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Sir John William Denys Margetson (born 9 October 1927)

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Sir John (William Denys) Margetson KCMG
interviewed by Jimmy Jamieson on 1 March 2007

National Service in Palestine

JJ: Perhaps we can start with your career after college and university. What did you do first of all?

JM: Like everyone else of my age I was called up in 1947 to do my National Service. I think the only interesting thing about that is that, having been commissioned in the Life Guards, I went out to join the regiment in Palestine, as it then was. In fact, I served there for the last six months of the Mandate, which was on the whole a very unpleasant experience. The army was present in large numbers, but we had virtually reached the stage when the army no longer played a significant role in maintaining law and order. It was quite obvious to everyone that just as soon as we pulled out, there was going to be an unholy fight. The Arab countries were already massing, and had said in so many words that they intended to throw what would become Israel into the sea. And so for the six months I was there, both sides were manoeuvring to get into the best possible position for this fight.

I was in a squadron of armoured cars stationed in Jerusalem. We had one or two things to do, like patrolling the Jerusalem-Jaffa road, and taking potash convoys up from the Dead Sea; that kept us fairly busy and led to one very unpleasant experience, which was on my way up the Jaffa road. Coming through the very mountainous and beautiful area of the Judean highlands I was ambushed and my scout car was blown clean off the road. I opened fire immediately with everything I had, which you were not meant to do. You were meant to ring up the brigadier and say: "May I open fire with my two-pounder gun?" He could be playing tennis at the time, in which case you might have to wait until the set had finished. In this case I didn't bother about the regulations. I opened up with everything, which was just as well, because this made the people who were about to plunge the plunger down to blow my armoured car up act prematurely. They thought that I knew where they were – which I didn't. But they plunged it down and then ran for it. Of course it went off, and there was an enormous explosion about three feet in front of my armoured car.

Anyhow, I survived that. The sequel to this is that in the 1960s I was staying in a marvellous house in Tuscany. Also staying was a very nice Israeli diplomat who was working in the United Nations in New York. Sooner or later, of course, he asked me the inevitable question: "Had I ever been to Israel?" And I said: "Yes. In the days when it was Palestine". And we worked back on that, and it so happened by extraordinary coincidence, that he was the chap in Haganah responsible for that part of the Jaffa road, and he had ordered my ambush. We became very good friends and went on a lot of expeditions together and kept up for many years with Christmas cards.

JJ: He wasn't a member of the Stern Gang?

JM: No, he was Haganah, which became the Israeli Army. The two terrorist gangs were the Stern Gang and Irgun Tzvai Leumi. No, I won't go on with my adventures in Palestine. After six months came 14 May, the date indelibly inscribed in all our hearts when we knew that we would get out.

JJ: Which year was that again?

JM: 1948. I had the task of escorting the High Commissioner, General Cunningham, to the airfield, and I turned up at Government House, my troop of armoured cars and scout cars absolutely bulled to the nth degree, looking marvellous. My orders were to get to the airfield, which was just north of Jerusalem, as quickly as possible; to stop for nothing; not even for the guard of honour, which was outside the King David Hotel. We took off at breakneck speed, but we slowed down a little bit as we passed the guard of honour. I think the Warwickshire Regiment, who provided the guard of honour must have been a bit disappointed that General Cunningham didn't inspect them, but we slowed down to about 20 miles an hour, and then accelerated with his old Rolls Royce jammed between a couple of armoured cars. We took him to the airfield, and I caught a glimpse of him – the only time I ever saw him. He never once came to see us when we were in Jerusalem. I know he must have been a major target, but I was rather disappointed that he didn't make a fleeting visit to some of the troops who were there in vast numbers. Anyhow, he got on the 'plane and flew off to Haifa, then on to a Royal Naval cruiser, and that was that. We went south over the Sinai Desert, down to Port Said, and back to England. That was my first experience of decolonisation -- the end of the British Mandate -- and it was on the whole a very unpleasant one. One couldn't walk around

at all for fear of terrorists. We had one very nice officer in our regiment who had been shot, and very severely wounded whilst walking around Jerusalem. When I left Palestine I swore a mighty oath – I said: “I’m never coming back to this part of the world. It has a basic disagreement between the Jews and the Arabs which seems to me to be virtually insoluble, and so goodbye”. I have never returned to the Middle East.

JJ: After that what was your next move? Did you just leave the Life Guards?

St John’s College, Cambridge, 1950

JM: In fact I had had rather an unusual sandwich of my National Service between two sessions at Cambridge. So I went back to Cambridge, and completed my degree. I read anthropology and archaeology, which was a great pleasure. As a result of anthropology, I got particularly interested in Africa, and I had a strong political feeling that the African Empire should be dissolving. I thought it would be a good idea to help one of those colonies towards independence, and so I joined the Colonial Service. I got my choice, which was Tanganyika. I wanted to go there because it was a United Nations Trusteeship Territory, which made it a little unusual.

Colonial Service in Tanganyika, 1951

JJ: What were the implications of that?

JM: Well, the implications were that you had two masters. On the one hand we had of course the Secretary of State for the Colonies, but we were also answerable to the Trusteeship Council in the United Nations. Our Governor used to go and give evidence before them when they were reviewing their trusteeship territories. In turn the Trusteeship Council sent out visiting missions to tour Tanganyika to see how we were getting on.

JJ: Did they give you instructions or suggestions on how you should be running the country?

JM: They couldn’t give instructions. What they wrote was a report and we may come to that later. Owing to the presence of a blinkered American representative on the Trusteeship Council, they wrote a very hard-hitting report in 1954 which said we ought to give

independence to Tanganyika very soon. This upset the Colonial Office and the government in Dar es Salaam. It didn't really affect me. I was working in the bush at the time. It did affect me later on. I'll come on to that. But the Trusteeship Council took a great interest in us. Much later in my career I was President of the Trusteeship Council. The trusteeship territory was interesting, and it did lead to all sorts of difficulties.

JJ: Did the fact of the Trusteeship Council mean that, in the end, independence for Tanganyika came perhaps more quickly than the Colonial Office, and yourselves on the ground, would have wished, or thought was desirable?

JM: Well it wasn't because of the Trusteeship Council so much, because the report to which I referred was disclaimed by the United States Government. It was their representative who'd been largely responsible for writing it. It was also disapproved of enormously by the New Zealand Chairman of the visiting mission. But what it did do, was provide a platform for the new African political party called TANU (Tanganyika African National Union). Its leader, Julius Nyerere, was invited, as a result of this visiting mission, to appear before the Trusteeship Council, and this gave him an absolutely unique opportunity, because TANU, up till then, had been a tiny organisation only present, I suppose, in Dar es Salaam and perhaps a couple of other provincial centres. But as a result of appearing at the United Nations, Nyerere became – a reaction of course particularly on the part of the neutral non-aligned countries – a world figure, and his movement took off. And TANU became a major feature on the political scene.

JJ: When did independence finally come to Tanganyika? Tanzania as it became afterwards, of course.

JM: It became independent in 1961. Before then I had been entirely in the bush which I loved and did lots of most interesting and adventurous things. To be a District Officer was in fact, in my opinion, the greatest job for a young man, because it had enormous responsibility, gave you the opportunity to have ideas and do something about them. It was mostly in the open air and you were working with extraordinarily interesting people. I loved that. For two years I was Private Secretary to the Governor, Sir Edward Twining, later Lord Twining, who was a very remarkable, larger than life, figure. He was a major influence on me, needless to say. It was one of the greatest bits of luck I had, to be made Private Secretary. Of course, the whole

period I was Private Secretary there was a political battle going on between Twining and TANU. TANU wanted independence quickly, Twining and the Colonial Office wanted a more measured pace to independence, to attract economic investment and to create a multi-racial state at independence.

JJ: This was the Colonial Office saying this?

JM: Multi-racialism was the policy, not just for Tanganyika, but for Kenya and of course, the Central African Federation, because the Europeans and the Asians had a great contribution to make to the development of the country. Set against this was, of course, the very simple programme of TANU which was general elections and independence absolutely as soon as possible. And so on the one hand you had Twining very carefully and cleverly holding things back, though he was rather let down by a political party which he had virtually formed – a multi-racial party called UTP – the United Tanganyika Party.

JJ: He had formed a party?

JM: I said virtually. He gave it a lot of encouragement. And it was extraordinarily ineffective, so towards the end of his period, he actually wrote a very confidential letter to the Colonial Office saying: “If this fails; if we can’t hold the fort”- and he began to doubt whether it would be possible - “we must open the floodgates and it must be an African state and Julius Nyerere and TANU must be the bosses”. I only actually heard of this letter the other day. Information about it was gleaned by a professor who is writing the biography of Sir Richard Turnbull, who succeeded Twining. Turnbull was later Governor in Aden. Up till now it has been the accepted view that Twining just held everything back, and was just thoroughly negative and that Turnbull opened the floodgates and independence followed. It’s quite apparent that the letter which Twining wrote in November 1956 in fact became the blue print for constitutional development, and that this must have been the basis of the briefing which Turnbull got a year later. I left Tanganyika in 1959, because I saw that independence was just around the corner. In fact independence was not achieved until 1961. I left to get back to England for several reasons. But I wasn’t quite sure what I was going to do.

Appointment to the Foreign Service, 1960

My interest in politics had been roused by being Private Secretary to Twining, but I didn't find either the Conservative Party or the Labour Party really to my liking. What I was really after was the sort of party, which is now called New Labour.

Not sure quite what to do, a friend in a restaurant in Chelsea said to me: "Have you ever thought of joining the Secret Service?" and I said: "No. I don't even know anything about it; only what I've read in Somerset Maugham". Anyhow, to cut a long story short, I joined for a time and later I decided to take the late entry exam into the Diplomatic Service, which I did. Rather to my surprise I passed, and then I started my diplomatic career.

