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# RESERVE AIR



# FORCES

## in the new millennium

By Squadron Leader F A Freeman AE RAuxAF

**M**any readers will be familiar with a series of articles on the history of the Reserve Air Forces which appeared in 'Air Clues' in the Spring of 1997. Since that time, there have been many changes affecting the Reserve Air Forces (the Royal Air Force Reserve (RAFR) and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF)), not least those brought about by the introduction of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 (RFA 96) which came into effect on 1 April 1997. In particular, the effect of the Act on the RAuxAF in terms of its greater utility to the RAF for all types of operations comes at a time when the RAuxAF celebrates 75 years since its formation in 1924. Therefore, this article looks at the history of the RAuxAF as well as the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) (previously an element of the Air Force Reserve) with a view to examining where the RAuxAF stood in the past and where it stands today in the RAF's Order of Battle. The article concludes with details of the measures that have been put in place to give the Force the greater operational capability that was foreseen when RFA 96 was drafted.

## HISTORY OF THE RESERVE AIR FORCES

The Reserve Air Forces have their origins going back almost to the date of the foundation of the RAF itself. In a paper entitled 'An Outline of the Scheme for the Permanent Organisation of the Royal Air Force', dated December 1919, the Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Hugh Trenchard proposed the laying of a foundation of a future Air Force on a territorial basis. He envisaged that the eventual organisation would provide for training both on a unit and on an individual basis and he even foreshadowed the new Sponsored Reserve concept by suggesting that 'manufacturing and commercial firms will assist by forming units of their employees'.

The Territorial Army had been formed by Act of Parliament in 1908 with an emphasis on home defence, although the original intention envisaged the new force as second line reinforcements to a new Expeditionary Force. In 1923, the Salisbury Committee on Home Defence recommended that a Home Defence Air Force be established, organised partly on a regular and partly on a territorial basis with the result that the Auxiliary Air Force (AAF) was formed in 1924, to provide fighter and bomber squadrons as part of the RAF's Order of Battle. An Order in Council dated 9 October 1924 provided for 'The Territorial and Reserve Forces Act 1907 shall apply to the auxiliary air force (sic)

and the officers and men of that force', thus embracing an air arm within the territorial and voluntary military organisation. Moreover, The Committee of Imperial Defence, on 1 June 1923, proposed that "The Auxiliary Air Force squadrons should be manned and organised on a basis somewhat similar to that of the Territorial Army".

The first AAF squadron (No 602 (City of Glasgow)) was formed on 12 September 1925. Early on, the Force included 5 'Special Reserve Squadrons'. These differed from the AAF squadrons as they were 'cadreised' units, made up of both regulars and reservists. However, in 1936/37 they were all transferred to the AAF. By the time war broke out in September 1939, some of the



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squadrons had been transferred to Fighter Command and one squadron (No 503) was disbanded in 1938 to become No 616 Sqn. In 1940, for the Battle of Britain, there were 14 Fighter squadrons (including 2 Night-Fighter units) and 5 Army Co-operation and Reconnaissance Squadrons.

The pre-war AAF, with its overtones of elitism, was viewed with some unease by the regular RAF. Moreover, AAF airmen were not required to serve other than on their parent unit, a state of affairs which was to cause serious difficulty, inconvenience, discontent and wasted manpower during the Second World War. The regulations were changed in 1939 but airmen signed on for a 4-year engagement so it was to be 1943 before the last of the 'non-deployable' volunteers were retired or moved out of this category. However, the AAF itself was already beginning to change under the impetus of preparations for war. In 1938, the task of manning the Balloon Barrage was entrusted to the AAF. The upper age limit for officers and men in the balloon squadrons was 50 years and, inevitably, the balloon squadrons attracted to their ranks artisans and members of the middle and working classes of the day.

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Earlier, in 1936, the Air Ministry had decided that it could not obtain the pilots it required from existing sources of supply and that a new type of direct entry reserve was needed. Any new venture would have to appeal to the broad mass of the country and respond to popular feelings and aspirations. Young men were to be attracted from the middle class with no suggestion of any pre-determined social hierarchy. All men were to be enrolled as sergeants, with commissions solely available on proved merit, e.g., for University Air Squadron men on entry and for others only after they had demonstrated their worth. Among titles suggested for the new reserve was 'Citizens' Air Force' – which emphasised its democratic aspirations – but the one chosen was the RAFVR and this was to be the portal of entry through which most of the men who flew during the Second World War were to pass. By 1939, the Civilian Wireless Reserve, the Civil Air Guard and the UAS had all been absorbed into the RAFVR. The RAFVR, unlike the AAF, was part of the Air Force Reserve, a distinction which, in 1990, was to have far-reaching consequences.

