

DEALING WITH FOREIGNERS

Getting to know key host country nationals, private, and official; spotting and cultivating key contacts; potential rewards. Official visits. Relations with diplomats of other countries.

Adam was first appointed a head of mission, at the relatively early age of forty-eight, as Ambassador to ‘Noridan,’ a vast north African Muslim state of some strategic importance. This was also a promotion, since the Noridan ambassadorship was at the level of Director (then called Assistant Under-Secretary of State or AUS), one rung up from Adam’s previous grade of Counsellor. At that time the compulsory retirement age was sixty, although a number of diplomatic service officers found themselves forced to retire before their sixtieth birthdays if there was no suitable job on the horizon for them by the time they were fifty-six or fifty-seven. When Adam’s appointment to ‘Khaliman,’ the Noridanese capital, was announced, his then line manager, the supervising Director in the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, congratulated him and reminded him that at this grade he was likely to remain a head of mission now for the next twelve years, apart from any home posting in the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London as a Director or above. His annual reports would no longer be written by his ambassador: he would be writing the annual reports on his own senior embassy officers, and reports on himself would be written by the relevant supervising Director far away in London.

Adam was lucky to be given a date soon after his arrival in Khaliman for the presentation of his credentials to the Noridanese President, the ceremony that frees a newly arrived ambassador to begin to function. His

credentials, or “letters of credence,” signed by the Queen and written in standard flowery antique language, addressed the Noridanese President as Her Majesty’s “good friend,” the term used in all such documents, even when addressed to the most bloodthirsty and corrupt dictators on the planet. Those addressed to other Kings and Queens, refer to “My Brother/Sister and dear Cousin” or to “Your Highness,” depending on the closeness of the dynasty to the House of Windsor (Britain’s royal family), some of whom may be quite literally cousins of the royal signatory. The nominal purpose of the credentials is to assure the receiving head of state that the new ambassador has the full confidence of the Queen and her government and is an all-round admirable person. The ceremony is largely ceremonial and while there is often little or no substance, there may on occasions be nuggets worth reporting back to the new ambassador’s foreign ministry at home. Moreover, its atmosphere and the presence or absence of personal chemistry between the head of state and the new ambassador may set the tone for their relationship for the rest of the ambassador’s tour of duty.

Adam, never having served as ambassador to a royal court, had had no need to equip himself with diplomatic uniform, gold braid, fringed epaulettes, plumed hat, and sword, so he performed his part in the ceremony wearing a dark grey lounge suit. He inspected the Presidential Guard of Honour before being led into the Presidential Palace by the Noridanese Chief of Protocol, who had briefed him the previous day on what he would be required by local protocol and tradition. The elderly, heavily built President, standing in elaborate military uniform on a dais in front of a rather monarchical-looking throne, his face grave and unsmiling, waited for Adam at the far end of an ornately decorated room. Adam handed over his credentials letter with a brief neck-bow. The President murmured a word of thanks and passed the letter, without reading it, to the Chief of Protocol standing behind and to one side of him. Short formal speeches were then exchanged, Adam and the President each assuring the other of his earnest desire to improve yet further the already friendly relations existing between their two countries, while promoting the causes of world peace and the eradication of poverty and hunger throughout the world.

The Chief of Protocol then beckoned forward the four most senior members of Adam’s staff who had been watching the presentation from the back of the room, for Adam to present them to the President. Adam and the President, accompanied by a Noridanese interpreter and the Chief

of Protocol, then retired to a smaller drawing room where they sat down and were offered glasses of warm Coca-Cola (Adam accepted his but didn't drink it). After a brief exchange of politenesses, the President rose and extended his hand to Adam who hastily got up and shook it. The President then withdrew, Adam was taken to yet another room where his four embassy colleagues were waiting, each with his or her warm Coke, and the five of them were led out to where the Foreign Ministry's Protocol Department cars were waiting to take them back to the British embassy, Adam's ambassadorial Union flag¹ now fluttering on the off-side wing of his car. Adam was now a fully-fledged, duly accredited British Ambassador. His first act in this capacity was to send a telegram to the Secretary of State in London saying so, and adding some personal impressions of his first encounter with the Noridanese Head of State.

