

A Base Commander Celebrated

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Some things never change and the 1980's were almost as politically polarized in the UK as they are now. Ronald Reagan was President, Margaret Thatcher Prime Minister. While they evidently got along famously, many Britons weren't enthused by either of them, or by what they represented. Some of that spilled over into dislike for just about anything American, and into outright hostility toward the US military presence in the UK.

I remember one faculty member phoning the Area Director's office in anger; the previous evening she had been stopped by MPs at RAF Greenham Common who asked to see ID as she was on her way to teach a class. "This is still the United Kingdom", she reminded me in raised tones, "and we are not required to carry identification documents".

An even more memorable incident occurred at RAF Brawdy, a naval base in northwest Wales. It was a tiny base, and we ran two or three classes a term there. To some surprise, an introductory French class made it onto the schedule and had enough enrollments to run. The instructor, a teacher from a local school, was well-received until one day she announced to her class that she wouldn't be available that weekend to help with homework questions because she would be in London taking part in a demonstration sponsored by the Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament.

Some of the students took great umbrage at this, and complained directly to the base commander. Their argument was that some one opposed to nuclear weapons shouldn't be permitted on a military base, much less teach members of the military and their families.

The Field Registrar alerted Ernie and me to what was happening, and we waited with some trepidation to hear what happened next. Ernie was on the phone with an ESO, defusing a potentially problematic class-scheduling request, when the other phone rang and a voice asked me to hold for RAF Brawdy's base commander.

The first surprise was hearing him chuckle when he asked if Ernie and I were aware of what was going on. The second surprise wasn't far behind. "I understand the students' concern", he said, "but they didn't take into account that the reason we're here at all is to defend your instructor's right - and anyone's right - to demonstrate for whatever cause they believe in. I reminded them of that."

Those of you who knew the UK and Iceland office will not be surprised to learn that, at the end of our respective calls, Ernie and I immediately turned to our sherry cupboard and poured ourselves a drink to toast that base commander and all like him.