

Update – 5 Apr 2024

It has been a pleasure to meet some of you who have made it along to the various reunion events of the past few months. As ever, we value the opportunity to provide an update on the RAF's activities and to test some of our ideas amongst a group of experienced thinkers! Given that many members are not able to attend every event in person, I thought you might appreciate a brief note to sketch out some of the subjects occupying the Service currently.

Operations and Exercises

It is almost a cliché to say we are busy. With virtually every front-line aircraft type involved in one sort of operation or another, the RAF remains the most operationally committed of the UK's Armed Forces. And yet we are making a concerted effort around our operational mindset; not because we lack any sense of an operational imperative. To the contrary. However, operations have, for the past 30 or so years, been mainly about the 'away game'. As we think about lessons from Eastern Europe, we are in no doubt that our operational mindset is as important at home as it is when we are away. This is manifest in our approach to Agile Combat Employment, an idea familiar to anyone who served during the Cold War, and one in which we are again becoming well-versed. Our regular 'Inside Air' podcast brought this to life a few months ago in a fascinating interview with Air Marshal Harv Smyth (Episode 64), which can be found at the RAF website, Apple and Google podcasts, and Spotify.

Those who follow the news will have seen the recent coverage of Typhoon, supported by Voyager, conducting deliberate strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen. All of us who have served will understand the superb team effort that went into conducting these missions. It remains to be seen how the situation will develop but given our extensive experience of the region, we do not expect the overall demand on our aircraft there to abate. Elsewhere, you will have seen the recent airdrop that the Atlas conducted in Gaza, delivering 10 tonnes of aid on behalf of the UK government.

Meanwhile, we continue to support NATO in Europe as part of increased reassurance activity, including with Typhoon and Voyager conducting 'enhanced presence' patrols mounted from the UK. The Poseidon has continued its impressive growth in outputs, conducting a significant amount of operational flying over the past few months, and proving to be enormously successful in supporting our Royal Navy colleagues.

On Exercise STEADFAST DEFENDER, the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, Poseidon, Voyager and Typhoon participated in activity over the North Sea region, notably with Lighting II (F-35B) deployed on HMS Prince of Wales as part of the UK Carrier Strike Group. Typhoons from 29 Squadron deployed to Spain on the Tactical Leadership Programme for the first time in many years; a welcome development, signalling our increasing integration with NATO partners. Exercise ARCTIC PHOENIX saw Atlas and Typhoon, supported by 2 Group's Global Enablement personnel, operating in the High North and exercising the kind of capabilities that were the norm some 30 or 40 years ago.

Typhoon, supported by Voyager, Atlas and C-17 took part in Exercise SPEARS of VICTORY in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Exercise RED FLAG introduced the challenge of Agile Combat Employment, testing operations over long distances and from multiple locations. C-17 deployed to Australia on Exercise GLOBAL DEXTERITY to work with our AUKUS partners, while Typhoon and Voyager returned to Exercise BERSAMA LIMA (which translates as 'Together Five') in Malaysia and Singapore to demonstrate the UK's commitment to the Indo Pacific through the Five Powers Defence Arrangement.

Other News

As readers will know, there have been a number of changes in senior Air Command positions over the past few months. Air Marshal Paul Lloyd has now been formally appointed Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (DCAS) and Air Marshal Al Marshall assumed post as Air and Space Commander in succession to Air Marshal Harv Smyth. There has also been change of incumbent as AOC 2 Group (AVM Suraya Marshall hands to AVM

Jason Appleton) and of the post formerly known as COS Capability (AVM Linc Taylor hands to AVM Jim Beck), which is now known as Director Capability & Programmes.

The transition to the Airbase/Air Wing model continues apace with responsibility for stations falling solely under 2 Group. As a result, we are seeing greater opportunities to focus our efforts on how we develop our stations in future, not least as our thinking turns again to Agile Combat Employment.

Meanwhile in 22 Group, the team there has led the training of Ukrainian pilots and maintainers, with the first 10 Ukrainian pilots graduating in March in a ceremony at RAF Cranwell. Number 6 Flying Training School trained these pilots on the Tutor, and this first cohort will now move to advanced flying training provided by the French Air Force before learning to fly F-16s.

With much media speculation surrounding the timing of a General Election and a Comprehensive Spending Review, our focus remains delivering to the Government's priorities and meeting the considerable demand for Air and Space power. As ever, we continue to think about our long-term plans and how to advocate for what we do. Seasoned veterans of this sport will understand the skill required in turning complex ideas into understandable language. We tend to be good at talking about what we do. Greater resonance can often be found in talking about what we are *for*. There is also something rather compelling about stories. What stories do you know that best bring to life the importance of Air and Space power?

Finally, readers of the Sunday Times might have seen Professor Michael Clarke's article last December on lessons from Ukraine. 'At year's end,' he wrote, 'lexicographers like to discuss the "word of the year". Military specialists have no doubt that this year's word is "drones".' As a Service, we are giving a lot of thought to uncrewed technology and have recently published our Autonomous Collaborative Platform (ACP) Strategy (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/royal-air-force-autonomous-collaborative-platform-strategy>). It is the product of a lot of magnificent work that our Capability team has been doing over the past two years. I would be interested to know what you think.