

Scribblings

Journal of the Pen & Sword Club

News, views, and clues for defence communicators

January 2025

Editor: Mike Peters

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THE DECLINE IN DEFENCE COMMUNICATIONS IS PAINFUL TO WATCH....

THE LAST ISSUE OF SCRIBBLINGS was shocking, writes The Pen's Immediate Past President, Hugh Colver. A former two-star Chief of Public Relations to the UK Ministry of Defence during the First Gulf War era and author of the Green Book on Media Handling in Conflict, Hugh also served in the No.10 Downing Street Office press team during the Falklands War. He also deployed aboard several Royal Navy warships during the Icelandic Cod Wars and in Belize, Hugh's career includes a time as Director of Communications for the Conservative Party and as Director of Corporate Communications at BAE Systems, the international defence giant. In his early years in journalism he wrote for both the Financial Times and the Guardian. Today he continues his work as a business development and public affairs advisor and as a strategist and mediator.



DECLINE in defence communications which we have all observed over the last far too many years is a disgrace and is indeed shocking. As an organisation that stands for the importance of defence communications, and the need for quality people with the right training and experience, it was sad to see the Pen & Sword Club members Derek Plews, Mike Evans and Mark Laity savaging the current UK defence communications scene.

We should sit up and take notice. These three know a great deal about how this should work. They told an uncomfortable truth. They also, though, reflected that the UK is behind other nations in this area - and we used to be good at this.

The Pen & Sword Club needs to become a more voluble voice in making the case for professional defence communications. We have a formidable collective CV in this area. Second to none in fact. We need to be heard because the rot cannot surely be allowed to continue.

When I returned to the MoD in 1985 after stints in other areas of the Government Communications machine I remember being shocked to discover that after all the reports that had been written and all the worthy conferences that had been held, the communications lessons of the Falklands Conflict had not been translated into operational planning and were therefore not reflected in the organisation as it went about its daily business. We soon put that right and indeed we took our planning into NATO where it was embraced by the Americans and the other European members.

Just as well. When Gulf War 1 started I was able with my Pentagon colleagues to apply those plans to the operations, bring the Saudis into the fold, and proceed to mount a pretty good comms effort throughout the war. We didn't get everything right of course and we learned some more lessons we were able to reflect in our plans.

If the MoD is not preparing for operations and does not have the people trained for it what is it for? And that is as true for comms as for other areas of responsibility. In this context – and encouraged by the three contributions mentioned above, as well as that from Stephen Badsey – I'd like to address two issues.

Media Operations

Derek Plews covered the Army's failure to emphasise media operations in favour of social media. He also said that 77 Brigade did not seem to recognise media ops as a skill. Indeed it is apparently regarded by some as a "Cinderella." This is extraordinary and helps to explain why the broadcast and print media is full of defence nonsense, stories that do not get rebutted and misunderstandings based on ignorance of defence, its people, and its equipment.

Let us be really clear. As part of the wider and all-embracing strategic communications organisation across the MoD and the Armed Forces, Media Relations and Media Operations are essential parts of the armoury and one of the most important. That should be obvious to anybody but especially to comms professionals, so it is utterly incredible that it is not seen as such.



It is a skill that people must be trained for, and the MoD and the three Services have ample opportunities available to them to ensure that personnel receive on-the-job training. Those opportunities are there every day of the year. In my experience, there does not need to be an argument about civilian versus military. We need both. However, both must be properly trained, and they must be posted to appointments that permit them to develop this skill. And that takes me to my second issue.

Organisation

The MoD had, in the past, a two-star level civilian running the whole communications show and three one-star Service deputies. The Army in particular always thought that putting a promising one-star into the job would broaden their experience and give them a career-long understanding of the wider political and media world in which their Service would always have to operate.

They had to learn fast in those jobs, and they relied heavily on the expertise around them. One of the key skills they acquired quickly was in media relations.

Of great importance was that they had credibility with the media. The media knew they were plugged in to their service, knew that they had experience and knew that they had knowledge. They also had credibility drawn from status within the organisation. They were plugged in to their Chiefs. They knew stuff. How can it be right, as Derek reported, that the Army is now civilianising and downgrading that role?

Incidentally, how can it be right that junior officers who have been given a short term comms task with no training and no background find themselves being given awards as military communicators? It denigrates the job, makes everyone think they can turn their hand to it at a moment's notice without any training or background and it undermines the credibility of the civilian specialists who have learned the skills over many years.

I support the view that there should be a cadre within each Service so that personnel can adopt communications as a specialism, as part of their career development, but clearly giving them a functional strand which they can carry through their career in different ranks, perhaps aspiring to a one-star job heading up comms for their Service and then going on to bring that skill to higher appointments. Imagine how much more effective that would be.

In parallel, there must be a civilian group that concentrates their entire career on comms. At the top of the department that person acts as Press Secretary to the Secretary of State, is a senior civilian in the MoD with the right amount of clout in Whitehall and runs the defence comms organisation that deals with policy, finance, and procurement issues as well as operations. He/she has a military/civilian team under them with a multitude of skill sets and specialisms and the ability to deploy on ops and offer commanders solid and credible advice. They can be civilian or military in the operations role or as we see often a mix of the two – reservists with a comms specialism. This is not rocket science. Why have we lost this approach?



The role of politicians

Incidentally, I notice that the role of “politicians” is being dismissed in some of this discussion. That is a mistake. A Government of a particular party is elected to run the country. A Cabinet is formed and one of the key jobs is as Defence Secretary.

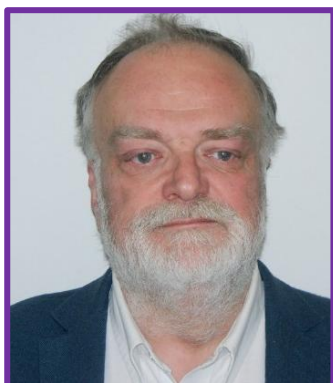
The person running communications in the MoD must be a key adviser to the Secretary of State. In my view that person should also run the comms organisation within the department and have high status within the organisation. Much of what happens comes from the Secretary of State and his/her Ministers. They are responsible to Parliament and to the people. We must never forget that vital link. Politicians are not “interfering.” They are in charge and as we are a Parliamentary democracy that is right and proper.

Yes, the quality will vary, yes some of them will bring more to defence than others – but they are the ultimate boss and quite rightly. One of the things that surprises me about the decline of defence communications is that Ministers have allowed it to happen. My experience of Ministers was that they regarded it as one of the most important jobs. I saw my Secretary of State every day, travelled with him and was a key adviser. In that situation defence communications can never be “down the page.” And that is as it should be.

So, we in the Pen& Sword Club have a key responsibility. We must take this message everywhere, advocate comms excellence, support the current practitioners and seek to give them better training, a greater level of importance and more clout. Only then will defence communications improve and get back to the levels to which it has aspired in the past.

A Journalist’s View ‘From the Coalface’

By Tim Mahon, former Editor-in-Chief of Moench defence publications.



Tim’s career in the defence information business spans four decades and three companies. Fifteen years in sales and general management roles with Jane’s took him to live and work in California and Virginia for a decade, returning home after 9/11. Since then he has been a freelance writer, author, editor, and consultant, culminating in four years as Editor-in-Chief of Military Technology magazine, from which he semi-retired at the end of 2022..

THE RECENT presentation on Media Operations before a small but very engaged audience at the Little Ship Club, near Southwark Bridge in Central London in November prompted me to reflect on my own experience with official press relations over the last couple of decades – and to question whether I should revise my hitherto rather skeptical viewpoint.

