INTERVIEW WITH THE
CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF
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Air Chief Marshal Sir Peter Squire, Chief of the Air Staff

Sir, when you first joined the RAF did you ever think you would be CAS?

Certainly not. I was far too busy at the time actually aiming to pass the course at Cranwell. While I don't think I fared too badly, it certainly was not my aim at all to be at the top of the Air Force 37 or so years later, not least because I don't think I was a star in any one respect; I was much more of an all-rounder. Notwithstanding, I had a fierce determination to do as well as I could whilst I was at Cranwell. And I think that has been my approach throughout my service career – to do as well as I can at the job in hand, whether that is 30 minutes on the range, when you are really concentrating as hard as you possibly can, or in a staff appointment or whatever. While I have set my cap at certain appointments, this was not one of them, but it has been a huge privilege to have held this post.

Do you think it was particularly valuable to do the 3 years' professional education?

I found it so. To an extent it was part of my upbringing. I had been thinking about going to Cranwell for a long time. I got what would now be called a sixth form scholarship in that I was awarded an RAF scholarship at Cranwell at the 'O' Level stage, which gave me automatic entrance on the back of two 'A' levels. To an extent, that did condition my last 2 years at school. I got my two 'A' Levels (albeit modest ones) in the lower sixth year because of an experiment that the school tried, and was then able to do a lot of things in my last year which didn't improve the grades that much. If Cranwell had stopped taking 'A' level entrants, I might actually have been quite poorly placed because I am not sure that I would have got into too many universities at that stage. But those 3 years for me were excellent. It was a bit like a boarding school for 18–21 year olds, albeit freer than a boarding school and therefore more like a university. And we did a reasonable amount of academic work – aerodynamics, electronics, thermodynamics and war studies – as well as the flying and general service knowledge, the drill and leadership training. Indeed, I have no doubt in my mind now that, had we applied ourselves better to the process of gaining for the course an external degree recognition, we could have achieved that. At the time, potential academic partners said it would take a fourth year, but the Service was not prepared to countenance that on the grounds of cost. And they were probably right, but with the approach now to external accreditation, I am sure they could have done it; although they may have had to tweak the syllabus slightly.

Obviously you have had a very successful career as an aviator and a commander, but how did you adapt in the later years to your more political role?

You develop through experience. I don't think you suddenly become political, with a small 'p', or anything of that nature; it's a bit like moving from being a first tourist on a squadron to being a flight commander. Progressively, as you have watched others do it – as shag you have listened to the crew room chat, as an MOD officer you have shared in erudite discussions over lunch in the Whitehall Mess – you absorb it; you learn by experience. You don't actually have to be political either. But you do need to have a political nose; you have to have the nous to know what will play well and what won't run. That doesn't mean to say that you don't give contrary advice, but at least you can put it in a way that recognises what the outcome might be, or in a better way to achieve what you want. At the end of the day, I firmly believe that at every level in the MOD it is for the serviceman or woman to give the best military advice, and it is for others to say either no, I can't do that for political reasons; we are going to march in a different direction; or get on with it. In terms of equipment procurement, for example, it is for others to overlay military advice with the European or industrial dimension.

Obviously one of the main experiences you had was commanding a squadron in the Falklands. How did you view this from a personal perspective?

It was a very interesting experience, and one learnt a lot of things about military capability and about human response. At the time I was immensely fortunate. A lot of people were involved in Operation CORPORATE, but not many from the RAF deployed to war as a formed unit and operated in the unusual environment of an aircraft carrier. In terms of the application of air power, rather than the personal lessons, then certainly I came away convinced that joint operations were something that we needed to be better at. I came away persuaded, if I hadn't been already, that this country needs to have a carrier force of some sort, but that we had the ability to use RAF offensive assets from the sea provided the maritime platform was properly organised to accept them. That was not the case in 1982. Hermes was not prepared for offensive operations, it had no effective ground intelligence support, and the tasking organisation was structured solely for air defence operations. These deficiencies have been put right in the Invincible class carriers and such capabilities must be an absolute prerequisite for the CV(F). Secondly, there was the need for reach. We had focused for so long on the central European Front that, other than buddy-buddy tanking to get the Buccaneers to some of their areas of operation, the only reason we had tankers was either for extending QRA or getting aircraft across to Canada for exercises. Air refuelling wasn't seen as a strategic capability, and the Falklands reminded us of the advantages of strategic reach. We all came away firmly of the view that we should never buy an aeroplane again that couldn't either take on fuel or give away fuel, depending upon its primary role. I am disappointed, therefore, that Astor is not going to have an air-to-air refuelling capability because I think we have missed a trick. I know it was going to be technically demanding, and in theory the platform meets the key operational requirements without air refuelling, but I think we will rue the day that we decided against incorporating an air refuelling capability. Next, the importance of support helicopters was absolutely clear. We lost 6 Wessex and 3 Chinook in Atlantic Conveyor, which meant that the mobility of our own forces was severely constrained. Since then, we have seen that, wherever we are deployed – Northern Ireland, Bosnia or Afghanistan – SH are an essential asset. Finally, the need for precision weapons. After a number of attempts to self designate from the Harrier, because there were no target markers in Theatre, I lofted the first successful weapon against a pinpoint target. Before that we were dropping dumb weapons using a fixed sight, because we couldn't align the IN on a moving deck, and I believe that in the high winds that are prevalent in the South Atlantic, many of the weapons that we dropped were wide of the mark. We dropped 4 LGBs on the penultimate day of the War – 2 were direct hits and 2 dropped short, but I have always believed that those 2 precision attacks showed the Argentinians that we now had a weapon of extreme accuracy and that this may have been something of a catalyst for the Argentine surrender.

