

# *Our Man in Phuket*



**Alan R. Cooke MBE**

# “Our Man in Phuket”

by

Alan R. Cooke MBE

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## Escape from Kuwait

On 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1990 I was woken as usual by the news coming in on my bedside short wave radio alarm, which was set for six o'clock. Normally I would have laid there while Marie made us both a cup of tea, but not that morning because she had returned to the UK just a few days before. I lay there listening to the BBC news; "Reports are coming in of Iraqi forces crossing the border into Kuwait at 2 AM this morning". Shit, Cooke get your arse out of here. Make a cup of tea, think logically, petrol, money, stuff a grab bag, listen to the 7 AM BBC news. "Iraqi troops are crossing the border in force".

Into the car and round to the ATM where I pulled out five hundred dinars. I stick the card in again and pulled out another five hundred, which was quite a chunk of money. I was aware that there was a queue forming behind me. If I took any more I ran the risk of being lynched. Next, the petrol station and to fill up. Right; I now had a full tank and a full wallet. It was time for me to get my arse out of here.

Back to thinking logically.

The only way out of the country by land was south into Saudi Arabia. If I went straight down the Coast Road I would get to the Saudi border in under an hour, but the chances were that the Iraqis would have helicoptered troops in and closed the border. If they had not then the Kuwaitis would be unlikely to let me out. If the whole border post was abandoned on the Kuwaiti side it seemed unlikely the Saudis would just let me in since I had no exit visa, no entry visa, nothing. Shit. I decided to go back to the apartment and listen to the BBC again to see if anything was changing. I soon learned that it was changing. It was getting worse.

By 1989 I had been a contract-signing, global itinerant for over 30 years. Excluding my time offshore in the oil industry, I had always had a state-of-the-art short-wave radio. By the end of that second day of August, my first floor apartment had become the font of all knowledge for the apartment block I lived in, well, knowledge as reported by the BBC anyway. Normal people, if they had a radio, would have an AM FM set which was not a lot of use once all the local radio stations had closed down. As so often happens in times of emergency, the BBC short wave radio service had become king.

The fact that I had spent three years in the British army, with a bit of active service, meant that I did not find the situation quite as terrifying as the 26 or so families, 60 souls in all, who were living in the apartment block. Not having a wife or children there to worry about also made my situation easier. By the end of the day I was still in the apartment, still unsure what to do for the best.

A message was relayed to me to attend a meeting in another apartment block about a hundred metres away. Why me? Well, I had the radio, but then the Embassy always seemed to know where I was. At that stage we were all moving about quite freely in our own localities. When I got there I realised that I was now part of a group of people who were judged to be notional leaders from other surrounding blocks. As we sat around a table wondering what was going on, and what we should do about it, there was a knock on the door. On the doorstep were three young men, all pale skinned and all around 25 years old. They had smart haircuts and wore the so-called “cargo trousers” that were all the go in Pattaya and Phuket (Thailand) at that time. They had a very casual, confident and relaxed demeanour, but none of them showed any sign of carrying any weapons.

First off I assumed they were from the SAS, but on reflection SAS guys would not have been that smartly turned out. I do not recall any of them sitting down and I remember one of them spouting a few platitudes, it was nothing you could hang your hat on.

Having said what little they had come there to say, they left. This must have been about the third day of occupation and their fleeting visit left two impressions on me. Firstly, it was, I imagine, meant to boost British citizens’ morale and impress them at the speed with which three Brits, whether SAS or similar, were able to get to them. The second, I guess, was the main point, that the Foreign Office officials could now claim they had done something when they reported to their political masters. I was never called to another such meeting but now the Embassy had my phone number. I was surprised the phone was still working and presumed that any calls I received or made were now being listened to.

As I walked back to my apartment I was trying to absorb the “what” and “why” of the meeting I had just attended. Just about every male head of household, plus a few wives, were in my flat waiting for a report on what had transpired. I told them as much

as I could, which in essence was not very much. The appearance of the three squaddies, as they undoubtedly were, provided everyone with some comfort, I suppose. With nothing further to do, they all then dispersed to await events. At a time like that I would normally have plonked myself in an armchair and given myself a stiff whisky, except I didn't have any because this was Kuwait!

The fact that I, a dedicated or at least aspiring alcoholic, was willing to waste a couple of years of my life in a "dry" country like Kuwait, is testament to the fact that times were relatively hard and I was having to accept whatever work I could get. I had basically been told by the company that it was Kuwait, along with a demotion in status (but not a decrease in pay), or the open road. At 53 I was not quite so hot headed as in the past. I now had too much of my life and pension invested in Halcrow to get stropo.

