

# BRIXMIS IN THE 1980s: THE COLD WAR'S "GREAT GAME"

## **BRIXMIS**



MEMORIES OF LIAISING WITH THE SOVIET ARMY IN EAST GERMANY

by

Major General Peter Williams CMG OBE

---

**BRIXMIS IN THE 1980s: THE COLD WAR'S "GREAT GAME" -  
MEMORIES OF LIAISING WITH THE SOVIET ARMY IN EAST GERMANY**

**Peter Williams**

**Table of Contents**

Foreword .....	2
The Road to BRIXMIS.....	5
The Origins, Establishment and Role of the Mission .....	6
Formal Liaison Tasks .....	10
Social Liaison .....	12
Duties at Spandau Prison and Other Liaison Duties.....	13
Cultural Tours in the DDR .....	17
Town Tours .....	19
The Chipmunk Connection.....	22
Operational Touring .....	24
Touring Equipment.....	25
Operational Planning Considerations .....	31
Touring Routine.....	37
Touring Activity .....	42
Touring Dramas.....	55
Detentions.....	59
A User-Friendly Environment.....	65
Concluding Remarks .....	70
Postscript .....	73

## Foreword

This monograph on BRIXMIS (the British Commanders'-in-Chief Mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany) in the 1980s was originally written during a dull, but mercifully short, tour of duty in the Ministry of Defence in 1995. My aim was to set down my impressions of life in the Mission before the Cold War became little more than a historical curiosity. It is hard to remember, for instance, that the 1980s was an era before GPS (global positioning system) navigation, digital photography and mobile telephones.

As a result those of us in BRIXMIS were more often than not unsure of where we were exactly in East Germany and we were constantly out of touch with our headquarters; the positive aspect of this lack of precise information and of command guidance was that it encouraged the use of their initiative by the Mission patrol members, known as 'tour crews'.

In part, I decided to create this document to meet a request from Regimental Headquarters Coldstream Guards, my parent regiment, to write about operational experiences that Coldstreamers had had away from life in a battalion in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This accounts for the occasional emphasis on regimental issues in the text. But putting this memoir together also offered me a chance to draw a line under what had been the most exciting and professionally challenging part of my military career in the 1980s.

Subsequently, in the late 1990s, I wrote a short postscript after the publication of two books on BRIXMIS and in late 2004 I also amended the text to incorporate information from friends and former colleagues and from the growing number of French and American websites about the Allied Military Liaison Missions (AMLMS).

Finally, in May 2002 I was fortunate enough to return to the world of Russian affairs when I took up the post as the first Head of the new NATO Military Liaison Mission (MLM) in Moscow, leading a small team that includes Polish, German, Hungarian, American and even Russian staff officers. However, despite the similarity of its title to those of the Second World War Military Missions<sup>1</sup> and to the Cold War AMLMS

---

<sup>1</sup> During WW2 there had been an exchange of Military Missions (MMs) between the principal Allies. As General Shtemenko noted in his history of the Soviet Supreme High Command ('Stavka') 'The Last Six Months' (Kimber 1978), before 1944 there had been a number of MMs accredited to the Stavka. Major General John R. Deane headed the

in East Germany, the NATO MLM's mission could not be more different from those predecessors; it is, for instance, explicitly and emphatically neither allowed nor equipped to collect information for NATO's intelligence structures<sup>2</sup>.

I remain eternally grateful to everyone with whom I had the privilege of serving in BRIXMIS, including all of our long-suffering wives and families. It was, indeed, a 'Great Game'<sup>3</sup> and with hindsight we can now confirm that we emerged from it, fortunately, on what was, on balance, the winning side.

But today BRIXMIS and the Cold War have passed well and truly into history. The task now of the new NATO MLM was and remains to play a small part in the grand effort to encourage the countries of the

---

US MM (and wrote his fascinating memoirs 'Strange Alliance' in 1946; published in 2005 in Russian as 'Странный Союз'); he was assisted by a staff that rose to 150 before it was disbanded on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1945 and was supported by BG Christ (Military Attaché), RADM Maples (Naval Attaché), MG Spalding (Lease-Lend) and MG Hill (Air Attaché). In March 1944 General Montague Burrows took over from General Martels as Head of the British MM, assisted by Admiral Archer, who took over as Head in October 1944 when Burrows fell out with the Soviet bureaucracy. General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny headed up the Free French MM. Dean, Archer and de Lattre attended the (second) Capitulation ceremony at Berlin-Karlshorst on 9<sup>th</sup> May. Deane summed up his own frustrations: 'the whole history of cooperation in the conduct of US and Soviet air operations is simultaneously the history of an American initiative and of the Russian opposition to it'. There were also MMs in Moscow from Norway (Colonel Arne Dahl), from Czechoslovakia (BG Heliodor Pika) and from the Yugoslav National Liberation Committee (Lt Gen Volomir Terzić). He notes that the MMs were particularly keen to visit the active fronts. For its part the Stavka sent MMs to the Allied side. The first to be set up was the Soviet MM to Britain on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1941, which was initially led by Lt Gen Golikov and then by the 35-year old Rear Admiral Kharlamov 'who was distinguished by his intelligence and high principles, and as a specialist in military planning'. Kharlamov landed in Normandy from HMS Mauritius and was then replaced for the remainder of the war by General Vasilyev, who had been a liaison officer to the Allied forces in Italy. The Soviet MM to Tito's forces was led by General Koneyev, while Maj Gen Kislenko was in charge of the MM at the Allied HQ in the Mediterranean theatre. Maj Gen Ivan Susloparov led the Soviet MM to the Free French and to SHAEF, Eisenhower's HQ. Before the war he had been the Soviet military attaché in Paris (1939-40), before becoming commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army's artillery at the front. In 1944 he returned to France as the head of the Soviet MM at SHAEF in Rheims. His finest hour came on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945 when he found himself without instructions from the Stavka, but faced with an ultimatum to sign the German 'Act of Military Surrender' on behalf of the Stavka. Faced by this awesome decision, according to Shtemenko, Susloparov resolved the problem by signing the armistice document, but annotating it to the effect that in doing so he could not rule out the signing of a subsequent, more complete document, if any Allied government should demand it. Stalin appears to have forgiven him this act of initiative, surely as great a political risk as any liaison officer has ever taken, and Susloparov survived until 1974. In the event the signing of the act of surrender at Rheims at 0241 hours on 7<sup>th</sup> May by General Jodl (along with Generals Bedell Smith for SHAEF and Susloparov for the Stavka) was soon over-shadowed by the ceremony at Karlshorst just after midnight on 9<sup>th</sup> May, when a virtually identical document was signed by Field Marshal Keitel (along with Marshal Zhukov for the Stavka and Air Chief Marshal Tedder for SHAEF, and in the presence of a host of senior officers, including Susloparov).

<sup>2</sup> I get a particular thrill from knowing that I am probably only the officer who will ever have had the privilege to wear four flags as part of my service dress uniform: I wore the British and Soviet flags as part of the BRIXMIS breast pocket emblem and from May 2002 to June 2005 I wore the NATO and Russian flags in the emblem of the NATO MLM in Moscow.

<sup>3</sup> The 'Great Game' was the name given to the era of international rivalry in central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when the British, Russians and others were vying for influence largely through the activities of military-political reconnaissance officers.

former Warsaw Pact, including of course the Russian Federation, to enter as closely as they may wish into the security aspects of the Euro-Atlantic community in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The NATO MLM presents all those involved with it with great challenges, but it is no substitute for the sheer excitement of our old 'Great Game', which was played out for more than four decades on the roads and training areas of the German Democratic Republic.

As the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the agreement that set up BRIXMIS approaches, it therefore seemed to me to be the right time once again to revise my monograph on the Mission in order to make it more comprehensible to readers who might be less familiar with the situation in the last decade of the Cold War and with the British military acronyms and other jargon used in the original text.

I have also added three new annexes to this monograph. The first is the text of the Robertson-Malinin Agreement (RMA), in Russian and in English, as carried by four crews in the 1980s. The second gives some details about Robertson and Malinin, both of whom were very remarkable men, quite apart from being the signatories of the RMA. And the third and final annex brings together some maps, photographs and other documents that should help to bring the text to life.

I am hugely grateful to the staff of the NATO MLM for helping me with this updated version of my monograph. In particular, I must thank my outstanding Russian Liaison Officer, Colonel Zarina Vashurina, and Warrant Officer Pawel Bacler for their technical support and, most especially, my wife, Anne, for putting up with the endless saga of what must remain for me an ongoing project.

Finally, of course, I both can and must accept full responsibility for the accuracy and interpretation of the facts and anecdotes mentioned in the text. Please pass any corrections or questions to me by e-mail on [fraddsmeadow@hotmail.com](mailto:fraddsmeadow@hotmail.com).

## **The Road to BRIXMIS**

What was to be one of the most enjoyable and professionally exciting chapters of my military career began one chilly day in 1974. As the Intelligence Officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Coldstream Guards, an infantry battalion based in Spandau in West Berlin, I was travelling as the duty observer on the daily round trip of the British Military Train from Berlin to Braunschweig (Brunswick) in West Germany. As the train slowed down somewhere in East Germany, I suddenly spotted a matt green Opel Admiral saloon car set back from the track. Next to it stood a British soldier waving cheerfully at my fellow passengers and I just had time to make out the distinctive yellow vehicle registration plate that identified it as a BRIXMIS car.

Thoroughly intrigued by this sighting, it was at that very moment that I promised myself that, whatever it took, I would return one day to Berlin to serve, like that unknown soldier, in the British Commanders'-in-Chief Mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany, known to everyone as BRIXMIS or 'the Mission'. And, as luck would have it, I was to do so not once, but twice, in the periods 1981-83, as a Tour Officer captain, and then 1987-89, as the Ground Operations Officer and a major<sup>4</sup>.

Getting into the Mission as a young officer required a number of hurdles to be crossed. First, I had to persuade my regiment, in the person of my old commanding officer, Colonel Peter Tower, that I was not going to 'jump ship' and join the Intelligence Corps or, worse still, that I would leave the Army after enjoying my time in BRIXMIS. Fortunately, for me these were not difficult undertakings to give because I could not imagine at that time not wanting to return to command Guardsmen once again.

The greatest of the hurdles was the 18-month Russian Interpreter course<sup>5</sup>, immediately followed by a 6-week Colloquial German course, both of which took place at the Army School of Languages in Beaconsfield; the latter left me with little more than a gloss of German, but it well and truly confused my hard won Russian!

---

<sup>4</sup> I was advised at the Staff College not to try for a second tour in BRIXMIS as this would 'overly narrow your employment profile' and would constitute a 'career foul'. I decided to follow my heart and persist with my ambition to return to the Mission and I am glad to be able to report in hindsight that this Staff College advice proved to be little better than rubbish.

<sup>5</sup> At that time Beaconsfield courses also included British and Japanese diplomats, who only did one year of Russian language training on the basis that they were much brighter than the military; this was an entirely correct assumption too! The Japanese diplomats assured us that learning Russian through the medium of English was not too tricky because 'for us Japanese the two languages seem to be so similar'; for us the similarity was all too often hard to spot!

---

The final hurdle was much more fun: a 3-week course at the Intelligence Centre in Ashford, where everyone headed for BRIXMIS was initiated into the mysteries of Warsaw Pact equipment (always known as 'kit') recognition, photography and reconnaissance ('touring') tradecraft<sup>6</sup>. The so-called Special Duties course ended with a 3-day 'tour' exercise on and around Salisbury Plain in southern England, trying to avoid capture by the 'enemy forces' while reconnoitring various military installations and other 'targets'.

Finally, after almost two years of training to be a 'tourer', as the liaison officers and NCOs were always called, I arrived back in Berlin at long last in July 1981, bursting with enthusiasm to begin my two-year posting to the Mission. I wanted nothing more than to get out on the road in the 'DDR', the local abbreviation for the German Democratic Republic, as East Germany (or the former Soviet Zone) insisted on being called.

As an unmarried officer I was given a room in the British Sector Headquarters Mess in the Olympic Stadium barracks complex, just a short walk from the BRIXMIS offices on the top floor of the former German Reich's sports administration building<sup>7</sup>. By 1981 it had become the 'London Block' and it was also the home of the Foreign Office's representation, the British Military Government (BMG), of Headquarters Berlin (British Sector) and of the Anglo-French-US Allied Staff Berlin.

## **The Origins, Establishment and Role of the Mission**

BRIXMIS had been set up on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1946 under an agreement between the chiefs of staff of the British and Soviet forces in Germany, known as the Robertson-Malinin Agreement<sup>8</sup>. This called for the

---

<sup>6</sup> The top student in the field of equipment recognition was awarded the 'Eagle Eyes' trophy.

<sup>7</sup> When Anne and I got married in February 1982 we moved into a married quarter at Shawweg 6, about one kilometre from the BRIXMIS offices in Charlottenburg and later, in the period 1987-89, we lived at Scottweg 41, on the other side of the arterial Heerstrasse. The married quarters in Berlin were maintained, at German expense, to a standard that far exceeded what was normal in West Germany or back in Britain.

<sup>8</sup> The origins of the MLMs dated back to the 14<sup>th</sup> November 1944 'Agreement relating to the Control Mechanisms in Germany'. Article 2 of this agreement had decided upon the exchange of MLMs. The very first stage of the process occurred as a result of the meeting in Moscow in October 1943 of the Soviet, US and British Foreign Ministers at which they had agreed to set up the European Advisory Commission; France was invited to join in at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. The original abbreviated title was BRIXMISS (later shortened still further to BRIXMIS). The mission formed up in Berlin on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1946 under Maj Gen (later Lt Gen Sir Geoffrey) Evans, but despite being ready on 16<sup>th</sup> September, the date when the Robertson-Malinin Agreement was actually signed, its Soviet passes were not issued until 28<sup>th</sup> September. The first Main HQ was at Geschwester Schollstrasse 51, near the Wildpark railway station in Potsdam, and the Rear HQ was in the Control Commission Germany HQ in Fehrbellinerplatz in Wilmersdorf (now the Bezirksamt Wilmersdorf). In 1957, anti-British and anti-US 'spontaneous' rioting in Potsdam, allegedly about Anglo-

---

reciprocal exchange of liaison missions in order to foster good working relations between the military authorities in their respective zones of occupation; by the 1980s the reciprocal Soviet mission in the former British Occupation Zone, known as 'SOXMIS', was based at Bünde.

Similar deals had then been struck in 1947 by the Soviet authorities with their French and US counterparts (the Noiret-Malinin and Huebner-Malinin Agreements), installing Soviet MLMs (SMLMs) in their respective Occupation Zones at Baden-Baden and Frankfurt-am-Main, while the French (FMLM) and American (USMLM) AMLMs were set up on a reciprocal basis.

For reasons lost in the mists of time, all three agreements with the Soviets differed significantly and the British were allowed to have almost as many liaison operators (just over 30) in the Soviet Zone as were the other two Allies combined.

However anachronistic some of the clauses were to become during the next four and more decades, the terms of the original agreements remained unamended until 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1990, when all the MLMs, both in East and in West Germany, were deactivated on the eve of Germany's reunification.

The Mission was a small organisation, never exceeding eighty or so officers and other ranks, of whom some 60% were Army and 40% were Royal Air Force (RAF)<sup>9</sup>. During the earlier years there had been a Canadian Army officer on the strength and in the last years of its existence a splash of maritime style was added by the inclusion of a lone, bearded Royal Navy tourer, Warrant Officer Dickie Dawson.

---

American intervention in Jordan and Lebanon, caused considerable damage to the AMLM compounds and so BRIXMIS moved to Seestrasse 32, by the Heiligensee and its classified offices and the families were repatriated to West Berlin. The other AMLMs reacted in a similar manner. Around the same time the Rear HQ moved to the British Sector HQ in the Olympic Stadium complex in Charlottenburg. The Noiret-Malinin Agreement launched FMLM on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1947; USMLM was inaugurated by the signing of the Huebner-Malinin Agreement on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1947. There were also 15 other Military Missions (MMs) in Berlin, representing the victorious belligerent states under the terms of the Occupation regime (CA, BE, PL, Brazil, LU, CZ, YU, DA, Chinese, NO, Australian, Indian, GR, South African and NL); the lack of an NZ MM is curious; BG, HU, IT and RO had been at war with the Allies and, despite jumping ship to the Allied cause, did not have 'victorious belligerent' status. In West Berlin, for example, by the 1980s the Belgian and Greek MMs had evolved into quasi-consular offices, while the Czechoslovak and Polish MMs were based in East Berlin and, enjoying free access to West Berlin, were assumed to be under KGB (or GRU) control and to be up to no good, presumably running agents and doing some 'self-help' duty-free smuggling.

<sup>9</sup> By 1988 BRIXMIS had three female Army (WRAC) NCOs on its strength, but none was trained to act as a Tourer. It may seem strange in a more modern context, but it was still considered to be 'inappropriate' for a female soldier (or officer) to spend several days in a car with two men. However, despite this BRIXMIS taboo, by 1988 female operators had already been taking part in 'special duties' with male soldiers in Northern Ireland for many years.

Our boss, known as the 'Chief BRIXMIS', was an Army brigadier, assisted by the 'Deputy', who by the 1980s was always an RAF group captain; this represented an equitable balance between the armed services providing the manpower.

Below this command element the members of the Mission were a mixed bunch of hardened small team operators (many with long years of experience on covert operations in Ulster and with the Special Air Service), intelligence and technical experts and a sprinkling of keen young tour officers from the combat arms (like me), who were all too often in need of a steadying hand from the older and wiser operators, but who provided most of the Russian and German language skills.

During the 1980s BRIXMIS mirrored one aspect of Soviet military expansionism by growing to fill all the space available on the top floor of London Block. We began by persuading the British Commandant (the General Officer Commanding), General David Mostyn, to let us have the large suite of rooms that was equipped and reserved for him as a 'war flat'. This was not a difficult argument to win for two reasons: first, because he was a generous man by nature, but, secondly, because allegedly he had no idea that he even had such a facility available to him. And yet, despite the collective amnesia about the apartment, a cleaner had been employed to maintain the rooms in beautiful order just in case, after many long years, the Commandant might suddenly wish to sleep in his headquarters.

Beyond the Commandant's flat lay still more office space, where many decades of old Berlin newspapers had been stored by the BMG; these rooms were also emptied and transferred to BRIXMIS in the late 1980s. The resulting excellent accommodation, along with a large garage-cum-workshop area just behind London Block, meant that we were all free to concentrate on the job, rather than on complaining about our administrative base.

As far as the public was concerned the sole task of the Mission was that of helping to keep the peace by conducting liaison between the two British Commanders-in-Chief (of the British Army of the Rhine and of Royal Air Force Germany) in Rheindahlen and their counterpart, the Commander-in-Chief of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG), whose headquarters was in the former wartime German High Command complex in Zossen-Wünsdorf, south of Berlin<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> It was a sign of the dramatically changed times that by the mid-1990s all three of these CinC posts had ceased to exist.

For this liaison role the Soviets provided BRIXMIS with 31 passes, accrediting 11 officers and 20 technicians to HQ GSFG and so permitting those individuals, along with their families, to be within the Soviet Occupation Zone. These passes were always in great demand and so, whenever a full-time tourer went on leave or on a training course, another Mission member would automatically be given the vacant slot and so would become 'on pass' on a part-time basis.

Curiously, although later in 1949 the occupation zones became the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, the three Soviet missions, known as SOXMIS in the British and SMLMs in the US and French zones, and the three Allied missions, the AMLMs, in the Soviet Zone never acknowledged the existence or authority of these new states. This was to maintain the advantages of the status quo laid down when the AMLMs were established in the late 1940s.

For example, BRIXMIS and other AMLM passes were only handed over to authorised Soviet officers and were never handed to East German officials. Inevitably, this state of affairs irritated both the German states, even if there was little that they could do about it. Consequently the members of the AMLMs answered solely to the Soviets in East Germany and, in a reciprocal manner, the Soviet missions' personnel would only communicate with their respective Allied hosts in West Germany.

Another peculiarity was that, in a strangely Russian form of 'class consciousness', the AMLM officers' accreditation passes were signed by the GSFG Chief of Staff, a 3-star general, while those for the AMLM other ranks, our wives and our vehicles only needed the signature of the Chief of the Soviet External Relations Branch (SERB).