On the outbreak of war in 1939, the AAF was embodied into the RAF and all its squadrons became RAF squadrons, although its personnel remained members of the AAF. Personnel enlisting or commissioned into the RAF during the war entered the RAFVR, with the exception of those from overseas. It is illuminating to examine the contribution made by the AAF squadrons in the Battle of Britain, a campaign which can be bounded by time – 10 July to 31 October 1940. An estimated total of 2900 aircrew flew in the Battle with some 700 on AAF squadrons. Of these 700 aircrew, 150 were members of the AAF, the others comprising 215 members of the RAFVR, including 128 SNCOs, and 147 members of the RAF. The remaining personnel came mainly from the UAS and from overseas. A further 26 members of the AAF flew with non-AAF units. These figures further serve to demonstrate the changing character of the AAF as it entered the war.

## POST-WAR DEVELOPMENTS

At the end of the war, the AAF and the RAFVR were disbanded, amidst plans to return the RAF to an all-regular air force. However, by 1946 it was decided to re-form the AAF and the RAFVR and, in 1947, the AAF received the prefix 'Royal', to become the Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF). Earlier, in April 1941, another volunteer organisation, the Observer Corps, had been granted the Royal prefix in recognition of its contribution to the Battle of Britain. The pre-war Auxiliary flying squadrons returned to their ancestral homes, to fly the latest mark of Spitfire, followed by the Vampire and Meteor, all of which soon acquired the gaily-coloured squadron heraldry of the pre-war years. There was a rush to join, some former senior officers electing to join at a lower rank. It would be tempting to think that it was the ethos of the pre-war auxiliary which led to such a large number of volunteers, but with the pre-war AAF depleted, even by 1940, it is more likely that many applicants were war-time RAFVR men who simply wanted to keep flying and the weekend opportunities for doing so, in the newly-formed RAuxAF, seemed ideal.

The re-formation of the RAuxAF was not limited to flying squadrons. The value of auxiliaries in supporting roles was also recognised with the formation of 12 RAuxAF Regiment squadrons, whose primary role was airfield defence with light anti-aircraft guns and 28 Fighter Control and Raid Reporting Units. During the Korean War of 1950-1953, some 2300 personnel of the RAuxAF fighter

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squadrons were called up for extended training for three months. Meanwhile, the resurgent RAFVR had also enjoyed something of a revival. Aircrew were recruited and some were also recalled for full-time duty during the Korean War. Eleven new RAFVR flights were formed within Fighter Command for control and reporting duties and three more were planned. At its post-war peak, in 1950, the strength of all the RAF's volunteer reserves stood at some 40 000 personnel.

By 1953, just 7 years after the reconstitution of the RAuxAF, a Working Party concluded that the RAuxAF flying squadrons could not attain a state of efficiency which would enable them to play a useful part in the kind of short, intense war which was envisaged at that time. However, the RAuxAF flying squadrons were part of a force that the Americans had been told was to be retained up to 1957/8 in return for aid up to the value of £75m each year, so disbandment of the force had to be postponed. In the event, by September 1956, it had become clear that it was no longer possible to maintain any of the units of the RAuxAF. The role of the flying squadrons, in 1955, was that they would be required in the event of an airborne invasion to destroy low-flying transport aircraft for which their Meteors and Vampires would be adequate. The chances of the Russians launching that particular form of attack were judged not very high and did not justify expenditure of about £4m a year on the RAuxAF fighter squadrons. Moreover, the squadrons would be unable to maintain at immediate readiness, the standard required for operations on the outbreak of war. Some RAuxAF pilots were receiving training on regular Hunter squadrons but they were unlikely to be needed as reinforcements for the regulars in war. Most important, however, the Defence Budget could not stand the cost of re-equipping the squadrons with more modern aircraft.

