October 29, 2020
Interview with David Griffiths

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Summary:

David Griffiths is a former Canadian naval official. He served as a member of the Canadian delegation to ACRS.

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Contents:

David Griffiths, Canada
Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on October 29, 2020

Miles Pomper
So, I need a couple of formalities to start. Just, can you give your full name?

David Griffiths
Yep, full name is David Griffiths. David Nigel Griffiths.

Miles Pomper
Maybe you can talk about when you are involved in ACRS and what your role was and how you got involved?

David Griffiths
Sure. I was the Senior Staff Officer Doctrine at Maritime Command Headquarters when it was decided that Canada would be the "mentor" nation for maritime issues in the process. And I was the desk officer for the Russia-Canada Incidents at Sea Agreement, so it was very much my bailiwick. And I'd been in the war in Yugoslavia, attached with the European Community Monitoring Mission, so I had a particular interest in peace and war issues anyway. So anyway, I became the Maritime Command desk officer for the project from the outset.

Miles Pomper
And so, you say you were in the foreign ministry and handling maritime?

David Griffiths
I was a naval officer – I was the Senior Staff Officer Doctrine for the naval headquarters.

Miles Pomper
So you were particularly focused on this maritime group, then?

David Griffiths
Yeah. The political decision was made that Canada would be the mentor nation for maritime issues within the ACRS Working Group, and so the two organizations that Foreign Affairs approached was [sic] the Navy to deal with prevention of incidents at sea between the navies – that's where I came in – and the Coast Guard to deal with issues of maritime safety.

Miles Pomper
You said, you dealt with some other things in Yugoslavia, and you had a lot of experience kind of in this?

David Griffiths
I was particularly interested in issues of war and peace. I always had an interest in the Middle East anyway. But having seen some war close up I was particularly keen to take the job when I was asked. But it was as the Incidents at Sea Agreement desk officer that was my formal rationale for being involved.

Miles Pomper
And had you had any experience in the region before?

David Griffiths
Not in the Middle East, no.

Miles Pomper
So I guess you kind of walked into the situation that had already been set up, what was your first impressions, I mean, about your counterparts and the people you were working with.

David Griffiths
My first impressions were formed when we first met, and the first intersessional workshop on this was at the Canadian Coast Guard College in Sydney. That was in September of 1993. And one of the things that struck me from this, as it has with other international things that I've done – when you get sailors into the same room, they're just sailors, and a lot of the politics drops aside once you can establish that professional sailor-to-sailor link. As an aside, during the Cold War, I remember

meeting a Polish naval officer and I remember saying to him that aside from the difference in language, culturally I had more in common with him than I had with a Canadian fighter pilot. So, this is, I think, a tremendous advantage that the maritime community has, this epistemic community of sailors. Because it's a common culture. Everybody understands the sea, and everybody understands that way of life. We could go aboard each other's ships and follow all the appropriate courtesies because there's just international standards in how navies relate to each other. So it was very, very warm.

The fortunate thing for us at that first meeting at the Coast Guard College, is that our very first day was the day that Rabin and Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn. So we started with the – you know, we were in sessions – and then well, "Let's take a break and watch this on television." So here we were, Arabs, Israelis, Canadians and people from other countries that were supporting, all watching this event on the White House lawn. And all of us holding our breath – will they shake hands? That was the big thing that everybody was asking each other. And when the two of them actually did shake hands, it was almost like an emotional release for everybody. And that, plus the fact we were there in casual civilian dress – there was to be no formalities – really built a bond right at the beginning. And one other thing – and it sounds trivial but I think it's important too – that night, we went to dinner at the fortress of Louisbourg. It's an 18th century fortress that has been renovated to the way it was in the 18th century. There's a restaurant there, so we went there that night to have this dinner in this 18th century fortress. And again, this is the first time in some cases – first time some Israelis and Arabs had actually met each other.

And at the end of this dinner, there was a little group of musicians that were singing 18th century songs. And just for a lark, being a sailor, I asked them if they knew a modern song called "Chevalier de la Table Ronde" and they didn't, and so I said, "Okay, I'll sing a verse." So I sang a verse, at which point then – you know – claps, cheers, and then someone said, well, "The Americans – come on Americans, you should sing." And the Americans were all too shy. At which point we had a Russian guy from the Russian Foreign Ministry and Vladimir, bless his heart, stood up and said, "Ha! I'm Russian. Americans cannot sing! I will sing!" And he sang some Russian naval song. And then a couple of the other people from the Western mentor nations got up and they sang a bit. And finally, I said, "Well, come on, are there any Arabs that can sing here?" I always remember my colleague from Bahrain say, "Yes, I am an Arab and I can sing." So we got a Bahraini song. And then after a while, we got virtually all of the Arabs to do something. And then finally, of course, it was "Come on Israelis, you can't sit there in the corner. Up you get!" so, "Hava Nagila." And it all sounds very trivial, but on that very momentous, first day, we sang together. And almost every meeting we had after that, one of the questions was, "When are we going to have the next sing-song?" And, not to trivialize any of this, but building those – those very personal connections became really, really important as this process continues.

