

**THE ELEVENTH IN OUR “TALKING HEADS” SERIES TOOK PLACE ON 29<sup>TH</sup>**  
**JULY 2021**



The Master, Dr Kathy Seddon, welcomed Liveryman and friends to the eleventh in the Talking Heads series. Kathy introduced the conversationalists for the evening Group Captain Andrew Turk DFC ADC MA, Station Commander, RAF Valley, one of our Affiliated centres, and Past Master, Wing Commander Graeme Morgan, Chair of our Awards Committee. A particular welcome was given to our guests Wing Commander Rory McLaren and Squadron Leader Penelope Butterfield.

Graeme began the evening by stating that Andy was the first “Talking Head” to come from outside the Company and thanked him for joining us. He wanted to know what had changed since he left the RAF and noted that there were fewer Station Commanders so felt Andy could be considered a Minor Deity! Graeme asked particularly about Andy’s expectations and motivation to join the RAF

*Short Interruption due to a fire in the BT exchange in Bangor exchange that affected Anglesey’s broadband.*

Then Andy thanked everyone for the invitation to speak and described the affiliated status as a great honour. Andy described how he had joined the RAF, as Graeme left, over 30 years ago There were huge opportunities for youngsters provided by the RAF that he is keen to replicate today. He joined when the cold war was coming to a close and peace was becoming the norm. It was obvious that recruitment would be reduced so he signed up at 18 and loved it. Andy felt it fulfilled a childhood dream as he had been an air cadet and the first time he flew was in a Chipmunk.

Immediately after his officer training his first role, whilst waiting for the start of his aircrew training, was a tour in Germany. The Tornado Squadrons were just coming back from the desert, and they were accorded a memorable hero’s welcome that was very exciting. In the background Andy’s day job was with SHQ where he learned a lot about leadership. Subsequently, after starting his flying training, after a year his role changed from pilot to navigator in a Tornado.

Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria were places that the RAF went to interventionally- rather than through NATO Article 5 - where the role is defence against the Russians. Andy described

how as a Squadron Commander he was sent to Libya with 48 hours' notice launching sorties from Norfolk and 48 hours later they were in Italy in sustained operations over Libya – very exciting.

Graeme then asked about the Tornado and its performance. Andy agreed that it was part of the legacy of classic aircraft of the RAF. It was designed to fly at 200 feet, to avoid enemy radar, through cloud and fog, using autopilot, at 600 knots. A group of four or eight ships flew together in the pitch black. Planning was intense and forensic, using 'terrain following radar' that painted the surroundings six miles ahead, projecting a safe line ahead for the aircraft to follow. In forty years, there wasn't a single crash with TFR. A fantastic piece of kit! They had legacy weapons up to large nuclear bombs. Once the Cold War disappeared the emphasis shifted from mass destruction to precision. They used advanced technology with fewer aircraft required to fly to a target and reduced collateral damage – a legal requirement. Laser guided bombs were used where a cross hair on the target directs a laser spot which the bomb guides to. They had proved it in Gulf War one and were then using it more adaptively at low level. The technology evolved and the planes were upgraded with high grade GPS causing a change in the role of the Navigator. The kit knew where it was so the role was to pick out more difficult targets, hitting individual windows or individuals. Having two people in an aircraft was great in terms of shared situational awareness and gave great mutual support.

Graeme then asked about Andy's experiences on operations.

Andy recalled patrolling with Rory in Tornados in Iraq. As Saddam Hussain became increasingly aggressive it became more intense. Five years later Gulf War II started, and Andy was a weapons instructor with 617 Squadron (Dam Busters). They were bringing in a new cruise missile 'Storm Shadow' which was top secret. It was a 'bunker buster' weapon. They were brand new and took a long time to programme (months rather than minutes as they were still in the trials stage). Turkey pulled out of the Coalition causing a change of plan. Rather than flying from Turkey and releasing the weapons from NW of Baghdad, they had to launch from Kuwait in the SE but still fly to the original launch point NW of Baghdad and be there 'on time'. Therefore, on the first night had to fly ahead of everyone, routing to the west of Baghdad to release the weapons. Also, unusually the ground invasion was brought forward and was now taking place at the same time. Looking down with night vision goggles the world was on fire. They spotted a missile that was tracking them. There was no warning. They jettisoned their fuel tanks, so the aircraft was much lighter, one more manoeuvre and the missile exploded behind them. They had fired one weapon but had to return with one missile and with low fuel. This was the first of many similar operations.

