

The UK Ministry of Defence has announced that British military assets used in operations over Libya are on their way home tonight, following NATO's decision to conclude the mission on 31st October.

Visiting Italy's Gioia Del Colle airfield, where many of the UK air assets have been based throughout the campaign, Defence Secretary Philip Hammond approved the immediate return of six Tornado GR4 fast jets.

The news of NATO's decision came through while Mr Hammond was in Italy, enabling him to give the go-ahead to the initial drawdown – which will also see dozens of supporting staff return home. Operations will continue until 31st October, but the number of missions will be scaled down significantly, meaning fewer aircraft are required.

The remaining British air assets, including another 10 Tornado GR4s, two VC10 tankers, two E3D Sentry and one Sentinel surveillance aircraft will return to the UK over the coming days. HMS Liverpool will begin its journey back to UK waters over the weekend.

At its peak, the UK had 2,300 personnel, 32 aircraft and four ships committed to the operation. The UK has flown more than 3,000 sorties, more than 2,100 of which were strike sorties, successfully striking around 640 targets.

All of which puts a timely focus on a Parliamentary hearing this week. The question of how much the UK's assistance to the Libyan rebels cost (Correction: protecting the civilian population in line with UN mandate, now withdrawn) and who will pay for it was explored by the House of Commons Defence Committee on 25th October.

The witnesses being quizzed were Armed Forces Minister Nick Harvey MP, DCDS (Ops); Lt General Richard Barrons; First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, and Chief of the Air Staff Air Chief Marshall Sir Stephen Dalton.

Firstly, how much? Much has been made of the arcane accounting procedures within the MoD, but the witnesses seemed to be giving a clear and definitive (if not yet final) account.

Basically all fixed charges will be borne by the Defence budget within a variety of headings (pay etc) The variable costs appear to be the cost of operations (£160 million) and the cost of replenishment (£140 million). Operations include all those little out of pocket things like operational pay, and, although this was unclear, extra kit whisked up for the ops.

Replenishment covers the need for new stocks, especially of munitions. What was not probed was whether this would be on a like-for-like basis, or otherwise. This is particularly relevant on Brimstone, where the dual mode seeker version proved so effective that UOR conversions were

made as stocks tended to zero. (Witnesses were very coy about how just-in-time we actually were). The military loved the advanced toy from MBDA – their stock has risen rapidly in the past year. So surely they'd want dual mode not the standard fit going forward? This was unexplored.

Another bone tossed out which went unchewed was the 4,500 flying hours of Typhoon. Presumably this means additional maintenance, consumption of service life, and possibly accelerated depreciation. The conspiracy of optimism may not just apply to new equipment procurement.

So who pays the piper? Number one in line is obviously the Treasury, and the much-vaunted contingency reserve. But several other potential paymasters were highlighted without light actually being spread.

Technically, the Foreign Office should be paying for the air and sea evacuation of UK nationals early on. Will they? It's unclear, but the discussions don't seem to have started yet.

Burden sharing with NATO? Will costs lie alone where they fall, or will gallant allies who stayed at home put their hands in their pockets? There were politic-weasel words here.

The Libyans were liberated. Surely they're going to be happy to help their helpers? Not quite. Our guys may not know who to ask, or maybe they're just shy about talking money to foreigners.

Maybe the British taxpayer will pay for everything in the end. I'm sure this is something HCDC will want to have another poke of.

What was also fascinating was some of the advance headlines on "lessons learned". "You can never have enough ISR" seems to have joined the old truism that you can never have too much petrol or bullets. Sentinel is to be held onto until its not needed over Afghanistan – and it became clear that this might be beyond ground combat operations. It will be looked at again in the next SDSR, and it's clear that the RAF will be pushing to retain the capability. The other two services might even support them.

The obligatory tangle over Harrier and Tornado produced interesting support for the latter from the First Sea Lord and the Minister – Harrier couldn't have provided the same effect over Libya (and some doubt was cast over Afghanistan too if both types were currently in service). But the future, if handy land bases with agreeable hotels were not available, would be an entirely different matter ...

