

Minister for the Armed Forces James Heapey MP: The Ministry of Defence Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to speak to you today about the MOD's response to the Covid pandemic.

The beginning of the year already feels like a lifetime ago. And it's hard to remember that, back in January, Covid wasn't really in the news.

Equally, what's also, perhaps, hard to remember, is that period when Covid was very much in the news for being overseas but not yet here

With the numbers of cases rising alarmingly in Italy and horrendous pictures on our TV screens of overstretched Italian intensive care units, the nation was genuinely concerned about Covid. About how we would make up for the lack of intensive care beds. And about how would we procure and distribute the billions of items of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that would be needed.

As our plans to respond to the pandemic developed, we were confronted by the challenges of delivering millions of meals to the many vulnerable people who would be shielded.

And, as our response developed further still, we wanted to know how we would achieve the testing of hundreds of thousands of people per day.

Make no mistake. When those lines of activity and the many moving parts, both in the UK and abroad, were brought together this became a logistical and operational challenge the like of which we hadn't seen since the end of World War 2.

Now, all of these challenges, were fundamentally owned by Other Government Departments. And I am keen to say up front that the work of my colleagues in the Department for Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Defra, the Treasury and elsewhere has been truly extraordinary.

That said RUSI has invited me here today to talk about Defence's contribution. So you'll forgive me if I speak with some pride over what we've achieved whilst supporting those other departments...

Whether that was creating new mechanisms for the procurement and distribution of PPE

... developing vast Nightingale hospitals from London to Manchester, Birmingham to Bristol ... so that thousands more intensive care beds were available

... providing additional clinicians from the Defence Medical Services to meet

the increasing demand on the wards

... designing and establishing the structures that could test hundreds of thousands of people a day.

Or whether it was embedding planners in every local authority to co-ordinate our response at all levels.

This wasn't our fight and so, rightly, our soldier, sailors, airmen and air women were not the ones on the TV screens.

The real heroes of this crisis were our NHS and our wider public services.

But behind them over 14,000 military and civilian personnel from within the MOD have stood tall. I'm grateful for all they've done.

Today I would like to delve into the detail with five vignettes showing-off just some of this fantastic work.

Let me begin with Major Eb Mukhtar.

In his civilian job Eb leads operations for Google shopping. But in his spare-time he serves with the Reserves as a Staff Officer with National Reserve HQ attached to 16 Air Assault Brigade in Colchester. And when his nation needed him Eb really stepped up.

Realising that the shortage of PPE meant that many smaller health care providers couldn't receive the necessary equipment from their traditional suppliers, Eb, working in conjunction with E-bay, designed an e-portal that allowed up to 45,000 different users including NHS customers and GPs to access the NHS supply chain.

Next I want to draw attention to the efforts of soldiers from 66 Works Group Royal Engineers.

They recognised a gap in testing coverage and developed the concept of the Mobile Testing Unit in just under seven days.

After adopting a 'Scrapheap Challenge' approach in a Royal Engineer workshop, they transformed crew transport vans into the specialised MTUs being used today.

From engineers to our brilliant DSTL scientists working at Porton Down.

They didn't just enhance the UK's testing capacity, they addressed another very basic challenge.

PPE face masks used by the NHS must fit properly, so a special spray helps medics determine whether the masks both fit and can resist droplets expelled by patients.

But the spray used to test those masks was unavailable in the time frame. So a new solution had to be found. Enter DSTL. They developed and manufactured

sufficient spray to help tackle this challenge and protect NHS clinicians on the frontline.

Meanwhile, our colleagues over at Defence Equipment and Support were immensely active in procurement.

They established a special team that enabled the Department for Health and Social Care to approve and place an order for almost 10 billion items of PPE – many hard to source – worth £5.3 billion with suppliers across the world.

Through their Defence Logistic Hub at Donnington, they also distributed more than 10,500 different pieces of critical medical care including more than 3,700 ventilators.

Not only did they adapt Air Separation Units used by aircrew to treat COVID-19 patients, but they worked with industry and the RAF to use 3-D printing technology to improve face masks for frontline NHS staff.

Finally, there is what CDS likes to call our neural network.

By which he means the embedded expertise that we plugged into Public Health England and the NHS, and into our national, regional and local partner organisations.

Between them they helped bolster plans to delay, contain and manage the impact of the virus across different sectors.

They brought specialist assistance in everything from medical, logistics and engineering to data analytics, problem solving and information management.

Together they ensured the national response functioned at scale and moved at pace.

But it would be wrong for me to imply our people were exclusively busy on the home front.

They also provided tireless support to local government and civil authorities in our overseas territories.

In Gibraltar, they assisted with logistics and planning as well as bringing in essential food and medicine.

In the Falkland Islands, they brought their medical expertise as well as supplies and an oxygen generation plant.

After departing earlier than planned, the crew of RFA Argus and HMS Medway have spent the last few months supporting countries in the Caribbean tackling Coronavirus. And they are still there now – ready to assist in any relief effort required during hurricane season.

In Ascension and St Helena, our people delivered vital kit and in the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Cayman Islands they provided essential security assistance.

Now we're on the road to getting Coronavirus effectively under control in the UK, the question for us is how we support other countries around the globe who are still at the peak of the pandemic.

Throughout this unprecedented crisis, our Armed Forces have continued to maintain our nation's resilience.

Our adversaries have continued to test us during this difficult time and, if anything, the global environment has become even more competitive.

But our brave Defence personnel have continued to keep our nation safe, maintaining our nuclear deterrent and protecting our sovereign airspace and territorial waters while countering the international terrorist threat from Daesh and deterring malign state and non-state actors.

