A MESSAGE FROM THE COMMANDING OFFICER

Cdr Matt Punch MBE RN

It seems remarkable that our time at RAF Benson is already coming to an end. Our stand up parade last July is still fresh in my mind, but the next chapter for 845 NAS is approaching. My family and I, like many of you, have found our time at Benson thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding. We have worked alongside some fantastic colleagues from the RAF; they have supported us superbly and the Squadron is stronger and more capable as a result of their efforts. The move to RNAS Yeovilton is an exciting one and allows us to re-join the rest of Commando Helicopter Force which will bring a lot of benefits. I do not underestimate the impact such a move will have on Squadron personnel and their families; for some it will mean going home (picture below), for others it will mean moving home. Although my team have developed an excellent plan, there is the risk of some individual issues arising. I am particularly concerned if you suffer any accommodation or housing problems. If this is the case the 845 NAS EWO (WO1 Byrne) should be your first point of contact.

2016 has been very busy so far. You will read about the deployment to Norway, which was a tremendous success. The Cold Weather Survival Course is one of the hardest challenges any of us face, so everyone who passed that course should be extremely proud of their achievements. In early April we deployed on Exercise Griffin Strike in support of 42 Commando Royal Marines and operated alongside colleagues from 846 and 847 NAS, the Chinook and Apache Forces. Living and operating in the field (in this instance in South West Wales) is the next step in understanding what is achievable with the Merlin. Led by Chief Petty Officer Swash, the engineering team provided excellent continuity with the aircraft which allowed excellent training to be conducted by the aircrew.

As ever, I am keen that all gaps in the exercise and deployment programme are exploited. Adventurous training is one way of doing this and you will read Petty Officer Piper’s account of the Royal Navy Ski Champs in this newsletter. Additionally as I type, 9 squadron members are cycling from Lands’ End to John O’Groats; a magnificent feat which I certainly would not attempt and one that has raised over £2000 for the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity.

Finally, I would like to advertise the CHF Families Day at Yeovilton on 28 July. It is always a fantastic day, which includes an opportunity to fly and for me to meet as many of you as possible.
With Ex Black Alligator a distant memory and Christmas over, the Squadron’s main effort at the start of the New Year was to deploy aircraft, equipment and personnel to another extreme climate; this time in support of Ex Clockwork 2016 in Norway. Sitting some 300KMs inside the Arctic Circle is Royal Norwegian Air Force Base Bardufoss and the destination for the Squadron’s Extreme Cold Weather Environmental Training.

Temperatures averaging well below freezing and with maximum lows of a chilly -30 degrees Celsius, the location is perfect for training and offers many challenges for even the most experienced of aviators and engineers. With such an extreme climate, the first aspect of Ex Clockwork is to ensure all personnel have completed the Cold Weather Survival Course (CWSC). The delights of which are covered in a separate article.

CWSCs completed, the aircraft departed from RAF Benson and undertook the 4 day, 3500 km transit to Bardufoss via the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. On arrival the engineers immediately made use of the new and improved facilities at the Air Station, namely two new large temporary hangars. As simple as they are, these were undoubtedly a major factor in reducing electrical faults that are symptomatic of an aircraft that has been cold soaked (left outside) for a pro-longed period. They also reduced the preparation time required for the aircraft when compared to operating solely outside and had the added bonus of minimising exposure times in the elements for engineers.

With a requirement to train 12 pilots and 12 aircrewman in a little over 3 weeks, it was felt that the target was achievable but would be dependent on favourable weather conditions and aircraft serviceability. The flying phase consisted of local area familiarisation sorties and take-offs and landings in re-circulating snow and once completed these were followed by more demanding evolutions. These included load lifting, navigational exercises, mountain flying and formation flying, all by day and night. Additional tasks included briefings with the Norwegian Air Force and providing assistance to the local Mountain Rescue teams with the re-supply of over 5 tonnes of firewood to their mountain rescue huts; many of which were up to 45 miles away.

To accomplish what we did in such a small timeline was a great achievement and would not have occurred had it not been for the impressive efforts of the Squadron’s engineering and support departments. In total, 72 sorties were planned and only one was lost due to an aircraft being broken. This was made even more impressive after the best efforts of one crew who, on landing on top of 4’ of snow, found a 3’ rock buried inside it. Simple physics then took over and ultimately the rock won. Undeterred the engineering team rose to the challenge and the aircraft was back flying with the absolute minimum of impact.

Away from the demanding workloads many individuals took advantage of opportunities to venture away from the base. This time was utilised in many different ways, ranging from honing individual skiing or snow boarding skills, to some hardened individuals taking up the challenge of ice fishing. Much to bemusement of others it came as little surprise that fish was not on the menu that evening!

In conclusion Ex Clockwork was a huge success for all involved. Next stop is back to our roots and a return to sea.
Navy Ski Champs – Petty Officer Piper

Organised through the Royal Navy Winter Sports Association (RNWSA), every year over 1000 Royal Navy Regular and Reserve personnel take advantage of the opportunity to conduct Adventurous Training (AT) by either skiing or snowboarding in the Alps.

This year’s championships were once again located in the beautiful resort of Tignes Val Claret which sits some 2100m high and additionally provides access to Grande Motte Glacier. A perfect location for beginners and the more advanced skiers, the area comprises of over 150 km of wide green and blue runs with full access to the Val d’Isere resort as well.

Having been granted a week’s AT from the Squadron, the booking process could not have been easier, with the options being to organise everything individually or to utilise the events travel company who work with the RNWSA. As I was going solo this year, option B prevailed and having contacted the company a variety of packages were offered that covered everything from equipment hire, lessons, accommodation and even flights and transfers.

