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LAMPORT, Martin (born 1952)

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF MARTIN LAMPORT,

RETIRED DIPLOMAT AND VOLUNTEER RECORDER WITH THE BDOHP

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE 1975 -2010

The opinions expressed in this piece are entirely my own and do not reflect Government policy. The incidents related are as I remember them. Others may have different recollections.

I was a Foreign Office child, born in Munich in 1952 where my parents had met and married. We travelled to seven different countries during my childhood. After various false starts involving production engineering and the Royal Armoured Corps, I applied for and was accepted by the FCO in the autumn of 1974.

West Indian and Atlantic Dept 1975-76

On 13 January 1975 I reported for duty and after the introductory courses was posted as Head of Registry to West Indian and Atlantic Department, which dealt with British Overseas territories. Registries were the centre of any department in those days. All the department's papers and activity, letters, telegrams, submissions and briefs had to be submitted to the desk officers on the appropriate file and could not be put away until clearly marked with PA and initialled. They also had to be recorded in inward and outward registers and any new names entered on nominal indexes with the file reference. This tedious activity was carried out by three clerical officers, who knew far more about the process than I did and accomplished their duties without help from me. The pace of work was regulated by the departure of the mail bags, carried by diplomatic couriers in first class, on preferably British, airlines. Letters had to reach the Outward Bag room in time for the closing of the bag to Barbados or Belmopan or wherever. If they were classified "Secret" they were sealed in the old fashioned way with wax and a brass stamp. Dripping burning wax onto the thick manila envelope, it was not unknown for the whole lot to catch fire and be ruined, resulting in pitiful appeals to a harassed secretary to retype it before the bag closed. Later they got electric wax melters, but these took ages to heat up and usually got into a sticky mess.

I was in charge of the department's security which entailed regular changes of combination locks. To change one or two locks, which involved dialling in the old number, inserting a key, then setting up the new number was not too difficult. But after more than about half a dozen there was a high chance of making a mistake with so many numbers to muddle. Once the key could no longer be inserted the thing was stuck and the Office locksmiths had to be called to dismantle it. This happened so often they gave me some Allen keys so I could get the backs off myself and thereafter I spent many happy hours sitting on people's floors surrounded by bits of combination lock. I was not the only person to have trouble with locks. I remember a sad report from Saint Helena, which read, "The new wall safe arrived. We tested the lock before it was installed. It was cemented into the wall by unsupervised workmen. Nobody has been able to open it since. It is now hidden behind a picture." Persuading the photocopier to work, it was a primitive machine with great drums of black toner and a sinister green light, was another more or less full time occupation.

West Indian and Atlantic department's concerns were principally the Falkland Islands, where they were trying to put a fisheries licensing policy in place to generate a local revenue stream and Belize, where the pressure for independence was frustrated by Guatemala's claim on the territory. The Guatemalans were sabre rattling and most Central and South American states were inclined to support them. To prevent any coup de main operations the decision was taken in Whitehall to substantially upgrade the British garrison, even though it was not a military or financial commitment the Government particularly wanted. A flight of Harrier Jump Jets was deployed to Belize City supported by an anti-aircraft battery of the RAF Regiment. All this activity involved much to and froing between the FCO, the MOD and the Cabinet Office, so I found myself running back and forth across Whitehall with secret documents. Once I took some to the Cabinet Office in a locked pouch, only to find they did not have a key to open it in the Joint Intelligence Committee offices. One of the desk officers nevertheless managed to get his hand into the pouch and extract the files. He must have had training in that sort of trick and I was impressed. The uprated military presence did the trick because there was no more threat of a Guatemalan invasion, though the British garrison and the Harriers remained in Belize until 2003/4, long after independence.

My other main contribution to the department was organising drinks parties for departures and arrivals, an activity for which I showed some talent. In those days such events were taken seriously with gin and whisky on offer as well as beer and wine and consumption was

generally high. When an Assistant Under-Secretary in charge of several departments retired I was called upon to organise his leaving party. This was held in the splendour of the India Office Council chamber. By the end of the evening the Under Secretary was propped up against a desk, drink in hand, arm around secretary, pipe in mouth. Apparently he took some persuading to go home to his wife and not to his club that evening. The next day I staggered into the Office nursing an awful hangover. Half way through a not very productive morning the phone rang. "Sir so and so really appreciated your efforts at his party last night. Do come down and have a drink with him at lunchtime". It was not an offer to refuse even if the thought of more liquor made me heave.

Unfortunately the talents of a locksmith cum butler were not recognised on the Foreign Office's annual reports, so I did not finish the year in West Indian and Atlantic department with much credit. The result was that my second posting was to Finance Department, specifically Interdepartmental Claims section. This activity was about as interesting as it sounds. All the money spent by embassies abroad for activities or staff which belonged to other government departments, MOD, Home Office, Overseas Development or whatever had to be extracted from the accounts and charged to the appropriate department. This gave rise to long lists of numbers which had to be added on primitive machines and reconciled. I had a particular loathing for this sort of tedious work and a wonderful talent for reversing digits in any long number. To make matters worse the office was situated on the top floor of Charles House on Lower Regent Street with large skylights through which the sun and heat poured during the hot summer of 1976 making the working conditions as stifling as the work. I quickly decided that drastic action was required if I was to escape. Knowing I had the A' level grades to get into university I thought I had better invest some more in my own intellectual development if I was to avoid for ever plodding in the dullest jobs the Office had to offer. After some research in the Central London library and some rather optimistic applications to prestigious universities I was finally accepted by Westfield College of London University to read French with Spanish. So I applied for and was granted special unpaid leave.

Nationality and Treaty Department, 1979-1980

Returning three years later with a degree in French with Spanish and a passable command of both languages, I was sent to Nationality and Treaty Dept, which was then housed in Clive

House in Petty France, next to the Passport Office. The work consisted of applying the provisions of the British Nationality Act 1948 to people who were trying to claim British nationality from overseas. People from former British colonies automatically became citizens of the newly independent Commonwealth countries when they gained independence. Sometimes that would catch out the descendants of British families who had moved around the empire for generations and suddenly found they had lost the entitlement to a British passport, having become citizens of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, or wherever, without ever realising. Others discovered that they could not claim citizenship by descent from a British father if their parents were not married at the time of their birth. A subsequent marriage might legitimate the child, but when Australia legally abolished the concept of illegitimacy Australian marriages no longer had this effect. Trying to explain such legal niceties to an aggrieved Aussie was good training for diplomacy. The desk officers sometimes had to resort to studying old maps of India to determine whether someone's father or grandfather had been born in former British India, or an Indian native and princely state, which could have important consequences for the nationality of future generations. It was not the most exciting work, but a lot more interesting than bean counting in Finance department. It was very satisfying when a lawyer tried vehemently to argue their client's case, but displayed far less understanding of nationality law than the lowly civil servants who had become experts. They usually received a negative response, even though they had probably charged a fat fee just to write to the department.

There was an ex-Royal Navy man in my team who usually went off to the pub at lunch time and had an uncanny knack of appearing like a permanent fixture the instant he leant on a bar. He expected to down three pints in the first hour to get into the right rhythm and encouraged his colleagues to do the same, which I generally resisted. Whether much work got done in the afternoons was somewhat doubtful.

Libya, 1980-1983

After a year of this I was eager to move on and asked Personnel where I might go next. They decided it was high time I had a posting. Expecting something French or Spanish speaking, which would have made sense given my recent qualifications, I was surprised to find that I was to be sent to Libya as an Entry Clearance Officer. There followed a period of courses and preparations as I got ready to travel out to Tripoli shortly before Christmas in

1980. Entry clearance work was concerned mainly with detecting people, who were likely to overstay their visas and seek to remain in UK. Even then the pressure to escape from the economic or political misery in many countries was becoming apparent. At the time Libya was not one of these. Buoyed by enormous oil revenues, and with a population of some three million, Gaddafi's regime enabled most Libyans to live well, provided they did not disagree with him. Those that did were pursued and eliminated. There had been one or two highly publicised cases of murders of dissident Libyans in Britain, so ministers had promised Parliament that all Libyan visa applicants would be interviewed, hence the need to strengthen the visa section in Tripoli. I was duly sent off to the Immigration Service training unit at Harmondsworth, where the entire emphasis was on identifying potential overstayers and immigrants. There was no training whatever in how to identify potential Gaddafi hitmen. I suspected that the entire operation was really no more than a fig leaf to cover the Government's embarrassment if Libyan students were murdered in Britain.

I bought a Hillman Avenger, which was the only car I could afford that had a sump guard and set out to drive down through France to Marseilles, then across to Algeria and along the North African coast to Tripoli. It took so long to clear customs in Annaba that I was well behind schedule and worried lest the embassy did not meet me at the border. I drove fast. A policeman flagged me down in a small town, "Vous roulez trop vite Monsieur, mais ce n'était pas gros". I discovered how handy it was to have a passport which showed I was a diplomat. Once through Tunisian immigration there was a strip of barbed wire enclosing minefields and the odd rusting tank before arriving at the Libyan side, where documents were handed over and nothing appeared to happen for hours. Despite the smartly uniformed police and customs officers, it was clear that none of them would do anything until told to by an unshaven and scruffy looking individual in traditional costume, who was evidently the local party man. After an hour or two they let me proceed with much stamping of my passport and other documents. To my enormous relief an embassy driver, who had waited for hours, came up and introduced himself. The drive to Tripoli went through an area of empty desert and then along the coast road, fringed attractively with palm trees. Eventually we drove through the suburbs and at about three in the afternoon pulled up outside a large white building on the coast.

My first impression was that this must be some sort of warehouse. The upper stories were hidden behind low palm trees, but the entrance was all scarred and blackened. This, it was

explained, was the result of a petrol bomb thrown the last time Gaddafi had sent his thugs to demonstrate against the British. I was let in by another member of the local staff with warm greetings and told to wait. The building had originally been the Italian naval headquarters overlooking the harbour. There was a large entrance hall with a staircase leading up from it. Two wings extended giving access to offices on either side. After a few minutes the heavy tread of someone descending the stairs in loose slippers could be heard and a rather grumpy looking Englishman appeared. He was a UK based security guard, ex-navy, and gave every appearance of having been awoken from his siesta in an upstairs flat. The embassy worked from 0730 until 1430, so it was deserted by the middle of the afternoon. He explained that no accommodation for me had yet been found and I would be sharing a house with another entry clearance officer in a suburb where most of the ex-patriate community lived.

The embassy worked from Sunday, though I maintained it was against my religion, to Thursday. The work consisted of fetching visa applicants from the waiting room and leading them to an office where they were interrogated through an interpreter as to their reasons for visiting the UK. If they had sufficient money, return tickets and an incentive to return a visa could be granted. Visas were really a form of currency, so British companies would be begged to write supporting letters, or Libyan ministries, Libyan Arab Airlines and anyone else who could be prevailed upon would be enlisted to support the applicant's case. Records were kept in a vast card index system and checks were made in a visa warning list in the hope of spotting known undesirables. Three locally engaged ladies worked in support of the Entry Clearance officers, the Consul's wife, an English wife of someone in the oil industry and a jolly Irish nurse who had lived in Libya ever since the British army had been there and knew the place backwards. But as Libyan names can be transliterated many ways into English, so Abdulqassim might appear as Belgassem, with these primitive methods it was a hit and miss process. On the whole it was a happy team, though the tedium of trying to extract any information out of reluctant Libyans soon became a strain on my temper. Most conversations went something like, "What is your job?" "Employee." "You can't be an employee, Libyans are partners, not wage workers." (A Gaddafi slogan displayed all over town). "What do you actually do?" Conditioned to be highly nervous of authority, they could not be blamed for being as taciturn as possible, even with well-meaning authorities.

A flat was eventually found for me on the third floor of a block near the Pink Mosque, a modern monstrosity with domes and minarets, somewhat reminiscent of an earwig. It used

to blast out the morning call to prayer at about half past four and force me to pull a pillow over my ears. But the early awakening was welcome one morning when I noticed a flickering light in the bedroom door and discovered burning plastic dripping out of the wall by the fuse box. The mains supply wires had been extended by twisting on extra pieces and corrosion in the joints had eventually heated up to the point where they caught fire. Later the Turkish neighbour below came to complain of a leak in his kitchen ceiling. Upon investigation it appeared that most of the space between my flat and the one below was full of water. Damp patches could be seen on the outside of the building at the same level. As all the floors were a polished marble compound, I had to move out completely while workmen were sent in to dig holes here and there to try to find the leaking pipework.

My immediate neighbours were a Turkish diver, working for one of the oil service companies and an American ex-Vietnam veteran, a helicopter hydraulics mechanic, who worked for the Libyan air force teaching helicopter maintenance. He was a friendly character and before long he managed to make friends with others in the embassy, which was to have consequences. There were lots of ex-American servicemen in Libya at that time and some were involved in extremely shady activity with the more murderous elements of Gaddafi's regime. Principal among these was an ex CIA man, who was supplying explosives and training and may also have been trying to persuade the Libyans that he could help them acquire nuclear weapons; whether he actually could have done so was extremely doubtful. There was a nuclear facility of sorts near Tripoli, heavily protected by batteries of Russian anti-aircraft missiles, but it seemed unlikely that they were ever able to produce significant quantities of fissionable material. The CIA eventually lured him to a Caribbean country and seized him for indictment in the USA. Another of his associates was also thought to be involved in some very dark dealings. How closely my neighbour was involved with these characters was never totally clear. The Libyan dinar was worth about two pounds sterling and ex-patriate advisers were extremely well paid. I watched as the Americans won and lost hundreds of pounds on games of craps as though it were Monopoly money.