SERB was the small outstation of the Zossen-Wünsdorf GSFG main staff that controlled the issue of passes and the maintenance of the AMLMs' villas in Potsdam. It also acted as the clearing house and point of contact for all official business between its own Chief, a Soviet colonel, and his counterparts in the AMLMs (Chiefs BRIXMIS, FMLM and USMLM), as well as with the East German authorities.

The Chief of SERB had greater power than his rank might suggest and the quality of life in the missions rested to a large extent in his hands. When he was ordered to be uncooperative, as was the case more often than not in the early 1980s (mostly in retaliation for Western official protests over the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), he could restrict access to Potsdam and East Germany for non-pass holding Mission members and other visitors. But when he was under instructions to be helpful, as was routinely the

case in the late 1980s, then it appeared that almost no request was too much trouble for him and his SERB staff to meet.

### **Formal Liaison Tasks**

Apart from passing infrequent formal messages between our own Joint Headquarters (HQ BAOR and HQ RAF(G)) in Rheindahlen and HQ GSFG, BRIXMIS also carried out an active programme of true liaison tasks.

Led by our own Chief, we hosted the officers of SERB and other Soviet guests from Zossen-Wünsdorf at Queen's Birthday parades in the Olympic Stadium complex in West Berlin and at receptions in the BRIXMIS Mission House, our very pleasant Soviet-owned lakeside villa by the Heiligensee (Seestrasse 34) in Potsdam.

We also played a part in ensuring that the ceremonies at the Tiergarten Soviet War Memorial in the British Sector of Berlin passed off smoothly by liaising closely with the British Sector's Royal Military Police (RMP) provost-marshal.

In the DDR BRIXMIS annually sponsored a Remembrance Day (11<sup>th</sup> November) religious service at the Stahnsdorf War Graves cemetery, just south of Berlin<sup>11</sup>. This was always well attended by the Commonwealth members of the East Berlin diplomatic corps, not least because of the excellent tea laid on afterwards by the Mission House warrant officer and his local staff.

Also on a formal liaison level, the Mission made regular wreath-laying visits to the British memorials at the former concentration camps at Buchenwald (outside Weimar), Sachsenhausen (at Oranienburg, just north of Berlin) and Ravensbrück (across the lake from Fürstenburg in the northern DDR).

---

<sup>11</sup> Stahnsdorf had been the main cemetery for central Berlin and was chosen as the site for the Commonwealth and Italian war cemeteries at the end of the First World War. It was, however, cut off from West Berlin when the Wall went up in August 1961.

The local Soviet Komendant (equivalent to a British garrison provost-marshal) was always invited to attend and we made a point of laying flowers on the memorials to the Soviet victims too, before taking our Russian hosts out to lunch. The Soviets were always enthusiastic about these trips because they provided both of us with a chance to display our wartime solidarity and to remind the Germans of their sordid past, all of which, understandably enough, particularly appealed to the Russian military mentality. What none of us ever commented upon, however, was the fact that these camps had continued to be used by the Soviet and East German communist authorities for some years after the end of the war.

On one occasion in the early 1980s I was also lucky enough to help to host a SERB visit to West Berlin, which we arranged to allow a Soviet officer to see where his father had been held, after having been singled out by the Nazi authorities as a leading resister in his prisoner of war camp.

The sad odyssey took us first into the still very active Alt Moabit high security gaol, then on to the ruins of the Lehrterstrasse SS interrogation centre and finally to Plötzensee prison, where his father had been guillotined. We were joined at that last awful place by a German communist survivor, a former inmate, who was able to recall the arrival and execution of that particular group of Soviet resisters.

On that saddest of days it can have been of no real consolation to our guest, Lieutenant Colonel Albert Zalilov, to know that his father, the renowned poet, Musa Zhalil, had been made a posthumous Hero of the Soviet Union, but we all hoped and prayed that having been able to trace his father's last steps might have given him some measure of understanding and peace.

Not all our liaison duties were formal events and we used the facilities in Potsdam to entertain our Soviet counterparts and their wives, notably for our annual BRIXMIS film night, which was held in the Mission House. Although this was always a convivial evening, there was invariably a slight clash of cultures where the choice of the film was concerned; this was because our guests would normally have preferred to watch old British comedies, in particular Norman Wisdom feature films, and wanted their films to be chosen from within a relatively narrow spectrum from slapstick comedy to the heroic.

On the other hand, the BRIXMIS young officers, who fancied themselves to be a touch more sophisticated, lobbied hard to get new releases like 'Tarzan, the Legend of Greystoke' and 'Chariots of Fire'. However, after getting our own way, we were disappointed to find that the SERB opinion was that the

---

former contained too much violence and sex for a Russian audience's taste and that the latter portrayed an incomprehensible English view of sport as an arena for class conflict.

As the duty interpreter I was, however, flattered in the early 1980s when our Chief offered to show SERB the latest James Bond film at the forthcoming film night. Colonel Rubanov, his counterpart, replied with a smile: 'Thank you, brigadier, but no. We have enough of your own James Bond: Captain Williams!'

## **Social Liaison**

Our other main venue for informal social contact with SERB officers was the Soviet Officers Club in the centre of Potsdam, where we held small, but boozy, parties for departing BRIXMIS officers. We used to invite equal numbers of Soviets and would spend a splendid evening sharing anecdotes and linguistic howlers and marvelling at the mastery of English literature and idiom enjoyed by officers like Yuri Pliev<sup>12</sup>, a stalwart multilingual member of SERB, and Dmitri Trenin<sup>13</sup> and the other SERB interpreters. The only house rule on these convivial occasions was that, in return for the Soviets supplying the venue, we would be responsible for the bill, which we paid painlessly enough with our own subsidised East German Marks<sup>14</sup>.

The other enjoyable area of social liaison was the annual programme of events involving the other Allied missions. After the British had hosted their counterparts at the Queen's Birthday celebrations in West

---

<sup>12</sup> Yuri Pliev served in SERB both in the early 1980s as a Major and then returned as a Colonel in the late 1980s. He said that he came from Ordzhonikidze (now Vladikavkaz) in the North Caucasus. He spoke wonderful English, as well as Ossetian, Georgian, Russian and Italian, and could quote the Book of Common Prayer, the King James Bible and the works of George Bernard Shaw at length. He claimed that his father had been killed in the war, but that he was the nephew of Army General Issa Aleksandrovich Pliev (1903-79). General Pliev was twice a Hero of the Soviet Union and, according to Yuri, was the head of the Soviet contingent in Cuba during the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962. He appears to have lived with his wife, Ludmilla, in the KGB 'village' near the Cecilienhof in Potsdam, although he had responsibilities in Zossen too. It was always assumed that he was the KGB man in SERB and that everyone else was GRU. Around 2005 he was allegedly living in Cyprus as a businessman.

<sup>13</sup> Dmitri Trenin went on to become a well respected expert on international security issues and by 2002 was the Deputy Director of the Carnegie Centre in Moscow. His successor in the late 1980s as senior SERB interpreter was Major Sergey Savchenko; he rescued me in January 2003 when he arrived at the very last moment as a freelance civilian interpreter to translate for me at a State Duma (Parliamentary) seminar in Moscow.

<sup>14</sup> Officially the East Mark was worth one Deutschmark, but in reality the exchange rate fluctuated and at times the ratio was 7:1, which made shopping in the DDR very painless. I recall on one occasion buying 56 beers in a pub and paying 19 East Marks, when that equalled just over £1.

Berlin and Potsdam, the Americans always laid on an excellent and typically informal 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic at their lakeside Mission House in Fahrland.

Then, ten days or so later, the French Mission would follow suit with a reception to mark Bastille Day at their villa, two doors down from our own Mission House in Seestrasse.

A second burst of partying occurred in the period around Christmas and the New Year with joint carols in the home of one of the AMLM chiefs in West Berlin and parties being given for and by SERB in Potsdam.

At one such SERB party in the late 1980s, I noticed that none of the Soviet conscripts seemed to be present and asked Yuri Pliev where the other ranks had gone. He explained that President Gorbachev had ordered that alcohol could no longer be consumed by officers in the presence of soldiers and so the other ranks had all been sent away for the evening. 'So', I asked, 'who is preparing all the food and drink downstairs?' 'Oh', he replied, 'it's being done by our wives. We've bussed them in from Zossen to do the hard work in order to ensure that we, the men, can have a good party!'

### **Duties at Spandau Prison and Other Liaison Duties**

In the early 1980s BRIXMIS was given the additional responsibility of providing a duty interpreter for Spandau Prison, where the leading Nazi war criminals had been incarcerated after their trials at Nuremberg, although by the early 1970s only Rudolf Hess was left, serving out his life sentence. This new task became ours in early 1982 following the departure of the British Foreign Office's own interpreter, a certain Mr. Sanders; he had been persuaded many years earlier to serve on at Spandau Prison well into his retirement, but he had finally got fed up with waiting for Hess to die.

Having taken my turn as the Spandau Prison guard platoon commander in the early 1970s<sup>15</sup>, I now found myself involved occasionally as the duty interpreter there. It was, of course, fascinating taking part in

---

<sup>15</sup> The Quadripartite Allies took it in turns to spend a month guarding the prison; the French and US months fell either side of the British months and so we never handed over or took over from the Soviets. The guard platoon's job was very

---

the meetings between the four Allied Governors (US, British, French and Soviet) and accompanying them and the four medical officers on their respective visits to the solitary 'Prisoner No 7' in his cell.

Hess was a cantankerous and naturally domineering individual, who complained about his swollen ankles and just about everything else too. Whereas the Western Allies tended to be sympathetic about his alleged ailments (and even kept one floor free in the British Military Hospital (BMH) in Charlottenburg, just in case he fell ill), the Soviets were much less concerned. Allegedly this was because at Nuremberg Stalin had grudgingly agreed to commute Hess' death sentence to life imprisonment and so the Soviets were determined to make sure that a life sentence should mean just that.

My sole claim to fame was helping out at one Governors' meeting<sup>16</sup> when the normally unflappable Soviet military interpreter, Valentina Anufrieva (née Jakovleva), found herself unable to understand what it was that the prisoner had requested. It transpired that she had never encountered the English term 'loo paper' and so I was able to rescue her with the Russian for it ('tualetnaya bumaga'), and at the same time to improve the quality of Hess' life too!

On one of my visits the crusty and comparatively aged Allied governors had decided amongst themselves that Hess must go immediately into the BMH to have his heart monitored or, failing that, that a British medical orderly should be brought in to observe the prisoner twenty-four hours a day.

They were startled, however, by their Soviet counterpart, the youthful Lieutenant Colonel Gennady Savin, when he declared: 'I don't care what the doctors say or indeed what Mr. Bogomolov of the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin may have said to you, gentlemen. Hess is a military prisoner and this is a military prison and any decision for action requires unanimity. And I'm telling you that there is no consensus and so he's not going to hospital and I am willing to take responsibility for my decision. So, let's move on to something else!' And, of course, Hess defied the medical prognosis and survived, just as Savin had said he would.

---

boring and all contact with Prisoner No 7 was prohibited. Indeed, Hess would routinely put in a formal complaint if any guard platoon soldier tried to make contact with him while he was taking his exercise walk in the prison garden.

<sup>16</sup> Curiously, despite the fact that the business of the prison was theoretically only to be conducted in the languages of the four Allies, in reality the Governors normally conducted their business in German, sprinkled with English and French. As we were not German interpreters this made our presence even less critical.

---

Spandau Prison was noted, as well, for the fine lunches that the duty Allied governor hosted, at the Berlin Senate's expense, after these all too often fruitless meetings and inspections. National cuisine and alcoholic beverages were 'de rigueur' and no one was expected to have any further business engagements or work to return to after these feasts.

Hess' death on 17th August 1987 heralded, albeit unnoticed at the time, the end of an era. Whether he killed himself or was helped to commit suicide remains somewhat of a mystery, but, whatever was the case, I have always felt that the bottled-up evil genie of the Nazi era was released by his death and a psychological blockage was unjammed<sup>17</sup>.

While BRIXMIS and SERB were helping the RMP's Special Investigation Branch to complete the forensic investigation into Hess' death, all of Spandau prison was demolished on the orders of the Allied and Soviet commandants and all the rubble was buried in a hole in the centre of the British military airfield in Berlin, RAF Gatow, in order to stop any potential relics falling into the hands of Nazi sympathisers<sup>18</sup>.

The Berlin police even managed to recover and destroy Hess' flying suit and other effects, which had been stolen several months before his death by souvenir hunters; these items had accompanied Hess ever since his surrender in Scotland in 1940 and on, via the Nuremberg trials, to Spandau Prison. And, in a final act of political black humour, the British garrison built a new NAAFI shopping centre for military families, which, although formally called 'The Britannia Centre', was thereafter known as 'Hessco', a play on words on the Tesco chain of supermarkets in England.

A further 'de facto' acknowledgement of political realities in the late 1980s was the monthly visit by the Ground and Air Operations Officers from the Mission to the British Embassy in East Berlin, where we briefed the Ambassador and his senior staff on our perspective of current military developments in East Germany.

---

<sup>17</sup> Lt Col Tony Le Tissier MBE, the British Governor from 1981 until the Prison's final dissolution on 17 Jan 1988, wrote an excellent short book to set the record straight, but its publishers went bankrupt and few copies were distributed or sold ['Farewell to Spandau' by Tony Le Tissier, published by Ashford, Buchan & Enright 1994; ISBN 1-85253-287-4]. He makes it quite clear that Hess did indeed commit suicide. He was declared dead in the British Military Hospital; my wife, Anne, was an in-patient on the same day on the ward on the floor above and so can claim, somewhat dubiously, that 'Rudolf Hess died under me!'

<sup>18</sup> Snr Lt Dmitri Naumenko, the Soviet Governor, Lt Col Vladimir Chernykh's interpreter always liked to wear the RMP Special Investigation Branch (SIB) tie that had been presented to him to mark for his part in the SIB's complex investigation into the circumstances of Hess' death.

The views of the diplomats were equally valuable to us as they gave us an insight into the strange world of the DDR's ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). Nevertheless, despite these exchanges of views and our own 'gut feelings', when I finally left Berlin in April 1989 there were no signs of great changes in the wind that were really obvious to any of us in BRIXMIS. The fall of the Berlin Wall and of the East German regime that same autumn totally surprised all of us; selfishly, for those of us who hoped to serve again in the Mission, the news was actually unwelcome.

The East Berlin Embassy visit was our only foray on official business into the DDR capital because Headquarters Berlin (British Sector) was responsible for all the intelligence coverage on the ground in East Berlin and because we in BRIXMIS answered ultimately to the British Ambassador in Bonn.

That the Mission should operate on the basis that there was no East German state, but only a Soviet zone, and yet its members should travel regularly to East Berlin to brief the British Ambassador to that (for us at least) non-State was just another of the curious and interesting anomalies in Cold War Berlin.

Rather less arduous liaison duties included occasionally showing British VIPs around Potsdam, which as a garrison-cum-royal residence town had been the Windsor of the Kaiser's Germany. The city contains numerous splendid palaces set in magnificent parks, such as Frederick the Great's summer retreat, Sansouci, and the more modern Cecilienhof, where the Potsdam Conference was held in 1945.

In the 1980s, with the Berlin Wall still very much in place, there were few tourists in East Germany and so the Mission's visitors often felt as if the town's attractions were reserved for them and them alone. Less tangible, but all too obvious to everyone who came from the hustle and bustle of West Berlin, was the comparatively unhurried pace of life in the East; in some ways it felt like stepping back into the 1950s.

## **Cultural Tours in the DDR**

While BRIXMIS' British visitors could only go to Potsdam as and when SERB was willing to issue them with a temporary 'pink pass' entry chit, those members of the Mission holding the fulltime 'touring' passes could go further afield on what were known as 'cultural tours'. These outings saw tourers and their families setting off to stay, normally for several nights, in hotels in the other main cities of East Germany, such as Rostock on the Baltic coast, Erfurt and Weimar in the south-west, Leipzig (near the former prisoner-of-war camp in Schloss Colditz) and Dresden.

Indeed, after our wedding in St George's Charlottenburg, the British garrison church in West Berlin, my wife (Anne) and I even spent part of our honeymoon in Dresden, accompanied by a Highland officer in a kilt (Willie Macnair) and his wife (Charlotte) and a very tall and lugubrious sergeant (Tony Haw) in the Green Howards, a Yorkshire infantry regiment.

The latter was completely unmoved by the glories of Saxon culture and responded to an appeal to show sympathy for a burnt-out royal palace with the immortal words: 'Well, it's a good thing it weren't new!' In reality the main appeal of these cultural trips for most tourers' wives was the shopping because the East was like one giant bargain sale, even if supplies and quality were tantalisingly erratic.

By the late 1980s the Soviets had once again opened up Weimar to the Missions and we spent a very pleasant weekend there in the summer of 1988 on what we had expected to be a very normal cultural tour. Arriving in the BRIXMIS minibus on the Friday evening, we booked into the Hotel Elephant, a very elegant and traditional hotel on the town's main square and we were given excellent rooms<sup>19</sup>. For these we, as 'Potsdam residents', paid the 'Inlandtariff' of about £8 a night in East Marks, whereas a Western tourist would have been charged ten or so times as much and in hard currency too.

---

<sup>19</sup> The Elephant was reputed to be the venue of one of the Mission's more embarrassing moments. Apparently at some point in the 1960s or 1970s an operational tour crew had spent the night in the Elephant. As per the SOPs the officer had brought his exposed films into the hotel with him and had slept with them under his pillow. However, the tour crew had rushed off in the morning, leaving the films in a plastic bag under the pillow. Assuming that the films were already in the hands of the Stasis, the tour drove on and decided to say nothing to the BRIXMIS authorities unless and until they were called to account for their stupidity. Silence reigned and soon thereafter Weimar was put into a PRA. Some years later the PRA map was re-issued and Weimar re-emerged from PRA. The next tour crew to visit the Elephant was duly presented by the manager with a bag of films, accompanied by a wink and 'I think some of your colleagues left these here some years ago and so we've been holding them safely to give to the next Mission guests!' So much for every East German being intimidated by the Stasi secret police!

The next morning we left a typically sleepy Weimar and drove off to Erfurt, about an hour to the west, for an allegedly vital shopping assault on that beautiful old city, followed as ever by a team of shadowing Ministry of State Security (MfS) 'Stasi' agents. However, when we got back to Weimar at teatime the whole place had been transformed: the town square and the hotel were full of Stasis and elite East Berlin Volkspolizei ('Vopo') policemen in large blue Volvos and an electric atmosphere of strict security had enveloped the area.

Assuming that a SED Politburo member, or perhaps even the head of the DDR regime, Erich Honecker, had arrived and had taken over the best accommodation in town, I went to Reception, fully expecting that we would be sent away and would be forced to return to Potsdam there and then. The receptionist affected surprise and assured me that we were welcome to stay another night, as we had made reservations to do so, and agreed that we could have a table in the hotel's renowned gourmet restaurant later in the evening, whenever we so wished.

So, having put the children to bed, we (Colin Ward and I) emerged downstairs in our smartest summer service dress with our wives (Joanna and Anne) in their best frocks and moved past the far-from-inconspicuous Stasi bodyguards to the small restaurant, where we were expecting to pay about £5 each for an amazing meal.

As we crossed the room to our table, all four of us noticed someone familiar sitting at the next table and we struggled to put a name to the face, expecting the character to be a leading East German politician. It was as we sank into our seats that in shock we all realised who it was: the West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, with his wife, Hannelore, and their son. To this day I am not sure which group of us was the more surprised: the Kohls, on having two British officers in 'glory order' ushered to the next table, or us, on finding the Federal Chancellor eating in the same restaurant and staying under the same roof as us deep in the heart of East Germany. He smiled at us and we smiled back, but we decided not to speak, unless spoken to first, and the Chancellor clearly made up his mind to do likewise.

When the Kohls had finally left the restaurant, the whole place erupted. We could not believe that the Stasis had allowed us to be in the same hotel as the Chancellor, let alone to eat at the next table; the local staff could not believe that they had been serving the most powerful German of his day; and the West German tourists in the restaurant were amazed that they had effectively had dinner with their own head of government.

The following morning we again shared a dining room with the charming, smiling Kohls before they left in a huge cavalcade of Vopo and Stasi vehicles to move further east to Gera. As the sirens and blue lights became little more than a memory, Weimar returned to its normal 'small town' calm and we were all left pinching ourselves to see if it really could have happened. Why had the Stasis not sent us packing? Why did they feel confident enough to let us sit at the next table, when tourers in uniform were always viewed by the East German state as, at best, an irritant and, at worst, saboteurs and spies in uniform? It all seemed so unlike the obsessively secretive DDR that we normally experienced as tourers.

