

## CHAPTER FIVE

# TERROR AT SEA

“If the terrorists are not able to attack targets on land, because we have hardened these, or in the air, because we now have air marshals and our airlines are taking precautions, the next alternative is to attack by sea.”

—TONY TAN, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER OF SINGAPORE AND  
COORDINATING MINISTER FOR SECURITY AND DEFENSE<sup>1</sup>

“If a boat that didn’t cost \$1,000 managed to devastate an oil tanker of that magnitude, imagine the extent of the danger that threatens the West’s commercial lifeline, which is petroleum.”

—A COMMUNIQUÉ ISSUED BY AL QAEDA’S POLITICAL BUREAU  
ON OCTOBER 13, 2003

**GIOIA TAURO, ITALY**—On October 18, 2001, port inspectors in this small southern Italian seaside town were making a routine inspection of a cargo ship. They were looking for illegal migrants, as people-smuggling is common on that coast. But they had never seen anything like this.

Inside a shipping container, they found an Egyptian man with a virtual hotel room—including a bed, toilet, heater, and fresh water. They also found two laptops, a cell phone, a satellite phone, and airport security passes for Kennedy International Airport in New York, Newark International Airport in New Jersey, Los Angeles International Airport, and Chicago O’Hare Airport.<sup>2</sup> Also found were papers identifying the man as an airplane mechanic.<sup>3</sup>

Italian intelligence officials declined to provide me with any information on the case except to say that the suspected al Qaeda terrorist was in the custody of a “non-European country.”<sup>4</sup>

American military and intelligence officials were about to learn that fewer than four months after the September 11 attacks, al Qaeda was opening a new front in the War on Terror: the sea lanes.

This is the story of that war, one that America and its allies have unequivocally won so far. It is the largely untold tale of ingenious terrorist plots, modern-day pirates, an attack on a French-flagged oil tanker, the high-speed pursuit of bin Laden’s fifteen-ship fleet, the capture of the “al Qaeda admiral,” the killings of two key al Qaeda operatives, and the ominous designs of deep-sea terrorists who wanted to learn how to dive but not to resurface.

**CAMP DELTA, CUBA**—In December 2001, in an American detention center on the western tip of Cuba, the U.S. got its first big break about an impending al Qaeda seaborne attack.

Three Moroccan prisoners captured in Afghanistan told interrogators about an al Qaeda cell forming in Morocco.

In time, American intelligence would learn that the Morocco cell was targeting American and British warships moving through the Straits of Gibraltar, a channel that narrows to barely fifteen miles wide between Spain and Morocco.

Bin Laden could hardly have chosen a more strategic spot. Hotly contested in both world wars, Gibraltar is the only outlet of the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. Much of Europe’s food, oil, and trade moves through this vital channel. A strike in the straits, which the Arabs know as Bab al Zakak, could kill hundreds and choke Europe’s economy—the world’s second largest.

Months of interrogation had provided some clues of an attack.

But vital pieces of the puzzle were missing. When would they attack? How? Planes, boats, submersible bombs? Where was the cell? Who controlled it?

The interrogations were hobbled by the crawling pace of translations and by the fact that one of the best interrogators was a woman, which irritated the Arab men held in camps in Guantanamo Bay. She would turn their vexation to her advantage and skillfully gather many of the important early clues.

Slowly, a picture came into focus. In seemingly stray comments gathered from repeated interviews, detainees described the cell leader—a mysterious Saudi man that they knew only as “Zuher.”

Was it a real name? Al Qaeda operatives are known to use aliases even inside their own training camps. Even if it was a real name, it was only part of one.

The intelligence gaps were agonizing and the Guantanamo Bay interrogators did not know how much time they had before Zuher’s cell attacked.

**RABAT, MOROCCO**—In hopes of a breakthrough, CIA Director George Tenet flew to Rabat. Morocco’s busy capital city is a metropolis of whitewashed buildings, broad boulevards, palm trees, and aging Art Deco hotels near the Atlantic Ocean. In February 2002, Tenet was there to meet Morocco’s king, Mohammed VI, and his portly intelligence chief, General Hamidou Laanigri.

Tenet was received in the grand style preferred by the Moroccans. He got down to business. The CIA director told the king and the spy chief that Moroccan prisoners in America’s Cuban holding pen were talking about a mysterious al Qaeda cell leader who might be hiding in their country and plotting to attack ships in the Straits of Gibraltar. King Mohammed agreed to help Tenet find the terrorist leader.

**CAMP DELTA, CUBA**—Two Moroccan intelligence agents were sent to America’s Cuban base and went right to work sizing up the Moroccan prisoners.

The agents had considerable advantages over their American counterparts. In addition to Arabic, they were familiar with Moroccan idioms and regional accents. They knew the family history of the kingdom's radical Islamist leaders, who are far fewer in number than in neighboring Algeria. That knowledge allowed them to make connections that Americans might miss. Most important, they accidentally created a climate of panic and fear without ever issuing a single harsh word. The prisoners knew the Moroccan intelligence service could take them home; they feared that their countrymen could use *other* methods of persuasion once they were far from the reach of American law.

