



The NetWorker

**Newsletter of the Pen & Sword Club
Issue No: 5 March 2009**

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MOG (V) deploys over 20 per cent on 2009 operations

A new book about The Minders?

Major Peter Williams reflects on life in darkest Devon

DDPR Dermod Hill tells of his days as The Man from the MoD

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Major Michael Collie puts his TV work into perspective

And Next Month:

Lieutenant Colonel David Reynolds reports on the frontline

Major George Oliver calls from the North East

First Westcountry region lunch

Spring sees growth in club life membership

Annual subscriptions to the club have been rolling in to Secretary Major Doreen Cadwallader and we have seen a 25 per cent increase in life membership over the last two months. The club now has 16 members who have taken the option.

With the weather beginning to improve the club's diary for the year should also start to wake up with the Spring. Though we are well aware that the current economic situation is not proving easy for some our retired colleagues. Nevertheless the anticipation of good meetings and events to come is there. Please re-examine your diaries and see if you can make any of the events offered in the last newsletter.

Apologies early in this issue to all those who have sent in contributions and photographs. This is a bumper edition but, nevertheless, copy has been held over to the next edition. This should be issued in early May after the Editor returns from checking out the beaches in the South Pacific.

The Minders – revitalising an idea

The club has a significant membership of former Ministry of Defence Government Information Service officers who have served in many parts of the world. Colonel David McDine has been in touch to revive his idea of a book entitled "The Minders." This would be based on the experiences of those who interfaced with the media over the years and will pull no punches in how it worked or failed. The format suggested is an anthology of tales from individuals with a normal limit of around 1,000 words.

The title comes from the nickname conjured up during the Falklands War when the relationship between media and their information officer minders became stretched, to say the least. Interestingly as the month of March gets underway there is a national debate about the credibility of the UK media, in particular, and a Commons Select Committee has been hearing some lurid claims.

All of us who have dealt professionally with the press have shock and horror stories although we acknowledge that we have many friends among the media who behave totally responsibly and ethically.

At this stage the book is aimed at contributions from the former MoD Minders and several have already been written. But if you have an idea please pass it on to Colonel David. Tales may be controversial or interesting and unusual – all will be considered. Here is your chance of that elusive 15 minutes of fame! E- mails please to david@mcdine.fsnet.co.uk

Fifth of MOG (V) strength deployed in 2009

Media Operations Group (V) Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Tim Purbrick, pictured below, told The NetWorker just before going to press that during 2009 some 21 per cent of his officers will deploy on operations. Another seven per cent of the units are currently on Full Time Reserve Service and the remainder is making significant efforts towards the preparation of those deploying.



Currently Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Mackenzie is deployed as Military Strategic Communications Liaison Officer in the Defence Section of the British Embassy in Kabul and Lieutenant Colonel Sean Tully is mobilizing to be the Chief Media Operations for Op Telic in Basra. Colonel Sean ran the Press Information Centre during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He will hold that post again as the main part of the UK contribution to the theatre comes to an end.

Major Dale Clark and Captain James Mayhew are mobilizing for their deployment to Op Herrick as, respectively, SO3 Media Operations in the Press Information Centre and OC Combat Camera team for three months.

Captain Paul Smyth remains mobilised for Op Telic while being based at J9 Media Operations at Permanent Joint Headquarters. He is currently in HQ Multi-National Division (SE) in Basra for a period before deploying to Op Herrick in October for a six month tour as the SO2 Press Information Centre.



Captain Huck Keppler has taken an FTRS contract as the SO3 Media Operations in HQ British Forces Cyprus for three months.

The Networker wishes them well in their service and looks forward to receiving reports and photographs of their deployments.

Peter in the Snow

The weather caught many off guard in February. But Major Peter Williams who now lives in Sticklepath, near Okehampton in deepest and darkest Devon was not among them.

Twenty-two inches of snow fell in the Okehampton area of Devon on February 6. This was “quite exciting for the locals “says Peter. Not since the 1970s when a young man was kidnapped by Mormon women and tied to a bed on an isolated farm next to Okehampton Training camp has the area hit the national news.

