

SECURITY WHILE CRUISING

by Judy and John Gill

When long range cruising, your boat becomes your home. Naturally, you have many more valuable items aboard than normal weekend or local boaters might have, such as: Extra cash, electronics (both household and navigational), jewelry, computers, etc.

You have a beautiful yacht which to most people living ashore looks very expensive, therefor presenting an attractive invitation to area criminals. Fortunately the incidence of actual piracy is extremely rare, but thievery and vandalism can be a problem. In many boating areas, those living near the shoreline are among the poor, especially in industrial areas. Some of these areas may be located just a little ways from shore and where they may not be noticed from the water, but where a nearby quiet anchorage is easily observed and accessible from land.

The key to security is prevention and minimizing the risk of theft. When cruising in unfamiliar areas which is typical for those engaged in long range cruising such as the America's Great Loop Cruise, select marinas and anchorage's which are recommended in the guide books. Don't tie up to docks, piers, barges, etc. in remote areas or unsafe parts of town. If it doesn't look safe, it probably isn't. Rehearse with your crew what to do if you think a threat is possible and consider moving elsewhere if you can.

The first and perhaps most important way to minimize the risk of a robbery is making sure that you have the best possible locks to secure your boat. And, that you *always* use them whenever you are away from your boat and even when aboard after dark. This includes hatches as well as cabin doors (it makes little sense to lock the doors and leave the hatches open as they provide easy ingress). The best locks are made of stainless steel and have tube type keys. Combination locks are hard to pick, but you must take care to set the numbers to the same group when locked (0000) so that only those numbers will become tarnished and not give the thief the real combination. Brass and bronze locks look great and weather well, but these metals are soft and easily cut or sawed through quickly. Make sure that the lock's latching mechanism is not spring loaded and easily opened by inserting a piece of thin plastic like a credit card.

According to most law enforcement officers, there are three things that criminals try to avoid: **TIME** - the longer it takes them, the more apt they are to get caught. **LIGHT** - they do not want to be seen and possibly identified. **NOISE** - they try to avoid alarm systems and/or calling attention to themselves by making noise. Following these premises, boaters can minimize their risk by leaving on a couple of lights (use timers for 110 volt lamps) when away from your boat at night. Outside lights are even more effective in deterring crime as well as being an aid to those living aboard when returning to the boat after dark. Leaving a radio or TV on could also indicate that someone is aboard. Most importantly have good locks which require time and noise to break into the boat.

Long range cruisers, particularly those who enjoy anchoring out should consider installing an alarm and/or outside light system which can also be activated from inside the vessel. The ability to turn on bright lights and sound an alarm - horn or siren (from the

salon or stateroom) may help scare away unwanted intruders. Always make a note of your exact "GPS Lat. Lon." anchorage location (or marina slip number and address). If you need to make a 911 emergency call on your cell phone (or VHF Channel 16), you will be able to give accurate information about the location where immediate help is needed.

One thing that we installed in our boat was a small Brinks® safe on our stateroom counter (through bolted with lock nuts inside the safe) to safeguard valuables like: Cash, credit cards, jewelry, important papers, spare keys, etc.

Here is a good idea for those who carry an EPIRP aboard. If an intruder attempts to board your boat, turn the unit on and know where to hide it quickly in a secure place. Even if you are forced off the vessel or tied up and left aboard, help will soon be on the way to rescue you and/or find your boat.

Additionally, long range cruisers should consider purchasing several vinyl coated chains and/or bicycle locking cables and several really good padlocks. Lock the dinghy to your boat and your outboard motor to either the dinghy or the boat using one or more of these cables with inline combination locks. Carry a couple of extra cables and locks aboard to be able to go from your boat's mid ship and stern cleats to dock cleats and have sufficient locks to padlock both ends. More than one yacht has had its dock lines untied and set adrift by vandals during the night. This was the only threat that was made to our boat, during our 6,724 mile Great Loop Cruise, by a boater and his buddies who had too much to drink. We used our heavy duty bicycle cables to lock our boat to the dock, called the police who came to our boat and took a report - confronted the main culprit, returned and told us that a warning was given and not to worry. With the cable plus locks and police assurance we were able to get a good night's sleep. We also got into the habit of tying the bitter end of our dock lines on the boat instead of on the dock as an added precaution and used the cables and locks if there was any doubt.

A frequently asked question: Should we have a gun aboard? Quite often when people think about security, they conjure up thoughts of pirates climbing aboard in the middle of the night to pillage them (too many horror movies when they were youngsters). These thoughts lead some boaters to consider arming themselves to the teeth by going out and purchasing an arsenal of firearms.

It is true that a gun offers much more protection than a club or a knife, but the decision to carry one aboard should be made only after very careful thought and study. If a firearm is carried aboard, ALL crew members should be well trained in its use, maintenance and storage - including trigger locks. Ammunition must be stored in tightly sealed and saltwater proof containers.

There are two things to consider before keeping a firearm aboard: (1) The First is whether the owner and ALL crew members have already made the decision to kill if necessary! Is everyone confident that they can live with that decision in a millisecond when face to face with an aggressor? (2) The Second is knowing the firearms laws of each State and Country in which you plan to visit (Canada expressly prohibits bringing firearms into their country -- with only a few hunting exceptions). The point is that while you may

still be alive, you may end up having the guns confiscated or worse spend time in prison!

Those not willing to purchase and/or have a gun on board but are uneasy about not having the maximum protection, should know that Flare Guns (visual distress signaling devices) at close range can be Lethal and may be the only weapon needed aboard. (Note that some states and foreign countries require a permit for a flare gun, the same as for any other weapon - so check it out ahead of time.) Many 12 gauge flare guns will also accept a double ott buckshot or a pumpkin shell - although these plastic guns may not be capable of firing more than one shot. Still, as a last resort, a flare gun kept by the master stateroom bunk might give some comfort to those who normally keep a loaded firearm at home.

If all your preventative measures do not prevent a robbery, then the pain and aggravation continues. Most insurance policies require you to report any theft and be able to document what was taken. All jewelry items should be appraised and insured separately for this reason. This is when a very accurate record of each and every item aboard becomes most valuable. You will need the make, model and serial number of each item taken. Items for which you do not have a model or serial number will naturally be in question. If you have a list of everything on your boat, it will be far easier to make your claim that certain items are no longer aboard and therefore have been stolen (keep one list aboard and a duplicate elsewhere). By all means, call the local authorities, make a report and insist on receiving a copy of their report. Even if you know that it may be a waste of time regarding any recovery - your insurance company will probably insist on a police report before paying any claim. It's a fact of life that many jurisdictions do not want to get a bad reputation, particularly if a *transient* boater is the one making the claim!

Remember statistics show that you are safer on your boat than most people are at home on land. Be careful, be vigilant, and by all means have fun - that is what long range cruising is all about!