Everybody loved the precision weapons and the high level of successful prosecution of targets. The cost effectiveness of using high tech strikes against low cost assets like "technicals" wasn't discussed. But there'll be plenty of call from Brimstone, Paveway and Storm Shadow going forward. Even if the cost of a sortie from Marham to deliver the latter wasn't spelled out.

The Royal Navy in some senses was the Silent Service around the table. The serendipity of a warship in transit to be paid off looming over the horizon, or the utility of the often ignored mine

hunters, sailed serenely onward.

But the strike capability of the Royal Navy through embarking Army Air Corps Apaches onto flight decks was evident, as well as their Tomahawk capability in the early stages. And the use of 4.5 inch naval guns for shore bombardment was unexpected, but justified their fit to later Type 22s and Type 23s years back.

Although the MP's wouldn't let them sit back, it was clear that the Services, particularly those with blue uniforms had reasonable grounds from self-congratulation. Parliament will get its turn when it offers the forces an Op Ellamy Parliamentary Welcome Home in the Spring of 2012.

The co-operation shown over Libya, as well as the Defence Treaty signed between the UK and France, will be further demonstrated as the flagships of the Royal Navy and the Marine nationale are lined up to work side-by-side next year to demonstrate the progress made between the two fleets.

The Royal Navy's key deployment of 2012 - which will see the UK Response Force Task Group (UK RFTG) head to the Mediterranean - is due to join forces with the FS Charles de Gaulle and her carrier battlegroup for an exercise. Those of a superstitious frame of mind will note that this year's Op Cougar exercise in the Mediterranean was a stepping stone for Op Ellamy, and a long-planned exercise in Oman preceded the Iraq invasion.

The link up was agreed by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, and his French counterpart, Amiral Bernard Rogel, who have met twice recently - once in Paris and once at the US Navy-led International Sea Power Symposium on Rhode Island - to formally review progress made since the signing of the UK-France treaty last year.

The two admirals said that maritime operations off Libya had demonstrated the significant progress already made in developing cooperation and interoperability between the two navies.

In addition to the international effort in the Gulf of Sirte, 2011 has seen the Cougar 11 Task Group - the first test of the UK RFTG since it was formed under last year's Defence Review - work with the French patrol ship FS Commandant Birot, while just this month assault ship HMS Bulwark hosted 130 troops from 2nd Marine Infantry Regiment (2RIMA), plus all their equipment, for the latest Joint Warrior exercise in northwest Scotland.

In the two recent meetings, Admiral Stanhope and Amiral Rogel decided that the major assets of both navies should make 'maximum use' of working together as the two navies look to create a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force by the mid-decade - and that much of the foundations for such a force have already been laid.

The coming years will see an increasing number of British sailors and marines trading places with the French counterparts as part of the Personnel Exchange Programme designed to improve the understanding of the respective navies so they can work together more effectively.

In addition, more work will be carried out on the two navies' aircraft carrier programmes,

enabling British aircraft to fly from the Charles de Gaulle and French aircraft to operate from HMS Queen Elizabeth and Prince of Wales when they enter service towards the decade's end.

During his time in the USA, Admiral Stanhope visited Groton, Connecticut, known as the 'submarine capital of the world', to visit the latest addition to the US Silent Service.

The USS Missouri is the seventh of a planned 30 Virginia-class hunter-killer submarines, which are similar in size, firepower, equipment and price to the UK's new Astute-class boats.

Captain Mike Bernacchi, Commander of the US Navy's Submarine Squadron 4, guided Admiral Stanhope around the brand-new Missouri. Admiral Stanhope is himself a submariner with two commands - those of HMS Orpheus and HMS Splendid - under his belt, and the role of teacher on the Perisher command course in a naval career spanning four decades.

The US officer said the visit was highly beneficial for both navies as the submariners discussed construction, training and modernisation of the two silent services:

"Throughout my naval career I have had great interactions with the Royal Navy and through engagements, such as the visit aboard USS Missouri by the First Sea Lord, which was very engaging," Capt Bernacchi explained.

"We continually share information, which contributes to our alliance and makes us both stronger.

"We discussed the advantage of the new training technologies and how that has led to advances in onboard warfighting preparation, which our captains are using to very effectively prepare our Virginia-class boats for at sea operations."

The second part of the September War Diary will be published in a couple of days.