As background, a couple of anecdotes. About 15 years ago, I was writing for a US-based magazine that specialized in military training and simulation issues. A big story at the time was the recomplete of the Army's Deployed Tactical Engagement Simulator, which Saab won from incumbent Cubic. Having been out to Kenya to see the system operating at first hand, I wrote an extensive feature.



Before even starting to draft said feature I called my usual point of contact at DE&S, asking for comments and/or a brief interview, explaining my deadline and asking for as much detail as they were comfortable with. As was my then usual experience, the response I received came a week after deadline and consisted of “we are unable to comment.”

Fast forward a year or so to a training conference in Sweden and a social event on the Saab stand. My host beckoned me to his side and introduced me to a couple of gentlemen from UK DE&S, one of whom immediately said : “We didn’t like your article at all, Mr. Mahon.” Somewhat taken aback, I asked why.

“You made it sound like Saab just woke up one morning and had a brilliant idea which we had no input to at all. There was nothing about the efforts we put into the programme or any reflection on the evolution of the requirement.”

I explained that I had tried but, as was my usual experience at the time, I had not been

able to get past the PR gatekeepers and was frustrated in my attempts to illustrate another side to a compelling story. “However,” I said, “I have now started my own web-based publication focused on training and I would be delighted to put your side of the story. Being my own master means I won’t have any deadline or content restraints, so let’s pick a date convenient to you for me to come down and find out more.”

“Good Heavens.... We can’t actually talk to you!!!” My host rapidly disappeared behind his stand to conceal his convulsive chortling.

The second incident illustrating my frustration was a few years later, when an opportunity came up to profile a major command that was in the process of embracing considerable and far-reaching change.

This was an interesting project, and I spent a day or so doing some due diligence, outlining a working structure, and starting to frame open-ended questions that took into account any sensitivities the principals might have. Then I contacted MoD PR.

After several voicemail messages and two calls that actually connected to a live person but got nowhere, I found myself talking to an individual who was supremely unconcerned with what I was seeking to achieve. I then spent a couple of hours drafting a document to be put in front of the newly appointed commander and explaining that, as it had now taken ten days to get to this point, I had a deadline looming that meant I had just over two weeks in which to conduct the necessary interview.

To my surprise, I got my answer the following day. However, the tenor was not surprising at all. “We are actually supremely busy at the moment as the commander settles in and we draft policy and work on interservice issues. I suggest you call us in the New Year.” That conversation took place in mid-August. A month later, there was an in-depth interview with the same commander in the national press.

It is, of course, possible that I have unachievable aspirations or even expectations. It is also the case that I feel not only frustrated but also belittled by constantly being sidelined, fobbed off or fundamentally ignored by officials whose job it was, so I thought, to promote, profile and promulgate good, positive stories about Britain's military machine, its capabilities, challenges, and achievements. Which explains why I gave up trying to seek official comment or assistance several years ago.

My experiences with DoD, with the Ministère de la Défense Nationale and with NATO HQ – the latter on an embed in Afghanistan in 2009 – have been fundamentally different: not perfect, but infinitely more cooperative and engaging.

Of course, I fully recognize that the picture on the other side of the fence is neither simple nor monochromatic. Limited resources and changing objectives mean there may be regular requirements to focus effort on the needs of the national press or the broadcast media; the unfortunately untrustworthy nature of many of the freelance or employed journalists preceding me may well have soured attitudes to an approach from a relatively unknown (or potentially uncontrollable) source; yet another request may have been the straw that broke the camel's back for a point of contact whose resources or training may have been lacking; or maybe my timing has been unfortunate and I have permanently managed to mount difficult requests at times of crisis or high pressure within the organization.

But I – like many of my peers – have a deep-rooted desire to tell positive stories about British defence, yet I find it nigh on impossible to navigate my way to authoritative, apposite, and articulate commentary from the official side of the equation.

That's a pity. And, from the tenor of the discussion before, during and after lunch at the last Pen & Sword Club meeting, the winds of change may already be blowing through Main Building and beyond. So, it is maybe incumbent upon me to try again when the opportunity and need arises. Which I will do. I am convinced my experiences are not unique, but I must reconcile my frustration with the conviction that repetition is not necessarily inevitable.

I am proud of being British and of our armed forces. I wish I could do more to support them and desire strongly so to do. It would be nice – exceedingly so – to be able to craft a story that reflects both industrial and operational sides of the coin, written sympathetically and empathically as well as objectively, while serving the interests of all parties involved.

Perhaps that makes me naïve or out of 'sync' with the modern media: I hope not. And I hope my next effort to engage is better conceived, better prosecuted, and better received.

Farewell to Aubrey and Paul

SCRIBBLINGS reports, with great regret, the passing of two Club members – Aubrey Chalmers, a Daily Mail, journalist for 32 years and Paul Hayley, the Soldier Magazine photographer sent at less than 12 hours' notice to join 5 Brigade on its way south to the Falklands in 1982. Both helped in the establishing the credibility of defence communications which was not too fashionable in their era.

Lieutenant Colonel Aubrey Chalmers, right, was a member of the first tranche of professional journalists to join the Territorial Army Group of Information Officers (TAPIOs) while he was the Daily Mail's man-in-the-Midlands. An enthusiastic member of the Birmingham Press Club Aubrey was to make his mark in Army Communications very quickly. As the TAPIOs geared up to run courses for Unit Press Officers earmarked to serve in the Northern Ireland Troubles, Aubrey was to write a series of instructions on how to produce press releases, hometown news stories and a manual on dealing with the media.



In addition Aubrey wrote the first constitution for The Pen & Sword Club when it was formed as a home for retiring TAPIOs. Aubrey's journalistic career was extensive, and he was at the forefront in reporting from the industrial heartland of the United Kingdom and was always on the scene when a story broke.

He was one of the first TAPIOs to deploy to Gulf War 1 and immediately found his slot. Together with other TAPIOs he set about professionalising the British spokespersons team and added his extensive knowledge to a group that sifted the news, established the stories, and compiled the questions and answers to ensure the public, at home, got the right messages.

Aubrey continued his support for the Army on leaving the TAPIOs to become part of the nationwide team bringing professional public affairs support to the Army Cadet Force. He was to go on to become a cadet force Deputy County Commandant. Aubrey moved to South Devon following the death of his wife and was in a nursing home overlooking the Dart Estuary when he passed on in November last year.

A tribute from Colonel Martin Newman

Aubrey had served as an Army Cadet Force Officer prior to becoming a TAPIO. Unfortunately, a heart attack curtailed his service in the Pool but once recovered offered his services to the newly established ACF PR Unit. His previous ACF experience and professionalism in the world of communications became an invaluable asset and Aubrey did much to grow our team and to train the cadet forces county press officers.

Aubrey joined us as a guest presenter at one of our training weekends at Altcar and he immediately saw the opportunity of partaking in generous glasses of 'wee nippy sweeties with equipart water' and extra portions of chips, both curtailed by his wife on medical grounds! By the end of the weekend he volunteered to join us and became our second-in-command. His contribution to the unit was outstanding and he played a major part in raising the standard of public relations within the ACF and consequently increasing media profile and exposure.

His comradeship and humour were sadly missed when he was appointed deputy commandant to Leicestershire and Northants ACF. Our loss was their gain.



Paul Hayley, left, stood out from the small band of photographers who earned their Falklands medals. While covering the training and preparations of 5 Brigade Paul struck up a relationship with the commanding Brigadier and soon found the HQ had asked for him to be attached.

Tasked at a few hours' notice Paul believed he was only travelling as far as Ascension Island. Without appropriate clothing but a lot of photographic kit he suddenly found he was also wanted for the invasion force and earned a reputation for scrounging the right equipment to complete his task.

