AN OFFICER IN AFGHANISTAN

Esmeralda Kleinreesink

Query translation Officer in Afghanistan v2.0

Original preface +3 chapters

I'm through accepting limits

'Cause someone says they're so

Some things I cannot change

But till I try, I'll never know

The Wicked

For my home front: my husband Bert, my father and my mother

Preface

> *The story goes that three umpires disagreed about the task of calling balls and strikes.*
>
> *The first one said:* "*I call them as they are.*"
>
> *The second one said:* "*I call them as I see them.*"
>
> *The third and cleverest umpire said:* "*They are nothing, until I call them.*"
>
> *Based on Simons (1976)*

'Esmeralda, I miss dialogues,' the non-fiction editor-in- chief said after reading my first attempts at writing.

'Dialogues?' I said. 'As if I still know what I said to someone five years ago. Shouldn't I write non-fiction?'

'Certainly, but dialogues help create character and make sure that you don't need boring explanations,' he said. 'It's called s*how, don't tell*.'

It would be one of many things I learned about the craft when writing this book.

'To improve the story even further, you may also play with the timeline. As long as the events you describe have really happened, it remains non-fiction.'

Therefore, this is a non-fiction book. It describes my deployment from January to May 2006 to Afghanistan as NATO chief air and ground transport planning. Every event detailed in this book has really happened. I have really left a minister out in the cold ('The Minister'), blundered at the Dutch embassy in Kabul ('The Embassy'), named a chair Taliban Suicide Chair ('An Average Day') and thought that I had ended up in a brothel ('The Beauty Parlour').

Every person mentioned in this book is real; however, to protect their privacy nobody is mentioned by their real name.

Out of all the dialogues in this book, there is only one sentence that I am 99 per cent sure of that it was pronounce the way I wrote it down. It is the sentence: "*We are British. We do not say 'no*'," from 'Colonel Blimp'. But I wouldn't claim the same of my reaction to this statement.

This book describes the way my memory has shaped my deployment to Afghanistan five years ago; the ups and downs, the high points and low points, with the emphasis on special occasions. I was deployed in a new domain: originally, I'm trained as a manager, a computer scientist and an interpreter/translator Dutch-English, but I had no clue about air transport planning. However, as the Operations Centre guy said: 'You're an officer and wear Air Force blue, so everything should work out fine.'

First of all, I'm an officer, and only secondly a writer. That doesn't mean, however, that this is an uncritical book. I have done my best to sketch a realistic image of what it is like to work as a staff officer at international headquarters. That image is not always positive: bureaucracy, cultural differences, laborious cooperation and curious political decisions will all be discussed. But there are also enough reasons that keep me working for the military: team spirit, variety, the possibility of strange, new experiences and the feeling to provide a relevant contribution to society. That enthusiasm is also described in this book.

I have tried to show the reality of a deployment including some military jargon. In case of language problems, there's a glossary at the end of the book with military terms, which expains, for example, that when soldiers *cannibalize* they do not eat human flesh, and that military *black holes* have nothing to do with the universe. At the end of the book you will also find a simplified list of ranks to look up whether a warrant officer is higher or lower in rank than a lieutenant-colonel or a general.

Obviously I have my own motives for writing this book. For starters, I was flattered by the fact that a renowned Dutch publisher asked me to write this book. Hardly any books have ever been written by soldiers about what it is like to work at international military field headquarters, or by female soldiers about what it is like to be deployed as a woman. About the dilemma of bringing your ballet stuff ('Sports and Saunas') or how leg holsters, once popularized by action heroine Lara Croft, can be quite inconvenient for real women ('The Holster').

I hope this book may contribute to a real image of what these anonymous soldiers from the headline news do in foreign places, hoping that it will create some understanding for these people who risk their lives day in, day out for peace and security. They deserve to be regarded as an investment instead of a closing entry to balance the budget.

Prologue

‘That surely was an interesting ride,’ I say when we finally enter the gate to HQ ISAF in Kabul that afternoon, the International Security Assistance’s Headquarters. I can still feel my heart pounding in my chest. My gun’s grip is completely moist when I snap the holster guard strap on.

‘Yep,’ Peppe says with a fixed stare, while also replacing his gun in his holster. ‘Not my thing.’

Normally, our city trips through Kabul are just as boring as the meetings we go to with the Air Transport desk. Even this morning, there was nothing to indicate that this trip would suddenly become exciting.

‘Good morning,’ I greeted the sergeant at exactly five to eleven, when the four of us arrived at the Movement Control desk: lieutenant-colonel Peppe, major Mario, warrant officer Aurelio and myself.

‘We´re here for the eleven o’clock convoy.’

