

A hot place to visit

British Apaches and crews visit Arizona, the right site to train for duty in Afghanistan

By HAL KLOPPER

Mesa, Ariz.—the home of the Apache Longbow combat helicopter—is thousands of miles from Afghanistan. But just 70 miles from Mesa, in the desert community of Gila Bend, Ariz., the British Army has found an acceptable surrogate landscape for training.

There you'll find the Barry M. Goldwater Range, which has just what the British Army wanted: punishing dust, heat and mountains. It's the perfect place for the British Army to train its AH Mk1 Apache air and ground crews for potential service in Afghanistan and other hot spots around the world. The AH Mk1, the British equivalent of the AH-64D Apache Longbow, is already performing peacekeeping duties in Afghanistan.

To prepare for ongoing deployment in that region, the British Army recently sent six AH Mk1 Apaches to Arizona for training duty. The helicopters are among 67 assembled in the United Kingdom under license by AgustaWestland, as prime contractor, from kits built by Boeing Rotorcraft Systems in Mesa, the home of Boeing's Apache production programs. Although the production program ended a few years ago, Boeing continues to support the British Apache program with a small team in the United Kingdom and program-office employees in Mesa who help keep the Apaches maintained and spares flowing.

"Apache is an evolving aircraft. Working closely with AgustaWestland and the British Army helps to ensure they have the right systems in place and we have a solid understanding of what's needed in future upgrades," said Jerry Horgan, manager of the U.K. Apache program at Boeing Rotorcraft Systems. "Having actual British Apaches in Arizona makes it that much easier to build strong relationships for the future."

The terrain surrounding the Goldwater Range has given more than 400 British Army pilots and maintenance crew mem-

bers a chance to train in an environment similar to the one they'll experience in Afghanistan or Iraq when such deployment occurs. Typically, around 250 soldiers are in the training process at one time.

The soldiers, part of 3 Regiment in the British Army Air Corps (AAC), spent three months at the Western Army National Guard Aviation Training Site in Marana, Ariz., 30 miles south of Gila Bend. There, they trained with the National Guard experts and prepared for firing exercises that take them into the range for days at a time. The weather at the end of the three-month visit had relaxed somewhat since their arrival in August, when temperatures topped 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38C).

"While our pilots are getting valuable flight training, remarkably it appears the soldiers benefiting the most are the men and women on the ground," said Lt. Col. David Meyer, AAC, who is responsible for conducting U.K. training activities in Gila Bend. "Everyone is learning, and that's essential as we move forward."

The British Army has deployed a unit of eight Apaches in Afghanistan, performing ongoing defensive missions in support of the peacekeeping force there. The British regularly rotate crews in and out of Afghanistan, so having a large, fully trained force ready is a benefit the service appreciates.

"We regard environment training as absolutely essential before we go on operations," Meyer said. "We don't have a representative environment like this in the United Kingdom, so it's important we come abroad to understand the environments where our troops will be deployed. For many this is their first trip abroad, and for our pilots, the opportunity to complete their qualification training is essential."

Meyer added, "This type of training is the best we can do for our air and ground crews to ensure they are prepared." ■

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The Barry M. Goldwater Range is hot and dusty and surrounded by mountains—making it an ideal place for the British Army's AH Mk1 Apache air and ground crews to train for potential service in Afghanistan.