Says Peter: “Life in Devon these past eleven years has been most enjoyable. Gill and I were a little apprehensive about coming back to England after 30 years in The Netherlands. Would we fit in? Would we be treated as outsiders and would we have a social life?

“We were fortunate in our choice; our village is very lively with two pubs, a church, village hall and many activities. The population is about 400 with many in-comers, mostly from the Home Counties. We were made to feel at home more or less on arrival on Christmas Eve 1997.



“My last years at school were in Exeter followed by six months as a Police Cadet in Torquay before joining the Army. That did help with integrating. Getting local builders in to do the alterations to our snuff-it house was a good move and catching up with 30 years of lost pub life soon introduced us to village life and local personalities

“The one thing, however, that both Gill and I do miss is the international environment. Working at HQ AFCENT and enjoying interaction with other nationalities and speaking other languages is not something that one encounters in a small Dartmoor village.

“The other side of this coin, however, is the joy of a community life. We do, nonetheless, have our one month Continental “fix” every year when we catch up with family, former colleagues and friends. Other travels have included the US and Canada, Iceland and Norway as well as short visits to Berlin, Tenerife, Andalusia and Verona for the opera.

“Early on I took a four year degree course by correspondence for a BA (Hons) in South African History with the emphasis on the Zulu War. This included a visit to South Africa in 2000, with fellow students to the battlefields under the tutelage of David Rattray, who was so tragically murdered a couple of years ago.

“Having opted to stay away from the golf course, I keep myself very busy with the Parish Council, the Village Hall, Rotary Club and the village-based conservation

group, which assists the local Dartmoor Park Ranger and National Trust Estate Warden as well as other local agencies.

“My most important and time-consuming work, however, is Secretary of the local branch of the Royal British Legion of which I am also the county PRO (thanks to the TAPIO Pool experience).

“Would we have fared better in warmer climes? All things said, we doubt it!”

A CIVVY'S TALE (or surviving among the military)

Dermod Hill, reminisces about his career in the Ministry of Defence and the culture shock of arriving in British Army of the Rhine as the “Man from the MoD”



The Pen & Sword Club is fortunate in the diversity of its membership. Not everyone served the unit in uniform but there are, among our supporters, former and serving members of the Government Information Service who not only helped and advised us during our in-service years but have also become great friends.

One is Dermot Hill who rose to the heights of Deputy Director Public Relations Army and has a great story to tell. Some of it may be new, and controversial, to a few members but there are many who can vouch for the experience of being a civilian attached to the Regular Army.

Says Dermot: "The uniformed - civilian interface of much of MoD information work has stood the test of time but, like true love, has not always run smoothly. Is it something about a uniform? Or is it something about a suit?"

"I noticed the phenomenon first many years ago when I joined the TA as an elderly private. My father had written a book about his horrendous experiences as a rifleman in the First World War which, like a dutiful son, I had never bothered to read in his lifetime. But having on impulse got it out of the shelf, I suddenly felt I had missed out on the military experience. The book, incidentally, was republished in paperback two years ago.

"As a TA soldier, I quickly noticed that a whole assortment of people - postmen, dustmen, clerks, machinists - would put on a uniform on Friday night and suddenly start talking about *****g civvies. In its way, it is a testament to the latent power of the military persona.

"Joining up was to prove fateful for me. I was working as a staff feature writer for ITV publications, mainly turning out 14 editions of the TV Times in its monopoly heyday selling three million copies a week.

"With my mortgage and season ticket in mind, I was also moonlighting in the evening as a features sub on the Daily Mail and contributing 'colour' pieces to the Mandrake page of the Sunday Telegraph. Basically I was white with exhaustion, smoking 40 cigarettes a day and bad company at home, if I got home at all!

"Something had to change drastically. I had passed the age of 30 and needed a major restructuring of my life. At that point I noticed an advertisement recruiting press officers for the Ministry of Defence. The TA had proved very absorbing. So I put in an application thinking, at worst, the perch would give me breathing space to consider other things.

"At the selection board, the Civil Service Commission gave me a copy of the Callaghan government white paper promising that all revenue from North Sea Oil would be banked in a separate account so people could see exactly how it was spent to upgrade national infrastructure. What pie in the sky that was. But I had no difficulty skimming it and summarising its key points in a would-be press release of 200 words while an invigilator stared at his stopwatch.

