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Amendment 1, U.S. Constitution, Dec. 15, 1791

KIDNAPPED OFF NIGERIA – AN AMERICAN SHIP CAPTAIN UNVEILS THE TRUTH

By Rob Almeida, G-Captain, April 4, 2014



Images courtesy Capt Wren Thomas

Surrounded by rolling cornfields, Sidney, Illinois is a sleepy mid-western town with a population hovering just above 1,000. Captain Wren Thomas III grew up on a farm here, about as far away from the ocean as one can be in the United States.

Much farther away still was a drug-filled pirate lair in the swamps of Nigeria that 30 years later, he would find himself in as an unwilling guest.

This is His Story.

Captain Thomas yearned for a different lifestyle than that of a farmer in the mid-west. "Two weeks after graduating high school in 1984, I found myself swabbing the deck on board the Arcemont Tide, a supply boat owned by Tidewater Marine providing services to the jack-up rig, Glomar High Island IV."

Wren quickly discovered the Captain onboard was difficult and demanding, but he was lucky to have a great Mate.

Tony, an Italian from Boston, taught the young mid-westerner everything he needed to know, though "if I didn't know, then it was certainly taught by my screaming Captain."

As was common for mariners of his day, Captain Thomas found himself switching companies regularly. The incentive at the time was often \$10, which was a big raise at the time, especially to a man with a wife and son.

In less than five years, he became a skilled mariner, having worked for Tidewater, NICOR, and Delmar Oil and Gas. In February of 1989, he changed course and found himself at the gates of Marine Corps Recruiting Depot, San Diego.

After nearly 2 years as a grunt, Captain Thomas was honorably discharged a bit earlier than planned due to family medical reasons. He decided to return to the maritime profession, moving his family back to Louisiana for a job with Delmar Offshore. Soon after, he earned his first USCG license.

In the years to follow, Captain Thomas worked for a number of different offshore vessel owners on board supply boats, anchor handling boats, jack-up boats, survey boats, research vessels, ROV boats and frac boats.

In May 2007, he left Hornbeck in favor of a position at Edison Chouest (ECO), a company which at the time, had new boats and better accommodations. Best of all, they provided their crews a cook.

Working Overseas

Shortly after joining ECO, Captain Wren Thomas was transferred to India to work on a frac boat for about a year before delivering the vessel to Brazil.

After the delivery, he was transferred to Nigeria to work on another frac boat.

A year later he requested a transfer to Onne, Nigeria so he could get back to supply boats.

Captain Thomas explains that, "on a supply boat, it's just you and your crew, but on a frac boat it's you, and over a half dozen client personnel. It was stressful to say the least. In Lagos, I learned really quickly that the Master doesn't run the ship and USCG rules and regulations are thrown out the window."

In Nigeria, you play the rules of the crews and clients.

Life in Nigeria was challenging. During his four and a half years working in Onne, every one of the 45-day hitches was a significant challenge, both personally and professionally.

"I run a very tight ship and that worked against me," recalls Captain Thomas.

It was great for the office 8,000 miles away in Louisiana, but for those trying to act in accordance with rules and regulations in Nigeria, it was pure hell. Captain Thomas refused to merely accept the way things were. In return, he was faced with many threats from crews, many arguments with Chevron, many arguments with INTELS port services, with his Nigerian office, and even Nigerian officials.

These concerns were brought to the attention of his home office in Louisiana. They always replied that they would resolve the problem and even gave an assurance that "the problem was taken care of." But it never was.

It was a challenging situation that was impossible to fix or leave. Captain Wren Thomas explains "I tried many times to transfer out, but was always told that things would change, things were taken care of and I was the best of the best that they couldn't afford to transfer me out and lose such a good Master."

Captain Thomas has earned a reputation for excellence. Although his vessel was about 15 years old, it generally considered the nicest and cleanest vessel in Nigeria. He ensured his ship was in better shape than even the 1 year-old boats.

To say it was difficult to run a supply boat with only an American engineer and the rest Nigerians would be an understatement. Working abroad is always a challenge, but Nigeria proved to be one of the hardest environments to

operate in. Crews were notoriously inept, with little concern for the well-being of their vessel. Even the good crew members would actively seek ways to get out of work or ignore rules in favor of their own way of doing things.

