

We sailed on 7 February for Hamburg, but a day before we arrived we had to change the programme due to ice. Although the ice in Hamburg was relatively thin, and merchant ships were using the harbour, we would be in for 5 days, and with colder weather forecast we did not want to risk being iced-in, or damaging our rudders and compromising our deployment. So instead we turned left and went down the Kiel canal to the ice-free port of Kiel.

At Kiel we interacted with the Press, local dignities and the German Navy. We also took time to pay our respects to the fallen at a nearby Commonwealth Cemetery. Overall it was a relatively low-key visit but an interesting one.

After Kiel, it was back to sea and to exercises with the Polish Navy.

Our visit coincided with a visit by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, and his Polish counterpart, Admiral Mathea. Both the VIP visit, and our interaction with the local community, went well. ♦ This included a press conference for 37 national tv, radio and print journalists. I thought that organising senior officers was tough but the media, especially photo journalists (who want to go everywhere to get the right angle), brings a whole new dimension to the expression 'herding cats'. The good news is that the publicity resulted in over 4000 Poles coming onboard for the ship as visitors, and in appearances in all the major news channels.

Following our high profile visit to Gdynia, we moved North to Copenhagen for a somewhat lower profile visit. On arrival, we were originally planning host 250 guests, but less than 24 hours before the event, this number swelled to 370. As a result of miscommunication between the Embassy and the ship, it also transpired that all the guests were arriving 1 hour earlier than originally planned. To cope with the numbers, we developed a system of 'dynamic' hosting which involved taking groups of guests on a tour around various displays as they embarked, thus preventing crowding in any one location. Amongst the visitors was the US Deputy Ambassador in Copenhagen, with whom I had worked in Afghanistan, so it was a very pleasant evening all round.

When we left Copenhagen we headed North towards Oslo for our next Port visit. En route we exercised with the Swedish Navy. Our Royal Marines went ashore close to Gothenburg and practiced landing drill with their Swedish counterparts. We also conducted trials with a Swedish Combat Boat (CB 90) which the UK is looking to purchase. These boats are an equivalent size to our smaller landing craft and can carry about 20 troops. However they are much faster and will be ideal for escort roles.

After a visit to Oslo we moved North of the arctic circle for Exercise Cold Response with 9 other NATO nations - of which more anon.

Happy Matelot, the author, is serving aboard HMS Bulwark. ♦