

Southbound:

The LE Eithne Voyage To Argentina

Travelling over 12000 nautical miles, the flagship of the Naval Service; the LE Eithne, successfully sailed this immense distance under the Irish flag as a result of an invitation from the Argentine Government to the Irish Government. After the successful mission of the LE Niamh to the Far East in 2002, this deployment to the South Atlantic represents one of the most lengthy ever undertaken by the Naval Service. The core reason for the Eithne's deployment was to join in celebrations commemorating the founder of the Argentinian Navy, Mayo man Admiral William Brown.

Initial planning for the deployment was co-ordinated by the interdepartmental naval overseas deployment committee headed by the Department of Defence and with representatives from a variety of stakeholders including the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, Enterprise Ireland and Tourism Ireland. The operational details of the deployment were worked out by a Naval Service co-ordinating group. On board LE Eithne, the amount and variety of services that it would deliver in the course of its visits to Mar De Plata and Buenos Aires in Argentina, Montevideo in Uruguay, Rio De Janeiro and Fortaleza in Brazil were worked out between the ship and the various stakeholders; these included the

Department of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Missions in each country, Enterprise Ireland, the Health Services Executive, the Admiral Brown Society, Our Lady's Children's Hospital (with which LE Eithne is twinned) and Cork University Hospital.

For officers on board it was a challenging and memorable experience. The ship's X/O, Lieutenant Commander Aedh McGinn, who has been with the Naval Service for fourteen years, recalls the 63 day voyage as being remarkably successful and blessed with good weather. "Obviously, one of the problems at the forefront of your considerations when undertaking a voyage like this is weather. If we were to come up against continuously nasty weather it makes it very difficult to complete other aspects of your job."

The voyage of the Eithne was, by its very nature, a unique undertaking; all the more fitting in that they were bound for





celebrations dedicated to a unique man - Admiral William Brown - who was pivotal to the realisation of independence for the Argentine people. Brown was a soldier and humanitarian and there are many examples of how he promoted the principles of the law of armed conflict even long before these were codified.

On Monday 6th February 2006, the Eithne departed from Haulbowline Naval Base. The first port of call was Tenerife, in the Canary Islands arriving at midday on the 10th of February. After stocking up on fuel, food and a night out for the crew the ship set sail around midday the next morning. Bound for South America, the Eithne voyaged south towards the equator and, when not on duty, the crew found various ways to entertain themselves using DVD's, computer games, quizzes and the onboard gymnasium. Nevertheless, there was always work or training to be done. "Throughout the journey training exercises were constantly carried out. These ranged from the expected fire-fighting and damage control exercises to the perhaps surprising 'operations in a hostile environment' and 'armed boarding' exercises.

"We worked closely with the crew when we were planning either leisure activities or operations. It's vital that they feel closely involved with the running of the ship, particularly on such a lengthy voyage," adds Lt Cdr McGinn.

"This year LE Eithne, like its seven sister ships, will spend approximately 210 days on patrol around Ireland"

On February 17th the ship passed the equator and moved into the southern hemisphere, observing tradition here by requesting permission from the King of Neptune to pass the hemisphere. Commander Mark Mellet explains here: "Perhaps the highlight of the outward journey was the traditional ceremony associated with crossing the equator... In the course of the ceremony King Neptune was requested to facilitate the safe passage of LE Eithne from the northern to the southern hemispheres. The ceremony, which is steeped in history, was originally designed to relieve boredom in the long passages."

As the ship neared the coast of Brazil, the crew was aware of reports of rampant piracy in this area. Reports of pirates successfully overrunning ships are not unheard of, and contingency training to deal with this was instigated on board.

Also in Brazilian waters the ship regularly got warnings of any hazardous materials floating in the water. On one occasion it was noticed that a 50 ton hazard had drifted a long way from where it was originally reported. It was decided that the best thing to do was to sink it and after firing on the hazard, naval divers were then sent to finish the sinking, only to find themselves surrounded by hammerhead sharks. Luckily, these sharks appeared to be little interested in the divers and the event continued successfully without further incident.