Though they didn't need interpreters, it was still slow going. The Moroccans patiently gathered clues. "Zuher" appeared to be a real name. They did not know, however, if he was Moroccan, Saudi, or some other Arab nationality, or how long he might remain in Morocco. But, they learned, he was married to a Moroccan woman, and, with any luck, Zuher or his wife would show up in Moroccan government records.

Then they hit pay dirt. One prisoner remembered the name of a relative of Zuher's wife who lived in Casablanca. At last, a solid lead.

**CASABLANCA, MOROCCO**—Moroccan police tracked down Zuher's in-laws in Casablanca, a sprawling, charmless industrial city on the Atlantic coast.<sup>5</sup> Where was Zuher? The in-laws insisted they did not know.

In the course of the interview, a police sketch artist was brought in. As police questioned the family about Zuher's appearance, the artist used a charcoal pencil to scratch out an image of the mysterious mastermind's face. He showed the family members the likeness. They agreed that it was Zuher. In the drawing, Zuher had a broad face, a thick beard, and deep-set dark eyes.

Meanwhile, intelligence officials searched government records, looking for any sign of "Zuher." They looked at national identity

cards and hotel records as well as customs and immigration documents. It wasn't easy. Few of these records were computerized. Card files had to be searched by hand and there were millions of pages to sort through. Nothing substantial turned up, except the identity card of Zuher's wife. Now they had a home address.

By mid-March 2002, surveillance teams had staked out Zuher's home, and shadowed him on the few occasions that he ventured outside.

They noticed a pattern of secretive behavior. He had never applied for a Moroccan identity card or registered with the police, both of which are required by law in Morocco. He stayed indoors for long periods of time—which is unusual in a hot climate, especially in an apartment that lacked even a single air conditioner. (Many similarly situated Moroccans prefer to sit outside in the cool night air.) He didn't rent an apartment in his own name, but insisted that he and his young Moroccan wife live with her relatives. He paid cash for every purchase and never opened a bank account in his own name. He seemed incredibly disciplined, as if trained by an intelligence service.

As it turned out, he made one crucial mistake: He relied on funds wired from Pakistan to the bank accounts of his wife's relatives. This suggested to Moroccan intelligence that they were watching either the right man or someone they should be watching anyway.

Then Zuher's travels suddenly increased. An informant spotted him at the border post of Melilla, a Spanish territory inside northern Morocco. He was seen again entering Ceuta, a Spanish enclave directly across the water from Gibraltar. He was also observed negotiating in maritime shops, trying to buy several Zodiac speedboats.

The Moroccan intelligence service read his e-mails, listened in on his phone calls, and watched him around the clock. While Morocco is an emerging democratic society, roving wiretaps are far easier to get in the kingdom than in the United States, even

under the Patriot Act. As Moroccan intelligence officials gathered information, they quickly concluded that Zuher was a major al Qaeda figure.

From his e-mails and other communications, they knew that he had survived the U.S. bombing of the Tora Bora region, one of bin Laden's Afghanistan strongholds, in November 2001. And he was clearly following orders from an al Qaeda commander, who seemed to be holed up somewhere near the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. That commander, known from his e-mails to Zuher, called himself simply “Abu Bilal.”

Bilal is believed to be the *nom de guerre* of Abdul Rahim al-Nashiri, one of the senior planners of the attack on the USS *Cole*.<sup>6</sup> Later, Arab intelligence officers would jokingly call al-Nashiri the “al Qaeda admiral,” as he was directing bin Laden's attacks at sea.

In April 2002, Zuher's e-mails revealed that al-Nashiri wanted him and an associate to fly to Saudi Arabia for further instructions. It is a well-established protocol within the bin Laden network, as outlined in the writings of Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's number two man, to conduct all operational conversations in person. Something big was in the works.

The Casablanca airport is a dingy temple to 1960s modernism. Zuher and another Saudi man, Hilal Jaber al-Assiri, and their two Moroccan wives were discovered in the passenger lounge. The police closed in.

Once in custody, their discipline broke. They gave investigators the name and whereabouts of a third cell member, who was soon arrested. They admitted to training in bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan. One said he had dined with bin Laden “many times” and that he last saw bin Laden alive near the town of Gardez, Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

Their plot may have been only weeks away from completion. They were waiting for an al Qaeda logistics team to make and load the explosives. The plan was simple and lethal: Zodiac boats would

be packed with high explosives and rammed into the hulls of American and British warships. Clearly, al-Nashiri hoped to reenact his successful attack on the USS *Cole*.

