

# FRIAT Forum 2024

## **Paul Atherton – Opening Remarks**

RAFCTE's Chief Executive Officer, Paul Atherton, started proceedings by saying that alongside the Volunteer Progress Meeting (held two weeks prior), the FRIAT Forum is one of those events that signals the start of the ground rush of the delivery phase for the Royal International Air Tattoo each spring.

He then went on to explain RAF Fairford is in a different place compared to recent history. Increases in USAF activity since 2019 means there are a number of impacts. One key example is a 700-bed shortfall for volunteers ahead of this year's show, due to less accommodation being available for RIAT on base. Last year, the summer Bomber Task Force deployment coincided with the start of the RIAT build, which was an added complexity. He reiterated that safety is paramount at all times, the base is an active airfield which is live with USAF aircraft during the build phase, and we must adopt our plans to work around USAF real world operations. However, Paul added that the 501<sup>st</sup> Combat Support Wing (who operate RAF Fairford) continue to be extremely forward leaning with regards to the event.

Looking ahead to this year, Paul highlighted some of the added expenses that have recently come to the fore, the first being volunteer accommodation – with roughly 1,500 volunteers working across the show and the majority of them needing to stay on-site, and temporary accommodation needed to be brought in. Secondly, with the Royal Air Force's current operational activity, which is at a very high tempo, Paul explained that RIAT is unable to acquire the same quantity of aircraft support equipment from the RAF as we could pre-COVID, which means it has to be hired in at a cost. For example, aircraft passenger steps to allow visitors to get onboard large aircraft.

## **Paul Atherton – Safety**

The Manchester Arena Terror Attack, and subsequent Inquiry and report has changed public safety at events forever. Paul says events are scrutinised now more than ever. Last year we introduced a 100% bag search regime, which was at the behest of Gloucestershire Constabulary.

The 100% search, which will again be applied this year, means that FRIAT may no longer have access to the showground through their own designated entrance. This is due to enhanced security and safety restrictions and constraints, but work is still ongoing to see what we can offer to FRIAT.

However, RIAT (as well as other event organisers) continue to look at ways in which the entry process can be streamlined. Paul explained that RIAT staff were at Cheltenham Festival the week of the FRIAT Forum, to look at their new security search infrastructure. Other changes based on the Manchester Arena Inquiry include a relocation of Emergency Services Silver Commanders, additional CCTV, and increased scrutiny of event documentation and contingency plans.

*(Post Meeting Note: Following Cheltenham Festival, the Police Silver Commander has confirmed that security remains a key element of any large event, technology is advancing but not quickly enough so there will need to be a balance of new and old ways of providing the required search and security regimes for RIAT this year. The changes mandated last year will be applied again.)*

## **Paul Atherton – RIAT23 Recap & RIAT24 Changes**

Reflecting on last year, Paul acknowledges the heavy rain had an impact on the event and said wind speeds not only influenced the flying display, but also caused concern with some of the structures erected on the showground as they are temporary and can only withhold specified windspeeds.

The local road network gave us additional challenges in 2023. A road which forms part of the 'Purple Route' (used for VIP, Aircrew & Shuttle Buses) was closed in early 2023 due to multiple culvert collapses. Therefore, last year RIAT had to build a temporary bridge to enable the traffic to come in. This road is still not open and won't be for the 2024 show, so a solution is required again this year, and possibility for 2025 too.

Paul appreciates that given the nature of the event, RIAT can be an easy target for those focussing on environmental impacts, however the event is embarking on a 10 year sustainably plan which is non-discretionary to secure the future of the event. A lot of solutions are still being developed, but we can't get left behind and become viewed as 'unacceptable' in the eyes of society. At the moment we are world leaders with what we are doing within the airshow community. This was highlighted at the recent European Airshow Council in Brussels where it was obvious that RIAT is in a totally different place to anyone else, with only AIRPOWER at Zeltweg taking action similar to RIAT. Many European colleagues just do not even consider it because it is too difficult due to cost or desire. We have an opportunity at RIAT to keep ahead of the game. Paul explained his viewpoint that there is 'sustainability' and sustainability. Firstly, the environmental issues. But secondly if we don't address this we may not remain socially, financial or practically sustainable as an event in 10 years time.

