



Roger Helmer writes

HONOURING THE MILITARY COVENANT

WE'VE all read the headlines. A soldier shot for lack of body armour. Inadequate equipment. Troops facing road-side bombs in unprotected Land Rovers while those from NATO allies use vehicles with at least some mine protection. An officer dies for lack of the medevac helicopter that could have saved him.

And it's not just in the field. Our forces personnel are finding that the level of operational commitment is close to the limits of toleration, with very limited opportunities for recuperation and training. One Royal Engineer recently set off for his eighteenth tour of duty in Iraq.

When they get home, things are not much better. Some of our accommodation for soldiers is decrepit, and anywhere else would be condemned as unfit for human use. No wonder the forces struggle to maintain recruitment and retention. No wonder General Sir Richard Dannatt breaks cover to say that his soldiers are stretched to the limit.

The first duty of any government is the defence of the realm, and the Military Covenant is key to delivering that duty. Yet Blair and Brown seem to see the armed forces as politics by any other means. They make military commitments which help them to strut and posture on a world stage, to portray themselves as global statesmen, but they care very little about providing the means to deliver.

Gerald Howarth MP, the Shadow Defence Minister and TFA Council Member, has offered a bottle of champagne for the first sighting of Gordon Brown entering a UK military establishment. The bottle is still on his sideboard. Happy enough to fly out to Iraq for a photo-op with the troops, Brown takes little interest in them back home.

These issues were set out in detail by Air Chief Marshal Sir Peter Squire at a meeting in January at the Royal Air Force Club, organised by TFA.

The RAF is suffering serious shortages, not least in the areas of air transport



Roger (left) shared a platform with Air Chief Marshal Sir Peter Squire, Chief of the Air Staff from 2000-2003 and Air Vice-Marshal Prof. Tony Mason (right) at the RAF Club on 28 January 2008. The meeting marked the launch of a series of TFA events on the Broken Military Covenant, organised by Tony Hilder, TFA's Hon. Secretary. A report on the second event, featuring the Royal Navy, will appear in the next issue.

and reconnaissance. Retention and overstretch are constant worries.

Commercial principles of cost effectiveness were introduced by the Thatcher government and enthusiastically pursued by Labour. Yet there is a key difference between business and soldiering. In business, performance can be measured against a range of indicators on a monthly basis. Yet in the military, so many of the deliverables are unquantifiable, especially in the areas of ethos and morale.

Sir Peter is particularly concerned at the pressure to introduce contracts of employment in the military, which he says will undermine the principle of unlimited liability. He singles out European Union legislation as a particular danger to the military ethos, and regrets the failure of our government to obtain derogations from EU rules for the forces. He identifies a number of modern trends that tend to undermine morale, and threaten "the need to be different": among them risk aversion; a culture of blame and compensation and health and safety; and the onward march of political correctness.

Sir Peter commended the Strategic Defence Review at the back end of the 90s as a good and professional piece of work, but it has essentially failed because the Treasury started out under-funding it by half a billion, and since then has broadly offered only inflationary increases, while actually inflation in the military

is running at 7% a year or higher.

We have a choice to make as a nation. Do we want to continue to be a country capable of defending itself? Or are we happy to rely on others for our entire defence? While the EU is very good at strategies and policy papers, it is much less good with resources, personnel, guns, planes, ships and tanks. The EU's defence policy is little more than a reallocation of existing resources - and if a military unit is assigned to the EU, it can't be assigned to NATO as well. Far from adding new capability, EU initiatives are likely to add nothing but confusion.

Or should we rely on the US? No one is more in favour of the transatlantic alliance than I am, but I no more want Britain to be a province of the USA than of the EU. We have no right to call on our US allies for support unless we have also made our own commitment to defence.

There is no substitute for a properly-funded military. We should be looking for cross-party consensus on a minimum percentage of GDP ring-fenced for the armed forces. 3% would be a good start.

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This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in *Compass Magazine*.