Moroccan intelligence officials seemed impressed with their quarry. “They are not foot soldiers. They are educated, ideologically formed, and they are technically proficient.”<sup>8</sup>

It was a clear-cut victory. A major cell was smashed, vital intelligence collected, and potentially hundreds of lives saved. But it was only the beginning.

**RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA**—He was known sometimes as “the prince of the sea” or the “al Qaeda admiral.” His full legal name, intelligence officers would learn, was Abdul Rahim Mohammed Hussein Abda al-Nashiri.

Al-Nashiri was born in Mecca and, like bin Laden, he was a Saudi from Yemeni stock. He had trained and fought alongside bin Laden since the 1980s, and was involved in most of al Qaeda’s strikes against Americans. He arranged for the shipment of explosives for the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and telephoned the suicide bombers to approve the murderous attack on the USS *Cole* in October 2000.<sup>9</sup> With a \$25 million price on his head, al-Nashiri was listed in 2001 as “one of the most dangerous” of twenty top al Qaeda operatives still at large.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Nashiri had been steadily promoted inside al Qaeda. As top al Qaeda members were killed or captured—including military commander Mohammed Atef; September 11 operational planner Khalid Shaikh Mohammed; his replacement, Abu Zubaydah; September 11 manager Ramzi Binalshibh; and Southeast Asia commander Hambali, who masterminded the Bali bombing—bin Laden increasingly relied on al-Nashiri. He was one of the few experienced managers left and he was lethally efficient.

At the height of his powers, al-Nashiri commanded a fleet of some fifteen cargo ships, which he dispatched to smuggle terrorists,

tons of explosives, and cartons of cash or drugs. He even had the power to order the conversion of freighters into floating bombs.

The al Qaeda fleet is not a new development. Bin Laden has leased and owned cargo vessels since the early 1990s, using the vessels to transport sesame seeds as well as explosives. Sometimes the flotilla was used to smuggle terrorists into Europe or move drugs to Asia.<sup>11</sup>

The terror network had a history of maritime attacks. Bin Laden's crew tried to sink the USS *The Sullivans* in January 2000, but the heavy explosives sank the terrorists' dinghy. Later that year, off the coast of Aden, Yemen, a bomb-laden boat detonated beside the USS *Cole*, killing or wounding sixty-one sailors. For two days, naval commanders feared the *Cole* would sink; only the heroic efforts of the crew saved it.

What was new was al Qaeda's bold, strategic vision. The terror network relentlessly probed for weakness. Bin Laden had clearly found the soft spots in air travel. Even after September 11, al Qaeda continued to test airport security with Richard Reid, the so-called shoe bomber.<sup>12</sup>

Shipping is another big target. Eighty percent of the some six billion tons of goods sold each year is carried by ship.<sup>13</sup> It is impossible to track every cargo vessel; more than 46,000 ships ply their trade at the world's 2,800 ports.<sup>14</sup> Many are registered in shady Third World nations, which do not even try to police their carriers. Seventy-five percent of ocean-going trade moves through five chokepoints: the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Straits of Gibraltar, the Straits of Malacca, and the Straits of Hormuz—a fact that has not escaped the attention of terrorists.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most vulnerable is the Straits of Malacca, between Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula. It is the lifeline of Singapore, the world's busiest port. Half of all oil shipments thread through these straits, which shrink to less than two miles wide at their narrowest point. Sinking even a single ship in the straits would imme-



diately raise oil prices around the world and wreck the economies of the city-state of Singapore and its Southeast Asian neighbors. This is not just a threat to America's allies, but to America itself. The 1997 Asian financial crisis demonstrates how faraway events can rock Wall Street and erase investments in the 401(k)s of seventy million Americans.

The ultimate al Qaeda target is our economy, according to Admiral James M. Loy, deputy secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. "Our link to the global economy is by water—95 percent of what comes and goes to this country comes and goes by ships."<sup>16</sup>

After September 11, the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard realized that they could not risk being reactive, waiting for intelligence about looming terror attacks. So they adapted the classic Bush strategy of preemption. "If all you do is wait for ships to come to you, you're not doing your job," chief of U.S. Coast Guard intelligence Frances Fragos-Townsend said. "The idea is to push the borders out."<sup>17</sup>

Throughout 2002 and 2003, American and allied navies and intelligence services scrambled to track and seize terrorist ships in the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

In what was probably the largest joint naval operation since the end of World War II, America and its allies used every weapon in their arsenals: spy satellites, surveillance planes, naval patrols, even paid informants in remote ports.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. Navy and its allies in Europe and Asia tracked and boarded many vessels that military officials call "ships of concern" with evocative names like the *Baltic Sky* and the *Cristi*. Sometimes the al Qaeda ships would slip through the net and vanish to emerge renamed, repainted, and re-flagged. Then the hunt would begin again.

**TRIESTE, ITALY**—Italian police boarded the *Twillingler*, a cargo vessel docked in Trieste, on February 19, 2002.

Eight crewmen—all Pakistani nationals—were arrested on suspicion that they were linked to al Qaeda, which is believed to operate training camps in the semi-autonomous tribal lands in eastern Pakistan.

