

Air Loadmaster Association

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Press Release 28 September 2011

The Air Loadmaster Association is one of only a few associations remaining which is for members of the Royal Air Force who have served as Air Quartermaster or Air Loadmasters. (AQM and ALMs).

On Friday 14th October 2011 at 1330 hrs; ten years from the inauguration of the Association, members will be at the National Arboretum to attend a Service in the Chapel and then proudly watch as a Memorial to all those killed in action, or in the course of duty is dedicated. The officiating padre, the Reverend Tony Guilfoyle, is himself a former Air Quartermaster.

The memorial has been built with white Portland stone which mirrors that of the Armed Forces National Memorial. Its base comprises granite setts with blue slate chips. The funding was donated by members and the base has been excavated and laid by retired Squadron Leaders Derek Smith and John Watson. It has already received a Royal accolade when it was admired by the Duke of York on a recent visit to the Arboretum.



The Memorial incorporates the AQM,ALM and RAF crew brevets

During the Service, retired Squadron Leader Brian Jopling, a recipient of the Queen's Gallantry Medal will read out the names of branch members who have been killed in the course of duty or on active service.

Operational requirements permitting, it is hoped that the service will be attended by serving branch aircrew from RAF Brize Norton, RAF Benson and RAF Odiham, and trainee cadets from RAF Cranwell, possibly the largest serving RAF contingent the Arboretum has seen on parade. Also, with the above proviso, at 1430 hrs a flypast from a C17 Globemaster, a C130 Hercules and Chinook representing a few of the diverse roles members have flown in.

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Background Information

To date the earliest known airman Quartermasters (QM) were those ground crews such as our oldest member Les Sumption, now in his 90's' used when required on dispatching duties, whilst serving on 31 Squadron, Dakotas, in Burma 1944. Between then and the end of WWII several other airmen were known to have flown as QMs in VIP roles.

Post-War, many QMs found themselves operating on the 1947 Berlin Airlift. The aircraft types on which they operated included the Avro York, Lancaster, Dakota, Stirling, Valetta and Hastings.

For the next fifteen years, in the 'pre-Brevet' era, there was a recognised need for airmen to fulfill permanent QM flying roles, from V.I.P. duties to transporting men and materials around the world and dropping supplies in operational theatres – Korea, Suez and Malaya. Training became more professional as post-war aircraft came into squadron service including the Blackburn Beverley and the Bristol Britannia. Helicopter roles were being trialed and the first four WRAF joined the branch in the late 1950s. Additionally, the jet age had arrived with variants of the Comet and later the VC10.

In early 1962 the Air Ministry had announced that the role of Air Quartermaster was to be recognised as an aircrew trade and that a flying brevet (QM) would be awarded to those who qualified – those currently serving as QMs would need to successfully complete the new training courses in order to be assimilated to aircrew, and more importantly, the new trade was available to direct entries into the RAF. More modern aircraft entered squadron service including the Argosy, Andover, Belfast and Hercules. In the meantime a course was established to train junior airmen and airwomen in the skills they needed as a SNCO (and to survive in the Sgt's Mess!).

In 1967 the RAF took a giant step forward and commissioned a number of quartermasters to take over as section leaders and a few years later, in 1970, the QM brevet was changed to the modern American designation of LM (Loadmaster). By this time many QMs were operating on helicopters in tactical and Search and Rescue operations, first on the Whirlwind and then the Wessex. In November 1967 the main transport squadrons had withdrawn British troops from Aden and in 1969 had supported the British Dependency of Anguilla.

Threats to the UK in more recent years involved LMs operating in Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Bosnia, and most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan; more versatile aircraft such as the C130J, Tristar and C17A came into service. In 1986, Laura Bush became the first WRAF LM to amass more than 10,000 flying hours whilst flying on VC10's. To date QMs have operated on more than thirty aircraft types.

In April 2002 the operational role of the LM underwent further changes. Training is now centralised at RAF Cranwell, using modern technology to perform increasingly more technical tasks on more sophisticated aircraft as the number of operating crew has been reduced significantly. Loadmasters are now re-designated as WSOPs and perform a number of rear crew roles. All wear the new single wing 'RAF' brevet.

During the last sixty years, many LMs have been recognised for their devotion to duty, courage and bravery and awards to some outstanding individuals are the Air Force Cross; Air Force Medal; George Medal; Queen's Gallantry Medal; Mentioned in Dispatches; OBE; MBE; and Queen's Commendations. Since the introduction of airmen and airwomen as QMs, more than thirty have died on active service, through terrorist action or on normal operations, including the loss of a number of operational QMs and a U/T (under-training) course of QMs on July 6th, 1965 when Hastings TG577 crashed near Abingdon in Oxfordshire while on a parachuting sortie.

The RAF Air Loadmaster Memorial (dedication service October 14th, 2011) at the National Arboretum is a permanent reminder of them and of all those who have served, or are serving, as RAF QMs, LMs and WSOPs. The graceful obelisk has been provided by members of the RAF Air Loadmaster Association who this year (2011) celebrate their Association 10th anniversary.