

Speech: PM's speech at RAF100 Centenary celebration in Downing Street

It is great to see so many servicemen and women here for these special centenary celebrations – and a particular honour to welcome Mary Ellis – who flew Spitfires and bombers to frontline bases in World War Two – and Colin Bell – who was a pathfinder and Mosquito pilot.

I want to begin by telling you about an extraordinary moment recently, when on the way back from Cyprus, my plane was intercepted by two RAF Typhoon jets.

As they – I am not sure of the right expression here – pulled up alongside my plane, they tipped their wings and revealed their weapons – a gesture that I understand is a warning, perhaps a little like a lion baring its teeth.

It was a most extraordinary sight. A true heart in mouth moment.

And even though I knew it was a mock exercise, I was given a rare glimpse into what it must be like in a Russian aircraft probing UK airspace, or in an airliner not responding to air traffic control.

No one who has witnessed such a moment could ever doubt the skill, the rapidity of response or the might of Britain's Royal Air Force.

And it made me immensely proud – proud not only of our impressive military force but of the skill, courage and dedication of our airmen and women who for 100 years have so valiantly defended our skies and kept our enemies at bay.

From those flying aces of the First World War to the pilots of Typhoon jets that can break the sound barrier.

From those early pioneering engineers to the ground crew, technicians, air traffic controllers, nurses, medical staff, drivers, and flight operations officers of today.

The men and women of the Royal Air Force have always stood for bravery, service, duty, and standing alongside your peers in the Royal Navy and Army.

And today, in an increasingly uncertain world, your skill and courage are vital to the air and space power which allows the UK to respond quickly and decisively around the world.

Whether that is mounting immediate disaster relief, or an evacuation operation as we did in the Caribbean last autumn. Fighting Daesh in Syria and Iraq as the second largest contributor to air operations in the region. Or conducting a long range precision strike mission within a matter of hours as

we did in Syria last month – one of the gravest decisions I have ever taken as Prime Minister.

And as the threats we face continue to intensify and evolve – from the resurgence of state based threats to the regional instability exploited by extremists – air power will continue to play a decisive role in protecting the security and prosperity of our nation, people and allies.

So it is fantastic that next month our F-35 Lightning stealth fighter jets will arrive in the UK ahead of schedule, ensuring that Britain remains at the forefront of international air power – and maritime power too with our Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers.

And it is fitting that 617 Squadron – the squadron of the legendary Dambusters – will be stood up again and its pilots will fly these most advanced fighter jets.

But it is not just in combat and emergency operations that the RAF has made such a significant contribution to this country and our way of life – it is also in the desire to give back, and the support you give to communities here and overseas. From sustaining our links with the Falklands or resupplying the French military in Mali to your countless contributions to communities across the United Kingdom.

For one hundred years, the RAF has proved it is not only the first independent air force in the world, but the finest. It stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines and the Army in defending our nation and promoting our values, and I am delighted that members of each Service are here this evening.

And to those here today on the threshold of their careers, I want to say what a great choice you have made.

Because, in whichever branch of the Armed Forces you serve, you will be the worthy successors of those brave, innovative and inspirational men and women who have gone before you.

From the Battle of Britain to Bomber Command, from the Falklands to the Gulf War, from humanitarian relief operations to those who fly today's missions against Daesh in Syria and Iraq – we owe the men and women of our RAF an immense debt of gratitude, as we do all our servicemen and women.

On behalf of the nation, thank you. Thank you for your dedication. Thank you for the many sacrifices you make. Thank you for a century of extraordinary service and courage.