

Episode 84: Robert was in a gunfight with pirates

Today's story takes place off the coast of Somalia, a country in Africa.

If you look at Africa on a map, you'll see Somalia on the east coast, right on the water of the Indian Ocean. In fact, of all the countries in Africa, Somalia is the one with the longest coastline. And for the Americans listening, to give you an idea of how big it is, Somalia is almost the same size as the US state of Texas.

But here's the thing about Somalia. It's considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world. I mean, here in Florida, we have homeless people. Some of you know, I work with a group here to help the homeless population get the things they need. But in Somalia, literally half of the people in that country don't have a home or any kind of permanent residence. This means there are millions of people who are desperate, and hungry, and they're vulnerable to abuse.

And just on the north side of Somalia is the Gulf of Aden. This is a very popular water route for large ships carrying lots of cargo, headed either to or from the Suez Canal. In fact, each year there are around 20,000 of these ships passing by. That's more than 50 ships every single day.

So there's a certain sector of the Somali population who sees all this valuable cargo going by each day, and they see an opportunity to make money. These are modern day pirates. They see many of these big ships as easy targets. I mean if there's a large cargo ship carrying manufactured goods, they just want to get from point A to point B. They typically aren't equipped to fight off or defend their ship from being hijacked and held for ransom.

But today we're going to hear a story from Robert. There was a time he was on one of those big ships, off the coast of Somalia. The pirates saw it as easy money. What they didn't see was that Robert's ship, the one being attacked, was a warship in the US Navy.

Scott

Before we get into the action part of the story, I want to set this up so people have a good picture of what's going on here. You were on a Navy ship called the USS Nicholas, and it's classified as a frigate.

Robert

Correct.

Scott

What does that mean? How big was it? What was this ship like?

Robert

The Oliver Hazard Perry class ships have all been decommissioned, but at that point in time, this ship was 553 feet long, 45-47 feet wide and it was the smallest warship that the Navy had. We were designed initially for anti-submarine warfare, which is trying to find submarines. That was specifically my job, I was a sonar technician. I hunted and tracked subs, classified subs and torpedoes, things of that sort. I was in charge of the torpedo tubes for a little while, that was kind of fun.

Scott

Obviously, even though it's a small ship in Navy standards, that's still a pretty big ship. How many people were on the boat?

Robert

When I first got there the initial crew was something like 220-230. By the time I left, my god, we desperately needed people. We were so undermanned that we were busting our asses every day and every night. The cool thing about being on a ship- I know it's like that for military and police and things of that sort -there's that brotherhood that they talk about. They usually stick fresh officers, like JO's, NSIN's, lieutenant JG's and lieutenants, on the frigates so they can learn their stuff and then start moving up to bigger ships if they're on their way to leading a vessel. Everyone was really cool with each other. The atmosphere was cool. Everyone was there to do their job and work and we'd hang out and that was pretty much it. Testosterone pumped usually about halfway through a deployment (laughter) but you know, we were all just eager to go home. That was about as far as that got.

Scott

Alright, so the ship was designed primarily for anti-submarine warfare, but during this time when this event happened, you were in the Indian Ocean?

Robert

Yes.

Scott

International waters just west of the Seychelles. For people not familiar, that's a group of over 100 islands and it's several hundred miles east and south of Somalia, which is a coastal country in Africa.

Robert

Which is very, very big on piracy action going on over there.

Scott

It seems like that's, whenever we hear 'pirates' or pirates being in the news, it's always Somalian pirates. I assume that's because the country is in disarray and overrun with poverty and it's just a way to make quick money.

Robert

It's to the point where people are being shanghaied into it. So you really don't have a choice sometimes.

Scott

That's one of the reasons that the USS Nicholas was in the area, you were running counter piracy operations.

Robert

Yes. That, and there was more to it. Due to the fact that Somalian piracy had gotten so bad that they were starting to board cruise liners and things of that sort. So we went over to the African Partnership Station and started to help train their military in counter piracy operations as well. The US and NATO were funding the majority of it. So not just counter piracy ops, but we were doing a lot of training too. We had whole groups on our ship that were sleeping in the same

berthings as us, eating with us, trying to learn and everything. They weren't usually around the ship, they were mainly speaking to the security groups and boarding teams.

Scott

I understand you guys had somebody watching all the time, around the clock, for any activity anywhere around the ship. How did you track that? What was the watch like?

Robert

We had our forward and aft lookouts. Those guys were out there with night vision goggles, binoculars and sound powered phones. Now would be a good time to explain sound powered phones. I have to equate it to using a can with a string. There's a little plate that sat on your chest, and it had a little thing that went around your neck. Connected to the plate was a set of headphones and there was a little arm with a hinge on it. At the end was a microphone with a button on top of it that swiveled as well. So you would push the button and your voice would be able to travel through the line and to whomever else it was dialed to and we could hear it like that. The good thing about it was it didn't require batteries or anything like that. You just plugged it into the ship, screwed it down in there and you were immediately able to do sound checks and talk to people.