Miles Pomper

I've tended to talk to people generally about the process, but not always so much in depth about what these guys did. So, how did that kind of proceed and in these matters on the INCSEA [incidents at sea], I guess, if it also involved rescue at sea, and so on?

David Griffiths

Yeah. Essentially, what we had decided was that there were two tracks that we would follow in this maritime process. One would be the prevention of incidents at sea, which would be the naval thing – that was my job. And the other was the Search and Rescue – Search and Rescue being particularly important because it's a humanitarian obligation, it's not just a nice thing to do. It's something that all nations are required to do, and it is humanitarian. So for example, Search and Rescue Regions around the world are defined not based on political boundaries, but on operational principles. So Search and Rescue is a very good, non-political thing.

The incidents at sea thing is important because naval vessels interact at sea. You don't get divisions of troops that march past each other, but you get naval vessels that do meet each other. You get naval vessels that can even steam through the territorial waters of another country, as long as they are under innocent passage. And

so in times of tension, the risk of something going wrong is considerable. So although discussion of an incidents at sea arrangement is a very technical professional thing, it is politically important because it can assure politicians that there's not going to be some misunderstanding of what's going on, or unintended consequences. So, throughout the process, it was basically the Navy, with me as the desk officer, that handled the incidents at sea negotiations. And it was Coast Guard and the military Search and Rescue people that handled the Search and Rescue. And so these two things went on parallel from time to time. We'd be in a plenary session, but then we'd go off into our different rooms to deal with our particular technical concerns.

Miles Pomper

What were the dynamics in the negotiation, who kind of took charge? What were some of the differences? How did it kind of progress in the process?

David Griffiths

Yeah. On the INCSEA side, it was a Canadian chair throughout, and what we did is – there is an agreement between the United States and initially the Soviet Union, now Russia, that was established in 1974. And it was a remarkably innovative arrangement, very clear of politics, but very technically oriented. And after the U.S. and the Soviet Union signed this thing in '74, a lot of other countries did the same with the Soviet Union. So Canada had an Incidents at Sea Agreement with the Soviet Union and then Russia. So what we did is, we took the Canada-Russia agreement as a baseline. And we said, okay, the difference is, this is bilateral. In the Middle East, we're going to be talking multilateral, but let's just take this text as a basis and then see how we might adapt it to a multilateral Middle East context. And so that gave us a baseline to start with. And as we'd go through, we'd say "That's not going to work, because this is the Middle East", or "That's not going to work because it's multilateral." And gradually, we built it.

And there'd be arguments over specific terms of specific titles. We did all of this in English for common language but we found some interesting translation issues. One of the provisions of this thing would be that when vessels or aircraft of one party are conducting surveillance on the other, they'll be careful not to interfere or threaten and so forth. And I don't think I'm revealing any secrets, but there was one particular Arab delegate, who was absolutely against this thing, and just could not see how that could possibly be in there. And I had a talk over tea later on, and I said, "How can you – you know – what's wrong with this? If you're in close proximity, you don't want to have anything - " but he said, "Yeah, but how can you talk about legal spying?" And I said, "No, no, that's right." In the Arabic language there isn't something that comes across really well as "surveillance", it was coming across as "spying". Once we got that out of the way, then off we went. And there were several, several examples of that kind of thing.

There was a lot of argument about the title. And it is a long and ponderous title – let me just see if I've got it here – because it's – I mean, only a lawyer would love this – the "Guidelines for Operating Procedures for Maritime Cooperation and Conduct in the Prevention of Incidents at Sea on and Over the Seas in the Middle East." But every word, of course, has significance – "on and over the seas", for example, means submarines are not part of it. So, there was a lot of detailed negotiation that went into that.

Miles Pomper

Did you know that submarines are not part of this agreement?

David Griffiths

Nobody wants to put submarines in these agreements. Everybody understands that submarines are different. It was deliberately excluded from that first – the U.S.- Soviet thing, and everybody has kept it out since. Nobody wants their submarines to do anything that's public – that's why you have a submarine. So, the key thing about the incidents at sea process is that when ACRS collapsed in 1995, I believe I'm correct in saying that the Incidents at Sea Agreement was the only product of that Process that was signed, sealed, delivered, ready to go at the technical level. All it needed was political signature and it would have been in place.

Unfortunately, before the politicians could get at it, the process collapsed. However, it must be on file somewhere in everybody's files. And, again, I don't think these years

after the event I'm revealing any secrets, but at one of our meetings, we got most of the provisions sorted out – there were still some things to be ironed out but they were details. And at the end of a meeting, the Israeli Admiral said, "look, I'm an admiral, I'm paid to make decisions." He said "I'm comfortable with this the way it is. Yes, we need to refine stuff," but he said "when I go home, I am going to instruct all of my commanding officers of ships and aircraft to read this thing and comply with it." He said, "I'm not saying it's official. I'm not asking any of you to do the same thing. I'm just telling you that if one of your vessels comes across one of ours, you choose to use these signals, our guys will know what you're talking about." And that to me, again illustrates one of the strengths of the maritime issues in these kinds of discussions. Sailors understand that stuff.