Rules of protocol are changing all the time, mostly (in Adam's opinion as he looked back years later on his first few weeks as a head of mission) in the direction of becoming less formal, more relaxed, and less burdensome. Nowhere has this gradual change been more welcome to practising diplomats than in the duty laid on newly arrived heads of mission, whether ambassadors or high commissioners, to pay introductory calls on some (nowadays) or all (in Adam's early days) of his diplomatic colleagues. In more recent times the practice has developed of the new ambassador making introductory calls only on those fellow members of the local diplomatic corps with whom he will have the closest and most substantive relations. Thus during his first few weeks after presenting his credentials a new British ambassador will naturally call on the Dean of the local Corps, his other European Union and Commonwealth colleagues, and on the American, Russian, and Chinese ambassadors. In a capital city where a large number of countries are represented, calls on even that limited selection of colleagues will be remarkably time-consuming, and not all of them will be equally rewarding.

When Adam began his ambassadorial career, the burden of courtesy calls was incomparably heavier than it is now, and the demands of internationally accepted protocol were inexorable. Adam's first few weeks after he had presented his credentials were occupied almost exclusively by a huge and obligatory programme of introductory calls on every one of his diplomatic colleagues, the bane of the life of a head of mission in those rigidly protocolaire times. Then as now, Adam's first call was

necessarily on the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps—the longest-serving foreign ambassador in Khaliman. Seniority among heads of mission in any post is determined either by the ambassador's date of arrival or, more usually, by the date on which he or she presented credentials. The size, power, and importance of the ambassador's country have nothing to do with it. A newly accredited American ambassador is the most junior diplomat in the Corps, and the ambassador of Malta who has been there longer than anyone else is the most senior. As Dean he is the representative of the whole local Diplomatic Corps in its dealings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the rest of the host government. The Dean also represents the Corps at ceremonies to welcome or say farewell to visiting dignitaries, at state funerals and weddings, and other such formal occasions, although for the most important of these the presence of the entire Corps may be required (as Adam was chagrined to discover in the coming days). He formulated for himself a rule of thumb on this: the more insignificant the country and the more authoritarian its régime, the more frequently its rulers demand that all the ambassadors accredited to it turn out for its numerous ceremonial occasions, generally making them sit on benches in the hot sun in some vast open-air parade ground, in strict order of seniority, waiting for several hours for the local bigwigs to arrive, then for several more hours while quasi-military ceremonies were conducted, then for a couple more hours waiting for the President or Vice-President and his (or in rare cases her) entourage to leave.

For the moment, however, introductory calls would be the order of the day for Adam. The Dean, an elderly Maltese, stressed that Adam and, where appropriate, his wife, should call on every other ambassador, as far as possible in their order of seniority, ending with the *Chargés d'Affaires* (ambassadors' deputies occupying their ambassadors' places during the absence of their bosses from the country). The dean warned that failure to pay an introductory call on any ambassador, however irrelevant his country, would be taken as a slight that could mar Adam's reputation in the Corps throughout his time in Khaliman. Such a minatory warning would strike a modern diplomat as both impractical and absurd. For Adam, it had to be taken seriously, for at that time it reflected virtually universal practice.

"You said that I should be accompanied on my calls by my wife 'when appropriate,'" Adam said. "When will that be appropriate?" Adam could well imagine how Eve would react to the news that she would be required

to spend several hours a day, for weeks to come, accompanying him on an endless series of calls on other ambassadors and their wives, many of them certainly people with nothing much of interest to say.

“When your secretary telephones to arrange a time and a date for each call, she should ask whether it would be appropriate for your wife to accompany you,” replied the Maltese. “Some of our Muslim colleagues will prefer your wife to pay a separate call on their wives. As you will understand, they can be quite uneasy in mixed company. There’s sometimes a problem over a Muslim Excellency not being able to shake the hand of a woman, however eminent.”

“What happens when the ambassador paying the call is a woman?”

The Dean smiled. “Fortunately, Mr. Ambassador, that does not appear to arise in Your Excellency’s case.”

Adam was even more dismayed by the thought of having to ask Eve to pay separate calls, on her own, on some of the Muslim ambassadresses.² She was more than capable of carrying off such occasions without the smallest embarrassment, but she was also capable of reminding Adam, if and when the occasion arose, that she was neither employed nor paid by Her Britannic Majesty or her government and that even such a grand personage as the Maltese ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Noridan was in no position to give her orders. But in the end she would comply, with a reasonably good grace.

There was worse to come. “Your Excellency should bear in mind,” said the Dean, “that some of our colleagues will ask, towards the end of your call, when it would be convenient for them to pay a return call on Your Excellency.”

