Alan Pollard

Interviewed by

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It's the 21ˢᵗ of November 2017, and we're in London at the BCS offices, nestled between Covent Garden and the Strand. I'm Jonathan Sinfield, an IT professional and interviewer with Archives of IT. Today I'll be talking to Alan Pollard.

After training as a teacher, Alan joined the Army, and in a career spanning 32 years rose to the rank of Brigadier. He was initially recruited into the Royal Army Educational Corps, and after three years transferred to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps where he remained until his retirement from the Army in 1998. Today that corps comes under the umbrella of the Royal Logistic Corps. After the Army Alan spent the next ten years as an IT consultant, working with a number of multinational blue chip companies, such as EDS, Boots, British American Tobacco, H&W shipyards, BAE systems, and Walker Foods. In 2008 Alan was elected President of the BCS. Since 2010 Alan has undertaken a number of voluntary assignments, and is a personal IT tutor. In 2016 Alan helped set up the Wiltshire Police online safety team. Welcome Alan.

Thank you.

[01:31]
Alan, so I'm going to take you back to the beginning. Where and where were you… Sorry. Where and when were you born?

I was born in Hastings in Sussex in 1944, and, strange though it may seem, and if you look at the dates, it's interesting to work out, my earliest memory was actually hearing the doodlebug.

My goodness.

So, so that must have been, you know, they, they landed on Hastings right up till 1945, so I must have been in my first year. So, weird, or what.

Mm, yes. Yes. [laughs] No, certainly not a pleasant memory. Something of repercussions thereafter. Anyway. And, perhaps you can tell me a little bit about your parents.

Yes. My father was, he, he went to Hastings Grammar School, as I did later, and became a, a clerk to a timber merchant, and then, was called up during the war, spent his time in the Royal Engineers. He took part in a number of engagements in France. He was lucky enough to be one of the last people when they, when the big evacuation at Dunkirk occurred. He was in charge of a, a convoy of lorries, and, he was, he was, by then he was a Sergeant Major, and, there as a problem with, the convoy had been held up, so he ran forward to see what the problem was, to find that every one of the lorries behind him had suddenly surrounded by Germans, and he just managed to leap on the lorry at the front and it shot off.

Wow.

So, I might not be here today if, if he hadn't been a good jumper. [laughs]

Wow. [laughs]

He left then, and worked for the rest of his life, and became eventually managing director in a big timber importers in Hastings. And I worked there during my, during my summer holidays every year. So I, I learnt a hell of a lot about working with, you know, working people, and, even though I was the boss's son, they treated me well. So…

[03:48]
That's good. And, his parents, were they in the timber trade, or…?

No no. His, his father was a printer, and they lived in Hastings. They're an old Hastings fishing family. And, he went off and, and fought in the First World War. My mother's parents were, interestingly enough, were stage folk. They were actors. And they, they, together, grandmother and grandfather, formed a comedy duo, acting

up and down the country in all sorts of theatres. So, maybe some of my, my love of comedy these days stems from that.

Yes. No, I'm just thinking about your, your father's time in the Army, career in the Army. Perhaps that may have influenced you as well...

Yes, probably did.

...in later life.

Yes, well I was at, when I was at the grammar school, I went to Hastings Grammar School, I was actually in the CCF, Combined Cadet Force, and I rose up to the sort of, Senior Under Officer rank in that. And enjoyed that so much. My brother, sadly, you know, passed away now, but my brother preceded me, and decided he was going to be a teacher, and, I didn't know whether I wanted to join the Army or be a teacher, so I opted for the soft option and, and became, went to training college, teacher training college, and while I was there, I was actually recruited into the Army. So I got the best of both worlds.

Yes.

One interesting point, which I, I should mention, is that, I think, some of my early love of, of mathematics and, and calculation, stem from my maths teacher, who was also my housemaster at the grammar school, who was actually Tom Cookson, who was Catherine Cookson, the authoress's husband.

Oh right

And, they were an absolutely lovely couple. And, we knew them quite well. And… But he was, he was a wonderful maths teacher. And, and I think it's just… He… He proved to me that I could pass, pass maths at O Level, which I did, quite easily, and he was just showing me the simplicity of maths. It was lovely.

So you were mixing with celebrities from an early day by the sound of it.

Yes, absolutely. Yes.

[06:19]
And let's take you back to those school days. As you say, you were at Hastings
Grammar School I think from 1955 to, through to '63.

Yes.

You've already mentioned maths, and the influence of Tom Cookson.

Yes.

What other subjects did you enjoy at that juncture in time?

I, I liked languages, I did French, I did Latin, and geography. Enjoyed those. I was
very… Very interesting. At that stage, there was a great push for boys from the
grammar school to go to university, and, maybe sort of, very early on, and it's
mirrored nowadays by some people's thinking, I thought, well OK, fine, but then,
what after that?

Yes

What am I going to do with it? You know, how am I going to sort of earn my living?
I went for, I remember going for a career interview, and I shall remember it to this
day, because it was pretty fatuous. The chap looked at the thing, he said, 'Oh you're
doing geography. Yes, I think we'll put you down as a quantity surveyor.' That was
it. It lasted about five minutes. [laughs]

That was your careers advice, was it?

Yes. And I, and I decided that's the last thing I would ever do. [laughs]

Right. Mhm. So at A Levels at Hastings.

Yes.

What did you study at…?

I did, French and geography.

Right, French and geography.

Yes.

[07:49]
And you've already mentioned, from there you went to St Paul's College?

Yes, St Paul's College, teacher training college, St Paul's College in Cheltenham. Did a three-year course, which these days would have given you a BEd. But they didn't give a degree then. But during the last year I was, saw an advert for the Royal Army Educational Corps, and applied, and got in. So I left college and, and never actually taught in a school.

Right.

But I did have a teaching certificate.

[08:23]
Right OK. So, what was the, for you, moving from Hastings to St Paul's College, what was the, any differences would you say, or changes, influences?

Yes. The abiding impression was, it was the first time I had actually left Hastings.

Right.

And to me, you know, people all looked like people in Hastings, and spoke like people in Hastings.

Right.

And I, and I got to college to find a completely diverse range of, range of people. Quite a number of people from, from oop north.

Yes.

And Cornwall. And all, all over the country. And I, and I just had to learn to mix with everybody and anybody.

Right.

So I don't think I was, certainly wasn't the posh grammar school boy.

Mhm.

But, I was certainly, a bloke down south, and they probably thought, a strange, looked at me as strangely as I looked at them sometimes. But lots of them now are sort of, lifetime friends.

[09:28]
Great. OK. So, through your time to college, if we look at important influences for you during that time. You've mentioned Tom Cookson as your maths teacher at school.

Yes.

Anyone else that, or any, either incidents or individuals that you could say…?

Not really. I trained, strangely enough I trained as a primary school teacher. And, I did, I specialised in art and design.

Right, OK.

And I did a lot of pottery, and I became the head of something called the Tarsus Press. So, St Paul of Tarsus. And Tarsus Press was actually a, a typesetting and printing club.

Oh right.

And we used to print lots of very very smart, smart pamphlets and brochures and so on. And, so I, I learnt at a very early day all about typesetting and fonts and lettering and so on. So, you can see a thread going through into computing.

Yes, I… Yes, as you say, it's…

I did bookbinding as well.

Right, OK.

And… So quite a number of early things were actually then bound, into bound copies.

Mhm.

Couldn't touch it today, but, you know, I've still got at home some lovely bound books that made with marble covers and…

[11:04]
Excellent, excellent. What appealed to you… You said from teacher training college you joined the Royal Army Educational Corps.

