ANDREW MARR:  
The hundreds of British troops who’ve died in recent campaigns such as Iraq and Afghanistan will of course be remembered along with the fall of the two world wars and many other conflicts. Earlier I spoke to the new Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nicholas Houghton, about some of the challenges facing the armed forces, but first he told me what Remembrance Day means to him.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:  
It’s true that in many respects the armed forces have never been held in greater esteem by the nation, but the purposes to which we’ve most recently been put has never been more deeply questioned. But I think on this day, this is a day where as a nation we come together to remember service and to remember service that has involved sacrifice. And I think that that act of remembrance happens at a number of levels. It happens at a national level, but also on a very personal level, and some people reflect on their own personal losses. I know from my own perspective, I spend some time thinking about friends from my own regiment that have fallen in conflict over the years.
ANDREW MARR:
Do you think that the armed forces after people leave service are properly treated in this country now because there’s great debate about whether soldiers who’d been injured were treated well in terms of pensions and help afterwards and housing and so forth? Do you feel that …

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I think that this is an area where we’ve always got to maintain a sort of a … if you like a dynamic over watch. Certainly from within the armed forces, we feel that there is a moral duty to our people that never ends, even once they’ve formally left the armed forces, and in many ways the baton is taken on by such things as the National Health Service, social services, by charities. The vast majority of service people that leave of course go on to have second careers and very successful careers. I think that at the moment though, particularly because of the casualties that have arisen from Afghanistan, there is a particular concern about those individuals who’ve had life changing injuries. But I am very confident that what the armed forces have put in place over the last few years genuinely is sort of state of the art in terms of what we call the “pathways to recovery”, and we’re very, very careful that a combination of both charitable support and government support is brought together in a way that ensures there is constant over watch of the journey that individual wounded servicemen and women make from the point of wounding right through to the time that they’re settled into civilian life.

ANDREW MARR:
There isn’t a serious paper today which doesn’t have images of wounded servicemen from Afghanistan. What do you say to their relatives who fear that once this huge drawdown happens and we leave Afghanistan for good, things just return to the Taliban and it’s all been wasted?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I think it’s very difficult to as it were capture the strategic benefit of a campaign like Afghanistan in the moment. I mean you can turn to things. You can at a very local level in Helmand say look, the individual potential for individual human lives has been significantly enhanced. You can turn to the fact that not a single terrorist attack
against the Western world has been launched from Afghanistan in over ten years. But I think that the genuine case is one that is better made in retrospect when there’s been more of a strategic audit of the benefits. There’s always a counterfactual to going into Afghanistan in circumstances as we did, in many interventions: what might have happened had we not done? And you had in Afghanistan a country in a state of insipid civil war with a very strong chance that it would have disintegrated; that the area of ungoverned space across the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan would have increased; that Pakistan itself might have been destabilised. None of those things have happened. We have left or will be leaving Afghanistan with the chance of fledgling democracy, some prospect of some prosperity, with the ability of the Afghan National Security Forces to provide security in a sovereign sense internally to that country.

ANDREW MARR:
And looking ahead to the future of the armed forces, are we going to see more as it were mini Afghans, do you think - attempts to nip al-Qaeda in the bud in Somalia, possibly in Syria where there’s clearly an al-Qaeda element there at the moment?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I am a firm believer that armed forces should not in a binary sense be either at war or as it were in a contingent posture at home. There are lots of places in the world that have the potential to become seriously destabilised: Somalia, Yemen, parts of Africa, lots of places in the world. Whereas if we can proactively get in there and use some of our unique access that the British forces enjoy because British reputation is very high in these respects, we have an ability to build institutions, help train armed forces so that they can themselves bring stability to their own countries.

ANDREW MARR:
Can I turn to the terrible story that we’re still seeing the aftermath of, which is the sentencing of a marine to life imprisonment for the murder of a Taliban prisoner? And we’ve had very different reactions. Julian Thompson has called for clemency, a lot of newspapers call for clemency. Very special circumstances - he’s just seen the body parts of his comrades being used as trophies; it was a very, very difficult situation.
Facebook … There’s a huge campaign on Facebook asking for him to be released. On the other hand, we’ve seen one of your predecessors, Lord Guthrie, saying “No, no, murder is murder. He must serve life.” Which side do you come down on?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Well my position on this is that no serviceman or woman of the British Armed Forces is above the law. They’re not above the law - the law of the country, international law or the law of armed conflict. This was a heinous crime. Judicial process has found this individual guilty and it would be quite wrong for the armed forces to adopt some special pleading, some sort of exemption. We do expect immaculate standards of our people. We do train them to do right things …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) As I’ve said, he’d just seen the body parts of comrades being used as trophies. This is not like something happening on the streets of London or Birmingham.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
No and I accept that. But if we try to put ourselves beyond the law or expect special provision from the law, then we start to erode the position where we have a moral ascendancy over those that are our enemies and that is the wrong thing to do. There is a due process that will lead to a sentencing. Now it’s for that process to determine whether or not any form of clemency should be shown in the sentencing. And whereas I fully understand the views of the likes of Julian Thompson, they’re not … those are personal views. They’re not the views as it were expressed from a position of current authority within the services where we would not want our position in these respects to be eroded.

