

Colonel Blimp

These are the last two weeks of my deployment to the Headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force (HQ ISAF) in Afghanistan. I will leave three days after the British have taken over from the Italians who have reigned this HQ for the last nine months, supplemented by people from other nationalities, such as Dave, a Brit who is one of my air transport planners, and myself. I am the NATO Chief Air and Ground Transport and I am Dutch.

Half of our 'Italian' crew have already returned home as has Carlo, our excellent Spanish boss. He is replaced by an English Army colonel, a stately man in his fifties with quite a belly and a double chin. He speaks the Queen's English and likes order and tidiness. For three days, his attempts at cleaning his new office are the talk of the town. Everyone in the building passes by his open door a couple of times a day to see him fighting the room.

And granted: after those three days the room had been transformed from Carlo's paper-and-files-filled-chaos into an almost empty office. It has a bare desk with an office chair with five functioning casters (where did he get those?) and a simple chair to sit opposite him. Should he have kept any of Carlo's papers during his tidying mania, they must have disappeared into the low, grey cupboard with an illustration of a tank hanging over it. Not that it is very likely that he has kept anything: something that was produced during a previous ISAF mission by a non-Englishman can hardly be relevant. He has put up curtains, organised internet access in his room and every morning the *Financial Times* is delivered to his office with which he spends the first hour of his working day.

I am surprised by the internet access. HQ has only limited availability of Internet, based on operational necessity. Our logistics department already has two internet computers: one in my air transport room and one in the petrol room. The Spanish colonel always used the one in the petrol room, but apparently that doesn't befit an English colonel.

After ignoring us for three days while straightening out his room (kudos to him) he sends for me.

'Oh, oh,' William mutters when a corporal informs me that the colonel would like to see me now.

'Why, oh, oh?' I ask.

'When the colonel asks "to see you now", it means trouble,' he says in a grave voice and hides away behind his computer screen without making eye contact.

Last week, William replaced Mario, the Italian major. William is, as I am, an outcast in this now, two weeks before the takeover, almost entirely British system. He is British Air Force and air force personnel are somewhere at the bottom of the caste system of the British Army. Below worms and

other molluscs, but significantly above foreign army personnel, or, even worse, foreign air force personnel such as myself. But as a fellow air force man he is apparently closer to me than to the British Army and we are on very good terms.

'It's best to agree with everything he says, that is the fastest way to get rid of him,' William says.

In my mind I review the last few days: did I do something wrong? I can't think of anything. Being nonetheless slightly nervous after William's comments, I walk to the room next to ours. The door is closed. I knock three times. No response. Is he deaf, is he on the phone or is this an intimidation tactic?

I wait five seconds, just as I was taught fifteen years ago as a new cadet at the military academy. The memory makes me smile. Then the memory immediately changes into an unpleasant feeling in my stomach. That protocol also required a military salute in front of the desk. How formal are the English, am I supposed to salute the colonel in his office? I have never done that: in the Netherlands we don't salute anymore, and the Italians and the Spanish never insisted on protocol. I rack my brain trying to remember how it should be done. Something to do with walking up to the desk and stamping your feet together. No, that can't be right; The new Dutch drill no longer incorporates stamping as that does not comply with Health and Safety regulations. Then I firmly tell myself: stop this nonsense, just follow normal Dutch protocol. A 'good morning colonel, I am lieutenant-colonel Kleinreesink, you sent for me?' with a pleasant smile should suffice.

Once again, I knock three times on the door, this time so loudly that nobody could possibly ignore it. After waiting another five seconds, I slowly press down the handle, swing the door and gingerly insert my head into his office.

A stern 'yes' comes from the five caster chair. Ah, he is reading his newspaper; clearly intimidation tactics. I walk forward and halt next to the visitor's chair that is right in front of the desk, say the rehearsed sentence and extend my hand with a friendly smile on my face. An unfriendly face topped with grey hair looks at me and then at my extended hand. For a moment everything remains silent. Maybe saluting would have been better. Then he shakes my hand. I expect a 'please be seated', but when that doesn't come, I remain standing like a schoolgirl in front of a cross teacher. To prevent any awkward fiddling and to compensate for the previous lack of military protocol I remain at ease: legs spread and hands folded on the back.

With some jealousy I see that his workspace is the acme of clean desk policy. Apart from one lamp, one computer and one copy of the *Financial Times*, it is empty. He has put the telephone on the radiator behind him and even an in-tray is missing from the desk. Out of the corner of my eye I spot the in-tray on the low cupboard below the picture of the tank. Also empty. On the newspaper

lies a thin pile of printed A4 paper that I recognize as the order for the takeover ceremony that will be held in two weeks. Ah: at least he knows his priorities. Apparently there won't be any ranting and raving about any real problems such as the lack of available aircraft, and my colleagues from the petrol desk don't need to worry about surviving a cross-examination about the available oil supplies in Afghanistan. Seeing and being seen by the officials during the takeover ceremony obviously has the highest priority with this colonel.