Yes.

What appealed to you about that corps at that juncture in time?

Quite simply, I think as I alluded to earlier on, it was the ideal combination of the two things that I thought I wanted to do with my life, which, teach and be in the Army.

And, I went along first of all for an interview, and then I had to attend the Regular Commissions Board, in Wiltshire, and then got offered a short service commission, which in those days was three years extendable by one year up to eight.

[11:50]
Mhm. Just thinking back to your period in education. What key lessons did you learn from education that you would attribute to your later-day success would you say?

That's a good question. I taught, the period that I taught there was spent at the Junior Leaders Regiment at Bovington in Dorset, which was the Royal Armoured Corps. And I was teaching junior soldiers. And they were, not all of them but a large number of them were, were drop-outs from school, who thought they'd go in the Army. Not a lot of education. And, immediately there was a, there was a transformation from them, suddenly realising that if they wanted to get on in the Army and succeed, education was the answer.

Yes.

And, it was interesting seeing that that change from, where they obviously couldn't have given twopence about school lessons, to suddenly being quite attentive. And actually discipline wasn't a problem.

Right OK. So from an early age you were encouraging individuals…

Yes. Yes, from an early age. And, and it's probably heresy but if I had my way today, I'd bring back National Service tomorrow.

Right. [both laugh] I'll, I'll be on guard for that.

Yes. [laughs]

[13:16]
OK. So you spent, what, three years there, in the Royal Armoured Corps.

Three years there. And then… Yes, it's a little bit involved, but… Another lesson on, on managerial decisiveness. I wanted, I wanted to convert to a sixteen-year commission, which was then, it was called a limited service regular commission, but they wouldn't let me do that, because, I hadn't got a degree. And so that, that stuck in the craw a little bit, since people were, as I say, nowadays they were getting a BEd coming out of, of college.

Yes.

And, so I applied to join the Ordnance Corps, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, their supply and distribution logistics. And, at that time the regulations said that you couldn't transfer to another corps from a short service commission to a full regular commission, that's life, and, that, that would have been ideal. And I remember then going to a Cavalryman, who was the commander of Bovington base, for an interview, and I can remember him saying, [with accent] 'Well, Pollard. You've got down here, you don't want to be a regular. Why don't you want regular commission?' And I said, 'Well sir,' I said, 'you know, the regulations don't allow it.' 'Well do you want one?' I said, 'Yes, I would love to.' 'Well bugger the regulations.' Crossed it right through the thing and put 'regular commission'. [laughs]

Excellent.

And, so, that was the start. So I mean, that was, that was, you know, a good indication of, make a decision. [laughs]

Excellent. Excellent. And your ability to influence perhaps.

Maybe. Maybe.

[14:58]
Yes, good. And, what appealed to you about the Ordnance Corps as it were?

[pause] I think… I'd got all the brochures and went through all of the different things that might attract me. I wanted to be part of the support arms, as opposed to the teeth

arms. So I didn't want to transfer into the infantry or the artillery or anything else.
And, it just looked fascinating, the range of things that could be done in the corps, and
we were, you know, storing everything from, gun barrels to pin needles, you know,
so…

*Yes. Actually it might be useful for our listeners perhaps to explain exactly what the
Ordnance Corps was doing at that particular juncture in time in…*

Yes. Well the Ordnance Corps has been, I mean it's, it's a very very old corps, was
originally the Army Ordinance Corps, and then got its royal warrant, I think after the
First World War. And it's always been the, the corps that's been the supplier to the
Army. And, being the supplier to the Army, means that it's actually got to have the
right level of stocks, not only in peacetime locations, but in wartime. And, they were
experts in translating peacetime needs to wartime needs, for mobile supplies.

Right.

And, my first unit was actually on a mobile stores unit in Germany, it was called the
11th Ordnance Field Park, and that was, that was a whole load, 100-plus lorries stuffed
to the gunnels with, with spare parts. And, whenever there was an exercise, you
know, we went out on exercise, and we issued our stock from there.

Right.

So, what you needed for wartime was very very different to what you needed in
peacetime.

Mhm.

And one of the difficulties, and something which taught me a lot about, that's had
echoes with computers since, I'll give you an example. That, you think that you will
have a part for a Land Rover. Well when we first went into Afghanistan, quite a few
years ago, there were anything up to about 90 different marques of Land Rover in

service. Well how do you stock for that, you know, when they're all, when they're all totally different?

Yes.

So you have to have quite a clever algorithm on, on coverage of marque, the stock that they hold, commonality of items. So put some items into commonality storage and so on. And that sort of thing. And it's, it's fascinating really. And, you know, it got me going on, on computers and, and how you can use computers. Because we were early stage then. Although we were manual accounting, we actually were fairly well in advance of, of what a lot of people do today. For example, we used to, if somebody made a demand for an item, and we hadn't got it, we would shadow account it, which means that we would actually make a record of that, and as soon as so many people, let's say six people, whatever, asked for that item, we would in-stock it. Which was, which was totally different to these days. I mean you, these days you go into a supermarket, and you say, 'Have you got any so and so?' And they say, 'No. People don't ask for it.' Well I've just asked for it.

Yes.

You know. And, if only they would capture the requests as opposed to the sale, I think you'd have a total, totally different shopfront, quite honestly.

[18:57]
Mhm.   Yes, OK. So… And was that data held on what we, held manually, or on computer servers?

Kalamazoo binders.

Kalamazoo. Right, OK.

And that goes back.

Indeed, yes.

And it wasn't, it wasn't held, it wasn't held by, by computer, in the field.

No.

We did at that stage have quite large mainframes, back in the main depot in Bicester, in Oxfordshire. And that was a, that was a couple of football fields of ICL 1900 equipment. And, interestingly, the Ordnance Corps always had ICL, and the Pay Corps, who were the other compatriots in computing in those early days and did pay, were always IBM.

Right.

So there was, so there was quite a rivalry, not, not only between the cap badges, but between the manufacturers.

[19:57]
Mhm. And your first involvement with what today we call information technology, when in your career in the Army would you say that came, in terms of year and what role were you…?

Most, most definitely, in the early, early Sixties.

Right. OK.

I was, I was second in command of the Ordnance Field Park, and as I explained, we had accounting systems that fed back to the main computer. We knew that something happened to the paper vouchers that we sent off, and they got coded, and so on. And, we became one of the first units to trial a new field system, and I, somebody came out to, the senior officer came out to visit us, and I was asked to spend, you know, an hour with them. And in the end, I spent about a whole day with them, and they said, 'You've thought about this quite a lot haven't you? We'll let you come and help us do it.' And, then I went on a, on a course about ADP, as it was then called. And, passed that course. And, though I didn't go straight on to a computing job then, I

clearly passed the aptitude test, and it was a tick in the box. So I knew at some stage I would be going back to that. From there, in 1973, I was in, that was in Celle, in Germany, up near the, the then border. I went to Dortmund and served with the Royal Artillery. And I was what they called a Brigade Ordnance Officer. And, I was always a, not a figure of fun, but it was, people used to say, that was the time when, when there was a pop song called *You and Me and a Dog Named Boo*.

Mhm.

So I was, I was Boo. Brigade Ordinance Officer for 7th Artillery Brigade. And that was actually providing spares for air defence systems.

Right, OK.

And, that again was a sort of, was a stock control issue. And, very interesting, the, the thread runs through.

[22:12]
And at that stage did you have people working for you, we classify today as IT technicians, or…?

No. The point about being… Although I had people working for me in the, in the Ordnance Field Park, the Army has a number of people who serve in the teeth arms and the support arms, actually commanding troops, but they have a large number of staff officers. So, so fighting a desk rather than fighting an enemy.

Mhm.

And a staff officer becomes part of the staff of the, of the headquarters. So I was the, the brigade, 7th Artillery Brigade commander, right-hand man, on supply. So if he wanted anything for his brigade, then it was my head that he hit round the head with a ruler, to see why, why I could get… And my job was, then was liaising with the suppliers. So I didn't command the suppliers, but I was the sort of, interface.

Right. So was it that prompted your subsequent interest in outsourcing et cetera, or…?

Could, could be. Yes. I hadn't thought of it like that, but, maybe. Maybe so.

[23:28]
Right. You were in direct contact with those suppliers, or…?

Oh Yes.

Procuring…

No, not, not with the suppliers. I didn't procure at that stage. The suppliers were actually other stores units, like the one that I had just left, the Ordnance Field Park, that held the stocks for the Artillery Brigade.

Right.

And they, they held the stocks, in those terms… Artillery, every one of the regiment had a Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers section, squadron, or whatever. They had their own stores unit. And it was the interface between me and the people who ran those stores units who supplied the parts to the workshop to mend the guns and so on.

Right. OK.

That's how it worked. So I didn't have a, I didn't have a responsibility for procurement, or for re-supply; that was the job of the workshop store section.

Right. OK.

But, if there was a particular problem with an artillery that was holding up an exercise, then, it was my head on the block if it, if it wasn't solved.

[24:40]

Yes, yes, OK. Thank you. And, how did your career develop from, from there, within the Army?

I went, after, after that period, I then went into the computer world, and I went into what was then called, I think it was CSDW, the Computer Systems Development Wing.

Right.

Back at Bicester. And I spent, three years there, learning all about programming. I became an expert on PLAN programming, and did a systems analysis course, trained as a systems analyst. And then became a live programmer on the mainframe, the one that was supporting units in the field that I had been on the other end of.

Right.

OK? And that was interesting in that, one of the first, one of the first systems that I got involved with was a, an ammunition control system for stocking ammunition. And the point about ammunition is that, you have to issue ammunition that's got a contiguous batch number. It's a bit like shelf life date if you like.

Yes.

And you actually had to make sure that you'd got sufficient, sufficient rounds in one particular batch to meet demand. If you didn't, then you couldn't issue that, you had to start on another batch.

Right.

Right? And, even in those early days, we hadn't, we were flush with ammunition, and spares, you know, austerity started, you know, way back when.

Yes.

And, somebody had done the original program that you would never have to check more than 50 batches to get the contiguous issue. And I was there on the day that it actually reached 51. And the whole system crashed.

Oh dear.

[laughs] Yes.

To put some timeframe on that, when…

That was 1975 to '78.

'75-'78.

[26:49]
Yes. And then, from, from there, I went to become the commander of the Aircraft Support Unit at Middle Wallop, which was the Army Air Corps. And so I, I wore a blue beret, and I commanded the unit that stored all of the spares for army helicopters.

Right, OK.

And that was, that was a, a command appointment, so I had people there who, who ran the system with me, and looked after the stores. And, very interesting early insight to real-time computing. In those days we worked on an RAF system, called 472, and the RAF system was a global system. And I could have, and it happened many times, could have somebody come in to my unit from the workshop, we had our own engineers, come into the unit from the workshop, and order, let's say, a rotor for a helicopter, and we checked in the stores and we'd got one left. And so they said, 'Yes, I'll have that.' And I went into the system, and by the time I went into the system after having checked it, it had already been issued to Hong Kong.

Right. Yes.

And I had to, I had to oversee that helicopter blade leaving my store en route for Hong Kong, when somebody was standing at the door saying, 'I want one.' And that was, that was sort of, real-time computing in a, in a big way.

[28:29]
Yes. So what was the solution to that type of...?

Oh dear me. Just had to, wait till the next, wait till the next delivery.

Oh right.

Yes. There was, there was no way of, there was no way of overcoming it, because everything was done on, on a priority basis.   So depending on what the priority of the order was, then, that person would go to the top of the queue. So clearly, in this case, it was a helicopter that was in the workshop but it wasn't operational. Whereas Hong Kong, they'd actually got an operational helicopter.

OK.

So they had a zero one priority demand.

OK.

Right?

And the 472 that you mentioned there, who built that system?

That was an RAF system.

Right.

Yes, RAF system. And, it, it was held on all RAF bases, and because this was a flying station, that's how they got involved with it.

And the 472, was that the hardware and software that…?

Yes, it was the whole system.

Yes. And that was provided, was it ICL, IBM?

It was IBM I think.

IBM.

Yes. I'd need to check that, but I think it was IBM.

[29:35]
OK. And you said there you had, obviously people under your command, people working for you.

Yes.

How many would you say were involved with, again, what we would call today IT, or…?

Well, I suppose, everybody really. Because, they all, they were either storemen or operators, so even the storeman who managed the stores had a, had an interface with the people who were operating the computers, and understood it, and understood about stock and so on.

Right, OK.

And, and importance of having correct location, and a proper location system.

Right, OK.

There was about, I suppose it would be about, 50 people running the unit.

50. Yes, So a fair, a fair number.

Yes.

And, and they were encouraged to progress on the IT side, or…?

Yes, those who showed interest, showed an interest. Yes.

Were you using your program [inaud]? You mentioned that you had undertaken a programming course in the past.

Yes. I didn't there.

No.

But I did when I went on then to my next job. Because I went on and became a staff officer in United Kingdom Land Forces, in 1971 to… No, 1980 I think, or '81 to '83. Something like that. And I became part of the ADP team for Headquarters UK Land Forces. And we had responsibility for computer support to the UK Army.

Right.

And it was in that job, I did some pioneering work in that. That was the very early Eighties, and, it was when personal computers were just starting to come in. And I had one of the, one of the earliest computers in the country. I actually worked with, with a company called, I think they're still going today, Lynwood.

Right.

Lynwood systems. And they, they did some, they produced some superb video display units that were tempest controlled. Do you know what tempest is? Tempest is, is the sort of, the Faraday cage screening effectively.

Oh right, OK.

So they were secure systems.

Mhm.

So you couldn't actually access them, because they'd got, they'd got protection. And they produced a, off their own bat, they had a chap there who was a genius and he produced a, a microcomputer. And, they, they wrote an operating system for it, and the operating system they called Lousy. And it was the Lynwood 1 user system[?]. [laughs] Which, they called it a Lousy. And it had an eight-inch floppy disk.

Right, OK.

And, they gave me one of those to play around with in the, in the headquarters. And, I developed on there a headquarters information system, fairly noddy, but I did that in BASIC. I, I learnt BASIC, you know, following on from learning PLAN. I, I wrote the system, and delivered it, and actually it, it was delivered to about six or seven headquarters up and down the country.

Excellent.

And, it didn't do much, very noddy in today's terms.

Mhm.

But, I was both, I was both the designer, the programmer, the systems analyst, the builder, and the deliverer of that system. [laughs] So I did the whole lot in one. And I had to market it as well.

Mhm.

Very interestingly, I had a, I had quite a, not a, not a run-in, I wouldn't say a run-in, because that's, that's a bad word, but, some opposition from somebody at that stage who was entrepreneurial in himself.

Mhm.,

I remember his name and I remember meeting him. But he was a, he had got an Amstrad.

Right.

And Amstrad were just coming out at the same time. And, he was a great devotee of Amstrads, and couldn't understand why anybody was buying a, a crappy old system from a guy called Pollard. Why didn't we all have Amstrads? And if you look back on that, it was the sort of, the beginning of the, of the confrontation between bespoke and, and you know, off-the-shelf, both in terms of hardware and software, then featured throughout the next few decades.

So you could have become a rival to Mr Sugar could you?

I could have done. Yes, I could have done. But Lousy, Lousy was pretty Lousy in the end. [both laugh]

You've both got the first, the same first name.

[34:30]
Yes. One of the things I did do at that stage, that was, while I was there, it was when the Falklands campaign was on. And, they, suddenly they had a urgent demand to produce, the commander in chief had an urgent demand to produce a computer system to catalogue Argentinian prisoners of war. And, I was called in. 'You're a computer expert. We want a system.' And over one weekend I procured and built a simple database on a Commodore 64.

Right.

And it got shipped off on the Monday, and the day it landed in the Falkland islands, the Argies surrendered. So it was, [laughs] it was never used as…

Oh right.

But what they did use it for, interestingly, was, they used it for a legal claims database afterwards.

Right.

So, never saw it in action, but… I always remember that. And I think, well, you know, I, I… People say, 'Were you in the Falklands?' And, I did a little bit. [laughs]

Mhm. You were very much hands-on.

Oh Yes I was. And it was, it, it was very much cradle to grave really in terms of the systems and finding out what they would do. That was the joy of it then, because you, you could actually see it having an effect.

Yes. Yes. And adding value.

Yes.

[35:59]
I'm conscious that you rose to the position of Chief Executive, Logistic Information Systems.

Yes.

Perhaps you can take us through that [inaud].

Yes. I went, I went right through from, from that job at UK Land forces. I then went out to Germany and commanded a stores depot. So that was leaving, leaving IT, and going back into mainstream, and I was commander of a stores depot in Viersen in Germany. During that time I got promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Got posted back to

the Ministry of Defence, and was second in command to, on the, on the unit that did all of the IT procurement for administrative computers.

Right, OK.

Administrative as opposed to operational. Operational computers were, were done by the Procurement Executive, and, those things with embedded computers and so on. Whereas all support computers, we had responsibility for the, for the whole of the Army budget. And I, I met then somebody who was a great influence on me, was then, was the colonel, and today retired, that was a major general, was somebody called Bill Robins.

Right, OK.

And Bill Robins is, you know, quite well known in the system. And ended up in the computer world. And Bill was a, became a great friend.

Right, OK.

And, he did something quite, quite, quite changing really in a way. He said he wanted to do a, he wanted to go back to Shrivenham to do a, a defence fellowship. But it meant taking, taking time out of his job. And, I think I'd been working for him for a year, and he said, 'Would you be prepared to do my job, you know, in my stead, for a year?' And he got permission for me to do so, and I did. And I ran the, ran the branch for a while. And, a great lesson in trusting people.

Yes.

You know. I didn't screw it up, so…

Good. And he… You say he was an influence on you.

Yup.

In what way, what characteristics would you say you learnt from him?

He was… He was a real gentleman. Is to this day. And he was one of the most self-effacing people you could ever hope to meet. But he was hyper-intelligent. And he was one of these people who would say to you, 'Tell me Alan, you know more about these things than I do,' and he knew that wasn't true.

Right. OK.

You know. And, and yet, he would, he would, was a great expert in getting information out of people, by just talking to them and listening. And he was a superb listener. So I think, you know, there's a, there's a lesson in life.

Right. Yes.

[39:07]
I went from there to set up something called the Army CIS Agency, CISA, down at Blandford in Dorset. And that was in conjunction with the Royal Signals.

Right.

So there's the first, first iteration of the Royal Signals taking over, you know, primary sponsorship of IT if you like. But I actually had to be involved then in designing and setting up a new unit, and a new build, had to do the build plans and all that sort of thing. And eventually, became part of the staff of the new Army CIS Agency down at Bovington.

When was that?

That was in… When would that be? That would be about 1986 to 7.

Right. Yes.

Then I was promoted to full Colonel. And, the thing about the Army is that, as soon as you get to the rank of lieutenant colonel, you still wear a cap badge. So I was Lieutenant Colonel in, then, RAOC. When you, when you become promoted to a red hat, then you become part of the General Staff, and you leave your corps, and you become, I then became Colonel Pollard, Late RAOC. Because you're now part of the General Staff. And they're the ones who wear the, the, you know, red Gorget patches on their, on their collars, and red background hat, and, loads of, loads of, scrambled egg on their hat and all that sort of thing. And, I became the IT Adviser to the Quartermaster General in the Ministry of Defence, in London. So, Quartermaster General is, is the one who provides all of, everything for the Army.

Right.

And, I became his IT adviser. So I was dealing then directly on a day-to-day basis, with a, with a four-star general.

[41:23]
Mhm. And at that time, presumably, liaison with outside suppliers?

Yes indeed. Yup. Yup. More so a little bit, sort of later on. But, they then built a very large headquarters down at Andover, and, we moved out from London down to Andover. And, I, I there met somebody else who, who became the Quartermaster General, somebody who is well known in the, in the computer world, General Sir Sam Cowan, and his son now is a general too. And he was the Quartermaster General at that time, and he was a, he was a, a great plain-speaking Irishman. And, as a little, a little aside, I remember going to one of his board meetings, and, he was in a vitriolic mood, and he was going round the table criticising everybody. And eventually he came to me, and he said, [with accent] 'Alan! Why haven't I got a good IT system?' And I said, 'General, because you haven't got a good business plan.'

Right.

And everybody, everybody round the table went, 'Oh my God, that guy, he's going to be crucified.' He stared at me, and he said, 'Bloody good answer.' Turned to the next one and said, 'Why haven't I got a bloody good business plan?' [both laugh]

So, a lesson on how to influence people.

Well Yes. Actually, in, in a way, standing up to people.

Yes.

I've never been a yes man. And I could have grovelled, and then just dug the hole even deeper. And, and it, a lesson actually, because I worked directly to a major general, not to a full general, I worked directly to a major general, who was another chap who was a, who was a, a bit of a pig.

Yes.

And I remember getting called in one day, and, he would just find fault in everything.

Mhm.

Right? And, I remember, he said, 'Oh, go on. All right, leave the office,' you know. And I went and walked round the block, [laughs] and remember to this day, I went back, and I barged straight into his office. Hs, his ADC said, 'You can't go in there.' So I passed straight into his office. And I said, 'General, you got a problem with me?' 'No, why?' I said, 'Well what's all that bloody rubbish about?' 'Oh, sit down. Have a cup of coffee.'

Right.

You know… Again, I could have been cut off at the knees.

Yes.

But, it just shows you actually that, you know, a lot of people, it's bluster.

Mm.

You know, very often the, you know, they will use bluster and bombast when they don't really understand something.

Yes.

And I said, 'Look, you got a problem, and I'll tell you about it. This is why so and so…'

Yes.

And, and you know, sat down and had a sensible conversation.

Mm.

When you can see you're not going to be walked over.

Mhm. And, I'm, I'm sure, not wishing to patronise you, but I'm sure they, someone like him and others would respect someone who can stand up to them and tell them, the truth as it is, rather than, as you say…

Yes. What they want to hear.

Yes, what they want to hear.

Yes. Not what they don't want to hear. And what they don't want to hear is very often, as you say, the truth.

Yup.