Below: Dermot shows he can mix-it with the best. This bout in the ring has to have a fuller story, which The NetWorker will try to tease out. His

formidable opponent is James Bond aka The Saint. Or in another guise film star Roger Moore.



“At interview, a board member drew my attention to a current news item about a group of army wives who were protesting vociferously about their treatment by the services. The question was how would I deflate the bad publicity? My answer was that the last thing I would contemplate would be putting pressure on the husbands to make the wives shut up. That would lead to an even worse story. I sensed this was not the model answer.

“It was then put to me, cryptically, what would I do if given the job but later proved to be temperamentally unsuited? My answer was that in that hypothetical case, the last place I would wish to remain was in the job. The upshot was that I joined the Defence Press Office as a probationary information officer one month after Mrs Thatcher came to power, which already made me an anomaly. The Iron Lady's first act was to handbag the civil service and impose an immediate freeze on all recruitment.

“I slipped in only by virtue of the slow pace with which MOD completes its security and health checks. Six months and a general election had elapsed since being offered the post and receiving a start date in Whitehall.

“In Main Building all the military wore pinstripe suits, so my hand did not twitch to salute as I walked the corridors. By then, incidentally, I was a Lance Corporal. The problem was that defence at that time was totally becalmed. Nothing was

happening at all. In consequence, in the press office trivial things were made of much of.

“As an example, I remember, having to turn my mind to the burning issue of how soldiers should address officers while playing in the Army rugby team. I could hardly believe the file which circulated then re-circulated with comments at ever more giddy layers of seniority. Finally the matter was resolved, I think at Army Board level, and a ‘line to take’ prepared. Outcome. Normal compliments must prevail at all times

“Mercifully, the work tempo picked up. A national strike by tanker drivers potentially endangered essential services. I was delegated to listen in at contingency planning meetings whereby army fuel tankers were discreetly repositioned and soldiers with HGV licences had their leave mysteriously cancelled. Soon after, I was trusted to attend bi-lateral MoD /Northern Ireland Office meetings which oversaw security operations. For a recent journalist like me, this was fascinating stuff. I was genuinely impressed by the clarity of much of the policy making process. Meanwhile the crisis on the future of Rhodesia began boiling up nicely.

A bomb at RAF Uxbridge

“And then one evening, minutes after the day staff had left and handed over their files to me as duty night press officer, the phone rang to let me know the IRA had planted a bomb in RAF Uxbridge.

“A media stampede ensued. I was soon under siege by furious journalists. At Uxbridge, basically the gate had been shut and the press, with acres of space and airtime to fill, had been told to clear off. For the first time, I realised I had a proper job. Laboriously, using the MoD's private trunk telephone network, I gleaned what had actually happened. There was a public right of way through the base, so a small gate in the fence was always left unlocked. I had a security farce on my hands.

“But then I discovered that a MoD policeman who had spotted the bomb had shifted it with his bare hands away from an accommodation block. So I also had a hero. My course of action was therefore clear in a flash. Draw a veil over one, and shine a light on the other.

“Maddeningly it took hours of patience and persistence to get this agreed. But at last by 8.am next morning as the day staff trickled in, a picture facility was finally in train, my log summarising 12 hours telephoning was as long as War and Peace. But the coverage had swung our way. I was blooded as a defence press officer at last. But little did I realise my real education had not yet begun.

They eat press officers over there.....?

“In the small print of my terms of employment my post was described as a 'mobile grade'. Blink and you would miss it. So I had really not expected, at one month's notice, to be asked to take my children out of school, and transplant them and my shocked wife and our pet cat Lucy to live with the army in Germany for three years . Why the rush? A staffing gap had arisen on the eve of the major autumn field exercise. Why the gap? Shrouded in mystery. They eat press officers over there it was rumoured.

“We arrived in our Citroen Dyane crammed with our moveable possessions at mid-evening at a small block of flats with a broken down central heating boiler, situated in a village of 400 souls by a windswept lake 10 miles from the nearest town and 40 miles and a two-staged bus journey from the nearest army secondary school.