When Prince Charles married Princess Diana, the CIA man's Welsh secretary insisted he throw a party to celebrate the event. The British Ambassador, who might have been expected to acknowledge the occasion did precisely nothing, so my neighbour and I found ourselves celebrating amongst a somewhat incongruous crowd in his luxurious villa. At one point he sidled up to me and said he wanted to pass on some sensitive information to the

embassy. Who should he talk to? I said I was but a humble visa officer and knew nothing about any such person. I suggested he talk to the Ambassador if he wished to communicate anything secret to the embassy, but that sort of thing was way above my pay grade.

The whole episode became much more exciting when my neighbour told the CIA he was also working for the KGB. The Security Service was alerted and everybody connected with him ended up being thoroughly grilled over what their relationship with this individual had been. Whether he was really involved with the Russians, or whether he was merely an engaging fantasist I was never completely sure.

Eventually the Libyans made some accommodation available to foreign embassies in some new tower blocks. I and some of the other junior staff got nice flats on the tenth floor, but it was a long time before the lift worked, so keeping fit was not difficult, particularly in the heat of summer. There was no air conditioning and the only way I could sleep in the summer heat was to shower, not dry, hurl myself onto my bed with a fan going full blast on me and hopefully fall asleep before the heat again became unbearable. In the morning it was straight back under the shower to cool down.

When not at work the expatriate community amused itself with the Tripoli branch of the British Sub Aqua Club. I had done some diving training and now had the opportunity to take it a stage further. The club took its training seriously, using the Ambassador's residence pool and was able to dive off various beaches within an easy drive of the city. The sea was not deeper than about twenty metres, but there was plenty of life to be found if one looked closely for it. A British oil service company, Seismographic Services Ltd, kindly provided a shed in its compound for the club's compressor and members took it turns to fill the air cylinders for about a dozen divers on each trip. To qualify for the BSAC standard of third class diver a variety of dives had to be undertaken and although a low visibility dive in the harbour and night dives were possible it was difficult to find a fresh water dive. The only solution was a small lake in the desert near the ancient town of Ghadames, which lies just south of the southernmost tip of Tunisia. To get there required a six hour drive into the Sahara, so it was a long weekend expedition. The road went across the Tripoli plain and up the impressive ascent of the Jebel, the hills that border the plain of Tripolitania. The land then seemed to slope gently away into an endless stony desert with one or two small oasis villages along the way. The classical sand dunes of the Great Ergs did not appear in that part

of Libya, but could be seen on the horizon in the Tunisian desert. The lake was an extraordinary geological curiosity. It consisted of a circular pool some thirty meters deep and maybe fifty in diameter from which the water escaped into a much larger shallow evaporation pond. The whole system was surrounded by a low sand dune, stabilised by vegetation, so that the water level of the two pools was actually slightly above that of the surrounding flat desert plane.

When not diving or wind surfing, the principal amusement of the expatriate community was various darts leagues, which met in different houses every week. Each host had constructed a bar of sorts and ran his own brewery. Beer was concocted out of bio malt, which the Libyans imported, presumably for their children's health. Whenever it appeared in the little supermarkets the westerners would descend and purchase huge quantities. A brand of local sparkling water was sold in strong bottles, so they were used to bottle the result. Sometimes it was almost acceptable, at others it was pretty horrible but nobody ever complained. For those with a taste for something stronger and the courage to trust they were imbibing ethanol and not methanol there was Flash, a spirit distilled from fermented sugar which was produced by some of the oil company people, who kept their activities a closely guarded secret. When well diluted with Coca Cola it was not a bad drink, but at least one unfortunate expatriate was known to have died from methanol poisoning.

Fortunately the embassy used its diplomatic privileges to evade the restrictions on alcohol. Every two weeks a member of staff would fly to Malta to deliver and receive the diplomatic bags which were exempt from customs inspection. In addition to the official mail there would be bags of bacon, pork and gallon containers of gin, kindly filled by the High Commission in Valetta. But with the arrival of a new and dynamic Deputy Head of Mission, this system was supplemented by the import of crates of food from the Italian shipping company Alberti. They would pack a large case, lined with a completely sealed tin box. The food went round the outside and serious quantities of alcohol into the middle. The Embassy's wonderful fixer, Jumma, a tall lanky man with an irrepressibly cheerful disposition would organise customs clearance and when one of the crates arrived on the embassy's truck the locally engaged staff would go home and the entire UK based team, bar the Ambassador, would attack the box with whatever implement they could find and form a chain gang to unload the contents into one of the basement storerooms with which the old headquarters was well supplied. This system worked well for spirits and wine, but the

alcohol to volume ratio in beer was too low to make it economic to import. The embassy decided to brew its own beer and was able to import home brew kits in large quantities. I was put in charge of the brewery and several cases at a time were prepared and stored in an old air raid shelter at the back of the building. Again most of the British staff would stay on after work to assist with the bottling process. Once bottled the beer would take a couple of weeks to settle. Occasionally the bottles would explode and I would find glass fragments sprayed around the room. I was seriously worried that this might happen when someone was handling the bottles, but fortunately it never did. The beer was christened SPLAJ Ale, after the Socialist Peoples' Libyan Arab Jamahuriya, the country's official title. I proclaimed it was Africa's smallest independent brewery and on the whole its product was of an acceptable quality by local standards.

As time went on the ability to import food became more important. Gaddafi closed most of the independent shops and only allowed government controlled outlets to sell produce. A huge department store opened, well stocked with every kind of imported luxury at unrealistically low prices. The Libyans and expatriates descended like locusts. I got a nice tennis racket and a good set of stainless steel kitchen pans. Within a couple of months the whole store was empty save for a few tins of rather horrible tomato purée. It was never restocked. Getting any decent fresh food became a weekend chore which involved driving out of town to the village market and buying directly from the farmers off the back of their pick-up trucks. Only what was in season was available and I was soon storing racks of potatoes and onions to survive the winter. But one relic of the past was the bakery behind the embassy where an old, blind baker would prepare rustic loaves and cook them in an Italian wood fired oven, which must have dated from well before the war. In the evenings the neighbourhood would gather outside the shop and someone would help him to thrust the loaves into the oven. People would chat patiently while they waited for the bread to cook. There was something incredibly human and civilised about this evening gathering, which was a scene that had been repeated in towns and villages around the shores of the Mediterranean for thousands of years. One day an Italian lady came to buy bread and I was amused to see the Libyans insist the "Signora" go to the front of the queue, just as though Italy were still the colonial master.

One of Gaddafi's eccentricities was to put all the secondary school children into military uniform. This led to the incongruous sight of young girls doing their best to enliven ill-fitting combat greens by wearing high heels and ear rings, walking along the street next to

mum, who would be fully wrapped up in a white Barakan. In winter with their white woollen cloaks the Libyans managed to look quite like the ancient Romans who had once colonised their shores. The magnificent Roman ruins of Leptis Magna and Sabratha were easily accessible and virtually deserted, so the few visitors could wander around having a Roman city almost entirely to themselves, with white columns and date palms making a spectacular foreground and the blue sea beyond. There was a lovely beach fringed with palm trees down the Western Highway, accessible for a day trip or overnight camp. If there were western girls any Libyan men would instantly park themselves a few feet away, but apart from ogling they made no attempt to communicate.

During my second year another entry clearance officer arrived with whom I became firm friends. We used to partner for tennis, although we were both terribly bad players and the embassy secretaries usually won. Playing on the Ambassador's residence tennis court, the match was interrupted at four o'clock every afternoon by the evening call to prayer, directed towards the residence by powerful loud speakers from a nearby mosque. I used to quip, "Second set, Lamport and Garrett lead by three games to two". He also became a companion on trips out to an impressive ruined Berber granary on the plain just below the Jebel. This consisted of a wide circle of small arches built of undressed stones, some three tiers high in places, which formed a defensive wall on the outside and provided small cellar like structures on the inside in which families had presumably stored their harvest. Near here I discovered some shallow gypsum caves and persuaded my friend to go crawling about in them with me. I had a proper caving helmet but Garrett managed with a torch strapped to his Indian polo hat. Dressed in long shorts he looked every inch the Englishman. The caves had evidence of inhabitation by porcupines, but we never found one about in daylight.

Other characters in the embassy included Vic, the communicator, with whom I used to play chess. Somehow the game was usually fairly well balanced before dinner, but after an excellent meal provided by Vic's wife and a few drinks, I always managed to lose in the end. Tom was a much more lively security guard, who tried his best to teach me to play squash. I managed to play a bit, but never to a high standard. Thrashing a squash ball around in Libya's summer heat was a fearsome work out. Tom was ex-army and had been in Uganda when Idi Amin was in charge. He used to tell how he had to pass through numerous check points on the road to the embassy and always took the trouble to chat to the soldiers. After a while he asked them, "Where are your flowers? Haven't you heard there is a competition for

the check point with the best flowers, which will win a prize.” He soon had them all cultivating patches of flowers round their road blocks.

The main east west road was used by the army to transport its tanks. These were the latest T80s, which arrived in regular batches from Russia and were taken from the docks past the embassy on tank transporters, so it was easy to count them. Their weight had caused long stretches of the main road to develop grooves like a drag ski lift. At speed they produced a most unpleasant rocking sensation in a car, which together with the appalling standard of Libyan driving meant any road journey was a frightening experience. Most of these tanks were lost in the Sahara when one of Gaddafi’s interventions in Chad went disastrously wrong. The submarine arm of the Libyan navy was also parked directly below the embassy, but in all my time there I never witnessed one of them put to sea. When President Sadat of Egypt was assassinated Gaddafi’s supporters went wild, charging round the town in hooting convoys. It was a sickening reminder of the hostility below the surface, despite the friendliness of most Libyans. This same “rent a mob” were much in evidence during the September parades to mark the anniversary of the revolution. They were stationed in a small phalanx in front of the saluting stand, where they shook their fists and chanted “Al Fatah”. When filmed with a narrow angle lens this would have looked like a big crowd, but in reality most of the onlookers did not display any particular appreciation as the Libyan military marched past in imitation of a Russian May Day parade. I was rather tempted to join the “Al Fatah” crowd. I could imagine the Ambassador peering down from the saluting stand and muttering, “There’s a fellow down there, looks extraordinarily like Lamport”. The crowning moment was when the navy frogmen marched past in wet suits with bits of diving gear incongruously draped around them. They looked almost as if they were trying to march with fins on and would have won prizes in Monty Python’s “Ministry of Silly Walks”.

Having failed to achieve a wider pan-Arab unity with Egypt and Syria, Gaddafi turned his attention to Africa and meddled in the civil war in Chad. His main political objective was to promote his ideas in Africa more widely and he tried to host a summit of the African Union. The first attempt foundered as some countries objected to Libya’s support for a Chadian rebel leader. The following year however the summit went ahead and Tripoli was full of African delegations. Western embassies were not allowed to attend the meetings, but the second secretary managed to invite some of the Commonwealth delegations to a party at his house. This had the enormous attraction from their point of view that there would be alcohol. All

the junior staff were asked to bring along their lady friends amongst the British community, so there would be lots of girls to dance with the African delegates. Whether much useful information was gleaned about the African Union meeting I never discovered, but it was a hell of a party.

Gaddafi's other proclivities at the time were to support the IRA with funding and weapons and to offer to supply Argentina with Exocet missiles during the Falklands war. Fortunately the Libyans only had ship launched Exocets, which would have been of no use to Argentina once the General Belgrano had been sunk. The Anglo / Libyan relationship was finally broken off over the murder of WPC Fletcher by the Libyan People's Bureau in St James's square. Then there was the American bombing of Tripoli and the destruction of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, but I left before these events and the final, bloody and richly deserved, demise of the "Revolutionary Moslem" as Gaddafi liked to style himself.

Unfortunately brewing beer was not catered for in the FCO's staff reporting process, and I did not get particularly high praise for my work in Tripoli. After two years I was able to bid for a new job and was selected for Assistant Administration Officer in Caracas. I was not sorry to leave Libya for the last time on a KLM flight to Amsterdam, but to my enormous dismay the inbound oil men had drunk the aircraft dry and there was no beer to celebrate until I arrived in Schipol. The new job required a period of training in London and an opportunity to brush up my Spanish, so I spent a wonderful summer of 1983, living during the week in London to attend courses and Spanish classes, which I did not find particularly arduous, and spending weekends with my parents who had retired to Ross-on-Wye.

Venezuela 1983-85

Caracas in 1983 was such a complete contrast to Tripoli it might have been on a different planet. There were Muchachas, girls, salsa music and drink a plenty. When serving a gin and tonic or a Cuba Libre, the barmen would fill a tall glass with ice, fill it to the brim with spirit and hand over the tonic or Coca Cola bottle alongside. There were wonderful restaurants serving filet steak, Arepas, Venezuelan maize cakes, and paellas to die for. Venezuelans had a penchant for gas guzzling American limousines and the private airport next to the embassy was crowded with immaculate twin engine planes.

The job of an Assistant Administration Officer was to deal with all the management aspects of the embassy which were considered too boring or too trivial to interest anyone else, except when they went wrong and then complaints rained down. The section was assisted by a typical example of an embassy fixer, Alberto, who was a cheerful and helpful character with whom I could enjoy a joke, but who somehow did not inspire complete trust. Much later I heard he had been sacked for some speculation or other. Marie was a delightful elderly American lady who did the book keeping. She had badly damaged her legs when a light aircraft she was piloting had crashed many years before. She had been with the mission for years and knew everything there was to know about the accounts, relieving me of the burden. Sadly, when there was an inspection her post was abolished in the usual round of cost cutting and salami slicing. I had to shoulder the whole burden of the book keeping, my least favourite task. Although I had had the requisite training this had been such a long time ago I was hazy on some of the detailed procedures and the first few months were a nightmare as the accounts refused to balance. The FCO in those days used an antiquated American system called Kalamazoo, which involved much swapping of carbon sheets onto peg boards to achieve a double entry for each transaction. A more tedious task was difficult to imagine.

