

A NATO Post in Norfolk, Virginia (Twice!)

By Cdr Mike Channon OBE RN



Towards the end of 1986, I learned that I was going to be appointed to Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) HQ in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. I was in the Ministry of Defence (MOD) at the time, where I had been promoted to Commander a year earlier, but SACLANT would be my first real Commander's job and my first experience of a full NATO appointment.

Although I had an inkling of how NATO worked, I was not really prepared for what was to come. I basically knew that NATO was an alliance of European and North American countries to expedite collective defence, security and interoperability, but had little idea of how it all functioned. I was sent by MOD to the Military Committee Meteorological Group (MCMG) Working Group (WG) at NATO HQ in late February 1987, knowing I would be its SACLANT member the following month. It enabled me to have a turnover with the person I was relieving in a real-time meeting.



SACLANT HQ Flag Plaza in 1987

In late March 1987, my family and I found ourselves on US soil in our second foreign accompanied tour. We had so enjoyed our previous experience in Hong Kong, that we were really looking forward to this one. Although very different, it did not disappoint. After a couple of weeks in a hotel, we moved into a house in Virginia Beach, where our back yard comprised sand dunes leading to a beach facing Chesapeake Bay. This was idyllic, although we had to live with the continual presence of sand in the house! We would prove to be very popular with colleagues and their families wishing to use or leave wind surfers on our beach!

In May I was sent on the NATO Staff Officers' Course at the NATO School in beautiful Oberammergau, Germany. This was a one-week course "cramped" into two weeks! It was conducted at a very leisurely pace and had allotted times to visit local castles and other sights of interest that weren't really necessary. It was fun though and did teach me the nuances of the relationships between the political side of NATO, the North Atlantic Council and Nuclear Planning

Group, and the Military Committee (MC). The MC was made up of the nations' Chiefs of Defence and they had an International Military Staff (IMS) in NATO HQ, to coordinate and liaise with the Military Command Structure.

At that time there were three Major NATO Commanders (MNCs); SACLANT in Norfolk, USA; Commander-in-Chief Channel (CINCCHAN) in Northwood, UK and Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR) in Mons, Belgium. CINCCHAN was charged with the protection of shipping in the North Sea, Dover Straits and English Channel as part of keeping open European Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in a conflict. Later, in 1994, the MNCs were reduced to two, with the majority of the responsibilities of CINCCHAN moving to SACEUR, predominantly to its Major Subordinate Command (MSC) Allied Forces Northern Europe based in Kolsaas, near Oslo, Norway.

The SACLANT Area of Responsibility (AOR) was essentially the whole of the North Atlantic from the North Pole to the Tropic of Cancer and from the East Coast of North America to the West Coast of Europe and Africa (but not the CINCCHAN AOR). SACLANT's three MSCs were CINCWESTLANT, COMSTRIKFLTLANT, both based in Norfolk, USA and CINCEASTLANT based in Northwood UK. NATO loves its acronyms! There were many further Command sub-areas but in the interests of brevity and in trying to prevent readers losing the will to live, I will not describe them here.



Pimm's AI Fresco and the SACLANT Spouses Club, 1988



My role as Staff Meteorological Officer, was to be responsible for policy, planning and coordination of meteorological services to NATO maritime forces. This was achieved through the appropriate committees, working groups and NATO maritime exercise planning meetings. Many IOs will remember the Cold War NATO live exercises "Ocean Safari" and "Northern Wedding"!

I worked alongside another UK Commander who was the Staff Oceanographer and a German Commander who was the Secretary to the NATO Military Oceanography Group (MILOC) and the liaison officer to the SACLANT Undersea Research Centre (SACLANTCEN) in La Spezia, Italy. We all worked for a USN Captain who was the Chairman of MILOC, and the SACLANT member of the MCMG. The big difference between MILOC and the MCMG was that the former was managed by SACLANT, and the latter by the nations who would rotate the Chairman.

The workload for my post was not particularly arduous. Meetings were mainly biannual, and I was more of a

coordinator than a provider, but the social life in a multinational community was most enjoyable. I also played golf when able, football and softball for the Warfare Division, and cricket for the UK staff against other communities of US citizens usually with largely Asian ethnic origins. Pitches were often poor and dangerous! I also ran the Warfare Division 10-pin Bowling Team in a Thursday night social league which, I'm told, is still going to this day!



The UK Cricket Team in 1988. Mike Channon, second left

My family also enjoyed life and we travelled to see as much of the USA that my leave permitted. This included Disney World, Niagara Falls, California, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, the Grand, Bryce and Zion Canyons as well as Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks.

I left SACLANT in September 1989, to command the Royal Naval School of Meteorology and Oceanography. Little did I suspect I would return to Norfolk three years later.

My second appointment to SACLANT in October 1992 was more of a late manning contingency rather than the original plan for me, but it would turn out to be an apposite move.



SACLANT HQ Flag Plaza in 1992

There had been some changes while I was away. SACLANT had a brand-new building a hundred yards away from the old one. I was now SACLANT's Staff Officer Oceanography. An earlier NATO manpower review, unsurprisingly, had suggested that the department give up one Commander's post but in typical military fashion, the UK offered to reduce from two to one Commander, unknowing that Germany had given up its position too, in a political move to secure a post in the Exercise Division. So, within a few months we would have a USN Captain in charge of one Commander, not the ideal management structure! Of course, none of the tasks had been removed. It was fortunate that I had extensive experience from my previous time here.