Recapping on last year's show, we had 200,000 people on site over the weekend, including 31 Air Force Chiefs, 70 Delegations, and a Royal visit. The event is unique and the only occasion where so many senior leaders from across the world, both military and commercial gather in such numbers in the same place at the same time, at a public event in a foreign country. Paul expressed that it's a sign of the status RIAT holds that the USAF support with 11 of their senior commanders.

Some substantial changes for last year's show included the movement of all trade shedding and catering units from the northside to the southside of the taxiway in the red zone, to open the view towards the runway. The general feedback is that it worked well (and improved photography of the static display aircraft in this area) and we will continue with this layout for 2024.

While the weather had a negative effect on public viewpoint of the show, Paul recognised there were still plenty of areas for improvement including toilets, public catering offering and queues at customer entry points, all of which have been recognised and addressed over the winter by the relevant departments. Overall, our visitors were fairly satisfied giving us a Net Promoter Score of +44. NPS scores run from -100 to +100 and across the event industry it is regarded if you are in + you are doing well. In 2022 we achieved a NPS of +66 which went down to +44 last year, which we assume was due to the weather. Our new Head of Marketing and Customer Experience, who deals with this has been in the industry for 25 years and the highest she has seen previously is +29 so the fact that we got +44 and we considered that a bit of a failure has given her a challenge for next year.

### **Wendy Toms – FRIAT Manager**

Wendy welcomed FRIAT members before presenting an update on tickets sales for this year and feedback from last summer.

Starting with this year, at the time of the forum, sales are at 86% (which is much higher compared to the same time last year), with 24% of the current bookings being new members. Additionally, from people who visited last year, 64% of FRIAT members have renewed for this year. Wendy felt the 2024 renewal process worked well – the new ticket system meant we were able to do a more automated renewal process which removed the manual process of contacting each person who returned a form after the show. It meant that FRIAT members did not need to worry about collecting a form early and remembering to post it back – everyone was able to have a relaxed weekend and the renewal information was in your emails to deal with as and when. However, the new ticket system meant we were not able to offer the instalment payment plan so our workaround was a four month basket as opposed to a 20 min basket giving everyone time to save up for their tickets. This is something we may replicate again for 2025.

COAP were in the enclosure in 2023 with Nikon, which was really popular with all their equipment being used throughout the weekend. COAP will be returning to the enclosure this year and they are looking to bring in additional photography equipment from the likes of Epson, Fuji Film, Sigma & Canon. Having tried for many years to get camera companies into the enclosure this is really good that COAP have been able to facilitate this for us and you due to their links into the camera manufacturers.

Running through feedback, Wendy says work is ongoing to ensure FRIAT members can hear the commentary in the grandstand, marquee and other areas of the enclosure. Other comments that were also taken on board include the dissatisfaction with the catering offer in 2023, this was being reviewed for this year.

She added there is a review into the 'enthusiast offer' currently underway within Douglas Bader House and said a survey may be circulated for FRIAT members to fill out. There was a short discussion on what was important to the

enjoyment of RIAT for those in the room, which will be fed to colleagues conducting how we can enhance the enthusiast offer at future shows.

### **Simon Hough – Head of Commercial Activities and Hospitality**

After onboarding a new catering company, ToGather (formerly Feast It), Simon admits there are lessons to be learned from their performance at RIAT 2023, ahead of this year's show. Elaborating further, he said catering offering will be increased to seven refuelling stations across the showground (vice three Service Stations previously) and after discussions with ToGather, an improvement is expected.

With two years of extreme weather, Simon appreciates there is a need for more shelter and the amount of public shelter is being increased, primarily at these new refuelling stations.

