

IRISH NAVY CONTINUES HUMANITARIAN MISSIONS IN THE MED

LÉ Róisín becomes the latest Irish naval vessel to assist the Italian authorities in the search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean. To date over 8,590 migrants have been successfully rescued during the course of the Irish navy's first three humanitarian missions, involving the LÉ Eithne, LÉ Niamh and LÉ Samuel Beckett. Report by Michael McHale.



Crewed by 60 members of the Permanent Defence Force under the command of Lieutenant Commander Ultan Finegan, the LÉ Róisín was dispatched from the Naval Base, Haulbowline, Co. Cork on Sunday 1 May.

The latest deployment is expected to run until mid-July, all depending the operational demands and requirements, and will possibly be followed by further deployments in time.

In conversation with 'Emergency Services Ireland', Lieutenant Commander Anthony Geraghty of LÉ Samuel Beckett says that the scale of what's going on there is extraordinary. "The best term for it is it's biblical. It's only when you go there that you physically realise what's going on," notes Lt Cdr Geraghty.

At a total of 3,770 estimated deaths, 2015 was the deadliest year on record for migrants and refugees crossing the

Mediterranean Sea, trying to reach Europe. Crossing from North Africa, and for many, originally coming from as far away as Syria and Iraq, an influx of migrants desperate to reach safer shores in Europe has led thousands to risk their lives on ill-equipped rafts in extremely hazardous conditions.

The reality is the rate of migrant deaths recorded last year would have been considerably worse were it not for the tireless work of international and domestic naval search and rescue operations.

Ireland continues to be one of the main countries carrying out this lifesaving work. Prior to the latest deployment of LÉ Róisín for a 12-week mission, the Naval Service had dispatched three other ships on separate missions to the Mediterranean during 2015, to monitor the seas off the Italian coastline.

The LÉ Eithne, LÉ Niamh and LÉ Samuel Beckett were

involved in the recovery of over 8,590 migrants crossing the sea over a nine-month period. During the third mission, LÉ Samuel Beckett was involved in the rescue of 1,420 migrants.

Led by Lieutenant Commander Anthony Geraghty, the ship left its naval base at Haulbowline, on 24 September 2015, before returning to Ireland on 17 December 2015.

SKILLS APPLICATION

For the crew of the LÉ Samuel Beckett in the Mediterranean, the success of their mission was dependent on applying the skills they've learned while working along the Irish coast to a new and vastly different setting.

"We were normalising the kind of operations we do around the Irish coast in general, insofar as we launch boats all the time. It's routine for us. We do search and rescue operations around the Irish coast all year round.

"We drill for practice mass evacuations of our citizens, in case we have to evacuate them from countries. So, it was a matter of bringing all those elements together for this mission," Lt Cdr Geraghty adds.

In total the LÉ Samuel Beckett had a crew of 59, which is 14 more than the usual average crew size, mainly due to the enormity of the task at hand and the length of the mission.

The workforce included additional EMTs and paramedics to treat wounded migrants coming on board, as well as extra chefs to feed large groups of people and a full diving capability, should it have been required.

"If you're deploying away from home for that period of time you need to be self-sustaining logistically and tactically. You need all those additional people on the ship to keep it going 24-7.

"The ship effectively is a small town, and everything and all the services that you require of a small town, you require on a ship. But it's worse than that insofar as this ship, or town, is taken away from Ireland completely. "

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER ANTHONY GERAGHTY

Lt Cdr Anthony Geraghty has been the Officer Commanding (OC) of the LÉ Samuel Beckett since August 2014, a few months after the ship was commissioned and first delivered to the Irish Naval Service. His term as OC on the ship will cease in August 2016.



Originally from Dublin, Lt Cdr Geraghty joined the Naval Service in 1989. Post commissioning in 1991, he completed the International Sub Lieutenants course with the Royal Navy and was awarded his Naval Watchkeeping Certificate.

He has held numerous appointments at sea and ashore at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Prior to his current role, Lt Cdr Geraghty served a two-year term as OC of the LÉ Ciara.