I am here with three of the five people from the NATO Air and Ground transport desk that I manage, on our way to the weekly meeting on Kabul International Airport, on the other side of the Afghan capital. The only one who has remained to man the desk is Dave, one of the two warrant officers who do the air transport planning. At the weekly meeting, all the logistical planners from the many military camps in Kabul are brought together. Major Mario always attends on behalf of our desk. Since a convoy will only leave when there are at least three passengers, and today no one from HQ ISAF had to go to the airport, Mario chartered us to join him. I thought it a good idea to see what happens during these meetings, and Peppe

and Aurelio felt like sightseeing Kabul Airport, hence the presence of the almost entire transport desk here at Movement Control.

'*Here is key. Guard outside later,'* the Italian sergeant says with a heavy accent, while he gives me a car key.

'How much later?' I ask.

He gives a shrug.

I give Mario the key. Mario is a blushing Italian major in his late thirties who likes driving. He starts walking to the parking lot on the other side of the HQ where the white four-wheel-drives are parked.

Aurelio, the second warrant officer doing the flight planning, who is also an Italian in his late thirties, rearranges the camouflage scarf which he has arranged as a choker around his neck, before he takes the walkie-talkie from a second Movement Control sergeant. Behind the desk is a large map of the Kabul area, with colourful pins stuck to it. Aurelio and the sergeant chat a bit in Italian over the walkie-talkie. It works. It is not the only functioning walkie-talkie in the area. Aurelio's talking is followed by a lot of noise and another, unintelligible voice from one of the cars driving around in the area. The sergeant checks the map, answers in Italian-English with '*yes, yes'* and '*lodger, logder*', and continues his conversation with Aurelio.

The third, also Italian colleague, Peppe, a fifty-year-old lieutenant-colonel, talks to the desk sergeant. The sergeant points out two photographs: one of a white Toyota pick-up and one of a yellow cab. The number plates have been erased by Photoshop, but below the pictures are partial plates.

'These are possible car bombs. They ask us to look out for them and be careful,' Peppe translates for me.

I smirk. All Afghan cars in Kabul are yellow, a remnant from when the Taliban had forbidden all cars except the traditionally yellow cabs. And all relief organisations drive around in white four-wheel-drives or Toyota pick-ups, so the city is full of them too.

Not getting the rest of the Italian briefing, I go sit outside in the sun on one of the lower walls, take one of the water bottles from my backpack and take a sip. My flak jacket, which weights thirteen kilos and is easiest to transport by wearing it, quickly becomes too hot in the sun. I undo the Velcro on the left and right hand side, lift the jacket over my head and put it down on the ground. Air! The back of my uniform is already soaked, while I have only worn the flak jacket for ten minutes. I feel sorry for the men and women who have to walk entire foot patrols wearing these.

I leave the jacket near the wall and take a short walk to Destille Garden. Destille Garden is the HQ's soothing relaxation point: a green lawn, some trees, a few chairs and a wooden shed where they sell ice cream when it's hot. The main attraction consists of a few rabbits who love to be cuddled by big men in camouflage. I sit down on one of the chairs and look at the cuddling. A few men are crouching on the grass; some caress the rabbits slowly and methodically from head to tail, others prefer intense scratching behind the ears. They all come alone. Cuddling rabbits is something that soldiers do on their own. Destille Garden is hardly bigger than half a soccer field, but its importance as relaxation point cannot be measured in terms of its size.

Fifteen minutes later I return to Movement Control to see whether there is any progress in our trip. Mario drives up with 'our' car and even the security car, with a British guard/driver is already there. The second guard is still nowhere to be found, as usual in this Italian-run NATO HQ. Time indications are just that: indications.

'Does the Movement Control sergeant ever say anything besides "yes, yes" and "roger, roger"?' I ask the British guard.

‘Fortunately, that was all he’s had to say so far, ma’am,’ he says.

‘I sometimes wonder whether people get killed because of language and communication problems,’ I say.

‘Well, I’ve heard this story about a couple of Poles, who were briefed over the radio,’ the guard says. ‘They didn’t hear or understand that they were not allowed any weapons near Karzai’s palace. They were greeted with load guns to their heads by Karzai’s bodyguards.’

I can see bearded bodyguards, shouting in Pashtu and feel the barrel on my temple. Language problems have to get people killed at times.

With a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, the second guard comes slouching along at half past eleven, half an hour late. The Italian corporal gives the four of us a short nod and, without saying a word, sits down on the wall to finish this cigarette. We still have over an hour to drive to the meeting room at the airport, a fifteen-minute-drive at most, so we're not in any real hurry, which is exactly what he radiates.

Long time ago, I learned that the armed forces are like any other organisation. If I'm to arrive on time now and in the future during one of these routine trips, I'll have to learn to live with the pace of work and definitely should not be under the illusion that I, as a lieutenant-colonel, can order someone who is not under my direct command. In other organisations a manager also can’t tell someone from another department what to do, no matter how tempted he or she is.