“With their wives, no doubt,” said Adam.

“Of course—when appropriate. However, if you are reluctant to double the amount of time you have to spend on your own calls by accepting return calls as well, it’s quite in order to say that you hope His Excellency will be willing to defer his return call until a later date, when Your Excellency will have completed Your Excellency’s programme of introductory calls. It will be mutually understood in such a case that the deferment will be indefinite.” The dean smiled a conspiratorial smile. Adam later found, to his infinite relief, that even in that hidebound era no one ever actually insisted on paying a return call following his own introductory call. A few of his more ancient colleagues insisted on making a ritual enquiry as to when a return call would be convenient, but no such

nonsensical event ever took place. Similarly, Eve found that in practice she hardly ever had to call on any other ambassadress on her own, although she dutifully accompanied Adam on many, perhaps most, of his own calls. This tiresome convention too is now a thing of the past.

Adam had to overcome a powerful urge to ask the Dean, who was after all a Commonwealth colleague, to stop calling him Your Excellency or Mr. Ambassador and to call him Adam. But he sensed that that would have to come later, if at all. This occasion had to be solemn; it was, after all, part of the Dean's *raison d'être*. Adam was relieved to find that nearly all his diplomatic colleagues were automatically on first-name terms with Eve and himself from the time of their first meetings, whether formal or social.

A feature of Adam's (and usually also Eve's) calls on his diplomatic colleagues in those early weeks was the production by a uniformed maid of a large plate of their host countries' local delicacies, often sticky lumps of some indeterminate substance flavoured with an anonymous sugary coating. Pressed to take the third, fourth, and subsequent helpings of the hosts' local dish, Adam and Eve both learned to decline without causing offence. Repeated glasses of some fiery alcoholic liquid, produced only in their hosts' country, were more difficult to refuse, even at 10 o'clock in the morning.

At last the ordeal by introductory call on their colleagues in the Corps was over. Adam had accepted the Dean's advice not to omit a single ambassador or chargé, however obscure the country he or she represented. The Australian ambassador had mentioned, during their call on him and his wife, that their United States' colleague, an emaciated businessman who owed his ambassadorial status and life-long title to his success in having raised several millions of dollars for his president's election campaign, had given considerable and widespread offence in the Corps by failing to pay introductory calls on several of his colleagues from the more insignificant countries, although despite the grumbling it seemed to be reluctantly accepted that such arrogance was only to be expected of the representative of a super-power. (On the other hand, the jovial Russian ambassador had conscientiously called on every one of his colleagues.)

Another area in which customary international practice has relaxed over the years since Adam's induction into the ambassadorial world is that of attendance by heads of mission at National Day receptions. Nowa-

days, especially in big posts with a large diplomatic corps—well over one hundred embassies or high commissions in some of them—it is generally accepted that it's impossible for every ambassador to attend every single national day function. In some capitals, such functions may take place almost every week-day evening, sometimes with three or four on the same evening. As with introductory calls on first arrival, heads of mission are nowadays bound—and permitted—to be selective about the functions they will attend in person. They may send a member of their embassy staff to represent them at the rest. Adam's experience, however, in an earlier era allowed him no such leeway. It was made clear to him by the Dean and by some other friendly colleagues that his own personal appearance at every national day function would be *de rigueur*; to send one of his staff to represent him would be taken as a calculated snub, not just to the host country's ambassador but also to its head of state whom he represented.

During the three weeks following Adam's presentation of credentials, there had been four national day parties, big evening receptions each at the relevant ambassador's residence, which Eve and Adam had been obliged to attend. Three of these had marked the national days of minor countries which Adam understood to be the only functions given by their ambassadors during the year. The Australian ambassador had warned Adam that there were five or six ambassadors in Khaliman—those of Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia—whose failure even to put in an appearance at any national day reception would be certain to be noticed and to give offence. Everyone knew that the Americans were often represented at such occasions by the ambassador's deputy or even one of the embassy's Counsellors; this was widely deemed to be another example of superpower arrogance, but only to be expected. There were more than ninety embassies in Khaliman (including most Muslim countries and many other Africans as well as the bulk of the Europeans and a few from Latin America and Asia). Each of these would hold a national day reception during each year: that meant up to ninety obligatory evenings out annually for Eve and Adam, without counting the numerous other evening receptions and dinners that would crowd into their diaries, along with almost as many lunches. The only bright spot on the horizon was that the horrors of the working breakfast had not yet crossed the Atlantic to Noridan.

