

## Royal Aero Club Awards - 2 July 2008

I have found the experience of presenting these awards both humbling and uplifting.

I feel humbled because I am, I suppose, typical of the sort of worthy who gets invited to present awards. That is to say I feel very unworthy when anything I have done is laid alongside the achievements of those whose hands I have just shaken.

And I feel uplifted because of the accounts of skill, courage, determination and service to others that we have just heard. This bucks current trends in society. The wealth and the technologies available to citizens of the developed world have brought opportunities. Aviation itself is only just over 100 years old (well, the heavier than air variety anyway). Before then, human beings had no opportunity to take to the skies. Now, great freedoms have opened up. Yet, paradoxically, it seems that society is becoming over-developed in its desire to regulate every form of human activity in minute detail and in its obsession with keeping us safe – whether we like it or not!

Aviation is inherently dangerous and it is right that its commercial forms should be most carefully conducted to protect the innocent user. But aviation is, or should be, also a quintessential expression of freedom, and of the spirit of adventure that has enabled the human race to develop and progress. That aspect is, I believe, one of the main things that attracts the more adventurous and individualistic souls in society to take up an air sport. Yet sporting and recreational flying is at risk of becoming blighted by over-regulation. Politicians and civil servants want to keep us in a box where we will be safe, certainly, but also where they can control us.

Those who have received awards today for their achievements in the air are, as I said in my opening remarks, bucking that trend. They are beacons for us all of the triumph of individualism over the limited, uniformly grey and tightly controlled world that legislation such as Health and Safety is imposing upon us.

I do not, of course, glory in the fact that what we do entails risk. The bad side of that could not be more poignantly illustrated for us today than by the tragic death of Tamsin Causer in her brave pursuit of her sport of sky diving. We should make our activities as safe as we can, but it should be up to us.

But the fact that air sport in all its forms is difficult and potentially dangerous is a reason that it is so character revealing and so character building. I used to fly fighter aircraft in the RAF. I thought that made demands on one's character and that I was part of a special elite. Then I tried the sport of competition aerobatics and found that my handling skills were no better than the civilian pilots against whom I was competing, all of whom had far fewer hours than I did. Then I gained

insight into competition gliding, by crewing for one of my sons and by flying with him and others in the occasional competition. I found that the level of skill, airmanship, determination, fitness, mental agility, tactical appreciation and management of risk was at least comparable with the qualities required of a military pilot. I have not tried other air sports, but have little doubt that I would be equally seized of their substance.

I would like to comment further on the issue of risk management and the place of sport in society. It is often said – and I think that we would all agree – that sport provides a socially acceptable outlet for the aggression that is an inherent feature of the human character. It is also said that sport mimics real life and that makes it particularly interesting because it requires the player to make decisions, as in real life. Most sports have an element of risk management, again as in real life. Here I would draw a distinction between tactical risk and actual personal risk. For example, in deciding whether to take on a difficult long pot or to play for safety, a snooker player is considering only tactical risk; at most, only the outcome of the frame is at stake. But if, for instance, a competition glider pilot commits to a very marginal final glide rather than going for the safety of one more climb, and maintains that commitment all the way to the finish line (or not!) he or she is not merely making a tactical judgement. His/her personal safety is also on the line. It seems to me that sports, such as air sports, that have this element of personal commitment provide a higher test of character.

Some of today's awards are not, or not only, for achievements in the air, but for long and dedicated service to a sport or discipline, or to helping others. That bucks another adverse trend in society, which is the culture that places individual "rights" first and foremost in the minds of citizens, and leaves no particular place for any concept of duty or service. Society as a whole, as well as the discipline or activity they have chosen to serve, is the better for the efforts of the award winners, and it is good to see the aviation community recognise them today.

Further, it seems to me that awards under the National Honours system are sometimes made in part on account of celebrity status. I know where I think the real nobility of the individual, and the real substance of a sound society, is to be found. It is in people like our award winners.

Those reasons – respect for courage, skill and determination in the air, and admiration for long, selfless and dedicated service to a cause - are why I feel proud to have presented these awards tonight. I salute every recipient.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "John Alliman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.