

# Armed forces personnel complete Hajj

Led by the Islamic Religious Advisor to the Chief of Defence Staff Imam Asim Hafiz OBE, the Hajj was a chance for British Muslim armed forces personnel to reflect on the role of their religion as part of their service. Hosted by the Royal Saudi Arabian armed forces throughout, the Hajj took place 10 to 14 August, culminating with the festival of Eid ul Adha.

Hajj, meaning 'to intend to journey', is the fifth pillar of Islam and requires all Muslims who are able, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and surrounding locations of historical significance.

The group, which consisted of regular and reservist personnel from the army and Royal Air Force, arrived in Jeddah and performed the Umrah pilgrimage prior to visiting Medina. Here, the group were hosted by the Royal Saudi Arabian armed forces who arranged a visit to the Mosque of Prophet Muhammad as well as to the site of the Battle of Uhud before returning to Mecca to complete all of the Hajj rituals.

Major Nabeela Malik, a Reservist from the 212 Field Hospital Unit said:

Performing Hajj has been a magnificent experience for me. However, what made it more so was undertaking this once in a lifetime journey with colleagues from the UK Armed Forces.

We were all supported by our respective units and were superbly hosted by our friends in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Armed Forces.

The team travelled to Mina from Mecca where they stayed in a sprawling tent city which accommodated approximately 2.5 million pilgrims from around the world. This was followed by a visit the Jamaraat for the symbolic stoning of the devil, represented by three stone pillars, replicating Prophet Abraham's experience.

Corporal Abdoulie Jobe, from the Royal Logistics Corps said:

Having already experienced many memorable events during my service, I was speechless when I found out that I was going to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj.

The visit was made more special as I was able to visit with colleagues who are also serving. My senior team were very supportive.

The service personnel also met with the British Consul General Mr Seif Usher, who congratulated the group on achieving one of the five pillars of Islam, before returning to the UK.

Officer Cadet Zrar Maqsood, from the Defence School of Communications and Information Systems said:

I feel extremely privileged to have been given an opportunity to perform Hajj during my service with the Royal Air Force, as a guest of the Saudi Armed Forces.

I feel reenergised to get back into my engineering training followed by a Commissioning Course!

The armed forces personnel were selected to join 25,000 pilgrims from the UK travelling for the Hajj this year.

The Ministry of Defence encourages and celebrates diversity, promoting an inclusive working environment. To achieve this a wide range of initiatives under a defence wide Diversity and Inclusion Programme (DDIP) have been established. While recruitment is an important element, the wider programme takes a much broader view of diversity and inclusion. It is driving real change by embedding diversity and inclusion within leadership and culture and taking steps to increase the retention and progression of people from underrepresented groups.