

News story: UK standing by for Storm Isaac in the Caribbean

As the storm makes its way towards the Caribbean Windward islands, an Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team has been deployed to work with the Governors and supporting agencies on the islands. A further 87 engineers, medics, maritime experts and other specialists have joined the regular crew of RFA Mounts Bay, which is the mobile hub of the British relief effort. Approximately 1,000 personnel are deployed or being held at high-readiness for if further storms head towards the region.

Homes were destroyed and infrastructure was decimated when Hurricane Irma and Maria, two of the most powerful hurricanes for decades, hit the region back-to-back in September 2017.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

I want to assure everyone in our Overseas Territories that our Armed Forces have been pre-positioned in the region and are absolutely prepared to help. We will be there to support during this hurricane season while still helping those whose lives were devastated by Irma and Maria to rebuild their lives and homes.

As well as being able to carry vital aid and equipment, RFA Mounts Bay will use the Royal Navy Wildcat helicopter on board to provide aerial support. There is also a medical facility on board, with 10 patient beds.

The Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) troop, consisting of Royal Engineers from the British Army and Royal Marines, have been training with their French counterparts in Martinique to ensure they are fully prepared. This training is part of a six-month deployment to the region for hurricane season, while RFA Mounts Bay also carried out a significant HADR exercise in July.

Commanding Officer of RFA Mounts Bay, Captain Peter Selby RFA said:

As proved during our Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief exercise in July, RFA Mounts Bay is prepared and ready to assist the Government and people of Montserrat. We are currently on route and undertaking the final stages of preparation for our response.

As well as preparing for this year, RFA Mounts Bay was in the region when Irma struck last year and will remain there until 2020 to provide support to the islands.

Captain Jonathan Cooke of 24 Commando Royal Engineers (24 Cdo RE) OC HADR

Troop said:

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Troop onboard RFA Mounts Bay is ready to assist residents on Montserrat. We have previously deployed to the island both in July and on Operation RUMAN last year and have gained a good understanding of the current status of the island and infrastructure in order to best support the island if required.

Montserrat Governor Andrew Pearce OBE said:

We are delighted to welcome this small team from the Armed Forces as we make our final preparations for the approaching storm. I am also particularly reassured that if we need her, RFA Mounts Bay is ready to respond.

[News story: Sea king helicopters – asbestos](#)

Veterans may have seen media reports about asbestos being found in some sea King helicopters. The MOD is undertaking a thorough investigation of this and any advice to veterans will be published here when available. In the meantime, the following information may be useful.

- asbestos is fire resistant and was widely used in the 20th century as an insulating material in boilers, pipework etc and notably in building construction
- asbestos exposure can relate to occupation, but there are many other sources in the environment
- contact with asbestos does not produce acute symptoms but over time, typically many years, a variety of chest conditions may develop, dependent on the type of asbestos, and the level and duration of exposure
- information about medical conditions related to asbestos exposure can be found on the NHS website at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/asbestosis/> and <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/mesothelioma/>
- the War Disablement Pension and the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme both make provision for any illness or injury caused by service in HM Armed Forces. Awards are not made for exposure, but for an injury or disorder including asbestos related conditions
- further details on how to make a claim under the War Pensions Scheme, and regarding the conditions and applicable dates, are available via the

[Veterans UK War Pensions page](#)

- welfare support for veterans, including home visits where needed, is also available from the [MOD's Veterans Welfare Service](#)
 - should you wish to pursue a common law claim for damages, regardless if you are a civilian/contractor or service/ex-service personnel, you may wish to seek legal advice on the merits of such a claim
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[News story: Defence Minister sees Stockport firm finishing multi-million-pound military bridge order for Australian Army](#)

- Defence Minister Stuart Andrew's visit to WFEL in Stockport signified the completion of the final Dry Support Bridge which is part of a £53m contract with the Australian Army.
- The Defence Minister described the firm, which has benefited from £600m-worth of export orders, as 'a model for how companies across the country can thrive on the global stage'.
- He witnessed a 90-minute demo build of a 46-metre bridge from the firm, who are renowned world leaders in the field.
- He visited with the Head of Australian Defence Staff London, Air Commodore Brian Edwards.

