



# HMS ECHO

## WINTER 2019 NEWSLETTER



PROTECTING OUR NATION'S INTERESTS



## What's new?

Since last going to press ECHO has, as always, been keeping busy. A maintenance period was completed in December ensuring that ECHO is fit to continue her upcoming tasking including both survey and defence engagement operations. ECHO and her Ship's Company also spent the Christmas period in the Black Sea.

## The Black Sea

At the start of December HMS ECHO received notice that she was to deploy into the Black Sea on Operation ROCKHARD, to conduct Defence Engagement with the UK's allies and friends in the region and demonstrate Her Majesty's Government's commitment to the region. With very little notice, there was just time for a quick stop at Crete to collect stores and personnel, most pressingly winter woollens for the sub-zero temperatures that would be experienced in the Black Sea. On 17 Dec the Ship transited the Turkish Straits, first the Dardanelles and then the Bosphorus, before making the most of her three weeks in the region, which is the period permitted in the Black Sea for a naval vessel under the terms of the internationally agreed Montreux Convention.

Whilst operating in the Black Sea Ship's Company experienced port visits in a variety of places.



# A Visit From the Secretary of State

## Ukraine

Our first stop was Odessa, Ukraine, where there was a very warm welcome from the Ukrainian Navy and the locals alike. The UK has been offering her support to the Ukrainian armed forces through Operation ORBITAL for some time, and the arrival of a Royal Navy ship was extremely well received. The Ship's Company was able to enjoy the local preparations for Christmas and soak up the atmosphere of a vibrant city, as well as making preparations for a VVIP visit on 21 December.

The Secretary of State for Defence, the Right Honourable Gavin Williamson CBE MP, flew out to Ukraine to visit HMS ECHO and meet his opposite number.

He started the day by addressing the Ship's Company and wished everyone a Merry Christmas, recognising the valuable contribution made by members of the Armed Forces who are deployed over the festive season. He also presented an award from the Royal Humane Society to Ship's Company in recognition of a particularly challenging rescue of over 200 migrants from sinking boats in June 2017, when the ship had been deployed on Operation LITTEN.



Commander Warren said of the award: *"I'm delighted to see this recognition for a team who, during this rescue and others, worked tirelessly to save over 4600 souls from peril at sea".*

The Secretary of State then enjoyed breakfast on board with Her Majesty's Ambassador to Ukraine, Ms Judith Gough CMG, and the Commanding Officer of HMS ECHO, Commander Matthew Warren Royal Navy, before setting off to visit the naval base and the Ukrainian flagship, HETMAN SAHAYDACHNIY. Here the UK party met the Ukrainian Defence Minister, Dr Stepan Poltorak, and the Head of the Ukrainian Navy, Admiral Igor Voronchenko, and the 2 ministers engaged in valuable bilateral talks.

To return to HMS ECHO, the group took an invigorating trip in the patrol boat GURZA-M, the first of 20 such vessels joining the Ukrainian fleet. The Secretary of State used the opportunity to tour the ship and speak to the sailors individually about their experience on board and the current deployment, making an especial effort to thank those who had contributed to hosting his own visit and that of the Ukrainian dignitaries. Before leaving for the airport there was still time for a glass of mulled wine and a mince pie with personnel from the ship and Operation ORBITAL and to express his gratitude once again to the service personnel deployed over Christmas.





## Christmas On Board

### Romania

The next port that ECHO visited was Constanța, the largest port in the Black Sea and the oldest city in Romania. Here 14 members of Ship's Company volunteered to spread some festive cheer at a disabled children's home. On arrival they were serenaded by a Romanian Christmas song and shared in a traditional meal of bread and onion, before giving out gifts round the Christmas tree. Closing with a rendition of *"We Wish you a Merry Christmas"*, HMS ECHO's sailors and Marines reluctantly departed.

"It was very rewarding to deliver Christmas cheer to these children spending their Christmas in a children's home," said Leading Medical Assistant Lauren Armour, one of the volunteers from ECHO.



The Ship also spent Christmas day alongside and a large number of her company started the day with an invigorating dip in the Black Sea.



Our Navigating Officer, Lieutenant Ben Adams Royal Navy, is a keen swimmer and organised the event, as well as encouraging others to take part. His own verdict after encountering the icy waters was summed up in two words: "Bloody cold!", which at 7°C, might have been an understatement.



## A Christmas Day Captain

After returning to the ship, there followed a day of celebrations to make the most of spending Christmas apart from families and loved ones. For the youngest sailor on board, Engineering Technician Matthew Sutch, this included the traditional opportunity to become captain for the day. After his breakfast in the Commanding Officer's cabin, there was a handover ceremony on the quarterdeck when he was promoted to Commander Sutch. The new Commanding Officer enjoyed the chance to preside over Santa handing out Christmas boxes and providing updates to Ship's Company over main broadcast, but in an example of sound discretion he forewent the temptation to conduct rounds on the First Lieutenant's cabin.



The history of the site was explained before the list of fallen was read, a commemorative silence kept, and a wreath laid by Commander Warren, ECHO's Commanding Officer. Prayers were then led by our Chaplain, Reverend Phil Amey.

## Wreath Laying at Commonwealth War Graves, Georgia

Before long HMS ECHO was alongside again, this time in Batumi, Georgia. The history of Georgia is a long and proud one, with connections to many other countries. One episode of the nation's past was a period from 1918 to 1920 when she was under British protection and UK servicemen were deployed there to defend the Batumi-Tiflis-Baku railway line.

A memorial now stands to those who died while serving here, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and over half of the Ship's Company took part in a memorial service there on 29 December.

AB Ryan Prince was the wreath bearer and ceremonial piper for the commemoration. He said of the event: *"It is easy to forget these people as they are so far away from home and yet died in the pursuit of peace."*





## Manoeuvres with the Georgian Coast Guard

Later that day a number of Ship's Company and embassy personnel were invited by the Georgian Coastguard to a traditional Georgian banquet called a "supra". The supra is almost a ritual for the Georgians who take hospitality very seriously and it was not long before the table was groaning under a wide variety of dishes and local wine, little known in the West but direct descendants of what claims to be the oldest tradition of wine-making in the world, going back over eight thousand years.

The host, Captain 1<sup>st</sup> Rank Temur Kvantailani appointed his deputy, Captain 1<sup>st</sup> Rank Ramaz Papidze as the Tamada, or toastmaster, who led a series of toasts centred on Naval life, each of them followed by the Georgian cry of "*gaumarjos!*" Georgian hospitality certainly lived up to its reputation and relations between Georgia and the UK were reinforced over glasses, bowls, and even horns of the local wine.



On arrival in Georgia ECHO was greeted by traditional dancers on the jetty so when sailing, two members of the Georgian Coast Guard were welcomed on board and invited to observe the ship's departure from the bridge. ECHO established communications with the Georgian Coast Guard Cutter OCHAMCHIRA, and the two ships manoeuvred together, providing a further opportunity for the Royal Navy to foster and consolidate its relationship with the Georgian Coast Guard.

HMS ECHO left Georgia on New Year's Eve and passed into 2019 as she sailed towards the Bosphorus, a watch handover, and her next tasking, with all on board having experienced a Christmas like no other in the Black Sea.

## What's Next for ECHO?

2019 already promises to be a busy and productive year for ECHO who stopped in Turkey for her first port visit of the year. ECHO is due to get back into her core survey role and is expecting to spend some time over the coming months in the Eastern Mediterranean.

