

BRIGADIER NICHOLAS COCKING

interviewed by Malcolm McBain
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for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme.

Early military life

MM: Brigadier, I see that you were born in 1936 in Margate, Kent, went to school in Ramsgate, sat the entrance examination for Sandhurst in 1953, and joined the Army in 1954. Presumably that was for your National Service, but you entered the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst as an Officer Cadet in 1954 and were then commissioned into the 7th Royal Tank Regiment at Catterick in 1955. It looks as if you were intending to make the Army a professional career. Is that correct?

NC: Yes, that is correct. There is one slight error there. In fact I didn't join as a National Serviceman, I joined as a regular soldier. I'd had a discussion with my father about a year before, and I said, "If I've got to do National Service, I'd like to give the Army a try". I had left school not really quite sure what I wanted to do. Originally I'd hoped to go into the Royal Navy but, when I was thirteen and taking the exam to Dartmouth, I failed the eyesight test insofar as I was found to be slightly colour-blind, and this disbarred me from the executive branch of the Navy. This had left me slightly uncertain for three or four years but, with National Service looming, I decided to sign up as a regular soldier and to apply to become an Officer Cadet at Sandhurst and take the necessary exam.

MM: So that was a deliberate decision and, soon after being commissioned, you were posted to the British Army of the Rhine with 7th Royal Tank Regiment as a Tank Troop Leader. What did that entail?

Tank troop leader with 7RTR

NC: Well I had in those days three Centurion tanks and twelve men, NCOs and soldiers, and this was essentially part of an armoured squadron, and we were deployed in Germany to defend the inner German border from the Warsaw Pact forces, as part of the NATO organisation.

MM: So did that bring you into contact with the German population at all?

NC: At that stage, not all that much. We had only recently, or comparatively recently, ceased to be an army of occupation, and we did meet the Germans, of course; we shopped in the shops, we ate in the restaurants and so on and so forth, but I don't remember mingling with the Germans socially very much. There was some social mingling but it wasn't nearly as common as it became some twenty years later.

Posting to Trucial Oman Scouts

MM: I see in 1959 7RTR was amalgamated with 4RTR and you were promoted Acting Captain, and appointed Squadron Second in Command, and then in 1960 you were posted to the Trucial Oman Scouts and did Arabic language training in Aden in that year. Would you like to tell us something about that?

NC: Yes. Like many things in my life, it almost happened by accident. I had decided after some very good years as a Troop Leader, which I thoroughly enjoyed, that I wanted to strike out a bit and change my lifestyle and seek a bit more of adventure, so I applied to join the Kenya East African Armoured Car Squadron. At the time I joined, unfortunately they were Africanising the junior ranks up to Captain, so that actually debarred me. And so, rather dejectedly, I was sitting in the Mess one evening when one of our Squadron Leaders, a chap called Dougie Grocock, was asking me about what I was going to do and I said, "I really don't know now. I wanted to go bush-whacking and had set my sights on Africa and the East African Armoured Car Squadron," and he said, "Have you ever thought of Oman?" And I said, "Well, I'm not quite sure exactly where Oman is, but tell me about it." And he did, and I became interested and, to cut a long story short, I volunteered to join the Trucial Oman Scouts, and was accepted and went off for language training as you have said. The Trucial Oman Scouts was an organisation that was funded by the Foreign Office. It was local Bedu tribesmen organised into Squadrons of lorried infantry, and young British officers were seconded to the Trucial Oman Scouts to command these Bedu soldiers. And it was an extraordinary experience. It was just before the oil was found, or was being commercially exploited though exploration had been going on for some time, and the whole of society at that point could be said to be verging on the mediæval. It had not really changed for the last three or four hundred years and, if I say there was no tarmac, no 'blacktop' as the Americans call it, even on the airfields where they used oil sand for the aircraft to land, you'll get some of the idea of the backwardness and lack of development in the area. But of course it was a fascinating insight into the timelessness of Arabia.

Arabic language training

MM: Indeed! Now tell me about the language training, because that was obviously extremely important. Who conducted it?

NC: It was conducted by Army instructors. I remember one particular officer, a Captain called Andrew Kirk who was very effective and taught us very well, and we really had to strain a bit; we had to learn fifty words a day as I remember - I don't think it was a hundred, it was a hell of a lot anyway - and we had little cards for writing the words down, but living of course in an Arab environment, as we were in Aden, it was a tremendous help because we were able to go down to the suq and practise our Arabic, much to the amusement of the locals. But they joined in because Arabs are always delighted when you speak their language, and many of them think it's a gift from God if you can, so it's a win/win situation. I thoroughly enjoyed it and indeed we were taught to read and write which, in three months, I think is now judged to be perhaps over-ambitious, but we got there, and we went off, and I found myself on posting to the Trucial Oman Scouts up in the far west, at a place called Mirfa, and we were really operating on the edge of the Liwa Sands and also facing the Qatari border some 300 miles away. We were there to protect the oil exploration that was being carried out by an organisation called Petroleum Development Trucial States, which was a consortium of the main oil companies. I found myself alone as a British officer with 120 Arab soldiers and two Arab officers, so the Arabic I'd learned in Aden suddenly became really rather important.

Oil interests in the Arabian Gulf

MM: So after that episode, did you become interested in oil?

NC: Well yes. It was a fascinating time. The nearby exploration station was called Tarif and it was about thirty miles away from our base at Mirfa on the coast, and we used to interact - or I used to go up and see them at the weekend, which was Thursday night, when very often they had a film and I could have a few beers and a large Texan steak with these enormous tool pushers as they were called - great big American chaps who manned the rigs and who were very entertaining. The whole thing was run by an ex-Welsh Guards officer called Max Roberts who was an extremely agreeable and very smooth man, but he seemed to have all these enormous Texan oil men eating out of his hand. It was really quite amusing to watch him operate.

MM: And were they finding oil?

NC: Vast quantities. There was one well called Moorban, which has really underwritten the wealth of Abu Dhabi and, in particular, the Trucial States or, now, the UAE. There were commercial quantities - substantial commercial quantities - of oil found both on-shore and off-shore at the time and it was only about a year later that they started being developed commercially.

MM: And were you actually in Oman at that time?

NC: No. I was on the Trucial Coast, but we were known as the Trucial Oman Scouts. Quwwa Saahil Oman in Arabic. The 'Force of the Omani Coast'. And that's where we operated. It was really essentially the United Arab Emirates as it's known to-day.

MM: So, what was your military role at that time?

NC: In that particular posting, it was in fact to man the Western approaches from the Qatari border along the sand-tracks that ran in from there. We were also engaged in hunting for smugglers of mines - these were being smuggled into Oman for the dissidents that supported the Imam who lived in the Jebel Akhdar and was against the Sultan. There was very much a civil insurrection type of business down there, largely tribal, partly religious, and these mines and weapons were off-loaded on the beach at night and so, very often, we found ourselves lying up at known landing sites where the dhows came in and unloaded these weapons and mines onto trucks which were then driven off down to the deserts into Oman. And this was a feature of operations all the way along the Trucial Coast at the time. We also used to do, from time to time, camel patrols down into the Liwa Sands and these were always very good fun - quite arduous, but it allowed us to engage with the tribes who lived down in that area because we were also conscious that the Saudis were making reconnaissances on their side of the border and very often penetrating into the Sands because there was no clearly demarcated line. And people like the Santa Fe Drilling Company that were working then in Saudi Arabia, were urged on by the Saudis - and needed very little urging - to go in and start prospecting, as far as we were concerned, illegally for oil in that area. So it was quite a tense situation as people staked out the ground for the oil concessions that were known to exist in the area.

