

# Scribblings

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*Editor: Mike Peters*

## Soft power – it's all about whose story wins.



AS WE LOOK at the storm clouds gathering and contemplate the new world disorder then the role of Strategic Communications should surely be at the centre of our discussions, writes Club Executive Council member, Mark Laity, pictured left, the former BBC Defence Correspondent and latterly Head of Strategic Communications at NATO's Brussels Headquarters.

This was in some way symbolised for me by the fact we have just lost one of the most powerful and persuasive voices of what increasingly looks like a fading rules-based outlook.

Joe Nye who died on May 6 was the thinker who invented the word 'soft power', arguing that hard power was not the only or even the best way to make friends and influence people.

One of his quotes stated, "It's not just a question of whose army wins, it's also about whose story wins."

Whose story is winning today? Looking around then the narratives that are dominating seem to be often characterised by anger, disillusionment, toxic populism – all of which have powerful real world impact. Hard power may be on the rise, but our opponents are at the same time putting huge efforts into dominating the narrative landscape.

It's in this context that the Pen & Sword Club is holding its 2025 Symposium on Wednesday June 18, with the title, 'The Role of Defence Strategic Communications in today's Security Environment.' The timing and topic could not be more relevant.

We are also hugely privileged that the keynote address will be given by Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, who is not only the club's president but the man who has led the government's Defence Review as well as being a former NATO Secretary General and British Defence Secretary.

He will be followed by a series of panels, all focussing on key aspects of the StratCom challenge. It will start with reviewing the Challenges of Disinformation and Artificial Intelligence, then a look at Narrative Wars. After lunch there will be a panel on NATO StratCom, and finally an assessment on how Defence Communications can better Information and Media Operations at the operational and tactical level.

We have a strong group of panellists to introduce and lead the discussions, including senior representatives from NATO, the Ministry of Defence and disinformation experts, including from Ukraine.

It should make for fascinating listening but hopefully will also mean many of us – who are still active – can leave with ideas and thoughts on how we can make a difference. We cannot afford to lose the battle of narratives that is raging now.



[The Pen & Sword Club's symposium on the role of Defence Strategic Communications in today's security environment will be held on Wednesday 18th June 10 am – 4 pm at The Little Ship Club, Bell Wharf Lane, Upper Thames Street, London. If you are interested in attending, please contact the National Chair \[rosiestone@talktalk.net\]\(mailto:rosiestone@talktalk.net\)](#)

## Why is the UK guarding its bridges... but not its reputation

*The British Army once had a formed unit of professional media operators. Now it has confusion. And in modern warfare, that's a dangerous liability, writes Scribblings Editor Mike Peters, right, who once commanded both the TA Pool of Information Officers and the Army's Media Operations Group after serving as a Company Commander in the Light Infantry Volunteers. Mike spent a lifetime career in defence communications working as an evening newspaper journalist and later leading media communications teams at BAE Systems, Westland Helicopters and for the Ministry of Defence.*



THE MINISTRY of Defence is reviving the spirit of the Home Guard, says the Daily Telegraph — but in 21st-century form. The plan is to establish a new reserve force to protect key infrastructure across the UK in times of crisis. Ports, airfields, power stations and data centres could be targets in any future conflict or hybrid attack, and a trained, regionally-based force to help guard them is a welcome idea.

It's practical. It's relatively inexpensive. And it fits within a growing conversation about national resilience.

*But this otherwise sound development also highlights a serious blind spot in Britain's defence posture: while we're funding a static defence capability, we're neglecting a vital frontline asset — the ability to fight, shape and win in the information domain.*

Today, the British Army has no formed, deployable media operations unit. It lacks a standing capability of trained communications professionals who can operate alongside commanders, embed with journalists, provide credible briefings, and respond in real time to the information challenges that now define modern war. The gap isn't new — but it is widening. And it matters more than ever.

It wasn't always like this. For decades, the Army relied on the Media Operations Group (Volunteers) — a highly capable, part-time unit composed largely of professionals from journalism, broadcasting, defence communications, and PR. These were not hobbyists. They were experienced media operators who understood both the newsroom and the battlespace. They deployed on operations and exercises, supported brigades and divisions, and ensured that Britain's voice — clear, credible, and timely — was heard amid the fog of war.



But that capability was lost in a well-meaning but ultimately misguided reorganisation when the Media Operations Group was folded into 77 Brigade, the Army's unit responsible for psychological operations, information activities, and behavioural influence. The result was confusion — both internally and externally.

Transparent, open media engagement became muddled with psychological warfare. Career journalists and broadcasters found themselves misaligned with influence doctrine. Some left. Others were sidelined. And commanders, unsure of the difference, often avoided media operations altogether.

