

Mass Murder on the High Seas

When video of a grisly shooting on a fishing boat circulated online, one determined investigator went on a quest for justice

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The Attack

ON A CLEAR SEPTEMBER 2012 AFTERNOON in the middle of the Indian Ocean, far from the coast of Somalia, the crew of a traditional Arab boat called a dhow are tending to their fishing nets when four much larger commercial longliners close in. Armed guards on each longliner appear on deck.

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With no chance of escaping and a temperamental engine slowing them down, the twenty or so crew members from the dhow leap into the water as bullets begin to shower the ocean around them. The attacking ships jostle for position, and guards on a second ship take over the shooting. One of the men in the water clammers back aboard the dhow and manages to restart the engine. He tries to flee, but two of the longliners block his path. The other two catch up,

and all four longliners ram the wooden ship to splinters, throwing the man back in the water.



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Pakistani security guards firing AK-47s and Kalashnikovs from one of the longliners pause when they hear the remaining victims crying out in Urdu, a language they understand: "We are not pirates," say the fishers, presumably recognizing they've been mistaken for some of the Somali marauders responsible for more than 780 piracy attacks over the previous four years. At that point, the longliner captain hands over the steering to his first engineer and heads to the deck, grabs a gun from a guard, and shoots at the men in the ocean who are still alive, clinging to wreckage from the dhow.

Were it not for the ten minutes and twenty-six seconds of grainy footage uncovered two years later, in 2014, this violent attack and an earlier one that in total took the lives of as many as thirty-eight fishermen would likely never have come to light. Instead, like most crimes at sea, they would have gone unreported and unpunished, a product of the rampant impunity that exists across the world's oceans—where, as the fates of those victims reveal, it is entirely possible to get away with murder.

Early Discoveries

MONTHS AFTER THE SHOOTING, a Fijian fisherman boarded a boat at the port of Suva, Fiji, and saw the video of the events on a cook's phone. Before long, the video was circulating among crew networks all over the Pacific. In August 2014, a university student in Fiji uploaded the footage, mislabelled as "Fishing vessel fijian crew gettin shot, out side fijian waters," to YouTube. Her cousin, a police officer, had sent it to her; wanting to protect him, the student made up a story that she'd found the video on a stranger's cellphone in a taxi.

She'd hoped the footage would serve as a warning for Fijian fishermen about the risks they faced at sea.

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“It was circulating for a while—really quite horrendously as a snuff video,” says Duncan Copeland, the executive director of TM-Tracking (TMT, formerly Trygg Mat Tracking), a Norway-based nonprofit, referring to a genre of video documenting actual murders that some people watch for entertainment.

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Fijian authorities opened an investigation but quickly determined that the incident had not occurred in their waters and did not involve Fijians. For a few weeks after the video appeared on YouTube, the footage featured in some mainstream media reports and on fisheries forums, but after a while, attention drifted away. With the Fijian investigation closed, Copeland and other staffers at like-minded nonprofits knew that any further inquiry into the video would fall on them.

In October 2014, TMT, which specializes in vessel tracking and intelligence to combat illegal fishing operations and broader fisheries crime, launched a forensic investigation into the video with three goals: identify the vessels captured on camera; determine where they were registered; and, more broadly, identify any countries with potential relevance to the case—the nationalities of ship owners, vessel agents, crews, and victims.

The footage showed three longliners on scene when the shooting took place: the Taiwanese-flagged *Chun I 217* was most prominent; the Seychelles-flagged *Chun I 628* and Chinese-flagged *Liao Yuan Yu 99* were farther from the camera. Figuring out the identity of the fourth ship, on which the video originated, however, was more difficult.

“The first thing we did was take a whole lot of stills from the video and identify some defining features,” Copeland says. The video provided glimpses of the ship but no name, registration number, or other distinguishing features that would make it easily identifiable. But the investigators captured screenshots that showed details like railings, the position of windows, and the design of the trim and painstakingly cross-checked them against images of other fishing vessels.

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“One of the things we’ve done at TMT is build what we believe is the largest repository of information on fishing operations in the world,” says Copeland. That includes tens of thousands of reference images, 3,000 of which were useful

for this case. The team narrowed down the list of potential vessels to 300, and eventually, one emerged as the most likely candidate: the Taiwanese-flagged *Ping Shin 101*.

Working independently from TMT, Human Rights at Sea, a UK-based nonprofit, focused on translating the video footage into English, with help from the US Department of State, revealing that someone with authority, speaking in a mixture of Cantonese and Mandarin—likely the captain—was directing the part of the shooting depicted in the video.

Still, the cumulative efforts of the nonprofits and others left significant questions unanswered: Who were the victims and why were they killed? How many of the longliners in the video were directly involved? And, crucially, who ordered the killings? It would take the work of a private detective turned reality TV star to lead investigators to the answers.

The Detective

WHEN THE VIDEO SURFACED in 2014, Karsten von Hoesslin was working as an expert in hostage and hijacking negotiation for Risk Intelligence, a European consulting firm specializing in maritime risk assessment for governments, insurance companies, the shipping industry, and the oil-and-gas sector. European Union officials asked the firm to look into the video to see if there were any EU connections. There weren't, but von Hoesslin couldn't get the grisly footage out of his mind. Two years later, he finished working with a production company for a National Geographic TV episode on piracy. When the producers learned about the video footage of the shootings, they were eager to follow von Hoesslin's investigation. A new reality TV series, *Lawless Oceans*, emerged, with von Hoesslin as the host.