Still clucking from the excitement, we rushed back to West Berlin and the Mission just managed to report that the Chancellor was on a private visit to East Germany before Reuters broadcast the news. With the wisdom of hindsight it is much easier to place the Kohls' trip in the context of improving inter-German relations, but at the time (just 18 months before the Berlin Wall fell) it seemed such an anomaly that we dismissed it from our Cold War mindsets and carried on, convinced that things would go on in much the same way for the next few decades as they had done for the last four decades and more.

## **Town Tours**

Before moving on to describe in some detail how we operated under normal conditions 'on tour' within the DDR, there are two other areas of unusual liaison activity that deserve to be covered: 'town tours' and reconnaissance flights.

As regards the first category, BRIXMIS took advantage of the fact that it had substantially more touring passes than either of its Allied counterparts by sending out what were in effect foot patrols to 'fly the flag' in those Soviet garrison towns that were open to AMLM tours. The aim was fairly loose, but it could be summed up as: 'Go forth, find the Soviets' pubs and see if they will drink with you!' Russian speaking officers relished the chance to practise their language skills on unsuspecting Soviet officers and warrant officers in bars, while the non-linguist tourers benefited greatly from discovering that the 'Ivans' were not unlike themselves (but much poorer), that the beer was unbelievably cheap and that East German nightlife could be fun.

My own favourite town tour locations were: Rostock, the port city through which a great deal of Soviet military equipment was transported; Lutherstadt Wittenberg, around which tours were often detained; Gardelegen, Haldensleben and Hagenow, small towns on the edge of the Letzlinger Heide training area; and Potsdam itself, whose Komendant (like a town provost-marshal), Lieutenant Colonel Sukhonosov, seemed to appreciate the curious British sense of humour<sup>20</sup>.

The normal routine was to arrive in the late afternoon, book into the town hotel and then walk to the local Soviet Komendatura to pay one's respects, before diving into the pubs and working men's clubs. Then, the next morning we would look in on the Komendant to consume a bottle of whisky (and normally a reciprocal one of vodka), if the opportunity had not already presented itself the evening before.

These visits also paid unquantifiable dividends later on because it was infinitely preferable to find yourself or fellow tourers being 'detained' (arrested) by an old acquaintance, rather than by an unknown and distinctly unfriendly character.

The Komendant in Rostock, Lieutenant Colonel Gorbachev, became quite an Anglophile as a result of our visits and, at the end of a long, liquid and relaxing session in his office, he turned to me and my three fellow tourers and announced: 'You [to an RAF warrant officer, Mal Girling] have the complexion of a Georgian. And you, my friend [to a Sapper officer, Colin Ward], look like a Lithuanian. And you [to a Gunner NCO, Staff Sergeant King] could even be mistaken for a Russian. But you, Major Williams, ... you could only be a British Army officer!' Perhaps naturally, I assumed that this was meant to be a compliment and so I took it as such.

Few Komendants had any respect for the East German officials with whom they were expected to liaise over garrison disciplinary, administrative and protocol matters. Lieutenant Colonel Gorbachev asked us to wait in his office on one occasion, declaring: 'Please don't go. I'm really enjoying having you here, but I've just got to rush off to a bloody protocol reception with the loathsome Germans'.

Similarly, during our honeymoon in February 1982 our BRIXMIS minibus broke down in Riesa, a grim industrial town just north of Dresden. After they had rescued us, the staff from the Komendant's office

---

<sup>20</sup> I met him one day at a reception in the BRIXMIS villa and after greeting me warmly he wagged his finger at me in disapproval, saying: 'Now you're a bad boy! Twice yesterday you drove really slowly past the Soviet Officers Club trying to see what was going on and that's why I stepped into the road and shouted at you to go away!' I feigned ignorance of a sort, but we both knew that there had been a high level officers' meeting and a 'sexy' mobile satellite communications dish had been tantalizingly parked outside the Club.

---

tried to get us all a meal in a bar, where the Soviet interpreter often ate. The barmaid refused outright to deal with us and denied that they ever served food in that bar. Appalled by this rebuff, the interpreter declared: ‘These wretched Germans are all still fascists under the skin!’<sup>21</sup>

Town tours were fairly constantly watched over by the Stasi agents. In Lutherstadt Wittenberg, for example, on one dark winter’s evening a very obvious Stasi ‘nark’ agent was following us as we moved through the town on foot, en route to the Komendatura. Every time we paused to look into a shop window, he would dive into a doorway or stairwell and wait for us to move on.

So I decided to do the same thing and within moments I was joined in my stairwell by the astonished Stasi agent. ‘Don’t worry’, I assured him, ‘we’re on our way to see the Soviet Komendant and later we will be in the Maxim Gorki Kulturhaus. So there is no need to get cold following us!’ He looked shocked, muttered something about not understanding my appalling German and pretended to stop following us.

Sure enough, later on we did indeed make our way to the Kulturhaus, the town’s only centre of nightlife, where it was ‘live music night’. Despite the lack of tables, one was found for us and the tourers joined in the merriment. Most of the local girls seemed to be rather over-painted and to be controlled by a bunch of Arab-looking young men, but everyone seemed to be determined to enjoy themselves and I decided, as the tour officer, to keep an eye on the general proceedings and on the rest of the tour crew.

Moments later and scarcely to our surprise, three rather smartly dressed young men entered and, miraculously, a table was emptied so that they could sit next to ours. They ordered fruit juices, confirming any lingering suspicions that they were a Stasi team. I decided that, if I was not going to indulge in the serious drinking antics of the locals and my fellow tourers, I might as well join the Stasi teetotallers and so I moved to their table and sat down, much to their horror.

‘So, what do you guys do for a living then?’, I enquired. Realising that ignoring me was not an option, one of them replied: ‘We’re teachers’. ‘Well, isn’t that a coincidence’, I declared, sitting there in my army pullover with its badges of rank and BRIXMIS flag on both arms, ‘so am I. What do you teach?’ An awkward pause in the conversation followed, after which one of them said to me: ‘Please be careful. Those women your friends are talking to are prostitutes’. ‘But, surely not’, I replied, ‘Can there be such a thing as

---

<sup>21</sup> The saga of our night in Riesa is a long one, containing a drunken Komendatura officer called Nikitin, Soviet married quarters’ lavatories that our wives claimed were indescribably grim and an East German man who insisted, despite the sub-zero weather, in exposing himself to the female occupants of our stationary minibus (while their men were all asleep).

prostitution in the German Democratic Republic? I thought that such things only happen in capitalist countries!’

Later, in the very unpleasant men’s lavatories, I asked one of the Arab youths if he came from Libya. He looked insulted and stated that he was an Algerian. ‘So why are you here in Wittenberg?’, I enquired. ‘We come here to study socialism and they make us work in the rubber factory next to the river Elbe’. ‘So, what have you learnt about East German socialism?’ ‘That it’s ‘socialisme plus merde’!’, he replied. Perhaps controlling the local whores was a compensation for being used as virtual forced labour.

These ‘town tours’ rarely came up with any startling intelligence, not least because they were always shadowed by the Stasis, who ensured that no East German military or state employees spoke to us. The Soviets, on the other hand, despised the Stasis and had few qualms about talking to their wartime Allies; on a man-to-man level and over a drink or two we found that we all shared very similar views on the world, politicians and the need for a quiet life. Not unsurprisingly, plenty of tourers were willing to volunteer to ‘drink for Queen and country’ on a town tour every once in a while, but it was the Army linguists who tended to be keenest.

### **The Chipmunk Connection**

The other remarkable area of unusual Mission activity was executed by a small and intrepid band of aviators in the RAF element of BRIXMIS and involved reconnaissance (recce) flights within a zone that stretched 20 nautical miles from the quadripartite Berlin Air Safety Centre in central Berlin.

The members of the two man crew were known affectionately as ‘Biggles’ and ‘Algy’ (after the heroes of a series of English children’s books) and flew their obsolescent Chipmunk trainer all over this zone. Allegedly they were conducting aircrew refresher training for personnel at the RAF Gatow airfield, as well as for anyone in BRIXMIS adventurous enough to ask for a ride. I did so only once and emerged feeling battered, bilious and amazed that anyone could work effectively in such primitive and demanding conditions, let alone produce photographs in focus.

While most of the flights generated by the Allies were indeed just the training flights that they were claimed to be, two or three times a week each of the Allies was cleared by its respective political and

military authorities to fly low level photographic recce sorties. Unlike the Americans and the French, our overflight team was an integral part of our liaison mission. We, the British, were convinced that we gained enormously from knowing that the same officers were covering the local area around Potsdam both on the ground and from the air.

The activities of the Chipmunk were shrouded in great secrecy, particularly by our own side. The aircrew never wore BRIXMIS uniforms or drove distinctive Mission vehicles during their visits to the RAF Gatow airfield and seemed to revel in their anonymity.

The fact that this 'cover story' worked was clearly demonstrated to me during a visit to Potsdam, when I was helping to escort some senior Royal Air Force (RAF) visitors. The group also included the Station Commander of the RAF Gatow airfield and his wife and we were all being shadowed closely by Stasi agents.

Suddenly, as we stood on the broad terrace outside the Sansouci Palace, the low throb of a propeller-driven aircraft could be heard approaching. All of us men, knowing what it must be, averted our eyes, but not so the wife of the RAF Gatow commander. 'Look, darling! It's a small plane. Goodness me! Isn't that your Chipmunk? Darling, do pay attention!' But none of us would look up from studying the graves of Frederick the Great's favourite dogs or whatever and the Station Commander hissed to his wife: 'Listen to me. Please understand that you can't see anything!' And so the unseen plane flew on and away, allowing us to resume what passed for normality in Potsdam.

Of course, even if we might struggle to keep the Chipmunk's real mission a deep secret, it was quite obvious to the local East Germans what it was designed to do. On one occasion a forester stopped us on tour as we were trying to creep up on a Soviet radar deployment in a forest north of Potsdam and, taking no notice of our protestations of incomprehension, announced: 'Sorry, but you're too late! The Russians were here for four days with about a dozen trucks, but they went home to Schönwalde late this morning. But don't worry, your little plane came over and buzzed them earlier!'

Meanwhile, the British Chipmunk flying at as little as 500 feet above the ground, along with its US and French counterparts, was apparently known to one and all in the Soviet garrison, almost like a friend, as 'the Potsdam Duty Officer' – even if occasionally sentries would fire at it to discourage its close attention.

What the Russians and East Germans could never guess, however, was just how enormously effective the efforts of ‘those magnificent men in their flying machines’ had been.

## **Operational Touring**

All of these essentially ‘kosher’ liaison activities involved only the officers in the Mission and made BRIXMIS seem, at least to a casual onlooker, like an organisation that was devoted to ‘champagne soldiering’. For example, Mission personnel were excused from having to take part in Berlin garrison alert call-outs (known as Exercise Rocking Horse) and played no part at all in the training and exercises that dominated almost every other British and Allied serviceman’s life in West Berlin.

Indeed, in the DDR we did not even have a wartime role because it was assumed that tours would be eliminated by our ‘hosts’ as the first act of war. As a result BRIXMIS might sometimes appear to the casual observer to be what the soldiers would have called ‘a waste of space’ or a ‘waste of rations’.

The truth, of course, was altogether different, but all aspects of touring were classified at least France/UK/US Confidential (although they have largely been declassified during the 1990s). As a result we could not admit the true ‘raison d’être’ of the Mission to anyone who did not meet the ‘need to know’ security requirements.

The reality was that, even if the formal liaison tasks might have appealed to those of an alcoholic disposition, the actual business of touring would have found favour with a hardened drug addict.

Such was the thrill that the job provided that I, like many other tourers, dreamt about being ‘on tour’ every night that I was in BRIXMIS and for many years afterwards. In fact, to this day many of the old touring habits are still with me, such an obsession with vehicle registration numbers and with gazing into railyards in the hope of seeing military equipment on flatcars and loading ramps!

---

While the other two AMLMs normally operated in 2-man teams because of the comparatively few touring passes that their agreements with the Soviets allowed them, the basic BRIXMIS touring unit was the 3-man team, which gave us much greater flexibility<sup>22</sup>.

Typically BRIXMIS tour crews would consist of: the Tour Officer, who commanded the patrol and took the photographs from the rear seat; the Tour NCO (non-commissioned officer), whose rank could range from sergeant to warrant officer and who, as the equipment recognition expert, 'called the kit' into a tape recorder; and the Tour Driver, whose tasks included being the security lookout and a steadying influence on his seniors. Occasionally a second officer might replace the Tour NCO and, rather less frequently, some tours were even commanded by specially selected, experienced Tour NCOs, instead of by an officer.

## **Touring Equipment**

The equipment used by the Mission and issued to tourers was superb, not least because it was largely procured at the expense of the 'Senat', the government of West Berlin, which under the Occupation regime's financial regulations was unable to query items that could be justified by the Allies as supporting genuine liaison, such as vehicles, cameras and office machinery<sup>23</sup>.

Some things, however, were clearly too exotic to fit into this broad spectrum of reasonable 'liaison equipment' and in the late 1980s this category of excluded items included a very advanced and extremely expensive prototype thermal imaging video camera, as well as a range of image intensifiers and night vision goggles for operations in very low light conditions.

The most obvious feature of BRIXMIS was its fleet of tour vehicles, which was based on two types: saloon cars and cross-country jeeps. By the early 1980s the old Opel Admirals had given way to Opel Senators, but, although they might look like normal production saloons, they were far from standard by the time they were painted matt olive green and handed over to the Mission's Motor Transport (MT) Section.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Noiret-Malinin Agreement, for instance, allowed the French Mission to hold 18 passes, of which 6 were reserved for officers; in the 1980s the total strength of FMLM was around 45 persons of all ranks and so only 40% could tour in the DDR at any one time. BRIXMIS with its 32 passes also was also established with a similar 'tour-to-tail' ratio.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Le Tissier has subsequently informed me that the money came from German Federal Government funds, but was dispersed on Bonn's behalf by the Berlin Senat.

Every Senator was fitted with Ferguson four-wheel drive, a modification that was very unusual and expensive at that time, and had strengthened suspension and half a tonne of armoured plating under its belly to protect its engine. Its fuel tank capacity was increased to 180 litres and all the internal surfaces (such as the dashboard, seats and ceiling) were blacked out with matt material to aid photography by minimising reflection.

Extra lights were fitted in order to enable all tour vehicles, including the Senators, to impersonate a motorcycle or a small East German Trabant car and curtains were fitted inside the back and rear side windows to help the Tour Officer in taking photographs unobserved by onlookers. The resulting Senator was a relatively inconspicuous, long range, very fast saloon car with good cross-country qualities and the ability to carry three men and all their camping and operating kit in all weathers and in some comfort too.

Range Rovers had been selected as a touring 'jeep' for the Mission in the late 1970s and were a particular favourite of the RAF tourers, principally because they provided more space for 'creature comforts' and had a large sunroof from which observation and photography could be conducted. They were also equipped with an electrically powered winch which made self-recovery by the crew on boggy ground easier than having to using the manual 'hand-raulic' winch and the ground anchor that were carried in the Senators.

Sadly, despite these apparent advantages, Range Rovers proved to be cold in winter, filled up with dust in summer, were thirsty on fuel and were mechanically very unreliable. In the Army element we tended to view Range Rovers as fine for impressing people at an English Home Counties horse show, but not much good at all as a cross-country patrol vehicle. In the mid-1980s the Range Rover was replaced in the BRIXMIS touring fleet by the Mercedes Geländewagen jeep, always known in the Mission as the 'G-wagon', which had all the good points of its predecessor and, more importantly, almost none of its shortcomings.

Nevertheless, both types of jeep were hardly inconspicuous, having large expanses of flat, reflective windows, and they seemed to encourage aggressive responses from their Soviet and East German target audiences. In contrast, the Senator had a low profile and was deceptively fragile-looking vehicle. But it had a real turn of speed and, if it was unable to get away in good time, it was often given the benefit of the doubt by the opposition in potentially hostile encounters.

Having toured extensively in all three types of tour vehicle, I much preferred the Senator. It was a thoroughbred touring vehicle, even if it was a rather cramped environment in which to live and work.

Just like the other AMLMs and the SMLMs, 'on pass' BRIXMIS vehicles were also fitted with distinctive yellow Mission registration plates<sup>24</sup>.

If it was vital to have a good vehicle fleet to get around the DDR's poor roads, it was equally important for us to be able to record what we encountered and the key to this was our photographic equipment.

In the 1980s each Tour Officer was issued with four Nikon cameras, three of which had motor drives, and a range of lenses up to 1000mm, plus a 'doubler' ring. Monochrome and colour slide films, often up-rated from 400 to as much as 6400 ASA, allowed us to record images in almost any conditions, including at night when used in conjunction with an electronic image intensifying tube. This enabled tour crews to satisfy the intelligence community's perfectly understandable obsession with technical and order of battle information needing to be 'photo-confirmed'.

Video also proved to be extremely flexible in low light conditions and provided an additional source of information because video tape picks up sound and some electronic emissions that were otherwise beyond the reach of the tour. These audible and inaudible signals were technically exploited by experts back in the UK

However, even if the Nikon lenses fitted onto the video camera allowed for a magnification capability of up to 5500mm, the disadvantage of video was that it meant one more holdall bag to fit into the already crowded back seat of a Senator.

As a result I rarely carried a video camera on tour, unless specifically asked to do so. Another reason for not doing so was 'Old Buffer's Law', which states that 'the more senior the officer, the greater the difficulty he has in mastering modern equipment and the less likely he is to produce good results'.

---

<sup>24</sup> These plates (about 38x19 cm), were mounted both on the front and on the rear bumpers in place of normal military number plates. In design terms, they were yellow in colour and were marked with a national flag, a unique number and a short description of the parent Mission. By the 1980s BRIXMIS had the series numbered 1-19; USMLM 20-29; FMLM 30-39; SOXMIS in the British Zone (Bünde) 40-49; SMLM to the US Zone (Frankfurt/Main) 50-59; SMLM to the French Zone (Baden-Baden) 60-69.

In reality it was unfair to expect those who were not full-time tourers always to take photographs in sharp focus and consistently to deliver professional results. Tour NCOs learnt that they had to be patient with senior and part-time Tour Officers, but they were often ruthless in their 'constructive criticism' of full-time tourers and particularly of their photographic achievements or lack of them.

If cars and cameras were vital for achieving the mission, from the individual tourer's perspective the equipment issued to enable him to live in reasonable comfort in the field was also important.

Camping stores were relatively simple, but they did develop in sophistication as the 1980s progressed. Individual hooped tents, made from Goretex waterproof material, were issued late in the decade to replace the green nylon Australian poncho sheets that we had used as bashas (shelters) and under which plastic foam 'karrimats' and sleeping bags were unrolled.

In my case, I found it too difficult to learn new tricks during my second posting to BRIXMIS and could barely erect a hooped tent in daylight on a lawn. As a result I carried on using an Australian poncho right through into 1989 because I knew that I could put it up quickly, silently and without the use of a torch, even on the darkest and grimmest of nights. Young tourers might have been bemused or appalled by my antics, but most seemed content to see them as some of the early signs of 'Old Buffer's syndrome' emerging in their Operations Officer!

Touring uniform was another aspect of Mission life that proved to be an issue of unexpected sensitivity and it was one where we differed significantly from our Allies. The French crews toured in barrack dress trousers and jumpers and wore shoes, while at the other extreme the Americans wore camouflaged fatigues and combat boots. If the former were somewhat inhibited in their endeavours by a desire to stay reasonably clean and smart, the US tourers risked being viewed as aggressors.

Thus, when Major Arthur 'Nick' Nicholson of USMLM was shot dead by a Soviet sentry in Ludwigslust in 1985, one of the excuses put forward by SERB was that 'in our army only reconnaissance troops wear camouflaged uniform and so the young sentry, inevitably, assumed that the American officer was acting in an aggressive and impermissible manner'. Despite the feebleness of this justification for murder, the Soviet authorities stuck to this line.

In BRIXMIS we stayed firmly in plain green touring uniforms until the demise of the Mission, long after the rest of the British Army had switched over to camouflaged combat clothing. Somewhat eccentrically I was still to be seen wearing a 1960s-vintage green combat jacket almost two decades after they had been handed back to quartermasters everywhere else. And so to avoid misunderstandings, we wore obviously on both arms a British flag with the word 'BRIXMIS' in bold letters under it.