Posting to The Hague

JM: I spent my time drafting – first of all learning to draft in good Foreign Office fashion – which has never left me, I have to say. Drafting in Chancery, telegrams and despatches, very largely about a thing that is now forgotten but which was then central to foreign policy in the Netherlands, which was West Irian. You may remember in that period Indonesia was trying in every way including the use of force to get West Irian to become part of Indonesia. The Dutch at the time Indonesia was formed, had decided that West Irian was quite separate – totally different racially and primitive compared to western Muslim Indonesia. I spent a lot of time on that, and I covered internal politics. I worked for Paddy Noble, the Ambassador – Sir Andrew Noble – a real professional. I learned a great deal from him. He was very unpopular, particularly with his senior staff. He was always rather nice to his junior staff. Luckily I was junior. So, he was very nice to me and I ended up writing his obituary for *The Times* some 25 years later.

JJ: Did you speak Dutch?

JM: No. The good thing about the Netherlands is that just about every Dutchman speaks English much better than I could ever have spoken Dutch. There was a very nice chap I shared a room with in Chancery, and he being a career diplomat said he was going to learn Dutch. He worked terribly hard, passed all the exams. But I said: "No. To hell with that. I'm a bad linguist. I'm going to get to know the Dutch instead". So I had many more Dutch

friends than he did and it served me well later on in my career, though I was not to know that at the time.

JJ: What general political issues were abroad in The Hague at that time? The Dutch had joined the EEC. We were stuck in EFTA. Did this spark off any ..?

JM: The Dutch were doing their very best to help us in our first application to join the EEC and they could not have worked harder or better. The then Foreign Minister was Dr Luns, a considerable figure, and he was afraid of no one let alone General de Gaulle. He did his very best. I was not involved in that at all really. Just after I left, when the General said “No”, Mr Edward Heath came to say thank you to the Dutch.

JJ: Very interesting. I remember Luns myself. He made himself famous in Brussels when we were part of it by, apart from being very tall, always wearing bright red socks, whatever suit he was wearing, which amused the rest of us.

Return to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1966-68

JJ: After The Hague you came back to London and became Foreign Secretary, George Brown's, Speech Writer.

JM: It was a bit more than that. In their wisdom Personnel Department – I'm not being critical of them – sent me to what was then the CRO. I had said to them I was a very late entrant and wanted to learn quickly about the Foreign Office; but they were conscious of the fact that I had served in East Africa, so they sent me to the department which had the longest name and the least work of any department in the CRO, and that's saying something. It was called East and West Africa Aid Department and General Development – something like that. Anyhow, there was no work to be done there, except once. The Prime Minister had breakfast one day with David Frost in Claridges and came back with the idea from David Frost that there was a very severe famine in Africa. Of course Harold Wilson immediately thought that there was something which for humanitarian reasons he should do something about. But also I think he probably felt it would do his image quite a lot of good if Britain led this great rescue operation. For reasons which I won't go into, this came to my desk and I rang around a few people in the CRO. No-one had heard of a famine in Africa, so I then sent a telegram to

every single mission in Africa – that’s the Commonwealth missions and the Foreign Office missions – saying “Any famine around? I’d like to know”. I got replies from absolutely everyone, bar one. There was a little Embassy in what had been a French Colonial Territory in West Africa, and they, I think, must have lost their cipher book or they were too busy or something. I don’t know what, but they never replied. I sent a reminder and they never replied. But all the rest said: “No. No – there’s no famine”. Except Kenya, and they said: “Yes we have a bit of a famine in the north-west part of Kenya, but it’s been going on for about four years, and the Kenyan Government are dealing with it rather well”. So I wrote a quick minute back to No 10 and that was that.

But more important – I used to go to Personnel Department and say “I am doing nothing. Please send me to a busier department”. So, for reasons which really had to do with the personality of John Barnes, who was the rather famous Head of Western Organisations and Co-ordination Department (WOCD) in the Foreign Office, they sent me to see him. John Barnes was a remarkable man; cleverest man I have ever worked for. He was the son of the famous Bishop Barnes, who had been a fellow of the Royal Society and fellow of Trinity, Cambridge. John had carried off every conceivable prize in Cambridge and was a double first in Classics. But he was actually a bad judge of people, and he had the habit of turning people down for jobs in his Department. It was said to get a job in his Department, you either had to be an old Wykehamist – he was of course an old Wykehamist himself – or you had to be a son of the manse – again he was that. Luckily for me my father was a clergyman, so John, who knew absolutely nothing about me really, took me on and I occupied the seat which was the co-ordination seat in WOCD. One of the jobs in that co-ordination seat was to draft speeches for Ministers if they wanted to make rather general speeches about foreign affairs. I was happily doing this when George Brown was made Foreign Secretary.

George, who was a great character, but I needn’t go into that in any detail, liked to make a great many speeches, but needed someone to write them for him. I was sitting there in that job, so I became his speech writer. He rather liked me, for reasons that I don’t know. We can go into the personality of George later – people he liked and disliked. He was very eccentric.

He started off with a good system of speech writing. When he wanted to make a speech he would gather all the Heads of Department and Under Secretaries involved and have a discussion. I would be there with an elementary form of recording machine and would record

the meeting. I would then go back to my room, use bits of the discussion, particularly bits which George himself had said, and using my own contributions develop a speech. This was fine, but unfortunately George, I'm afraid, became rather unpopular in the Foreign Office. This is no secret. And people didn't like going to his meetings. He might be tight. He might humiliate them. He might shout and God knows what. These meetings became fewer and fewer, and so I would find myself drafting speeches, either sitting with him and Paul Gore-Booth, the PUS, in a huddle of three, or else I just drafted without any help at all. The draft would then be cleared with those who were interested in the Office, and it would then go to the Secretary of State.

George Brown was an impossible man to work for. He would for instance ring me up at two o'clock in the morning and say: "John. I think we should make a speech about Vietnam. Now please draft me something". He always wanted the speech by yesterday. I remember for instance there was a debate in the House of Commons – a general debate on foreign affairs – he loved these things; but on this occasion he thought he was going to be abroad and so no one warned me this was coming up. He decided the night before the debate that he'd put off his departure and that I should write him a speech; and that was at seven o'clock in the evening. I was just about to leave the Office. So I got hold of one of our splendid departmental ladies, as they were called in those days. She was very good at typing, and I asked her if she would mind staying on. So I drafted and Sir John Rennie, who was a Deputy Under Secretary, said he would come and see me when he'd finished having dinner at some embassy at about eleven o'clock. I think it was nearly midnight by the time he appeared. I showed him the draft and he said it was fine. So we had it typed and I put the departmental lady into a taxi and sent her home. I put the speech in draft into the Secretary of State's letter-box in Carlton House Gardens. He read it over his breakfast and delivered it – actually rather well, for him – the next day. I say "well for him" because you never knew what he was going to be like when he actually delivered a speech. There was a famous occasion – famous for me – when there was another debate in the House of Commons. George always liked to go through the speech soon after lunch in his room in the House of Commons, and he would decide whether he wanted to alter it a bit, or not. I remember on this occasion John Thomson, Head of Planning Group, was there, to make sure that he was happy with it. George wanted a few alterations, so I took the speech into the next door room where there was a PA, and I dictated the alterations. The Head of the departmental ladies of the Private Office was that splendid person, Bill Easton, and she saw through the door that George was going to the

cupboard in which he kept the sherry. (Sherry was George's downfall.) And she, quick as a flash, moved into the room, shut the cupboard door and locked it, put the key in her pocket and popped back to the room I was in. There was a gigantic explosion from George, but he was sober and the speech was given and was a great success.

JJ: Tells you quite a lot about him.

JM: But I remained devoted to him. He was an impossible man. He was in a way a sort of genius. He left school at the age of fourteen, but he had a beautiful mind. He could hold his own in a room filled with people, some of whom were Fellows of All Souls, all of whom were extremely intelligent, highly educated – and he held his own effortlessly. But his genius was deeply flawed. He left after 18 months and I was then posted.

JJ: Could I just ask you one thing? Do you remember he was very interested in Palestine at some point? And you, having been there yourself ...

JM: He wouldn't call it Palestine – it was Israel.

JJ: Indeed. The Palestine problem, should I say.

JM: This was, I suppose, one of the things for which he will always be remembered, Resolution 242. I wrote him a speech on the subject at the end of the Six-Day War, but I didn't otherwise get involved on that particular one. The speech was, I think, at the United Nations, but 242 was the thing with which he lived day and night. Lord Caradon was of course in New York doing the hard work, but George Brown was deeply involved steering all the time. It was a thing very dear to his heart. But I can't say I played any part in it other than drafting one speech.

JJ: He left, leaving you high and dry?

Posting to Saigon as Head of Chancery, 1968

JM: George Brown left and it coincided with the time I was due to be posted abroad. I always remember one thing which happened while I was being posted to Saigon. I had left my desk.

I was at home busy packing my stuff for Saigon and while I was being briefed I got a message that there was going to be a major debate in the House of Commons about the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and would I please come and draft a speech for the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson? My mind was really off speech-writing by then, so I did my best to get out of it. I rang up Michael Palliser, who was the PM's Private Secretary, and asked him if he would write the speech. I remember going to see Christopher Makins who was the Desk Officer. Christopher said he was sorry, was too busy, but he would lend me a book. He lent me the biography of Huss, the great Czech-born religious reformer, at least 500 pages long, and totally irrelevant. So I buckled down and wrote a speech. And actually, though I say so myself, it wasn't a bad speech. Denis Greenhill, to whom it went first, said it was the best speech I'd ever written. When the debate was held, I read Harold Wilson's speech – he did not use a single word of mine. So my speech was the best speech never delivered. Evidently Harold Wilson liked to have something in his hand which somehow triggered him off and then he would dictate his own speech. However, that's just a little by-the-way. Saigon: that's what my eye was on.

