

From Captain P A Stroude Royal Navy



HMS PORTLAND
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Dan,

With HMS PORTLAND well into the second half of her nine-month deployment, and now operating in a very different theatre, having swapped the heat and dust of the Middle East for the jagged ice-capped peaks of Patagonia in far South America, now seems a suitable time to update you on our many travels and varied activities.

When I last wrote we were alongside Bahrain, in the midst of the Arabian Gulf summer, completing a series of briefings and some defect rectification in advance of commencing operations in earnest. These began under the command of the Kuwaiti-led Combined Task Force 152, which saw us working with our American and Gulf Co-operation Council allies to tackle the smuggling of fuel, weapons or people inside the Gulf. Typically this involved our boarding teams visiting local dhows between dawn and dusk, to examine cargos and exchange information, both to gather intelligence on patterns of life and to reassure the maritime community. The opportunity also arose to conduct capacity building exercises in conjunction with the navies or coastguards of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. All the while the Ship maintained the highest state of readiness and Force Protection 24 hours a day, ready to respond at a moment's notice to either terrorist or aggressive Iranian activity.

On leaving the Gulf we escorted the mine-countermeasures vessels HMS MIDDLETON and HMS BANGOR safely through the Strait of Hormuz, and emerged once more into the Indian Ocean and the south west monsoon, where we switched to Combined Task Force 150, initially under the command of a Royal Navy staff but subsequently commanded by the Pakistani Navy. With a much



more focused remit of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics, this period saw us hunting larger cargo dhows in challenging weather conditions, over a vast area that stretched thousands of miles from the Gulf of Oman in the north, to the coast of Tanzania south of the equator. Despite intercepting several promising looking targets and conducting thorough searches with both Royal Marine and Royal Navy teams, no illicit cargo was discovered. Other notable highlights of this period included a major, multi-national anti-submarine exercise, involving US, Australian and French maritime forces, and a dramatic night time sprint in heavy weather to assist in the rescue of 15 Iranian sailors, whose fishing dhow sank in the stormy conditions; happily all survived, although one required medical attention onboard HMS PORTLAND.

Operations at sea were interspersed with a number of port visits to Abu Dhabi, Muscat and Dar-es-Salaam, where we undertook defence or diplomatic engagement, refuelled, conducted repairs, and allowed the Ship's Company rest and recuperation when the opportunity arose. When offshore and in a lower threat environment, it was possible to relax the Ship's defensive posture and inject some fun into the programme, which might include flight deck sports, barbecues and the occasional 'hands to bathe' if the sea was calm enough. When HMS PORTLAND crossed the equator southbound on 12 September, the appropriate ceremonies were observed in full to honour King Neptune, with upwards of 70 percent of the Ship's company requiring initiation into his realm, and myself strangely needing to be initiated for a second time!

Departure from Dar-es-Salaam marked the end of our time in the Operation KIPION Joint Operations Area, and a blessed end to the extreme temperatures of the region, as we passaged south through the Mozambique channel for a short courtesy visit to Durban, before proceeding around Cape Agulhas at the southern tip of Africa to make our way to Simonstown at the beginning of October, for a much-needed mid-deployment maintenance period. Here, while we were superbly hosted by the South African Navy, the Ship's Company took it in turns to proceed on some well-deserved leave, many returning to the UK, some opting to fly families and loved ones out to join them, some staying to explore Cape Town and the local area, and some venturing as far afield as Fiji or the Caribbean. Those whose turn it was to be working onboard were also able to take advantage of a wide range of Adventurous Training, courtesy of a team from HMS TEMERAIRE.

At the beginning of November we bid a fond farewell to South Africa, having enjoyed a thoroughly memorable month there, and after a short visit by Devonport Flotilla Staff to assure our operational capability, we steamed west into the South Atlantic, to commence the aptly named Atlantic Patrol Task (South). After rendezvousing with RFA GOLD ROVER, the tanker which will accompany us for this phase of the deployment, we started a busy series of exercises focused on navigation, communications, seamanship, gunnery and aviation, anxious to make the most of the valuable opportunity to work with a dedicated consort. However we had barely acclimatised ourselves to this routine, and to the distinctly cooler temperatures of the high southerly latitudes, when we were obliged to render medical assistance to the incredibly remote island community of Tristan Da Cunha. This necessitated embarking by helicopter a critically ill patient, his wife and three-year old daughter, for a fast passage to South America and a properly equipped hospital. After a four-day sprint, during which the daughter was thoroughly spoiled by my soft-hearted sailors, we successfully flew them into Montevideo, and waited for the GOLD ROVER to catch up and replenish our fuel.

As I write now we have just entered the Pacific Ocean, en route to our next port of call on the west coast of Chile. Our passage here took us through the stunningly picturesque but tortuous and navigationally challenging channels of the Strait of Magellan and the Patagonian Canals. Snow capped mountains, glaciers, sheer-sided cliffs and friendly wildlife such as whales, seals and dolphins, characterised our passage. Suffice to say this was thoroughly enjoyed by all, and the



Ship's Company are in good heart.

As mentioned in my previous update, we are always keen to hear from you and strengthen the close affiliation that we value highly. Sadly my Affiliations Officer, Lieutenant Commander Adam Titcombe, will leave the Ship in Chile; I am sure you will join me in wishing him all the best for his next appointment to the UK Maritime Battle Staff. He will be replaced by Lieutenant Commander Andy Parker on the same email address (HMSPTLD-Logs-HOD-LO@mod.uk), who will no doubt write to introduce himself before my next update letter. Until then I wish you all the very best.