Defence Minister Stuart Andrew today visited a Stockport company which is world-renowned in building tactical military bridges. While there, he marked the completion of a multi-million-pound deal to supply the Australian Army with the vital logistics equipment.

The £53m deal with Australia is part of £600m-worth of export orders that WFEL has amassed over the past decade. The Defence Minister described the firm as 'a model for how companies across the country can thrive on the global stage' at a time when defence exports have surged by over 50% to £9bn.

The workers also demonstrated their world-class reputation by constructing a 46-metre Dry Support Combat Bridge in just 90 minutes whilst the Minister toured the factory.

The bridges will be used in combat situations providing rapidly-deployable temporary infrastructure ensuring vital equipment and soldiers can navigate their way through the most challenging terrain. The military bridges can also be used in times of crisis during natural disasters maintaining essential lifelines to those who need it the most.

Defence Minister Stuart Andrew said:

Through WFEL, Stockport is leading the world in military bridges which help troops defeat our enemies and provide essential aid to people in disaster zones. Not only does WFEL bring hundreds of jobs and millions of pounds of investment to the UK, but it enables relations with some of our closest allies to flourish. As they finish an order for Australia, kick one off for America and look towards more opportunities to build British bridges, they are a model for how companies across the country can thrive on the global stage and play a key role in the defence of our nation.



Defence Minister sees Stockport firm finishing multi-million-pound military bridge order for Australian Army. Crown copyright.

Work continues at WFEL following the completion of this Australian order as the company has now turned its focus to new orders for the US Army, building upon the 116 military bridges that the company has already built for US forces.

Whilst 90% of its Stockport production is exported overseas, WFEL's contribution to UK defence can be traced back as far as 1915. The company has been designing and producing bridges for the UK military since the 1970s, and the relationship remains to this day – the British Army has over 50 sets in service. They have been proven in the field in the likes of Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are also potential UK opportunities in the pipeline for WFEL, with the company currently bidding to update and replace some of the MOD's military

bridging systems. It could become part of the Mechanised Infantry Vehicle (MIV) programme's supply chain, which would support the current 227-strong local workforce.

The opportunities could mean a further boost to investment in the North-West, which already benefits from £2 billion of defence spending – supporting over 12,000 industry jobs in the region.

Ian Anderton, Chief Executive of WFEL, said:

As the leading tactical military bridge maker globally, WFEL continues to work to provide solutions for customers like the Australian Defence Force. Our long-standing relationship with the ADF first began over 30 years ago, when they chose our Medium Girder Bridges. We have been delighted to continue to support them again today, not only with the supply of further MGBs but also with a significant capability enhancement with the latest mechanised Dry Support Bridges.

The adoption of the DSB not only provides the ADF's Manoeuvre Commanders with the ability to cross significant wet or dry gaps quickly and efficiently, it allows a level of inter-operability with an ever-growing user base. We have worked collaboratively with the Commonwealth's Managing Contractor to reduce risk for this contract and are pleased to be providing an off-the-shelf solution to the ADF's wide-gap tactical bridging requirements.



Defence Minister sees Stockport firm finishing multi-million-pound military bridge order for Australian Army. Crown copyright.

The Minister was also accompanied by the Head of Australian Defence Staff London, Air Commodore Brian Edwards.

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The Australian-UK bilateral defence relationship has been forged over many years and is incredibly strong and enduring. In recent times, we have seen an increased emphasis in opportunities for collaboration from a defence industry standpoint. This project introduces into service the latest addition to the Australian Army's suite of combat bridging. It will ensure that the Australian Defence Force has an enhanced gap crossing capability which will enable land forces, both mounted and dismounted, to cross wet and dry gaps in support of operations.