What was much more fun however, was the process of funding the embassy. Venezuela operated an official exchange rate, but embassies were allowed to obtain Bolivars at the market rate. This meant that the embassy was funded by London buying dollars in a bank in New York for which the Caracas embassy held a cheque book. I would ring round three or four currency dealers and ask what rate they would give for the dollar that day. The conversation in Spanish would usually go, “How many dollars do you want to sell?” “Twenty thousand” “OK Sir, I’ll get the boss”. Once a deal was concluded at the best rate I would jump in a car with an office driver and run round to the shop and pick up bundles of cash. The only security for this operation was its unpredictability. Even though the Deputy Head of Mission was a bit queasy about the practice, I reckoned I was saving HMG the equivalent of my own salary most months by not exchanging dollars or sterling at the official rate.

The first Ambassador in Caracas was Hugh Carless, who had gained fame for his part in “A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush” with Eric Newby. When I arrived in Caracas, Hugh Carless had conceived a plan to put a bust of Simon Bolivar, the Venezuelan national hero, on top of a mountain peak, “El Gavilan” in a place known as Los Frailes where there was a rather nice

mountain lodge. This was to be his parting gift to the country. I went to stay in the same hotel and climbed the Gavilan to investigate the feasibility of this scheme. The climb involved a couple of hours slogging uphill in the heat and a very steep scramble to the top of the rocky outcrop, no challenge for a rock climber, but beyond the comfort zone of most hikers. On my return to the embassy I pointed out that getting any substantial load up to such a place would be a major undertaking, requiring an enormous amount of manpower or a helicopter to transport the bust and the necessary materials to make a plinth for it in such an inaccessible spot. The scheme was clearly beyond the scope of the embassy's information budget or the Ambassador's frais, so it was quietly dropped.

I tried to join one of the private clubs, which offered squash and tennis courts and a swimming pool. But the snobbish management refused me on the grounds that my business card described me as "Agregado Administrativo", which translated as Administrative Attaché, implying to them a non-diplomatic rank, rather than a third secretary, which was what I was in reality. As a consolation I managed to join the Venezuelan Speleological Society, a much more congenial crowd. They went on expeditions to caves which were accessible from Caracas and there were also members who liked diving and hang gliding, so I was in my element.

Embassy life improved with the arrival of a dart board and a small room turned over to make a bar. This allowed the junior staff to enjoy their lunch break, getting the most spectacular sandwiches from a delicatessen in the neighbouring building, a famous piece of architecture known as the Cubo Negro, for it was basically a black cube, but with fabulous marble floors. The clerical and secretarial staff would gather to enjoy their sandwiches with a beer and indulge in furiously competitive games of darts. One task for the junior staff was to collect diplomatic bags or guard the hold of the aircraft, usually British Caledonian Tristars, which had sensitive equipment destined for embassies further south. This invariably meant getting up at about two AM as flights to South America always seemed to arrive at unsociable hours. Once I apologised to my driver, a lovely man called Roberto, for getting him up in the middle of the night. "Eso es mi trabajo!" said Roberto proudly. "That's my job". Tragically Roberto was accidentally shot dead by a trigger happy policeman some years later. British Caledonian was a great airline. There was always champagne in first class where the Queen's messengers sat with their bags. That at least was some compensation as the QMs, as they were known, were usually ex-forces and quite happy to relieve the boredom of their

job with a chat. On one occasion the vice-consul and I had gone down to collect the bags as there was to be an important Heads of Mission conference in the embassy, chaired by an undersecretary, Sir somebody or other, from London. Having collected the bags, had a few drinks and signed the paperwork we returned to the Embassy and, when depositing the bags in the strong room, discovered to our horror that we had one bag for Bogota and were missing one for Caracas. It was very likely the missing bag would be the one containing all the important papers for the conference. I thought seriously that as my Diplomatic Service career could be about to end miserably I might make a proper job of it by scrambling all the combination locks in the embassy and then setting off to wander round South America, free at last. Frantic calls to Bogota were made to ask the Ambassador, who was due to fly to Caracas, if he would courier the missing bag back with him. Casual courier passports were held by embassies, so anyone could be officially designated to transport diplomatic bags without fear of inspection. The ambassador considered such a menial task quite beneath his dignity and declined. Inevitably the Sir Somebody or Other, who arrived from London the next day, asked to be allowed access to his papers so he could prepare for the conference. But in the end the missing bag turned out to contain nothing more important than a spare combination lock which was not required urgently. When driving through town in a mini bus, escorting the ambassadors, one of them looked down into the deep river bed which bisects the city and exclaimed, "Look, there's a rat down there." The sight of half a dozen senior diplomats craning their necks to look for a rat thoroughly tickled me. Whether the rat appreciated the attention will never be known.

There was one very special person in Venezuela, whom I was incredibly privileged to meet. Juan Pujol was a Spanish Catalan, a chicken farmer by trade, who had survived the civil war, even though his sympathies were clearly republican. When the Second World War broke out he decided he wanted to play his part, so he offered his services to the German embassy in Madrid and then went to Lisbon, where he started to invent fictitious information about the UK, allegedly brought to him by an airline pilot, and feed this to his German spymasters, who duly it reported back to Berlin. Thus the famous Carmarthen spy ring was born, serviced by a fanatical group of Aryan Welsh Nazi sympathisers, who were a pure figment of Juan's imagination. When the British, who were decoding the German messages eventually tumbled to what was going on, they quickly intervened to bring Juan to England. There he became agent Garbo and lived in Hendon, where it was given out he worked for the BBC Spanish service. Somehow he met my mother's family and enjoyed the opportunity to speak

Spanish with them. My mother used to recall how they bought olive oil from a chemist so he could show them how to make a tortilla. Of course they had no inkling of his real role, which was to be one of the British double agents, feeding fictitious information to Berlin, which was crucial to deceiving the Germans as to the real target of the D Day landings. So pleased were the Germans with his work, they awarded him an Iron Cross, which seems fitting for one of the most successful double crosses in history, which saved thousands of allied lives as the bulk of German forces defending France were held in the Pas de Calais until it was too late. After the war Juan was considered to be at great risk from remaining Nazis and he went off to Venezuela to work for the Shell oil company and eventually remarried and had a family. In 1984 Nigel West broke the secret of this story in his book "Garbo". Catalan television picked it up and made a programme about Juan Pujol as he was able to go to England and officially receive the MBE he had been awarded by the British to go with his Iron Cross. My aunt heard about him and managed to make contact, so he met her and my mother and revisited his old wartime haunts in Hendon. When he got back to Caracas, I got in touch and had the great honour of giving lunch to one of the most famous spies of the Second World War, an old man now, but still with a twinkle in his eye. I also ensured Juan got a bottle of decent Scotch in the embassy Christmas present list.

Nuclear Energy Dept and Science Energy Nuclear Dept 1987-1989

When my posting to Caracas came to an end I was due for a home tour. By good fortune I was posted to Nuclear Energy Dept as the Desk Officer for the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, the IAEA. This organisation was primarily concerned with implementing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT, as it was known, under which the five recognised nuclear weapons possessing states agreed not to transfer their weapons technology and to work towards disarmament and the other signatories, most countries in the world, agreed not to try to acquire nuclear weapons. In return for their compliance they would receive assistance with the non-military applications of nuclear technology and accept IAEA safeguards and inspections on their facilities. This work was much more suited to me as I had studied enough physics to understand the significance of enriched and unenriched uranium and plutonium and the basic theory behind nuclear weapons. Another aspect of the job was to review applications for export licences for equipment which might potentially be useful for a state seeking to acquire weapons grade uranium or plutonium or to develop the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons. There were several such states, which had

refused to adhere to the NPT and were known to have developed or be in the process of developing nuclear weapons. Israel was the prime example and it was supposed that they had collaborated with South Africa, which was also developing the capability. Pakistan had most famously acquired EURATOM centrifuge technology through the efforts of AQ Khan. India was of course also striving to match Pakistan. Other countries like North Korea and Iraq were suspected of having the intention to acquire nuclear weapons, but it was not thought that they had got very far at that stage.

After a time Nuclear Energy Dept was amalgamated with another small FCO department and became Science, Energy and Nuclear Dept, or SEND, but I retained my job dealing with the IAEA budget, to which the UK contributed, and nuclear export licences. It did however entail a nice move from the attics of King Charles Street to the ground floor office on the corner of Downing Street and Whitehall. There were two basic reference documents against which to assess the export licence applications, the Sensitive Nuclear Explosives Technology, or SNET list and the Zanger Committee trigger list. These brought me into contact with a range of interesting colleagues as there was often an element of doubt as to whether a particular licence application was a proliferation risk or not. I decided the best course was to ask the experts and made a couple of trips down to Aldermaston to talk to people there about licences that were particularly troublesome.

One nice connection was that an old friend of mine was working for a company that specialised in high speed photography and had acquired a licence to manufacture a particular type of electronic camera, the Imacon, which had originally been developed to help test the explosive lenses used in the UK's nuclear weapons programme. Imacons had lots of other applications, but their export licences were looked at particularly closely. The most sought after technology at the time was that used in the manufacture of gas centrifuges. These enormous banks of steel tubes spinning at very high speed are filled with uranium hexafluoride gas to separate the fissionable U235 from its stable isotope U238. To make a nuclear weapon very pure U235 has to be obtained, or a fissionable isotope of plutonium extracted from uranium which has been irradiated in a reactor, known as reprocessing. As uranium occurs naturally the gas centrifuge was generally the preferred route for start-up proliferators. The centrifuges needed to be made out of special materials such as maraging steel and suspended with magnetic bearings to withstand the enormous forces generated by their rotation. If a country appeared to be trying to acquire such equipment, without any

other legitimate end use, it was a potential give away that they were up to no good. Iran was of obvious concern as it did not allow the IAEA full access to its reprocessing facilities even though it was a signatory to the NPT. If a licence was refused I would draft a telegram to the embassies in all the other countries in the Nuclear Suppliers Group to instruct them to make demarches to their hosts not to supply similar equipment. Whether this activity really contributed much to making the world a safer place is difficult to judge, but it felt worthwhile at the time.

I also volunteered to serve in the FCO emergency unit for a NATO crisis management exercise. It may have been the very last time one of these exercises, which were intended to practice headquarters and national political systems and communication rather than actual troops, was run with the scenario of a Soviet invasion of West Germany. The emergency unit in the basement received streams of incoming telegrams and watched imaginary press briefings as the war escalated and allied forces were forced to retreat across the north German plain. It was quite surreal living in this enclosed world of unfolding crisis for long overnight shifts and then emerging into a peaceful Whitehall and thinking, “What are all these people doing, going about their business calmly when we have just been attacked with chemical weapons?” Unfortunately the real world intruded into this exciting game of role play. SACEUR, NATO’s senior military commander in Europe, decided his forces were about to be overwhelmed and sought authority to use nuclear weapons against Warsaw Pact follow on forces massing in Eastern Europe. Some NATO countries panicked, fearing that the secret that NATO had launched a first nuclear strike, even in a game, would leak out, and cause the most horrendous political and diplomatic row. The game had to be stopped sooner than intended.

Brussels, 1989 -1993

That autumn I finished my spell in Science Energy Nuclear dept. It had been a good job and had allowed me to visit several of the country’s nuclear facilities, which was a privilege and a fascinating insight into the world of nuclear energy and waste management. On account of my French I was selected to do a six month attachment, known by the French term, “stage” in the European Commission, followed by a posting to the UK Representation to the European Economic Community (EEC) in Brussels. In the Commission I was to serve in the Secrétariat Général, a central part of the machinery which maintained relations with the

Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. In the early part of 1990 I found myself in a small glass office in the Berlaymont building, trying to write reports on the discussions of the European Parliament's Economic Affairs Committee. To begin with I was accommodated in a hotel, but eventually had a flat with a lovely view of the equestrian statue which adorns Brussels' magnificent Cinquantenaire gateway, a short walk across the park from my office.

One advantage of the job was the monthly descent of the European Parliament to Strasbourg to hold its week long plenary sessions. Those tasked with following it travelled down on what had become known as the Gravy Train because of the lucrative allowances paid to MEPs. In the parliament's plenary sessions the Commission officials had some seats reserved in the hemicycle of the Council of Europe (the EP did not have its own chamber in those days) at the extreme right hand side from the speaker's rostrum. This meant I found myself next to MEPs from the extreme right French National Front. When I moved to UKRep I was seated at the other extreme of the spectrum, next to Greek and Irish communists. Neither of these groups were exactly congenial neighbours, particularly the Greek who used to work himself up into a spitting fury if ever anything to do with Turkey was being discussed. The most effective speaker in the parliament was the formidable Ian Paisley who only got two minutes speaking time in any debate, but could thunder his point across more effectively than speakers of the bigger parties with ten minutes to waffle in. I occasionally encountered him in a lift, but the man's general demeanour did not encourage any attempt to engage in conversation. There was a good story going round about Ian Paisley. He had been approached by a journalist who spotted him in Madrid airport and, wondering what the arch protestant was doing in such a Catholic country, approached him looking for a story. Paisley growled at him, "I am about the Lord's business, now fuck off!"

When the Parliament took its very extended summer holiday from July until September, there was absolutely nothing to do, so it was accepted that the officials could also knock off for the summer. On 4 August 1990 Catherine and I married in a big Roman Catholic ceremony in Thornbury, the nearest Catholic church to her home that was large enough. Both families were Anglican on the arrow side and Roman Catholic on the distaff side, so religious differences did not matter.