Not all the introductory calls on Corps colleagues were a waste of Adam's professional time; nor were all the national day parties. Most of his Commonwealth and EEC (now EU) colleagues gave him useful insights into the political and economic scene in Noridan, and tips on how to circumnavigate the many pitfalls lying in wait in Khaliman for newly arrived diplomats and their spouses. Several soon became firm friends and invaluable sources of sensitive information. After a few months Adam was able and glad to reciprocate as he built up his collection of local contacts. In the case of his EEC colleagues, the exchange of information took place not only informally on social occasions such as receptions, lunches, and dinners, but also more formally at the monthly meetings of EEC ambassadors. Adam found that at these meetings the most useful information tended to be provided by his German and French colleagues, and often the Dane and the Belgian: most of the rest spent more time listening and taking copious notes than contributing anything themselves. Meetings of all the ambassadors of Commonwealth countries took place more rarely and were in general less productive, although obviously much valued by the ambassadors of the smaller Commonwealth countries. At both EEC and Commonwealth ambassadors' meetings some participants seemed to have few local contacts, depending for their reporting to their governments mainly on what they were able to pick up from the EEC or Commonwealth meetings and from conversations at parties with other diplomats. Before long Adam became a net contributor, although he generally came away with at least one nugget of news that justified a reporting telegram to London (with Adam's own assessment of its implications and reliability in each case). The members of Adam's embassy staff similarly often gleaned valuable information from their Commonwealth and European opposite numbers in other embassies. But much more (and more reliable) information came from the Noridian contacts whom all of them zealously cultivated at their various levels, the youngest of these, such as students, often being the most daringly frank.

As an example:

Diplomatic missions often seek to improve and lighten their relations with the people and dignitaries of the host country by arranging events that will be enjoyed by local people and involve friendly contacts with local government officials, the host country's military officers, local business and media people, and others with whom contacts

made in the context of the event may prove useful later. For example, a goodwill visit by a ship of the Royal Navy to a port of a foreign or Commonwealth country can be a powerful demonstration of British goodwill. If enough local people can be involved in it, and if it's properly covered by local television, radio, and the press, it can give a long-lasting and favourable impression of British friendliness, smartness, and efficiency: very useful for raising the profile of both the British embassy or high commission and of Britain itself. During my time as British high commissioner in Australia a Royal Navy destroyer, HMS Valorous (not its real name), paid a three-day visit to the northern Australian port of Darwin, on the Timor Sea, much closer to Indonesia than to Sydney or Canberra. J. and I flew up to Darwin for the visit. The high commission information officer and my Naval Adviser (Commonwealth equivalent of Naval Attaché) had flown up a week earlier to set up the arrangements in accordance with guidance notes sent by the Ministry of Defence in London.

Under the plan for the visit, J. and I were to be flown out to Valorous in the ship's small Lynx helicopter so that we would be on board during the last hour or so before the ship reached Darwin. The Mayor of Darwin and his wife had also been invited to fly out to Valorous with us. The four of us gathered at the side of the Darwin port's helicopter pad to watch the little Lynx come in from far out to sea, hover for a moment over the landing pad, twirl a little, descend, and land. The helicopter pilot, in full flying gear, climbed out, saluted the party smartly, and came with us into the small VIP lounge in the main port building to brief us. Introducing himself as Lionel, the pilot took his four passengers through the emergency drill to be followed "in the highly unlikely event of us having to ditch in the sea": unhook and remove the big headphones and microphone used to communicate with the pilot and co-pilot, undo the star-shaped safety harness by rotating the metal fastener over the tummy, shrug off the harness, push out the plastic window beside the passenger seat, and crawl through it into the sea, trusting to the buoyancy of the flying suit that each passenger would wear to keep afloat until rescued. "The only slight snag," Lionel warned, "is that you'll only have three minutes at most to do all that before the helicopter turns upside down, because of the weight of the engines and rotors above the fuselage. Once that happens, you're suspended upside down below the waterline and it all gets a lot more tricky. Any questions?"

There was a stunned silence.

“All right, then: here are your flying suits. As soon as you’ve got them on, we’ll board the Lynx and get going.”