On 5 July 2011, Captain Wren Thomas took command of the supply vessel **C-Retriever**. The crew and vessel worked exclusively in support of the Chevron-operated Agbami Field.

The operating pattern was very clear and consistent. The work was routine and Captain Thomas and his crew settled into the predictable schedule. In his entire time on that run, they only deviated once when delivering a borrowed tool back to an ExxonMobil-contracted drillship which was well offshore to the east of Agbami.



PSV C-Retriever. Image via Christian/Shippotting

Attacked

On 22 October 2013, Captain Thomas' day started with a bit more angst than normal. His boat was carrying radioactive materials which meant a lot more paperwork and his ship would be the last to onload at Onne.

At 0845, 15 minutes before the convoy was scheduled to depart from the port, his sailing orders came in, directing him somewhere else besides his normal Agbami run.

"I don't know where the supply boats for those fields were," notes Captain Thomas. "Each field has its own supply vessels. If more are needed they usually hire a boat for what they call a spot job."

Even my Nigerian chief officer and the crew found it strange."

At 0910, the **C-Retriever** was slightly delayed in leaving with the convoy and the Beachmaster announced over VHF Channel 16 the ship's departure and destination "a practice generally avoided to conceal ship's movements. Announcing the location and destination could make the ship easy prey for pirates."

Considering the very real security threats faced by him and his colleagues in Nigeria, this violation of operational security was a daily occurrence and it infuriated him.

"All the people who needed to know that information had the access to gain that information via secure channels," he commented.

After leaving the convoy at "Charlie Charlie," approximately 10 nautical miles past the fairway buoy, the **C-Retriever** was on its own and heading toward its destination to the east of the Agbami Field.

At 0300 the next morning, his ship came under attack and Captain Thomas and most of his crew were soon barricaded inside the Bulk Tank Room, awaiting the inevitable.

Using angle grinders, the pirates slowly cut their way into

the room.

In a futile attempt to avoid capture, Captain Thomas and the Engineer sprayed water at the grinder, eventually electrocuting the pirate using it.

That made them mad.

As soon as the grinder had cut a large enough hole, the pirates began firing 7.62mm rounds from an AK-47 blindly into the room.

Captain Thomas and his engineer looked at each other and soon came to the conclusion that the ricocheting bullets presented a far greater immediate danger than whatever the pirates were intending to do to them.

They shouted at the pirates in an effort to explain their intentions to give up. The pirates understood and the door was opened shortly after.

After profuse apologizing and making up excuses why he threw water on the angle grinder, Captain Thomas was able to gain the trust of the pirates.

The pirates allowed him to gather his malaria pills and a few items of clothing, before he and his engineer were placed aboard a speedboat with six other pirates bound for God-knows-where.

That was the start of an 18-day saga that continues to haunt him to this day.

What sort of training were you given before working in Nigeria?

No special training for Nigeria or Pirates.

Did any of your training include anti-piracy training?

Not really.

Was the fuel theft business discussed directly with you on an official level prior to being assigned to Nigeria?

Yes and No. It's a tough issue that no one wants to address.

What did you know about the fuel theft business prior to working in Nigeria?

Nothing at all.

Now that you've worked in Nigeria, what can you tell me about the fuel theft business?

It's a dangerous situation. People get hurt or killed if they cross the wrong people.

Who is involved in the fuel theft business?

It seems like everyone in Nigeria is involved.

Were there warning signs of things to come? Any close calls?

There were many warning signs. I was threatened many times, but nothing was ever done in response.

Did you have a citadel?

No, we used the Bulk Tank Room, with the engine room to the front of it and the z-drive room to the back of it. The pirates had 2 ways to get to us either through the watertight door dividing the engine room or the emergency escape hatch in the z-drive room. It was easier and more convenient for them to cut through the door to the engine room. When the pirates came through, they were armed with AK-47s and a M-60.

Where did they take you?

When the pirates kidnapped me and the other American, we were immediately taken ashore. For the first week we stayed in the bush further inland and then I talked them into moving us. I told them I was going to die from a heart attack at this location because of the high traffic causing noises. Every time they heard anything, they chambered rounds in their weapons. This is how we existed every night and day. So finally I talked enough sense to them that they moved us to the swamps right off the beach. We were hidden very well in the creeks.