Investigators found false identity documents and “other material judged incompatible with their position as ordinary seamen” on their persons and in their sea lockers.<sup>19</sup> The crewmen were deported to Pakistan and are believed to have been questioned by Pakistani intelligence.

**SICILY, ITALY**—Italian anti-terror police again swung into action after the *Sara*, a cargo vessel, sent out a distress call on August 5, 2002. Italian and other intelligence services had been monitoring the ship for some time. It was towed into port and fifteen men aboard were arrested. In the crew’s possession, investigators found fake identity cards, \$30,000 in cash, and maps of several Italian cities and the Vatican. The fifteen arrested men were held for questioning at an Italian facility in Caltanissetta.

Naval intelligence had suspicions about the ship’s owners. The *Sara*, originally known as the *Ryno*, was owned by a Pakistani American, Rifat Muhammed, and Dimitris Kokkos, a Romanian who is wanted by the Greek government for smuggling and other activities. He was also part owner of the *Karine-A*, which the Israeli navy intercepted hauling short-range missiles bound for the Palestinian authority in the Gaza Strip.<sup>20</sup> He has since disappeared.

*Sara* captain Adrian Pop Sorian claimed he was boarded off the North African coast and made to transport the suspected terrorists. He said he issued the distress call when his Pakistani “passengers” threatened to kill his crew. Captain Sorian also said that he overheard one of the fifteen Pakistanis, suspected of being an al Qaeda operative, talking to radical Islamists in Afghanistan. He thought the man on the other end of the phone was “Taliban.”<sup>21</sup>

**EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**—The *Cristi* had disappeared. NATO intelligence believed that the 1,600-ton cargo vessel was ferrying wanted men linked to al Qaeda.

The *Cristi* was believed to be registered in Tonga, a Pacific island run by a corrupt monarchy that serves as a “flag of convenience” for shippers who don’t want to answer too many questions.

If the records are correct—and it later turned out that Tongan paperwork was incomplete—the *Cristi*, like the *Twillinger* and the *Sara*, was partly owned by Dimitris Kokkos.

The hunt was on. The U.S. Navy deployed ships and aircraft. The Greek and Israeli navies fanned across the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean seas.

**OFF THE COAST OF AL-MUKALLA, YEMEN**—A French-flagged oil tanker, the *Limburg*, was approaching Ash Shihri oil terminal on October 6, 2002. On board were three hundred thousand barrels of Iranian crude oil and nineteen crewmen.

Members of al Qaeda were waiting in a small, explosives-packed fishing boat that was hoping to spill not just oil, but blood. But the terrorists couldn’t find their primary target, a U.S. warship, so they steered for the *Limburg*. “We would have preferred to hit a U.S. frigate,” a terrorist from the Islamic Army of Aden said, “but no problem, because they are all infidels.”<sup>22</sup>

As the tanker was idling three miles off shore, a junior officer saw the fishing boat coming. There was nothing anyone could do. The approaching craft was too small and too fast, and oil tankers weighing hundreds of tons cannot be easily turned. They were helpless.

The blast ripped through the *Limburg*’s double-steel hull. The oil poured into the sea and caught fire, sending black smoke almost a mile into the sky. Ninety thousand barrels of oil poured into the waves, polluting forty-five miles of Yemen’s rocky coast.<sup>23</sup>

The crew jumped from the pitching deck of the burning *Limburg* into the wine-dark sea some two stories below. One crewman, a Bulgarian, drowned. His body washed up on shore several days later.<sup>24</sup> The other eighteen sailors and the skipper were soon pulled aboard boats manned by workers from an oil terminal operated by a Canadian firm, Nexen Inc. “We owe them our lives,” Captain Peter Raes said.

U.S. intelligence had e-mailed a warning days before to counter-terrorism agents worldwide detailing a possible attack on ships in the Persian Gulf or Yemen.<sup>25</sup> The report was maddeningly vague; the Americans knew an attack might be coming, but did not know enough to stop it.

The attack was astonishingly easy. Yemen has no coast guard, though the U.S. is now helping it launch one.<sup>26</sup> Tankers are defenseless.

Somehow, the wounded tanker stayed afloat. American, French, and Yemeni intelligence officials cautiously approached in small boats. They studied the massive hole in the tanker’s side. Forensic investigators found shards of a fiberglass boat and trace amounts of TNT. No human remains of the terrorists were found. In the aftermath of the USS *Cole* attack, experts had found human teeth embedded in the ship’s hull—a clue that helped intelligence learn the perpetrators’ identities. This time, the investigation would be harder.

Still, al Qaeda swiftly took credit. Al Qaeda’s political bureau issued a short communiqué on October 13, 2002: “If a boat that didn’t cost \$1,000 managed to devastate an oil tanker of that magnitude, imagine the extent of the danger that threatens the West’s commercial lifeline, which is petroleum.”

