firefight. Who does triage? Where? Just getting the wounded aboard from a small boat presents a challenge. If the pirates (or crew, for that matter) were injured and unable to climb a ladder, they would have to be put in one of the ship's rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIB) and brought up in the RHIB using davits. That can be challenging enough; doing it while the injured person is screaming in pain, bleeding, or going into shock adds another element of stress. To prepare for the eventuality of a firefight, Genung said, "We ran this as an exercise on ourselves, where I had sailors who volunteered to be pirates, and used all the techniques [necessary] to capture these pirates and bring them aboard."

You may be wondering why every Navy ship out there doesn't have personnel trained to handle hostile situations. It comes back to a policy decision that has been debated for years. Nearly every ship has what is called a Level II boarding team. This is the standard team that does routine, compliant boardings, where the master agrees, "Okay, you can come inspect my ship." The issue has been whether all ships should have what are called Level III boarding teams, that is, teams that can do noncompliant boardings. They can go in and put guns to foreheads if that's what is required. The Navy made a conscious decision not to train and fund ships to have the capability for a Level III boarding team, which has now become a problem for the antipiracy mission. When you're going after pirates, if it's an aggressive situation and you don't have a Level III team that's trained to take these guys under fire, you have to back off. Level IV teams, by the way, are special operation forces; in my opinion, there are not enough of those out there either. The only time CTF-151 has a Level III capability is when there is an amphibious ship with embarked Marines assigned to the task force. The Marines made the decision to have a trained Level III boarding team as part of their deployable forces. This has proved to be beneficial on several occasions, including the rescue of the crew members of MV *Magellan Star* in September 2010.

Although there is an antiterrorism element to fighting piracy, it plays out primarily on land. At sea, CTF 151 is engaged in a law enforcement activity, and suddenly *Vella Gulf*'s sailors were going to be cops and jailers, certainly missions for which most of them had not been trained. Genung's good luck was having a couple of crew members aboard who had been stationed at Guantánamo, and they were able to take the lead in offering suggestions on handling prisoners in a manner that kept everyone—good guys and bad guys—safe.

As I've mentioned, *Vella Gulf* had been deployed on anti-drug-running missions in the eastern Pacific, so there was some experience in law enforcement but with Coast Guard law enforcement detachment (LEDET) teams taking the lead. Drug runners are much less inclined to use their weapons than are young Somali pirates who've been taught that firing an AK-47 and rocket-propelled grenades at big ships is a way to scare them into submission. Genung was also conscious of the potential dark side of turning volunteer sailors into prison guards. There would be no Abu Ghraib incidents under his command.

Long before I came aboard and *Vella Gulf* became flagship for CTF 151, Genung had worked with Vice Admiral Gortney at Fifth Fleet to come up with an acceptable way to confine pirate suspects. His initial assignment had been to provide safe accommodations for as many as fifty prisoners, but that proved to be unrealistic for many reasons. Gortney finally settled on a plan for embarking twelve suspects inside the skin of the ship. It involved "pirate proofing" (think "baby proofing," but for people who hate you) a passageway in the area where sailors returning from a chemical-biological-nuclear warfare environment outside the ship are decontaminated. The area is immediately aft of sick bay, which made it ideal for getting the pirates processed through a medical evaluation, getting them cleaned up and showered, and clothing them in disposable coveralls—the so-called poopie suits that sailors wear to protect their uniforms when they're emptying sewage tanks. The combination of constant training coupled with preparation of physical facilities, all supervised by a skipper who had totally bought into the antipiracy mission, made *Vella Gulf* ready long before I came aboard.

