

Op HERRICK 19 Media Day

Even though UK forces are beginning to prepare for withdrawal from Afghanistan, pre-deployment exercises are still in full swing and I was invited along to Salisbury Plain Training Area for the Operation HERRICK 19 Media Day.

The day was a chance for members of 7th Armoured Brigade 'The Desert Rats' and No. 7 Squadron to speak to the nation's media and to demonstrate the kind of tasks that they will be given when they deploy to Afghanistan.

After driving into the middle of nowhere to reach Copehill Down training village, the day began with a briefing from Brigadier James Woodham OBE MC - Commander Task Force Helmand for Operation HERRICK 19. Having commanded 1st Battalion The Royal Anglian on Op HERRICK 11, Brigadier Woodham has seen the progress that the Afghan forces have made over recent years and expressed that they are dealing with the Taliban more and more convincingly as the days go by. Due to the lack of operational need, the Brigade have been tasked with closing some of the remaining UK bases and preparing for the withdrawal of around 800 troops by the end of the year.

With the briefing concluded, it was time to move outside to FOB West where a demonstration was put on to show how a Forward Operation Base is dismantled and moved on to the next location. As heavy logistical equipment started packing up a lookout post, an AAC Apache was called in to provide top cover - one of Odiham's pride and joy was inbound to pick up a heavy artillery gun.

Although it's been in theatre since late last year, the media day was also a chance for RAF Odiham to introduce the Boeing Chinook HC4 to the public.

In December 2008, Boeing signed a 34-year contract with the MoD to install an upgraded cockpit suite (Project Julius) to eight of the UK Chinook force - in April of the following year, this was extended and signed to include the entire fleet. As well as the upgraded digital display cockpit, there is also the addition of a third crew member seat and by the end of 2015 the majority of the Chinook fleet will be fitted with JULIUS - converting the existing Mk2 and Mk3 helicopters to Mk4 and Mk5 standards respectively.

As Odiham continues to take delivery of these upgraded aircraft, the base is also preparing for the drawdown of the force in Afghanistan and the return of its Chinooks and their crew. I spoke to Group Captain D J Toriati OBE MA RAF, Station Commander RAF Odiham & UK Chinook Force Commander to find out how he expects station life to change over the next 18 months.

"Station life is largely centred around generating aircraft that are ready to support global operations. I genuinely don't see life changing all that much. We'll still have the Operational

Conversion Flight (OCF) and will probably start to expand the size of the OCF so that we can generate the number of crews needed to sustain a larger force for the future. 7 Squadron have long held the capability to support operations and trains its pilots continually so again I don't think we'll see much change there. What we will have is the ability to support different sorts of exercises than we are at the moment. At the moment we're very much focused on exercises that prepare our crews for Afghanistan - whether it's in Jordan or El Centro, California. What I see us doing more of in the near future is different kinds of exercises for different kinds of operations. We'll go back to Norway and train for extreme cold weather operations which I think will be fantastic. We'll be able to spend a little more time developing our maritime capabilities too. Rather than two or three weeks on board HMS Illustrious in the space of a year, we might go and spend two or three months and really hone those skills. We're a busy station now and we'll be busy going forwards - it's just that we'll have a little more flexibility in the type of training that we can carry out."

With the Chinook force's main focus being on operations in Afghanistan in recent years, Arctic and maritime exercises have been put on hold for most and very few crews have been able to go to Norway to keep these skills current. It is no surprise that the Station Commander is excited to get back out on different exercises.

One of the main things that the Chinook force have been tasked with in Afghanistan is the IRT/MERT role - crews on standby 24/7 waiting for a call to pick up injured troops from the battlefield. Surely this will be the Chinook's legacy in the Afghan campaign?

"I think it is a fantastically important role to have and I think at the tip of the spear, to be able to take a casualty off the battlefield in the small amount of time that it takes has undoubtedly helped save lives. It is a massive team effort - the pilots, crewmen, the medical team and the force protection crew, the ground engineers that help get them ready. You're right - it is an iconic role for the force to have and we're hugely proud to be able to deliver this capability in the way that we do. However, it also underplays the huge amount of other work that we do in Afghanistan - supporting the Afghan national security forces and enabling them to take their operations forward, taking our own soldiers in the air support role and helping to keep the pressure on the enemy. Also everyday resupplies too - water, ammunition and supplies into patrol bases. The Chinook has enabled that too. I like to think that the force has made a contribution across the spectrum in Afghanistan. I think it is the workhorse of the lift force but again I wouldn't want to underplay the contribution that the Merlins, Sea Kings and Lynxes have made to the campaign - it's been a huge team effort."

The withdrawal of the Chinook force is going to leave a massive hole in the capability that the Afghan forces will have but the UK Chinook Force Commander doesn't think this will necessarily be an issue.

"The crucial point is that we make the assumption that they will go about business in the same way that we have. We are an advanced military force that has been able to use aviation to offset

a strong and capable force of ground troops. From what I've seen, the Afghans do business in a different way and they will continue like that - they will spend much more time on the ground, they'll have more vehicles and be amongst the locals in a different way because after all, it is their country. I think if you go forward with that original assumption then yes you could say it's a hole in their plan but in reality, it won't be. They have got a growing indigenous helicopter capability and although it's not yet the size and shape of ours, I still think they have a chance to develop the same sort of capability that we brought to the mission."

As mentioned previously the HC4 delivery is in full swing, the HC5 upgrade will begin at the end of next year and Odiham will be receiving its first brand new HC6 in the next quarter. One big question remains unanswered - can Odiham accommodate a fleet of that size?

"In any aircraft fleet there is always a sustainment group that is about 25% of the overall fleet either in deep clean, an upgrade program of some sort or in trials. What is at Odiham today, if you brought in an additional 14 aircraft plus the returning units from Afghanistan then it's not as clear yet as to how many aircraft we will be operating on a day to day basis. There are different places where you can store aircraft. We're looking at several things - there is an airfield at Benson that is going to have two large helicopter squadrons moving out of it in the next three to four years and therefore there's that capacity there to use - that's one course of action we'll look at exploring. We could take some of the Chinook force out of Odiham and put it at RAF Benson to operate alongside the Puma HC2. It is just one course though. We are also investigating doing all business out of Odiham which could see the entire force there if we make certain assumptions. One thing I do know is that our base is not going to shrink in any size, shape or form. Broadly speaking the amount of activity overhead is going to be the enduring footprint. Can we absorb the activity related to the additional aircraft at Odiham or is there a more straightforward option at Benson for us to move some aircraft there? It's still to be decided."

After a flight on board ZA713 the day came to an end and as the dust settled on an inspiring insight into theatre preparations, one thing became crystal clear.

The RAF Chinook force is getting stronger by the day.

Many thanks to Group Captain Toriati for his time and to Flt Lt Meg Henderson for making this article possible.