This was not an empty threat. According to American and Saudi sources, months before the *Limburg* attack, allied counter-terrorist operatives had thwarted a plot to blow up the Ras Tanura oil terminal, where some 6 percent of the world’s oil is processed each

day. Saudi police and intelligence officers arrested more than twenty people.<sup>27</sup>

Yemeni intelligence, with leads from the CIA and French intelligence, slowly began to unravel the *Limburg* plot. Over the next two months, some twenty suspects were rounded up. Two men confessed to loading the suicide boat with high explosives. Others revealed the identity of the operational commander, Abdul Hakim Bazib, who was linked to al Qaeda. The manhunt seemed about to end on December 19, 2002, when a group of terrorists was cornered in a three-story house in Hadramaut province, the land where bin Laden's father was born. Roadblocks were set up and police settled in for a long siege. It didn't last long. The terrorists opened fire with automatic weapons and lobbed grenades.<sup>28</sup>

The terrorists shot their way to freedom. Two policemen died and two others were wounded. Only two injured gunmen were captured. The rest disappeared into the night. Bazib is still at large, but the bulk of his cell is either dead or in custody. Mohsen al-Fadhli, one of the al Qaeda planners of the *Limburg* attack, was not one of the lucky ones. As he was planning an attack on an American housing complex in Yemen's capital, Yemeni intelligence nabbed him. The twenty-one-year-old Fadhli is a Kuwaiti citizen. One Kuwaiti government source described the arrest as "a significant blow to al Qaeda. This is one of their main organizers and fund-raisers."<sup>29</sup> Another victory against al Qaeda's war to bring terror to the seas.

As the crippled supertanker was towed to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates for repairs, Yemen was just beginning to calculate its economic losses. Shipping insurers immediately raised the "war risk surcharges" by \$150,000 for any ship bound for a Yemeni port—a 300 percent increase.<sup>30</sup> Business at Yemen's two main ports, Aden and Hodeidah, plunged by 50 percent. As oil tankers were rerouted to Djibouti and Oman, Yemen would lose some \$4 million per month in fees.

Still, Americans feel the price of al Qaeda's attempted seaborne terrorism at the pump. One of the reasons that gasoline prices have climbed so sharply since 2001 is the attack on the *Limburg* and the ever-present threat of attacks like it.

**OFF ANTALYA, TURKEY**—The USS *Monterey* found the *Cristi* at 4 a.m. on October 23, 2002, some seventy nautical miles south of Antalya, Turkey, in the eastern Mediterranean. As the U.S. Navy's board-and-search team approached, they noticed the cargo vessel had been crudely repainted and renamed the *Tara*.

After several hours' search, the Navy allowed the ship to continue. If there had been contraband on the ship, it had been offloaded sometime after the vessel disappeared.

But the pursuit and boarding of the *Cristi* was still a valuable exercise. "We believe that if a global terrorist network wants to move people or material, they will likely try to do that through shipping," said Commander Bob Ross, spokesman for the U.S. 6th Fleet in Gaeta, Italy. "The first objective is to protect shipping and the second is to disrupt, deter, or degrade potential terrorist activity."<sup>31</sup>

**UMM AL QAIWAN, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)**—Umm al Qaiwan is one of the poorest of the UAE's emirates and one of its least inhabited. It was a perfect hideout for one of the world's most wanted terrorists.

But it was more than a safe haven. From Umm al Qaiwan, al-Nashiri could watch the sea lanes of the Persian Gulf. Unknown to American and allied intelligence at the time, al-Nashiri was plotting to attack the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, based in nearby Bahrain.

An informant reported that al-Nashiri was taking flight lessons there. Why did the "prince of the sea" want to fly? Most likely, he wanted an international pilot's license because it would legally admit him to most of the world's major seaports. This bureaucratic

courtesy had its uses—al-Nashiri could legally wander into secure areas to do reconnaissance for future attacks on seaports.

It was his satellite phone that betrayed him. Like most phones, when it receives a call, it automatically broadcasts its location. Unfortunately for al-Nashiri, the National Security Agency's satellites were listening in. The CIA station chief in Abu Dhabi relayed the information to UAE intelligence.<sup>32</sup> Agents nabbed al-Nashiri within hours.

In his possession were two fake Saudi passports, a laptop, and a satellite phone—both of which were mined for clues.

Capturing al-Nashiri may prove to be the equivalent of shooting down Japanese admiral Yamato's plane during World War II—a turning point in the war at sea. Al-Nashiri's arrest was kept secret for several months in the hopes of rolling up other terrorists in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. One Bush administration official said: "This is definitely a big fish."<sup>33</sup>

Al-Nashiri was turned over to the CIA, the state-run Emirates News Agency reported, "as part of the ongoing cooperation between the two sides in the fight against international terrorism." The UAE intelligence alliance with the U.S. is just one of many that the Bush administration has negotiated—and others are said to be just as productive. With its dizzying number of alliances, the Bush administration's War on Terror is anything but unilateral.