On balance, unlike the members of the Soviet missions who sought to blend into the civilian crowds in West Germany by wearing minimal badges and insignia, we believed that our well-being was more likely to be enhanced by not giving a sentry the chance to claim that he had no idea that he was shooting a British soldier. And, in retrospect, I am sure that our solution to the uniform issue was the right one.

While the vehicles, cameras and camping equipment were excellent, it was always a surprise to outsiders to discover that tours carried no communications equipment at all, but the truth was that travelling incommunicado gave us great advantages. The Robertson-Malinin Agreement of 1946 had mentioned (presumably motorcycle) despatch riders, but its drafters had neither envisaged 'touring' patrols nor any requirement to speak to Mission members in the field.

By the 1980s this situation remained unchanged, with a single insecure radio and a civil telephone providing the only links between the BRIXMIS offices in West Berlin and the Mission House in Potsdam. Both were, of course, closely monitored by our Soviet hosts and by the Stasis.

Instead of giving tour vehicles radio sets, successive Chiefs had preferred to hold our Soviet sponsors to their undertaking in the Agreement, whereby they guaranteed to provide the Mission with communications between itself and its own superior headquarters.

In effect this meant that, in the event of a touring drama, the crew would call upon the Soviet or East German authorities at the scene to contact SERB in order that a request for assistance could be relayed to BRIXMIS. Although apparently cumbersome this system worked very well, help was always forthcoming in due course and the Chief was quick to respond by sending his thanks to those involved in relaying the messages and providing help to his crews.

On the other hand, the advantages of being incommunicado were enormous. Above all else it allowed the Chief to claim that he was blameless in regard to any alleged misdeeds perpetrated by his teams out on the ground. He could always assure Chief SERB that a full BRIXMIS investigation would be conducted after the tour returned and that the necessary measures would be taken, while remaining personally unsullied by his subordinates' indiscretions.

The Chief's assurances were normally sufficient to defuse any awkward situation and, generally speaking, so long as no harm had come to any Soviet personnel or Soviet property in a particular incident, the topic was unlikely to be raised again as substantive business. Damage to East German property was rarely mentioned and claims for compensation were left unpaid by the Missions.

The most extreme example of this was the incident just before I reached BRIXMIS in 1981, when an Army tour (commanded by Nigel Shakespear) had allegedly damaged 10 out of 14 Vopo and Stasi vehicles that had been deployed to stop the tour vehicle getting away from Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz), where it had been closely monitoring a Soviet rocket artillery unit. All the damage had been inflicted on the East German vehicles and so the Soviets were not inclined to punish the tourers and apparently limited their criticism to a single 'pro forma' protest about the incident.

From the Ground and Air Operations Officers' perspective the lack of radios meant that the independence of action of individual tours could not be interfered with by BRIXMIS headquarters. Once briefed and launched into the DDR, there was nothing the Operations Room could do, other than to wait for the tour's safe return. The tourers themselves revelled in this high degree of freedom of action, knowing that they were on their own until such time as they might call on the Soviets to summon further assistance in an emergency.

The only exception to a tour's inability to communicate with the BRIXMIS Operations Room was the rarely used opportunity to pass urgent messages back to West Berlin via the secure radio facilities at the Royal Military Police station in the Helmstedt Allied roadhouse<sup>25</sup>. This facility, known as 'Checkpoint Alpha', was located at the western end of the Berlin Corridor autobahn, but getting there was a time-

---

<sup>25</sup> The Helmstedt roadhouse complex was the forward operating base for any Western Allies' military operation to launch an armoured column along the Berlin corridor to demonstrate the Allies' access rights in the event of a new Berlin blockade. This was the classified purpose of the Anglo-French-US LIVE OAK staff at the NATO European HQ (SHAPE) at Mons in Belgium and of the Allied Staff Berlin.

consuming performance because the tour had to pass through the Soviet controls at the Inner German Border (IGB).

Furthermore, attempts to speak to the Mission House in Potsdam from telephone boxes in the DDR were invariably unsuccessful, not so much as a result of Stasi intervention, but because almost all East German public telephones, like their British counterparts, were the victims of mindless vandalism and so were 'kaput'.

The final aspect of equipment that some visitors were surprised to hear about was that BRIXMIS tourers carried no weapons. Liaison work was deemed to be an unarmed business, effectively diplomacy in uniform, and, given that there was virtually no violence against foreigners in the DDR other than when sanctioned by the State, there was no advantage to be gained by carrying small arms.

Tourers were therefore expected to rely on their wits to see them through difficult moments and being unarmed removed any temptation to try to fight one's way out of a tight corner<sup>26</sup>. As a result tour crews were able to maintain a suitably non-aggressive posture and to appear to be 'good guys', even if the truth was rather less black and white.

### **Operational Planning Considerations**

BRIXMIS operational tours were divided into two main types: 'Ground' and 'Air' tours. Ground tours, at least in theory, concentrated on Soviet and East German Army (NVA) military facilities and activities, such as garrisons and their local training areas, exercise and other road and rail movements and all sorts of field deployments.

Air tours, on the other hand, looked at Soviet and NVA flying programmes from airbases and at air-to-ground firing ranges, as well as covering fixed communications, radar and air defence sites. In reality, however, the boundary between the two categories was blurred and all tourers were expected, within reasonable bounds, to grasp whatever opportunities came their way.

---

<sup>26</sup> Acting violently, even in self-defence, risked being misinterpreted by the Soviets, who might use it to constitute an excellent excuse for declaring the tourer 'persona non grata'.

Unlike in the other AMLMs, where Army personnel tended only to go on Army-oriented Ground tours and where airmen invariably went out into the DDR on exclusively Air-related tours, in BRIXMIS we operated a policy that produced much more mixed crews. For instance, the parent service of a Tour Driver, be he a soldier or an airman, made no real difference; in theory the next man on the roster went out with the next tour, whether it was a Ground or an Air tour.

As a result the experienced Tour Driver was an expert on all types of target and from where they could best be covered. For example, he could advise an RAF officer, commanding an Air tour, on how best to seize the opportunity to cover any significant military convoy or rail movement that the tour might encounter or, conversely, he could suggest to an Army officer on a Ground tour where to 'lurk' in order to exploit an unanticipated flying programme.

Similarly, the only way for a Tour NCO to become an all-round equipment expert was to go out on both types of tour because nothing helped an individual to remember a piece of 'kit' better than actually seeing it 'in the flesh'.

The Mission's Chipmunk aircrew also proved to be invaluable as Ground tourers in the Potsdam area whenever they could be spared to go 'on pass' as part-time tourers, thanks to their tremendous knowledge of the ground from an altitude of 1000 feet or less.

Close liaison between the Ground and Air Operations Officers of all three AMLMs was needed to ensure that everyone was not trying to cover the same attractive targets or locations at the same time. Weekly coordination meetings and monthly lunches, as well as almost daily telephone calls, guaranteed that we were all working to a common framework.

For this purpose the DDR map was divided up for tour planning purposes into four sectors, centred on the 'island' of Berlin: Areas A (north), B (south-west) and C (south-east) and 'the Local' area (Potsdam and its environs within an arc spreading out about 30 kilometres to the north, west and south).

Under this well coordinated system at any given moment two AMLMs were allowed to deploy tours in each of these alphabetical areas: for example, BRIXMIS Ground and USMLM Air tours in Area A,

FMLM Ground and BRIXMIS Air in Area B and USMLM Ground and FMLM Air in Area C. A clockwise rotation moved the Missions on to new areas every three weeks or so.

Unlike the changeover system in the other areas, the coverage of the Local area rotated on a 24 or 48-hour basis and 'the Local' was restricted to a single AMLM's Ground tours.

Wherever possible, this was also tied in with that particular Ally's Chipmunk or equivalent overflight sorties and so the aim was for the RAF Chipmunk to fly in the morning before a BRIXMIS Local tour was launched in the early afternoon. This allowed for the tour crew to be briefed by the aircrew on activities already underway, such as training programmes on the Dallgow-Döberitz and Krampnitz tank ranges or the loading and unloading of significant equipment at rail ramps, such as Satzkorn, Rohrbeck and Priort.

Despite the inevitable temptations to do so, there were few 'unpleasantnesses' between the three AMLMs over allegations of one AMLM 'poaching' in another mission's assigned touring area. The existing coordination arrangements and personal friendships ensured that any such misunderstandings were quickly resolved at Operations Officer level.

On one occasion in the late 1980s, however, I was commanding the legitimate Local tour when we were briefly detained by the escorts of a Soviet air defence equipment train in Satzkorn sidings, just north of Potsdam. I had decided to accept the detention, rather than try to escape past the impromptu roadblock, because I knew that we had done nothing provocative. The young Soviet sergeant in charge asked me: 'Are you Americans?' When I assured him that we were not, he added: 'Well, we've already been bothered by two US tours today and, if you see them, tell them that if they come back again, we'll shoot them!' The Americans were clearly 'poaching' and so we were sent on our way by the Soviets with a friendly farewell.

Tourers could not, however, go just exactly wheresoever they pleased within the former Soviet Zone because the AMLM Agreements had specified that access to restricted areas was denied to them and identical constraints were imposed on the Soviet MLMs in the former Allied Zones in West Germany. Over the decades this had evolved into a rigid and well defined system of Permanently Restricted Areas (PRAs).

The host staffs, in our case the Soviet HQ GSFG in Zossen, issued definitive PRA maps to each of the AMLMs and each 'master map' was coloured in by hand, was signed by the GSFG Chief of Staff and each had its own tantalising anomalies to be exploited. Although mercifully infrequent, the issue of new master PRA maps used to lead to a mad flurry of activity because every set of 1:50,000 scale tour maps had to be amended before the new PRA boundaries were activated, normally only several days after the handover of the new master maps. The massive 1:50,000 wall map in the Operations corridor that covered the whole of the DDR also had to be amended by the BRIXMIS cartographers, as well as preparing new larger scale PRA maps, which showed all of East Germany on two manageable sheets.

During my first tour in BRIXMIS in the early 1980s almost 40% of the DDR's territory was placed out of bounds to us as PRA. Later in the decade the extent of the PRAs shrank to about 33% and as a result we were able to enjoy access to much of the Baltic coastline and to most of the borderline with Poland and Czechoslovakia. However, the very sensitive Inner German Border (IGB), guarded by its own East German Border Command, remained strictly within PRA throughout the 1980s.

The Soviets, no doubt in close cooperation with the DDR authorities, constructed the PRA map with great care, ensuring that movement of tours was channelled through easily monitored chokepoints. No doubt, similar devious calculations exercised the minds of the Allied staffs in Rheindahlen, Baden-Baden and Frankfurt when they amended their own PRA maps for issue to the SMLMs.

AMLMs might well, for instance, be given access to a major road, but often not to the critical garrison towns through which it passed, resulting in slow and tedious detours and making the pursuit of military convoys and trains much more difficult. In the DDR the only exception to movement within the borders of a PRA was transit along autobahns (motorways), which had become an established and accepted norm. Inexplicably, it even applied to the autobahns that led up to the Polish border, along which tours could normally operate without harassment, despite the fact that no tour could legitimately claim to be in transit to Poland.

In the early 1980s this accepted practice proved to be invaluable as it enabled the Soviets to permit the missions to satisfy their Allied masters that no Warsaw Pact invasion force was being concentrated on DDR territory in preparation for an invasion to 'liberate' the Poles from themselves and the heresy of Solidarity.

Operation Spahi, this tri-AMLM activity, confirmed that nothing unusual was going on, in sharp contrast to the situation in 1968 when there had been a massive build-up in the DDR before the invasion of Czechoslovakia, with the autobahns and main roads leading towards the Czech border being choked convoys with 'liberators'.

Nevertheless, however boring the PRA rules might be, they were scrupulously adhered to by all ranks in the certain knowledge that, if you were detained indisputably inside a PRA boundary, at the very least the Tour Officer could expect to be declared 'persona non grata' (PNG) by the Soviets. To be 'PNG-ed' was viewed by one and all as 'a fate worse than death' and was also enormously inconvenient to the British authorities because it took at least two years to train up another Tour Officer from scratch.

Even when being escorted by a Soviet Komendant into a PRA, tour crews were under orders to halt at the edge of the 'Yellow area' (as per the overprinting colour for PRAs on the definitive maps) and seek explicit approval from the Komendant to enter the PRA just in case the line-crossing could be used as an accusation against the tour at some later stage.

Temporary Restricted Areas (TRAs) were also declared at short notice by the Soviets to cover specific areas for a given number of days, but rarely exceeding one week; similar restrictions were also imposed by the Allies on the Soviet missions in West Germany.

TRAs were treated with the same respect as PRAs, with one important exception: those tours that were already out on the ground in the DDR at the moment when the TRA notification was passed by SERB to the AMLM Mission Houses in Potsdam were considered to be justifiably ignorant of the new TRA's existence.

As a result we operated a number of 'wheezes' (cunning plans) to try and get around the possibility of TRAs being announced. For instance, a tour returning to Potsdam might be expected to rendezvous ('RV') at a pre-arranged location with an outgoing tour so that the fresh crew could hand over full details of the new TRA and pass on the Operations Officer's re-tasking orders to the returning tour.

Tours that received orders at a covert RV to go and operate within a TRA had varying degrees of success. One lasted less than 20 minutes in the so-called Rheinsberg Gap (between the Wittstock and

Templin PRAs) before being detained by Soviet paratroopers, while others managed to operate for days apparently unseen or at least without prompting a hostile reaction.

Whatever the case might be, the Operations Officers back in Berlin would display tremendous surprise when challenged by SERB to explain the activities of a given tour crew in a newly imposed TRA. Somewhat cheekily we used to respond to all such complaints by inviting the Soviets to detain the tour, brief it on the new TRA and then escort it out of harm's way!

While PRAs and TRAs were strictly observed, the case of Mission Restriction Signs (MRS) was quite another matter. Tradition suggested that in the 1950s the Soviets and East Germans had introduced these prominent placards, normally fixed onto red concrete posts, in retaliation for similar prohibitions put up in the British Zone. But, whatever their origins may have been, by the 1980s an estimated 10,000 MRS adorned the DDR. Printed in four languages (English, French, German and Russian) MRS announced that the passage of members of foreign military missions was prohibited.

All three AMLMs, however, worked on the assumption that because MRS were not mentioned in the Robertson/Noiret/Huebner-Malinin Agreements they were therefore invalid. The result was that, apart from presenting themselves as very desirable touring souvenirs (even if sometimes old MRS placards had to be snapped off their posts in order to encourage the East German authorities to replace them with smart new collectable versions!), MRS acted as advertisements for something of intelligence interest lurking somewhere behind them. Far from having the intended effect of keeping tours away, they presented the same attraction to tourers as bright lights do to a moth.

Furthermore, although 'being behind MRS' was a standard accusation levelled at detained tours, in reality all parties accepted that it was a minor transgression in comparison with a clear breach of a PRA or TRA. Despite the fury of the Stasis and of some Soviets, the MRS issue was generally treated as a fine piece of well meant 'pantomime' and the Mission Restriction Sign was justifiably chosen to be the motif on the BRIXMIS Association's tie.

Even taking into account the limits imposed by PRA and TRA 'out of bounds' areas, there was no shortage of suitable targets for tourers to operate against in the rest of the DDR and it was the task of the

Ground and Air Operations Officers to construct Tour Briefs in manuscript format for every tour crew that went into East Germany to 'do the business'.

Even if some tourers might occasionally have suspected that there was 'neither rhyme nor reason' to the targets that they were given by the appropriate Operations Officer, in fact every Tour Brief was an amalgam of some of the following: requests from outside agencies (such as the UK Defence Intelligence Staff in London, JHQ in Rheindahlen and the other AMLMs); follow-up actions from previous tours; and the sort of intuition that can only be gained by experience on the ground.

The more sceptical might accuse the Operations Room of deploying an 'Intelligence Hoover' to suck up anything and everything, but the secret was to ensure that a well informed and cunning hand was pushing the vacuum cleaner.

## **Touring Routine**

BRIXMIS crews prepared for their tours in great detail before leaving West Berlin. While the Tour Driver was preparing the vehicle and checking the team's camping and vehicle recovery stores, the Tour Officer and NCO would be ensuring that the cameras and tape recorders were in working order, studying the specific target files and updating themselves on any technical intelligence requirements that had been issued by the Weapons Office.

The tour route was planned with the use of the vast 1:50,000 wall-map coverage of the DDR, which stretched for about 30 metres along the main corridor outside the Operations and Liaison offices. Failure to do so could prove expensive as I and others frequently discovered to our cost. The old saying that 'prior preparation and planning prevents pathetically poor performance' (or words to that effect!) ought to have been branded onto the back of every Tour Officer's hand.

I learnt this lesson in particular at Athenstedt when acting as the Chief's Tour NCO on a Ground tour<sup>27</sup>. With better preparation we would have checked the relevant Air target file and would have avoided

---

<sup>27</sup> The Tour Driver on this occasion was Cpl John 'Benny' Boland RCT and the date was 12<sup>th</sup> August 1982. We were rammed by a massive NVA Tatra-148 truck which charged straight from the main gate of the Athenstedt East German Air Force radar installation and smashed into the left side of the Chief's black, shiny Opel Senator car ('No 1'). This

---

the well recorded 'Suicide Alley' that ran along the perimeter wall of this NVA radar site; we paid dearly for this oversight.

Having spent probably most of one day preparing to go off into the DDR, a tour crew's last stop in West Berlin would be to collect personal equipment from messes and married quarters, before driving south-west down the Avus autobahn link, which all other Allied traffic used in order to get onto the Berlin Corridor autobahn at the Dreilinden 'Checkpoint Bravo' border crossing point.

We in the AMLMs, however, turned off to the right just short of the main autobahn exit from West Berlin and we crossed into Potsdam and East Germany via the Glienicke Brücke, which was curiously designated the 'Bridge of Unity' by the DDR authorities<sup>28</sup>.

On the bridge we weaved our way through the chicane of barriers, set up to stop defectors crashing through to gain their freedom in West Berlin. We then handed our vehicle and personal passes to the Soviet checkpoint guards, who recorded the details of every BRIXMIS tourer and visitor and checked that there was no damage to the car or to its special Mission vehicle number plates.

---

smashed virtually every sheet of glass in the vehicle and forced us across the road and into the ditch, where we ended up jammed between the truck's bonnet and some small fruit trees. The car would have rolled and there would certainly have been serious injuries or worse to the tour crew had the fruit trees not been there. I climbed out through a smashed side window and remonstrated with the East Germans that this was no way to treat a general and that the Komendant must be summoned immediately. Cpl Boland was, understandably, a bit shocked and so he stayed in the vehicle while the Chief and I made a cup of coffee, all the while being harassed by the Stasi who were taking photographs and congratulating one another. Eventually I threw my coffee over a creepy Stasi who got too close and overdid the photography. I immediately apologised to the Chief, who replied: 'It's a good thing you did it because I was just about to do the same thing!' After many hours we managed to get the NVA to provide tea, served on a stainless steel tray, and the Komendant summoned help from Potsdam. Eventually Maj Willie Macnair, the Ops Officer, arrived with the recovery trailer and took us back to Berlin, but not before the Komendant's assistant and I had gone off in a UAZ-469 jeep to try to telephone Potsdam. This little trip included waking the dead in a small village near Halberstadt where, when the Soviet officer tried to ring the VOPO police station's doorbell, the air raid warning klaxon on the roof went off; he then invited me to repeat this piece if fun, before we rushed away in the dark! The Alexander Barracks REME workshops rebuilt the DM40,000 Senator and costed the rebuild work, allegedly, at DM64,000 – so it was a good crash and a very lucky escape for all concerned. After this incident, Chiefs of BRIXMIS changed their Opel Senators to the same olive drab colour as the other tour vehicles because the shiny black Senator had clearly not provided any measure of deterrence against retaliation. Anne and I returned to the Athenstedt radar site in late 1990 and were amazed to find it much unchanged; the large radar sails were still in place and the vehicle park was full of NVA Ural and W-50 trucks. The only obvious difference was that the German flag by the front gate now bore a Federal German eagle at its centre and not the hammer and compasses of the old DDR regime.

