Dear Families and Friends,

As we have welcomed in 2015, I thought it would be a good time to provide you with an update and of course wish you a (belated) Happy New Year. We are continuing with our work in the Arabian Gulf and making some real progress, particularly with developing the critical relationships with our friends in the United States Navy out here as well as the local authorities in Bahrain and the wider region. We are well settled in to our temporary home in RFA CARDIGAN BAY and, by the time you read this, will have completed 2 months of the deployment, just short of one third of our time away. At least we can now say that we are coming home this year(!).

Since arriving, we have been keeping ourselves busy, understanding the routines and planning for the forthcoming exercises and training. Plus the routine business of ensuring the 4 minehunters that work our behalf at sea are given all of the support they need. Of course, it has not all been work and we have been finding as many opportunities as we can to have some fun. One notable occasion was the “Jingle Bells Fun Run” around the Naval Support Activity (we just call it the NSA - it is the American base here). Setting off at 0600 for a 2.5 km run, when the outside temperature is significantly cooler, was good to shake out the cobwebs. The team entered into the Christmas spirit, donning hats and bells to make the most of the occasion. It was certainly an enjoyable start to the Christmas period where we actually spent most of our time at sea but those who were able to take part (or could actually get out of their beds at that time) thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

It is always hard being away from loved ones, families and friends, especially so at Christmas. We all missed being at home with you, but were fortunate enough to be in Dubai for 3 days but it was a great boost to receive some gifts and cards from families and we also all had a UK4U Christmas box. This is a charity box containing several useful items of kit including a torch/bottle opener (it's always handy to be able to open a beer in the dark) as well as a Spork and sewing kit plus some nibbles amongst other bits and pieces. This year was a special year, as Fortnum and Mason also sent a small tin containing chocolate and playing cards. It was to commemorate the gifts sent to the troops on the front line during World War One, initiated by Princess Mary, the daughter of King George and Queen Mary, in October 1914, affectionately known as the ‘Tommy’s Tin’. Celebrations here were of a different nature to what we are accustomed to as the sun was shining brightly and the temperature outside was 25 degrees Celsius. This meant that we could sit by the pool and enjoy the sun and a cold beer, a far cry from home and the temperatures you are experiencing.

New Year in Bahrain brought a different kind of fun. Following celebrating the New Year we entered a Touch Rugby 7’s competition held at Bahrain Rugby Club. The competition itself was a
social event with mixed teams. Each team should have had a player over 50, a female and a child. We struggled a bit with the child, however, Lt Cdr Rich Bicknell was 'nominated' to be our player over 50 – he's not quite there yet(!). The ref made the rules up as he went along; however there were 2 known offences “scoring a try” and “show boating”. A sin bin was in force for players who breeched any of the rules. Being placed in the sin bin consisted of a good egging and a shot of a homemade cocktail. CPO Chris Smith found himself in the bin on a few occasions and the Doc (Surg Lt Lew Thomas) got a good egging for asking silly questions. The scoring system was difficult to work out, you scored more points if a female or child scored; so we were on the back foot throughout. All in all though, we thoroughly enjoyed a good afternoon in the sun.

We have just completed our first multi-national exercise operating with the American and Iraqi Navies. The aim of the exercise was to show how the forces could successfully protect maritime infrastructure, in this case one of the Iraqi oil terminals, critical to their oil based economy. We also had the opportunity to host the head of the Iraqi Navy, which involved him having a tour of the facilities onboard CARDIGAN BAY and a demonstration of the capabilities of other units that were involved with the exercise. Throughout the exercise we embarked 2 US Navy fast patrol boats, to act as the bad guys and test the defensive responses on the oil platform and from the ships involved. We also had US Army Black Hawk and Apache helicopters operating from the ships large flight deck. It was a bit different from our usual mine countermeasures tasking and a good opportunity to get involved in something a bit different.

Now, we are all looking to the future where we have a few exercises prior to our planned stand down week in Dubai, where some of the team are going to fly partners or friends out for to enjoy a well earned break. This effectively falls at the halfway point of our deployment and we are looking forward some time to relax. Our focus at the moment is to plan and execute training events at sea, again working closely with the US Navy and ensuring that all of our ships are properly maintained so they are well prepared for when the temperatures really do start to rise in the Spring.
We have planned two Charity fundraising events to keep us on our toes and attempt to make some money for really good causes. The first event is a team challenge to raise money for the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity (RNRMC). The RNRMC focus on those who wear uniform today – Ships, Squadrons, Submarines and Commandos – and do all they can to boost morale, improve facilities and ease the pressure that life in the Service can bring. The RNRMC is a grant making charity and provides valuable funds for naval and military charities that work with families and veterans, especially those experiencing difficulty with child support, ill-health, old age or hard times. We have set a challenge to use the main stairwell onboard RFA CARDIGAN BAY to climb up and over Mount Everest. The facts of the challenge are the ship has a set of stairs, which is 116 steps high, each step is 9 inches. For us to reach a height equal to Mt Everest (29,029 feet) we must climb 38,705 steps, this works out a total of 334 trips top to bottom. We aim to complete the challenge in less than 12 hours, with each team member completing 22 trips – it will be interesting to see if we can crack it in the time we’ve set. Your support is welcomed and to donate to this worthy cause please visit our site: www.virginmoneygiving.com/team/COMUKMCMFOR. Any amount would be hugely appreciated.

The second is an individual challenge where PO Gareth McLeggan is aiming to run the distance from Faslane (Scotland) to Portsmouth and then Plymouth (all of the RN’s UK ports), a total distance of 1044Km. He has to complete at least 10km a day until we return home to achieve the distance required. He is running in support of Pancreatic Cancer Research Fund (PCRF). Pancreatic cancer has the lowest survival rate of all cancers; only 3% of people diagnosed with the disease actually survive. The PCRF is the first charity that is solely dedicated to tackling this awful disease through funding for research and fair allocation of available resources. Donations can be made via https://home.justgiving.com/Gareth-mcleggan. Again, any support is very welcome.

The next team to come here are in the process of forming up ready to complete the comprehensive training package to enable them to deploy and take over the role from us towards the end of May. You will remember we undertook that training between August-November last year. We are looking forward to meeting their command team when they visit in February to gain an insight into operations here in the Arabian Gulf to shape their UK training.

I intend to write again soon to keep you all updated on our progress. In the meantime, I want to thank CPO Smith for providing most of the words in this letter – he did all of the hard work and I have just had to provide a bit of oversight (and check some of his spelling!). Your support through
telephone calls, letters, parcels, emails and, much more importantly, keeping everything on track back at home in our absence, has been fantastic. Thank you. I can assure that you remain in our thoughts and that you should be proud of the efforts of the team out here. I certainly am.

Yours sincerely,

Tim (and the rest of the team).