You mentioned formed units Sir. Did you have a view on that in the Gulf War of 1991, because I think we caused problems with trying to get an 'A-team' together.

I believe that it is very easy in hindsight to make comments. But I think probably we did get it wrong for DESERT SHIELD by putting together an 'A-team' which then subsequently had to be 'rouled' when we went from DESERT SHIELD to DESERT STORM. That is not in any way to denigrate those that went on DESERT STORM because, in the event, they did a superb job. In 1982, I was severely restricted in the number of pilots I could take – 8 for 6 aircraft – and while I was offered the opportunity to choose from across the Harrier Force, I elected to take only from my own Squadron, including one who had very recently achieved combat ready status. Because we now deploy 12 or 18 aircraft, often at a ratio of 2 to 1, that cannot be done with a single squadron. So we now approach it very much on a wing basis, which mirrors the way we are operating our peacetime MOBs, mainly because of under-manning a year or so ago. The Wing concept has worked extremely well, with elements of 3 or 4 squadrons involved at both Ali Al Salem and Al Udeid.

Can you see us going a little bit further along that route Sir – having a Base Commander and a Wing Commander, like the Americans, where we deploy a Wing Commander and leave the Base Commander behind to look after the families at home?

I think the way we are doing it at the moment works pretty well. We have nominated DOB commanders who deploy with their command team often formed from their own stations, normally leaving OC Operations Wing to run the rear party. If more than one flying squadron is represented, then an individual – normally the senior squadron commander – runs the flying operations. This structure has worked well in the past and again during Op TELIC.

But it is interesting that we are talking about a war fighting air force, isn't it? It is probably what neither of us thought we were joining in the late sixties/early seventies.

At that time, we were exclusively focused on the Cold War – one which we trained hard for but thankfully never came – and, as a result of TACEVAL and our single-minded approach, we were probably as well-prepared as we could be for that war. In the 10 years since the collapse of communism, we have transformed the Air Force into one with expeditionary capability, which isn't the same as being deployable. The Harrier and the Jaguar Forces were, of course, deployable as has been the Support Helicopter Force, but largely they went to pre-planned options. When I was OC 1 Squadron we had options all the way through Europe but we regularly practised North Norway, Denmark and Germany as the most likely of our DOBs. Now the front line has to be capable of going almost anywhere, and I think the transformation has been extremely well achieved; no one should be surprised that it has taken 10 years to achieve.

You obviously see a lot of the young airmen and women, the younger aircrew, who have come from a different generation. How do they seem to you, compared to earlier generations?

Taking first the aircrew, they are different in some ways, largely because their approach to flying is more professional than ours was at the same stage. Much of this has to do with training – Red Flag and similar high value training was not available to first tourists in my day. If selected for PAI or subsequently QWI training, then that certainly taught you to be more professional in the application of air power. Combined with training, there is of course the impact of technology. To understand the technology and to get the most out of modern weapon systems there is a lot of private study to be done, whereas on my first squadron we did not do a lot of swatting, other than in preparation for the visit by CFS Agents – the trappers. Those that applied themselves most probably got the best results, but the pressures were very different. In other ways they are not so very different. My contemporaries were just as committed to the Air Force and a desire to fly, but we weren't equipped or trained to the same degree. As far as the airmen and women are concerned, I find that they are also very similar in terms of why they are in the Air Force. But again, they have been trained differently and so their experience and levels of training are different as we have changed, for example, our apprentice schemes. For the future the concept of multi-skilling in technical trades is extremely exciting, and will result in increased flexibility across the Service. It will also provide for them a greater challenge as they master 2 specialisations; moreover, when they do come to leave the Service it will give them very much better qualifications with which to transfer to the civilian environment. At the same time, I believe very strongly that we need a second line of servicing and a deep servicing structure which is not totally contractorised and that they have access to. This is not just for the reason that we want to be able to give them a break from the front line – although that is vital for retention – but it is also important that they can develop their technical skills in deep servicing, which they cannot do at first line where they are very much into repair by replacement. It will also protect the intelligent customer capability. In my view, this can best be achieved by locating a deep servicing facility close to the front line where individuals can still have access to SFA, sports facilities and Messes.

