AM: Year after year on Remembrance Sunday we talk to the Head of the Armed Services and we’re often discussing a future of cuts and reductions. Well, in 2017 it’s Air Marshal Sir Stuart Peach and the topic, I regret to say is the same was ever. I spoke to the Chief of the Defence Staff earlier before he went to the Cenotaph and I began by asking him how he might explain the importance of today to for example a teenager watching at home, looking at those commemorations with little knowledge of the history involved.

SIR STUART PEACH
Today we mark and remember over a million British and Commonwealth soldiers who died in both World Wars. So it is about remembering the sacrifice they made so that we can enjoy the freedom and liberty that we have today. It’s also very important for that person to understand that this is also about reconciliation. That nations move on. That nations remember together and then they also understand why reconciliation matters. This is a very important day to remember and think about how nations went to war and try and understand what that meant.

AM: Can I ask about the Army today. Is it big enough?

SP: The Army today is a total force and we need to remember that in our conversations. It is a combination of the Regular Armed Forces, the soldiers that join full time, the Reservist, the Volunteer Reservist –

AM: Well let’s talk about both of those if I may. In terms of the full time Army is it big enough?
SP: The Army’s big enough to do all the tasks that we give it. And I would be absolutely wrong not to say we don’t have an issue with recruiting.

AM: The reason I ask that is year after year after year I’ve talked to people in your position and Defence Secretaries in that chair and they have promised people watching this programme that the Regular Army is not going to fall below 82,000 troops. That is the absolute floor. Where is it now?

SP: It is below that number now.

AM: 78,000 or whatever.

SP: And that number is publicly available. But it’s worth remembering that 13,000 people have joined our army this year. Many people have decided to stay in our army this year and our army is a total force of Regular and Reserves. And the Volunteer Reserve –

AM: Which is also below your target.

SP: The Volunteer Reserve is growing very rapidly and it’s very important that we understand that there are many opportunities for the people of Britain to serve both as Regulars and as Reserves to provide that total force.

AM: The Defence Select Committee, who are experts in this, say “we do not believe this figure of less than 80,000 is adequate to counter a sudden unexpected threat.” Are they right?

SP: I don’t think they are right. I think if we take that total force – you’ve mentioned there the word ‘threat.’ What we need to understand is the armed forces need to evolve to the threats we face. The threats we face now are really serious, a dark world out there. We have a –
AM: I’m sorry to interrupt but in this dark world we are 4,000 below what we were told was the floor level of soldiers. We’re 4,000 – how much further can we keep falling?

SP: We are 4,000 below, that’s a matter of public record and we’re doing all we can to improve the offer and to make sure that people understand the opportunities presented by service. But the threat we face requires us to think about that threat carefully and manage it for the safety and security of the British people. And that takes many forms. So there are many new forms of threat, such as cyber, as well as traditional state on state threats.

AM: You’re talking about recruitment. Are the Army paid enough?

SP: The pay issue is subject to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body who are in their process of gathering evidence at the moment.

AM: But soldiers are getting 1% where many other public sector workers are getting 2 to 3% at the moment. I ask again, are they paid enough in your view as Head of the Army, speaking for the Army?

SP: Speaking for the Army that we do not see in our consultations with our own people, we don’t see pay at the top of their list of concerns. Because it’s actually not just about pay, it’s also about the total offer. The enjoyment factor of being a member of the armed forces. A very serious and important profession.

AM: Looking ahead Sir Michael Fallon, the former Defence Secretary said that Britain has to spend more than 2% extra per year on the armed forces. Was he right about that do you think?

SP: Well we spent over 2% now and that’s again a matter of public record and that 2% we need to ensure. My job is not to
AIRCHIEF MARSHAL SIR STUART PEACH

argue in political circles, my job is to make sure that the money the government allocates is spent wisely and effectively and is matched to the threats we face.

AM: And you have at the moment a £20 billion hole to fill in some way and all the armed forces are wondering how it’s going to be filled, what’s going to go. And there have been suggestions that HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion are two amphibious support ships and about a thousand Marines are at threat, which really worries the Americans and other allies.

SP: Well, let’s look at the threats. The threats we face have evolved. We had a national Security Review in 2015, the National Security Strategy was right. The problem is that many of those threats have got worse, therefore we need to understand how they’ve got worse, why they’ve got worse, develop a National Security Capability Review to match the new threats. That’s the process we’re -

AM: I’m sorry. The Marines and the amphibious force was one of the things that we were always best at. It was one of the things that our allies admired about the British Armed Forces and therefore a threat to that really worries a lot of people watching this programme.

SP: Of course it does. Both inside the armed forces and outside. But we’re making a significant contribution to NATO so right now this day we have almost 10,000 members of the armed forces supporting NATO directly which has increased in response to the threats we face. We are growing outside the capabilities. Twice this year as the result of terrible tragedies both in Manchester and London we have deployed the armed forces on the streets of Britain as part of our response to national security.
AM: Sir Michael understood all of those things and he’s been around for a long time. Can I ask you about Gavin Williamson. You must have spoken to him by now. How much about defence does he understand?

SP: Mr Williamson is our Secretary of State. The very important point –

AM: I know, but how much about development does he understand?

SP: The very important point is that the UK armed forces are under civilian control and I’ve already engaged with the Secretary of State a number of times, as have the Chiefs of Staff, and will continue to do so. So it’s not a question about the Secretary of State’s experience, it’s a question about him being the Secretary of State and us working for him.

AM: Is he tough enough to fight for the MoD inside Cabinet do you think?

SP: The Secretary of State is our boss and we support him in understanding the world we’re in, how we must respond to it both with allies and on our own and this important point about the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the very first priority our Secretary of State made was to visit NATO as part of Defence Ministers meeting and as Mr Stoltenberg, the Secretary General of NATO made clear on Thursday the UK is a leading member of the alliance and the Secretary of State is leading the armed force.

AM: Sir Stuart Peach, on this very solemn day thanks so much for joining us.