Von Hoesslin is in his midforties; he's tall and athletic, with brown hair and often a stubble. Born just outside Toronto, he studied the South China Sea for his master's degree in strategic studies, in the course of which he developed an

interest in piracy. He switched to intelligence gathering for his PhD research, learning how to infiltrate criminal networks, but he grew impatient with academia, ultimately abandoning it for real-world work: gathering intelligence, rescuing hostages from hijacked ships, and negotiating ransom payments with pirates.

He was also drawn to cold cases—particularly those involving the high seas, where evidence is notoriously hard to come by—and, in 2016, he began pursuing work as an independent detective, a career move that suited his somewhat maverick tendencies. He liked being in the middle of the action, whether arranging a hostage handover or, in his downtime, skiing deep powder with his avalanche rescue dog, Delphin. He was optimistic, too, believing (perhaps naively) that the *Lawless Oceans* spotlight might lead to justice for the victims he saw in the video. In early 2016, von Hoesslin set out to begin his investigation, the film crew in tow.

A few months later, he reached out to Copeland, hoping to learn more about what TMT had discovered and how his own investigation could complement the organization's efforts. The two men met over beers at a pub in London, England, bonding over their shared Canadian backgrounds and intense interest in the case. By then, TMT and other organizations investigating the case, including Human Rights at Sea and Greenpeace, had established the preliminary intelligence around the footage. What was missing was more evidence: testimonies from witnesses and, perhaps most crucially, a confession from the person who fired the shots.

The Industry

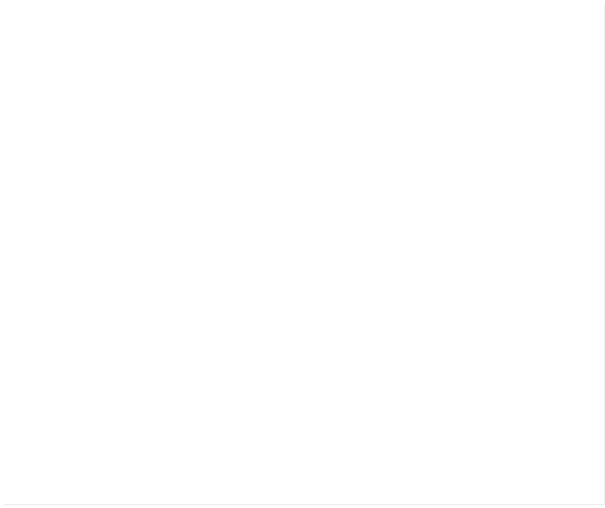
ONE OF THE MOST NOTABLE CLUES from the video was that the four longliners had been in close proximity at the time of the attack, leading experts to suspect they were connected in some way. Separately, investigators from TMT and Greenpeace focused on the longliner most prominent in the footage, the Taiwanese-owned *Chun I 217*, trying to identify its ownership or

operational connections between it and the other longliners. Greenpeace's efforts revealed that the *Chun I 217* had ties to nineteen vessels, the *Ping Shin 101* among them. As they dug further, the Greenpeace investigators determined that the two ships had a common operations office—room 307 in a building in Kaohsiung, Taiwan's largest port, used by a man named Lin Yu-chih, the executive director of both the Taiwan Tuna Association and the Taiwan Deep Sea Tuna Fishery Development Foundation.

Subsequent investigation from von Hoesslin revealed that another longliner visible in the video, the *Chun I 628*, flagged to Seychelles, also had a Taiwanese connection: its owner. For the investigators, these ties to Taiwan were not incidental. At the time, Taiwan was a particularly bad actor in the global fishing industry. Reports of widespread illegal fishing and labour abuse had dogged Taiwan's fishing sector for years. NGOs and other maritime experts believe that, within such a culture, where crime was commonplace, captains felt emboldened to perpetrate more forms of rule breaking, including violence.

Fishing is an economic priority for Taiwan, which has a distant-water fleet (boats fishing beyond its territorial waters) of more than 1,100 vessels—second only to China—that generates around \$1.2 billion (US) in value. That's not including the hundreds of additional vessels like the *Chun I 628* that have Taiwanese ownership but are registered in (or “flagged” to) other countries—most often countries with lax regulations—an arrangement known as flags of convenience. A 2016 Greenpeace report portrayed widespread criminality within Taiwan's fishing industry. The murders depicted in the 2012 video represented just one incident, the report noted, for a fleet operating “almost entirely out of control.”

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There were no laws that set minimum working standards for migrant crews, few inspections of vessels, and little policing of crimes at sea, says Yuton Lee, a Taipei-based oceans campaigner for Greenpeace East Asia. Recently, Taiwan has made efforts to improve the legal framework governing its distant-water fleet, including an action plan for fishing and human rights, but Lee notes that a lack of transparency remains a big issue, and reports of illegal behaviour continue to emerge.

