

ACNS Ships speech – General Assembly 2019

Rear Admiral Higham

Note: The script below is provided for reference as originally written; speech content may have differed in delivery and this document should not therefore be used as a source for official quotes.

It is a great honour for me to speak at the General Assembly today, on behalf of Vice Admiral Nick Hine, the Second Sea Lord, and the Royal Navy, to thank the Kirk for its steadfast support to my Service and indeed the entire Armed Forces community. And, most importantly, to thank you for your continued provision of our cherished Church of Scotland Chaplains and to report on the truly global effort they've been part of this year.

By now, my accent will have given away the unfortunate ... but inescapable fact that my personal heritage is not Scots. My roots lie predominantly in Ireland but my mother in law was a proud Orcadian – is there any other sort – and she taught me that accents don't really cut it anyway. True heritage lies in dialect, a language in its own right ... and when it comes to alternative languages, the Royal Navy can more than hold its own! We've even got our own dictionary – Jack Speak; Jack, of course, being the Naval term for a sailor ... Jolly Jack Tar. And even if you've never seen the book you'll recognize many of the phrases in Jack Speak that have passed into common use - All above board for example - was the description for anything stored on deck, visible to all and so definitely not pirated goods ... to pull your finger out was what a gunner's mate would do in getting ready to fire, his finger having been keeping the priming powder in place above the ignition hole of a canon.

As well as these characteristically practical phrases, many show the humorous side of a sailor's character – never far from the surface in my experience – and you'll not be surprised to know that Chaplains attract numerous entries in Jackspeak: the Bish; Amen Wallah, Sin Bosun and Maker's rep are all listed. But by far the most common though is "God botherer".

And, as a professing God botherer myself, I like it because it seems to capture so much of the Navy's prevailing view of God and helps us to understand why the bond between sailor and Chaplain is such a strong one.

What's interesting to me is that it suggests that the existence of a God, is something of a given.

Perhaps not as surprising as it seems given that sailors spend so much of their lives at the mercy of the elements, experiencing both the beauty and majesty of the night sky and the terror and power of an ocean storm. From that angle it's no wonder that the idea of God has always been such a tangible notion to sailors - it just isn't something that we bother about very much – the chaplain, our God botherer is there to do that for us.

And just as our Naval language permeates our everyday life and culture, I think there are parallels too with a sailor's attitude to God and people ashore. Just as the daily rhythm of life at sea is designed to keep men busy ... Call the hands; hands piped to breakfast, latitude and distance traveled calculated, noon proclaimed and so on, the modern lives of everyday people are much the same are they not? The drive to work, school drop off, watching the next episode of whatever it might be, the diet, the half marathon, the next holiday ... We know there's more to life than the daily grind but we're distracted. Distracted by the excitement of life and submerged under its trial and tribulation. We have a sense of the bigger kingdom, a bigger God, something more meaningful but we find ourselves distracted by the little kingdoms, the little gods, here on earth. Our inner thoughts are quite deep, our private fears profound but the hustle and bustle of modern life keeps these hopes and fears at bay.

I hope this gives you a richer idea of how the heritage of the Naval Chaplain gives them such a unique and vital role in the work of our Service today. That fundamental acceptance that they work on our behalf, to a greater agenda than the current tactical circumstances might dictate, and the fact that in the Navy ... unique among the armed forces ... they wear no hierarchical rank confirms an agenda centered firmly on our people and their welfare. The people who are truly our greatest asset, the people without whom there would be no Naval Service. Recognition too that the spiritual domain, the well-being of the mind as well as the body is such a central part of good leadership in the Royal Navy. Indeed, the Deputy Chaplain of the Fleet, Scott Shackleton, leads our own Naval Service Ethics Committee, encouraging a just culture of reasonable challenge. Our Chaplains are also helping us improve on our proud record of inclusivity and the strides we're making to ensure Naval life is fair for all ... while recognizing that there's much more to be done for the Service to be truly reflective of the Nation it serves.

So enough of the general, what exactly have our chaplains and the Fleet they serve been up to this year?

Well it's a busy and upbeat picture. For the first time in my 30 year career the Navy is growing. Growing in terms of both our people and our ships. From 2015 to 2025 the tonnage of grey steel we operate will increase by 30%. Fueled by a future ship and

submarine build programme that includes the 2 magnificent 65 000 ton aircraft carriers that I saw in all their glory from the aircraft window as I landed in Edinburgh yesterday.

The fourth of seven Astute Class Submarines, HMS Audacious, being finished in Barrow over the summer before joining the rest of the submarine Flotilla based at Naval Base in Faslane, a base which this year had the pleasure of hosting the last moderator. A visit on which she took part in life raft drills with our sailors and submariners and also visited to the community hub at Helensburgh to meet their families.

Then of course there are the 5 new Offshore Patrol Vessels being built at Govan where the Type 26 Anti-submarine warfare frigates continue to take shape – now a truly global design success with Australia and Canada planning to build their own derivatives. The first of the Royal Navy's Type 26 frigates will be named HMS Glasgow, demonstrating the enduring close bonds between the banks of the Clyde, our ships and the women and men that sail in them.

In the here and now of current operations, the Navy is in high political demand. As well as the Queen Elizabeth's much vaunted deployment to the Eastern seaboard of the United States, we've maintained a near-permanent presence in the Indo-Pacific with the Type 23 Frigates HMS Sutherland, Argyll & Montrose as well as the Amphibious Landing Ship HMS Albion. Add to this the return to polar ice by the submarine HMS Trenchant; the Royal Marines deployments from the Arctic Tundra of Norway to the jungles of Brunei and Belize; the RN Medical Service delivering a UN field hospital in South Sudan; HMS DRAGON disrupting illicit activity in the Indian Ocean, with 5 major drug busts in a 3 month operation; as well as our usual activity in the middle east, Mediterranean, North and South Atlantic and I hope you can understand why we claim to be one of the few genuinely global Navies.

And everywhere that the Royal Navy has gone, your Chaplains - our Chaplains - have been with us.

With more than half having been able to deploy in 2018 alone. This year marked 50 years' of unbroken deterrent patrols, a tale of remarkable human dedication and commitment with Chaplain Mark Davidson, among their number, recently completing his second Deterrent Patrol and now returning to lead an ecumenical ministry at Helensburgh.

Indeed, we'd love to work with more women and men from the Church of Scotland, whether in the Regular or Reserve service at sea or ashore, with sailors or Royal Marines Commando, far afield or here in Scotland.

I hope you can see from that brief snapshot, not only can the RN hold up a record of distinguished service that stretches back almost half a millennium, we're also demonstrating our enduring utility - right now - on current operations, delivering tangible effect around the globe in the bold, confident manner that befits the traditions of our service. A Service that's in great demand.

And above all, because the architects of our future success are the extraordinary men and women who make up today's Naval Service, I hope I've given some insight into how and why the ministry of our chaplains amongst those people is so cherished.