

RESERVES AT THE SHARP END

The recent Operation Biloxi saw the deployment of 19 RAF reservists. From providing meteorological services to photographing visiting dignitaries, reservists perform a variety of roles, but most agree that it's a life-changing experience

RAF reservists are currently supporting operations worldwide, and have recently returned from Operation Biloxi, the longstanding NATO Air Policing mission for the Black Sea region based at Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) air base in Romania. A purely defensive operation, the mission was introduced after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and is now part of NATO's assurance measures. Operation centres monitor the airspace and, if an interception is required, NATO aircraft can be scrambled as part of a Quick Reaction Alert (QRA).

Strategically positioned near Constanța on Romania's eastern border, MK air base is just 20km from the Black Sea coast; 300km, as the fighter flies, from Odesa in Ukraine and 400km from Sevastopol in Russian-occupied Crimea. A €2 billion project to expand and modernise the base began in 2021, and it will likely be the largest NATO base in Europe when work is completed.

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Predominantly occupied by the US Army, visiting nations build temporary accommodation for the duration of a tour, but can make use of all the other facilities on the base. As well as gyms and dining halls, there are cinema areas, table tennis and pool tables, and a very popular volleyball court. The US welfare teams also put on language, gardening and first aid classes and a range of events and competitions to ensure there's plenty of options for people to stay busy and motivated.

"Excellent facilities can make a world of difference," says Sergeant Barry, SNCO Delivery at 502 (Ulster) Squadron, the RAF's oldest reservist squadron. "We were fortunate



to be at MK air base during the summer, when it was mostly dry and very warm, which made it very pleasant.”

Support service

Six Typhoon fighter jets plus aircrew and engineers from IX(B) Squadron at RAF Lossiemouth were stationed at MK air base for four months from April 2024. They were supported by an Expeditionary Air Wing (EAW) made up of individual augmentations from all over the RAF, plus a number of reservists.

“We were there to bolster the Romanian forces and the Romanian Air Force. They do their own air policing, we’re there for additional

Typhoons from RAF Lossiemouth operated from Mihail Kogălniceanu air base, Romania, during the multi-national Exercise Dacian Strike – one of many exercises which comprised Operation Biloxi

support,” explains Squadron Leader Kiernan, Chief of Staff, 140 EAW.

“We had about 220 personnel on the EAW as a whole and 19 of those were reservists, which I think is possibly the most reservists the RAF has ever deployed on a single operation. They do a variety of roles, within the media team, intelligence, Mechanical Transport (MT) and support functions, and within the Guard Force protecting our assets.

“It was really interesting to watch how seamlessly the reservists integrated into the team. Our deployment was mostly made up of individual augmentees, who didn’t know each other before they arrived, so it was very easy >

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for the Reserves to mix in. The professionalism they demonstrated was fantastic. You would not have known, looking externally at this deployment, for example, who was a Regular and who was a reservist. The experience they brought from the real world was phenomenal. It changed the atmosphere within the deployment for the better, without a doubt.”

Mr H, Air and Space Operations Manager at 502 (Ulster) Squadron, has been a reservist for five years, after 23 years as a Regular. His role is to identify skills gaps among reservists with little or no training and compile an appropriate training plan. As the Deployed Operating Base Warrant Officer on Operation Biloxi, his main task was to support the Commanding Officer and Senior Executive Officers within the EAW.

“That actually starts at the lowest level, or from the ground up,” he explains. “Making sure our people are well rested, well fed, and motivated to carry out their duties.

“On deployed operations, we put people in a unique position where they can develop very quickly in a short space of time, be that personally or professionally, and it’s very rewarding to see people reach their potential. It’s great seeing the Reserves fit in. They’re enthusiastic, they’re keen to learn and integrate – they bring that little extra to the team.”

Transferable skills

Flying Officer Rosie Hill is a member of the Mobile Met Unit, an RAF-sponsored Reserves unit providing critical meteorological services in support of defence operations and exercises in the UK and around the world. She works in a civilian capacity for the Met Office at RAF Odiham but was providing support to both aircrew and personnel on Operation Biloxi, cloud forecasting and taking wet-bulb globe temperatures as well as making sure troops had a tactical weather advantage.

“From a meteorological perspective, the skills I’m learning with the Met Office complement what I learn when I get deployed,” she says. “But I also learn about processes and

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

The Reserve forces play a crucial role in national security, from countering security threats, peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts abroad to supporting communities at home.

One week could be at a desk, the next, deploying thousands of miles across the world to uphold global peace and security.

There are 40 Reserves roles in the RAF, many of which offer training and require no previous experience. There are also a number of professional roles that make best use of skills and experience in areas where the RAF has gaps.

Reserves train and work alongside full-time regulars, working at weekends, around their day jobs.

