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On the 16th of October 2009, a party consisting of 14 members of the Maritime Reserves (MR) flew to Basel in Switzerland to attend the 5th International St Barbara Shooting Competition, based at the Militärkasernen in the nearby town of Liestal.

The team was made up of two Officers, four Senior Rates and eight Junior Ratings from the units of HMS King Alfred, HMS President and the RNR Air Branch. It was the first time that many of those present had competed at a foreign NATO competition.

This year's competition had particular significance for the hosts. The Artillerie-Verien Basel-Stadt (The Artillery Society of the City of Basel) was celebrating its 175th year, making it the oldest Artillery unit in Switzerland and the oldest military Club in Basel.

From the moment we landed it was all go. We were driven straight from the airport to the Barracks to change into No.1 Uniform.

We were then transported to the highest point overlooking the City of Basel, the old battery positions in the Bruderholz. This position was built to defend Basel as a result of the instability of Europe both during and after the Napoleonic Wars.

It is now the home of the Wehrmänner Monument which commemorates those service personnel who served during the Second World War. It is interesting to note that the Swiss thought that there was a serious threat of invasion from Hitler's forces during the Second World War and there are still many reminders along the Rhine of the defences built by the Swiss to defend their nation.

The opening ceremony was conducted by the 42nd President of the Artillerie Society, Oberst Remo Lardelli, who along with many local civilian dignitaries congratulated the Society on its history and longevity. The music for the ceremony was provided by the Band of Das Militarspiel and rounded off with a 10 shot salute from a 7.5cm Field Cannon.

The second part of the celebrations involved a march through the centre of Liestal, back to the Barracks with flags flying and the band playing. The MR did not have a staff for their ensign, so a wooden pole was acquired and the Ensign was nailed to it. Reminiscent of HMS JERVIS BAY!

The opening ceremony was finally brought to an end after a drinks party with local civil dignitaries and an evening meal. Upon completion the Maritime Reserves mustered for lectures on the competition procedures, and the principles of marksmanship, by those competitors who had fired both the pistol and the two rifles in previous years.

Saturday 17th

After a hearty continental breakfast, individual units were transported to the range for the start of the competition. This competition is different to other NATO competitions in that it concentrates purely on marksmanship.

The weapons used are the Stgw 57 (7.50mm Assault rifle), the Stgw 90 (5.56mm Assault rifle) and a Sig 9mm pistol.

Each competitor has to select one of the rifles as the competition weapon for the chance to win a medal; the other weapon is fired just for the experience.

For the first rifle shoot, a computer display is used to show the fall of shot. For the second rifle shoot, only the first two shots are marked back then you have to complete the detail and hope for the best. It is the second shoot that determines whether you win a medal, so you have to think hard as to which rifle you chose.

This year's MR team consisted of many Junior Ratings who had never held or fired a pistol. The senior members of the team were allowed by the Swiss range staff to coach these new shooters and also to act as safety ratings during the pistol competition.

The coaching must have worked because there were some excellent scores recorded by all of the UK shooters!

On completion of the competition, the hosts provide a barbeque and refreshments for the competitors and beer is only served to those who have already shot! As in previous years, the competitors were then encouraged to visit local museums and civilian institutions such as the local Fire Service college, as part of the cultural experience of Switzerland.

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"Promoting the efficiency of the Reserve Forces, by providing opportunities for International experience, education and personal development".

This year, the Maritime Reserves were taken on a guided tour of the city of Basel accompanied by officers from the German Military Police and Combat Engineers. Our Guide was Major Thomas Purtschert, the Vice President of the Artillerie-Verein, and local inhabitant. Major Purtschert proved to be a very accomplished guide, who informed us the history and local traditions within the old town and how many of the small bars within the town have their own breweries within the bar itself!

It was very interesting to see the expression of the local population to uniformed servicemen and women walking through the centre of the old town of Basel. Some thought we were Americans!

The evening consisted of a prize giving ceremony, followed by an informal meal at which the hosts and especially Fachoffizier Fabian Coulot, the organiser of the competition, were thanked for their hospitality and presented with gifts from the visiting countries.

Needless to say the socialising amongst the competitors lasted long after the final course had been served at the meal!

On Sunday morning all the remaining competitors said their final thank you's and goodbyes, and departed back to their respective countries.

Again it was a very worthwhile exercise for all the UK competitors. All the details carried out by the MR, from the parades to the shoots, were carried out to the highest standards and as such the Swiss have asked us to return again next year, even though due to the popularity of the competition, the number of competitors is being held at 250.

This trip was a valuable incentive for the retention of younger members of the party, to show what they can achieve whilst being a member of the Reserve Forces. The Maritime Reserves are now being deployed as Ship Protection Teams in the Middle East and competitions such as these can only help to develop personal confidence regarding weapon handling and marksmanship skills. These 'foreign' trips give the UK Reserves Forces an opportunity to show the professionalism and the calibre of manpower within each Unit to our European neighbours.

Many friends were made again this year through the various competitions attended by the MR with the financial help of the UK Reserve Forces Association. The Maritime Reserves have been the only UK service representatives at many of these competitions, which has prompted the organisers on more than one occasion to ask us to attend year after year – we must be doing something right!

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Link: http://artillerie.org.summer.hostorama.ch/Anlaesse2009/175_Jahre_AVBS/index.html
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