

*SPEECH GIVEN AT THE LIVERY DINNER 28<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2015*  
by the Master, Squadron Leader Chris Ford MBE RAF (Ret'd)

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening to you all.

I should like to follow the welcoming words from our new warden Malcolm White and repeat his very warm welcome to our guests, from **all** in The **Honourable** Company of Air Pilots, to this - our 57th Livery Dinner.

You are already aware that 2015 marks many famous Anniversaries. I should like to take a few minutes to remind you of some well-known events - as well as touch on a few which may not have been covered by our history teachers!

One thousand years ago, shortly after the Monk Elmer attempted to fly from the church tower of an Abbey in the west of England, King Canute - more famous for trying to hold back the tide – landed in Wessex with an invasion force and went on to become the most successful Anglo-Saxon King of England.

Eight hundred years ago, at Runnymede, The Magna Carta was signed by King John of England in an attempt to terminate a civil war with his Barons. Though heavily amended in the years following, we still cite the Magna Carta as the cornerstone of the British Constitution. For buried within the Charter were a number of fundamental values, which both challenged the autocracy of the King and proved highly adaptable in future centuries. One lays down the liberties and customs of this wonderful City of London, including the establishment of our ancient Guilds. More famously, the 39th clause gave all '**free men**' the right to justice and a fair trial. Some of Magna Carta's core principles are echoed in the United States Bill of Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights **and** the European Convention on Human Rights.

Two hundred years ago on the fields of Waterloo, Wellington, assisted by the Prussian Allies, finally overcame Napoleon and ensured many years of peace in Europe. I would like to think that aviation in the form of observation balloons made a difference to the outcome. However I cannot find a definitive account of the battle mentioning this form of military aviation which was used, for the very first time, in 1794 at the battle of Fleurus during the French Revolutionary Wars.

One hundred years ago in March 1915, Number 4 Squadron departed from Farnborough and landed their BE2c Biplanes at their new home near Ruislip - and so started the almost continual association of military flying with the area that became RAF Northolt. 1915 also saw the start of the Zeppelin raids on England and the first Victoria Crosses awarded for aerial combat.

Seventy five years ago 'The Few' were locked in aerial combat over our green and pleasant lands, defending our nation. I doubt they recalled the wording of Magna Carta as they twisted and turned in dog-fights over the City of London - BUT they upheld our freedom. Furthermore RAF Northolt featured heavily in the Battle, being the home of many Polish manned RAF Squadrons.

50 years ago Sir Alan Cobham was our Master. In the same year the Super VC10 and BAC 1-11 entered commercial service. Both these aircraft were pillars of the British Aviation industry and went on to serve for many years demonstrating the prowess of British Engineering. Having served as a passenger aircraft, then modified to be Pax cum Freight and eventually as an Air to Air Tanker Aircraft, the last of the Royal Air Force's VC10s was finally retired from service only two years ago.

This evening we find ourselves gathered here as an **Honourable** band of aviators united by a common desire to be as professional and safe as possible - to be held in the highest of esteem and to be trusted by our peers and the public alike.

The well-founded response to 9/11 was to secure the flight deck from interference by unauthorised persons. No-one could have ever imagined a scenario such as Germanwings 9525 as a consequence of such a safety requirement. This has been a shock and our sympathies must go out to all those involved - from the families to the recovery crews and the Airlines concerned alike.

I hope there is not too much of an overreaction to such a unique incident and that the public will appreciate that we, as highly trained pilots, are honest, well-balanced and professional individuals.

Aviators will never be immune to the stresses and pressure of everyday life. They are just as prone to the frustrations which others may suffer. We are all human and with that comes a degree of risk. How often are we impatient when we phone a company and are told to make YET another keypad selection, to listen to YET another automated voice, offering YET another choice? As Crewmembers how het-up do we get when searched by an over zealous security official at the gate looking for a nail file when **we** are actually able to control the destiny of all our trusting passengers with our bare hands? Furthermore, we **must** be assured that when help is needed it is available from our employers with full support of both Medical Officers and HR departments, without fear of repercussions. After all we are **Honourable** types and should be treated as such.

To the Future. Now that we have a majority Government for the next five years let us seek positive news of the expansion of airport capacity in the South East sooner rather than later. Let us also hope that the positive forecasts of growth following the planned 50% reduction of Air Passenger Duty **north** of the Border will encourage the Government to seriously consider following this lead throughout the **rest** of the United Kingdom.

There is no doubt that if aviation progresses at a similar pace for the next one hundred years, there will be pilotless passenger carrying aircraft, possibly flying at super or hypersonic speeds using space technology with much greener and more efficient fuel systems. Our future airports could be space terminals, our shorts and flip flops replaced by space suits, our inflight meals and drinks may not be the same (and some might say "thank goodness"! ). However, I do believe there will **always** be a place for a pilot in the cockpit to take command and react correctly to that "one in one hundred" – **no** - "one in one hundred thousand" probability of the tranquility and normality of a routine flight becoming a near disaster in the blink of an eye. We may not all be perfect but with our skill and professionalism we must be present on the flight deck to prevent a disaster!

Our principal guest this evening is Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford. Sir Andrew was commissioned into the Royal Air Force in 1977 and after flying training was posted to 72 Squadron flying Wessex helicopters. This was to be the start of a period of 25 years of close involvement with the Support Helicopter Force during which he time served in Northern Ireland, Germany, The Falkland Islands, The Lebanon and The Gulf. With over 5000 flying hours he had exchange tours with both the Royal Navy's Commando Helicopter Force and the Royal Australian Air Force. Affectionately known as "**Pullthrough**" by his Senior Service colleagues, he has Commanded the Support Helicopter Tactics and Trials Flight where he learnt the techniques of 'track-while-scan' - which proved useful recently when meeting the wife of the Mexican Ambassador to the UK - and later Mayleen Klass! He is a keen skier but, after a particularly good lunch in 2012, he slipped and fell in the car park even before reaching the slopes.

Suitably anaesthetised by the wines Sir Andrew carried on regardless - only to discover as he made his way down the piste he was unable to make any turns to port. For he had broken his leg!

An accomplished aviator and peerless staff officer, Sir Andrew has commanded in every rank. Uniquely and justifiably he has achieved the distinction of being the First Helicopter Pilot to be appointed as the Chief of the Air Staff - a position he has held since July 2013. Sir Andrew, you are most welcome.

Finally - before I propose a toast I should like to say a couple of thank yous.

The first must be to The Learned Clerk, Liveryman and Army Aviator, Paul Tacon, for without him and the support of his excellent office staff Ruth, Pat, Julie and James we would not have such an efficient and effective **Honourable** Company.

Next, I would like you to join me in thanking the members of the London Banqueting Ensemble for the fine music this evening, as well as Steve Fletcher and Shane Brennan for the spectacular Post Horn Gallop. And, of course, the staff and caterers of Drapers' Hall for the excellent meal and service.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you a Toast to

**The Honourable Profession of Aviation**