In September we went back to Brussels and started our working life together. We were given a nice house in Woluwe St Pierre, a tram ride into town. Catherine managed to get a job in a large Belgian hospital, the St Luc, where she was expected to speak French. She had a struggle to get her school girl French up to an acceptable standard, but with the help of her nursing colleagues was eventually accepted. She also joined a Territorial Army unit based in Germany, which existed to run an ambulance train to evacuate the wounded from any central European conflict to the channel ports. She had great fun preparing to nurse on the train and practicing casualty management exercises. One day she proudly returned just in time for a dinner party, displaying a shooting prize. The army were starting to recognise that even female nursing soldiers would need to be able to defend themselves and practice basic infantry skills on top of their medical speciality.

The politics the following summer were dominated by the discussions leading up to the Maastricht Treaty, which eventually established the European Union with three important pillars of activity, each governed by different rules determining the respective roles and powers of the Commission, the Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament. Concepts such as Subsidiarity and Qualified Majority Voting were introduced to manage the complex relationships between the EEC's institutions and its member states. There was also a small advisory institution, the Economic and Social committee, composed of experts appointed by their member states. It had no powers to propose or amend legislation, but could publish opinions and advice from a theoretically experienced and a-political group of senior citizens. I was given the task of liaising with the British appointees, who were a lot of fun. Catherine and I were able to try our hand at some official entertaining. After a diplomatic upbringing entertaining guests at home was something I expected to do and I enjoyed cooking. On our first attempt a cheerful lady of Caribbean origin on the Committee took over the kitchen. On our second there was a mix up between Catherine and me over the mussels to decorate a paella. Somehow they did not get boiled, but put on top of the dish in the oven, where of course they opened and looked perfect. It is amazing how rubbery an unboiled mussel can be and as the guests were trying to pull them out of their shells in their teeth, only to be smacked on the nose by a ricocheting mussel, I realised that sharing responsibility for a dish was a recipe for disaster. Thereafter I concentrated on the savouries and Catherine master-minded puddings. One man in the Economic and Social Committee deserves special mention: he was a vet, Dr Peter Storie-Pugh, one of the very few POWs who escaped and was eventually incarcerated in Colditz. He was a terrific character and loved to tease me.

The political work in UKRep was increasingly dominated by Margaret Thatcher's opposition to Jacques Delors's attempts to build ever deeper ties between the member states by increasing the range of areas in which they should submit to collective EEC management. It was three years after her famous Bruges speech and the splits in the Conservative party over Europe were becoming ever deeper and more bitter. For the Institutions Section team, reporting on opinions of the European Parliament became an urgent and politically sensitive task. Once after the Parliament's late night plenary session we were still in our office at two in the morning trying to finish a telegram, which would be sent from the secretary's lap top to the UKRep communications centre and from there to the morning's Whitehall distribution. Suddenly all the lights went out. It was an energy saving measure. I lit pieces of paper while my boss hunted for a table lamp to finish the draft. The late hours were hard work, but they did give a sense of being at one of the sharper ends of the diplomatic spectrum. Fortunately Sir David Hannay, the Permanent Representative, was too busy to pay much attention to my work and never visited my office, tucked away at the top of the building. He hosted a lunch for the MEPs and I noticed the way he entered the room, shook hands and introduced himself, then moved on to the next guest before they had had a chance to say who they were. Whoever they were they were not sufficiently important to register on the radar screen of a man like David Hannay. When he left UKRep his successor, Sir John Kerr was a much more charming boss.

That autumn the political world was shaken by two historical events, which caused great excitement in the European parliament. The first was the fall of Margaret Thatcher, who was forced to resign after losing the confidence of her party over, among other things, her stance on Europe. Catherine and I were invited to celebrate the appointment of John Major as the new Prime Minister by the Conservative MEPs. Returning rather full of champagne, we were about to turn in when the telephone rang. It was Catherine's military unit asking her to volunteer for the first Gulf War, which had broken out when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and an expedition was being planned to evict him. The colonel in charge of the ambulance train wanted the army to run a railway line across the Iraq desert, so he could use his train to support what was expected to be a brutal and bloody battle. In the event wiser heads prevailed. Catherine decided she would only go if the whole unit were called up. Saddam's army collapsed very quickly and the fighting part of the war was soon accomplished. But Saddam Hussein was not removed from power, a fatal miscalculation in my view, which resulted eventually in the disaster of the second Gulf war.

That autumn it was the UK's turn to have the Presidency of the Council of Europe, so the work of UKRep was ever more hectic. Shortly before Christmas the Prime Minister came to the European Parliament's plenary session to address it. John Major was to be accommodated in the residence of the British Ambassador to the Council of Europe, a separate institution from the European Union, which was based in Strasbourg and which had lent its twelve starred flag and its debating chamber to the European Union. Although John Major had his armed police escort, I was asked to sit up all night in the residence to keep watch. Nobody offered to arm me of course. It was not a great night, considering I also had work to do the next day, but at the official lunch offered to the PM I sat with the close protection officers and was able to discuss the merits of Glock 9mm pistols, which was some compensation.

Belize, 1993-1996

In the spring of 1993, I was posted from UKRep to become Deputy High Commissioner in Belmopan, the capital of Belize. This was an exciting prospect. Aldous Huxley had famously said of British Honduras, Belize's colonial name, that "If the world had any ends, it would be one of them". There was still a military garrison in Belize, which had been there to deter a Guatemalan invasion ever since I had started in the FCO some eighteen years before.

Arriving at Belize City airport was a novel experience. The aircraft descended lower and lower over a swamp, to the point where a water landing seemed inevitable, then suddenly the tarmac flashed underneath and we landed. Air defence positions were visible near the runway, confirming that the British garrison meant business, though it had just been formally decided that it would be withdrawn, as Guatemala had finally agreed to recognise Belize as an independent state and relinquish its territorial claim. (Up to a point, it still rumbles on). My predecessor met me with the words, "Its good you arrived on time, we have just got time to drive to Belmopan so that I can pay my farewell call on the Prime Minister and introduce you." This seemed like an auspicious start. Old George Price was the architect of Belize's independence. He had been a difficult man to deal with and there must be as many miles of FCO filing cabinet space devoted to the Belize / Guatemala dispute and the eventual independence process as to almost any other subject. My predecessor also left me the

enviable task of hosting a lunch for the contestants in the Miss Belize competition. It was clearly going to be a tough job.

Belmopan, the capital, was built some fifty miles inland from the coast to protect it from the risk of hurricanes, which periodically devastated Belize City. At that time it was little more than a large village, with government offices, a few roads of houses for the richer Belizeans and ex-patriates and one or two small businesses. A sleepy one story hotel, the Bullfrog, provided guest accommodation. The British High Commission was about the only diplomatic mission in town, the rest preferring to remain in Belize City despite the hurricane risk. The office was a short walk from the residential compound, which housed the High Commissioner's residence, Merlin House and the Deputy's house, known as Dee House. These were named after two ships, intimately connected with the history of Belize. HMS Merlin had played a key role in the famous Battle of St George's Cay, when the colonists had repulsed a determined Spanish attempt to gain control of the territory. The sailing paddle steamer Dee had provided the colony's main link to the other British possessions in the Caribbean during the nineteenth century. The compound, which also boasted a small swimming pool and a tennis court, was well fenced and guarded. This was very reassuring as one of the High Commission staff had been attacked and raped by an intruder in her house a few hundred yards away.

The proposed withdrawal of the British garrison was the most important development during my early time in Belize. There were several camps and the small force was equipped with Scimitar light tanks and backed up by six Harrier aircraft and a flight of Puma and Gazelle helicopters. Some of these assets were to remain in support of a much smaller training base, as Belize's large empty spaces were ideal for jungle warfare training. The bases were to be handed over to the Belize Defence Force, a battalion sized army that would act as a trip wire should Guatemala ever attempt an invasion. A couple of British Officers were on loan to this force to help it develop its capabilities. My initiation was to understand the lie of the land and the military situation. The army kindly flew me by Gazelle to Punta Gorda, the southernmost town to visit the base there. There was a magnificent observation post, built on top of a high, jungle clad spire of rock, which overlooked the Guatemalan border and the one road which led into the Peten, the area of Guatemala closest to the only highway into Belize. If there were ever to be an attack the forces would have to travel up that road in order to position themselves to swoop down on Belmopan and Belize City, so the defenders

expected to get some warning of any military preparations. Going from the committee rooms of the European Parliament to jumping from a helicopter onto a tiny landing platform on top of a jungle covered rock was quite a change and I much preferred the latter.

Catherine quickly made contacts and started to do some voluntary nursing to help the Belize Red Cross, which was working with some of the immensely poor Central American refugees who had fled to Belize to escape the violence in their own countries. Belize was a country where a man with a machete could clear a patch of jungle, grow a few vegetables, build a hut and live in it with his family with virtually no money or modern conveniences. The problem this created was that there was no way of stopping Guatemalans, who had been driven out of their own country by forest clearance, carried out by the generals to make cattle ranches, from wandering over the border and setting up homesteads in Belize's pristine forest, which had not been inhabited since Mayan times. Satellite imagery showed the depressing spread of destruction, which seemed to be almost impossible to prevent, as those responsible were some of the poorest people on earth and had no other options to survive.

The High Commission had six UK based staff, five of whom worked in Chancery and the Management Officer downstairs. They were supported by several locally engaged staff. I had an excellent Commercial Assistant who helped me to visit all the companies that might be persuaded to consider buying British products, though these were almost invariably beaten on price by US and Chinese goods. The accountant, a Guyanese ex-army pay corps clerk was less good news however and after several struggles with his poorly kept books and an incident of gross insubordination, I sacked him. He was replaced with a very bright girl of Chinese descent. The High Commissioner was somewhat eccentric. The American ambassador used to recount how he had been staying in a jungle lodge in northern Belize and had gone for a boat trip on the river when he met our High Commissioner swimming. He stopped the boat and called out, "I hear there are a lot of alligators in this river!" The High Commissioner replied, "Yes, but I hear they are rather timid". He made the mistake of reporting in a telegram to the FCO that George Price's Peoples' United Party was sure to win the election, "Or he would eat his hat". Inevitably the United Democratic Party won. Belizeans had been observing the sound practice of always changing government at an election. The next morning the High Commissioner's hat was nicely served up on his desk with knife and fork, pepper and salt. I was not sure whether he appreciated the joke.

Although politics were fiercely contested in Belize, most governments seemed to do little but denounce the corruption of their predecessors, whilst perpetrating their own. One of the High Commissioner's pet hates was the company set up by Michael Ashcroft, Belize Holdings. This had opened the door to off shore financial services, a shipping register and other brass plate activities. Although there was nothing illegal in any of them, in a poorly regulated environment like Belize, of which it was said that it was founded by pirates and many were still there, it was an invitation to potentially criminal activity and money laundering. I often had to complain to the shipping register that Belize a registered ship had been detained somewhere for lack of proper documentation and safety equipment. I witnessed the High Commissioner trying to tackle Michael Ashcroft about Belize Holdings in a rather aggressive way at a lunch party. He later became involved in some adverse newspaper reporting about him and nearly ended up in court over it. Picking a quarrel with an immensely rich and powerful political party donor was not a particularly wise course, whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue. I heard a comical story about one High Commissioner, who had developed a soft spot for an American lady who ran the Belize zoo. One evening he decided he would drop in on her and so got his driver to drive him to her house, only to discover when he got there that there was already another car parked outside, so he turned round and beat a hasty retreat. The moral of this story is not to use your official driver on private amorous business. Tongues will wag.

In addition to commercial work and supporting the excellent Aid Secretary, who coordinated international development work, I took part in the Belize External Intelligence Committee. It was a great pleasure to work with the local police and army officers under the command of the excellent Cabinet Secretary, Carlos Perdomo and the then Deputy Head of the Defence Force, Alan Usher. I also liaised with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Belize was ideally situated between Colombia and the US border and a lot of drugs were smuggled through the country. The local DEA office in Belize City was decorated with posters of gun toting agents, helicopters and patrol craft as the DEA clearly saw themselves as actors in some sort of Hollywood cops and robbers drama. There were one or two big hauls of drugs and British forces helped the local police with their helicopters. Because of drugs, unemployment and a volatile mix of Caribbean and Central American ethnicity, Belize was not a safe country. When the High Commissioner was hosting his final reception in a Belize City hotel some rocks were thrown over the wall and a lady was hit. I rushed to the entrance to try to get the guards to investigate and returning found to my horror

that Catherine had been struck on the head and had a nasty cut. We rushed her off to Airport Camp to see the army doctor and fortunately the injury was not serious. The High Commissioner sent her a lovely bunch of flowers to make up for the shock she had had.

Thanks to my military experience, I was able to get a place on a jungle warfare orientation exercise for senior officers, which was run by the Army in a remote area. I went to the nearest base and was kindly oriented on the new SA 80 rifle. In my day I had trained with the Stirling sub machine gun and the Fabrique Nationale pattern self-loading rifle. Landing from the Puma helicopter in the middle of absolutely nowhere and seeing the bearded instructors, who had already been in the jungle a week, was an unnerving experience. "Christ! What have I let myself in for?" I thought. In the event the instructors were absolutely brilliant. They taught how to set ambushes, river crossings, camp attacks and how to pitch up a basher and make yourself comfortable even in that hostile environment, where everything was wet and any slight scratch became instantly infected. Belize has lots of limestone, which forms classical cave country with deep river beds and steep escarpments, all covered in vegetation, which made the going particularly tough. When the helicopter dropped me back outside the High Commission, I walked gleefully in to greet my colleagues, who screamed and held their noses. To be undetectable in the jungle one must revert to one's natural animal smell, avoiding soap, toothpaste or anything artificial and after a week I smelt pretty rank.

