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Behind the Iron Curtain

By Hugh McLeod

In the last year of the Second World War each of the major Western Allies exchanged liaison missions with the Soviet Army. This work continued in the immediate post-war period once the separate Soviet, US, UK and French zones of occupation were defined. In 1946 the UK was the first to make an agreement, known as the Robertson-Malinin Agreement, that established the permanent deployment of its Mission (BRIXMIS) in the Soviet Zone, while the Soviet equivalent (SOXMIS) did the same in the UK Zone. In 1949 Germany became subdivided and the Soviet Zone became the German Democratic Republic (GDR). BRIXMIS existed for 45 years until the end of the cold war in 1991. After studying at Sandhurst, Hugh served in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Regiment for 12 years and between 1979 and 1981 he was active in BRIXMIS. In his talk he described its role and some of his personal experiences in participating in its operations at a time when East/West relations were particularly tense.

BRIXMIS was based in British HQ in West Berlin but had a forward base (the Mission House) in Potsdam in the GDR. One of the roles of the mission was liaison with the Soviet authorities. Roughly every month there were official meetings with the Soviet officials and many of the mission staff were Russian speakers who could interpret for the C-in-C and other senior officers. However, liaison played only a small part in the work of BRIXMIS. It saw its real tasks as gathering technical intelligence on the types of Soviet armaments and on the composition, organisation and plans of the 38,000 strong Soviet forces stationed in East Germany. Under the Robertson-Malinin Agreement the UK was permitted to tour in the Soviet Zone with a crew of three service personnel (one from the RAF and two from the army). To help meet its objectives those on an operational tour carried professional camera kits since high quality imagery gave NATO analysts a great deal to work on, especially since there was no public Soviet equivalent of Western defence manufacturers' advertising material. They also picked up those potential items of interest that all armies leave in their trail. One rather unglamorous example of this detritus was substitutes for toilet paper. Soviet Army ration packs didn't contain toilet paper, so they used whatever came easily to hand such as letters from home (the envelopes showing Unit Identification Numbers), marked maps and signal logs. Hugh recounted how, as a fluent Russian speaker, he was given the unenviable task as "rubbish officer" to sort out (with the aid of very necessary rubber gloves) what the tours brought in. Soviet forces did not have unit badges, but the composition of troops could be deduced from vehicle registrations because these were allocated on a system that UK intelligence understood. The Soviet Army had routines such as the twice-yearly rotation of conscripts, and these allowed BRIXMIS to assess normal levels of troops and pick up changes that might indicate a threat of an increased level of hostilities

It took several years for BRIXMIS to find a modus vivendi with the Russians and East Germans. In time they came to accept that the UK had a legitimate role in monitoring matters such as troop levels and routine activity but this was never fully understood by many in the Russian military who were prepared to use lethal force if they felt the line of acceptable activity had been crossed. Several members of the Western Missions were killed or wounded in the GDR and Hugh admitted that he had, himself, experienced several "narrow squeaks". What

was acceptable was never fully defined although there were some “rules of the game”. The two sides exchanged maps with Permanent Restricted Areas (PRA) marked on them. The PRAs in the GDR, which were surrounded by Mission Restricted Signs (MRS), contained airfields, sensitive installations, HQs and major training areas. Those on BRIXMIS operations almost never entered PRAs but relied primarily on observing movements between PRAs to identify units and new equipment. The situation was complicated by the occasional imposition of Temporary Restricted Areas which were also surrounded by MRS. If these were strictly observed they would have made carrying out allotted tasks almost impossible so they were often ignored. However, this ran the serious risk of operatives either being fired at or, if in a car, being rammed.

Training involved being taught how to take high-quality photos in challenging situations, how to recognize the various types of Soviet armament and how to carry out operations in the context of the negotiated rights and restrictions. On arriving at the Mission House in Potsdam the three selected to undertake an operational tour would be given their specific tasks and objectives. The Mission Office contained a detailed map with every installation of interest marked on it and this was used to plan the route to be taken and to assess its attendant risks. The three operatives then set off by car, usually an Opel Senator, with a number of modifications including four-wheel drive to enable it to drive fast across country. Curtains fitted along the back window made the operative with the camera in the rear seat difficult to see and so he was able to take photographs without attracting undue attention.

Hugh described several of his operations in some detail. In the early 1980s the Soviets were rolling out a new rifle, the AK-74, and new tank the T-64 which Allied intelligence agencies had identified as a priority target for investigation. One operation involved scouring rifle ranges at night to pick up examples of spent ammunition from the AK-74 that could then be examined. Later he trailed a train carrying tanks and eventually came across a lone T-64 tank sitting in a siding opposite a signal box. After dark he used a ditch to crawl up to the tank unsighted and, using a special molybdenum spike, was able to scratch and obtain the first ever sample of its armour which could then be analysed by MOD scientists. On another operation he was tasked with checking several tank ranges for T-64s. Cunningly the operation was timed for May Day, a Russian national holiday, when it was thought likely that many of the guards and sentries would be drunk and neglectful. This supposition proved correct and one hangar containing 7-8 tanks was found to be not only unguarded but not properly locked. Armed with a top-secret turret key, Hugh was able to take the first internal photographs of the T-64, including its auto-loader, the first of its kind in the world. These photographs were to provide NATO with full understanding of the auto-loader and other features of the tank. As a result, NATO made a reappraisal of its armour capability and initiated an upgrade of its infantry anti-tank weapons. Gathering this important intelligence took over an hour and was fraught with danger because Soviet troops could have returned at any moment, probably drunk, and, seeing their negligence exposed, would almost certainly have opened fire.

Hugh considered that BRIXMIS was both important and valuable – a real intelligence factory. On a personal level he found serving in it hugely stimulating. Little happened entirely by chance, so to some extent you created both your luck and your disasters. It combined great danger with great fun. He believed that the lessons learnt back in the cold war period have relevance to addressing the new threat posed by Putin’s Russia and he concluded his talk by offering some reflections on the current situation in Russia. He believed that Putin, having

floated to the top of a sea of corruption in alliance with the KGB and the Mafia is very unlikely to resign because several oligarchs are still flourishing under his regime. In common with the Whites in the Russian Civil War he is wedded to the ideal of a Great Russia and a contempt for Ukraine. He is getting no objective advice and could quite possibly resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons to achieve his aims, although he has never discussed openly what these aims are. Throughout Russian history a corrupt autocracy and the desire for a strong leader have been the norm and this is unlikely to change. Depressingly polls believed to be reliable have shown a high level of support from the Russian people for Putin's actions. In 2008 he had an 88% approval rating; this dipped to 61% in 2013 but in 2014 it rose to 85% following the annexation of Crimea. Similarly, a dip to 69% in 2022 was followed by a surge to 83% following the invasion of Ukraine. Given these factors, Hugh was gloomy about Russia re-joining the community of nations in the near future.

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