

## RAFA Overseas Area and Conference Report



This years RAFA Overseas Area Conference was held the day prior to the RAFA Annual Conference in Blackpool on the weekend 16-19 May. Richie Atha braved the passenger seat for the 8 hour journey each way as I borrowed the family wheels for the weekend trek to Blackpool and back. We had a tight schedule to stick to, and in turns out a lot of socialising to be done in the margins. Arriving on the Thursday night just after midnight - we managed to secure a night cap - and hit the internet to realise that RAFA had splashed out in style and we were staying in a hotel rated 73rd out of 73 in Blackpool according to Trip Advisor! As it turns out this was of little consequence as we hung out with the crowd, where-ever they ended up down the Blackpool strip each evening.

The Friday Overseas Area Conference was held at the same time as the annual RAFALO conference nearby so Richie managed to meet up with old mates and colleagues, while as new Chairman, I met with many many wonderful folk from the overseas and UK branches and got to meet with the leadership of RAFA from both the overseas and Central Council perspectives.

The Friday was very much focused specifically on issues related to our overseas branches. Dwindling membership, lapsed members, and financial constraints were key themes in common with all branches. However the passion and dedication of these branches was the over-riding take away and it is abundantly clear that despite significant challenges, the overseas branches are still going strong.

My 3 key takeaways came from this 3/4 day session:

1. Many branches have welcome packs at Station/Unit arrivals level - **we should replicate this.**

2. The healthy competition between (overseas) branches is wonderful and tangible. Standby for some **targets for the Belgian branch** so we can show our colleagues what we are made of!

3. The issue of **Welfare training for overseas branches** was raised again. Belgium is ideally placed and relatively accessible to provide a central point to conduct such training. Something to look at at the tail end of this year. The welfare presentations by Rory O'Connor and his team over the weekend were first class and enlightening, and will be the subject of a subsequent article in the next edition of our newsletter.

Also of note and a theme throughout the weekend: RAFA strategy is being positively refreshed, with the newly appointed RAFA Secretary General, Nick Bunting at the helm. This is ideal timing as we look to focus on refreshing our own Belgian Branch strategy supporting our own key Welfare deliverables.

So plenty of food for thought for me as your Chairman - and thought that will evolve into strategy and presentations from me to your committee throughout the coming months, and then with your committees input we can hit the streets and implement our collective ideas when the time is right.

The RAF Association's main conference started on Saturday morning to a weekend of full sunshine and clear skies. As the Belgian delegate I got to sit in and vote on a variety of issues from the vote on the new Central Council members (congratulations again Dick) through to welfare issues, and even the stickiness of the RAFA Wings Stickers! Powerful stuff indeed.



Joking apart, the weekend was enlightening and excellent value. One could not help but be impressed by the passion, dedication, friendliness and clear focus on Welfare and Support issues throughout the delegates, attendees and paid help. The Conference served as a clear reminder to me that the core values that are part of the Military genes and makeup, the esprit de corps, the intangibles that true camaraderie brings to an organisation, the very things that attract young men and women to the RAF - these intangibles become very visible and tangible indeed when looking at RAFA and what we do collectively. As a member led welfare charity we have a lot to be proud of, and we can all associate with the desire to remain in the tight knit community of serving and ex serving personnel and their families. I am humbled and delighted to be a part of it [RAFA] frankly.

Throughout the weekend the village was manned by serving personnel, Air Cadets from 177 ATC, the Calendar Girls fundraisers – dressed in full 1940's vintage style (Richie and I felt duty bound to chaperone the Girls and protect them from all the RAF Pilot types...), Top Gun Racing and Roundall Racing motorbike teams along with staff from around the country. The RAF Falcons parachute display team descended on the exhibition vehicle outside the Winter Gardens to help build Wings windmills for the kids' sandcastles and talk to the public about how they are helping to support the RAF's welfare charity of choice.

RAFA welfare personnel were able to talk to the public about the Storybook Wings initiative with their sofa and books providing a comfortable and cosy place to read a child a story in the shade.

Meanwhile, inside the Winter Gardens the organisation's event for its members got under way with an opening ceremony, a silent tribute conducted by the Chaplain in Chief of the Royal Air Force and address by the Mayor of Blackpool. RAFA wanted to highlight the reason the RAF Association was established, which is to provide friendship, help and support to the RAF family. And this year we focused on the welfare we deliver.





Saturday evening's awards included presentations to several branches, RAF station teams and air Cadet squadrons for their fundraising and membership contributions.

Sunday morning started with a parade along Blackpool sea front to the Armed Forces Memorial. The RAF College Band from Cranwell led the March past and salute to the event's dignitaries. At the memorial there was a service and flypast from the RAF Tucano Display Team resplendent with the Association's Wings Logo on the underbelly of the aircraft reminding onlookers why we were all there.

Further information can be found at  
<https://twitter.com/hashtag/RAFAC14>