

POLICE AVIATION CONFERENCE *by Bryn Elliott*

So whose idea was this anyway?

Well it certainly was not mine.

I served as a police officer in London [Metropolitan Police 1965-1996] and on retirement set up Police Aviation News as a free newsletter produced by Police Aviation Research for UK police aviation paid for by industry.

The 'product' grew with the expansion of the Internet and became global in stages so that by 2000 it was both an e-mail and on the Airborne Law Enforcement Association web site [www.alea.org] as a free download. Income on what is simply a not for profit operation comes from advertising.

By 2006 a group of Conference operators [The Shephard Group] approached me to plan their revival of the Police Aviation Conference in London. I operated Conferences for them in 2006, 2007 and 2008 for a flat fee.

The concept of the conference as we now present lies with Alexander Shephard the former owner of the Shephard Group in 1993. How he organised the first few events is not known but the first one day event was held on Monday 27th September 1993 at the Cophorne Hotel, Effingham Park in West Sussex as an adjunct to the early Helitech shows when they were held in Surrey. They soon split off from Helitech and took on a brief life of their own but withered and died – apparently from a lack of support.

I went to the final event in that early series and learned a great deal from viewing the people, listening to their presentations and taking in the comments – both good and bad.

I was surprised – shocked even – to note that two of the audience were French speaking police pilots from Angola. Neither spoke or understood English well and it seemed ridiculous that they were even there.

I also noted that some speakers had extreme difficulty in making a presentation in English simply because it was not their mother tongue. Also that there was a strong preference for presentations by senior officers effectively speaking about their past experiences – often words primed by a junior officer.

Added to this was a make weight presentation by a journalist from the Shephard Group. I guess they had lost a speaker and he filled in. Although well meant, I knew from recent experience that police do not like being pontificated to by journalists. It went down like a lead balloon.

Finally, at the end of that 1996 gathering everything I had seen appeared summed up and damned by a short comment by the then head of the London Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit [Inspector Phil Whitelaw]. "Waste of time, heard it all before".



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Shortly afterwards the Shephard Group dropped Police Aviation as a product and moved to another title. It may have been a financial move but clearly they decided that the product was not viable. They were probably correct in their assessment, it was early days in police aviation and many units were simply not operating a professional service, often operating within a 'flying club' mentality.

It was with this as a somewhat daunting background that I faced a request from the Shephard Group to help them with running a new Police Aviation Conference in London during 2006! Fortunately it was made clear that it was an experiment and that the event was 'piggy-backing' on one existing event at the same venue – Heli-Power and a new one 'Heli-MRO' aimed at helicopter maintainers.

I took on the challenge as my first foray into conference world. Fortunately I had attended a couple of Shephard events as a journalist in the recent past so was not completely wet behind the ears, but setting up one from cold was not exactly a cake walk.

Firstly I had to settle in my own mind just what I wanted to achieve with this new arena and then find some support outside of the Shephard Group.

Bearing in mind what I had learned a decade earlier I made some assumptions that although slightly inaccurate turned out to be what was required.

Over the years I grew to realise that the two French speaking Angolan's were not quite as 'out of place' as I had fondly thought. Many nationalities can follow and understand English and yet not hold a conversation in the language. The pretty general 'requirement' to hold presentations in English remains a severe barrier to many.

For the new series of Police Aviation Conferences I wanted to have an all ranks policy for the primary speakers. In the past there was a pressure to invite the majority of speakers based on their seniority and the sparkle of their uniform. This led to the uncomfortable spectacle of a very senior officer making a presentation about an unfamiliar subject and then having to defer to another of a lower rank to fend off a probing question. Clearly with some cultures that cannot be adhered to, but in the majority of cases the speakers will be knowledgeable practitioners.

The selection of suitable contemporary subjects for each conference is based on the judgement of the programme consultant and whatever advice that person chooses to take. There is no substitute for knowledge.