In April this year, nine people working aboard a Taiwanese-owned-and-operated vessel called the *Da Wang* were indicted on charges related to forced labour and physical abuse of twenty Indonesian and Filipino crew members. Prosecutors allege that the workers were beaten and forced to work up to twenty hours a day, their bosses threatening to deduct or withhold wages.

Crew members on another Taiwanese fishing vessel, the *De Chan No. 116*, alleged that last year, the vessel illegally transferred fish onto another vessel, for which Greenpeace investigators found evidence by using tracking data that showed an encounter between the two boats lasting several hours. When they notified Taiwan's Fisheries Agency, they were told the encounter was an approved bait exchange. "A lot of times when we investigate and collect all this evidence and give it to the [Taiwanese] Fisheries Agency, they just say, 'Oh, there's no evidence,' or, 'There's no record,'" says Lee. "Most of these distant-water vessels travel at least half a year—sometimes up to three years—on the

high seas without any kind of monitoring. No one knows what happens if the authorities don't oversee the operation on board.”

When Taiwan's ties to the video footage of the shooting emerged, the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Fisheries Agency told media that the *Chun I 217* was just “passing by” at the time of the shooting and that the victims were likely pirates—a conclusion that maritime experts doubted, with one Greenpeace analyst noting the debris from the boats was not consistent with the type of vessels pirates typically used.

Many of Taiwan's longliners, including the four in the video, operate with Seychelles fishing licences, taking advantage of the island nation's proximity to the Indian Ocean's prime tuna fishing grounds—and its lenient regulations and enforcement.

That's where von Hoesslin, motivated to identify the ship independently, picked up the trail in March 2016. He began by searching the Seychelles fishing licence registry for all Taiwanese-flagged vessels and then searched social media for images of the ships. Through profiles of crew members linked to those images, he pinpointed the *Ping Shin 101* as the vessel he was looking for. Von Hoesslin envisioned meeting up with the ship and coercing the crew to allow him on board so he could sleuth for clues, but that plan collapsed quickly. The ship, he learned, was at the bottom of the sea. It sank in July 2014 under suspicious circumstances.

The Collaborator

ANGELA HUNT WAS WORKING for a shipowner based in Athens, Greece, when von Hoesslin wrote to her, asking about her company's vessel the *Sam Tiger*, a bulk cargo carrier that had rescued the crew of the *Ping Shin 101* when it sank in the Indian Ocean. Von Hoesslin wanted the crew list so he could track down potential witnesses to the shootings in the video, hoping he could use them to determine the identity of *Ping Shin 101*'s captain. Hunt was

reluctant to give that information to a stranger. “I’m one of those really straight and narrow people,” she tells me. But she was intrigued by the case and, eventually, with her boss’s permission, agreed to help.

A few days later, von Hoesslin flew to Athens so they could meet in person. The film crew for *Lawless Oceans* came along, too, which worried von Hoesslin. The director was a hard partier who went on frequent all-night benders; his primary concern was not solving a mass murder, the detective feared, but creating entertaining television. In the end, von Hoesslin ditched the film crew and met Hunt alone at a cafe. They chatted for a while, and then Hunt left to smoke a cigarette, leaving a folder of documents on the table. Inside was the crew list. Von Hoesslin took a picture of it before Hunt returned.

“It was just like the movies,” Hunt says.

Armed with the *Ping Shin 101*’s crew list, von Hoesslin could confirm who was on board the day of the shooting. He began reaching out, hoping that, through the crew members, he’d figure out who the captain had been. Meanwhile, Hunt, who had just returned to work after maternity leave, became obsessed with helping to crack the case. She spent hours of her free time—weekends, nights, her baby’s nap time—researching the *Ping Shin 101*. She even dreamed about the case. She was motivated, too, by the idea of justice for the victims: “To stop that lie that they were pirates,” she says. The exchanges between Hunt and von Hoesslin over WhatsApp, as they bounced ideas off each other for leads, served as a kind of diary of the investigation. With her insider access to the shipping industry, Hunt was a valuable collaborator, knowing how to find vessels that had changed names over time, locate ships at sea, and run background checks on the parent companies using special databases.

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Of all the details they learned about the *Ping Shin 101*, one stood out: the ship had been involved in another—eerily similar—violent incident previously. They found an old damage claim filed by the *Ping Shin 101*, alleging the ship had accidentally rammed another boat in 2010. But video footage von Hoesslin found on YouTube indicated that the incident was actually a malicious and intentional attack, in which the *Ping Shin 101* and two other Taiwanese longliners ganged up on an Indonesian fishing vessel off the coast of Indonesia.

Witnesses

IN MAY 2016, von Hoesslin finally met with one of the *Ping Shin 101*'s former crew members who was on board at the time of the shooting. Aldrin, whose last name is withheld for his protection, was a slender, soft-spoken man from the Philippines who appeared, holding a machine gun, in a Facebook photo taken on board the *Ping Shin 101*.