Paul made his name among the soldiery with ease. He became adept at flagging down helicopters and hitching lifts to wherever he thought there was to be action. With the vaguest of briefs from Soldier Magazine and no generic military support he nevertheless took thousands of pictures and found the ways and means to get them back to the UK. In

the years that followed Paul was much in demand to speak to his slide show and travelled extensively telling his story.

Paul left school at just 15 years of age and took a Saturday job as a wedding photographer. After completing his apprenticeship he applied for a job in 1971 as a photographer with the Ministry of Defence and was posted to The Royal School of Artillery Larkhill, Wiltshire.

In 1974 Paul was promoted to Senior Photographer at 'Soldier' magazine based in Aldershot. The advert read 'must be prepared to travel anywhere in the World at 24 hrs notice'

Paul worked for the Ministry of Defence for a total of 16 years and covered many conflicts. In his time as an MoD photographer he went to Northern Ireland, Beirut, Belize, Kenya, Canada, Bermuda, Norway, Germany, France, Australia, Austria, The Gambia, USA as well as many places in England, Scotland, and Wales. Eventually Paul did tire of all the travelling and though he loved his time with the MOD he decided to put down some roots. In late 1987 Paul opened his own studio doing Social Photography and freelancing.

Paul was once asked how he would like to be remembered. He said: 'If my photographs evoke memories then my job's been done. I'm proud to be counted as a member of the Class of 82 and have the tattoo to prove it.'

Members in the news

THREE CLUB MEMBERS HONOURED

Scribblings congratulates three club members who featured in the 2025 New Year Honours List. Major General Alastair Bruce becomes a Companion of the Order of the Bath, WO2 Paul Barnes, has been awarded an MBE and Lt Col Anita Newcourt received the King's Volunteer Reserve Medal.



MAJOR GENERAL Alastair Bruce of Crionaich CB OBE VR DL is a former commanding officer of the Army's Media Operations Group (Volunteers) as well as a journalist and television correspondent and an officer in the Royal Household. He recently completed a tour as Governor of Edinburgh Castle.

A commentator on royal, religious and national events for Sky News, Alastair was previously with the BBC, and was historical adviser to several feature films as well as the ITV series Downton Abbey.

He has been a commentator on many major state events in the United Kingdom, including the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012, the Royal Wedding in 2011, the Papal Visit in 2010, the Coronation in 2023, and the deaths and funerals of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997, the Queen Mother in 2002, the Duke of Edinburgh in 2021, and Queen Elizabeth II in 2022.

Commissioned in the British Army, in 1979, Alastair saw active service in the Falklands War of 1982. An Assistant Vice-president with Merrill Lynch from 1983 to 1989 Alastair took command of the Media Operations Group, co-ordinating media representation of military activity. In the same year, he was mobilised on active operations in Iraq, serving in Operation TELIC.

Alastair is the equerry to Prince Edward. He accompanied the prince to such events as the Wedding of Albert II, Prince of Monaco. After serving as Director of Ceremonies of the Order of St John, in 2008, he was appointed a Knight of St John and in 2010, became an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours for "services to the Territorial Army". He was Deputy Commander of 3rd Division and Colonel of the London Scottish Regiment.

In 2020, Alastair was appointed honorary colonel of 5 Military Intelligence Battalion and in 2021, as honorary colonel of Tayforth Universities Officers' Training Corps. He was appointed honorary colonel of 6th Battalion, the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers in 2023.

Queen Elizabeth II appointed him as one of her heralds in 1998 as Fitzalan Pursuivant, and he has been a member of the Royal Company of Archers, the Sovereign's ceremonial bodyguard in Scotland, since 1990.

Alastair has worked as a historical advisor to Oscar-winning films such as *The King's Speech* and *The Young Victoria*, and the BAFTA-winning television series *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015). He has worked with several independent production companies in the preparation of television documentaries which are regularly aired on the BBC, America's PBS network, Discovery Channel and A&E channels. Among these are *Nicholas and Alexandra*, *Victoria and Albert* (2001) and *Days of Majesty*.

Alastair has lectured widely throughout Britain, Europe and the United States; his subjects range from the last Tsars of Russia to British monarchy and the Vatican. In 2011, he was appointed Honorary Professor of Media at the University of Winchester.



Warrant Officer Paul Barnes made a pivotal visit to Fort McCoy in Wisconsin last May. His mission? To champion the importance of international co-operation and interoperability in military operations between the U.S. and United Kingdom.

From immersive installation tours with Fort McCoy Garrison leadership to presentations covering warfare doctrine and lessons learned from the British Army's studies on the war in Ukraine, Paul's itinerary was packed with engagements aimed at fostering deeper cooperation between the British and American military.

WO2(SQMS) Paul Barnes MBE is SO2 Warfare at the British Army's Land Warfare Centre. He was the lead author of ADP Land Operations (2022), DN 22/02

Freedom of Action in the Application of Land Power (2022), and JDP 0-20 Land Power (2023). He currently has responsibility for domain level doctrine and academic interface within Warfare Branch, is Secretary of NATO's Senior Land Doctrine Panel, Chairman of its NATO MDO Study Group, and leads ABCANZ's Manoeuvre Doctrine Project Team. He regularly speaks on doctrine matters to audiences at home and abroad.

WO2 Barnes has an MA in Military History from the University of Birmingham, where his dissertation was entitled 'The Development of British and Dominion Aerial Re-supply in the First World War 1916-18'. He is a CGS' Fellow and, uniquely, a CAS' Fellow; was the British Army's Visiting Fellow at RUSI in 2018/19 and a Fellow at West Point in 2020/21. He won the RAF's Salmond Prize for Essay Writing in that Service's centenary year. He has written articles which have been widely published in the UK, USA and Australia and is currently writing a book on the Principles of War for Swift Press to be published in 2025.



Lt Col Anita Newcourt MBE QVRM TD VR AAC joined the Reserves as a WRAC Officer Cadet in Bristol University in 1983. After graduating and passing out of Sandhurst she spent a short stint during the Summer Season at PUBLIC Information at HQ London District. This was followed by an appointment to the newly formed 5th Royal Green Jackets as Unit Press Officer to publicise the fledgling unit.

Following a short time at 10th Battalion the Parachute Regiment she joined the Media Operations Group, where she served until 2014 in a variety of roles.

Anita was then posted to 11 Infantry Brigade as SO1 Military Community Interface, mainly focusing on developing links with the Community through Education.

This was followed by a posting to the newly stood-up Sandhurst Group as SOI Engagement.

One of the highlights of her time at Army Media and Communications (2018-2021), was the role of French Liaison Officer, for the Commander of the Normandy 75 Commemorations. In 2021 she was posted to the 1st Aviation Brigade as SOI Engagement, whilst also working on a project for the Army Air Corps to improve communication and support for AAC Veterans. This was followed by a posting to Engagement in the 4* HQ of UK Strategic Command. Whilst in this role her post was converted to Full Time Reserve Service for which Anita was selected. She received the KVRM for her service in the Reserves.

New Chairman for 7644 Squadron Association



PETER DOREY, left, has taken over as Chairman of the 7644 Squadron Association from fellow Pen & Sword Club member Tim Blakey. Tim was a founder member of the Association, which in its present form, began in 2017 after a suggestion by Wing Commander Howard Leader.

The Squadron has been affiliated with the Pen & Sword Club from its inception when members of the Squadron regularly trained and worked alongside the Pen's founding organisation, the TA Pool of Information Officers.

