In My View

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I was very interested to read Dr. Scott Truver’s recent article “Mines and Underwater IEDs in U.S. Ports and Waterways” in the Winter 2008 edition of the *Review*. I was all the more interested because of my own involvement with this issue in the 1980s and early 1990s as part of the Navy’s previous Maritime Defense Zone program along the U.S. East Coast. During that period, I was the mine warfare planning/operations–responsible Naval Reserve officer assigned to Maritime Defense Zone Sector 3, and later Sector New York. Our scope of responsibilities included the ports of New York, New London, and Philadelphia, and while the threat at that time was related to the Cold War and the possibilities of Soviet Spetsnaz or saboteur attack on harbor shipping, many of the issues and challenges remain the same today, with the threat of extremist terrorist attacks.

I basically agree with Dr. Truver’s key points and rationale but feel that not much progress has been made in terms of providing effective, locally available capabilities and resources since the time I was grappling with this issue “way back when.” Part of the problem is the waxing and waning of the Navy’s focus on mine warfare over the years, with changes in budgetary and resource allocations to this challenge. The other part of the problem, though, is the geographic size of our port areas, such as New York/New Jersey, the hydrography and tidal flow of a port with a major freshwater river outflow, and the volume of commercial and recreational ship and boat traffic that such a large port has. During my time we knew that there was little that could be done proactively, that the best we could hope for was a focused, reactive response with whatever resources were locally available until more capable forces could be brought to bear from other locations. We did our best, therefore, to create a contingency plan of cooperation between the Navy (including locally available explosive-ordnance demolition teams), Coast Guard, Army (e.g., Army dive teams), port authority, and local law-enforcement and emergency-response organizations, trying to identify and
utilize what few assets we had in the optimal manner. We were only partially successful.

As an aside, not really detracting from the key messages being conveyed by the author, I would like to point out the difficulty for a hostile swimmer of affixing an explosive charge or limpet mine on the hull of the Staten Island Ferry while it is discharging or loading passengers (see page 107 of Dr. Truver’s article). If you have ever observed how ferry unloading/loading operations are performed, you will note that the ferry crew leaves the propellers turning to hold the ship into its berth, with quite a bit of resultant propeller wash churning the water around the ferry in its slip. This results in an outflow of underwater currents that would effectively deter anyone from attempting to swim up alongside the hull. That is not to say that off-duty ferries in their layup slips wouldn’t be vulnerable to attack, since their propulsion machinery is secured, but in that instance the explosive charge would likely have to be command detonated later, while the ferry is in operation, in order to have the greatest terror impact. Also, even though our nation has made great strides in cleaning up our waterways, any local diver could tell you that underwater navigation around places like Upper or Lower New York Harbor or the Delaware River is problematic at best, even for professionals.

My hope is that warning voices such as Dr. Truver’s will be heard and that long-overdue resources sufficient in capability and availability will finally be provided to our nation’s ports for their protection.

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