

The last British Army units to leave Germany will finally withdraw by 2019. 7th Armoured Brigade based in Paderborn will end a chapter of British Army history which began in 1945. To anyone who ever served in Germany in the Cold War days of BAOR and post the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, this will mark a bitter sweet moment, reflects former Army officer Nick Watts.

Life in West Germany during the Cold War was rather unreal; kit was packed ready to move out to respond to a surprise attack. Units were only allowed to let a certain percentage of personnel leave their bases, for fear of a sudden call out. Nuclear warhead sites needed guarding (the author spent his 25th birthday on such duty). RAF aircraft were on Quick Reaction Alert. The editor's father would be whisked there at dead of night, destination unknown until after he retired. It all seems a long, long time ago.

After the end of the Cold War the justification for the continued presence of British armed forces on the sovereign soil of another country became weaker. The Treasury got to work in the 1990s and the numbers began to reduce. However, the operations to Kuwait in 1990 and Bosnia in 1992 were based on armoured units based in Germany. Over time further expeditions to Kosovo and Iraq and Afghanistan drew on these units as they were the main reservoir of Britain's armoured forces.

The announcement of the final drawdown of forces from Germany back to the UK is probably long overdue. The decision has been mulled over for some time before the announcement was finally made. The number currently still in Germany is 16,000. The final element of 4,400 will probably be withdrawn during the summer of 2019. This will be slightly ahead of the government's target of 2020.

In the UK the army will group itself around seven major clusters. Some old bases will be closed and new bases are being taken over from the RAF. The government is anxious to point out that Scotland will see a grouping of all arms which will be higher than in the rest of the UK per head of population. The high readiness units will be based around the Salisbury Plain area, whilst the "adaptable" force will be located across the regions of the UK. The army is using this move to ensure that units are co-located so that they can train together. It will mean that service families will no longer be moved overseas and back again, creating a more stable family environment.

For the Army, this move fits into their plans to be ready with the Army 2020 structure; part of

Force 2020. For the MOD this is one step further on the road to recovery after the hiatus which has prevailed over recent times. The MOD is investing £1.8 bn in new accommodation and saving £240 m annually on the cost of maintaining the army in Germany. In terms of rationalization this all makes good sense. However, no longer will Tommy nip down to the Schnelly for a "Bratty and frits mit senf"....

Details of the investment in new bases and accommodation were announced in the House of Commons by the Secretary of State for Defence, Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP, and have been set out in the 'Regular army basing plan' which clarifies for the first time the Army's future UK locations.

Around 70% of the Army will be brought back from Germany by the end of 2015, with the final 4,300 back by the end of 2019 - a move expected to eventually save £240 million a year.

The personnel will be based across the UK, with major concentrations around Salisbury Plain, Edinburgh and Leuchars in Scotland, Catterick in North Yorkshire, Aldershot, Colchester, Stafford and the East Midlands. The new basing plan will make the best use of the defence estate and provide better accommodation and facilities for our troops and their families.

The government says it is investing £1.8 billion in the new basing plan and £1 billion of this will be spent on building brand new accommodation. This will see around 1,900 new family homes being built and more than 7,800 new rooms for single soldiers, along with over 800 upgraded rooms for single soldiers and over 450 upgraded homes for families. The rest of the investment will be spent on technical infrastructure.

A supporting document detailing the individual moves and the impact on local areas can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications/regular-army-basing-plan

Jim Murphy MP, Labour's Shadow Defence Secretary, responded in the House of Commons : "While there is much less strategic need for our Forces to be based in Germany, it can still play an important role in providing training facilities. How does the Secretary of State envisage this function being supplemented if it is no longer available there?"

"There will be real disappointment at closures across the UK today, from Canterbury, Ripon, Shrewsbury to Brawdy, where historic bonds are being broken.

"The Secretary of State says that his disposal plans will bring in substantial receipts which have already been factored in to future budgets. After the Government's 4G debacle, he will forgive these benches if we wait for further detail before taking that on face value.

"On Scotland, the Armed Forces remain crucial to Scotland's future but today the government has reneged on its promise. While there is positive news about the return of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards and the Royal Marines staying in Arbroath, a pledge of thousands of troops to Scotland has become a plan for just hundreds. This is a body blow to Scotland and won't be forgotten.

"UK Defence Planning Assumptions rely on doubling our number of Reservists by 2018. Despite this, there is uncertainty over employer engagement, workplace protections and missed recruitment targets. It is disappointing that today we heard little of where Reserve units will train or of the fate of existing units. The Army 2020 plan around which today's announcement is based remains in jeopardy while these issues are unresolved.

"UK troops have been stationed in Germany for almost 70 years and we support their return home but this will be matched by detailed scrutiny.

"I hope the Secretary of State will be able to further outline the implications of today's announcement for personnel and their families, as well as local communities - who will I am sure give them a warm and patriotic welcome upon their return."