Al-Nashiri was reportedly shipped to a special interrogation center in Jordan.<sup>34</sup> This is an increasingly busy facility, according to an Arab intelligence source I interviewed in 2003, and it uses "methods denied to Americans."<sup>35</sup> He would not elaborate, but it seems safe to conclude that it is far tougher than Abu Ghraib. Whatever the reason, al-Nashiri is said to be "cooperating."<sup>36</sup> For bin Laden, this couldn't have been worse news.

**NORTHWEST YEMEN**—Qaed Salem Sinan al-Harethi<sup>37</sup> thought he was safe. The al Qaeda terrorist had evaded capture by Yemeni security

forces and was now deep into the lawless region of northern Yemen, a redoubt of Islamic radicals that the central government has not been able to subdue after years of civil war.

He was one of al-Nashiri's lieutenants and did not know his superior had been captured and compromised. On November 3, 2002, his ignorance would kill him.

Terrorism is often a trade of close calls. Al-Nashiri himself, while posing as the owner of the Yemen-based Al Mur Honey Company, had been arrested by Saudi Arabia in 1998 and released in 1999. "He was like a trout out of season," a UAE intelligence official jokingly told me.<sup>38</sup> (But in 2002, the CIA was not playing catch-and-release with terrorists.) Al-Harethi too had his scrapes with the law, but money, connections, and luck had always saved him. In December 2001, he had evaded Yemeni troops in the Marib province, an operation that cost eighteen Yemeni soldiers their lives. Now his luck was running out.

As al-Harethi and five other known terrorists barreled down a two-lane highway in the dry expanse of northern Yemen, a slow-moving bat-like plane found them. Its high-resolution black-and-white video images were beamed back to a control room in Djibouti, some 160 miles away. The CIA team there had no difficulty recognizing al-Harethi; they had been hunting him for months.

The Predator launched its sole Hellfire missile. Direct hit. Al-Harethi, his companions, and their vehicle disappeared in a ball of fire. In the charred chassis, Yemeni intelligence found weapons and explosives.

If al-Nashiri had given al-Harethi any final orders to attack U.S. ships, he did not live to carry them out.

**LONDON**—Barbar Ahmad is a thirty-year-old British subject who ran websites and other businesses that American and British investigators believe were used to fund and recruit for Taliban and Chechen



terrorists. On August 6, 2004, he appeared in a London court to hear charges read against him.<sup>39</sup> Of course, he denied them.

However, a look at his computer's hard drive told a different story. E-mail records revealed that he had received communications from a sailor aboard the USS *Benfold*, an American guided-missile destroyer. The writer said he was a "U.S. naval enlistee" who was "sympathetic to the jihad movement."<sup>40</sup> The sailor (who authorities do not want to name) praised the Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. This might not have been the sailor's first e-mail.

Ahmad's computer revealed that he had received sensitive U.S. naval documents on April 29, 2001, showing the precise *future* movements of the Constellation battle group—of which the *Benfold* was a member. The mysterious e-mailer noted: "They have nothing to stop a small craft with rocket-propelled grenades etc., except their Seal's Stinger missiles."<sup>41</sup> U.S. Navy SEAL teams, usually composed of four men, operate in small boats near naval vessels and are equipped with shoulder-launched Stinger missiles.

Documents found on Ahmad's computer detailed the specific assignment of each ship, the battle group's planned movements, and a drawing of the battle group's formation.<sup>42</sup>

Investigators won't say if Ahmad passed these documents to the Taliban or al Qaeda. If he is extradited to the United States, Ahmad faces a thirty-one-page indictment in a federal court in Connecticut. Only then will we know why the terrorists failed to strike and who the traitorous mole aboard the USS *Benfold* was.

**OFF SABAH, THE STRAITS OF MALACCA**—It was 3 a.m. on a Wednesday in one of the busiest waterways in the world. From the deck of the chemical tanker *Dewi Madrim* on March 26, 2003, one could see the lights of oil tankers bound for Korea and Japan and U.S. military vessels hauling food and ammunition to Iraq. In the humid

haze above the darkened coastline of the island of Sumatra, no one saw the speedboat.

It was alongside the lumbering tanker before anyone could sound the alarm. Ten armed men climbed aboard. The modern-day pirates seized control of the ship while most of the crew was still asleep. While piracy is an all-too-common occurrence in these seas, it is what happened next that got the attention of intelligence officials around the world.

The men, carrying assault rifles, did not attempt to offload the cargo or the crew, who could be held for ransom. (Chinese and Malaysian ship owners, among others, have been known to pay as much as \$1 million to free a captive crewman).