Another memorable operation was Libya - the first-time combat missions were launched for the UK since WWII. Two days later they were in Italy. Gadhafi's regime was driving tanks through the city and their air support allowed the opposition to fight back. In Afghanistan it was sobering to hear what was going on, on the ground it was important to give people space to fight back. In Syria, with Assad, operations were very complicated with Russian intervention adding in another factor.

Graeme then asked about RAF Valley, the last remaining major presence in Wales. Andy noted that command at any level is an honour and a privilege but especially with 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of RAF Valley and the Centenary of the Training School These will be recognised in September, in Bangor, due to Covid. Andy described them as a very happy bunch of 1500 people, the second largest employer on the island and the biggest single employment location on Anglesey. Their work involves training air crew, saving lives and sustaining the front line. They are the only fast jet pilot training centre for the UK. All RAF and Royal Navy fast jet units depend on RAF Valley to train their world class pilots. Texan aircraft are fitted with modern avionics and are powered by propellor, alongside the Hawk T2 for advanced jet training and Jupiter helicopters for maritime, mountain and search and rescue training. Forty pilots are

trained from each platform, each year, but more than that they assist more widely with Mountain Rescue 24/7, apprenticeship training, providing a civilian airfield and contributing to the local community. Covid has made things difficult but forward planning has helped. In terms of noise the Texan aircraft is the main factor due to its propellor. When RAF Linton on Ouse in Yorkshire closed down, the aircraft came to Valley, but they try to keep it over the sea and away from built up areas. It is important to maintain the front line of air defence is dependent on training these pilots, however.

Graeme then asked about Search and Rescue which is now contracted out.

Bristow took over the service and their crews are mostly ex-military and work well with personnel at Valley. Valley delivers training for search and rescue, for instance recently in Cyprus their crews coped with forest fires. A key area is the Royal Navy Carrier Fleet which must be trained to do its own search and rescue. Bristow have a drone to drop rescue packages ahead of the team. The RAF therefore stay supporting – but from a slight distance.

Graeme then asked about the future: drones, facial recognition etc less warfare more policework? Whither the RAF now?

Andy noted that they use the term “remotely piloted air systems” as there is a human in the loop; it isn’t autonomous. This raises the question about what it does it mean to be in the fight? Operators see some dramatic scenes that can cause mental health issues.

The RAF also have a swarming drone squadron that could overwhelm a missile system. Cyber is very interesting and is in grey space between competition and conflict - where Putin loves to be. It is difficult militarily and morally and is the subject of numerous Staff College essays!

Graeme’s final question was about misadventures. Andy responded that some things sear themselves into one’s consciousness. One was a very near miss in Wales as a Hawk crossed his plane at three feet – he grabbed the ejector seat handle, but all was well. Another was in Kuwait when he watched a patriot launch hitting an inbound scud missile and a couple of days later, he watched a surface-to-air missile pass between his formation that he felt he should have probably given a more timely alert about.

Past Master Geoff Hughes gave a vote of thanks for the privilege of hearing from such a very distinguished serviceman (DFC) Geoff felt Andy’s enthusiasm came across loud and clear and would be important to those under his command. Geoff also commended the adaptability of the armed forces to new changing conditions, saying it was good to know that they are there protecting us. He asked Andy to pass on our gratitude to all those at RAF Valley. Geoff also thanked Graeme for his excellent questioning saying he carried out his mission with military precision and with little collateral damage! We finished an excellent evening with a toast to the speakers and to the Livery.



Talking Heads with Group Captain Andrew Turk DFC ADC MA, Station Commander, RAF Valley, one of our Affiliated centres, and Past Master, Wing Commander Graeme Morgan, Chair of our Awards Committee