“More to the point, I was now a CIVVY. My TA comrades would not have been proud of me. Though not strictly the Oxford Dictionary definition, it is common knowledge in the army that a civvy is a substandard species. But in Germany he is one of almost of mythological proportion.

“Lavish allowances, easy terms and obscenely generous perks are widely believed to be showered on these offending interlopers. Retribution is inevitable and only fair. Subtly, only the least desirable quarters will be available. The broken boiler obstinately continued to break down throughout a severely cold winter. We shared a floor with a Canadian officer and his family, lovely people but also verging on the substandard, though not technically civvy.

“The field exercise duly took place during three weeks of continuous discomfort and rainfall until field manoeuvres had to be abandoned because damage to the farmland caused by armoured regiments practising war was too much for the population, and too expensive for the compensation budget. I arrived back at my shared office in the divisional headquarters about 100 miles away and was immediately flabbergasted to read an open signal issued from the Corps headquarters in Bielefeld complaining about excessive overtime claims by civilian information staff and ordering the divisional administration to strictly curb such claims in future.

“Being a journalist, I had never claimed overtime in my life. Paid overtime was not in the journalistic culture although dreaming up expenses afterwards in the bar was. Basically you stayed with the job till it is finished. I was so cross that for the first and last time as an Army PR officer I grabbed a sheaf of forms and immediately sent in a claim for a 2000 Deutschmarks.

“As time went by things mellowed considerably. The job in Germany was quite different from that in the press office in Whitehall. There, it was the role of the

press officer, while others were preoccupied with innumerable distractions, to keep absolutely focused on the communication issues, to give clear and reasoned advice on suitable courses of action, to push it without timidity at whatever level was necessary, and then carry out the necessary work professionally.

“In Germany, the job was essentially generating local boy good news stories to send to the UK press. The army did not want people with delusions of information management or aspirations of advising generals in tricky corners, they wanted column inches of good, uncritical publicity. Not all civilians understood that.

“Some information officers also confused equivalent status with real ranks and quickly came a cropper. Others, to my personal strong disapproval, would show up at field exercises wearing bits and pieces of combat uniform. To me, it signified they had no confidence in their real role or identity. During the remainder of my tour, with the help of the BFBS staff in Cologne, I learned the radio business and multiplied my output of stories exponentially. No matter how muddy the location, I made it my business to turn up everywhere in a suit, even parodying my civil service status by carrying an umbrella, a fantastically useful appendage, incidentally, in wet places.

“I remember being stopped in a muddy field by a colonel. His combat trousers were saturated in mud up to the knee; rain water was dripping off his beret in a channel through his open necked shirt. I was wearing rubber boots, and stout riding Macintosh, and of course had the brolly.

He remarked that I was the only sensibly dressed person in BAOR.

“At social events, I was still frequently bearded about my fabled allowances. But I would simply reply - what did they think I ought to do, give the allowances back to the Ministry? This absurdity always ended the topic on an amicable note.

“At the end of my tour, I had developed a genuine and enduring respect for the army and an appreciation of the difficult life soldiers, and their families, lead. My wife founded a Brownie pack and was appointed supervisor of the garrison play group.

“A civilian is not a soldier and will eventually pursue quite different paths. But when we work together with mutual respect, it is an unbeatable relationship. I returned to Whitehall on promotion, and thus began to become more involved in those other intriguing aspects of a large Whitehall department, its political life and its huge involvement in science and research, not least atomic research.

“Later I experienced two years unaccompanied as chief information officer in Northern Ireland before becoming Command PRO for UKLF, then Deputy Director Army PR, a post which now no longer exists.

“I had many scrapes and near misses, but I enjoyed the experience hugely and it has left me with some outstanding memories.

One of the major plus points....

“The development of the TAPIO Pool has been one of the major plusses. Under Alan Protheroe, the first Senior TA Public Information Officer and later COs like Mike Peters it grew not only in size, but in ambition and training, later being tested in the Gulf War where TAPIO exploits need no repetition here.

“Here, perhaps, lies the ideal solution to military PR. A fully integrated military unit with the complete range of professional skills and an accumulated depth of experience.