'Did you assign the people from the logistics department for the takeover ceremony?' he asks in a harsh tone.

'Together with Paul, the deputy,' I say.

'You made a mistake. Your two warrant officers are not on the list.'

'I did that on purpose,' I say, 'Air traffic continues as normal that day, so my warrant officers will need to do the regular planning and man the phones.'

'I will not put any officers in the hot sun for hours during a ceremony, when there are non-commissioned-officers such as your warrant officers sitting comfortably in their office,' he says.

'With all due respect,' I say, 'but these warrant officers make sure that military operations can continue.'

'Just explain any of my officers how it works, and they can easily take over during the ceremony.'

The room remains silent. I am astonished.

'Air transport planning is not the kind of work that you can just explain to anyone.'

'Sure enough, you can to a British Army officer,' he says, emphasizing 'British' and 'Army'. He looks at his newspaper and it is clear that the conversation is over.

I make another attempt: 'Sir, what if the British air force major and one of the warrant officers remain here so the other warrant officer will be available for the ceremony. That will ensure enough expertise not to endanger normal operations.'

He shakes his head. 'Your major will also attend the ceremony. Make sure that one of my British lieutenant-colonels from the petrol desk is briefed,' he says, followed by an impatient 'thank you' when I make no attempt to leave.

After this conversation, I walk into the air transport room and close the door. Both warrant officers look surprised: I never shut the door.

'Gentlemen, I have fantastic news: you are both allowed to attend the takeover ceremony.'

'I don't want to go to the TO and besides, that is not possible 'cause it will leave the desk unmanned, ma'am,' Dave says.

'Our new colonel feels it's important that we all attend the TO.'

'Then who will man the phone?' Dave asks in an impatient tone.

'One of the lieutenant-colonels from petrol.'

Dave now looks just as astonished and furious as I feel.

'One of those idiots?' he asks in an incredulous tone. 'What do they know about air transport planning?'

For a moment I doubt whether I, as an officer, should point out to Dave that it is not polite to describe a fellow officer as 'an idiot'. However, I recall yesterday's diner conversation between two of these 'idiots'.

'Do you remember Freddy?'

'Oh, yeah, the loser. We pulled his leg last Christmas, didn't we? Pegged him down with four croquet hoops in front of the officers' mess. Naked.'

'When I went out for some fresh air at midnight he was still there.'

'He wasn't even protesting. Quite admirable, as it was rather cold in the snow.'

I decide that objecting to Dave's terminology might not be entirely appropriate and would mainly damage my own credibility.

'I was informed by the colonel that British Army officers can be employed anywhere after only a short briefing,' I say. Like the colonel, I emphasize 'British' and 'Army'.

'You didn't explain that we are in the middle of a war here and that we are trying to keep an operation going? That flying may be more important than a TO during which the VIPs can tell each other how wonderful they all are?' Dave says, while giving me a penetrating look.

'Of course I did,' I snap at Dave, 'but I didn't get the impression that he was open to reason, more that this was some kind of power play.'

A choked sound comes from where William sits. When I turn around, I see him trying to suppress a snigger.

'Yes?'

'This is fairly typical,' William says with understatement.

In the next few days I will quickly find out how 'typical'.

The Friday morning after becoming acquainted with the colonel, I sleep in as I always do on Friday and Sunday mornings. When I get up, I mop the floor of my bedroom (which mainly results in the water in the bucket turning black) and send some private emails before I leave for the office at noon. As soon as I walk onto the metal outer stairs, a corporal hurries towards me.

'The colonel has been looking for you all morning. He urgently wishes to see you', he pants.

This time the knocking on the door is immediately followed by an 'enter!' Last time I felt that the colonel's face spelled trouble, now it looks like he is on the verge of exploding.

'Where were you?'

'In my room, enjoying a well-earned morning off, as usual on Friday mornings,' I say in a somewhat more irritated tone than I had intended.

'Where is the rest of your office? Why is it not manned?'

For a moment I don't know what to say. The air transport desk is always manned. The warrant officers take care of that themselves, I never need to get involved and no warrant officer being available has never happened before. Until now, the two warrant officers have been the epitome of professionalism and have been totally committed to their jobs.

'I don't know,' I say truthfully.