In the summer of 1994 Catherine and I returned for leave in England, but the past intruded on me in a big way that year in the form of the Matrix Churchill affair, which caused a major public enquiry conducted by Lord Justice Scott. This scandal went back to my time on non-proliferation work. As far as I could understand the case, what had happened was that an important British machine tool manufacturer, sadly one of the last, had won a big contract to supply lathes to Iraq. The Iraqis claimed they wanted them to make engine crank shafts, which was scarcely credible. The financial future of the company relied on being able to fulfil the order. The lathes were computer controlled and of a type known as four axis, which meant they were subject to export licence requirements under at least two regimes. One was the COCOM agreement to prevent sophisticated Western equipment getting into Soviet Russian hands. In point of fact by this time computer numeric control had been around long enough that it was no longer cutting edge technology and the Russians probably had no trouble at all getting hold of it on world markets. The other was the Sensitive

Nuclear Explosives Technology regime, because the four axis operation of the lathe meant it could be used to carve the incredibly precise hollow shells of fissionable material, neutron reflectors and explosives which form the core of a nuclear weapon. What to do about these licences had been a real puzzle. As far as I was concerned, there was no reason to believe that Iraq was anywhere near actually being able to build a nuclear bomb. (This was subsequently proven by the IAEA enquiries before the second Gulf war and subsequent searches, which revealed no evidence of any such sophisticated programme). They were only at the first tentative stages of trying to acquire enrichment or reprocessing technology. To settle the matter I went to see the experts down at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston and asked whether they would use equipment like these lathes themselves. Reassured that they were not really suitable, and understanding that there were important economic and intelligence interests at stake I decided that as far as non-proliferation was concerned the licences should be approved. Middle East department of the FCO were equally perplexed. The bloody Iran / Iraq war had ended and there was political pressure to relax the export control regime on Iraq. Unfortunately however Ministers had somehow failed to explain their decision to Parliament. Before a parliamentary committee of enquiry, William Waldegrave, the minister responsible, uttered the immortal words, "Truth is a very difficult concept". Another bit of back room Whitehall machinery had become involved. This was an interdepartmental working group set up to consider difficult export licence issues, which went by the wonderful name, "The Restricted Enforcement Unit". It met in totally non-descript offices in Palmer Street. Amongst others, HM Customs were represented on it. After the licences had been issued, they discovered that the programming for the computer controllers which accompanied the lathes was really to make fuses for shells and rockets, therefore clearly military in application. As Matrix Churchill had concealed this, stating the machines were purely for civilian use, Customs decided to prosecute the company, which brought the whole affair into the open. I was required to give written evidence to the enquiry and many more senior people had to appear in person. As far as I was concerned I had acted correctly. There was no evidence that the machines were in any danger of being used for nuclear proliferation, and that was where my responsibilities ended. The best bit was when I was asked, somewhat pompously, if I had been aware of a certain telegram the FCO had sent out about Iraq and was able to answer with immense smugness, "Yes, I wrote it".

Back in Belize the final preparations and commemorations were being made for the withdrawal of the garrison and establishment of BATSUB, the British Army Training Support Unit in Belize. There was a magnificent last display by the Harrier aircraft. Then there was a Royal Visit. HM the Queen came to Belize in her capacity as Head of State of that country, which was still a realm in the Commonwealth. This meant the main responsibility for the visit rested with the government of Belize, rather than the High Commission, though we were of course heavily involved. In the event it all passed off smoothly enough. Though the High Commissioner was closely involved and honoured for his efforts, no thought was given to presenting the High Commission staff and I spent the visit chasing administrative arrangements for the Royal hangers on. The last time the Queen had visited Belize she had been offered the national delicacy of Gibnut, a large jungle rodent. The next day a British newspaper announced “Queen eats rat!”

At one point, when I was in charge of the High Commission it had fallen to me to save a man’s life. This criminal was on death row for the brutal murder of an English woman who was a VSO volunteer in Belize. The Belizeans had the death penalty, but the final appeal could be made to the Privy Council in London. The Belizeans were unhappy about this colonial legacy, which restricted their sovereignty and mainly because of the extortionate cost of hiring British legal counsel to represent them. This case had gone to the Privy Council and at six AM on the Saturday morning of the execution, which was due to take place around nine AM, the Resident Clerk in the FCO telephoned. The fax machine in my study started to spew out reams of judgment granting a stay of execution. Calls to the police and the prison were of no avail. The only person who could stop the hanging was the Attorney General, who was also the Foreign Minister, Dean Barrow. Eventually, with the help of my local staff, I ran him to earth in a bungalow a few blocks away and got him out of bed to receive the Privy Council’s judgement. He was furious, but had to respect the legal process and use his authority to stop the execution, though vowing he would put a stop to the practice of allowing the Privy Council to interfere. It was a close run thing. During my second tour life in the High Commission became considerably more relaxed under the new boss, who was an excellent diplomat and liked entertaining.

Security Policy Department 1996-1999

I was due a home posting and learned I was to become the NATO Desk Officer, or DO/NATO in Security Policy Department. I liked to joke that my younger brother was “Donatello”, but the return to London life and the pressure of work in a busy policy department was certainly no joke. NATO was in the process of enlarging, first to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, then to the Baltic States. Whether this was really a wise policy I was never convinced. The smaller middle European countries inevitably lean east or west, depending upon how they perceive their security interests. Incorporating them into NATO added little to the alliance’s military strength, but increased its commitments and was seen as a threat by Russia, which it has never really come to terms with. NATO was coming up to its 50th anniversary, which was to be celebrated in London with a grand dinner in Lancaster House. I was involved in the preparations and was able to attend the dinner, hosted by Prince Andrew, which was a nice reward for all the hard work. Another perk came my way when a colleague sadly disgraced himself through drink. This man was tasked with liaising with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which arranged meetings of parliamentarians from all the NATO members in various venues. He accompanied the British MPs to a meeting in Edinburgh, but his intoxication resulted in a formal complaint to the Secretary of State. Robin Cook wrote an apologetic letter back to the chairman of the Parliamentary committee. To my great amusement it stated that I, who was to be the replacement, had been “The Deputy Head of NATO Section since November 1996”, but that “the pool of experienced officers engaged on a broad range of NATO policy and other security policy work in London was limited.” I felt I should ask for a pay rise. At least I got a very nice trip to Warsaw out of it, as the Poles, recently admitted to NATO, were eager to put on a good show for the visiting parliamentary delegations and organised visits to the reconstructed old city of Warsaw and to Krakow.

There were other aspects to security policy work, which also brought their perks to this job. I was the FCO representative for Civil Emergency Planning. This was a cross government process, which sought to coordinate non-military aspects of crisis management. In order to exercise its crisis management procedures, NATO carried out biennial exercises of officials and headquarters staff, which did not actually involve any movement of troops on the ground. As the Soviet Union had collapsed by then these exercises no longer involved potential invasions of Europe, but military peace building missions in some fictitious country which

was supposed to be descending into civil war and humanitarian crisis. Planning for these exercises took the best part of a year and involved NATO and national officials meeting in various attractive locations to draw up all the supporting paperwork. In 1998 I spent a pleasant week in Norfolk Virginia working with NATO colleagues to construct the civil emergency aspects to supplement the military scenario that was being prepared. One of New Zealand's islands had been transposed into the middle of the Atlantic for the purpose, while its imaginary population, consisting of two ethnicities, were at each other's throats and a bloody civil war was imminent. But while planning was in full swing for this fictitious scenario, the real world intruded in the form of the Kosovo war. Eventually the exercise was cancelled while NATO intervened with massive force against Serbia to stop a new wave of atrocities being committed in the Balkans.

Sana'a 1999 - 2002

After three years in Security Policy Dept I was due another posting and finally secured Deputy Head of Mission in Sana'a and Consul General Aden. The Sana'a embassy consisted of two old Yemeni style buildings in a small compound next to a water pumping station. One housed the consular and visa sections and the management and accounts teams, while the other was for chancery and the commercial and information sections. My office, next to the Ambassador's on the chancery floor, had a view over the fore court. The UK based staff in chancery consisted of Her Majesty's Ambassador, me, a commercial second secretary and a registry and communications lady. There was supposed to be a political secretary, but the post was unfilled for quite a long time, the previous incumbent having been nearly incinerated when a huge gas explosion ripped through a supermarket next to her home. The new incumbent finally arrived having driven from Amman in a battered Isuzu Trooper crammed with a motor bike, a paraglider and a largish dog. There were also two Yemeni commercial staff, Mohammed and Lutfi and a Yemeni information officer. In the other building the Management Officer doubled as the Consul and with a UK based Assistant Management officer was supported by quite a large team of locally engaged staff and a Vice Consul, who ran the visa section with some local support.

When I arrived it was not a happy embassy. It already had a chequered history, as a previous Management Officer had perpetrated a notorious fraud of official funds and had committed suicide while the case was still under investigation. My predecessor had a grudge against the

Ambassador, who was an amiable Welshman and an excellent Arabist. This grudge seemed to be all about the official vehicles. The previous DHM believed he had been the target of a kidnap attempt. Kidnapping westerners had become a national sport in Yemen. The idea was that a tribe which thought it was due some extra help and support from the government would kidnap a western expatriate or two and hold them to ransom until the Yemeni government, which usually negotiated, promised them some investment. As this was before Al Qaida inspired Islamic extremism had really taken hold, the hostages were usually fairly well treated and eventually released. Sadly, this was not always the case as the government's attempts to intervene often put the hostages' lives at risk. My French colleague told me one of his worst moments had been when he discovered the army was proposing to shell a mountain top village where some French hostages were being held. During my time a Norwegian diplomat travelling home through Arabia was kidnapped and tragically killed in a shoot out with the army. My predecessor had managed to evade kidnap and when he reported the incident the FCO had decided that he, like the Ambassador, should have an armoured Range Rover. The vehicle had duly arrived and as it was new and much smarter than the Ambassador's official car the latter had appropriated it, for which his deputy never forgave him. I couldn't have cared less. The embassy also had a semi armoured Discovery, complete with an HF radio and huge HF aerial mount so it could in theory communicate with the embassy in Riyadh. This was much faster than the Range Rovers and had the added attraction of an externally mounted loudspeaker so the driver could talk to road blocks, or yell curses at the traffic without lowering the fixed armoured glass. While I was waiting to get my own car, I was able to use the Discovery, which was fun to drive and had a certain "Bond" film style about it.

From my predecessor I inherited a mansion with about fifteen rooms and a large garden, which was grossly over any sort of reasonable scale of property for anyone but a Head of Mission, but as the contract had been agreed for several years I enjoyed the use of it without having to defend the decision to hire it. At the top it had a typical Yemeni room for chewing Qat and a large roof terrace. The house came with two delightful Ethiopian maids, Ganet and Assenako, a cook, locally engaged embassy guards and a squad of six Yemeni soldiers who provided security. The latter lived in a squalid gate house and had one AK 47 between them with 90 rounds of ammunition. What sort of incident they expected to blaze off 90 rounds in I could only guess at.

Drinking was possible in the British Embassy club, the Lion and Jambiya, the clumsy broad bladed dagger which was worn as an indispensable costume decoration by Yemeni men, although an AK 47 or an automatic pistol had also become essential fashion accessories and were carried quite openly. The club had a small swimming pool, a tennis court and a bar quite close to the residences in the suburb of Haddah. I was the vice-chairman of this institution and had to play a role in its management with a small committee drawn from embassy and expatriate members.

Apart from commercial visiting and a bit of economic reporting one of the embassy's main issues with the FCO was over the vexed question of travel advice. Providing such advice to British travellers had seemed a reasonable task for the FCO to undertake, but it became extremely politically sensitive. Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, had announced that his foreign policy would be ethical. He was determined that the FCO should lose its elitist image and be seen to be more responsive to consular problems affecting Britons abroad. Ministers were naturally worried that any incident that occurred to a British citizen overseas would be viewed in the light of the travel advice the FCO had provided about that country and so there was pressure to err on the side of caution. Meanwhile the country itself would object very strongly to being described as unsafe and make its views clear to Her Majesty's Ambassador. There was thus a constant tussle between the Ambassador in Sana'a and Middle East department about every nuance of the travel advice. Given that Yemen was awash with weaponry, which was frequently employed in local conflicts and kidnapping foreigners was a regular occurrence, it was difficult to see how the travel advice could be anything other than draconian. But expatriates and diplomats with local knowledge were able to travel round large parts of the country without too much risk, so the Ambassador felt strongly that the FCO's advice was pitched too harshly.

The Ambassador and his wife loved Yemen and were considering retiring there, although it was not long before they were dramatically disabused of such notions. She was an old Middle East hand too and had become increasingly enamoured by Islam. One morning when the UK based staff were gathered in his office for their usual weekly meeting the Ambassador announced that he and his wife had been to see the Mufti and she had converted to Islam. There was an embarrassed silence. Then the visa officer, a wonderfully chirpy character from the North of England asked, "Does that mean you can have three more wives Ambassador?" How I did not collapse into fits of giggles I will never know.

