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By [Jesse Burkhardt](#)

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Insitu's "ScanEagle" drone aircraft — designed and built in Bingen — contributed to the successful military operation on April 12 that freed an American ship's captain being held hostage by Somali pirates

To recap the story, which made headlines around the world: Armed pirates operating out of Somalia attempted to capture the American container ship Maersk Alabama on April 8. The hijacking effort failed, but the American captain — Richard Phillips — volunteered to be held as hostage to end a threat of violence to members of his crew.

Phillips and several pirates left the Maersk Alabama in an inflatable lifeboat. U.S. Navy ships — including the destroyer USS Bainbridge — converged on the scene to make sure the pirates did not escape the area with Phillips.

A four-day standoff ensued.

Half a world away in Bingen, Insitu officials followed the incident closely.

"We know the ships we're deployed on," said Steve Nordlund, Insitu's vice president/business development. "When we heard the Bainbridge was on the scene, we knew we had a chance of being in the operation."

The Bainbridge employed its ScanEagle technology to provide around the clock observation of the lifeboat.

"The ScanEagle is not an airplane, it's more of a flying camera," Nordlund said. "The airplane is a facilitator to get to our product: We're known for very good imagery. The ScanEagle provides daytime and nighttime imagery, and long endurance. It's not unusual for the ScanEagle to go on 16-hour missions.

On the evening of April 12, U.S. Navy SEALs were able to individually target and kill the three pirates holding Phillips. Phillips was not injured.

After his rescue, Phillips praised not only the Navy SEALs, but also the creators of the highly-specialized surveillance technology that provided a big assist in freeing him from pirates armed with AK-47s.

"The Boeing/Insitu team (on board the Bainbridge) did get a chance to meet with Capt. Phillips, and he expressed his appreciation to the entire team," Nordlund said.

Knowing Insitu played an important role in the successful rescue of an American hostage was an extraordinary experience for the company's staff.

"There were a lot of Insitu employees walking around the streets of Bingen and White Salmon very proud of our involvement and what we do," Nordlund said. "The overall sense of the employees at Insitu is, we'll all reflect back on this one day and say, 'Wow.' There are lots of jobs in life, but how often is there a chance to work on something really cutting edge that makes a difference, or something that is viewed around the world. We're humbled by it. At the same time, we are working with our customers every day and saving lives. This one just happened to make the headlines."

Insitu's ScanEagle was first deployed in 2004. It has a 10-foot wingspan, can fly as high as 20,000 feet, and operates very quietly. The drones are lightweight — 40 pounds for a fully-fueled ScanEagle — and can be launched by what is in effect a slingshot.

"That's one of the reasons it's used so pervasively in the military," Nordlund said. "It helps in our overall force protection. The sons and daughters of Americans are being protected by ScanEagle every day."

Nordlund said Insitu technology has been increasingly employed in operations in the Gulf of Aden — off the Horn of Africa — in recent months.

"It's a hot spot for pirate activities," Nordlund said. "Even though there are wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is another war going on, and our Navy is fighting it."

Nordlund added that President Barack Obama made a phone call to the Bainbridge to offer congratulations on the successful mission, and he also spoke directly to Phillips.

For Insitu, trying to keep a relatively low profile about a customer like the U.S. Navy — which was using Insitu's products during an incident the whole world was watching — proved to be a daunting task.

"We do not discuss customers' operations," Nordlund explained. "But the images we saw on TV were coming from our vehicle, and when you're involved in operations that get the focus this did worldwide, it makes us very proud."

Nordlund pointed out that the footage aired on television news programs around the world were supplied to the media by the U.S. Navy, and not by Insitu or its parent company, Boeing, which made Insitu a wholly-owned subsidiary in 2008.

Perhaps it was a case of wanting to share in some good news, but Nordlund

noticed some apparent "pride of ownership" in the various television news reports on the Boeing/Insitu involvement in the rescue of Phillips.

He pointed out that the Portland television stations tended to focus on Insitu, based in nearby Bingen, while Seattle stations talked about Boeing, which has deep roots in Seattle.

"On KATU-TV, a Portland station, it was Insitu that was given the credit, and on KING-TV in Seattle, it was Boeing," Nordlund said. "They were tailoring to their particular area. But we are part of the same family. The combined Insitu-Boeing team made it happen."

The high-profile success of the Navy's rescue operation is likely to further heighten demand for Insitu's products, and the company is continuing to expand. Insitu currently has more than 500 employees, most of them working in Bingen and White Salmon.

"We've hired 90 new employees since Jan. 1," said Jill Vacek, communications specialist for Insitu.

Vacek pointed out that Insitu is also in the process of adding new facilities in Stevenson.

"Overall, we're continuing to grow, and are growing into space in Stevenson," she explained. "The Stevenson move will be for about 60 additional employees, but there will be no lessening of the number here."

Nordlund hinted that further expansion is anticipated.

"Insitu has 519 employees now. But check back at 5 p.m.," he joked.

Nordlund also stressed that, despite the occasional rumors, Insitu is not leaving the Bingen/White Salmon community.

"That's the furthest thing from our minds," he said. "We are going to grow."

Nordlund noted that Insitu recently signed a \$30 million contract with the Canadian Army for ScanEagle training and supply.

"We will support their ground forces in Afghanistan," Nordlund said. "So we're seeing Canadian uniforms around town now, as we're continuing to bring an international flavor to Bingen and White Salmon."

In addition to the Canadian deal, Insitu has a contract in place to provide ScanEagles for the Singapore Navy.

And the product line is being further refined.

"We're working on a second aircraft beyond ScanEagle — the `Integrator,'" Nordlund said. "We're getting ready for some real-world operations with the Integrator."

The Integrator will have a 16-foot wingspan, as opposed to the ScanEagle's 10-foot wingspan.

"It can carry more payload," Nordlund pointed out.

Nordlund reflected back on the humble origins of Insitu, and marveled at the innovative company's phenomenal growth in a relatively short span of time.

"Great things can happen," Nordlund said. "Just a few years ago, Insitu was a few guys in a garage."

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