



THE GATEKEEPERS

Drug Interdiction and the Irish Naval Service

Working as part of the joint-task force established in 1996, the Irish Naval Service has successfully continued its many and varied functions, and in recent years their work in drug interdiction has secured some notable successes. Ruairi Kavanagh speaks to Lieutenant Commander Cormac Rynne.

“Nationally we operate as part of the Joint Task Force under a high level Ad Hoc committee, set up between 1994 and 1996. This committee consists of the Flag Officer commanding the Naval Service, an Assistant Commissioner from the Gardaí and the Collector of Customs and Revenue. Members of the Joint Task Force (JTF) are the Commander-Fleet Operations, the head of the Garda National Drugs Unit and the head of the Customs National Drugs Team. At a lower level are the inter-agency liaison officers or DLOs.”

THE EXTENT OF THE CHALLENGE

Narcotics smuggling worldwide is a massive problem, and the challenge for the Naval Service in doing its part in Irish waters reflects the intensity of the global struggle. “The challenge is immense,” says Lieutenant Commander Cormac Rynne, Operations Officer at Haulbowline Naval Base, “particularly since the introduction of the single European market. This meant the virtual dissolution of internal borders within Europe. The primary effect of this has been the dismantling of the ‘stop and search’ operations which were standard at points of entry in each country. As a result, the whole practice of randomly searching a person or a vehicle at a border crossing, airport or sea port virtually ceased.” Effectively it drove the entire enforcement aspect of interdiction towards intelligence gathering and acting on that intelligence.

The fact that the Naval Service must pursue its drug interdiction role at sea means that intelligence is a lot harder to obtain than it would be amongst the close knit, land-locked countries of mainland Europe. “It is a lot harder to gather intelligence and the Naval Service does not have a narcotics intelligence gathering wing. Our function within the JTF is purely operational, and only in relation to maritime importation operations. We act on intelligence gathered by others, although we do of course feed our own information into the system where relevant. But we don’t dictate intelligence driven operations. We work closely with our JTF partners.” Various international bodies such as Europol, the World Customs Organisation and other international police agencies all contribute towards the enforcement effort and the pool of information and intelligence.



Lt Cdr Cormac Rynne: "The challenge is immense, with the focus on intelligence gathering."

The emphasis globally has shifted from simple seizure and arrest to the dismantling of distribution networks. This is partly due to more sophisticated smuggling techniques. From a naval point of view there has been a massive increase in surveillance work. The decision to physically intervene is made at Joint Task Force level. So how does the Naval Service decide if a vessel is acting suspiciously? "We have a continuous presence in our waters, so we know what vessels are out there. We can have up to 2,000 fishing vessels operating on a given day, French and Spanish are particularly frequent, and we would know their patterns and their locations. In addition we get considerable information from the daily Maritime Air Patrol. There is also the matter of accumulated experience, when vessels might be observed acting strangely or not following a familiar pattern. So it's a combination of observation, intelligence and experience, along with the assistance from other members of the JTF."

"We also have a policy, a relatively recent development, where we 'hail and challenge' shipping on an ongoing basis." According to Lt Cdr Rynne, this practise has proved very successful in identifying the

operations of a vessel that may be considered suspicious. It is also of assistance in cases of search and rescue. "We would question the vessel as to who she is, where she's bound, her last port of call, cargo, crew, that type of information. If there is any information that's not quite right we can then pass it on to the relevant enforcement or indeed safety authorities."

However, despite the international trends shifting from seizure to the dismantling of existing networks, Cormac Rynne is adamant

fact is the main function of our ships. The primary tools of our trade are our small interception vessels, the function of our ships is to put people on other ships, whether it's for medical assistance, firefighting assistance, drugs enforcement or normal fishery protection. In terms of drug interdiction, our role has changed from purely intercepting vessels to providing information to other policing agencies as well as providing the maritime expertise and interpretation as to what was going on."



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that the vital role of boarding and inspecting will never change; "You will never get away from that, whether it be in fishery protection or drugs enforcement. There is no substitute for putting crew onboard vessels and that in

Drug smuggling and intercepting drug shipments always requires international cooperation, these drugs are coming from somewhere. "It is a fact of dealing with large investigations that we may never know the

final outcome of a particular case. We are simply there to provide information or assistance in a particular situation.” The ability to act on an isolated incident without knowing the outcome or the broader mission is something that can be difficult for military personnel, explains Cormac Rynne. “You always want a clear mission and a clear outcome,

few instances of weapons being used by smugglers. I think that has more to do with the international element, particularly in the US where if weapons are used the sentences are multiplied.” This belief seems to have spread internationally according to Lt Cdr Rynne, and with the rare exception, Irish crews have not encountered weapons. However, there are

“The classification of a boarding operation depends on the estimated risk. Depending on the threat assessment, the ship’s captain decides how to deal with it. Although there have been very few cases of our crews encountering weapons we can’t afford to be lax in our methods. On the next boarding we could encounter heavy weapons. The captain of the ship can decide on basically one of two interdiction options, he can bring his own ship alongside the vessel in question, known as ‘closing’ the ship. He can then cover the vessel with his own armament before launching his boats. Alternatively, he can do a ‘stand-off’ boarding, which means he launches his boats from some miles off, up to 10 or 12 miles, below the visible or radar horizon. This is also known as a covert boarding, the purpose being to board the vessel before the crew of that vessel even know you’re there. Each of these options carries their own degree of risk.”

that’s the way military personnel generally think. However in terms of criminal proceedings, where all cases will end up, there may not be a clear outcome within Irish jurisdiction.”

