Dear Families and Friends,

I write to you at a time when, if things had gone according to our original plan, we would now be safely alongside in Plymouth. Instead, as you are very much aware, we are mid way through our task to lead the UK’s response to the tragic migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. I would like to begin therefore by saying thank you very much for your understanding and forbearance as we deliver this essential search and rescue mission.

Since departing Devonport in Easter Week, the Ship and her Company has achieved an incredible amount. Gibraltar, a traditional first stop, with strong historical and impassioned links for the Royal Navy, proved as always universally popular, and again we rose (97 of us!) to the traditional challenge of the early morning run to the top of the Rock!

Our eastbound journey to Turkey and the Centenary Commemorations of the battle of Gallipoli (G100) included a short logistics stop in Piraeus, Greece. We took the opportunity to welcome on board guests from the local, diplomatic and military communities, and in return the Ship’s Company was able to enjoy the attractions of the ancient city of Athens. But of course our Mediterranean transit also provided time for the huge amount of work which was required to prepare the ship for what was not only the highlight of our deployment, but also an immensely important event in the navy’s and the country’s calendar – G100.

Anchoring the UK contribution to the commemorations, BULWARK played a prominent role as the home for VIPs ranging from their Royal Highnesses (TRHs) The Prince of Wales and Prince Harry, the Ambassador to Turkey, Chief of Defence Staff, First Sea Lord, the Foreign Secretary and about 140 other participants. The ship was the main attraction during the maritime sail pasts for both International and ANZAC Days on 24 and 25 April, providing a gun salute for the Commonwealth and Irish Ceremony and fittingly marking the ANZAC Dawn Service with the whole Ship’s Company lining the deck in what is known as a ‘Man Ship’. Two days of maritime manoeuvre in close formation with other ships from Turkey, France, Australia and New Zealand was both spectacular and rewarding. BULWARK was honoured to be able to provide a 48 man Royal Guard to salute TRHs at the ceremony ashore as well as providing another 100 members of the Ship’s Company to support and enable the Commonwealth and Irish Ceremony at Cape Helles.

Achieving this whilst concurrently hosting a media heavy Royal Reception, an official party of WW1 descendants and getting underway for the sail pasts was both challenging and successful, in equal measure. The weather was splendid throughout and I am sure you will have seen some of the coverage on the television and in the press.
All the hard work really paid off and I am immensely proud to say that the Ship not only looked absolutely stunning but also that we delivered, over 4 days, every one of the vast number of tasks that we had been asked to undertake and we did it with great style and panache entirely in keeping with the finest traditions of the Naval Service.

Towards the end of G100 we learned that we were to be re-tasked to help address what was becoming a major crisis involving thousands of migrants making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea, during which many lives were being lost. As such, before dawn on the morning of 25th April we headed back towards the Mediterranean with a new set of orders in hand.

Following on from G100, this became a further period of intense activity with planning, preparations, adjustment and storing all becoming the new norm. A short logistics stop in Crete and Catania, Sicily enabled us to embark extra personnel and humanitarian and medical stores, as well as to plan for and await the arrival of the three Merlin helicopters from 814 Squadron, essential to the search element of our mission, known as Operation WEALD.

Having transformed the ship and our landing craft into floating rescue and migrant reception centres, we immediately struck success rescuing hundreds of migrants, and from which we enjoyed extensive media coverage, even on General Election day! That day we returned to Catania with 629 men, women and children who we had saved from their fragile and unseaworthy craft and the peril of the sea. But just 3 weeks later we returned to Catania with nearly 1200 more! We have to date rescued nearly 3000 people from a dreadful fate, providing them with immediate medical attention, food, water, clothing and sanitation; but more importantly we have given them life and opportunity where otherwise it would have been lost – and we feel incredibly proud to be doing it with such success.
As you know we were committed to Op WEALD for 60 days and our programme is based on this. We are now half way through and whilst we still remain at 5 days notice for any contingent operation, our return to Devonport is planned for Thursday 9th July and I fully expect to return on that date. I would like to invite you to join us in Plymouth Sound that morning such that you can enjoy the passage up river with us before we berth alongside for the Summer. We will be in touch with the detail and I hope to be able to confirm this opportunity a few days in advance of our return; but as ever, we remain subject to the weather, tight timelines and other factors that may affect the plan. So, please keep your fingers crossed and I’m sure the plan will work. Either way, I am hugely looking forward to greeting as many of you as possible when we return, and as I said, details will follow.

Looking ahead to the Autumn, our programme is, yes, busy! Already our preparations for the autumn deployment, COUGAR 15, are well under way; but once home, aside the essential maintenance required to keep our Ship fit, we will be enjoying some precious, treasured time at home and on leave with you.

In the meantime, may I thank you most sincerely for your unerring love and support. Without it we simply could not derive the confidence and unbounded enthusiasm and commitment that we require to tackle our tasks head on – I am immensely grateful to you all.

With my very best wishes,

Nick Cooke-Priest
Commanding Officer
HMS BULWARK