<sup>28</sup> At the height of the Cold War the Glienicke Bridge was a favourite venue for the swapping of convicted spies, dissidents and other suspects by the Western authorities and their Eastern counterparts. By the 1980s only the AMLMs and diplomats accredited to East Berlin could use this crossing; no 'normal mortals' were permitted to use the 'Bridge of Unity'.

While it was accepted that they could match the faces to the passes, it was also taken for granted that searches of mission vehicles, whether SOXMIS' in the West or ours in the DDR, violated the tour's quasi-diplomatic immunity and so were out of the question. Meanwhile the East German border guards, manning the checkpoint for diplomatic vehicles crossing the bridge, watched our every move and reported back to the Stasis.

The first stop for all tours was the Mission House in Potsdam, where teams tended to stock up on sweets and soft drinks and often had a quiet word with the resident warrant officer or with returning tours in order to get a feel for current levels of activity and hotspots out on the ground. All such conversations had to be conducted outside or to a background of loud pop music on the (well justified) assumption that every room was bugged by, or on behalf of, our Soviet hosts.

Indeed, the quickest way to get repairs done to the Mission House, for example, was to announce loudly that the painters were overdue and that we were deeply disappointed with SERB for not delivering on its promises. Sure enough, the next morning the overdue East German workers would be on the front doorstep, much to everyone's feigned surprise.

In fact, 'Young Werner', the 'odd-job man', had a degree in electronic engineering, but claimed that domestic work was all that he could get. And so, of course, the Stasis and their Soviet masters had a firm idea about everything that went on in the Mission House. We also worked on the assumption that all the other locally employed staff members were under the control of the Stasi authorities.

While the tours in the Local area went out for a fixed period, normally either 24 or 48 hours before handing the task over to another AMLM, the duration of the great majority of our sorties was based on a compromise, on the one hand, between travel time and operational freshness, and, on the other hand, the timeliness of the information collected.

Ground tours tended to spend three days on the road and might sometimes take in a fourth day, but by that point individual efficiency and sharpness were declining, equipment was getting tired, supplies were running low and what had been hot news was becoming little better than history.

Air tours usually went out on the night before their first day's planned activity. The RAF tourers, who could thus claim an extra overnight allowance (paid at West German rates), had a difficult task persuading Army tourers that this was entirely necessary. But, as ever where money is concerned, our aircrew were experts at justifying the apparently unjustifiable!

Much of our routine activity on tour would have appeared to an onlooker to verge on ritual. Habits had become traditions and most were inculcated into novices during the training course at Ashford. For example, berets were always removed as we left the Mission House and normally stayed off until the tourers needed to deal with the Soviet authorities again, be it during a detention or when crossing back over the Glienicke Bridge at the end of the tour.

Next, in an attempt to lower the vehicle's profile, the light over the rear number plate was always switched off as the tour left Potsdam and both the front and the back plates were then 'muddied' in the first available filthy puddle. Later all these indiscretions would have to be corrected before crossing the Glienicke Bridge or else the Soviets would protest about a lack of respect for the rules of the road.

Our approach to 'creature comforts', the finer points of life, would also have found favour with a geisha girl. Halts for a hot drink ('brew stops') were taken every two hours and much muttering could be expected from the Tour Driver if the break was too late, even if there was a great deal that was of operational interest going on.

Every tourer carried two 1-litre thermos flasks of boiled water and his own 'brew kit' (coffee, tea bags, sugar and milk substitute). At each halt one crew member would make all three drinks and there was a strict rotation of 'brew stop' duties: first the Tour Officer, next the Tour NCO and then the Driver, often known as 'the Fahrer'. The 'folk memories' were indelible of officers, in particular, who had been mean with their brew ingredients and so woe betide anyone who tried to get away with providing low quality 'NAAFI dust' coffee or cheap and nasty 'Five Pints' creamer.

The evening meal tended to be the social highlight of each day and curries were (in every sense) hot favourites, created largely from the contents of assorted tins. In the summer, if the mosquitoes were not too bad, the cooking might be done outside the vehicle, but the preferred option was to set up a camping gas stove in the gap between the front seats. I always had reservations about this ritual for two reasons: first,

---

because it was clearly a fire risk (even if there never actually was a serious drama); and secondly, because I only ever ate cold food on tour, but I had to live in a curry-laden atmosphere all the same.

My own diet consisted almost entirely, and without variation for days on end, of herb cheese and salami sandwiches, peppermint sweets and green apples. Despite spurning hot food, I nevertheless held the record for exiting a tour car and removing one's trousers, an accolade that I won when I spilled a whole pint of freshly made tea into my lap one day - and very painful it was too!

BRIXMIS SOPs (standing operating procedures) also laid down that at all times, both day and night, there had to be at least one man in the tour vehicle and all the doors had to be locked. This was the best possible way to ensure the security of its sensitive contents and was, in addition, considered to provide an aura of quasi-diplomatic immunity to the vehicle. 'Thou shalt not break into a tour car' was viewed as one of the unwritten rules that the MLMs, be they Allied or Soviet, expected everyone to respect and so keeping someone in the vehicle was designed to reduce the temptation to break into it for anyone who encountered or detained a tour car<sup>29</sup>.

The Tour Driver was the man whose duty it was in high summer and whose dubious pleasure it was in the depths of winter and thunderstorms to sleep inside the vehicle. Whatever the weather, unless the crew was actively working, the Tour Officer and NCO were expected to spend the night outside the vehicle.

Normally on a Ground tour the aim was quite simply to disappear at about midnight by going right off the beaten track into a forest to occupy a suitable 'Z-platz' (from the German for a tent: 'Zelt'). Once there we would silently and without the use of lights set up our bashas and tents between convenient conifers and all go to sleep<sup>30</sup>.

---

<sup>29</sup> Despite these precautions, the Soviets or East Germans did occasionally break into tour cars, invariably during the course of a messy detention. In the early 1980s a BRIXMIS Air tour was surprised in high summer by Soviet 'spetsnaz' special forces and the tour crew was taken prisoner by force and all the contents of the vehicle were seized. The Komendant freed the tourers, but the equipment and personal belongings were taken off to Zossen. The tourers reported back to the Chief and, inter alia, listed for the Quartermaster the military equipment that they had lost. All three claimed to have lost their arctic winter sleeping bags, not the cheaper and less desirable summer ones; their stories had to be amended, however, ten or so days later when the Soviets returned all the kit, including vandalised cameras and three soiled summer sleeping bags. A nice try anyway!

<sup>30</sup> During my first two years in BRIXMIS (1981-83) I always slept with my boots on, just in case we were surprised in the night; I did not relish the prospect of being detained in a half-dressed condition. By the late 1980s I was not only older and less nervous, but the touring environment was more benign and so I retrained myself to sleep with my boots off! Not all tourers were able to sleep soundly in the field. One RAF Tour Officer in the early 1980s was terrified of the

Just before daybreak we would strike camp and re-emerge in a less remote location, preferably within sight of a major military transit route, where the driver would boil up the water to fill the six thermos flasks and we would wash and get our equipment stowed for daylight operations.

In theory, therefore, it was very unlikely that any Stasi or passing local would bump into the tour at its most vulnerable time, when all three men were asleep, and we were careful to leave behind no traces of our presence when we moved out of our Z-platz, not least because good sites were hard to find, especially in the northern part of the DDR (Area A), and often needed to be re-used by later crews.

One final aspect of our ritual behaviour was the view that the edge of civilisation lay at the extreme limit of reception for British Forces (BFBS) Berlin radio programmes. Much of the routine of touring was far from spectacular or exciting and so it was very relaxing during brew stops and quiet periods to be able to listen to the diet of familiar voices and music, as well as the news, beamed out from BFBS Berlin. My personal favourite was Gloria Hunniford who broadcast programmes about her visits to British units worldwide in such an intimate and chirpy style that she almost seemed to be sharing our tea breaks with us.

Fortunately, all was not lost beyond the limit of BFBS reception because each tour vehicle had a cassette player too, even if there were few tapes that suited all tastes. Dire Straits, the Eurythmics and the Scottish comedian, Billy Connolly, found themselves in that élite grouping and will always evoke pleasant memories of East German forests and railways for me.

## **Touring Activity**

There was, of course, no such thing as a 'typical' Ground tour, but they all contained many of the operational activities described below and what was also very much a fact was that no tour ever went according to the Tour Brief issued to the crew by the optimists in the Operations Room.

---

dark – and of just about everything else. The Tour NCOs and Drivers soon realised this and decided to 'enhance his concerns' by persuading him that most of the wild animals in the forests were rabid. He would spend the whole night awake, lying on a camp bed under a basha and a mosquito net, smoking. Whenever the other tourers woke up and got out of bed, they would toss fir cones onto this officer's basha and would then make helpful remarks like 'Crikey, sir! Did you see that squirrel – it was wobbly and frothing at the mouth!' After a year or so this exhausted officer regained everyone's respect when he marched in to see the Deputy Chief and asked to be removed from the Mission because his nerves were in tatters and he could see no prospect of ever being able to relax on tour.

---

The monitoring of road junctions and railway lines was one activity that took up an enormous amount of any tourer's time and everyone soon learnt where the best observation points (OPs) were. All tours, whether Ground or Air, were expected to occupy suitable vantage points, particularly during the long evening hours, unless they were busy on some other specific task.

Exercise-related and administrative convoys tended to use obvious routes and some OPs, like those around Beelitz and Treuenbrietzen ('TB') to the south of Potsdam and those in the so-called Lübben Triangle (Lübben-Luckau-Calau) in the Spreewald area to the south-east of Berlin, were traditionally happy hunting grounds for tours with time to spare.

Similarly, OPs overlooking railway junctions and main lines often came up trumps and everyone had his own favourites, such as those on the 'Cottfin' (the Cottbus to Finsterwalde railway line) and in the Local area around Potsdam. It was an accepted norm that any tour that 'caught' a significant military rail movement had to wait a further six hours in order to establish whether the first train was part of a larger deployment by rail.

Despite the importance of good OPs, the use of camouflage to conceal a tour car or its dismounted members in such spots was strongly discouraged on the basis that to cover the vehicle with freshly cut foliage or to use a camouflage net could only be interpreted by our Soviet hosts as being contrary to the spirit of liaison, the Mission's principal purpose.

All the same, tourers were encouraged to select their OPs with great care, ensuring that the best possible advantage was gained from existing natural cover and that an escape route was always available. So, while it was considered quite legitimate to omit to make oneself obvious to passing Soviet and East German vehicles, it was seen as breaking the unwritten rules and as a 'crime of commission' to set about deliberately camouflaging and concealing the tour car and its crew.

Visiting garrison towns to assess the levels of activity in their barrack complexes and on the local training areas was another key tour task. Everyone felt himself to be somewhat of an expert on the Soviets in the Local area around Potsdam, which contained 10<sup>th</sup> Guards Tank Division (10 GTD), 35<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Division (35 MRD) and a host of other units, but only full-time tourers could develop the necessary familiarity with more distant garrisons.

For instance, I felt particularly at home creeping around the Guards Air Assault Brigade in Cottbus, 16 GTD in Neustrelitz and the mix of Soviet and NVA bases in Halle. Simply driving around, peering over barrack walls and checking rail sidings for the tell-tale signs of the recent movement of armoured vehicles could give a tour crew an excellent feel for just how normal, or otherwise, things were.

Close to each garrison town was its own training area or 'polygon', where basic fieldcraft and marksmanship could be practised and, more often than not, where some live firing and comprehensive dry training exercises up to company or even battalion level could be conducted.

Tours monitored these facilities with great interest, photographing and commenting on activity levels, while trying not to get detained in the process. For their part, inactive training areas not only provided useful negative information, but also offered rich pickings for tour 'gannets' (compulsive scavengers). We would steal anything and everything of interest that was not guarded and whatever we were unable to carry off, we photographed and recorded 'in situ'.

Unlike the situation for NATO forces in West Germany, in the DDR every unit had its own designated and fully prepared wartime deployment areas some kilometres from its peacetime location, from which it could be launched in a period of transition to war. As a result almost every wood in East Germany seemed to be full of pits for that had already been dug and revetted for armoured and specialist wheeled vehicles.

Another feature of many deployment areas tended to be a command bunker. These varied in their sophistication and size from small unguarded buried concrete structures, like small 'Nissen' huts, up to extensive and permanently manned high level bunker complexes with their own communications arrays and intruder alarms.

The thing that all the bunkers had in common was that they were wired into the Soviet field telephone system. This allowed the occupants to deploy from barracks on 'radio silence' and then communicate securely by telephone in a time of crisis without giving away their positions to listening Allied signals intercept units.

Fortunately for us at least, the Soviets had an appallingly poor grasp of hygiene and of operational security in the field. For instance, there was no lavatory paper in their field ration packs and so the soldiers

---

were forced instead to use letters from home and miscellaneous military paperwork. And so, by tip-toeing around their chaotic ablution areas in the woods and trying to avoid standing in their 'blind mullets', we were able to recover enough raw material to pin down which units had been in occupation of that location and roughly how recently.

One Royal Engineers Tour NCO, who had best remain unnamed, found his own way to get even with the Soviets for making him indulge in this filthy and disagreeable task: by making use of each bunker's escape hatch, he set out to leave a calling card, this time with real lavatory paper, inside the front door of every command bunker! The Soviets' reactions to his gestures are unknown, but they can have done little for East-West détente.

Although units did occasionally 'crash out of camp' (quite literally in the case of 10 GTD which would burst through the back gate of its barracks and go straight onto the Berlin orbital autobahn) and practise occupying their own deployment areas, their normal destination for regimental and higher level manoeuvres was one of the major training areas within the DDR.

It was there on the vast polygons (whose names still bring a tingle to an old tourer, like the Letzlinger Heide, Altengrabow, Jüterbog, Wittstock and Lieberose training areas<sup>31</sup>) that Soviet and NVA commanders could conduct live firing manoeuvres and could be tested on their ability to put theory into practice during each unit's all too rare exercise periods.

Unfortunately, just as in West Germany, the major training areas were all firmly placed in PRA by our hosts and so we were restricted to trying to catch Soviet and NVA units at three other stages: first, when they were deploying from garrison by road and rail into the polygon; next, if and when they moved tactically between PRAs from one training area to another; and, finally, during the return to barracks phase.

While an increase in specialist railway rolling stock might well trigger our interest in forthcoming movement by rail, road moves were invariably, and tantalisingly, advertised by the humble Soviet traffic regulator, known affectionately to all tourers as a 'reggie' and to me, alliteratively, as 'Reginald Rokossovsky the reputed Russian regulator'.

---

<sup>31</sup> I was quite shocked in late 1990, when making a nostalgic trip to the former East Germany, to be passed by a Bundeswehr (Federal German Armed Forces) truck coming out of what I had always thought of as the Jüterbog PRA, but it was simply a sign of the new era.

The East German military authorities normally preferred to employ their own military police on motorcycles to guide their convoys, but the Soviets favoured the cheaper variant, the static human signpost. Reggies also allowed stressed Russian vehicle commanders to avoid the tiresome business of trying to read the civilian, non-Cyrillic roadsigns.

The long suffering young ‘reggies’, wearing white helmets, black leather suits and reflective belts and twirling striped regulating batons (known to BRIXMIS as ‘pozhaluysta’ sticks after the Russian word for ‘please’) were a feature of the DDR countryside. Lucky tours would find a reggie sitting dejectedly, and normally all alone, at major road and track junctions, waiting for a column to arrive so that he could direct it in the right direction with his baton.

Our next task was to find where the other reggies had been posted and then occupy an OP between two regulated junctions in order to wait to see what the reggies were expecting. The Soviet Komendant’s Service was responsible for most regulators, but they were all too often dumped on the side of the road in all weathers with no real rations or other creature comforts and were studiously avoided by the locals. For the price of a cigarette and a friendly word or two many reggies would let a tourer know if he had finished his regulating task or if he was still expecting more ‘kit’ to come by, so satisfying the crew’s nagging curiosity.

While regulators on main roads might simply signal that driver training or administrative traffic was on the move, much more exciting was the sight of reggies being dropped off or already in position at those points where tactical routes crossed over main roads used by civilian vehicles. These unpaved ‘tac routes’ were a distinctive feature of the DDR countryside and an extensive network of them linked garrisons with their local rail loading ramps, training and deployment areas.

‘Tac routes’ also allowed for tactical route march movement by tracked and wheeled vehicles, known to the AMLMs respectively as ‘hard kit’ and ‘soft kit’, between the major polygons. We used to mark the known ‘tac routes’ on our touring maps, reasoning that, if the Soviets erected signposts on them for all to see, no one could object to us recording this information. Routinely checking ‘tac route’ crossing points for recent use provided us with another fair indication of activity levels.

In addition to observing ‘tac routes’, we also concentrated our efforts on the river crossing sites that lay on the main axes between training areas and others that were close to garrisons with amphibious

engineering units. Not only could tourers get a chance to evaluate the competence of sappers undergoing preparatory pontoon and ferry training, but every once in a while we would be lucky enough, particularly at sites on the Elbe to the east of Wittenberg and around Havelberg, to catch several hundred Soviet or NVA vehicles executing a major tactical river crossing exercise as part of a movement phase, normally from one manoeuvre training area to another.

Observing the Warsaw Pact's ground forces on exercise and in their daily garrison routines over many years gave the AMLMs unique insights into their real strengths and weaknesses at the tactical level, which was all too often far removed from the image of themselves that the Soviet and NVA authorities put out via their propaganda machines. While the whole world could watch the triumphant displays of military equipment on the great Soviet anniversaries in Moscow and on the 7<sup>th</sup> October DDR National Day parades in East Berlin, only the missions had the chance to peek around the curtain to see what military things were really like backstage in East Germany.

The overall impression of the Soviet Army that we gained was of fine, functional equipment, much of it at the forefront of military technology, in the hands of troops whose quality varied enormously. At the bottom of the scale were the simple 'cannon fodder', like most motor rifle, artillery and logistic conscripts, who were only expected to do one simple job and tended to do it with little or no enthusiasm and under a military regime that would have depressed anyone as a result of its coarseness and frequent brutality.

Non-Slav citizens, the much despised 'natsmeny', were concentrated in these units and provided their officers and NCOs with almost insuperable linguistic, cultural and disciplinary problems. As a consequence the Soviet Army at street level gave a poor impression of itself and was characterised by unmaintained barracks and quartering areas and by scruffy, dirty and listless soldiers.

What was equally true, however, was that there were pockets of excellence in the Soviet military and that, where it really mattered, the personnel were as well trained, motivated and led as their counterpart servicemen in most NATO armies. Tourers soon learnt to treat some arms of service with particular respect. Chief among these were KGB and other signallers, airborne, 'spetsnaz' (special forces) soldiers and rocket artillery troops. If most Soviet officers and men would prefer not to notice or report having seen a tour, the members of these élite units often revelled in the opportunity to chase and detain AMLM tours.

The image presented to the Allied missions by the NVA was, generally speaking, much more positive. In many ways the DDR was the heir to the Prussian and Wehrmacht military traditions and the East Germans appeared to us to be born and bred as 'natural soldiers'. In their bearing and the way they wore their field grey uniforms, they looked like real soldiers and their vehicles and other equipments were almost always in good order.

While the NVA officers might complain among themselves that they were having to make do with less modern 'kit' than their GSFG allies, they certainly knew how to train their men to get the best out of what was available. Furthermore, unlike their Soviet counterparts, their confidence when they were on exercise verged on arrogance; they knew that they were good and didn't mind who saw it and so they allowed us to get better coverage of their convoys than we were otherwise used to getting from the Soviets.

The professionalism of NVA soldiers, be they conscripts or regulars, was especially demonstrated by their approach to operational security: they left nothing behind of value to us on their training areas or in their exercise deployment sites.

Personally, along with many other ex-tourers, I found the collapse of the NVA in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall to be one of the great surprises of the post-Cold War era because, once its political control by the SED party was removed, this mighty and professional army allowed itself to be dismantled by Bonn without any evident resistance at all.

Activity levels declined markedly between the early 1980s, when anything up to three divisional level movements of equipments could be spotted in a single tour during the two peak exercise periods, and the end of the decade, by which time the spirit of détente between the Cold War rivals was very much underway.

However, even though there may have been fewer major deployments in the late 1980s, we could target the larger surviving exercises fairly accurately thanks to the notification procedures introduced under the Stockholm agreements on confidence building. During these exercises we were often faced by interference from East German busy-bodies, but we were occasionally surprised when the Soviets intervened to defend the AMLMs' right to sit in rail OPs to watch the exercise participants deploying and going home.