ANDREW MARR:
So you’re not ruling out personally the idea of clemency by judicial process, in the proper process?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
No, what I’m saying is that those who are in authority over the armed forces …
ANDREW MARR:

(over) You can’t call for it?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

… should not request any form of leniency. In fact I think it’s dangerous to do so. We should be immaculate in these respects. Murder is murder. This is a heinous crime. Thankfully it is an exceptional act in terms of the broad conduct of armed forces.

ANDREW MARR:

Are you concerned about the amount of time it took for this to become public knowledge because there is some suggestion there was a kind of cover-up possibly inside the army; that the video of this crime was being passed around almost like a war trophy and that some people are calling for an inquiry, an internal inquiry into whether this was covered up or wasn’t revealed quickly enough?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well forgive me, I haven’t myself heard or seen evidence of the fact that the video has been common knowledge for many months. As far as I’m aware, this thing has only relatively recently materialised and due process was initiated as soon as the evidence of this crime had come to light.

ANDREW MARR:

Do you think this has stained the marines’ reputation?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

No, I don’t. I mean I think … I mean I stand by the statement of the Deputy Commandant of the Marines a couple of days ago when the verdict was passed. I think that by and large the standards of the marines are absolutely immaculate, as they are for all other elements of the armed forces, and they will be deeply shocked, deeply upset; they will feel their reputation hit very hard. But I think that they should not rest on the laurels of their wider sort of competence and quality, but they will move on from this.

ANDREW MARR:
We’ve been talking to Alex Salmond, the First Minister of Scotland, on this programme, and he’s been talking about the division in the armed services that would follow a vote for Scottish independence. Have you got plans for this? Are you looking at how this would happen?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Well again I’m not conscious of any division in the armed forces. It’s not as if the United Kingdom’s armed forces came about as a merger and there’s some sort of de-merger on the stocks. Look, there is no current active planning about what would happen in the event of Scotland voting for independence. What we are doing is providing what we think objective information in support of the hugely beneficial case of keeping the United Kingdom together.

ANDREW MARR:
Well shouldn’t there be some active planning given that the Scots, who want independence, assume that there’ll be a Scottish Air Force, a Scottish Navy and a Scottish Army and that assets currently used by yourselves will be part of that?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Well I think the point at which you get into some sensible planning on that is the point where the need for some sort of disaggregation becomes a fact.

ANDREW MARR:
So you’ll wait for the vote?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Wait for the vote. Because it’s not as if suddenly there’s going to be a crisis and Scotland becomes enemy forces and they have some of their assets behind our lines. This should be a wholly mature debate …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) You hope, you hope.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
… one would hope.
ANDREW MARR:
Yuh.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
But, as I say, I think that the most important thing for the people of Scotland to weigh in their considerations is how much better the security of the United Kingdom is delivered by the maintenance of the United Kingdom’s armed forces as an integrated whole rather than attempting to think of separating out a small fraction, and that that would deliver.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) But if the vote goes that way, that’s what will happen. I mean you know there will be an RAF squadron sitting in Scotland, wherever, and there’ll be our military bases in Scotland and of course the Trident submarines there which will be sent south after the vote.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
But that’s one of the reasons why I think it’s best not to speculate on how such a disaggregation might happen, but do it more coolly if that is the scenario that faces us.

ANDREW MARR:
What about what’s happening to Portsmouth because a lot of worry there that this was a political decision to try and buy off the Scots, keep the Government going. Now if Scotland again votes for independence - I keep saying if, but it could well happen - then is it the case that the rest of the UK will depend upon Scotland to provide all future surface vessels for the Navy?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Well I certainly don’t hold to the view that the decision on the future of British shipbuilding was one born of as it were a sort of political mandate. It was very much a matter of a business rationalisation. In terms of raw business sense, it makes sense that the place where they have the greatest capacity and the best depth of skills, which is on the Clyde, that’s driven by a business decision.
ANDREW MARR:  
And yet if Scotland becomes independent, that will mean that the rest of the UK will depend upon Scotland to build all surface ships. Would the Portsmouth decision, do you think, be revisited if that took place?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:  
Well again I …

ANDREW MARR:  
(over) We would be the only sort of major maritime power (if we still are) who weren’t able to provide our own ships.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:  
Well there may have to be some reconsideration of that if that were to be the scenario. Again, for reasons that I explained earlier, I don’t think that that is going to be the most likely outcome. But I think we live in a world now where it’s not the purposes of the defence budget to underwrite elements of industry. We will go and get our ships in the place where it makes the most sense for the British taxpayer in terms of getting the right capability for the armed forces.

ANDREW MARR:  
Parliament’s about to be told, we read, there’s going to be another £800 million spent on these two carriers which still don’t have proper aircraft capacity. Do you think that you have been lumbered with political decision which is now on your budget, and at a time of you know intense cutbacks elsewhere that must be frustrating?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:  
If we could turn the clock back, might we make a different decision? It might be that we would go for a smaller version of that carrier. But the more often you change your mind on these things, the more costly they become.

ANDREW MARR:  
Yes.
GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I think that it was everybody’s view at the last strategic defence review in 2010 that these carriers were an essential and very useful part of our future force structure, and that future force structure is - as we build towards it - postulated on a structure for 2020 and that’s the time by which we will have regenerated our carrier capability.

ANDREW MARR:
Sir Nicholas, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
My pleasure.

INTERVIEW ENDS