

Following a couple of weeks of Easter leave, we sailed again on 10 April for Exercise Joint Warrior 12 off Scotland. This involved our sister Services and also had a large international flavour, but the main purpose for us was to validate the Lead Commando Group of Royal Marines. The Lead Commando Group are the Royal Marines who are held at very high readiness to react to short notice requests by the Government.

Immediately following Ex Joint Warrior we spirited South, at our sedate 18 knots, to arrive off the coast of Portland and Weymouth. We spent a week of practicing the implementation of the maritime Olympic security plan, primarily with the Dorset Police. This was important to ensure we had a workable procedure to deliver security for the Olympic sailing venue – which would be our mission for summer.

The rest of May was spent in our base port of Plymouth conducting maintenance, and updating some of our communication systems so that we could seamlessly integrate with civilian authorities. A mad few, including me, 'smashed in the phys', which is another way of saying we trained hard for the Field Gun competition at the end of the month. HMS Bulwark was the first ship in 35 years to make the Grand Final; most of the 24 teams come from shore units. We came a very credible 4th place overall, which was impressive given that we had only half of the 6 weeks allocated with the gun in which to train. The camaraderie at the event is spine tinglingly good, especially as we were a unit from sea and therefore the expected underdogs – the support the Ship's team received from the crowds and the other teams is unforgettable. My family was in the room when we found out we had qualified for the Grand Final (the top 8 teams with lowest aggregate time after 7 runs) and the roar of delight from the crew was amazing.

Back in Devonport we took early summer leave, which meant that, for all those with a family, main leave did not coincide with school holidays. This is not popular but was a necessary evil if we were to work through August and September.

The main effort for us this year was successful delivery of Operation Olympic. I think for the first time, the Royal Navy hosted the Emergency Service Headquarters at sea on a ship. HMS BULWARK was the host for the Police led security function. Our operations room was the Police HQ called Maritime BRONZE (the police nomenclature for their hierarchy of HQ is GOLD, SILVER & BRONZE similar in most respects to the military levels of Strategic, Operational and Tactical). Maritime BRONZE was mainly made up of RN and Dorset Police personnel but other agencies such as LOCOG & MCA were also represented.

The Captain of HMS BULWARK became Maritime Force Commander Dorset and together with the Dorset Police BRONZE commander was responsible for the tight security of 55 square miles of sea. At the height of the operation we were in command of 90, ships, boats, helicopters and jet skis operated by over 1000 people (see photo above).

With the benefit of hindsight people may question why we needed such a large footprint for a benign security operation? Well, firstly we did not know it would be benign, and secondly the parameters were tight as we tried to balance freedom with security. A fast boat could transit from the outer ring of security to the field of play in a couple of hundred seconds – we needed units capable of assessing and if necessary interdicting potential threats. Hence we had helicopters with snipers and fast offshore raiding craft with Royal Marines. It was a well laid out plan and executed successfully.

We had known about this operation for 18 months, and the key element of success was the close integration between all the differing agencies – HMS BULWARK was unaffected by the shoreside G4S fiasco. At the end we sailed knowing the job was well done, and all teams involved are rightly proud of their contribution to a successful Olympic Games 2012. After the Olympic Operation we returned to Plymouth, spent 8 working days alongside to recuperate, carry out essential maintenance and storing ship, before deploying as the lead for the Response Force Task Group.

The name given to our 9 week deployment to Mediterranean is COUGAR 12. The first phase involved practicing operations as a task group and various beach landings on the Cornish coastline, before sailing South via Gibraltar to the Mediterranean .

The second was an exercise with the French military called CORSICAN LION, where we demonstrated interoperability as part of a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force. This involved both a Carrier Strike Group, lead by the French carrier Charles de Gaulle, and the Amphibious Task Group by HMS BULWARK. The exercise culminated with a VIP day showing the full range of capabilities, our flexibility, and how well we work with our French counterparts to Ministers and leading figures from both the UK and France.

Shortly thereafter the French submarine, with which we were training, had to return to its base, so we cut short our Anti Submarine Warfare (ASW) exercise. As a result, we had bit of time within our programme, so took the chance to top up on fuel with a US tanker. Very prudent. As a logistician, I always push to take these opportunities, as it increases our contingent capability. It is also a good training activity. Not many nations' Navies regularly practise Replenishment At Sea (RAS). The Royal Navy is a world leader, and we continue to make progress in this area. The new Queen Elizabeth class carriers will utilise an improved Heavy RAS system. The demonstrator version is being built at HMS RALEIGH in Cornwall.

In the interests of boosting the ship's morale we held a 'Miss Bulwark' competition onboard. Our female ailers acted as judges, and the majority of the mess decks, including the wardroom, entered one 'lady' to compete for the coveted title of 'Miss Bulwark'. It always impresses me what 'Jack' can make when given some black tape, gash (black plastic) bags, tin foil and a mop head. 'Miss Liberty' (left) won this rather colourful event.

The ship then made an impromptu stop at Corfu. Whilst alongside, we continued to command the Task Group, but also granted time to our sailors for rest and recuperation.

We then sailed for Exercise Albanian Lion, which was the main workout for the Royal Marines, both their Headquarters, in the form of 3 Commando Brigade, and 45 Commando, who are currently the very high readiness Lead Commando Task Group.

Some of the (very!) eagle eyed among you may have noticed HMS Bulwark on the BBC during their screening of the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall on Saturday 10 November. We had 'staged' the footage a few days earlier. On Sunday 11 November we stopped the Exercise and remembered the fallen.

The exercise Albanian Lion then began in earnest 'Pre landing forces' were inserted early to recce the enemy - divers from Fleet Diving Unit 2 provided the shallow water skills necessary to prepare the beaches. The Commando Surgical Group and Snipers had a roll out, and 3 assaults were conducted by 45 Commando. 2 of these were from the sea, and ended with a push over 100km inland. All of this was sustained and controlled from the sea. This exercise provided a fantastic and professionally rewarding experience in amphibiousity, or as Royal Navy would say, "It was hoofing"!

For the great cause that is the Royal Navy & Royal Marines Charity, which supports serving members and veterans of the RN & RM, we depart from Gibraltar on 26 November. By bike. If our technology works, you should be able to follow us on the Royal Navy Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/royalnavy>

I know times are hard, especially as we approach Christmas, however if you are able to, please make a contribution at:

<http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/fundraiser-web/fundraiser/showFundraiserProfilePage.action?userUrl=bulwarkcycleteam2012>