BULWARK COMPLETES JEF(M)

On a cold and wintry Wednesday in mid-December, HMS BULWARK returned to her home port of Devonport after a long and successful JEF(M) deployment; drawing to an end a momentous 6 year period of operational running.

Deployed as the Amphibious Flagship in the UK’s Joint Expeditionary Force (Maritime) 2016 (JEF(M)16) Task Group, under Commander Amphibious Task Group (COMATG), Commodore Andrew Burns OBE, HMS BULWARK transited east through the Suez Canal in late October. The ship was then required to pass through the high threat Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This transit was successfully conducted at the highest state of readiness in company with HMS OCEAN, MV EDDYSTONE and with close escort from HMS DARING.

On entering the Arabian Sea the first task for HMS BULWARK and HMS OCEAN was to take a combined total of nearly 1000 tonnes of marine diesel and aviation fuel from USNS JOHN ERICSSON, an underway replenishment oiler from the United States Military Sealift Command. The two ships steamed together on either side of the oiler at less than 50 metres range for several hours whilst the fuel was passed.

Even with the long endurance capability of both HMS BULWARK and HMS OCEAN, Replenishment at Sea (or RAS) allows maritime forces the independence and flexibility to stay at sea for long periods and lets them move across great distances to meet operational tasking. This will likely be the last RAS conducted with both HMS BULWARK and HMS OCEAN together as HMS BULWARK prepares to hand over the mantle of Fleet Amphibious Flagship to HMS ALBION.

Following major amphibious exercises in and around Oman, HMS BULWARK and HMS OCEAN parted company for the last time; HMS OCEAN is now on station in the Arabian Gulf as Flagship of CTF50. Commodore Burns transferred from HMS BULWARK to HMS OCEAN.

On the way back to Suez, HMS BULWARK visited Somaliland to provide training for local forces before returning once again through the Bab el Mandeb with HMS DARING as escort and then made her way through the Suez Canal towards a long-planned Defence Engagement visit to Haifa in Israel. The visit to Haifa was a huge success (see article below). Only a short transit later after leaving Haifa, BULWARK pulled in to Barcelona, for a final foreign ‘run-ashore’ before returning to the UK.

BULWARK will now remain in her base port in Plymouth for the next 6-7 years, remaining at “extended readiness” and then subsequently undergoing a major refit ahead of rejoining the Fleet in 2023. As such, this is the last “Assault Stations” for a while, but fear not ... we will be back!

FROM THE CAPTAIN

Dear families and friends,

As you are aware, BULWARK has now returned to Devonport, where she will now remain for the next 6 or 7 years before rejoining the Fleet. After we left Haifa in Israel, we paid a highly enjoyable visit to Barcelona, which afforded the Ship’s Company the opportunity to explore one of the best “runs ashore” in the Mediterranean, before sailing back to the UK via the MoD seaport of Marchwood to de-ammunition the ship (an essential task that needed to be done before we could proceed on Christmas leave), and arrived home on 14 December.

As my time as the Captain draws to a close, I look back over a busy and demanding period with pride and admiration. BULWARK has achieved a huge amount over the past 12 months and that is in no small part thanks to your loved ones, my sailors and marines, without whom the ship would not run, fly, cook and clean or serve, defend herself, conduct amphibious operations on foreign coasts thousands of miles from home, and ... most importantly .... she would not serve and defend Great Britain, our Island nation who so heavily relies on maritime power and the Royal Navy. The announcement last week that BULWARK has won the 2016 Fleet Trophy for “Best Capital Ship” is testament to the hard work and unwavering support my team have provided to me, and the Service.

So, thank you to all of you for your unwavering and faultless support and care over this past year; it has meant everything.

Yours aye

James Parkin
Captain HMS BULWARK
BULWARK BACK IN BLIGHTY!

On Wednesday 14 December friends and family of members of HMS BULWARK gathered on the jetty at HMNB Devonport to greet the ship and her company home after a 3 month deployment to the Mediterranean and beyond. BULWARK left the shores of the UK back in September, since then she has sailed just shy of 14,000 nautical miles and visited 8 countries.

The blue skies, yet wintry weather didn’t dampen the spirits of the eagerly awaiting crowd, the hot drinks, minced pies, pasties and heated marquee probably helped as well! There was also plenty of entertainment to keep the crowds amused whilst waiting for the ship to pull in to view and come alongside, this was provided in the form of: the Royal Marines Band, a children’s facepainter and entertainer, Santa Claus and even a flypast from a Merlin MK3 helicopter of 845 Naval Air Squadron from RNAS Yeovilton.

After BULWARK came alongside in Weston Mill for the final time before entering a 6-7 year period of extended readiness and a full re-fit, Steward Michael Cowell, of Plymouth, was the first member of the Ship’s Company to proceed down the gangway (after winning the rights in a charity auction held on board) to greet his family. He said ‘It’s been a long and enjoyable deployment on JEF(M) but I’m certainly glad we’re home in time for Christmas, and even more excited that I’m back in time for my daughter’s first birthday!’.

