



Inspiration from tragedy

IT HAS been a year of joy, sorrow and privilege and one of the joys of being High Sheriff has been to recognise, encourage and reward the many examples of community spirit in West Sussex. The Shoreham air show crash was not an event that I had expected to have to face during my year in office, but it exemplifies brilliantly such a spirit.

I was attending the air show that day last August as a guest of the Royal Air Force Association for which the show has been its main fundraiser. It was a beautiful clear summer's day – a day to enjoy and be happy. I had taken the salute from the magnificent RAF Falcon Parachute Display Team that morning. During lunch, I excused myself to see the Hawker Hunter do its spectacular pass along the runway and begin the climb for its roll. I remember being excited and moved by its grace but concerned by the seemingly low altitude that initiated the manoeuvre. I must mention, at this point, that I have a Private Pilot's Licence and knew this particular aircraft well. In what

seemed, and still seems, in slow motion, I remember that something appeared drastically wrong and as the inevitable happened, nothing could have prepared any of us for the dreadful sight of that horrific fireball and the gradual, ghastly, realisation of all that this was going to mean to so many.

For the spectators, the rest of the afternoon was also in slow motion. Not so for the emergency services who were magnificent in the face of appalling horror.

That terrible week in the midst of truly torrential rain – would the torture never end? – I visited the crash site on the A27 bridge with the Lord-Lieutenant and the Chief Constable. And tragedy turned remarkably to inspiration. The police officers patiently shaking the trees and bushes for, well, frankly, bits as small as fingernails. The volunteers on the catering truck. St John Ambulance – again all volunteers working twelve hour shifts. The white-coated men and women cataloguing all the body parts at filing cabinets and desks standing upon the

white traffic lines along the tarmac of the A27. Strangely surreal, yet oh so active.

I watched them box up some remains and as the box was carried to the mortuary van to go to Brighton everyone stopped work to line the route in respect. This happened each time. For a box of pieces. And during all this, local ladies delivered cakes and Marks and Spencer and Tesco donated socks and food. There was a lovely moment too when some children gave one of the police search teams a box of Cadbury Heroes.

So, from this tragedy a community had come together. The fund – managed by the Sussex Community Foundation – has topped £190,000, with £90,000 already paid out so far to help the bereaved families. There continues to be help, care and protection for the most vulnerable for the good of all. Something I think that all High Sheriffs are proud to represent.

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High Sheriff of West Sussex 2015-16