JJ: And that was in 1968 when the Vietcong Tet Offensive took place.

JM: The Tet Offensive took place early in 1968 and I went towards the end of 1968. There had been another offensive in between. It was in many ways a somewhat unsuitable posting. I had a wife and children aged one and three, and there we were heading for a place in the middle of a very considerable war. I remember asking John Barnes whether he thought it was a good posting. He said it would be good for my career. So whether or not it was good for my career, I went from the frying pan of George Brown into the fire of Saigon.

Murray MacLehose was the Ambassador there – a very remarkable chap. He was later Governor of Hong Kong and subsequently Lord MacLehose, Knight of the Thistle. He wrote to me and said that every embassy in Saigon had sent all its women and children home but we hadn't done that in the British Embassy. Opinion was rather divided and he thought it should be left to people to decide for themselves what to do. So I went off on my own, and landed in Saigon which is an amazing city. That is to say, you had half a million American soldiers in Vietnam and of course the military presence was very visible in Saigon, but otherwise, Saigon was a very busy oriental city; an enormous number of people on little Vespas and Honda scooters – the air polluted with carbon monoxide from these scooters. You could see the

signs of war to a very limited extent. Some remains of the Tet offensive – some of the damage done by that and the May offensive – I can't remember if it was May or June offensive - was still visible, but otherwise it was just a commercially very busy city with a huge number of military around.

JJ: Was there any sign of the old French occupation at that time or had that all gone?

JM: Well the signs were there in the form of two or three good French restaurants and the old *Cercle Sportif*, I think it was called, in which in the old days the French relaxed and rode horses, swam and played tennis. At my time it was where a certain number of diplomats went. The British rather less than the rest because we had our own swimming pool and our own tennis court; but I used to go there very occasionally. There were a number of very beautiful French colonial buildings and French was, to some extent, spoken, but of course the American presence was overwhelming. Anyone who was anyone spoke English.

JJ: It was a very difficult situation for any embassy I imagine at that time. What was the point of our embassy in Saigon under those circumstances?

JM: As you know, the British had refused to be drawn into Vietnam in military terms. We said it was quite unsuitable for a co-chairman of the Geneva Conference to be involved in this war. The British had always refused when pressed by the Americans to send, I think it was, the Black Watch. The Americans wanted the Black Watch – very fine soldiers of course. But short of military assistance we were there to give them everything we could, including moral support. And we wished to trade with Vietnam. There were a tremendous number of United States dollars swirling around. The whole economy of South Vietnam was floating on a raft of American dollars and to some extent we were able to profit from this. It is rather amazing that all the oil for the huge American army there was supplied by Shell, which was quite something. But we did a certain amount of business with the Vietnamese. And lastly the embassy had more than its fair share of military and RAF people.

JJ: Attachés and so on?

JM: Well the ambassador had his own private aircraft which required someone to fly it, so we had a Wing Commander as an Air Attaché and a Squadron Leader who spent most of his time

flying this aircraft. I told Murray, who was very angry with me, that this aircraft was not cost effective. You had to have people to maintain it.

JJ: Where was the Ambassador flying to?

JM: There was a civil airline run by the CIA called Air America and it could fly you anywhere, pretty well at any time. It was a sort of taxi service and I used to fly on this. You didn't bother to book. It didn't matter. You just turned up from wherever you were, at the airport, and then just thumbed a lift on the next Air America aircraft that came in. So from my point of view I saw no point at all in this embassy plane. You could say it would enable you to have a look at the fighting; you could go and see what was really happening in place A or B. In fact you couldn't because, as soon as there was fighting in the area, the Americans closed the airspace and we were not allowed in. However, Murray was wedded to his aircraft, and I am happy to say that later on when I was in the Foreign Office, I at least got it downgraded to a single engined aircraft instead of this rather beautiful de Havilland Dove. It was a very fine aircraft. I flew down in it to Singapore once when it had to have a major service or something.

So we had an awful lot of RAF people there. We had three colonels who were looking at the war from what you might call the technical point of view; writing reports on things like the use of the B52 bomber in a tactical capacity, and the use of mass deployment of helicopters and all that sort of thing. They were technical chaps. We also had our Military Attaché, who was a full colonel. We had an assistant Military Attaché and of course they all had to have their supporting staff. The Embassy was enormous, and then added to that was the fact that we had a large medical team who were working at the children's hospital in Saigon. This medical team consisted of paediatricians, anaesthetists, and a lot of nurses. I as Head of Chancery was responsible for the administration, not just of the Embassy, but of the medical team. When I say the Embassy was enormous, that perhaps is an exaggeration. It was a large Embassy. It was very small compared to the American Embassy on the other side of the road, which was headed by an Ambassador and three other people of ambassadorial rank, but we'll deal with the American presence later.

As Head of Chancery you are in charge of the political side of the Embassy and the real difficulty in Vietnam was to know what exactly was going on. Everyone would talk to you -

there was no trouble about that. I mean you could go and be briefed by the American Embassy and be briefed by the Vietnamese ministries; you could be briefed by the American military on the ground whenever you turned up. Everyone was keen to tell you exactly what was happening. The trouble was they all disagreed and the difficulty was to find out the truth of the matter. My first visit to see things in the field was to see the Marines up in 1 Corps – right in the north of South Vietnam. They were of course a *corps d'élite*. I stayed there for a couple of days and I saw more flip charts, as they call them, in one day than I'd seen in the rest of my life. They flew me to various fire bases and so forth, and they were very conscious that they were on top of everything. They were superb fighters and anyone who attacked them or came anywhere near attacking them, got the hell beaten out of them. So one came back thinking: "Well the American army are doing very well". And then you went on another trip; for instance I went to the Mekong Delta on a very long trip – actually accompanying the Minister of Information who was a friend of mine – and you talked to the American advisers on the spot. They could be from the American Foreign Service, CIA or from the American Army, and they were part of an organisation called CORDS, which stood for Civil Operation and Revolutionary Development Support, which came under Bill Colby, later Head of the CIA. And these chaps, who were the advisers on the spot, really did know what was going on and you got a very different picture talking to them from what you got talking to some of the military people, for instance the Marines.

The other people of course who had strong views were the international press corps. There was an enormous press corps – several hundred people accredited – and I used to see a good many of them, and I used myself to brief the British members of the press corps once a week. They all attended the famous "five o'clock follies", which was the official daily briefing of the press corps by the American spokesman. So the difficulty, as I say, was to find out where the truth lay. Indeed there was never any answer to this, but you just tried to make your judgments as best you could. My feeling always was that Murray MacLehose, the Ambassador, was over-influenced by his friendship with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who was a formidable and fine American Ambassador. I used to go and see my opposite number in the American Embassy – a chap called Galen Stone – who was an impressive person who had fought in the Second World War, and had been at the Royal College of Defence Studies – very pro-British. Galen and I have been great friends to this day. Galen, I thought, gave one a more balanced view than the sort of line Bunker was pushing with MacLehose.

JJ: Surely the Americans were putting a gloss and showing that they felt they would win the war at that time?

JM: That was the spin. You had to try and strip away the spin, and try and get to the truth of the matter. I think the people who helped me greatly in trying to make sense of this extremely confusing situation were first of all, Bill Stewart who was the assistant to Colby, the Head of CORDS. Bill Stewart was very much a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) and an extremely intelligent man, who later on worked for *Time Magazine*. Bill as personal assistant of Colby, really knew everything that was going on; and he was very balanced. I used to go and talk to him a lot. Then from the Vietnamese point of view, I found it quite useful to talk to Vietnamese officials and the Vietnamese Army. But much more important I made friends with the Private Secretary of the President – President Thieu. He became my great Vietnamese friend, Hoang Duc Nha, and he and his wife who was, as Vietnamese women are, incredibly beautiful, had both been educated in America. She'd been at Berkeley, studying fine arts. Nha was a marvellous source of information on things as seen through Vietnamese eyes, in particular of President Thieu. He was in fact remotely related to President Thieu which was why he got that job. It was particularly interesting to talk to him when things were going badly. You would get a terrific anti-American line from him, and you learnt just how extraordinarily proud the Vietnamese people were, and how they resented the fact that they had had to call in the Americans to help them. Indeed the Americans were fighting their war for them. Strangely enough, the mirror of this was in Hanoi when I was there many, many years later, where you got the same feeling about the Russians. The North Vietnamese resented the immense amount of Soviet aid and therefore the influence that it gave the Russians. Anyhow, Nha became a very great friend and was a huge source of information.

I think the point at which I began to feel my way through all this was when Melvin Laird, the American Defence Secretary, came on his first visit to South Vietnam. I gave lunch to a reporter whose name I can't remember. He was a very important reporter on the *Los Angeles Times* travelling with Laird. He said that Laird had come to Saigon to tell both the Americans and the Vietnamese that the Americans must pull out. They must hand over responsibility to the Vietnamese. They would continue to give the Vietnamese all the technical assistance, arms and ammunition they wanted, but the American Army would be pulled out. Slowly. Not immediately, to give the Vietnamese a good chance. Now that they had been completely retrained and re-equipped by the Americans, they were going to have to stand up to future

North Vietnamese efforts alone. And this was of course extraordinary news. I remember telling Murray MacLehose about it. He wasn't the least bit fazed by it. He sort of nodded wisely and said: "Oh. Yes, yes, yes". But I was really amazed.

