

House of Commons Debates 06 March 2008

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. Speaker *in the Chair*]

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RAF Welford (Security)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn. —[Ms Diana R. Johnson.]

6.1 pm

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be able to raise this matter. I welcome the Minister to his place, as he has been extremely courteous to me in my short time in the House. I think that I must be one of the higher-maintenance Members for him and his Department, for a host of reasons. I place on the record my gratitude to him and his civil servants for the courtesy and tenacity with which they have taken up a number of matters. I have another for him tonight, which is related to a military installation in my constituency called RAF Welford.

RAF Welford is a former wartime air base. During the second world war it was visited by both Churchill and General Eisenhower and considered to be of major strategic importance to this country and our allies. It remains so today, because it is now one of the largest ammunition storage facilities in Europe. It is currently under the command of the 420th Munitions Squadron, in support of the 501st Combat Support Wing at Fairford. That is a United States air force forward operating air base, last used in operational circumstances as recently as 2003 in the Gulf war.

The site at Welford covers more than 800 acres in isolated Berkshire downland, but it is accessible. It is only 38 miles from its parent base at Fairford, and has access to the M4. Having its own access to a major arterial motorway is one of its unique features. It is used to store large, air-delivered bombs, many of which are extremely old. On my visit there today, I heard of plans to reduce the amount of ordnance stored there by roughly half, principally because of the reduction in the use of so-called dumb bombs in favour of so-called smart bombs. Today's armed forces need less ordnance to achieve the same result, and much of the ordnance there dates back to the Vietnam war. RAF Welford is an extraordinary place to visit. From the ground one can see the extraordinary earth bunds, which are also visible on Google Earth. Much of the ordnance is still sitting out in the open air, although much of it is now being covered.

About last October, rumours started to be heard in the air around west Berkshire of the removal of Ministry of Defence armed guards from the base at RAF Welford and their replacement with a much smaller number of unarmed civilian guards, possibly members of the MOD's civilian guard service. I saw it as part of my job to calm some of the concern. At that stage no one knew whether RAF Welford had a future or whether it would continue to store high explosive munitions. If no munitions were to be stored there and it was to become a place where the occasional trenching tool or mess tin was stored, there would be no need for the type of guard service that is there now. Clearly, however, it is still being used as a munitions store.

I wrote to the Secretary of State to raise the local concerns, and I received a letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence on 20 January. He set out a number of points, but the most important is:

“The USVF”—

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the United States Visiting Force—

“is also continually reviewing its security arrangements and the MOD is currently engaged in discussions with them regarding security at RAF Welford, however, no decision has been made.”

Later in the letter, the Minister states:

“I would, however, like to assure you that the security arrangements at all bases, including RAF Welford, remains an important priority to both the MOD and the USVF and that any changes that might take place will only occur if they are both suitable and appropriate to the circumstances and do not compromise the overall level of security.”

That was a welcome assurance as far as it went, but it did not allay the concerns of the people who work at RAF Welford or who live close to it.

On my visit to the base, I met the commanding officer of Welford, his superior from Mildenhall and the liaising RAF personnel from Fairford and Mildenhall. It is clear that, although Welford now stores less tonnage of ordnance, it remains very important to the USAF. A considerable investment is being made in buildings and infrastructure on the base.

The purpose of this debate is to draw from the Minister what the review of the security arrangements is about and the implications for local people and those who work at RAF Welford. I hope that he will also address concerns arising in other parts of the country where such reviews are starting to be discussed, and those of the wider community in the present climate. The level of threat to this building is “severe”, which is not as high as “critical”, but it shows that we live in a dangerous world.

Obviously, I shall not discuss in any detail the precise form of current security provision at the base. I am sure that the Minister would not thank me for doing so and will not do so himself. Suffice it to say that the current provision is comprehensive: it is a full security package provided by armed MOD police officers with access to dogs. Local people tell me that they are an extremely assiduous group of officers and that anyone who approaches the perimeter for some legitimate reason is approached immediately. However, the information we have is that those officers, who are highly professional and highly trained, are to be replaced by a much smaller number of unarmed guards, and that is the basis for a degree of concern. I therefore have several questions to which I would like the Minister to respond.

In 2006, RAF Welford was designated a strategic site under the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005. That puts it alongside the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston—also in my constituency—Burghfield, Devonport, Faslane, Lakenheath and two or three other important sites. Only two of the sites listed under the 2005 Act are not protected by armed MOD police: the headquarters at Northwood, which is protected by the Royal Marines, and, I believe, Feltwell, which is a base close to Lakenheath, and the MOD police from Lakenheath cover that area. The proposal is that the armed guards go, but what has changed since 2006? Prior to the deployment of armed Ministry of Defence police, there were a number of incursions on to the base by so-called peace protesters. Under the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, such incursions can result in imprisonment, however benign the intent

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of those responsible. Since the MOD police have been on the site, I believe that there have been no such incursions.

