

Alan Kaye AEO (East) 1986-89.

Mid August was not a good time to join SCS, but it was my misfortune to arrive in Minden at that time. Not a good time because nearly everyone was away doing what I soon learnt was a major reason to work for SCS – every school holiday was an opportunity to travel all over Europe in heavily loaded duty free cars, typically Volvos. The house Andrea and I were due to occupy was not yet available so we were temporarily allocated a 3 bedroom flat (‘Officers, for the use of’) in Blietturnigweg on the edge of Minden. Opposite was a billiard table flat field of cabbages that seemed to go on to infinity. We didn’t speak German and had no transport – my previous post as a senior school inspector had an Alfa Romeo attached to it that, sadly, they would not let me bring. So, with only Dm 10 in our pockets we managed to catch the right bus and went into Minden on our first full day, a Saturday. Minden is a pretty town and much more like what I expected than the Blietturnigweg infinite cabbage patch. We were enjoying wandering around town, not spending since we now had less than Dm 10 and no one had told us that credit cards were useless in most shops at that time. Suddenly, everyone disappeared as if down a plug-hole - it was 12 o’ clock and not the first Saturday of the month. Welcome to Germany! I can still taste that first shared Gyros near the bus station as we tried to find out how on earth to get back to the cabbage field with only DM 3 between us.

Into work at my new office in Kingsley Barracks on the Monday (all the advisers still on holiday in various parts of Europe) and a call came through from Ian Duncan, Deputy Director, safely based in the Big NAAFI-in-the-Sky – Rhinedahlen. “Everything OK?”, asked Ian “Yes, I think so Ian.... but we are in temporary housing, have no car, no bank account and speak no German and, Ian, what are the arrangements for my induction into SCS?” “Your what? – there’s a military Cavalier that will be somewhere and should be available for you so you can drive down to Rhinedahlen this week and we can have a chat.” “Where’s Rhinedahlen?” I lamely asked.....And it is with this inauspicious start that I commenced working for SCS, with my evenings spent wandering down arrow-straight roads through the cabbage field regretfully wondering why on earth I had made this career choice (I had also taken a drop in salary, which didn’t help!). I had been senior mathematics inspector in Surrey LEA where I was very happy and where my boss was the legendary Joan Dean, who took the care and comfort of her staff very seriously with induction procedures, rigorous appraisals and on-on-one forward planning as key features. Life was going to be a bit different.

Thankfully it got better. Much better. I was actually rescued initially by Lt Col David Harrison, Commander Education, 4th Armoured Division and based in Bielefeld. David came to see me and realised I was isolated and pretty unhappy – no wheels, no German, no staff around and no idea of what the job entailed. In the best military can-do tradition, which I came to admire and respect, he quickly got me organised. He took me out to meet General Michael Hobbs and the various brigade commanders in 4Div.

More importantly, he got one of his fluent German-speaking majors, Damien, to take me to a Mercedes dealership in Bielefeld to buy a used Mercedes – and I came away with a spanking second hand 280 SE for next to nothing – now, this was more like it!! I am still a friend of David to this day, now a retired brigadier, and remain eternally grateful to him. Eventually the advisers came back from their holidays. They were not too sure about this new guy from UK! Chris Ingham, newly appointed as an adviser, joined us. Fresh from headship in UK, Chris was ex-SCS so knew the ropes. She was a great adviser and a wonderful support to me and we became good friends. Chris loved to tell the story of how, although she did not have a strong background in maths, she was recruited to have a mathematics responsibility in SCS. She was therefore somewhat dismayed to find, on arrival, that her new ‘boss’ had quite a strong mathematics background! The fact that Chris had forgotten more about teaching maths to young children than I would ever know soon allayed her fears and we developed what I hope was a mutually beneficial professional relationship.

