

17th October: 100 Years of the RAF

Talk given by Group Captain Simon Paterson

We were given an account of how the early pioneers, such as the Wright Brothers and Bleriot, showed the potential of flying. Then in 1912 the Balloon Corps and the Royal Flying Corps were formed and used for aerial reconnaissance. These were followed by the Royal Naval Air Corps in 1916. Unfortunately at that time, neither the Army nor the Royal Navy were interested in air power, largely because in the years leading up to the beginning of the First World War the Government, only too aware of Britain's maritime history and responsibilities, had been too busy concentrating on building up the navy in competition with Germany. It was the far sightedness of Field Marshall Smuts and Winston Churchill, both of whom saw the potential of air reconnaissance for troops on the ground in identifying where enemy positions were located, that led to the creation of the RAF in 1918 as a fighting force. Indeed it was a combination of the RAF, tanks and other mechanised weapons that speeded up the conclusion of the war. There was little progress in developing the RAF during the 1920s and early 1930s, until the threat of Hitler's Luftwaffe made the Government take air power seriously, as we know from the valiant efforts of the Spitfire and Hurricane pilots during the Battle of Britain in 1940. Even so, it was not until 1944 that the RAF was technologically up to steam.

We also had an interesting and very personal story of how the speaker joined the RAF in 1992, became a helicopter pilot and rose through the ranks by service in Northern Ireland during the Troubles with the IRA, then in Afghanistan, then the Second Gulf War in Iraq and again in Afghanistan. The emotional problems involved in modern warfare, the speed of making decisions involving life and death situations, the advantages and disadvantages of helicopter warfare, were all brought home to the audience who were given an insight into the stresses and strains of being a pilot in the difficult circumstances of warfare in the 21st Century.