

OC 656 Autumn Report

Readers of 'The Chinthe' will no doubt be assured that the shackles of COVID 19 and the ongoing problems that continue to raise their ugly head across the world have not precluded or even managed to slow down the tempo of 656. The cyclical nature of life on the squadron continues, with another rotation through the regular commitments of exercises and maintaining the extremely high readiness (EHR) attack capability of the 1st Aviation Brigade.

In my last contribution to 'The Chinthe' I provided an update on our deployment to Norway for Exercise CLOCKWORK. The exercise was highly successful and ensured our extreme cold weather capability keep progressing.



Figure 1 - On display at 2021 G8 Summit

On our recovery from the High North in February; 1 Platoon, the integral REME Aviation Engineers, furiously set about getting the fleet ready for our embarkation aboard HMS Prince of Wales. The unenviable task of fitting the emergency flotation system to an aircraft determined to sink to the bottom of the sea carries a large engineering burden. Needless to say, the engineers delivered, providing 3 aircraft for what would be a momentous occasion as the first embarked squadron across all three Services on board the Royal Navy's newest, and largest member of the fleet.

Onboard for 3 weeks during her sea trials off the South West coast, the squadron set about qualifying and requalifying aircrew in deck procedures; focussing on deck landing training and learning the ways of the Navy. With a relatively inexperienced Ships Company, the time on board was invaluable for both services in determining and refining operating procedures to allow a slick and efficient system to get aircraft airborne in order to conduct potential littoral strikes in the future.

We were also lucky enough to be joined by the carrier's first visiting F35, providing insight into the combined potency and flexibility of the Carrier Strike Group.

Towards the end of the summer, once again the Squadron has proved itself as capable of deploying on contingency operations with a major exercise across the entire length and breadth of the UK. The whole Squadron Group was tested and absolutely delivered in a realistic and challenging scenario working alongside some of our partners from the wider Defence community.

Finally, to complete the trilogy of sea, snow and sand; approximately half of the squadron deployed to Oman on Ex PINION OMAN.

Predominantly an aircrew training exercise that delivers dust landings, mountain flying and HELLFIRE ranges; it also proved a great opportunity for less experienced members of signals, ground support flight and engineers to hone their skills in what proved to be quite

an austere environment with temperatures regularly exceeding 40 deg. The exercise based from RAFO Massanah Airfield in the north of the country, was unfortunately struck by the second tropical storm in Oman's history. Naturally



Figure 2 - Hunting at night



Figure 1 - Dust FARPING in Oman

this led to elaborate stories and bragging rights from those that were confined to their rooms for 3 days during the downpours and 100 mile per hour winds.



Figure 1 - Loading up HELLFIRE

Ex PINION OMAN led to a monumental day for the most recent pilots to arrive on 656 Sqn as this would be their opportunity fire their first live HELLFIRE missile at targets in the desert. Accompanied by an obligatory rush of adrenalin, the laser guided, anti-armour precision missiles shot off the rails on their way to striking pre-designated targets in the vast Omani desert.

With the entire squadron now qualified to fly in the desert and to fire the live weapons system – 656 aircrew are now ready and equipped to operate in hot, mountainous, arctic and maritime operations.

With virtually no time for acclimatisation – engineers, signallers, aircrew alongside the most recent batch of cold weather survival courses are currently being plunged back into the minus 20 deg temperatures of Norway. These personnel are providing an advanced party to prepare the aircraft for flying in January when the Sqn main arrives again for another (and potentially the Sqn's last) Ex CLOCKWORK.

As we head into our Christmas leave, I would like to wish the entire Association a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and I hope to be able to host you all at an event later in 2022 if a suitable time can be found.