When the cigarette is finished, the Italian corporal slouches to the passenger side of the security car. I lift my flak jacket over my head, put the helmet on which had been secured to my jacket with a large hook and get in the car.

Before we really started, we already stop. The first stop of our two-car-convoy is inside the gates of the headquarters, right before the guard post. When we see the British

driver and the Italian guard leave the car in order to insert a magazine in their weapon next to the car, the four of us also exit the car. With my right hand I take my Glock and point the barrel upwards, in the safe direction. I use my left hand to unbutton the magazine holder in my holster to take out a full magazine with fifteen bullets in it. I click the magazine into the pistol. When I put it back in the holster I automatically check whether the button that is supposed to keep the weapon in place is properly closed. I feel like Lara Croft.

The driver of the security car in front of us shows his paperwork to the guard on duty. A latex gloved hand takes the papers; they are studied and returned with a nod. Via the walkie-talkie we hear the driver check us out with Movement Control and get a '*yes, yes, lodger, lodger'* in return. After a nod from the Italian guard, an Afghan security man opens the gate for us.

Slowly we exit the gate, over the speed bumps in the Green Zone that feel like the car gets a puncture, even when crawling along. Past men in black from an external security firm who intently look through the scopes of their weapons. Via a roundabout, we enter Kabul's busy main road, one of the few tarmaced roads in the county.

Along the road are shops the size of sea containers. In front of it are men with beards and long robes on low stools. Women, hidden behind bright blue Afghan burkas, walk through the mud on heels. Here and there polished nails pop up from under the burkas to close the front, which is open from the middle. On the street corners and at roundabouts Afghan men in green uniforms and caps sit on wooden chairs in the sun staring listlessly ahead. Large billboards with bright colours or photographs of serious looking men in beards extol the virtues of its goods. Some street corners have a water pump with a puddle underneath it and a few ten-year-old girls with plastic buckets swarming around it.

We are on our way to the military part of Kabul International Airport. A one way road with shoulders that are used as rubbish dumps leads to a large, muddy square with deep holes

in it. The entrance to the camp is made up from barbed wire, concrete roadblocks and petrol trucks that for safety reasons have to wait for hours and sometimes even days before they are allowed in. A ten-year-old boy in thorn, mud stained clothes gazes intently at us. A young intell officer? I know from the bazaar that Afghan boys that age are excellent at mental arithmetic and facial recognition.

The security car calls in Movement Control over the walkie-talkie and reports '*destination reached'*. Movement Control's only response is a '*Lodger out'.* Involuntary I shake my head. It is not just that the Movement Control sergeant's English is not up to par with his 'lodgers', but he also doesn't adhere to basic radio protocol such as repeating our call sign and our message, so we all know that he knows what we have said. A great recipe for communication problems.

Two guard wearing white, latex gloves exit the wooden guardhouse. We all get out of the car so it can be searched easily. A third guard enters carrying a round, broken mirror on a stick, to look underneath the vehicle. The papers are inspected and then the first red-and-white barrier is opened.

Mario, Peppe, Aurelio and I embark in order to disembark five yards further on at the unload point: two low barrels filled with gravel from which a PVC tube protrudes that is kept in place by sandbags. A yellow sign with an arrow and the text 'unload weapons here' rests on the floor against the first barrel. Even though you never see Lara Croft unload, at most she reloads, this routine does provide the ultimate Lara Croft feeling: when you make a mistake the weapon may fire. That causes everlasting disgrace, an MP investigation, an note in your file and a heavy fine. I take my Glock, aim it diagonally upward and with my right dumb I press the release button that makes the magazine slide out of the pistol's grip. Gravity puts the magazine in my left hand. In the same movement I put the filled magazine back in my holster and close the button. I place my Glock in the PVC tube, pull back the slide and inspect the

chamber. It is empty, as it should be. Then I pull the trigger, listen to the accompanying click and put away the Glock.

After the meeting, which was attended by only half the people expected, of whom at least another half didn't give the impression of understanding either English or Italian-English, I visit Dimitrios, the Chief Cargo, at the request of my Canadian roommate. She is Chief Helpdesk and gave me a pleading look this morning when I told her that I would visit the airport. 'A computer has been missing for some days now. It has to be at Kabul Airport, but the Greek guy who runs the place claims they don't have it. He drives me nuts. The only English he speaks is "*never receive workstation"*,' she said, while imitating his heavy Greek accent.

She is not the only one going crazy. Cargo at Kabul Airport is handled by very amiable Greek soldiers who lack any kind of organisational skills and hardly speak any English. Consequently, cargo's always missing. It's not so much lost or mislaid; it's just that nobody can find it.