Moving on to my second point, I have been told that it is difficult to envisage any circumstances in which MOD police on the site would be required, under the rules of engagement, to use the weapons that they carry, and that they have to be trained to use. One might therefore ask what the point is of having armed police on the site. My understanding is that under section 3 of the Criminal Law Act 1967, any of the MOD personnel may use force, up to and including lethal force, if it is a reasonable action taken in order to save life. It is obviously not necessary to have armed guards to protect property, because they could not use their weapons for that purpose, but if someone intended to remove munitions from the site for use elsewhere, or wanted to detonate a bomb on the site, they could be required to use their weapons.

It was made clear to me when I was on the site today that the size of the munitions stored there—the smallest is about 500 lb, and there are bombs of up to 2,000 lb—means that we are not talking about the sort of thing that someone could remove from the site under their coat or over their shoulder. Some form of heavy-lifting equipment would be required. Nevertheless, an assessment was made and a risk was identified. That risk is deemed to be no longer applicable.

My third point is that it is important to know whether the current review of the threat is being cross-checked with the assessment of our Security Service and the police. What may not be a threat to the United States air force may well be envisaged to be a threat by our security services. It is important that local people be given an assurance

that the proposal is not a cost-cutting exercise by one or both of the organisations concerned. Obviously thought has been given to what would replace the MOD police officers. It has been hinted that in addition to any provision made, MOD police at Fairford could provide back-up, but there is talk of their numbers being reduced as a result of a parallel review. At times of high traffic, Fairford is a good hour away from RAF Welford, even though it is only 38 miles away as the crow flies.

It has been hinted that Thames Valley police can provide back-up to anyone on the site, and that arrangements will be made with them, but that aspect of the issue causes me great concern. Thames Valley police force has undergone a reorganisation in recent years, which has resulted in a basic command unit that includes west Berkshire, Wokingham and Reading. West Berkshire is a low-crime area—long may it remain so—but Reading has a much higher crime rate. It is only through the tenacity of our local superintendent and his predecessors, the actions of a number of partners, and the support of the chief constable that we manage to keep police numbers up in west Berkshire to a fair degree. However, I have to say that police are pretty thin on the ground, particularly in the rural downlands. Members of the rural community frequently complain that there are not enough police officers out in those rural areas.

It is frankly fanciful to believe that there are roaming patrols in the Hungerford and Newbury area that could be at RAF Welford in seconds flat in response to an incursion on to the site. It is also fanciful to believe that

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there is a Thames Valley police armed response unit that could respond with any degree of speed in such circumstances. We are also led to believe that technology can now assist in the security of such sites. I am sure that there is a degree of truth in that—sensors, CCTV and new lighting can all deter people from entering such sites. However, those are of use only if there is somebody to monitor them and others to respond when they are activated. What is the Minister's response on that? Will he give an assurance that the issue will not be yet another burden on our hard-pressed local police force? What alternative deployments or prospects will be offered to the highly respected Ministry of Defence police officers working on the site? Will there be proper consultation with the Ministry of Defence Police Federation, which has great concerns about this matter?

As I said, I have calmed—or done my best to calm—some local concerns. I am prepared to do more placating of the rumour mill if the Government give me a little more assurance than the Minister did in his letter. I accept that there may be entirely understandable reasons why a reduction might be necessary; I am the first to accept that terrorist or criminal threats need to be constantly assessed in relation to the protection of what is stored in the base and its physical infrastructure.

However, we need to be assured that such circumstances as result from the review will be arrived at by proper joint working between us, as host nation, and the United States air force. I understand that the memorandum of understanding that forms the basis for the contractual arrangements for the guarding of US bases is being updated; it was first published in 1980. It would be helpful to know whether the proposal forms part of that updating.

I am extremely proud that a United States air force base is in my constituency. Greenham Common, in my constituency, is synonymous with so many things but, contrary to what people might have thought from what they saw on “News at Ten” every night at the time of the cruise missile deployment, the relationship between the United States visiting forces when they were there and the town of Newbury, which is so close, was extremely strong.

As the local MP, it is a matter of pride to me that the forces are here. I want to make sure that the base is properly protected, and I hope that it continues in the area. I should like to place it on the record that I enjoyed meeting the United States personnel on my visit. I hope that they and us, the local people, continue to have a long relationship. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

6.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Derek Twigg): I thank the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) for his kind comments at the beginning of his speech. He has always been courteous in his dealings with me and assiduous in pursuing his constituents’ interests. We have met about various issues on a number of occasions, and I am sure that we will meet on others. I congratulate the hon.

Gentleman on securing this debate on the review of security at RAF Welford. I know that he has already raised the

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matter personally with the Secretary of State for Defence, and I am happy to confirm the assurance that he has already been given in the House today.

RAF Welford is made available to the United States visiting force under the NATO status of forces agreement of 1951 and other arrangements, which are appropriate to the relationship between the UK and the US for the purpose of our common defence. The United States visiting force is present in the UK at the invitation of the UK Government, and demonstrates the special relationship that exists between our two Governments.

