

By Gisela Stuart MP



"Ma'am, the explosive event is to take place in 30 minutes." That was my wake-up call from Sub Lieutenant Robert Frost. It was 5.30 in the morning and we were on board the mine hunter HMS Grimsby in the Persian Gulf. The "explosive event" was an object representing a mine being disposed of as part of a clearing exercise.

For me it was day four of a tour organised by the Royal Navy for the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme.

This was set up to give members of the Commons and the Lords first-hand experience of the armed forces. Having decided whether to join the Army, the Navy, the Air Force or the Marines, we have to pass a fitness test, are issued with the appropriate uniform, given the honorary rank of a major or, in the case of the Navy, a lieutenant commander, before being sent off to spend 22 days with our soldiers.

The initial security briefing includes advice on what to do if taken hostage. Be careful what you say, don't panic and, when you get rescued by your own side, don't be surprised if they manhandle you. They'll handcuff everyone first and establish who is friend or foe later.

Makes sense, but it was useful to have it spelled out.

We started in Bahrain. It's a mistake to think that all the Gulf States are the same. Bahrain, unlike its neighbours, is mostly Shia, is less dependent on oil and does its best to move towards a parliamentary democracy. And it knows that, without outside support, Iran could make the kind of historic claim on Bahrain which Iraq made on Kuwait. The first briefing covers the region's strategic importance and the UK and other nations' military presence. Our role has increased significantly since 2001 and, geographically, Commodore Lowe covers an immense area spanning from the Red Sea to the west coast of India and as far north as the Arabian Gulf.

Operations in the Gulf are complex. There are more than 30 navies operating in the region, plus task forces from the EU and Nato and conversations brim with abbreviations, acronyms and curious words such as "deconflicting" - which I think means that those who are on the same side should try not to get in each other's way.

We are here to keep sea lines of communication open, to counter terrorist-related activities, such as narcotics, alcohol and people-smuggling - all of which to some degree fund terrorist activities - and we play our part in the Global Maritime Partnership On Counter Piracy. The UK is a maritime trading nation and much of our oil and gas comes from this part of the world.

If things go wrong here, it won't be long before we'd notice it on our streets and in our shops.

We are picked up by HMS Kent. Launched in 1998, she cost £140 million to build and £14-16 million a year to run. She carries an array of weapons, from Harpoon anti-ship missiles, to Stingray torpedoes and vertical launched Seawolf anti-air missiles, as well as a helicopter.

Almost 200 officers and ratings are on board and I'm sure finding bunks for five visitors wasn't easy. It is hot and I mean hot. The water temperature is around 32C, but at least air-conditioning makes things easier on board. These ships were designed for anti-submarine warfare and intended to sail in cold Atlantic waters.

There are some Royal Marines on board - a reminder that the Navy isn't just about sailors and the sea. The Navy plays its role on land, sea and air.

HMS Kent's tasks are to participate in defence diplomacy, support the joint maritime operations, and provide an airborne asset, as well as supporting wider British interests.

Some British interests in the region are more obvious than others. If the Straights of Hormuz are blocked, the entire world's trade will suffer.

Piracy is back and it's big business. Modern container ships are huge and there are only about 600 of them. Capturing one means a huge bounty for the pirates, usually big ransom payments by some company or other and increased insurance premiums for all of us.

International law is difficult to enforce. Bringing the pirates to justice is far from easy and the solution to the problem has to be found in Somalia and not the high seas.

And then there is human trafficking, counter narcotic patrols and providing disaster relief and humanitarian aid.

A small sea boat takes us from the HMS Kent to Royal Fleet Auxiliary Lyme Bay. I now understand what they mean by floating platforms. Lyme Bay, a class of ship which replaced the Sir Galahad Class, can carry military forces of up to 356 Royal Marines and all they need, as well as vehicles, battle tanks and, above all, fuel. These are massive floating petrol stations. Access to the ship is either by helicopter, the extending side ramp or via a floodable stern dock. Think of a James Bond film and you get the picture.

The Royal Fleet Auxiliary [RFA] is outside the navy, but provides capabilities which can be deployed where and when they're needed.

On Lyme Bay we talk to reservists. Many of them are coming up to their limit of 18 months' service in a three year period. The armed forces rely on them more than was anticipated. A fair number are signing up full time. They've got the taste for active service and it's a secure job.

HMS Grimsby is a mine hunter which can fight back if it needs to, but its main function is defensive. It works with local communities but first and foremost they look for mines and dispose of them.

After the Iraq war mine hunters cleared an area off the coast, which allowed the local fishermen to go out and earn a living, and brought down insurance rates for oil tankers, which in turn affects the price of oil for all of us. The process is painstaking and slow, relying on modern technology, but in the end the job is done by experienced divers and explosive experts.

Some of the officers we met started as submariners and have served on Trident nuclear boats.

Talking to them reminded me that the essence of Trident is the reliability and precision of its delivery mechanism.

Once the decision to launch has been made, there is nothing to stop it. So it's much more than just the price you have to pay to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

The journey back to Bahrain in an US Desert Hawk helicopter is a neat illustration of the way we share capabilities! After four days in the Gulf I've seen first hand that there is nothing optional

about us having a Navy. It's essential to the protection and defence of our national interests - military as well as trade.

None of the political parties should forget this. Talk of saving money by cutting back on aircraft carriers is not just misguided, but it's dangerous. We are an island, and we must have a properly equipped Navy.

Gisela Stuart is Labour MP for Edgbaston, a member of the foreign affairs committee and chairwoman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International and Transatlantic Security.

Andrew Miller MP on the Royal Navy and Sea Cadets

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