

## MARITIME WELFARE



A drone returns to the Phoenix after searching the waters for any boats of migrants in distress

# A saviour from the sea

Last summer, Regina Cotroneo and her husband Chris were onboard the 40m motor yacht Pepita, crossing from Lampedusa to Tunisia while cruising in the Mediterranean, when they spotted something that disturbed them floating in the water.

It was a discarded winter jacket and it lay in the water as if some ghost was wearing it. They asked Marco Cozzoli, the yacht's captain, how he thought it got there and he told them it probably belonged to a refugee drowned at sea trying to escape from Libya intelligence.

This sparked many discussions about the experiences he had witnessed throughout the year. Regina recalled: 'In around the same time, the Pope held his first official visit to Lampedusa, from where he launched an appeal to citizens of the world to lend their contribution to this cause. My husband and I felt personally compelled to take heed of the Pope's message.'

More than 20,000 men, women and children are thought to have drowned in the last 20 years seeking to cross the Mediterranean. The United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, says that some 1,500 people boarded or gave missing at sea so far this year – and more than 1,200 of them since the beginning of June.

UNHCR estimates that around 20,000 migrants have arrived in Malta from Libya since 2002. Last year it was reported that about 10% are still on the island, which has a local population of some 407,000.

The crossings to Europe are mostly organised by criminal gangs operating largely from Libya. Migrants are placed on rickety, unseaworthy boats with very few resources in the hope

Welfare agencies have warned about the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean as thousands of refugees seek to cross the sea in unsafe vessels. **MICHAEL HOWORTH** reports on a maritime initiative which seeks to provide vital frontline support...

that they will be rescued by authorities before they dehydrate or drown.

When the Cotroneos, who live in Malta, boarded in October 2013 that more than 400 migrants had drowned near the Italian island of Lampedusa, they were moved to do something more positive instead of just watching from the sidelines. Buying a boat and tackling the problem at sea seemed to them the best way forward.

So, putting their own money where their mouth is, the couple have chosen to personally fund the conversion of a 40m former fishing trawler into a mercy ship they call Phoenix. They found her in Norfolk, Virginia, where she had been used as a research vessel and later by the US government for training purposes. The refit was started in the UK but was concluded at Regina Skippard in Malta.

They have named the operation that runs the yacht Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) and based it in Malta. Operating from the island nation, but flying the Italian flag, the blue-hulled yacht may look a little scruffy but she and her crew have a heart of pure gold.

Phoenix carries two seagoing HD tenders and two sports drones which it seeks to use to originate at sea via radio or through GPS, who is from New Orleans, is able to fly each of the two Schibot 5-500 canisters, or drones, off the custom-made flight deck on the yacht's stern.

He explained how the drone's HD-quality night vision and thermal imaging cameras are powerful enough to read a piece of paper in a passenger's hand from the air. 'We are making history in many ways by being the first civilian ship to use such grand technology,' he added. 'We hope that this is going to change the environment for rescue at sea. We're innovators here. We're trying to do something that no one else has been able to do.'

When they come across a migrant boat in international waters, the crew of Phoenix contact the nearest authorities, communicating the position and the nature of distress. They are obliged then to wait for further instructions, but they use that time to transfer food and water using the tenders they carry. Life jackets, blankets and other medical assistance are also made as appropriate. Phoenix carries a



Orphan children are checked by the medical crew aboard Phoenix

paramedic onboard working from self-equipped medical bay.

Last month while at sea, the Phoenix crew spotted a boat in distress carrying approximately 300 migrants. Immediate contact was established with MBOC Force who directed that the migrant boat be intercepted. Having reported back on the state of the vessel and the people onboard, Phoenix was eventually directed to assist by taking the migrants onboard.

All 83 women and children were transferred via EIBs when they were given first aid by the two paramedics onboard. Meanwhile, the Italian warship Desmos approached the location and, using MOAS and Italian Navy EIBs, the rest of the migrants were all provided with life jackets and transferred.

Later that same day Phoenix again became involved in another rescue operation, this time discovering a wooden boat carrying approximately 400 migrants. EIBs were used to transfer these migrants to the Italian vessel.

The migrants were mostly Syrians, Palestinians and Iranians, among them a two-day-old infant, and included a member of people from Damascus who stated that they had sold their worldly possessions to make the trip. One of those rescued said he sold his house and car and spent \$15,000 to get his family away from the conflict.

The MOAS team seeks to serve as an offshore aid station, in the disposal of both MBOC Force and ICG Malta. As a first aid station at sea, we want to be out at sea as much as possible,' a spokesman says. 'To remain faithful to our mission, we do not act as a ferry service between Libya and Europe. Our aim is always to disembark as soon

as possible and go back to assist those in distress.'

Far from being against the law, saving lives is the obligation of any vessel at sea according to international law,' he pointed out. 'The only difference between MOAS and a fishing boat or a merchant vessel is that we are at sea purely to help locate and assist vessels in distress.'

Phoenix carries a qualified and paid crew of six, comprising captain, first officer, chief engineer, second engineer and two seamen.

There is also an operational team of eight people responsible for search and rescue, all of whom have extensive experience: an onboard operations officer, assistant operations officer, one security officer, two paramedics, and three Schibot drone operators. The two groups are separate but indivisible.

Regina and Chris also take it in turns to go to sea on the Phoenix and despite being a civilian now, the director of the project was until recently the commander of the Armed Forces of Malta. Members of the crew also have experience in the armed forces, maritime rescue and medicine.

With the operational costs, including the costs of the drones, standing at roughly €350,000 per month and the initial 10-day mission costing the couple over €20, the Cotroneos say they have now exhausted their budget and there is a desperate need for more funds. They are hoping to crowd source extra funding for MOAS to extend the ongoing mercy mission into a year-round operation.

Further information: [www.mogas.eu](http://www.mogas.eu)



Migrants show how they carry life jackets to deal with dehydration and severe hypothermia. All pictures: MOAS

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