So we had those guys out there. We also had our bridge crew and our gunner watches. We had a mounted .50 caliber in the front. Big beautiful automatic weapons. If you've ever seen Rambo with the gun connected to the truck on a swivel, no human should be fired on with that thing; it's massive. So we had two on the front on either side. We had two midship which was halfway through the ship where I was. Then we had a man in the back with a portable gun that fired the same caliber bullet as a .50 caliber.

Scott

Ok, and the back is called the flight deck?

Robert

Correct. He was on the flight deck.

Scott

So you were kind of in the middle of the ship?

Robert

Yes, I was up a story too. I was on the O2 level. During the day I stood under the mast, but the guns were directly next to the masts, so I was halfway up the ship, and one story up.

Scott

Ok. So this happened at nighttime just after midnight. How were you outfitted as far as what you were wearing at the time?

Robert

It was Africa. So we were in coveralls. We were usually in coveralls out to sea anyway, you know the super sweet janitor outfit? Big, poofy, one big zipper. It was great if you had to pee because there was a zipper from the bottom too. They're just baggy and blue and they're nice. So we had that, we had our flak jackets on, we had a helmet. We also had walkie talkies, and we were using up until the event where we needed to use our sound powered phones. We

checked out night vision goggles during the night. We never had them out during the day because those things are expensive as hell.

Scott

Well you wouldn't need them during the day right?

Robert

Naturally. I just figured somebody would hang them up, that's kind of something that would happen.

Scott

Is a flak jacket, how does it compare to something like a bulletproof vest? Or is it anything like that at all?

Robert

From what I understand- I actually can't honestly answer this for you -my flak jackets were just the flak jackets, we didn't even have the inserts. (laughs) It was just like a really heavy vest. I can tell you this though. The .50 cal's were plated, so on either side it swiveled in the middle, but it's set up on a stand. So it's set up on a tripod mounted to the deck and then there's 3 plates in front of the legs which roughly protect my legs to my waist; upper thigh to waist. I'm not very tall, these are not very big plates, but they're heavy as shit. Then you have 2 on either side of the barrel. So you could see the sights and then there's plates on either side and you have this section in between where you can look as you're swiveling around.

Scott

So if it's nighttime and the opposition sees fire coming from your spot, if they fire back at that, chances are they're going to hit metal, rather than hitting you.

Robert

Unless they get lucky or unless they're really proficient.

Scott

What we're going to talk about, like I said it was just after midnight and it was completely dark but there was a full moon-

Robert

Yes.

Scott

-Radar picked up activity.

Robert

I was on the midwatch, which starts at 10pm and ends at 2am. We usually relieve each other a half hour early or something like that, we did on my ship. So 9:30pm to 1:30am was really the watch. I was about to get off watch, since it was just after midnight. That day was April 1st, so there's that. I went around trying to tell this story and nobody believed me.

So just after midnight I'm about to get off watch and my ship was about to pull into the Seychelles. Then radar reports that something was coming toward us off the starboard bow; starboard being right, port being left. So something was coming off our starboard bow which

was mount 55 which is where I stood. I'm looking with the night vision goggles and I kind of see it coming in. They tell us to switch to sound powered phones. The issue with the sound powered phones is that they don't work with the helmet on, so I had to take my helmet off. Then I had these big ass headphones on and everyone was quiet on the line, I was just receiving information. That incoming target split in 2, one had gone forward one had gone aft, and they circled us. Well, I saw the one coming after us that went forward, so it turned in my direction. I unplugged my phones and I ran to the other side to mount 56, as I'm going to plug them in I see this skiff go around back towards port. I thought he went around front, turned around and went back around. I unplug my phones and plug them back in on the starboard side.

I see this object come around again and it sits by my flight deck, and it's sitting there. It's quiet, dead quiet, except for my headphones. I actually had my iPod in, at that point in time I didn't even think to rip my headphones out. So they were sitting there, for what was probably a couple minutes. It was really quiet. I'd say it was easily the longest couple of minutes I've ever had. I had taken my night vision goggles off in the event that I had to fire. I didn't want to blind myself and I've never shot with night vision goggles on.

It was pitch black, but the moon was out and full, but it was behind my ship. So these guys are sitting in the shadow of my ship. It's bright, if you've never seen the moon at sea, it's just beautiful, it's the most illuminating thing. But they were in my shadow and it's pitch black in that shadow. I was kind of squinting trying to see what's going on, hoping they're not doing anything crazy, and I see them spray the flight deck. I don't know why they sprayed the flight deck, I didn't know why at that time I should say. My buddy Schoonmaker was back there and he was the one who had the M240 with him.

Scott

When you say, "spray the flight deck" you're talking about firing a weapon at the flight deck?

Robert

Yeah. He just held and squeezed the trigger and sprayed from one side to the other. I didn't know what happened to Schoonmaker so I screamed over the sound powered phones. I called, "Schoon!" and he didn't answer. So I pulled the trigger and started shooting back. By the law I had the inherent right to self defense, defense of others, and defense of federal property and yada yada yada.