Simon offered apologies for his colleague Vicky Cheevers, who is the new Head of Marketing and Customer Experience. However, he communicated on her behalf to say that the visitor journey is being looked at in detail. This has led to the reinstatement of the customer experience working groups being reinstated at DBH, where all aspects of the customer experience are regularly discussed.

RIAT has some unique opportunities for visitors, for example it is the only UK airshow where visitors can watch the Red Arrows prepare their jets, start-up, taxi out and take-off ahead of their display. Therefore, we are trying to make more of this, and the eastern end of the showground is being rebranded as the 'Take-Off Zone'. Other enhancements include the introduction of new digital screens across the showground, change of wayfinding across the showground and more colourful and engaging information on the static aircraft information boards.

The discussion prompted a question on the return of a RIAT app, which is being planned to be reintroduced as a better product for 2025.

The new range of merchandise was discussed with the reveal of the RIAT branded fighter jet rubber ducky for this year, inspired by an F-16.

### **Peter Reoch – Head of Air Operations**

Peter's brief started with an introduction to the four themes for RIAT 2024 and the aspirations for each of these themes in terms of aircraft and how they'd be displayed. He alluded to an aspiration for all British flight test aircraft to be parked together close to the centre of the static displays. The F-16 theme is being supported by Lockheed Martin and the appetite to support is high. However, the political pressure on nations to donate F-16s to Ukraine and the need to reduce flying hours on the airframes may have a negative impact (as seen with the cancellation of the Belgian F-16 solo display). All the static display jets will be parked together at the western end of the showground, all at 45 degrees, in a long line which will have an elevated photo platform located at the eastern end.

He gave an overview of how the different volunteer teams contribute to the handling of aircraft and aircrew at RIAT. In total, some 340 volunteers work in the various Air Operations teams to enable the airfield to operate. He mentioned that for circa 250 aircraft, this will generate some 1300-1500 personnel, which the hosting / accommodating / facilitating of can be a more complex than the aircraft themselves. The role of all the teams in delivering a safe, efficient and regulatory compliant environment was explained, with RIAT operating in a highly complex world of MAA, CAA, NATO & ICAO regulations. Peter also spent time explaining the differences between rehearsals and validations (which are conducted when FRIAT are not present in the grandstand) and the pre event display scrutiny process taken by the FCC.

Moving away from Air Operations, Peter ran through a series of 'RIAT Mythbusters' with his colleagues, tackling misinformation online. *(The list can be found at the end of this report)*

As requested by attendees, the considerations around static aircraft display parking plan were explained by Peter, with the balance between creative intent and operational practicality explained. As part of this Peter showed the intended parking plan in the South West Loop for RIAT 2023, and how aircraft cancellations forced last minute changes to the layout and angles at which aircraft were parked (such as the Harriers, Phantom & Fitter).

The invitation process for aircraft was explained, which starts ahead of the previous year with the selection of the operational theme, creation of aircraft wish list during the summer, then international approvals before issuing of formal invitation letters in October. These are followed by Embassy Visits and ongoing liaison over the winter/spring. It was reiterated that individual approaches (by well-meaning enthusiasts) to squadrons or display teams can be very unhelpful to RIAT and have had a negative impact in the last two years, so the enthusiast community were asked to refrain from such activities. As part of this Peter also explained the restrictions in place surrounding aircraft from the US Department of Defense coming to European airshows. In short, aircraft are not permitted to fly from the Continental US to Europe just for an airshow, they can only come if they have an operational tasking in Europe. RIAT have great relationship with USAFE and will always work to attract those special aircraft, as has been seen with WC-130J and E-4B in recent years, but the restrictions mean that attracting certain stateside based aircraft is very difficult.

Finally, Peter ran through the currently confirmed aircraft and stated he thought we were on course for a strong show in July. He exclusively revealed to FRIAT members that the Bréguet Alizé would be on static display, which was well received.

## **RIAT Mythbusters**

*Online Statement: "RIAT have to spend lots of money to bring in lots of traders and other ground displays which fill up the airfield"*

RIAT Response: The commercial activities on the RIAT Showground, including the traders, food and drink concessions and bespoke outlets bring in over £500,000 of income.