On arrival in Tignes the first few mornings were spent with the Royal Navy and Royal Marine Ski and Snowboard instructors who are there to refresh and hone personal techniques. This allowed individuals time during the afternoons to practice and explore some of the 180 miles of piste. With a few more runs under the belt, it was straight back to the fully catered lodge for dinner before a return to the town to enjoy some Après Ski.

With the basics covered, the remaining days are geared towards getting individuals prepared to compete in the traditional end of week races. Separated by ability, these are a great events and something everyone really builds up to and enjoys. Such is the competitiveness there are often locals on the sides of the slopes cheering along and witnessing the odd tumble.

The RN Alpine Championships is an exceptional opportunity for personnel to conduct AT, test themselves physically and enjoy themselves away from the work environment at a vastly reduced cost – and it won’t even affect your leave balances! Having been fortunate to attend the Championships a few times, I would recommend anyone who has a passion for the outdoors and winter sports to utilise the incredible opportunity afforded to us. If you require more details on the Alpine Champs they can be found at http://www.rnwsa.co.uk

Ex Clockwork Cold Weather Survival Course – Leading Air Engineer Technician Amy Wilkinson

With the Squadron pencilled in to deploy to Norway for Ex Clockwork 2016, I guess it was the fear of the unknown and what to expect on the dreaded Cold Weather Survival Course that individuals from the RN, Army and RAF feared the most. To make matters worse, some of us were specially selected to assist in the teaching of the remaining courses once we had completed our own. However, as testing as it was, it is most definitely an experience I will look back on in a very positive light and one which will always intrigue me as to the differences between the 3 services.

With an overarching aim to teach aircrew, engineers and support personnel the skills to train and survive in an extreme environment, the course is mandatory for all personnel and has to be successfully completed before anyone is allowed to work on aircraft, fly, or even leave the base.
Ex Clockwork Cold Weather Survival Course (Cont).

Having received the mandatory briefings and kit inspections in the UK prior to deploying, the first 2 days of the course are in a lecture room covering additional subjects and familiarisation with the vital and potentially life saving equipment that individuals will be using. Proving to be wide and varied, these briefs covered everything from as simple as ‘how to pack your pockets in your jacket’ (the last thing you need at those temperatures is not knowing where your Arctic Mittens or hat is) to knowing ‘how to build a survival shelter’. With lectures and prep done, it was into the ‘field’ and the challenges that come from operating and surviving without creature comforts such as a bed, shower or toilet for 4 days.

Split into distinct phases, each ‘tent group’ had to navigate themselves up the mountain, carrying their Bergan, Weapon and pulling a Pulk (an arctic sledge). With the first evening being spent in a 10-man tent the following day brought further navigation exercises, practical demonstrations on avalanche drills as well as learning how to erect homes for the second night; camouflaged 4-man tents were located in ‘harbour’ positions to defend against enemy hunter forces. Cozy to say the least, these small lightweight tents proved easier to put up than their 10-man counterparts and most people managed to get a cold but good nights sleep.

The survival side of training starts on day 3 by having to build a snow shelter or ‘Quincy’ (an improvised Igloo). A real labour of love, this involves piling upwards of 1.5 tonnes of snow into a mound before tunneling an entrance and sleeping area into the centre. With everyone’s Quincy frozen solid they were put to the ultimate test and used as accommodation for the final night and, despite lots of reservations, they did warm up to a comfortable 0°C.

The final morning brings the infamous ‘Ice Breaking Drills’, which involves each individual jumping into a hole cut into a frozen Norwegian lake wearing only thermals and cam whites whilst carrying a Bergen, holding their ski poles in one hand and wearing loosened snow shoes. Carried out so individuals know how to survive should they fall through one of the numerous frozen lakes, you have to remove your Rucksack, slip off your snow shoes and use your ski poles to pull yourself out. Once clear you have to roll in fresh snow to help absorb some of the water followed by a traditional tot of Navy Rum – Course Complete!

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Long Service and Good Conduct Medal with Clasp. WOACMN Byrne for 30 years service.

AFGHANISTAN - Operational Service Medal . Air Engineering Technician Lewis

CO’s Prizes

CO 845 Termly Awards are given to personnel who have shown a marked contribution to Squadron productivity and Operational Capability throughout the Term. Spring 2016 CO 845 Termly awards go to:

Corporal Clarke. For exemplary work in the Engineering Training Cell where his forward thinking and pragmatic nature have ensured that all engineering authorizations have been migrated onto a new system. An invaluable presence in the training cell, he will be greatly missed once we return to Yeovilton.

Senior Aircraftman Evans. For his contribution to transition and his consistently professional approach to tasks throughout a demanding period.

Leading Aircrewman Evans. For his outstanding contribution in organising, planning and executing the transit to Norway. He has definitely raised the bar with his efforts and set the standard for future transits.

Air Engineering Technician Jackson. For his efforts and performance during Ex Clockwork. Unanimously voted as the best maintainer throughout the detachment by all supervisors, he is most deserving of this award.

Emergency Contact

Joint Casualty & Compassionate Centre (JCCC)
Tel: 01452 519951- Man ted 24Hrs a day
Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare Portal
http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/welfare/find-help
Tel: 023 9272 8777

Update on Domestic Links at Yeovilton

Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (formally NPFS) at Yeovilton
Tel: 01935 455277
Tall Trees Community Centre
Tel: 01935 840333