

Speech: Defence Secretary celebrates UK's partnerships at Airpower 2017

It's great to be here again.

Let's begin with a few thank yous.

First to the Air Power Association and our sponsors today for putting together a marvellous event in a majestic venue.

Next, to our overseas guests. We've managed to squeeze the world into one room, with 45 or so air forces from five continents here today, and more than 40 further locations joining us virtually.

Those who can't be here will be disappointed to learn they are, for once, missing out on some unusually balmy British weather. However, I'm not just grateful for your attendance, but also for your co-operation week in week out providing over flight access, training with our squadrons, who operate side-by-side with us.

When I think of our joint efforts, I think particularly of our 70 nation Counter Daesh coalition. As I took office three years ago this week, these Islamist terrorists were barely an hour from the gates of Baghdad. Following your contribution in support of Iraqi Security Forces they've been defeated in Mosul – the last Iraqi city they've held.

When I think of joint effort too, I think of our NATO missions. Many in this room are part of those air policing patrols over the Baltic and now Black Sea skies.

And in the year of its 70th birthday, let me thank the United States Air Force for being our enduring ally throughout that time. I'm delighted we have General David Goldfein, the US Air Force Chief of Staff here today. Because he will attest to the role the USAF and Marine Corps have played in training up our F-35 pilots and ground crews.

We have around 125 pilots and ground crew training in the United States on our 10 F35s and others in the United States, turning our Royal Air Force into a 5th generation enabled force that takes us that one step closer to the regeneration of our carrier strike capability. With HMS Queen Elizabeth now embarked on sea trials the day when those fighters will fly from her deck will soon be with us.

The story of our new fighters brings me neatly to another thank you: to industry.

Last year the UK became the European repair hub for F-35 avionic and aircraft components. It's a huge endorsement of the Team UK approach, involving a pioneering collaboration between two companies and our own Defence Electronics and Components Agency. And that bid proved so compelling that the

UK was chosen not just as the European but as also the global support provider. Beyond F-35, we know that our pilots couldn't fly without seamless synchronisation with industry partners arming and maintaining their aircraft.

I've one final thank you if I may. To our Royal Air Force – many of whom are with us at their home bases and deployed on location across the globe. You're currently involved in 13 missions across four continents in more than 22 countries.

Besides striking more than 750 Daesh targets in Mosul, you are providing much valued ISR to our Coalition partners in southern Syria, you're helping to lead NATO in Eastern Europe, making friends and promoting British influence and industrial brilliance through our Typhoons and Red Arrows on Eastern Venture last year. And while you've been doing all that, our Quick Reaction Alert crews are tirelessly guarding the home front 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to secure our skies.

99 years on from the formation of the RAF, you are delivering air and space power, epitomising professional excellence and taking that extraordinary relationship between human and machine to new heights.

PARTNERSHIPS

Now, these partnerships between people and planes, between industry and the RAF, between the RAF and our great overseas allies, have been the mainstay of air power for almost a century.

But, as this the title of this conference's suggests, '21st century partnerships', our team approach must change to endure. To understand why and how consider again those three key air power partnerships.

1. PEOPLE AND AEROPLANES

First, planes and people. Our machines are undergoing a radical revolution. We're been using our rising defence budget to spend £178bn Stirling on upgrading our kit and our future air fleet is now beginning to emerge.

It will include eyes in the sky like Protector: capable of circling at 50,000ft feet for 40 hours, more than doubling the capability of our relentless Reapers.

It will include fifth generation strike fighters like F-35 and two new squadrons of Typhoons.

And I can announce today we have signed a £40m contract over the next two years to upgrade their Defensive Aids Sub System, which already includes missile warning, on-board electronic countermeasures and decoys, but will provide even stronger protection against evolving air-to-air and surface-to-air threats.

In the coming weeks and months you can expect to find some of our next generation equipment on display at RIAT, this week, and DSEI in September.

A reminder that these are also sources of prosperity we can export to allies. All these disparate devices are linked by their capacity to Hoover up information. But as we soak up more and more intelligence, we must get better and better at getting to grips with all this big data.

Increasingly, the secret lies in automation: not removing people from the equation, but helping humans solve the problem.

Recently, we launched a £3 million pound competition for companies to develop machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence to crunch the data and create a comprehensive picture of the virtual battlefield, freeing up our people to make better decisions.

Already, 30 firms have been allocated the money they've got six months left to deliver before the next phase. And I for one, can't wait to see what they come up with. Yet, as we embrace this new tech we must also start to attract a new type of high flier into the air service.

The new RAF strategy is rightly focused precisely on these people challenges and has already put some of the sharpest minds in the RAF onto that task. The emerging picture looks set to challenge cherished preconceived ideas raising such questions as whether it's time to wean ourselves off our attachment to hierarchy.

In the future, we'll need surely to pick people based on a wider range of skills: people as attuned to apps as aeroplanes, switched on cyber warriors who don't fit the traditional mould.

What will make our life harder in seeking and retaining these people is the fact that our competitors in the jobs market will come from multinational tech companies like Google who spend on infrastructure what we spend on defence.

