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ARMY

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The Highlanders
(Seaforth, Gordons & Camerons)
The QO Highlanders
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The Seaforth Highlanders
The QO Cameron Highlanders

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Dear Fellow Highlanders

I just wanted to write to thank the many of you who have taken the time and trouble to write notes of support to the Battalion prior to our deployment on Op HERRICK 14. Please forgive me for not writing to you all individually, but deploying at the same time as writing Corporals and Lieutenants reports has completely unhinged my administrative ability.

I thought it would therefore be timely for me to just outline a quick update before we deploy. We will try to keep you all updated throughout the tour, but I confess that our time will be stretched this summer and I expect that it will be Andy MacKay, OC Rear Operations (Waterloo Company) who will be doing this.

We have been conducting our pre-deployment training officially since last September, but in truth so many specialised courses started over a year ago and our mental and conceptual preparation has been nearly two years in the making. After fast approaching 24 years in the Army, I can assure you that this is the most detailed, frantic and pressured bout of pre-tour training I have ever witnessed or been part of (as one wife put it, "happy with the tour, just do not make us do PDT again"). However, with the old the maxim of train hard, fight easy, we are now feeling pretty well prepared.

In addition to all the individual training, all three Companies have been through a demanding Confirmatory Exercise at Thetford and a very wet CALFEX on Otterburn. All of these have been interspersed with a huge array of courses that allow a Company to use and fight with weapons and systems that a Corps Commander would have struggled to find only 10-15 years ago.

We finished our training in the middle of February on Salisbury Plain with our Final Test Exercise for the Battlegroup of nearly 1,000 people. The Battlegroup (or Combined Force – CF) HQ expanded to over 80 staff – bigger than a Brigade HQ. You will not be surprised to learn that the Battlegroup passed with flying colours and received wide praise for our skills and readiness to deploy. Forgive me for sounding like the proud parent, but when we were being compared to the best that 3 Commando Brigade can provide it was all the more satisfying.

After some pre-deployment leave, we have been issued with an enormous amount of equipment (3 sacks full of uniform, body armour and goodies). The kit is now so good that only issued items will be used in theatre – possibly a first! So please do not believe any of the old newspaper reports about poor kit, Her Majesty has provided literally everything we require.

We deploy over the next month to take over from our sister Battalion, 2 SCOTS, in the Lashkhar Ghar District of Helmand. This is a vast area from the dense Green Zone of Babaji to the farmland of the Ardanghrab River Valley with the thriving commercial District Centre in the middle of our area. B and D Companies will both be Ground Holding Companies in the Green Zone, whilst A Coy will form the Operations Company for the whole of the Battlegroup area. We also have under command an Armoured Infantry Company from 3 MERCIAN and a Squadron of the SCOTS DG, plus a Gun Battery and Engineer Squadron. Support Company has been split up amongst the other companies with the Recce as a part of A Company, and the Mortars, Snipers and FSGs being split up amongst them all to give all them a bit more punch. The whole structure is so diverse that we have a total of 15 different capbadges under command.

My final, but in no way less important, manoeuvre element is Waterloo Company, commanded by Major Andy MacKay which not only includes the duties and families but also a large deployable element of the Battlefield Casualty Replacements and reserves. They will have as demanding a time as anyone deployed in a forward check point.

I also wish to write to ask for your continued help, support and understanding. Historically the summer has been the "fighting season" and although there has been steady progress through the winter, we do not expect the insurgent to give up this summer without a hard fight; a fight we are more than ready for. I would ask that you keep us in the public consciousness during our tour, ensuring that the public in our traditional home understand and support our actions this summer. I would also ask that anything you can do to help the Regiment raise money to aid our welfare and wounded would be warmly appreciated. Finally I would ask that you come to welcome us home when we conduct our homecoming parades in December.

I can hand on heart say that everyman from Officers, Sergeants' Mess down to the individual Highlander is prepared, confident and ready to go. They have continually impressed the training organisation with our unique blend of tenacity, discipline and compassion; the perfect mixture for the task and the tough days ahead. I can assure you that none of us will let down the collective historical tradition of all those that have gone before us.

I look forward to seeing you on our return.

Alastair Aitken