The Australian deal was made up of two contracts, following an internationally competed tender. As a result, WFEL supplied its leading Medium Girder Bridges (MGBs) and Dry Support Bridges (DSBs) to the Australian Defence Force (ADF). This has resulted in a huge boost for the 132 organisations who have benefited from contributing the WFEL supply chain.

The UK enjoys a very close bilateral relationship with Australia, which has strengthened over recent years, with the introduction of annual conferences and close co-operation on many international issues – including a shared commitment to fighting extremism on coalition operations, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Australia also recently decided to choose BAE Systems to build nine British-designed Type 26 warships. The deal, which could be worth up to £20 billion, has been hailed as the biggest Naval ship deal for a decade. It is not only another clear example of Britain's world-leading defence industry, but has been described by the Defence Secretary as 'the dawn of a new era in the relationship between Australia and Great Britain, forging new ties in defence and industry in a major boost as we leave the European Union'.

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[News story: New pocket guide for troops to access mental health support](#)

Updated: Added the link to the published pocket guide.

The [guide](#), jointly launched by Samaritans and the Ministry of Defence, gives advice on how to identify signs that someone may be having difficulties, suggests ways of offering support and gives information on where help can be found.

All military personnel and reserves, some 200,000 people, will have access to either a hard copy or digital version of the booklet.

The [guide](#) builds on the range of support already available to service personnel who are struggling with their mental health, including access to specialist mental health medical care, training and education on good mental fitness and the Combat Stress 24-hour Mental Health Helpline.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Mental health issues can affect anyone and I want to ensure no one in our military suffers in silence. It is vital that service personnel know where to turn to in times of crisis, and this guide will raise awareness of the support available.

By helping our people to spot the early signs that someone may be struggling, we give them the best chance of a full recovery.

Specifically designed to promote peer support amongst those serving, the [guide](#) champions “looking after your mates”, and covers:

- Identifying someone struggling to cope with mental health issues
- Understanding the complexity of suicide
- Knowing when to intervene, support and report
- Where to get further support, including the Samaritans service, whose volunteers are available any time, via phone and email or in person at the charity’s 201 branches, and the recently launched Combat Stress 24/7 Military Mental Health Helpline

Minister for Defence People and Veterans Tobias Ellwood said:

While military mental health continues to be slightly better than the general population, we’re committed to ensuring that those who need help are able to get the support they need.

This guide, alongside our extra investment in mental health care and the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline, will be invaluable in helping our people to help each other.

Samaritans and the MOD have announced several joint initiatives to offer training and support to serving personnel, veterans and their families who are struggling with mental health issues.

The Samaritans programme has been funded by £3.5m from LIBOR, and the guide is the latest part of this programme. A separate booklet is set to be launched for veterans, and the wider military community.

The next stage of the project will include the launch of other peer support tools, specially designed training courses for military personnel and a confidential webchat service. Training for Samaritans volunteers on how address mental health in a military environment will also be introduced.

Samaritans CEO, Ruth Sutherland, said:

Samaritans is committed to bringing the expertise we have gained in training people to provide peer support to the military, in order to prevent suicides. This is the first step in a journey to provide

a variety of support for serving personnel, veterans, reservists and their families.

The [booklet](#) will also help personnel spot signs that colleagues may be having suicidal thoughts and provides information on how such a situation should be approached, and where support is available.

The number of military personnel who take their lives continues to be below rates for the general population, with the military rate of suicide being 8 per 100,000, in 2017, compared to 18 per 100,000 in the general population in 2016.

The Ministry of Defence is now spending £220 million over the next decade to improve mental health services for serving personnel. In February of this year, the Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson also announced the establishment of a 24-Hour Mental Health Helpline for serving personnel and their families, funded by the MOD and run by the charity Combat Stress.

The MOD's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is designed to encourage all members of the armed forces to recognise the importance of mental fitness and encourages individuals to seek support if they are struggling with their mental health.