Message from the Commanding Officer

We were expecting to spend February honing our submarine hunting skills and also conducting trials at a NATO facility in Norway. Unfortunately the emerging need to remove and replace one of our diesel generators dominated our February programme, complicated by the fact we were not in base port but alongside in Faslane, the Navy’s submarine base by the Clyde. However, in true “Fighting Clan” spirit, HMS SUTHERLAND was able to rise to the engineering challenge. Furthermore we were able to take advantage of some of the opportunities offered by a prolonged presence in a beautiful part of the world, not all that far away from our namesake county of Sutherland. You’ll read about some of these activities below, along with a round-up of what else we have been up to this month to provide an insight into life onboard The Fighting Clan.

‘Merlin McMerlinface’ – no naming competition is safe

With the embarkation of our Merlin Mk2 from 814 Naval Air Squadron, the crew asked the public to help them find a new call sign by opening hashtag on Twitter: #NameOurMerlin. In 2016, the Natural Environment Research Council also famously asked the public to name its new polar research ship with ‘Boaty McBoatface’ emerging as the popular choice. With little originality, ‘Merlin McMerlinface’ was soon put forward as a potential call sign candidate, as well as other suggestions including ‘Imbru’, ‘Claymore’ and ‘Clynelish’ – well we did ask people to keep in mind the Ship’s historic connection to the county of Sutherland when making their suggestions! Other proposed names have included ‘Highlander’, ‘Tartan Talon’, ‘Clansman’ and ‘Sgian Dubh’. The new call sign will be announced on the Ship’s Twitter page @HMSSUTHERLAND.
Diesel Generator Change

A major challenge of the last month has been the need to change one of the Ship’s four diesel generators; these are important pieces of equipment which provide power to the Ship’s propulsion, war fighting and habitation systems. This complex procedure was made even more challenging by the fact that HMS SUTHERLAND was away from her base port. Despite these obstacles, the Marine Engineering department and their supporting contractors worked long hours to get the Ship back to sea, doing so successfully within a tight schedule - something which they can all be rightly proud of.

“Man overboard Man overboard” - MOBEX and Boat Drills

The last position anyone wants to be in is floating somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, watching their ship sail away over the horizon. That’s why, to ensure this never happens, HMS SUTHERLAND conducts regular man overboard exercises (MOBEX) every time she is at sea. The Ship can recover a man overboard using either one of her two seaboats (Pacific 24 rigid inflatables), or alternatively using the “Swimmer of the Watch”, a sailor in a dry suit and diving fins attached to the Ship by a line. In addition to her regular MOBEXs, we also recently managed to run some lengthy periods of seaboat drills, launching and recovering our seaboats repeatedly in daylight, dusk and night, and practising recovering a man overboard by seaboat in a variety of sea states. This allowed the Ship to locally endorse a number of Seaman Specialists as seaboat coxswains, a key part of their career progression and the Ship’s maintenance of capability.

Stunning Scottish Sunrise

As a sailor we get the chance to visit some amazing countries and do some wonderful things but every now and again there are times when you’ve just got to stop and say “wow”. Whilst at anchor on the Clyde we were treated to the most spectacular sun rise which had everyone taking time out from their busy schedule to go onto the upper deck and admire the view – thank you Scotland.
Welcome aboard ‘Bish’ Chaplain Mike Beasley USN

For the men and women of any naval unit, the Chaplain is a vital member who provides support and advice for both serving personnel and their families. This month the “Fighting Clan” welcomed Chaplain Mike Beasley USN, affectionately known as ‘Bish’, who provided ecumenical and pastoral care for the Ship’s Company whilst we were away from Devonport. ‘Bish’ is on a personnel exchange from the US Navy and will carry out pastoral duties onboard HMS SUTHERLAND and our sister frigates HMS NORTHUMBERLAND and HMS MONMOUTH.

Flying Operations

The Aviation branch of the Royal Navy is essential to operations in order to deliver airborne support to ships and extend our global reach. From combat missions and humanitarian aid to being a ship’s ‘eyes in the sky’, the Fleet Air Arm helps keep the skies safe and supports the Ship’s mission. In order to provide this cutting-edge capability, HMS SUTHERLAND has been conducting flying training for all Ship’s Company in order to familiarise them with the (much larger than the Wildcat) Merlin Mk2. From aircraft engineers, to Officers of the Watch and Aircraft controllers, the last couple of months has seen the Merlin embark on several sorties to not only preserve the pilot’s skill set but the rest of the Ship’s as well. This has included simple launching and recovering to more complex serials like emergency landings in reduced visibility.

Visit by the Moderator of Scotland and Chaplain of the Fleet

The “Fighting Clan” is always proud to uphold its affiliations and this month she was able to do just this by hosting the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Rt Rev Susan Brown, who was previously the first woman to serve in the Sutherland Presbyteries. Mrs Brown was joined onboard by several prominent members of the Chaplaincy including Venerable Martyn Gough QHC, Chaplain of the Fleet. The visit allowed Mrs Brown the opportunity to learn more about the Royal Navy’s presence across the Scottish region and meet some of the men and women who help protect the United Kingdom. It was all the more poignant for Mrs Brown as she previously volunteered as a regular crew member for the East Sutherland Rescue Association (ESRA) in her hometown of Dornoch for ten years.
Main Machinery Space Fire Exercise with Local Area Fire Brigade

One of the most dangerous events that can happen on a ship alongside is a fire in a main machinery space (or “main box”). Therefore it’s important HMS Sutherland regularly exercises her reactions to this scenario so that she can be prepared for the worst, should it happen. It is also important for Local Area Fire Brigades (LAFB) to be familiar with warships, their layouts and fire fighting procedures so that they can provide assistance if needed. Happily these two requirements were able to coincide during our stay in Faslane, where we devoted an afternoon to a simulated fire in the Gas Turbine Room with the aid of the LAFB. This proved a very useful exercise for both fire brigade and Ship, as they reacquainted themselves with each other’s Standard Operating Procedures and worked out how best to work together to deal with this sort of incident. Needless to say, the (exercise) fire was extinguished!!!!

Sailors visit Sutherland and help out local communities

Taking advantage of the Ship’s time in Faslane, a group of personnel from HMS Sutherland took the opportunity to visit our affiliated county. The visit lasted two days, during which our sailors were generously hosted by the local communities. The Executive Officer (XO) and Weapon Engineer Officer (WEO) met the Lord Lieutenant, Dr Monica Main and visited Loch Eriboll and Durness. Meanwhile a second team visited Golspie and Brora completing some community work. The team cleared the Golspie Pier slipway of rubble and flotsam. The following day, half of the team went to the local beach to do a clean up and litter sweep while the other half headed to Brora Primary School, where they tidied the Willow Tree patch to create a tunnel for the children to play in. They also held a Q&A session with one of the classes, discussing disaster relief and the role the Royal Navy plays in providing assistance to countries who have suffered from natural disasters. Prior to heading back to the Ship the sailors were treated to a tour of the beautiful Dunrobin Castle, the ancestral home of Lord and Lady Strathnaver, the Duke of Sutherland.

Our Future Programme

March will be another busy period at sea for the “Fighting Clan” – we will look to prove some of our weapon systems, conduct additional whole ship training exercises and support the Fleet Navigation Officers courses. On completion we will return to our base port in Plymouth for a maintenance period and take some well deserved Easter leave.