ARMY AFLOAT

A significant milestone was achieved earlier this month proving the capability of the British Army’s Apache helicopter to operate and strike from the sea. Cannon and Hellfire missiles were successfully fired against seaborne targets in a long-planned exercise near Gibraltar early in May.

In total, 550 rounds of 30mm ammunition and nine radar-guided Hellfire missiles were fired, achieving a 100% strike rate. This was the first time that the missile has been launched in the maritime environment.

The two weeks to 14th May saw a succession of ‘firsts’ for the Army Air Corps (AAC) Attack Helicopter Force at sea. Currently deployed onboard HMS Ocean, the Royal Navy’s largest warship, 656 Squadron from 4 Regiment AAC have spent the past few weeks conducting intensive training that will allow them to operate by day and by night.

Major Mike Neville Army Air Corps, who commands 656 Sqn onboard HMS Ocean, said, “Today we proved that Apache can operate effectively from a Royal Navy ship, transporting munitions from the ship’s magazine, aircraft upload, launch, firing and then recovering to HMS Ocean. Once again 656 Squadron is at the leading edge of Attack Helicopter capability development. We are now well on the way to proving the maritime strike capability in highly complex scenarios.”

Despite the majority of 656 Squadron having seen recent service in Afghanistan, the maritime environment presents many new challenges. Understanding shipborne life and learning new procedures for the preparation and movement of ammunition from the ship’s magazine to the deck, efficiently and safely, was no small achievement. In combination with the successful live firing aspect of the exercise, 656 Squadron have established a firm base on which to develop their maritime role.

Commander Jol Woodard, Royal Navy, the Commanding Officer of HMS Ocean’s Air Group, added, “Today’s achievement is a landmark in the integration of the Apache into the maritime domain and is also a very important step in the development of the UK’s amphibious capability. I have been delighted with the way in which 656 Sqn and their support elements have integrated into the air group as a whole and the success of this whole-ship evolution demonstrates just how potent a truly Joint air group can be.”
Captain Andrew Betton, Royal Navy, HMS Ocean’s Commanding Officer concluded by saying, “HMS Ocean is the UK’s only dedicated amphibious helicopter carrier and it is fitting that we provided the platform from which the Army Air Corps have made history. 656 Squadron have fully integrated themselves onboard the ship and are an integral part of HMS Ocean’s ship’s company.”

Army Air Corps 656 Squadron and HMS Ocean are part of the Response Force Task Group (RFTG), deployed on Exercise Cougar 11 which is a long-planned series of exercises in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

RFTG is a new initiative announced in last year’s Strategic Defence and Security Review and is the heart of the UK’s maritime contingent capability, held at very high readiness to respond to unexpected global events. It highlights the enduring need for the armed forces to plan and train for unforeseen events that may occur in parallel with the defence main effort of current operations.

Initially, the Task Group will demonstrate its amphibious capabilities through multi-national exercises in the Mediterranean, before conducting further exercises in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf.