

“Sell-Out”.

Chapter Two - The SAS.

My first selling appointment is with Sultan Jefri al Bokhran and a Colonel Will “Will-do” Fairweather of the SAS, still Britain’s No.1 crack, front-line military unit; and even more important now the Royal Navy has been downsized to the Royal Submarines.

Sultan Jefri is so well known that a Net Worth Analysis is just not worth pressing the button for. Ruler of Kef Ismel, an island off Malaysia - a pimple on a huge oil-field - and overwhelmingly wealthy, the Sultan is a flamboyant character, always in the media: driving the No.1 car in his own Grand prix team; producing and directing movies that were firmly set in the 19th. century, “because that is when men were men and women were women and the desert was unconquerable”; piloting a satellite; giving money to whatever good cause takes his fancy, and generally having a whale of a time. People have a sort of affection for him, not just because he is short, dapper and always smiling and ready to talk to the cameras about his latest project, but because he uses his huge income to indulge his interests, unashamedly, and people say “Now that’s what I’d do if I had that kind of money”.

I knew nothing about Colonel Will Fairweather so I keyed in for a biography. And he turns out to be just the kind of person that makes the rest of us feel totally inadequate in dealing with Life. Most of us can fend off the office bore given time, avoid a scene with a beggar on public transport by making a large detour, and think up a witty riposte half an hour after somebody has made us look stupid - too late maybe, but something to put away against another bad day - but most of us are unable to say, categorically and certainly in this day and age, that we never get scared. Colonel “Will-do” Fairweather, of the SAS, cannot possibly know the meaning of, or even how to spell the word ‘fear’. Innumerable decorations; DSO and Bar, OBE, DFC and Bar, AFC, Knight of the Order of Dannebrog, U.S. Air Medal, Trucial States Most High Commendation, even the Uzbekistan Order of Nevski. An astonishing

harvest in peacetime, especially for a flier. No doubt due, in part, to his ability to survive being shot down in the Steppes, bailing out over the Empty Quarter, or ditching in the Java Sea due to engine failure. But largely due to an unbelievable number of sorties as a fighter/bomber pilot, in at least twenty engagements where British interests or those of UNEAT (U.N. Enforcement Against Terrorism), required some professional and fearless input against well-armed and very nasty baddies - chip runners, arms dealers, rampant fundamentalists or just plain old-fashioned "freedom fighters" for the drug trade.

"Will-do" is carrying a Portascreen so I presume we are going to see some videos of derring-do, hopefully relevant to a purchase on his and the Sultan's part. The Sultan offers me a Montecristo Thin and lights it for me with his titanium Lauren.

"Dr. Briggs," he says, "Colonel Fairweather would like to show you a short film.

"With pleasure," I say and the Colonel sets up his screen on the conference table and starts it running.

"This is a 2 billion euro Stealth aircraft. The prime weapon of the SAS," he says. The video shows one of these amazing planes cruising along at no doubt some phenomenal speed at night. It is flying at very low altitude, which I assume is to avoid the enemy radar. It appears to be following the contours of a desert landscape. Its black colour and its shape, so like a huge bird of prey, give the impression of unassailable menace, quite in keeping with its reputation as a formidable piece of military equipment. Suddenly it explodes in a huge flash of fire and the camera follows the debris as it falls to earth.

"That is not, of course, supposed to happen," says Colonel Fairweather grimly, as he switches off the screen. "And that is why we are here." The Sultan puffs at his cigar, and nods his head. I puff at mine and wonder where this is leading.

Colonel "Will-do" continues to talk, "You know that the face of modern warfare has changed considerably. That we now have a formidable array of high-tech weaponry - electronics to short-out the enemy's power supply at his base, microbes to break down his fuel, low frequency infrasound to disorient his personnel, corrosive materials to melt his weaponry, and microrobots to attack his troops, to name but a few. Each of these needs an assured method of delivery. The Stealth is the best means of doing this that has yet been invented. It takes this materiel to the point of maximum impact and delivers. The Stealth is the most feared of all MSRs." He pauses, looks at me carefully and says, "Maximal Suppression Resource."

"Ah," I say. The Sultan smiles encouragingly and "Will-do" continues.

"It is almost invisible to enemy radar. It is constructed from non-metallic composites, which absorb rather than reflect radar beams. Its unique shape and its electronic attenuation system reduce, almost to zero, the penetration of enemy electromagnetic energy, which would allow enemy radar to lock on. Furthermore, it is equipped with missiles which when fired assume the radar profile of the Stealth and divert enemy fire, if by luck they have assumed, and I emphasise assumed, that a Stealth is in their space. As for the rest of its accoutrements, they are classified, so I will stop there".

"Now, Dr. Briggs," says the Sultan, "you are wondering how it is possible for one of these remarkable aircraft to be destroyed in battle".

“You are right”, I say.

“Colonel Fairweather will tell you”, says he, “and please remember that each Stealth costs 2 billion euros”.

“The problem,” says the Colonel, “and I expect you will find it hard to believe, is maintenance. The Stealth has to be in zero-defect condition to evade enemy attention. Even so much as a worn rivet can make it susceptible to enemy radar lock-on. As you saw on the screen. What the SAS doesn’t get from our masters is adequate resources to maintain the Stealth”.

“Government cuts,” I say.

“Precisely”, say the Sultan.

“Cost-cutting,” says the Colonel, “manpower shortages, inadequate training, fewer technicians, shortage of parts, less funding for refurbishment; you name it”.

“We should add,” interjects the Sultan, “that this does not just affect the battle-worthiness of the Stealth, but of the whole of the SAS. A regiment whose reputation is second to none”.

“For the moment,” adds the Colonel bitterly, “In a recent opinion poll asking the public about their confidence in various of our institutions, confidence in Parliament was 9%, in our legal system 13%, in the Church 10%. Even confidence in our police was at an all time low of 22%. But, confidence in the military was over 50% and in the SAS at 69%. How long that will continue is open to debate, if the Government maintains its present level of funding.”

I already know this, of course. Citizens’ Opinion Polls have long been the favourite way in which the media, who commission most of them, draws the attention of the public to the “State of Battered Britain”. The results are published every week and on “This Day”, wacky university professors give us their analysis of where it’s all leading. These pundits are frequently criticised in the intellectual magazines, and especially in “New Encounter” - a magazine said to be supported by Brussels - for creating what they call “a climate of negativism”. The P.M. hates the opinion polls and would dearly love to ban them. But he can’t, of course. Well, to date, he hasn’t figured out how to sell the idea to those of the voters who are not his own supporters.

“Will-do” appears to be waiting for me to say something so I follow a hunch and say to the Sultan, “Would I be right in thinking that you wish to assume some of the funding responsibilities of the Government? Particularly where the SAS is concerned?”

“Almost, but not quite, Dr. Briggs. I wish to buy the SAS. For whatever price is needed.”

To cover my amazement, I take a pull at the cigar and look wise. Nobody says anything for a while. I am thinking that such a purchase could seriously impact my bonus in a seriously positive way. But, and it’s as big a “but” as you could wish for; how will the P.M. react to the idea of selling the Nation’s favourite institution? Or, to put it from his point of view, what would the Nation think? The Sultan breaks the silence.

“I can see that you have doubts about your Prime Minister’s reaction.”

“I do,” I say. “But there is a way round it. Frankly, the trick is for the SAS to appear to be still British, even though it’s yours. The P.M. would like that. Would you be prepared to lease it back on those occasions when the government might need it?”

“That might not always be convenient, Dr. Briggs.”

“Yes. I can see that. Perhaps you might consider expanding the regiment into a battalion. In which case, a lease-back of part of it would not be so difficult.”

“That might be a logical answer to the problem. I am prepared to pay whatever is necessary to maintain it in permanent A 1 battle-worthy condition.”

“Where would the regiment be located?” I ask.

“We would continue to use the bases in the U.K. and there would be a satellite base in my country which would be used for special training needs.”

I am beginning to get the picture. Although the Sheikh is very popular over here, in his own country there have recently been a few minor demonstrations against his benign but autocratic regime. When that starts it usually escalates into full demands for democratic process and the U.N. and others find it difficult to respond. To save them the embarrassment, the Sheikh no doubt reckons that his best policy is to hold down the lid - and what better way to do it than with a crack military force operating “in the interests of political and economic stability“. Colonel Fairweather is speaking:

“Obviously the terrain is good for training in desert warfare, but the Sultan will also create for the regiment a number of simulated terrains - arctic, jungle, urban, etc. Such training environments will ensure that we are the best. Which will never be the case in the present circumstances.” I recall a recent news item which reported on the Sultan’s latest activity, building a 150 hectare frozen home for his collection of rare arctic plants. Creating simulated terrains would not seem to be a problem.

“So,” says the Sultan, “Will you please discuss this with your superiors and advise me of their views. Here is my card.”

“I most certainly will, Sultan Jefri,” I say, “and thank you for coming to see me.”

“Not at all,” he says. And they leave.