Dear Families and Friends,

Since I last wrote the team have been extremely busy, firstly taking part in a multi-national exercise in the Central Arabian Gulf and more recently repositioning to the Gulf of Aden and Southern Red Sea at short notice. With only a couple of weeks or so until we return home, I wanted to update you on the important work we have been carrying out.

Exercise ‘Artemis Trident’

During the last 2 weeks of March we were fully involved in Exercise ‘Artemis Trident’. This was a US led Mine Warfare training exercise designed to build inter-operability between US, UK and French units over a sustained period. The first phase of the scenario built-up with intelligence sources reporting that a fictitious hostile nation was laying mines in the Arabian Gulf. In response to this threat, and under the direction of a US Combined Task Force Commander, a coalition was rapidly assembled to sail to the threat area and hunt for the suspected mines.

Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) CARDIGAN BAY, our afloat forward support base, command and control platform and our deployment home, embarked a number of additional force elements including US Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUV) and a Mine Hunting Unit (MHU). The former are autonomous vehicles that are used to search the seabed with its own high definition, side-scan sonars. The latter, are 11 metre long, remote-controlled Rigid-Hulled Inflatable Boats (RHIB), which tow a side-scan sonar in the water, again searching the seabed. Further, we were in charge of four surface ships, whilst there were another four surface mine hunting ships participating as well as US mine hunting helicopters. All in all, a really quite sizable Coalition Force.

Throughout the two week exercise, the team organised and coordinated the mine hunting effort for US UUV, MHU and ships from all three participating nations. Communications issues, doctrinal differences and occasional language barriers were ironed out early on and the exercise was declared a complete success. The mission was achieved and in total 25 exercise mines were detected. The majority of these were training mines laid specifically for the exercise. One of our ships, HMS SHOREHAM recovered an old exercise buoyant mine (picture on the left) and used it to simulate live ordnance with some demolition charges – you can see the results below.

Whilst acting as an afloat Command and Control platform, RFA CARDIGAN BAY has the important job of sustaining ships at sea by providing them with fuel, water, food and medical facilities. This is achieved during rafting serials where ships berth alongside CARDIGAN BAY, using huge ‘yokohama’ air-filled, rubber fenders as cushions.
between the ships, allowing stores to be transferred and thus enabling the Task Group to remain at sea for sustained periods. When we rafted with the French ship, their chefs took up the chance to come onboard CARDIGAN BAY to use the galley facilities to make some fresh bread! It is not often that the French look to the British for help in the kitchen!

Once all ships had returned to Bahrain and debriefings had taken place, the final day of the exercise was rounded off with a sports competition and BBQ at the American Base. This provided a great opportunity to relax and get to know some of our counterparts from different ships that we have been working closely with over the period.

RFA CARDIGAN BAY Repositions with Task Group

Following on from Exercise ‘Artemis Trident’, the team were looking forward to a relatively quiet period alongside in Bahrain. However, emergent national tasking meant a change of plan and a significant amount of urgent planning and preparation to sail with all that was needed. Having re-embarked the UUV and MHU, additional personnel, food and stores into RFA CARDIGAN BAY, the ship sailed to work in the Southern Red Sea, Bab-El-Mandeb straight and Gulf of Aden. This strategic move and change in operating areas was very much a routine type of reaction within our operating area, taken in response to instability in the region. Our mission very much remains as we set off to do in November last year and that is to ensure the freedom of navigation and deter maritime threats in the area.

Upon arriving in the new area, the Task Group made port stops in Djibouti (east Africa) allowing ships to replenish and conduct limited maintenance alongside. Our first stop also saw RFA CARDIGAN BAY hold a Birthday Party for Her Majesty the Queen on behalf of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The team were involved in setting up the event and hosting some high profile visitors including the US and British Ambassadors, senior Military figures and influential personnel from trade and Industry. Holding a high profile party at short notice for over 150 guests is something the RN and RFA have always been good at. It gives us a chance to strengthen relations with friendly partners and exercise diplomacy and ‘soft power’ all over the world. It also gave a couple of, not so young, Bruce Dickinson fans the opportunity to get their guitars autographed!! ….. The heavy rock fans amongst you will recognise him as the lead singer of ‘Iron Maiden’ who, as a keen aviation specialist and pilot, is working in the country and trying to set up Djibouti’s international airline.

(UUV 12m RHIB launching from CARDIGAN BAY)

Having enjoyed the party celebrations, eaten far too much Birthday cake and experienced a ‘run ashore’ in Africa the team got straight back to work organising and coordinating US Units (two ships, UUV and MHU teams), two UK ships and a French ship. This is quite a sizable Task Group for a staff of only 15 personnel.

Having now been operating in the area for three weeks following a 2000 nautical miles transit, the team have been working around the clock to ensure the safe and legitimate use of one of the
busiest and most important shipping lanes in the world. This tasking is of huge importance to both the UK and global security as the sea lanes remain the arteries of world trade. This is of particular importance to the UK as an island Nation who relies on energy security from imported sources. The UK also has a large trade deficit relying on imported goods to support the domestic economy.

It has not been plain sailing all the way. However; the grit, determination and most importantly team spirit that I have seen over this period has gone a long way to enable us allow us to achieve our mission. I am hugely proud of the team and all that we have achieved since relocating to the new Operating Area.

PO ‘Mac’ McLeggan’s charity challenge

As we enter the last phase of the deployment PO Gareth McLeggan ‘Mac’ is in the final stages of his 1000 mile charity run. Despite setbacks including a broken running machine onboard and a pain from a hernia, Mac has battled through to keep the challenge on track.

He is running in support of Pancreatic Cancer Research Fund (PCRF). Donations can be made via https://home.justgiving.com/Gareth-mcleggan. Any and all support is very welcome to this worthwhile cause.

We’re Coming Home!

Looking ahead, we can breathe a sigh of relief that our replacements have passed the validation phase of their work-up training, well done to them. As we approach the last two weeks of the deployment, preparations for returning to the UK are coming together. Handover notes are being written and ‘comfort boxes’ have been packed. I know that all of the team are really looking forward to returning home and seeing loved ones. We are looking forward to some well deserved leave and a period of down time that will allow everyone to catch up with family and friends and recharge their batteries.

Being away for over six months presents many challenges; it can be extremely difficult for family back at home and without your continued love and support we simply would not be able to do the job we do. Throughout the deployment your letters, parcels, emails and phone calls combined with knowing that you have been looking after things back at home, has been a constant reassurance to us all. Thank you – as ever, you have been brilliant and kept us on track while we have been away. I wish you all a fantastic summer with your loved ones and the best of luck in the adventures and challenges that lay ahead.

Yours sincerely,

Tim (and the rest of the team)