

# **A SPY FOR PEACE**

Steve Wright, February 2005, previously unpublished

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This is a note to Brian Martin from Robin Ballantyne [Steve Wright's pseudonym] on the techniques of field research best suited to perform investigative study of the players involved in the military, security and police business, better known as the repression trade. The note is intended for researchers interested in the mechanics of such field research. It aims to provide a practical guide on how to enter such market places; the best modus operandi to undertake such research without drawing too much attention to the researcher; how to best prepare for a visit; what to look for and how to record it; how such field research findings should be analysed and reported and how to compile an up-to-date arms dealers diary so that future security fairs can be investigated and assessed.

## **2. WHY SPY?**

Most information about the trade in military, security and police equipment transfers is out of date. Arms fairs are a rich source of up-to-the-minute data since they act as a showcase where companies and governments can show off the latest in technology and trumpet to future buyers the special products and innovations which lie on the immediate horizon. Documentation on many products including associated technical information may only ever surface at one particular arms fair. Such data can and has proved vital in undermining corporate denials about being involved in a particular branch of the security business.

Apart from certain sensitive destinations such as China, entering arms and security fairs is not spying. The best way of thinking about it is gathering data from a specialised trade show. This is less dramatic than thinking of such work as James Bond type penetration but more appropriate to get the researcher into the appropriate mind set of seeking company product information. The key reason for being in such a venue is to gather product and technical information on transfers, colluders, traders and buyers and to ensure that any assertions about specific weapons and technologies can be backed up by documentation. Denial is quite common in this area of business so it is important to ensure that sufficient documentation and photographs are taken to support a researcher's perceptions that a particular deal, event, transfer happened and is significant.

Thus the most important activity at the fair after safely getting in and out is making a record of those present and their most relevant products and activities which can be used by other researchers keen to uncover more evidence on particular transactions and security support networks.

## **3. PREPARATION & MODUS OPERANDI**

When a novice researcher enters an arms or security fair for the first time, it can be a bewildering and slightly scary moment. Even someone who has immersed themselves in the literature of arms and human rights will find the dazzling marketplace of stalls selling everything from armoured vehicles to electric shock devices somewhat confusing. So preparation is key.

Many arms exhibitions put their maps and product lists online in advance of the event. It is worth checking that the first day is not one limited to VIPs or press especially if it is a foreign event where every day spent abroad is precious and resource intensive. It also needs to be said that many more fairs are advertised than take place and it is not unusual for an event to be cancelled or postponed. Therefore before committing resources to travelling, double check either the website or with the organisers or their foreign agents that the event will take place as planned.

To go to such an event, one will need an identity. To pretend to be what or rather who you are not takes a tremendous amount of subterfuge and simply is not worth it. The best modus operandi is to go as a security consultant and say you are moving into new areas and are seeking new clients. That way your passport confirms that you are who you say you are. That is important at a venue where your passport is sometimes required to confirm identity and it avoids adding unwanted paranoia given that usually such events are crawling with military police, state security and intelligence officers. Being a consultant in a new area serves two purposes. There is no need to hide your ignorance, which is genuine, and it gives you a real opportunity to ask lots of interesting questions. The dealers love this opportunity to show off their knowledge since after the initial rush such events nearly always involve long periods of tedium for the sellers. The consultant tag also gets the vendor's interest since you say you are looking at developing new markets for new clients and therefore it makes economic sense for these business people to see you as a promising business contact. Later on, when you want documentation, brochures and photographs, your ID also is self-explanatory — i.e. you are ignorant of their products and need as much material as possible to show potential clients.

What will be expected is a proper business card. An absence of a card with email telephone, address and fax numbers will draw suspicion. The best option is to get a set professionally made up with a PO Box number and a suitable security consulting logo. You can arrange for your normal phone to have a different ring for a new line if required or invest in another line just for your investigative purposes, for example a mobile number that you only answer for that link.

Many security and arms fairs will take place outside your home country, outside your normal language zone and may even be in a different continent. It is worth taking such considerations into account when preparing. Since English is the main lingua franca of these events, if you speak English you probably have enough communication skills to get by. However, should the reason for doing field work in a particular country require precise details of a specific technology in a language which you are totally unfamiliar with, say Turkish, Russian or

Chinese, then do hire an interpreter and use them as part of your introductory repertoire.

If you are travelling long distances to another country where the climate and food are vastly different from your country of departure, ensure that you allow yourself sufficient time to wind down and adjust. Nothing is more stressful than having to go directly to a security expo after being on a 12-hour flight. It is much better to have had a couple of days acclimatizing, to have checked out directions to the venue and to know roughly how long it will take you to get there and back and how.

#### **4. THE FIELD VISIT — HOW TO GET IN, WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

There are essentially two ways to gain entry to an arms, police and security fair: (i) pre-book on an official invitation proforma or via the organizing company's website; or (ii) just turn up on the day and register on site.

