

# 846 NAS LINK LETTER

*846 Naval Air Squadron, RAF Benson, Oxfordshire, OX10 6EG*

## From the Commanding Officer

**Lt Col Derek Stafford MBE RM**

It gives me great pleasure, following the Squadron Standing Up on 30 Sept 14, to introduce myself as the new Commanding Officer of 846 Squadron in this inaugural Link Letter. It really is very humbling to have been put in command of over two hundred of the very finest people, not only in the Naval Service, but in the Armed forces as a whole; proven time and again during our illustrious past and already proven in the recent period with a successful desert training exercise in Jordan prior to Christmas leave.

We simply could not do what we do without your support and this link letter is one of the small ways we can keep in touch and show you how very much we appreciate that support. I am certainly no stranger to life on the Commando Helicopter Force (CHF), of which 846 of course forms an integral part. I have served twice on each of 845 and 846 Squadrons, a single time on each of 847 and 848 Squadrons, and prior to this appointment spent a year in the Headquarters – in total, well over 12 years in all. As such, I am familiar with many of the issues that face you and your family, helped in no small measure by the fact I share many of them myself having a family of my own. That said, I am also aware that we all have different tolerances and perspectives on life and therefore the extent to which some things matter will vary greatly between all of us. Being different is human, but where possible, differences of opinion should

not be caused by a lack of information and this is a key area upon which I wish to focus during my two years at the helm of 846.

One of the challenges of keeping you well informed is that not everyone likes to be drawn into military life to the same degree. 'Link' letters and newsletters go some way to achieving the balance, as I hope you agree, and they will be continued for as long as that remains the case. However, whilst useful, they are somewhat impersonal and provide only one-way communication, whereas I am a fan of the sort of two way information flow that can only be achieved by meeting and chatting with you. It is often difficult to gather significant numbers of families together but there will be opportunities during the 846 Homecoming event on the 7 May 15 and the CHF families day later this year, to which you are of course all invited. I intend to hi-jack part of both events to devote to 846 specifically. I think it will be really useful to set aside some time for ourselves so that I can introduce myself, and key figures in the team. There will be more to follow on the subject, but when the time comes, I do hope you can make it.



We live in extraordinary times, with unprecedented things happening every day. However, the one constant seems to be the truly remarkable feats that 846 personnel achieve day after day, thanks largely to your continuing support. Despite the uncertainties derived from changing governments, and the direction of travel of wider defence priorities, I have absolutely no doubt that the future of 846 (and the CHF) is very bright indeed. The period has already seen us operating in the desert of Jordan and soon after you read this, we will be deploying for the Arctic Circle, followed by the move back to our spiritual home at Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton, all the while tasking and supporting operations. It is exactly because of these types of unrelenting challenges and the hard work put in across the Squadrons and the Force that we develop what we like to call the 'Junglie Ethos'. It is this ethos that makes every one of us so immensely proud to do what we do on a daily basis and it is because that of that I ask you all for your continued support to help us do what must be done.

I look forward to meeting you all in due course. In the meantime, I wish you the very best for a prosperous year!

Yours Aye,

Del Stafford



## **846 Naval Air Squadron** **"To your Duties"**

### **Cpl Thompson RM – D Flt**

It was during the recent SDSR that the decision was made that Merlin Mk3 & Mk3A helicopters then operated by 28(AC) Sqn and 78 Sqn RAF, were to be handed over to the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm and the CHF. These would replace the workhorse of the sky, the Sea King Mk4, due to leave service in 2016. The Merlin has been in service with the RAF for the last 14 years, where it has been deployed extensively on operations, including Iraq where it was utilised to provide a Medical Emergency Response Team, (MERT) platform and more recently Afghanistan, providing medium lift Support Helicopter capability, moving troops and stores around Helmand Province. The Merlin is a hugely capable machine, boasting a maximum airspeed of 149 KTS, an increased payload over the ageing Sea King, ably lifting up to 5 tonnes of 'tooled up' battlefield troops and equipment internally or up to 4 tonnes externally from a cargo hook. It also has an impressive airborne endurance of 4 hours which can be increased by utilising an internal extended range tank (ERT). In time CHF will look to develop Merlin further, upgrading avionics and in addition introducing a folding rotor head and tail to facilitate a maritime role in order to support the Royal Marines ashore and afloat.