Scott

So you didn't have to contact a supervisor or something saying, "Hey is it ok to return fire?"

Robert

He was on the line with us, but when I did not hear him I actually had the right to go ahead and do what I did. I called for him and I shot. Whatever they were shooting at wasn't as important. My gun was huge and it's loud. So they started shooting back at me. That's what started this little volley between us. We are all trained to shoot the .50 cal in 3-5 round bursts. It seems vulgar, but for 3 rounds, it's "Die mother fucker" that's doo-doo-doo. Then "Die mother fucker die" is 5 rounds. That's how it shoots, "doo-doo-doo-doo-doo." That's how I was shooting, but the issue was because it was so dark, I had to wait until I was being shot at to even see where I was shooting. They were floating around here, there and everywhere, kind of bobbing. They were really low to the water.

So we were going back and forth. Now, Schoonmaker was fine, for anybody that might be worried. Schoonmaker was just fine. Apparently he had taken his sound powered phone off because the cord didn't reach the other side of the ship. I didn't know that, obviously. What's even funnier is that the reason they shot at the flight deck was because my buddy Lenny, he got up, walked across the flight deck, and was trying to get in the ship. Someone on the other side was holding it down because they thought that we had been boarded. On our 1MC the Captain got on. The 1MC is basically an intercom on the ship and you can direct where you want the sound to go. So he cut it from the outside, for him to project his voice saying, "Hey there's pirates." He didn't want us on the outside to know so he had it only on the inside. He made the announcement that pirates were there. My buddy got up because on their sound powered phones he heard, "Get your ass inside." He walked across the flight deck, tried to get in, couldn't, walked back across and I guess that's when they saw him and Schoonmaker because that's when they shot.

We were returning fire back and forth. We were doing 3-5 round bursts. I say that because I let off of the trigger at one point and I saw my plate to my left, the one that's mounted to the gun, flash. So these guys, with AK-47's you just hold the trigger down and bullets are going everywhere, so these guys were close.

Scott

Just to get a picture of the boat that they were in, I think you called it a skiff. This is a small boat right? Like maybe 20-3- feet, or was it even that big?

Robert

I don't remember the length of it honestly. It wasn't very big. Three people were on this skiff and they seemed like they had enough room, but I couldn't see it being extremely comfortable. They had 5 55 gallon drums of fuel in this thing. How we didn't hit them is a miracle, because honestly I don't know how I'd feel if I'd ignited a barrel and blown people up. Not to mention, they were close to us.

We were firing back and forth, I honestly don't know how long this firefight went between the two of us. I know Mark was fine. Eventually it got to the point where somebody kicked that engine and they took off. Well we hadn't really had a good solid plan for if pirates came and actually attacked us at that point in time, so we only had one engine online. They were way faster than us at that point in time. We took off after them. I kind of equate it to the Star Trek Enterprise. It was cool we were trying to speed up after them and then we hit warp drive as soon as our second engine came on and we just took off after these guys. We were following them on radar and they were walking away and opening up from us pretty well. We caught up to them.

We had to get permission, our CO had contacted whomever to say, "Hey look, we already got in a gunfight, things are started here." So we were waiting for permission to come back to be boarded, but we were in an area where our radio was so spotty. As we caught up to these guys, we saw one of them standing up and he's waving his hands. We had our spotlight on these guys and we had everything on them. One of them is waving his hands and the other two are using buckets to just ditch water. These guys were sinking and they were sinking fast.

Scott

So that's why you were able to catch up to them.

Robert

Essentially yes. We were catching them. So it took a little while before we were actually able to get the go ahead to board them.

Scott

How do you even do that? Do you send a small boat toward them?

Robert

Mmhmm.

Scott

Ok. So what's the process with that?

Robert

We have a team called VBSS, Visit Board Search and Seizure. They get on a RHIB, which stands for Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat. You know those action movies where they're in these inflatable looking things but it's hauling balls through water and it's just packed down full of dudes? That's exactly it. We got VBSS onto the RHIB and we kept the RHIB on the other side of them so that way they were able to be lowered down without any incidents. You know, maybe they were going to try to do something before VBSS got there, I don't know. All I know is that I manned my gun. I didn't move from my position after that.

So after we caught up, one was waving his hands, the other two were ditching water. As soon as we caught up to them one of them took a mini mag light, you know those big ass flashlights that cops have? He had a mini one. Those things are awesome by the way, awesome, I love those mag lights. Everyone had our night vision goggles on and we're just watching these guys but you couldn't see shit because of that mag light, the way he held it. You could see splashes on either side of the skiff. So they basically knew. "Thanks to the Geneva Convention, we're saved. So we're not gonna drown, but we got stuff on here that we need to get rid of." They're basically tossing weapons, they tossed everything they had off to the side. That included radio equipment. The time comes when VBSS comes around the corner, they pick these guys up, bring them back on board.

