

NAVAL SERVICE TO CELEBRATE 75 YEARS IN OPERATION

Ireland's Naval Service will mark its 75th anniversary in September with a series of celebrations during the month to mark the significant historical milestone since the maritime, defence and security service was founded in 1946. Report by Ruairí de Barra.

(All images courtesy of the Defence Forces Press Office)

During his recent anniversary address, the current Flag Officer Commanding the Naval Service (FOCNS), Commodore Michael Malone, said: "Underpinning our achievements over the last 75 years have been our personnel and their families at home."

"I take this opportunity to thank, not only those who have served in the Naval Service, but those who have supported them. The mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, family and friends who have held the fort at home and who have also made sacrifices, so that others could serve."

Celebrations planned for the month of September include a 'Meet the Fleet' event in Dublin and Cork. A number of vessels shall visit Dublin, where the President Michael D. Higgins will conduct a sail past on Wednesday 1 September, before hosting the crews at a special afternoon reception to honour their service.

The flotilla will then proceed to Cork for Saturday 4 September, where the Taoiseach Michéal Martin shall take the salute during a sail past at Haulbowline and Cobh. The ships, escorted by a parade of sailing yachts

and small boats, shall then sail to Cork City, for a civic reception hosted by the Lord Mayor of Cork, Colm Kelleher.

While it is hoped that public events such as the 'Meet the Fleet - It's Your Navy' planned tours of the ships will be well attended, they are all dependant on restrictions in place at the time. Other events planned for September include a 'Naval Family Day', the publication of a special book of photographs, a special edition of the Defence Forces' magazine 'An Cosantóir', and the presentation of a special Certificate of Service to all serving Navy personnel and civilian staff at the Naval HQ in Haulbowline.

INTEGRAL AND FORMATIVE ROLE

The creation of the Naval Service in 1946 laid down the foundations of a service which has proven steadfast and resilient over the years. In his



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special message to the Navy on this momentous occasion, President Michael D. Higgins noted: "The connection between Ireland and the seas that surround us is as ancient as it is fundamental to our understanding of ourselves. Our seas have played an integral and formative role in our



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Vice Admiral Mark Mellett (the first naval officer to hold the position as Defence Forces Chief of Staff) will be in service for the 75th anniversary before he retires on 29 September.

social, cultural and economic history.”

It will also be a day of remembrance, when families and shipmates will think of those who are no longer with us. Those who shared a youth spent in service at sea, have an unbreakable bond which can only be found by those who have endured hardship together. Navy veterans continue to meet, support and mind their old shipmates.

“The selfless manner that the members of the Naval Service meet all challenges, head on, reflects the spirit of the generations that preceded them and inspires the next to make a difference,” according to Defence Forces Chief of Staff, Vice Admiral Mark Mellett.

It is very fitting that VADM Mellett will still be in office when the 75th anniversary takes place, as he’s the first naval officer to hold the most senior Defence Forces position. He retires on 29 September, when Major General Sean Clancy shall then assume command; and the new Chief of Staff will also make history as the first Air Corps officer to hold the position.

Attending a commissioning ceremony of five new naval officers

on 16 July, Minister for Defence Simon Coveney highlighted the recently launched ‘tailored recruitment’ drive by the Naval Service, which will include pop-up recruitment centres in ports around the country.

The Minister called on others to consider joining the next generation of sailors. “I hope that we can encourage other young people to take on the exciting and rewarding challenge of a career in the Naval Service.”

MARITIME DEFENCE AND SECURITY

Today the work of the Naval Service is primarily carried out during Maritime Defence and Security Operations (MDSO) patrols. The range of work is vast, and the area of operations is astonishing, with maritime interdiction of narcotics and arms, search and rescue, fisheries inspection etc, conducted within the harsh environment of the North Atlantic.

Speaking of her respect and admiration of the Navy, the Secretary General of the Department of Defence Jacqui McCrum said: “The versatility of a Naval Ship and her crew on patrol are displayed by the ability to adapt; from a day-to-day fishery protection role to search and rescue, diving operations, drugs interdiction as well as many more. This is a testament to the varied skills maintained by each and every member of the Naval Service.”