This cultural retreat from professional media engagement has left a vacuum. And it stands in sharp contrast to the Royal Air Force, which has preserved and strengthened its own Media Reserve. The RAF continues to invest in civilian media expertise, trusts its Reservists, and deploys

them meaningfully. As a result, it retains a professional capability with credibility in both the service and the broader media environment — something the Army should possess.

The consequences are strategic. In Ukraine, well-coordinated media operations have helped neutralise Russian propaganda, sustain international support, and energise domestic morale. Kyiv has shown that narrative dominance is not a luxury — it is a force multiplier. It influences allies, deters enemies, and shapes outcomes. Britain, by contrast, often relies on reactive, centralised messaging. Commanders have little access to embedded communicators. Strategic communications are either politicised or too remote to shape events at the tactical level.

This is not a PR problem. It is a battlefield necessity. If a crisis were to erupt tomorrow, British forces would deploy without coherent, credible media operations — and no formed unit to implement one. That would leave space for misinformation, speculation, and adversary propaganda.

Worse still, it would risk losing the public narrative at the most critical moment: before the facts are established, before the cameras arrive, and before strategic momentum is set.

Fixing this is not difficult. The MOD already has the talent — both Regular and Reserve. What it lacks is a formed, properly funded media operations unit, modelled on the best of the old Media Operations Group but adapted to today's information environment.

This unit must be deployable, integrated with operational planning, and trusted to speak clearly and credibly in fast-moving situations. It must also be separate from psyops and influence activity. Credibility and clarity depend on that distinction.

It is telling that funding and political support have been found for a static, defensive capability in the form of the new “Home Guard.” That’s not a mistake — key-point defence is important. But it’s remarkable that in 2025, the Army does not have the means to deploy a coherent media operations team into a major exercise, let alone a real-world operation.

We are guarding our infrastructure — but not our reputation.

Wars are no longer won solely through firepower. They are won by shaping perceptions, commanding attention, and earning trust. If Britain wants to remain a credible actor on the world stage, it must fight on the front that matters: the information front.

It’s time the Army reclaimed its media mojo — before someone else defines our story for us.

[Next month Mike will outline ideas for a purple solution to strengthen battlefield communications involving all three UK Armed Services](#)

## *The delusion that you can suppress damaging news*

*Daily Telegraph columnist retired naval officer and Pen & Sword member Commander Tom Sharpe says the Royal Navy’s Navy leadership is in crisis, but the Service itself is fine, as he takes the navy to task for the current state of its public communications. Writing in the Daily Telegraph on May 14, 2025, about news that the First Sea Lord had been asked to step back over misconduct claims, Tom said: “We have found ourselves in conspiracy-theory open season.”*



Tom, who once worked in the Navy’s communications department, added: “the story has been badly handled.” He also cautioned against the delusion that you can suppress damaging news through careful stage management. “You can’t,” he said.

Worse still, Tom continued, “different branches within Defence ran different comms tracks, which meant two papers ended up racing to publish first. Not their fault – it’s their job. But by losing control of the story, it broke mid-afternoon Friday – earlier than planned. By Sunday, the journalists who’d missed the scoop were under pressure to find new angles, many of which weren’t true.

“And still we don’t really know what happened, how serious it was, or who was involved. Had more information been released early, identities could have been protected as part of the trade-off. Now the story will just run and run as new details inevitably leak, and no one will escape. What bothers me is: if we can’t manage something like this properly, what happens when something really awful happens – like losing a ship, or going to war?

“Operationally, this won’t matter. Take the Navy and Joint Teams in Northwood overseeing the Carrier Strike Group as it nears the decision to enter the Houthi missile envelope in the Red Sea; they’ll see this as no more than a minor distraction. Easily 98 per cent of the RN functions day to day without interaction with the head of service. Some will be annoyed, as will their families, but most will just crack on.



“Likewise at the strategic level, whilst the timing adjacent to the Strategic Defence Review culmination is unfortunate, it won’t make any material difference. It’s not like the Navy will receive less money as a punishment – it won’t receive any in the first place.

“The real damage is to public perception, especially when public understanding of what the Navy is for is already so low. That hinges on whether these events are seen as isolated or endemic.

“In 25 years of service, I’d say – vehemently – it’s the former. And that’s not the Kool-Aid talking; I spent those years surrounded by good people doing hard jobs in extraordinary conditions. But outsiders only hear about the bad eggs – and lately, there have been too many. Now this.

“So, the Navy and Defence have a job to do – starting now – to convince people otherwise. If these two organisations can’t do that together, beginning with communications and grounded in education, then they will fail.”