There was so much that happened after that. I was watching these guys. I had the captain come up and talk to me. They were "Atta boy'ing" me. I was getting slapped on the back. I didn't know what the hell to think of all this. My adrenaline was through the roof. Eventually I got relieved from my watch. I did see them get boarded, I did see them being detained, and I did see them coming back. After that, somebody came up and finally said. "Alright, go to bed." I said, "Roger that. I will." So I went to bed. I woke up around 7 in the morning. They told me to go ahead and just sleep. We were supposed to be pulling in at 8.

I woke up to the 1MC saying, "Hey, we just found their mother skiff and we're boarding them now." Those two were teams. I don't know how we got them, I was knocked out. We got them and that's all I know.

Scott

After you took these 3 initial attackers off the boat, I read that you sunk their ship or blew it up. What's the process on that?

Robert

So after we get them back on board, we're supposed to tow the boat at that point in time. We circled it a little bit and we got on what was called the 25 mike mike, a 25mm. We fired at the thing and it blew up and it was really cool. It was really really cool. This big ass fireball. Again, it's 2-3 o'clock in the morning. It was pitch black besides the moon, this skiff, and that fireball. It was badass. It didn't make a noise and we didn't film it. I guess we were far enough away from it, I don't remember a noise, but I felt the heat hit. I was blown away by that.

Scott

Did it blow up so spectacularly because of the tanks of fuel on them?

Robert

Yes. That's exactly where they were aiming, all the fuel. Then we were supposed to circle it until the fire went out. We ended up circling it for a couple hours. Once it died down a good amount that's when we were able to leave after the mother skiff. By that time they'd come on board. We had a translator on board, and they were interrogating these guys. They were telling us some crazy stuff. So here's one of the facts I found out about, they had an RPG with them. One of them had an RPG hoisted up on his shoulder. He was about to fire it but the person who had the AK-47 was the newest one on that skiff. So I guess he got nervous and started firing when he saw my two buddies on the flight deck. When I opened up, due to the fact that they didn't expect me or see me at all, when I opened up I scared the guy and he dropped the RPG in the water.

Scott

RPG is Rocket Propelled Grenade.

Robert

Correct. It is a ridiculously overpowered way to just blow things up. It's extremely destructive. If that had hit our ship, we would have been done. If it hit us anywhere. If they hit the flight deck, we had fuel tanks back there, the oil lab is back there where they maintain and monitor the oil in the engine, not to mention my equipment was back there and that stuff is flammable. If they hit us in the middle of the ship there's a tank there, not to mention that's where all our torpedoes were. If they hit us in the front that's where our HAZMAT locker was, our hazardous material locker. So if we got hit, we were done.

Scott

It sounds like your ship would fall under the category of a target rich environment.

Robert

(laughter) You could say that. You know they used to call us torp sponges. So if we have a HVU, a High Value Unit like a carrier is rolling through and we're on a mission and out of nowhere a torpedo comes and there's no way to chase it off using torpedo deterrents, then we gotta jump in front of it.

Scott

How did you know that they had an RPG if they dropped it in the water?

Robert

They told them themselves. They all got split up and they were sat down and the interrogator went through and questioned them. I guess that new guy gave up everything. Not only did they tell it to the translator and our guys, but they told that to the FBI later on.

Scott

The bottom line is that these guys were just run of the mill pirates with high powered weapons and they were thinking in the dark that you were just some kind of a merchant vessel or something that was just going to give up easily. They didn't even realize this was a US warship they were attacking.

Robert

I guess not. If they had known that it was a US warship they might have, I don't know, gotten caught just so they could not be pirates maybe. I've considered that, but that's kind of a hindsight I guess.

Scott

So the next day you found their mother ship and then what?

Robert

We got those two on board, the 5 of them were split up in the way that they were detained. We had 3 on one side of the ship and 2 on the other side of the ship. While I'm still standing my watch, I see these guys daily. I'm still on the second deck looking down everyday thinking, "These guys tried to kill me."

Scott

How are they detained? Are they just handcuffed to a rail or something or is there like a cell or something that you keep them in?

Robert

No. They were treated very well because of the whole Geneva Convention. If we pulled into port and they said anything anyway, that could throw their case out just about. They're not supposed to be mistreated. I'm cool with that, I understand that maybe they were in dire situations. Maybe they'd all been shanghaied, maybe they wanted a more stable environment. Hell, a US Federal Prison could be more stable than the way Somalia is run. So I understand, and that's fine. They weren't zip-tied everyday. They had cots. They were able to do whatever. They were able to exercise everyday. They were able to pray, they're Muslim so they were able to pray. They were treated fairly and it's just crazy knowing, "Those are my attackers, and I have to see them everyday."

Scott

So you've got 3 Somali men under arrest in US custody, what are the options? What do you do with these guys?

