

The operational role of the Royal Marines Band Service during the contingency era: lessons from Op GRITROCK

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Abstract

The Royal Marines Band Service (RMBS) deploys in support of the Royal Naval Medical Service in a variety of operational roles. This article describes the roles that RMBS personnel performed whilst deployed on board RFA ARGUS during the recent Operation GRITROCK. The article is divided into five main sections, each describing one aspect of the work that RMBS ranks were asked to undertake: casualty handling; working within Primary Casualty Receiving Facility (PCRF) departments; personal protective equipment (PPE) monitoring and drills; temperature monitoring; and last, but not least, musical support. This will provide the reader with an insight into what the RMBS have achieved whilst deployed on board ARGUS and also what skills they are able to bring, both to contingency operations and operations in the medical environment.

Introduction

The Royal Marines Band Service (RMBS) is not a purely ceremonial organisation: it keeps two of its five bands (Scotland, Plymouth, Lympstone, Portsmouth and Collingwood) ready to deploy in support of the Commando Forward Surgical Group (CFSG) and the Primary Casualty Receiving Facility (PCRF) on board RFA ARGUS. The RMBS has deployed regularly on operations over the last thirty years, from Ops CORPORATE to HERRICK, where they have worked in very close co-operation with the Royal Naval Medical Service (RNMS). The RMBS's links with the PCRF stem from Op GRANBY (the name given to all British military operations during the 1991 Gulf war), and since then bands have deployed on operations and exercises to form an integral part of both the operational capability and moral component of the PCRF. It is usual for approximately thirty RMBS ranks to be deployed, out of a band of fifty, for an average PCRF. This allows the band to fulfil whatever is required of it from a medical perspective, but also gives them maximum flexibility to supply whatever musical support may be asked of them.

For Op GRITROCK, the deployment of a bespoke, lighter PCRF meant that fewer RMBS ranks were needed. Therefore, instead of the usual Captain Royal Marines in charge, with two operating sections of fifteen ranks each led by a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO), a Warrant Officer was deployed in charge, with two sections of six ranks each led by a SNCO. Having only thirteen ranks deployed meant that any musical support would have to be on a reduced scale compared to previous operations.

The primary role of RMBS ranks embarked on board ARGUS is that of casualty handlers; however with the lower number of medical personnel deployed for Op GRITROCK they also supported other sections operating within the PCRF. After initial discussion, it was decided that it was best to conserve the resources as a manpower pool, housed in one of the spare wards, with ranks supporting medical staff and departments as and when required. This demonstrated flexibility and ability to adapt and improvise within an operational environment.

Music as always, is synonymous with the RMBS and during the deployment the musicians provided musical support to both the ship and also to Army units ashore in Eden Park, Benguema and Freetown, supporting events ranging from Remembrance Day parades to Christmas services, 'Wings' parades and curry nights. The following article explains the roles and responsibilities undertaken by the RMBS ranks and the diverse ways in which they achieved their aims.

Casualty handling

The RMBS personnel were responsible for all casualty handling that took place within the PCRF, including the collection of patients when they arrived on board and escorting them into the PCRF, and transferring patients between the different departments within the facility. Casualties can arrive on RFA ARGUS by either helicopter or boat, and can be either ambulatory, non-ambulatory or stretcher cases. During this operation, the majority of patients were suffering from disease and non-battle injury (DNBI), so there was not the usual need for RMBS ranks to

provide security and sanitation of oncoming casualties for ordnance and ammunition, and no requirement for them to supervise and guard enemy forces.

Working within the wards

During Op GRITROCK, RMBS personnel were distributed throughout the departments within the PCRf. In addition to casualty handling, personnel were designated as 'runners', responsible for getting blood samples to the laboratory and liaising with the Hospital Management Cell (HMC). Those attached to theatres assisted with whatever help was required during any procedures that were being carried out, as well as helping to transfer patients on and off the table and into recovery. Those attached to ward areas assisted by helping to order patient meals, move patients between departments, change beds, check equipment and help look after the patients' general wellbeing.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) monitors and drills

All thirteen members of the RMBS on board underwent weekly training in personal protective equipment (PPE) drills, and acted as PPE donning and doffing monitors. These individuals were responsible for ensuring that all personnel donning and doffing PPE did so correctly and safely, ensuring that they followed the standard operating procedure. Certain contingency plans for dealing with a suspected Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) patient were also explored and exercised regularly to ensure their smooth operation in the event of this happening. This contingency planning entailed the safe movement of any patient with suspected EVD from the High Dependency Unit to the flight deck for onward transfer. The patient would be moved from their bed into the Mobile Isolation Pod (MIP) before being decontaminated in a 'clean' area. The MIP would then be transferred to the flight deck and into the helicopter, in which the patient would be transferred to the Kerry Town Treatment Unit (KTTU). These steps were exercised regularly to ensure not only the safe transfer of the patient ashore, but also to keep all personnel safe from the risk of contracting EVD. All members of the RMBS are required to undertake Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) decontamination training at the Defence Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear Centre at Winterbourne Gunner in Wiltshire; the differences between the EVD operating environment and the CBRN operating environment are few, and it was therefore easy for personnel to make the transition. This regular CBRN training ensures that personnel stay current for the role within the CFSG, which requires a high degree of proficiency of CBRN skills and in particular casualty decontamination.