It seemed to me that the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), from what I'd seen of it, which was not very much because they were always in reserve, didn't do much of the fighting. The fact was that the Americans were the frontline troops, and the ARVN were somewhat in reserve. I didn't think they would stand a chance against the North Vietnamese who were, and had proved themselves to be, incredibly formidable. So, Murray MacLehose and his Counsellor, Kenneth James, continued to take the line of guarded optimism, and Murray's successor, John Moreton, also took that line – guarded optimism. I'm afraid the Head of Chancery, ie me, took the view that that was quite wrong, and that it should be perhaps guarded pessimism. It's quite difficult for a Head of Chancery to disagree with his Ambassador and the Counsellor, but I did, and remained friends with both of them. But we did have this fundamentally different outlook. So it went on. It's such a huge subject, I'm not quite sure how far to get into it. But by the time I left, Vietnamisation was fully in place.

JJ: The Americans had withdrawn totally by then?

JM: No, no, no. Nothing like that. They'd started to withdraw very slowly. There is one other point I must make about the American war effort. The peace movement was getting very strong in the United States and this undoubtedly influenced a lot of the soldiers in the American Army in Vietnam. I realised this when I went to a showing of a film called "MASH" at Tan Son Nhut, which was where the headquarters of the American Army was. The cinema was an American military cinema – I was certainly the only English person there. I was taken by Galen Stone, and in this film "MASH", which was based on the South Korean war, there was a point at which a rather unpopular officer was attacked; as far as I remember, physically hit by a US soldier. The whole cinema got up and cheered at that point. I thought: "My God. There's something very seriously wrong with this Army".

Then of course the other thing was drugs. The American Army was being demoralised by drugs, and to the point at which fragging started – that is to say there were cases of soldiers throwing grenades into the tents of their officers.

JJ: Fragging?

JM: Yes, fragging. This started to happen; also the difficulty which the section leader, an officer or senior non-commissioned officer, would have in getting someone to lead the section on patrol, was getting more and more marked. People were just opting out saying: "It's not my war. Someone else can be killed". So the Army was becoming demoralised by the whole war. Laird was pulling out a demoralised army which took some time to become a professional army. Of course at the time of the war in Vietnam America had the largest conscript army there had ever been, and that was an important factor in the whole process of Vietnamisation.

Now I'm not sure that I should go on much further, except perhaps to mention one thing. Towards the end of my stay, there was an election for the Senate. People say that South Vietnam was not a democratic nation. In fact democracy went quite far. I took a great interest in that election. One of the slates of candidates was headed by a great Vietnamese friend of mine, Vu Van Mau, who had been Vietnamese Ambassador in London, and was an immensely distinguished professor of law. On his retirement as ambassador he had been offered jobs as professor both in America and France, and had refused, saying he had to go back to his country to see how he could help. He was a very fine man and a Buddhist, and he led the anti-Thieu slate against the President; and they won. I visited many polling booths and I have seldom been so impressed by the fairness and efficiency of the election. So the American presence was very strong; democracy was finding its feet in South Vietnam. Going on to another important matter, corruption.

JJ: Who was corrupting who?

JM: Well, what I now know, which I didn't know at the time, was that President Thieu and Ky, the Vice-President, were both deeply involved in the drugs trade and making huge sums of money. And those sums of money were spent in pursuing their own ends, and of course filling their bank accounts in Switzerland. But the point about the general corruption was that you could take the view, which I am afraid certainly Kenneth James took, and I think John Moreton also took, that corruption was part of the Orient. You couldn't expect it to be stopped. They took a very relaxed view. I was not so relaxed about its consequences for the war. I said: "Look, if you're fighting a war and two people are in for a job as a colonel of a

regiment or even a general, the one who pays the highest price will get the job. That does not help create an effective army.”

Perhaps I should just add one or two sentences about the strain of being in Saigon during the war. It was very considerable and people didn't probably realise it at the time. There were the 122 rockets which came into Saigon most nights at certain times of the year. They made a most tremendous bang when they landed, but they didn't do much damage. Then you had the constant B52 bombing which took place at night. The planes came over at 30,000 feet and dropped their loads, usually on what was the Iron Triangle – a big Vietcong area just to the north of Saigon - and we'd hear this great “Woomp – woomp” sound as these enormous bomb loads were dropped. Then the B52s would fly back to Guam, where they were based. In addition to that, most nights you had “H and I” fire - that's harassment and interdiction artillery fire. Very often the heavy guns would fire across the city. Then you had soldiers at every street corner, soldiers, who when they got bored would open up with their guns, like machine guns. They were usually firing at cats. They were seldom firing at Vietcong or any sensible target. But all this sound of war, I think, had a considerable effect on people after a couple of years. The Treasury in their wisdom and the Foreign Office, of course, had decreed that no-one should stay in Saigon for more than two years. It was a two year tour with a holiday in the middle. Many's the time people would come to me after their first year and say that they'd love to extend it for a third year because they were enjoying it so much. And I would say: “Sorry. It's not allowed. It's only a two-year posting”. When they finally left they would say: “Thank God you refused my request to stay for a third year, because I now realise what a strain it was”. My own experience was that I felt a great sense of responsibility for my wife and two tiny children for the whole time. When we finally took off at Tan Son Nhut airport, my sense of relief was enormous. It was a huge weight removed from my shoulders. So I was very glad to leave Saigon when I did.

Return to the Foreign Office in 1970 and secondment to the Cabinet Office, 1971

JJ: After your two years in Vietnam you returned to London, were promoted to Counsellor, and seconded to the Cabinet Secretariat in 1971. You stayed there until 1974. Was this something you wanted to do or were you asked to do it?

JM: No. I did a year in the Office in charge of the Indo China countries in South East Asia Department. I enjoyed that very much because I knew the subject well, and an awful lot of interesting people used to come to see me to ask what the Foreign Office view was on Vietnam in particular, and Cambodia and Laos. I had some excellent people working for me, so I really enjoyed that. But rather to my surprise I was promoted after a year to Counsellor, and Donald Gordon, who was the absolutely splendid Head of South East Asia Department, wanted me to succeed him, because he was going off to be a Deputy High Commissioner in Malaysia. But the Foreign Office said no. They didn't like to promote people from Assistant to be Head of a Department, and they wanted to send me to the Cabinet Office – the Secretariat of the Cabinet Office.

The Cabinet Office is a rather amorphous department which has a Whitehall-wide interest. For example, the Statistical Office and the JIC is based there, and so forth. The kernel of the Cabinet Office is the Secretariat – that is the small body of people who service the Cabinet itself, and comes under the Secretary to the Cabinet, who, when I was there, was the splendid Burke Trend. We were very small. There were three sections of the Secretariat; one dealing with home affairs; one dealing with economic affairs and one dealing with foreign and defence matters. Since then of course it has got larger very particularly with a section dealing with European matters after we joined the European Union. There were four of us on the foreign affairs and defence side; two from the Ministry of Defence and two from the Foreign Office. It was extremely interesting. One of my main jobs was to brief the Prime Minister on all foreign affairs matters, which I enjoyed doing. The other responsibility was to service the Cabinet itself and the Cabinet committees. You are allowed to talk of Cabinet committees now, but in those days you wouldn't have admitted to their existence. But of course the Cabinet committee I was concerned with was the one dealing with defence and foreign policy. You had to take the minutes which involved a strange bit of "Mandarin" expertise; all the rules laid down by the first Secretary to the Cabinet, who was the famous Lord Hankey. One rule was that the minutes had to be circulated in 24 hours come hell or high water. It was often extremely difficult to make sense of a diffuse and strange discussion and to condense it into the form required. But I enjoyed doing it. I had a boss, Sir Philip Adams, subsequently Ambassador in Cairo, who was very able, a delightful man, but just a little bit indolent. I was delighted because it meant every now and then he would get out of going to the Cabinet meetings, and I would step in for him, and so I really had a ringside seat for a lot of extremely interesting discussions.

JJ: The Foreign Secretary was Alec Douglas-Home at that time?

JK: He was, yes. The trouble with Alec Douglas-Home, who was an absolute joy to work for, was that he invariably had a ball point pen in his mouth when he spoke in Cabinet, and I remember there was one occasion I couldn't tell what the hell he was saying. So I looked up and he actually had two pens in his mouth, and furthermore, he used to slip down in the very slippery leather chairs in the Cabinet Room, so he was three-quarters of the way under the table. I couldn't understand a word, so I had to get hold of the Foreign Office afterwards and ask what he was meant to be saying, and I recorded that, and all was well.

JJ: He was the Minister who expelled all those Russian spies wasn't he?

JM: Yes, he did. But that was before I was in the Cabinet Office. I remember it well. He and Denis Greenhill – they were the two people. Although we had several big and difficult things to deal with the hardest problem that landed on my lap was the arrival of the UK passport holders from Uganda. There was that dreadful man, Amin, who'd thrown out all the Asians from Uganda and taken all their possessions, and as I remember, about 30,000 of them arrived in the UK and we had to cope with that.

Heath had taken a decision in Cabinet that we should welcome them all, viz those that didn't go to India or Pakistan. This was a considerable crisis, and so the rules were broken. That is to say, there is a rule which says that all Cabinet committees are either ministerial or official; you never mix the two. And another rule, as I said, is that minutes have to be written within 24 hours and circulated. Both of those we broke. Burke Trend agreed there should be a special committee to deal with the UK passport holders, which would be chaired by David Lane who was then the Junior Minister in the Home Office, MP for Cambridge. And it would consist of officials, senior officials, from about eight different Whitehall Departments; all the departments dealing with this crisis. You can imagine – housing, education, medical matters, defence matters, God knows what. I was the poor chap who had to be secretary to this and make it all work, which was a terrific business. But when it was all over I always remember David Lane sought me out in the Cabinet Office and came to thank me for my work; and I must say it is rare in my experience for a Minister to do that. I felt very pleased indeed. He was a fine man, and I went to his memorial service in Cambridge a while ago when he died.

