

RAFA
Annual Conference
Eastbourne
2013

Report to Branch 13th May 2013

The main concerns at the Conference were:

- the declining numbers of members and active members
- how to deal with the membership funding deficit
- the way of recruiting new, younger members
- improving communications
- reaching out to the public with a clear, simple message of who we are and what we do.

The decline in membership.

In 2002, membership stood at approximately 97,000, by the end of 2012 it was around 65,500; it is estimated it will reduce to about 40,000 or lower by 2020 with the inevitable reduction in the numbers of Branches and Clubs. Only a small proportion of today's membership is considered to be 'active'.

These numbers affect the Association's ability to finance itself and the Branches to fundraise, run their welfare work or to function as a Branch or Club.

Membership income. Subscriptions amounted to £650,000 last year with membership costs at £1.3m, showing a deficit of more than £600,000. This gap needs to be closed. Cost reductions have been made particularly with the staff review of 2012 (£200,000) but Council demands further cost savings.

The question of how to recruit new, and particularly, younger members is fundamental. Numbers of young serving RAF personnel joining RAFA have increased quite substantially in recent years. Opening up the associate membership to individuals who have never served but who have an interest in aircraft, a family connection to or affection for the RAF is to be encouraged.

Communication: Lifestyles have changed, people spend more time online. There is room for making better use of IT (with the advantage of lowering costs). The website, Airmail and Branch Newsletters need improving. A launch paper for improving communication has been put together by several members of the Council.

Reaching the public, particularly in its fundraising capacity, with a clear, simple image of ourselves could possibly be brought about by bringing together the RAFA, the RAFBF and the RAF CT under something like 'The RAF Foundation', thereby retaining the RAF identity and eliminating the sense that the three are in some ways competing with each other.

In his pre-conference statement titled 'Royal Air Forces Association 2020', Sir Dusty had outlined three options:

Accept the inevitable, continue as we are and face closure when the RAF Association is no longer able to sustain its objects.

Take resolute action to ensure the survival of the existing model: to increase membership, bear down on costs and provide more effective support to Branches and Clubs

To lead the formation of an 'RAF Foundation' drawing together other charities such as the RAFBF and possibly the RAF CT, reshape the structures accordingly and recast aspirations to suite the likely environment and needs beyond 2020.

Sir Dusty had recommended taking Option 2 and holding Option 3 in reserve for later, if needed.

On the afternoon of the first day, the President put aside the rules of procedure and opened up the debate on membership. Ideas and discussion came from the floor, the two main issues being a) the concern, particularly among some older members that the comradeship and shared history would be affected by opening up the organisation to too many members of the public who had never served and b) how best to use modern methods and

thinking (particularly the use of IT) to reach out to younger potential members. Sir Dusty's approach helped to clear the air and bring the varying concerns of delegates out into the open. One example particularly illustrates this. The need for a modern, relevant Association was passionately put forward by a young RAFALO, a Corporal stationed on Cyprus who faced the President vigorously with the challenge of reaching out to his (the Corporal's) contemporaries whose interest lay mainly in the number of their beer tokens. The 'discussion' between the two lasted some lively few minutes with the Corporal taking the upper hand and Sir Dusty turning eventually to Conference with the good humoured remark, 'It's not often you see a Corporal challenging an Air Marshal' only for the Corporal to come back with 'No Sir, I'm not a Corporal – an acting Corporal.' The Conference erupted with loud and hearty applause. Sir Dusty's open approach helped to clear the air. By the second morning of Conference it was generally accepted that change was essential and that the Association should now move forward.

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13.5.13