MM: And your duty as a Trucial Scout was to which government?

NC: The British Government, who were the custodians of the Defence and Foreign Policy, such as it was, of the Trucial States. They acted *in loco parentis* for all the seven Sheikhs of the Trucial States, through a Political Resident in Bahrein.

MM: And so your friendship with the Texan oilmen was really slightly tricky.

NC: Not really because they were working for the organisation known as the Petroleum Development Trucial Coast. They were purely commercial; they were professional oilmen; they were, if anything, opposed totally to the Santa Fe Drilling Company on the Saudi side of the border in a completely commercial sense. There was no particular nationalistic or jingoistic rivalry there at all. It was all about oil; it was all about money but, in Arabian terms, it became about political interest because Saudi Arabia has always claimed suzerainty over all the minor states on the periphery of the Gulf of one sort or another; a suzerainty which is vigorously rejected by the various Emirs and Sheikhs, but they are very much conscious of their big brother sitting in the middle of the Peninsular, which is so much more powerful than they are.

Incursion into the Buraimi Oasis

MM: And so much more organised.

NC: Well, I'm not sure the Saudis were all that much more organised, certainly at that stage. They'd already made an incursion into the area of the Buraimi Oasis in about 1956 and had been rejected by the Trucial Oman Scouts and one or two British Army units, and had beaten a hasty retreat. And they never made an overt incursion again in what is now deemed to be UAE territory but, at the time that the British

withdrew in '70/'71, there were some fairly tense negotiations between the British and the Saudis over what should be left behind in terms of what should be given to the United Arab Emirates and what could rightly be claimed for the Saudis. And this was negotiated at the time of King Faisal under the Foreign Minister Omar Saqqaf. And a *modus vivendi* was established which has existed more or less intact to this very day.

MM: So that is interesting. And it was a British negotiation, then, with the Saudis.

NC: Well, it was the British representing the interests of the Sheikhs of the Trucial Coast and you can be sure, in the case for example of Sheikh Zaid of Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Rashid of Dubai, two of the principal Sheikhs, that they would have been fairly closely engaged in the negotiations that were going on on their behalf.

Whether, in the event, the British Foreign Office was able to tell them entirely what the game plan was, I have never known. There have been one or two claims since that the British perhaps were not totally - well, perhaps were economical with the truth, to use a phrase that will be well known in British Government circles, with their clients; but by and large a satisfactory solution was arrived at, certainly in the case of the Saudis, less so when the islands of Tumbs and Abu Musa were involved in various ways, had rights granted to the Iranian regime and the Shah, in exchange for certain undertakings that he gave for the stability of the Gulf as a whole. So it was a typical diplomatic arrangement, but it's held up pretty well since that time.

MM: Do you consider that the British did a reasonably fair job of assessing their own commercial interests as opposed to those of the resident Sheikhs in what became the United Arab Emirates?

NC: I think that the British attitude was, as far as I could tell, entirely honourable and altruistic. I think they felt that they had built - and rightly so! - they had built a very solid reputation with the ruling Sheikhs of the Trucial Coast, who could look to the British for many years. Indeed, when the Labour Government announced its East of Suez policy, there was widespread dismay, and it was well-known that Sheikh Zaid, who was the premier Sheikh because of his wealth and position in the Trucial Coast, offered to pay for the British Army to stay. They were going to make a subvention to the Defence Budget and Mr Healey made some rather disparaging remarks in the House of Commons, which really did no good at all, to the effect that the British Army were not going to 'act as mercenaries for Middle East potentates'.

MM: Can we establish which year that was, when Mr Healey made those remarks. That must have been.....

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Withdrawal from Aden

NC: Well, I would have said that was about '67/'68, but I can't precisely remember. We came out of Aden at the beginning of '68. It could have I suppose been as early as '66. It was soon after they'd announced withdrawal from East of Suez, as he made the announcement as Defence Secretary. I can't precisely remember now - it was probably about '67. And then the Sheikh made this offer and I think Julian Amery, or some other amazing intellectual, stood up and made a remark about it, and Healey put him down straight away. But it didn't resonate in the Gulf terribly well, where we had been looked upon as protectors and friends, and suddenly we were calling them Middle East potentates!

MM: Yes, grossly undiplomatic! And counter-productive!

NC: Oh totally counter-productive!

Adverse effects of press comment on events in the field

MM: Well, that is the problem we have to live with in the field, I'm afraid. It must be even worse for the Black Watch to-day as I think you were hinting.

NC: You know, they were talking last night. "The Regiment is devastated!" This must be music to the ears of the people in Iraq who listen to all these broadcasts because they've got world-wide television and so on.

MM: Quite.

CN: The Regiment will have been saddened by the loss of the soldiers, but 'devastated' rather implies that they're sort of cowering in their camp. Well, my memory of the Black Watch is that the Iraqis will be lucky if they don't go out with bayonets looking for people.

MM: Exactly! So anyway, this was all before - while we had a Labour Government from the period about 1964 to 1970. This was when we began our major retreat from the Gulf Region.

NC: And the Far East.

MM: And the Far East, that's right. We had given up Aden in - I thought the Aden retreat started in about 1965.

NC: No. It was later. We were coming to the end of the Indonesian confrontation in 1965. I don't think we pulled out of the Far East until about 1969/70.

MM: Right. I don't want to get too far ahead of your actual career because you had this period in the desert and then came back to Scotland with 4RTR to retrain - training as an armoured recce unit before going to the Arabian Peninsular. Then you went back to Aden as Regimental Adjutant for RTR. What does a regimental adjutant do?

NC: He's the principal staff officer of the Commanding Officer. The Commanding Officer commands; the Adjutant implements his orders, in very simple terms; really sees that the Commanding Officer's orders are correctly implemented, I suppose. If there is an operation, for example, as we had in Aden, the Commanding Officer would call in his Squadron Leaders and give them what we call verbal orders, or he would give them orders over the radio. The Adjutant would make sure that those orders were put down on paper and delivered at the earliest possible time to confirm the oral orders. He was a staff officer above all else, and generally was the hub of the routine activity on the operational side and the discipline side in the regiment. The logistics were looked after by a Quartermaster, but the operations, discipline, what we call the Adjutant General's side of things, were all the province of the Adjutant, which he ran on behalf of the Commanding Officer.

MM: Good. So that was a vital role in Aden in 1963.

NC: It's generally acknowledged that a Captain and Adjutant is the key officer in his rank at that time. Everybody - most people would hope to be Adjutant, if you see what I mean.

MM: At one stage or another.

NC: Absolutely.

MM: So in 1963 there must have been trouble brewing in Aden.

NC: Certainly was.

MM: Can you describe it?

