

# European support takes SHAPE



As a Service spouse, I had occasionally heard of SHAPE but knew little about it, writes **NFF Projects Officer Nicola Thompson.**

That all changed when the NFF were invited to visit by the European Joint Support Unit (EJSU) leadership team – perfect timing as I took up my new role as overseas lead within the NFF.

Located in Mons, Belgium, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) is the hub of NATO activity worldwide. With around 75 Naval Service personnel serving in Belgium alone as part of a European footprint of nearly 350, there is a clear need for us to understand how we can support our people living and working on the continent.

This visit was timed to coincide with the Community Liaison Officers' (CLOs) annual conference. There are 18 CLOs across Europe, from familiar assignment locations such as Naples and Brussels to the more obscure, such as Izmir in Turkey and Madrid.

Part of their role is to integrate, coordinate and communicate with their regional Service communities – and with 1,200 personnel and 2,300 dependents in 97 locations across 17 countries, that is a huge challenge for a relatively small, hardworking team.

I travelled with colleagues from the RAF Families Federation on Eurostar, a hassle-free two-hour journey to Brussels, though the onward leg to Jurbise was not so smooth, as our group lacked the linguistic skills to deal with confusing station signage and ended up late for our rendezvous

with our hosts...

Apologies accepted, we were whisked to our accommodation via the memorials to the first and last British soldiers killed in the First World War, located on the same road – very poignant.

I was keen to learn as much as I could about the life of a Service family on overseas assignment.

It is essential that I understand not only how SHAPE works, but also the 'lived experience' for this particular demographic of Service families if I am to be able to communicate the unique challenges associated with an assignment outside the UK. Nothing illustrates this better than the experiences of others, and I was eager to meet as many of our families as I could.

Our visit was relatively short – just three days – and we packed in a huge amount.

We were asked to speak at the conference to share best practice, educate the CLOs on what resources are available and what support the Families Federations are able to offer them to ensure families are best placed to have a successful overseas experience.

This year's event was overshadowed by the threat of coronavirus which forced a number of attendees to participate virtually – something that we are now all too familiar with!

The conference was followed by an invitation to meet the new UK National Military Representative, Brig Jonathan Biggart, and the Single Service Leads, who welcomed us to SHAPE and asked us to



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return on a regular basis to continue supporting families.

We also hosted a meet-and-greet event where we managed to speak with around 50 people, gain their insight and perspective, and share and signpost resources and opportunities available to them.

This time spent with Service personnel, spouses and children was hugely valuable, and I took away an extensive and detailed list of the good, the bad and the ugly of overseas living.

I learnt a huge amount in a short time from this trip, which was planned and carried out before the travel restrictions and social distancing of the Covid-19 pandemic were introduced across Europe. I was able to understand the similarities and contrasts in issues between those living overseas and those back in the UK.

There were familiar themes such as housing, education and healthcare, but also, and perhaps the least understood aspect, the logistics of moving to and from the country – arguably the most stressful and demanding times of the

assignment.

Other points such as spousal employment and even basic things we take for granted such as driving and banking all present obstacles, and really test the resilience for which our families are renowned. As an organisation, we are taking things forward and have already begun to establish a more formal relationship with the Army Families Federation representative based in EJSU.

This is one step forward, though there is more to be done; we are working on better communications with those living overseas and seeking to improve information flow with the CLOs to try to reach as many families as we can.

Importantly, we have started the dialogue with those overseas in Europe and aim to build on this across all regions with Royal Navy families. I look forward to a return visit.

If you would like to share your overseas experience with me, or perhaps feature in a Homeport article, please do get in touch on [Nicola.Thompson@nff.org.uk](mailto:Nicola.Thompson@nff.org.uk)

# NATO

## in a nutshell

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a military alliance of 30 member states from North America and Europe, established on 4 April 1949.

The members are (founding members marked \*): Albania, \*Belgium, Bulgaria, \*Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, \*Denmark, Estonia, \*France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, \*Iceland, \*Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, \*Luxembourg, Montenegro, \*Netherlands, North Macedonia, \*Norway, Poland, \*Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, \*UK, \*USA.

SHAPE first appeared in 1951 in the Parisian suburb of Rocquencourt, but moved to Belgium in 1967 as a result of French President Charles de Gaulle's decision to withdraw from NATO's integrated military command structure.

[www.nato.int/](http://www.nato.int/)