“TAPIOs and I, of course, have not always seen things eye to eye. I remember particularly one senior TAPIO coming into my office in Main Building to make phone calls before going out to Saudi Arabia. By coincidence I was taking a phone call from the deputy editor of the Sun and was overheard telling him in abrupt terms to go away and stop pestering me.

“The TAPIO looked at me as if I was a lunatic on the loose. PR people do not talk to editors like that. But as I had said above, it is all to do with being confident in who you are and what you are doing.

“The Sun had the idea of installing mobile fax machines in the desert so that our boys could instantly send letters to their loved ones - inevitably via the Sun news desk. They did not see why I could not grasp the brilliance of the scheme, and phoned me constantly to check the progress of the proposal.

“Also, there being a war on, I was pretty pressed myself. At that time, I was liaising with the Department of Health to produce a media plan for the overflow of desert casualties which would affect UK civil hospitals. I also had a list of no less than five fly-on-the-wall television producers who want to be granted access to field hospitals as the bodies came in.

“Bodies were certainly expected, but thankfully did not come in the numbers predicted. Meanwhile, as a civvy I was issued with a wire sprung bed frame and a mattress and was told I was expected to sleep in the office for the duration of the war. This being Main Building, and the month being February, naturally the centrally heating broke down completely for two weeks.

“I realised then that Defence PR was a young man's game and I would not last there forever. But I did make sergeant in the TA!”

I love to go a wandering!

Major Roger Hudson settles into the hedonistic life of The Charente in this message from France.

“There are 30 stone built houses in my hamlet. Thirty-three if you count the new creamy yellow bungalows that have appeared on the edge. There used to be two coffee bars. Sadly along with most of the young people they are no longer there. We are 1.5 kilometres from a sizeable village, which has all the amenities, post office, chacuterie, boulangerie, pharmacy, a bank and so forth.

“It also has a tabac, and a most wonderful cafe/pub owned by a splendid 80 year old called Mamie, whose late husband, who died many years ago, was a musician. Hence the wonderful concerts held in our tiny village hall. (Salle de Fete). A Chicago Blues Festival, for example, with the musicians from Chicago – flying over especially to play!

“You may think that, as you drive through, closed shutters and an apparently quiet atmosphere lends itself to a dull existence. Do not believe it! Much happens, even if it is folk dancing to a bagpiper, reminiscent of gentler times in the UK in the 50's. The French do not like change. Hence the appeal for us to make our home in a 180 year old farmhouse, a gite, and a fair bit of land, an orchard meadow and tranquility,

“After many years living abroad, some 25 with the British Forces Broadcasting Service, then the BBC World Service, and eleven years with the Media Ops Group where I had even more foreign experiences, Norway with the ACE Mobile Force, Poland, with 7th Armoured Brigade, Denmark, Germany, Oman, Portugal, and The US.

“In fact, as I had lived in Belize, Cyprus, Germany, Gibraltar, Malta, Singapore and a few other places with BFBS, when I decided to retire, I found it hard to settle in the UK. We tried Torre Vieja in Spain at first. Much to be enjoyed, but too hot in the summer, a few too many nose-rings and tattoos, but great musically as I continued playing jazz guitar and getting paid for it! The trouble was that I had helped open a radio station, Exite FM (Yes, the spelling is correct!) The music was taking over my life, and there I was under the impression that I had retired! So we moved to France.

“One of the many attractions is that it is a long days drive from our little bolt hole in Sussex, via Newhaven and Dieppe. We returned home to France just a few days ago, and it took 14 ½ hours door to door. Long, but do-able!



Above: Major Hudson with the Ace Mobile Force in Norway

“We have lived here now for two years. We are involved in the community, but having said that, although we have French friends, our language skills are developing – we have a reasonable level of conversational French – but like many here, we tend to socialise more with other English speakers.

“Having said that we belong to a most excellent organisation called Accueille de Ville France.

“This is in nearby Angouleme, about 30 minutes away. It is a French “welcoming” organisation, mostly for French newcomers to the area. However, about eight or nine English speakers also belong and attend various soirees, restaurant visits, and a French conversation class which they have kindly organised for the Brits! It has been a great way to meet people and to enjoy many cultural activities. A visit to a Chateau for a wine tasting is planned next month for example. The Chateau will be cultural, the wine tasting perhaps less so!