JJ: You were there when Parliament voted to join the EEC?

JM: That was before I arrived. The emphasis on that was all past by the time I reached Cabinet Office.

JJ: Lucky you.

JM: We had plenty of other things to be getting on with, but I didn't have that one.

JJ: Were you there when Ted Heath resigned?

JM: No. I'd left by then.

JJ: You missed all the exciting stuff?

JM: All the exciting stuff leading up to it; all the strikes; the refusal to move coal around the country, and all that – I was deeply involved in that.

Perhaps I could just mention one thing – anti-terrorist measures. There had been a couple of very nasty incidents.

JJ: This is Irish terrorism?

JM: No. International terrorism. Very nasty incidents of aircraft being high-jacked – the Middle East etc. Burke Trend very sensibly, with Denis Greenhill of the Foreign Office said: “We must prepare so that if this ever happens in Britain or concerns British people, we are ready to deal with it”. So it was put on the agenda for the Home Affairs Committee. I suppose it was a compliment that Burke asked me to field this one. The idea was to get the Home Affairs Committee to face up to the possibility of terrorism. The Chairman of this Committee was Reggie Maudling, the Home Secretary, who was an extraordinarily indolent fellow, and the matter was thrown round the table in a desultory way. I was at my wits end waiting for something to be said that I could use as a reason to start the anti-terrorist planning. Then just when it was almost over, Lord Hailsham, who was Lord Chancellor, suddenly said:

“We’ve got a very good police force. We’ve got a very good army. That’s fine, but shouldn’t we have a very clear chain of command? My experience in the army leads me to believe this is very important”. Reggie Maudling said: “Oh that’s a very good idea, Lord Chancellor – chain of command”, and then went on to the next thing on the agenda. But that was enough. I wrote it up in such a way that we could pin all our anti-terrorist planning on that, which we did.

I had working with me a chap from the Ministry of Defence, Michael Mates, who is now an MP. He was then a Colonel. I don’t think he fitted very well into his cavalry regiment, which was probably why he was in the MoD. A very nice chap. Michael Mates and I planned the first exercise which was a high-jacking of a ‘plane. We had a ‘plane – with of course passengers on board – we brought it into Luton and it was told to park right off the runway. We brought in the SAS. They unfortunately could only come via Cambridge. They came roaring in by aircraft to Cambridge; rushed out in their Land Rovers from this Hercules aircraft. Unfortunately a member of the public saw this and rang the *Daily Express* and said: “There’s something happening”. So it was in the papers; great excitement. People got fairly hot under the collar. Civil servants don’t like publicity. I said: “This is a good thing because the public now knows that we’re tackling the problem, and with luck a few terrorists may see that we’re tackling it.” So that was a great success. We then had another exercise which Michael Mates and I planned -- the occupation of an embassy by terrorists. We planned that, the Duke of York’s barracks in Chelsea was going to be the embassy, and at that point I went off to my next posting. I was so pleased when a year later, when I was in Brussels, two things happened. An aircraft was hijacked to Tunisia with British people on board and the government were able to fly our team out and deal with that. And then the Iranian Embassy was captured, you remember, in London, and all our plans went absolutely as we had rehearsed. So that remark of Hailsham’s was very important. I met him some years later and said: “Do you remember?” He replied: “I haven’t the faintest memory of that meeting, but I’m very complimented to be the father of anti-terrorism”.

JJ: Michael Mates became Minister in Northern Ireland, did he not?

JM: Yes he did. That was the peak of his career.

JJ: He’s still around.

JM: He is.

JJ: So then you went to UKDEL NATO.

Head of Chancery at UK Delegation to NATO, Brussels, 1974

JM: Yes, but I was sent first to the Senior Officers War Course at Greenwich, because I explained to the Foreign Office that when I was in the army we had the Bren gun and the Bofors gun, and now they have weapons systems - could I please learn something about the modern Army, Navy and Air Force? They sent me on the course which was very good, and then I went to be Head of Chancery in our Delegation to NATO Brussels.

JJ: And you were there until 1978, I think?

JM: Yes. The Head of Chancery has to ensure that the whole delegation works together under the Ambassador

JJ: So this is a sort of civilian side of UKDEL NATO?

JM: NATO has Permanent Representatives from every member state. They are all senior ambassadors who together form the Council. Then quite separate from that there is the Military Committee. The Council is what matters. The Military Committee are of course important; they advise, and the chairman of the Military Committee sits on the Council by invitation, but doesn't speak unless he's asked to. Dr Luns was then Secretary General, and he chaired the Council with tremendous *élan*. The Council sometimes meets at Head of Government level. It did when I was there. It was after the Americans pulled out of Vietnam, and after South Vietnam was overrun. Some allies began to say: "If the Americans really can't be relied on to stand by their allies in Vietnam (Kissinger had said that the Americans had let down the South Vietnamese) what about NATO – could the Americans be trusted?" So we had a Heads of Government meeting. President Carter came over, and I think he dealt with that very well indeed. Brilliantly. The American Ambassador was then a superb chap, Bruce, who'd been ambassador in just about everywhere you can think of – Paris, Bonn, Moscow and China. I don't know where he hadn't been.

JJ: What about the Germans and the French?

JM: I think it's what about the French, really. There's always been a difficulty, because, although they pulled out of the military side of NATO, they remained full members of the alliance. And there they were on the Council and all the Council committees, including the Political Committee on which I represented Britain. It was always difficult. In political consultation they were always disinclined to share information. I was very keen on this question of Soviet expansion in the Indian Ocean, which then was a problem, and I would lead the French slowly down the coast till they were talking a bit about East Africa. Then when it got down to Madagascar, or somewhere, the French woman delegate would say: "This is a bit far from the treaty area. I don't think we should be discussing this".

JJ: I was going to make the same point if you'll forgive me?

JM: But the Soviet threat was worldwide, and ...

JJ: But NATO wasn't built to cover world wide problems?

JM: It was built to defend a particular area, but if the potential threat was trying to undermine the allies all over the world, it was highly relevant. You could argue that one till the cows came home. The French actually – the people there – there was a marvellous Ambassador called Rose – they could not have been nicer or more helpful. But they had to be conscious of the *Gaulliste* approach to NATO which was very different. The military – I suppose they had their difficulties too. The French seemed to me to have it both ways. They got out of the military side of the alliance, but for instance they nevertheless were well and truly plugged into the radar system defending Western Europe. So the whole thing was a gigantic bit of *Gaulliste* hypocrisy actually, but there we are.

JJ: How did NATO react to Turkey's invasion of Cyprus? 1974, perhaps it happened before you arrived?

JM: Yes, it was before I arrived. The sort of problem that springs to mind was the danger in Portugal after their revolution. They had Communist ministers who in theory had access to

NATO intelligence and so forth. It began to be a problem which we had to tackle. Then there was the Icelandic 'cod war' but in general the problem at NATO at that time was how to keep the western defensive shield up in the face of constant demands on governments to cut their armed and their defence budgets.

JJ: You had the USSR playing about and being a menace?

JM: They were a gigantic military force, and they were up to nonsense all over the world. The Russian threat was worldwide. They believed, as good Marxism-Leninists, that capitalism would destroy itself with its internal contradictions, but they weren't above giving the process a push wherever they could, anywhere – Africa, Middle East, even the Pacific. They were always searching for a warm water port in the Pacific so that they could operate in the winter, and not be iced up in Vladivostok. I think the thing that probably gave me the most pleasure when I first arrived was drafting in the Political Committee a brief for the negotiations at the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This of course was something that really mattered to NATO. I remember saying at the time it was an absolute time bomb. To allow the free movement of newspapers, periodicals and books right across the Iron Curtain was something which would eventually have a catastrophic effect on the Communist system. And so it proved. We were doing something which really mattered enormously for the future.

Perhaps I could just mention one other thing. I had some marvellous people working for me. I've always been lucky. In Saigon I had very fine people working for me, but in NATO they were really a quite exceptional bunch, which included Robin Janvrin, who was a First Secretary, and is now the Private Secretary to the Queen; Alyson Bailes, another First Secretary, or was she a Second Secretary – I can't remember, but she was dealing with that awful subject of MBFR – Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions – and she dealt with it superbly. We were a very happy team. Of course a lot of members of the delegation came from the Ministry of Defence. They always sent their best people. And we all worked very closely with the military side. In fact, we were the only delegation that had the military actually sharing the same corridor as us, the civilian side. General Sir David Fraser was the Military Representative at the time I was there. An absolutely splendid person and a good and prolific author since he retired.

JJ: Then you went back to Vietnam?

HM Ambassador, Hanoi, 1978

JM: Well, I did. It all happened rather suddenly. Sir John Killick, who was the Permanent Representative, and was a very impressive man indeed, thought it was about time I got promoted, and I found myself at rather short notice being sent out to Vietnam as Ambassador. I didn't expect this, because Hanoi was the capital of the unified country of Vietnam, and I didn't think that they would ever agree to a chap who was so involved in South Vietnam being allowed in Hanoi. But they did agree, I suppose because they wanted British aid, and that was the price they were prepared to pay.

Hanoi was a most miserable place to be sent to. It was reckoned to be, and I'm absolutely sure it was, the hardest post in the world for the Diplomatic Service. It was a very small Embassy. One has to say straight away that the Vietnamese didn't want to have any embassies there, except of course for Communist ones. What they really liked was a VIP arriving in an aeroplane, being met by attractive Vietnamese girls presenting them with wonderful flowers, and putting them up in the official guesthouse, which was quite a reasonable place to stay, unlike the hotels which were terrible and rat infested. Then taking them round one or two, what one could call Potemkin Villages, and finally back to the 'plane and with many more mutual congratulations, the pretty Vietnamese girls would say goodbye. And that sort of diplomacy suited the Vietnamese quite well. The Vietnamese were incredibly secretive, they didn't want anyone to know what was going on in Vietnam. I mean, compared to Vietnam China in the Cultural Revolution was just an open book. They took immense trouble to hide everything from you. First of all, you were not allowed out of Hanoi, unless you got permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was a rare thing, and I'll talk about that later. Secondly, the Vietnamese were not allowed to talk to us. There were three or four show-piece Vietnamese who would travel round the Embassies on national days. Ours was a rather distinguished doctor who spoke English beautifully, and was in fact a relation to the old Emperor of Vietnam.

