

UK Task Group Exercise and Engagement in Montserrat

The UK Task Group in the Caribbean assembled in Montserrat following a day of engagement activities and Disaster Relief exercises.

RFA Argus spent the day conducting tasking on the British Overseas Territory of Montserrat, a volcanic island so covered in lush green vegetation that it is known as the 'Emerald Isle of the Caribbean'. The Crisis Response Troop were landed ashore to conduct Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercises in the deserted volcanic exclusion zone on the south of the island, while the Wildcat helicopter from 815 Naval Air Squadron collected aerial photography to assist the local scientific community with their work monitoring the active volcano on Montserrat.

Commando Helicopter Force (CHF) inserted the Mobile Air Operations Team by fast-roping from 845 Naval Air Squadron Merlin helicopters. A safe landing zone was prepared and then teams of combat engineers and medics from 24 Commando Royal Engineers and small teams from 47 Commando Royal Marines and 3 Commando Brigade also fast-roped to the ground.

The chance to land in the volcanic exclusion zone is a rare opportunity for the Crisis Response Troop to test their equipment ashore in a deserted environment without direct interaction that could create the risk of COVID transmission to the clean bubble that is maintained on board RFA ARGUS. The Wildcat helicopter from 815 Naval Air Squadron flew on tasking to support the local community, particularly scientists of the Montserrat Volcanic Observatory (MVO).

The 203 Flight Commander, Royal Navy Pilot Lieutenant Jim Carver said: "outreach projects are routine business for Wildcat Flights. 815 NAS has formed a good relationship with the MVO in previous years, and we were keen to continue that this year despite COVID restrictions. Due to social distancing measures we were unable to fly the scientists and maintenance crews around the volcanic survey sites, but we were able to gather airborne imagery of parts the volcano that are only accessible by helicopter and pass them back to the MVO researchers".

Commander Kate Muir is the head of the UK Task Group in the Caribbean. She said: "Montserrat provided the task group with an exceptional opportunity to refresh its disaster relief skills in the exclusion zone, which minimises the risk of COVID transmission. Although we could not meet with anyone from Montserrat, we were really pleased to be able to support the Montserrat Volcano Observatory with some photographic survey work. My thanks go to Governor Pearce and the Royal Montserrat Defence Force for enabling our visit and for keeping my teams safe. I hope that the rest of hurricane season is kind to Montserrat!"

Governor Andy Pearce said, "I am delighted to welcome RFA Argus back to our

shores for this short but extremely useful visit. I know the MVO are particularly grateful for the helicopter support. Montserrat always offers a unique space to complete life-saving HADR training and I am very happy the crew had the opportunity to learn here. While it is a real shame that we could not interact as we usually would, face to face and in the community due to COVID-19, I am looking forward to the return of Royal Navy support next year."

Though not able to meet in person, the Governor and Commander Muir were able to speak together on a dial in for local radio station ZJB Radio. Here the hosts asked questions about the activity of the UK task group and how they would respond to any events like a hurricane in the time of COVID.

The day finished with the arrival of the Royal Navy Offshore Patrol Vessel, HMS Medway. She sailed close to Argus to take receipt of a transfer of stores and mail, which is always an important boost for the Ship's Company moral. This presented an opportunity for the whole Task Group to be photographed, and so with two ships aligned the Wildcat and Merlin helicopters flew in formation to capture the entire UK Task Group with the striking green of Montserrat as a backdrop.

Both ships have now sailed on to continue their patrols in the Caribbean, ready to respond in the event of a hurricane or to provide support to the British Overseas Territories when needed, and also to assist international partners with counter-narcotics operations in the region.

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