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How Varonis Helps the Hospital Ship USNS Mercy Cost-Effectively Protect Patient Data

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**Mike Taylor,
CIO, USNS Mercy**

USNS Mercy

USNS Mercy is a 1,000 bed hospital ship, renowned for its outstanding command and well-respected crew.

The Mercy was most recently activated in support of COVID-19 DCSA Response, Task Force Los Angeles in March of 2020.

HIGHLIGHTS

CHALLENGES

- Protecting patient data along with mission-critical and potentially government-sensitive data
- Ensuring that the hospital ship is self-sufficient and all data remains secure on premises
- Maintaining a lean security team while ensuring that threats are promptly detected and defeated

SOLUTION

The most robust data security platform:

- **DatAdvantage** provides visibility into on-prem servers, Active Directory, SharePoint, and Exchange
- **Data Classification Engine** finds and classifies sensitive data
- **DatAlert** for fast threat detection and response

RESULTS

- Up to $500,000 in cost savings in terms of hardware and new personnel
- Varonis does the work of 4–5 people, saving time for the security team
- Demonstrable evidence that the USNS Mercy can detect and stop security incidents

Challenges
Protecting PHI and government-sensitive data

As a hospital ship in the United States Navy, the USNS Mercy must be completely independent and self-sufficient on the water. Being a ship, it can't just turn on more cloud storage—everything needs to be protected on premises.

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> "The Mercy is a hospital on the go. We move to areas where people desperately need our help. Being a hospital, the biggest thing we're concerned with protecting is healthcare data," explains CIO Mike Taylor.

But helping people isn't the only thing the Mercy does—its use case is unique, even among military treatment facilities.

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> "We're not just a platform that provides healthcare, we're also a goodwill ambassador for the United States. We give tours to foreign nationals and host events for dignitaries. So it's not just about protecting healthcare data—it's about protecting data that might be mission-critical or government-sensitive," Mike adds.

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Wherever in the world the USNS Mercy is called to, protecting sensitive data is critical. That's why they have Varonis. Varonis helps them identify and remove stale data, and track permissions, active users, and network activities. This visibility is a must-have, especially when visitors are given temporary access.

Without Varonis, detecting and resolving potential threats would be a huge job—and require more personnel than Mike currently has in his lean security team.

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> "If we didn't have Varonis, we would need to log events from about four or five different places, including Active Directory and Exchange. We'd need at least 4–5 extra bodies, and those people might not have equal expertise across all systems," Mike says.
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> "You go cross-eyed pretty quickly looking at access logs and trying to decipher false positives from actual threats—and it's easy to miss something, especially if you're on a 90-day mission and you've been doing this every day for a month or more," he adds.

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Solution

On-premises security and responsive support

For Mike and his security team, top priorities include protecting sensitive data, tracking user access, and removing stale data to save on data storage costs.

Here's how Varonis helps the USNS Mercy:

→ **DatAdvantage for Windows, Directory Services, SharePoint and Exchange** gives him visibility into those systems from one place.

It enables him to audit file access and review access permissions for remediation without manually logging into multiple different workstations. If healthcare information is ever stale, exposed, or improperly stored, Mike can quickly and easily take remedial action.

→ **Data Classification Engine** scans data stores and locates sensitive data.

→ **DatAlert** monitors files for signs of ransomware and other threats.

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> Mike says, "Varonis has helped us evolve the way we do business, not only by complementing our network protection suite, but by closing all the gaps that we thought we had covered with an elegant layer of software protection."

Varonis also provides responsive support to help ensure that the Mercy always achieves the best results possible.

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"They are super responsive, super knowledgeable, and they're all problem solvers. They deeply understand the software and the requirements, and they're able to look at my infrastructure and help me achieve the results I'm looking for," Mike says.

"I never feel like I need to call Varonis to check my system, because they do health check-ups all the time. It's nice to have a non-invasive support system; I have nothing but great things to say about their support team."

Varonis data security in action

Mike says it's 'vindicating' to have a product that does exactly what it's supposed to do—especially when it helps stop a potential breach.

That's exactly what happened aboard the USNS Mercy.

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"I received an alert: someone was attempting to access data that wasn't normally accessed by that workstation," Mike explains.

Mike sent someone to check what was going on—and in doing so, prevented a potential security incident in progress.

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"Someone had walked away but left their CAC card in their workstation. They didn't lock it. Then another person that was supposed to be part of a tour sat down and tried to access things. When we went to check, we basically caught them in the act—they were walking away really fast to catch up with the tour," he says.

Fortunately, the Mercy has protections in place. There was no way for the responsible party to copy data, plug anything into the computer, or open sensitive files. Nevertheless, Mike needed to prove that nothing had been compromised—and with Varonis, he was able to do just that.

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"We had real-time data showing: here's the exact time this happened, here's what the person was doing, here's what they tried—and failed— to access. We can easily determine, with evidence, that there was no incident," he says.

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"Varonis is a force multiplier. I don't need to have a super large staff—I can have a small team of people, like I have on the ship, and still have everything I need to make our protections better and take direct action on potential events."

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Results

Cost and time savings for a lean security team

Varonis helps Mike's team stay nimble and adaptive, no matter what security challenges they may face.

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By his estimation, Varonis 'gives him back' the labor of four to five people, and saves his team time in the process.

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> "It frees up personnel to do more meaningful things like managing electronic health records. The time savings is great, but I think the internal happiness that my team has from not having to be chained to a desk and plowing through logs is also a big deal."

For the USNS Mercy, this amounts to cost savings. Every extra sailor or civilian he needs on his team costs thousands of dollars—and a security breach would cost far more.

Plus, by pinpointing stale data that can be safely deleted, Varonis saves on data storage costs for the Mercy on a daily basis. Already, **Varonis has helped Mike reduce stale data by over 75%**.

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"By allowing us to utilize our space better and more efficiently, Varonis easily saves us a few hundred thousand—maybe even half-a-million—dollars per year in terms of personnel cost and hardware cost recovery. If it also saves us from a security incident—that's priceless," he explains.

With an 'elegant layer of software protection' helping him protect his command, Mike sleeps easier at night.

"I take personal pride in knowing that I'm doing good service to my command. More importantly, I'm able to demonstrate to CIOs and other leadership levels that my command is protected and that the Mercy is equipped to deal with complex cyber challenges in real life and on real missions," he says.

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The visibility you need to stop breaches before they happen.

Varonis gives you a unified audit trail of events so you can find out exactly what's happening with your data.

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