NC: Yes. When we got there, first of all there'd been a set-up in Aden developing where we were going to give more and more independence to the ruling groups in Arabia. It was, at that time, based on the role of the traditional rulers, the tribal Sheikhs, coming together in conclave to run the Aden Protectorate. And it was beginning to develop into a more formal, political process where a universal franchise was going to vote in political groupings rather than just tribal leaders, though inevitably the two overlapped. And indeed, as it turned out, tribal interests overrode in the end, what might be described as more democratic groups to power. It was a

time of change and, on the borders, there was no great concern other than border skirmishing with tribes from The Yemen, and there was at that time a degree of hostility between The Yemen and Aden itself. Nasser had been active in The Yemen for some time and there was already a battle between Republicans and the Royalists up there, with the British supporting the Royalists but in a fairly non-attributable way, as were the Saudi Government. Billy Maclean, John Cooper, all these ex-SAS people from World War II, were up there, directed or not by David Stirling; private armies, arming the Royalists groups and helping to direct their operations against the Republicans. This spilled into the border region of Aden, and we found ourselves fighting a traditional border war. Border skirmishing.

MM: So these border skirmishes were going on. Were you in Aden town itself?

NC: I was in Little Aden as the Adjutant. We had two squadrons up on the border in Aden and one squadron further up with the Trucial Oman Scouts on the Gulf itself, and these rotated over a period during the year. And the Squadrons were quite actively engaged in border skirmishes of one sort or another. These eventually developed and, in the January of 1964, the Federal Regular Army, as it now was - it used to be the Aden Protectorate Levies - the Federal Regular Army was launched into an operation called Op Diamond, which went from Thumier northwards, and the British Armoured Car Squadron were in support. This was called Operation Diamond, and suddenly there was a much more substantial enemy or rebel opposition, and it began to turn into quite a fire-fight and, in the end, the British reinforced and the whole operation turned into what became known as the Radfan Theatre of Operations, which indeed went on from then until the time of the British withdrawal.

I remember that, in my own regiment, in one squadron alone, an officer was awarded the Military Cross, a sergeant received the Military Medal, and one of the sergeant majors an MBE, plus several mentions in dispatches, so it was quite a significant operation.

MM: Were there many casualties?

NC: Very few! On our side! One or two on the others'. I mean, there was quite a famous incident when they caught two SAS chaps in The Yemen, and they were in a hold up in an observation post, but then they were surrounded, ran out of ammunition, and were captured. They were beheaded and their heads were stuck on pipes in Sana'a for all to see. So the brutality of Iraq is not unknown in Arabia.

Posting to Malaysia for Confrontasi with the Indonesians

MM: No. No indeed. Old tradition. So anyway, after that bit of excitement, you were off to Borneo for Confrontasi (confrontation).

NC: Yes, against the Indonesians. One of our squadrons was pulled out of operations on the border in Aden, came down to Little Aden for about 48 hours to get their kit sorted out, flew straight off to the Jungle Warfare School in Johore Bahru, did three or four weeks' training there, and then were immediately put into confrontation with the Indonesians; so they went from hot gun barrels to hot gun barrels in about a month. But it was a terrific tour and actually we all enjoyed it. It was very good from that point of view. And also, when the main party landed, the first thing we had to do - not unpack our suitcases or go to bed, but go immediately to

the operations room and take over and deploy one of our squadrons immediately around a large jungle area down on the east coast, because the Indonesians.....

MM: East coast of.....?

NC: Malaysia. Because the Indonesians had already parachuted in, in what became known as the Labis Landings, and we were surrounding the jungle while the Gurkhas went in to find these people, most of whom unfortunately had landed in trees and were left suspended, and it wasn't until they were found some weeks later, having starved to death, that we were able to call the operation off. It was not an effective assault by the Indonesians, but we weren't to know that on the day we arrived. So it was all go in those days.

MM: No. But were you actually in Peninsular Malaysia?

NC: Yes.

MM: And would you have been able to deploy there with armoured cars?

NC: What happened was, we put armoured cars all round a substantial track of jungle controlling all the roads on the outside while the Gurkhas went in to flush them out. We had one squadron based in Seremban where the RHQ was, and Headquarters Squadron. We had one squadron in Singapore, which had two detached troops in British North Borneo, and another full squadron down in the Kuching area, and they

were the ones who were principally engaged in confrontation with the Indonesians along the border.

MM: You didn't take part in that?

NC: Not directly, no. I mean I used to go and visit them quite a lot, but I was never involved in the action there.

MM: I had no idea that they had actually landed in Peninsular Malaya, itself.

NC: Oh yes. Just behind Malacca. I mean it was a disaster, but still.....

MM: Yes, but still they tried it. That's known as the Secret War of course.

NC: I've been involved in quite a lot of secret wars. Why secret?

MM: Because the press didn't get hold of it. Because Mr Healey didn't want it to be known at the time that British forces were engaged in fighting in an area where we were supposed to be pulling out.

NC: Well quite. I can see that that could be a difficulty.

MM: And they succeeded in really keeping that out of the press.

NC: I don't know to what extent they had to use D Notices and all that sort of thing.

MM: I suspect they just did not say much about it.

NC: The Indonesian confrontation was quite well known about. A lot of British servicemen knew about it. And people in the Far East. It's difficult to think that no-one could know about it. I think media activity was different in those days and, if it was an operational matter of that nature, then they showed a reticence that regrettably does not exist to-day.

Return to RMA Sandhurst as an instructor

MM: Well, it was an astonishing episode in many ways. So after that you came back to Sandhurst as a Company Instructor.

NC: That's right. The Royal Military Academy.

MM: And what were you instructing in?

NC: Tactics again. In the British Army there are three divisions in the Staff which are widely recognised: one is G Operations Training Intelligence, one is A which is to an extent administration, discipline, that sort of thing, and the other one is Q which is logistics and supply. I've always been working as what is euphemistically known as a G Snob. I've always been on the operations or intelligence side, or training.

MM: So you were teaching these young cadets on the basis of experience in the field.

Training for internal security operations

NC: Yes. Obviously there was a syllabus that you taught and you brought your own experience to it. What was really interesting, looking back, was that we were teaching them among other things general warfare tactics and so on - but we were also teaching them internal security operations. And we were teaching them the operations that had been used ever since the end of the War and indeed before the Second World War, where you controlled crowds by parading troops holding up banners ordering the crowd to disperse, a magistrate would read out the Riot Act and then, if they didn't disperse, you started knocking people off, or shooting them down - on a fairly selective and carefully controlled basis, one has to say, but there was no hesitation about this, and this usually quieted the situation pretty smartly. You hoped it wouldn't come to that. But, in the light of what we taught them in the three years at Sandhurst of course, all that went out of the window the moment we went into Northern Ireland. Not to put too fine a point on it, suddenly, when it was our own people, some of the rules that had held good for maintaining control of the Empire were thought to be unsuitable, and the whole of the IS system of operation changed dramatically.

MM: 'IS'?

NC: Internal Security.

MM: In what ways?

NC: We were suddenly given long shields and batons and we stood there while people threw petrol bombs at us and snipers shot at us over the heads of the crowd, and of course caused quite a lot of fatalities in the British Forces. But then we worked out some counter moves and so it developed into much more of a cat-and-mouse game than the marching down the street with a band playing to intimidate the locals.

MM: Interesting experience once again. Anyhow, that was the Northern Ireland problem that didn't arise until after you had left Sandhurst.

NC: No, that started to go in about 1969.

MM: But in 1969, or at least even earlier than that in 1968, you went to the Staff College.