Everything in Hanoi for western diplomats was grim in the extreme. We were all living on rations. The country was totally exhausted. They'd won the war but they hadn't the faintest

idea what to do with the peace. They were bent on a totally straightforward creation of a Stalinist state, and as a real Stalinist state, fear ruled.

JJ: So you had no real contact with those who were running the country? Or if you had contact they wouldn't actually tell you anything worth reporting back to London?

JM: Absolutely. You just got the official line. This was the whole challenge. This was why I enjoyed my time in Hanoi so much, because the challenge was how, as a western diplomat you could find out what on earth was going on in that country, and what its policies were likely to be - external policies in particular. And to tackle this was really the greatest challenge and the greatest fun.

You got nothing at all from the newspapers, but you had to read them. Every now and then there might be an occasional clue that you could pick up. We had these locally engaged staff who were of course debriefed on what the British Embassy was up to every week. And of course you had your visits to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I talked occasionally to Ministers, and, once or twice to the Prime Minister. You got nowhere and learnt nothing that you didn't know. So I quickly learned to cotton on to countries which, whilst not Communist, were much closer than Britain to Vietnam. Vietnam then made a great point of being a neutral and non-aligned country, and so they tended to open up a little bit to the ambassadors of the non-aligned countries in a way that they never would have to a western ambassador. The leading non-aligned countries were India, Egypt and Yugoslavia. It so happened I liked the Egyptian Ambassador very much; we were good friends. The Indian Ambassador, also a good friend, was a great yoga expert. So I said that I was a tremendous enthusiast for yoga; in fact I had never practised yoga before. They took me on gladly and I went twice a week, not for the yoga, but for the tea afterwards because then we swapped news. I eventually got a frozen shoulder and couldn't do any yoga, but Miranda my wife also used to come because she liked to do yoga. The Indian had gone off on leave. The Yugoslav had disappeared completely and hadn't been replaced. So Miranda and the Egyptian Ambassador were left standing on their heads with me looking on. At the tea party you had to put something in to get anything out. My contribution derived from the fact that we had an extraordinary unofficial office down in Saigon. Now the history of this is quite long and I don't know whether you can bear to hear it all.

JJ: Let's have it briefly.

JM: As Saigon was falling, and everyone was moving out rapidly, a young very presentable Indian arrived, called Sammy Maideen. He was being sent by his family to get his father out of prison. His father had been the richest man in Vietnam from French times. He owned just about everything you could imagine. And he'd been put in prison for complicated political reasons which I won't go into now. Sammy's job was to get his father out, and, of course, as he spoke English perfectly, and had been educated in England, he got to know the English journalists very well, and through them, the British Embassy. As the last members of the Embassy left they handed Sammy the key of the Embassy and handed him the flag, which was pulled down, and said: "There you are Sammy. Look after the Embassy and goodbye". Now Sammy was very happy to do this because he liked Britain and he had to stay to get his father out. Well, he got his father out of jail; that wasn't very difficult, and sent him back to Madras. But Sammy stayed on. And the point was, an extraordinary number of ethnic Chinese, living in South Vietnam, had links with Hong Kong and were longing to get out. As long as they could prove they had a link with Hong Kong – e.g. a member of the family living there -- we could look after them. We could fly them out. The Vietnamese were perfectly happy that this should be done, because they loathed the ethnic Chinese, and because it enabled them to seize all their goods and possessions. The ethnic Chinese were only allowed to carry one small suitcase with them, which was searched very carefully by the Customs. We would bring in from Hong Kong Cathay Pacific aircraft, and these Hong Kong belongers would be flown out. This was really a very big exercise. Six of the Vietnamese staff of the embassy were employed by Sammy to do this. Sammy himself did all his work without charging the Government for it at all. He was eventually given the MBE, but the point was that in the process of organising all this, he got to know a large number of influential Vietnamese officials, and he knew more of what was going on in South Vietnam than anyone else around, and certainly anyone else in Hanoi. So at these yoga sessions I could tell my colleagues what was happening in the southern part of Vietnam and particularly Saigon and Cholon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City, and they would tell me what they had heard was going on in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and so on up in the north. They became a very good source of information.

Another Ambassador, not in the yoga session, who was enormously helpful, was the Iraqi. Iraq was close to Vietnam because they had supplied them with cheap oil and had given them

a large loan at one point. It was from the Iraqi, whom I called on very early after I arrived, that I learnt the truth of what was happening between Vietnam and China – the Sino-Vietnamese split. When I left I had been briefed by the Foreign Office that the essence of Vietnamese foreign policy was that Vietnam would always keep well in with the Soviet Union, and would never do anything to upset its great neighbour to the north, China. Well this was completely wrong because I discovered within a week of arriving that the Chinese were withdrawing all their aid workers, and were in the process of having a major row with the Vietnamese about the ethnic Chinese who were fleeing to the north through the so-called “Freedom Pass” into China. And when 150,000 had gone, the Chinese simply closed the gate, and that became a very serious problem between the two countries. I got wind of all this, first of all from the Iraqi who was very well informed. Having checked up with one or two other people – the French knew a little bit, and so on and so forth – I then set about writing a telegram, which was pretty much to say to the Foreign Office: “You’re a hundred per cent wrong. This is the situation”. That was a difficult telegram to send as one’s first telegram. They might say this chap Margetson is trying to be terribly clever or trying too hard to make an impression. So I had to draft it very carefully. But I took it to our Communications Officer and he was absolutely aghast at its length. He said we had never sent a telegram that length before. He had only sent at the most three sentences and they all had to be encrypted in a particular way. I said I was sorry but this telegram was important and it had to go. I never had any trouble with the Communications Officer after that. That brings me to the size of the Embassy which was tiny. Apart from myself there was a Head of Chancery.

JJ: Who was a very young chap, because you remember I visited you at that time?

JM: Totally inexperienced. There was an Admin Officer, a Communications Officer, and my PA. The PA only did a six months tour because it was considered so grim that no woman would stand it for longer; but my wife had to stand it for two years. Communications Officers did one year at a time. It was all very primitive. I mean the communications was by Morse code. It was tapped out and sent using an aerial which was just like a little clothes line at the back of the Embassy. We had an enormous gale one day. The Swedes had spent thousands of pounds building a magnificent wireless aerial on their embassy just round the corner. That was blown down and they were completely incommunicado for several weeks. All we had to do was to string our little clothes line up again and we were in action.

How do you find out what's going on? Well, you've got to have a bit of luck, and I had a bit of luck. There was a very nice young member of the Mexican Embassy, a very left wing chap, with a wife who was absolutely charming, and also very left wing. When they arrived in Hanoi she said that she wanted to learn Vietnamese at the university. The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs had said that was impossible because Mexico was a non-communist Embassy. She was infuriated by this and she went on and on at them saying her credentials were marvellous, she was a real revolutionary at heart, etc etc. Eventually the Vietnamese relented, and she studied there for quite a long time. When I got to know her, she had left the university and had a lot of ordinary Vietnamese friends whom she knew very well indeed. She would be dropped off by her husband from his little jeep. She would be wearing a conical hat and a black outfit like all the Vietnamese wore, and she would just disappear into the crowd. She had a rather dark skin and you would never know she was not Vietnamese. She would go calling on all her friends, and from her I used to learn just how terrible the economic situation was; for example that the Vietnamese language had added an additional word which was "to wash without soap." You could not buy soap. The economy of the country was in a terrible state, and it was simply because they were determined that it would be a pure Marxist-Leninist state. They passed a law forbidding capitalism. No-one could employ more than - I can't remember how many it was - six people, and it was that that finally did for the people in the south; the prosperous traders in Cholon and Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City, and led to that tremendous exodus of the boat people.

Another bit of luck came in the form of an Irishman called Dermot Kinlen who was genuinely concerned about human rights. He managed to shame the Vietnamese into giving visas to him and the two men he brought with him - his doctor and his Roman Catholic priest. They could come to Vietnam and they could be shown these resettlement camps which were hellish places to which all those who had played any part in South Vietnam in the war were sent. Western embassies were extremely interested to know what was going on in these re-education camps. Dermot turned up and he was taken to one. His priest friend had been a missionary in Vietnam in French times, and spoke Vietnamese fluently. During their meetings at these re-education camps, he always pretended to have a very weak bladder, and would disappear to the loo all the time. While he was there he would hear the confessions of various inmates who would tell him exactly what was going on, which was all pretty ghastly. Through Dermot I really learnt a great deal about the re-education camps, which the

Vietnamese authorities would have paid anything for me not to know. That was another bit of luck.

