



House master: Sir Neil Thorne, Chairman of AFPS

COMMONS KNOWLEDGE

THE ARMED FORCES PARLIAMENTARY SCHEME GIVES POLITICIANS A TASTE OF MILITARY LIFE WRITES IAN CARR

For many, the machinations of the Westminster village may seem a world away. But, like it or not, the decisions made there affect us all. So when Parliament is moulding our future it would be nice to think that those expressing their views at least know what they are talking about.

Yet for the more active among us, leaving such things to chance is not an option. Which is why, 24 years ago, philanthropist Sir Neil Thorne founded

the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme (AFPS).

"When I entered the House," he told *Defence Focus*, "there were very few Members of Parliament with direct military experience and there are even fewer today, which was having a serious effect on the quality of our debates on defence issues."

One problem facing MPs who want to learn about what makes the military mind tick is getting access to troops at a working level. When they do have contact with the

Armed Forces, for example, as a member of a select committee, the opportunities for MPs to get a good understanding of what life is like for the troops are rare.

"I know from when I was a member of the House of Commons Defence Committee that the military tend to treat you as if you are at least a two-star officer," said Sir Neil. "Well you won't learn anything about what



Picture: Matt Clark

Sky's the limit: Godfrey Bloom MEP, advanced postgraduate

goes on at the coal face that way."

So, from the outset, the idea behind the scheme was to give politicians from all the main parties a chance to get access at an appropriate level. Which means getting MPs into a uniform sweating alongside soldiers, sailors or airmen.

"When I was setting it up, I told the Services I wanted the members to be crawling through the bushes with the Corporals, feeling the weight of the kit and the wet of the ditches," said Sir Neil.

Over the last two decades the AFPS has expanded to include Members of the House of Lords, MEPs, and even the occasional flash of pinstripe can be seen. "I quite like to get high-fliers from the Treasury who might one day be standing next to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and who can ask 'is that wise Chancellor?' when he is considering cuts to the Defence Budget," said Sir Neil.

Each year a two-day introduction to Defence is held at the Defence Academy at Shrivenham where MPs get to experience the nuts and bolts of military life. They learn about the role of the military in a democracy, the strategic context for defence, and how forces are generated to achieve military strategic objectives. Discussions are mixed in with practical sessions where attendees get to handle equipment and have their knees buckle under the weight of a Bergen.

Those who want to carry on must commit to spending 22 days on the scheme in the first year, and 20 days each year if they come back for the second and third level. The MPs attach themselves to a Service of their choice and at some stage during the year embed with their chosen unit for five consecutive days. "That's where they learn what members of the Armed Forces are all about," said Sir Neil.

To make it more meaningful, students are given a notional rank and a uniform with a specially designed AFPS crest. As a motivator, promotion can be gained as members progress through the course.

In the first year, graduates learn about life at company commander level. "Looking at Service life from the perspective of a Lieutenant Commander, Major or Squadron Leader is most appropriate because the company commander should know quite a lot about everybody under their command, their backgrounds, and what they have to do on a day-to-day basis," said Sir Neil.

In the second year, postgraduates experience life at the next command level (Wing Commander and equivalent) and then in the third year they learn about the responsibilities of a full Colonel and rank equivalents. Rounding off the course, a fourth year looks at how today's military co-operate in a joint environment.

For people whose diaries are groaning with engagements, signing up is a huge commitment. But it is clearly considered to be worth it. Even politicians who have direct and recent experience of Defence make time for the course.

Last year, former Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth took part. "The lectures and question sessions were invaluable. Access to this quality of debate is hard to come by," he told *Defence Focus*. Another former MOD Boss, John Reid, now Lord Reid, has also been on the course, saying: "It's invaluable for an understanding of the issues which we have to confront."

Advanced members attend a number of high-calibre lectures at the Royal College of Defence Studies in Belgrave Square. Commandant Vice Admiral Charles Style said that having the AFPS

defence agenda and Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir David Richards has encouraged every peer and Member of Parliament to sign up to the scheme.

After the last election, when MPs were quizzed on constituency doorsteps about Afghanistan, 74 MPs said they wanted to sign up to the AFPS. "That was a record year," said Sir Neil, who was only too happy to accommodate them all.

The politicians' interest does not surprise Vice Admiral Style. "For a period after the Second World War, and with national service lasting into the early 60s, it used to be that Parliament was full of people who knew military business first hand," he reflects. "But it isn't like that now, and meanwhile the world is a tricky place, so AFPS has to be a good investment for national parliamentary knowledge and



Food for thought: Member of Tynwald, Manxman Juan Watterson



High flier: Madeleine Moon MP of the Defence Select Committee



On target: Baroness Fookes of Plymouth, advanced postgraduate

Pictures: LA(Phot) Jay Allen

members was a mutually beneficial arrangement. "If we are discussing some really difficult developing international security problem, and we have an ex-Defence Secretary in the group, they can give us a hugely valuable insight into how such things are handled."

The scheme has MOD backing. "This couldn't be done if MOD didn't support it, because they provide the attachments," said Sir Neil, who has an annual meeting with the Defence Secretary who he says, often comes up with new ideas for the scheme's development.

The public, too, are pushing the

decision-making."

But with the well-being of those who comprise the Armed Forces ever close to his heart, Sir Neil sees another equally important role for his initiative. "I always say to the MPs on the scheme, 'look, the Admirals, Generals and Air Marshals always have avenues they can follow to make their points - it's the soldiers, sailors and airmen who haven't got a line to the Secretary of State, that are relying on you to speak up for them'." And, thanks to AFPS, when the politicians speak, it is safe to assume that they know what they are talking about. **DF**