In 1948 the

LÉ Cliona completed the first overseas naval mission, by returning the remains of the Nobel prize-winning poet William Butler Yeats, who had died in France in 1939, to rest ‘under bare Ben Bulbin’s head’.

That was the very first of countless deployments, operations and missions in the decades that followed: ‘MV Claudia’, ‘Marita Ann’, the Air India Disaster, the terrible loss of Leading Seaman Mick Quinn DSM during the attempted rescue of the crew of ‘Nuestra Senora de Gardtoza’ to name but a few.

The incredible interdiction successes of ever-increasing quantities of narcotics, demonstrate the value of constant vigilance of the coast, sea lanes and approaches, while strong international links and co-operation are also vital.

The Naval Service is part of MARSUR (the European Maritime Surveillance Network), which shares maritime information for Situational Awareness and also the Maritime Analysis Operations Centre-Narcotics (MAOC-N).

These linkages have been very important and have aided the Navy – working as part of the Joint Task Force, with An Garda Síochána and Revenue Customs Service – to stop nearly €1 billion of narcotics entering Ireland or the European Market.

Lt Cdr Mike Brunicardi, former Officer Commanding (OC) of LÉ James Joyce, says: “This is vital work as the interdiction is the last and critical part in getting boots on deck of these smuggling boats. That’s why



Naval officers pictured during an armed boarding exercise as part of a training operation for maritime interdiction of narcotics and arms.



Major General Sean Clancy who assumes command as the new DF Chief of Staff in September, will also make history as the first Air Corps officer to hold the position.

the Navy maintains a presence at sea at all times and aims to stop the illegal shipments.”

OPERATIONS PONTUS & SOPHIA

The pinnacle of this service to date must be the deployments to the Southern Mediterranean, during Operations PONTUS and SOPHIA. In 2015, Italy was nearly single-handedly dealing with a migration crisis. Fatalities were mounting as desperate people displaced by wars or conflicts, and vast numbers of people displaced by poor economic conditions, attempted the perilous journey across the Southern Mediterranean in unseaworthy craft.

As part of Operation PONTUS, the LÉ Eithne was the first to depart in May 2015, forging the trail that LÉ Niamh and LÉ Samuel Beckett followed over the course of the year. Each year, thereafter, Ireland continued to answer that call, with three ships dispatched annually to conduct complex and dangerous missions, not just recovering people from sinking craft, but the traumatic task of recovering deceased bodies from dark and cramped bilges (the bottom part of a boat), not to mention from the sea.

The Naval Service transitioned to EUNAVFOR’s Operation SOPHIA in 2017 and committed vessels to this

UN mandated mission until 2019. Operation SOPHIA’s mission was primarily a security one, designed to disrupt the trafficker’s business model, and to counter oil and weapons smuggling. Irish sailors continue to serve in EUNAVFOR HQ in Rome as part of Operation IRINI, the successor mission to SOPHIA.

During the deployments, over 18,000 individuals were rescued while tragically many deceased people were also recovered. Working in harsh environmental conditions and bearing witness to human suffering at a level normally only associated with that of violent conflict, Naval Service personnel completed all tasks assigned to them.

The Navy brought tremendous pride to the entire nation through hard work, courage, respect and above all their humanity. The way in which they performed their harrowing duties has been in keeping with the finest traditions of the service and of Óglaigh na hÉireann.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The last 75 years have seen the Naval Service prove itself capable, adaptable, resilient and responsive. The next 25 years are being charted by a Commission on the Defence Forces, which is examining every facet of its structure and its work.

With a firm commitment to the fleet replacement programme by Government, including the purchase of a new large multi-role vessel to replace the flagship, LÉ Eithne, there will certainly be no lack of challenges

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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to come.

What the future holds is unknown. However, one thing is for sure, somewhere on the first morning of the next 25 years, an Irish warship ‘with our own flag to the fore’ will be conducting its duties, a physical expression of the sovereignty of this island nation.



Minister for Defence Simon Coveney highlighted a ‘tailored recruitment’ drive by the Naval Service, when he attended a commissioning ceremony for five new naval officers on 16 July.