'Aren't you Chief Air Transport?' he sneers at me. 'Isn't it your job to know where your people are and to always have the desk manned? Wasn't that of the utmost importance to ensure the continuation of the operation?'

Gee, he actually listened during our previous conversation. I fight off the urge to remark 'But weren't there enough British Army officers to take over?' as exploding colonels probably cause a lot of trouble. This thought, however, suddenly makes me realise what is happening here.

I stick to an 'I will make sure it will not happen again', followed by 'as long as I am Chief.' Finally, I add 'colonel' to this stuttered sentence. I expect a 'get out!', but the colonel only turns his back to me to stare out of the window and I walk out of the room without saying anything further.

When, half an hour later, the two warrant officers enter the office with the innocent attitude of two kids who have just raided the biscuit jar, I close the door for the second time this week. I waste no time asking where they have been and adopt my best mum-is-angry face.

'You do realize, I hope, that this can be construed as mutiny?' I open.

'It is Friday morning; the two of us have just been to the bazaar, like everybody else on the compound. It is low-ops day, ma'am,' Dave says.

I nod. 'Correct, but not for the air transport desk. I repeat my question: mutiny?'

It stays quiet for a long time.

'Strike?'

Dave and Aurelio look at each other and I have the impression that Aurelio gives Dave a short nod, although that could have been a trick of the eye.

'Was there a problem? Something the Army officers couldn't solve, ma'am?' Dave asks innocently.

Dave is a very talented soldier, but a second career as an actor is not on the cards for him. He is not the only one, because I feel the start of a smile enter my mum-is-angry face. Just what I thought!

'Did one of *my* warrant officers brief the *British* Army officers?' I ask.

Both of them shake their heads, without saying anything and I see Dave suddenly pout his lips. My starting smile is immediately under control when I realise the crucial mistake the gentlemen have made.

'That's incredibly stupid of the both of you. If you want to play games, you have to do it properly. What you have done now, is invalidate the argument that one of you two should always be present.'

Dave clasps his belt and I think I hear a very soft 'damned'.

'We were only gone for a moment.'

'I'm not interested. The colonel says it was the whole morning'.

'Completely exaggerated,' Aurelio says.

'The lieutenant-colonels from the other side of the hallway have received your message loud and clear; they had no idea how to take over,' I continue without addressing the question of how long they were gone. 'But you gave the wrong message to the colonel by walking away without even giving them a minimal briefing. Who are the idiots now?'

Clearly, the ground underneath Aurelio's feet is rather interesting, so is the view from the window behind me for Dave.

'From day one I have told you that when things go wrong, I will take the blame, without any objection. That's what I am Chief for. Have I ever not done that?' It's a rhetorical question, as I know that this is something they find surprising. Apparently, it is something not every chief does.

'So I took the blame.'

They actually look guilty and my angry face is real now.

'I have also said from day one that in exchange I expect you to inform me of potential problems and exceptional decisions you take so that I know what to bend over for.' Both men nod.

'Do me a favour and promise me that you will never play these kinds of games again without consulting me first.'

Both gentlemen give a relieved nod, followed by a rather bashful 'Yes, ma'am'.

Although I am now genuinely angry, I also have to laugh at the absurd situation. Here I am, cryptically telling off two older men, one of whom is old enough to be my father, but we understand each other perfectly.

'I've had enough stress for one day. I think I will also go to the bazaar for a long visit and afterwards go and sit in Destille Garden. Fortunately, I have two very capable warrant officers who are perfectly able to run the shop without me.'

With those words, I leave the office and do not return until after dinner. We never again talk about the incident and, apart from the day of the takeover ceremony, the air planning desk will never again be unoccupied between eight in the morning and eight in the evening,

One of the things I ponder that afternoon in Destille Garden is the new Commander's Intent. The new British general, COMISAF, intends to spend the first two months of this command visiting all the key leaders in Afghanistan. A very commendable initiative, which might result in some logistical challenges. As a fully assimilated Italian, I therefore decide to spend my unexpected 'afternoon off' by inviting one of the Italian staff officers from COMISAF's office to an espresso.

'How many people will the new COMISAF travel with during his key leader engagement? His aid-de-camp, some force protection people, maybe a press officer and a staff officer?' I ask after some small talk.

'Oh, no, he wants to travel with a large party. We are talking dozens of people.'

Apparently my face darkens, as my conversation partner asks: 'Will that be a problem?'

'Possibly,' I mutter. 'Is it true that COMISAF has his own armoured vehicle that he wants to take with him wherever he goes?'

'Hmm,' he says and looks around, apparently to decide whether he is willing to say more, but as Milan Palace is busy and we are surrounded by fellow Italians and Brits, he leaves it at that.

