

CSG21

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# Partnership shows off 'the best Britain has to offer'

**W**orld-class British engineering, from companies large and small, will be on display when the Carrier Strike Group steams into action.

As the naval strike force deploys on its maiden mission to the Indo-Pacific, it will act as a floating symbol to the globe of the UK's technological prowess.

And it shows what can be achieved when businesses unite to tackle one of the biggest industrial endeavours since the Second World War.

It took 10,000 people from 90 companies – ranging from huge billion-pound multinationals, employing thousands of people, to humble local firms with a dozen staff – to build both the two Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers.

And a similar feat has been undertaken to create the carriers' airpower, made up of F-35 stealth jets alongside Merlin and Wildcat helicopters.

From physically building the aircraft and creating the sophisticated sensors and radar systems that are within them, to constructing safety lights and critical electronics, it took an army of people to achieve.

And for some involved, like retired Royal Navy Commander Matt Avison, it was a deeply personal effort to be a part of.

He is the capture director with defence firm Thales UK, which is a key sub-contractor to Lockheed Martin UK in developing the sophisticated Crowsnest early warn-

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*This has been a real testament to the UK's ability to do high-end engineering*

ing system technology which will protect his son, an F-35 pilot embarked on HMS Queen Elizabeth.

As a former Sea King helicopter pilot with the navy for some 26 years, Matt knows all too well of the critical importance of the system having used its predecessors, Cerberus and Search Water.

'This is a huge responsibility. Crowsnest is there to protect my son as well as everyone else. Therefore for me, it has to work and has to work well. It means a lot to me. There's a really personal connection,' he says.

Tony Welch, Thales' vice-president for Crowsnest, says the company's work on the hi-tech system would not have been possible without the collaboration of the network of small and medium-



Staff from LFD Ltd at their base in Gosport



Merlin Mk2 helicopters

sized enterprises (SME) nationwide – as well as his team who 'went above and beyond' to complete the system.

The supply chain involved companies from across Hampshire, including technology and communications firm Viasat, near Aldershot, IT firm Centerprise International, near Basingstoke, and aviation specialists Osprey Consulting Services near Farnborough to name just a few.

'The SME community has been absolutely key and we have had to work very, very closely with them,' Tony says, insisting new relationships have been forged as a result.

Speaking of the project, he adds: 'This has been a real testament to the UK's ability to do high-end engineering. Given the speed that's it's been done, it's quite remarkable what's been achieved in the past two years.'

One of the main partners involved in the programme was

Leonardo UK.

As well as equipping the two aircraft carriers with communications technology, the Yeovil-based firm also produces the Wildcat and Merlin helicopters and the sophisticated electronic systems within them.

Nick Whitney, managing director of Leonardo Helicopters UK, says: 'Our helicopters truly are the best of British, made in the UK, built for and used by the UK armed forces and supporting their missions.'

'These helicopters being built in Yeovil are supporting high-end British jobs.'

'We don't just look at these helicopters now and think the hard work is done, we look to see how we can work together in developing platforms to meet challenging scenarios and come together further through applying the state-of-the-art radars. Leonardo UK provides that holistic solution.'

Nick's colleague Mark Hamilton,



Nick Whitney, managing director of Leonardo Helicopters UK

Picture: Leonardo

who is the managing director of electronics at Leonardo UK, agrees and says it was 'extremely rewarding to see the fruits of our labour' helping to keep the nation safe.

'As a defence business that employs some of the UK's brightest scientific and engineering minds, our involvement with the QE-class is representative of the world-class capabilities which are made by UK industry,' he adds.

'As someone who has worked in this industry for many years, I've seen that the UK is capable of amazing feats of engineering and we're able to domestically produce many of the cutting-edge capabilities that allow our country to play a leading role on the world stage.'

Among the companies working together with Leonardo was Gosport's LFD Ltd.

Based at Zenith House, the team of 15 staff have worked to design, produce and supply key safety lights used by both the Wildcat

**26**

The number of years Matt Avison spent as a Royal Navy helicopter pilot

**15**

The number of staff at LFD Ltd who worked on safety lights for Wildcat and Merlin helicopters

and Merlin helicopters heading out on deployment.

'LFD are proud and privileged to be able to supply and support UK military helicopters with lighting equipment, through Leonardo, during the forthcoming deployment of HMS Queen Elizabeth and Carrier Strike Group,' says Len Fleck, managing director at LFD.

The company was established in 1989 and has been supplying covert and visible lights to military aircraft – both on fixed-wing and rotary – platforms across the world.

But like other companies, LFD has been battling to adjust to the restrictions and difficulties placed upon the company due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Len adds that despite the 'difficulties caused by Covid' over the past year, it was a 'tribute to the staff' that they were able to complete the systems required for the Merlin helicopter on time.



Matt Avison, capture director for Thales UK