The P2000 Archer-class patrol vessel is considered a warship like any other in the Royal Navy – “except a lot smaller,” says Chief Petty Officer Neil Johnson. He should know: he served on HMS Smiter 2013-15 and since then has been in 1st Patrol Boat Squadron (1PBS) in a support role. He regularly visits all 16 vessels in the fleet.

The Royal Navy is making it easier for contingents to organise tours of ships by having a central point of contact to coordinate them. We talk to a member of 1st Patrol Boat Squadron about what cadets can expect from a tour of the P2000 vessel.

Serving on a warship as small as the P2000 presents unique opportunities and challenges. The crew of five or six are led generally by a Lieutenant, often in their first experience of command of a warship. The crew are generally on postings of between two and three years. The small crew means working as a team is extremely important.

“You wouldn’t just have one duty on board, you’d have several duties,” Neil says. “For example, on Smiter I looked after catering, medical. I was also second in command so was looking after executive functions. In the summer the ship goes away for six to eight weeks so you’ve got to get on in a small team. You might not all like each other but you’ve certainly got to get on and do the job (although it does help if you do like each other).”

The main role of the 14 P2000s of 1PBS is to support Royal Navy training. However, a significant part of their role is flying the flag for the Royal Navy around the UK. Neil says: “They’ve got a lot of outreach because they can get into ports and little marinas where you’d never be able to send another warship. So that enables us to assist with civilian ceremonies, do some recruitment work and to conduct a bit of regional influence.”

Part of this ‘Royal Navy in the public eye’ engagement is putting on tours for cadets. “At the very least we like to get cadets on board, give them a ship’s tour, let them meet and talk to the crew,” says Neil. “But ideally what we try to do is get them out on the sea, port to port or back to the same location. It gives them an experience of being at sea in the Royal Navy, a snapshot of how a ship operates.”

Neil adds that the cadets get to drive the ship from the helm, go on a tour of the ship, meet and greet the ship’s company and observe entering and leaving harbour. “Where we can we try to make it as interactive as possible,” he says. “The cadets all seem to go off with smiling faces – even the ones who get a bit seasick.” Not that there’s any shame in that, he adds. “We tell everyone to bring seasickness tablets with them because the ship moves around a lot. It’s 50 tonnes and 20m long: I can stand on the jetty and rock it. So it’s affected by wind and swell quite a lot. I’m pretty much immune to seasickness because I’ve spent so long on P2000s, but some of my colleagues have to take tablets regularly. There’s no point being uncomfortable at sea.”

The Royal Navy is trying to make it easier for cadet units to access opportunities such as tours of ships. “Historically, visits like these have been organised through COs networking,” Neil says. “Ships are generally more than happy to have cadets aboard, but in the past it’s depended on a cadet CO knowing someone in command. Now all the P2000s submit their availability to the Royal Navy Youth Team, who then coordinate visits. It’s a new concept for us, but we’re hoping it’ll make the opportunities easier and fairer.”

“AT THE VERY LEAST WE LIKE TO GIVE CADETS A SHIP’S TOUR AND LET THEM MEET THE CREW, BUT IDEALLY WE’RE TRYING TO GET THEM OUT ON THE SEA”

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ON PATROL

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