Here, too, getting excited about it doesn't help, as being direct is not done when it comes to dealing with Italians and Greek. Having a cup of coffee and some chitchat, however, does help. Especially with Dimitrios, as hardly anybody talks to him on a quiet, normal tone anymore.

Dimitrios is a small man with a grizzled three-day-beard. He's on the phone, speaking Greek in an excited tone and walking in circles as far as the telephone cord allows him while he supports his story with his right hand. As soon as he sees me in front of the door of his office container, a big smile appears on his face and he motions me in.

‘*Sit, sit*,’ he says and points to the chair next to his conference table, while he ends the conversation. ‘*Crazy, everybody is crazy*,’ he says to me as soon as he puts down the telephone and he lifts his arms while he shrugs his shoulders. ‘*You want tea, yes?*’

He takes a deep breath when we sit down with two steaming mugs in front of us, coffee for him, tea for me. He confesses that this is his first quiet moment of the day. It’s chaos and everybody only shouts at him. I don’t even have to raise the Canadian computer problem, as he starts about it himself.

‘”*It's a workstation,” they say. They want workstation, no workstation here*.’ With a tired look he asks: ‘*What is workstation?*’

Ah, that’s a good start. To begin with, he doesn’t know what a workstation is, and doesn’t like asking the Canadians. That's not surprising, as the main problem of native English speakers is that they have no idea how complicated their language is and how many difficult words they use all the time.

‘*A workstation is a computer*,’ I say.

He thinks for a moment and then shakes his head and his right hand.

‘*No, no computer here.*’

On his desk sits a large parcel, about 15x20x10 inches, a format that suspiciously looks like a desktop computer. I walk to the desk and look at it.

‘*Don’t know what is, for who. You know?*’ he asks.

There is no address on the parcel anymore, but in large letters the word ‘desktop’ appears on it at least ten times. I sigh to myself and doubt whether I should despair, or laugh about it. A careful smile appears around my mouth.

‘*This is the missing computer,*’ I say. ‘*Two problems solved.’*

He looks surprised. ‘*Is desktop. Not workstation, not computer!’*

When I explain that ‘desktop’ is another word for ‘computer’ he throws his arms in the air.

‘*Why don’t they tell me? This was here many days,’* he says with a desperate expression on his face.

Fifteen minutes later I leave the cargo container with a large parcel under my arm, while Dimitrios waves me goodbye.

There is still some time left before we have to go back to HQ. We have arranged to drive back at half past four, so I decide to make use of the time by visiting the airport's check-in counter. Kabul International Airport consists of two parts. An enormous military part next to a tiny civilian section where commercial planes from airlines such as Ariana Afghan Airlines fly from. I go to the military check-in counter, as we have nothing to do with the civilian part.

‘Are you happy with the way we plan the planes?’ I ask, while I put down the desktop.

‘All too often there are people just showing up,’ the ground steward, a friendly British sergeant, says, looking longingly at the desktop parcel.

‘What do you do then?’ I ask.

‘If there is a spot, we let them travel anyway,’ he says.

‘Do you check whether those seats stay available after the next stop?’

‘No, we have no insight in the stop-over data.’

‘Why not?’ I ask. ‘It’s all in our planning spreadsheet.’

‘What spreadsheet?’ he says and he points at the empty counter. Only now I notice there is no computer.

‘We applied for a computer a few months ago at your HQ’s computer department.’

I put my hands in front of my face and close my eyes. ‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ I say, peeping through my fingers. ‘Do you happen to have the application forms at hand? I’ll

see what I can do.' That's all I dare promise him, as I have no idea why an application for a computer at such a crucial spot should take so long. He ducks behind the counter and quickly emerges with an email print-out from over three months ago.

On the way back, the triumphal, two-lane tarmac road through Kabul has changed into a four-lane-road. The yellow Kabul cars work their way through the barrows, and the white, blinded pick-ups from foreign relief organisations meander the military vehicles. Quickly, we lose contact with the security car in front with Aurelio in it. The British driver strictly adheres to the military driving rule 'always keep driving'. A rule the Dutch do not always obey, as it brings about a driving style that doesn't win hearts and minds. As the instructor in the Dutch mission preparation class so beautifully stated: 'How would you feel when the Nigerians came to bring us tribal culture and most of what you see is that they drive too fast, race through shoulders and in general behave antisocial?'

Mario softly hums while driving. 'No problem,' he says, when the security car disappears from view. 'We are almost home, I know the way.'

I smile when I hear him use the word 'home'. I sometimes use it too; apparently, my home is there were my bed is.

Then, all of a sudden, we stop. In the third row from the right. In front and behind us a white Toyota pick-up and two yellow Kabul taxis on both sides. We are stuck. Mario stops humming. I look at how deep the cars are to see whether they carry an invisible but heavy load. Car bombs are often made out of old, heavy, undetonated bombs and grenades. One of the taxis is quite deep. It's a saloon, so I can't see what's in the boot.