We hugely (if tremulously) admired the way Lionel hovered the helicopter above the big destroyer once we reached her far out on the horizon, matching the ship’s speed and direction through the water and positioning the Lynx precisely above Valorous’s tiny helicopter pad, marked with its big H. We didn’t know whether to be reassured or alarmed by the sight of the ship’s fire-fighting team, in full firemen’s kit, gathered round the landing pad, pointing thick hoses at the centre of the pad as the helicopter, still moving forward at the same pace as the ship, gradually lost height and settled gently on the dead centre of the pad. We heard Lionel shut off the engine and the gradual fading of the noise of the rotors as the fire-fighting team put down their hoses and came forward to lash the Lynx firmly to the deck. What amazing skills people like Lionel possess! But we were secretly relieved to know that we would be returning to dry land aboard a substantial Royal Navy ship, and not in the little Lynx.

After J. and I and the Mayor and Mayoress had been introduced to the Captain of Valorous and had a welcoming drink in his stateroom, the Captain and I went through the arrangements for the ship’s arrival ceremony together, and then discussed the programme of events for the ship’s officers and ratings that had been arranged for them during the three-day visit—football matches, a banquet given by the Mayor, a disco for the entire crew to meet the local youth sightseeing with a visit to the famous Kakadu national park, a visit to the Darwin brewery, a debate and quiz at the university, and conducted tours of Valorous. Satisfied with these plans, the Captain invited his four visitors to have a look round Valorous while we waited for her to arrive at Darwin and for us to disembark. Walking round the deck with one of the ship’s officers and the Darwin Mayor (by now a good friend), we came across Lionel, who had piloted the helicopter that had brought us out to the ship. I greeted him warmly, congratulating him on the extraordinary skill he had exhibited, not only in flying us out across the water, but especially in landing the little helicopter with such precision in a high wind on the deck of a moving ship, without mishap.

“Tell me, Lionel,” I said, “all that emergency drill that has to be carried out in less than three minutes if you ditch in the sea—have you ever had to do that for real?”

“No, no,” laughed Lionel. “Not for real, I’m glad to say. Of course I had to practise doing it many times in the big tank in a mock-up of a helicopter during training, as we all do.”

“And did you manage to get out before the three minutes were up and the machine turned turtle in the water?” I enquired.

“No, never,” Lionel replied. “No one does. It's absolutely impossible.”

On the arrival of Valorous at Darwin, and as the senior representative of Britain in Australia, I was ceremonially piped ashore by a smartly turned-out rating playing what looked and sounded like a superior tin whistle, while the Captain, standing to attention on the other side of the top of the gangway, saluted J. and myself as we left the ship. Of course it was the office I held that was being formally acknowledged in this traditional way, not myself personally. Nevertheless it was a proud and memorable moment for both of us—if no more memorable than our flight in the Lynx.

Much more valuable than meetings with his fellow diplomats for the collection of information and insights about Noridan was Adam's growing portfolio of contacts with Noridanese decision-makers and opinion-formers. His calls on the ambassadors and their spouses once completed, Adam turned to much more useful and congenial introductory calls on Noridanese ministers and their officials, newspaper editors and commentators, senior army, navy and air force officers, business and trade union leaders, bankers, and (with great caution) a few independent political activists. Adam was surprised and gratified to find that most of these were not only ready but often also eager to entrust to him confidences which, if he had leaked them to others, would have caused them severe embarrassment, or occasionally much worse. Some government ministers would voice scathing criticisms of aspects of their government's policies and even of their government colleagues, but only in one-on-one conversations or in the intimacy of their house, Eve's and Adam's official Residence but also, for the time being, their personal and family home.

Adam came to realise that Britain was one of only a limited handful of countries whose diplomats were felt to be trustworthy recipients of highly sensitive information and opinions. But while he was off to a flying start as the new British ambassador, and therefore *prima facie* trustworthy, he had to earn future confidences by himself being personally discreet. He must take care to respect the confidences entrusted to him, show consistency in his own communications, and be seen as an accurate and reliable exponent of his government's policies and intentions. Above all he must

never be caught out in malicious gossip, tricky behaviour, or, above all, lies. It was tacitly assumed that he would report to London even the most sensitive of private revelations, insights, and opinions, and that they would go no further. Occasionally, in fact, Adam would share some of these with the most obviously trustworthy of his Commonwealth or European colleagues, or with his American opposite number, usually in exchange for equally valuable insights and revelations in return. But his own reliability as a recipient of confidences enabled him to build up close relationships with some of his Noridanese officials and other contacts, and some of these stood him in surprisingly good stead when he was in need.