Aldrin boarded the vessel on March 23, 2011, as a twenty-five-year-old, after having worked for a decade as a deckhand. In his conversations with von Hoesslin, some of which were filmed for *Lawless Oceans*, Aldrin described how a Singapore-based recruiting agency called Step Up Marine Enterprise—which has long been tied to labour abuses like human trafficking and wage theft—promised him around \$350 (US) per month (minus a hefty upfront recruitment and airfare fee). It was less than the average salary in the Philippines, which at the time was roughly \$460 (US) a month. Crewmen like Aldrin worked seven

days a week, often for eighteen hours a day, which amounted to an hourly wage of \$0.65 (US). Crews could be at sea for eighteen months, unable to communicate with their families.

The work was hard and dangerous, with fights sometimes breaking out between crew members. The captain of the *Ping Shin 101*, Aldrin recalled, drank a lot and hit, kicked, or punched crewmen if they made a mistake, such as losing a fish. Aldrin didn't know the captain's name—only his nickname, Captain Hoodlum.

Three months before the murders, in June 2012, the *Ping Shin 101* took aboard two armed Pakistani security guards, hired to protect the vessel against the threat of piracy in the western Indian Ocean. It was a common practice among fishing vessels operating in the region at the height of Somali piracy, between 2010 and 2013.

Aldrin had seen the aftermath of a pirate attack only once before—back in 2000, while working on another fishing boat off the coast of Somalia. The ship was burning, he recalled. He didn't know if anyone survived.

At a hotel room overlooking the sea in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, von Hoesslin and Aldrin sat with a map of the Indian Ocean spread out on the table in front of them. Von Hoesslin asked what Aldrin saw during the incident in the video, and Aldrin described how the longliners had their searchlights on, scanning the ocean for targets. Von Hoesslin was confused. The video showed the attack taking place during daytime.

No, Aldrin said, it was night at the time.

Von Hoesslin struggled to absorb the new information as Aldrin explained: around five days before the shootings captured on the video, there was another attack, just as horrific, on a dhow.

The night of the earlier incident, the crewmen were on deck, fishing in the dark, when the captain ordered them to stop working because there was a pirate vessel nearby. Aldrin and the other crew members ran to the side of the boat to watch as the *Ping Shin 101* and the three other longliners in the area circled the alleged pirate ship and then took turns ramming the dhow.

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One of Aldrin's coworkers, another Filipino named Maximo (last name withheld for protection), whom von Hoesslin later interviewed, heard voices from the crew members who were thrown into the water. "No Somali," they said, trying, it seemed, to indicate that they were not pirates, just as the other victims would days later.

When the *Ping Shin 101* got close, Maximo saw the captain come down from the bridge and call on the two guards to shoot at the men flailing in the water. When the guards hesitated, the captain grabbed one of their machine guns and began firing. At one point, Maximo alleged, the captain returned to the bridge, taking over steering from the chief engineer, and reversed the *Ping Shin 101* over one victim. Once it appeared all of the dhow's crew members had been killed, the four longliners used their searchlights to scan the ocean for survivors. All they found was bodies, drifting amid the wreckage.

Less than a week later, the same four ships repeated the same brutal aggressions against the second dhow in the same fishing area. Aldrin again recounted how he and the *Ping Shin 101*'s other crew members ran to the side

of the vessel to watch as guards on all four longliners shot and killed all of the second dhow's crew members while they struggled desperately in the sea.

Between the two attacks, Aldrin estimated that at least thirty to thirty-four people had been murdered, though other witnesses claimed the death toll could be as high as thirty-eight. Von Hoesslin was horrified. The video had showed only four people killed. "I knew the body count would go up," he admitted during his interview with Aldrin. "But I never, ever, would have imagined thirty people."

Aldrin spoke of the victims as pirates, but von Hoesslin rattled that assumption: "Were they shooting at you?" von Hoesslin asked.

"No," said Aldrin.

"[Y]ou didn't see any guns, and they didn't shoot at you, and they didn't try to hijack your ship," said von Hoesslin, trying to nudge Aldrin toward the logical conclusion: How could the victims have been pirates if they did not pose a threat?

To von Hoesslin, Aldrin seemed like a good guy, if a bit obtuse. In the YouTube video documenting the second attack, he appeared at the very end, standing in a corner, with wild, salt-crusted hair, not smiling. He was a family man, supporting his mother and sister, and even during the interview, four years after the murders, he seemed disturbed by the footage when von Hoesslin played it for him.

The detective asked Aldrin how the crew felt about the events. Aldrin was uncertain. "Mixed," he said. Relieved that they were safe from a potential pirate attack but also sad.

"Because?" von Hoesslin pressed.

“It was people, it was—” Aldrin began.

Von Hoesslin finished the sentence for him: “Because people were getting murdered.”

The Victims

ONE OF THE VIDEO’S central mysteries that von Hoesslin hoped to uncover was the identity of the victims. Despite what many of the witnesses had been told—and what the longliner captains apparently believed—the dhows were not run by Somali pirates. The footage showed a blurry flag aboard the second dhow before it was destroyed. The red, green, and white stripes with an emblem in the middle indicated the ship was potentially from Somaliland but more likely from Iran. Von Hoesslin assumed both dhows were just fishing boats, but the reality, he soon discovered, was far thornier.

Iran’s strict visa controls meant von Hoesslin could not go there himself. Instead, he hired a local to make inquiries in Konarak, a port on the Gulf of Oman and a hub for Iran’s fishing sector. In the city’s main boat-building neighbourhood, the “fixer” met a boat builder named Rahim Bebak, who confirmed that two of his dhows had been missing since 2012: the *Haamdi* and the *Naseri*.