Robert

Africa Partnership Station, again, like I said, it was designed that way so eastern African countries could jail and prosecute and have the supplies to detain these people. I guess at some point in time they asked for more money, they were denied said money, and they said that we can go ahead and fuck ourselves and we had to take them. The fact of the matter is, my ship USS Nicholas, could not pull into port with these detainees. If we pull into a friendly country we can't pull in with these guys. So we had to wait until the FBI or the higher ups could come up with an idea of what to do with these guys. That means we're out to sea for an extra week or two, which, let me explain, that got kind of rough. The longest my ship was ever out to sea was from the voyage from Virginia to wherever we were going, so across the Atlantic. The reason

being, you have to go up and around. If a US Naval ship makes a B-line from one country to the next it's considered an act of war. So no matter where you're going, you have to make a round about voyage to get there.

Scott

That way your approach is always not a surprise, you're announcing yourself sort of.

Robert

Correct. That's usually the longest. As soon as we get to port we go back out to sea for maybe max 4 days at that point in time. My ship couldn't handle a lot of stores past that. We weren't as efficient as something like a carrier is of course. Those things can just stay out to sea. As far as we go we have to pull in every once in a while to get food, stores and mail.

Scott

So you were waiting out at sea this whole time for the FBI to come?

Robert

Mmhmm. What ended up happening is that we were out there for so long, we were out for a week or two. Usually in the Navy you get 2 entrees per meal, you get blah blah blah. It eventually got to the point where we weren't getting any food. There weren't any stores yet. We had to start calling out asking superiors, "When are we going to be able to get stores? When are we going to be able to get...?" We had nothing. We ran out of food in the ship store. I heard it's the equivalent to prison in the sense that, when you're on the ship out to sea you're stuck and confined where you are. You're wearing a uniform and you know everybody. You have a ship store you can buy stuff at, you can even buy cigarettes there. You're not going anywhere, you're out to sea in the middle of the ocean, where are you going to go?

So we ran out of everything. I'm talking about Cup of Noodles, candy, cigarettes. So a sister ship that was running operations in the area, it was a landing craft, came up and they had to come bring us stuff. They were chucking and throwing us stuff from the ship store. It was crazy. We ran out of entrees. We got down to 1 entree, and we ran out of rice, which is unheard of. Finally the FBI was able to come via helicopter. They scooped these guys up and away they went. Then we proceeded to finally go to our next port.

Scott

How long after they were picked up did the court case actually begin? The court case was in the US right?

Robert

Correct. They were taken back to Virginia since it was a federal case. After we were done with the deployment, we pulled back in and NCIS came on board. I have to say, NCIS were just terrifying people to be around. They were so matter of fact, there was no joking with these guys. The TV show doesn't even explain it. These guys were balls to the wall with all the information. Asking, "What happened with this? What happened with that? That sounds wrong, tell me about it again." These guys are just nuts to be around. So they started doing their investigation on the ship and I had to talk to them everyday for, I don't even remember how long. They were taking shifts from my vantage point. They actually climbed the mast and low and behold there was a hole in the mast. They had shot directly above my head. If it were at a lower angle they would've shot between the plates and hit me. It was crazy, apparently it was directly over me.

So we went to court. We look like a living Norman Rockwell painting, there's just a bunch of sailors in uniform in a dimly lit room waiting in the back. I was very nervous about the trial because this was a federal thing and I didn't know how to feel. I'd never been to court before and here are all these people and they're looking at me. My testimony is going to eventually put these guys in prison. There were a bunch of us there, probably a dozen of us. Anyone who was involved in the whole thing was all there in this back room. I didn't testify the first day but I remember people leaving the room, getting called and then bam bam bam, they're gone. The next thing I remember about the trial was having to testify. It was fucking terrifying in this courtroom. You've got this jury and mad people in it, if I recall correctly. There were the 5 guys sitting on the bench and what I thought was really interesting was one of the NCIS agents that questioned me when the ship pulled in, presenting all this information and questioning me on the stand.

When we had gone through the whole investigation when we got back they took pictures. I signed and dated this CD and they took it and they sealed it in front of me. It wasn't until that day in trial, months and months later that he walked up and handed me the CD and said, "We want you to open that and put it in the such and such." I was like, "Alright." I opened it up and they said, "Is that your signature?" I said, "Yep." They said, "Is that your handwriting?" I said, "Yep, that's my handwriting." Then we went ahead and put in the disk which showed a 360 degree view of where I was standing. You could look up, down, left, right, it was crazy. So we looked all around and they said, "Was that your view?" I said, "Yes." Then I had to point to those guys. They said, "Do you recognize them?" I said, "Yeah I recognize them because these are the guys who were detained. I had visually seen them everyday." So I pointed at them, they thanked me for my testimony, and I was out of the door.

Scott

Ok, so all 5 of them were convicted and this was like a milestone. This was the first piracy trial conviction in the US since 1820.

Robert

Yeah 1820. Almost 200 years. Isn't that wild?

