

The Magic of Merlin

At the end of 2005, I was lucky enough to be awarded Bedford Squadron's 'Cadet of the Year Award', which traditionally is accompanied by a flight. In previous years this has been a fast jet flight, however, due to weight restrictions, I won a flight in a Merlin helicopter, one of the newest aircraft in the RAF.

After an early start (0530) I was soon travelling to RAF Benson, near Oxford. Once there I located 28 Sqn's hangar, the Squadron that would be flying me that day. It was with trepidation and excitement that I waited by the Ops desk for a member of the crew, but my rest was short-lived; before long I was sitting in a room with my pilot, co-pilot, and two loadmasters. After a briefing on the days weather and what to expect in the air, the helicopter's captain showed us all the route that he had planned, and although it was a lot to take in the crew were very friendly and encouraged me to ask as many questions as I wanted. Without delay I was then fitted for a helmet, flying suit, and suitable warm clothing, as I was told that it was going to be very cold, and that there was a strong possibility of snow. Moving quickly on once more I was taken out to the helicopter and my flight had begun.

The sortie lasted two hours and 15 minutes, and was excellent fun. From low-level flying we went straight onto 'quick stops', running landings and running take-offs and simulated troop drops at Abingdon, a close-by army barracks with a runway. The pilots used the sortie as an opportunity to practise some of the skills needed when they would be going out to Iraq later this year, and the event was packed full of activity. Returning to RAF Benson the pilots and loadmasters honed their abilities in under slung loads, picking up and dropping off barrels and tyres. Throughout the entire sortie I was attached to a harness, which allowed me to move around the aircraft, sit on the ramp, sit between the pilot and co-pilot and by the side cargo door. The views and things we got up to were amazing, and with the crew explaining what we doing the whole time, it was also an educational experience. The thing that struck me most about the crew was their ability to have humour in the helicopter, but also to know when to be extremely professional.

The whole day was incredible, and I'd like to thank the staff at Bedford for securing the flight, 28 Sqn for looking after me and providing me with a trip that was second to none. Thanks also to Sgt Floyd for travelling to RAF Benson and back, and taking some brilliant photos.

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