But there's another chapter in the story of *Vella Gulf* that needs to be told before I get on with my CTF 151 pirate-catching saga, and that's the amazing job Captain Genung and his crew did with the hijacked Ukrainian-operated RO/RO (roll-on/roll-off) MV *Faina* just prior to the cruiser being assigned as my flagship. On 25 September 2008 (my birthday), the 500-foot, 13,870-ton Belize-flagged ship and her crew of twenty-one were hijacked by as many as fifty Somali pirates who identified themselves as the Central Regional Coast Guard. The vessel was heading to Mombasa, Kenya, with thirty-three Soviet-made T-72 tanks, antiaircraft guns mounted on four-wheel carriages, heavy trucks mounted with a multiple-launch rocket system, rocket-propelled grenades, and 812 tons of ammunition. The pirates claimed that documents found on board indicated that the cargo was destined for Juba, Southern Sudan, rather than for the Kenyan military, and there were press reports saying that the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), as well as other intelligence groups, had confirmed that claim, even though the Kenyan military denied it and said the arms were to be deployed only within Kenya.

The pirates initially set the ship on a course toward their stronghold near the city of Eyl in the northern Puntland region of Somalia but changed direction slightly when USS *Howard* caught up with them.

The orders to the Americans were clear: under no circumstances does *Faina*'s cargo reach land. The ship ended up anchored in more than forty fathoms of water about eight miles off the village of Hinbarwaqo, between the pirate-friendly ports of Harardhere and Hobyo, and there it stayed under pirate control for 133 days, blockaded by warships from the United States the entire time, and occasionally by at least one Russian ship, the missile frigate *Neustrashimy*, while negotiations took place over a ransom demand that began at $35 million and eventually declined to the $3.2 million that was reportedly paid by the ship's owners. Additionally, NAVCENT stationed the fleet tug USNS *Catawba* (T-ATF-168) to provide logistical support to *Faina*.

Puntland's minister of fisheries, Ahmed Said Aw-nur, was quoted by multiple news outlets, including the *New York Times*, urging a commando military operation, presumably by U.S. forces, to regain control of the ship. "If the Islamists get the arms, they will cause problems for all of Somalia." U.S. intelligence agencies apparently had drawn similar conclusions, but storming the ship had been ruled out. I'm guessing that there was real concern that the pirates would carry through on their threat to blow up the ship and the hostages—and everyone knew they had the wherewithal to do it.

So it became a waiting game, and the mission of playing man-to-man defense—making certain that nothing on board *Faina* made it to shore—fell to *Vella Gulf* for more than one hundred of those days. Nothing I've experienced or read during my time fighting and later studying piracy comes close to explaining the human agony caused by these pirates as does the experience that Captain Genung had during that assignment. For a couple of reasons, I've asked him to tell me precisely and completely how it played out for himself and for the hostages: first, because the question of whether fighting piracy is a valid mission for our Navy keeps popping up, and second, because many dozen merchant and fishing ships and crews have been held for ransom off the Somali coast—some for more than a year. Only in the case of *Faina* do we have an almost day-by-day account of the hell that those ill-fated hostages have been put through.

It began on 29 September, when, as captain of *Vella Gulf*, Mark Genung assumed duties as the on-scene commander from the departing USS *Howard*. The deal *Howard*'s skipper had made through his Somali interpreter was that the Americans would permit the pirates to

resupply themselves aboard *Faina* in exchange for the right to speak with the master on a daily basis or as often as desired. Genung believes the pirates saw the agreement as positive because it allowed them to be confident that some level of negotiations would continue for the release of the ship. *Faina* was also the only hijacked ship anchored off the coast of Somalia that had a warship nearby, causing him to also believe that in the Somalis' minds, if they made that concession, the Americans would be unlikely to undertake a more kinetic response.

By the time *Vella Gulf* arrived, the Russian master of *Faina*, Vladimir Kolobkov, had died, probably from heat stress or a heart attack, and the only other Russian aboard (most of the crew was Ukrainian), first mate or chief officer Viktor Nikolsky, had assumed command. He, along with another officer, manned the bridge 24/7 at the direction of the pirates. Initially, Genung and Nikolsky spoke via bridge-to-bridge radio three times a day, but eventually they settled into a twice-a-day routine, typically at one in the afternoon and then again in the evening, and they did it every day that *Vella Gulf* was on station.