'Did anyone write down the partials of the suspicious cars?' I ask.

Two silent heads shake no. The right hand side of the road houses on of the rare high-rise buildings in Kabul: a couple of concrete, five-storey-flats that look like they have been

designed by an East-German architect. The garden is empty, the flats are standing between dark, tamped down soil.

‘Mario, try to go to the right,’ I say. ‘If necessary, you can drive through the garden of the flats.’

Mario nods and without saying a word, he starts turning the wheel to the right. Peppe slowly gets his weapon out of his holster and puts it along his right leg, with the barrel aimed downwards and his right index finger stretched along the trigger.

I open the button that keeps my Glock in place and then put my hand on the weapon while it's still in the holster.

It's deathly quiet in the car. We can hear the muffled sounds of the street enter the car. A goat bleats in a shrill voice, after which he sniffs at a butchered carcass that hangs on hook outside the butcher’s. Two laughing boys chase each other.

That’s a good sign, I think. When there’s an attack, the locals are warned in advance and keep their children inside. However, they didn’t do that at the recent market suicide bombing, says another voice in my head. How does the walkie-talkie function? says a third, practical voice. Would Mr Lodger-Lodger know enough English to send help? Shouldn’t you chamber your weapon? says the first voice again. No, that will only lead to unnecessary unrest in the car. I am the highest in rank and need to keep my composure.
My heart doesn’t understand that yet, as it beats at a high pace and the hand on my gun is moist.

Peppe’s hand with his heavy gun in it trembles.

Slowly, the traffic jam starts to move. Mario manoeuvres the car to the right hand lane, right next to the barrows. The deep taxi stays in place, and so do the other cars around us. We crawl along the last five minutes until we reach the roundabout at the beginning of the Green Zone.

I feel tremendous relief when I can see the HQ gates. That was quite an exciting ride, compared to the boring slowness of HQ.

With the adrenaline from the ride still in my body, I deliver the desktop to my roommate at the helpdesk. She is happy it's back.

'Now I have a question for you,' I say. 'How do I find out what the status of an application for a computer is for someone at the airport?'

'The computer department will know,' she says and points them out.

At the computer department I show the major, a man with fierce, gray hair, the email from the check-in counter.

'That is not the right application format, it should be requested by web form,' is his first comment.

Fucking bureaucrat, I think, and take a deep breath in and out. In my least sarcastic tone possible I ask: 'Maybe that was problematic due to lack of a computer?'

He stares at me over the edges of his reading glasses.

'Can you see whether the application has ever been taken up?'

He walks to a computer in the corner of the office. Excruciatingly slow he uses both his index fingers to import some data from the email into the computer.

'I normally never do this. The one who usually does this is on leave. For three weeks, no less.'

I make some empathic sounds.

'Yes, it's been taken up, but rejected,' he says when the computer shows a new screen.

'Why doesn't the customer know that yet?' I ask.

'Customer?'

'Yes, customer. My customer and yours: the airport check-in counter.'

Slowly he takes his reading glasses off and puts one of the arms in his mouth.

‘They probably don’t want to know and pretend we didn’t tell them. That happens more often.’

I look at him with raised eyebrows, but decide not to start the discussion. The adrenaline from the ride doesn’t decrease, instead, the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach only increases, as does my heart rate.

‘Why was it rejected?’ I ask.

‘There is no network connection at the spot where they want the computer, and they also didn’t request one.’

Infallible bureaucratic logic. I can feel my fingernails press in the palms of my hands.

‘What should we do to get that network connection?’

‘We are not allowed to lay on new network connections. Too expensive.’

I sigh. ‘Not even when it’s necessary from a military-operational point of view?'

He sucks on the arm of his reading glasses.

‘Only when the process owner gives permission,’ he slowly says.

‘As Chief Air Transport Planning I'm process owner of the Intra Theatre Airlift System, of which the airport check-in counter is part of,’ I bluff. ‘Just tell me where I need to sign.’

When I leave the computer department’s office half an hour later, the first hesco I see gets a kick and a ‘damn’. Two and a half weeks and multiple forms and telephone calls later, almost four months after the request, the airport check-in counter does however have a computer with a network connection. Patience is a virtue.

Cleaning Fit

With a cleaning cloth in one hand and a bottle of blue disinfectant in the other, I'm cleaning a desk on my first day in Afghanistan.

This was not entirely what I imagined when the Air Force Operations Centre called me six months ago asking me whether I felt like going to Afghanistan as Chief Air and Ground Transport Planning for NATO. I had an image of a flight planning room with large television screens, clocks indicating the time at airports all over the world and red tickertape with the most recent flight data on it. I saw myself wearing a tough desert uniform with a flak jacket over it and a Lara Croft holster on my right leg.

