

## **TSW Report (Reunion Dinner 1<sup>st</sup> July 2022)**

If the preceding years were unusual for the impact of COVID, the last 12 months have seen a rapid return to 'TSW normal', which is code for busy. Whilst the unit saw a reduction in some commitments, the last year has seen the Wing deploy to 12 overseas countries in an intensive operations and exercise programme. The last 6-months has clearly been overshadowed by events in Ukraine, with the unit directly supporting some Defence activity, whilst the reality of war in mainland Europe has given a stark reality to the meaning of 'readiness'. It is interesting times to be on the Wing.

Whilst the hardship of COVID certainly rescinded this year, the disease continued to influence unit activity, including putting something of a dampener on Christmas celebrations due to a modest outbreak in early December. Whilst a continuing factor in how we operate, including the need to be fully vaccinated to deploy, the impact of the disease on Wing life is now pleasingly relatively small.

On the operational front, TSW has continued to regularly deploy personnel to Mali, the Middle East in support of Operation SHADER and to the Falkland Islands. However, the nature of this support has changed markedly, in all locations. In Mali, the CH-47s stopped flying this month, and our personnel are due to pull out in July, ending a very popular deployment that we have sustained since 2018. Our support to SHADER has also seen a reduction, with the MT drivers no longer deploying to Cyprus to augment the Typhoon deployment. However, we continue to be deployed elsewhere in the region supporting Chinook operations. By far the most popular change has been the reduction of personnel deploying to the Falklands, with 7 of the 10 posts that we have filled since 2014 being handed back 'to Trade'; TSW now only staff the refuel site at Fox Bay. In total, this represents a reduction of 14 personnel deployed when compared to 2021.

Whilst the above represents a welcome reduction in commitments, there is plenty of new stuff coming too, which is arguably more relevant for the unit. Firstly, TSW is increasingly being called upon to support activity in Eastern Europe as Defence seeks to demonstrate its support for NATO partners. As I write this, the unit is currently deployed in Lithuania with Puma helicopters, with planning for the next iteration supporting Chinooks focusing the Operations Room. Whilst currently relatively dynamic, it is likely that such support will be a mainstay of activity over the coming years. In the wake of the Integrated Review, TSW is also finding itself increasingly deployed to Army Regional Hubs, specifically in Kenya, Oman and Brunei. The former will be a major focus, with most Support Helicopter training likely to be conducted in Eastern Africa in the years ahead. The exercise programme has also picked up pace in the wake of COVID, with teams deploying to Norway, Northern Macedonia, Cyprus, Jordan, France and across the UK over the past 12 months.

Whilst the Wing focuses on delivering what can often seem an ever-changing series of activities, a key priority continues to be the maintenance of forces at readiness. As in previous years, this includes tasks in support of the Special Forces and a host of contingencies, such as UK industrial action or hurricanes in the Caribbean. However, the unit also has a requirement to be prepared to war-fight, much as our forebearers did in places like the Falklands and Iraq wars. Whilst always something that a command team needs to think about, the events of this Spring in Ukraine have brought this requirement into sharp focus. Like most units in Defence, we have work to do to ensure that we are

ready (or more ready at least) for such an event; be that better doctrine, training or equipment. The challenge for TSW though, is how to improve our ability to war-fight whilst we are so busy operating around the world, without breaking our people. That balance will be at the heart of the year ahead.

It is not all serious work over the next 12 months though; fun is back! Of note, our social calendar is back to pre-COVID norms, including the return of Choppers beer calls, regular top tables, and of course the long overdue Families' Day. Our Adventurous Training and Force Development programme is also gathering pace. Whilst we have had some great UK based events over the past 12 months, including several trips to ~~The Old Shades~~ London culture sites and the Scottish Highlands, we have some exciting overseas trips planned for the year ahead. The signature trip will be a battlefield tour to Sicily, to follow in the footsteps of the RAF Servicing Commandos during the war in the Mediterranean. Whilst limited to serving TSW personnel, the plan is to share the itinerary with the Association, so that the wider community can join us if they wish.

Having been the CO for just over 12 months, I have been heartened to see how strong the Association has become, specifically the links with the Wing. I was blown away by the extraordinary event at the Arboretum last summer and was personally extremely proud to accompany our Falklands veterans to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial event only a few weeks ago. I often bore the current generation with my views on how special the 'TSW family' mentality is to our unit culture, and how rare and valuable it is in today's RAF. A huge part of that family is this Association, which I am incredibly proud to be a member. To all of those who run or contribute to the Association, from all on TSW who enjoy the benefits, thank you.

Wing Commander Jon Smith

Commanding Officer Tactical Supply Wing