

NATO HQ Brussels, 1989

By Lt John Nixon RN

In August 1989 I was coming to the end of a two-year appointment at HMS *Sultan*, where I had been teaching microprocessor and computer theory/practice to artificer apprentices. The next stage of my career had been agreed with my appointer, and would involve me undertaking further Information Systems (IS) training, and then working on the design of Management Information Systems (MIS), which were being introduced in the Royal Navy under the general umbrella of 'Executive Reporting' to drive financial and management efficiency. The Instructor Officer specialisation was leading the way in the introduction of computer training and undertaking numerous specialist jobs in that field, and this is where my own career development lay.

As it transpired, my replacement at *Sultan* arrived early and I was offered an opportunity to assist in the development of computer management and security within the Secretariat of the International Military Staff (IMS) at NATO headquarters in Brussels. Perhaps because of my 'intermediate' knowledge of French and German, plus the fact that I had spent two years overseas in Mauritius with my family before becoming a Schoolie, I accepted the appointer's offer of a three-month contract.

However, I quickly realised that I had no in-depth knowledge regarding what my appointment would involve – namely dealing with the rapidly growing introduction of desk-top personal computers (PCs) for those who traditionally relied on secretaries, PAs and typing pools. Having a background in digital technology, Pascal and machine code programming only placed me in a 'computer literate' category as far as the NATO HQ job was concerned. So I hastily attended a number of short training courses in DOS (Disk Operating System) and PC hardware and PC networking. Application software such as word processors, spreadsheets and databases were all novel at that time and somewhat of a black art to most people – including me, apart from my 'Amstrad' home computer with its own word processor and directly-connected dot-matrix printer.

After a family holiday in Alsace, France, where I could practise both French and German (interestingly, whenever speaking French to locals I was replied to in German), I packed several bags and travelled by train, ferry and train again (from Bruges) to a comfortable flat in Brussels, which was in the same street as the European Parliament building.

On arrival I was met by my new boss, Julia Simpson, who was a WRNS Superintendent (later Schoolie Captain Royal Navy) with an IS background. One source of amusement for my new international colleagues in the Secretariat would be the fact that I always addressed Julia as 'Ma'am'. The Americans in particular found this to be a quaint aspect of 'Britishness', which they seemed to like. These cultural influences and contrasts would be an endearing element of working at NATO (or 'OTAN' to give it its French abbreviation).

Some early impressions of Brussels, which were all very pleasing, included the strong smell of chocolate waffles (*les gaufres*), historic buildings, trams and the spacious and clean metro stations. There was also a disproportionately high number of professional people associated with NATO and Parliament out

and about with people sitting outside cafés and restaurants. This all created a refined and sophisticated atmosphere.

On arriving at the main gate the next day, I was impressed to see the famous NATO HQ statue and all the national flags flying in the wind (photo below). I was rather taken aback, however, when attending my first meeting with several very senior IMS personnel in attendance, as the Chairman announced that the "IMS is pleased to welcome Lieutenant John Nixon of the Royal Navy, who is going to be our computer expert in the Secretariat." I was naturally flattered but knew 'expert' was a little off the mark to say the least! *L'expert* in French, however, does not have the same 'high status' inference as 'expert' does in English.



(Old) NATO HQ Brussels (<https://www.nato.int>)

Because a significant part of my work would be related to computer security, I soon came under the direct supervision of a senior Belgian Air Force Officer, Colonel Jean Coupez. Being head of security for the IMS, he was clearly well informed and knew (and was known by) almost anyone of any importance in NATO. We immediately got on well together and he introduced me to my first Belgian meal of *moules et frites*, and generously took me on my first guided tour of the city.

I shared an office with an American Air Force Colonel called Dennis Chya (although I fear I may not have recalled his surname correctly – it was of Polish origin). Both Colonels, despite being of much higher rank than me, soon became close associates and took me under their wings to one degree or another. We often went to one of the two NATO restaurants together during coffee breaks, where we shared stories, opinions and jokes in a convivial manner gathered around a table. The predominant practice of wearing civilian clothes (suit and tie) also helped to remove the influence of 'rank awareness.'

NATO HQ itself was set in a large, plush and impressive building that I loved walking around because of its wide open spaces, internal shops and banks, exquisitely decorated and designed toilets, and relaxing restaurants. A swimming pool and tennis courts were also part of the restaurant complex.