How do you see us achieving that Sir?

I had no difficulty with the thought that we develop deep servicing through a partnership with industry. Equally, some of it may continue to be done through the Defence Aircraft Repair Agency. However, the partnership must give us what we need in terms of surge capability, intelligent customer knowledge and a working environment which is conducive to return of service. I suspect there will be an additional cost to this formula in comparison to embedding the servicing facility with industry as currently configured. However, what we save in the DLO could easily be outweighed by extra recruiting and training costs in Personnel and Training Command if we get retention wrong. This will not necessarily be an easy argument to win but we cannot afford to sacrifice levels of retention.

Soldiers are trained to fight and seamen to go to sea, but, with the exception of the RAF Regiment and some other areas, it is really only aircrew who deliver air power. Are we in danger of diluting our professionalism by creating a single GD Branch for wing commander and above?

I am alert to the issue but, equally, we cannot fill all the historically tagged GD posts with aircrew, because there just aren't enough of them; the front line isn't big enough to support that full range of appointments. At the same time, we have a responsibility to maximise the use of the competencies that people have. It is wrong to say that, no matter how good you are, we are going to restrict your career profile. Nevertheless, I believe that non-aircrew recognise that there are some jobs for which you have to have a flying background; in coalition terms, the Americans will not accept non-aircrew in certain posts. For the same reason, we have said that our MOBs must be commanded by aircrew. Similarly there are annotated jobs at 1, 2, 3 and 4-star level for which I think that aircrew will be required. My predecessor, I remember, was asked by Secretary of State Robertson at a Defence Council meeting if he could ever see the Chief of Air Staff being non-aircrew. He said, yes he could, but I don't know how far ahead he was looking. My concern, if I had one, is far more that we have got to find a way of grooming aircrew officers. As we tend to keep more and more of them in the cockpit, their opportunities for broadening are becoming less.

Obviously Strike Command and PJHQ are the providers of military force, but how do you see your role at the moment with the current operations going on?

The Chief's role must be, first and foremost, to provide advice on the application of air power to CDS. For that, I rely on personal experience, knowledge of what is going on and what is reported to me through either the air staff in MOD or from CINCSTC. I am responsible for the fighting effectiveness of the Service and for its morale and confidence, so I must clearly take those points into account in giving advice. Outside of that, I act as part of the corporate body of the Chiefs' committee, the Defence Management Board and the Defence Council, in giving advice to either CDS, PUS or Ministers on more general matters.

Just continuing the theme of the current conflict, could you comment on the first use of Storm Shadow in the last couple of days?

Clearly we await the more developed BDA and it would be wrong to jump to conclusions too quickly. But on the face of it, the weapon and its introduction has gone extremely well indeed. It was brought into use quickly as the conflict began and therefore industry has more to do before we achieve a full operational capability. But on the initial evidence, it has gone remarkably well, in terms of reliability and accuracy. However, it will be some time before we know what has gone on inside the structures that it has hit. In the meantime, it provides a war fighting capability to complement the coercive capability that is offered by TLAM.

If you had your time as CAS again Sir, would you do anything differently?

I don't think I would make any fundamental change. Naturally, there are some debates and decisions which have gone in a way that is not what I might have hoped. With hindsight, I might have slanted arguments in a different way in order to achieve a better outcome. But I don't think I would do anything fundamentally different. I have not been a person for shaking an organisation from top to bottom if that has not been required. Coming into this post, I had known and worked with my predecessor for many years, indeed, ever since he was a squadron commander and I was a flight commander. I have succeeded him on a number of occasions and shared many of the same ideas. It has been much more a question of adjustment of direction as opposed to radical change.

Moving on to air power and looking at it in the broader frame. We are within a few months now of the centennial of the first powered flight – do you think air power has lived up to its promises?