For the new researcher, the first approach has the benefits of making the journey secure. If you are say heading for a security fair in one of the world's hot spots, say in the Middle East, it is more comforting to show them a letter of acknowledgement or a formal invitation from the organizers. The only disadvantage to this formal approach is that it signals your plans to whoever maybe watching on the international telecommunication highways.

The second approach has the disadvantage of uncertainty — you never quite know if you will be refused entry or not. However in my experience of twenty years of visiting fairs, I have never been turned away at the door. In fact I have had sufficient encouragement at some entrances to try my hand at getting a press badge. This requires a little nerve if you have no press bona fides but the advantages are substantial including special press information packs, an impressive badge and a virtual carte blanche to photograph anything which moves.

Once you are in, the first impression is one of blooming buzzing confusion. The first thing to do is to buy or acquire a show guide giving a map of all the show halls and the position of various country pavilions and stands together with a timetable of any special events such as VIP visits or equipment demonstrations. Then move to a coffee sitting area and pick up a daily show guide if one is available. The sitting areas are important places to sit and people watch without drawing attention to yourself. Lots of deals are done here and one of the important things to watch out for is invitees: who is there, what status they have and from what countries. Sometimes the press packs give lists of visiting delegations and these might be important later on. For example, what was the UK government doing selling arms in Jordan at a fair attended by the Iraqi high military command?

The coffee corners are good spots to earwig on deals or commercial conversations. If you are a newcomer, this is a free space to mark out your priorities in terms of interesting companies and their whereabouts on the official map. It is really easy to miss critical stands if the fair is a large one covering several sites so an important first step is to mark out a series of walks. Begin in

one corner and methodically track each series of stands line by line making your way slowly and methodically down the entire length of each hall. Make marked notes on any stalls which you may wish to return to later.

## **5. GATHERING IMAGES & DOCUMENTATION**

The amount of documentation available at each stall is limited to what the stall holder has physically brought with them. As a rule of thumb this will gradually run out over the duration of the fair and will usually always be used up by the last day. This is especially true if there are public open days or if the fair has a day open to military staff and their families. The key to ensuring maximum documentation is to get into the fair on the first day it is publicly accessible and get in there as early in the first day as possible.

The best tactic is to work the fair in the first hour it is open and siphon off as much documentation from all the stands that is relevant to your field of interests. Be aware that not all the documentation will be on display. Some companies have a limited number of heavy duty catalogues for their best potential customers. On the second more thorough run through the fair when the crowds have settled down a bit, revisit the key target stalls and ask for further documentation.

It helps here if there are more than one of you since one can hold the camera and the other can do an interview. These interviews may be the only time you get proof positive that one company is enabling another for example to produce its products under licensed production.

Photographs or video material are potentially valuable in identifying people, products and procurements. Some of the stands themselves will contain material and claims which will appear nowhere else. Do not be afraid to ask searching questions or just to leave the camera running all the time in case you pick up conversations taking place at each stand that you would otherwise be too nervous to video.

It has also to be said that many stands are vacated at lunch time leaving a wealth of company info and contact lists including videos, etc. Such stalls sometimes provide a golden opportunity to liberate a vital jigsaw puzzle piece in an investigation but be prepared to be dumb about what is meant for the public and what is not.

Try to get photographs of key salespeople, key new products and key customers — especially if VIPs are in the assembled throng. The closer you can get the better. If you do not understand how a particular weapon works, ask and photograph the salesman or woman telling you — you might just capture the only explanation of that technology before it goes public.

## **6. DOING THE ANALYSIS**

Once you are back to base, write down as much of what you saw as you can possibly remember including the equipment you photographed. Your short-term memory may be quite good but much will fade within a few hours of attending the

fair. Note the most salient details, connections and the contradictions, e.g. representatives from torturing or embargoed states buying stuff; leg irons and torture technologies on stands; innovations which change the way that internal wars are fought; new technologies which enable human tracking or extra-judicial execution. Also look out for invitations to new fairs. Attending one of these events is like being on the *Readers Digest* competition list — once you're signed up you continue to get further invitations forevermore.

Map out the links between local connections and their corporate owners overseas and see if new ways are being evolved commercially to get around any arms embargoes by using subsidiaries.

## **7. APPLYING THE RESEARCH**

Some items from the fair may be “hot news” — a particular deal or innovation — and that should be relayed to media contacts as soon as possible, especially if you have managed to secure photographs or video footage.

Some material is particularly relevant to specific NGOs such as the country teams of Amnesty International. Sharing information enables a jigsaw puzzle piece to be provided to an ally who could not otherwise have access to that documentation. Otherwise store everything. In the past, denials from companies or even threats of legal action have been obviated because documents secured at a security fair contradicted the company's official line and they backed off.

## **8. AN ARMS DEALER'S DIARY**

Even a simple search of the web will reveal a long list of annual arms and security events on virtually every continent. Familiarise yourself with this list to ensure that you are aware of what is coming up. Sometimes these events happen in ways which contradict stated government policy or highlight hypocrisy — foreknowledge enables you to tip off a friendly journalist to secure the angle.