

More than 3,000 sailors and Marines are gearing up for a three-month training deployment to the Mediterranean – this year's key workout of the UK's high-readiness task force.

Exercise Cougar will see 12 Royal Naval warships, Royal Marine Commandos and naval airpower, which make up the Response Force Task Group (RFTG), train with French and Albanian counterparts. Further details are on the next page, including units deployed.

The Cougar exercise is long-planned, annual deployment, and not in response to any current world events. It will start in spectacular style with a beach assault by the Royal Marines in Cornwall and runs from 1-9 October before the entire force meets up in the Mediterranean later in the month.

The force will then take part in two large-scale exercises, interspersed with various smaller exercises, training and goodwill visits –to some places which rarely see the White Ensign.

The RFTG was created under the 2010 defence review and is a rapid reaction force that deals with unexpected world events that require military intervention.

Defence Secretary Philip Hammond said:

"The UK's Response Force Task Group is a major force forming part of our contingent capability, ready and able to respond to emerging events worldwide.

"This deployment will see it work alongside our allies at a time when international co-operation and joint operations are more important than ever before. The same taskforce conducted a number of exercises and visits around the world last year and proved itself to be invaluable during the NATO campaign in Libya."

Last year it was called upon to support operations off Libya. HMS Ocean launched repeated Apache gunships strikes from her flight deck while HMS Liverpool spent seven months enforcing the no-fly zone and preventing arms from reaching pro-Gaddafi forces by sea.

Twelve months on and Portsmouth-based HMS Illustrious will be taking Ocean's place as the helicopter carrier assigned to the task group. She will be joined by the nation's flagship HMS Bulwark, from where Commodore Paddy McAlpine, Commander UK Task Group, and 3 Commando Brigade's Brigadier Martin Smith will direct Cougar.

They will oversee two key exercises: Corsican Lion, working hand-in-hand with the French; and later this autumn the force will shift to the Adriatic to work with the Albanian military.

Corsican Lion, which will take place during the second half of October, will see the Cougar force

link up with France's flagship and aircraft carrier FS Charles de Gaulle.

Her flight deck will be the launch pad for Super Étendard and Rafale jets, offering a first real glimpse of how the RFTG should look at the end of the decade when the UK's next generation of aircraft carrier, the HMS Queen Elizabeth, enters service with Lightning II fast jets .

And in the nearer future, Corsican Lion is the most important strand of Cougar and a major step along the road towards forging a fully-operational Anglo-French force by 2016.

There will be planned exercises with the US and Algerian forces and visits to Algeria and Malta – particularly poignant for Illustrious as she has ties with the island going back to her predecessor during World War 2.

Commodore McAlpine said:

"Cougar 12 provides us with a superb opportunity to rekindle our amphibious capability after a prolonged period when our focus has been on operations elsewhere. "

Participants in Cougar 12 are:

HMS Bulwark

HMS Illustrious

HMS Northumberland

HMS Montrose

RFA Mounts Bay

MV Hartland Point

Headquarters of 3 Commando Brigade

45 Commando (currently the UK's on-call Royal Marines unit ready to respond to world events)

30 Commando IX Group

539 Assault Squadron Royal Marines

814 Naval Air Squadron (Merlins)

815 Naval Air Squadron (Lynx)

829 Naval Air Squadron (Merlins)

845 Naval Air Squadron (Commando-carrying Sea Kings)

846 Naval Air Squadron (Commando-carrying Sea Kings)

854 Naval Air Squadron (airborne surveillance and control Sea Kings)

656 Squadron Army Air Corps (Apache gunships)

659 Squadron Army Air Corps (Lynx)

HMS Illustrious has left Portsmouth naval base today to join her counterparts in the South West for Wader today. She has Merlins and Sea Kings embarked.

HMS Bulwark left Devonport naval base today October 1 on her way to Wader. Bulwark will sail past Devil's Point at 1845. HMS Montrose will sail past Devil's Point on Tuesday October 2

Work up for the Reaction Force Task Group will take place throughout next week in the vicinity of Plymouth and the south coast