



## Migrant rescue operations in the Mediterranean

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### OUR VALUES

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# Tac Talks

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## Introduction

In Aug 2016, HMS ECHO was tasked to relieve HMS ENTERPRISE as the UK contribution to OP SOPHIA - the EUNAVFORMED mission to combat people smuggling in the Central Mediterranean out of Libya. After completing her Basic Operational Sea Trials (BOST) in October, ECHO deployed from the UK and arrived in theatre in December.

Migration from Northern Africa - and Libya in particular - into Europe has been occurring for a long time, with Sicily and Italy being key destinations. As numbers drastically increased in 2014 from approx. 60,000 migrants to over 200,000 and then exceed 1,000,000 in 2015, OP SOPHIA was established in June 2015 to combat the flow and especially the considerable loss of life. Not all migration was through the southern Mediterranean out of Libya; however, it is the most transited route with the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece the second most frequented.



*HMS Echo in Valletta.*

With a mandate to “conduct a military crisis management operation contributing to the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED), achieved by undertaking systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and assets used or suspected of being used by smugglers or traffickers, under applicable international law, including UNCLOS and any UN Security Council Resolution” Italian, British, Spanish, French, German and Belgian ships have worked together to “disrupt and deter” the smuggler’s model.

After 15 months in theatre, ENTERPRISE had rescued over 9000 people and when ECHO returned to the UK for a mid-deployment docking after 8 months she had rescued 4050 and transhipped a further 1538 migrants from other OP SOPHIA units or NGO vessels and disembarked them to Sicily, Italy or other ships.

When ECHO was being generated, we built on the lessons identified and experiences of HM Ships RICHMOND, BULWARK and ENTERPRISE. With ENTERPRISE being the same class of vessel and coming directly out of the Area of Operation as ECHO entered, her experiences and processes were particularly relevant and an effective starting point.

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The Operational Headquarters (OHQ) in Rome with a Force Headquarters (FHQ) embarked in an Italian carrier at sea controls the mission. The day-to-day reporting and coordination is administered by the FHQ, however, the International Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre – Rome (IMRCC-R) will assign units to an event as they maintain overall responsibility for SOLOAS in the Mediterranean.

Before sailing for our first patrol ECHO's command team visited ITS SIRIO for a brief from their command team on their experiences conducting migrant rescue operations before the commencement of the mission and as a member of the EU task group. This allowed our team to gain a sense of the historical issue and how it has changed in recent times. Coupled with discussions with ENTERPRISE, we felt well prepared to commence operations. The ship was fitted with the EU communications equipment, which allows same time chat, email and intranet connectivity with the FHQ and other EU units. There was a general feeling of nervousness and excitement at being involved in such a large-scale humanitarian effort – especially amongst the warfare sailors who would be at the frontline dealing with the migrants.

On commencement of our first patrol, ECHO was stationed 30nm north of Libyan Territorial Waters near migrant activity. With most boats coming out of Sabratha, this was an effective position to be to respond quickly to a distress call to IMRCC-R or sighting by the MPA. However, as the mission has evolved there is less appetite for warships to be seen as a ferry service. As such, ECHO is now being stationed much further north. These results on average a 10hr transit to any incident and a reduction in the number of incidents being responded to. Our internal battle rhythm has therefore also changed as initially ECHO would receive a tasking in the early hours of the morning, be on scene, and commence affecting the rescuing by daylight. However, the new positioning, long transit times and not being tasked until mid-morning has resulted in arriving on the scene by early evening and working into the night.



*Migrant vessel alongside HMS Echo.*

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Once all rescues for the day – on some days there would be up to a dozen rescues, which may not be completed until after midnight and potentially up to 2000 migrants being rescued – FHQ's legal department after consultation with IMRCC-R would inform the units of the disembarkation plan. This would require consolidation of migrants onto the ships involved in rescues with migrants being trans-shipped late at night or ships being sent to Ports of Safety in Sicily or Italy.