We saw very little of the other Warsaw Pact allies' armies because none of them had troops garrisoned in the DDR. They did, however, send contingents to participate in the annual 'Brothers in Arms' ('Waffenbrüderschaft') manoeuvres, which were held on the major East German polygons. BRIXMIS and the other AMLMs did what we could to catch the arrival and departure of these foreign contingents, but to do so we needed a degree of luck. Fortunately, on those occasions when we did manage to find them, they were normally friendly enough, probably because they had little or no idea about what the AMLMs were trying to achieve.

One such stroke of good fortune occurred on one of my tours in the Local area. Late at night, while sitting in an OP in the small town of Treuenbrietzen and flicking through an equipment recognition manual, I remarked to the Tour NCO (Jeff Fairbairn) that I had always wanted to see an OT-64, an 8-wheeled Czech and Polish armoured personnel carrier.

Some time later in the early morning we were all dozing 'like coiled springs' when I suddenly heard a low rumble coming towards us and then, emerging from the mist, we caught sight of a lone Polish OT-64 coming out of the Jüterbog training area. Scarcely able to believe our luck, we chased it all the way to the border of the Altengrabow PRA. Thereafter we often tried to conjure up 'sexy kit' by deliberate wishful thinking, but sadly the magic never worked again!

In the midst of the army activity, there were also opportunity air targets for Ground tourers to cover. This was especially the case when Mi-8 HIP utility and Mi-6 HOOK heavy lift helicopters operated in support of the Guards Air Assault Brigade and during the offensive phases of major manoeuvres<sup>32</sup>.

Other attractions included catching Mi-24 HIND attack helicopters transitting at low level, with their pilots using main roads and railway lines for navigation instead of bothering to map read, and night live firing programmes at air-to-ground ranges, on which both HIPs and HINDs used to fire seemingly whatever the weather. Even if we could see very little, our video coverage allowed the boffins back in England to work out what was going on and to assess the techniques and tactics that were used.

---

<sup>32</sup> The largest stream of helicopters that I ever managed to catch contained about 70 HOOK and HIP helicopters and made the earth shake around us.

Ground tourers had to avoid the temptation to 'poach' at airfields, which were reserved for Air tours, but luck had a way of favouring Ground tours. For example, much of the early photographic coverage of the Su-24 FENCER fighter-bomber in the DDR was taken not by well targeted RAF tourers, but by lucky Army officers sitting in road OPs in the Lübben Triangle, some distance from the aircrafts' home base.

Naturally, given the twice yearly training cycle to which both the Soviets and the NVA adhered, there were slack periods in the touring calendar and these were filled by the Operations Officers with the lower priority taskings.

One of these was the coverage of logistic installations and facilities. All tourers were expected to be able to conduct surveys of known sites, often consisting of little more than panoramic photography, and to take an interest in all brand new projects and in the modernisation of the DDR's civil infrastructure.

If taking panoramas of industrial plants can scarcely be described as glamorous work, we found that some tasks, like surveying the Greifswald and Rheinsberg nuclear power plants and covering the installation of railway electrification and natural gas pipelines, could often become a compulsive pastime. The logistics intelligence experts in Rheindahlen and London were always eager for any information that we could provide.

Another of the lower priority tasks given routinely to Ground tours was that of carrying out updating surveys on the mapping of the DDR. The 1:50,000 scale maps were based on pre-war cartography, which the BRIXMIS Military Survey 'Geo' section, with never more than two members, was constantly revising on behalf of our Allied counterparts. This work could only be completed by individual tours going out on the ground to verify the details, most of which were drafted on dyeline (like blueprint) maps using information from satellites and other sources.

Some tourers found the mapping task, known as Operation Saddlebag, very boring, but there were always military and paramilitary border guard facilities lurking unexpectedly in quiet corners of the countryside that only mapping tours in otherwise unknown territory would reveal. And even when there were no targets to discover, I always felt that the sheer pleasure of being somewhere where no one else from the West had any real reason to be was a privilege in itself.

The final major feature of the 'Intelligence Hoover' in the DDR was the chance that it provided for all of us to achieve a first sighting, a 'scoop', be it of technical or of order of battle significance, because new equipment was constantly being introduced into GSFG and its units were endlessly being restructured in order to adopt this new 'kit' and tactics.

The search for a 'scoop' was recognition skill at its most competitive and satisfying. Some scoops were the result of direct tasking by our customers, such as the request by Technical Intelligence (Army) for one of the ERA (explosive reactive armour) boxes that started to appear on Soviet tanks in the mid-1980s.

On that occasion, within one week of us receiving the high priority tasking an ERA box was on the customer's desk in London. It had not been prized off a tank by some intrepid tourer<sup>33</sup>, but had been found by a Tour NCO (Dave Butler), largely thanks to serendipity, in a vehicle pit on the south side of the Lieberose tank range. Inspired by this find, USMLM then went on to recover two more ERA boxes soon thereafter, helping to draw a line under this technical mystery.

All too often, however, scoops were a total surprise. Perhaps the best example was the discovery in the late 1980s of an SS-23 (SPIDER, 'Oka') short range ballistic missile unit deployed on the isolated Haufeld training area in the south of the DDR. The BRIXMIS tour that found it was almost instantly detained and its vehicle was covered with a tarpaulin. The Tour Officer (Mike Hill) had nevertheless managed to take about 17 frames before the detention occurred even if, along with his crew, he was convinced that he had been seized by an SS-21 (SCARAB, 'Tochka') unit.

It was only the subsequent analysis of the film by our Weapons Office staff that revealed that, far from being yet another SS-21 sighting (on a 3-axle launch vehicle), it was actually a technical and order of battle scoop: the 4-axle SS-23. And in those 17 frames, the tour had managed to get good technical coverage of the launcher and transloader vehicles and of the missile itself, all involved in a transloading exercise. Until this incident no one in NATO had realised that the Soviets had deployed SS-23s as far forward as the DDR; before long, as a result of US and other pressure, these SS-23 systems had been withdrawn to the USSR.

---

<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the Chief (then Brig John Foley) had held a brainstorming at which we had had a string of young glory-hunting, intrepid Tour Officers, such as Capts Stephen Harrison RTR and Colin Ward RE, volunteering to jump from bridges onto 'kit' trains as they moved into PRAs in order to prise off these precious ERA boxes. Fortunately it proved unnecessary to test their resolve and their luck.

---

More often, however, progress in understanding new equipment involved the slow collection of many pieces of information until the shape of the jigsaw finally became reasonably clear. This was the case in the early 1980s with the introduction of the T-80 main battle tank, when we had been given tantalising glimpses of what had to be a new tank, but it took many months before these amounted to a proper unveiling of this beautiful machine.

I remember well, for instance, being firmly ordered at gunpoint off the Dresden autobahn by the Komendant, when my tour got too close to a fully tarpaulined, unidentified tank that had slid off its low-loader vehicle; it had to be a T-80, but the Soviets were determined to stop us confirming this.

Similarly, in the late 1980s we were fascinated by the arrival of the highly advanced, self-propelled gun-missile air defence system, originally known as ZSU-X and later as 2S6 ('Tunguska'), but the 'scoop' consisted of numerous 'mini-scoops', rather than a single revelation. At first the Soviets let us see a fully tarpaulined vehicle on a train and this allowed the 'tarpologists' to announce that it was definitely the introduction of a new tracked armoured vehicle to the DDR.

Thereafter, in stages, they let us (whether deliberately or otherwise) build up our knowledge about the chassis, followed by the superstructure and then, tantalisingly slowly, we were allowed to see and analyse the weapons and fire control systems, along with its associated unit vehicles. Everyone enjoyed the competition, particularly between the AMLMs, to fill in the missing parts of the 2S6 puzzle.

My own small part in this saga consisted of hanging around the outskirts of Halle because we knew these equipments were based there. Finally my Tour NCO (Graham Geary) suddenly spotted an unknown radar dish rotating above a mound of earth; without being able to see any vehicle, he immediately declared: 'ZSU-X fire control radar!' 'How do you know, no one has ever seen it?', I replied. 'I just do. So photograph it, please!' And. Of course, he was right. We did so in colour, monochrome and video, and so another small piece of the puzzle was secured<sup>34</sup>.

---

<sup>34</sup> It was strange to be invited in 2003 to visit an armoured unit near Moscow, where we were shown the 2S6 'Tunguska' in all its glory. In a similar way, having managed as my last ever 'scoop' in BRIXMIS to get full coverage of the new BTR-80 rkh (NBC recce variant), it was a real thrill to inspect one, now apparently designated RKhM-4-01, during the ground-breaking Exercise Avariya-2004 in the Kola peninsula in August 2004. This exercise saw the Russians demonstrate their NBC equipment, in particular their 'supercontainers' for the safe movement by road and rail of nuclear warheads.

One final example of a scoop shows how some sightings could have a significance beyond what the tour could imagine at the time. Late one foggy night near Oschatz we encountered a UAZ-469 jeep dropping off regulators. However, these were no ordinary 'reggies'; each was a lieutenant colonel, equipped with a regulating baton and they were placed at both ends of a small village. To satisfy our curiosity we occupied a particularly insecure OP, up a dead-end alley in the centre of the built-up area.

Not long afterwards the convoy arrived and proved to be no disappointment: a complete SCUD missile battalion moved slowly past us, allowing us to record all the vehicle types and their registration numbers. It was only some time later that the experts from our headquarters in Rheindahlen let us know that this had provided the first confirmation on the ground of a GSFG front-level SCUD unit and that our report had enabled them to lower the classification of this information sufficiently for it to appear at last on the widely distributed order of battle lists.

The tour process did not, of course, end with the return of the vehicle and its crew, via the Mission House in Potsdam and the Glienicke Bridge, to West Berlin.

The immediate action of every tour, from whichever Allied mission, was to call in at the USMLM offices in order to fill in a manuscript 'Tour Highlights' proforma. This itemised the main equipments that had been spotted, a summary of any detentions and serious incidents that had occurred and any newly identified Stasi surveillance vehicles. This brief information was the basis for the daily reports from each AMLM up its own national chain of command and was normally sufficient for the order of battle experts to identify the units that had been spotted.

On finally getting back to the BRIXMIS offices in the Olympic Stadium complex, the Tour Driver went off to start his post-tour vehicle cleaning and maintenance tasks down in the MT yard. Whereas the rest of the tour crew's duties were largely bureaucratic from this point on, the weary driver often faced several hours of manual labour before he could creep off home, including a session on the outdoor car washdown point whatever the weather might be.

Meanwhile the Tour Officer and NCO would drag all their holdalls up to the top floor of London Block, along with any sacks of stolen booty that had been scavenged out in the DDR. First stop was the Duty NCO's office to book the tour back in and to hand in our carbon copy of the Tour Highlights proforma, followed by visiting the Special Section, our RAF-manned photographic processing cell.

Special Section's proudest claim was that it would always produce monochrome prints by the time the tour crew came to work the next morning; colour slides might take a little longer, but everyone understood that a rapid result was vital if the tour's 'photo confirmed' information was to be disseminated in a timely manner.

Most important for the tourers was that this rapid photographic service normally enabled the Tour Officer and NCO to submit the report from their last tour before going off on their next tour.

The scale of the task carried out by the Special Section in this pre-digital photography era was enormous and in the last years of BRIXMIS over two million Deutschmarks (over £750,000) was spent annually on film, photographic paper and developing chemicals alone.

Responsibility for the overall Tour Report lay with the Tour Officer, who was expected to provide the text for surveys of training and deployment areas, along with details of unusual incidents and comment on anything that he felt was significant. In all of this he was assisted by the Tour NCO, on whose shoulders rested the task of identifying and listing all the 'kit' seen and, where applicable, noting that it had been photographically confirmed.

The vast majority of Army tourers, both officers and NCOs, was deliberately drawn from the combat arms (infantry, tank, artillery, engineer and signals) and so were also expected to be able to interpret and comment intelligently on what they saw on the ground in the light of their previous military experience.

A tour could also generate a variety of other written products, depending on what had occurred during its patrol. Detention Reports and Serious Incident Reports were the Tour Officer's responsibility, while the Weapons Office, helped by the tour crew, concentrated on producing Technical Reports and gave a preliminary analysis of any equipment scoops and possible order of battle developments.

Another small cell, operating under the 'nom-de-guerre' of the 'Spandau Office', was also formed in the 1980s to manage what was known first as Operation Tamarisk and later as Operation Tomahawk. This aimed to exploit the military artefacts and other rubbish scavenged, both systematically and opportunistically, from the nastier corners of the DDR.

As a linguist I thoroughly enjoyed this work, collecting the paperwork on the ground, trying to tease the information out of it once it had dried out and then writing up short Spandau Reports on the documents. Their contents ranged from field postal numbers, field ration pack details and equipment and personnel registers, through training and technical manuals, to various classified documents discarded in error by the Soviets.

Our goal in the Mission (in a pre-Local Area Network word processing era) was to issue our routine Tour Reports within a month, with the relevant photographs, sketches and other information attached to them; all were classified Confidential or above. Especially significant reports could, of course, be pushed through our drafting and clerical processes in a shorter time.

## **Touring Dramas**

Despite the best laid plans of the Operations Officers, like every other military activity, touring was not without its dramas, many of which tested our patience and our sense of humour.

For example, vehicles occasionally (or more often in the case of Range Rovers) broke down and officers were normally encouraged to stay inside the car as the security man, while the Tour NCO and Driver applied native cunning and brute force to try to resolve the problem, often by making use of the vehicle recovery and repair equipment carried by every tour. Local farmers could also be persuaded, usually for a small fee, to pull a tour vehicle out of the mud.

Sometimes, however, no amount of ingenuity was sufficient and it was clear that a full recovery operation would be needed, involving a spare tour jeep and the BRIXMIS trailer, which had to be deployed from West Berlin. The round trip from the Olympic Stadium complex, via Potsdam, to the farthest corners of the DDR took ages, but at least tourers carried all the necessities to keep themselves warm and well fed in such an emergency.

The sight of one tour car towing another rarely excited the interest of the locals, but children always appeared from the bushes and offered help and sympathy in exchange for ballpoint pens, chewing gum and sweets. On one occasion, however, a Tour Officer (Chris Hughes) met a lady from a BBC film team, which was making a programme about Bach's life in Eisenach. Looking at the recovered vehicle and its towing vehicle, she felt the need to ask the immortal question: 'Tell me, do you always carry a spare car?'

Drama was also a constant possibility when tours decided to overtake, or 'run', convoys in order to get close enough to record the vehicles' registration numbers and the details of the troops and equipment carried in or towed by the trucks. Opinions varied about whether it was safer to 'run' a column from the rear or head on<sup>35</sup>.

The rearward approach was felt to afford more of the element of surprise to the tour crew, but the head of the convoy might have already stopped and its soldiers might be on the roadway, effectively blocking the tour's escape. Or another vehicle might suddenly appear travelling on its own side of the road and so be moving at speed towards the oncoming tour crew.

On the other hand, 'running' a convoy from the front risked alert Soviet or NVA drivers and vehicle commanders deciding to swing their trucks across the centre of the roadway and so forcing the tour car into the ditch or worse.

In the event, we were not usually given the luxury of choice. Instead we had to tackle the column from whichever direction was open to us and the genuinely 'life or death' decision about when to abort the overtaking manoeuvre rested solely with the Tour Driver. His job was to concentrate on the reactions of the other drivers, while the Tour Officer and NCO were focussing on the recognition and the photography tasks.

At times there was much sucking of teeth in anticipation as the intrepid 'Fahrer' was heard to mutter: 'Don't worry, Sir. There are only eight or ten trucks there', but the convoy would then turn out to contain a hundred vehicles or more. Quick driving reactions, allied to a firm helping of luck, invariably pulled the tour crew through the potential drama in one piece, but a 'brew stop' was often required to give our heart rates a chance to return to normal.

One minor tactic, fortunately, provided us with a surprisingly high degree of security when overtaking or making 'close passes' of sensitive installations or deployments: the Tour NCO used to wave with his right hand and keep smiling, while all the time 'calling the kit' into his tape-recorder.

---

<sup>35</sup> Whatever the case, what was distinctly unsafe was trying to run a column from the rear at night without the use of headlights! We tried this once, when being pursued by a Soviet truck, and ended up bouncing off an unsuspecting East German civilian driver's Lada car. Not our best decision!

This cheery, apparently friendly gesture had two positive effects: first, it deceived the unwitting Soviet and East German soldiers into thinking that we were no threat to them; and, secondly, it provided superb cover for the Tour Officer in the back of the car. The officer could take his photographs unobserved because it is impossible for any onlooker's eyes not to be drawn to the movement of the waving hand. Few security measures can have been adopted as cheaply or as effectively.

What kept us all alert, of course, was the certainty of the unexpected happening. Whenever we crept onto a training area or 'lurked' around the back wall of a barracks, we could never be sure that some nasty surprise wasn't lying in wait for us, like a trigger-happy sentry, an overly enthusiastic armoured vehicle driver with an urge to flatten a tour car or even a new hole on a well known track. Common sense and an acute sense of self-preservation sufficed in most instances, but sometimes a crew's luck would run out.

For example, in order to shake off Stasi surveillance teams BRIXMIS tours often left the autobahns by switching off all the tour car's lights and using 'UFOs' (unofficial fly-offs), bumping down the grassy bank next to the motorway and onto a parallel agricultural or forestry track and so disappearing into the dark of the night. Unfortunately, obvious UFOs tended to be cut off by the East German authorities by digging a ditch or by placing some solid obstacle on the track. These surprises could be both disappointing and downright dangerous to any unsuspecting tourers.

Changing weather conditions also played havoc with the rough, unpaved tracks on which we used to creep around training areas and other out of the way spots and so our heavy and often overloaded tour vehicles occasionally got bogged down, however skilled the driver might be. Winching the car or jeep out of the mire, either with the electrical power winch on the jeeps or using the ground anchor and hand-powered winch carried in the Senators, gained an extra dimension of drama when it was undertaken 'in contact with the enemy' under the potential gaze of a sentry or some other hostile party.

Strangely, at none of those moments when I was forced to 'winch in contact' were we ever interfered with by the opposition, either thanks to the sentry deciding in a very East European way not to see anything or perhaps because we clearly represented no threat while we were floundering about in the mud and rain.

The risk of being shot was also much less great than might have been supposed, even though all sentries and deployed troops carried live ammunition. In part this was the result of the strict orders that all

---

armed personnel were given and because of their natural desire to do nothing that might lead to investigations and recriminations by their own authorities.

A BRIXMIS tour car was struck by a number of rounds of ammunition and the Tour Driver was hit back in March 1962<sup>36</sup>, but during the 1980s such incidents were very rare. For instance, in the early 1980s a British tour was fired at by the Soviets when it passed the same missile deployment unwisely for a third time on the Euper training area, just north of Wittenberg, but to do so had been rash.

The aim of touring, of course, was to try, whenever possible, to gain the vital information about a given objective without it becoming aware that it had been a target. Keeping one's distance and restricting the number of 'passes' (drives past) to no more than two tended to limit the risk of irritating the prey from biting back.

Only one tourer was shot during the 1980s, Major Arthur 'Nick' Nicholson of USMLM (killed on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1985); on that occasion he had been emerging from a sensitive and guarded installation and, according to the Soviets, he had failed to respond to a challenge to halt before the sentry fired and killed him.

Just as the use of violence against tourers by Soviet and NVA personnel was a rarity, so too were serious incidents involving the AMLMs and the DDR police and their plain clothes Stasi colleagues, the 'narks'. A curious, but perhaps predictable, *modus vivendi* had developed: the Stasis attempted to verify that, at least by day, our operating techniques and areas of interest were unchanged, and we allowed them to do so unless and until we needed to get away from them, at which point our speed and cross-country ability were normally sufficient to deliver a clean break.

'Narks' tended to become more persistent when AMLM tours were operating behind MRS or were too close to NVA or other sensitive State facilities, but they were usually only too happy for tourers to concentrate on their Soviet allies' assets.

---

<sup>36</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> March 1962 Cpl Douglas Day RAF was driving Lt Col Nick Browne at night in the Klein Machnow suburb of Potsdam when they were shot at by the East German Border Police (GREPO); the vehicle was hit a number of times and Day received wounds, mainly internally, and spent six days in hospital in the DDR. The story is covered at greater length in Geraghty's book on BRIXMIS.