The crews, he said, came mostly from the Balochistan region of Pakistan, just across the border. Again, visa restrictions prevented von Hoesslin from travelling, so he sent the fixer to one village where the majority of the crew had lived. One family had lost three sons. Others had lost husbands, brothers, cousins, nephews. It was there that the fixer discovered a twist: the village was also a major hub on a drug-running route from Afghanistan to Europe. Iranian dhows would smuggle heroin to Kenya and Tanzania, fishing along the way. The heroin would then be packaged in with the catch destined for European markets.

The crew aboard the dhows likely knew they were running drugs, but the new information didn't exonerate their murderers either. The deeper von Hoesslin got, the more he wondered: Is there anyone who's actually innocent here?

The Captain

BY LATE 2016, von Hoesslin had interviewed Aldrin, Maximo, and two other witnesses to the shootings—all former crew members aboard three of the four longliners that participated in the attacks. Maximo remembered being on board the *Ping Shin 101* back in 2010, when the ship rammed the Indonesian fishing vessel. He recounted how that ship and two other longliners repeatedly smashed the smaller boat until it broke apart and sank, and he offered a revelation: the *Ping Shin 101*'s bosun at the time was the same man who went on to captain the ship and repeat the same ruthless tactic against the *Haamdi* and *Naseri* two years later.

The witness testimonies, however, revealed little about the identity of the person heard in the video giving orders to kill—the person von Hoesslin believed was Captain Hoodlum, who appeared in a grainy image on Aldrin's Facebook profile with a tattoo curling up one arm.

Von Hoesslin travelled to Mombasa, Kenya, where, according to Aldrin and another former *Ping Shin 101* crew member, the vessel had made a stop after

the attacks on the dhows. There, two customs officers led him to a room where hundreds of thousands of crew lists from boats that had docked in Mombasa were haphazardly stored. I'll never find this, von Hoesslin thought. Somehow, he landed on an old carbon copy of the crew list, but the ink had faded to the point of invisibility. Back in his hotel room, von Hoesslin put a towel over the document, ironed it, and then dried it using a hair dryer until the paper turned black, revealing the faded lettering—and the passport number, birthdate, and name he needed: the captain of the *Ping Shin 101* at the time of the shootings, thirty-nine-year-old Wang Feng Yu of China.

Von Hoesslin was making strides but still needed to figure out where Wang was and how to catch him. A Chinese detective found out that Wang's family lived in a rural area outside Shanghai. The film crew working for National Geographic TV wanted her to approach Wang and ask him to sign a waiver consenting to appear in the series. Von Hoesslin balked, certain that, if they did that, Wang would disappear without ever confessing, and the entire investigation would be for nothing. Von Hoesslin called up the detective on his own to explain the situation. "Please tell them you can't find him," he said.

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The detective agreed, and *Lawless Oceans* wrapped up filming in late 2016. But von Hoesslin already knew Wang's whereabouts—information he'd gleaned privately from a source at the port in Victoria, the capital of Seychelles. Wang was aboard a Taiwanese-flagged ship, the *Chen Hsing 668*, somewhere in the Indian Ocean. With no plans for a second season of the series materializing,

von Hoesslin would continue tracking down the captain on his own, using the proceeds he'd earned from the show.

He hired the same Chinese detective to call the fishing company Wang was working for, pretending to be a relative asking for a contact number. In January 2017, von Hoesslin called Wang at sea with the help of a translator. He posed as Simon Kars—the fictitious director of operations for a company that escorts ships through parts of the ocean where piracy is a threat—and pretended to recruit Wang for a job as captain aboard one of the escort vessels. It was a tactic von Hoesslin had learned during his PhD studies and later during his surveillance and countersurveillance training—using a cover identity to infiltrate a criminal organization. Based on everything he'd learned from Aldrin and the other witnesses he'd interviewed, von Hoesslin knew Wang was a proud man, and he was convinced that Wang would not miss an opportunity to brag about how he'd defeated pirates.

During the nearly hour-and-a-half-long call with Wang that von Hoesslin recorded, he asked about the captain's experience with pirates. Through the translator, Wang described an incident akin to the one captured in the 2012 video: Wang watched a boat approach on his radar screen, and when it was eight kilometers away, he triggered the ship's alarm and instructed the crew to hide. "Then we approached, and I turned on the spotlight, and then they started to shoot us."

None of the witnesses von Hoesslin had interviewed had indicated that the dhows had attacked—but the detective let Wang continue. "[The security guards] told us we needed to report to the [security] company to see if we could start firing or not, but I didn't care that much, and I started to fire."

A month later, von Hoesslin met Wang in person at his next port of call: Colombo, Sri Lanka. He was still pretending to recruit Wang, but this time, von Hoesslin brought cameras to film the meeting, which Wang consented to.

They met at a hotel. Wang, slender, with close-cropped hair, wore sunglasses, jeans, and a dark blazer, obscuring the dragon and snake tattoos imprinted on his forearms.

