

A Close Encounter with Pirates

By Art Pine

Chesapeake Area Professional Captain Association's (CAPCA) delivery captains encounter all sorts of unusual developments as they ferry vessels from one port to another, but this harrowing tale certainly stands out.

Captain Ursula Skagen and her husband, Dane, also a licensed captain, were delivering a 40-foot Valiant, from Bocas del Toro, Panama, to Marathon, FL, earlier this year when they were overtaken by four skiff-loads of pirates.

The incident occurred 75 miles northeast of the Nicaraguan coast. The Skagens were rounding Capo Gracias a Dios, heading into deep water after sailing out of their way to avoid the expanse of shoals nearer the coast. A small fishing skiff carrying three or four young men motored by, the occupants smiled and waved, and the Skagens, trying to be friendly, smiled back and tossed them a pineapple and a six-pack

of beer. Another boat came by, and they chatted with its crew. But the vessel couldn't match the Valiant's 8.5-knot speed.

Then came four larger boats loaded with some 30 men. While three of the boats kept pace several yards away, one crew member came alongside and boarded the Valiant. One of them clearly had a knife, which he kept tapping on the pedestal. The Skagens, unarmed, decided there was no way they could ward off the pirate crews.

The Skagens kept sailing while the pirates turned off the Valiant's single sideband and VHF radios and tore through the lockers and compartments, apparently searching for drugs and weapons. Finding none, the desperados decided to call it a day, pocketed some stolen gear, and started to leave.

"They knew what they were looking for, and we didn't have it," Ursula says. Their *jefe*, who spoke fluent English,



Dane Skagen

suggested straight-facedly that they all shake hands "on our business deal," and the crew reboarded its own boat and motored back toward the Nicaraguan coast. Everyone waved.

Ursula, who has logged 35,000 miles of passages on her own boats during the past couple of decades and co-owns (with Dane) her own international delivery service, says the couple learned some valuable lessons from their experience. Chief among them is to stay way off the Nicaraguan coast.

Both Skagens hold 50-ton near coastal master's licenses with endorsements for auxiliary sail and towing. Find them at usdeliverycaptain.com.

Schooner Virginia: A Platform for Teaching Youth

Sailing the waters of Norfolk Harbor, the Schooner *Virginia* has been filled with students learning about science, math, maritime history, and more, through educational programs run by Norfolk's Sail Nauticus.

"Our mission is to introduce as many local and regional youths to sailing as we possibly can through this vessel. Focusing on at-risk youths, we provide an opportunity for kids that otherwise might not

have a chance to participate in this type of activity. The schooner is a wonderful platform for teaching Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM), teamwork, and expanding personal limits," says K.C. Fullmer, sailing director at Sail Nauticus (sailnauticus.org), which is entrusted with administering onboard educational sailing programs by the City of Norfolk. "This vessel allows us to open up the scope of what we do and ultimately reach out to bigger groups than we can accommodate on our fleet of Harbor 20s."

In June the *Virginia* led the Harborfest parade, which kicked-off Norfolk's annual free, waterfront maritime festival. School children and Nauticus partners (other area non-profit organizations that work with at-risk youth) were

aboard to enjoy the ride and festivities. In addition to its regular camp partners, this summer *Virginia* also welcomed aboard Camp Trident students.

Camp Trident is a Cape Charles-based non-profit (camptrident.com) run by individuals with military training, and provides challenging outdoor experiences for boys ages 13-17. "Our day on the schooner was a wonderful intersection of local availability and the missions of our two organizations," says Camp Trident founding director Mia Guinan. "The schooner staff was very welcoming and began coaching our kids right away, using teamwork to hoist the large sails. The kids were so excited for the opportunity, and it was a phenomenal experience."

The Schooner *Virginia* is a 122-foot replica of a 1917 Virginia Pilot schooner of the same name. It was built in Norfolk between 2002 and 2004 and was originally used by the Virginia Maritime Heritage Foundation as an educational platform. Its working crew is a combination of paid staff and volunteers.



Students from Camp Trident aboard the Schooner Virginia. Photo courtesy Steve Earley/ The Virginian-Pilot