Somehow, cleaning cloths and disinfectant were not part of my fantasy.

My new colleagues look pityingly at me when I try to clean the incredibly dirty desk that is to be mine the coming months. It is one of five desks in a small room where only a large, yellow map of Afghanistan with military bases and airport on it indicates that this is the flight planning room. No tickertape, world clocks and television screens. The once white desk is grey-black and the keyboard, the computer monitor and even the whiteboard have a dark veil over them. Everything I touch makes my hands dirty.

'Why is everything so dirty, greasy black?' I ask.

'Because Kabul has run out of wood,' Peppe says, the dignified Italian lieutenant-colonel who is in charge of ground transport. 'They now burn car tires and manure and since Kabul is in a valley, the smog lingers.'

'Hence everyone's cough,' Aurelio says, 'they say it stops within two weeks after returning home.'

Peppe and Aurelio cough simultaneously.

‘So they say, indeed,’ Dave mumbles. ‘Lariam, the anti-malaria pills they gave us in Cambodia was also told to be safe. It only made you hallucinate a little.’

Dave is the only Brit in the team and takes care of the air transport planning together with Aurelio. Mario, the fourth member of the JTMS desk, Joint Theatre Movement Staff, only looks with a sheepish smile, but doesn’t say anything.

Peppe’s explanation for the filth doesn’t surprise me. When I looked out of the small windows of the armoured vehicle during the three-mile-drive from Kabul International Airport to HQ ISAF, I didn’t see any trees. I did see many mud walls. Kabul came across as a barren, brown city lacking any metropolitan style.

My new team mates keep following my activities with a smirk of recognition. Dave says: ‘It’s no use cleaning, but do as you please, ma’am.’

I’m fighting a losing battle. Nothing gets clean, despite my scrubbing and the bottles of disinfectant that we are supplied with in abundance. If there is something we do not lack apart from bottles of drinking water, it is disinfectant. Our office alone has five: every desk has its own bottle next to the computer. Even the bathrooms are equipped with the blue stuff.

These are not the camp’s only hygiene measure, by the way. When we went out for lunch together this afternoon, the poster at the door of the dining facility said in typical Italian English: *Attention: wash your hands before entry the kitchen.* I had already washed my hands in the bathroom, but that appeared to be neither necessary, nor sufficient. Before you enter the dining facility, there is a washing room: a huge steel sink with automatic soap dispensers above it. That is no luxury, because when, as a good girl, I washed my hands for the second time the foam was dirty again. No wonder the average Afghan only lives to forty-five.

When my desk is still covered with a grey film after half an hour of scrubbing, I decide that Dave’s words were wise, and stop cleaning. He mumbles something about ‘bosses who don’t listen’. I pretend I don’t hear it. At least I tell myself, I have settled down. There’s

nothing like cognitive dissonance. According to Dave, I have made a fool of myself earlier today anyhow, so this can be added to the list. During his explanation of the way he and Aurelio use a spreadsheet to plan the military transport planes, I called a Hercules transporter plane a C-one hundred and thirty. After all, in Dutch it's called a *C-honderddertig*. I hardly know anything about air transport planning, but that I do know. Dave pointed out to me that this military all-rounder when it comes to air transport is called a C-one-thirty in English, to add subtly: 'C-one hundred and thirty sounds like you don't know what you are talking about, ma'am.' At least he found that out quite quickly: it will take a couple of days before I can pretend to be a somewhat convincing Chief Air Transport.

'I think you've done enough here at the office on your first day,' Karel says when I put the disinfectant back on the desk and gratefully rub my hands with the hand cream Aurelio offers me. Karel is my Dutch predecessor whose job as Chief JTMS I will take over starting next week.

'You probably don't have any bed linen in your room. Let's go get some.'

Indeed, this morning after arrival, when I put my luggage in the appointed bedroom, the mattress was only covered by a white duvet. There wasn't even a pillow. My anonymous roommate's bed near the window, however, was made with a green-and-blue duvet cover I recognised from the Dutch army bedrooms.

Karel and I walk outside and for a moment he remains standing on the balcony on top of the stairs. Our office building consists of two rows of corimacs, temporary buildings the size of a sea container that have been piled up two stories high with a hall in between, a white roof on top and a metal staircase on the outside. It looks like a junior architect played with white Lego blocks. The balcony provides a view over a large part of the compound: a collection of white corimacs, brown tents and low, concrete buildings in colours varying from light brown to blue.

‘Now you can’t see it, because of the smog,’ Karel says while he looks around, ‘but as soon as it’s rained, you’ll see white mountaintops everywhere, the foothills of the Himalayas.’