Temperature monitoring

Op GRITROCK and the fight against EVD required

all personnel spending time ashore to be temperature-monitored as part of the initial screening process against the disease. The RMBS were highlighted early on in the deployment as suitable candidates to carry out the task of temperature monitoring. As time wore on temperature monitoring came to be seen as part and parcel of daily life on board and a tacit acceptance of it was recognised. All personnel coming on board ARGUS by either helicopter or boat, as well as ship's personnel returning from ashore, were met at their point of entry, and their temperature was checked by the RMBS; a digital contactless thermometer was used for this purpose. Documentation was kept as a record of previous visits ashore to identify any possible contact with EVD whilst in Sierra Leone. Hand-wipes and hand gel were also provided on return to the ship, in order to comply with Infection Prevention Control regulations. As an enhanced precaution against EVD, all personnel who had been ashore for any reason, upon returning to the ship, underwent twice daily temperature monitoring for a period of 21 days. Although it was an individual's personal responsibility to ensure that the twice-daily temperature checks were correct and up-to-date, the results were collated weekly by the RMBS, then recorded in a spreadsheet for further scrutiny and data collection.

Musical support

The RMBS personnel were able to contribute their musical skills to improve the morale of the ship, as well as that of units ashore. With only thirteen members from the Scotland Band deployed, the variation of musical combinations was not as extensive as the RMBS would have liked: however, the 'show must go on'. This short-notice deployment limited the options for instrumental categories of the ranks embarked, as well as limiting what musical equipment could be embarked. This was not detrimental to their output and the band had the opportunity to get equipment flown from the United Kingdom (UK) to enhance the levels of musical support. The parade band played the ship out of Falmouth Docks to begin the deployment, and also performed at a 'Wings' parade held for the newly qualified pilots of 820 Naval Air Squadron. The brass quintet regularly enhanced the Padre's weekly Sunday church services, gave concerts around the ship and also travelled to the Eden Park accommodation for KTTU to perform for personnel ashore. On Remembrance Sunday, the whole ship paid its respects to fallen comrades and the band formed an integral part of the service on the flight deck. The Buglers of the RMBS Corps of Drums also contributed to the musical output on board, performing Last Post and Reveille for Remembrance Day, and providing mess beatings for the 350th anniversary of the formation of the Royal Marines. Christmas was a busy time for the RMBS with the band performing for the whole ship's Christmas Carol Service on the flight deck and also entertaining diners eating their lunch on Christmas Day, playing a selection of well-known carols. A

triumphant fanfare appearance in Falmouth for the turning on of the Christmas Lights was achieved through a video link, and a feature for Children In Need was recorded in late November and broadcast on the BBC. New Year gave the band an opportunity to support the ship's pantomime as the resident show band. Band members provided instrumental lessons in their free time to other members of the PCRf and ship's company, including saxophone, guitar, drums and even bugle. Towards the end of the deployment, the RMBS utilised the new equipment that was sent out to provide various new combinations including Dixie, Ska and Function bands. These new combinations were used to entertain personnel both on board and ashore before the ship departed the Joint Operations Area. The band also provided a focal point for the decompression element of the journey home, entertaining the ship's company and Embarked Military Forces (EMF) around the various mess decks on board.

Conclusion

The RMBS continues to strive for excellence in meeting the demands of the Royal Marines and Royal Navy. Whilst on board, band personnel performed their dual role, firstly

through working within the PCRf, but also by greatly improving the morale not only of the ship's company, but also of Tri-Service personnel ashore, through performances and teaching. The experience that band personnel gained in the CBRN environment proved invaluable in their training to fight against EVD. Primarily deployed as casualty handlers for the duration of Op GRITROCK, personnel of the Royal Marines Band Scotland demonstrated their ability and flexibility to adapt, overcome and improvise within an operational environment. This required them to show a willingness to undertake a range of diverse roles and responsibilities, whilst achieving their aims swiftly and with resolve, proving them to be a worthy asset to the PCRf and the Defence Medical Services.

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