

Viewpoint

The Life of an Air Attaché: Alcohol, Cholesterol and Protocol?

By Air Commodore Ian Elliott

Having been in post as the UK Air Attaché in Washington DC for a few months, my wife and I were visited by my eldest daughter who had remained in the UK to complete her university studies. Around the dinner table one evening, she asked me “so Daddy, are you a real life spy now?” In most of my previous tours it must have been fairly self evident what I did for a living – the flying suit alone being a fair clue! In trying to answer her question, I was struck by the thought that it is hardly surprising that she didn’t have any understanding as to what an attaché is or what one does. After all, if I’m honest, I myself had little real clue as to the breadth and depth of my responsibilities before I arrived in post. And so it was that, with one year of diplomatic experience now under my belt, I thought I would commit a few thoughts to paper to dispel a few myths and, perhaps, whet the appetite of a few other ‘trained warriors’ who may consider a diversion into this fascinating but little understood career area.

In making the following observations, I would highlight two key points: no two attaché posts are the same and no two attachés approach their tasks in the same way. The challenges I face in the USA are dramatically different to those faced by colleagues

in Russia or Australia or Brazil. The UK (and the RAF) has radically different relationships with each country; history has shaped our current geopolitical and military landscape. The role of the diplomatic community is to forge relationships, build trust and influence others such that strategies, policies and plans are shaped in accord with the UK’s preferred direction of travel. Diplomats are also the UK government’s in country ‘eyes and ears’ who provide feedback on everything from politics and public opinion to threats and opportunities, be they economic, climatic or security related. As a member of the military attaché fraternity my overall role is therefore best summed up as ‘insight and influence’.

My challenge in the USA is far different from colleagues in many other nations, not least because the USA is, and is likely to continue to be, our military ally of choice. They are the world’s only current superpower and possess military might beyond compare. Their active duty armed forces total nearly 1.5 million; their annual military budget is \$680Bn; their Air Force totals almost 540000 personnel across active duty, Guard and Reserve areas; they currently field over 5500 manned ac and have a further 180 unmanned; their USAF training machine graduates 800 new

airmen recruits each week to sustain the 327000 current USAF strength.

So is there a special relationship between this monolith and our humble nation? Indeed, does it matter? Are the quantitative differences between the military capabilities of our two nations now so stark that we are wasting our time and effort in even trying to keep up with them? I would argue very strongly that the 'Special Relationship' is very much alive and well. Of the numerous areas of common ground between our two nations which stem from our common language and shared values, it is the field of security which provides the real underpinning substance to making the relationship 'Special'. Indeed, the manner in which the relationship has evolved with regard to the sharing of intelligence and nuclear cooperation would undoubtedly have forced a knowing 'I told you so' smile from Churchill – the man who originally coined the phrase back in 1944.

In these times when we face the significant stresses of concurrent widespread operational commitments and major budgetary constraints, it behoves us to do all that we can to ensure that every penny of the defence budget is spent wisely to maximize the effects of our fielded and contingent military capabilities. Given the United States of America's lead role in current coalition operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, it is critical that we should stay militarily 'close' to their armed forces if we are to integrate and interoperate effectively in the joint and coalition environment on the deployed stage. In seeking to be 'close', I mean close in every

regard. We need to understand their people, their kit, their doctrine, their leadership thinking, their industry, their political drivers and their constraints. For the US military machinery, this is no small challenge! However, we have a host of tools available to assist. Enter Air Attaché stage left!

Prior to taking up my current appointment, a learned former 4-Star RAF Officer gave me some excellent advice. He observed that: "countries do not have relationships; air forces do not have relationships; people have relationships". Wise words! Ultimately, the waging of war (or deterring of aggression) is fundamentally about human behavior and attempts to persuade others to behave differently. Equally, at the heart of politics, lies the fundamental issue of relationships. As I go about my 'insight and influence' duties, I have become acutely aware that I am not going to achieve anything unless there is a fundamental bond of trust between me and my interlocutors. This is not something which can be signed out from Stores; it needs investment of time and effort and needs constant nurturing. However, once established, doors magically open, favours are granted, long standing bureaucratic hurdles can be overcome and real progress can be made. That is not to say that we should always agree with our US brethren. Often we do not. However, where an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect (and in this regard our military heritage brings us enormous kudos) exists, then a full and frank expose of potentially contrary positions can be debated without anyone falling out! A serving USAF 4-Star General remarked to me

recently that the relationship between our air forces was like a long standing marriage: we cohabit very happily but do not necessarily always agree about everything!

We are very fortunate that another vehicle we have at our disposal, which helps foster trust and build mutual understand and respect and which thus contributes significantly to the enhancement of our military, is the UK/US military exchange programme. In the air domain, we currently have 57 exchange officers embedded within the USAF and within the air arms of the US Navy and US Marine Corps. These officers range in rank from Flight Lieutenant to Group Captain and are employed in a wide range of capability areas. Many are aircrew: we have exchange Officers on most front line USAF ac types, including the F22 and the B2. Others are employed in staff duties in the Pentagon in areas ranging from long term strategy development to air force legal activity. We have Officers involved in USAF research into the use of directed energy weapons, space operations, medical research, cyber development, force protection training, air C2 training and sophisticated information architecture work. In all these areas, RAF Officers are exposed to the latest US thinking and the latest US hardware. More importantly, they work – and in some cases fight – alongside their US colleagues. Their US counterparts are employed in a similarly wide-ranging number of posts within the UK. The friendships and professional relationships developed during these tours endure and in many cases current RAF air Officers enjoy unwarranted access and influence with USAF General Officers because

the 2 parties have a personal history dating back to an earlier exchange tour. The experiences of our 2 air forces in working constantly side by side on deployed operations since 1990 has also provided a perfect opportunity for senior staff to generate that all important mutual understanding and trust.

In terms of RAF development and the UK's strategy for air power, I would contend that the RAF/USAF relationship is every bit as important as the RAF/British Army relationship or the RAF/Royal Navy. That said, in undertaking my job I am not exclusively 'USAF facing' as I go about my business. Within DC, there are 110 air attachés (which was a shock to me – I had no idea there were that many air forces in the world!) and there is considerable horizontal networking between us. Not a day passes when I do not meet with at least one of my DC air attaché colleagues to have a full and frank discussion about matters of mutual interest. With 57 exchange Officers to look after, a steady throughput of senior RAF visitors to the US and numerous attaché colleagues to keep abreast of, no two days are the same and each week throws up fresh but interesting new challenges.

I hope this short piece has provided a brief flavour for the range of activities in which I am engaged. Is it interesting/varied/valued work? Absolutely! Do I feel that I and my small team 'make a difference'? Absolutely! Is this an area of Defence business which I would recommend to colleagues who fancy a change from 'mainstream' RAF/MOD HQ work? Absolutely!

The answer to my elder daughter's

original query is 'no, I am not a spy!', rather, I deviate in numerous areas in pursuit of the British Defence Staff's overall role of securing insight and influence. I am not a 'snitch' - I work for policy makers not the intelligence community!

I recollect that on arrival at nursery school at Brize Norton aged 4, my younger daughter when questioned about her father's profession announced confidently that "my Daddy is an alligator" - an understandably close approximation to the correct answer of 'navigator'. Fast forward the clock 16 yrs and during a recent family reunion she posed the same 'so what do you actually do now Daddy?' query. I explained that I was effectively the oil in the gearbox between the cogs of the USAF and the cogs of the RAF. 'Ah' she exclaimed, 'so you're a lubricant now!' I think I preferred the alligator description....!

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