"Incidents such as the navigational hazard show how unpredictable any voyage can be, it was a notable diversion and also served as a very good training exercise in itself" adds Cdr Mellett.

By February 25th the ship was over 6000 nautical miles away from Ireland the LE Eithne sighted Argentinian soil and on the following day the ship arrived at the Argentinian port of Mar Del Plata.

On Station In Argentina

Over the next few days the ship was opened to the public and interviews were given to local and regional media about the purpose and reason for the voyage. Several formal events were attended by the crew, with an end of visit banquet being held on the Eithne



herself.

The ship set sail again for Buenos Aires where various events and functions were again attended and on Friday, March 3rd a parade ceremony took place indoors at which there was a formal unveiling of a bronze statue to Admiral Brown.

The following days in Buenos Aires included a party on board the ship for sick children, public visits and a full Irish themed evening. There were several local trips as well as visits to local schools – many of which are named after Admiral Brown. One such school was presented with an electrical generator, the Eithne, sponsored by Musgraves Cash and Carry and brought on the ship from Ireland. This was installed by the crew in quite a remote school called after William Brown and which was accessible only by boat several hundred kilometers up the Parana River.

The ship left Buenos Aires on the 8th of March and arrived on the next day at Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay where the ship stayed for a number of days. The next port of call for the ship was Rio de Janeiro in Brazil where St. Patrick's Day festivities were held. The crew also worked with organisations that help street children such as the non-governmental organisation TASK Brazil (TASK = The Abandoned Street Kids) and arranged a visit of a group of abandoned street children onboard ship. Working with TASK Brazil, the ships personnel including electricians, carpenters, painters and engineers carried out essential repairs to a shelter for abandoned children. In addition to this work in Rio De Janeiro, members of the crew carried out work at the NGO's farm which is used to provide an alternative livelihood for the abandoned children.

"St Patrick's day itself was spent both reconstructing and fixing Casa Jimmy, a safe house for children in Rio de Janeiro, and holding a St. Patrick's day reception dinner with Martin Greene, the Irish ambassador to Brazil. On the 18th of March the crew visited Corcovado, the Statue of Christ, which many of the crew later stated to be a high point of the trip," says Lt McGinn.



Coming Home

Finally, on Monday 20th of March, the long journey home began. Two days into the trip the weather took a turn for the worse and deteriorated into heavy thundershowers that reduced visibility, blanked radars and raised the humidity.

The ship docked at Fortalesa, in Brazil, on the 23rd of March where there was media and public interest in the boat. With the help of the Irish Catholic Missionary network, the crew of LE Eithne linked up with the Redemptorists missionaries in Fortaleza and helped in the repair of housing for the poor and, with some difficulty, helped in the painting of a school.

Eventually, in the early hours of the 28th of March, the ship left port and by half twelve the next morning the LE Eithne had returned to the northern hemisphere. However, on the

3rd of April an oil-tanker did not 'give-way' for LE Eithne, as maritime law requires, and after some tense radio signals however, a collision was avoided and the tanker changed course in the final moments.

Unfortunately this was the end of the voyage's challenges. Two days later the ship entered more heavy weather. Her course was changed as LE Eithne struggles with the tumultuous seas and wind for a full day and night. This proved to be the last significant weather problem on the return journey.

Finally on Friday 7th of April, the LE Eithne returned home having successfully completed the second longest deployment in the history of the Naval Service and, with the exception of one crew member who had broken his ankle in Tenerife, the entire crew of 77 personnel including attachments had returned safely.

"In this case the Naval Service deployed on a 25000 km mission to another hemisphere. LE Eithne's success in the South American deployment not only reflected positively on the Defence Forces but also on the Government of Ireland and the Irish people," says Lt Cdr McGinn.

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