Says Peter who joins the club's Executive Council: 'I'd like to thank Tim for his service and guidance of the Association. Tim made great efforts to put the Association on a firm foundation and promoting it to the former and current members of 7644. The Association keeps in touch with former members of 7644 including social support, career development and for social events. I am delighted that we continue to benefit from Tim's participation'

Peter served with 7644 from 1994 to 2004 with a focus on print journalism, media training and media operations primarily at the MoD and PJHQ. He regularly attends The Pen's events.

He is currently responsible for corporate relations at a cyber security research organisation, working with tech companies, third party foundations and individual researchers to build trust and safety on the internet. Peter previously worked in marketing for the French defence contractor Thales at their Paris HQ and for Hewlett-Packard's defence business in the UK and Australia.

Tim Blakey, right, joined 7644 Sqn in 2001 after he served for four plus years with 4624 (Air Movements) Squadron as an SAC, loading and unloading Hercules, VC10s and Tristar aircraft at RAF Brize Norton. He was mobilized for six months during the Kosovo Crisis. In his civilian job, Tim worked as a Senior Editor at Oxford University Press in the Video Department."

7644 (VR) Public Relations Squadron, Royal Auxiliary Air Force is a unit of the Royal Air Force. The VR designation indicates the unit's history as part of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR). The squadron's role is to provide Media Operations support for RAF and NATO forces world-wide in times of peace and war. The unit is based at RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire.



What was to become No. 7644 Squadron was the 1940 brainchild of Lord Beaverbrook. The government of the time identified the need to keep the public informed about the Second World War, giving the hard facts, but also introducing servicemen and women telling their own stories. It was realised that the reporters covering the stories needed to be guided by people with dual expertise.

Lord Beaverbrook's idea was to find information experts with a service background or interest and ask them to become officers in each of the Armed Forces. Almost everyone approached volunteered and so was formed the first specialist public relations unit in the RAFVR. After the war, the RAF recognised the benefits of maintaining a small number of journalists in uniform. After being part of other units, these PR specialists became No. 7644 (VR) Public Relations Squadron RAuxAF at the amalgamation of the RAFVR and the RAuxAF on 5 April 1997.

Mike takes a new role with the Army Cadet Force

A NEWSPAPER, radio & television journalist for 40 years, Mike Edwards was the nightly face of the Scottish News on STV for more than quarter of a century. This year he takes on an additional role as the Honorary Colonel of the Army Cadet Force in Glasgow and Lanarkshire.

Mike serves in the Army Reserve, having joined the Territorial Army in 1994. As a member of the Media Operations Group (volunteers) and a Major in the Royal Highland Fusiliers, he was mobilised to serve on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When he retired from his media career to become a full-time carer for his mother Margaret- who had been diagnosed with dementia - he was appointed an ambassador for Alzheimer Scotland. Mike is passionate about helping people and their families living with dementia and also works to support military veterans as a caseworker for the armed forces charity SSAFA.



A trustee of the Royal Highland Fusiliers charity, and the Highlanders Regimental Museum at Fort George he also sits on the board of Crimestoppers Scotland. He holds a degree in Sociology, a diploma in journalism and is a graduate of the British and Canadian Army staff colleges. He is a Deputy Lieutenant of Dunbartonshire.

Mike was named Reservist of the Year in 2022 at the Scottish Veterans' Awards and was awarded the OBE for charitable and public service in the Queen's Platinum Jubilee birthday honours list in 2022

Winning Streak in Wales

CLUB member Martin Wade, right, featured in two awards made to 614 (County of Glamorgan) Squadron, Royal Auxiliary Air Force in recognition of exceptional performance and teamwork in 2024. The squadron won the Clyde Trophy, an accolade given to the unit demonstrating the highest performance in media and public relations in 2024. The squadron's media engagement in the last year included features on BBC and ITV Wales, as well as coverage in print, online, and RAF channels,

The squadron's Media Flight also received the Howard Leader Trophy. The award was presented to Flight Lieutenant Wade, pictured above, Sergeant Sharples, and Corporal Harris for their media efforts marking the 100th anniversary of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force.



Their contributions included organising an exhibition at the Welsh Parliament, generating widespread media coverage, and publishing On Dragons' Wings, a history of No. 614 Squadron authored by Martin.

Martin moved to Wales to study International Politics at Aberystwyth University in 1988. He has over 20 years' experience as a journalist for newspapers and magazines and currently is a press officer for the Welsh Government.

The Media Flight award takes account of tasking in 2024 including coverage of events marking the 100th anniversary, deployment across the globe in support of UK defence operations - including to Korea and Ethiopia - coverage of Anglo-French exercises in France and an exchange with the Montana Air National Guard in the USA.

Before joining the Welsh Government, Marin was digital editor for the South Wales Argus in Newport for 11 years and earlier was with Newsquest setting up and managing a network of 12 newspaper websites across South Wales and Gloucestershire.

Martin told Scribblings: It was my privilege to write the very first history of 614. It tells the story of Wales's only RAF Reserve squadron from formation in the 1930s, through the Second World War and Cold War to the present day. To have it published in this centenary year of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force was very special. 'On Dragons' Wings', is published by Y Lolfa with all profits going to the RAF Benevolent Fund and South Wales Aviation Museum is available from Amazon: <https://lnkd.in/eN84RXZ2>.

No. 614 Squadron was originally formed on 1 June 1937 as an army co-operation squadron unit of the Auxiliary Air Force. It served during the Second World War, first in this role and later as a bomber squadron. Upon reformation it served as a fighter squadron until the disbandment of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force in March 1957.

No. 614 Sqn Royal Auxiliary Air Force was reformed in 2014 and is now a General Support Squadron qn that provides dedicated support to RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire. It maintains a base in Cardiff and recruits from across South Wales and the West of England.

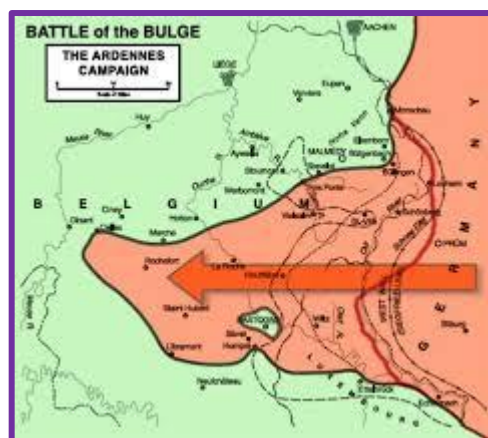
Scribblings continues its search for the best examples of defence communications and finds the news full of significant anniversaries. From the Battle of the Bulge in WW2 to the British exercises – Lionheart and Spearpoint - there is still much to learn

World War 2 and the Battle of The Bulge

HITLER'S last desperate gamble, the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes brought sad news for the British Army's Film & Photographic Unit with the deaths of three members. . Scribblings is fortunate to have connected with Imperial War Museum specialist Oliver Carter-Wakefield who has trawled through the final months of 1994 and into the final year of the war to reveal what AFPU was capturing on film.

Eighty years ago the Battle of the Bulge was still raging. The British part of the battle is well documented though often more commented upon in the context of disputes between American and British Generals. Scribblings called on Imperial war Museum photographic specialist Oliver Carter-Wakefield to give a more detailed account of the time.

Oliver completed his completed his thesis, titled: 'The Cameraman's Experience of the Second World: A Study of the Army Film and Photographic Unit's Dope Sheets, 1939-1943' in conjunction with the Imperial War Museum and the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London's School of Advanced Study. His research uses contextual documents compiled by members of the AFPU as a springboard to explore wider issues of image and identity within Britain's wartime army.



