

He recognised the number on his phone. It was the Operations Centre and a call at this time probably meant that a boat carrying migrants was in distress. He drives to base as soon as possible and arrives with other members of the crew. All rush on board and go through their check lists to get the boat underway as soon as possible.

The bridge receives a weather forecast from the Operations Centre that indicates a moderate 'Gregale,' bad news for any small boat in open seas. The patrol boat sets out a short while later and is immediately confronted with mounting waves outside Marsamxetto Harbour, breaking over the bow and splashing down on the bridge windows.

The captain has been informed that a drifting migrant boat lies 50 nautical miles south of Malta. He estimates that it will take the patrol boat at least three hours to get there in the prevailing heavy seas. It is going to be a long night, and probably day, as the chances of locating a small fibreglass boat in pitch darkness and heavy seas are small! Yet he is well aware that the migrants' survival depends on the perseverance of his crew.

Missions in rough seas can be considered as one of the worst working conditions that anyone may encounter, especially at night. Persons on watch cannot identify the sometimes enormous waves in front of them but must 'feel' their way through the sea as the craft climbs and descends waves. All too often, the odd wave manages to fool all and slams into the bow, sending a shockwave through the craft. In the most demanding of missions, up to three-quarters of a crew may be down with sea-sickness, whilst the fitter members are faced with excessively long watches in order to get the mission accomplished.

Yet, employment with the Maritime Squadron remains a career that fully quenches one's thirst for adventure, where a certain degree of uncertainty prevails every time a patrol boat sets out to sea; and where hours of routine patrol can dramatically change into moments of intense action, often pushing personnel to their physical and mental limits.

It is 1.15 a.m. The patrol boat has arrived at the last reported location of the migrants' boat and begins searching downwind. The captain has plotted a search pattern and the wheelsman begins to take the vessel through each search leg with observers scanning the wave crests for the boat with a powerful searchlight. Nothing but white water is visible.

Sunrise comes at 6.30 and an AFM fixed wing aircraft takes off from Malta at first light to join the search. Finally, at 8.20 a.m. there's a crackle on the radio and the pilot reports ►



Photograph by Mark Tabone

A Protector class patrol boat.

On call with the Maritime Squadron

It should have been a pleasant Friday evening with the family until the captain of the AFM Protector class patrol boat received a call on his mobile....

MAJ. MARTIN CAUCHI INGLOTT

A dinghy is pulled up the rear ramp of a Protector patrol boat.

The Maritime Squadron's Rapid Deployment Team.



Photograph by Noel Spiteri



sighting a boat 7NM south of the patrol boat. The craft speeds to the scene and finds a small white boat bobbing up and down the waves like a bottle cork with 30 bewildered, freezing, exhausted and severely sea-sick Africans on board.

Locating the boat was the first difficult task. The next challenge is to transfer the migrants onto the patrol boat safely. Bringing the fibreglass boat alongside in such rough conditions is not an option since this will either smash the boat into the side of the patrol boat, or cause the boat to capsize since the migrants would panic and rush to one side.

The only logical but dangerous solution is to lower a dinghy and transfer the migrants a few at a time. The boatswain slides a dinghy down the ramp at the rear and evaluates the situation... it is as desperate as expected. He first throws life-jackets to all the migrants, then starts transferring the migrants onto the dinghy, then onto the patrol boat, starting with the weakest including toddlers and a pregnant woman. It all takes half an hour.

The patrol boat can now head home, cutting through the high wave crests that are now in an opposing direction. It is going to be a long, rough trip...

Upon securing lines at base, the migrants are handed over to the police and the captain walks through his vessel as the crew begins bringing the ship back to a decent state of readiness.

It was a challenging mission for all, but he is satisfied since he pushed his vessel and crew to the limits on a life-saving mission, and was successful. He can now go home and get some rest. Hopefully, the mobile will not ring...

This was a general description of a patrol boat operation that became the norm over the past two years. Last year alone, there were over 50 migrant boat cases, and over 1,000 migrants were rescued by patrol boats. But going out to sea to save migrants, to conduct search and rescue, or to perform maritime surveillance are just a few of the missions that the Maritime Squadron performs.

The squadron's other major missions include patrolling the high seas, safeguarding the continental shelf and Malta's resources. The squadron is also responsible for enforcing fisheries legislation, with the patrol boats ensuring that no foreign fishing boats fish within Malta's zone without authorisation, and that local fishermen abide by conservation regulations.

More adrenalin intense is the pursuit of smugglers. This is a task that entails patience and fast reaction. Hours of waiting for a suspicious movement on radar are followed by high speed chases, often in pitch darkness. The elements of surprise and deception are crucial for a successful outcome since the smuggler can easily jettison his illicit cargo and/or avoid arrest if he notes the presence of the patrol boat.

The squadron also conducts numerous other routine tasks such as inspections of pleasure craft; monitoring commercial craft at sea; emergency towing; burials at sea; disposal of unserviceable government stores; VIP conveyance and providing escort to foreign warships. ●

BELOW LEFT A Swift class patrol boat meets a boat carrying migrants on the high seas. **BELOW RIGHT** Rescue at sea.



Photographs by Darrin Zammit Lupi