The Stasis who shadowed us were apparently surveillance operators, rather than thugs, and invariably shied away from open confrontation with tourers. Their greatest fear seemed to be that of having their photograph taken by tours because, allegedly, if their face got onto the files of the Western security services, they would never survive as undercover agents in West Germany or any other capitalist country.

At least in theory, the whole population of the DDR and all members of GSFG ought to have been endlessly reporting on our movements, so allowing the Stasi and Soviet staffs to keep a tight control on mission activities. However, Colonel Yuri Pliev, the troubleshooter for the Chief of Staff in Zossen, assured me that very few Soviet soldiers or dependants ever rang up to say that they had seen a tour car.

Pliev believed that this was typical of his countrymen because they were terrified of being unable to answer all the questions that the 'organs' of state security might subsequently ask them; it was preferable to see nothing and therefore to report nothing.

Nevertheless, Pliev assured me, Zossen received plenty of information on our activities, presumably thanks to the Stasis, and so he claimed that he had no need to probe tourers with impertinent questions because he already knew all about the sort of mischief we were making.

## **Detentions**

Just as getting arrested is an occupational hazard for petty criminals, so too was being arrested, known as 'being detained', for tourers and it evoked a broad spectrum of emotions among its victims. Given that the initial stage of any serious incident would often involve a degree of physical danger, a certain amount of stomach-churning fear was only to be expected. Aggressive pursuits, car crashes and close encounters with loaded weapons should give rise to similar reactions in anyone normal.

The initial fear then tended to give way to a sense of embarrassment on the part of the tour crew about having allowed itself to fall into a trap or to make a stupid mistake<sup>37</sup>. Many a driver felt something

---

<sup>37</sup> Being unarmed meant that tourers did not suffer from the 'psychological castration' effect that soldiers who have to surrender their weapons normally feel. This was also evident in the former Yugoslavia where UN Military Observers were also unarmed and took being detained by the Serbs with a degree of equanimity; the armed UN elements, on the

akin to shame whenever a detention resulted from getting a tour vehicle bogged in or rammed and the aim of most 'Fahrers' was to stay a 'detention virgin'.

Avoiding getting caught became, however, an unhealthy obsession for some tourers, based on a mixture of fear of the unknown and fear of the 'leg-pulling' that was sure to greet them back in the MT compound and in the BRIXMIS all ranks bar. For my own part, for good Coldstream reasons, I was always content to be detained by Soviet Guards soldiers, but I was far less happy when I was caught by men whose units did not bear the élite Guards honorific title!

In any detention the immediate action for the Tour Officer, once he had ensured that everyone was uninjured and all the sensitive equipment was stowed away from prying eyes, was to demand that the detaining party should summon the Soviet Komendant to the scene. SOPs made it clear that we were forbidden to deal with anyone except a properly accredited, pass-carrying Komendant because he alone could speak with the authority of the Chief of Staff in Zossen.

Once the Komendant had arrived, sometimes without an interpreter, and had identified himself as such, the vehicle's pass and our tourers' passes would be handed to him and the situation would invariably calm down. His task was to conduct an investigation of the circumstances, questioning the arresting party and the Tour Officer, and then to produce an incident report for HQ GSFG, known as an 'Akt'.

Just as it was his job to produce the Akt, so too was it ours to refuse to sign it; even the Mission's Russian speakers were prohibited from signing in case it was used as an admission of guilt or later appeared in a conveniently 'doctored' version. Our aim was to try to note any details from the Akt, especially the field postal number of our captors so that we could later confirm which unit had been involved.

After the bureaucratic niceties were completed, detentions often became quite jolly affairs as we all killed time until the Komendant received further orders to escort us from the area or to let us go<sup>38</sup>.

---

other hand, suffered from a much greater sense of failure, shame and depression when they were taken hostage and disarmed.

<sup>38</sup> SOPs gave us no hard and fast rules about what we could and could not talk about and so my preferred technique was to overwhelm the Komendant with information about my life and career. I did this for two reasons. First, because it was excellent practice for my Russian language skills. And, second, because I knew that he would have to report in great detail and in long-hand on everything that I had said and done and that this would then have to be cross-referenced by several staff officers in Zossen. So, if they could waste our time in a detention, we could waste theirs after the event!

---

In August 1981 we<sup>39</sup> enjoyed a thoroughly memorable detention as a consequence of watching Soviet engineers practising their amphibious drills at the Elster-Gallin crossing site on the river Elbe.

Our main mistake was to stay too long in the same spot, imagining that we had not been seen, and so, as the day turned to dusk, we were suddenly ‘bounced’ by a very professional ambush mounted by these same Soviet sappers. The first I knew was when I saw camouflaged men with AK-74 assault rifles approaching us rapidly through the trees behind the tour car. I immediately checked that the doors were locked and all kit was covered up.

The Tour NCO and Driver were caught outside the vehicle, fortunately equipped at that stage with nothing more incriminating than a large pair of binoculars, while I was inside the Senator, having just finished a pint of tea and a can of cola.

When the Komendant arrived from the nearest garrison town, Wittenberg, over an hour later, he and I went through the ritual examination of the Akt and he was content with my explanation as to why I was not allowed to sign it. I suggested that he should let the Tour Driver back into the car so that he and I could conduct our business more comfortably in the open air, but he decided that he was unable to agree to that.

Instead, he decided to probe me about what we were up to in that neck of the woods. ‘Why are you sitting here in this forest? And why are these two men out of the vehicle?’, he asked. ‘Well, we have to stop every two hours for a coffee break and to give the driver a rest and this seemed like an inoffensive, out of the way spot. I assume that the men got out for a pee’, I replied.

‘But you must have given them permission? And why was one of them carrying a powerful pair of binoculars?’ ‘In our army we let our experienced NCOs decide when they need a pee. As for the field glasses, you’ll have to ask him ... but I do know that he’s a keen bird-watcher,’ I explained. ‘Oh yes. What kind of birds?’ ‘I’m afraid that my vocabulary doesn’t include many bird names in Russian, but, if I said ‘swans’, would we all be on the same wavelength?’, I countered.

---

<sup>39</sup> The Tour NCO was Sgt Martyn Woods RA and the Tour Driver was Cpl Steve ‘Taff’ Evans RCT. The incident occurred on 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> August 1981. On 25<sup>th</sup> April 2005 I was lucky enough to be presented with the US Legion of Merit by SACEUR, General James L. Jones USMC. Searching for a ‘bon mot’ or two, I pointed out that that same day was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US-Soviet meeting up of the Western and Eastern fronts near Torgau, also on the Elbe. I noted that, although I was neither a US nor a Russian citizen, I could claim a link to this historic event because of my own tour crew’s ‘combat crossing’ of the Elbe with the Soviet Army some 36 years later, albeit under arrest at the time!

The Komendant smiled broadly and gave in gracefully saying: 'I suspect that this conversation is getting me nowhere, isn't it!' Thereafter we got on excellently and I proceeded to give him my life story, knowing that he would have to report it all later in great detail and that cross-checking this would keep several officers busy in Zossen. The negative side of all of this was that it was more than seven hours after the ambush before he could be persuaded to let the Tour Driver take my place in the car, which finally let me out for a desperately long overdue pee!

Around midnight the Soviet engineer commander, who had earlier visited us in a T-64 tank, arrived in a huge PTS tracked amphibian (rather like a wartime DUKW). Jumping down from it, he said: 'So, you want to see my crossing site, do you?' I tried a feeble denial along the lines: 'What crossing point?', with which we got on with the tricky business of getting the Senator up the ramp onto the cargo deck of the PTS.

Then, holding on to the PTS cab roof with the Komendant and the sapper commander, we charged off through the trees, across the flood plain and, without even changing gear, the PTS hurtled into the river Elbe. The amphibian swam the fifty metre wide river in a matter of seconds and we came to a halt in the moonlight on the shingle-covered far bank. After a great deal of tugging and towing we finally got the Senator up onto the flood barrier 'bund' and the Komendant announced that we were to follow him back to his office.

I was not prepared, however, simply to slink away under escort without one final scene being played out. 'Wait, please. I don't think that we can leave just yet'. 'But, why not?', replied the long suffering Komendant. 'Because we should never allow ourselves to neglect a piece of history and tonight was just such an occasion'. 'But, what on earth do you mean?' 'I would like formally to shake the commander by the hand here in front of our assembled company and thank him for permitting me to participate in a great event: the first crossing of the Elbe by the wartime Allies since 1945!' Everyone seemed thoroughly to enjoy this example of odd British humour and we parted from the Soviet engineers as the best of friends.

On reaching the Komendatura in Wittenberg it became clear that we would not be released until daybreak at the earliest, probably in order to keep us out of trouble while the full amphibious crossing exercise at Elster-Gallin went ahead around dawn. So I pulled out my emergency bottle of NAAFI whisky and the Komendant responded with one of Voentorg vodka and we settled own to make the best of a long night of enforced inactivity, because the return of our passes could only occur when the Komendant received an order from Zossen to let us go.

Despite the conviviality of the situation, I was unable to resist scoring an important psychological point off my Soviet host by insisting that I needed to use the lavatory and refusing to accept his claim that it was 'closed for remont'. Just as I knew it would be in a former Wehrmacht building the loo turned out to have been smashed and vandalised and apparently uncleaned since 1945. The embarrassment on the face of the Komendant at having to reveal the true squalor of the Soviet military ensured that we parted as equals and not as a dominant captor and his chastened detainees.

All too often a potentially serious drama could best be defused by accepting a possible detention, rather than trying instinctively to run away from the scene and so almost certainly exacerbating the situation. Tour crews without linguists tended to prefer the escape option to the awkwardness of being unable to communicate with the detaining troops, but those of us who were lucky enough to be able to muddle along in Russian and some German could often talk our way out of a tight corner, as at Satzkorn sidings (see above).

On several occasions, much against the instincts of the Tour Driver, I decided to accept a detention in order to monitor the passing military traffic, while continuing to explain to the Komendant and our captors why we had every right to be where we were and why we felt that it was both unnecessary and unreasonable to detain us. I hope that in doing so I may have persuaded some Russians and East Germans that we were not evil capitalist saboteurs and might just perhaps be military men with a sensible job to do, not unlike themselves.

Conversely, excessive aggression by tourers reacting to attempts to stop them operating was often a recipe for disaster. A certain amount of latitude might be allowed by SERB in cases when tour cars bounced off Stasi and Vopo vehicles blocking their escape or when damage was done to civilian property, but offering, and worse still using, violence against Soviet troops was the ultimate 'no-no'.

This was made crystal clear to us all in the early 1980s following a very serious incident in the Local area, during which a USMLM tour, commanded by an US Army officer, not only refused to stop when surrounded by Soviet soldiers, but eased steadily forward through the cordon.

This resulted in a young Soviet officer being deliberately run over by the Americans and being dragged along the road by his head. That the Russian survived was allegedly nothing short of a miracle, but the expulsion of the US Army officer and the novice tourer USMC officer who was understudying him was a

well justified reaction and punishment. The USMLM driver was not, however, made 'persona non grata' because, as SERB explained, he was simply acting on the criminal orders given to him by the Tour Officer.

Above all, that sorry event and the other rare violent acts by members of the AMLMs broke the fundamental 11<sup>th</sup> commandment: 'Thou shalt not do anything, however attractive the short term gain may be, that puts the long term viability of the missions at risk'.

Every tourer has his own dramas to recall. I shall resist the temptation to write in detail about any more of the incidents and detentions that were the highlights of my two postings to BRIXMIS, but undoubtedly the most famous was the day that I almost got the Chief (later General Sir John Learmont) killed by the NVA air force at the Athenstedt.

Other notable incidents in which I was involved included: the time that we<sup>40</sup> were detained near the Satzkorn rail sidings and the tour car was covered by a tarpaulin, but we still managed to 'take' the passing air defence trains; the occasion when we<sup>41</sup> deliberately crashed into a Stasi nark car on the Auer deployment area and did a successful 'runner'; the day the Tour NCO (Ken Wike) leapt onto a pausing train at Prödel, south-east of Magdeburg and tried to calibrate a BMP-2 cannon with an apple<sup>42</sup>; the morning that we<sup>43</sup> were

---

<sup>40</sup> The Tour NCO was Capt Phil Richardson INT CORPS (but badged RCT), but unfortunately I can't recall who the Tour Driver was.

<sup>41</sup> The Tour NCO was WO2 Ken Connor SAS (but badged R SIGNALS) and the Tour Driver was Cpl Wayne 'Hissing Sid' Fury RCT; they had both decided to 'wing' the nark car quite deliberately and, in fact, gratuitously and so we had crashed into it in the middle of a field, just outside a wood full of deployment pits. In the aftermath I was asked by the Deputy, Gp Capt Dick Bates, to explain how and why the crash had occurred. I claimed that it had taken place as we were leaving the wood; he then said that this wasn't the story that he had heard from WO2 Connor, who had claimed that it happened inside the wood. I was then obliged to waffle about what the 'forward edge of the wood' meant in Army-speak – and left to remonstrate with Ken Connor about getting our stories together if we were going to be so 'economical with the truth'! This was not our finest hour.

<sup>42</sup> This incident became a bit of a 'cause célèbre' because I managed to take a series of colour slides and these were shown to senior officers in Rheindahlen and London (and one appears in monochrome in Tony Geraghty's book on BRIXMIS). The facts of the matter were that, while having a cup of tea on a railway bridge at Prödel on the line between Zerbst and Magdeburg, we were surprised to see a 'kit' train coming slowly towards us, obviously laden with Soviet equipment. We got ready to photograph the train as it went past, only to have it stop under the bridge with several BMP-2 armoured infantry fighting vehicles on one side of the bridge, while all the escorting Soviet troops were in their carriages ('M-wagons') at the other end of the train. We drove off the bridge and into the field to get a better look at the head of the train, at which point Sgt Ken Wike RA said that he wanted to get onto the train in order to try to solve the question about the calibre of the BMP-2's cannon. Watched by the irate train driver, he jumped up onto the flatcar and then onto the BMP-2's deck and ripped the muzzle cover off the cannon. It was then that he realised that he only had two objects with him to provide scale: an apple and his Dictaphone tape recorder. So he balanced the Dictaphone on the barrel and rammed the apple into the muzzle. This did not, in fact, produce the answer to the question, but it did make a great photo! We then left the scene at high speed, carrying several bits of stolen equipment (the muzzle cover and the cover for the anti-tank missile housing on the turret roof). Later we discovered that the

‘lasered’ on the Haufeld polygon by a Soviet artillery observation vehicle; and many other ‘lantern swinging’ adventures<sup>44</sup>. Suffice it to say that the dramatic and heart-fluttering incidents more than made up for the frequent periods of tedium on tour.

## **A User-Friendly Environment**

To put them properly into their overall context, the serious incidents, detentions and scoops have to be seen as having happened in an essentially ‘user-friendly’ environment.

For a start, we were just one part of a reciprocal arrangement; it was not in the interests of the Soviet staff in Zossen to make our lives in the AMLMs too difficult because it could rebound on their own missions in West Germany. Indeed, back in 1969 the GSFG Chief of Staff had noted to the Chief of BRIXMIS that he appreciated that the missions had an important observation role to play, but that this came with a duty to

---

Soviets were at first convinced that it was an FMLM tour and that they sent out a message to all units to grab the evil French. Presumably from an interview with Brigadier John Learmont, Tony Geraghty’s book (p.261) quotes Chief SERB, Colonel Alexei Rubanov, saying to Chief BRIXMIS: ‘In an odd way we Soviets take professional pride in the fact that you British pull off something like this. It was a very good operation. Was it Captain Williams or James Bond who pulled this operation?’ Ken Wike later received a BEM, presumably in large part for this famous incident.

<sup>43</sup> The Tour NCO was Sgt Tony Haw GH (Green Howards) and the Tour Driver was, I think, Cpl Tony Parkinson RCT. We were watching the Soviet ACRV-2 artillery observation vehicle from about one kilometre away when it suddenly ‘fired’ its range-finding laser at us and we were illuminated by the reflection off the tour car’s windows. We immediately put down our binoculars and cameras because we knew that these types of ruby lasers could burn holes in camera shutters and in eyeballs. Fortunately the morning was slightly foggy and this probably reduced the risk to us in any case. Technical Intelligence Army, the Defence Intelligence Staff’s technical experts, came rushing out to Berlin to ask us about this incident.

<sup>44</sup> Just as in the crash on the Auer deployment area, not all incidents resulted in us being covered in glory. One other such event, in February 1982 saw me in a tour crew with Sgt Tony Haw and, I think, Cpl Tom McDowell RAF. We were operating at night in the southern area of the Local Area, covering routine activity, when we spotted a convoy of Soviet fuel bowers (known as ‘Oggley-Poggley’ wagons from the Russian word for ‘flammable’ (ОГНЕОПАСНО) painted in large letters on them). We started to ‘run’ the column north up the route F2, but soon irritated some of the officers and a ZIL-131 workshops vehicle peeled off from the convoy to chase us away. It proved to be surprisingly persistent and, trapped between a railway line and the F2, we were forced to make a quick decision in order to get away from our pursuer. Stupidly, we charged through a wood with no lights on and turned onto the F2, again with no lights on, and in doing so we bounced off a passing civilian Lada car in a shower of sparks. Still pursued by the ZIL we made a dash for Potsdam. However, when we reached the Glienicke Bridge, the Soviets noted the damage and refused to let us across. The SERB duty officer, Dmitri Trenin, came to the bridge and only released us when Zossen was ‘satisfied’ with our version of the truth. On return to Berlin the Chief, Brian Davis, ‘tore a strip off me’, quite rightly pointing out that, by leaving the scene of the crash, we had laid ourselves open to accusations that we had killed a civilian or worse and that we were in no position to refute any such claims. Having made me feel suitably stupid and contrite, he then announced that he would defend me and my crew with all his vigour when he was summoned to explain the incident by Zossen. Another case of a less than glorious incident, but in the event no one was seriously hurt, which was a huge relief. In 1995 I travelled widely in the former Yugoslavia as Deputy Chief UNMO and took the opportunity in the then Serb-controlled Eastern Slavonia (in Croatia) to have my vehicle filled up at the Russian battalion’s fuel point at Klisa airfield. I tried, but failed miserably, to explain to the Russian conscript soldier who operated the hose why for me it was a real thrill to get this close to and be filled up from an ‘Oggley-Poggley’ wagon!

---

behave in a discreet and inoffensive manner. As a result there were, in essence, acceptable norms of behaviour and it was only when tourers flouted them that they could reasonably expect to be stamped upon.

A part of this largely unwritten understanding of how the Robertson-Malinin and its sister agreements were to be interpreted was that there should be no publicity about any of the missions. Although BRIXMIS, for example, was fairly obvious to everyone in the British Sector of West Berlin, it was never mentioned in the garrison's newssheet, the 'Berlin Bulletin', except very rarely when reporting on formal liaison tasks, such as the Remembrance Day services at Stahnsdorf, or when babies were born to Mission wives in the British Military Hospital.

Similarly, every effort was made to keep mention of the Soviet and Allied missions out of the British press and, even when a major event occurred, like the killing of USMLM's Major Nick Nicholson, the media coverage was kept to a minimum by limiting information flow in the expectation that the missions would soon sink back into media obscurity.

The publication on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1989 of a very hostile article about the AMLMs therefore came as a most unwelcome bolt from the blue. It was entitled: 'Where are these bespattered Mercedes going? Or some facts about the murky practices of the Western Liaison Missions'. The original piece appeared in the Soviet Army's daily newspaper, 'Krasnaya Zvezda' (Red Star), and was then eagerly reprinted by the official organ of the East German ruling SED party, 'Neues Deutschland', a couple of days later. It challenged the right of Allied tourers to creep secretively around in the DDR, allegedly conducting espionage and other foul deeds.

Our Chief immediately protested to the Chief of SERB over this unprecedented and totally unprovoked assault on BRIXMIS and its sister missions and, in due course, a verbal apology was received with an admission that its publication had been counter to the policy of HQ GSFG<sup>45</sup>.

At the ground level, we tourers were also outraged, but for quite different reasons: only two members of each AMLM had been named in the article (in BRIXMIS' case Flight Lieutenant Dave Browne

---

<sup>45</sup> The line from Zossen was that the article had been inspired by some of the hard-line military opponents of President Gorbachev's 'perestroika' policy. In reality, however, nothing could appear in 'Krasnaya Zvezda' without approval at the highest levels in the MOD and the article was never publicly repudiated. Interestingly and in line with the preface to the Robertson-Malinin Agreement, the article dated the origins of the MLMs back to the 14<sup>th</sup> November 1944 'Agreement relating to the Control Mechanisms in Germany'.

and Captain Stephen Harrison) and the rest of us were upset about being excluded from this unique and high profile chance to be exposed and 'outed' publicly as military spies!