Although considerably reduced since the end of the cold war, the USVF forms an important part of the continuing US commitment to NATO and the security of this country. That importance is much more than just symbolic; direct support is provided to NATO forces and coalition forces—including, of course, UK forces.

The UK welcomes that commitment and the contribution that the US forces provide to NATO, which remains the cornerstone of Europe’s security policy and the only organisation guaranteeing its members’ collective defence. Under the 1951 agreement, the Secretary of State for Defence retains legal possession and control over all sites made available to the USVF, including RAF Welford. The sites continue to be known as RAF stations for the simple reason that they are RAF stations playing host to units from the US armed forces stationed in this country.

The USVF units remain responsible for administering their own routine, day-to-day activities. They use the RAF stations on licence technically as a matter of comity

between sovereign powers and rather than as a matter of landlord and tenant. But article 2 of the NATO status of forces agreement is clear in its statement that:

“It is the duty of a [visiting] force and its civilian component and the members thereof as well as their dependents to respect the law of the receiving State.”

We play host to a significant population of US service personnel, their civilian support personnel and their families. There are currently approximately 12,000 members of the USVF stationed at the 10 USVF bases in the United Kingdom, making a valuable contribution to our collective defence. In addition, there are a similar number of dependants, making a total USVF plus dependants of some 24,000. We should not forget that we have a responsibility to provide those personnel with a safe and secure environment and to support the important work they do, so that it is not disrupted or undermined.

As the hon. Gentleman has highlighted by initiating this debate, any armed forces establishment is likely to contain dangerous materials. This is certainly true of RAF Welford. In those circumstances, safety is paramount, and any unauthorised incursions into military establishments may present a risk. The various warning signs around the base are there for the safety of the public as well as for the security of the base. Of course signs are not enough and it may be of value if I outline to the House the arrangements in place for the security of USVF bases.

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The degree of protection at Ministry of Defence establishments and sites used by the USVF will vary from site to site according to the location, the nature of the establishment and the risk to the site. Security measures are informed by threat assessments, which are derived from available intelligence. That involves risk management decisions, taking into account the effectiveness and proportionality of countermeasures.

It is the UK's responsibility as the host nation to provide and fund the appropriate level of external security to RAF bases made available to the USVF in the same way as support would be provided to any MOD establishment with a similar role. In addition, the host nation will take into account legal and policy restrictions placed on the USVF and acknowledged sensitivities and concerns associated with conducting global operations while based in an overseas environment.

There are several options that may be considered for the protection of defence establishments. The first is unarmed guarding, the core of which is provided by the MOD guard service and comprises access control measures that can include personnel and vehicle searches and patrolling, where an unarmed guard provides a limited visual deterrent but may be limited in his or her ability to respond to an incident.

The second option is defensive armed security. An armed guard at the entrance to a military establishment provides an important visual deterrent. An armed guard is also better placed to respond in the event of a terrorist incident if a suspect is armed, and is

able to react quickly to an incident. Armed guarding at UK armed forces locations is provided by UK service personnel from the unit stationed at those locations or by the Military Provost Guard Service, a specialist unit designed for that purpose. Beyond that, however, the MOD has the option of deploying the MOD police to any location owned or run by the MOD. They bring with them the full range of constabulary powers.

In addition, police officers possess the skills to interact with personnel and the general public with a view to gathering intelligence, maintaining the peace, detecting and preventing crime and prosecuting offenders. With the agreement of the local police force they can work both inside and outside establishments. There are currently close to 4,000 personnel serving in

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the MOD guard service, around 2,000 personnel in the Military Provost Guard Service and some 3,500 MOD police officers. They work at more than 200 locations across the country. May I take this opportunity to make clear my appreciation, and I am sure that of all hon. Members, for the work they do in maintaining the safety and security of the armed forces and the public?

When it comes to the USVF sites, there are some variations in this pattern. The status of forces agreement places a responsibility on the visiting forces to maintain internal security at any location provided for them. That duty is also fair and reasonable. We would not invite forces to this country who did not recognise or understand such a duty. Those responsibilities and duties are fully recognised by the USVF. It maintains a security force that has jurisdiction over US service personnel and which can provide both armed and unarmed guards for these locations. The security force does not, however, have constabulary powers. For that they must draw on either the local police force or the MOD police. Discussions are taking place with the USVF on future arrangements as part of a wider review of security at its bases, including RAF Welford. It is too early to predict the outcome, as the hon. Gentleman will understand, having made a number of important points about that.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the MOD continues to strive to adapt and improve the security measures already in place so that they meet the evolving threat, with priority given to the protection of life and those assets critical to the delivery of our defence capability. Our security policy and standards must be proportionate to the threat, effective, consistent and cost-effective. In attempting to gain efficient and cost-effective security, it is important to ensure that appropriate physical security measures are in place and to identify the right balance and number of personnel required to perform the task.

In closing, I should like to assure the hon. Gentleman that the security arrangements at all bases, including RAF Welford, remain an important priority to both the MOD and the USVF. I further assure him that any changes that take place will occur only if they are suitable and appropriate and do not compromise the overall level of security.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-six minutes past Six o'clock.