What did they feed you?

Indomie Noodles (ramen noodles) and we got a packet of these every other day. And on the days the Negotiators would make them angry, we wouldn't eat.

How did they treat you?

Horribly. Very inhumane.

They fought with each other the entire time, they would chamber rounds on each other and they would beat each other.

They treated us like animals. It's about as close as a person could get to being a POW. Some of them were particularly cruel to us. The stifling air was filled with smoke from crack and pot the entire time.

I found my training as a Marine kicked in and provided me with survival skills. I knew not to fuck with these people. I did push them as far as I could and then I would back down.

I knew not to piss off a Nigerian. Or worse a Nigerian pirate, or even worse a Nigerian Pirate on drugs. I was surrounded by the last kind.

Did they let you communicate with anyone?

On the 6th day I spoke with my Nigerian Manager and then after my second talk with him, he refused to talk to me.

Did any of the pirates try to befriend you while you were kidnapped?

Yes, one of their community boys (slaves) who cooked for us did. I actually got close to him. He was alone it seemed. Most of the other Nigerians hated him, although he was good friends with the leader. He was very scared and often wanted to sleep on the piece of foam with my Engineer and me. He was like a scared kid. He asked if I wanted some tea. I told him yes then when he got around to it about an hour later I told him I didn't want it, since the caffeine probably wouldn't be good for me. Even this kid could snap and he went completely nuts and told me not to ever make him angry again or I would regret it.

He had Satan in his eyes. I apologized to him and accepted some tea.

Under what circumstances were you released?

We were taken up the river and exchanged after the money was counted. We were given to a team of three Nigerians that were sent by one of the tribal chiefs acting as a 3rd party for ECO.

Tell me what it was like to return home.

I was still running on adrenalin.

I had very little sleep during the 18 days I spent in captivity, and then I was up for about 72 hours while going

through two debriefings. After spending a few hours with my sons, grandsons and wife in Lafayette, I finally slept.

It was difficult not being able to find help or talk to anyone about my experience except friends and family. I felt really bad, felt it was my entire fault, and then it got really bad after I started hearing the lies that were being told to my family.

No one ever offered me an opportunity to visit a doctor or receive any counseling or psychiatric help, let alone to pay for such treatment or meds.

When I got home, I was on my own.

Lisa Hamby with ECO finally & I think in January & decided to ask about my medical condition and wanted to offer to help pay for everything with the demands that I release all my medical records to ECO.

Up until I got help and put on proper meds I wanted to end my life. Every time I was alone in my house, I was trying to figure out which gun I was going to use. When I was driving, I was trying to figure out how I could do it in my truck. I would get so engrossed in wanting to kill myself that I would get dizzy.

I hated what I put everyone through.

Were you debriefed by anyone at ECO? If so, what did they say?

I was in debriefing for at least 5 hours. We started from & went to &. I had made an error (it was a time with the Lat and Lon) in my logbook and they gave me hell about that.

Then, as usual, I started my Chief Officers entry for the next day as he took over about 2330 & 2345. I told them I went to bed at this time and they said how could you be in bed and do the log at the same time?

They pretty much were calling me a liar. What I typically do is write the next date at the top, then I write 0001, Latitude, Longitude, C.O.G, S.O.G. and then let the Chief Officer fill in each.

This is just to get him on the right format. If I didn't do this, I found that they would screw it all up or just wouldn't write anything.

What is the hardest thing you've had to deal with since you have been released?

Putting my family through this & I have a 92 year old grandmother. Not being able to tell my story to all the news agencies that wanted to hear it, the thought that I came really close to killing myself out in the bush and at home, all of the lies and not getting help sooner than what I did.

The VERY BIG THING THAT HURT THE MOST is neither my family nor myself ever hearing from Gary Chouest, the owner of the company I was working for when kidnapped by the Nigerian pirates.

I realize there was a lot going on, but a few words to express that they were doing everything they could to get us home, or even meeting with us upon our release would have been nice.

If you could provide advice to anyone considering working offshore Nigeria, what would it be?

I would never recommend it to anyone. If I did I would tell them to stay in the United States. Or if they go overseas make sure the ship has armed guards and never, ever work in Nigeria.