When we decent the stairs, I ask: ‘Why the hand cream? I didn’t expect that in a male environment.’ Aurelio is not the only one with cream on his desk. To my surprise, when I shook hands with the colleagues of the Petrol desk, who, together with us, are part of the Logistics Department, I saw tubes with hand cream everywhere.

‘You’ll see for yourself what the heavily chlorinated water in the showers will do to your skin,’ Karel says, and he chuckles when he continues: ‘Most men also use body lotion, by the way. In large quantities. ’

We walk about two hundred and fifty yards away from the office building and arrive in a no man’s land near the back fence of the compound.

‘Here are all the noise producers,’ Karel says. ‘Diesel generators, back-up power units and the disco tent: that’s where you go when you want to dance. But do realize that you’ll be frowned away as an officer.’

We walk back a hundred yards to a spot I recognize as the dining facility and then walk past a volleyball field and a soccer field.

‘That’s Movement Control, where you can get a car and security for when you want to leave the compound,’ he points out.

‘What’s the team like?’ I ask Karel while we’re walking.

‘The two warrant officers, Dave and Aurelio are great. The two of them do the entire air transport planning. You’ll hardly have to look after that.’ He points to the right. ‘That’s the GP. Useless to go to, as the Italian doctor doesn’t speak any English, as do most of the Italians by the way. If you really have a problem, you’re better off going to Kabul Airport, as it has a Dutch GP. It also has the nearest field hospital. ’

When we walk along the tarmac road, he continues his analysis of the team. ‘Peppe does the ground transport planning on his own. Basically, that’s useless as no NATO country has yet provided ISAF with cars or trucks. He hopes to become a full colonel after this deployment.’

‘And Mario?’ I ask with a slight pant in my voice.

‘Mario.’ Karel hesitates for a moment. ‘You should try to work around him a little. His English is not too good, so you can’t let him do much more than let him fill out the daily and weekly reports. Just be glad that Peppe and Aurelio, the two other Italians, speak excellent English. That’s quite unique at this Italian run HQ.’

By the time we reach a concrete building with matching concrete stairs, my breathing is clearly audible. I look surprised at the road behind us. Does it have a hidden gradient? The road looks perfectly level. I stop to catch my breath.

‘Sorry,’ Karel says when he notices I stopped, ‘that’s quite normal in the beginning, as we are here at almost 6.000 feet. Coming from sea level, it takes some acclimatization.’

He puts his hands behind his back while he waits for me. ‘Don’t be surprised when you get a nosebleed in your first week. That could be due to the height, but also because of the smog, just like the almost obligatory sore throat. And don’t forget: you’re not allowed to do any sports during the first two weeks. ’

‘It shouldn’t be a problem when I take it easy, right? I ask. Two weeks no sports sounds awful.

‘Some time ago an American died quickly after arrival because of lack of acclimatization. So don’t do it.’

‘What else is there to do in the evenings, if you’re not going to the gym?’

Karel points at the concrete stairs. We ascent till we reach a closed, wooden door on the first Floor. ‘Kabul Café only opens at night,’ Karel says with his hand on the door handle.

‘It’s mainly populated by English and Dutch officers and the music is soft enough to have a good chat, unless there’s a karaoke night.’

‘Is this the only entertainment, besides the disco tent?’ I ask.

‘You could also go to one of the national Living Rooms. Most of them have a bar that also welcomes foreigners.’ Karel has a slightly sour look on his face when he says: ‘Obviously, the Dutch Living Room doesn’t because of the zero-can rule, the ban on alcohol. You won’t see any foreign guests there. ’

We walk back to the road.

‘On the left are the women’s sleeping quarters, I presume you’re sleeping there?’

I take a really good look. When I got rid of my stuff in the bedroom, I arrived from the other side. The building is a collection of two rows of white corimacs with a white roof on top, as there are so many on this compound. It takes some time before I’m certain these are ‘my’ sleeping quarters. Meanwhile Karel walks on.

‘To the right, you can hand in your bed linen and dirty laundry on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays before noon and collect them two days later. Let’s go see whether the manager also has some clean linen for you outside of opening hours.’

Ten minutes later we exit with arms filled with nice and clean bed linen, including a brightly blue coloured bedspread and a clean pillow. When we stand in front of my room, while I search my many pockets for keys, Karel glances around surreptitiously.

‘Officially I’m not supposed to be here: men are not allowed to enter a woman’s room.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’ I ask, while I turn to look at him.

He shakes his head. He looks very serious.

‘Then you must be glad you’re not in my room yet!’ I say, while opening the room and making an inviting gesture.

He hesitates for a moment before he enters. I leave the door open, so it's clear that we're not doing anything improper. Together, we make the bed and afterwards Karel shows me the internet connection in the wall. I connect my laptop, but internet doesn't come up.