Aden

As I was also officially designated the Consul General in Aden, I soon had to pay a visit to the city, which had left deep scars on British colonial history after the bitterness and bloodshed of our withdrawal. Nevertheless most Adenis would insist that things had never been so good as when the British were there and they were probably right. The city itself clings around a barren, mountainous island connected to the mainland by a causeway. Despite efforts to create a new container terminal it had the air of a neglected time warp. Ancient Bedford army lorries could still be seen on the roads, belching black clouds of diesel fumes. Old British army barrack blocks looked as though they had not received any maintenance since the 1960s. In the dock yard lathes and milling machines gathered dust, while some workers squatted on the ground trying to cast metal in a crucible with a blow torch. There was one semi acceptable hotel on the seaward side and one amazing Chinese restaurant which had survived all the political turmoil and served some of the most delicious Chinese style seafood to be had anywhere on the planet and even beer to wash it down. In the old Christian cemetery, which we had stopped using during the fighting, could be found the graves of soldiers who had belonged to regiments with names like, “The 10th Duke of Cambridge’s Own Lancers” or the “125th Napier’s Rifles”, testimony to the Indian regiments we had used to garrison the place before independence. In the new cemetery in a valley well away from the city, where Remembrance Day was commemorated each year, were the neat rows of Commonwealth war graves of all the British soldiers killed in the 1960s violence.

The British consulate was housed in a small air conditioned villa and was a time warp itself, straight out of Somerset Maugham or Graham Green. The locally engaged Vice-Consul, Mustapha, was a lovely man, almost completely spherical, like a caricature of a Pasha, and amazingly well plugged in to the local scene, so he could introduce me to influential journalists and politicians. He was supported by a secretary and a small staff of guards and servants to keep the building. The most memorable of the latter was old Ghraleb. There was a huge statue of Queen Victoria in the garden and Ghraleb used to point fondly to her and exclaim “This is my Queen”. Once when I went down I was greeted by Ghraleb in great distress. The cistern on the lavatory for the master bedroom had broken that very morning and was out of order. Ghraleb looked crestfallen and announced, “I knew you were coming and when I saw it I said to myself, “This is from God!” The consulate also had a charming

local legal adviser, who was also a Sheikh. He invited embassy visitors to his house to have lunch and meet his wife and family, a great honour for the guests. Thanks to the century of British influence, Adenis were generally more liberal in their attitudes than the northern Yemenis.

The major concern in Aden was the five British Muslims held in Aden gaol for terrorist offences. These young men, one of whom was the son of Abu Hamza, had gone to Yemen to train with Abu al Hassan, one of the Yemeni-Afghans, like Osama Bin Laden, who had been recruited to fight the Russians in Afghanistan and returned with extreme religious views and a hatred of the West. The Britons had been caught in Aden with weapons and accused of plotting to attack various targets. Their trial had been relatively shambolic, so there was some doubt about their guilt and for political reasons the British government was reluctant to take a position on whether they were guilty or not. It was also very anxious to show that British consular protection would extend to British Muslims just as much as to any other British citizen. But in a bungled attempt to secure the prisoners' release Abu al Hassan's cell in the Abyan desert lands up the coast from Aden had kidnapped a bus load of tourists, several of whom had been killed in the ensuing battle with Yemeni security forces sent to rescue them. This tragedy had done little for the cause of the prisoners in Aden.

I supported our excellent lady consul in Sana'a by undertaking some of the regular visits we paid to the prisoners to check on their welfare in the old British gaol on the mainland part of Aden. It was a grim place. The prisoners were brought into the prison Governor's shabby office and usually ranted at me for half an hour or so about how badly the British authorities had treated them and why were we not doing more to secure their release? I would listen patiently, hand over any newspapers and magazines I had brought them and some fruit on one occasion, and undertake to report to London. There was clearly no point in trying to engage in any kind of debate with such fanatics and it was also clear that one dominant individual was acting as the spokesman and leader of the group, so on some visits I asked to see them individually to get a better chance to hear the views of the others, but they were reluctant to speak openly about what they really thought. Coming mainly from Birmingham and having grown up in the era of Paki bashing skinheads and the row over the "Satanic Verses" it was understandable that they had developed anti British views from a sense of rejection and, alienated, they had sought to make sense of their feelings by espousing an extremist Islamic narrative. After an ear bashing in Aden gaol, I would go off to meet some of the very few

British expatriates who still lived in Aden. There was a lady archaeologist and a merchant navy captain who was working on a World Bank project to develop the port. They were amusing and congenial company and would take me to swim on a deserted beach on the far side of the island. There was also a small Anglican church which ran a medical centre to treat blindness, which was much appreciated by the local community, though it too was attacked shortly before I left Yemen.

Another strange story in Aden, which had occurred before I arrived, was of a French yacht that had put in with two crew, they reported that a third, British, member of their crew had been shot dead by Somali pirates. In the extreme heat of the Gulf of Aden they had had no option but to consign his body to the sea. A spent cartridge case found on deck tended to confirm this story. The Yemeni authorities and the French, as it was a French yacht, had the primary duty of investigating this sad case. There was little for the British to do other than collect and forward the deceased's possessions to his family, but Mustapha told me he had interviewed the French couple when they arrived and as they were clearly extremely shocked and upset he tended to believe their story.

Terrorism

In the autumn of 2000 we were camping on the beach at Hodeidah when I received a call on my mobile phone from a reporter in Dubai to ask for my reaction to the news that the USS Cole had been bombed in Aden. These Aegis class destroyers used to visit the new docks in Aden to refuel on their way to the Gulf. A motor boat had rammed the ship and exploded, causing extensive damage and killing seventeen US sailors. This was horrifying news, particularly as I had offered the US Defence Attaché hospitality in Aden and had gone on an extensive tour of a sister ship of the Cole, the USS Barry, a few months earlier. I called the Ambassador to ask if I should return immediately, but he decided I could wait until the next day. Early the next morning the phone rang again. The embassy had been bombed. There was extensive damage, but mercifully no casualties as the bomb had been thrown over the wall in the early hours of the morning. I packed up my family and rushed back to Sana'a.

A powerful bomb had exploded near to an outside generator between the outer wall and the side of the building blowing in most of the windows and reducing the offices on that side to a shambles. As the windows had inner and outer arches filled with coloured glass in a plaster frame, a traditional Yemeni architectural feature, known as a "Gamariya", there was lots of

glass and plaster blown in, some of which was embedded in the opposite walls of the rooms. It was horrible to think what might have happened to anyone who had been in those offices at the time. There then ensued a farcical episode which could only happen in those parts of the world where facts and evidence are held to be of lower priority than face saving. Unwilling to accept that anything like these attacks could possibly occur in his country, President Ali Abdullah Saleh insisted that the USS Cole had suffered an internal explosion and that the embassy blast had been caused by a faulty generator. This was obviously impossible as in both cases the metal had been blown inwards and the generator was still perfectly intact. But until the President had changed his mind, which took about a week, none of the police or officials charged with investigating would believe the evidence of their own eyes. Nevertheless this did not stop them from arresting the poor guard who had been on night duty at the embassy and trying to beat a confession out of him. He was in a shocking state when the embassy finally got him released. The embassy was not allowed to clear up the mess until a team from Scotland Yard had painstakingly collected and examined every piece of debris to try to recover parts of the improvised explosive device. It did not appear to have had any very sophisticated detonator, but the explosive must have been powerful stuff as it was estimated to have been about ten to fifteen pounds and it did sufficient damage that the whole building had to be reinforced with a new beam across its cellar.

As soon as they could reassemble, I made a point of briefing all the locally engaged staff about what had occurred and what further security measures would be put in place to ensure their safety. They responded very bravely and a squad of armed soldiers was stationed outside the gates to deter further attacks. The same could not be said of all the UK based staff. One colleague, who had just left, but was taking some leave locally as he was very happy in Yemen, never even came back to look at the damage, far less volunteer to help with anything in the crisis. Also unfortunate was my briefing of a journalist from the Washington Post. Having shown this individual some of the damage, I remarked, "Every terrorist organisation in the Middle East is represented in Sana'a", but forgot to stress that this remark was most emphatically off the record. It was a logical inference as Yemen was a place where in the arms Suks, markets, you could acquire anything from a pen gun to a 22 calibre heavy machine gun, land mines, hand grenades and AK 47s à gogo. In short, if you wanted to tool up for World War III, Yemen was the place to go. I had acquired a beautiful WWI pattern Short Lee Enfield rifle, complete with bayonet, for 40 dollars and hung it on the wall in my hall. The next day someone pointed out an article in the Washington Post, which read

something like, “Every terrorist organisation in the Middle East is well represented in Sana’a, said the Deputy Head of Mission of the British Embassy, as he picked his way amongst the debris of his bombed out embassy”. I thought one distinction my career had lacked so far was to be declared “Persona non Grata”, and booted out. I confidently expected to have achieved it this time. Fortunately the Yemeni embassy in Washington must have been napping and nobody in the FCO reprimanded me for it either. By such slim threads does a career hang. I got my revenge by refusing to brief that journalist ever again.

The Ambassador was due to retire and I became Chargé d’Affaires for a couple of months. My first concern was President Saleh’s desire to visit London on his way to New York and to have a call on the Secretary of State whilst there. Robin Cook was not keen to meet him and for several weeks no positive answer could be extracted from Middle East department, whilst the Yemenis kept enquiring and I fretted. Not to have received the President would have been extremely damaging to relations and the embassy would have felt the President’s displeasure in one way or another. Eventually a telegram came offering a meeting with Lord somebody or other, a junior Home Office Minister, on the thin grounds that he had been involved in drafting some anti-terrorist legislation. I sent back a snotty telegram, saying that with due respect to His Lordship, Saleh would never have heard of him and would think he was being fobbed off. It did the trick. Robin Cook gave the President lunch in his Carlton House Terrace flat and honour was satisfied.

The next problem was that Robin Cook had decided to instigate a more liberal policy of requesting the release of British prisoners held in foreign gaols on compassionate grounds. Consular department had decided that the British detainees in Aden would be an excellent test case for this initiative. They drafted a submission to the Secretary of State setting out their case. The political Second Secretary and I did not think that the Aden detainees would be particularly suitable subjects, nor that the Yemenis would be likely to accede to any demarche for early release. We put our heads together and drafted a reasoned response, pointing out the pitfalls. The submission went up anyway, but Consular department had not agreed their line with Counter Terrorism department which had a hundred fits and contested the recommendation. It was rare in the Foreign Office to have policy advice contested by different parts of the organisation. Shortly afterwards Robin Cook was replaced as Foreign Secretary by Jack Straw, who took a rather more robust approach, and the whole idea got put on a back burner.

Another difficult issue for the Acting Head of Mission was when information was received that another attack was planned on the embassy for a specific day; this time a rocket propelled grenade round was to be fired at the building. London did not think the threat was credible. From my office window I could all too easily see how a pick-up truck might stop by the roadside and someone in the back take a pot shot at the upper floors with an RPG. Such weapons were readily available in Yemen. I wondered how I could explain to the family of a dead colleague why I had decided to ignore a warning of that nature, even if the threat were not deemed particularly credible. I decided that we had nothing to lose by shutting the shop for a day, without any explanation. It might inconvenience a few visa applicants, but nothing more serious would happen. But I had a devil of a lot to lose in a worst case scenario, so why take the risk? In the event nothing did happen, but as the man on the spot I was prepared to back my instinct whatever London might think of me for it.

In Palestine the intifada was in full swing and the Foreign Minister called EU Heads of Mission to see him to make clear his deep concerns about the violent Israeli response. After they had all answered him, parroting their official lines that their governments condemned the violence too and were making their views known to both sides, they took their leave. The Foreign Minister shook hands with each saying “Goodbye your excellency”, until it was my turn when he said “Goodbye Martin”. That, thought I, was quite a compliment.

I sometimes received calls from the Economist Intelligence Unit to help paint a picture of the local scene for one of their reports on Yemen. Conscious that my phone might be bugged, I was rather cautious about what I said, but I could not disguise my feeling that Yemen was a country with such severe problems, that unlike Belize which could be expected to muck along in its own sweet way indefinitely unless inter-ethnic tensions really surfaced, the future of Yemen was impossible to see. With limited economic resources, a persistently unstable security situation, which discouraged foreign investment in projects like gas pipelines, they were sure to be blown up, a very young and fast increasing population, an abundance of easily available weaponry, and an economy of which it was said that twenty five percent was devoted to the production and consumption of the drug Qat, fast emptying the precious aquifers, not to mention endemic corruption which bedevilled all attempts to develop successful enterprises, the future really did not look promising and so sadly has it turned out.

Then the new Ambassador, who had been Deputy Head of Mission in Addis Ababa arrived, having driven via Djibouti and got across to Aden by sea. To welcome her and her family to Yemen the locals helpfully filled up her diesel car with petrol. Once installed in Sana'a there followed the usual round of calls on ministers and presentation of credentials to the President which all went smoothly. This was not always the case. Once, I was present when a senior EU delegation came to Sana'a and met the President. Then everybody piled into the President's official limousines to go to another part of town. The official drivers drove through Sana'a's crowded streets like lunatics. I could see it coming. Sure enough the cavalcade had a multiple shunt when the lead car suddenly braked. Not much damage was done and the drivers seemed completely unperturbed by nearly giving their official guests whiplash injuries. What a fuss would have been made if such a thing had happened in London!

A ministerial visit was planned by the FCO minister responsible for the Middle East, Keith Vaz. He had been born in Aden, so had a special interest in Yemen and a busy programme was arranged for him to meet important figures in Sana'a, including the President. This gave me a bit of difficulty. A ministerial visitor to Islamabad had questioned why the embassy club there was only available to UK based staff and expatriates and excluded locally engaged staff. There had been circulars about the need for a more inclusive approach. The fact that these clubs were essentially run on the lines of a pub and therefore not appropriate for LE staff in countries where alcohol was banned and that if they had swimming pools they would be patronised by western women in bikinis, did not appear to have been considered by the Ayatollahs of diversity and political correctness who ruled in Whitehall. I decided that as Keith Vaz was just the sort of minister who might enquire into such arrangements, I must make some changes to the constitution of the Lion and Jambiyah club, so that the locally engaged staff could also join if they wished to. The opposition from certain members of the committee was intense. After much discussion I decided to impose my changes on them, whether they liked it or not. The argument that it was better to work something out and jump before they were pushed cut no ice with some of the expatriates who resigned in protest. In the event the minister never took the slightest interest in the club. Only one member of staff, an Adeni girl, whose more liberal education was stifled by the rigid attitudes of the north, asked to join the club. Before long she had met and fallen in love with a British geologist. They married and settled in Devon, where as far as I know they have a family and have lived happily ever after. I was pleased that my decision had led to the creation of one happy

family. It was an illustration of how extraordinary consequences can flow from seemingly unrelated events.