**Here you**  
**are!**  
**don’t**  
**lose**  
**it again!**

THIS FAMOUS cartoon by Philip Zec came to mind as the Pen & Sword Club’s May networking lunch group toasted the generation that won the Second World War.

Celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day at London’s Little Ship Club the Club raised a collective glass to those who reported and photographed the war effort and another in memory of family and friends who fought and endured the conflict.

Tales emerged of a father taken prisoner of war at Tobruk and entered captivity in Germany; of others who fought the fires of The Blitz, struggled in the sands of the Western desert, the beaches of Anzio and the jungles of Burma, and of those who stayed behind and not only kept the home fires burning but provided essential medical services and the moral support so necessary in a major conflict.

Our thanks to Brian Moore for his patriotic decorations for this event, plus the appropriate “bubbly” for the major toasts and to Malcolm Davidge who missed the event but also provided liquid refreshment for our regular diners.

The club’s networking lunches will restart again in September when we hope to re-arrange a visit by club member Lt Colonel Tim Mallett, of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps which was postponed due to a family bereavement.



# Britain's missile gap is now undeniable

**THE CARRIER** strike group has sailed. “Operation High Mast,” an eight - month deployment, will demonstrate British resolve in preserving freedom of navigation around the world and hone skills in long-range operations. However, what many don't realise is that it also takes with it half of Britain's available defence against ballistic missile attack, writes club member Clifford Beal, the former Editor in Chief of Jane's Defence Weekly.

Britain's only homeland defence against medium-range ballistic missiles is centred upon the Royal Navy's Type 45 destroyer fleet and its Sea Viper anti-missile system. The problem is that four of the six Type 45s are still in maintenance or not fully crewed and ready, leaving just two to defend the country in event of attack. HMS Dauntless is one of them – and currently speeding towards the Mediterranean as it supports the carrier HMS Prince of Wales.

The pummelling Ukraine has received from Russian ballistic missiles gives a glimpse into what Britain could face in the very near term if war in Europe suddenly escalated. The next generation of missiles – such as Russia's Oreshnik – are hypersonic, travelling at several times the speed of sound and making them more of a difficult target to intercept. Oreshnik was dramatically demonstrated to the West in a strike on the Ukrainian town of Dnipro last November.



*One or two batteries of the Arrow 3 or SM3 would be an insurance policy worth paying for Sky Sabre missiles alone are insufficient Credit: Corporal Adam J Wakefield*

Despite the MoD's recent R&D test success in America with this technology, Britain is well behind Russia, China, and the US in developing these missiles as an offensive deterrent. For defensive purposes, the current Sea Viper has only limited capability against medium-range missiles and an upgraded version to improve on this may not be ready until after 2030. Most engagements would still likely be dependent on allied and satellite early-warning and “cueing” of incoming missiles.

What else is in the arsenal? The Army's six deployed batteries of the Sky Sabre missile and its ground-based radar are insufficient to offer coverage of UK critical infrastructure and in any event would be used to defend against mainly cruise missiles, aircraft, and drones.

Pending the results of the forthcoming Strategic Defence Review, there are currently no plans for a limited homeland missile defence such as that fielded by Israel with its Arrow 3 missile system – shortly also to be deployed by Germany as well.

As things stand, ballistic missiles fired at the UK from Russia, or the Middle East would have to be intercepted by the two Nato Aegis Ashore systems in Romania and Poland firing the American SM-3 interceptor and any on-station US Navy Aegis-equipped destroyers off the Spanish coast. A last ditch defence might also be offered by Sea Viper in UK waters but clearly the reliance is still on Uncle Sam.

The UK's Trident submarine-launched nuclear force is the country's ultimate deterrent against a nuclear attack on Britain. But would any government risk launching Armageddon against a limited but potentially catastrophic conventional attack on critical national infrastructure by an enemy using ballistic or cruise missiles? At the moment, we have few options with which to respond.

At a meeting in Brussels last October, Defence Secretary John Healey agreed to step up cooperation on missile defence and developing long range missiles with Nato allies.

The UK will lead the new "Diamond" initiative, to further integrate Nato's missile defences, while also pledging to develop new long-range, cutting-edge missiles, improving the Alliance's collective air defence and offering opportunities to the UK defence industry. But these are largely not efforts aimed at homeland defence against longer-range missiles.

The UK also signed a Letter of Intent in 2022 to take part in the German-led European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), a multinational effort – but not a NATO one – to develop an integrated European air defence system with anti-ballistic missile capabilities. Germany's Arrow 3 system will be the centrepiece of this, and it looks like the UK government's involvement is an attempt to get "under the umbrella" that Arrow 3 will provide.



