

Special report

Challenger 2 ea in Kosovo

For the first time the Army's new main battle tank has been put to the test on operations

Pictures: Mike Weston

SELDOM has such a noisy neighbour been given the kind of enthusiastic reception afforded to Challenger 2 when it arrived in town. Villagers around Podujevo in northern Kosovo greeted the mighty growl of the tank's engines by waving at the new kid on the block, reassured by its powerful presence.

Lt Col David Allfrey is the commanding officer of The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, the first regiment to take charge of 16 Challenger 2s in an operational theatre.

He said: "Curiously, where you would expect people to complain about the noise and everything else that is associated with tanks, in Kosovo people are hugely reassured by the dust, smoke and noise."

"To quote a lady I spoke to: 'The day we heard the tanks coming, we knew that we were secure!'"

The tank has performed robustly, in many cases exceeding expectations; one completed a 178km road-run with no breakdowns at all.

In the sweltering Balkan summer, which regularly sees the thermometer rise above 30C, tankies have been using to the full

the environmental control system which regulates temperatures inside the hull.

"We are all extremely happy with its reliability; it is a very flexible weapons system indeed," Lt Col Allfrey said. "We have been able to project the tanks around the brigade area in a way that we could never had done with previous main battle tanks."

"Inevitably there are one or two breakdowns, but my own experience of Challenger 1 and Chieftain before it, is that the breakdowns are so infrequent, it is in a completely different league really."

The regiment's main task has been to deter any aggression across the boundary; something Challenger 2 is particularly adept at. Crews carry life-support systems so they can live off the vehicle for many days if required.

"It has been well supported, and we are still learning about the vehicle. I think it is quite excellent," said Lt Col Allfrey.

"Inevitably with a weapons system that big it is being subjected to some very considerable mileage. Conditions are hard-wearing; it is doing very high speeds on tarmac for considerable distances. All in all, it's very good news."



Rising to the challenge: Above, Stuart Gowans of B Squadron

ases fears



Pr An McGann checks Challenger 2's muzzle reference system mirror; Tpr Neil Gow and LCpl peek through the turret, and tank commander Cpl Andy Potter, right, surveys the horizon