

820 NAS: A Summary of 2020

Lt Nick Jackson-Spence RN

Pilot and 820 NAS Media and Public Relations Officer

2020 has been a unique year for the entire nation, not least for 820 Naval Air Squadron. We started the year in good spirits, taking advantage of a well-earned period of recovery and regeneration following last year's embarkation on HMS Queen Elizabeth for Westlant 19. We kept our aircrew current with essential aviation skills, whilst our engineers carried out important maintenance, not only our own aircraft, but in support of our sister squadrons and the RNAS Culdrose as a whole.

Just as we were getting back into an ASW focus and looking forward to our first real detachment of 2020 with Exercise Joint Warrior in Stornoway, the Coronavirus hit the nation. The announcement of the national lockdown by the Prime Minister meant that, unfortunately, we had to cancel our involvement in the exercise. It was too late for the advance party, who were already on the drive up to Scotland and were recalled when it was clear they wouldn't make it to the island!

Instead, we were asked to prove our flexibility and adaptability by assisting the NHS and South West Ambulance Service during the Coronavirus outbreak as part of Operation Rescript. Three aircraft, aircrew and a team of engineers were ready to support the NHS 24 hours a day by providing casualty evacuation across the South West. It required a significant effort from the entire Squadron to ensure we were fully prepared, a new training programme focused on getting into small helicopter landing sites day and night, and meticulous engineering to ensure our aircraft were ready should we be called upon.

Around this time the Squadron faced some fundamental changes; we said goodbye to Cdr Chris "Grassy" Knowles and welcomed our new Commanding Officer Cdr Ian "Reg" Varley. 849 disbanded and its personnel were absorbed into the 820 family, doubling the size of the squadron overnight and expanding our role to include Airborne Early Warning. There wasn't long to adapt to the new ways of working before we were back into our primary role on our home afloat, embarking three helicopters along with aircrew, engineers and support personnel onboard HMS Queen Elizabeth for BOST and Exercise Crimson Ocean.

The newly re-named Fleet Operational Sea Training (FOST) organisation put the ship through a rigorous assessment process, ensuring the ship was safe and ready to deploy on global operations next year. A busy flight deck increased the complexity of the task and 820 NAS were tasked with an extensive flying program including Helicopter In-Flight Refuelling, Vertical Replenishment at Sea (VERTREP), Anti-Submarine Warfare and training to protect the task group from surface and airborne threats. Whilst onboard we were awarded the "Bambara Flight Safety Shield" commending our flight safety culture and awareness of the inherent dangers of aviation.

A short period of summer leave followed, and we were back to work generating aircraft and aircrew currency for our next embarkation. This time it was four of our aircraft along with two from 824 NAS for GROUPEX and Exercise Joint Warrior 20-2. Despite the additional difficulty caused by the Coronavirus, the squadron completed over 35 realistic ASW and ASuW tactical sorties against live assets tasked to destroy the carrier. These exercises were carried out with multi-national units from the Carrier Strike Group, including two Type 23 Frigates – HMS Kent and HMS Northumberland - the Dutch frigate, HNLMS Evertsen, and the US destroyer, USS The Sullivans. During the exercise, we were

visited by Naval Flying Standards Flight to assess our standards and practices as a squadron. The visit was a huge success and we impressed NFSF with our professionalism, attitude and integration with the carrier.

The youngest member of 820 NAS, Air Engineering Technician Lewis Clelland has already embarked with the squadron onboard HMS Queen Elizabeth four times in a short space of time. He commented:

“Despite the disruption we’ve had to our programme due to COVID 19 it’s been a fast paced and varied year. Along with getting used to life onboard the carrier, the highlights for me were Adventurous Training in French Alps before the Coronavirus hit and then working in support of the NHS for Op Rescript. I’m also really looking forward to my first operational deployment onboard HMS Queen Elizabeth as she sails to the Far East next year.”

Commanding Officer, Cdr Ian Varley said:

“The devotion to duty and determination to succeed whilst under pressure epitomises the contribution that every single member of 820 NAS has made to our operations in 2020. To know that we have trained for and delivered our routine purpose whilst also reacting rapidly to assist in the whole-nation crisis makes me an incredibly proud yet humble Commanding Officer of the squadron. As we look ahead to next year, the arrival of ASaC fitted aircraft and trained crews to join the deploying group for CSG21 makes for an exciting venture. Many happy memories of a career in the Royal Navy will be made in 2021.”

The success of 820 this year is down to huge team effort by the squadron, along with the family and friends who have supported us through a busy and unpredictable year. Looking forward, 820 NAS will continue to conduct carrier operations safely and effectively, adapt to whatever challenges come our way, deploy with HMS Queen Elizabeth on her maiden operational deployment next year and maintain the highest professional standards in everything we do.