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U.S. Marines Take Ship From Somali Pirates

(AP) DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — U.S. Marine commandos stormed a pirate-held cargo ship off the Somalia coast Thursday, reclaiming control and taking nine prisoners without firing a shot in the first such boarding raid by the international anti-piracy flotilla, U.S. Navy officials said.

The mission - using small craft to reach the deck of German-owned vessel as the crew huddled in a safe room below - ranks among the most dramatic high seas confrontations with pirates by the task force created to protect shipping lanes off lawless Somalia.



The crew managed to kill the engines before taking refuge in an panic room-style chamber, leaving the ship adrift and the pirates so frustrated they started damaging equipment after hijacking the vessel Wednesday, Navy officials and the ship's operator say.

Lt. John Fage, a spokesman at the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, described the pre-dawn raid as an "air and sea" assault that included Cobra attack helicopters for surveillance and coordination.

Marine Corps officers involved in the raid told reporters in a conference call that the attack involved "overwhelming force" and the element of surprise. Marines were able to separate the pirates and confront them singly or in small groups, while helicopters bore down.

The armed pirates gave up quickly when faced with large numbers of Marines carrying heavier weaponry.

Getting to the crew barricaded behind three walls in a safe room proved to be a quite a challenge, however, and the Marines had to drill through steel walls to reach the suspicious sailors.

Capt. Alexander Martin said the crew was finally persuaded that they were being rescued when a Marine ripped the American flag patch from his uniform and stuffed it through a hole the rescuers had bored in the final steel door.

Martin added that he also spoke to the ship's captain in Russian.

It was the first boarding raid since the multinational task force was formed in January 2009 to patrol off the Horn of Africa, said U.S. Navy Cmdr. Amy Derrick-Frost in Bahrain.



Fage said there were no injuries reported among the Marines or 11-member crew of the Magellan Star. The pirates were armed with AK-47 assault rifles, but "there were no shots fired" on either side, Fage said.

A Turkish frigate on anti-piracy patrols, TCG Gokceada, first responded to a distress call from the ship, which flies the flag of Antigua and Barbuda. Fage said the crew - which include Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Filipino seamen - was able to maintain contact with maritime officials from their safe room using a satellite phone.

The crew also shut down the engines as the pirates approached, leaving the ship to drift at sea, said Juergen Salamon, the ship's operator based in Dortmund, Germany.

"The pirates had entered a ship that they couldn't steer and there was no crew," he said.

The pirates then hit an emergency button that connected them directly with the ship operators in Germany.

"They asked us where the crew is," he chuckled. "We told them, 'They're on leave.'"

There was no demands for ransom, he said.

The ship was traveling from Bilbao, Spain, to Singapore with a cargo of anchor chains, Salamon said. It is now en route to Dubai for repairs.

"The pirates were angry and vandalized the ship badly," he said.

Salamon said the ship operators were not in direct contact with the U.S. Navy, but were communicating with other maritime security watchdogs in the Horn of Africa.

Then just before dawn Thursday, the U.S. team from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit's Maritime Raid Force launched the assault from aboard the USS Dubuque, an amphibious transport ship.

The Dubuque was in the area en route to a joint training exercise with Jordan and received orders from the White House to assist the anti-piracy task force, Brig. Gen. David Berger, the head of Marine Corps operations at the Pentagon.

"It's a great thing that everything ended without any bloodshed," Salamon said.

In a separate case, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borisov said a cargo ship held for four months by Somali pirates has been freed. He did not say whether ransom was paid for the release of the Bulgarian-flagged chemical tanker Panega, which was hijacked off the Yemeni port of Aden.

Borisov said the 15 Bulgarian crew members were safe.

U.S. warships are part of a 25-nation mission protecting merchant vessels from pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia and into the Gulf of Aden. The task force often opens fire on suspected pirates, but had not previously launched a boarding raid.

In April 2009, a team of Navy Seal sharpshooters positioned on the fantail of a U.S. warship killed a trio of Somali pirates to free an American sea captain who had been taken hostage and was being held at gunpoint onboard a lifeboat.

Last month, Denmark said a helicopter from one of its warships fired warning shots and foiled a pirate attack off Somalia.

At the United Nations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said last month options under consideration to prosecute suspected pirates include creating a special international court.

More than 140 piracy-related incidents have been reported off Somalia's coast since January and more than 30 ships have been hijacked, according to U.N. and anti-piracy task force reports.

Associated Press Writer Juergen Baetz in Berlin, Anne Gearan and Anne Flaherty in Washington contributed to this report.