

The Surprising New Science of Running

June/July 2010 | Volume 19 | Number 5

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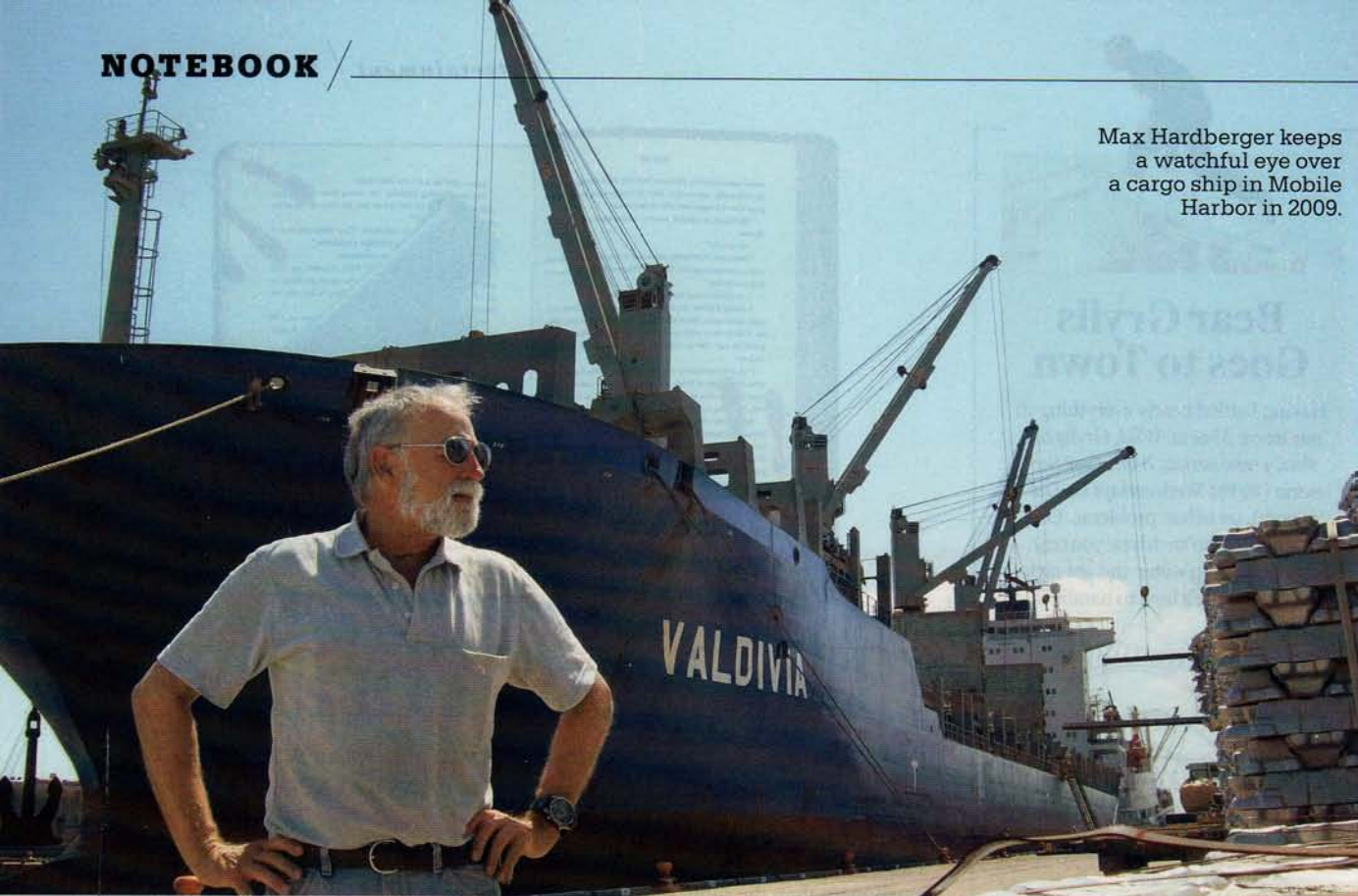
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Max Hardberger keeps a watchful eye over a cargo ship in Mobile Harbor in 2009.