Keith Vaz got on so well with President Salah that the latter offered to put his personal aircraft at the Minister's disposal so he could visit Aden. This, of course, was not foreseen in the programme and would have meant cancelling a number of appointments in Sana'a at short notice with all the diplomatic damage that might cause. The Minister was very anxious to accept the President's offer. The embassy was very anxious that he should not. As we sat discussing the issue it suddenly occurred to the Minister that the personal planes of Middle Eastern presidents who had been in power for a long time were not necessarily the safest means of transport. He rapidly changed his mind.

Catherine became involved in organising a diplomatic camping expedition to the famous Shahara Bridge, a seventeenth century construction that spans a narrow gorge between the town of Shahara and a neighbouring small mountain. This was a major undertaking, involving some forty people including the Ambassador, the visiting Defence Attaché, the US DCM and representatives from several EU embassies. For security the convoy had the usual heavily armed escort. This time the heavy weaponry was provided by a belt fed machine gun, whose operator proudly wrapped himself up in yards of bullets. Had we been attacked I reckoned it would have taken him at least five minutes to untangle himself and set up his weapon, time which no determined attacker would be likely to grant him. Shahara was an unspoiled hill top village though some of the buildings, which had been bombed by the Egyptian Airforce in a previous conflict, were still bomb sites. It was judged to have been a memorable trip and Catherine's contribution was much appreciated, but the latent hostility of the Huthi population in the area should have served as a warning of what was to come in Yemen. Gunfire could be heard echoing round the hills for most of the night.

We had to go back to Sada in the north of Yemen to see another British citizen in prison. He had been in an Islamic madrassa run by some radical cleric. He had acquired an automatic pistol in the local arms suk, with which he contrived to shoot his British room-mate through the chest, killing him instantly. It seemed to be a case of incompetent weapon handling and the Yemeni way of sorting it out would have been through the payment of blood money to the victim's family. Some British nurses worked in the Sada hospital, where gunshot

wounds were a speciality. They told us twenty six dead had been brought in after one wedding, which must have been quite a falling out amongst the in-laws.

On the 11th September 2001 I had a rather good lunch with my German opposite number and several other members of the diplomatic community. Returning home the attack on the Twin Towers was being shown repeatedly on the BBC World Service TV news, which we could receive via satellite. The world had changed. In Yemen, as in much of the Middle East, the immediate instinct was to believe any story which absolved Islamic terrorism and credit any rubbish which sought to implicate the Jews. One thing was immediately clear, there would be no pressure from the FCO to make a case for the release of the Aden detainees for the foreseeable future. When the decision was taken to attack the Taliban in Afghanistan, Yemen was considered to fall within the potential conflict zone, which was sensible. Lots of Yemenis had been involved in the previous Afghan conflict and had become radicalised. Given the recent history of attacks, it could be expected that they might attack western targets again. Oil company workers immediately went onto double salaries with leave every few weeks. FCO personnel were offered one extra paid journey home. All staff deemed non-essential were evacuated and those on leave did not return. Families went home, though the Ambassador chose to keep her children with her. In Sana'a I was engaged in refining plans for evacuation of all British citizens, should the need arise and briefing the consular wardens who helped to maintain a communication link between the local British community and the embassy. With no support staff in chancery, keeping on top of the paperwork and keeping the communication systems working was a constant struggle. I used to say the "Fuck up Fairy" did not just visit the old embassy, she lived on the roof. One bit of equipment or another was usually on the blink and once I gave myself a nasty shock, trying to connect one side of the registry's electrical system to the other to restore power to the communications equipment. An FCO technician could visit periodically from Addis Ababa, but some of the contracted engineering staff were hampered by the fact that they could no longer obtain travel insurance cover due to Yemen being designated within the Afghan war zone. Such are the unforeseen drawbacks of outsourcing government tasks to private companies.

I enjoyed excellent relations with the American embassy. The Defence Attaché lived nearby and had children of similar ages, so they have remained friends. As Washington was so much further behind Sana'a it would sometimes occur that the US Deputy Chief of Mission would call round at two o'clock in the morning to tell me they had just received some

important threat intelligence. One 4th of July, which the Americans did not celebrate much in Sana'a the US lady Ambassador, Barbara Baudain, had come to a party at my house with all her heavy security escort. Entertaining the US ambassador on 4th July seemed like a good plug for the "Special Relationship".

The Americans experienced one of the madder incidents that occurred in Yemen. The American Admiral in charge of US forces in the region was due to visit southern Yemen and so it was arranged that the Ambassador, Defence Attaché, DCM, CIA Station Chief, in short Uncle Tom Cobbley and all, would fly down together to meet him at Taiz. Their aircraft was hijacked by a lone attacker, armed with one of the pen guns which were readily available in the arms Suks. He ordered the pilot to fly to Iraq. The prospect of the entire top team of a US embassy being delivered to Saddam Hussein could have created a diplomatic incident of monumental proportions, but it appeared that the hijacker was unaware of just what a big coup he had brought off. The pilot protested he had not enough fuel to reach Iraq. Aden was out of the question for the hijacker, as the Yemeni security forces would have been sure to intervene. Eventually he agreed to go to Djibouti. Meanwhile the US diplomats had slipped out of first class and distributed themselves amongst the rest of the passengers. The Defence Attaché had a compass on his watch strap and to his great relief saw that the plane was heading south. When they landed at Djibouti the Americans ordered the cabin crew to open the rear door, which they did after some resistance. The Ambassador, sans her high heels, and the rest of the passengers jumped down the inflatable ramp and ran for it. The would be hijacker suddenly noticed his hostages legging it across the apron and following a struggle in which one of the flight crew was shot through an arm, he was overpowered. So ended another incident in the life of the lady Ambassador. She had been in Kuwait at the time of the Iraqi invasion and it was said, she was working her way through the State Department's entire emergency response manual.

As my time in Sana'a drew to a close, I bid for another posting and eventually got Head of the Commercial Section in Lima. This was an exciting prospect as it meant a chance to employ my Spanish again and the prospect of another interesting country to explore. But my adventures in Sana'a were not quite over. Through the Hash House Harriers I had got to know the Deputy Russian Defence Attaché, Nikolai Zhukov, though no relation of the famous general. Although relations with Russia were more cordial in those days than they later became, Nikolai was obviously a GRU officer tasked with befriending the western

expatriate community. Once when attending a party at the US Defence Attaché's house, his wife had been caught trying to break into the Defence Attaché's personal computer. Clumsy really, for what John Le Carré would have described as a "Moscow Circus trained hood!" Nikolai was very keen on guns and one day he and some others invited me to a shooting party in the desert near town. I was keen to get hold of some ammunition for my old Lee Enfield, so I should have fired it at least once. We found a grocers shop which also stocked weaponry. Poking about in the back the grocer opened cupboards revealing land mines and hand grenades next to the eggs and milk powder. Sure enough, a box of 303 ammunition was dug out and the party spent a jolly afternoon banging off all sorts of weaponry. The 303 made by far the best bang making the AK 47s sound like pip squeak fire arms. Nikolai was ex Russian Special Forces and he could certainly shoot well with his Makarov pistol, a weapon with which I found it quite impossible to hit anything.

Nikolai was also a climber and we had swapped mountain stories, so the day my successor arrived Nikolai asked to come and see me to show him some pictures of his recent climbing trip in the Caucasus. I arranged for him to come in early and suggested that my successor check into her hotel and have a bit of a rest after the long flight before coming into the office. Being keen she turned up while Nikolai was still there, so I introduced them and said, "If you ever want to do any shooting, Nikolai's your man". On hearing this Nikolai proudly opened his briefcase and pulled out his loaded Makarov pistol. Visitors to the embassy were required to deposit any weapons they were carrying with the gate guards, but as Nikolai had turned up in a diplomatic plated car, they had let him drive in without asking. I did not know what impression my successor might receive, having a Russian intelligence officer produce a pistol inside a British Embassy in her first ten minutes. I thought that with a friend like Nikolai, a man really didn't need enemies. I was sure the FCO's Security Department would have had something to say about the incident, but fortunately nobody told them.

That evening the new occupant of the Deputy Head of Mission's fifteen room mansion came to inspect. While she and Catherine were up on the roof a distant boom echoed round the city. Neither woman made any reference to it. Later that evening at a reception we learned that a car had exploded outside the security police HQ: a fitting welcoming and leaving message from Sana'a.

Lima, 2002-2004

Back in England I had the usual series of pre-posting training courses. I was very determined to add the economic reporting job to my role, as I had done in Belize and Yemen. There was some resistance to this as the FCO's economists thought that economic reporting was too difficult for Commercial sections and should be the preserve of Chancery. But nobody else in Lima wanted to do it, so I managed to attend all the available courses and build on my O' level economics to master the jargon.

My family eventually assembled with fifteen suitcases for our journey to Heathrow, Amsterdam, Bonaire and eventually Lima. Landing on Bonaire was an extraordinary experience as the KLM plane seemed to be too big for the island, but it was thrilling for me to spot from the air familiar landmarks near my favourite dive sites. In Lima we were met by an office driver and taken to the Miraflores Park hotel, which was a very luxurious experience for the children. The staff even laid places at breakfast for various dolls. We eventually moved to an old house in San Isidro, next to the Anglican church and an ancient pre Colombian site called the Huaca Pucllana. The house had massive security gates and a completely enclosed garden with a very small swimming pool and an excellent built in barbeque, so it was really ideal. The embassy itself was on the twenty second and twenty third floors of a tower block overlooking the sea, next to the Miraflores Sheraton, some half hour walk away. Faced entirely in green glass these impressive buildings formed a natural updraft for the local para gliding fraternity, the madder members of which would fly so close they could drag a wing tip across the glass frontage of the Sheraton.

I inherited a wonderful team of locally engaged staff, two men assisted by three ladies. They were a happy team and I got on really well with them. My first act however was to have my predecessor's fridge removed from my office. Much as I enjoyed a drink I did not think keeping beer in my office was quite the image I wished to project. I then set about building up as many contacts as possible. This was particularly useful for economic reporting, as I could call on the IMF and World Bank representatives in Peru and discuss the economy with people who actually knew something about the subject. At the time however Peru was recovering from the bitter years of the Sendero Luminoso terrorism and under President Toledo was prospering economically. All the focus in Whitehall was on Argentina's default crisis and there was less interest in my more reassuring reports about the state of Peru.

Although it was largely carried out by FCO diplomats, trade promotion work was the responsibility of the DTI and they never seemed to be able to agree what to call it. It seemed that each new senior official, who was put in charge, was determined to make his mark by instigating a major reorganisation. It had once been “Overseas Trade Services”, which seemed a good enough name, but shortly after I arrived in Peru the word went out that the current title, “Trade Partners UK”, TPUK was not really working as a brand name and needed to be changed. After a consultation exercise the DTI eventually settled on “UK Trade and Investment”, UKTI. What the total cost involved in changing all the logos on all the paperwork I could only guess at. Work undertaken for a UK company was charged for, so the commercial sections were really providing a heavily subsidised consultancy service. Nevertheless this put a lot of onus on them to produce good quality and useful reports, which would help a company to assess the potential market for its products in the country and to decide whether it was worth investing the time and effort to export there and leave them feeling they had got value for money. My team were very good at assembling all the relevant statistics, but I had to help them quite a lot to produce fluent written English.

The DTI seemed to have a curious attitude towards British business. This probably came from their staff having had to act as both regulators and promoters. They tried to insist that absolutely not a minute’s extra time be spent on a report than was being charged for. This seemed quite alien to my way of working. I thought it much more important to produce a good quality piece of work, irrespectively of whether it took a few extra hours or not. They also circulated instructions that the main focus of commercial sections should be on reactive work rather than taking initiatives. This seemed completely out of step with the Diplomatic Service approach where dynamism and initiative were valued. The only way a UK based commercial officer could be of any use to anybody was if he or she had made lots of contacts and could arrange for a British businessman to meet someone in the right industry so they could talk business. This could not be achieved sitting in an office, so I tried to spend as much time as possible out and about networking with local companies and trade organisations.

The Ambassador thought that his commercial section should look professional, so he passed on his copy of the Financial Times. I was interested to read a number of articles warning of a looming unsustainable debt crisis in Western economies. Anybody responsible for economic stability who read them should have begun to worry long before the bubble finally

burst in 2008. Another important strand of the economic work was trying to win allies for the UK's position in the Doha Trade Round negotiations, which dragged on and on, but at least gave me a reason to go and call on senior officials in the Peruvian economic ministry.

The biennial Arequipa mining industry fair was a big event in Peru and we organised a British stand to try to put British equipment on the local map, where it was almost completely absent. This was a rather futile endeavour. Peru specialised in huge scale open cast copper and gold mining operations, supported by enormous Komatsu mining machines. The UK manufactured highly specialised equipment for deep shaft coal mining, which was a totally different type of operation, so we had little opportunity to break into the Peruvian market with competitive equipment. Nevertheless, I thought we could at least oil the works by importing some cases of Free Miner beer from the Forest of Dean. This was finally cleared by customs and driven down to Arequipa, some eight hours drive from Lima on the office truck, where it was deposited for safe keeping with the locally engaged Honorary Consul. On the night of the reception I discovered to my horror that it had not occurred to the Consul that the beer was supposed to be delivered to the hotel and chilled in preparation for the reception. An hour before kick-off it was rescued, but of course it was warm and shaken and the staff had no idea how to serve a bottle conditioned real ale. Despite this disaster quite a decent quantity of warm cloudy beer was consumed and what was left over was used for official entertainment in Lima, treated with the respect it deserved. It was an object lesson in how losing sight of a single detail can spoil a carefully planned operation.