*Clifford Beal, left, was a defence journalist in both Washington and London before he turned to penning historical novels, non-fiction, and short stories. Despite writing about modern military technology for much of his career, he was always passionate about times past, particularly the Renaissance and early modern Europe.*

*Indeed for many years he donned full medieval armour to participate in fighting tournaments in the US and UK. He has previously written high fantasy and horror under his own name but now writes historical fiction as Ethan Bale.*

But not all NATO countries are participating, and control structures are still opaque. While allied cooperation is important, collective talking shops like Diamond are doing little to protect Britain now, particularly at a time when the UK is taking the lead in staring down the Russian bear over Ukraine in a "coalition of the willing." Even if the Strategic Defence Review comes out in favour of homeland missile defence, what we don't need is a five-year feasibility study.

It's no secret that missile defence doesn't come cheap but until now the repercussions of not having such a shield haven't had a proper and public debate. Perhaps it's time for the government to take a leaf from Germany's playbook and acquire a stop-gap measure to deter a ballistic missile attack on critical infrastructure. One or two batteries of the Arrow 3 or SM3 – strategically placed in the UK but offered up to whatever the European Sky Shield Initiative becomes – would be an insurance policy worth paying for.



## And it's good Permanent news says Alex...

Alex Aiken, one of the Club's powerful group of Vice Presidents, took up a new role advising the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs on communication in 2024. He was formerly Executive Director for the Government Communication Service, responsible for Security, International and Cabinet Office communication. He served as Head of Profession over 2013-21 and was formerly Director of Communications & Strategy for Westminster City Council.

Alex took to LinkedIn in May to say: "It's good news that the UK Government Communication Service will be led by a new Permanent Secretary.

"The appointment of an official with the highest civil service rank, upgrades current arrangements and gives the head of profession the same authority of other Civil Service leaders. In some ways it's 'back to the future' as Howell James held that role between 2004 and 2008 with distinction.

The ending of the ill-conceived 'Chief Executive' experiment and the revival of the senior role shows the value that the politicians place on effective communication.



"The job description for the new role tasks the post holder with a mission to 'implement a radical redesign of government comms,' aligned with the No10 strategy.

"This will make some people nervous, and experts like Anne Gregory have argued that government communication must tread warily around the politicians.

*Alex Aiken, pictured in Downing Street.*

"That's right, and that's what the civil service code and strong communication leaders must deliver. However, in the same way that departmental permanent secretaries are expected to oversee contentious legislation, the new senior leader for the government communication will have to find honest and effective ways to present sometimes controversial government policy.

"And that's never been truer in the 2020's always-on digital media environment.

Effectively presenting public policy remains a supreme challenge.

"The job remit sees this as a 'pivotal role overseeing major reform of how the UK government communicates with the public.' Duties in the job description are familiar but reflect the call for modernisation. The need to raise standards and "rigorous performance management." The need to coordinate government communication. To make sure that messaging is consistent and to adopt new communication methods are all part of the brief.

"Similar tasks were set for the first UK 'Department of Information' led by John Buchan in 1917, including a 'concerted effort to use modern communication channel'. Anyone interested in the history of UK government communication will learn from Alexander McKenna's excellent '100 years of Government Communication' - on the GCS website.





**Government  
Communication  
Service**

**“ There are strong communicators and leaders in the GCS who will help a new permanent secretary succeed. It is clearly time for the service to transform with the new job description calling for change. And in 2023 the OECD - OCDE identified an “opportunity to elevate” the GCS to deliver more responsive communication.**

**“There is an excellent canon of existing professional practice to deliver this goal and successful campaigns like GREAT Trade and**

**Investment, Covid, and the ‘Long Term Economic Plan’ of 2013-15 show how change for public good can be achieved.**

**“That requires the full range of communication tools, supported by data and behavioural science with specific goals, in a well-resourced cross government campaign. That’s an exciting task for the successful candidate to re-establish the leading role of government communication.”**

## ***Members in the News***

### **Steve boosts Forces in Business Awards**

**AIR Marshal Steve Shell, Chief Executive Officer of SSAFA , the Armed Forces charity, supported by The Pen & Sword Club, commenting on the 2025 Forces In Business Awards said: "With commemorations recently to mark VE Day 80, we've seen the high regard the military community continues – rightly – to be held in.**

**"This esteem extends to celebrating achievement once people return to civilian life, and for those in the Reserves, and there are few better examples of this than the Forces in Business Awards, which highlight the absolute best that the partnership of Armed Forces community and business offer.**

**"Those nominated for the awards have made a successful transition from the Armed Forces and act as role models for others, and therefore deserve our praise. And because it's a partnership, I also commend the Forces-friendly employers on the shortlist because these businesses see the potential and opportunities offered by reservists and veterans.**

**"SSAFA – 140 years old this year – is a trusted source of support for when the forces family needs help, and we're extremely proud to again be the official charity partner of these awards."**

**The 2025 Awards Gala returns to the iconic Great Room in Grosvenor House London, Park Lane, on 26 Jun**



# Victoria looks forward to War Game

**MANAGING** Director of VRM Advisory, Victoria Mackarness who once was Campaigns Manager in the Cabinet Office is looking forward to the Sky News War Game podcasts which start in late June.