But there are things we can do to make our life easier: widening our recruitment pool, making the most of the talents of all our people whatever their colour, religion or gender.

Last year I lifted the ban on women serving in close combat units in the British military. Since then the Royal Armoured Corps has opened its ranks to women. The Royal Marines will follow on next year.

Today I can announce the RAF regiment—the ground fighting force of the Royal Air Force – is also adapting to the modern age—a year ahead of schedule—by offering roles to women from this September.

2. INDUSTRY AND AIR FORCE

As we reconfigure the relationship between the RAF and our personnel we also need to reset that vital relationship between defence and industry to keep ahead of the curve.

We've already heard about how the RAF's Rapid Capability Office is partnering with Leonardo to develop next generation decoys to defeat air-to-air and surface to air missiles: an arrangement based on mutually aligned incentives,

where both sides put in equal funding and gain an equitable share of the profits, so the RAF can then invest again in new capability.

Yet, this same Office is not just looking for the next big idea but for simple, smarter ways to deliver more from what we already have. Take Weapon Stockpile management critical for sustaining fight in flight. The Rapid Capability Office is working closely with our Defence Equipment and Support organisation to calculate and understand the shelf life of weapons, potentially saving defence millions, whilst ensuring our personnel have access to the most up-to-date capabilities to take the fight to the enemy.

That kind of RAF efficiency needs to become the rule not the exception. So we're now re-activating the famous Battle of Britain 601 Squadron of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, tapping into the talents of leaders from industry, academia and research to advise and shape and inspire our organisation.

To inspire industry to develop blue-skies disruptive capability and introduce a younger generation to subjects like science, engineering and maths, so integral to the future of air power. That will mean reminding young people of the stories of our great inventors and imagineers.

We have had no shortage of brilliant brains. From jet engine inventor Frank Whittle 80 years ago, to Michael Faraday, whose statue you passed as you walked in this morning, and who 170 years ago was the first to report the effects of quantum size particles, contributing to the birth of nano-science, and is now being used to devise kit like self-healing aircraft.

These are stories that remind us that a job in air power is a chance to truly change the world.

3. RAF AND THE WORLD

The final relationship that must change fundamentally in the 21st century.

The partnership between our RAF and our international friends and allies who are so welcome here today. We're stronger when we stand together.

Today there's never been a greater need to unite, since we're facing a raft of 21st century threats from Russian aggression in Ukraine and further afield to the nuclear menace of a belligerent North Korea. From the impact of mass migration on the shores of our continent to the wave of cyber attackers we've seen recently.

These threats—unprecedented in their complexity, in their concurrence, and their diversity and multiplicity—demand a new response.

I know that partnership comes as second nature, not just to the RAF, but to all the airmen and women who are here in this room.

Yet, in the past partnership almost happened by accident. Today, as our 2015 SDSR and the new RAF strategy conclude, it has to happen by design. Across the globe, you'll find us strengthening our commitment to co-operation. When it came to the purchase of the P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft there

was another opportunity to join forces with others.

So, a fortnight ago, I signed a trilateral statement of intent with Norway and the US, creating guiding principles for a trilateral P-8A coalition, whilst laying down a framework for further cooperation in readiness, enhanced defence capability and interoperability.

And while I'm mentioning our new P8 Squadrons, I can today reveal their first commanding officer will be Wing Commander James Hanson. They will be based in RAF Lossiemouth in Morayshire and their names will be 120 Squadron—recalling the RAF's highest scoring anti-submarine unit in the Second World War, fittingly for a Squadron that will scour the seas their motto is "endurance"; and 201 Squadron, named after one of the RAF's oldest formations.

201's old motto "here and everywhere" neatly sums up the approach of our Joint Expeditionary Force which we've just extended to nine-nations, with Sweden and Finland joining last month. This too will provide us with greater possibilities for partnership: from responding very quickly to humanitarian tasks, to rescuing our citizens from crisis hotspots, and conducting more minor military missions.

We're not just strengthening bi-lateral ties with the US and Norway, but with our close French partners. Six years ago, when the Lancaster House treaties promised ever closer cooperation some were sceptical as to what that might mean.

Yet today our aircrews are flying in each others' aircraft against the Daesh, our defence companies are producing world-leading missiles, and we are supporting French operations, by providing air transport to assist French counter-terrorism operations in Africa.

This agreement made at Amiens last year expires at the end of this month. But the need does not. So, as we look forward to the next UK-French Summit this autumn, I have agreed to continue providing this air transport support for at least the next six months.

The point is our nations are key allies. Together we are the backbone for European security in an era of evolving threats and instability, originating from both southern and eastern flanks of Europe.

As we look to life beyond the political framework of the EU, with the largest navy in Europe, an Armed Forces whose professionalism is second to none, you will find Britain stepping up and reaching out to old friends and new allies alike, with our RAF, our greatest ambassadors, leading the way.

CONCLUSION

In the past 99 years great airpower partnerships changed the nature of warfare. And as the 21st century threats increase, as our 21st century air fleets emerge, let's now seize the chance to forge even stronger 21st century partnerships: augmenting our air forces, inspiring our people, overwhelming our adversaries, and helping our nations soar to even greater heights.