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Close Call in the Red Sea

By Diane Chido
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Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series on the intersection of geopolitics and the global supply chain by JES Scholar-in-Residence Diane Chido.

I recently had the good fortune to meet Master Wesley Heerssen, former captain of the *U.S. Brig Niagara* (2003-12) and currently a licensed master in the merchant marine. He kindly sat with me for an interview about some details on commercial shipping – especially to relate his experience in December 2023 while traveling through the Red Sea in the area currently under attack by Houthi militants. This is a new challenge by one of Iran's proxy militia's ostensibly to interrupt supplies of arms to Israel that has escalated to this group firing on ships under many nation's flags as discussed in a previous [issue](#).

Master Heerssen explained that, on board, his title is chief officer, meaning he is second-in-command to the captain. The captain deals with the cargo and everything that has to do with it outside of the ship, such as loading and unloading and dealing with logistics and customs. The Chief Officer is responsible for the ship's operations on board. Heerssen has been with this company for seven years and is regularly at sea for four months at a time, then has shore leave, then goes for another four months. He has sailed on a number of vessels in this capacity.



ARC Liberty in Santos, Brazil on Aug. 10, 2024 [i]

On this occasion, Heerssen's ship, *Liberty*, owned by American Roll-on Roll-Off Carriers, was transporting commercial vehicles from Germany to Korea. This is a long trip, made much shorter by the convenience of the Suez Canal shown on the map.[ii]



Map of Suez Canal and Red Sea

Liberty is a Pure Car, Truck Carrier, a vessel built for this specific purpose to transport different types of rolling cargo, such as new private cars and trucks, heavy construction equipment, and other heavy loads. It flies the U.S. flag and was built in 2006. It can carry 6,354 vehicles and has a dead weight of 19,628 metric tons, the equivalent of 2,886 African elephants!^[iii] There is a video on the website of the company that originally owned the *Liberty* that provides a virtual tour of one of their roll-on roll-off, or "RoRo" ships.

Liberty left Germany with its load of new commercial vehicles ultimately bound for China with other stops planned in Asia, including Korea. *Liberty* approached the Suez Canal, which is owned by Egypt, from Port Said on the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Once a ship is in the canal, a canal or "Suez crew" comes aboard ostensibly to guide it through; however, Heerssen noted that it seems that their real aim is to sell off-brand cologne and souvenirs like sphynx keychains. He said they all carry the same backpack filled with the same trinkets every time, so there must be some warehouse where they stock up from the same supplier for every trip.

The four-person crew's wooden boat is hoisted onto the ship's deck with its crew onboard and is given a reserved cabin for the trip then their pilot takes control of the ship for the passage. In some cases, however, the pilot is too busy enjoying the food and conversation, or even napping, and the second officer, in this case Heerssen, is still mainly managing things.^[iv]

An average of 50 cargo ships pass through the Suez Canal on normal days. Ships travel in convoys through the canal, a bit like cars on a road under construction with a flag holder who lets several cars through going one way, then flips the sign to "stop" so cars traveling from the other direction can pass. The convoys have six to 10 ships in each. On this trip, *Liberty* passed through the canal, past Sinai in Egypt and Jedda in Saudi Arabia. The crew had rested all day to prepare to "stealthily" pass through the 18-mile Bab-el-Mandeb Strait at night between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa. The map shows how narrow this strait is and how little maneuverability a massive cargo ship would have in passing through it.

Liberty had already passed the Houthi stronghold of Hudaydah without incident, shown in the second map.^[v] Normally, once the ship has left the strait, there are another 12 hours of sailing to get through the Gulf of Aden and into the Arabian Sea. By this point, Heerssen noted, the Houthis had not yet shot at any ships in the area and once a ship passes the Horn of Africa, it was considered in the clear. Monitoring threats, however, at this point American Roll-on Roll-Off Carriers made the decision to turn the ship around.



Map of Yemen

This meant that once the ship turned around, it would spend another two days backtracking in the Suez Canal and another three days passing back through the Mediterranean Sea heading west this time. *Liberty* then stopped in Spain to fuel up for the much longer trip taking a week to travel around the South African Cape of Good Hope, and, a month after turning around, arrived at the first scheduled Korean port. The trip around Africa is about 5,500 miles.

A ship of this size burns an average of 50 tons of fuel daily with fuel costing \$600 to \$1,200 per metric ton, or \$30,000 to \$60,000 in fuel cost per day. This is enough fuel to sail around the Earth 1 and 1/2 times. This trip was the equivalent of about one circumnavigation. For a trip of a month, this would cost the company \$900,000 on the low end, or up to twice that. That doesn't include the cost of the crew and supplies and other expenses, including the added costs of essentially two trips on the canal. Plus, the cost of "war risk" insurance has risen steeply during the crisis. All of these expenses are borne by the shipping company, not by the cargo owner.

So, for a minimum of maybe an additional \$2 million per trip, shipping companies have an interest in ending the Houthi threat to the Suez. Considering concern for the crew (maybe) and concern about losing the valuable cargo, American Roll-on Roll-Off Carriers decided the cost-benefit of the Suez shortcut was not worth it. Its customers were probably also not happy with the month-long delay in receiving their supply of cars.

If there is a risk of danger, ship captains have the prerogative of telling the shipping company the route is too dangerous, and insisting on not going, but there

can be informal sanctions on which captains are then selected for future trips. The ship traffic along the Cape of Good Hope is massive and only increasing as the crisis continues. Heerssen likens it to the traffic rate of the English Channel, which is much narrower. It is possible to try to sail farther away from the cape, but in the open ocean there are significant swells coming from the Southern Ocean, so it is best to stick closer to shore and stay in the prescribed shipping lanes, which are marked with a series of buoys and lights.

As an interesting aside, according to the U.S. National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, while there is technically only one global, interconnected ocean, there have historically been four recognized and distinctly named oceans: the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, and Arctic. Today, most countries, including the United States, now recognize the Southern (Antarctic) as the fifth and “newest” named ocean.

In December 2023, an international coalition called “Operation Prosperity Guardian” was formed to protect vessels traveling through the Suez with ships positioned according to their coverage plans, especially for the highest risk vessels like those flying U.S. or Israeli flags. Members of the 20-nation coalition include the United States, Bahrain, Canada, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain. Conspicuously absent is support from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which would seem to bear some responsibility for the threat emanating from their region.^[vi]

The Associated Press reported on Aug. 5, 2024, that Houthi rebels “have targeted more than 70 vessels with missiles and drones in a campaign that has killed four sailors. They seized one vessel and sunk two in that time. Other missiles and drones have been either intercepted by the protective coalition in the Red Sea or splashed down before reaching their targets.” After a pause initiated by a July 20 attack by Israel on the Houthi Hudaydah base, targeting fuel depots and electrical stations, the Houthis began attacking ships again on Aug. 3, striking the *Groton*, a Liberian flagged ship and causing only minor damage.

Close observers believe the resumption of hostilities to be in retaliation for the July 31 assassination widely blamed on Israel of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Iran, one of the Houthis’ primary benefactors. This has led to increased concerns that the war in Gaza is turning into a full regional conflict.

In December 2008, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously for Resolution 1851 to permit the open pursuit of pirates into Somali territory for one year. This did not only mean pursuit on land, but also by air, and “by any means necessary.”^[vii] However, at that time, there was also a war taking place in Somalia against the al-Shabaab terrorist group with another international coalition led by the United States to combat them. That coalition also included Iran. In this case, it was a terrorist group attacking international shipping and not strictly “pirates.”

Today, the world is much less coalesced around agreement on how best to protect global shipping in a world of much greater complexity and volatility, especially in the Middle East.

The Houthi attacks are causing shipping companies to consider other routes, including those over land, which would add significantly to their costs and are fraught with security and geopolitical concerns over travel through China and Russia. We will explore the wider implications of this Suez crisis in future articles.

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