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Dear Sirs,

Firstly, Happy New Year and a huge thank you for the parcels and presents we received over the Christmas period (and with the vagaries of the post they are still coming). The soldiers really appreciated the thought and effort that went into them and they brought a reminder of home and the Christmas spirit to Afghanistan. Over the Festive period a number of decisions were made to the Battalion's advantage. D Company will deploy over the coming months to support the Manoeuvre Battlegroup. This is excellent news and provides the longed-for certainty that the Company and the families craved over the autumn. For the new Assaye Company (the combination of A and B companies in Fallingbosten) Jordan beckons. The Company will deploy on exercise there in February and March and for a few of the new Jocks this will be their second overseas exercise in the space of 5 months.

Just after Christmas the Battlegroup deployed on its largest and longest operation so far, a 10 day deployment to help protect the recovery of American Forces from one of their bases as part of the drawdown of their Forces in Helmand. The operation started on Boxing Day and involved the entire Battlegroup, over 400 people and 58 vehicles. We deployed to the tune of Caber Feidh played by the RQMS(T) Lambert with blue skies but freezing temperatures. The temperatures dropped to -12C at night with the windchill but the attitude and application of the all the soldiers was exemplary. The operation involved us protecting an isolated route in the Dashte (desert) and was a success. Particularly, it showed the Battlegroup can operate very effectively with our American allies. On the last day of the Operation we made sure a convoy of over 180 vehicles was able to transit some 40km unmolested by the insurgency and move safely back to Bastion. As an aside, during the Operation we celebrated New Year in the Dashte with non-alcoholic Champagne, a traditional Danish marzipan treat and a slightly gratuitous artillery illumination fire mission to provide the fireworks – a memorable experience.



Major Sorenson, the Operations officer and myself enjoy New Years Eve in the field

Returning to Christmas, the Battlegroup celebrated the occasion in style in camp Bastion. The second-in-command as I/C Christmas laid on a fantastic evening of fun and cheer on Christmas Eve. Two events stand out for me: firstly, the Danish contingent's skit parodying our daily evening update – if your allies are taking the mickey out of you, you know the relationship is strong; and secondly, the midnight carol service supported brilliantly by the Artillery brass band at which the Brigade Commander was our guest. You may have caught sight of the latter event on Sky News on Christmas day, with the Second-in-Command, Major Jes Giles, front and centre singing a solo – he is now challenging Captain Ed Challis as the media starlet of the Tour. On Christmas day, I visited all the Battlegroup's outstations including STERGA 2. Morale was very high and although all were understandably thinking of home they made best of the day. The Irn Bru and Tunnocks caramel wafers provided by the MSP Angus Don and the Support Our Soldiers charity went down particularly well, as the picture captures.



LCpls Cook and Hay enjoy their 'taste of home' at the STERGA 2 Christmas Lunch

For then Corporal now Sergeant Verity, it was especially memorable as DCOMISAF, General John Lorimer, promoted him – I add the photo below was staged in aftermath of the event and he had the correct headdress on when he marched out to receive his third stripe...



Santa Claus is promoted by General Lorimer at STERGA 2

The Battalion continues to drive forward with its many tasks in Afghanistan. The Regional Corp Battle School is gearing up for its first Afghan Army Officer Continuation training course and received the first batch of soldiers taken off the front line to be given further training. The latter is a huge step forward and shows the maturity of the Afghan Army in recognising the need to constantly learn and refresh its skills in order it can maintain its professional development. Our soldiers both in Kandahar and supporting the RAF Regiment in their defence of Bastion continue to impress me with their irresistible enthusiasm and dedication to vitally important but repetitive defensive guarding tasks. And finally, STERGA 2 shouldered the brunt of the pre-Christmas visits including the Prime minister and CGS. The location, as I have said before, is picturesque and steeped in history and has the most evocative view from any sangar in Helmand as the photograph captures.



The view looking East early in the morning over the old British Fort from STERGA 2

Looking forward into the early part of the New Year, our focus is firmly on the recovery of the final bases in central Helmand back into Bastion. This will be a busy and challenging time which will test the Battlegroup in its logistic and movement planning. But it will be a hugely rewarding operation to be part of and we are looking forward to it.

I wish you all the best for 2014 and will write again next month.

James