To keep up the momentum of British interest in the local mining industry it was decided that the embassy should organise a seminar to look at the various social and ecological issues, which were causing conflict between the big mining corporations and the local population and environmental pressure groups. I took a lead in organising funding and sponsorship and recruiting speakers. I was particularly fortunate in having called on a professor of development studies at Oxford, who had made a particular study of Peru and she agreed to be a key note speaker. This conference was organised for the autumn of 2005, but the embassy was inspected in the early summer and in the usual cost cutting exercise my post was downgraded. I could have stayed on and completed my tour, but I felt I had probably done all I could in Peru. The trade statistics, which had been showing a steady growth in British exports, were starting to falter.

The Horn of Africa 2004 – 2007

In the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, I was appointed the desk officer responsible for the Horn of Africa in Africa Dept (Equatorial), which clumsy title had evidently been dreamed up by some official with a hazy knowledge of geography to lump together everything which did not fit conveniently into either the northern or southern regions of the continent. They wanted me to start as quickly as possible, so I was able to freeze a number of weeks leave still owing to me and settle down to the routine of living in London again.

The Horn of Africa was a particularly unstable and dangerous region. Ethiopia and Eritrea had stopped fighting each other but were still being kept apart by a large UN peace keeping force, as they disputed possession of a particularly insignificant little town called Badme. The exact frontier between the old Italian colony of Eritrea and Ethiopia had been insufficiently clearly defined to place Badme definitively one side of it or the other. After years of fighting, the case had been submitted to the International Court of Justice, which had ruled in Eritrea's favour. This had not prevented the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry proclaiming triumphantly that they had won the case and having done so they were unable to admit otherwise. This was particularly galling for Eritrea as it had accepted a ruling against it in the case of some islands in the Red Sea, which were awarded to Yemen. So the stand-off continued with the constant possibility of another bloody conflict breaking out between two of the world's poorest countries, which had already squandered huge quantities of blood and treasure over the Badme question.

Somaliland had broken away from Somalia and had an incontrovertible claim to recognition as a sovereign state, having suffered appalling brutality at the hands of the Somali regime, but African countries had an unshakeable horror of break-away states as most of them contained regions which might take encouragement from Somaliland's success, so the policy of the African Union was not to break ranks over border changes, though they were ultimately forced to do so in the case of South Sudan.

Meanwhile in Somalia itself there remained a power vacuum, partially filled by a group of Mogadishu based war lords and partly by an international creation, The Transitional Federal Government. This had been created by a conference in Nairobi, sponsored by the European Union and was intended to reconcile the warring factions and bring some sort of stable

governance to Somalia. In the event, it was unable to gain enough support or military clout to move to Mogadishu and eventually settled in Baidoa, where it clung on consuming Western aid money, without ever showing much chance of gaining power. Its leader, President Youssef, was a Puntlander, the extreme north east corner of the Horn, which had also broken away and become effectively self-governing. He claimed to be the world's longest surviving liver transplant. He was a jolly fellow and once telephoned me out of the blue from Khartoum, where he was presumably trying to drum up support. I was flattered, as it is not every day a junior official gets a direct call from a president. The Ethiopian ambassador also tried to butter me up by inviting me to dinner, which to my astonishment turned out to be a one on one occasion, though what the ambassador thought he might learn was never made clear.

Meanwhile in Somalia the Islamist narrative was taking hold and eventually emerged in the form of an extremist group calling itself Al Shabab, the Young Ones. The Americans, who were fighting an increasingly violent Islamist backlash in Iraq at the time, decided to support the war lords, their former enemies from the time of "Black Hawk Down", the loss of a helicopter in Mogadishu in 1993. By giving oxygen to the war lords they effectively destroyed any remaining hopes for the European Union's efforts to build up the Transitional Federal Government. Eventually the situation deteriorated to the point where the Ethiopians invaded, the one thing that could be guaranteed to unite all Somalis in armed opposition and ensure that the Islamists would gain control. There was a small window of opportunity to have engaged with a relatively moderate Muslim leader Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. But the Europeans were still wedded to the Transitional Federal Government. At a meeting with his Somalia team the FCO Minister, Lord Triesman, said he sensed that there was a cooling on the part of officials towards the Transitional Federal Government, but as far as he was concerned it was the only horse to back. To my eternal shame I did not feel confident enough to disagree with my immediate superiors in front of the Minister and state my view that the Transitional Government would never make headway and that by casting Somalia into the mould of Iraq, the Americans would be sure to create the right conditions for extremism to flourish, which of course it did and Somalia remained a failed state for many years.

There was constant pressure from Somalilanders in Britain and former British soldiers who had served in the Somali Scouts on the FCO to change its policy on the recognition of

Somaliland, which had achieved a sort of democracy and remarkable stability since it had fought off the Southern Somalis in the days when their communist regime was backed by the Russians and Cubans. The latter had switched sides overnight when the Ethiopian monarchy was toppled by a Communist revolutionary council, known as the Derg, and Somalia had been disintegrating ever since. One individual in particular, who had been a Somali Scout, had access to Ministers. Tragically his son had been in the FCO and been killed in a helicopter crash in Bosnia. But despite their efforts to enlist the support of MPs, Ministers remained immovable on the question and despite my strong sympathy for their cause, I had to proclaim the official line, that it was primarily for the African Union to lead on this issue and for former colonial powers to wade in would be likely to do more harm than good.

One formidable Somalilander, whom it was a privilege for me to meet, was Edna Adan, a midwife, who had achieved an incredible amount by establishing a modern maternity hospital in Hargeisa and working tirelessly to combat female genital mutilation, one of the ancient horrors that still persists in that part of Africa.

Another factor in the British Government's inertia over Somaliland was the admiration the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, had for the Ethiopian President, Meles, whom the latter regarded as a forward looking example of a new and more progressive political elite developing on the African continent. Even the blatant rigging of an election and the continued stand-off over Badme and persecution of Ethiopia's largest minority, the Oromo, was not enough to shake Blair's faith, and he invited Meles to be the star guest at his flagship Development Conference, held in Edinburgh. So ingrained had this attitude become that the Department for International Development fought desperately to keep the full extent of the election rigging out of official Cabinet Office analyses lest it affect the large amounts of direct budgetary aid they were giving to Ethiopia. Naturally this money was strictly earmarked for development purposes, but the savings to the Ethiopian treasury were doubtless useful for military spending too.

One advantage of the job was that it involved a familiarisation visit to the region. I was able to visit Nairobi, Addis Ababa, where the embassy compound was experiencing a serious problem with marauding leopards, and Hargeisa, where I met the President and saw something of the progress that had been made in one of the most desperately poor regions of Africa. In Addis I met an old friend, a German diplomat who had worked on secondment in

NATO section and was now the German Deputy Head of Mission. We spent a pleasant day walking in the countryside together and I was struck by how less developed Ethiopian agriculture appeared to be compared with the intense terraced cultivation I had seen in Yemen. The one visit which failed to come off was to Asmara, which I always regretted as understanding Eritrea was one of the keys to unlocking the political stalemate in the region.

There then arrived an opportunity which was to change our lives. Our friend Noel Marshall, who had been Ambassador to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg when we were in Brussels, was looking for crew to help him sail his yacht Sadko to Antarctica. Catherine decided nothing would stop her going. I realised that with the frozen leave I still had to take I could spend a couple of months away from work without asking for unpaid leave and so I opted to leave AD(E) at the end of 2006 and find another job on my return in 2007. Immediately after Christmas 2006 we said a fond farewell to our children, who stayed with their grandparents, and set out to join the boat in Ushuaia. We had a very successful cruise across the Drake Passage and down the Antarctic Peninsula as far as Detaille Island, well south of the Antarctic Circle. On the return journey we were able to visit many of the islands of the South Shetland group, finishing at Elephant Island, where Shackleton's men had been stranded. This had a special resonance for me, as my mother, as a very small girl, had met Shackleton and Tom Crean on board ship in 1916 when they were trying to find a ship to rescue their companions and my grandfather was returning from Chile to join the colours.

UN Department and Kosovo 2007-2010

I went first to a temporary post in United Nations Department. It was a strange, less happy, working atmosphere than Africa Dept had been. I had the distinct feeling that colleagues were watching one all the time, looking for something to complain about. Diversity may have improved the FCO's intellectual capacity, but the old esprit de corps which had allowed for friendly banter between colleagues, when nobody took anything anybody said too seriously, seemed to have given way to a new conformity, where criticism of the establishment or scepticism about the latest "pronunciamiento" were likely to be taken down in evidence and used against the unwary.

The UN was battling with its eternal demons, how to give effect to the doctrine of "Responsibility to Protect", R2P in the jargon, without possessing the military clout to

intervene in civil wars, or the political will to shoulder the responsibility for Article Seven action (the article of the UN Charter that empowers it to take military action when it determines there is a threat to international peace and security). Big power politics amongst the permanent five members hamstrung the Security Council and smaller power rivalries blocked any progress towards reforming it to include emerging economic actors like Brazil, India and South Africa. I suggested that it should adopt a variable geometry, where the permanent five and rotating ten members could invite up to six others to join Security Council discussions on any specific issue that was particularly relevant or appropriate for them. Nobody thought that this was even worth considering.

Kosovo section

After a few months a job came up in Western Balkans Group as the politico / military desk officer for Kosovo. I bid and with my previous NATO experience was lucky to get it. In the aftermath of the bloody break up of former Yugoslavia, Kosovo had been the scene of bitter fighting and ethnic cleansing between the majority Albanian Moslem population and the Serbian militias, backed by Belgrade, which had led to a NATO intervention in 1998, bombing Serbia and eventually invading Kosovo to allow the millions who had fled to neighbouring countries to return. This was of course done without UN Security Council endorsement, because Russia, which traditionally supported Serbia, would veto any resolution. After the fighting was over Kosovo was placed under UN administration, where it had remained more or less unhappily up to 2007, but after riots and further inter-ethnic violence it had become clear that this situation could not last indefinitely. There were still large numbers of NATO troops stationed in Kosovo and, with the deteriorating war in Afghanistan, there was increasing pressure, particularly from the cash strapped British Ministry of Defence, to find a more durable solution for Kosovo and release resources for use elsewhere. In practice the British provided one of the smallest forces in Kosovo, less than one hundred troops, while the other major NATO powers all provided around one thousand. By the time I arrived in the department the decision had been taken by the quintet of powers, USA, France, Germany, Italy and Britain, that Kosovo should become an independent state. This was anathema to Serbia, which regarded the territory as the cradle of its nationhood and site of many of its ancient Orthodox monasteries and Russia also remained bitterly opposed.

One of the major issues was what to do about the Kosovo Protection Corps, which had been established to bring the former guerrilla fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army under some

sort of control and give them a new, primarily civil defence, role. They were to become the embryo of a new Kosovo Defence Force, a small army that was intended to be completely non-threatening to Kosovo's neighbours, but sufficient to deter any aggression from non-state actors. Meanwhile the European Union was to take over much of the work that had been done by the UN, setting up a modern legal system and helping to administer the territory while its fledgling government developed. One of the effects of this was that policy work had to be cleared with the UK Representations to the EU in Brussels, NATO, the UN in New York as well as the embassy in Pristina and the relevant FCO departments, all of which took time and encouraged civil servants to justify their existence by fiddling with every piece of work and delaying everything up to its deadline.

As the politico / military lead, most of my work involved liaison with the Ministry of Defence, which was determined to reduce its presence in Kosovo to almost nothing to save men and resources. This was logical, as there did not seem to be any good reason why the UK should be permanently involved in Kosovo, but it had a major drawback from the diplomatic perspective because the less we contributed the less influence we had in discussions between the countries which were cooperating to determine the future architecture of Kosovo's institutions. It was a typical example of the UK wanting to play a role in world affairs which it no longer had the economic or military strength to sustain. In the end the FCO was not prepared to argue with the MOD and they got their way, but what really surprised me was that they were not even prepared to hand over all of the small amount of money they had promised to NATO to help establish the Kosovo Defence Force, so great was the stress on their over spent budgets.

When my time in Western Balkans group was coming to an end I hoped for a final posting, but it was not to be. Many of the jobs for which I was well qualified were being downgraded in the usual cost cutting exercises. The FCO was also downsizing in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the beginning of austerity budgeting and offering a generous early retirement package to anyone in certain grades prepared to leave. I did not wish to retire and hung on doing various temporary jobs and serving as a stabilisation adviser for several military exercises, which I found most enjoyable. I flew by Hercules to RAF Kinloss, spent a couple of weeks helping to prepare a conference on cyber security at the Wilton Park Conference centre and a week at the Defence College on an exercise the military called Habile Cormorant, and I called its corollary, Clumsy Shag. But these temporary

deployments could not make up for the lack of a substantive appointment. I read an article in the FT, which said people thought the typical diplomat had been to boarding school, drank gin and tonic, wore a white suit and Panama hat and got by on a smattering of Arabic. In short, the Carlton Brown image, which the FCO was desperate to lose. I ticked all those boxes. I realised I would do well to accept voluntary early retirement, rather than soldier on in some London based job I disliked. At the end of October 2010 I left the FCO for the last time after an association which went back to my birth, in fact earlier, as there had been a Lamport in the Foreign Office since 1944.