There is a strong preference for serving practitioners to 'front' each of the subjects, presenting them as operator experience. Whilst this can be acceded to there are instances where the subject matter is such that it has not yet entered service or is a thought provoking comment on the industry. The aerospace industry is a relatively fast moving discipline and there are many instances whereby the presentation is necessarily industry led. In those cases it would be churlish to place any sham 'operator' as the front for an yet to be developed technology.

The key to the success of the events is the Chairman. Getting that selection right was a journey in itself. The best of this genre provide an independent and knowledgeable support for an international gathering of speakers often struggling with English as their second tongue. Having two Chairman undertake the task in the course of an event is sometimes a necessary evil, having two Chairman overseeing the same session is often a recipe for disaster.

For a series of conferences it can be helpful to gather together a core group of speakers around which the constantly changing conference programmes can revolve. For them the experience of anchoring the proceedings is also a learning curve. The primary difference is that – unlike the programme consultant – they can have input to form without being obliged to maintain silence!

The final choice for overseeing the Police Aviation Conference as Chairman was more obvious to me than it was to him but finally I managed to convince *Gareth Davies* he was the right person. He was between jobs at just the right time, had an excellent pedigree in aerospace, technology, people management and ski instructing.

In truth he did not think instinctively that he was the right person, that came later. I have never regretted the choice and I believe that the speakers appreciate his availability to their needs formed by an ability to lead a spacecraft control team and at the same time cajole his students into throwing themselves off the side of mountains - sober or otherwise - brings to the show a special quality. All this capability is helped by his own immersion in the European culture – *he lives in Munich* – and an ability to converse with his European brothers at all levels.



It should be pointed out that Gareth Davies is very fiercely an Englishman with a very Welsh name and perhaps that is one reason why he is exiled in Munich! Equally this appreciation of the current series of Shephard Police Aviation Conferences was written by an Englishman with a very Welsh sounding first name – he is effectively exiled from taking an active part in the proceedings by choosing to be a journalist!

So that was me as Bryn Elliott, Programme Consultant, but that state of affairs was not to last in that form.



A Shephard Conference

The revived Shephard Group Conferences were well received and I planned them for them in 2006, 2007 and 2008 for a flat fee. The Shephard Group changed hands in 2008.

In 2009 new owners of Shephard decided they could not run a conference that year so I set up PAVCon to operate in London that year. As the Shephard Group subsequently pulled out of conferences in that sector I have operated them since as Police Aviation Research using the brand PAVCon. It is the same team at the coal face but effectively operating for a new [in house] master and in a slightly different style that allows the occasion to be more police service hands on.



Following the 2009 event on home territory in London the event transferred to Europe and was hosted by an existing air show operator at Pribram in the Czech Republic in 2010. That arrangement eased the workload required in bringing together what was still a very young and inexperienced team.

The following year the event moved to be held within police premises near Bilbao, Spain. This was again a new concept where police operators and industry worked hand-in-hand with PAVCon providing the link. The following year a similar arrangement was undertaken in Germany with the German Federal Police as hosts. In 2013 a new set-up saw PAVCon operating within an industry setup but with a significant involvement of the Interior Ministry. That required a slightly new scenario to be trialled by the use of an independent museum as the actual venue to ensure that there was perceived to be a sufficient distance between commercial rivals. The fact that a number of fixed wing manufacturing companies were happy to operate on the edges of a rival factory was groundbreaking.



The PAVCon event is a meeting place for police aviators of all skill-sets and ranks to be, a European answer to the much acclaimed Airborne Law Enforcement Association [ALEA] event in the USA that many of the world's police aviators are associated with. To that end individuals and the PAVCon brand are members of ALEA and the invited US speakers are also ALEA members.

It is approaching 20 years since Police Aviation Research was set up as an idea primarily to research the history of this branch of aviation and to connect police aviators in the different corners of Britain together with news. There are few within the industry that do not agree that the original ideals have now been exceeded in that the newsletter and the conference now bring together police leaders across Europe and the United States to meet and understand the different aspects of their craft.