Training course at the Staff College

NC: That's right. I started in '68 in Division 3, which is in Shrivenham, which was the Science College. You could do three courses of Science - Div 1, Div 2 and Div 3. People who had not intellectually or academically got much of a scientific base went on Div 3, which was the vast majority. I was one of those. We studied there for three months, and then went to the Staff College in the January to start on the General Staff training.

MM: What did you think of that General Staff training?

NC: It was pretty good. It was pretty good for all sorts of reasons. First of all, the quality of the instructors was high because all the brightest young Lieutenant Colonels were moved in to be what they called Directed Staff, so you were probably being taught by people who, in many cases, were going to rise to full General rank or just below that, so they were pretty impressive people anyway. You were interacting with your generation and you were led to believe that you were the cream of your generation with the usual hyperbole of these situations, but I think it would be true to say that you probably met most of the people that mattered in your generation at that time, and interacted with them both socially and intellectually, and that's important because, as the years developed ahead, of course, your paths crossed more and more. So it was important for all those reasons and it was good, after active soldiering, to have a year to think more deeply about your profession, and being challenged about your ideas, and correspondingly challenging some of the solutions that you were offered. So it was intellectually stimulating in many ways.

MM: It has a very high reputation of course. Did you come across people from outside the military?

NC: Not from civilian life. There were people from the Navy and the Air Force. More interestingly, in many ways, there were people from abroad, both from NATO and from the Commonwealth, and we had quite a good smattering of people from those worlds, and that also made it interesting.

MM: Right. I don't think I can really press you any further on the Staff College. You went straight from there to be a GSOII in 1970/'71 in the Gulf again; GSOII Intelligence, British Forces Gulf. Whereabouts were they based?

Return to the Arabian Gulf as GSOII, Intelligence

NC: Based in Bahrein. And I answered to General Roly Gibbs, who subsequently became Field Marshal, CGS, and died a few days ago, who was a wonderful fellow and a very good man to work for, and also double hatted to the Commander of the Land Forces, Brigadier Philip Ward who sadly died last year. He was a Welsh Guards Officer. And so it was a very interesting, and indeed happy, time. They were both good masters and I enjoyed working for them.

MM: And what were you doing there? You were supposed to be out of the Gulf by then.

NC: No, we didn't leave the Gulf until December '71. We were obviously planning the withdrawal, looking at the threats that were coming in, looking at the political developments, which I referred to earlier, first with Saudi Arabia, also with Iran, and indeed establishing the United Arab Emirates as a viable federal government. So there were threats - there were threats from Iraq. At that time we were beginning to watch the radicalisation of the Palestinian movement, and we were already connecting with the organisations like the PFLP, PLO, Fatah and the various subshoots of those, and it was my particular task on the one hand to have direct responsibility in intelligence terms for the Lower Gulf and Oman and, on the other hand, the second string to my bow as it was, was to maintain a listening watch on the

development of the radical Palestinian terrorist movements. And indeed one of the first planes to be hijacked was a BOAC plane out of Bahrein which ended up on Dawson's Field, under the care of one Leyla Khalid, who was quite infamous at the time. I was the intelligence duty officer when the message came through that this aeroplane had in fact been hijacked and diverted, which made it quite tricky because I knew a number of our friends in Bahrein had children on board who were going back to boarding school, so the handling of how this was announced had to be fairly carefully considered.

MM: Indeed. Where is Dawson's Field?

NC: Dawson's Field's in Jordan - East Jordan. It was an old RAF airfield disused after the Second World War.

MM: You mention PFLP and I can't remember what that stands for.

NC: The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, run by a chap called Na'if Hawatmi. But he's long dead - we can forget about him!

MM: Can you tell me something about the hijacking of this aircraft?

NC: Well, not really. These people were on board and they took the aircraft over in flight, and it was, as I recall, one of the first hijacks that took place, so everyone was absolutely stunned that this plane - you know, people didn't think you took over aeroplanes. Anyway, they took over this aeroplane and diverted it to Dawson's Field,

where the aircraft was eventually destroyed, but all the hijacked passengers were safely recovered, as far as I recall.

MM: Yes, that's my recollection. But a pretty exciting time. Can you say a bit more about what your job in Bahrein itself actually entailed?

NC: Well, at that time, in the Trucial States, we had a series of Desert Intelligence Officers, who had been there for some time. They were all serving soldiers, had been taught Arabic, and they were down there really to maintain intelligence on the local political scene, if I can call it that - it was mainly tribal affairs but also, to an extent, the infiltration of dissidents of one sort or another, and I used to run that network and the funding of the network with a view to disbursement of funds in order to secure information within the Peninsular. And also we were concerned at that time with the serious developments in the Dhofar, where the Marxist Government of The South Yemen were actively supporting a Dhofari insurrection against the old Sultan, Said bin Taimour, and they were having some success against the Sultan's Armed Forces. However, it was beginning to stabilise and we had a lot of activity down there, in so far as the Sultan's Armed Forces were officered in the main by British serving professional officers, although there some on contract. It was the same with the Air Force and the Navy. And this was all brought together, in a way to confront the Dhofari rebels, who were good soldiers; when I'd been in the Trucial Oman Scouts, one squadron was all Dhofaris, and they were cracking good soldiers, no doubt about it, and stood out among the other Arab troops. Anyway, they were giving the Sultan quite a hard time, and we moved in in support, and we were running various intelligence.....

MM: In support of the Dhofaris?

NC. No in support of the Sultan's Armed Forces.

MM: Now, while you were acting in this rather key post, what sort of rank were you at at that stage?

NC: I was a Major.

MM: Were you in contact with Air Force and Navy Intelligence?

NC: Yes. I was in contact really with Navy Intelligence. The Air Force didn't have any specific intelligence themselves at the Headquarters. The Air Force officer who was part of our triumvirate was in fact in charge of intelligence in Kuwait at that time. The Dhofar operation was a very interesting one because we had also received the support of a Brigade from the Shah of Iran, and his people were deployed along a stretch of the Dhofar called the Hornbeam Line, and they were pretty effective as well. We were getting a lot of Dhofaris coming over after a period of time, out of both conviction and convenience, and we were creating forces, irregular forces which we called the Firqa, who were going to operate against their former comrades supported by the Communists. The Firqa were largely trained by specialist SAS officers and NCOs who were put into the area to lead these Firqas against the enemy or the aedu, as they called them, and this was quite a successful part of the overall operation. It culminated successfully after I'd left in about '74/'75 when the rebel

forces were subdued, won over, or were otherwise ejected from the Dhofar. But as part of this, it was thought necessary that Said bin Taimour should surrender his authority to his son, who was in virtual house arrest down in a palace in Dhofar itself. Said bin Taimour was in many ways a good man but, like so many old Sheikhs whom the British helped retire, he was past his sell-by date, as we would say nowadays. He was deeply suspicious of the wealth coming from the oil; he was deeply suspicious of modernity; he was anti electricity; he was shutting the gates of the cities at last light, when a man went round and locked all the gates. So there was nothing bad about him; in fact he was a very charming fellow in many ways and, within the terms of Arab culture, quite an intellectual person.

MM: And the city you're talking about there is Oman?

NC: Muscat. The city of Muscat. They used to bang all the gates shut all round the walls. That was it! No-one came in or went out until dawn.

MM: Strange place! Did you have anything to do with the British representatives in Muscat?

NC: Yes.

MM: Name?