CLOSE CO-OPERATION

Throughout the Irish navy's three Mediterranean missions, its ships co-operated closely with the Italian navy, who had a task group located nearby, and a fleet of search and rescue ships



from the country's coast guard.

"At the diplomatic level there was an arrangement that the Irish Government put in place, that when and if we picked up people in distress, that we'd bring them to an Italian port and they'd be brought there to a place of safety," Lt Cdr Geraghty recalls.

"Once we came across one of these boats in distress, what we effectively did was declare a search and rescue. We then started co-operating with Italian authorities and the Italian marine co-ordination rescue centre, and they would get us to take the people on board and they'd tell us what port to go to. The Italian Ministry for the Interior is effectively the agency within Italy who is responsible for rescuing people when they come ashore there."

The naval crew found that how busy they would be on a given day depended on factors ranging from sea and climatic conditions to the number of people on North African beaches ready to depart.

"There could be days down there where 1,000 to 2,000 people could be put to sea from the Libyan coast. So, sometimes a particular ship would be used as a hub – other ships would be doing rescues and you'd transfer them to that particular hub."

TRANS-SHIPMENT OPERATIONS

"What also happened a few times was what we call trans-shipment operations – we would find a platform in distress and we would rescue those people. And then we would be instructed, rather than bring them to a place of safety, to bring them to another ship nearby, or a ship that was effectively operating as a hub.

"From an operational point of view you could have two or three of these operations a week, or you could have a quiet period for a week or two, and then you could have three or four of them in a day."

Having already walked vast distances and travelled for as long as six months, the next stage of the migrants' tortuous journey to safety would involve small rubber boats crowded with 80 to 120 people, or unsteady timber barges with between 350 and 600 passengers per trip.

"These boats as vessels aren't particularly sea-worthy. The rubber craft appear to be made under very poor quality controls. There wasn't a lot of air-tight chambers. They'd be leaking. There would be debris inside them. And then they're overloaded. They don't have lifejackets. They don't have any equipment to assure their safety.

"And certainly it's the same for the wooden barges. They're completely overloaded. They've no life raft. They've no lifesaving equipment. Nine out of ten times they'd have no life jackets.

"So, these people really, whether they realise it or not, are in immediate peril and at risk of death from the minute they leave the beach. The reality is they probably have anything from 12 to 48 hours, once those boats leave the coast, to survive. And if they're not found and picked up within that period then the grim reality is that, if those boats are going to sink, a large proportion of those people are probably going to die."

SENSE OF RELIEF

For those who do manage to be saved, while some may be exhausted or have hypothermia, there's an overriding sense of relief that they've made it this far.

"The real feeling, certainly from our interaction with them, is

'PEOPLE OF THE YEAR' AWARD NETS FOR MED NAVY RESCUES

The immense courage and resilience displayed by the Irish Naval Service in saving thousands of lives during their humanitarian missions in the Mediterranean, received due recognition at the People of the Year Awards last December.

In the Mediterranean, thousands of people attempt to make the crossing every day to a new life, driven by the turmoil of their home places, unfortunately, not everyone makes it.



MC Grainne Seoige pictured with Adi Roche who presented Able Comm Op Shauna Fero, Lt Elaine Maloney, Chief ERA Rory De Barra and Cpl Conor Kilbride with the 'People of the Year Award'. (Pic. Robbie Reynolds)

Naval crews on board the LÉ Eithne, LÉ Niamh and LÉ Samuel Beckett served to shine a light of inspiration during the ongoing tragedy. In May 2015, the LÉ Eithne and her 69 crew set off on an eight-week voyage where almost every day there were reports of scores of refugees who lost their lives. On this voyage alone they saved 3,376 migrants.

The LÉ Niamh undertook a three-month mission in July, based off the coast of North Africa, rescuing more than 4,100 people. Then in October the LÉ Samuel Beckett went to sea in an operation that lasted until early December, before returning home.

that from the time they left their homes it's probably the first time, when they got on board our ship, that they actually felt safe."

Despite some difficult conditions, Lt Cdr Geraghty describes the work of his crew throughout the mission as excellent. "I couldn't be prouder of any of the people who worked on the ship, and I would sail with every single one of them again."

All photographs courtesy of The Naval Service Photo Section.