

## **Crewmembers' efforts after the attack**

*Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.*

Executive Officer Chris Peterschmidt had to get his wits about him fast. He was second-in-command on the Cole and he had urgent and competing concerns.

"We had to cut power to those cables. We had to get firefighting foam onto those puddles of gasoline. We had to make sure that all the hatches and temporary bulkheads that we could create were stopping the flooding from progressing into the rest of the ship."

Peterschmidt feared they might still be under attack. He ordered crewmembers near him to break out their weapons and set up a security detail on the main deck. For the next 90 minutes, sailors worked to find, extricate and triage 39 of their most critically wounded shipmates. When they ran out of stretchers, they pulled doors off hinges to get the wounded off the ship. They used the backside of a ladder. They rigged ropes to slide them down to the peer.

They had to stop the spread of damage that threatened to sink the ship, but the Cole's main repair locker was destroyed. It's essentially a tool room stocked with emergency response equipment. Further complicating things, the ship's communication system was down. With more than 50 sailors wounded or missing, the Cole's chain of command was disrupted. Crewmembers started to organize themselves and natural leaders emerged. Lieutenant JG Robert Overturf was one of them.

"We had people taking care of business. People took it upon themselves because they didn't need anybody to tell them what to do."

Runners began to carry messages to and from repair lockers and between the ship's officers. For three days, crewmembers worked around the clock to shore up the ship and keep it from sinking.

Their efforts were paying off. Peterschmidt as well as the Cole's Captain Kirk Lippold felt they had made serious headway in stabilizing the ship. Engineers got one of the generators to work. They were successfully pumping water out of flooded spaces. Peterschmidt and Lippold ordered some of the crew to sleep.

Then, a call comes out: "Flooding! Flooding! Flooding! We have got flooding!"

The one surviving generator had stopped working. Power to the ship was cut. Pumps shut down and water rushed in. Peterschmidt remembers.

"All the progress we had made in the two days beforehand almost all but evaporated. In our minds, [we were] losing the ship. You had to put your hand against the wall that had water on the other side, feel around to find those cracks that were now developing and then plug them in the dark knowing if that bulkhead that you had your hands against gives way, you would not have much chance of survival."

The Cole's last engine room was filling with water. Peterschmidt ordered a bucket brigade. Crewmembers waded into flooded compartments to find and plug cracks. Crewmembers determined there was a crack in the shaft seal between a room known as Aux 2 which was completely flooded and Main Engine Room 2. They used anything they could to plug the crack.

But the water kept coming and the small portable pumps they had didn't have the power to force the water all the way up and out of the engine room. Peterschmidt used the one cell phone on board to call Commodore Jim Hanna who was coordinating the U.S. Military's rescue response.

"I was trying to articulate and describe our situation. He had asked me point blank, 'Are you losing the ship?' And [I said] the words for the first time, 'Yes, we are at risk of losing the ship in a matter of hours.'"

Senior officials debated ordering the crew off the ship but Peterschmidt argued against it. To allow the Cole to sink to the bottom of the harbor will be to concede defeat and to fail their missing and wounded shipmates. Instead, they decided to do what seems unthinkable. On a ship that was sinking because of a hole in its side, they decided to make a second hole just above the water line.

It was risky. Sparks from the torch could ignite fuel in the water. Chris Regal, Hull Technician Second Class, volunteered to burn the hole.

A fire did not start and crews immediately ran the portable pump's hose through the new hole. The pump began to expel water off the side of the ship, and the water level held steady. Regal climbed out of Main Engine Room 2 and sat on the deck. An officer handed him something he will never forget, a cold drink and his first hot meal in three days: a Chili-Mac.

Nineteen days after the Cole was attacked, four Yemeni tugboats towed the ship out of Aden's harbor. For the ship's crew, it was a victory born out of tragedy. They had resolved that the world would not see a U.S. Navy destroyer sink to the bottom of Aden's harbor.

The Cole was ultimately placed onto a heavy lift ship and transported to Pascagoula, Mississippi, where it was restored to full working order and redeployed in 2003.

*– Reported by Jordana Gustafson for America Abroad*