In general, the East German population adopted an attitude of indifference towards tourists, displaying the remarkable skill that people living under totalitarian regimes soon master: that of being oblivious to whatever they feel is not their own business. But there were plenty of locals who, when it seemed safe to do so, would be polite or downright helpful to us.

Many tours were flagged down by irate villagers, past whose homes an endless stream of dust-raising Soviet equipment had passed, who would tell us that, for example, a large number of Russian tanks had just gone by. We were always startled and grateful to be offered this information, even if experience showed that, as untrained observers, civilians tended to exaggerate and 'one hundred tanks' probably only meant forty armoured personnel carriers.

One particular instance of East German friendliness occurred to me one summer's morning, when we had just emerged from our overnight 'Z-platz' and were parked on the side of a forest track in the Rheinsberg Gap, boiling up our thermos water and having a quiet shave.

Suddenly a tiny Trabant car appeared and came to a halt next to us and out got a smartly dressed Forstmeister (head forester-cum-game warden). With a cheery smile he insisted on chatting to us in passable English, which he claimed not to have used since he left school in 1944, and told us that a Soviet general was having breakfast as a guest in his house, having been shooting his deer overnight. We assured him that we would soon be finished and away and he wished us well.

Ten minutes later he returned at high speed and insisted that we leave without delay, which we were about to do in any case. 'You see, the Russian general is leaving any moment now and may even come this way. I'm sorry, but I'll have to report having seen you here because I am a party member', he said, pointing to his SED lapel badge.

We assured him that this was no problem for us to be reported to the authorities and that he should feel free to do so. 'But next time,' he emphasised, 'please don't park in such an open spot. You're welcome here, but please park back there in the trees so that I can only see part, say a half, of your car and then I can

---

always claim that I never saw it at all. Sadly, here on the edge of the track is just too obvious and I'd never get away with denying that I'd seen you!'<sup>46</sup>

As far as we could make out, with the exception of Stasi narks and other loyal party and government officials, we were operating in a remarkably friendly environment and so we had to do something fairly aggressive or insensitive before most people, be they Soviet or DDR citizens, would turn against us. The East Germans civilians, if they thought about the AMLMs at all, probably considered that we were there to keep an eye on the Russians and that we were, therefore, on the whole a 'good thing'.

For his part, the average Soviet officer was normally willing to give us the benefit of the doubt, possibly reckoning that we were all in the DDR together to keep the Germans down!

The conditions of life as a tourist were not bad either. Quite apart from going 'off to war' in a very well designed and equipped vehicle, we found ourselves working in a country renowned for its ice-creams, sticky cakes and its shopping, even if the best emporia seemed to be largely reserved for cultural tours (and for Cavalry officers in the Mission on proper tours).

Local tours, for instance, enjoyed looking in on the shop run by the 'Bird Man of Nauen', north of Potsdam. Not only was he noted for being a jolly soul, but he also sold some cheap and often defective porcelain figures. Despite it being in poor taste, there was a prize offered for the worst 'second' quality figure from his shop, but the ultimate goal, the elusive 'Club-footed Ballerina of Nauen', was unfortunately never tracked down and acquired for the Mission House's poor taste collection.

East Germany was also the only country where British soldiers have been able to 'wind up' (infuriate) the police with impunity. The Vopos were not noted for their intellect or sense of humour, but were trusted by the DDR regime to collect hard currency fines by operating radar speed traps on the access autobahns from West Germany to West Berlin. The locations of all the normal speed traps were well known to us, but we took no notice of them on the basis that the DDR authorities did not exist for us and had no powers to control us.

---

<sup>46</sup> On another occasion we were 'lurking' in the dark on a wet evening in the Lübben Triangle. Suddenly there was a knock on the window of the Senator. We opened it cautiously and an East German woman said: 'Good evening. I'm sorry, but you'll have to go. You see, this is my driveway and I work for the DDR Ministry of Defence'. I replied: 'Yes, of course. I'm sorry if we have disturbed you. We'll go now'. 'No, don't rush. How long do you want?' I looked suitably confused. 'How long do you want me to wait before I ring up and report having seen you?' I thanked her and told her to ring just as soon as she wanted because it was all the same to us.

---

Occasionally then, on very quiet days when there was no exercise activity to monitor, we would set out to irritate the Vopos by driving upstream from a radar trap and parking the tour car in the central reservation of the autobahn. There, with a cup of tea in hand, we would warn the oncoming traffic to slow down and see how long it took the Vopos to realise that they were catching no one in their trap. When they did finally 'smell a rat', they would cruise up the motorway and we would drive off, giving them a cheeky wave as we went. It was not very grown-up behaviour, but it was great fun nevertheless!

When returning from tour we could even get away with driving through the beautiful Grünewald forest in West Berlin on our way back from the USMLM house to our base in the Olympic Stadium. The Berliners and the police were clearly irritated about being covered in dust and mud by dirty tour cars, but also knew that we could probably claim 'operational necessity' as an excuse.

Perhaps the greatest perk of all was that, after all the excitement of rushing around the DDR on tour, we could return home to real civilisation in West Berlin, which was far and away the best equipped and serviced garrison that I have ever seen. We were coming back from a land of comparative poverty and drabness to one where everything worked and was maintained to a standard that we in the military have never enjoyed in Britain or elsewhere, thanks to the unique funding arrangements by which the Berlin Senate ended up paying a large part of the Allied garrisons' bills. Indeed, after spending six of the happiest years of my life stationed there, I still mourn for the 'loss' of Cold War Berlin.

We were also fortunate because, unlike most of the other people engaged in highly classified work in the British Sector, we were encouraged to mix with the rest of the Allied military community and to socialise within the Mission itself. The ultimate watering-hole was the BRIXMIS Club, an 'all ranks' bar that was festooned with touring memorabilia and provided the ideal venue for 'in house' social events, which were always well attended by the close-knit Mission community. It also gave 'well oiled' tourers the chance to unwind in a relatively secure and benign environment; some took the opportunity to indulge in traditional conversational gambits like: 'Do you know, Sir, you're the best/worst ... that I've ever served with!', without having to face retribution later on for having done so<sup>47</sup>.

---

<sup>47</sup> This traditional British soldier's conversational gambit was deployed with great skill one very cold winter's evening in East Berlin when Anthony Raymer and I took a group of other Coldstreamer officers out to dinner, all dressed in uniform. James Bucknall emerged 'well oiled' from the restaurant after dinner and saw an East German Transport Police officer moving along the side of the canal. James staggered up to the unsuspecting TRAPO and declared: 'Do you know Marshal Zhukov?' 'Wie, bitte?', replied the startled TRAPO. 'Marshal Zhukov!' stated James, 'Y'know, 'e was the best bastard platoon commander I ever 'ad!' Mass hilarity erupted from all of us, but total confusion prevailed on the part of the poor TRAPO.

---

## Concluding Remarks

Some years afterwards it is already impossible to recreate a true impression of the fantastic atmosphere of professionalism, enthusiasm and camaraderie that characterised life in BRIXMIS. The job itself was exhilarating, not infrequently dangerous and undoubtedly addictive; it really was the 'Great Game' of the Cold War, played out in the forests and farmland of regions with evocative names like Mecklenburg, Brandenburg and Saxony.

In over forty years of continuous operational status, effectively operating behind the enemy's front lines, our Mission was incredibly lucky never to have anyone killed in a shooting incident or even in a car accident in the DDR. But our sister missions were not so fortunate, with Adjudant-Chef Philippe Mariotti of FMLM being killed in a deliberate ramming incident by the NVA in Halle-Lettin on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1984<sup>48</sup> and Major Arthur 'Nick' Nicholson of USMLM being shot and killed by a Soviet sentry almost exactly a year later outside Ludwigslust<sup>49</sup>.

Sadly, despite the very active status of BRIXMIS, in common with other British servicemen and women who sallied forth on operations only just short of war on land, sea and in the air against the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies, there has been no medal awarded to mark this long and ultimately successful campaign<sup>50</sup>.

But with or without medals, we all had the tremendous satisfaction of knowing that we were playing an important part in keeping the peace in central Europe and had a huge amount of fun doing so too<sup>51</sup>. It was the fulfilment of every soldier's dream: 'Real men, real kit, real enemy, real job'.

---

<sup>48</sup> In this incident Adjudant-Chef Philippe Mariotti, the Tour Driver, was killed instantly when the NVA Ural-375 truck hit the tour car; the Tour Officer, Captain Staub was seriously injured and moved immediately to hospital. Adjudant-Chef Blancheton, the Tour NCO, who was also injured in the head and arm, remained at the scene to ensure the security of the damaged vehicle and its sensitive contents.

<sup>49</sup> Major Nicholson was shot outside a Soviet installation, known to us as Ludwigslust 475. In 1960 an FMLM officer, Lt Moser, had also been wounded when he was shot by the chief of a Soviet traffic regulation post; this was, the FMLM history suggests, an era when the Soviets were much more trigger happy.

<sup>50</sup> On 8 May 2002 'The Times' published a letter by Sir Michael Burton, former British Minister and Deputy Commandant in Berlin 1985-90, in which he called for the issuing of a 'Queen's Medal of Freedom' to all former Cold War servicemen and women and to their diplomatic counterparts who had been serving when the Wall came down in 1989. The idea was not taken up by the British Government.

<sup>51</sup> In a normal year members of the Mission picked up about 2-3 MBEs (for junior officers) and a similar number of BEMs (for NCOs), but those who did not get one were often every bit as deserving as those of us who were lucky to be

---

But how did the Soviets see us? The best unsolicited view that I ever managed to squeeze out of a senior SERB officer came from Colonel Yuri Pliev in early 1989: 'The French don't seem to be doing much. The Americans can be dangerous cowboys. And you British love to be seen as amateurs, but you don't fool us; you're the ones we've got our beadiest eyes on!'

Soviet 'perestroika' sounded the death knell for the Allied missions and as one former Tour NCO complained to me: 'That Gorbachev, he's got a lot to answer for!' Perhaps we should have realised in the 1980s that we were sparring in the last round of the Cold War, but without the benefit of hindsight I was not alone in still not being able to foresee its end when I left the Mission in April 1989<sup>52</sup>.

Before the end of that year the Iron Curtain and then the Berlin Wall were breached and less than twelve months after that, on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1990, on the eve of the Day of German Reunification, the Allied and Soviet missions were finally stood down; in BRIXMIS' case this ended more than 44 years of continuous operations.

One last, curious footnote to the world of touring took place on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1991 with the non-fatal shooting by a Soviet sentry of a Bundeswehr (German Army) officer, Major Weiss, and the detention of his three-man crew.

The incident occurred outside a Soviet (by then Western Group of Forces; WGF) installation in the Altengrabow area, when, according to the Soviet Army daily 'Krasnaya Zvezda' (23<sup>rd</sup> April), the German military personnel had been photographing the military site. Allegedly, they failed to halt when challenged and Private Delvukin then opened fire in accordance with his orders. Major Weiss was wounded in the hand.

The article alleged that this was the latest in a series of attempts to penetrate WGF installations and that in the course of more than 20 attacks on sentries one Soviet soldier, a Private Kobzar, had been killed and six others had received gunshot wounds. The German Ministry of Defence was reported as stating that

---

awarded one. I was very fortunate to be given an MBE in 1983 after my first BRIXMIS tour. The paucity of awards remains a deficit that issuing a Cold War commemorative medal would have gone a long way to remedying.

<sup>52</sup> I heard the news of the fall of the Berlin Wall on the BBC World Service while I was on exercise with 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Coldstream Guards in Kenya. I had rigged up my radio with a piece of Claymore mine wire as an antenna 'plugged into' the corrugated iron room of my hut on the Nanyuki showground. It was hard to believe at the time and it took many years to accept all the consequences.

---

Weiss' crew had been photographing a depot 'in performance of official duties' and that Minister of Defence Stoltenberg had ordered a halt to all such surveillance activities<sup>53</sup>.

Since then a whole new world of peacekeeping opportunities has sprung up and I have been lucky enough to have the chance to use my old touring skills in the Balkans. Indeed, I was amused to find an old Soviet adversary in Croatia in 1995: Major Sergei Illirianov, a Ukrainian UN Military Observer (UNMO) with whose team I stayed in the then Serb-occupied Krajina.

I always asked my fellow Russian and Ukrainian UNMOs if they had served in East Germany during the periods when I was also there. And so I was delighted to find that Sergei had been in Leipzig in the Guards Air Assault battalion in the late 1980s. 'You must have been based to the west of the city in that camp with a parachute training jump-tower. I seem to remember that we called it Leipzig 241', I remarked. 'That's right, how did you know that area?' 'Oh, well we used to creep around your camp in our tour cars', I replied. 'Aha', he said as a wave of recognition and nostalgia washed over him, 'and we longed for your visits because I was the Recce Platoon commander and we used to be crashed out to chase you away, but we never caught you!' Such is the new world order.

BRIXMIS was a very special experience for all of us lucky enough to have been part of it. At its best, touring was not unlike gambling, but with a near certainty of winning. And, of course, there was always the British Military Train to ambush and wave at during the duller moments on tour. So, if in many years to come I am ever asked by a small girl or boy: 'Grandpa, what did you do in the Cold War?', I'll have to fight back the temptation to relive those wonderful four and a half years, blow by blow, and will try to say instead: 'Well, it's not easy to explain. Let's just say that I used to wave at trains ... yes, indeed, I had great fun sitting and waving at trains!'

- - -

---

<sup>53</sup> Almost certainly the very last AMLM incident took place in August 1994 when a French NCO and a German civil employee were injured by an explosion that occurred when the FMLM premises in the Quartier Napoleon in West Berlin were being cleared for handover to the German authorities.

---

## Postscript

Less than a fortnight after I had finished writing the first version of this paper back in 1995, I managed to buy a copy of Tony Geraghty's book on BRIXMIS, 'Beyond the Front Line'<sup>54</sup>. While he veers occasionally towards sensationalism and some of his facts are irritatingly incorrect, he has given a good overview and a fair flavour of life in the Mission over more than four decades. Fortunately, his anecdotes do not, by and large, overlap with mine!

The most accurate summary of the achievement and ambience of BRIXMIS, however, appears in the Foreword of Geraghty's book, where the Duke of Norfolk, himself a former Chief, reflected that: 'We got close enough to the Russians to respect them, as well as to photograph their military secrets. The Cold War ended with a bloodless victory and the victory was ours.'

Then in 1997 a second book on BRIXMIS was published: 'The Last Mission'<sup>55</sup>. Written by Captain Steve Gibson, who was a Tour Officer in the final months of the Mission's existence, it provides a ground level view of what touring was all about at the culminating point in the Mission's history. I believe that it captures the atmosphere of what it was like to be a tourer much more effectively than Geraghty could ever have hoped to achieve.

I can recommend both books, but neither should be read in isolation if a balanced insight into what the AMLMs were all about is what the reader is seeking. I would also like to note a number of other books and articles that have more recently given fascinating commentaries on this era in the DDR.

The first is 'Stasiland: Stories from behind the Berlin Wall'<sup>56</sup> by Anna Funder. The second is in German and is an academic study of the MLMs: 'Alliierte Militärmissionen in Deutschland 1946-1990'<sup>57</sup>,

---

<sup>54</sup> 'Beyond the Frontline: The Untold Exploits of Britain's Most Daring Cold War Spy Mission', by Tony Geraghty, HarperCollins 1996, ISBN 0 002 55616 2. This was, in effect, the public history of BRIXMIS; unfortunately, it contained numerous factual mistakes.

<sup>55</sup> 'The Last Mission: Behind the Iron Curtain', by Steve Gibson, Sutton Publishing 1997, ISBN 0 750 91408 4.

<sup>56</sup> 'Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall' by Anna Funder, Granta Books 2003, ISBN 1862076553. The author interviewed Stasi functionaries in a quest to understand their motivations and disturbs the reader with her findings.

<sup>57</sup> 'Alliierte Militärmissionen in Deutschland 1946-1990' by Dorothee Mussnug, Duncker & Humblot 2001, ISBN 3-428-10403-X. The sole Russian publication about the MLMs has been an article in Russian in the journal 'Независимое Военное Обозрение' [Independent Military Review] on 15th September 2000 by a Russian historian, Maj Gen (ret'd) Aleksandr Furs, entitled 'Powers & Restrictions; The Useful Experience of the MLM Activities'.

---

which seeks to place the Missions in their historical context. The third book is WO2 Ken Connor's 'Ghost Force: The Secret History of the SAS', which has a chapter on the Cold War based on his time as the SAS senior Tour NCO at the end of the 1970s and just into the 1980s<sup>58</sup>. The fourth is 'Licensed to Spy: With the Top Secret MLM in East Germany' by John Fahey, who served in USMLM in the early 1960s<sup>59</sup>.

Some commentators have sought to place the significance of the AMLMs within the wider sweep of the Cold War. The retired US general William Odom has stated his view that: 'Some successes in intelligence collection turned out to be fairly important, but they hardly justify the claim that has been informally made by a few veterans that the missions played a major role in winning the Cold War'<sup>60</sup>.

Finally it is worth pointing out, however, that the spirit in which the end of the Cold War was conducted in Germany was civilised and that there was no 'triumphalism' on the part of the Western actors. The German authorities paid most of the costs of the return home and resettlement of the Western Group of Forces and even trained thousands of officers and their dependants in useful civilian skills, such as computer and small business techniques.

Furthermore, the German government undertook to maintain the Soviet war graves and memorials and has been true to its word<sup>61</sup>. For instance, as a memorial to the Red Army soldiers who captured the building, the newly restored Reichstag, now the seat of the German Bundestag (parliament), has retained an impressive amount of the Red Army graffiti that had been written on its walls in May 1945. The Tiergarten and Treptow Park war memorials in Berlin have been repaired and were unvandalised when I last visited

---

<sup>58</sup> Ken Connor's book is 'Ghost Force: The Secret History of the SAS', published in 1998 by Orion Books, ISBN 025282 6972. He is very critical of the quality of the Soviet armed forces and some of his facts are challengeable; tour cars, Opel Senators for example, carried 180 litres of fuel, not the massive 120 gallons that he claims.

<sup>59</sup> Commander Fahey served in the US Navy and his book was published in the US in 2002 by the Naval Institute Press, ISBN 1-55750-294-3.

<sup>60</sup> Lt Gen William E. Odom retired in 1988 as Director of the US National Security Agency; he served in USMLM from 1964-66. His comment was published in the on-line Parallel History Project in June 2005.

<sup>61</sup> The German authorities seem to have stuck scrupulously to the deal that was made to maintain Soviet war memorials and cemeteries in the DDR (and indeed throughout Germany). The Federal German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and his East German counterpart, Lothar de Mazière, gave a written undertaking at the Concluding Session of the Two-plus-Four Conference in Moscow on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1990, that states: 'The monuments dedicated to the victims of war and tyranny which have been erected on German soil will be respected and will enjoy the protection of German law. The same applies to the war graves, which will be maintained and looked after.'

them in 2001<sup>62</sup>. The result has been a relatively painless and non-acrimonious drawdown (and, in the Soviet case, end) to the more than four decades of the Four Powers' presence in Germany.

As we leave the last millennium and the Cold War further and further behind us it is extraordinary to note that former MLM members can now request their Stasi archive records from the German federal authorities. This is something that we cannot expect the KGB (now FSB) or GRU in Russia to do for us; indeed it is unlikely that the British authorities would accede to such requests from former BRIXMIS tourers. So, bizarrely, the East German MfS has turned out in the end to be the most open of all the Cold War intelligence organs!

- - -

© Peter Williams, Canberra, August 2006

---

<sup>62</sup> Observance of this undertaking to look after the old Soviet memorials and cemeteries extends beyond the tourist centres of the great cities. In small towns like Beelitz and Treuenbrietzen the town centre Red Army memorials and war graves have been maintained. This is even true of the Potsdam Soviet garrison cemetery, which I visited in 2001 and found three Ukrainians working on its maintenance; they told me that they came back every summer, paid for by a German government contract, and were delighted to be able to play a part in respecting their Soviet heritage.