The need for the RAuxAF Fighter Control Units (FCU) and Raid Reporting Units (RRU) had also disappeared by 1956 as a result of recent improvements to the Control and Reporting (CR) system. However, the CR branches and trades were not popular with the regular RAF and were manned largely by National Service personnel. It was only when National Service was phased out and the CR system became further automated that it was possible to disband the FCUs and the RRU's in 1959/60. Finally, the RAuxAF AOP and Regiment Squadrons were also disbanded as their only role was in global war and it was felt that there was no place for Auxiliary units which could not immediately take their place in the front line; moreover, it would have appeared illogical for the old established Auxiliary fighter squadrons to be abolished before the younger and, in the public view at any rate, less important elements of the RAuxAF. Therefore, the RAuxAF was disbanded at a stroke in 1957, although the FCUs and the RRU's soldiered on until 1959/60. Had it not been for the formation of 4 Maritime Headquarters Units in 1959/60, the RAuxAF would have ceased to exist.

The period 1960 to 1979 were wilderness years for the Reserve Air Forces, the RAFVR suffering a similar fate to that of the RAuxAF when it was reduced to just 4 units and an establishment of some 200 reservists. Moreover, a report by the RAF Reserves and Auxiliaries Policy Committee in May 1977 emphasised that the reserves had little to contribute to the effectiveness of the RAF in war, a situation brought about by the restrictions on call-out under the Reserve Forces Act current at that time. The centralised management and policy-making machinery of the RAF for its reserves also fell into decline. After the war, a One-Star Air Ministry Directorate of Auxiliaries, Reserves and Cadets (DARAC), supported by a full-time Service and Civil Service staff had been responsible for the RAF's reserve forces; however, DARAC was dis-established on the virtual disbandment of the RAuxAF in 1957 and the centralised management of the Reserve Air Forces was not to be re-established until 1987, with the formation of the AOC Air Cadets and Director Reserve Forces at RAF Newton. In the 30 intervening years, the affairs of the volunteer reserves were managed in an integrated manner by their Operational Commands and Groups.



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## RECONSTITUTION

In 1979, it had been decided that 3 RAuxAF Regiment Field Squadrons would be formed on a trial basis, their role being to provide ground defence to key airfields. The trial was successful and 2 more Field Squadrons were formed in 1982 and a sixth in 1983. By this time, lessons learned from the Falklands War had led to the formation of a Movements Squadron and an Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron of the RAuxAF. Two light Anti-Aircraft Squadrons of the RAuxAF Regiment were formed in 1985 and 1986, using weapons captured from the Argentines in 1982 and 4 Airfield Defence Flights of the RAuxAF were also formed in 1986. Meanwhile, a Public Relations flight of the RAFVR had earlier been formed in 1981 and a RAFVR Intelligence flight was formed in 1986. Therefore, as the 1980s came to a close, the volunteer reserves of the RAF consisted of 17 RAuxAF units and 4 RAFVR flights, a combined establishment of some 2200 personnel, to which should be added the first 4 aircrew members of the RAuxAF since 1957, established as rear-crew members on the Nimrod in 1983. Then came the invasion of Kuwait and the end of the Cold War.

The operation to liberate Kuwait in 1991, which became the Gulf War, exposed the deficiencies in legislation regarding the call-out of the RAF's reserve forces. Under the Reserve Forces Act 1980, the Air Force Reserve (ex-members of the RAF with a reserve liability and the RAFVR) could be called out not only for the defence of the UK but also when warlike operations were in preparation or in progress elsewhere and national interests were threatened. Indeed, members of the RAFVR had been called out in support of the RAF prior to the Gulf War and have been called out continuously to this day. The RAuxAF, on the other hand, could only be compulsorily called-out when national danger was imminent or a great emergency had arisen. Therefore, prior to RFA 96, the RAuxAF was essentially a peace-time training force, with no operational utility short of all-out war. This was the quandary facing the Secretary of State for Defence on the outbreak of hostilities with Iraq. On the one hand, he had a pool of volunteers within the RAuxAF who were urgently required to support the RAF, particularly in the movements and aeromedical roles, on the other hand, it was not possible to compulsorily call them out without the legislation being in place. In the event, the problem was solved by asking the required volunteers to 'volunteer' to be called out, the irony of which was not lost on the volunteers themselves.