I am among the first Ab-initio Commando Aircrewman to complete the challenging 15 month course, training me from 'grav' to Commando Aircrewman qualified to operate Merlin. On completion of the Operational Conversion Flight, (OCF) I joined 78 Sqn RAF, for its last 3 months.

As the Sqn prepared for handover on the 30 September 14, I was getting to grips

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with keeping on top of my currencies, drills and competences as well as consolidating what we learned on the OCF. I was also tasked as one of the key planners, charged with planning the routing and coordination, over some rather unstable countries and controlled airspace, of flying 3 Merlin Mk3s from Akrotiri (Cyprus) to Aqaba (Jordan) in support of Exercise JEBEL BLADE.

As handover grew nearer it was both an exciting and reflective time. Exciting, that 846 NAS would stand up as the first Merlin Junglie Sqn, and reflective seeing a RAF Sqn with over 75 years history being disbanded. The weeks leading up to handover saw those involved in the formal parade conduct drill practice, which due to the mix of Navy, RM and RAF drill made for an interesting challenge for everyone involved. The first few rehearsals were led by RAF instructors with everyone doing their drill, then the Navy First Drill (State Ceremonial Training Officer) arrived and the RAF fell in line behind the Senior Service. Handover itself culminated in a Royal Parade, guests included HRH Prince Andrew and top brass from both services. The lowering and raising of The Colours, a thunderous 7 aircraft fly by timed to perfection, followed by an evening celebration which featured the Royal Marines Corps drums Beating the retreat at sunset, and a 'hoofin' hangar party, including dancing girls and a Queen tribute band. It all made for an event that no one will forget. The following morning at 0800 the White Ensign was raised outside the newly reformed 846 NAS and all hands went about the business of 'Navalising' and re-arranging the Sqn as directed by the CO and Senior Pilot (Major Parry RM). With the Sqn commitment to Ex Jebel BLADE which was now only a few weeks away, it proved to be a busy period.



The Ex JEBEL BLADE aircraft transit began on Tuesday 14th October, with crews under instruction from 22 Course, who are due to complete their OCF in January 2015, having the task of planning, coordinating and flying the aircraft from RAF Benson to RAF Akrotiri. The route took the 3 Merlins through France, Corsica, Naples, Corfu and eventually Cyprus and is covered in the following article. Simultaneously an advance party from 846 NAS were flown forward to Akrotiri to preposition in order to take charge of the aircraft and complete the task of delivering them to Jordan. As part of the advance party we arrived in Cyprus a day or so ahead of the transiting Merlins. Keen to take advantage of unusual downtime we were hosted by Akrotiri's Search and Rescue Sqn, 84 Sqn RAF, who ensured we were welcomed and looked after well. Go-karting, Barbecue's visits to the beach featured on the schedule backed up with a few 'wets' in their Sqn bar. This was intermingled with some serious work, confirmatory planning and checking of 'diplomatic clearances' to transit Israeli and Jordan's airspace. The plan came together and with the aircraft arriving as planned. We briefed, loaded up and departed for Aqaba, arriving early afternoon and went straight into orientation and arrival briefings. The aircraft were based at King Husain International Airport (KHIA), and the

detachment were accommodated in a camp located south of Aqaba, about an hours coach journey away (overlooking The Red Sea). The location was nowhere near as austere as our expectations, having heard 'bad buzzes' prior to leaving the UK. The facilities were more than acceptable - food was good, facilities included a gym, an enthusiastic PTI, hardened accommodation with air conditioning and WIFI. Our only frustration was the twice daily journey to and from the Airport to our place of work.

We received some excellent Survival training and briefings the first day from the specialists from Defence Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Extraction (SERE) Training Organisation (DSTO) out of RAF St Mawgan to set the scene. The following few days allowed the Aircrew Instructors to re-qualify in operating in the desert environment, finessing dust landing procedures, external load lifting, flying and operating in relatively hot temperatures and altitudes 3000FT above sea level. Once current they then cascaded and taught the procedures to the lesser experienced operators and pilots on the Sqn detachment. Once cleared and qualified during the day we consolidated on what we had been taught before Night Operations. This mirrored the daytime challenges but proved to be slightly more 'A level' as it was conducted using Night Vision Goggles (NVG's). The training went safely and progressed quickly and by the end of the 2 weeks the entire detachment were qualified or 'EQ'd'. This was a real team effort, in order to achieve the aircraft needed to be serviceable, so it has to be said that the attitude and commitment from our team of engineers was key to the success of our training. In addition the careful planning and coordination of the flying programme is also fundamental in order to achieve the goals efficiently.