Instead, these “pirates” expertly disabled the ship-to-shore radio and switched on their own portable VHF communication system. Once they had control of the bridge, they reduced the tanker’s speed and practiced steering the vessel.

By 4:05 a.m., they were gone. They took a few valuables from the crew and two of the ship’s senior officers. No request for ransom was ever made and, more than a year after their disappearance, the officers are feared dead.

Noel Choong, who runs the International Maritime Bureau’s Piracy Reporting Center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was concerned about “three things—the automatic weapons, the fact that chemical tankers were targeted, and finally, the fact that they know how to operate the tankers. . . . They are obviously very well organized.”<sup>43</sup>

Pirates in the South Pacific rarely use automatic weapons. They usually target oil and diesel tankers—which have cargos that are easily sold in black markets—not chemical tankers. And, of course, pirates are primarily interested in money; the ones who took over the *Dewi Madrim* had only a passing interest in loot.

It looked like an al Qaeda training mission, according to Aegis, a London-based defense consulting outfit. The seizure of the *Dewi Madrim* was, in the words of *The Economist*, “the equivalent of al

Qaeda hijackers who perpetuated the September 11 attacks going to flight school in Florida.”

What could these pirates-cum-terrorists be training for? Choong offers a plausible nightmare scenario. “Our concern is that terrorist groups could use a chemical tanker as a weapon. Simply set the vessel on autopilot and aim it at another ship or a Singapore oil refinery and get off the ship” before it exploded.<sup>44</sup> It doesn’t have to be a suicide mission to be deadly and dramatic.

Singaporean officials were alarmed. “This may signal the start of serious preparations for a maritime terrorist attack as terrorists learn to navigate tankers to use them as floating bombs against other vessels, key installations, naval bases or port facilities,” said Singapore’s deputy prime minister, Tony Tan.<sup>45</sup>

Other developments also suggest that al Qaeda’s seaborne terrorism will continue. In 2000, an engineer who was fond of deep-sea diving was kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic terror group based in the Philippines that has long been linked to al Qaeda. Abu Sayyaf has terrorized Filipinos for years in the hopes of carving out an independent state for Muslims in the southern Philippines, but it has never made a waterborne attack. The engineer, when he was released in June 2003, was interviewed by Filipino intelligence officials. What he told them was disturbing: The terrorists wanted to be taught to dive—but not to resurface.<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, the owner of a diving school in Kuala Lumpur said a number of ethnic Malays had enrolled. “Strangely, they are seemingly uninterested in decompression techniques.”<sup>47</sup> Divers must decompress as they resurface or they may be fatally injured.

Three former students at the Safe Dive Club in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, were detained and questioned by Dutch police. One of the diving students questioned was linked to the Morocco cell that plotted to sink warships in the Straits of Gibraltar. Citing Dutch and American intelligence sources, the *Sunday Times* of London reported that “the al Qaeda marines may be deployed as

squads of divers to attach mines to hulls, bridge supports, dams, or oil rigs.”<sup>48</sup>

The paper also noted that the CIA captured “a small non-pressurized submarine from an al Qaeda cell in Southeast Asia” in 2002. The sub can carry up to six scuba divers and descend to 130 feet. Omar al-Faruq, an al Qaeda terrorist captured in 2002, told the CIA that he “planned scuba attacks on U.S. warships in Indonesia.”<sup>49</sup> Why would anyone want to learn to be a one-way diver? Intelligence analyst Mansoor Ijaz told me that he thinks the most likely reason is to attack deep-sea oil pumps, which often lie more than five hundred feet below the surface.<sup>50</sup>

Destroying oil pumps and gas pipelines in the shoals of the Caribbean could pinch U.S. energy supplies and cause billions of dollars of environmental cleanup on the shores of Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. And those hundreds of miles of pipes, pumps, and equipment are impossible to guard.

**PLATIYALI, GREECE**—The *Baltic Sky*, a 1,242-ton cargo vessel, steamed out of the Tunisian port of Gabes on May 13, 2003—and promptly disappeared.

Staff at the NATO Intelligence Center, tipped off by an informant in a “southern Mediterranean country,” were immediately suspicious.<sup>51</sup> Records showed that the *Baltic Sky* was hauling some seven hundred tons of explosives and detonators. Greek Merchant Marine minister George Anomeritis later crystallized these concerns into a question: “We are investigating who is behind the designated recipient and even if it turns out to be an ordinary company, this is such a huge load, what would they do with it?”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, the ship was supposedly heading for Port Sudan, a Red Sea anchorage hundreds of miles from commercial mining operations that use such explosives. Most worrying, the ship was supposed to make port in Sudan by May 16—a three-day journey. It still had not arrived by June 1.

Instead, the *Baltic Sky* moved erratically across the eastern Mediterranean, through the Dardanelles, which separate Europe from Asia Minor, and into the Black Sea before retracing its course back into the Mediterranean. The ship seemed to be heading anywhere but its destination.