*Online Statement: "RIAT get all their Police & Security for Free"*

RIAT Response: We have to pay costs to Gloucestershire Police, Wiltshire Police, Ministry of Defence Police, plus for the RAF personnel who perform guarding, and it's not cheap!

*Online Statement: "RIAT decided to search 100% of visitors, and then didn't do it properly"*

RIAT Response: Search policy for RIAT was dictated by the Police Gold Commander (Gloucestershire Constabulary) and tactically adjusted throughout the show in response to queuing at CEPs

*Online Statement: "RIAT got rejected by Red Bull"*

RIAT Response: Head of Air Operations was at Hangar 7 with the Flying Bulls in November. We have good relations with the Flying Bulls team. Their UK participation this year is focused on a June tour and given the costs involved vs RIAT 2024 themes, we decided to not pursue their aircraft this year.

## Question & Answers

*At some airports you can have a known traveller route with pre-screening. Is there options for the FRIAT group to pre-screened off site?*

No. In the eyes of the Police you have purchased a ticket and you are a member of the public and must be searched on your entry to RAF Fairford. It's something we have already explored.

*With the fast-track if you don't have bags you tried to implement last year, I got to Blue gate without luggage but was told to go into any queue, there was no fast track?*

Apologies for that we will do it better this year. We are looking to do a proper fast-track, looking at future shows it is something that will be made a condition of certain tickets you buy so you know you can't bring any bags with you in order to qualify for the fast-track.

*One thing that would be useful is if in the que there was a message asking you to get all your objects out of your pockets and put them into a plastic bag – it works at airports?*

We have just spent £50,000 on big screens, some of which will be positioned at the entry gates with messages such as that to help manage the queues while visitors are waiting. We will lead customers by the hand via these screens.

*I just wanted to touch on a question about the catering previous years we had our own caters i.e. Al who caters for us – even in bad weather he always had long queues at his stall and I know he is not part of the new catering company is he going to be with us this year?*

Don't know at the moment but we are working making sure the catering offer works for all customers.

*How many tickets in total do you sell?*

We work on about 1950 tickets for FRIAT.

*It's really important to people to get in quickly in the morning and the thought of the queueing with the masses is a nightmare – it's the golden ticket mentality on why I buy the FRIAT ticket, what is planned for us?*

We are not sure that we will be able to provide the FRIAT gate at Blue, we are still in discussion on the possibilities, but our hands are tied by the requirements of the Police. Once the requirements are clearer we can decide how the entrances are managed. We are all looking at that now and how it can be managed safely.

*If there is a 3<sup>rd</sup> party company (such as COAP) involved in an enthusiast event, it is noticeable that such companies cornering the market for airfield visits at quite a fat fee and I wouldn't be happy having to go through some 3<sup>rd</sup> party company to take part in an activity – its either part of the FRIAT package or it is not.*

Understood, and it would not be our intent for potential future FRIAT perks (such as airfield tours or photography days) to lead to additional charges by third parties.

*If you're not sure that you will have a dedicated FRIAT entrance, do you think you should take it off the website as a benefit of the package?*

Valid point and we will arrange for that to be done.

*Do you think we'll ever see the Blues Angels at RIAT in the near future?*

Short answer; no. But we do ask for them however their display schedule is set many years ahead. They are a prime recruiting asset for the US Navy and they are in high demand in the US.

*Do you try and attract aggressor aircraft?*

Yes, we have seen Draken & Top Aces participate with their jets in recent years. We are in communication with many aggressor organisations and recognise they operate exotic aircraft which we'd like to see at RIAT. However, there are much more complex restrictions in place for many operators of these aircraft (due to their civilian experimental registrations) and their fleets are very lean, so securing their participation can be difficult, but we do try.

*Are we likely to see an USAF F-16s, such as the Nellis Aggressors?*

We are very unlikely to see US based fast jets, due to the participation policies explained, and also the practicality/logistics of deploying jets transatlantic.