NC: Hugh Oldman. He was the Minister of Defence effectively. He'd been in the Aden Protectorate Levy as a Colonel; he'd moved up to Oman and then he'd retired

and been taken on as Minister of Defence. And during that time we planned another secret war at the other end of the Gulf, which I can tell you about if you'd like to know.

MM: Yes please!

NC: Well, towards the end of 1970 we'd had reports from one of our DIOs who was based near Ras Al Khamah in the Upper Gulf of the Trucial Coast, that he'd had information that Iraqi agents were establishing a base in order to foster rebellion among an almost prehistoric tribe who lived in the Mussandan Peninsular, called Shihu. Acting on this information, we began to plan an operation, which was known as Op Breakfast. Now this involved a battalion of British soldiers, a couple of frigates, the Special Boat Service, the SAS and two squadrons of the Trucial Oman Scouts. And this was a combined operation involving infiltration by air by the SAS and also a sea landing supported by the Navy. And it all went off in December 1970, and this force deployed into villages on the coast. Fudhra and Gumdah were two of the villages, but the birds had flown and all that was found was revolutionary documentation. They had obviously got wind of the fact that they were going to be taken in, and had disappeared into other areas of the Trucial Coast. They were never heard of again anyway, and the whole thing was snuffed out.

MM: The whole insurrection.

NC: The potential insurrection. Whether, in the light of events, the information we secured was as hard as perhaps it should have been one can never tell, but certainly it

was a fairly expensive operation and, as far as I recall, there wasn't a squeak about it in the British media anywhere. No-one knew anything about it.

MM: Because it worked.

NC: It certainly worked, yes.

MM: But when you were in Bahrein in this GSOII post, were you talking to many Arabs? Were you using your Arabic?

NC: Yes, very much so. But not as much as I subsequently did in Saudi Arabia. But yes, I used the Arabic whenever I could to keep it, to try and keep it burnished. And the very fact you're living in the society and shopping in shops, you should always try and use it if you could.

MM: When you were in Bahrein, did you have any information about Palestinian revolutionaries? Were they a cause of concern?

NC: Well, in Bahrein itself, no. We had other concerns in Bahrein; the Shia majority there always needed watching, but that was much more a Special Branch problem under a chap called Ian Henderson, who is very well known, and that was handled particularly well by him. I had no involvement in internal Bahreini politics at all. I didn't watch Bahrein at all. But obviously I sat in on the meetings when people talked about it, and took an interest, but it was not my bag to look after it. But yes! I got quite a lot of information about the Palestinians from sources, including the time

of Black September, when they attempted several times to assassinate King Hussain and he eventually drove the Palestinians out of Jordan. There was a lot of traffic at that time, and we were made privy to it all. So there was a lot going on. It was a fascinating two years.

MM: Indeed. Crucial place really.

NC: Well, it was. But we pulled out in good order and there were no serious ructions at all. We just withdrew.

MM: And nothing happened!

NC: Nothing happened! There were various dark predictions made, including several from me, that the whole thing was going to implode, once the benign British presence left and, as usual with predictions in Arabia, one was proved quite wrong.

Posting to BAOR and service in Northern Ireland as an infantryman

MM: And you went from there to BAOR.

NC: Back to armoured soldiering - something totally different, yes.

MM: What a contrast!

NC: That's right. Never a dull moment! I was still a Major and I went back to be a Squadron Leader which I enjoyed; I liked handling armoured forces, I knew about it,

I'd been well trained in it, I found no difficulty in it, and that was good fun as well. In that time, we did a tour to Northern Ireland. It was an infantry battalion so I became an infantry Company Commander as well.

MM: As an infantry..... You mean.....

NC: You were converted to an infantry battalion. As an armoured soldier you suddenly were boots- and-gaiters and on your feet on the streets, patrolling as an infantryman. This happened quite a lot in Northern Ireland in order to keep the levels up. And it was good in many ways because it brought on the younger NCOs in a way - I mean, they had plenty of experience in armour and operating in Germany, but there were these small groupings with young NCOs in particular who were operating very often on their own, and it gave them an edge to their attitude to life which perhaps they didn't get in Germany, which in many ways was quite challenging but on the other hand was pretty comfortable as well, one has to say. Northern Ireland was a bit more operational than that, especially in those days, and so it was good. And it's good because now you have a British Army who actually are quite skilful at various levels of counter-insurgency or internal security, or whatever you want to call it. And that's to our great benefit that we've managed to achieve this.

MM: How do you transfer the benefits of this experience of street fighting and sniping and that sort of thing from one generation to another? It's one thing to experience being shot at, but quite another, I would have thought, to teach young soldiers about it, and how to behave in moments of huge stress.

NC: There is no substitute for actually being on operations. The best you can do is to teach them all that you know about the situations they're likely to have to face, and you teach them the ways in which they can minimise the danger to themselves while maximising their operational effectiveness. There are drills and there are skills that you can teach which enhance the individual soldier's operational capability in these circumstances. But you've got to build up your own store of operational experience, at the end of the day.

MM: When you first joined the Army, you were presumably within a sufficiently short range of the end of the second World War to benefit from quite a lot of experience that had been picked up during the course of that engagement, so that must have been quite a good start but, by the time you're passing on your experience in Aden and Northern Ireland and so on, it must be getting more difficult.

NC: Well, I'm not sure that it is really. The point you make is a very good one. My first Squadron Leader in Germany was someone called Hugh Fane-Hervey who'd got a couple of MCs and I had the privilege of writing his obituary in The Times last year. And such was the quality of his service that they gave him the full page. He was a remarkable chap and I won't go into it now, but he was a wonderful fellow and certainly we young Troop Leaders learned a tremendous amount from him. But of course his operational experience had been mainly in the Western Desert and one has to say, looking back on it, it wasn't in the main, as it turned out, entirely relevant to what we were about to do as armoured soldiers in Germany.

MM: Or in Belfast!

NC: Well, certainly not in Belfast. No-one of that generation had experience of that sort of activity unless they had post-war, or just pre-war, done service in Palestine. But of course, in those days, our responses were, let us say, much more vigorous and there were no embedded journalists photographing rioting crowds being shot or anything like that. One doesn't want to be too emotive about it, but there was a more relaxed attitude to the responses the military were allowed to make in those circumstances.

MM: Different world!

NC: That's right. And in many ways easier!

MM: Yes, I suppose. I see that, at this time, you got a Bar to your GSM. The GSM is.....?

NC: It's the General Service Medal.

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MM: So that was a great marker.

NC: Well, it's a bit like, you know, like Frederick the Great's donkey – took on every campaign which he ...

Brigade Major in Tidworth garrison, Wiltshire

MM: And after that, back to Tidworth!

NC: Yes. As Brigade Major. Brigade Major is a rather grand adjutant again but, instead of being adjutant to a Lieutenant Colonel, you're adjutant to the Brigadier and you really run the Brigade on his behalf. G operations is always the senior branch and, alongside you, you have a very good chap who, in the old days, used to be called the DAA and QMG, who ran the discipline and logistics side of things while you again ran the intelligence, training and the operations. And so it was a familiar role to me; it was just one stage up. And it's a very nice job to have.

MM: And at home!

NC: Yes, that's right. We were in Tidworth, apart from going over to Germany occasionally for some training. It was a very nice stable time and, whenever we had to deploy any of our forces, they were usually placed under command of the overseas command, as was the case in the Cyprus insurrection in the middle '70s. So, apart from supporting them from the home base, we had no direct operational activity.