As an example:

At the height of the Ethiopian famine in 1984, as the international relief effort was beginning to show results in relieving hunger, deaths from starvation and sicknesses associated with malnutrition and deprivation on a colossal scale, it became apparent that there were millions of Ethiopians in the central and northern highlands who were living many miles from any navigable road, many too weak to walk hundreds of miles to the nearest feeding centre or clinic, and thus impossible to reach with supplies of food and medicines by normal means. The United Nations Relief Coordinator and some of the heads of UN agencies and NGOs³ (including Britain's Oxfam, Red Cross, and Save the Children, among many others) began to make enquiries about the possibility of air transport being made available for delivering relief supplies from the Ethiopian ports direct to remote airstrips in the mountainous famine areas.

At the same time, public opinion in Britain, stirred and shaken by vivid television reports of the famine and its pitiful victims, was increasing pressure on the government to step up its contribution to the famine relief effort. British ministers decided that an offer of Royal Air Force transport aircraft to transport relief supplies would amount to a dramatic high-profile gesture as well as filling a genuine and pressing need. As the British ambassador to Ethiopia at the time, on my first head of mission posting and still wet behind the gills, I was instructed to approach the Ethiopian government with this offer. My government at home immediately gave enormous publicity to my delivery of our offer, without waiting to hear whether the Ethiopian government would accept it.

As I had predicted beforehand to London, our offer presented the Ethiopian leadership, party and government, with a major political and ideological problem. The régime was both military and (nominally) communist, repressive and authoritarian, its top leaders ferociously anti-western and wholly dependent on Soviet military support for its resistance to several armed secessionist rebel movements around its periphery. To the hard-liners in the party and government, the idea of a NATO western air force such as the RAF being allowed to operate conspicuously inside Ethiopia in a famine relief role was almost unthinkable; I knew from several good sources that the Russians were actively encouraging the Ethiopians to reject our offer. Other Ethiopian government leaders were less doctrinaire and more pragmatic: they argued that to reject an offer of sorely needed help just because it came from a western NATO government would do irreparable harm to the international (almost entirely western) relief effort on whose continuation the survival of around nine million sick and hungry Ethiopians depended.

I was under increasingly urgent pressure from London, including from No. 10 Downing Street, to extract an Ethiopian reply to our offer of RAF transport aircraft for delivering relief supplies. I spent hours and days visiting ministers' offices and on the telephone to other contacts in the frantic effort to get an answer. Under growing media pressure at home, the British government decided to mobilise the first three Hercules (C130) aircraft, fill them with grain and medical supplies, and send them halfway to Ethiopia to await the Ethiopian reply at the British sovereign military base on Cyprus at Akrotiri. Still I could get no answer as the argument raged within the Ethiopian leadership.

At this point I received an unexpected telephone call from a senior contact in the ruling Ethiopian communist party. He was a party boss with whom I had had some friendly conversations at various official Ethiopian government functions, and who had cautiously uttered to me some faintly liberal opinions, always in strict confidence. His secret telephone call was to tell me that it was proving impossible to resolve the argument within the leadership between the hawks who wanted to reject the British offer of RAF aircraft, and the pragmatists who thought rejection would be disastrous. Since no agreement on the issue was in sight, it followed that I would never get a reply to our offer to transmit to my government. But then came the jewel in the message: if our aircraft were to arrive at the capital, Addis Ababa, they would not be prevented from landing and they would then be tacitly, but not

officially, allowed to operate relief flights into the remote famine areas.

Was this the definite answer I had been pressing for?

“That’s very welcome news,” I said. “May I take that as a definite promise?”

“You understand that it’s unofficial. I don’t have permission to speak to you like this, Mr. Ambassador—my life would be in danger if our conversation became known. But yes, it’s almost certain. That’s all I can say. Goodbye.”

And he hung up, that terrible “almost” ringing in my ears.