News Clip

"5 Somali men are facing life in prison after being convicted of piracy following an attack on a US Navy ship. Prosecutors claim the men, all in their mid-20s, attacked the USS Nicholas after mistaking it for a merchant vessel. The court's verdict is the first in a piracy case in America in nearly 200 years. They were arrested in April in waters near Tabouti. The men's lawyers say they are fishermen who'd been forced by criminals to attack the vessel. One of the accused told the investigators he's been promised 30,000 dollars for a successful mission. The trial took place in the town of Norfolk in the US state of Virginia. One of the largest Naval bases in the world, and home port to the American ship involved."

Scott

There was a statement from the US attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, his name is Neil McBride. He made a statement after the conviction it says, "'Today marks the first jury conviction for piracy in more than 190 years,' said US attorney McBride, 'These 5 Somali pirates were convicted of an armed assault on the high seas against what they thought was a merchant vessel, but turned out to be a US Navy frigate, engaged in counter piracy operations off the horn of Africa. Modern day pirates not only threaten human lives, but also disrupt international commerce by extorting hundreds of millions of dollars in ransom payments. Today's conviction

demonstrates that armed attacks on US flagged vessels are crimes against the international community and that pirates will face severe consequences in US courts.”

That's what they faced. What was their sentence?

Robert

It was multiple life sentences.

Scott

So they're not getting out anytime?

Robert

No. Honestly I'm still kind of up in the air about it. I think they learned their lesson at this point in time, it's been 11 years. There's no real lesson to learn besides, stop shooting at people and shit. It sucks, these guys aren't in their own country, they need a translator for everything that they do, they have to stick together now. These are all things I've thought of and it sucks.

Scott

Yeah, that's one of the things I was wondering about is, it was your testimony that sent these men to prison for life. Obviously it was their behavior that sent them there, but do you feel any guilt about that at all, or any regret or anything?

Robert

I think it sucks. It fucked me up at first, I'm not gonna lie. It really fucked me up at first. I wasn't the only one who saw what happened. When I fired, I fired to protect my shipmate, we had done nothing wrong. We were just there. I'm not gonna do the whole 'they started it' thing again because this is more serious when we're talking about it this time. Honestly, fuck man, they shot at us. Then not to mention, if I hadn't pulled the trigger, would that have hit us with the RPG? Maybe they recognized that we were military and were going to try to blow us the fuck up and get out of dodge. That could've been a thought on their mind, otherwise why would you blow up the merchant ship that you're looking at. So you're actually pushing questions I hadn't thought of at this point.

Scott

Well you don't have any reason to feel guilty, but the thing is sometimes when you go through a situation like this you have feelings of, I'm not gonna say guilt because you're not guilty of anything, but you feel bad that these guys are going to be in prison. Then like you said they may have been forced into doing this, but they forced you to defend yourself as well.

Robert

That's honestly why I don't feel bad, because what would have happened if I didn't. Either these 5 guys went to prison, or they would've blown up 180 of us and we would have died right there. I had a kid at that point in time so I had to go to work. Not to mention, my boy Schoon, he was in the back and I thought they shot Schoon. So no, they're not going to do that, they're not going to get anybody else on my ship. Like I said it's a really tight community between all of us, and I'd been on my ship for 6.5 years, that's a long ass time. I'd seen 2 full shift changes of people come on that ship. I knew all of these guys, these are all my shipmates and that's a lasting thing. Even with the way it was, it was still a fair fight. There were 2 of us shooting. The way that we were positioned, we had 3 guns but the 3rd gun couldn't even reach them. Again, these are all things I never really thought about until you asked.

I used to say, "Happy Anniversary" to my buddy Schoon who was in the back. Every April 1st I would say, "Happy Anniversary" to him until he stopped saying it back to me. I finally understood that that messed with him. I know how to minimize things, I've done that my whole life. I haven't lived the easiest life but I know how to minimize it. So at some point in time I thought, "I might be messing with him unintentionally, by saying 'happy anniversary' to him." So I stopped. Now, I had to go talk to a couple people, because I fired my weapon at somebody. I was fine, I was very adamant that, "No, there is no PTSD involved." Well 9 years later, I was sitting with my kid and he's like, "Dad do you want to play Call of Duty?" I said, "Sure man." He throws Call of Duty on. As soon as the game started, I heard gunfire and I couldn't tell where it was from. Mind you this is 9 years later, I love action movies, I'm a huge movie buff. Nothing ever made me feel the way it did for that one second where I heard gunfire and I didn't know where it was coming from. I paused the game. I told my kid, "I'll be right back. I gotta go, I'll be right back." I started shaking really bad, it was difficult to walk. I walked to where I was somewhere quiet and I started bawling uncontrollably, I could not stop. I thought I was going to die. I had a horrible panic attack. I had really shitty WiFi, I'm talking bum fuck Texas, so I'm trying to get a hold of this Veterans hotline. My WiFi was so spotty, but eventually I got a hold of a suicide prevention line, because I had to talk to somebody. I didn't know what was going on with myself. Finally I got to talk to somebody and I was able to calm down and realize I was safe. The whole reason I brought that up is because you never know what your brain is going to do to you. It took 9 years for that to happen.

