

STATEMENT OF DAVID W. HEINDEL

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ON BEHALF OF

American Maritime Officers
International Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots
Marine Engineers Beneficial Association
Maritime Trades Department (AFL-CIO)
Seafarers International Union
Transportation Trades Department (AFL-CIO)

BEFORE THE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

COAST GUARD & MARITIME TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE

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Thank you Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal and the members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing. My name is David Heindel, and I am the President of the Seafarers International Union (SIU) and the Maritime Trades Department (AFL-CIO). I went to sea in 1973 after graduating from the SIU's entry-level mariners' program and sailed aboard deep-sea vessels as a member of the engine department for nearly a decade before coming ashore to serve the union in a variety of capacities. On behalf of the SIU and the rest of maritime labor, we are pleased to offer this testimony to Congress. Collectively, we represent the crews of the U.S.-flag vessels that have been attacked, to date, in the Red Sea.

The recent attacks on international and U.S.-flag shipping in the Ban el-Mandeb Strait of the Red Sea have disrupted international commerce and represent the greatest combat threat to the United States Merchant Marine since the Vietnam War.

The men and women of the United States Merchant Marine are no strangers to armed conflict. The Merchant Marine dates its birth to 1775, when Jeremiah O'Brien took control of the Unity sloop, and captured HMS Margaretta in the Battle of Machias. Since then, in every major American conflict, the Merchant Marine has played its role as America's fourth arm of defense. During World War II, nearly 10,000 merchant mariners gave their lives to deliver the goods that kept our allies and our armed forces in the fight for freedom in Europe. Most recently, American commercial ships carried most of the sustainment cargo needed during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The attacks against shipping in the Red Sea have highlighted what has long been a fact of life for the American mariner – these are essential, dangerous jobs, that may require sailing into harm's way.

American merchant mariners have learned many hard lessons over the years when it comes to dealing with armed conflict. We have had to learn to respond to attacks from armed privateers and commerce raiders. We've navigated through mined harbors and rivers. We've braved torpedoes fired from invisible submarines. We've dealt with attempted hijackings, boarding by pirates and terrorist attacks in port. The attacks in the Red Sea represent some of the most technologically sophisticated threats we have ever faced. Attack drones armed with explosive devices, anti-ship cruise missiles and anti-ship ballistic missiles have all been employed against ships transiting the Red Sea.

We wish to thank the President and Secretary of Defense, the United States Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), the United States Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and the other relevant components of the United States military for their efforts to date, that have successfully protected U.S.-flag merchant shipping in the region. Despite the dozens of attacks launched by the Houthi rebels, every U.S.-flag ship that has transited the Red Sea has done so safely and without loss of life. We are also grateful to Maritime Administrator Ann Phillips and the rest of the Maritime Administration (MARAD) staff for their strenuous support of our mariners during these illegal attacks.

The impact of these attacks on the global international supply chain has been significant. Several international carriers have chosen to divert their vessels from the Red Sea and Suez

Canal approaches and instead send those vessels around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, adding nearly two weeks transit times to vessel voyages as well as sometimes sending shipping into areas of known pirate activity. Increased transit times, coupled with the increased cost of insurance has had a major impact on operations. The Red Sea accounts for 25% of the world's container shipping miles. We have seen a 70% reduction in ship transits and a 50% reduction in cargo moving through the region. Not since the Second World War has there been such prolonged, indiscriminate targeting of merchant shipping and as the crisis continues, impacts are likely to widen. Given the importance of the Red Sea on the Suez Canal route between Asia and Southern Europe – and more importantly, the United States - it is paramount that access to these critical shipping lanes remain open.

As noted, thanks to the significant support from the combatant commands in the region, no U.S.-flag ship has been hit by a successful attack from Yemen, and we have not yet lost a civilian mariner. We, along with the rest of America, mourn the loss at sea of two U.S. Navy personnel engaged in special operations to interdict weapons deliveries to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. To date, we have not seen any appreciable impact on mariner willingness to accept jobs on vessels heading into the combat zone, and to date we have not had a ship fail to sail on time because of a lack of crew due to these attacks. It is our goal to ensure that every U.S.-flag ship that is called upon sails on-time and with a full complement, as has been our long-standing tradition.

Our ships are not combat vessels, and they are not capable, alone, of repelling attacks from drones and anti-ship missiles. We are totally reliant on the United States Navy and our allies to protect all U.S-flag ships transiting the war-like zone. By long-standing practice, we have coordinated with TRANSCOM, MARAD and the Military Sealift Command (MSC) to provide on-going information, best practices, and critical information necessary to ensure safe passage in these areas. Thanks to this coordination, the shipping companies and labor organizations responsible for the vessels and their crew have access to critical situational updates from the relevant sources in the region.

