**A Brief Historical Reflection**

*“It is very difficult to know what one can do for these RFC people as Chaplain….I am now living with the fourth out of my six squadrons; and to my horror today I was told that another squadron is just about to come into the Wing- making a total of 7…they are ripping fellows these officers and I like them muchly - but it still remains to be seen whether one can be of any use to them or not.”*

So wrote The Revd R W Dugdale in a letter home from France during WW1. Such thoughts are sure to resonate with any RAF chaplain at the start of their service since the inception of the Branch in 1918. While the RAF has made immense technological advances, and has changed almost beyond recognition in the past 90 years the heart of our work and calling remains the same.

**The Foundation Years**

The Revd H D L Veiner was asked to establish a Chaplains Department for the Royal Air Force in May 1918, having been seconded from his work in the Royal Navy. By 1919, the RAF Chaplains’ Branch consisted of 21 C of E commissioned chaplains and 14 ‘other denomination’ chaplains. Veiner writes of those early years:

*“Just as for the next few years determined attempts were made to break up the RAF, and divide it up again into a Naval and Military Wing, so attacks were directed against the independence of this Chaplaincy Service. At times it was, in spite of strong opposition, within an ace of being absorbed by the Army. Brought up…in an atmosphere free of uniform, and*

*of the possible difficulties which do sometimes attend the holding of rank, I felt that in the new Force, which was more akin to the Army, Chaplains would be better in uniform. At first I held out against rank, but it seemed rather impossible to devise any uniform without badges of rank - such a kit too closely resembled the Church Army officer, or the canteen worker of that time, and, admirable as they were, they perhaps did not wish to be mistaken for a Chaplain. And so it came about that uniform was worn, and rank held, and both are retained today - on the whole, I think, for the better. Whether uniform is a hindrance or not depends upon the type of man who wears it, and how he wears it. It is most satisfactory to know that Prayers are read during the week in practically every station, and in some every day - by the Chaplain, by the Commanding Officer, or by some other officer. They were introduced at the very start, and in spite of difficulties have prevailed.”*

By the mid-1930s, there were Chaplaincies in Egypt, Aden, Palestine and Transjordan, Iraq, India and Singapore. Small RAF units in the UK were cared for by Officiating chaplains from the local community, while commissioned chaplains operated in teams on the larger units.At the outbreak of the Second World War, the RAF Chaplains Branch was deployed across all continents. Over 1000 clergymen would serve in the Branch between 1939 and 1945, several becoming Prisoners of War in Europe or the Far East, and a small but significant number losing their lives during active service. During this period church life was generated and nurtured. Bible study groups were set up, confirmation classes held, and Churches were created from tents, barrack blocks, corners of hangars, and tea-bars. Daily prayers were offered at every unit, and in the POW camps. An extract from Padre Fisk’s letter home from Iraq in 1943 gives us some sense of life in the ‘quiet moments’:

*“I am having a very happy time with my new Unit and feeling very much at home already. Did I tell you I hired the cinema in a town nearby for last Sunday evening’s service? To my surprise, they almost filled the place and we had a very fine and inspiring service preceded by some community hymn singing. There was a wonderful atmosphere. I also had three services in the morning and felt the day was very encouraging. We have a Bible Class on Wednesday Evenings in my tent and have decided to study the Acts of the Apostles. We also have a very good Toc H meeting on Fridays. I am also Welfare Officer and what with one thing and another, seem to find plenty to do. There are some famous Roman ruins somewhere near here which I hope to try to find tomorrow so I can take some parties out. We seem to get a lot of wind here so that dust gets into everything in the tent. But on the whole we cope very well indeed and I am enjoying the life.”*

Just as today, chaplains during this period could truly say that they went everywhere with their people and faced the same dangers that their people faced. Even those chaplains who served at home were exposed to real challenges.

Padre Martin, based for a time at Oakington in Cambridgeshire received a daily postbag of requests for news from relatives of downed aircrew:

*Dear Sir,*

*I wonder if you can give me advice. My husband has wrote to me, he is now a POW. Well*

*I have been writing to his crew’s next of kin. We promised each other we would write as soon as we get news. Well, Frank says the other ‘boys’ were killed. I don’t feel as if I can write and tell them. What shall I do, if I write and say I’ve heard from my husband they will want to know about thier (sic) loved ones. Please let me know what you think I ought to do.*

*Yours sincerely*

Padre Martin’s experience was replicated across the country as chaplains took on the task of writing to bereaved relatives, recovering bodies from the wreckage of aircraft, or burying the dead. Overseas or at home, the work of the Royal Air Force Chaplains’ Branch during this period was truly one of service and sacrifice.

