

**John Willis**

Mr Chancellor,

In 1956, when the Royal Air Force took delivery of its first-ever Vulcan Bomber, it seemed that nine years of careful design and test work had finally been crowned with success. Progress towards delivery of this first Vulcan had not always been smooth: indeed, the prototype of the jet that eventually evolved into the Vulcan had crashed on its maiden flight in 1949.

Delighted to finally take possession of the long-awaited Vulcan, the RAF immediately despatched jet XA897 on an exultant flag-flying circum-navigation of the globe. However, as jet XA897 finally approached London on its return from New Zealand, the staff of RAF Bomber Command could only look on in horror and dismay as it crashed just short of the runway.

Despite this inauspicious debut, the Vulcan Bomber went on to become the mainstay of Britain's nuclear deterrent strike force, through more than twenty-five years of the Cold War. The sustained success of the Vulcan is a classic example of how major technical investments can be made to work, despite the most discouraging of early setbacks, as long as the basic design is sound. The secret of such success lies not only in the engineering, however, but in the skill and dedication of the users of the technology.

It was in this regard that the Royal Air Force had the great fortune to commission John Willis as a pilot in 1958, right around the time that Vulcans were coming into regular service. John soon became one of the foremost exponents of these aircraft, mastering their performance features and dominating their idiosyncrasies. From the ignominy of the crash of XA897, John and his colleagues transformed the fortunes of the Vulcan, not only fulfilling its military purpose, but also ensuring it entered the popular consciousness of 'sixties Britain. Its distinctive kinked delta wings, its breathtaking speed, and the graceful aerobatics it displayed under skilled piloting, made the Vulcan so 'cool' that it simply had to appear in the 1965 James Bond film *Thunderball*.

The pre-eminence of John Willis amongst the ranks of Vulcan pilots was such that he soon progressed to training others in its use, helping to ensure the availability of skilled and experienced pilots throughout the life of the Vulcan fleet. It was not until 1984 that the RAF decommissioned the last of these aircraft, two years after the Vulcan had gained the distinction of the world's longest distance bombing raids during the Falklands conflict.

By then, John himself had long since risen through RAF ranks. After becoming Director General of Training, John was promoted to Air Chief Marshal, and was knighted by Her Majesty the Queen. After serving as the last incumbent of the post of Commander-in-Chief of RAF Support Command, Sir

John was appointed Chief-of-Staff in RAF Logistics Command. In that role, Sir John led efforts to ensure that procedural and communicational activities were always focused on enabling front-line defence, rather than becoming ends in themselves, as so often happens in large organisations. From 1995 until his retirement from the RAF in January 1998, Sir John was Vice Chief of the Defence Staff: the second highest position in the military hierarchy of our country.

These were years of profound change in the UK armed forces, as politicians rushed to cash-in on the ‘peace dividend’ which the end of the Cold War was assumed to offer. That the RAF has remained battle-ready for the unanticipated challenges which it now faces is in no small part due to the foresight and effectiveness of Air Chief Marshall Willis.

It was inevitable that a man of such talent and experience would not be left in peace in his retirement. Sir John remains active on the boards of companies engaged in communications and logistics, and serves also on national and regional charities for ex-Service Personnel, including the British Ex-Services Wheelchair Sports Association. To the great fortune of our region, Sir John declined pleas that he retire to London, preferring instead the tranquillity of the Northumbrian uplands, which he had often surveyed from the cockpit of a Vulcan soaring high above RAF Acklington.

His arrival in the region did not go unnoticed, however, and our former Chancellor Lord Ridley was swift to suggest to our previous Vice-Chancellor, James Wright, that the University invite Sir John to join Council. Colleagues who have had the privilege of working with Sir John over the decade in which he has served this University describe a pleasant companion, whose instinctive modesty belies not only his extraordinary career record, but also the penetrating intelligence and great efficiency upon which that career was built.

It was precisely these talents which the University felt it must call upon in 1999, shortly after the introduction of the computerised finance and human resources system known as 'SAP'. The computer technology underpinning SAP was state-of-the-art. Nevertheless, many staff seemed to be encountering significant difficulties in familiarising themselves with SAP and getting it to yield the outputs that they most needed. So heated had some of the debates over SAP become that it seemed the only way forward was to invite an expert in logistics and communications to implement an independent review. There is, of course, no finer logistician in the UK than Air Chief Marshall Sir John Willis.

Colleagues who worked with Sir John on the review of the introduction of SAP found his modesty and discretion to be melded to an iron resolve and ruthless honesty. Unlike so many of us, Sir John does not shrink from saying 'no' when that is what he means. It is fair to say that a few bombshells were indeed

delivered where required. Sir John's review process paved the way for improved management and communication procedures throughout the University, and bolstered the case for the successful reorganisation of our faculties and schools, which was subsequently implemented most successfully under the incumbency of Vice-Chancellor Edwards.

In acknowledgement of the major contribution which he has made to ensuring that our institution thrives and grows, Mr Chancellor, I now ask you to bestow an Honorary Fellowship of Newcastle University upon that Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire and Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath, Air Chief Marshal Sir John Willis.

**Citation by Professor Paul Younger**