Oliver's work makes a valuable contribution to histories of wartime film and photography as well as to our understanding of how the British Army responded to the societal and cultural challenges of total war. During the 'Battle of the Bulge', 16th December 1944 – 25th January 1945 the AFPU was involved in a number of ways.

Captured German artillery

On December 31, 1944, Sergeant Ian Grant shot interesting footage of German 88's - two of which were brought from Normandy and the other was made up from bits and pieces of nine wrecked guns – and were being used against their former owners by members of the 58th L.A.A. Regiment who, as part of the 11th Armoured Division, had been directed to hold a defensive line along the Meuse between Namur and Givet. The armoured component of the division (the 29th Armoured Brigade) played a significant role in stopping the westward progress of the German Battlegroup Böhm between the 25 and 26 of December.'

Germans Dressed in British Uniform

We're all familiar with story of the Germans dressed in American uniforms during the Battle of the Bulge. However, an entry in No.5 Section's war diary dated 09/01/1945 states that in the sector occupied by VIII Corps 'Rifleman Gillingham' was 'responsible for the arrest of two German soldiers dressed in British uniform.'

How, and in what capacity Gillingham, was attached to the AFPU is currently unknown. Although the original plan for Operation Greif called for the use of both American and British uniforms it seems likely that the men Gillingham arrested were part of a local reconnaissance mission rather than members of Otto Skorzeny's Einheit Stielau. It's generally held that the difficulties in finding men with a good enough command of English along with sufficient uniforms and equipment limited the ambitious scope of Greif to 44 men dressed as Americans the last of whom penetrated Allied lines no later than 19/12/1944.

The Battle of Sint Joost

This was part of Operation Blackcock (see below). The village of Sint Joost lay in the path of the 7th Armored Division's advance on the city of Montfort. In the face of a fanatical defence by members of the composite fallschirmjäger regiment 'Hübner' it took members of the 9th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry and the 1st Battalion, the Rifle Brigade supported by the flame-throwing Crocodile tanks of the 8th Hussar's four days to capture the village following their initial assault on the 20/01/1945.

The battle was covered by Sergeants Albert Blakeley, Jack Chitham, Terry McArdle and Gordon Walker. Writing on the 21st, Walker noted, 'every other German appears to have a bazooka and are using them to such deadly effect that our armour has withdrawn'.

During the fighting King George VI's nephew, Gerald Lascelles (president of the British Racing Drivers Association between 1964 and 1991 and brother of the more famous, former Colditz prisoner George Lascelles) then, a junior officer in the Rifle Brigade was photographed commanding his platoon in action.

Three deaths

Three members of AFPU's No.5 Army Film and Photographic Section died outside of Heinsberg in January 1945 - sergeants Bill Gross and Vic Watkins, and their driver Private Veron Smith. As with much surrounding the AFPU their exact date of death is somewhat opaque. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission website records Watkins as having died on 21/01/1945, Gross on 24/01/1945 and their driver, who was only 19 – as having died on 25/01/1945.

Their deaths are recorded in No.5 Section's War Diary in an entry dated 24/01/1945 which states that: Sgts. Gross & Watkins with Dvr. Smith were killed in action while coming out of Heinsberg. Lt. Peter Handford who was in Aphoven heard of the accident and proceeded to scene. He managed to get the two sergeants to the nearest observation post. Dvr. Smith had been blown to pieces and burned.



Handford, left, was one of the pioneers of location sound recording who would go on to win both an Oscar and a BAFTA for his work on *Out of Africa* (1985) and who also worked on *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) and a host of earlier films now considered classics - *The Entertainer* (1960), *Billy Liar* (1963), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968).

In 1945 he was leading the AFPU's small sound recording section which had been formed five months previously in September 1944.

The action that both the ill-fated trio and the recording section were covering was the attack by the 52nd (Lowland) Division towards Heinsberg as part of Operation Blackcock. Blackcock,

which involved three divisions – the aforementioned 52nd along with the 7th Armoured Division and the 43rd (Wessex Division) all of whom were part of XII Corps was launched on the 13th with the aim of pushing the German's back across the rivers Wurm and Roer thereby eliminating what was referred to as the 'Roer Triangle'.

Sgts Gross and Watkins submitted their last dope sheets on 21/01/1945. In them the cameramen report that they were with the 7th Cameronians advancing towards the village of Hontem, roughly three and half miles from the centre of Heinsberg, between the villages of Aphoven and Obspringen. The Cameronian's regimental history records that 'On the principle of giving the enemy no respite' the 7th Battalion were selected to take Obspringen and commenced their attack (which necessitated taking the smaller villages of Locken and Schnondorf first) at 19:30 on the evening of the 22nd.

Having achieved its objectives by the morning of 23rd this attack, which is described in the regimental history as 'one of the most interesting, daring and eventually successful of the entire campaign' cost the 7th Battalion 37 casualties and marked the end of its active participation in Blackcock (the operation itself would last until 27/01/1945).

Whether or not the three AFPU men went in with the attack is unknown. They would, of course, have been unable to film at night. I suspect, says Oliver, they probably filmed its aftermath on the 23rd and then joined the main attack on Heinsberg which was carried out by the 7/9th Battalion Royal Scots, 4th Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers and the tanks of the Sherwood Ranger's Yeomanry on the morning of the 24th.

Stanley Christopherson, a tank officer who took part in the attack described how: Eight hundred yards of dead flat ground had to be crossed before it was possible to enter the town, which was heavily protected by self-propelled guns, and we lost three tanks as we advanced through the smokescreen. Sergeant Lane's troop was the first to get into the town, and it was thanks to this troop that the remainder of our tanks found their way in. Sergeant Lane was awarded the Military Medal for his actions, but it was not until mid-morning on the 25th that the town was finally fully in British hands.

"Given that the war diary describes Gross, Watkins and Smith as being hit 'coming out of Heinsberg' it's my belief that they'd filmed what they could and were returning towards Obspringen when some of the remaining German artillery accounted for them. Of course, the fact that the incident is described as an 'accident' does cause one to raise one's eyebrows.

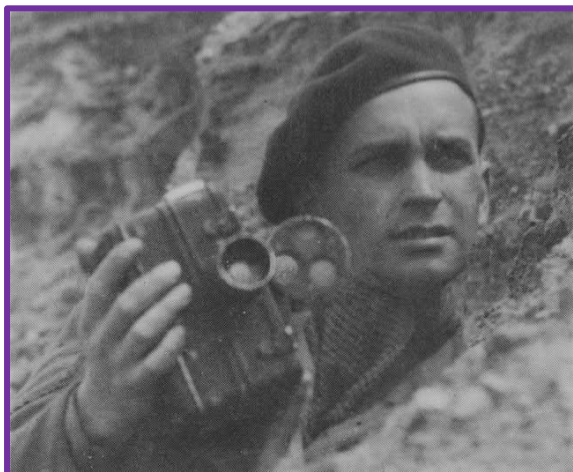
“Evidently Gross and Watkins survived long enough to moved away from the site where their jeep was hit, and this probably accounts for the fact that they and Smith are buried in different cemeteries. The two men, who were both members of the Middlesex Regiment prior to join the AFPU, trained together in the same cohort at Pinewood and as photographs from that time show were evidently the firmest of friends. It’s fitting therefore that they now lie side-by-side in Brunssum war cemetery.”

In his book *Cameramen at War*, Ian Grant tells of the deaths of the trio..