Conducting the rescue is broken into four distinct phases:

1. Tasking and preparations
2. Rescue
3. Sustainment; and
4. Disembarkation.

Without an operations room, the bridge team are responsible for managing the plot of EU vessels, NGOs and migrant boats. These are passed through on the EU communications system, direct from the MPA or via IMRCC-R distress calls. Once tasked to a particular event, ECHO will close the position and commence preparations with the ship taking approximately 30 mins to close up to Migrant Rescue Stations.

Once the vessel has been located the sea boat will close its position, assess the state of the boat and the migrants and command will determine the most effective way to conduct the rescue. Generally, for small wooden boats, which contain 70-80 migrants, the migrants are ferried across in the sea boat. The more common large rubber boats, which will hold 130 migrants, are brought alongside the ship with migrants using the pilot ladder to climb aboard. Large wooden boats can contain 500+ migrants, which again require ferrying the migrants to ECHO, and these rescues have taken up to five hours to complete.

The processing of migrants is a slow and complicated process. This involves searching the migrants for any weapons or contraband, issuing replacement clothes if required, conducting a medical check by the embarked doctor and medics, collecting basic personal information and issuing a bottle of water and breakfast bar. The NGOs can speed up this process as they do not conduct searches, collect information or separate by individual boat when conducting multiple rescues – much to the frustration of FRONTEX and Italian police.

Boat destruction is conducted on completion. The NGOs do not destroy the migrant boats, which has led to EUNAVFOR ships often being tasked to destroy boats to prevent the smugglers from taking back and using the boats again. Whilst on task, ECHO has destroyed 52 boats yet rescued migrants from 26 boats.

The sustainment phase is the most difficult. This can vary considerably from a few hours waiting to trans-ship the migrants or a three-day transit. With Sicily now effectively at capacity, the ships are being directed further north with destinations as far from the Area of Operations as Bari in Italy or Cagliari in Sardinia being identified as Ports of Safety. ECHO has had to make several transits of up to three days with 600 migrants onboard, which presents logistical – especially feeding - and security issues. A team of 10 Royal Marines is embarked to provide force protection during the approach to migrant vessels and whilst transiting. At times, the migrants have started to fight amongst themselves and become unruly – however, the RMs are very effective at quelling this. With deep-seated racial and religious tensions between Northern Africans and sub-Saharan, the feeding and security teams need to remain vigilant to ensure everyone is fed and to prevent fighting.

The disembarkation process is generally well organised by local authorities. After discussions between local medical staff and our embarked doctor about any potentially infectious diseases and a check of casualties and discussions with police to identify any persons of interest such as boat drivers and facilitators, disembarkation commences. Each port has its way of conducting the process which can cause frustrations as ECHO is keen to have the migrants disembark quickly to

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clean and reset the ship, whilst the authorities prefer to take their time and process the migrants in small groups – however, disembarkation generally takes 3-4 hours.

Another element of the mission has been to train members of the Libyan National Coast Guard (LNCG) and provide patrol vessels to prevent migrant vessels from exiting Libyan Territorial Waters. Whilst LNCG patrols and boat apprehensions have helped stem the flow, there have been incidents – including shots fired - between the LNCG and NGO vessels as the LNCG assert their authority. Suspicions are held that the LNCG are taking bribes and working with the smugglers to allow certain smuggler's vessels to proceed whilst apprehending others.

There have also been accusations of the smugglers colluding with the NGOs with Italian Senate Inquiries being held into any collusion and discussions on the possibility of not allowing NGOs to disembark migrants directly into Italy. It has been noted that when there are no NGO vessels in the area there are no migrant departures, however, once NGOs arrive the migrant vessels often depart in large numbers.

The mission's mandate has been extended until December 2018 and the UK remains committed with ECHO due back in the theatre in November and personnel embedded at the OHQ and FHQ. Despite numbers reducing significantly in 2016 and 2017 with year to date figures of just over 100,000, the mission is still seen as failing as it has not reduced deaths at sea or disrupted the smuggler's model. This commitment may change as migration numbers reduce to previous levels or it continues to fall out of favour with the government.

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