Now what else would you like to know? The Embassy – that is to say the Residence. This was an extraordinary building which had been the Consulate-General throughout the Vietnamese war – Consulate-General in Hanoi. It was a little octagonal building which had once been a brothel, and it had four bedrooms. Such was the state of housing that my Communications Officer was in one bedroom, my PA was in another, Miranda and I were in the third, and the fourth was for my children when they came out for their school holidays. So we didn't live in any way grandly. I remember my wife saying as she counted the dirty socks of my Communications Officer one morning before having them washed: "Being an Ambassadors is not very glamorous is it?" She would get up every day; pull on her jeans; get on her bike and go off to the market to see if there was any food she could buy. We all lived higger mugger there. The Head of Chancery had a little flat and the other person, who was the Admin Officer, lived in a terrible rat infested hotel. I was determined to do something about it. At one point we heard that the Swedes, who were very much in with the Vietnamese, because they'd really had a love affair with Hanoi for years, were bringing in the contents and all that was necessary to build and furnish a block of flats. So I went to the Swedish Ambassador, who was a great friend of mine, and asked if we could buy two of the flats. Amazingly he agreed. Now Michael Palliser (the PUS), whom I had seen before I left the Foreign Office, said: "If there is anything I can do, John, to help, just send me a telegram". So I sent him a telegram and I said: "Michael, I want x thousand pounds – I can't remember how much it was – to purchase two of these flats from the Swedes": it was a large sum of money. Michael wired back immediately Treasury approval and we went ahead. The trouble was, all this stuff was put on the trans-Siberian railway and by the time it reached the borders of China and Vietnam, the Chinese and Vietnamese were having a major fight on the border, and so it all just disappeared, and I thought: "I'm sorry Michael. I've wasted your money". And then months later ...

JJ: You hadn't spent the money – or had you paid in advance?

JM: I honestly can't remember. But months later I suddenly got news that the flats were coming by boat from Vladivostok to Haiphong. The boat came into Haiphong. The flats were put up. Pretty ghastly they were, but it was a great improvement for the Admin Officer.

Decent housing was really important for the morale of the Embassy. The standard of everything had been allowed to go, I'm afraid. What was meant to be my garden was just a mess of packing cases. People had just thrown them there. There were so many signs that morale was very low, I'm afraid. It took me over a year to turn it all round and get a happy and efficient Embassy. It was quite a struggle.

It was at the end of 1978 the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia. I won't go into that. It's quite complicated. But it led to the British cutting off aid, so I was not exactly popular with the Vietnamese Government. But as a result of the invasion of Cambodia the Chinese decided they were going to teach Vietnam a lesson and they invaded Vietnam through the Friendship Pass, which I had already visited. They came through in vast numbers in a sort of World War I type of military operation. Large numbers of infantry, machine guns and trenches. The Vietnamese were really very worried by this, although they said they weren't. I knew and had seen, and it's a long story how I saw it, miles and miles of trenches which the Vietnamese had dug over the mountains as a series of lines of defence which the Chinese would have to overrun before they could reach Hanoi.

It was very difficult to see how the fighting was going. London were very interested to know whether the Vietnamese were having to reinforce their troops by sending troops from Cambodia; taking them out of Cambodia and sending them up to the Chinese border. I found the answer to this because the wife of the Swedish Ambassador, who was a great friend of my wife, was a very close friend of the Romanian Military Attaché, and the Romanian Military Attaché had a house right by the railway. There's only one line that went north, and he knew exactly what went up that railway. The information came through the Swedish Ambassador and my wife, and I was able to tell London that they were defending Vietnam without, as yet, taking any troops from Cambodia and South Vietnam. So that was another little bit of luck. I may say that at one point when we were in Hanoi, a microphone fell out of the ceiling of the bedroom of the Swedish Ambassador and his wife which shows in this funny world of intelligence, the Vietnamese would not only bug their enemies, but their friends as well just in case they were going to do the dirt on them. The Swedish Ambassador was absolutely incensed: "How very rude. How very rude," she said.

What else? Just one more thing. After the fighting had been going on for some time, I learnt that the Vietnamese were taking all the files from the headquarters of the Communist Party,

and sending them down to Hue. So I thought: “My God, if they’re taking all their documents down to Hue, maybe I should do something about my classified documents”. So over the weekend we burnt every single confidential and secret paper in the Embassy. It was a tremendous operation. We had one tiny little sort of boiler thing in the grounds of the Embassy, and it was very largely my wife who stoked it up with all these documents. It took an awfully long time to burn them all and in the process she singed her eyebrows and she got quite a burnt hand as well.

JJ: The secrets were safe?

JM: The secrets were finally saved. But I’ve never been a great one for paper and I’ve always found that embassies work very well if they burn their documents fairly regularly. We managed to do this one hundred per cent in Hanoi. It had been done in Saigon just before I arrived, after the Tet offensive.

There is really so much one can say about Hanoi. Of course, in a really unpleasant place like Hanoi, the Western embassies come together and you make real friends. Not just the usual diplomatic acquaintances. We became great friends with about half a dozen Ambassadors.

JJ: That happens in difficult places. The more difficult the place the more your friendships develop.

JM: That’s right, and I think it was Trevelyan who said: “The ideal place is where you have slightly too much work and a whiff of danger” – and I think you had that in Hanoi.

Secondment to Ministry of Defence as Senior Civilian Instructor at the Royal College of Defence Studies, 1981-83

JJ: Well that’s Hanoi. You came back to London. I suppose after the rigours of Hanoi, going to the Royal College of Defence Studies was a nice sort of sabbatical for you to unwind with your family and so on? Perhaps we don’t need to spend too much time.

JM: I will go through that quickly. In fact that’s exactly what the Foreign Office wanted to do, which was extremely good of them. What actually happened was that after six months I

had got my breath back and was fighting fit, and tended to be extremely bored with the RCDS. I won't go into the details, but you had to appear at the same lot of lectures twice because it was a two year secondment. But it was a very nice way of spending two years getting to see one's friends again, and all the pleasures of being in London. And of course you did these very nice trips abroad, leading a dozen or so stalwart brigadiers. I did two trips; one to New Zealand, Australia and Indonesia and another to Canada, United States and Mexico. So I'm not complaining, but I did feel that I was marking time.

I did manage to deliver a few lectures which was not, on the whole, approved of. The directing staff were meant to sit back and watch other people give the lectures. I got so bored with it. In fact, for example, we had a ridiculous situation in which the lecture on Vietnam was delivered by a very good academic from London University called Paddy Honey, who I knew perfectly well. Paddy Honey hadn't been in Vietnam for about twenty years, whereas I'd just come back from it. He was very shamefaced about having to deliver the lecture. So I said I would take over from him next time round. I think that's probably enough about that.

Minister and Deputy Permanent Representative at UK Mission to United Nations, New York, 1983-84

Then, I don't know what happened about the postings, but I was sent to New York, to the United Nations, as Number Two to Sir John Thomson. At the United Nations you have two Ambassadors. You have the Permanent Representative, and you have a second one who has Ambassadorial rank; the point being that as the UK is a permanent member of the Security Council, we really have to be able to field an ambassador 24 hours a day every day of the year.

JJ: So were you the number two Ambassador? Were you also President of the UN Trusteeship Council which you mentioned earlier in our interview?

JM: Yes. What I wanted to do was find some interesting work to do. John Thomson was a very hard working man who attended all the meetings he should. Unless he got run over by a tram, I had very little to do, and this was rather frustrating. But John took almost all his leaves, so when he was away I had the "fun" of doing the work. I filled my time partly by simply accepting every invitation I received to go and lecture, or attend a conference, or

whatever. I also became President of the Trusteeship Council. This was not very onerous because there was, by then, only one Trusteeship Territory left. All the others, which of course included dear old Tanganyika, had reached independence. What was left was Micronesia, which was a Trust Territory of the United States. It had originally of course been German, and passed to the Japanese after the First World War as a mandated territory – a League of Nations mandated territory – and then passed to the Americans after the Second World War as a Trusteeship Territory. The Americans largely for security reasons, held on to it, and of course the Russians, as I said before, were longing to have somewhere where they could harbour their Pacific fleet in winter. They would have loved to have got their hands on Micronesia, but the Americans were there and were determined to keep them out.

So when I was President of the Trusteeship Council the process of moving Micronesia to independence was coming along rather slowly, but it was coming along, and it was divided into three future separate countries. Each would sign a treaty accepting all the aid that America would give it, and agreed in consequence not to allow any other country to have a defence/security interest in the islands. This was put in the form of a plebiscite and I went out to two of the three of them, which was absolutely fascinating and most enjoyable, and took up quite a bit of time. I remember I would sit with my feet dangling in the Hilton hotel swimming pool in Honolulu writing the report of the United Nations visiting mission. That was really quite a nice little excuse for getting away from New York.

But I loved New York. It had all that I wanted. A lively city, marvellous parks, music, wonderful. I had really settled into it when the dear old FO said I was to leave for Holland. I was absolutely delighted. I'd only been in New York 18 months – one General Assembly – which was quite enough quite honestly. You see the trouble with the United Nations then – I should have said this at the beginning – was that it couldn't really tackle major matters because, on the one hand you had Reagan in his dotage, and on the other hand you had Brezhnev also in his dotage; and East-West relations were simply stuck. In that situation of stalemate the Third World was making hay by planning the new world and passing enormous resolutions to that effect in the General Assembly, which have no binding value at all. An awful lot of one's time was just taken up rallying the troops to vote against ridiculous motions.

JJ: Lobbying all the time for that extra vote or two?

Posting as Ambassador to the Netherlands, 1984-87

JM: Finally after 18 months I received a letter posting me to The Hague. I went to see the Dutch Ambassador who'd been Foreign Minister; a very fine man. He said that I had to remember that the two Ambassadors who matter in The Netherlands are the British and the Canadian, and they are in a very special position, because it was their troops who liberated the Netherlands in the Second World War. I quickly learnt when I went there, that that was true. But this special position is something you should never take for granted. You can't live on the basis of Winston Churchill and Vera Lynn, you've got to work all the time to maintain that position.

JJ: Yes. What were your main objectives, as we say these days?