**The Cold War Years**

Building on the experiences of chaplaincy in the Second World War, the Branch was now an

established part of RAF life. Moral Leadership courses were now being provided worldwide, along with the pastoral and liturgical roles that had been ‘bread and butter’ from the very start. This period represents a very settled era in the Branch’s history. Chaplains served all over the world under many different commands and each denominational group had its own chain of command. The daily work of a chaplain at unit level could be recognised by those who serve today.

Padre R S Meadows, who joined the Chaplains’ Branch in 1943, wrote the following in the 60s when he was serving as the Assistant Chaplain-in-Chief, Bomber and Transport Command:

*“Being few in number (for instance, there are only 88 C of E commissioned chaplains in the whole of the Royal Air Force), the padre can expect to spend half his career overseas- “You have been selected for posting to Iceland” read a friendly little note I received in 1943! There is no lack of variety! Certainly in the course of 16 years a chaplain can expect posting to one of the Youth Schools, to Operational Units in the Home Commands,interspersed with probably three overseas tours one of which may well be unaccompanied. In addition to the normal parochial duties which absorb weekdays and Sundays and with probably up to three evenings a week, there is always the unexpected, usually in the shape of visitors to the office with problems of every kind. There is no limit to the nature and scope of queries that confront us day by day, but it is our privilege to be there for our interest is people.”*

But while the structure and work of the branch had become settled, the world had not. This was a period of turmoil, when issues such as the ‘The Morality of Pacifism and the Nuclear Deterrent’ were debated at Amport House. Chaplains continued to be involved in work in the most hostile places. Padre Alexander Ross freely volunteered to minister to small groups of RAF personnel who had been deployed during the Indonesian campaign. When the light aircraft in which he had been travelling came under small arms fire, Padre Ross was fatally wounded. His loss was keenly felt by the Branch.

**Operational Chaplaincy**

The Argentinean invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982 saw RAF Chaplains supporting Operation Corporate from home and overseas bases. However, Port Stanley and later Mount Pleasant, quickly became part of life for RAF Chaplains who have had a continuing ministry and presence on the Island to the present day. Many things have changed, and yet most would recognise the surroundings, however Chaplains now serve accompanied for 12 months.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union ushered in a new era in world history which brought with it new and challenging roles for the Royal Air Force and therefore the Chaplains Branch.

Since the end of the ‘Cold War’ the RAF has been under constant change and development while facing almost constant operational commitments. In August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the RAF mounted the largest operation since 1982. However, this time Chaplains deployed with their people. Within weeks a full Chaplaincy team was in theatre and working to full capacity. This marked a new beginning for RAF Chaplaincy. No longer were Chaplains ‘nice to have’ but considered an essential part of any deploying force. Indeed in recent years a Joint Service Chaplaincy post has been established at the Permanent Joint Headquarters to ensure an appropriate and timely Chaplaincy input to any emerging operation.

Throughout the 1990’s RAF Chaplains have served in all Operational Theatres, from the Gulf to Bosnia, and Kuwait to Kosovo. Gulf War 2 marked a further development in Operational Chaplaincy with the British Forces deploying a Joint Chaplaincy Command Structure, under the leadership of a Senior RAF Chaplain, Padre Stephen Ware.

Chaplains continue to serve in the operational theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan.

**From Padre’s Hours to the Beliefs and Values Programme and beyond**

In 1940 the Air Member for Personnel expressed concern about the spiritual and moral welfare of the quickly expanding Royal Air Force. Chaplaincy responded with the formal introduction of the ‘Padre’s Hour’ which ranged from a chat with tea and biscuits to preparation for confirmation and church membership. Over the years these sessions changed and developed with each generation until a major review beginning in 1992 resulted in the introduction of the groundbreaking Beliefs and Values Programme (BVP). The BVP, developed by a working group led by Padre Phil Sladen and supervised by Dr Michael Grimmit of Birmingham University, changed the dynamic of Chaplaincy input to the training

world. The latest version of the BVP continues to influence the men and women of the Royal Air Force as it explores the core values of Respect, Integrity, Service and Excellence in all things from a spiritual perspective. The BVP has also been the basis of chaplaincy involvement in the work of Force Development which engages with personnel on a regular basis throughout their career, dealing with ethical, moral and welfare issues. The BVP is also widely used in NATO, and has influenced the training programmes of our sister services.

**Branch Structures**

The structures of the Chaplains’ Branch remained fairly static, for the first 70 years or so. However, the restructuring RAF and the reduction in numbers from 100000 to 41000 over the last 20 years had an impact in the way in which the Branch was structured. The work of the Branch management in the 1990’s shaped the way for today’s unified management structure, with a Chaplaincy Board chaired by the Chaplain in Chief, who can now be of any denomination.

**Ministrare Non Ministrari**

To serve not to be served continues to be the motto of today’s Chaplains Branch, and I hope and pray that in a changing world our founding Fathers would still recognise that our ministry to the Royal Air Force is one of service in the name of our Lord and Saviour.