MY LIFE AS A...

# High-Seas Repo Man

NEED TO SNEAK A 10,000-TON SHIP OUT OF A THIRD-WORLD PORT WITHOUT A SECURITY CLEARANCE? WE'VE GOT YOUR MAN.

as told to EMILY MATCHAR

**M**AX HARDBERGER HAS worked variously as a pilot, a high school teacher, a maritime lawyer, and a marine surveyor. But it's his 20 years recovering and repossessing ships and aircraft — the last eight of them as head of his New Orleans-based company, Vessel Extractions — that we were curious about. Here's his story in his words:

THOSE SOMALI PIRATES, they're crude. Sophisticated pirates, the ones I usually deal with, don't go onboard with guns — they just wait until the ship goes into port, bribe a local judge to seize it for a bogus debt, then have it sold to one of their buddies at a fraudulent judicial auction. This happens all the time in Central and South America and the Caribbean. It's a great scam.

I do what I call "extractions" of these seized ships. I'll come into town surreptitiously, get a hotel some dis-

tance from the port, and surveil the ship. Sometimes I go onboard pretending to be a buyer or a port official to determine whether the engines can be started or whether we'll need a tugboat. Then I've got to figure out how to sneak the ship out of port without a clearance — the piece of paper stating that

Hardberger's next target: Somali pirates



the ship is leaving legally and with the port's permission. Sometimes it's easy. Sometimes it's pretty dicey.

My fee is based on three things: the value of the vessel, the amount of time necessary to get it out, and the situation we face onboard. An "opposed extraction" — when there's a guard or an opposition crew onboard — could cost the ship owner \$100,000 or more.

There are no rules in this business. You've got to be forceful, aggressive, and quite often devious. You have to be able to lie with a straight face. I never carry weapons on extractions, and I'll turn down a case if it will require violence against the crew or the guards. Somali pirates are a different story, but for repo jobs, I use only trickery.

My scariest extraction was of a ship called the Maya Express during the 2004 revolution in Haiti. The ship's owner had died and the boat had been left without management in Rio Haina, the Dominican Republic. Then this American guy stole the ship and took it to Miragoâne, Haiti, where he bribed a judge from a nearby village to seize it and sell it to him at auction. Legally, once a ship has gone through a judicial sale, the past doesn't matter. In Haiti you can seize a million-dollar ship by going to a mud-hut court that doesn't even keep records; a lot of the justices can't even write.

I was sent to Miragoâne by the

FROM TOP: COURTESY MAX HARDBERGER; VERONIQUE DE VIGUERIS/GETTY IMAGES REPORTAGE

ship's mortgage company. It's a very small port, very poor, and it's one of the best places to hide a ship because the local authorities are totally corrupt.

The Maya Express — 10,000 tons, 650 feet long, and about 10 stories high — was tied up to the dock with two anchors out and two Dominicans onboard as guards. I had my Haitian friend Roger — he's an interesting fellow, makes a living arranging cock-fights — take me out to the ship, where I told the guards I was there to inspect it on behalf of a buyer. I could tell just from looking at the engine room that we'd need a tugboat. If we could just get it into international waters — 12 miles out — without getting stopped by the authorities, we'd be free. Then I made a deal with the captain of a Russian ship in the harbor: For \$400 he'd let me recon the operation from his wheelhouse.

So the tug came in, with a crew. The crew started cutting the anchor chains with a torch, and, man, it lit up the entire bay. Haitians were running down from the hills to see what was going on, but I'd hired a couple of off-duty policemen from Port-au-Prince to let them on the dock but not let them back off. That's how we were able to keep people from telling the town police what was going on.

I thought it was going to take half an hour to cut the chains, but it took two hours. Ronald, my Haitian fixer, was telling me by radio that the Haitians on the dock were yelling and carrying on and that he didn't know if the off-duty cops could keep them at bay much longer. They had automatic weapons, but I'd told them not to hurt anybody. The fear was that (a) the cops would let the people go get the police, or (b) the cops would get overexcited and shoot someone. Then the tug radioed to say, "Okay, we're pulling her out." Suddenly I saw the ship turn and realized she was going to go up on the rocky coast. I said, "Oh, my God, she's gonna go aground!"