[45:04]

Anyway. Then, that department then, it was around 1992, '93, that there was a lot of interest in agencies.

Right.

When Michael Heseltine first brought I market testing, in the late Eighties, early Nineties, it was all about comparing yourself with a, with a civilian counterpart.

Mhm.

And, we, we had to say why our organisation, looking after people for the Army, should not be handed over to the private sector.

Mhm.

Totally outsourced in other words. And, we put forward a case for setting up an agency, which in or case was the Logistic Information Systems Agency, LISA. And, cut a long story short, I was, I was appointed the first Chief Executive of LISA, had about 650 people working for me. And part of that set-up was that, I would outsource a lot of our mainframes to an external supplier.

Mhm.

And so I conducted a competition, with three main providers, one of whom was EDS, and that was where my involvement with EDS arose. And, what I did at that time, I like to think that it was, it broke the mould. And I actually go and present it to the Government. And it was agreed that… Nobody's done this before, this is rather good. What I said was, if you outsource something, what you do is, people, a supplier will provide the equipment for you, and, he will provide the equipment and the support and the manpower, right, and that will be the contribution. And you would then pay a certain amount of money to that supplier. What we did was, slightly different. Because, part of that deal was giving us some money back. And the problem that we always had, and will have today, is that that money then didn't come back to me; it went to the Treasury. So I never saw any benefit of it. So I struck a

deal with EDS, and I said, 'Look, don't want money. I actually want more manpower. So you give me manpower in kind, so that I get more manpower in my unit, to support our systems that you are running, and there's no way Treasury could then net that off against my manpower provision.'

Right. OK.

Right? So actually, a double benefit to both. Benefited the supplier, because they didn't have to provide hard cash, and it benefited us. And I'm sure that there's somebody in Treasury this day who's going, 'This can't be right.'

Right.

And it worked. And it worked. And, and, became a model. And that, that contract got extended about three or four times.

[48:33]
Right. What type of, sterling or dollar value was that type of contract back then?

Oh, something like, in the order of about 50 million. So it was a lot of money.

So a lot of money.

A lot of money in those days, Yes.

And presumably, well, OK, as you say, you struck a good deal for the Army.

Yes.

But then you presented that deal to the Treasury and to Government representatives.

Yes, I had to go, I had…

Who also had to be sold on that idea or the deal that you had struck.

Correct.

Yes.

It was, again, it was, it was a, one of those little peacetime war stories, if I can coin a phrase, in that, at the time the Armed Forces Minister was, was Nicholas Soames.

Mhm.

And, I had got this proposition, and it was sort of, the, the final proposition on how to do things. And I went to the general, and I said, 'Look,' I said, 'this is it on paper. If I now put this up, it's going to go through n committees. It's going to go through goodness knows how many staff officers, who are going to chew it to bits and then, the deal will be gone.'

Mhm.

And he said, he… And he said, 'What do you want to do?' I said, 'Well I want a quick solution.' And he said, 'Well…' And this, this, early days of chief executives, and certainly chief executives in defence. And he said, 'Well, it's what you want to do. You're Chief Executive, you're supposed to take decisions. Write to Nick Soames.' So I did, wrote straight to Nick Soames, 'This is what I want to do.' Wrote straight back, 'Good. Done.' And my name was mud [laughs] in the corridors of power, because I [inaud]. But it was done. And they couldn't overturn it.

No. A man who does things.

Yes.

[inaud].

Yes.

How long were you a chief executive there?

For about, oh I think about four years.

Four years.

Yes. Three or four years.

[50:34]
You've talked about that deal. Any other particular successes in that period that you're…

Yes, quite a lot. I mean we…

…particularly proud of?

Yes, we had, a lot of mobile systems that we developed. We had one system which was, one of the other corps, now part of the Royal Logistic Corps, because we, by then we [inaud] with the Royal Corps of Transport. And, we had a guy there who, who designed a system within the Royal Corps of Transport IT unit, and it was called ERIC, electronic recording in cabs. And it was a little computer that went into, into the cab of a four-tonner, or a, or an armoured vehicle. And, interestingly, it was used in anger in Bosnia, and was about the only system that could actually communicate, when all the others, the Royal Signals, the lot, couldn't.

Right.

Which is quite interesting.

[51:48]
Yes. If you think about your time, what key, in the Army, what key decisions, positive and negative, you made, that made a real difference, would you say?

Ooh. [pause] I don't know. I, I… I like to think that, what I was able to do through the Army was to, was to combine a lifelong, what had become a lifelong passion for computing, with actually, doing something with it. Turning it round to be of applicational use.

Yes.

And that to me was, was, you know, real benefit. What systems have I produced that didn't work? Well I suppose, maybe quite a few. But, learnt one of the early lessons of business life then, is that if something doesn't work, don't throw good money after bad and keep patching it and, and adding patches to it and all the rest of it.

Mm.

Give it up and start afresh.

Right, Yes.

And unfortunately that's what the [inaud] do even to this day. You know, they do throw good money after bad.

Yes.

[53:15]
And… And it was a, it was a battle that's, you know, often being fought. I should mention one particular, one particular moment that probably had its greatest influence on me, in terms of, computing and, and I think in your notes you said, you know, a wow factor.

Mhm.

A wow issue. It was when I went to do my basic ADP training at Blandford, in 19… Oh, that would be about 1972, 1973. And they took us into their computer room then,

and they typed out a message, and then right by the side of it, it came out on a massive line printer.

Right. Yes.

And, and I can remember to this day thinking, bloody hell!

Mm.

And this whole thing came up. And you realised then that it wasn't actually typing one letter, one letter, one letter, one letter, one letter. It does a line, does all that line and all of the letters, then the next line, and then the next line. And you think, that's the power of computing.

[54:21]
Yes. Actually, just thinking for our, our listeners, can you explain what the letters ADP means?

Automatic data processing.

Right, OK. Just so that…

Yes. Yes.

I'm sure many people might have…

Yes. ADP, sometimes people call it EPD, electronic data processing.

Mm.

But the Army, it was always ADP. And then eventually became IT.

Right.

And then, CIS is a, is a current term, which is command information systems.

[54:51]

Right. Thank you for that. If you could do, if you could have your time again, is there anything you would do differently, and why, during your career?

I don't think there is actually. [pause] I… I have a, I have a regret, in that, I, I feel throughout my military service I was more of a desk warrior than anything else. And, I'm one of the few brigadiers who hasn't got a single medal to his name. So I never saw operational service. And, I feel a bit humbled by that sometimes. And people say, 'Oh you must have some war stories.' Well I haven't really. You know, I fought a desk rather than fought, fought an enemy. And, I've got a certain amount of self-consciousness about that, I think even to this day. Which again, is, goes with my sort of character, which is, don't take too much of yourself, don't take yourself too seriously. And, I, I… I don't have a medal, but, so what?

I think, most historians would say an army without supplies…

Well exactly. Yes.

…is an army defeated, or rather, an army in retreat.

Absolutely. Absolutely right. And, you know, the number of times… I mean we… What's, what's not generally known is that when the Argentinians, in the Falklands, surrendered, it was a bloody good job, because we were down to our last day's worth of ammunition out there.

Mhm. Yes.

And, similar systems like, things like that. Interestingly, in the first Gulf War, we had to have a re-supply link to the desert, and our link from Bicester to the desert was to a dial-up telephone in the desert.

Right, OK.

With a chap with a modem on the floor of… And then, interestingly, along came CNN reporters with their early versions of satellite telephones, and, you know, our people were going, 'What's that?' you know. And, very quickly, we put in a, what's called an urgent operational requirement, and we got one of those systems.

Mhm.

And, and in wartime, the bean counters let you pay first and argue the toss afterwards.

Right. Yes.

So, it was a, that was a, a good leap forward.

[57:39]
Right. Thinking about financial outcomes…

Yes.

…in your time in the Army as Chief Executive there, how important was it to quantify, I suppose success in, in financial terms?

[pause] Well it's very interesting, because, it's one of the, one of the basic failings if you like of Government financial management in my humble view, in that, the people who are responsible for deciding and procuring systems are not the people who eventually have to actually run them and make the savings out of them.

Mm.

So, you design a system that's supposed to deliver n million pounds' worth of savings.

Right.

Right? Once you've designed and delivered that system, the civil servant responsible for, you know, principal secretary or whatever, gets a tick in the box because he produced the system. That's then handed over to somebody else, you know, and very often there's a, 'Who the bloody hell designed this? This doesn't work.' And the savings never materialise. But if that person at the beginning had responsibility for delivering the savings, it would be totally different. And it doesn't happen. You look at any Government system, and that doesn't, that doesn't happen. They are procured, and they're handed over for delivery, right?

Yes.

Doesn't happen in business.

Mm.

In business, it's the chief executive's neck on the block.

Mhm.

You know, if the savings don't deliver. And, what the chief executive will do in private sector is, if he can see that it's not going to be a return on investment, he'll scrap it. Straight away. And as I said earlier on, we don't, we throw more money at it and try and make it, try and make it work.

Right.

And in the end, you finish up spending far more than if you had actually bought a system yourself.

Yes. It seems like a lesson in project management, or programme management.

Well, well… Because I went from, I went from the Army into, into the private sector, and having spent 32 years in the Army, having it drilled into me that the private sector was God's gift to management, I very quickly realised it wasn't. And it wasn't,

wasn't difficult to be fairly successful in the private sector, in terms of bringing a military brain that is actually trained to think about objectives and resources, and what are you trying to achieve; not just do it. Which is very often the sort of, you know, private sector mentality.

Mhm.

[1:00:34]
I do remember one of the first jobs… I got involved in, in outsourcing.

Right, OK.

And, my job was actually to advise companies, and all the companies that you mentioned earlier on, was to advise companies on, their outsourcing contracts, either writing them, writing the specifications for them, or reviewing them after they had been outsourced.

Right. OK, Yes.

And, two instances demonstrate the approach of business. Firstly, one of the first companies that I went to, and I won't mention it by name, but it was a very major high street brand, and, they wanted to outsource their computers. And I went to the then IT director and said, 'Right, first things first.' I said, 'Well, what are you hoping to achieve by outsourcing?' And he said, 'What do you mean?' So I said, 'Well, what objectives have the board set you?' And he said, 'Well, what do you mean?' And I said, 'Well look, they said outsource it. But to what end? Have they given you any guidelines?' And he said, 'Yes, told me not to bugger it up.' And that was it.

Right, OK.

There was no plan, no goal, no whatever.

No.

Right? And actually then, was able to then turn that company round, go back to the board and say, 'OK, what do you want to achieve out of it?' Now we can measure against, against the return.

So no benefits analysis at that stage.

Correct.

Yes.

Another one was, another big company, and they had had a contract for six months with a major supplier, outsourcing all of their IT, and they called in, because they, they told us that, you know, it wasn't delivering And, I went in to the company, and I said, 'Well, what's, what's the problem?' And they said, 'Well, they said they'd bring us business benefits. And they haven't.' I said, 'Fine.' I said, 'Well I've been through the contract. There's nowhere in your contract that you've written that actually describes how, how you quantify a business benefit, and how you will know when you've received it.'

Mhm.

'Isn't there?' Said, 'No,' So, so, they've charged you for business benefit, in the full knowledge you can never prove that they haven't given it to you.

Mhm.

And there's another, another good lesson there, in terms of looking at the requirement, and making sure that you, when you, when you write a contract, you specify what it is you want to achieve. I remember one big system that somebody produced for a major company, and, that supplier came to me and said , 'We won this contract.' I said, 'Well I'll tell you privately,' I said, 'you won't find anywhere in the documentation that actually says the system's got to work.' [laughs]

Right.

Because, they'd, down to the enth degree on how many bits of kit we'll have, I said, but nowhere it actually says it's got to work.

[1:03:36]
No. And these were, at the tail end of your career in the Army, these were the type of contracts you were…

Yes, that's right.

…involved.

Yes.

You mentioned EDS as well.

Yes.

A huge one.

Yes.

But… And you established Alpha Business Consulting.

Yah.

Was that straight after you left the Army?

No. That was… I went and worked for, a number of, a number of companies. First of all when I left the Army I went to work for a computer supplier in Nottinghamshire, stayed with them for about a year. And then I was recruited to form the outsourcing consultants called Morgan Chambers, in the, in the City. And, they, they were very much FTSE 100 outsourcing consultants.   You know, they charged big money but, but you know, they did big jobs.

Mhm.

And I spent several years with them. Then, went to another company as an IT director, of a supplier, but didn't really stay with them too long because I decided what I wanted to do was to set up by myself. So I set up my own company.

Right.

And, then, did work for the Government.

Right.

And I worked, a number of interesting assignments. I worked on the 2004-2005 Peter Gershon procurement review, looking at IT procurement in Government.

Right, OK.

And, did a lot of work on that. And, then, for a year, something totally different, but, but again interesting, I set up, for the Department of the Environment, I set up the, the first agency for them, a state veterinary service. So that was actually using my knowledge of agencies. I set that up, designed the systems for them, and so on. And then saw it, saw it to fruition.

Right.

That was a year. That was something that was totally different, which was, which was, Yes, they'd got IT in it, and it was very much a managerial contractual thing.

[1:06:04]
Mhm. And, your involvement with BCS. When did you, when did you join the BCS?

I joined BCS in about the, I think about the mid-Eighties.

Right. OK.

And, became fairly involved with them. Decided that I'd get my BCS fellowship. And then, about 1998 I think it was, or '97, somewhere like that, they did a major membership review, and, I was tasked with producing that, doing that review. And it led to, led to the growth of BCS membership.

Right.

Because the basic premise that I had was that, computing is not just about the technology; it's design, it's coding, and it's development.

Mhm.

Important though that is, it's about, what you do with it.

Mhm.

And therefore, the future of IT would be as much in how people make use of it, without even understanding what the underlying technology is, and therefore, why don't we involve more people from a broader, a broader public, in the BCS, in all of its aspects, not just the highly technical, fairly esoteric work, at the academic end, right down to the user and the system.

Right, OK.

And, it, it did… I didn't win too many friends in the academic community, but, it led to quite a major change in the, in the outlook of the BCS and its membership criteria.

[1:08:03]
Right. OK. And, for your, for your work in that area, the areas, you actually were elected President in…

I was, yes.

....2008.

Yes, 2008. And so, I had, I had a year as Deputy President in 2007, and then a year as President, 2008/9.

Mhm.

And that was, that was a great, a great year. This was my office.

Oh right.

Yes. [laughs] Yes.

So the office we're sitting in is, is like home.

Yes, that's right.

Certainly recent presidents have always had themes…

Yes.

…for their, for their years.

Yes.

Can you tell us about the themes for your year?

Yes. My two previous presidents were Sir Nigel Shadbolt, who was very keen on engaging with the community, and then Rachel Burnett, who was his successor, she extended that to outreach to the community.

Mhm.

And what I decided to do in my year was to have the theme, the BCS *in* the community.

Right.

In other words, what can the BCS to for the community? And I wanted people to be able to bring their, their skills, to benefit society in general. But, with the accent on volunteering.

Mhm.

And so, we, we set up a volunteers register, got a lot of people willing to, willing to participate in volunteering, and to apply their skills to helping, you know, local Scout troops, disadvantaged groups, schools, whatever. And, at the end of that year, I think, I then took it on one stage further myself, and decided that, you know, I was gradually winding down in business terms, so I'd actually work in the voluntary sector myself.

Yes.

[1:10:14]
Did some work on voluntary IT tutoring. I didn't do it for very long, before I realised that, if you do something on a voluntary basis, particularly with very elderly people, 90 per cent of them actually want a social worker, not an IT tutor.

Mhm.

And, I was becoming a glorified social worker, going along for a cup of tea and biscuit, without actually teaching anybody about computing. So I, I decided I would make a small charge, and I now make a very small charge, for going along to see people. In fact, if I'm with them for about half a day, it's 25 quid.

Right.

You know, they won't get that anywhere else.

No no.

And… But it's sufficient for them to know that they're getting something for their money.

Yes.

And, they will be conscious that, don't spend too much time on the tea and biscuits, because I'm paying this guy. And I've got now a, a list of about 20, 20 to 30, 25, 20, 30, elderly people that I look after, and, it's great fun.

Mhm.

It's great fun. In fact I'm busier now probably than I was before.

[1:11:28]
Taking you back to your time as President of the BCS. You talk about the BCS engaging in the community, and this register that you established here, [inaud] establish.

Yes.

You're also a liveryman, with…

Yes. Worshipful Company of Information Technologists. Yes.

And, was there a link-up there with the, the, this, the BCS…?

Yes. Yes. Yes. A lot of the members, and past presidents, had, were in the livery company as well.

Mhm.

So it was a natural affinity between the two. So we did an awful lot together. The volunteering episode that, initiative that I set up, I made the register available to the Worshipful Company, who have iT4Communities, is one of their main volunteering thrusts. And the volunteers were available there. And, as I've said before to somebody, you might say, well, there's any number of volunteers up and down the country; you know, what's special about that? Well, Yes, these were actually people with professional qualifications.

Yes.

And, so there's a certain cachet to having somebody who had got, you know, some letters after his name, CITP or whatever, than to having just, you know, Joe Soap who comes and looks after my box.

[1:12:56]
Mhm. And I'm conscious that iT4Communities actually moved, and has become part of AbilityNet as well. This is also an organisation you've had involvement with as well?

Yes. Didn't become part of AbilityNet. I had a close association with Ability… AbilityNet existed before that. And we went to… They are, they are specifically geared to providing computer assistance for handicapped people, be they deaf, blind, disabled in any way. And they do some superb work. And, I was asked if I'd join the board of trustees. I think the then chairman was a liveryman, and he co-opted me, and I spent two or three years on the board of AbilityNet.

So this was post your presidency?

This is post-presidency, yes.

Yes.

Yes. Yes.

Yes, as you say, a charity that's, has done so much for…

Absolutely incredible. Absolutely incredible.

So people with, well disabilities basically.

Yes. Some of the work that they do which is behind the scenes is, they've got a contract with a number of, of large public organisations to go in and test their systems for their impact on disabled people.

Mhm.

So in other words, no… You have a wonderfully designed web page, but how does that work for somebody who is colour blind?

Mhm.

And those sort of aspects. They, I believe are doing exceptionally well. They're going in and auditing systems for companies, and making sure that they are user-friendly in the fullest sense.

[1:14:50]
Mhm. Mhm. Yes. So… Another aspect… So, your presidency, am I right in saying, was looking at the professionalism of the BCS?

Yes. Yes, well we… Yes, we, we were at the forefront really of producing IT qualifications as a proper cachet for professionalism. And I worked very extensively with one of the previous presidents, Charles Hughes, who was an IT, he really led the professionalism thrust, to get it recognised worldwide as a valid qualification. And that led to the CITP title for IT professionals. And, what we dearly would have loved to have done at that time was to have extended it to lower grades of IT, but in fact now, in recent years, that has happened now, and they've now got a qualification for, for IT technicians, inaugurated by BCS. And so it's been, it's been good. And it was, it was interesting to see the large take-up of that.

[1:16:07]

Yes. Did you enjoy your time as President of BCS?

Oh it was a great year.

Yes?

Great year, Yes. It was a, it was a challenge. I tried to get round and visit, you know, as many people as I could. And, I had, I had quite a lot of opposition from members for what we were doing, who were quite keen to see the value of their membership subscription translated into what it was, in for them. And, so I, I had one or two stormy meetings, where we were trying to justify our sort of corporate position. But it was, it was good fun. I think, one or the, one of the highlights for me was, I was invited to go to the United Arab Emirates, and sign a memorandum of agreement with Abu Dhabi for university cooperation, collaboration. And, that was fantastic. Went out as a guest of the Sheikh, went to his palace and had lunch with him, and, fantastic, really was.

Excellent.

Yes. Managed to take my wife, and, she was escorted around separately, and taken to all the mosques and everything else. It was, it was really good.

Excellent. So…

But, it was hard work, because I had to… There was a, there was a, a lecture programme in there and in Dubai, where I had to go and give talks to university students, that sort of thing. And so, it must have been a week I think altogether.

OK. Good.

Yes. And the funny thing was, at the end of it, they always present, they're big at presenting gifts, and, I was presented with this, it was a big ceremony, and they

opened up this huge great cabinet, and there was a gold horse, you know, about, that, that high, you know, on a great big plinth, you know. You know, this is our gift to you. And, bloody hell, how am I going to get it home? [both laugh] I… So we had to go about, quickly, and find a, a large bag that it would, that it would… And I remember to this day going back through Dubai Airport, putting this through the… And you could see that, you could see the face of the people on the scanner, and they were clearly saying, 'Another gold horse going out,' you know. [laughter]

Yes.

It didn't come to me personally by the way. It came to BCS, and I think it's languishing on a shelf somewhere.

Oh right, Yes. For the record, it's up there.

Yes. [laughter]

But, well, someone who was responsible for the, for the logistics in the Army, I would have thought getting it home wouldn't…

Getting it home, no no…

…wasn't too much of a challenge.

Much of a challenge. Yes. [laughs]

[1:19:07]
So, and just… And bringing us up to date. You mentioned your voluntary work, and particularly, I say, with the, with the 'elderly' in inverted commas, but, introducing them and helping them with their, with the digital age. But I also notice you've been involved with the Wiltshire Police and their online safety…

Yes. They, about a year ago… I mean, after , with sort of, four or five years or more of looking after elderly people, and, seeing how vulnerable they can be in today's

technology terms, about, about this time last year… I live in Salisbury, in Wiltshire, and about this time last year somebody from Wiltshire Police Force came to give a talk to the local paper about, about cybercrime, and their wish that they could have a unit that would help people to stay safe online.

Mhm.

And, I wrote to them, and gave them a résumé of my background, and what I was doing, and said, you know, 'Would you like anybody to help you set it up?' And they bit my hand off. And, the scheme was launched in May this year, Stay Safe Online. And, in honesty, it hasn't had the take-up that we hoped it would. So, whether it will continue, I don't know. One hopes so. But the aim is that, suitably accredited volunteers, with full police clearance, will go into somebody's home, either who has been a victim of crime, cybercrime, or to stop them becoming victims.

Right.