In von Hoesslin's hotel room, they had a Skype "interview" with two of von Hoesslin's friends, who posed as directors for the fictional shipping company and outlined the "job description." For a while, they talked about Wang's experience with combat and arms training, and just as von Hoesslin was about to get into the business of the 2012 video, Wang abruptly left the room.

"He went to meet a lady," the translator said, smiling awkwardly when von Hoesslin inquired.

When Wang returned, he was with a woman named Joanna, who wore a zebra-print dress and pink lipstick. She sat quietly on the bed for the duration of the meeting. "This is turning into a fascinating interview," von Hoesslin said, clearly amused, before continuing with his questioning.

"I found this video, and I'd like you to walk me through it," he said, gesturing to the YouTube footage on his laptop. "Remember you told me about this," von Hoesslin added, referring to their earlier call when Wang had confessed to shooting the dhow's crew.

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Wang scrutinized the screen and asked for the vessel numbers of the other longliners. Von Hoesslin identified the ships and asked, “Was the *Chun I 217* also attacking?”

Wang clarified that all four longliners were taking action together. He knew the captain of the *Chun I 217*; he was older, around seventy. They were like brothers.

Von Hoesslin asked about the dhow. “Who were these guys?”

The dhows were smuggling something, said Wang, and described little packages he saw floating amid their wreckage. He believed the packages contained TNT, a powerful explosive substance, but von Hoesslin later learned they likely held heroin.

“And who was shooting these people?” von Hoesslin asked. It was the security guards, said Wang. Hoping for another confession, von Hoesslin prodded him for more, asking the captain if he had to shoot anyone himself.

The question made Wang visibly uncomfortable. After a while, the translator replied, “He seems not to like to answer that.”

The Reveal

That June, von Hoesslin, accompanied by a translator, met Wang again, in a restaurant in Hong Kong. He had a camera hidden in his shirt to film the encounter. At a table by a window, Wang played with the straw in his orange juice while von Hoesslin made small talk. Then he revealed his identity. Through the translator, von Hoesslin explained that he was investigating a case involving Wang. “What I need is for you to cooperate, and then I’ll make sure you get home,” he said.

If Wang was shocked or surprised, he didn't let on, appearing only mildly concerned and perhaps a little confused. "When we were in Sri Lanka, I sensed that you were hiding something," he said, before proclaiming his innocence. But he agreed to cooperate, perhaps because von Hoesslin claimed (falsely) that he was collaborating with the Hong Kong police. They headed up to von Hoesslin's hotel room for questioning. Wang again insisted that he did not take part in the shooting, that he did not order the guards to shoot at the dhow's crew. Von Hoesslin pushed back: that was not the same story as before.

Wang claimed he lied on their phone call back in January to make himself look more appealing for von Hoesslin's pretend job offer. "You trapped me," Wang said. His actions were all in self-defence, he insisted. He remembered that, during the first incident, at night, everything was happening at once. At first, the guards were just shooting in the water, trying to scare the *Haamdi* away. Then one of the other longliners started to chase the dhow, and the *Liao Yuan Yu 99* rammed it, puncturing the bow.

Von Hoesslin pressed Wang for more. Why, if the dhows were not attacking the longliners, did the four vessels kill the crew after the men had leaped into the water? Wang had no answer.

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The detective played the video showing the second attack, on the *Naseri*. Wang moved closer to the laptop, inspecting the footage.

“At that moment our ship was very close to that ship,” he said, noting how the dhow’s crew members were swimming toward the longliners, probably looking for a rescue. He added: “I still firmly believed they were pirates, and we fear pirates very much.”

“But they didn’t have guns,” said von Hoesslin.

Wang admitted the dhows didn’t produce guns. Later, he claimed that the captains of the other longliners were radioing among each other; they told him the dhows were pirates and that they needed the *Ping Shin 101*’s help.

Again, Wang insisted that it was the guards who did the shooting, not him. “My job was just to catch fish,” he said. He was required to report everything to his superiors on land, and they were the ones who authorized—and encouraged—the security guards to shoot and then later tried to put all the blame on him, Wang claimed. (Von Hoesslin’s later attempts to reach businessman Lee Chao Ping, who has ties to Shanghai and Taiwan and is believed to be the owner of the *Ping Shin 101*, were unsuccessful. There was no evidence that he was involved in the killings.)

It was an undeniably flawed system, forcing Wang to rely on his own equally flawed instincts to ascertain a potential threat. In the process, he became the very menace he claimed to have so feared.

Von Hoesslin told Wang he’d be watching him—tracking his movements through his passport—but the reality was more complicated. Lacking law enforcement authority, von Hoesslin could not arrest Wang. Instead, he sent a report to the Chinese federal police, summarizing his evidence against Wang and what he’d uncovered about the attacks, calling attention to the fact that all four captains were Chinese nationals and one of the longliners was flagged to China. Von Hoesslin never received a response.

The Sea

THE 2012 MURDERS were a particularly brutal example of the type of violence that routinely occurs at sea, where the lack of transparency allows all manner of criminal activities to flourish. As fish stocks in the world's oceans decline, competition increases, and boats may take extreme action to protect their revenue, whether with illegal fishing, engaging in organized crime like drug running or forced labour, or attacking vessels perceived as threats. A family member of one of the dhow victims reported to von Hoesslin that, before they were attacked, the *Haamdi* crew had been attempting to fill its nets beside a fish-aggregating device that belonged to the longliners. As the longliners moved in, another witness reported, the *Ping Shin 101*'s bosun had demanded that the dhow crew hand over documentation, but the men on the smaller boat ignored him, and violence ensued, suggesting that all of those deaths may have been the direct result of competition for fish.