Once qualified, more testing training took place, including formation sorties, night

and day before going on to support the deployed Royal Marines (40 Commando - Taunton) Forward operating from KHIA and being tasked and operating in slightly more austere conditions leading to the end of the highly successful exercise.

With the Royal Marines proudly celebrating it's 350th Birthday midway through the detachment, the 'Bootnecks' amongst us were invited and hosted by RSM WO1 Paul Mcarthur and Capt Reid, 40 Cdo at their lavish celebration and 'scrans-fest' at Camp Moran (a tented village similar to ours in the desert). Hats off to the SNCO who delivered the Corps citation in front of 574 Bootnecks, without the use of a safety net or crib card! A memorable evening, thank you from all at 846.

The final phase of Ex Jebel Blade saw the recovery of the aircraft back through Europe, a 3 to 4 day epic transit, a fantastic experience, routing a similar plan as previously flown outbound. As this was taking place, the Ops Team and Training Office had been flown back by civilian air transport to start proceedings and prepare for the newly formed Sqn's 'assurance visit' from Naval Flying Standards Flight (Rotary Wing) (NFSF(RW)), who visited in early December. After the visit and some well earned Christmas leave I look forward to Ex Clockwork and the challenges of flying and operating in the Arctic.

## **22 Course overseas transit**

### **Lt Ben Taylor RN – D Flt**

On the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> October 2014 members from 22 Course on the Merlin Operational Conversion Flight, 28 Squadron embarked on a trip across Europe to deliver 3 Merlin Mk3s to Cyprus.

The aim of the trip was twofold; to deliver 3 Merlin Mk3s to RAF Akrotiri, Cyprus for

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the onward trip to Jordan for environmental training and for the aircrew on the course to experience operating the aircraft abroad.

The morning of the departure had been preceded by 3 months of meticulous planning, from preparing the maps for the 2000 mile flight to booking accommodation, transport and the diplomatic clearances to fly through the airspace of 5 different nations. However, like most plans it failed to survive first contact with both the weather and aircraft serviceability which delayed the departure. Two of the three aircraft managed to depart from RAF Benson into the grim weather and managed to battle their way to a French military airfield (Avord) in central France a few hours short of their desired destination of Nice on the south coast. The third aircraft planned to depart a day later following engineering work and attempt to catch the first two the following day.

The weather conspired against the detachment again the following day with low cloud and fog delaying the departure from Avord, preventing the two lead aircraft making up for lost time and reaching the original planned night stopover in Corfu.



**The weather that greeted the two aircraft in the morning at Avord**

Instead they managed to progress on the route as far as Naples, Italy, where the aircraft were parked on the military dispersal with Mount Vesuvius looming in the background. In the meantime the third aircraft had managed to depart and make some progress along the route and stopped for the night in Rouen, France.



**The aircraft prior to departure from Naples with Mt Vesuvius in the background**

On the third day the weather finally stopped hampering progress and the two aircraft departed Naples on schedule to embark on a picturesque flight to the Greek islands. Unfortunately bad fortune struck the third aircraft once again later that day as it went unserviceable following shutting down for a refuel in Corsica. The resulting engineering work determined that a new engine was needed which would have to be flown from the UK, all but ending hopes the aircraft would catch the other two and leaving the aircrew grounded in Corsica for 5 days. Meanwhile the two serviceable aircraft narrowly missed out on making their planned overnight stop in Rhodes due to running out of daylight. Instead they stopped in Mikonos where they were made to feel very welcome by the local Hotelier, and could rest happy in the knowledge that they had made up

enough ground in order to leave the final destination of RAF Akrotiri within striking distance the following day as scheduled.



**The two aircraft being refuelled in Mikonos after arrival.**

The final day of the transit went without incident and following a refuel in Rhodes the two aircraft landed in RAF Akrotiri at around 1500 local on the 16<sup>th</sup> only a matter of hours behind schedule despite the multiple delays over the 4 days.

