

Navy frees humpback ensnared in Grand Banks gear

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They called it Operation Free Willy, of course.

A Canadian warship freed a humpback whale that was entangled in fishing gear on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland on Wednesday.



Navy divers from HMCS St. John's work to free a humpback whale from fishing nets near the Grand Banks off Newfoundland on Wednesday. (Canadian Press/DND)

HMCS St. John's was on a routine fisheries patrol when it received a radio message from a nearby fishing boat that a whale was in distress.

The 10-metre animal was thrashing on the surface as it tried to free itself from ropes and a large orange buoy snagged in its tail.

The frigate steamed to the area and put two small boats in the water.

"I couldn't believe the size of it — he was three times longer than our boat," Cmdr. Brian Santarpia, the ship's skipper, said Thursday.

"We were a little concerned about letting the boat get close, let alone letting divers get in."

For more than an hour, sailors in one of the boats tried to free the whale by cutting some of the lines that were attached to the buoy and about 20 heavy crab pots below the surface.

The sailors had to keep a safe distance as the humpback dove to the bottom and then surfaced in a futile attempt to get loose of the lines.

Santarpia eventually dispatched two navy divers without tanks into the water to try to save the animal before it drowned.

As most of the 220 crew in the ship's company watched from the frigate's upper decks, the divers swam up behind the exhausted whale and cut a line that was snagged under its belly.

'They were really excited'

The divers, who got within reach of the whale's tail, said it was slightly unnerving staring into the animal's eye, which was about the size of a large hand.

"The guys came back quite exhilarated," Santarpia said, laughing. "They were really excited."

Once free, the whale swam away slowly as two other humpbacks stayed nearby and a few dolphins looked on.

Santarpia said he turned to one of 20 young naval cadets training on the vessel and asked: "When was the last time you saved a whale?" He said he never had and I said, 'No, me neither.' "

"After 21 years in the navy, I've never seen anything quite like this."