The only other call I got from the Embassy during that time was to tell me the main desert road to Saudi was reported to be open. There were only two main routes out of the country in that direction, the one along the coast, the other across the desert. My only other recollection of dealing with the Embassy was to give them a list of household heads, complete with their nationalities and their family details.

Passing the word that we would leave in an hour at 2 PM, it was a total debacle as we tried to leave as a group convoy. There was such a high level of panic to get out of the car park that we more or less blocked ourselves in. Anyway we did get out, made it as far as the main desert road, but were stopped and told to park up while they wondered what to do with us. Most of those behind did a quick U-turn and headed back home. The Sergeant in charge had all our passports collected in a plastic bag, and a squaddie, as I understood it, was told to take them to a command post in a commandeered pickup parked on one side. This he went to do but was stuck in the sand. One of my idiots started to titter who I promptly told to "shut the fcuk up". My very real concern, as I could see these were front line troops by the casual manner they conducted themselves, was that if we were an embarrassment to them they simply take us behind the nearby sand dune and blow us away. However all was well, the Sergeant got fed up with us then threw the plastic bag our way and told us "yella yella" which I read as get the fcuk out of here. We did.

That evening I called a meeting of all the heads of the families, and asked if anyone would like to take over the position I now found myself in as an “apparent leader”.

There followed what I can only call a “pin drop moment”, a complete silence during which absolutely no one spoke up or stepped forward. So for now I was going to have to continue as their now anointed leader. I immediately started giving out jobs to people, the first being in charge of car parking. I felt it was important, under such stressful circumstances, to get people preoccupied and to give them as many things to do as possible in the hope that it would take their minds off the shit we were all in. Someone was put in charge of money, another was given responsibility for finding food, a third was in charge of internal communications, and so on.

During the following days I was constantly being expected to provide answers to questions I did not know the answer to, and I never wanted to give negative answers or to say “how the fuck would I know”, which is never a helpful response under such circumstances where everyone is desperate for some sort of reassurance. One time I slipped out of my apartment and went up to visit the Jordanian doctor with the English wife from our collection of souls. I knocked and asked if I could come in for a few quiet moments. He was most welcoming and sat me down in a very comfortable armchair. Then he uttered the immortal words “would you like a Scotch?”

“Ah, yes please.”

I sat with him and his English wife in complete tranquillity, sipping whisky, exchanging banal conversation and doing myself a power of good. Being a good doctor I’m sure he spotted my ‘condition’ the moment he opened the door. It can’t have been more than 10 or 15 minutes before there was someone else at the door. The doctor opened it and the visitor immediately spotted me over his shoulder.

“Aaah there you are,” he cried and I was off again, but at least I’d had the few minutes respite I needed in order to “reboot” both my brain and my nervous system.

I concluded that it was pointless to think we were going to get out as a group and discussed possibilities with Reg, one of our group who was reputed to be ex-SAS (he certainly looked like he

might well be). We agreed we would make a very early morning run for it in his Toyota four wheel drive vehicle across the desert. I believed that my responsibility was for myself and myself alone, and I should discount the 'position' I found myself in.

Events were to quickly overtake that decision. I will always look back with regret, and a little shame, on the decision I made to walk out at 10:10 AM that morning. I asked an American prick to tell the group to organise themselves with a new leader, but he didn't. Instead he told everybody that I had put him in charge, or so I heard a few years later, and then he turned out to be the complete prick I had already judged him to be. I have no idea who or what he was, but I had spoken with him enough to make a judgment and knew instinctively he was too self-centred to ever be a leader of others in such circumstances.

It was long time hasher, Johnny Johnson, who putting his head round my apartment door that August morning uttered the immortal words, "I've got a map. We leave in an hour."

Did he fcuk have a map, but we left anyway.

We left to link up with others at a nearby address in order to travel as a group. The address belonged to a family who were reputedly more knowledgeable in the ways of the desert than we were. As it turned out their experience was mainly based around going on family picnics. Reg Savage and I had agreed to travel together. He had been working in Kuwait as a mechanic but his thinking was to prove to be very much SAS.

We duly reported to the assembly point. We all parked outside while the family sorted out their shite and squeezed as much into their four-wheel drive vehicle as possible. We must have sat there for nearly two hours, finally getting on our way at noon, with the sun scorching down from directly overhead.