Are there any policies that should be changed at companies like ECO, or their clients, to help prevent such incidents from happening in the future?

Yes take threats as threats & don't brush off these indicators, because it's a very dangerous environment to work in.

Also, have two American Captains and two American Chief engineers per hitch running at the same time to give additional skill and experience to the vessels.

Of course, armed guards and citadels should be installed. Make sure the vessel is in top condition. We had 2 fire monitors and 1 was broke and both had to be started in the engine room but could be controlled from the wheel house.

We need night vision cameras. If you don't have a citadel, make the wheel house bullet proof along with all exits in the wheelhouse (thick stainless steel with hidden hinges). A citadel should be stocked with radios, food, water, ventilation, satellite phone, panic button, first aid kits, medicines, etc.

How often do kidnappings of westerners occur offshore Nigeria?

It happens often.

Just 2 years before me, two Americans and a Mexican got kidnapped off the C-Endeavour.

About a week before me, one of our newer boats got attacked, but the pirates didn't get on the ship for some reason.

About 6 months ago, one of the Captains on one of our crew boats got poisoned.

Did the policies of Edison Chouest put you in danger that you weren't aware of?

Yes, as there were really no policies. I was threatened many times by past employees (crew members) and these threats fell to deaf ears when I informed the company.

And being in Nigeria, Nigerians follow their own policies. Me, following policies that were in place, added to me getting kidnapped. There was no policy that would put guards on-board while at sea.

What is Edison Chouest's policy with regard to the fuel theft trade?

That's a hard one.

Captains have been caught in the U.S. airports with thousands of dollars and nothing happened.

The **Fast Servant** got shot up and 2 captains beat over the Exxon fuel monitor.

If the company wanted to stop it, they could put the Fuel Tracks back onboard all of their vessels in Nigeria and/or pull all their vessels out of Nigeria if it proves dangerous to do this.

Everyone has always said that the cause of the C-Endeavour's attack was a fuel deal gone bad, that they had sold fuel to two buyers, but only pumped to one of them. In turn, the guy that didn't get the fuel was very angry.

I was told by a Nigerian chief that he was on the bridge when the angry buyer came onboard and threatened the master wanting like one million U.S. dollars to make it all go away. He had the captain on his knees begging for forgiveness on the bridge. Those 2 captains and the Mexican chief engineer were kidnapped for 14 days nearly 2 years ago. The chief engineer is now back in Nigeria and the 2 captains, from what I hear, got brand new vessels in the US Gulf of Mexico.

Has anyone at ECO threatened you in any way if you told your story?

They told me that it wouldn't be in my best interest and that they couldn't stop me but that they were not going to give me their blessing.

Gary Chouest was supposed to call me according to my manager to talk to me about it and never did.

I was begging to talk, as this is what my Doctors were saying I needed to do to help me get over this. The best thing is to always talk and to stop it from living rent free in your head.

Why was this a hush-hush situation? The reason I ask is because if I were ever captured, I would definitely want everyone in the world to know.

To be blunt, ECO didn't want the world to know they screwed up again and still, two years after the **C-Endeavor** incident, the vessels had not been made any safer.

We were told that it would be in everyone's best interest not to talk and I took this as a threat.

I spent 18 days in Nigerian swamps because of threats. So I thought it best not to push my luck on ignoring threats. My office, in their own way, said we can't stop you from talking, but you are not getting our blessing nor do we recommend that you do it.

How have Edison Chouest's policies changed following your release?

From people I have talked to recently, ECO really hasn't done much as far as policies go. I have heard they have added some safety equipment, but in my opinion it isn't enough.

What they have done exactly, I'm not sure. And of course, I have to think of security for the vessels still over there. I wouldn't want to say too much.

I do know there are no guards on board. There is no bulletproof glass and the watertight doors can still be penetrated.

Conclusion – Where to go from here?

Given this brutally honest assessment, Captain Wren Thomas has exposed the dangers facing all mariners operating in the region. This perilous situation, which has already seen Americans kidnapped by Nigerian pirates, is erupting in a region filled with illegal activity ranging from fuel theft, corruption, and unscrupulous business deals.

Companies profiting from the rich Nigerian oil market have an obligation to protect those working for them and this account should serve as a call to action for mariners, owners and field operators alike to heed the lessons learned and take corrective action.