'No problem,' Karel says. 'Your laptop needs to be adjusted to the local network. The computer shop in the mini bazaar will do it for free, it's in the concrete building below Kabul Café. Why don't you take the laptop with you? We'll finish the rest of the tour there.'

We exit the women's quarters on the other side and Karel points out 'gym tent, entrance, Yellow Building, our mini park: Destille Garden' and before I know it we've circled the entire compound and are back in front of the mini bazaar with Kabul Café.

'This is it?' I ask.

'A thousand people on a stamp. Welcome to your new home,' he says and makes a gesture that spans the entire compound.

'At least everything is in walking distance,' I say.

Apart from some typical bazaar shops, the mini bazaar also has a mini supermarket with luxury goods like body lotion, chocolate and Coke. In the dining facility you can get one can of soda per day and in this supermarket you can buy a supplementary ration.

'Do you carry dollars or Euros?' Karel asks.

'Dollars,' I say, 'I was told that the exchange rate between dollars and Euros is one on one.'

'Correct. When you need to replenish, the Dutch cashier has more dollars or Euros. They'll be automatically deducted from your salary,' Karel says. 'See you later,' he greets and leaves me in the bazaar.

In the busy supermarket, I buy hand cream, a bottle of body lotion and Diet Coke. Then I start exploring the rest of the mini bazaar. The little shops are typically Afghan: a man

sits in front of the entrance on the floor or on a stool and there are hardly any customers. Most of the shops sell local products like cashmere scarves and hand-woven Persian rugs, but there's also a shop with computer supplies. This store is run by a young Afghan with a serious expression on his face who is not sitting in front of his shop, but standing behind a counter.

'Hello, ma'am,' he greets. 'How may I help?'

'I can't get onto the network.'

He looks at the laptop.

'If you leave it here now, it will be ready tomorrow. No charge.'

'Could you do it now, while I wait for it?' I ask. For security reasons, I would prefer to be there when he tinkers with my computer, but he has another idea.

'Yes, tonight,' he says, avoiding a 'no' and he points out two other laptops.

Gee, professional efficiency in Afghanistan, I didn't expect that. It gives me an uncomfortable feeling, however. In a modern war, information is everything. If I were the opponent, I'd give anything to be able to 'borrow' every rival's laptop for just one night. Look for private information, who they are, whether they could be blackmailed. Install some key logger software, so you know exactly what they type….

During mission preparation we're warned not to give our last name to the press and avoid being photographed with a name tag on, since it regularly happens that family back home receives threatening letters and phone calls. That's uncomfortable both for the home front and the deployed soldier. Leaving your laptop is a great way of surrendering more personal information than just your name. I decide to take the laptop back to my room for now.

When at the end of the day I run into Karel in the Dutch Living Room, he assures me that I can leave the laptop without qualms with the Afghan computer guy.

‘He was screened, otherwise he wouldn’t be there. ’

How do you do that, I wonder, screening people in your opponent’s territory where you hardly have an intell network? Do they stop by the Taliban to ask whether the computer guy is one of theirs? And when they say ‘no’, does that mean everything is all right? I still don’t feel very good about it, but I also want to mail home. I decide to put my trust in The System and to hand in my laptop to the computer man tomorrow.

Not long after I’ve installed myself in the Living Room on one of the third hand couches in front of the satellite television, my eyes start closing. I can hardly keep them open long enough to bridge the hundred yards from the Living Room to the women’s quarters. As soon as my head touches the pillow, I fall asleep.

In the middle of the night, despite the exhaustion, I wake up from a warm, moist feeling on my face and the taste of rust in my mouth. When I touch my face, my fingers get wet from a thick liquid. I vaguely know that something’s off. With my other hand I feel around for the button of the reading lamp. When I finally have it on, I can see I’m covered in blood: the nosebleed promised. Welcome to Afghanistan. When I slowly get out of bed, so I don’t wake up the breathing figure who is now in the other bed, to find a towel, a cynical grin appears: nosebleeds also weren’t part of my deployment fantasy. What else will this country have in store for me the coming months?

[...]

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.

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'm 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 phones?’ 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, ma'am? 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 getting acquainted with the colonel, I sleep in as I always do on Friday and Sunday mornings, my only time off. 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 they are always there. 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's Friday morning; the two of us have just been to the bazaar, like everybody else on the compound. It's 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've told you that when things go wrong, I'll take the blame, without any objection. That’s what I'm 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's 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'm 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'll 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 diner. We never talk about the incident again 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 months of this command visiting all the key leaders in Afghanistan. A very commendable initiative, which might result in some logistical challenges, however. 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're 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'm wondering, too. I’m afraid that I’ll have to explain to COMISAF that if he wants ITAS to keep flying, he'll 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's 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'm 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 to commandeer NATO planes? What did you tell the colonel?’

‘That it won’t happen as long as I'm 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.