The World Bank suggests that almost 90 percent of global marine fish stocks are now fully exploited or overfished. Data on the role of so-called illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is, however, so scarce that policy makers continue to rely on evidence dating back to a 2009 study to define the scale of the problem. More recently, data from Sea around Us, a fisheries data research initiative at the University of British Columbia, indicated that 24 percent of the Pacific Ocean's marine catch is unreported every year, and around 50 percent (3.7 to 7.2 million tonnes) of this unreported catch is illegally traded in international markets. The US International Trade Commission found that nearly 11 percent of the total seafood imports to the United States and over 13 percent of US imports caught at sea in 2019 derived from IUU fishing. In other words, there's a good chance that, as a consumer, you've eaten illegally caught fish.

The Indian Ocean hosts one of the most productive tuna fisheries in the world. And, off the coast of Somalia, where both shootings took place, foreign boats, including the *Ping Shin 101*, have routinely plundered the fish for decades. In the course of his investigation, von Hoesslin learned from witnesses that the *Ping Shin 101* was poaching fish off the coast of Somalia and then claiming the

fish was caught in Seychelles under its Seychelles fishing licence. Von Hoesslin informed the Seychelles police department in 2016, but nothing came of it.

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The surge of piracy attacks that began around 2010 against vessels operating in the region was partly, experts believe, a defensive measure by Somali fishermen to protect their natural resources. After several high-profile hijackings, many of the longliners operating in the western Indian Ocean took on armed guards. Companies formed to supply ships with mercenaries, often hiring former soldiers or guerrillas such as ex-Tamil Tiger fighters from Sri Lanka.

According to David Hammond, the founder and chief executive officer of Human Rights at Sea, the threat of piracy, combined with the availability of security guards accustomed to armed conflict, created a tinderbox for violent confrontations among fishing vessels far from shore.

For Hammond, a culture of violence and rule breaking at sea is inevitable when there's little in the way of accountability or rule of law. Far from land and the norms governing people's actions there, the slipperiness of human nature becomes apparent. "There's good and bad in all of us," Hammond says. "People cross the line when they think they can get away with it."

All told, the murder of unarmed men in the middle of the ocean did not surprise Hammond. "What I am surprised about is that it got to the public light," he says.

The Arrest

ALMOST SIX YEARS after the video of the second shooting appeared on YouTube, authorities in Taiwan arrested Wang on August 22, 2020, when he arrived at that country's southern port of Kaohsiung on the *Indian Star*, a Seychelles-flagged longliner.

Von Hoesslin was surprised: he had assumed Taiwan wouldn't touch the case, and now, suddenly, Wang was in handcuffs. Von Hoesslin reached out to Taiwanese authorities, hoping the interviews he had recorded with witnesses and with Wang himself might convince them that the shootings were not, as Wang still argued, in self-defence but unprovoked attacks. Eventually, von Hoesslin submitted the files and other evidence from his investigation to the Taiwanese authorities.

During his trial, conducted by three judges (Taiwan has no jury system), Wang once again claimed he was acting in self-defence and to protect his crew during a pirate encounter. But the Kaohsiung District Court rejected his defence and, in January 2021, convicted Wang of homicide and violations related to weapons, sentencing him to twenty-six years in prison.

Copeland at TMT applauded the conviction—a rarity in the world of high-seas crime. “This case has haunted me for six to seven years now,” Copeland told me when we spoke soon after Wang's conviction. But he also warned that it was an incomplete prosecution. Copeland believed that Wang, as the captain of the *Ping Shin 101*, deserved punishment, but he was charged with ordering only the four murders depicted in the video, leaving the other potentially thirty-four victims of the two attacks unaccounted for. Also, as von Hoesslin had uncovered during his investigation, Wang and eyewitnesses alleged there were others who played a role in the crime—from the captains of the other longliners who participated in the attacks to the owners of the vessels, who may have learned about the shootings and never reported them.

The apparent holes in the prosecution did not surprise Copeland, who notes that it's exceedingly challenging to investigate and prosecute a crime that takes place on the high seas. He listed the things complicating the jurisdictional tangle: a crime committed in international waters, on a boat flagged to one country, with witnesses and perpetrators often belonging to a bunch of other countries. "You're talking about very complex cases," Copeland said.

In an interview, Hsu Hung-ju of the Kaohsiung District Court, the prosecutor in charge of the case, said there was no evidence to support any criminal liability on the part of the ship owner. As for the other longliners in the video, allegations against them were moot, Hsu said. The fact they were on the scene didn't prove anything—without additional concrete evidence, the prosecutor could not determine if they had participated in the crime.

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Ultimately, von Hoesslin felt ambivalent about the news. By only going after Wang, Taiwan had taken the easiest path, he says. "The harder route is to go after everyone else."