The Ship’s Company will now enjoy an extended Christmas leave period before transferring to either their new units or on to BULWARK’s sister ship, HMS ALBION, in the New Year.
BULWARK IN HAIFA

HMS BULWARK was fortunate enough to pay a visit to Haifa, Israel between the 22 and 25 November. This was the first visit of a Royal Navy Capital Ship to the port in 10 years. During the course of the visit, the ship hosted a number of activities on board including a Reception and Capability Demonstration (RCD) on the first night in port. The RCD involved approximately 200 members of the Ship’s Company and attendees included the Israeli Minister of Defence and Her Majesty’s Ambassador to Israel. The night was concluded with a ceremonial sunset with music provided by a Corps of Drums from The Band of Her Majesty’s Royal Marines Collingwood who flew out to Haifa especially for the occasion. The ship also hosted numerous Israeli dignitaries and members of staff from the British Embassy for tours and lectures on Amphibious capability.

However, it wasn’t all work, as the ship’s rugby team, comprised of members of the Ship’s Company and members of the Embarked Military Force (EMF), got to play a match against the Israeli Barbarians in Tel Mond. Over 50 members of the Ship’s Company also attended to watch the game. Unfortunately, the strong Israeli National B team dominated the Bulwark team beating us 37-3. However the ship put in a very credible performance holding the Israeli National B team to less than 50 points; given that there is little opportunity for rugby training at sea this was a brilliant result. It is however fair to say that BULWARK dominated at the after match social.

As well as the sport and official functions, a number of tours were organised, these were to Jerusalem and The Dead Sea. 114 people went to Jerusalem and 43 to the Dead Sea. Father Charles, the ship’s chaplain also organised a two day excursion to the Holy Land for 50 members of the Ship’s Company (see article below). A further “tour” was also organised for our last night alongside to watch Be’er Sheva play Inter Milan at home.

BONKERS ABOUT BARCELONA

The Ship’s Company and EMF of BULWARK were afforded the opportunity for a port stop in the beautiful city of Barcelona on the way home from a busy and demanding JEF(M) deployment.

Arriving on 30 Nov the Ship’s Company got the chance to explore various parts of the city including the numerous Christmas markets, the Basilica de la Sagrada Familia, which has so far taken over two hundred years to build and is an incredible and iconic temple. 60 people from the ship also took the opportunity to visit the Barcelona National Football stadium, the Nou Camp, whilst we were there. Some lucky members of the Ship’s Company were even fortunate enough to secure tickets to watch Real Madrid and Barcelona play at the stadium on the Saturday afternoon!

Largely though, the brief stop in Barcelona afforded everyone on board the opportunity to take a quick pit stop of rest and relaxation before returning home to the UK, ready for Christmas leave, and the numerous DIY jobs that have no doubt been accruing for us over the past 12 weeks.
BULWARK VISITS THE HOLY LAND

A 50 strong group from HMS BULWARK were able to take time out from the ship during a visit to Haifa in Israel for a whistle stop tour of the Holy Land. Led by the Chaplain, Reverend Charles Bruzon RN, the two day trip took in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the sights of Jerusalem and finished on the shores of the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum whilst also taking a quick float (not swim) in the Dead Sea. The Captain even remembered to bring a copy of Navy News along to create the iconic “floating while reading a newspaper” image.

Reverend Charles Bruzon RN said, “This was an opportunity to walk in the footsteps of Jesus that could not be missed and the trip was a truly memorable ‘run ashore’ for the sailors and Royal Marines taking part.”

Planning for the trip started in earnest by the Chaplain once the visit to Haifa was confirmed in BULWARK’s Joint Expeditionary Force (Maritime) 2016 deployment. With a team consisting of those religious and also those wanting to learn about Christianity and the faith of others, the trip began in Bethlehem in the Church of Nativity followed by the Mount of Olives for a panoramic view of Jerusalem before proceeding via the Garden of Gethsemane into the Old City and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built atop Mount Calvary and the tomb in which Jesus was laid.

The team had an early shake at 0430 by the call of the Muezzin, making the ship’s own ‘call the hands’ seem mild during an overnight stay at a convent along the via Dolorosa, or Way of the Cross followed. The following morning saw a visit to the former temple’s Western Wall, the holiest place in Judaism, as well as the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount. A swim in the Dead Sea saw the BULWARK team floating at a depth below sea level normally only achieved by the submarine community at some 400m and was thoroughly enjoyed by all. A brief stop in Jericho for a view of the Mount of the Temptation was made before proceeding to the Sea of Galilee and Capernaum. Whilst all of the other Holy Land sites have been built on and around over the last 2000 years, Capernaum is perhaps the most untouched and a short service conducted next to the setting sun on the shores of Galilee was a truly special way to finish the tour.

KEEPING UP WITH HMS BULWARK

Family and friends who have access to Facebook can click on a link and ask to join the ship’s closed Facebook Group. Simply go to:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/HMSBulwarkCommunity/

Also, anyone can follow HMS BULWARK on Twitter at:

@HMSBulwark

For the younger ones amongst us, William the Bear also shares his adventures on Twitter at:

@williamtbear

Finally, the ship also has pages and a forum to join on the Royal Navy website at:

www.royal-navy.mod.uk/bulwark

Please come and join us on any or all of these sites!