'What are the chances that he is willing to fly without that thing?' I ask.

'Unlikely,' and he gives me an intense look. I gather from this look that the new COMISAF is not only demanding when he travels, but also at the office.

'Why do you want to know?' he asks.

'Because an armoured vehicle probably means that I need an additional plane.'

He nods understandingly: 'I see your weekly remark about the shortage of planes in the reports. How many do you have? Six, seven?'

'Try again,' I say.

'Five, four...?' he tries. I slowly shake my head and hold up two fingers. When it dawns on him what this means, he stops moving for a moment, and thinks.

'Then how are you going to fly ITAS, the Intra Theatre Airlift System, when COMISAF is on key leader engagement?' he asks.

Slowly I say: 'That is exactly what I am wondering, too. I'm afraid that I'll have to explain to COMISAF that if he wants ITAS to keep flying, he will have to travel by ground, or without his car and the entire party.'

'I am glad you don't ask me to deliver that message,' he says.

The Dutch C-130 planner I carefully sound out over the telephone puts it quite plainly. No intense looks and meaningful ums, just an outspoken: 'We offered our C-130 to NATO for ITAS, not for VIP flights. We have better use for our C-130. If this happens I'll withdraw the Dutch offer. And I don't think you'll find any other country willing to make their C-130's available for this.'

I decide to consult with my pillow on how to tell COMISAF that ITAS and key leader engagement from the air are not compatible.

The next morning, however, the colonel delivers me from this problem. For the third time in a week I stand at ease in front of a neatly cleaned desk, this time with the firm intention not to be overwhelmed again.

'Did you tell COMISAF that he can't fly?'

'No, sir,' I answer, without feeling any impulse to explain myself. If he wants to play boss-subordinate, he can get it.

'Then why do I get to hear that?'

'Maybe because I talked to one of COMISAF's staff officers about his travel plans and the staff officer concluded from our little chat that it is impossible to both fly ITAS and COMISAF with this entire party,' I say.

Flushed and emphasizing each and every word, the colonel says: 'We are British. We do not say "no".'

This time I am prepared. Last night I read the standard operating procedure which clearly states that the Chief Air Transport is responsible for the upkeep of ITAS and for planning the air transport capacity which has been made available to NATO. Not my department chief. I am to put the mission first and foremost, not nice COMISAF plans or national interests. Therefore I answer with the same emphasis: 'I am NATO. It is my call. I do say "no".'

It is silent for a moment and I can see the colonel's mouth distort.

'For the next two weeks,' he then says.

'The next two weeks,' I agree.

When I enter the air transport office, William asks: 'Did you have a fight with the colonel again?'

I nod.

'Don't worry, that's normal with him,' he says.

'How do you deal with that?' I ask.

'Oh, if it's important we go directly to the general above him, he does understand how things work.'

'You skip rank?' Escalating is something which normally happens only out of dire necessity.

'We do with him,' William says casually. 'What was this all about?'

'About the new Commander's Intent: if he is to travel by air we will need one or two extra C-130's for the next couple of months. Where do we get those?'

Dave grumbles from the corner: 'Two if he is to take his armoured vehicle.'

'He will,' I say.

'Would the British be willing to provide those?' I ask William.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Dave vehemently shake his head.

'I was under the impression that that discussion is over', William says surprised. 'It was discussed during the preparation and it was rejected because the British don't have enough capacity to in effect provide COMISAF with a private plane. Is he now trying it with NATO planes? What did you tell the colonel?'

'That it won't happen as long as I am Chief Air Transport.'

'Brave,' William says.

'She is Dutch,' Aurelio says, 'she doesn't have to worry about her career, only about the mission.' My standard answer when the Italians expressed worries about my career prospects when I made a decision, has clearly sunk in.

'So now COMISAF is trying to arrange it in theatre through the weakest link, our new colonel,' I say. 'Maybe I should also have a chat with your general. The British might find it interesting to hear that the new COMISAF is once again trying to arrange a private plane.'

'That won't be necessary,' William says, looking at Dave. 'Why don't you let me handle that. ITAS will stay in the air.'

We never discuss it again. Neither do the colonel and I: we try our best to avoid each other in the remaining two weeks, both glad that I will leave.

You have read a translated chapter from 'Officier in Afghanistan' by Esmeralda Kleinreesink. Interested in acquiring the foreign rights? Please contact Dutch publisher Meulenhoff via <http://www.meulenhoff.nl/nl/p4cc9c93f583e6/foreign-rights.html>.

Please feel free to distribute this pdf version, as long as no changes to the text are made.

©translation and Dutch original: Esmeralda Kleinreesink

www.officierinafghanistan.nl