

Speech given by The Master, Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators
Captain O W (Wally) Epton,

LIVERY DINNER 26 MAY 2011

Minister, Alderman, Principal Guests, Fellow Liverymen, Ladies and Gentlemen

May I first of all welcome our guest of honour this evening, the Right Honourable Theresa Villiers, Member of Parliament for Chipping Barnet and our Minister of State for Transport.

We are delighted that you were able to join us this evening Theresa, and hope that you are enjoying the warm friendship, the conviviality and the hospitality that the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators is pleased to extend to you and indeed all our guests.

Before being elected to Parliament and taking up the Transport portfolio in opposition, Theresa was Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury working alongside George Osborne, on the development of Conservative economic policy.

Theresa has served as a Member of the European Parliament and continues to fight hard against the Euro, the European Constitution and any further extension of EU powers. She has been on Any Questions and Question Time and although I am told that Theresa likes to engage in discussion on topical subjects, I wouldn't want to encourage any of you to quiz her after dinner in the manner of the Dimpleby brothers on her views about the emerging authority of the European Aviation Safety Agency.

I have been advised that in the past weeks, a report commissioned by Theresa's Department has recommended that the Railway Industry finds new ways to reduce costs. Perhaps I can offer a couple of suggestions from pilots in the aviation industry.

Why not for example, ask guards or engine drivers to pay for their own training before earning their salaries? Or better still allow the train operating companies to charge drivers for the privilege of driving trains, during their probationary period.

It sounds nonsensical I know and could you just imagine the Unions' reaction, but worryingly there are many young pilots in the aviation industry who are being forced to do just that. Faced with increasing competition and a glut of partially trained, ambitious young pilots, it is becoming commonplace in this era of low cost air travel that an aspiring pilot must Pay 2 Train and even Pay 2 Fly to qualify for their job.

This often results in firstly the pilot paying for his type training if he wants the flying job, and secondly pilots quite often being engaged at lower than market-

rates of pay. Some airlines only take on pilots if they have the relevant type rating which often has to be obtained at the pilot's own expense.

The love of aviation is what motivated nearly all of us to take up flying as a profession in the first place, and to continue to pursue this profession no matter what obstacles might have been placed in the path of our chosen career.

In our younger days the need for pilots was enormous. We were needed to defend this nation and most of us happily donned uniforms and served with the Air Force, Navy, and Army enabling us to fly at no cost to our parents or us.

The love of aviation motivated us and the same love of aviation motivates young people today but the world has changed. Today the nation does not need huge numbers of pilots as it did between 1939 and 1979. We are currently witnessing the latest round of redundancies affecting young Air Force and Navy pilots who have only just begun their training.

Training to be a pilot has become increasingly more costly and the money a young student pilot has to find is enormous in comparison with the student entering university seeking to gain a degree.

Despite all the recent attention given to the increase in student fees, the university graduate today is likely to emerge with a degree and a level of debt in the order of thirty thousand pounds, and with the opportunity to obtain a low interest loan that does not have to be paid back until they start earning above 21 thousand pounds per annum. The student pilot on the other hand will need to find upwards of 70 thousand pounds, and any loan obtained will be at market rates of interest, and then have to be paid back almost immediately training is completed.

To become a pilot today a young person needs to have wealthy parents, or to rob a friendly bank – one they can work with – perhaps Northern Rock - to fund up to 100 thousand pounds over 3 years to cover the cost of basic training, advanced flight training and aircraft type training.

We know that training a pilot is costly and it would help if the Government was to approve pilot training schemes and thus enable the Treasury to grant exemption from VAT in the way that other European states do. This is not a level playing field, and student pilots are flocking abroad into European flight training academies just to avoid 20% VAT. UK flight training are losing students and declining.

Salaries for pilots in their early careers are low, and whereas this Guild does not get involved in pay, we have to recognise that in many cases young pilots are not being paid at all during their probationary period of flying following graduation from airline mentored training schemes. The aviation employment market is placing huge financial burdens and job uncertainty upon pilots causing personal and domestic stress.

These are not exaggerations – we have received news recently of the first young pilot suicide which may have been a result of these financial and job uncertainty stresses.

The aviation industry today seemingly places less value on pilots than in previous decades, and treats them as an expensive and expendable resource. The perception is that if money can be saved on pilot costs then as long as regulations are not compromised, then money will be saved.

This Guild was formed in 1929 by a group of aviators who were passionate about flying and highly motivated by a love of aviation. They were aviators who were deeply concerned about the status of pilots and perceived that the profession was under threat from increasing regulation and exploitation by an emerging commercial aviation industry.

Our predecessors perceived a lack of status, and low recognition of the importance of their profession in the rapidly developing aviation industry of the time. They were concerned that their profession was being undervalued and they were in danger of being exploited unless they banded together as a professional body to maintain their status.

They were not so much concerned as to how the general public viewed the profession of piloting, but were more concerned with management, government and the evolving regulatory authority. They decided that they could best achieve their aims through the City of London as a Guild and by following the principals and practices of the Liveried Companies established in medieval times they could determine the standards of the profession and quality of piloting.

SOUNDS FAMILIAR – AND:

Today we should once again be concerned about the status of our profession especially for our future pilots.

These days, the fare-paying public does respect pilots, // they do value pilots highly and seem to know the true worth of the young men and women who fly them to their destinations in good weather and bad. The general public might appreciate that skillful and well-trained pilots are essential to the safe conduct of their flight, but it would seem that amongst government officials, aviation management and to a lesser extent with regulators, pilots are increasingly being treated as an overrated resource.

The love of aviation is driving these young people to self-fund their training in one of the most professional industries in the world. Yet it is being abused by those who should know better.

The Department for Transport, the Civil Aviation Authority, and the Airlines claim safety is their first priority and yet safety is already being jeopardised by this present situation. The Aviation Industry and Government should

recognise the need for well-trained British pilots to fly commercial air transport in UK airspace and beyond.

This Guild does what it can to assist young pilots get started and get them through professional pilot training through Scholarships and Bursaries, but there are limits to our largesse, and the generosity of scholarship sponsors may be running out. We will continue to do what we can, but the aviation industry has to accept its responsibilities towards the cost of advanced flight training and recurrent training to ensure skilled pilots are there to fly the aeroplanes the public want to travel in.

Ways have to be found to address these problems to ensure this country and the aviation industry is not short of pilots in the future. There is a risk that young people may no longer wish to pursue their dream of becoming an airline pilot if it is going to cost too much and give little to live on in return.

That will mean that Britain will ultimately be forced to look outside its shores for expertise and risk losing a skills leadership in aviation that it has enjoyed since long before this Guild was formed. I am sure Minister that you as much as the rest of us, do not want to see that happen.

It is worth mentioning that yesterday the new EasyJet Chief executive Officer Carolyn McCall met with the pilots union BALPA and EasyJet pilots to discuss precisely this situation.

In her words "There has been a continued deterioration in relationships between the company and pilots representatives over the last few years. For whatever reasons management lost sight of how big a difference having great people makes. It has taken its toll on how pilots feel about working for EasyJet, building mistrust and a lack of respect"

EasyJet is just one airline that has recognized there is a problem and is doing something about it. However many other operators and even the Department for Transport itself needs to look urgently at the value of British pilots to our economy.

We are greatly honoured that you should join us this evening Theresa and we hope that when you next fly you might enquire if your pilot is a member of this Guild.

Liverymen and distinguished guests I offer you these thoughts for the love of aviation.

May I therefore propose a toast:
To the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators

and

THE LOVE OF AVIATION.