



The Threat of a Spectacular Maritime Attack

Some observers believe that it is only a matter of time before terrorists conduct a staggering maritime attack on a major port facility.

PHOTO: PTE ANDREW SAUNDERS, FORMATION IMAGING SERVICES, HALIFAX

Al Qaeda has long had a fascination with maritime targets and has a history of going after these interests with only limited success. Its interest in maritime adventures is no secret and warnings abound. For example, on 3 August 2003, Tom Ridge, then U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, warned that terrorists might strike at ferries. One year later, Britain's First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Alan West claimed to have intel that Al Qaeda was planning to attack Western maritime interests including naval forces. Admiral West also warned that prime targets included port and naval chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and the Straits of Gibraltar. Observers believe that you can tell a great deal about Al Qaeda's future plans and intentions from their past deeds, both successful and the failures. But it appears that as much as Al Qaeda would like to carry out a spectacular maritime even, so far its successes have been limited. Al Qaeda has not lived up to its hallmark standard of spectacular event, high degree of coordination, and accompanying high body count.

Al Qaeda's only real maritime successes, limited as they are, have been their

strikes on the USS Cole, the French Tanker Limburg and attacks by their affiliates on two Philippine passenger ferries:

- **October 2000:** Two Al Qaeda attackers rammed a small boat loaded with explosives into the side of the USS Cole in the Port of Aden. Sadly, 17 sailors were killed and 40 civilians were injured in the attack, an event celebrated by Osama bin Laden.
- **October 2002:** The French oil tanker Limburg was attacked in Yemen's coastal waters when it was apparently rammed by a small craft carrying TNT. The explosion killed one crewman and spilled 90,000 barrels of oil into the Gulf of Aden.
- **January 2004:** A bomb was exploded on a Philippines ferry, *Superferry 14*, in Manila Bay killing 116 people. The Al Qaeda-linked Philippines terror group Abu Sayyaf claimed responsibility for the attack.
- **August 2005:** The Al Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the Philippines bombed a ferry, the *Dona Ramona*, at Lamitan on the island of Basilan. Some 30 people were injured when the device exploded near gas containers in the ship's canteen.

Halifax Harbour was severely damaged in an accidental explosion in 1917, but after rebuilding, has remained as the busy port and vibrant city shown above.

All of these attacks involved either placing a small craft loaded with explosives next to a vessel or placing a bomb on board the vessel.

While Al Qaeda's tactical successes have been limited, they have had several notable failures:

- **January 2002:** It was reported that Singaporean authorities had busted a 13 member Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah cell that had plotted to attack American air and naval forces in that Southeast Asian nation. One plan was centred on an attack against naval personnel riding on a bus ashore, while another was to bomb U.S. naval vessels Northeast of Singapore around Changi and Palau Tekong.
- **June 2002:** Moroccan authorities arrested three Saudi nationals believed linked to Al Qaeda who were reportedly plotting to attack British and American naval forces in the Straits of

Gibraltar with dingies loaded with explosives around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

- **October 2004:** U.S. authorities warned that groups of men, thought to be “Middle Eastern,” had videotaped the inside of some of the Washington State ferries. Some 19 incidents were considered at the time to be “highly likely” or “extremely likely” to have been terrorist surveillance operations.
- **August 2005:** Turkish authorities busted a reported Syrian-led Al Qaeda plot to ram explosive laden speed boats into Israeli cruise ships in international waters as they sailed to visit Turkey. Five Israeli cruise ships were diverted to Cyprus along with their five thousand passengers to avoid attack.
- **August 2005:** Al Qaeda reportedly fired timer-controlled Katyusha rockets at the USS Ashland and USS Kearsage. The U.S. warships were docked at the Red Sea Jordanian Port of Aqaba. One Jordanian soldier was killed in the attack but the ships and their crews were unharmed.

These failed Al Qaeda plots again concentrated on the tactic of ramming a small craft loaded with explosives into a vessel or placing a bomb inside the ship. The closest Al Qaeda has come to its “spectacular event” has been the failed Katyusha attack on two U.S. warships in Jordan.

Thus far, Al Qaeda has not sought to attack a major port facility, but that lapse seems to have come to an end, marked by the failed Jordanian venture in August. Al Qaeda also has witnessed the example set by Palestinian terrorists. Consider the 14 March 2004, joint Al Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade-Hamas suicide bomber attack on the Israeli Port of Ashdod, where two bombers apparently exited shipping containers to attack the Israeli facility. One bomber detonated himself near the chemical storage area of the busy Mediterranean port – either by accident or more seriously by design – possibly hoping to create a massive toxic chemical cloud in the area.

Additionally, there have been several news reports about how U.S. Homeland Security officials are deeply concerned about the prospect of a merchant ship carrying a weapon of mass destruction into a port adjacent to a major city. Former U.S. Counter Terrorism Coordinator, Richard Clarke, and the U.S. Intelligence community had come to a similar dark assessment of the potential for an Al Qaeda attack on a port city using a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) tanker. For instance, a Sandia National Laboratories study has warned that a terrorist attack on an LNG tanker passing Boston Harbor could be catastrophic. The study determined that an LNG spill from a 16-foot hole blasted in the side of the tanker’s hull, if ignited, would create a thermal blast that would set buildings on fire and melt steel out to 1,281



Aerial of CFB Esquimalt and area.

PHOTO: CPL COLIN KELLEY

feet and give people second-degree burns up to 4,282 feet away. Thus, when Al Qaeda ends its fascination with attacking ships in or near to port, it is almost certain to turn its attention to the port facilities themselves, a prized economic target.

This threat of spectacular maritime attack on a port facility should cause most G-8 countries like Canada to give pause. Canada has ranked fifth on the so-called Al Qaeda list of enemies to kill and is the only country yet to face a major Al Qaeda strike. Canada’s ports are far too open and vulnerable to organized crime and terrorist attack.

On 6 December 1917, history was made when two ships collided by accident in wartime Halifax Harbour and created the largest man-made explosion at that time. Some 1,900 people were killed and another 4,000 injured; 1,630 homes were destroyed; 12,000 damaged; and 6,000 people were left without shelter. It was an accident of navigation, not an intentional act of terror, but it is likely that this historical event has caught some Al Qaeda-planner’s attention.

In a post-September 11th world, Canada, like all G8 nations, could face an attack that would dwarf the Halifax Explosion.

It’s true that warships, luxury cruise ships, passenger ferries and super tankers have been the targets of the past, a major port appears to be the prized Al Qaeda target of the future. Taking such a threat seriously and preparing for worst-case scenarios could mitigate the effects of an attack, if not thwart such plans. **FL**

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