MM: Did you go to Cyprus?

NC: Did I go? I've been, of course, many times. But I didn't go during that time. That was when Nikos Samson, the Greek gangster, tried to create the problems with the Turks, which eventually led to the Turkish invasion.

MM: This was in the middle of your time.

NC: Yes, that was about '74 as I remember.

MM: Following that, of course, you were appointed as Commanding Officer of 4RTR, your old regiment.

CO of 4RTR with service in Northern Ireland

NC: That's right. That is always a very important point in one's career. To get command of one's own regiment is always deeply satisfying, and so it proved in my case.

MM: Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. So did anything significant happen in the period '76-78?

NC: Well, I took the Regiment to Ireland twice as an infantry battalion. I think I was the only armoured soldier who was called to do two full tours as an infantry battalion. So that was pretty interesting, but of course I was supposed to be commanding and training an armoured regiment. Well, when you take out the time, two four-month tours in Ireland and two four-month work-ups in each case, you're talking about sixteen months out of thirty months. Sixteen months, over 50% of the time, was spent training for or operating as an infantry soldier, and this inevitably had a knock-on effect on armoured training. We like to think - and I think we did - we overcame the problem, but it kept us pretty busy in that time.

MM: I find it just astounding that you can switch from one to the other.

NC: Yes, well, I think a lot of people - and a lot of armies - would find that pretty surprising. But we were pretty good at it.

MM: Were the Americans capable of such versatility?

NC: No. They're only now coming to grips with counter-insurgency internal security. They are great guys for war fighting and we came across this when we were both training the National Guard - the American team and the small British team I had there.

MM: The National Guard in.....?

NC: Saudi Arabia. We can perhaps come onto that a bit later.

GSOI in BAOR

MM: So, anyway, that's a fascinating insight into your background I think. Unless you want to say anything further about that, you became, following that appointment, GSO1 Ops 1st British Corps, Bielefeld. What did that job entail?

NC: I was responsible for the Corps General Deployment plan. Again, like the earlier appointments, it was very much operations. This time I was specialising in operations, it was a separate intelligence and training branch, and I was the guardian

of the Corps plan; keeping it updated and arranging all the staffing of the various developments that inevitably took place. We were involved in quite a lot of training exercises to test the plan, and I became, if you like, the orchestrator for that on behalf of the Chief of Staff and the Corps Commander. It was an interesting job; it was hard work but there was a lot of up side to it as well. I was always responsible for guiding VIPs round the Corps operational area, which we used to do by helicopter, which was always quite fun. I used to be the guide over the radio for the VIP and I used to sit next to the Corps Commander in the back two seats while the VIP rode round in the front seat. And we became quite expert at that, recognising all the various features on the ground. I remember one famous occasion when I was taking round the Commander of the Northern Army Group who was a very distinguished German General called General Kurt von Senger und Etterlin, who had lost an eye and a hand fighting on the Russian Front. He was a charming fellow. We were flying along and I started my spiel - my talk - as we flew down the Weser Valley. He suddenly stopped me and said, "Colonel, I understand very well your plan, I know the layout. Would you like me to tell me where all my cousins live?" And so we flew around the Corps area and, every time we came across one of the many Schlosses that were there, he told me who owned them, how he was related to them and matters of interest that related to them. So I actually had a very interesting forty-five minutes flight with him before we landed for the verbal brief.

MM: So did you have a lot to do with German military?

NC: Yes, quite a lot; the German Corps, the Belgian Corps, the Dutch Corps. We interacted with them all. The Americans used to, every couple of years, bring over a

full team to practise inter-operability operations in mock defence of the Inner German Border, testing out the plans in various ways, which culminated eventually in a massive exercise called Crusader in 1981 when we actually did it with troops on the ground; and it was one of the last, one of the last, great exercises in Germany, with armoured divisions, American airborne divisions, all pouring into the country and being deployed in that part - in the eastern part of Western Germany as it then was.

MM: Close to the border.

NC: IGB. The Inner German Border.

MM: Did you not get any problems with farmers and people like that?

NC: Remarkably few really. Inevitably there were problems, but we had a highly developed system of briefings and telling people exactly what we were going to do, where we were going to do it, and also a very good system for paying out compensation quickly, and we always deployed on these exercises in the early Autumn when all the harvests were in, so the tanks and the like were motoring across stubble and harvested maize fields and so on and so forth. So we minimised damage as much as we could, and the reparation system was pretty effective. And the Germans generally speaking were very appreciative of this demonstration of military capability, because they felt that they were vulnerable so close to the Warsaw Pact forces on the other side of the Inner German Border.

Chief of Staff 4 Armoured Division in Germany

MM: And that led on to your appointment as Chief of Staff 4th Armoured Division at Herford.

NC: Yes. This was a bit more of the same, really. The Chief of Staff, again I got back into - if you remember I talked about Adjutants, Brigade Major - the Chief of Staff is at Divisional level. Having done it at regimental and brigade level, I was now doing virtually the Adjutant's job at Divisional level; again principally concerned with Ops, Intelligence and Training. I had those three branches under me with a Major heading up each branch, and then my opposite number was the Colonel for Administration and Quartering, AQ, and he handled the formal discipline side and the quartermastering and logistical side. And that's the way it worked. And this time, because of NATO inter-operability, our titles were changed and I went from being Colonel GS to the Chief of Staff. And my oppo on the logistics side, to his great chagrin, became the Deputy Chief of Staff. I think he always thought I was *primus inter pares*, but now, according to the title, he was my deputy, something he found really quite difficult to stomach. In reality it didn't matter because we were heading up different disciplines, but it was always quite fun to tweak him.

MM: So that was quite a lengthy spell in Germany.

NC: It was indeed, yes.

MM: But leading to an appointment in the Ministry of Defence in London in 1983 for a year.

Posting to Saudi Arabia National Guard as Commander of British Mission

NC: Yes, well I came back, as far as I recall, I came back in about September to take up an appointment as Colonel MO3. Now Colonel MO3 is again all operations and responsible for NATO plans. That was the MO3 task. I had quite a large and extremely competent staff handling that. But when I landed, I had barely arrived in my young daughter's house in Cambridge, where I was stopping for a day or two, when the 'phone rang and the Military Secretary's Branch in London 'phoned me up and said, "Would you be prepared to volunteer to go back to Arabia as the Commander of the British Mission in the Saudi Arabia National Guard?" And I said, "But I haven't taken up my next appointment yet. I've only just landed." And they said, "No, but we would quite like to know." So I said, "Well, when do you need to know by?" And they said, "Well how long do you want?" And I said, "Well I want a week because I want to talk to my family about it, having been abroad for the last eight years." And they said that would be fine. Anyway, having spoken to my family, they were all very keen that I should go back abroad - I don't know why! But anyway, I eventually said yes and threw my hat in the ring, and so my name went forward with, I think, twelve others' and I was informed, even before I'd taken over my next appointment, that in fact, subject to Saudi approval, I'd been selected for the job. So I only did, in the end, about eight or nine months with the Ministry of Defence, which was extremely interesting and I enjoyed it because, again, operations is an important appointment and there was a lot going on. But at the end of the day my sights by then were fixed just over the horizon on going back into Arabia for, what I suspected, might be my last job. And I hadn't been expecting to go back to Arabia in my military career again.

