

The speech

30 June 1971 (48 years ago) at 7 o'clock in the morning I stepped onto a train. As well as 73 other young lads, at various locations in the UK with a common destination - RAF Halton.

Five months earlier I had informed my parents I was going to join the RAF. I remember my father's words well – I'm not buying you out.

I remember the common introduction who are you and where are you from? My answer I am Paul I'm from Boston. The reply would be, where's that? My answer, Lincolnshire. Again, the quizzical expression followed by what's your nearest football team. This would be to try and place you, unfortunately there are no senior league football teams in Lincolnshire

Well, many if not most, may not have known where Boston or Lincolnshire was then, but today you certainly do.

Ladies and gentlemen welcome to Lincolnshire.

A county with strong connections to the RAF it is often referred to as the bomber county. This association is due to the large number of bomber squadrons based here during the Second World War. It still has strong connections to the RAF. The Red Arrows at Scampton. Battle of Britain flight at Coningsby and officer training at Cranwell. Until recently anybody joining the RAF would have been at Swinderby down the road if male or Spitalgate near Grantham if you were female. Being Trenchard brats though we were different. A little bit exclusive you may say.

Now most people think Lincolnshire is flat and smells of rotting vegetables. Well that's not quite right, it's not all flat. There are the Wolds 25 miles in that direction. (*Point easterly direction*) Where RAF Binbrook used to be often described as a mini Yorkshire moors. And we are on the ridge that runs north to south known as the Lincoln Heights. Where the Lincoln Cathedral and Castle sit. There is a gap through which the river Witham flows 35 miles to the Wash. On its way it passes a tall church tower known as the Boston Stump. The stump and the river provided a navigation aid for returning RAF bomber crews.

Lincolnshire is known mainly for its fine agricultural produce. Cauliflowers, cabbages, potatoes, Brussel sprouts and sugar beet. Local specialities are Stuffed chine - salted pork filled with herbs, plum bread, Grantham gingerbread biscuits, Haslett - pork meatloaf made with stale white bread, sage, salt and black pepper (buy the ones with the crust) and last but not least Lincolnshire sausages spiced with sage. Washed down, with Batemans, good honest ales.

But not just vegetables and bombs come from Lincolnshire. Famous people such as Hereward the Wake, the Pilgrim Fathers, Sir Isaac Newton, Mrs Thatcher, Abi Titmus, Bernie Taupin, Sheridan Smith, Jenifer Saunders, Michael Foales (the astronaut) and Guy Martin all have origins in this fine county.

A lot of people come and retire here apparently for the old fashioned slow pace of life. Well not quite so slow, according to the Lincolnshire constabulary, who are very busy chasing speeding motorists and reminding us of the dangers of speeding?

So. Why did I or any of us leave home to join the Royal Air Force?

To get our hair cut unfashionably short, to be shouted at and called rooky, share a room with strangers and generally be treated with contempt and abused.

From the information on our website. Acquired by Bob. The official reasons for our motivation! were:-

To be trained for a trade and payed for doing it.	23%
Tradition. Because parents and family served, or had served.	11%
Member of the Air training corps.	20%
Parents wishes!	3%
To travel.	2%
Individual decision. (Own idea)	10%
Advert in the newspaper.	5%
Other?	15%

What interests me is the other. Because everybody has differing reasons for leaving home, friends and familiar surroundings.

Possible 'other' could be:-

Media influences in films such as Dam busters, Battle of Britain, 633 Squadron.

Fascination with aircraft.

The masculine image, wearing a Uniform. Sport. Job Security.

Now perhaps we would say the lifestyle.

In the 60's a well known writer. Leslie Thomas, wrote the book about national service called The Virgin Soldiers. Implied regular servicemen were misfits or oddballs, who not fitting into their communities, staying in the armed forces because civilian life would have no place for them.

For me I wanted something I could have job satisfaction and pride in. To be challenged, develop, away from the influences of my surroundings. To travel a different path.

I served in the RAF man and boy for three decades, something I did not expect to do.

The seventies. Not a bad time, but not great either. Pay diminished, accommodation, single and married was tired and cheaply maintained, too many old fashioned Snco's, troubles in Northern Ireland causing gate guard duties and a public who did not regard the armed forces highly.

The eighties for me was the best, after the fireman's strike, the Iranian embassy siege and the Falklands our stock as it were, began to rise and Maggie certainly appreciated the armed forces. Money was being spent. The second half I was in Germany; cash in my account and easy travel around Europe. The lifestyle was good. Then the wall came down.

The nineties. When it started to go downhill. The drawn down or peace dividend (where did that go?). Aircraft scrapped, stations closed. The main area of activity centred around the Middle East. There the highlight of your time off, was doing your washing. No drink, No fun. Although the forces standing in the public eye was higher than it ever was, with lots of home coming parades.

I will never forget my first day as a civilian again, it was 9/11.

I am proud to have been an RAF apprentice. It saddens me that a young person of today does not have the range of options open to them, or the opportunity to live in Europe that we had.

Now everybody has their own reasons for joining and leaving. Some left before finishing Halton; some did their nine/twelve years, some their twenty two. We each make our own choice.

Five years on from when I got on that train. I went home for a weekend, and on the Monday I got up to go back to camp. Looking out of the window I saw a car pull up on the car park near the yard where dad worked. Out got the driver getting into his skins (inclement weather clothing) waders and carrying his collie cutting knife. I recognised him, he was in the year ahead of me at school, and in fact if I remember right, he was the deputy head boy. I thought here I am an aircraft engineer on Buccaneer aircraft, travelled to Malta, Denmark, and Scotland. If I had not joined, then most likely that would have been me. I knew then I had made the right choice.

I know wish to propose a toast. They say it takes all sorts and kinds. My experience of life is that it does.

So my first toast is to the odds and sods, the misfits, mavericks and nonconformists, the others.

Second toast to absent friends.

Third toast to the rest of our lives may we live them well. (Paul Pickwell)