Not only was the original aim of delivering the aircraft (2 out of 3) achieved but valuable experience at operating the aircraft in different environments was gained by all of the aircrew on 22 Course. All of the aircrew got the opportunity to gain valuable “hands on” experience with the far more complex and capable avionics suite and many of the “Junglies” from Sea King Mk4 backgrounds were suitably impressed with the performance of the aircraft in its ability to comfortably cover long distances in a timely manner. It is without doubt that all involved will be quick to volunteer to take the new “Junglie” aircraft abroad at the next available opportunity!

## **HONOURS AND AWARDS**

### **WO1 (AET) WOOD MBE**

Warrant Officer Steve Wood was awarded an MBE in the Queens’ New Year Honors

list. This was to recognize his outstanding contribution to Merlin Transition.

### **Long Service and Good Conduct Medal**

#### **PO AET S THOMAS**

PO Thomas was awarded the Long Service & Good Conduct Medal; The Royal Navy LS & GC Medal was introduced on 24 August 1831. It is silver and circular in shape. The obverse of the medal shows the effigy of the reigning monarch, while the reverse shows the image of a three-masted man-of-war surrounded by a rope tied at the foot with a reef knot with the words 'For Long service and Good Conduct' around the circumference. An Other Rank who completes 15 years of reckonable service from the date of attestation or age 17½, whichever is later, and who holds all three good conduct badges, shall be eligible to receive the medal.

### **CO's Prizes**

The CO 846 Termly Award is given to the person who has shown a marked contribution to Sqn productivity and Operational Capability throughout the Term. The Autumn 2014 CO 846 Termly award goes to LAET Pipes.



**Lt Col Stafford presenting LAET Pipes with his award.**

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A number of personnel were awarded a CO's Commendation for particularly noteworthy performances, conducting their duties above and beyond the requirements of their terms of reference and exhibiting high professional standards.

AET Steventon  
POAET Smith  
Sgt Pickford  
PO McGinty  
POAET Whitmore

## ACC Certificates

The Aircraft Charge Certificate (ACC) is the final oral assessment conducted on CPOAET's, formally assessing the individuals' competence for employment as a detachment or Flight Senior Maintenance Rating (Flt SMR). The rigorous ACC assessment is the culmination of 12 weeks full time training and a further 12 months consolidation period which the candidates are to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of a wide range of topics from detachment planning, policy and assurance and airworthiness risk mitigation. The award of an ACC is a pre-requisite requirement for promotion to Warrant Officer AET. Two individuals were recently congratulated on this achievement.

CPO Moore  
CPO Elder

## The award of a Good Show

A Good Show is awarded for an individual exhibiting actions above that expected within their normal duties. It is to recognize a particular action which may have prevented a potentially dangerous situation developing further.

"In the first week of 846 NAS operating the Merlin Mk3, PO Mellor was tasked to isolate a leak from the No.1 hydraulic system. On completion of an Engaged Ground Run he carried out leak inspections in the transmission deck area. Even though the task PO Mellor was undertaking did not require him to inspect the flying controls, he noticed that there was a collar and split pin missing from a balance spring on the flying control system, to which RTI 1260 relates and directs an inspection every 300 hours; the aircraft had flown 240 hours since the inspection had last been conducted.

Although inspecting and isolating different sections of the hydraulic system is a complex task in its own right, it is down to PO Mellor's professionalism, vigilance and capacity that the potential hazard was spotted.

It would have been all too easy to solely focus on the maintenance task immediately at hand - if this loose article had gone undetected, in and around the area of the flying controls, the airworthiness state of the aircraft could have been seriously compromised and potentially have led to an incident.

**POAET Mellor** thoroughly deserves the award of a Good Show".



**Capt Griffin (CO CHF) presenting PO Mellor with his award.**

## **Update on the transition to Yeovilton.**

As mentioned in the opening article from Lt Col Strafford, 846 NAS HQ, D and M Flights will be returning to their spiritual home of RNAS Yeovilton on 27 Mar 15, with OCF Flight due to return later in the year. If you have any domestic concerns about this move, some key contacts are detailed below.

Royal Navy and Royal Marines Welfare  
(formerly NPFS) at Yeovilton  
Tel: 01935 455277

Tall Trees Family Centre  
Tel: 01935 840333

### **Emergency Contact**

**Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre  
(JCCC)**

Tel; 01452 519951  
Manned 24Hrs a day

**Royal Navy and Royal Marines Welfare at  
Yeovilton**

Tel 01935 455277