MM: Had you forgotten your Arabic?

NC: I certainly needed freshening up after all this time and the Army arranged for me to have a one-to-one tutor. I was living in London at the time so I continued to live in London and go daily to meet my Syrian lady, and she and I used to bash away at the Arabic to get me back up to some sort of standard. She was very good at it and it was a pretty relaxed and pleasant way of doing things.

MM: Is Arabic the sort of language that has different usages according to the sex of the speaker?

NC: Not really. The only thing about Arabic is that some of the words can have, in relation to their context and emphasis, different meanings, so you do have to be quite careful what you're saying; and other words, as in other languages, are a matter of pronunciation and, if you get it slightly wrong, it can sometimes be quite disastrous and/or hilarious. But that's the case, I think, with quite a lot of languages.

MM: So you had a really good introduction once again to life in Arabia with this appointment to SANG, and off you went in 1984. What sort of situation did you discover when you arrived there?

NC: The Saudi Arabian National Guard, in the context of Saudi Arabia itself, had always had a reputation for being the White Guard and the Army was the Red Guard. This is a drastic simplification of the situation, but in general terms the National

Guard was seen to be the bastion of the support of the House of Saud in fighting troops. Like all these things, there's a thread of truth in this, but one wouldn't want to over-emphasise it. I found when I got there that the British had a small team of about nine Lieutenant Colonels, one Colonel, myself and a Warrant Officer who was responsible for the administration of the team. The Lieutenant Colonels reflected various military disciplines from logistics to armoured and infantry and so on. The Americans, who were also present, and had indeed been present since about 1974, were running a thing called the modernisation programme; they had in the region of 350 uniformed officers and a big team of ex-service personnel produced by an organisation called the Vinnell Company. Between them the uniformed branch of the Americans and the Vinnell Company were responsible for the modernisation programme, which really meant the mechanisation programme that was going on at that time in the Guard. That was their fief. We, on the other hand, were responsible for more generalized training; we could turn our hands to almost anything, including making comments on the mechanised training when asked to do so. In particular, I got the mission focussed on internal security duties. At first the Guard were reluctant to acknowledge that there was any need for this because, in the usual Saudi way, it's a problem that they didn't think they were going to have to confront. But, after I'd explained the ramifications of the Johaimi Revolt in the 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mekkah and the subsequent chaos and violence that it provoked; I pointed out that it was, in essence, an internal security situation, and the reason it took the security forces so long to deal with it was that you had no proper internal security training. So after this they began to take the point and we embarked on a programme of internal security training for all the infantry battalions, both mechanised and non-mechanised, over a period of time. And in the end this became quite a vibrant

programme and they were apparently deeply appreciative of it. I also found that the structure of the Guard - there was no Brigade level of command, or hardly any Brigade level of command, outside the modernisation battalions, so the Arab General in charge, a respected and senior and elderly figure but a nice man, was continually having to deal with non-mechanised battalion commanders, of which there were about twenty-six at the time. I said this was ridiculous and that he shouldn't be dealing with all those people individually. 'You should make about four Brigadiers and put them into Brigades, talk to the Brigadiers and let the Brigadiers talk to the Lieutenant Colonels'. This may sound fairly fundamental but it was introduced amidst great rejoicing, and we quickly got them organised within about eighteen months, so things began to fall into place from then on.

MM: And you were dealing mainly, or only with a Saudi Arabian General?

NC: Yes. Abdullah El Amaro, who had formerly been head of the Asliha Quwat al Hudood which is the Border Frontier Service, and he knew Arabia like the back of his hand. He was an interesting fellow who knew a lot about the fauna and flora of Arabia, and indeed the history of Arabia, so we used to have long and interesting discussions. And on one memorable occasion he asked me to join him and his friends when we crossed the Nafud desert in the north, and we went with him from Jebel Shammer across to a place called Jawf near the Jordanian border. That was a memorable trip. It was the desert that Lawrence crossed in the film on his way to Aqaba. But we were doing it in Range Rovers.

MM: Was there much sign of unrest in Saudi Arabia?

NC: No sign of any unrest in Saudi Arabia except for two occasions. One I've already referred to before I got there in 1979 when a religious fundamentalist group under a chap called Johaimi, who had formerly been in the National Guard - to the great embarrassment of the National Guard - actually took over the Grand Mosque and had to be forcibly dealt with, causing considerable bloodshed and injury, and a great loss of face to the House of Saud who, at that time, came increasingly under attack from the Ayatollahs in Iran who had just deposed the Shah. Relations between the Shia Ayatollahs and the Sunni House of Saud became very tense over the handling of this Grand Mosque incident. The second time was in 1988 when again Iranian pilgrims came and tried to storm the Grand Mosque, and the SANG Special Security Force in the end had to open fire to stop them, because the Ministry of Interior Forces and the Police had been overwhelmed. One was an internal thing but fostered externally; the other was a straight confrontation with the Iranians. But those really were the only two major incidents. There had been some trouble with the Shia down in the Qatif region on the eastern side but these, by and large, were handled reasonably quietly and usually in the Saudi way: conciliation, consultation and a few hand-outs solved the problem.

Stability in Saudi Arabia and in the Middle East generally

MM: And do you think Saudi Arabia is a stable state?

NC: I think it's less stable than it was, for a variety of reasons. There are economic and demographic pressures but Saudi Arabia is unique insofar as the development in Saudi Arabia is not really like anywhere else. It's moved from being a nomadic,

agrarian society, very conservative with a small 'c', deeply pious in religious terms and, in the last fifty to sixty years with this cornucopia of wealth cascading down upon it, not only has the society survived but it has endured, and to that extent it is really quite remarkable. On the other hand they are going to come to a stage, I believe, when, to take a loose analogy, what happened in Western Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries was a confrontation in the main between the secular state and the religious authority, and this is now a phase that's entering into the Saudi dimension, in particular. Only in Saudi Arabia do the religious have a competing structure with the secular authority and, on top of both, in theory, the House of Saud which claims its authenticity from its relationship to the Wahab form of religion on the one hand, and its ability to handle the secular requirements of the State on the other. And all the way up, because the country is governed under the tenets of Sharia Law, which is the Islamic law, these two competing towers, if you like - competing columns of authority interlock all the way up, and they're interlocked at the top. (Tape change)

As I was saying, these two competing pillars of the religious and secular interlock all the way up to the top and, at the top, have got to be rationalised by the suppression of the religious and the dominance in secular terms of the secular, which will be difficult, not least because the Government is run according to the tenets of Sharia Law, which is of course Islamic law, and also, as I've said, because the House of Saud relies upon the authenticity, the endorsement of the religious establishment. So they would, to an extent, be denying their own authenticity, or would be in danger of doing so, by suppressing the religious and making it secondary to the secular. So all these questions have got to be addressed and, in addressing them, there are inherent dangers at every level. So it is difficult to say that the Saudi Arabian regime is stable. At the moment I believe it is stable but I see storms ahead, I see rocks ahead and, unless they

are successfully navigated, I think there will be fundamental changes in that country - probably not for the better.

MM: What are the risks?