He wrote: Just prior to the thrust on Gleve and Goch, the worst tragedy to strike at the heart of AFPU was the death of Sergeants Bill Gross and Vic Watkins and their drive. Very little information is available about the incident but apparently they were proceeding up the road to Heinsberg – remember they were veterans, but always willing to take a chance on a hunch. Perhaps, the hunch began to ring the wrong sort of bells, for at some stage they stopped. The professional within them warned that something was wrong, and they hastened to turn the jeep around. But the ring of warning proved to be a German 88, and the jeep was dead in its sights. As it turned it became a better target, and the pressure on the trigger finger did the rest.

Bill and Vic died fast and clean – but what were they doing on a road up which no other British troops had dared to go? They were far more professional in warfare than a great number of troops in the line were and their instinct for danger had an assurance that no other “paired” cameramen possessed. So why did they die on a cold morning of January 24, 1945?

The answer was, perhaps, well known, to all who served in AFPU. There was a tradition of getting ahead of the front line and filming back towards the advancing British troops! Ian mentions other incidents of AFPU photographers “swanning the front line.”



Sergeant Ian Grant, left, of the Army Film & Photographic Unit, is said to have been the first cameraman into the Belsen Concentration Camp. There will be more on this topic in a later edition of *Scribblings*. Ian Grant was born in Edinburgh in 1917 and was called up for military service in 1940. He spent two years with the Royal Scots where he became a Lance-Corporal. However, when he saw a notice asking for volunteers with a knowledge of photography he applied straight away.

Having “blagged” his way through his selection interview Ian was posted to Pinewood to begin his training to join No.5 Section AFPU. Prior to D Day he was whisked

away to the Isle of Wight to secretly film the new vehicles of 79th Armoured Division (Hobart’s Funnies).

On D Day Grant was assigned to land with Lovat’s 1st Special Services Brigade. He captured much of the iconic D day coverage of Lovat and his Piper Billy Malins. During his war service Grant Ian was both mentioned in despatches and awarded the Military Medal.

In April 45, whilst on assignment covering 11th Armoured Division Grant became the first cameraman to enter Bergen-Belsen camp following its liberation. After the war he went to work for J Arthur Rank shooting newsreels. He joined the infant ITN and was one of its cameramen during its formative years.

1984....and all that!

THE TITLE of a book by Orwell but also a date which sticks in the minds of defence communicators. The Falklands war was two years into history but the stinging accusations by mainstream media about Ministry of Defence public relations were still raw, writes Editor Mike Peters.

The multiple inquests into media handling by the Ministry of Defence had prompted a major deployment of the press to Germany in 1983 when hundreds of UK and international journalists were put into the field to test - and explain - the way the British Army would handle the press in future conflicts.

Then, in 1984, came the test - Exercise Lionheart. Staged by 1 British Corps it was presented to the world as the biggest ever British exercise and the largest mobilisation since the

Second World War. In fact, Exercise Lionheart involved a massive 131,565 UK personnel - regular, reserve and Territorial Army. Among them the British Army's strategic reserve of media operations specialists.

The TA Pool of Information Officers were to play a major role from the forward edge of the battle back to the home base in the United Kingdom. "I was there," says Mike leading the TA media professionals and filling, personally, the role of Chief Press Officer at the Allied Press Information Centre at Hildesheim.

"The Pool fitted well, says Mike, Many of us left early on a longer than usual detachment and covered the huge logistics push through the low countries and into Germany where in the initial days we started writing stories for the exercise newspaper, Lionheart News, edited by a member of the unit, Major Doug McArthur.

The MOD chartered civilian aircraft and ferries to move over 50,000 personnel into Germany. The total of 290 flights left the UK transporting 32,000 personnel. This was then followed up with 150 sailings across the North Sea and the English

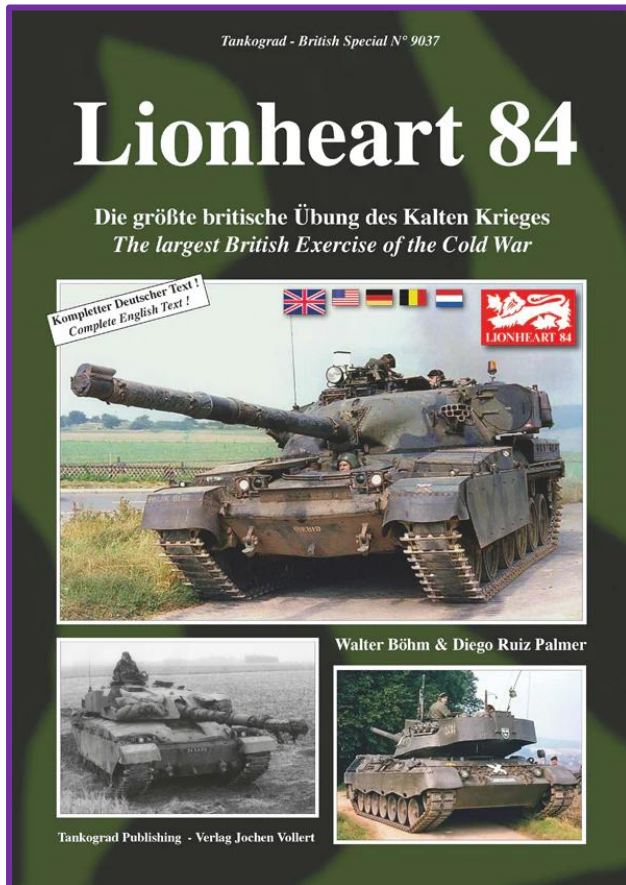
Channel using civilian ferries - these carried 23,600 personnel with 14,000 vehicles and trailers.

The exercise also involved 13,000 Royal Air Force personnel. The RAF deployed Harriers into the field and operated the newly introduced Tornado aircraft - which only retired from active service this year. Providing the opposition, there was a force of more than 10,000 - made up of German, Dutch, American and Commonwealth personnel. The logistics were unlike anything seen today from the British Military. It was the same size as if the entire population of Gloucester packed their bags and decided to invade Europe.

And, as you can imagine, with anything of this scale, accidents did happen, three British soldiers died and seven were seriously injured. What stuck in my mind though was the image of Regular Reserve soldiers who just did not want to be there. They looked miserable: the one's I saw definitely did not want to be in Germany. Was there a future for those who had left the forces and had a commitment to return in an emergency?

What was it like for Territorials. I found all those I met - and I travelled around a lot in September 1984. A more dedicated, cheerful, and fully engaged bunch of volunteers who wanted to be involved. And it showed! Did we get the publicity out - well a quick look online shows the tv clips and stories are still out there.

Personally, it was a bit of busman's holiday. From a press desk in Whitehall to a much less comfortable "cupboard" in Lower Saxony. But the excitement was the same and the workload relentless. All the ideas for an Allied Press Information Centre worked.



At one stage I was summoned from my cold tent in the wee small hours to provide a quick brief to the Corps Commander – General Martin Farndale had previously been Director of Public Relations Army and knew me and the benefits of consulting the MoD press office staff.

A few ‘unreliable’ memories of Lionheart

A tongue in cheek reminiscence from Major Penny Studholme, Media Operations Group (V)

FORTY YEARS ago I found myself sitting, somewhat forlornly, in a derelict stable block around the back of the old Victoria Barracks in Windsor. Recently out of University, and five weeks into my new career with British Aerospace, I had taken a period of extended leave to join with 131,565 other uniformed personnel on Exercise Lionheart, the largest troop deployment since the Second World War.

Being a mere Officer Cadet (albeit with a place at Sandhurst for the following year), the role I was to play on the exercise was unclear to both the Army and me. But when an officious tasking Captain appeared with a clipboard barking instructions that I, together with two other OCs in the stable, were down to be Watchkeepers for the next three weeks, I knew that was not going to happen.