I knew that the moment she went aground the jig would be up, so I decided I was going to jump in the water and swim to shore. I'd try to make my way to the mountains and hide out until dawn, then catch a *tap-tap* [a Haitian taxi] to Port-au-Prince in the morning. It's pretty dicey for a white man to walk through Haiti in the middle of the night — and this was during the Rebellion, so the roads were full of bandits — but I was going to do it. I figured there was a 20, 30 percent chance of me getting out; it was a full moon, and my white face would have shown up pretty well. My heart was pounding like crazy. I was thinking about what it was going to be like for my poor children without a father. I had already started to throw my leg over the rail when I looked up and saw the Maya Express turning broadside, away from the rocks. I just put my head down and said, "Thank God."

We took the ship to the Bahamas, because

it's one of those jurisdictions that respects the mortgagee's rights. The ship went to auction, and the American had to buy it legitimately. He changed its name. She's at the bottom of the ocean now. She was illegally carrying a cargo off the coast of Colombia in 2006 and sank. Two men died.

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED SHIPS. GROWING UP, I was crazy about adventure books, especially C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower series. I tried to run away to sea when I was 16, but the Seamen's Union wouldn't have me because I didn't have my parents' permission.

During and after college, I worked as a deckhand on a boat carrying supplies to the offshore oil rigs in the Gulf. While I was doing that, I used my sea time to earn a captain's



Harberger (far left) and some of his crew aboard the Erika, during his first trip to Miragoâne, Haiti

license, and when the oil fields dried up, I eventually went to Miami to be a ship captain. I put my little rowboat in the back of my truck and drove from Louisiana, 16 straight hours. When I got there I started rowing up and down the Miami River, and whenever I came to a ship I went aboard and asked them if they needed a deckhand. I served on various Haitian-owned ships, then got hired as captain on a tired old freighter with a mutinous crew and a big crack in the side.

I did my first real extraction in 1991. I was in Miami working as a port captain — that's the guy who travels around and meets the ships in their ports to arrange for loading and unloading — when one of my company's ships, the Patric M., was seized, and the ship's captain put in jail. So the company's financial officer gave me \$140,000 in cash and sent me down to Puerto Cabello, Venezuela.

The judge there had been bribed and was going to hand the ship over to another company with no legal process, so we decided to

sneak the ship out of port without a clearance. We paid off the guard to take a vacation. We paid off the pilot who controls ships in the port. He was going to make a radio announcement that night on a station all ships could hear — in code, so no one else could understand it — to let us know the coast was clear: "Nepo, Nepo, the girls are waiting for you in the Cafe Americano." I crawled under the port gate and sneaked onto the ship.

We cut the dock lines and were drifting in the channel. But the engine wouldn't start, and we were going to hit the rocks. Thoughts of Venezuelan prisons were going through my head, but at the very last minute, last gasp, the engine started. We steamed straight for international waters. As soon as we got there, we opened the whiskey.

MY COMPANY HAS A NEW DIVISION called Shiprotek. I'm taking a team of ex-military guys to ride onboard ships going up the coast of Somalia and kill pirates. Well, I shouldn't say that — our aim is to scare them off, but our *job* is to protect the ship, whatever it takes. We'll have one sniper with a Bushmaster .50-caliber rifle, and the rest of us will have AK-47s. There's a chance that if we're unable to repel the pirates, they'll kill us.

I don't do this for the adrenaline rush. If that's all I wanted, I'd go do motocross or something. I do this because I hate to see pirates get ships. At the same time, I've come close to dying so many times I can't remember them all. Landed in a tree while skydiving. Almost got dragged out of a car by a Haitian mob. One time my roommate's girlfriend tried to stab me. I had an engine fire while flying a single-engine plane over the jungle in Mexico. I managed to land at the Chetumal airport and leaped out of the plane screaming, "Not yet, my God, not yet!" ■