

The return home earlier this month of three of the Royal Navy ships that were part of the Response Force Task Group tasking in the Mediterranean and Middle East marks the end of the Cougar 11 deployment. The Task Force flagship, HMS Albion, and her escorting frigate, HMS Sutherland, both arrived back in their home port of Plymouth on Monday 8 August 2011, while RFA Cardigan Bay and her embarked military force from 539 Assault Squadron Royal Marines arrived in Marchwood Military Port on Friday, 5 August 2011. Cougar 11 was the first deployment of the Response Force Task Group (RFTG) - the UK's maritime quick reaction force, and a new initiative announced in last year's Strategic Defence and Security Review at the heart of the UK's maritime contingent capability to be held at very high readiness to respond to unexpected events worldwide. Despite the end of the Cougar 11 deployment, other elements of the RFTG remain at sea in support of current operations: helicopter carrier HMS Ocean continues to support NATO maritime operations off Libya, where she is acting as a huge floating airfield for Apache attack helicopter operations; HMS Liverpool is enforcing the blockade in support of sanctions against the Gaddafi former regime; and stores ship RFA Fort Rosalie continues to support Royal Navy operations in the Mediterranean. Commodore John Kingwell, Commander UK Task Group, said: "At every stage of Cougar 11 the Response Force Task Group has provided the Government with a range of options in a period of uncertainty on the world stage, demonstrating once again the value and utility of the Royal Navy. The Task Group continues to make a major contribution to the Libya campaign in the Mediterranean and has strengthened the UK's relationships in the Middle East. To do both simultaneously - and in addition to the main effort in Afghanistan - is a testament to the versatility of the Royal Navy and the sheer hard work of those involved." Against the back drop of the 'Arab Spring', both assault ship HMS Albion and Type 23 frigate HMS Sutherland sailed from Devonport Naval Base in early April three weeks ahead of schedule. They were later joined in the Mediterranean by further elements of the Task Group, which at its height consisted of eleven ships, more than a dozen helicopters and over 3,000 sailors and Royal Marines. At the beginning of June 2011, the Task Group split, with one group led by HMS Albion passing through the Suez Canal to conduct strategic engagements with allies and partners in the Middle East, and the second group, led by HMS Ocean, remaining in the Mediterranean to act in support of ongoing NATO operations off Libya. Captain James Morley, Commanding Officer of HMS Albion, said: "The Cougar 11 deployment has ended successfully but HMS Albion remains at very high readiness throughout the summer and into the autumn, on call to respond to the demands of an interconnected and unpredictable world. The importance of the work undertaken by HMS Albion and the Task Group in the Middle East during Cougar 11 cannot be underestimated. The region contains some of the world's busiest and most important shipping routes, linking Europe and North America with China and the Far East. Security and stability here is absolutely critical to the prosperity and well-being of the UK." Commander Roger Readwin, Commanding Officer of HMS Sutherland, explained the role his ship played during the deployment: "In the course of Cougar 11, HMS Sutherland was twice diverted to the North African coast, first to protect HMS Albion and HMS Ocean whilst off Libya and later to help enforce the maritime blockade against the Gaddafi regime. In doing so we have demonstrated why the frigate is the backbone of the Royal Navy - fast, agile and capable of a range of missions. However, my biggest asset by far is the ship's company, many of whom have seen action for the first time. They are a credit to their ship and to the Royal Navy." Lieutenant Colonel Paul Lynch, Royal Marines,

directed the planning of the amphibious exercises in the Mediterranean. He explained the value of amphibious capabilities:
"Cougar 11 reinforced a unique national capability, reinvigorating the specialist knowledge and skills of amphibious warfare within the Royal Marines, thereby providing a continued capability within 3 Commando Brigade to conduct complex amphibious operations."
"Notably, this was conducted at the same time as the brigade's ongoing commitment to operations in Afghanistan."
"The worldwide, balanced and expeditionary nature of our amphibious capability allows the Royal Navy and Royal Marines to deliver a landing force ashore at a time and place of our choosing and support them from the sea with little reliance on ports, airfields or host nation support."
Major achievements of Cougar 11 included:
◆ demonstrating the UK's ability to contribute to current operations whilst preparing for contingent operations, in a Task Group spread across several oceans; and to achieve both in addition to the defence main effort in Afghanistan.
◆ supporting NATO operations to protect civilians in Libya, including commanding the first maritime strike missions by Apache attack helicopters launched from the sea against military targets ashore.
◆ reinforcing the UK's commitment to, and strengthening the UK's relationship with, our partner countries in the Middle East through exercises with Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.
◆ reinvigorating the UK's amphibious capabilities after ten years' focus on land operations through exercises conducted with the Lead Commando Group (40 Commando Royal Marines) whilst the remainder of 3 Commando Brigade are currently in Afghanistan.
◆ conducting the first ever military exercise between the Royal Navy and Albanian Armed Forces since Albania joined NATO in 2009.