In a recent letter to General Jacqueline Van Ovost, commander of TRANSCOM, maritime labor noted the critical importance of “continued cooperation and information sharing, to ensure that our vessels and their crews have all the tools needed to ensure safe transits of the area. Especially critical are secure communication links between vessels transiting the Red Sea and the naval vessels deployed in the area to deter and defend against Houthi attacks,” and specifically asked for continued communication, “...whether this is in the form of specialized equipment, U.S. naval officers from the [Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping] NCAGS Shipping Control Teams, U.S. civilian mariners with the proper security clearance and COMSEC certification, or other naval liaisons being embedded on the vessels[.]” In response, TRANSCOM informed us that MSC would be sending additional personnel to augment the Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping (NCAGS), 5th Fleet/NAVCENT Maritime Operations Center, to enhance the flow of information between our ships and the combatant commands in the region.

Traditionally, mariners who have been sent into active combat zones have been entitled to hazard pay. We are working with our ship operators to ensure that this past practice is

implemented across the U.S.-flag fleet. So far, we have had a number of good conversations with our ship operators and we are confident that our members will receive a small premium for the additional risks they are taking while these attacks continue. However, I am convinced that every mariner sailing in that region would say the small premium they are receiving is nowhere near worth the risk of facing indiscriminate missile drone and rocket attacks reigning down in their workplace and would prefer to reroute around Africa than transit the conflicted region, in the absence of a need to deliver an essential cargo to the area in question. It is important to note, again, that we have had no issues crewing vessels heading into the Red Sea because of these attacks so far, but should the existing global conflict continue, non-essential transits of a war zone may have a detrimental effect on the maritime industry's ability to recruit and retain mariners in the future.

This fact highlights one of the messages we have been communicating to Congress for decades – the continued need for a United States Merchant Marine, crewed by American citizens, that can carry a significant portion of the waterborne commerce of the United States, as well as serve as a naval auxiliary and defense asset in times of national emergency or armed conflict. The United States Merchant Marine ensures that our nation has a reliable, dependable and loyal maritime transportation system, and that is why we continue to advocate for programs like the Maritime Security Program (MSP), Tanker Security Program (TSP), cargo preference and the Jones Act, all of which ensure peacetime jobs and infrastructure so that the ships, mariners, intermodal networks and experience we need to safeguard our economic security are there when we need them. To our knowledge, the U.S.-flag ships that have been attacked in the region have all been either MSP enrolled vessels or MSC civilian-mariner crewed vessels. This reinforces what we have been telling Congress and the Administration for years, namely, that continued support for the United States Merchant Marine is critical to American national, economic and homeland security.

Finally, maritime labor is concerned about the level of information that has been made available publicly regarding these incidents. Modern technology has made a wealth of information available to the public in a way that is far more accessible than it ever has been before. This includes vital information like ship locations, registration data, and even things like transit speed and destinations. Since the start of these attacks last November, there have been alarming breeches of operational security, including disclosure of vessel schedules, routes and other information regarding transits through the Red Sea. This information has been released in almost real time. The public dissemination of this kind of information, which can easily be rendered into actionable intelligence by the rebels in Yemen, is dangerous, and we would ask those in the press, whether professional or amateur, those on social media and elsewhere to remember one of the axioms of the Merchant Marine: “Loose lips sink ships.”

The United States Merchant Marine is proud of our record over the last quarter of a millennium. We have operated side-by-side with the United States military in virtually every conflict in the history of the United States. We provide the materiel and supplies to the warfighter and they, in turn, have protected our vessels and crews as we sail into harm's way. While the current situation involves the Houthi rebels in Yemen, we may well face in the future more sophisticated adversaries. The experience we are gaining now has demonstrated to the U.S. citizen mariners who are in harm's way that U.S. naval and other military personnel stand

with them and will continue to do so. Working together again has strengthened the bond between the Merchant Marine and the military, and we hope our success will deter our adversaries from taking unwise action against American shipping. The efforts taken so far to protect our vessels in the region have demonstrated the United States is committed to protecting its shipping and keeping the sea lanes open, and we hope this will incentivize other carriers to put their vessels under the U.S.-flag and use American citizen mariners, as has happened in past conflicts.

Our members aboard ship and our organizations ashore are committed to working with Congress, the Administration, and the Armed Forces to continue doing what has been our traditional mission – to deliver the goods, in peace and in war, as we have since 1775.

Thank you for holding this hearing on the vital topic, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.