

Report to the Council

Date: 24 April 2018

Subject: Freedom of the District - 56 Squadron Royal Air Force

Report : Chairman of Council, Councillor D Stallan

Recommendations:

(1) That on the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the RAF on 1 April 1918, the historic links between the communities of Epping Forest District and the Royal Air Force be celebrated, and

(2) That in recognition of this Council's commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant and the particularly close links with North Weald Airfield, the following motion be considered:

Motion to be moved by Councillor B Rolfe and seconded by Councillor A Grigg

"That, in the year of the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Royal Air Force on 1 April 1918, this Council reaffirms its commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant and the bonds of friendship between our Armed Forces and the people of Epping Forest District through the conferral of the Freedom of the District on 56 Squadron – the Royal Air Force", and

(3) That subject to approval of the motion by a minimum two-thirds majority, Wing Commander Matthew Fleckney MA RAF be invited to receive the Freedom of the District on behalf of 56 Squadron.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

1. National celebrations are being held during 2018 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Royal Air Force on 1 April 1918. To note the special links between the RAF and the District, it is proposed to bring a resolution to Council recommending the conferral of the Freedom of the District upon 56 Squadron which served at North Weald Airfield before and during the Battle of Britain. Section 249(5) of the Local Government Act 1972 (amended by Section 180 of the Local Government Act 1980) provides that a district or borough council may confer such an honour provided a resolution is passed by no less than two-thirds of the members voting at a specially convened meeting of the Council. The title of Honorary Freeman does not confer any rights.

History of the Proposal:

2. The first operational flight from North Weald Airfield on 18 June 1916 pre-dates the foundation of the RAF by almost two years. The airfield was commissioned as part of the defences against a new form of warfare, aerial bombardment of civilians. London was the primary target and North Weald was well placed for the defence. Zeppelins were the quarry of the Royal Flying Corps, with squadrons from North Weald among the first to see action. Thus began a new era of warfare in which the home counties of England found themselves in the Front Line.

3. On 1 April 1918 the Royal Flying Corps became the Royal Air Force. The Armistice was signed later that year. Many squadrons were disbanded and North Weald was closed soon

after. However, in 1922 a decision was made to reopen North Weald. By 1927, the Airfield was once again operational and had become the base of 56 Squadron, one of the most distinguished units of the RAF.

4. From the 'string and paper' aircraft of the early 1920s, 56 Squadron was to become part of the community and heritage of the district. By the outbreak of war in 1939, it was equipped with the new Hawker Hurricane fighters with which North Weald was to become most closely associated. The Hurricanes of 56 Squadron covered the retreat from Dunkirk and were among the first committed to what became known as the Battle of Britain.

5. By the time 56 Squadron finally transferred to RAF Duxford via Martlesham Heath in June 1941 it had been based at the airfield for some 14 years, the longest association of any squadron with North Weald.

6. The War came to all parts of the District. The Gunpowder Mills of Royal Ordnance in Waltham Abbey were among the key targets but the area's proximity to London made nowhere safe. Among the worst tragedies still remembered today was the destruction of the Prince of Wales Public House in Manor Road, Chigwell. A German aircraft thought to have become lost during a raid on the London docks dropped its bombs. The attack was devastating. Forty six people were officially known to have died but the true death toll is thought to have been nearer to 100.

7. By the end of World War II, the RAF presence within the area of Epping Forest District was extensive. Further wartime airfields were established at Stapleford Abbots and Willingale. The Balloon Site at Chigwell provided a base for intelligence units as well as barrage balloons for the defence of London. Blake Hall near Ongar had become a base of RAF operations. A 'dummy' airfield at Nazeing was established to draw the bombers of the Luftwaffe away from their real targets. RAF personnel were billeted in people's homes across the district. RAF casualties were buried in St Andrew's Churchyard.

Extracts from the Armed Forces Covenant

8. The Armed Forces Covenant as set out by the Government of the United Kingdom is 'An enduring Covenant between the People of the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government and all those who served or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their families.' Local Authorities play a key role in the upholding of the Armed Forces Covenant.

9. The Covenant continues 'The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfil that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families. They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment.'

10. Under the terms of the Covenant, the obligation of the Nation involves the whole of society. It 'includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.'

RAF 100 – the 100th Anniversary of the foundation of the RAF

11. The RAF has played unique role in the history of the United Kingdom. It has established itself as a key component in the defence of our freedom and democracy. A number of events are being held across the Country to mark and celebrate the Centenary of the RAF. Should a

motion to grant the Freedom of the District to 56 Squadron be passed by Full Council, it is proposed to hold a local commemorative celebration at North Weald later this year.

Parade and Community Music Event

12. Details of the community event to be held on Sunday 10 June at North Weald have been developed in consultation with representatives of 56 Squadron and North Weald Bassett Parish Council. Representation by the Ongar and North Weald branch of the Royal Air Force Association and other potential supporters are being sought as the project evolves.

13. At the request of 56 Squadron, should a motion to confer the Freedom of the District be approved, it is proposed that serving and former members of 56 Squadron escorted by the Epping Forest Pipe Band, exercise the right to parade through North Weald Bassett from the Village Hall to the Airfield Gate Guardian via the Airfield Memorial and Debt of Honour. Rolling road closures will minimise disruption to traffic flow during the march from the Village Hall to the Gate Guardian. The Chief Executive has agreed to the waiving of the District Council's fees in relation to the application of a Temporary Traffic Regulation Order (to be applied for in advance of the event).

14. On arrival at the Airfield, members of 56 Squadron will be greeted by the Chairman of Epping Forest District Council and other Civic Dignitaries. Upon completion of a parade inspection with a senior representative of the RAF, residents will be invited to bring picnics and enjoy an afternoon of musical entertainment provided by various bands in attendance. Refreshment concessions will also be available for those who prefer to obtain food and drink at the event.

15. This is a District-wide event. Invitations for this event will be sent to the Lord Lieutenant, High Sheriff, Members of Parliament and all County, District and Parish Councillors. Invitations will also be extended to members of the Royal British Legion, veteran associations and the general public. Attendance at the parade, entrance to the event and music will be free of charge to all.

16. Subject to the success of a bid submitted by representatives of the Royal Air Force, the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Spitfire and Hurricane will perform a fly pass over the airfield during the event.

17. A Budget of approximately £10,500 has been sourced from current funding identified by Airfield Operations for a Community Day (Neighbourhoods), supported by Public Relations (Governance). This event will replace the previously held Community Day. Funding will also be sort through sponsorship from airfield tenants and it is hoped that the area for the event will be dressed with static aircraft that are based on the airfield.

18. Should this event prove successful with the public, similar events could take place in the future and in time become income generating through ticket sales and sponsorship.

Financial Implications:

From within existing budget allocations £1,500 in 2017/18 and £9,000 in 2018/19 financial years.