So I suggest to anybody, if something traumatic happens, talk to somebody because you never know when it's going to kick in. I got a hold of Mark, I said, "Man what the fuck dude. What is happening to me right now?" He was like, "Bro, that's it. Your brain just clicked and it took that one thing 9 years later." So, talk to somebody, it's absolutely worth it. I know everybody who gets on here says something about it, but it's gotta be reiterated. Somebody once put it in perspective for me. I was talking to my best friend's little brother, he was in the army and he saw some horrible shit. I was like, "Dude, what I went through was bad, but yours sucked way worse." He said, "No dude, listen to me. Sure one thing might be worse than the other, but it still sucks. It's all relative, it doesn't matter. You can't really compare trauma in people because you don't know how people are going to respond to trauma. So you gotta talk to somebody." Save your own self.

Scott

That's a perfect example of, you need to talk to somebody even though you don't think you've been affected by it. You don't even realize how you've been affected.

Robert

Oh yeah! I mean shit, I've heard gunshots since then, I live in Texas. I don't know what it was, it was just that one specific moment. It might have been the AK round, but my kid's played this game before in front of me. I've watched him play and played it with him. It's just that one day.

Scott

Well you were out on a warship but you certainly weren't expecting to exchange fire or be in conditions like that.

Robert

No, not at all. It could happen to anybody, anywhere, anytime. I did speak to somebody eventually. I went recruiting, which was a horrible horrible idea. If you're in the military and

listening to this, don't go recruiting if you don't have to. You need some mental fortitude for that. I was speaking to a therapist for a little bit and she was really cool. She didn't bullshit me at all. She had military in her family with her brothers, so when she met me she knew exactly how to handle my bullshit.

Scott

I understand that for your part in this situation you got a medal?

Robert

Absolutely. The morning of April 1st, we woke up and as we were picking up the other 2 in the mother skiff, myself and Schoonmaker got called up to the pilot house, to the bridge. The captain was up there and he was up there with the command master chief and they were so cool. They said, "That was a dangerous thing and you guys did a great job." Then they gave us a NAM, which is a Marine Corps achievement medal, or NAM for short. They gave us a spot NAM. I guess after the gunfight was over the CO went over and on the spot typed this award up and sent it in for authorization and bam, we got it within hours. It was cool. They have a little mock up one you get that has a binder clip on it that they put on your coveralls and the medal hangs. You get to walk around the ship with it, but you gotta bring it back, then they hand you the real one. Yeah that was awesome.

Scott

Well it was well deserved.

Robert

I thank you.

Scott

I've got one final question, it's something that maybe some of the listeners will be wondering about. You said when this whole thing started, you had your iPod in.

Robert

Yes I did.

Scott

What were you listening to?

Robert

I'll never forget. I was listening to Deftones. That's my favorite band. That was during the gunfight. Adrenaline, that was their first album, come on oh my god, beautiful music. Very aggressive though. As we took off and started to chase them, my adrenaline was pumping. I knew that it was going to take a little bit because the second engine was barely kicking on. So I switched my iPod over to Eminem, the Re-Up album had just come out, a great album. I was trying to keep myself in the mood. It was also 1 in the morning, I was dog ass tired and I just got in a gunfight. (laughter)

Scott

So you were in a gunfight and you had your own soundtrack going-

Robert

Right! It was awesome. The Navy, even with that and other things that happened, the Navy was a lot of fun. I spent 11 years in the Navy. I don't regret any of it, I loved it. I've been to 44-45 countries on 3 other continents, it was awesome. I've seen some cool shit, I've traveled to some great places, I went through the Panama Canal which was awesome, I went Great White shark diving in South Africa. You can't beat stuff like that. The Navy was great. I'm a fourth generation military so I heard these stories all day. If anybody is interested I really suggest joining the Navy, it was a lot of fun.

Scott

Thank you for your service.

Robert

Thank you, I appreciate that.

Okay, I have a few things I want to tell you about before we get to this week's Listener Story –

First up – I've had a little issue with Instagram lately. My Instagram account is WhatWasThatLike, no spaces, and if you follow me there, you get a DM from me, asking if you have any crazy stories that might work for the podcast. And for the most part, this works great. But every once in a while, Instagram sees me sending out all these DMs and their computers think it might be spam or something. So for a day or two, I can't send any DMs. So there are a few people who followed me, and didn't get a DM from me as promised. And I hate that! But unfortunately there's not much I can do about it. But I'm still interested in hearing your story to see if it's a good fit for the show. You can just go to the website and click where it says "Submit your story". I read and reply to every one of those.

Do you use Reddit? I'm talking about the hugely popular site at [Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com) – REDDIT dot com. I love Reddit and I'm on there pretty regularly, and there's actually a subreddit for this podcast. If you'd like to join it, the sub is [r/WhatWasThatLike](https://www.reddit.com/r/WhatWasThatLike), with no spaces.

