



HMS BULWARK FAMILIES LINK LETTER

December 2014

Dear Families and Friends,

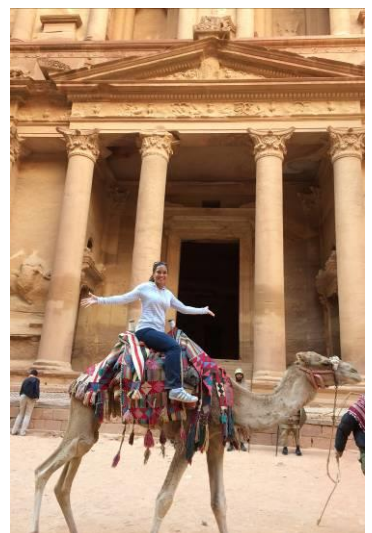
As we are getting ever closer to home – albeit with a thousand miles or so and still much to do ahead of us – I would like to take a final opportunity to write and share some more news from HMS BULWARK.

Last time I wrote the Ship's Company were enjoying some down-time in Muscat Oman, as the ship prepared for the International Mine Counter Measures Exercise (IMCMEX), the largest maritime exercise in the world in 2014. With 43 nations participating, BULWARK took charge of a multinational Task Force covering a huge area of sea ranging from the Northern Arabian Gulf to the Northern Red Sea and we exercised protection of the strategic international shipping routes and ports in the region.

With IMCMEX successfully completed, BULWARK headed from the Gulf of Oman to the Red Sea, this time northbound for our next 24 hour port visit to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. This visit was all about engagement with the Saudi Military, and as you can imagine the Ship's Company pulled out all the stops to demonstrate the plethora of capabilities the ship can deliver. Our Ceremonial Guard, in particular, made quite the impression at the Official Reception.

Our next task was to recover 3 Commando Brigade's vehicles and personnel in Aqaba, Jordan, from their exercise in the Desert with Jordanian Armed Forces. The belly of the ship is now full with Vikings, BVs and Land Rovers all covered in sand and we effectively their ferry home. Nearly half of the Ship's Company were able to take advantage of a whistle stop tour of the ancient city of Petra, a once in a lifetime experience for many.

From Jordan we returned through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean for the next port visit to Alexandria, Egypt. This was set to be the largest and most eagerly anticipated official visit of the entire Cougar 14 deployment, however, the extreme weather closed Alexandria Port so we were unable to bring the ship safely alongside. This was really disappointing for many who were looking forward to exploring this historic city and beyond.



Diverted north to Crete to seek shelter from the wind and swell, we were still able to hold a commemoration service on the Flight Deck to remember the 5th HMS BULWARK which exploded off Sheerness on 26th November 1914 with loss of all but 9 of the 750 crew. Committing a wreath to the sea and listening to a poignant citation from The Padre proved moving for all onboard.



Through calmer seas the ship commenced passage west and the Petty Officer's Mess added some variety to biscuits from the NAAFI at standeasay raising over £500 for charity in the process. The sponges, brownies, shortbread, scones and cupcakes were made and sold by keen amateur baker Petty Officer 'Taff' Churches, with the able assistance of Petty Officers David Austin and Nadine Kelly and they were all exceedingly good.



The next stop for BULWARK was the welcome port of Valetta, Malta, for the Ship's Company to enjoy some rest and recovery time after essentially the best part of a month at sea. For many this was a chance to revisit a city with a strong connection to the Royal Navy and for others to soak up perhaps the last of the warm weather we have experienced since deploying East of Suez. It was also the first sight of Christmas lights to make us think of home and also a little festive.

And so we head further west across the Mediterranean, as I have already said, we still have much work to do and many miles to go, but our thoughts nonetheless turn to our families. We are working hard at making homecoming a memorable experience both for us and for those who travel down to Devonport to meet us.



Regrettably, due to the phenomenal weather and sea states expected in the Bay of Biscay, we were unable to embark family members as planned for the passage home from Gibraltar. I sincerely apologise to those of you who had to cancel plans and I hope that we'll find time in 2015 to re-schedule.

Sadly for me, this will be the last time I write to you. In the New Year I shall be handing over Command of the Royal Navy's Fleet Flagship to Captain Nick Cooke-Priest in order to move on to my new post at the Ministry of Defence in London. I am sure that Nick will enjoy the challenges and demands that the role brings, whilst also recognising the critical support we receive from our families and friends – thank you.



In the meantime, I look forward to seeing as many of you as can be there to welcome us home. And, may I wish you all a very merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Kind Regards

Dean Bassett

Commanding Officer
HMS BULWARK