"My assignment was multiple," Captain Genung recalled in a lengthy conversation. "It was to ensure that none of the munitions on that ship left; to ensure that *Faina* did not get under way; to enable the safe release of the hostages; and finally—and I'm sure the admiral will probably laugh at this—to ensure it didn't get any worse."

Genung was right. I did laugh. Our Navy often gives its skippers missions where they're required to be successful, but higher command knows there's no way in hell that success is solely in the hands of that captain. You'll read about a few more missions like this in later chapters. Our intel on the *Faina* had been pretty good. Although ONI was certain that the vessel had not been targeted because the pirates knew what it was carrying, now that the bad guys had a chance to read the manifest and examine the cargo, they knew what they had stumbled upon. Somali experts interviewed for this book tended to downplay the importance of the capture of *Faina* because, they said, it's a RO/RO ship, and there's no Somali port at which those Russian tanks could be driven off, adding that even if the ship were run aground near the beach, unless they cut a massive hole in the side of the ship the tanks wouldn't make it to shore. But that doesn't mean that the pirates might not try to get some of the volatile cargo ashore. Genung explained it in detail:

> I don't know how familiar you are with Soviet armor, especially the older armor. They're relatively thin skinned, so one way to defeat an antitank round the Soviets developed was something called reactive armor. And the way it works on the outside of the tank, when a round hits it, this reactive armor actually explodes. It dissipates the force of the round, making it less likely that it'll actually penetrate the thin armor of the tank and take it out of commission. Well, think of what we've been dealing with for years and years in Iraq and Afghanistan and potentially in other places around the world with IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. Reactive armor—I suspect, I'm no expert—would probably be some of the finest IED-making material in the world.

So while it was true that there was no way those tanks were going to be driven off *Faina*, there was a possibility that the explosive armor, the small arms, and tons of ammunition could be offloaded into small boats and ferried ashore. That could not be allowed to happen.

Included in *Vella Gulf*'s mission of not letting things get any worse was the concern that terrorists would try to either capture or damage the cargo on *Faina*. "Think about what's going on in Somalia at the time," Genung said to me.

> You've got this low-grade civil war ongoing; you got al-Shabaab now getting involved in this civil war, and arguably, they were not necessarily in favor of piracy. But the pirates had reported that the manifest showed that these weapons were going to the government of South Sudan—it said "GOSS." There were significant signs that al-Shabaab would either (a) want that cargo for themselves for the IED-making material that we described, or (b) would not want those munitions to go to the government of South Sudan because that's a predominantly Christian group as opposed to the Muslim north. So there's a bunch of reasons why al-Shabaab would not want that ship to be able to either send the cargo forward or even to leave Somali waters.

> So, again, I had multiple responsibilities. I had to be able to defend the ship against an external attack. I had to ensure none of the cargo left. I was there to ensure the negotiations would culminate in the safe release of hostages, and then, whatever the heck else, don't let the situation get any worse than it already is.

In addition to Genung's regular crew, he had a five-man sniper detachment of Marines off the amphibious assault ship USS *Iwo Jima* that would man stations in case a firefight erupted.

> We periodically did health and comfort imagery, where we would work with the pirates and ask for all the hostages to be put on the bridge. The more we did this, in my opinion it became more and more likely that one of the hostages who clearly were psychologically [troubled]—it was a very tough situation for them—[would do something]. I became aware that we could have a Berlin Wall situation where one or more of the hostages could attempt to jump in the water and try to get rescued, and I might find myself in a firefight. The Marines were part of our ability to be able to respond to that.

Captain Genung's assignment to guard *Faina* and, in essence, give hope to her imprisoned crew was personally transformative in ways that military assignments rarely are. I asked him how having those twice-a-day conversations with Nikolsky affected him.