Even as Coronavirus raged, our aircraft continued to police NATO airspace.

Our flagship aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, was able to remain at sea for over 10 weeks so that her crew could complete operational training with minimal risk of infection – taking us one step closer to the carrier strike capability that can project British Influence across the globe.

All the while, we have continued training and generating the forces required for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, even if the reduced tempo meant they haven't yet needed to deploy.

And we have done so in a disciplined way – respecting social distancing and minimising the risk to our people.

All this has been a monumental effort.

And today is my opportunity to place on record our appreciation for the awesome work of our military and civilian workforce.

Those who put duty to our country ahead of spending time with their families during the pandemic.

Those who never stopped stepping up.

And – arguably even more impressively – those who quietly worked in the background keeping the Defence of our nation going whilst the nation's attention was on Covid-19.

Thank you all for keeping us safe.

But, ladies and gentlemen, RUSI is a serious academic institution and you haven't invited me to speak to you simply to express my pride in the exceptional effort of our Armed Forces.

You want me, rightly, to offer some more considered thoughts on what we can learn from this crisis.

Moreover, there will be lessons we must learn around the resilience of

defence and the nation which should inform our Integrated Review of foreign, defence, security and development policy.

So now let me touch on just a few of those lessons:

First, there is the importance of mass.

As was widely reported 20,000 service personnel were placed at high readiness during the crisis. Including

...1,000 people standing by in case our prison service needed support

...1,500 drivers ready to deliver essential supplies

...and 10,000 individuals able to step in at short notice to support the police.

In the end none of those contingencies were activated and the highest number of service personnel deployed in response to Covid at any one time was 4,820 – the majority of which are involved in the testing process.

But the fact we've not used the full 20,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen who were put at readiness...shouldn't lead us to conclude that they were not important to the government's response.

On the contrary, I recall vividly from those early ministerial implementation groups the scale of the contingencies the government thought it might need.

And the ability of the MOD to step up and say "we've got this" offered some easy answers to an otherwise extraordinarily complicated challenge.

In Australia, the design of the force is in part driven by homeland resilience requirements. And whilst I don't think that is the answer here, there's no escaping the fact that the ability to generate thousands of people to do anything from the swabbing of throats to the stuffing of sandbags in a time of crisis is a reassurance to us all.

Second, beyond the simple and quick availability of mass, Covid has demonstrated that Defence has the ability to draw on a wide range of operational and technical expertise.

Although we have capabilities principally to achieve our military aims, it has been satisfying to see how transferable those skill sets have been in the civilian environment during our pandemic response.

Our logisticians, engineers, drivers and medics, scientists, planners, intelligent analysts, communication specialists, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear specialists...have all been involved and added value in surprising ways.

I think we've been surprised ourselves by how our contribution to this crisis has really been about brains over brawn. And it goes to show how modern Armed Forces need mass but that mass achieves nothing without battle winning

technical know-how

Which leads me to my third lesson and that is that we cannot hold that breadth of expertise exclusively within the regular Armed Forces. And so we will need to ensure that we recruit and retain the eclectic skill-set that has proven so valuable...often within the Reserve.

This Integrated Review was always going to look at how we can further break down barriers between Regulars and Reserves...and how we generate a wider sort of expertise within our people...irrespective of their term of service.

The fact that some of the real heroes of the military response over the past four months have been Reservists really rams home the need to do this.

Finally, outside of times of crisis, we must maintain stronger relationships with the NHS, local authorities and other parts of the public sector.

Before my ministerial colleagues from other departments start to twitch; this is not an MOD land grab.

During the pandemic we forged strong partnerships at scale in double time.

We built up trust and mutual respect with our counterparts. We can't afford to lose that connection.

So we must make sure the appropriate people in our organisation retain an awareness of the way our public services work so that, whenever we have to work together again in future, whatever the challenges of tomorrow might be, we have maintained that trust, that understanding, that unity of purpose and that sense of belonging to one team.

Interestingly, this is a network that won't just be to the advantage of our homeland resilience.

As we move into a new age of great power competition it is the fusion of effort across Whitehall, allowing us to successfully compete with our adversaries and sow mutual understanding and awareness between departments, that will give us an edge away from home as well.

To conclude: Planning for sudden, fast-moving events like pandemics is the military's stock in trade.

We have tried and tested systems in place.

These were the systems we drew on when we helped co-ordinate the response to Foot and Mouth disease.

These were the systems we turned to when it came to security for the London 2012 Olympics.

These were the systems that made sure we had large numbers of military personnel at readiness during preparations for a 'no-deal' Brexit.

And these were the systems that made sure we could come to the aid of the citizens of Salisbury after the use of Novichok on British streets back in 2018.

Defence is good at this stuff! And our people have done a great job over the past few months.

In the midst of a deadly pandemic, in the middle of the greatest crisis we've faced in more than half a century...Defence has once more held firm and proven its worth.

We might now be in the 'new normal', bringing inevitable instability and insecurity

But we should draw enormous confidence from the fact that our UK Armed Forces have shown their mettle and proved that they are trained and ready to respond... wherever and whenever the country requires.

I finish, however, with a word of caution. History teaches us that crisis brings economic instability and economic instability brings insecurity. At times of insecurity Defence is at its busiest.

So it should come as no surprise to all of you that as we draw down our response to the pandemic and generate forces at readiness – just in case there is a second wave – the MOD is already recocked...and generating the military solution our country may need in the uncertain world that lies ahead.