I had applied for the AEO job for two reasons: My wife, Andrea, wanted to live on the continent and I wanted to get some high level resource management experience to complement my existing curriculum and school management experience – I thought that the signs were that the old route for senior LEA staff would soon give way to a new one, where applicants for top LEA jobs would need both significant curriculum and resource management experience. In this I was proved right - the move to LMS in UK from 1989 took many of the traditional administrative functions away from LEAs and my SCS experience put me in a strong position for the next move. However, my background was in curriculum and supporting schools so I was much happier in that role, rather than ‘pushing paper’ in Kingsley Barracks. Anyway, I was never too sure what to do with the paper and where to push it. Ministry of Defence and SCS procedures baffled me to the end! I started to visit ‘my’ schools. This was wonderfully enjoyable – I found professional, committed and welcoming head teachers and many young and vibrant teachers – who worked hard and played hard – great! I saw well-run schools and some truly excellent teaching and saw at first hand how seriously heads took their ‘care and comfort’ pastoral role – in stark contrast to my ‘induction’. Staff had high morale and schools were happy places to work and staff seemed eager to learn and improve their practice. I tried, imperfectly, no doubt, to develop the idea that heads and I together managed Eastern Area with our complementary roles and responsibilities. I used SCS as a test bed for developing my thinking on education management. Within the restrictions of what was possible in the MoD, of course - sometimes pushing the boundaries and sometimes failing to move the immovable. Standing Orders are, well, standing orders and Ian knew them backwards! I particularly enjoyed and appreciated the company of the heads in Eastern Area and used to look forward to our professional conferences together. The blurring of work and pleasure and the frequent dinners, which seemed to happen at the drop of a hat, although my memory may be playing tricks with me on that one. I have very fond memories of my farewell dinner, which Heads kindly arranged for me, and still enjoy looking at the signed print of Lemgo Rathaus as well as the beautiful, tasteful, porcelain nude!

I got to know Nolan Clamp and started to look forward to going down to Rheindahlen to spend time with him, although I never got used to not being offered a cup of coffee after a dawn departure and a tortuous 3 hour drive through the Ruhr Valley - everyone else attending the meeting had only driven 5 minutes from home to the office and had just had their breakfast so they didn't see the need for coffee. I came to appreciate Nolan's wit and wisdom. Although my style of management would never be his, I learnt a great deal from him – summed up by a cricket analogy, “See it early and play it late” as well as the well-proven military option – the “do nothing” option. Good advice for me, who has a bias for action, even when no action may be the better decision. Nolan also gave me the best interview advice I have ever had and which I have passed on to colleagues many times since – “Make every question you are asked a good question” – ‘cos they are the only questions you will get, so ensure you use them well.

I was neutral about the military when I joined SCS but came to appreciate and respect our military colleagues, as well as enjoying the helicopter rides. David Harrison stands out but there were many others. Their people and risk management methods intrigued me and were food for management thought. Although I was never likely to ask someone to do something that could get them killed, nevertheless, there was some transfer to my world. Some military aphorisms stood me in good stead and had applicability in educational management: “No battle plan survives the first contact with the enemy” and “Every battle takes place uphill, in driving rain and on the edge of the map”. Much as I sometimes would have liked it to be so, less useful was that the one that defined tactics as, “The view of the senior officer present”.

Memories come flooding back as I write this. How I got the sobriquet, “Deer Slayer”, given to me by my military chums – I managed to write off a Military Vauxhall Cavalier by hitting a deer at 120 km/h in driving rain on the autobahn. “It is well dead, sah”, said the attending RMP corporal. So very German, I escaped prosecution because the sign indicating deer were a hazard was 200m down the road so I had not been warned that leaping deer were an ever-present danger.

My three years were coming up and I was tempted to stay since I was now happy in my harness, most of the time, and enjoying the job, although it had its limitations and frustrations. I could get used to a free five- bedroom house with free utilities, duty free car (a brand-new Saab 9000 Turbo now, definitely not a Volvo!) and duty free Le Creuset cookware from the Rheindahlen NAAFI. But it all seemed a bit unreal so I applied for and got the Chief Inspector/Deputy CEO post in Oxfordshire. Six years there were followed by appointment as Director of Education and Community Development on the Isle of Wight, where, as well as working hard, I could pursue my passion for sailing. I must have done OK because they appointed me Chief Executive of the Isle of Wight Council and I was thus able to try out my devolved management ideas on a broader canvas. Those who know me will also know that Andrea is from St Kitts and Nevis – a small twin-island state in the Caribbean. We had met when I did VSO there in the late sixties. She wanted to come home and the Isle of Wight politicians agreed that I could leave with a useful pension.

Eight days after retiring I was on a plane to Antigua, and a new life. Nine years later, we are happily living on Nevis, occasionally making forays to Europe and visiting our house on the Isle of Wight. Since retiring, I have never applied for work but have been in constant part-time employment as a consultant – “Give me your watch and I will tell you the time, and charge you for doing so”!! I have worked on various donor aid projects, mainly connected to strategic educational management in eight Caribbean countries, the USA and Nigeria. I am yet to reach my “Gary Neville” moment (I’m still a Man U supporter) and call it a day – I just hope I will recognise that time has come before the clients do. An interesting current link with SCS, and one which makes me feel very old, is that the director of the consultancy company which hires me is Arthur Peter’s son – Arthur was an old SCS hand and was a head in Western Area during my time with SCS.

So, very fond memories of the colleagues that I was privileged to work with. It would be invidious to name only some of the heads because they were all very supportive to me and it would be great to re-establish contact. My email address is kayenevis@gmail.com.