The German officer moved within a couple of months and I took over his roles; MILOC Secretary and Liaison Officer to SACLANTCEN, as well as carrying out my own duties as Staff Officer to the Chairman of MILOC (my USN Captain) and Chairman of the MILOC Subgroup which executed the tasking of MILOC. This was demanding enough, but when the Meteorology position left a few months later, I became much too busy and had to sacrifice something. I very reluctantly (anyone who has visited beautiful Lerici, Italy will understand why) shed the SACLANTCEN liaison role to another UK Commander in the Warfare Division, and became the sole Staff METOC Officer. During MILOC and Subgroup meetings I soon discovered how desperate the Subordinate Commands were to have a new environmental computer system to support them and I resolved to undertake a project to procure what they needed as soon as possible. The project was titled the Allied Environmental Support System (AESS). The Subgroup formed a Requirements Working Group and I became the Project Manager. As it matured through procurement and implementation, a Configuration Management Board, of which I was also Chairman, was established.

My responsibilities as MILOC Secretary and Chairman of the Subgroup kept me incredibly busy. MILOC was a high-level group and so it was most important that the minutes were detailed and correctly recorded. I retained a tape recording of the meetings to ensure my minutes faithfully summarised each delegate's statement or position. Much to my family's annoyance, deadlines meant I often took the recordings home to work on in the evenings and even on leave on one occasion, which cost me a lot of "Marital Barter Units"! With the Subgroup, the German officer had originally acted as Secretary, but I couldn't be both Chair and Secretary, so another member had to take on the latter role. Both groups were constructive. Between meetings I would phone and lobby the representatives if something possibly contentious was coming up, which could be worthwhile, particularly when meetings like MILOC were only once a year. The Subgroup met twice a year, or more often if required for specific purposes, and was very productive, particularly with regard to driving AESS forward.

Meetings would be hosted by Commands and Nations, often in some very nice settings. During my tenure we met at Traben-Trarbach on the Moselle, Athens, Lisbon, Naples, Halifax (Nova Scotia), Victoria BC, Monterey (California), Washington DC, and of course, Brussels and Mons. The high level MCMG and MILOC meetings encouraged spouses to attend and the host country would normally provide a separate programme for them. Although pleasurable, the frequent travel from the USA to Europe and time zone changes could prove tiresome.

In the end, I was extended at SACLANT by a year to see the AESS project through to completion and ensure it was established and performed as required. AESS was proposed, initiated, tendered, selected, executed, delivered and tested in less than three years, arguably something of a record for a NATO project of this size. Professionally, this

was the busiest, most demanding and yet satisfying appointment I'd ever had. I loved it! I felt appreciated by MILOC and the Subgroup and felt a great sense of achievement with the success of AESS and fulfilment when the members contacted me for help or advice, which they did relatively frequently. I also had an excellent USN Captain as my boss.

The Norfolk area was a good place to live. US houses are spacious. The one I rented in my second tour had a salt water canal and dock in the garden, which enabled me to keep a boat which had access to some beautiful stretches of water including the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic. The fishing was wonderful, and I had productive crab pots that I merely threw in the canal from the garden. My wife was active in the SACLANT Spouses Club; she ran a Quilt Group, bowled, and helped run the English Conversation Group. She thoroughly enjoyed the life, but she also felt that, because I was so busy, I was forced to put work before family, which I undoubtedly did.

So, this tour didn't quite match our Hong Kong experience which was so culturally varied and far more family oriented (and we were younger), but it came very close.



Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey, 1993



Karaoke at a Christmas Ball in 1995. We were terrible!



MILOC Group, Athens, 1995



Captain Sullivan (UK), Mr Brody (Canada) and Captain Nicholas (CINCCHAN) in Traben-Trarbach, Germany, 1988

I returned to the UK for resettlement and foreign service leave at the end of September 1996. I retired in December and was awarded an OBE for services to NATO, in the New Year's Honours List. I returned to SACLANT in mid-February 1997, this time as a NATO civilian and stayed in the States another 13 years before final retirement. Initially I was recruited to design and implement a training course for the NATO Maritime Command and Control Information System (MCCIS), which had a similar architecture to AESS.

After the Cold War ended, NATO needed to change to meet new global threats such as terrorism, espionage, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and piracy. In 2003, Allied Command Europe became Allied Command Operations (ACO) and ACLANT became the forward-looking Allied Command Transformation (ACT), a totally Joint Service HQ. It was strange (and sad) to see blue uniforms diminish as army and air force personnel moved in. SACT became accountable for Education and Training NATO Wide and I became a Training Manager responsible for drafting NATO Training Policy, implementing a Systems Approach to Training and designing "Train the Trainer" Courses that were delivered at the NATO School at Oberammergau. I retired and returned to UK permanently in January 2010.

The title of this blog used the word "Twice" relating to my time as an IO, but in reality "Thrice" would have been more appropriate. In my final year in the Navy, after the end of the IO Specialisation, I was transferred to the Executive Branch. It is most fitting that I finished my working life in my third SACLANT tour, as a "schoolie" once again.

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