

Message from Rear Admiral Russ Harding OBE – Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Aviation and Carriers)

Having taken charge of the Fleet Air Arm (FAA) in September of 2012, I have spent the last 3 months visiting the men and women who keep the FAA running at a high tempo. These trips have taken me to the east and west coasts of America, to both of our air stations in the UK and to HM Ships ILLUSTRIOUS and BULWARK. It was a great pleasure also to visit the French aircraft carrier, CHARLES DE GAULLE, as she was exercising in the Mediterranean with the Royal Navy's Response Force Task Group's COUGAR 12 deployment - a visible sign of the continuing cooperation between our two navies.

I continue to be impressed by the high quality professionals operating, maintaining and supporting aircraft in the Naval Air Squadrons and Air Stations. The visits have highlighted how active the Fleet Air Arm is in contributing to operations worldwide at sea and ashore and equally as important, how exciting the future of the Fleet Air Arm is.

Last year saw continued support to OP HERRICK in Afghanistan with the Sea King Mk 4's of the Commando Helicopter Force supporting the operations of ISAF troops in Helmand Province, and the Sea King Mk 7 providing overland surveillance support resulting in regular interceptions of narcotics and weapons. At sea we have continued to provide Merlin and Lynx helicopters to deploy globally, embarked in surface ships of the Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) as they undertake defence tasks across the globe. Particular areas have included the South Atlantic, Caribbean and Gulf regions where they have contributed to Maritime Security Operations aimed at countering illegal trafficking of drugs, weapons and people.

Beyond these operational duties, 2012 also saw some of the greatest UK public events in decades – the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Summer Olympic and Paralympic games. The FAA played a key role in the UK security organisation to safeguard the games with RN helicopters and crews from across the various aircraft types, operating from HMS OCEAN in the Thames and HMS BULWARK in Weymouth Bay as well as from land bases, providing both a surveillance and response aviation capability.

Maintaining the airborne capability

Just as the submarine and surface fleets have taken delivery of new and refurbished vessels, so too is the FAA upgrading its capability. The Merlin Mk 2 Capability Sustainment Programme is well underway with the first Mk 2 aircraft having been recently delivered to RNAS Culdrose aiming towards full operational capability in 2014.

Staying with the Merlin fleet, Commando Helicopter Force, air crew and maintainers are now feeding into RAF Benson to start preparing for the transferral of the Merlin Mk 3 to the RN. There will be a two part upgrade package to the aircraft that will transform it into the Merlin Mk 4 and enable it to undertake ship-borne operations. The cockpit will be updated to the same standard as the Merlin Mk 2, and the fitting of folding tails and heads to allow the aircraft to be stowed below decks at sea.

Moving to the Lynx replacement, I signed off the safety statement in late 2012 that will enable us to begin factory-delivered training at the Agusta Westland site in Yeovil for the first batch of Wildcat helicopter trainers. Indeed, as an example of just how common the Land and Maritime variants of Wildcat are, the first FAA pilots to be trained in Wildcat will fly the Army AH Mk 1 variant as this will be available first.

Looking further out into the future, the FAA is preparing itself for the introduction of the two new Queen Elizabeth-class carriers that will come into service at the end of the decade. Despite the withdrawal of the Harrier and the disbandment of the Naval Strike Wing, there has been no break

in fixed-wing pilot recruitment and training. A small number of RN pilots are flying F-18 Hornets operationally with the US Navy. Personnel are also heavily engaged in the F-35B Lightning II programme with RN pilots and maintainers in the first training unit, VMFAT-501, at Eglin Air Force Base. Together, the RN and RAF have developed a comprehensive plan for the introduction of the Lightning II. We are standing up F-35B maintenance units from both the RAF and RN. Some of these men and women have transferred to a US-based training establishment which may operate there for up to six years before being transferred back to the UK. In addition, we are now in the process of setting up the test and evaluation squadron to be followed by the UK Operational Conversion Unit.

The past 12 months have been one of the busiest periods in the FAA's recent history. I am incredibly proud of the men and women who continue to step up to the daily challenges and meet every task that is asked of them with enthusiasm for the future and a sense of the heritage they stem from. I remain confident that this professional attitude and can-do spirit will ensure an exciting future for all who serve in the FAA.