In fact this was a perfect time to be crossing open desert, because if there were any Iraqi soldiers in the area they would certainly not be stupid enough to be out on patrol in the heat of the midday sun in August. They were more likely to be bivouacked up and having an afternoon kip. None of them would want to be doing anything as energetic as leaping about after a few bloody foreigners. Until Johnny had poked his head round the door Reg and I had been thinking about leaving before first light the following morning, which was not good thinking for two guys

with a bit of military experience. First light is when troops are fully alert, “standing to” and awaiting a possible attack. This, it turned out, was better.

We were advised to head north towards the Iraqi main highway, later becoming known as the “road of death”, when the Americans decided to use scatter bombs in order to obliterate the jam-packed Iraqi traffic. We travelled along this road for a short distance before turning left and heading south into a huge used car dump. Thousands upon thousands of vehicles had been simply abandoned in the desert in an orderly fashion. After a mile or so we emerged from this vehicle graveyard into the open desert.

Outside temperatures were by this time more than 50 degrees centigrade. Our small group had gathered others and we were now a small convoy of four or five four-wheel-drive vehicles. By that stage we had no idea what we were doing or where we were going, but we did realise that we needed help. We parked up on some hard sand. Below and to our right was a typical, picture book perfect desert Bedouin tent with a few desultory camels wandering about outside. Maybe we should go and ask the way. Nobody else seemed to want to be the one to make the approach, so I stepped out into the searing heat and walked the 150 or so metres to the tent. As I approached, I could see the whole family were seated around having their lunch in the low tent, with baskets of dried dates, fish and rice laid out in front of them. Shit, I thought, I’m going to have to sit down and join them, and experience the true desert hospitality. It would be considered insulting to refuse if they offered hospitality but I really didn’t have time to stop for a MacDonald.

As I got closer I saw the dark angry look on the father’s face. I was clearly not welcome, which was a relief. As he looked up at me from a few yards away, he implied by the unasked question “what the fcuk do you want, and where do you think you’re going?”

I did all the respectful “Salam Ali Cum” bit and then asked, in my very best (crap), Arabic; “which way to Saudi?”

He waved a piece of fish in such a way that it indicated nothing. Clearly he had no interest in being helpful and simply wanted me to disappear. I tried again. “Is this the way to Saudi?”

He probably thought it was too bloody stupid a question. Anywhere in a 60 degree arc south would have led to Saudi

eventually, and at this point one of his many children, a young lad of no more than nine or ten, jumped up. "Follow me" he announced and set off walking back towards our small group of waiting cars.

Jumping up onto the running board, he pointed in the direction we needed to travel and we were off. We probably drove for about three miles, far enough for me to begin to worry as to how the boy would be getting back to his family. Each time I tried to inquire he would merely reply "marlish", which pretty much meant "never mind". Finally I decided that his walk back was far enough and made him get off. After profuse and profound "Shukhrans", he was off and striding back to his interrupted lunch in the 50 plus degree heat.

Convoys do not work well on soft sand if they drive in line astern. The following vehicles progressively loosen up the sand so we had, in my opinion, naturally formed a line abreast, or could it be that nobody wanted to be last! Reg who was more up-to-date than I, said "it's like the Wicky Wacky Races". Our number had now increased to about 30 mixed vehicles, including a big long bright red, two-wheel drive American open top tourer. American cars can in fact handle the desert with their over powerful engines, but must be driven vigorously. It was soon apparent that this car, which had only the driver on board, was our point man, leading the way. Reg and I discussed this and decided he must either be a very experienced desert driver, or he was a Kuwaiti having a very enjoyable time leading us to safety.

He continued to lead the group from one hard standing to the next, be it compacted sand or sand that had become cemented. As soon as we were all gathered on the standing, he would be off again, leading the pack to the next stand, and so we progressed to the border in a series of hops. I could imagine he saw himself as a romantic figure. I'd like to say that his long hair and bandanna were flying in the wind as he sped off each time, but that would be a bit too much. I suspect that was the mental picture he had of himself. More than likely he was just somebody's driver.

At one stage we spotted Iraqi soldiers on the western horizon, sitting out the heat of the mid-day sun. None of them moved to intercept us – I guess they had lost interest in soldiering until later in the day.

As we drew closer to the border we could make out through the haze a black line stretching across the horizon. Gradually, as it came into focus, we could see that it was a huge sand bund, maybe as much as 10 metres high, that had been pushed up over a great many years to define the Kuwaiti-Saudi border. A few days later we learnt that a Range Rover with four occupants had tried to drive over it and got stuck. All four people had died.