> As time went on, I found myself being a mentor to him. When I'm talking to Viktor and saying, "Viktor, how're you doing?" He says, "I'm not sure we're gonna get outta here. I don't think we're gonna get out of this alive." And so, I'm finding myself on a bridge-to-bridge radio mentoring somebody who was not the captain when this whole thing started, who is now the acting master, and as a commanding officer of a navy warship, talking to another commanding officer of his ship, saying, "Captain, you have to be strong for your crew because they are looking to you for strength. I assure you that you will be home with your son again. I, or another United States ship, will always

be here until you're released by the pirates. This will end, and you will come home." But keep in mind, it was a very, very tough situation. The pirates had taken most of their clothes, a lot of their personal effects. They're only eating one meal a day. The crew, compared to the master and the first mate who was up on the bridge with him, had it far worse because they were in a relatively small space about twenty-three hours out of the day. I had negotiated with the pirates to at least give the crew an opportunity to get out and get some fresh air about an hour a day, and we would routinely watch that happen, and I would note it when it didn't happen. And I would remind Viktor. And also keep in mind that relative to earlier in the process, the ship ran out of fuel for operating their main electric plant, which meant that about twelve hours of the day they had no lights, no ventilation, no pumps that provided water. We were very near the Equator and, although it was September through January, when the sun shines on a steel ship that's a dark blue with a white superstructure, it's gonna get warm inside, especially with twenty people inside a small space. So it was hell on earth.

On a personal level, Viktor would share with us the telephone number of his son, and we would call and talk to his son and let him know that he was alive. When we took those pictures, they were very important to me for a number of reasons. They allowed us to understand the health of the hostages. It was a means for me, as a naval officer, to ensure that their families knew that their sons were okay, because one of my best means of intelligence was Google alerts. We could see what would pop up regarding *Faina*. And oftentimes, within a day or so of the pictures that we would generate and they would get released by Fifth Fleet, they'd be reproduced in the Ukrainian and Russian newspapers, so we could have a great deal of confidence that their families could see them. So [it affected me] on a lot of levels, as a human being, as a naval officer, as a commanding officer of my ship, as a brother captain. A lot of levels.

I asked Genung if he had been provided assistance from any psychologists who might suggest ways to sustain Nikolsky and his crew. "No, this was based on almost thirty years of [on-the-job training], it was based on experience. I guess the sea story—it takes sixteen or seventeen years to grow to be a commander of a ship. I took command of *Vella Gulf* around the twenty-two-year point of my naval service. But nothing in my training had ever prepared me for this. Just the medical assistance team and discussing things with my senior leadership, my XO, and other folks as we talked through the situation."

Only twice during *Vella Gulf*'s more than three months of guard duty did she go off station. The first occurred when a petty officer was diagnosed with acute appendicitis. Genung left a command element and all his Marines aboard the fleet tug *Catawba* and raced south at maximum speed. Then he put the sailor and a corpsman on a helicopter at maximum range and launched the helo to another Navy ship that was farther south. That ship raced south and at its maximum range launched the helo and brought the sailor to Mombasa, Kenya, where he was transferred to a fixed-wing aircraft and flown to Nairobi, where he was successfully operated on. That took *Vella Gulf* off station for about a day. Then, in December 2009, after some seventy days keeping watch over the hijacked ship, *Vella Gulf* was relieved by USS *Mason* in order to do a four-day port visit to the Seychelles, which Genung describes as "one of the nicest liberty ports in that neck of the woods."

The logistical support this particular group of Somali pirates had was extensive. Genung said that every day, or at least two out of every three days, a skiff would make the eight-mile trip from the pirate village with provisions. If it brought meat, it would take the form of a couple of live goats that would be slaughtered on board as needed. About every five days the pirates guarding the hostages would be brought a supply of khat. And periodically the guards would be changed, with the pirate commanders rotating every two or three weeks. Genung was able to keep track of those changes because he'd realized that the voice he was hearing on the radio had changed. "They would say something to the effect, 'He wasn't feeling well because he's got malaria, so he's at the hospital.' But my sense probably was that he was home for a conjugal visit and after his two weeks off, he was gonna come back and relieve the other guy again. And they would just trade off, back and forth."

