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Captain Phillips speaks with USC students

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On Thursday, the National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events, USC's research center for risk and management analysis related to homeland security, hosted its 10-year anniversary conference at the Ronald Tutor Campus Center.



'I am the captain now' · Capt. Richard Phillips of the Maersk Alabama was the closing speaker of CREATE's 10-Year Anniversary event, which took place on Thursday in the Ronald Tutor Campus Center. Phillips spoke on the 2009 hijacking of his ship by Somali pirates. – Nick Entin | Daily Trojan

The all-day event's closing speaker was Capt. Richard Phillips of the Maersk Alabama. In 2009, a team of Somali pirates hijacked Phillips' ship and held him hostage until a team of U.S. Navy SEALs rescued him; the incident inspired the 2013 film starring Tom Hanks, Captain Phillips, and made Phillips a national hero.

Sponsored by the Viterbi School of Engineering and the Sol Price School of Public Policy, the event also featured panelists such as Randy Hall, vice president of research and co-founder of CREATE, and Michael Chertoff, the former secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Panels involving "Next Generation's Greatest Chaos," "Advancing Homeland Security through University Research" and "The Changing Face of Terrorism" were also featured.

Yannis Yortsos, dean of the Viterbi School, introduced Phillips. Yortsos briefly discussed how rapid technological advances have expanded engineers' role in society before commending Phillips' heroism, calling Phillips a true American hero.

“Engineering can now enable disciplines which in the past were nontraditional, like risk analysis, economics and behavioral science,” Yortsos said. “CREATE has utilized this convergence to help our country.”

Phillips’ talk focused on leadership, and he emphasized the importance of preparation. Because Phillips knew about the prevalence of pirates off the coast of Somali prior to the highjacking, he organized a disaster drill to test the ship’s security procedures.

After this test, Phillips developed a security protocol with his crew that may have saved their lives during the highjacking. Phillips stressed the importance of flexibility and adapting to situations, however, after sharing that he had to deviate from his plan to eject the pirates from his ship.

Throughout the speech, Phillips reiterated three key points he wanted conference attendees to take away from his experience on to be applied to their own lives.

“I have three things I would like to leave you with: One, you are stronger than you know and you can handle much more than you think,” Phillips said. “Two, the only time it is over is when you say it is over. Three, a motivated, focused team of professionals can solve any problem.”

Throughout his talk, Phillips explained the events as they unfolded during the highjacking. After the pirates boarded the ship and held him at gunpoint, Phillips played what he called “mind games” to prevent further trouble.

For example, Phillips prevented the pirates from calling their headquarters to assist in the highjacking by reconfiguring the radar system so they were unable to do so. Phillips was very humble when he discussed his actions during the hijacking, emphasizing that bravery is possible when one remains calm and maintains a level head during times of duress.

“When faced with a threatening situation, we find something within us to do what must be done,” Phillips said. “It’s not possible to persevere when you’re panicked.”

During the attack, Phillips attempted to regain control of the situation by luring the pirates off the Maersk Alabama and away from the members of his crew, who were hiding below deck. Adding that he wished to clear up one aspect of his portrayal in the media, Phillips said that he did not give himself up with the intent of becoming a hostage or as a heroic sacrifice.

“My strategy was to be their adversary instead of their hostage, so I didn’t give up,” Phillips said. “My major responsibility was to get the pirates off my ship, so I carried out my duty.”