Victoria told her social media audience: “ Really looking forward to this podcast coming out. It's all too easy when you work in the defence bubble to talk about the risks we know we face, the capability gaps we think exist - but what happens when we really put this to the test? What happens when we have to imagine doing this for real? What happens when we have to start explaining things to the nation?

“The inimitable Deborah Haynes (also a Pen & Sword member since her talk to the club’s networking lunch) and the team at Sky News and Tortoise Media have pulled together an unbelievably well qualified cast (and me), to wargame this. The series opens on June 10.”

A top team of former government ministers and military and security chiefs have taken part in a wargame that simulates a Russian attack on the UK for a new podcast series by Sky News and Tortoise Media.

Among the line-up, Sir Ben Wallace, former Conservative defence secretary, plays the prime minister; Jack Straw, former senior Labour politician, resumes his old job as foreign secretary; Amber Rudd steps back into her former role as home secretary and Jim Murphy, a secretary of state for Scotland under Gordon Brown, takes the position of chancellor. The defence secretary is played by James Heappey, a former armed forces minister.

Lord Mark Sedwill is the national security adviser - a position he held for real under both Theresa May and Boris Johnson, while General Sir Richard Barrons, one of the leaders of a major defence review that is due to be published in the coming weeks, plays the role of chief of the defence staff, the UK's top military officer.

Baroness Helena Kennedy, a barrister and expert on human rights law, appears as attorney general, while Lieutenant General Sir David Capewell resumes his former role as chief of joint operations, the UK's warfighting commander.



## John joins the judges

**CLUB** Vice President, John Neilson , a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Public Relations is to help judge the 2025 PR Week Awards. Entries close on May 29. Says John, who is Lockheed Martin’s Director of International Communications:” I’m excited to join the judging panel.

In a world facing complex political, business, and societal challenges, PR and communications professionals play a crucial role—shaping perceptions, managing issues, and driving strategic impact across industries, from not-for-profits to FTSE 100 companies. These awards celebrate the very best in our industry—work that not only stands out creatively but also delivers measurable results aligned to business objectives. I'm looking forward to reviewing this year's entries and seeing firsthand how PR and Communications practitioners in the UK continue to influence, educate, and inspire.”



## Front lineTimes Radio role for Philip

**PHILIP** Ingram has joined Times Radio as a front line presenter. “ I’m happy to share the news,” says Philip, who is a former senior intelligence and security officer with the British Army.

Recognised as being comfortable in front of a camera, debating current affairs live on radio or writing for online and print Philip has been widely quoted and published. Outlets have included Counter Terror Business Magazine, Security Middle East Magazine, HQ, The Home of Global Security, The Daily Telegraph, The Dail Mail, The Mail Online, BBC Mundo, BBC World Service, BBC Radio and TV, Japanese NTV, Chunichi/Tokyo Shimbun, RT, INTERPOL and World TV.



## Surprise meeting in Doha



Executive Council member Sheena Thomson, a former Lt Commander and media operations specialist in the Royal Navy told Scribblings: “It was fantastic to catch up in Doha with the indomitable and charming Peter Clarke who I took over from as SFOR/NATO spokesperson in Sarajevo. It really didn’t seem like 26 years. Only grey hair gave the game away!



A good professional network with shared standards and ways of working really lasts the test of time - and makes meet ups such fun. Peter, also a member of The Pen, is now a Director of The Strategic Communications Academy.

## Peter is a Freeman



RAF Media reservist Peter Lisney, who specialises, he says, in getting the right messages across in energy and defence is a Fellow of ICPR and a Producer of the RAF's 'InsideAIR' podcast. He went live on social media to say: "Isn't it good to be a leaf on a tree. Part of something bigger than you. Something that was around centuries before you were born, and (hopefully) will be around centuries after you are gone. That's how I felt when I was admitted to the Freedom of the City of London at a ceremony at Guildhall. All part of my journey as a member of [The Worshipful Company of Communicators](#).