In addition to the lessons learned from the Gulf War, the end of the Cold War re-defined the need for volunteer reserves. The nation no longer faced a monolithic European threat and its armed forces were re-configured to meet the many demands of unpredictable, smaller and more numerous conflicts throughout the world. Also, UN peacekeeping roles and humanitarian and

disaster relief operations all threatened to place a burden on the armed forces, already depleted by post – Cold War cuts. The RAuxAF did not escape these cuts unscathed, the Airfield Defence Flights and one of the RAuxAF Regiment Field Squadrons have been disbanded since the end of the Cold War, as have the two anti-aircraft gun units. In the light of all these changes it was

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inevitable that the legislation governing the call out and organisation of the reserve forces required review. Against this background, the Bill which was to become the Reserve Forces Act 1996 (RFA 96) was born. The Act came into effect on 1 April 1997 and provided for the amalgamation of the RAuxAF and the war-appointable elements of the RAFVR, an event which was marked by a ceremony at RAF College Cranwell on 5 April 1997. This provision was intended to create a single war-appointable volunteer reserve for the RAF but, in the event, the Mobile Meteorological Unit at RAF Benson was transferred to the Royal Air Force Reserve (RAFR). Nonetheless, the provision swept up the earlier discrepancy whereby the RAFVR could be called out for lesser emergencies whereas the RAuxAF could not. Now, an increasing number of the RAF's volunteer reserves have greater operational utility.



## TIME FOR CHANGE

This greater operational utility has placed the volunteer reserves of all 3 Services under closer scrutiny. In 1992, the defunct centralised management of the Reserve Air Forces was resurrected with the formation of the Controllerate Reserve Forces DDPMA(A)&CRF (RAF) at HQ PTC. Shortly thereafter, in 1995, all Reserve Air Forces policy matters which had hitherto been dealt with in London, were 'rusticated' to Gloucester. CRF(RAF) is now supported by a Deputy Director and a staff of both Service and Civil Service personnel, including full and part-time members of the Reserve Air Forces. Since that date CRF(RAF) staffs have been directly involved in a number of initiatives to realise the wishes of the Air Force Board and exploit the full potential of RFA 96 by aligning the Reserve Air Forces more closely with their new operational utility.

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In 1995, work started to draft new regulations for the Reserve Air Forces which mirrored the new call-out liabilities and terms and conditions of service for the volunteers. In 1996, CRF(RAF) organised a major Symposium for the World's Air Reserves. In the same year, CRF(RAF) staffed the AFBSC Paper on the Optimum Force Structures and Organisation of the RAuxAF which led to a modest expansion of the Force, which commenced with the formation of the first 'Role Support Squadron' (RSS), the Helicopter Support Squadron at RAF Benson in October. In April 1997, the new regulations for the Reserve Air Forces were introduced and a new Air Transportable Surgical Squadron formed at RAF Leuchars. Another major milestone for the Reserve





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Air Forces followed the same month with the establishment of 45 reservist Hercules and 15 Puma aircrew and a new Training and Standardisation Squadron formed at RAF Halton. A busy month was crowned by the amalgamation of the RAFVR and the RAuxAF already mentioned and a new Computerised Reserves Administrative Management System (CRAMS) was commissioned. Finally, the Royal Assent was given on 1 April 1997 to re-name the Air Force Reserve the Royal Air Force Reserve.

In July 1997, a second Training and Standardisation Squadron was formed at RAF Shawbury and the first C130 reservist aircrew were employed, on High Readiness Reserve terms. In October a reservist aircrew trial for the Tornado F3 commenced and in November, the Director of Operational Capability Audit team endorsed the management of the Reserve Air Forces by CRF(RAF). 1998 proved no less busy. The first members of the RAuxAF to be called out since 1939 (under RFA 96) were deployed in January 1998 and a new Offensive Support Role

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Support Squadron was formed at RAF Cottesmore. The first Full Time Reserve Service (FTRS) agreements were introduced and, in April 1998, two RAuxAF Regt Field Squadrons re-roled to become the Strike Attack RSS at RAF Marham and the Air Transport & Air-to-Air Refuelling RSS at RAF Brize Norton, retaining their former numberplates. The first Puma reservist aircrew started training in May and, in the same month, the first Reserve Air Forces Personnel Survey was published, mirroring the regular Continuous General Attitude Survey. Finally, a Sentry AWACS reservist aircrew trial commenced in June.

