

ACT OF COMMEMORATION – INTRODUCTION BY AIR MARSHAL SIR CHRISTOPHER HARPER

General, Ladies and Gentlemen, Veterans, Friends of the Royal Air Forces Association.

On behalf of my Honorary Co-President Sqd Ldr Edward Hearn DFC and Bar, and members of the Branch Committee, welcome.

A particular welcome to General Van Caelenberge Belgian Chief of Defence – Sir, your support has been invaluable for the realisation of this Remembrance Service, thank you. I also feel proud to be able to mention that we have Royal recognition for this Service, and that His Majesty King Philippe has let us know that he very much appreciates the work that we do to keep the memory and values of sacrifice and comradeship alive among our veterans and our younger generations alike.

The seating is a bit of a challenge today with this grand number, but we wanted to keep our focus here on the Air Force Chapel where, I hope, you can all see the superb stained glass windows that are at the heart of our Remembrance Service.

What we see here today came about as a result of an initiative in late 1987 by the Royal Air Forces Association Belgian Branch (led by Chairman Bob Walkden, whose wife Ghislaine is with us today). They decided to commission Anglo-Belgian Air Forces Memorial Windows in memory of Belgian Members of the Royal Air Force and those who died in the cause of liberty and freedom: they sought to raise 400,000 BF, but thanks to the magnificent fund-raising efforts of many, in particular our President at the time Air Cdre Sir Dennis Mitchell, actually raised the truly astonishing sum of 1.5 Million BF which enabled the creation not only of the full set of windows but also the 'Golden Book' (the Roll of Honour) with the names of those Belgian airmen who died in the service of the Royal Air Force, and the plaques of the 22 RAF Squadrons on which Belgians served.

As commemorated by the plaque on the wall to my right, the windows were dedicated in a very grand ceremony in the presence of King Baudouin 25 years ago this month. This significant anniversary gives us the opportunity to remind ourselves of the importance of the Air Force associated linkages between the United Kingdom and Belgium and to remember those who gave so much during and after World War II.

This Service is particular dedicated to the Belgians who served in the RAF (and we still have a significant few here today), also to the people throughout Belgium who supported the crews of downed aircraft (and who still commemorate these numerous tragic events – some of whom are also with us today), as well as to those dedicated Belgians who, at great risk to their own lives, acted as Secret Agents or who operated with the Belgian Escape Lines, in particular the Comet Line, which brought so many airmen to safety.

The Royal Air Forces Association is committed to providing friendship, help and support to the broad Royal Air Force Family – we are pleased that this event has enabled us to bring together, for a short while, so many organisations and individuals who share common aims. To mark the occasion and to provide a permanent reminder for future generations, we have installed a new plaque on the wall on my left which I would now ask Padre Jones to bless.