NC: Well the risks are that, despite the wealth that has accrued to the country, the development that has taken place in the country, they cannot satisfy the demands of the population of which, I think I'm right in saying, 60% are under the age of twenty-five, and have been brought up in an educational environment which is very much religiously directed. They have far too many people studying PhDs in Islamic Law and far too few studying engineering, IT systems and so on and so forth; so a lot of these guys are unemployable, and this is a great difficulty. You either retrain them or you employ them as religious police which, in themselves, are a great force for division in the kingdom. Things are changing now, but they're probably at least a decade too late - better late than never, but is it too late? I don't know. I've heard various Saudi divines whom I know well tell me that they feel everything's now coming too late. But the educational system is going to be secularised much more and the endless reciting of the Koran by rote is going to happen not quite so frequently as is presently the case. So they've got to prepare an educated society that can meet the needs of that society in secular terms. Therefore you get employment; therefore you get satisfaction. But if you don't, then you get unemployment, you get resentment and you get an underclass, a substantial underclass that is prey to the overtures of the Islamic fundamentalists. And that, in turn, will bring problems.

MM: Do they have people who are thinking about problems of the world such as the Arab/Israeli dispute and the part played by the Western World in Iraq recently?

NC: Absolutely, yes. This is very much on the agenda. I mean the top echelon of Saudi Arabians are highly intelligent international people. One of my friends is, for example, a director of Royal Dutch Shell. You don't sit on the Board of Royal Dutch Shell unless you're a rather clever fellow. Similarly, Douglas Hurd said twelve years ago that Saud al Faisal, the Foreign Minister, was the most impressive of all the foreign ministers he'd ever had to deal with. So there are the right people at the top who understand how the world works. They all universally deplore the invasion of Iraq; they could see the knock-on destabilising effects it was going to have in the region and also they could visualise the Balkanisation of Iraq, which would be a matter, in their view, of destabilisation in the region, and I have to say I agree with that view. By 'Balkanisation', of course, I mean Kurds have Kurdistan, Sunnis and the Shia in the south, and so on. So yes, they understand how the world works in a very clear way, and this highly educated and intelligent minority are working towards bringing Saudi Arabia forward into an environment where they can contribute fully to the family of nations. But it's an uphill, difficult task, and we have to wait and see how things develop.

MM: And how about the Arab/Israeli dispute?

NC: They feel deeply about the Arab/Israeli dispute and any anti-Americanism, such as there is, has always stemmed from the unconditional, as they see it, support for Israel by the Americans and of course this has been further inflamed by the

American incursion into Iraq. I think at one stage they had hoped that, if the Americans were determined, as was apparent, to go into Iraq at an early stage, they would at least, in an even handed way, begin to force the Israelis to adhere to some of the UN resolutions regarding the Palestinian situation; at least that would have mollified them. But the way the Americans completely disregarded the road map to peace whilst going into Iraq, they thought spoke of an arrogance and insensitivity that was unbelievable.

MM: Do they understand some of the pressures that the American President operates under in relation to his own fundamental Christian power block within the United States?

NC: I think they probably are getting an understanding of that, though this is something as far as they're concerned relatively new. They've always demonised the well-known Israeli lobby as being very effective in influencing American policy, either by manipulating finance or votes, and they're deeply suspicious of the organised Israeli lobby in America. Now it's been joined by the fundamentalist Christian movement, that makes it doubly dangerous as far as they're concerned.

MM: Is there anything that they can do about it?

NC: Well they try to form American/Arab associations and, up to a point, these are really quite effective, but of course Christian fundamentalism is a very big movement, especially in the middle States, the mid-West and so on, and it's a question of money, power, numbers. And of course the Israeli lobby has been established in America for

a long time, and are very practised at furthering their cause by whatever means they deem fit. So the Arabs are a bit behind the curve on the spinning, the PR and associated matters.

MM: What sort of part, in all this calculation, do the big oil companies play? If any.

NC: At the end of the day, the large oil companies are industrial/political organisations and I suppose a good example is when, in 1998 when the Crown Prince was in Washington and he suddenly invited a select group of oil majors to investigate, and subsequently bid for, developing the gas concessions in Saudi Arabia. This eventually more or less ran into the sand - not entirely - but it was a realisation on the Saudi side that they needed the oil company investment and expertise in order to develop their own natural gas fields. But, more importantly, they could see on the one hand if they got the oil majors involved industrially, this would be an interesting guarantee of their own sovereignty because the American Government would never let important oil concessions go under the threat of insurrectional force. That was the thinking behind it. So they were able to get, if you like, a security guarantee without the formal piece of paper stating it, just by virtue of the fact that the big majors, the American majors in particular, the international majors as well, were involved in the country and *de facto* became hostages to fortune in the context of strategic power play. The second, and really equally important reason for drawing them in, was that the investment was not just going into the development of the oil fields but also a number of ancillary provisions such as railways, water supply and so on. People were talking about \$26 billion worth of investment, which would have generated all sorts of jobs in the economy, which would have also had a beneficial effect on this

demographic problem that I spoke of earlier, and the unemployment that exists. So yes, inevitably the oil companies do become involved in the politics of the region because things are linked in all the time. And, of course, they do respond to the aspirations of national governments, and the American aspirations to ensure a continuing, relatively inexpensive supply of oil is something that will drive the strategies of oil companies because that's the way things flow.

MM: What do you think of the role, or potential role, of Britain in this kind of problematic situation?

NC: Well, generally speaking Britain is still listened to with great respect because of its track record as an empirical power. There is still a belief that the British are very good at crafting international politics. But at the end of the day it's recognised that, in power play terms, the British are a middle-ranking player. The Saudis and the other Gulf Arabs recognise that the only really successful guarantor of their independence if push came to shove would be the Americans. We have not got the outreach capability to do anything other than support someone like the Americans going in there. Now support may be important, particularly from the political point of view - our military undoubtedly are very good - but in terms of sheer volume of numbers their contribution is inevitably limited. How long this residual belief in the British competence of handling affairs of state will pertain, I don't know. It must be waning all the time because we move further and further away from when we actually had hands-on experience of managing world affairs.

MM: Do you think there's any future for the European Union in dealing with problems such as are thrown up by the Middle East?

NC: Well, it would be nice to think that the Europeans could stake out a very clear position in opposition to the Americans in the Israeli/Palestinian issue. But they fiddle around on the fringes really, in the main. I think the question really is, is the European concept viable? And I don't see any indications at the moment that it is seriously so, so it's a bit of a hypothesis. I don't think its time has come.

MM: Well thank you very much for that. Is there anything further that you would like to say about your association with Saudi Arabia?

NC: Only as a postscript, really. The Ministry of Defence found it quite difficult to deal with my seven years there because I was supposed to be there for three years, but the Saudis - or the Crown Prince specifically - pointed out to various Foreign Secretaries whenever they came out that he wished to retain my services, and the Foreign Office of course came back with the view that I should stay. So I stayed there for seven years. And eventually when the Saudis knew I was going to retire, wanted me to stay out there, but I declined to do that for the usual reasons, at that time, in that particular role, but I did agree to look after and advise them whenever they wanted me to and, out of that grew a relationship with several of my Saudi friends which takes me back to Saudi Arabia three or four times a year in which I engage in some commercial projects, some advisory projects, depending on what they want. I personally enjoy the association that continues and I think it'll probably go on for some time.

MM: They recognise in you somebody they can trust.

NC: Well I like to think so. I think that's the point. Yes, I'm a familiar face, and I suppose they think I've got a bit of a track record of being on their side.

MM: That's very good. Thank you.

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