More Cases

VON HOESSLIN now lives in British Columbia, where he works as an avalanche forecaster, ski guide, and technical-rescue instructor. Ever motivated by righting wrongs, he occasionally takes on extra unpaid work as a freelance detective in the outdoor industry, investigating cases where negligence resulted in fatalities.

He has other unsolved cases, too, on his mind: the 2016 beheading of two Canadian men in the Philippines, the 2014 murder of two United Nations workers who were gunned down in Somalia during a mission to investigate the money trail from kidnapping and hijacking ransom payments, and the 2015 disappearance at sea of American fisheries observer Keith Davis, whose case von Hoesslin spent two years investigating.

Time and funding issues aside, von Hoesslin would like to someday go after the captains of the *Chun I 217* and the *Liao Yuan Yu 99*. (The captain of the *Chun I 628*, who, one witness claimed, also fired a gun at the dhow crew, died at sea in March 2013 after accidentally electrocuting himself.) It's his detective mind, von Hoesslin says—it won't stop. "It bugs me that those cases were started and there was a lot of time and headway put in all of them," he says. "It feels like something that needs to be done and no one else is going to do it."

The Appeal

IN THE HOURS listening to and watching the recordings von Hoesslin shared of his interviews with witnesses and Wang Feng Yu, I often wondered how Wang and the other longliner captains could have instigated such vicious attacks. How could they have participated or been complicit in the murders of so many unarmed men?

Last fall, I asked Taiwanese journalist Chi Hui Lin to conduct an interview with Wang on my behalf, hoping he might help answer these questions, but he never responded to the multiple letters Lin sent him in prison.

But Lin Yu-chih, the director of the Taiwan Tuna Association and the owner of the *Chun I 217*, did agree to an interview. Lin is in his seventies and has been in the fisheries sector for more than five decades. A prominent businessman, Lin owns sixteen vessels, which operate around the globe—from the Arctic Ocean to the Indian Ocean—fishing for various species of squid, Pacific saury, toothfish, and tuna.

He spoke openly about the threat to his business operations posed by violence at sea, but contrary to what witnesses told von Hoesslin, Lin denied that the captain or the security guards aboard the *Chun I 217* participated in the shooting. The longliner was just passing by, he said.

At the end of the interview, however, he ventured a guess at the question that had been nagging me: What compelled the longliner captains to attack? The murders, he said, likely resulted from a misunderstanding about whether the people on the dhows were pirates. Perhaps, far out at sea, facing a potential confrontation, moral boundaries grew blurry, he mused, noting the kidnappings, extortions, and financial misery pirates have wreaked on fishing boats in the past. “There are some people who really hate pirates,” he said.

Court documents from Wang’s legal proceedings provide few insights into his psyche, though they hint that life for him has not been particularly easy. The former captain of the *Ping Shin 101* never graduated from high school and worked as a seafarer for many years, but the long absences took their toll on his personal life; Wang was divorced. As a captain, he earned roughly \$1,500 (US) a month, with which he supported his grandparents, parents, and two daughters.

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Wang appealed his conviction from the Kaohsiung District Court, denying that he ordered the security guards aboard the *Ping Shin 101* to shoot. He claimed they communicated with their employer independently, Pakistan-based Bahria Security Systems and Services, via satellite phone and were instructed to shoot to protect the vessel. (The company failed to respond to an interview request for this article.)

In court proceedings, Wang alleged that he saw one of the dhow’s crew members start to climb aboard the *Ping Shin 101*. “In the chaos and panic, I shouted two words: ‘Shoot! Shoot!’” he said. “I am the captain, and I need to make the right decision at the most dangerous and threatening moment to protect thirty crew members’ life.”

The Kaohsiung branch of the Taiwan High Court upheld the lower court’s sentence. Wang filed another appeal with the Supreme Court, which overturned the two lower courts’ decisions in August 2021, allowing Wang a retrial in the high court. The Supreme Court’s judgment cast doubt on whether Wang ordered

the security guards to shoot, arguing that the dialogue heard in the video was too vague to ascertain intent. This past June, the high court ruled that the evidence showed Wang had ordered only one killing instead of four, and it reduced his sentence to thirteen years. The court said it also considered in its new ruling the serious security issues related to the area where the incident occurred. Wang can still appeal.

In the meantime, for advocates, one thing is certain: it would not be the last time that such violence has occurred at sea. Copeland has been hearing accounts from crewmen about captains taking away their phones and passports at the beginning of a trip so they have no ability to document potential crimes or abuse on board fishing vessels. “I have no doubt in my mind that this [violence] happens on a regular basis, but unless you’re on those vessels, you’re not going to see it,” he says.

If Wang’s trial was supposed to be the culmination of a long-fought plea for justice on the high seas, Taiwan’s recent ruling reflects just how elusive that endeavour remains, and to von Hoesslin, it gives an unsettling answer to the question that motivated him in the first place: What happens at sea when no one is watching?

Chi Hui Lin contributed reporting from Taiwan.

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[About Sarah Tory \(View All Articles\)](#)

Sarah Tory is an independent journalist and a correspondent for *High Country News*, a nonprofit magazine about the American west. Born in Toronto, with roots in Atlantic Canada, she now lives in the mountains of Colorado and often misses the sea.

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