“Our neighbours are quite splendid. They are incredibly tolerant of our language skills. They invite us to many family gatherings and help with so many of the tasks that are set before us in the field. I had to put in new fencing posts recently for a part of the fence that had broken and become rotten.



Above: When the PWRR were the “mafia” Major Hudson (right) with Major Gerry Bartlett (centre) and Captain Alan Frost (left)

“My neighbour organised another neighbour to donate the posts free of charge! We often return home to find a basket of vegetables on the doorstep, or attend a hastily organised aperitif session! These seem to last a long time!

“The largest employer in the area is Pepinier Charentaise. They supply trees and plants all over the country to garden centres, town councils and the like. Most of the folk in the immediate vicinity have either worked, or still work, at the company.

“It is often with the greatest of pleasure on a Friday evening at “Mamies” that I join blue boiler suited workers from Pepinier Charentaise, the Consellier General, (Regional Mayor), who happens to be the headmaster of the local college, an engineer or two, a handful of agricultural business folk, and of course, the inimitable Mamie.

“The beer is cold. So is the wine! They seem to like it that way. The conversation is warm. I always try to get home for dinner. I have been known to be late!

“I miss some of the members and former members of the Media Ops Group, and the great and not so great times that we had. But at least I have many memories and pictures to remind myself that I didn’t manage one medal –despite all the places I went to, and I was just short of my TD too!

Snow Business like Show Business

Major Michael Collier- still serving with MOG (V) - puts his TV world into perspective

“I write while looking out at the sort of winter that seems so rare these days, while schools shut all around us, fearful that children might be touched by a snowflake, or something.

“At breakfast I regaled my four daughters (now 8-14) with tales of how “in my day” I used to walk to school when the snow had been ploughed into walls that were higher than I was. Admittedly I was shorter then and it was a harsh Sheffield winter, but I find myself applauding Boris Johnson as he proclaims that the snow is no excuse for a “mass skive”. Fortunately my daughters’ school was one of the few to stay open: a good bit of British backbone, clearly.

“But it all took me back to my earliest television days on Countryfile, standing at the edge of a quarry in Wales – and that wouldn’t be allowed nowadays - delivering a piece-to-camera in a snowstorm. At one point the blizzard was so severe I couldn’t even see the camera. Did we give up? Well, actually we did. But don’t tell the girls that.

“Since then the television career has placed me in warm studios with make-up and coffee. Actually there’s now no make-up provided, or coffee, or even heating on occasions: we switch the lights on to warm up.

“But I sit in a very uncomfortable chair presenting the Politics Show from Birmingham (last week a viewer wrote in saying the BBC should give me a better chair - bless him), Midlands Today and exciting programmes like The Accountancy Channel, The Surveyors’ Channel and The Law Channel at MTV in London.



“I sense you reaching for your remote control right now, to find out about how to build when you have bats or how the latest High Court judgement over tenancies is going to affect something or other. Best of all, at MTV we get sandwiches.

“Gone are the days of battling with Countryfile’s blizzards in Wales, testing rapeseed diesel for Top Gear in Austria, commentating on canoeing for Paddles Up or even doing hyped-up voice-overs for the Radio Times. You see, other listings magazines are also available.

“But I still find myself standing in a flooded house being asked by a BBC News Channel presenter, “What are the people of Shrewsbury feeling right now?” Clearly I don’t know how they occupy their time – but, more relevantly, how I am I meant to know how they are feeling, as I’ve been stuck in a flooded house all day? Acknowledge (“How the hell do I know?”) – Bridge (“What you ought to be asking me is ...”) – Communicate (“I can look macho by standing in a puddle in wellies.”).



“Away from the telly, my other ventures flourish (phone for a quote). I even manage the odd TA day, some odder than others. Assisting with OPTAG is a key role now, preparing our forces for the rigours that await them overseas. And, for me, it puts my little telly world back into proper perspective.”

And the tail end.....

Tell The NetWorker who you recognise. Here's a clue – TAPIO Camp 1987.
Answers to michaelpcoms@btinternet.com