Meanwhile, intelligence discovered that the ship had been reflagged and renamed in the past year. And where was it registered? The Comoros Islands, a string of Muslim-majority isles off the eastern coast of Africa. These islands are notorious for practicing a severe form of Islam and for registering any ship for a fee.

As soon as the *Baltic Sky* sailed into Greek waters, the Greek navy swung into action. Frogmen and special forces approached the cargo ship in small boats as larger Greek warships watched from the horizon. The operation was over in minutes. The seven-man crew—five Ukrainians and two men from Azerbaijan—was arrested without resistance.

Once in custody, the captain, Anatoly Baltak, told an unbelievable tale. He said he only joined the *Baltic Sky* in Istanbul in early June (the previous captain had disappeared) and that he was told the cargo was to be discharged to another ship in the Ionian Sea, which lies between Greece and Turkey. Given the size and nature of the cargo, that seemed to be impossible.

Investigators were shocked by what they found in the cargo hold: Eight thousand detonators and 680 tons of ANFO, a commercially available explosive used in mining, stacked neatly in boxes. Anomeritis said the cargo's total explosive power was equal to "an atom bomb."

Fortunately, it was a bomb that would never explode.

**RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA**—Al-Nashiri's successor did not last long.

Khaled Ali bin Haj was a thirty-year-old Saudi citizen whose family traces its roots to neighboring Yemen. He had been Osama bin Laden's chief bodyguard in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and had

been linked to bombings in Riyadh in May and November 2003, which killed fifty-two Saudis and others. He was designated the regional head of al Qaeda for the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia.

Then, at a security checkpoint in the Saudi capital on March 15, 2004, he decided to open fire. Police returned fire, riddling his jeep with bullets.

Haj was found dead inside, along with Ibrahim bin Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed al-Muzaini, another suspected terrorist. When police pulled the bodies out, they found two AK-47s, ten magazines of ammunition, six hand grenades, three revolvers, and Saudi currency equal to \$137,600.<sup>53</sup>

Al Qaeda threatened to avenge Haj's death. "The mujihideen will teach the enemies of Allah, the mercenaries of Saudi intelligence, a lesson they will never forget."<sup>54</sup> So far, the terror group has proved unable to carry out its threat: One more sign, perhaps, that the strength of al Qaeda is weakening.

Whatever the fate of al Qaeda, the man that the London-based Arabic language paper *Asharq al-Awsat* called "the real chief of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia" is dead.

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**—Secretary of the Navy Gordon England knows a lot about developing new weapons systems. He spent more than a decade in the private sector managing the development of products for the Pentagon's arsenal. When I buttonholed him at the National Press Club, he talked briefly about a new craft in development that may prove vital to defeating the terrorists at sea.

Recognizing that the next al Qaeda strike could come from small bomb-packed boats, the Bush administration is rapidly developing a new weapon—the Littoral Combat Ship.

Known as the LCS in military speak, the new craft will move quickly and quietly in shallow waters. Unlike destroyers, frigates, and other large naval vessels, it will be able to engage small craft and cruise very close to the coastline. Its onboard computers will be networked to share images and information with other ships, air-

craft, submarines, and even unmanned vehicles, possibly including the Predator and the Global Hawk. Its mission, according to the Pentagon, will be “special operations support, high-speed transit, maritime interdiction operations, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and anti-terrorism/force protection.”<sup>55</sup>

With LCSs, another attack like the one on the USS *Cole* and those attempted since 2000 may prove impossible. That is one reason that Admiral Vern Clark, chief of U.S. naval operations, said, “We need this ship today.”<sup>56</sup>

Senate Democrats have also played a key role in securing America from waterborne attacks. Senator Fritz Hollings, a Democrat from South Carolina, saw the danger of attack on the nation’s docks and waterways. The Senate adopted Hollings’s Port and Maritime Security Act on December 20, 2001. Among other things, the Act requires ships to “electronically transmit their cargo manifests to the port before gaining clearance to enter.”<sup>57</sup> The bill compelled ports to take many of the same security measures as airports. “But for some unfathomable reason, we don’t take these preventative steps at our seaports—where most of our cargo arrives and where we are most vulnerable,” Hollings said before passage of the bill.<sup>58</sup> Now we do.

Even after the Democrats lost control of the Senate, Hollings continued to press for stronger port security measures and propose important new legislation. He is retiring in 2004.

The secret war at sea continues to this day. So far, the tide clearly favors the allies. A major terror operation to sink American and British warships in the Straits of Gibraltar was thwarted. The “al Qaeda admiral” was captured and is revealing the identities of his spidery web of terrorists. Two other key operatives have been killed and others captured. An al Qaeda mole aboard the USS *Benfold* has been discovered. Much of the al Qaeda flotilla has been identified, stopped, and boarded. The threat from the sea remains, but the civilized world is inestimably safer as sailors, airmen, and Marines go about their clandestine, vital work.