I think it has. We have proved beyond a shadow of doubt that control of the air is essential to the successful outcome of any conflict. Those who said the bomber will always get through have eventually been proved correct, as a result of the combination of stealth, precision and stand-off capabilities. Also in the role of reconnaissance, which was after all one of the first tasks that people required of air power, the technical capabilities of modern sensors – whether IR, EO or SAR – mounted in platforms from the tactical right the way through to UAV and beyond to the satellite, contribute hugely to the whole business of network enabled capability: getting inside the decision-making cycle of the opposition. Even in its earliest form, that is what people wanted when they sent up balloons and then early aircraft; it was to see what the opponent was up to. In sum, control of the air, which I don't think anybody would dispute is essential, the power of the bomber, and the contribution of reconnaissance, I would say are 3 key areas where air power has come good.

One of the other things we are seeing in the post Cold War world is that air power seems to be the weapon of first choice, or indeed the only choice, for the politician. Do you see this as a welcome development, or just an inevitable one?

It is a phrase which I have used because of the success of air power, in shaping the battle space, in particular the Gulf in 1991 and Kosovo in 1999. We then had Afghanistan, and now we are into Gulf II. These have all been serious war fighting scenarios but there will be circumstances where it wouldn't necessarily be the force of first choice. Sierra Leone, for example – although we needed air power through support helicopters, it was not an operation for which we needed a lot of air power to be able to resolve the crisis. In a relatively benign environment, therefore, air power may not be required to shape the battle space, albeit it was essential to carry out the task. At the same time, even in a non-benign environment air power is very rarely, if ever, likely to be the only choice. I suspect one will always want a land and/or maritime component, but air will always be an early entry force. When the record is written, it will be interesting to see in the aftermath of Operation TELIC whether it was right to go in with ground forces first, or whether it would have been better to have used air power first. But that will be for debate. Nevertheless, my view remains that air power is the force of first choice in anything but a benign environment, but it will very rarely be the only choice.

You have just touched on coalitions, and I think the next thing to come out of that is to look at the American dimension. Obviously air power is getting much more expensive, and there is a definite technology gap growing between us. What contributions do you think air forces like ours can make to the development of air power, given that we are definitely one or two steps behind the Americans?

In terms of the development of air power, there is no doubt America is putting huge sums of money into research and technology, and it will not be easy to hang on. But, as long as we maintain interoperability with our US counterparts, which we can do without buying everything that they buy, then I believe we will

always be able to join forces in coalition with them. Moreover it is a fact that, in some specialist areas, we are leading – in tactical reconnaissance we are certainly out ahead. Some European weapons are every bit as good as the US equivalents – for example ASRAAM, which it is about as good as you can get anywhere in the world. Storm Shadow has also to be a weapon system which is right up there in the van of stand-off precision capability. There are specialist areas which I think we are certainly well able to contribute to, in capability terms, and therefore perhaps in development terms as well. That said, it is unrealistic to expect that we are ever going to get involved to the same degree as the Americans with space, and there will be other C4 ISTAR capabilities that we won't be able to afford. My greater concern is that there will be some air forces in Europe and elsewhere that won't maintain inter-operability with us, and that could be a danger for NATO and for Europe.

At the same time, we have not got a perfect record of properly investing in capability. For too long, we concentrated on platforms with the prospect that we would fit the weapons, the datalinks, or ECM at a later date – i.e. getting the platform first and sorting it out afterwards. Now we genuinely are taking a much more combat-effectiveness approach to the procurement of capability, and are using the additional funds gained in SR03 to improve the overall capability of our assets.

You must be sad and proud Sir to be retiring from the position as professional head of your chosen Service. Have you any other thoughts or observations that you would like to make, either in relation to the air power picture as a whole or to the Air Force itself?

It has been a huge privilege and there will be many aspects of the job that I will miss enormously when the time comes. It will be people and their contribution that I will miss most. When I visit stations, I see the pride that individuals and units take in their performance. Such levels of commitment are impressive by any standard. For example, my tour to the Gulf just prior to the outbreak of hostilities in the middle of March was an uplifting experience. The responsiveness of units to late changes in deployment locations, the professionalism of all those involved either in expanding extant facilities or starting from scratch at new DOBs confirmed to me the high quality of all those involved – from DOB Commanders right the way down to those on their first productive tours. It was quite remarkable to see what had been achieved. Equally, here in UK those remaining at the MOBs have applied themselves remorselessly to the task of supporting those in the field. The sum of these efforts – at DOB and Home Base – has been quite superb in the execution of the task.

While this has been a very specific scenario, the dedication of individuals both in primary and in secondary duties and the sense of team work that binds us to a common cause, requiring people frequently to put Service before self, is for me the hallmark of our servicemen and women. It is a gold standard that sets them apart from many of their contemporaries outside of the Armed Forces. I hope that sense of duty will never change. I see nothing to suggest that it will.