I was curious about his negotiations with the pirates to allow the hostages time each day on an open deck. I asked what he had to offer to get that concession. "Keep in mind," he told me,

> it's bad for business for the hostages to get hurt or die, because then from [the pirates'] perspective, governments would consider potentially more extraordinary measures to get those hostages back, versus paying a ransom. The pirates were very reluctant to even admit the death of the master. We only figured it out because there was some confusion on the issue once I got a whole copy of the manifest from the shipping company and compared it to the name of the guy I was talking to—hey, that's not Vladimir, that's Viktor. And then they finally admitted it.
>
> So my sense was that we appealed to the pirates' desire that the hostages remain in good health and that we are assured of that. Then it was more likely that everybody would negotiate in good faith. Keep in mind as this was going down, this was about the same time that the Russians deployed some ships down into the Gulf of Oman, and there was a lot of thought on our part whether or not the Russians were actually going to turn south and come down to my neck of the woods, which would've made things interesting. The Russians had indicated that they were pretty unhappy about this; it was a Russian master who had died, a Russian acting master, a Ukrainian ship, so they have some relationships with the Ukrainian government. So I could see the pirates potentially [making a deal with us] for a bunch of reasons, and maybe most of all, because it's good business.

There actually were other tactics we had tried in the past to gain an advantage over the pirates when we found ourselves in a situation like the one *Vella Gulf* was in. This goes back to my first trip to NAVCENT in Bahrain, when we were experimenting with tactics. One of the simplest things we could do was keep the pirates from communicating with their bosses on shore by interfering with their comms, whether they

were using bridge-to-bridge radio or satellite phones. We could actually cut them off.

We also tried placing a destroyer out there near the pirate camps along the Somali coastline, and they would radiate active sonar into the near-shore shallow water, and all anyone could hear was a "BBBAAAAAAAARRRRRR" sound in the water that was just sound vibration. What we found out, however, was that it was more annoying to the hostage crews aboard their ships than it was to the pirates on the ship.

And then there was the BMT. The Barry Manilow treatment. In the middle of the night we'd turn on the loudspeakers playing Manilow's music, just to try and keep the pirates from getting any sleep. Okay, maybe it wasn't always Manilow, but it didn't matter because it didn't really work. We found that the only thing that really scared the pirates was when we would fire illumination shells at night. Because then they thought we were coming after them. I'm going to guess that none of the other stuff bothered them that much because they were all drugged up on khat.

After nearly four months alongside *Faina*, *Vella Gulf* was given her next assignment, which was to move north to the Gulf of Oman and embark me and my staff, becoming flagship for CTF 151 on 4 February 2009. Coincidentally, that same day a ransom of $3.2 million was paid for the release of *Faina* and her crew. Early the next day the pirates left the ship, and *Faina* arrived at the Port of Mombasa on 12 February, where the cargo was unloaded and turned over to the Kenyan military.

Now it was my turn to get directly into the pirate-catching business. Early one afternoon a week after my team and I embarked on *Vella Gulf*, we got a distress call from MV *Polaris* in the Gulf of Oman saying it was under attack. This was a 420-foot Greek-owned chemical and product tanker registered in the Marshall Islands with eighteen crew members aboard. *Vella Gulf*'s response was balls to the wall. I had drilled it into the commanders of coalition ships that the first thirty minutes of an attack are critical in terms of response. The attack was happening about thirty miles away, and it was clearly going to be a race to get there, first with a helo and then with our ship and *Mahan* (with ScanEagle), which was also in the area. We knew that the pirates weren't attacking ships within sight of warships for the same reason that nobody robs a bank with a squad car parked in front of it.

Mark Genung has great recall on what happened.