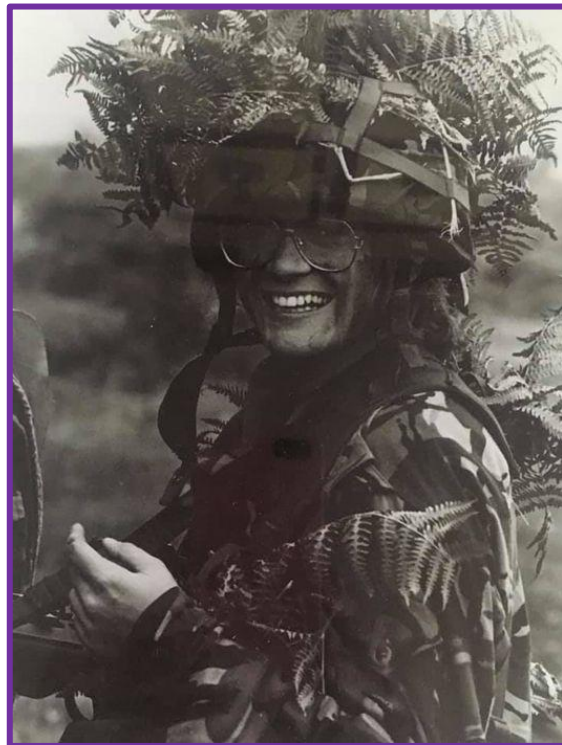
Politely, but firmly, I pointed out there must surely have been some mistake, for I was an experienced Press Officer with the country's leading defence company and as such, my talents would be wasted as a Watchie. Thankfully, he didn't challenge my totally inflated version of reality and, keen to clear his list, informed me that on arrival in Germany we were all to report to something called the APIC in Hildesheim, where we would be put to work. And thus my relationship with Army PR and the TAPIOs began.

I remember the huge, tented Allied Press Information Centre as a bustling hive of activity as preparations were made for the imminent arrival of 1000s of international journalists, all of whom expected their complex demands for access to everything, everywhere to be met. Immediately. Facilities were planned, individual programmes created, press releases written and photo ops identified.

Then the exercise began. And everything got ripped up and started again as, fairly obviously, the “war” didn't follow the very neat plans we had made for it. No mobile phones, no internet, no laptops, everything was done on paper, on typewriters and whiteboards. Finding out what the heck was going on where on the ground became the daily challenge.

But my two stable mates and I quickly realised that, due to our time in our respective University Officer Training Corps, we had a network of young subalterns across many of the deployed units. They became invaluable sources, calling in with locations long before the information reached our desks through official channels.

Our living accommodation was in 4-man 9x9 tents. Of which there were thousands in serried ranks stretching as far as the eye could see in all directions. And they were all, obviously, identical. Squat, green and with a red sand-filled fire bucket outside. Which made identifying our tent, in the dark, after a very long day in the APIC, quite challenging. After a number of occasions stumbling into the wrong tents, we hit upon a cunning plan. We emptied the sand out of our red bucket and used it to hold the bunches of flowers gifted to us from grateful journalists, thereby making our tent immediately identifiable.



Sadly, the camp Adjutant clearly didn't share our appreciation for all things floral, and after a brief meeting with him we returned one night to find our flowers unceremoniously dumped, and our bucket full of sand again.

We came across the camp Adjutant on more than one occasion, memorably one night in the Ratskellar in downtown Hildesheim. There were very strict rules in place about many things in the Camp, including an absolute ban on leaving the site at night. Which of course meant we all did.

A bottle of Apfel Korn delivered to the Guardroom proved most effective in ensuring we were sneaked under the wire and into the vehicles of the aforementioned young subalterns for a few drinks in the town. Until the fateful night we were spotted by the Adjutant. Another brief meeting ensued!

Shifts were spent mostly at a desk in the press centre but occasionally I was allowed out to accompany reporters into the field. I recall spending an afternoon trying to find the 17/21st Lancers who had moved forward from our agreed meeting point. It was early evening by the time we caught up with them, and the Officers invited the journalist and I to join them for dinner to apologise for the mix up. It was a magical evening - the dining table might have been bales of straw covered with a white linen cloth, but the addition of the mess silver, candlelight and food that would not have been out of place in a Michelin starred restaurant made an indelible impression on this young Officer Cadet. If being in military media ops meant going to war could be like this, sign me up.

I didn't join the group immediately after Lionheart. Mike Peters and Colin Mason both wisely advised getting some broader experience before moving over, so on Commissioning the following year I joined HQ Coy 6 Royal Anglian for a short spell. But the lure of the TAPIOs was too great, and by 1987, after an interview with Colin Mason at his radio station, I was in, and part of the team I had so enjoyed working with in Germany.

So, looking back, it was all down to the tasking Captain in the derelict stable in Windsor - I think I owe him a beer. Or maybe an Apfel Korn!

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After 20 years of separation ... WELL, HELLO BROTHER!

CHEERS ... in a break during battle manoeuvres Pte. Sammy Duncan raises an Army regulation mug of brandy in a toast to his long-lost brother, Pte. Gordon McConnochie.



TWO hardy Gordon Highlanders wept unashapedly in the middle of a German turnip field yesterday when they recognised each other as infant brothers who had parted to different foster homes 20 years before.

A chance remark to a Territorial Army journalist led to the emotional reunion — in the midst of a major "battle" — between Pte. Gordon McConnochie (26), 1st Bn. Gordon Highlanders, and his youngest brother, Pte. Sammy Duncan (21), a territorial with D (Gordon) Company of 251 Highland Volunteers in Aberdeens.

The regular Gordons, at present stationed with British Army of the Rhine at Heister, West Germany, had been on exercise in Lower Saxony, only 40 miles from their territorial counterparts.

The two battalions were on opposing sides in exercise Lionheart, NATO's largest manoeuvres since World War II, but they agreed to a temporary armistice to allow the brothers to meet.

Reunion halts manoeuvres

Sammy was a one-year-old when fostered by David and Frances Duncan, Dalnaird Crescent, Culter, who gave their surname. A bricklayer's labourer in civilian life, he joined the Territorial Army two years ago in the hope of tracing Gordon and two other brothers whom he knew had enlisted in the regular Gordons, although he could not remember them.

Sammy's trail grew hot when former Gordons officer Maj. Mike Tait took command of the TA company on leaving the Army.

By chance Maj. Tait had been Gordon's company commander in the regular battalion. And so alike are the brothers that when Maj. Tait first saw Sammy, he remarked in surprise: "What on earth are you doing here McConnochie?" — believing him for a moment to be Gordon.

Finding the stories on the ground

ONE of the great strengths of the specialist media operators on the ground was the ability not only to write a story likely to set the juices of news desks starting but also to hunt for and find the news.

Typical among them was Major Willie Morrison, a TAPIO who was also the editor of an Inverness newspaper. To tell Will there was a Jock regiment in the vicinity, and he was sure to bring home the news

Those were the days...when hometown stories were king and there were more newspapers than you could shake a stick at.

The reporters of Media Operations

Group were prolific hunter/gatherers of stories and never failed to meet the demand.

While some relied on standard stories written from proforma the Media Ops Group experts went the extra mile. The cutting above reveals a news coup by the ever active Major Morrison.

Earlier on Spearpoint

Major Doug McArthur, former TAPIO and member of the Army's Media Operations Group (V) recalls the time he was tasked with producing a troop newspaper for Exercise Spearpoint in 1980. Says Doug: Spearpoint News, an eight page black and white tabloid newspaper which ran for only four editions was an object lesson in how not to run a newspaper. It was wrong on so many counts, but it seemed to work."