Taking a deep breath and crossing my fingers, I reported this unofficial (and obviously deniable) message to London and added my personal recommendation that the aircraft should now leave Cyprus, come to Addis Ababa, establish their operational base and start flying supplies to the famine areas, even though the Ethiopian authorities had still not officially accepted our offer nor authorised the arrival of the RAF. Within an hour I received an answering telegram from London asking for my definite confirmation that if the aircraft flew to Addis Ababa, they would not be prevented from landing. The telegram reminded me of what I already knew all too well: that if the C130s arrived over the Ethiopian capital only to find oil drums blocking the runway, or, even more horrendously, if one of them were to be shot down as a hostile military aircraft entering Ethiopian airspace without Ethiopian government permission, it would be a public relations as well as a human catastrophe. London’s telegram made it very clear that if I had any reservations or hesitation about my prediction and recommendation, I should state them now so that the whole operation could be called off before even more serious harm was done.

I had no time to ponder the dilemma: the C130s were starting their engines on the Akrotiri airfield amid a huge UK press and television presence. What was at stake was more than my reputation for reliability in London and the future of my diplomatic career: it was potentially the lives of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of sick and starving Ethiopians. Yet the basis for going ahead was nothing firmer than a secret telephone call from a communist party boss who had been speaking unofficially and without authority and who would unhesitatingly deny having telephoned me at all if I were ever to quote him as the basis for mounting the operation. I swallowed hard and sent a telegram confirming my recommendation that the C130s should now fly to Ethiopia, claiming to have more confidence than I really felt that they would encounter no resistance to landing at Addis Ababa and

beginning operations. My recommendation was accepted and the aircraft were cleared for take-off.

On the bright sunny cool Saturday morning of November 3, 1984, my wife and I stood on the airfield at Addis Ababa, waiting for the arrival of the huge C130s. There was no sign of obstruction on the airstrip. Moments before the appointed time, two specks appeared in the sky, then a third. The specks grew into aircraft, and eventually we could make out the familiar RAF concentric rings markings, then huge banners painted on the fuselages proclaiming them to be carrying "Ethiopian famine relief supplies." One after another the transport planes landed and taxied to the terminal where an advance guard of the RAF, pre-positioned in case the operation were to go ahead, was waiting for them. Operation Bushel had begun.

The RAF were to stay in Ethiopia for fourteen months, delivering grain and medical supplies, tents and blankets, and other desperately needed supplies to needy people all over northern Ethiopia, flying every single day (including Sundays and Christmas Day) in harsh and dangerous conditions, without losing a single aircraft or crew or harming a single Ethiopian. They carried out difficult and dangerous low-level air drops of supplies to areas where there was not even a gravel airstrip at which a C130 could land. They were later joined by the West German Luftwaffe, flying slightly smaller transport aircraft, and later still by a squadron of the Polish air force flying ancient Soviet-made helicopters which landed at the sites of the RAF air drops to clear the DZ (dropping zone) of people and ensure that the supplies dropped would be collected for orderly distribution and not seized by the healthiest and fittest of the local people. So we had two NATO air forces (the RAF and the Luftwaffe) who had been enemies in the second world war, collaborating in a humanitarian cause with a Warsaw Pact air force from Poland, now ranged against NATO, but brave allies of the RAF against the Germans during the war. Professional and personal relations between all the crews—British, German, and Polish—in those cold war days were movingly close and comradely as they all collaborated in a great humanitarian enterprise.

Ethiopians in Addis Ababa would wave to the RAF C130s as they took off each morning to fly to the ports and load up with grain and other supplies, credibly reported as saying: "The Russian planes bring us guns and bombs, the English bring us food and medicines." Traveling often on the C130s to visit the feeding centres and clinics run by British NGOs in distant parts of the country, watching the daring low-altitude air drops and the landings of the heavily loaded aircraft at

impossibly short, often soft, gravel, or grass runways in remote mountainous areas, my wife and I saw more of Ethiopia than, probably, any of our predecessors.

My gamble paid off handsomely. But I, more than almost anyone else, knew what a gamble it had been.

NOTES

1. A British ambassador's flag is the Union flag with the royal coat of arms at the centre, signifying that the ambassador is the personal representative of his or her Sovereign as well as of his government and of his country as a whole. High Commissioners, however, fly an ordinary Union flag without the royal coat of arms, since many of them represent Britain in another of the Queen's realms, and the representative of the Queen can't present credentials to another representative of the same Queen (namely, the Governor-General). Such anomalies and differences keep protocol departments the world over happy and occupied.

2. A male ambassador's wife is an ambassadress. His female equivalent is also an ambassador. There is no word (yet) for the husband of a female ambassador, a rapidly increasing species, no doubt because when these nomenclatures came into general use, the species did not yet exist.

3. Non-government organisations such as famine relief charities and human rights organizations.