Advances in technology which smugglers can use to conceal or land illicit cargo have been rapid and in some cases this technology is accompanied by a capacity for deadly force, though to date, this thankfully hasn’t manifested itself frequently in Irish waters. “In this jurisdiction, and it’s strange, there have been

other worrying developments. The breakup of the former Soviet-Bloc has increased the availability of weapons worldwide, and there have been a lot of weapons found as part of illicit consignments, which is in itself disturbing. “We have encountered people who have been involved in violent activity in other jurisdictions, but thankfully to date they have not been used against our crews. This dates back as far as the Marita Ann gun-running incident in 1984, there was plenty of weapons on board but they weren’t used against us.”

All naval operations have their own ever-constant dangers, mainly weather, winds, visibility, currents and tides. “In addition you have the risks of that particular tactical situation. But the primary role of any ships captain, unlike other branches of the service, is

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The primary role of putting personnel on suspect vessels is something that will always be required.

safety of the ship. The safety of your vessel comes before the safety of individual personnel. If you lose your ship you lose everyone. In other military scenarios, concern for the personnel will come first, but that's not the way we're trained, we take care of the ship first and foremost. But of course we take every precaution. We're not going to 'cold-call' on a vessel, although legally we do have

and one bad move could ruin four or five year's work. It is also a matter of maintaining credibility, both inter-agency and international. Intelligence is shared based on your track record. If you fail to deliver, or if you let people down, they will not supply you with information in the future." The Irish Naval Service is viewed with very high regard by international agencies, a standard

we have a lot of accumulated experience and we have the right people. To an extent we have been a victim of our own success. It's hard to argue for more resources from government when we're perceived to be doing such a good job as it is. But there is always the 'what if' factor in terms of equipment and resources, and we could do more. There is always an additional internal danger that we could become complacent as we are doing the job so well at the moment. We have to remember that we're only as good as our last successful mission, on the next one you could encounter a crew with heavy weapons. The police use the term the 'lunatic 4 per cent,' and there is always a chance that we could encounter some of them, after all the rewards of drug smuggling are astronomical."

Indeed they are, a fact that makes this never ending global war so difficult. Literally everyone is a target for drug smugglers. For instance, a quarter tonne consignment can easily garner multi-million euro rewards. In this battle, there is little leeway for error; "It is so important that you do absolutely everything right, it's so easy to foul a mission. You can approach the vessel

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the powers to do so. In such situations there is always the risk that you may foul another agency's operation, or an international operation that we may or may not be aware of. There are a lot of players in this game, both nationally and internationally. Some of these enforcement operations can go on for years,

which the Naval authorities obviously want to maintain. "At what we do we are probably the best," says Cormac Rynne. "We would be recognised, definitely in terms of fishery protection without being arrogant, as certainly the best in Europe. The reason for this is that we are involved in these tasks so much,



Lt Cdr Rynne on the deck of the LE Niamh.



The naval service has worked hard to dismiss the perception of Ireland as a 'soft-touch' for smugglers.

perfectly, board covertly and then put your hands on the evidence and destroy the whole case. So in essence, a mistake can mean fouling up an operation that may have gone on for a considerable length of time, you have risked the lives of your crew in a

given your all, but the case may just collapse anyway. You have to be able to walk away from that.”

Illegal narcotics are available in every small town in Ireland, so it's apparent that a relatively small proportion of smuggled narcotics

The Future

And to the perennial question of can the war on drugs be won?

“That's not our role, our function is to uphold the law and to execute government policy, not to interpret or formulate such policies. But you can't help looking at the bigger picture. It is hard to see an end to it at the moment. A lot of work needs to be done to reduce the market demand in addition to trying to sever the supply chains. The key is making drug use and smuggling less attractive, I think Ireland may previously have been seen as a soft target, and with our partner in the JTF we have worked hard to change that.”

And it has changed. “We now have very powerful penalties with heavy mandatory sentencing on successful convictions. So it's a case of huge financial rewards versus the possibility of a heavy jail term.” While the turning point of this war may be far into the future, the steps made to make Irish waters less attractive as a gateway for illicit narcotics is a major achievement that the Irish Naval Service can justifiably be proud of.



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mission which will all amount to nothing because you made a minor technical or procedural mistake.”

To do all of this correctly requires a vast amount of training and although you can't be results driven all the time if you go to so much effort you want to be sure that you get a result. “And there is also the aspect that sometimes the system just fails, you have

consignments are intercepted. It is therefore easy to see the lure of this illicit trade. In Irish terms, the sea is believed to be the most frequent point of entry. “We have some very large commercial ports here, however the Naval Service does not have a role in policing traffic in these ports, but Ireland has a huge coastline and has been described as the unofficial gateway to Europe.”