The Spearpoint news desk in Hildesheim API – left to right, Ann Thompson, American Public Affairs, Doug McArthur, third from eft, four German conscripts and seated, John Turner. MoD information officer.

SPEARPOINT as part of Exercise Crusader was the re-supply element of the biggest British exercise to be held since the formation of the NATO Alliance. 63,000 troops took part, with 850 main battle tanks and in the air, five NATO air forces flew over 600 sorties a day. The Americans fielded the 2nd Armored Division and Germany the 3rd Panzer Brigade.

My memory tells me that the call for an exercise newspaper was American generated, and if BAOR did nothing, then it would leave the door open for the Americans to run the newspaper. Col John Mayo PR at Corps decreed that even if the Americans wanted to fly in a C130 with a printing press in the back, we could do better using down time on the local German daily paper in Hildesheim. Piece of cake!

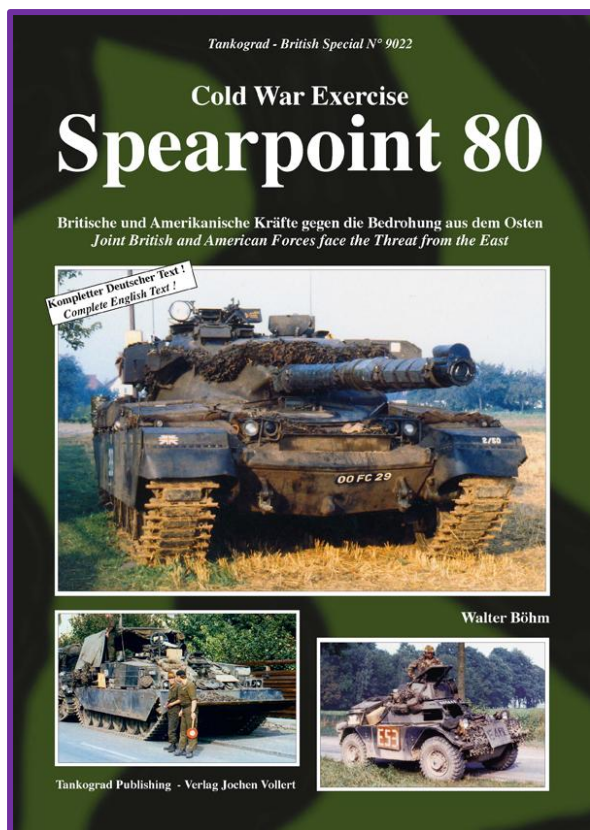
Back in 1979 I was running down my time as editor of Soldier News, started two years previously as a stable mate to RAF News and Navy News. At the time, Soldier Magazine was considered to be for the 'old and bold' and not really for the serving soldier, so a tabloid newspaper was started to run alongside Soldier Mag. It ran for another year after I left, and as the DPR of the day said at the time: "My predecessor made his name by starting Soldier News and I shall make mine by killing it."

When I was asked if I would like to run the exercise newspaper, I jumped at what I knew would be a big challenge. We would be working deep in the bowels of the Hildesheim Alge Meine Zeitung, a conservative daily newspaper edited by a committed anglophile.

We had several meetings before and during publication, highlighted by the editor's insistence that coffee was accompanied by Asbach (German brandy, very welcome but hardly in industrial quantities at 9.00 in the morning.

We would be let onto the stone where the pages were made up at 10.00 in the evening after the daily paper had been put to bed. We would work through until about 2.00am before our paper could take its turn on the press. Each print run was 50,000 copies, which then had to be distributed out to the units.

The paper had a dedicated page each for the Brits, Germans, and Americans. The rest of the eight pages were general news about the exercise, at the time the biggest re-supply exercise attempted by both USA and UK.



I was allowed a photographer, Paul Haley, and one reporter, Ann Thompson from Soldier, the Germans fielded four conscripts who were all at journalist school before doing their national service and the American contingent came from the 106th Public Affairs Detachment of the Pennsylvania National Guard "You've Got a Friend in Pennsylvania".

The first issue had to be out two days into the exercise which was interesting because we had no copy. We had some stories of the crossing as we travelled by Land Rover from Aldershot to Southampton, onto a roll on roll off ferry to Belgium, then across to Lower Saxony.

Tagging along with us was a photojournalist master sergeant from the American military paper Stars and Stripes. He was covering the story of the resupply from the British perspective, so his pictures and story proved a useful start. Thankfully shortly after arriving at our home for four weeks, Hildesheim Barracks, I got wind of a raid by Chinook on a forward headquarter position. Paul Haley and Ann Thompson were despatched on the Chinook with the enemy and came back with a

great story and pictures which proved to be the curtain-raiser for the exercise. We were off and running.

The different uniforms and ranks of my team tended to be forgotten as everyone was dedicated to the task. Everyone knew when their pages had to be finished, and we hit every deadline. The problems came from the military. This had never been attempted on such a scale before – at least in living memory, and there were quite a few uniformed PR people who would quite like to see it fail.

There was huge media interest in the exercise particularly from the UK. The national press were out in force and DPR had offered places to any local press to come out with their TA units, so there were several staged events for the press to go out and watch. Every morning there was a media briefing in the APIC, Allied Press Information Centre, and after that the press were whisked off in buses and Land Rovers to cover the action. Having a driver and dedicated vehicle was a boon as we never needed to rely on the APIC for transport.

Editorial office for Spearpoint News was a room in the APIC. John Turner, an Information Officer, between jobs on his way back home joined Ann and me in one corner, the four German lads in another, and the rest taken up by the 106th Public Affairs Detachment who never tired of telling us: "You've got a friend in Pennsylvania".

The APIC was a bustling place staffed by guys and gals from the TA, UOTC, Regulars drafted in, and most of the staff of Corps and Div PI offices. There was a Pool of Territorial Army Public Information Officers by this time, but it was in very much a fledgling state.

The uniformed role in the APIC was to 'facilitate' and help civilian journalists to get where they needed to be to see the action.

WO1 Tommy Atkins ran five RAOC photographers, plus two unit photos and three darkroom printers. In those pre-digital days 165 rolls of film were processed in one day and overall over 3,500 prints made. Rather than get them out taking pictures, the photographers were pretty much confined to barracks, printing for everyone else. The APIC organised briefings, transport, registration, hotel accommodation, even issuing wet weather kit where necessary. A story in Spearpoint News proudly reported that no less than 30 pay-phones were installed at the APIC for stories 'to crackle along the wires to offices in Fleet Street, Bonn and further

afield” They were backed up by telex and picture wiring facilities and studios for the radio and TV networks.

A highlight of the exercise was a combined air assault by 15 Para from Glasgow and the 82nd Airborne who flew non-stop from Fort Bragg to jump into Lower Saxony. Interestingly the American airborne company which landed nearest to us could not raise comms with the rest of the regiment but could talk to Bragg. So their communication with their headquarters and other companies was relayed to Bragg in the States and then relayed back again to Saxony.

Was it worth it? Looking back after all those years I was pleased to have taken part in the adventure although it was long hours and very hard work. Dealing with my own staff in two languages, dealing with printers in pidgin Anglo Deutsch in the middle of the night were certainly a challenge. T

Trying to get relevant information about the course of the war so that we could record it was an on-going battle. We learned to ignore people who said, ‘you can’t go there, ‘ or ‘that’s classified you can’t say it.’ Col John was always our last resort, and he never let us down. We had unprecedented access, and I think the paper was a success. Certainly, we did a better job running ‘our friends in Pennsylvania’ than if they were running us.

Foot Note:

Contributions to Scribblings should be sent to The Editor on michaelpcoms@btinternet.com.