JM: Perhaps we should start on the more homely side. I really felt in a sense I was going home because I'd spent two very happy years of my life, largely as a bachelor getting to know all the prettiest, and nicest girls in Holland, and enjoying myself hugely, and there I was going back and finding that a lot of my Dutch friends had risen to positions of great importance, which gave me an enormous advantage. I knew the Netherlands, and knew many people in it, and so it was really rather an easy entry for me. One trouble was that the famous old ambassadorial residence had been given up, but for good reasons. First of all, the British had never owned it. They had leased it from the Jesuits for over a hundred and fifty years. Actually, when I was in the Netherlands the first time as a Second Secretary, Paddy Noble gave a great ball to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the residence. It had never been owned by us. It was getting very decrepit and a new roof would have cost tens of thousands. All the electricity needed doing, and on top of that it was hopeless from the point of view of security. One of my predecessors, Sir Richard Sykes, had been assassinated by the IRA as he stepped out of the front door of the Embassy, and you could not prevent the general public from gaining access. So quite rightly it was decided to leave that very beautiful building. It was hell moving into a completely untried new building and getting it to work.

I might just say that in the days when I'd been in the Netherlands as a Second Secretary, the Ambassador's wife had to help her, a housekeeper and a famous butler – a Jeeves figure, called Brinkman. When we arrived there was no housekeeper. She had long since been

removed for financial reasons, and there was no butler. There were five pretty well untrained footmen, all Portuguese. We had that large number of footmen because I had to be guarded 24 hours a day, and they had duties throughout the night to sit at a security console. It was terribly hard work for my wife. I may say that my wife has always had to work very hard wherever she has been. I mentioned her work in Hanoi. She cooked, because our cook got electrocuted – not in our house – in his own house, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who didn't like the British, wouldn't send us a new one. You cannot hire one in a Stalinist state, and so she did the cooking. I wrote to the Foreign Office and said I had a vote from which I could pay for a locally engaged cook. My wife was the cook and she was locally engaged. They wrote back and said I could not pay her. It took them about four pages to explain, and I never read those pages, I was so angry with them. She worked extremely hard there. She had always cooked for me when I was Head of Chancery in Brussels, and was extremely good at it. And now in the Hague she was doing the work of a housekeeper, and training a butler and training the footmen, and getting the whole thing to work smoothly. It was not helped by the fact that my predecessor, for various reasons, one of which was the sad illness of his wife, had done virtually no entertaining. So we had a certain amount of leeway to make up in that field. I was determined to do this, because entertaining the right people in a country is very important for the image of the Embassy, and though I say so myself, I succeeded. When we gave our last dance, it was really a ball, the Prime Minister congratulated me on my Dutch friends. That really was a compliment worth hearing.

JJ: This was the Dutch Prime Minister?

JM: Yes. Lubbers. A very good man. But now, talking of rather more important things – really the whole time I was there, there were no difficulties dealing with the Dutch. They always listened to what one had to say. They always took it extremely seriously. They sometimes wanted a lead from Britain, and it was up to us to give it to them. Frankly it was pure pleasure from start to finish. I presented my credentials on the day on which the Dutch celebrate Sinterklaas – before Christmas. It is quite usual to write a short poem as a gift at Sinterklass parties. So I wrote one for Queen Beatrix saying how pleased I was to be returning to a country of which I had happy memories as a young diplomat. The Queen was delighted and handed it to the Foreign Minister with instructions that it should be put into the national archives. So there it is, the only Margetson poem extant well looked after in the Netherlands. I found the Queen was a great pleasure to deal with; extremely intelligent;

absolutely on the ball. I had access whenever I wanted to any Minister and to the Prime Minister, of course. I made a political effort on the political side when we were exercising the Presidency of the European Economic Community— as it then was. My object was to persuade the Dutch to look on us as real Europeans, and not just odd people who happened to be sitting at the same table.

JJ: Was it difficult to persuade them that we were at the heart of Europe, as John Major used to say?

JM: Luckily in the six months of the Presidency we'd done a lot of good, particularly towards creating the single market. I think it wasn't too difficult to show that our credentials were pretty good. The thing that I'd enjoyed very much was the period of the Dutch Presidency six months before ours. It led to a large number of ministerial and official visits to the Netherlands. Of course it was an awful business having to put up all these people. Our house was nothing more than a rather good hotel, but what it meant was that the links between the Dutch and the British at ministerial and official level got closer and closer, and this gave me enormous pleasure. I think the two countries really are extraordinarily alike, and can get on very well, very easily, and can act together as they do consistently, both in the EEC, in NATO, the United Nations and just about any organisation you can think of.

Shall I talk about other visitors? We had Margaret Thatcher. By gosh, she was hard work. By that I mean she kept us up until all hours of the night.

JJ: I think the Dutch would have appreciated her?

JM: Well I think the Dutch had an admiration for her. She came over for the summit meeting of the EEC, which takes place in every Presidency, and the particular problem facing them was South Africa and sanctions. The Dutch of course had very strong views about South Africa and wanted us to introduce even stronger sanctions. Mrs Thatcher was determined to resist this.

She arrived one evening and had a drink with us. She was delightful. I remember she posed for a photograph with my daughter and her, then, boyfriend. There were no votes in that; she did it out of the kindness of her heart. Then she went out to dinner, and she came back. I had

Geoffrey Howe staying with me too, and a Private Secretary, Charles Powell also. Geoffrey got up at about one o'clock and said he was off to bed. So I went out with him and in the passage I asked him how the hell was I to get Mrs Thatcher to go to bed? He just said: "John, that's your job" and pushed off. So I was left, and the PM went on talking until about 2 o'clock and then she too went to bed. I said: "You will remember Prime Minister that tomorrow morning when you come down it's a working breakfast, and then you go straight off to the meeting, and you won't be coming back here, so can all your cases be packed?" She came down at 7.30 in the morning, absolutely bandbox, which she always was, and we sat down to a very difficult breakfast indeed - Geoffrey Howe and Mrs Thatcher on one side, and the two Dutch equivalents on the other, and me at the head of the table. We didn't get very far.

JJ: What were the main points?

JM: South Africa – the whole business was South Africa. Then she went off to the meeting. I told her I would pick her up at 5.30pm. At 5.30 she came out. All the press were interested in Mrs Thatcher because they knew that she was opposed to the Dutch position. She had a major press conference, then she did interviews for the BBC and ITV, then she got into my car and I said: "I suppose you're going to Chequers to rest up after all this". "Certainly not", she said. "There will be lots of boxes waiting for me at 10 Downing Street". I knew she would go straight back and tackle them. Her energy was absolutely amazing. That was a meeting I won't forget.

JJ: Did she win that battle? I can't remember – over sanctions?

JM: She won the battle temporarily, but then South Africa reformed itself and that was the end of that problem. It was a difficult one for the Dutch. They had a historic link with South Africa. They felt a bit responsible for the Dutch colonists, although they disapproved profoundly with some of the views of the Dutch Reformed Church, and so on and so forth. So they were very torn about it. Their Calvinist conscience was involved. Their high morality; their tendency to lecture in a sort of Scandinavian way, morally, came to the fore in this connection.

JJ: The South African President is rather the same, isn't he? Mr Mbeke.

JM: Don't let's talk about South Africa. Is there anything else I should say about the Netherlands?

JJ: One question I would like to ask you – this business of the Dutch Parliament having to approve EU decisions and legislation before it can be properly adopted. That is the case, or is it not?

JM: I'm sorry, on this I must simply say I don't know. I thought it was rather similar to the British system – it all passes through their hands; the committee looking at it. But whether it has to be formally adopted in the Netherlands I do not know. I'm sorry.

JJ: Not to worry about that. We've almost reached the end of our interview.

JM: Then I stopped being a diplomat.

JJ: That's quite a shock to the system, isn't it?

JM: It was one which I rather enjoyed, because although I'd loved being in the Diplomatic Service, and although I'd had a most interesting time, I was happy to retire and return to a more normal life without footmen in deepest rural Suffolk. I thought I had been treated very fairly indeed by the Service. Coming in as a late entrant they'd given me a wonderful time; and of the four services I'd served in, the Diplomatic Service by a long way was the best run and the most enjoyable to work in.

Post retirement activities

I left diplomacy and was very happy to move into a new life. My real love is music, and I wanted to devote my retirement to music. My wife wanted to get on with her work in the field of dyslexia, in which she is a considerable expert, and we had our flat in London. I became Chairman of the Yehudi Menuhin School, which I enjoyed enormously, Chairman of the Royal School of Church Music and Chairman of the Joint Committee of the London Royal Schools of Music, that is to say the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music. And although I also was involved as a trustee of various other things, those were the

three main ones because in my experience you could sit on any number of committees and not do very much, but if you are in the Chair, that is where the buck stops and you have to work hard. So I worked hard at those three, and then I got very ill with a brain haemorrhage and as a result of that, I had to give them up. If I could just add one detail - I do think I did one good thing when, while chairing the Joint Committee of the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music, I managed to scotch completely a recommendation in the report written by Grey Gowrie and his committee on music and education in Britain, to the effect that there should be a single major conservatoire and the Royal Academy and the Royal College of Music should merge. It took me three years to kill that idea and I think both organisations are very grateful to me, because it was an ill thought out recommendation. To be fair to Grey Gowrie, I don't think he realised what on earth he was recommending. He didn't understand the system properly and it all came from another member of the committee. So that was one good thing I did. I wrote a little book about my old headmaster, who was one of the great reforming headmasters of the public school system, and later became Bishop of Coventry and was responsible for that amazing cathedral and all the wonderful things in it. Lastly, I had the honour to be appointed Gentleman Usher of the Blue Rod. This was not a very onerous position in the Order of St Michael and St George. So I managed to do a few things in retirement. And I finally retired from being village organist in our parish church in Letheringham. That was in 2005; and now I fill my time doing such things as speaking into this machine.

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