In other words, crime prevention. And the accent mostly has been on crime prevention rather than anything else. And going into people's homes. Or giving talks on cyber security. So I, I've devised a, a little programme now for, for doing that. And that, that's, it's valuable. It's not getting out as much as I would hope it would. You know, there's any number of cyber-aware organisations up and down the country, but this one is, is, it gets right into the heart of it.

OK.

And, and you're actually, you go with the sort of, the, the added cachet of being, you know, legitimate, because you're part of the Police staff.

[1:21:44]
Mm. So it seems to me, you've turned almost like a full circle. I mean you're, in terms of, you're back to education.

Yes, I know. Back to education, and back in uniform.

Yes. [laughs] Exactly. I hadn't thought about the uniform aspect, but, Yes, so, so…

Yes.   No, we have a, we had a… In fact now we have a, very much dress down, but when we started we actually had police uniform, and, with, with shoulder tab and everything. I've got a police number.

My goodness.

Yes. And…

There's[?] obviously not a record [inaud].

No, [inaud]. I have[?] no record. I think they've accredited me [inaud].

Yes.

But, some of the very first people I turned up with, you know, a bit startled at the door. 'I've got a policeman visiting me.'

OK.

But, in the end, we've actually opted now to, to, we now just have a, a T-shirt with the logo on it.

Right.

You know, it's lot more friendly.

Mm. Well we wish you success with that. It's…

Yes. Yes. Well, I, I…

 Certainly a great need.

[1:22:45]

I'm still, even, even today, taking on new clients of my own, and it's, it's pure, I call them clients, but it's purely, purely a hobby really. I love computing. I, I love what computers can do. I'm afraid, at the age of 73, I spend hours a day on Facebook and Twitter. I hate some of the vitriol and rubbish that gets planted on those, and, and people just don't realise that what you put on the Internet stays on the Internet. And it goes, it goes out a mile. And, people don't think before they write or post, unfortunately. One of my biggest bugbears, I, I would like a lot of money for the number of times I've had to sort people out with Windows 10 updates.

Right, yes.

They are a pain. And anybody who's listening, they are a pain in the, veritable. The problem with Microsoft and Windows, and everything, is, it provides a Rolls Royce when most people only just want a Mini.

Mhm.

And if only they would provide a simple, simple system that just did basic email, Skype, and a little bit of Internet access, without all of the paraphernalia that goes with them. It just, it just, befuddles people.

Yes.

It's not only that, but, there seems to be this mantra in, in computer hardware and software, that as soon as you have this process of continuous improvement, it's got to look totally different. So every, every issue of, of Windows, and, and its updates, so it introduces a different screen. Now to old people, who are used to seeing things in one set place, and used to being able to deal with something that's familiar, that change is not good.

Mhm.

And, what worries me, I've become quite worried over the last, couple of years, at the risk of, of disenfranchisement and social isolation of a lot of elderly people, now that physical systems of communication and getting Government support are going. You know, the post office is going, where everybody went down to get their… Everything's now done online.

Mhm.

And the assumption is now that everybody does things online. And it's the elderly who are getting left behind.

Mm.

And I think it's, it's a big problem. And I don't think it's fully recognised. And a lot of people do recognise it, but I don't think it's fully recognised. And it, and it does worry me, when you see, when you see the lack of ability, but the enthusiasm. Don't feel that elderly people don't want to know anything about technology. They do. They love it. I've got a chap who, 93, you know, he Skypes his family all over the world, he's done all of his, his family history, and done all sorts of things. They love it. And they love, they love getting to grips with it.

Yes.

But they don't want it complicated.

No.

You know? They want a simple interface, you know, and if I could design one, I'd make a lot of money.

[1:26:34]
Yes. Life's too short. Mhm. But looking at the future, I mean, you, you've been talking about the present and some of the, the charities there. But, thinking more

generally, what do you think are the biggest challenges, and opportunities, for the IT industry in the next ten years, would you say?

By far the biggest challenge, I think, is, cyber security. Security is a massive problem. And, thinking back to my military past, I don't think that the Government is investing sufficient money in cyber security, and cyber defence, as it should do. You don't, as, as things have shown, you don't need to face somebody on a battlefield now to cripple them.

No.

Get into their banking system and bring it to a halt. You can bring a country to its knees in a, with relative ease, without actually firing a shot in anger. But, you know, any number of aircraft carriers, with or without planes that fly off them, are not going to stop, stop that.

Mhm.

And I think, I think we need to spend a lot more on cyber security. Defend our cyber borders, as much as we defend our imagined international borders.

[1:28:13]
Right. OK. Mm. And looking at opportunities, I mean clearly there's opportunities for individuals to specialise in cyber security today.

Yes.

Any other particular areas that you think that…

Yes. I think, computing is getting, and comput*ers*, and processors, are getting so miniature now, that, that the future is going to see a rapid expansion over the next two or three years of, of the Internet of Things.

Mhm.

Connected computing. And, I think one of the interesting ones too is probably body worn or body inserted computing, implanted chips, and, you know, for health monitoring and those sorts of things. And, being able to sort of, go anywhere and just put your hand on a reader and it's got your whole medical history or whatever on it. I think that, there are some very interesting future developments to come. And, I think in not so many years' time, then people are going to say, 'Oh sorry, you had a card index for this?' you know. I mean, you look today, I've got three grandsons, they're thirteen, ten and nine, and they, you know, dial-up telephone? They sit there with their, with their iPads and their dad's iPad, you know, and, they're just, wizard at it. Because it's just want they do.

Yes.

It's what they do.

So natural.

[1:29:52]
Yes. I think, the, the challenge for the IT industry is not to be a victim of its own success, in that, I do worry that, today's young people, and some of the older ones, 73-year-olds who spend all their time on Facebook, social engagement is becoming electronic instead of physical.

Mm.

And, you know, the old joke about, somebody sitting down at a dinner table and, and get on their computer and say, 'What are you having for pudding?' you know, is not so, not, these days, is not so far-fetched.

It's near to reality.

It's near to reality. And, I, I think that there's a lot of work to be done in drawing a sensible balance between electronic and, and real life, and social engagement. And I don't know where it's going to go.

Mm.

And it, and it changes people's perception on natural courtesies. You look at the profanity and, and the abuse that is permitted on sort of, Facebook, Twitter and all these others. It's just… You know, these companies say they, they, they can't stop it all, they're doing all they can to stop it, but they can do a hell of a lot more. You know, they, they make their money through clicks for instance.

Yes.

So, so what's, what's in it for them to stop it?

[1:31:25]
Mhm. I suppose, finally, what advice would you give someone entering the IT industry today?

[pause] Embrace it. Never ever assume that you've learnt all there is to learn.

Mhm.

Because every day that goes by, I learn something new about computing that I didn't know before. You're always learning with computing.

Mm.

So, you know, be careful about labelling yourself as an expert.

Mhm.

There are lots of experts around, but, some of them are more drips under pressure than anything else.

Mhm. Yes, I think, someone was telling me the definition of an expert is, someone who learns from their mistakes.

Yes, that's right. That's right. And if you haven't made mistakes, you don't learn either.

No.

And which is true, I mean you mentioned earlier on, mistakes, Yes, I've made quite a few, I would say. But then you learn and apply them.

Yes.

And, look forward to tomorrow; don't regret the past.

Mm. Well on that positive note, Alan, I'd like to thank you on behalf of Archives of IT for your time you've spent with myself this morning and sharing your, your career and our thoughts with our listeners.

You're welcome.

Thank you very much Alan, and I wish you all the best.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

[End of Interview]