In July 1998, a new Air Defence RSS formed at RAF Leeming and CRF(RAF) staffs organised the Reserve Air Forces contribution to a major international reserve officers congress at Brighton and Aldershot. Also, in July, the first Search and Rescue reservist aircrew were employed and a second Reserve Air Forces Personnel Survey was issued in September. In October, a new RAuxAF Rapier FSC Squadron was formed at RAF Honington and FTRS contracts were issued to all of the members of the Reserve Air Forces who had been serving on Short Term Regular Commissions or Engagements.

The pace of work for the Reserve Air Forces has not let up in 1999, notwithstanding any changes brought about by the 1998 Strategic Defence Review. All Reserve Air Forces officers recommended for commissioning after 12 July are to attend the Officer and Aircrew Selection Centre at Cranwell and reservist JNCOs will attend the GST1 Course at the Airmen's Command School at RAF Halton. A new Air Publication for personnel and administrative procedures is being developed for the Reserve Air Forces, due for publication by April 2000 and it is hoped to develop a training course for administrative personnel on Reserve Air Forces units. Standardised recruiting and selection procedures for the Reserve Air Forces have been developed, along with a common Basic Recruit Course and serving officers of the Reserve Air Forces are being encouraged to attend Command and Staff Training to fit them for higher rank and responsibility. Finally, work is proceeding to develop Additional Duties Terms and Conditions of Service and trials are planned for Sponsored Reserves, both of these last initiatives flowing from RFA 96. On 1 June 1999, the post of DPMA(A)&CRF(RAF) was re-titled DPMA(A&RF)(RAF), deleting the word 'Controllerate' and thereby placing the Reserve Air Forces under a Directorate. This move heralds a gradual integration of Reserve Air Forces policy and personnel management matters with the relevant regular desks at HQ PTC RAF Innsworth, supported by staff versed in reservist issues.

## THE FUTURE

The RAuxAF has seen many changes since it was formed 75 years ago and it looks forward to celebrating its 75th Anniversary in October 1999 in style. It originally consisted of some rather exclusive flying squadrons but its exclusivity was soon changed with the onset of war and the formation of the Balloon Squadrons. The AAF provided 14 squadrons in the Battle of Britain, whose members consisted of aircrew from every port of entry into the RAF, including the RAFVR. The RAuxAF re-formed after the war, its members consisting of many ex-war-time aircrew and when these faded from the scene and operational efficiency declined, the RAuxAF and the RAFVR were largely disbanded. The two organisations survived nearly 20 years in the wilderness, with just 500 or so personnel until the RAuxAF was expanded from 1979, and the centralised management and policy-making machinery of the RAF for its reserves was diminished as a result. During that period, restrictions on call-out severely limited the effectiveness of the Reserve Air Forces to the RAF in war. The Gulf War proved to be a watershed in the fortunes of the RAuxAF; existing legislation proving

inadequate to allow their full employment in operations. These problems, and the defence reviews following the end of the Cold War, necessitated the re-writing of the Reserve Forces Act, to ensure that volunteer reserves had greater utility than hitherto. Prior to 1997, the RAuxAF could only be called out for the defence of the UK, and its operational readiness and culture reflected that fact. It can now be deployed for all types of operations and many of the initiatives which have been developed by CRF(RAF) staffs are as a result of both that increased utility and the mandated requirements of a new Reserve Forces Act.

Has the RAuxAF risen to the new challenge? Two years after the implementation of RFA 96, the RAuxAF has signalled its intention to the Government. Well over 90% of its members have signed up to the provisions of RFA 96, thereby indicating the confidence of the reservists themselves in the new Act and their readiness to be called out when necessary under its provisions. Many more will do so as their term of engagement is renewed. The RAF is committed to the Total Force Concept, which requires a fully integrated approach to the development of the skills and capabilities of reserve forces personnel but this does not mean that the unique spirit and enthusiasm of the volunteer needs to be lost. The operational employment standards and capabilities of the Reserve Air Forces should, however, be indistinguishable from those of the regular forces which the Reserve Air Forces exist to support. This unique blend of preserving the proud traditions of the 'citizen's air force' with the needs of the parent RAF for integration should ensure that the Reserve Air Forces continue to make a particularly valuable contribution to Defence well beyond the turn of the century.

At the time of publication, 114 members of the Reserve Air Forces are called out for permanent service in support of operations, including the Balkans. Of this total, 97 are members of the RAuxAF, representing 16 of the 21 established RAuxAF units.



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