As we approached the border we found we were not alone in our attempt to get out and joined the back of the queue. I suggested to Reg that he should keep a few yards back, as we did not yet know what we might be queuing for. I got out and casually wandered up to the barrier in order to check that it actually was the Saudi border. I was able to report back that all was well.

The Saudi Border Police Station was like something out of a Beau Geste movie. In my memory it was a two-storey building and looked like it was made of mud and wattle. When we finally reached the front of the queue an official took our passports to check, but didn't return them.

"Aliens over there," he indicated where we should wait. "Park there."

By now it was late afternoon and I was growing hungry. All I had was a tin of sardines which, as always, tasted delicious. They left us to stew until dusk had fallen and then organised us all into a convoy. We had no choice but to follow the men with our passports.

The small convoy was lead south on a compacted sand track until we reached a main road. We then turned more or less north westerly. Our original group of four or five still together, after a bit we turned off in a north easterly direction which seemed to be leading us back towards Kuwait. We really had no idea where we were being taken in the featureless desert, now that the light had gone.

The convoy eventually arrived at the Saudi side of the desert highway to Kuwait City. We parked up where we given access to a refrigerated container truck which stood with both doors open, and in the best Muslim tradition of providing food for travellers we were given individually polythene wrapped buttered rolls, and bottled water. With those bread rolls and bottles of water the Saudis had fulfilled their traditional obligations to us. I believe



that they despised all foreigners. In my experience Saudis, and to a lesser extent the Kuwaitis, consider themselves to be God's chosen people. I always thought that was the English – well, never mind.

The Saudi customs officer proceeded to give Reg and I a hard time, questioning us as if Kuwait had never been invaded. They made it clear that they intended to keep us in the cells overnight while they scratched their arses and left us for the next shift to sort out. It was at this point that Reg came into his own, thinking as I imagine SAS troopers think. He informed the Captain that we had valuable information that needed to be imparted to the British Government as quickly as possible. After repeating this assertion many times he finally wore down the official's resistance and they stamped our passports, officially signing us into Saudi Arabia.

The family we had set out with headed north to the UK, all others presumably Kuwaiti, Saudi or Arab nationals dispersed, while our bachelor group of six turned south. Reg and I were bound for Dubai. Johnny Johnson, my fellow hasher, was heading ultimately for Lao where he had a wife and family.



*Left to right: Ian W, David L, Reg, Johnny J, Alan R Cooke, Kelvin D, on the road south, outside of Jubail towards Dammam, Saudi Arabia. 11 August 1990.*

On route to Dubai, we were of course anxious to phone home in order to let our families know that we were safely out of Kuwait. The next day we spotted a Holiday Inn sign just outside Jubail, we turned off and parked up. As we checked in at reception the staff were not helpful. It seemed the Muslim tradition of showing hospitality to strangers stopped at the border. They would not accept our Kuwaiti Dinars and our regular credit cards had all been blocked. I, as has so frequently been the case throughout my life, appeared to be the only one able to pay. No drama there, I whipped out my American Express Gold card and we are in business. I booked and paid for one room, we all showered and changed our clothes. Most importantly I allowed each person to make one call home at international hotel rates. We then continued on our way south.

Our next stop was at the British Trade Office in Dhahran, for hospitality courtesy of Her Majesty's Government (HMG), where we were well fed and watered. We were quizzed about Kuwait and we told them all that we could, which was not a lot really. Reg imparted his non-existent valuable information. After a fine HMG breakfast we continued south to the Qatar border post where we checked in. Further down the featureless desert road we checked out of Qatar and into the UAE, bypassing Abu Dhabi and on into Dubai where Reg dropped me off at our company's Regional Head Office.

*To be continued...*

## A Brief Epilogue

Now as I come to the end of my narrative, did I make the right decision to retire to Phuket? Yes of course, it was and remains a good decision. Would I make the same decision again? Yes absolutely. Not a shadow of doubt.

With the help of today's technology courtesy of Google Earth it is possible to revisit, not just some but all of the projects I have worked on wherever in the world. Most if not all of my best, and most memorable work, is down there out of sight underwater, so much for being able to look down from outer space.

Darjeeling Cricket Club into which I put so much personal effort in 1975 – 1977 is no more, reportedly obliterated for the Arabian sport of camel racing, and now a club with no home ground. Much as the cricket ground in Accra, Ghana, which was tarmacked over for political rallies shortly after independence in 1957, making a deliberate political point maybe?

I do, however, have my little patch of green on this increasingly busy and built over delightful island of Phuket, which is only briefly underwater after torrential rain once or twice a year!