

Moderator, commissioners, friends, it is a great honour to join you this morning for a part of your proceedings and to be asked to address you. On behalf of Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of the Air Staff, I offer warm greetings from the Royal Air Force and I extend those greetings also on behalf of our colleagues in the Royal Navy and the Army.

“We have an anchor that keeps the soul
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love!”

Words from the famous hymn written by Priscilla Owens in 1882 and words sung by me every Friday evening when I was growing up only a few miles from here, as a member of the Boys Brigade, at St Johns’ Church, Inverkeithing. A church where the famous Ebenezer Brown had preached for 55 years in the late 18th and early 19th century. Where Robert Moffat had sat in the pews possibly contemplating one of his great expeditions to Africa in the 1800s.

But for me it was the place I grew up. Friday nights at the BBs. Under the watchful and guiding leadership of Jackie Pope and John Belford. Servants of the community and role models to us boys.

Sunday morning playing the church organ – oh my goodness, that church organ. It was awful! Beautiful, but terribly wheezy and barely audible. I suspect we’ve all been there...! And then one day the minister, the Reverend Bill Baird – he was such a lovely man – said, ‘we really must do something about this.’ And so the minutes of the meeting of the Kirk Session read as follows:

“Volume from church organ unacceptable. Order placed for one new electric motor to power the bellows.”

And so it was, a new electric motor was fitted to power the bellows. But no-one had thought to check what the right specification was for the new motor.

Well, friends. I will never forget. The first hymn that morning was, “All people that on earth do dwell.” And, let me put it this way, when I played the opening chord, I think all people on earth that morning must have had their fingers in their ears. Because even though we were in Fife, I think that organ could be heard in Aberdeen! The minutes of the next meeting of the Kirk Session read as follows:

“Volume from church organ unacceptable. Order placed for 50 sets of ear defenders.”

Well I made up the bit about the Kirk Session minutes, but the rest of it is absolutely true. And of course it meant that our choice of hymns became ever more strident. “Bill,” I would say, “do we really need to sing Onward Christian Soldiers for the fifth week running...?” Formative years and happy days. And days without which I would not have gone on to do what I have done in my career.

Days that taught me about the inevitable “storms of life, when the clouds unfold their wings of strife. When the strong tides lift and the cables strain, will your anchor drift, or firm remain?”

Our job in the Armed Forces is to help face the storms of life. To do our part to stop conflicts starting, and if they start, to help bring them to an end as quickly as possible. And right now, of course, we live in a very stormy world in which there is a lot of conflict going on.

And so perhaps more than ever, we feel the weight of our responsibility. Our responsibility to protect the nation. Our responsibility towards the security, stability and prosperity of the places we live, of our families and of our friends.

In the RAF, we currently have almost every front-line aircraft type committed to operations. Across eastern Europe, the Middle East, in Cyprus and the Falkland Islands. Our Quick Reaction Alert aircraft are on stand-by 24 hours a day to protect UK airspace. We’ve also been patrolling over the Black Sea and along the Eastern Border of the NATO Alliance in the face of Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine. And at the same time, we’ve continued to conduct operations against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. And as tensions heightened in Sudan last year, we evacuated more than 2,000 people from the country, bringing them to safety. And more recently, we conducted airdrops of aid into Gaza, directly to the people who need it. But these are responsibilities that none of us can discharge on our own. Which is why the incredible team – the incredible community – that is the Armed Services, owes all that it is to the people whose sense of responsibility and service drives them towards being part of that great calling that is to serve our country.

And amongst those, today I single out our Service chaplains. In the excellent report for the Kirk of their work over the past year, we are reminded of what a vital role you play in that most important aspect of teamwork – the belief and trust that propels us forward - what we know as the moral component.

I remember a few years ago being in charge of RAF operations in the Middle East during a particularly tense period in that region. In the operations centre, our UK team would oversee our missions 24-hours a day, experiencing the pressure of making life or death decisions, while our pilots would place themselves in harm’s way every day in the skies over some of the most dangerous places on earth. I remember one day being over in operations centre. On the screens, live feeds from across the region showed our own aircraft and those of the Coalition going about their activity. Sitting earnestly over their consuls were our operations staff – professional, diligent, busy – many of them very young. And then in the corner, was our resident chaplain, not getting in the way, but there. Just there. As the operational events started to escalate, he said to one of the team, “shall I leave?” “No”, came the reply from one the team, “please stay, it’s good to have you here”.

It’s good to have you here.

Let me assure you friends, that it would simply not be possible to navigate Service life without the ability to talk, to confide, to reflect, to laugh, to cry, or to remember.

And that's what our Service chaplains help us to do.

And so in sharing in the experiences of those they serve alongside, our service chaplains occupy a unique place in the fabric of these, our important national institutions, on whom our reliance amidst the storms of life seems greater now than at any time for many decades. And so, to our chaplains, and on behalf of all of the Services, I say thank you.

Thank you for the generous, steadfast and dedicated way you support the Service family and for the part you play in ensuring that our Armed Services can help navigate the storms of life by meeting the challenge that is placed down in front of us, for the sake of our country, our friends and our families. And to those who would serve, to the extent that you might join us in helping to meet these challenges, I hope you consider yourself most welcome.

To quote Hebrews Chapter 6, Verse 19; "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast..."

Let us hope this to be true and trust that it is.

I wish you all the best for the rest of your proceedings, for which I trust no ear defenders will be required!

Thank you again for your support, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning.