

It is always an incredibly sad day when a squadron is disbanded and none more so when it is a squadron that has served with such honour, pride, distinction and bravery over these last 96 years. But as well as being a sad occasion, it is also a moment to celebrate the achievements that you and your forefathers have wrought. From your early years as a Royal Naval Air Squadron, you were plunged into the thick of operations during World War 1, serving as part of the Independent Bomber Force and earning the first of your many battle honours. I know that you are proud of your naval heritage, thus woe betide anyone who, in their ignorance of your history, makes the cardinal sin of calling you 'two-one-six'! I am also delighted to announce that, on petition from your squadron commander, I have last week granted my approval for you to lay your squadron standard to rest in the Fleet Air Memorial Church in Yeovilton, a fitting final resting place that reflects and honours your Naval origins.

Over the years, you spent the first third of your Service history based overseas. I know that this is why there are only 3 of your 77 war graves in this country and I am delighted that you have made such efforts to pay your respects to those that you could in the United Kingdom, France and Italy. Remembering our fallen is important, so with the memory of 216 Squadron living on in your Association and sister Air Training Corps squadron, perhaps when the political climate allows you might keep in mind the Squadron's wish that these graves are not forgotten and you can visit their locations in such places as Libya, the Sudan and Egypt. I am also delighted to hear of the Association's plans to raise sufficient funds to erect a permanent memorial to 216 Squadron in the National Arboretum – this is most fitting and may serve as a focal point for your future Association activities.

It is clear from the vast majority of aircraft types that 216 Squadron has made its particular niche in air transport. Whilst you started out as a bomber squadron, flirted briefly as a parachute airdropping squadron and had a few more forays into bombing, the gifts that your motto alludes to you bearing, for the most part have been people. You had the distinction of being the world's first jet transport squadron and were trusted with the utmost of responsibilities, that of transporting HM, The Queen amongst many other worthy and important dignitaries in your role as a VIP squadron. However, Mr Hart aside [our oldest Association member who was on 216 Sqn when it flew Dakotas in 1942], for those of you here today the aircraft that has been synonymous with 216 Squadron has been the Tristar.

Another of Mr Lockheed's iconic aircraft, the Tristar has served you, the RAF and Defence incredibly well. And here I echo your Squadron Commander's comments in thanking everyone who has played a part in keeping the Tristar flying. The integration with industry that 216 Squadron trail blazed back in 1982 when we purchased the Tristar was vital. Whether from British Airways who taught our pilots and engineers, to Marshalls of Cambridge who modified the aircraft into the tanker variants, to Rolls Royce who maintained the engines and to Cobham without whom the Tristar would have remained a passenger only aircraft, your input was vital. But that support didn't stop there and it is only through your support over the intervening 30 years, joined by that of Thales and Northrop Grumman in the intervening period, that we can be here to celebrate the end of the Tristar in the manner that we have. I know that it has been a difficult journey at times, especially when the RAF became the only remaining user of note of the Tristar, making support and sourcing spares all the more difficult, but it is the lessons of that partnership with industry that we hope to reap in the future with the relationships we have in managing our remaining Air Mobility fleets of C130J, C17,

Voyager and, soon, the Atlas. I know from speaking to many of you in my time in command of 2 Group that you all have a love of the Tristar, both those who fly on it and those who maintain it. For some of you this is all you have known, for others it keeps bringing you back and the sense of family you feel is measureable.

But a squadron is not really about aircraft, it is about people. Your forefathers, the previous Commanding Officers and you, those who currently serve on 216 Squadron. For some of you, I know that this is the last time that you will dine in the Service as you prepare for a future outside in the next few months. So to: Flight Lieutenants Butler, Gill, Hollowood and Quaife, Warrant Officers Lee, Murphy and Tedd, Chief Technicians Hayes and Webb and Sergeants Ronald and Whyte [this list is subject to change and I will update accordingly next week], thank you for your Service and I wish you all the best in your future careers or retirement.

And so to your achievements operating the Tristar. You played a role in every major conflict that this country has been involved in since 1982. You were the lifeline to the Falkland Islands for the first 10 years and the arrival of Timmy or Tommy down in those desolate islands was a welcome relief to those waiting to go home to their loved ones, only surpassed by your subsequent departure. You earned your operational spurs on Operation GRANBY, flying an incredible amount of hours in both the air transport and AAR roles. You contributed to the constant presence of AAR support to Operation RESINATE and then spent 8 years detached to Italy supporting AAR operations in both of the Balkan's conflicts. You provided the lifeline to operations in Iraq, again in both roles, and were the key enabler to allow operations in Libya to be so successful in 2011. I am delighted that we have finally been able to recognise the contribution of those who took part in this campaign with the belated award of those campaign medals today. [If this part of the day goes ahead]. You have been back to the Gulf with an AAR detachment to Mussanna and have just returned from a highly successful deployment to replace the VC10 in the Falkland Islands.

Around all this operational activity, you have supported exercises around the world, led trails of fast jets to wherever they needed to be, supported fast jet AAR training in the UK and held the most critical of responsibilities in protecting the integrity of the United Kingdom through Operation TANSOR.

But perhaps your most defining commitment over these last 10 years has been your support to Operation HERRICK. From those hairy, early days of flying into Kabul which we would be hard-pressed to justify safely in today's risk conscious environment, to Kandahar and then finally Bastion. With the relentless drumbeat of the schedule, unrelenting fatigue and the pressure to deliver, you have done so. You have been the face of the RAF to much of the Defence community and unfairly shouldered the criticism for events outside your control. During the dark days of the introduction of defensive aids, when you worked tirelessly with Northrop Grumman to bring this vital capability into service and ironed out the inevitable teething problems, you took your own actions to improve the perception of the service you provided. You initiated 'Beer for the Boys' and over these last 7 years have raised an incredible amount of money to enable your pledge to give every Serviceperson a cold beer on their journey out of harm's way. You have raised over £116,000 which you have given to units for their homecoming parades and have given out over 187,000 cans of beer. These things matter and do not go unnoticed by those who tell me how significant such a seemingly simple act meant to them on their return home.

In the wider community you have also played a huge role. You have been the bulk of volunteers for front of house duties during the heartbreaking but important repatriation ceremonies and over this last year have raised an outstanding sum of money for charity, much of it to support the worthwhile and vital work of the RAF Benevolent Fund. Thank you.

In closing, I go back to your work on Operation HERRICK. Those 1,642 sorties took you over 16 million nautical miles over 6500 separate sectors. That is enough to fly around the world over 640 times and to the moon and back 33 times. You will have served approximately a million meals and 2 million 'refreshing cups of squash'! You will have taken ¼ million passengers to Afghanistan, but perhaps more importantly, some ¼ million personnel, some of them injured, home to their loved ones. These were indeed the gifts that you have born. Most of those will never know your names or the part you played, but on behalf of them, Defence, the RAF and myself, thank you.

I know that the 'can do' ethos of 216 Squadron will continue in the fleets and jobs that you move on to and that the memory of the Squadron will survive in your thriving Association and Air Training Corps' namesake. Enjoy your hangar party next week and your Gala Dinner in April – you have deserved it.

I now ask you all to stand and toast 216 Squadron.

AVM Reynolds
AOC 2 Group