Another example of international influences occurred one day in the office when Dennis was highly amused after I rang the transport section to book a car and said "Mister Nixon speaking." This was because he had served for many years in the military with Richard Nixon as president of the United States, so my name meant something to him. These little things made me feel 'at home' to one degree or another and I found working with officers and people from other nationalities at NATO a refreshing change compared with some of the rigidity and hierarchies associated with service life in more homogeneous settings.



The spacious corridors of the old NATO HQ building
(<https://www.nato.int>)

Uniform day was every Thursday, which was quite an occasion as service personnel had an opportunity to show pride in displaying their nationality and service. I also wore the NATO tie badge, which matched the Royal Navy uniform perfectly due to its blue and gold colouring. While civilian clothes tended to reduce status awareness, it was always noticeable in the cafés on uniform days that different nationalities tended to club together around large tables in the cafeteria, although some nationalities were more prone to this behaviour than others.

I was also very comfortable with the lifestyle of Brussels and the fact that it was not unusual to sit in the impressive and cultured Grand Place and drink coffee or hot chocolate outside a restaurant in the evening. I have to confess that I could not help but contrast this with some of the over-indulgence in alcohol and anti-social behaviour that was sometimes found in the UK. Because I was fairly competent in French, I could also communicate well enough to do my shopping and exchange some conversation with Colonel Coupez, or other colleagues. I also attended weekly classes in French, and some training courses in application software (such as Excel) in the city centre.



Grand Place, Brussels
Wikipedia (Troughnuf (Benoit Brummer))

Although I spent some time sightseeing in places like Bruges, I flew home regularly for weekends and was very keen for my wife and the children to come and spend time in Brussels as there was a realistic possibility that my appointment could be extended to a two-year married accompanied one. I especially wanted this to happen as I was beginning to feel comfortable in my new work and surroundings. I was also making good progress in writing

computer security orders and collaborating with IMS computer technicians, who were adept at DOS and setting up PCs.

To illustrate some of the 'no brainer' issues that arose due to the introduction of PC use for individuals (usually of high rank), with possibly their own choices of application software and printer, I recall we were having difficulties one day as one dot matrix printer was producing text that over-ran each page, which was clearly unacceptable. After looking at this for some time the idea emerged that the optimal solution would be to purchase paper of the 'right size,' presumably 'A4'. Of course all that was needed was a change to the paper size setting of the printer and/or word processor, but this form of 'problem solving' could be inefficient in the early stages of PCs for individuals. I also found that some senior officers, who included those from the Dutch, German, American and British armed forces, were somewhat guarded and protective of their own PCs and weren't always keen to have password protection applied to their devices. There was a need to standardise hardware, software and practices, but progress was probably best described as 'steady'.

About half way through my appointment, my wife and youngest son flew over to Brussels to spend the weekend with me and we went on the tram to see the British school in Brussels, as our teenage children would all have attended that institution if everyone moved to join me. As it transpired, I was offered the chance to apply for a married-accompanied appointment, but it was clear that our children were all at important stages in their education in Hampshire, and the opportunity evaporated.

When I came to leave Brussels, I had somewhat of a jolt to my emotions as Colonel Coupez, who was a man that I liked, admired and respected, wrote a report to the British Ambassador on my time in the IMS. In his words, I had been a pleasure to work with and had 'been a credit to the United Kingdom'. I wasn't expecting such an endorsement and it was with some humility that I briefly expressed my thanks to him and returned to my office. Although this event may appear of minor importance, it taught me a very important lesson in life – it's not 'what' is said about us by others that is important, but 'who' says it.

My brief appointment as a Schoolie in Brussels was a rich and rewarding experience, albeit with a number of 'anxieties' due to the fact that I could 'have done better' if I had been better prepared. However, I can possibly mitigate my disappointments in the knowledge that society, including NATO HQ in Brussels, was going through a technological revolution whereby military personnel and civilians were becoming their own administrators through the use of PCs. In the early days, they were self-contained and used their own printers, which was later followed by PC networking and shared resources. The internet would arrive about 10 years later, and facilitate all manner of options and opportunities, as well as risks.

However, the cultural and intellectual enrichment found in international institutions like NATO was the thing that had the greatest impact on me, and my internationalisation would continue in later years within academia and the pan-European research projects that I undertook over many years. The Head of the Secretariat, a Dutch general, drove me to my farewell lunch in Brussels with my closest associates, and it was then time to return to the UK to resume life at home and undertake my planned IS training to become a Schoolie systems analyst.