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I had an interesting thing happen recently. Or I should say, my wife had an interesting thing happen. Her car was struck by lightning. Fortunately, she wasn't in it at the time. She had just parked it about 10 minutes earlier. There was one of those huge lightning strikes, super loud, and she discovered that the passenger side mirror was destroyed and the glass was all over the ground. A big chunk of concrete had been taken out of the parking spot, and there was a large tree limb that had come off a nearby tree and dented in the roof. And then she found out that a bunch of things didn't work – air conditioning, radio, door locks, the electrical things. So she's without a car at the moment while all those things get fixed. I told her, "just think, if you had actually been driving the car when this happened, you could have been a guest on the podcast!". But it's an interesting story anyway.

And speaking of interesting stories, we now go to this week's Listener Story, which needs a trigger warning due to a first hand account of domestic violence. Stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks.

Caller

My first relationship out of high school was abusive and I almost died. Very early on he told me the typical 'all my exes are crazy' bit. For no good reason I just believed it. Occasionally he would yell at me and scream if I couldn't hang out with him and I justified that as being ok because I thought he was hurt and I felt like his actions weren't his choice. Obviously this just got gradually worse. It went from yelling to throwing things to shoving and raising fists very quickly, under a year's time.

The time he almost killed me, we were house sitting for my mother while she was on a trip for her birthday. We had gotten into a nonviolent fight. I decided that I was going to sleep on the couch and before I went to sleep I texted a friend of mine the phrase, "I don't think I'm cut out for romantic relationships." While I was asleep he read that and it sent him over the edge. There was a lock box in the room, because my mom's house was a rental, and that's where she still kept the spare key. Lock boxes are sturdy solid metal and heavy. I had kind of woken up when he entered the room. I'd hardly looked at him when he threw this lockbox at my head. He was only a few feet from me so it was pretty close range. I remember it as just a sudden white flash and my body felt bad. I fell off the couch and started to crawl. That's when he picked it up and hit me again. It was another white flash and my hearing was really muffled. All I could hear was my heartbeat in my ears. That was my, "Oh shit!" moment because tunnel vision started kicking in and my body felt like it was underwater. All I could think was, "Fuck, I'm hurt. I'm hurt. I have to get help." I somehow was able to crawl to the bathroom with my phone before he could catch me. I have cuts in my memory here. I only remember shutting and locking the door. I don't actually remember grabbing my phone or anything else.

While I was in the bathroom I was really dizzy and it was hard to move. I don't know how long I was in there or how long he was outside of the door. At some point I realized he was just pounding on the door and screaming to be let in. I finally came to the moment where I thought, "Ok I have to call 911. I have to call for help. He's gonna kill me. I'm gonna die. I have to call for help." I picked up my phone and was trying to dial, but the screen was black. I was really disoriented, but it wasn't working. Then I realized that the battery had been removed from my phone. So before he hit me, he had taken the battery out of my phone and then returned my phone to the same spot so I couldn't call for help. I remember feeling sleepy and scared. When I finally felt my head it was just this burning hot lump behind my ear. The swelling felt like it was as big as my hand and I didn't know what to do. So I got into the bathtub, turned on the cold water and just sat there, holding my head against the cold faucet hoping it would help somehow. Eventually, I fell asleep and he got in. At that point he was just doing this thing where he was crying and saying, "Oh my god my life is ruined. My life is ruined." He just kept saying that. I couldn't talk. I just felt dizzy and sick. He was trying to get me to follow his fingers with my eyes and I couldn't do it.

The next day I had work and I was still really woozy and in pain. The girls at my job could see the swelling under my hair. Half way through my shift I went home to go into urgent care. By that time he had calmed down and was in the reconciliation phase. He agreed to take me. For some reason at the urgent care they just let my boyfriend come in with me to see the doctor. Despite putting down head injury on the check in. So I had to lie to the doctor about what happened. The doctor looked at him, then looked at me for a really long time before explaining that I had an internal contusion affecting my face, eye, and neck. I also had a temporal lobe concussion. He looked at me and told me that if my injury was just one inch forward, I would've had internal

bleeding in my brain and died. That I was lucky I didn't. He told me to go to an ER immediately if my symptoms got worse, and that was it.

So we went home and I was ok enough at that time. A week later he slammed that side of my head into a door frame repeatedly when I was trying to run from him during another violent incident. Another time after that he almost killed us both in the car driving 90 miles an hour. The abuse didn't really end until I was finally able to move without telling anybody where I was gonna go. Now a lot of time has passed and he's completed schooling to be a social worker now. It terrifies me. I still have residual effects from the concussion like brain fog and issues with facial blindness. The scariest thing for me, is that he worked up to being that violent. I wasn't the only victim. I think about what could happen to someone else all the time. Especially because he's faced no repercussions. I also think about how many others like him there are.