Right, from top: Personnel taking part in drills to prepare for a Quick Reaction Alert (QRA), when NATO aircraft are scrambled in response to an incident in the air space monitored by the operation centres; Reserves carried out a number of roles on Operation Biloxi, including media, intelligence, Mechanical Transport (MT) and support, as well as the Guard Force



communication skills, which are important both within the civilian world and the RAF.

"Being embedded within the detachment is really beneficial," she adds. "Out there, we're getting to know the platform we're working with, and also how best to tailor briefs and the information we provide, to help both in day-to-day living and also from a safety point of view for the aircraft and personnel on the ground."

"It's a very rewarding job but it also comes with quite a lot of responsibility. I've only been in the unit two years and I've still got loads to learn but I'm really enjoying the journey."

Air Specialist (Class 1) Rossiter, of 614 (County of Glamorgan) Squadron in Wales, has been a reservist driver for five years. MT drivers play a crucial role in the RAF, transporting personnel and equipment, and driving a range of vehicles from cars and minibuses to HGVs and snow ploughs. AS1 Rossiter spent four months in Cyprus on Operation Shader and enjoyed it so much that she volunteered for a second mobilisation.

"It's a varied role," she says. "You could be transporting people to the airport, doing a VIP run for a senior RAF member or sweeping the runway."

"There are always challenges within the RAF, and if you're the kind of person who thrives under pressure, then it's definitely the environment for you. It's very different from my day job, and I think that is the big attraction. When I'm not on mobilisation, I can get involved with training or other activities such as remembrance events and parades."

"I've enjoyed all the experiences that the RAF has given me. If anybody asked me if I'd recommend they join, I would absolutely say yes. If you like a challenge, excitement and you want to learn new things, it's definitely the place to be."

AS1 Andrews is based at 502 Squadron in Belfast, but also sits under the Media Reserves Squadron based at RAF Halton. She joined the Reserves five years ago and has since supported the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic and been posted to Darwin in Australia with 6 Squadron. She was a media reservist on Operation Biloxi on the Mobile News Team (MNT), covering QRA activity, exercises, visiting dignitaries, defence engagement activities, and promoting the RAF to allied partners.

CALL OF DUTY

Sergeant Barry, SNCO Delivery at 502 (Ulster) Squadron, explains how reservists are called up.

"The whole process starts with a need, whether that be for an exercise, operation or a deployment overseas or in the UK. That could come in the form of a trawl for volunteers or it could be someone like me going into a capability to ask for opportunities. I consider the length of the deployment, who fits the requirement and, if there is more than one applicant, who it best suits for development."

"Other factors to consider are whether we can get finance and whether it meets all the requirements to authorise a callout order under the Reserve Forces Act of 1996."

"I then have to arrange all training before the individual is mobilised to ensure they know where they are going, when, and how long for. This could be anything from a week to three months, depending on where they are and what they do."

"I also have to work out the total length of the mobilisation, including all Annual Leave Allowance (ALA) and any Post Operational Leave (POL). This will allow the individual to speak to their employer and family before we formally call them out for deployment."

"I got to meet people from all walks of life, both Reserve and Regular," she says.

"Working on the MNT means I engage with all professions and ranks and it's fascinating to see how they work, understand their roles and responsibilities, and ultimately how they fit into the bigger picture to ensure mission success."

AS1 Karim Bachu joined the reservists 11 years ago as a Regiment Gunner with 2503 Squadron based at RAF Waddington. He undertook guard duties at MK air base, ensuring that everyone who came into the compound had the necessary ID and a valid reason to be there.

"Over the years so many opportunities have come my way that could only have come from being an RAF reservist," he says. "You get to meet people with different interests, and if something interests you, you could also give it a try. The highlight for me was the opportunity to apply to be an astronaut as part of the European Space Agency program. I put my application forward and had an online interview. It's an ongoing process so I will see where it gets to."

Crucial role

As the global security situation worsens and the demand on the UK's forces increases, reservists are likely to be required to play an even greater role in future operations.

"As a service, we use reservists a lot more, which means they have a lot more credibility," says Mr H. "Whether backfilling a UK role or deployed on operations, we need that flexibility. Utilising Reserves' skills is paramount for the future."

"In the past 17 years, I have seen more and more reservists coming into what we would consider to be day-to-day roles and functions within the RAF," adds Squadron Leader Kiernan. "My previous experience of reservists was predominantly on operations, where they were mobilised for a short time to fulfil a certain task, whereas now I think it's become much more the norm."

"Reserve squadrons bring a huge amount to the party. They have more capacity than we do on many units, where we're often one-deep in key positions. To have that resilience and capacity, particularly if you're fortunate enough, like I was at RAF Waddington, to have a reserve squadron on your unit, has been fantastic. It's evolved so much and I can only imagine how quickly it's going to keep evolving." 