Over coffee, a diplomat came up to those of us that were chairing this thing and said, "Can you just give us a little bit more time. And whatever you do when we go back in, don't laugh." So, fine. So we reconvene the meeting, and here we are all set now for this contentious issue. And one of the delegates said, "We've been talking a little bit over coffee, and we have a proposal. What if we were not to refer to 'remotely piloted vehicles', that we would refer to 'vehicles that are neither heavier than air nor lighter than air?'" So, well, "It's a very interesting contribution. What would our colleagues on the other side of the table say?" They said, "Well, that's a very interesting thing. But perhaps we could live with it, if perhaps this other thing that we were thinking about might be changed." And sure enough, that was agreed. So future historians are going to look at this agreement and see this thing that "parties will not fly a vehicle that's either heavier than air, or lighter than air" and wonder what the heck we were talking about. And funnily enough of, at a subsequent meeting, I was talking to one of my Arab friends and I said, "Boy, did the Israelis ever get one over you in that last set of negotiations!" He said, "yeah?" "It said, neither heavier than air nor lighter than air – have you ever considered the Israelis might have something that's exactly the same weight as air?"

And anyway, it was this kind of humor, this kind of give and take, this kind of pragmatic approach that really made this a joy to work with. I mean, it was – I think we all looked forward to these things. There were times where the negotiations were tough – of course they were. In fact, again I don't think these are any secrets now, but during the senior officers symposium in Halifax, at one point across the table, the discussion between I think it was the Israeli admiral and the Jordanian was quite difficult. We felt a sense of tension in the air. Over coffee, the Jordanian fellow came up to me, and he said, "Gah, it's good to see my friend again. He and I were both students at the U.S. Naval War College together, he's such a great guy." And then back around the table, it was, "Here's what I have to do." But again, I think you're getting the sense of the dynamic of these things, and where maritime issues are so – they offer so much opportunity for progress. And so often, issues are – they're biggest on land, not so much at sea, and sailors have a culture of working together, understanding each other – and that can set precedents that are then helpful to people dealing with more contentious issues ashore.

Miles Pomper

So obviously, despite all the work that you did, and the others in the group, but the bigger process kind of killed the agreement. I mean, if we were able to have a new process today, would you do anything different in terms of both the actual negotiation of such an agreement or how it works in the process?

David Griffiths

Well, funny you should ask. I recently wrote a chapter to a book called "Order from Ashes" and I called it "Oceans of Opportunity." And I can show you the book – it was essentially directed to an Arab audience, saying that we think of Arab culture as very much desert, but there's a strong maritime tradition there as well. And if it was to start again, the foundation is laid. There was 11 years, between ACRS and another seven years of the Maritime Safety Colloquium.

The foundation is there, the Incidents at Sea Agreement, the text is in people's file somewhere unless they've lost it. The Search and Rescue stuff could be picked up again, tomorrow. So it's all there, and I kind of outline in the conclusion of that chapter precisely what I would suggest – reconvene. A good place to start I think, would be something along the lines of something we've been doing in South Asia, for

some years. Peter Jones will know this, well, he and I were running that together. But each year, we would bring together senior naval officers from India and Pakistan, retired, half of them were former heads of the Indian and Pakistan Navy. And we would sit as private citizens somewhere outside the region, and share ideas. And over a period of – gosh – almost 10 years or more, there are now agreements between India and Pakistan that actually began there. Because these knowledgeable, credible people who could go home and talk to people that counted in their respective governments would come up with ideas, steer them up through their respective chains of command, and then let the political leaders do it and take credit.

I've often told the story when people ask me what Track II diplomacy is all about, I give them the example from this India-Pakistan forum. I was once blind-copied on an email saying "Our two delegations are meeting this week in New Delhi (I think) and your delegation has never asked our delegation about a certain topic. If your delegation were to ask our delegation, it might be productive." And some days later I saw a news report saying India and Pakistan have now come up with this new agreement to solve this old problem. And some friends said, "What, were you part of that?" "Yes." "Well, how come they don't mention your name?" "Well, because if they did, it wouldn't happen. This was a political achievement." But I would think that some kind of forum like that – a maritime forum in the Middle East – pick up where the Maritime Safety Colloquium dropped off, frankly. And – this is mentioned in other publications, but to be frank – the Maritime Safety Colloquium Track II process died because of bureaucracy in Canada, not because of anything in the Middle East. There are probably 100 plus alumni of that process. And some years ago, I was in Bahrain and met a couple of people that I knew from that process. So to my mind, it's there, it's – you know – the foundation is there, it just needs to be dusted off and started again.

Miles Pomper

And I mean, obviously, the ACRS talks had certain countries that were not involved, either by invitation or lack of invitation and some of them declined to participate.

David Griffiths

There was a lot of that – off the top of my head I can't remember. What I will recommend is, Peter Jones wrote an excellent history of this thing and it's in a publication called "Maritime Confidence Building in Regions of Tension". It was put out by the Stimson Center in 1996. And Peter – for each of the events that we held under ACRS – Peter has given a very, very good description of that. In the Maritime Safety Colloquium, the Track II thing, we had, I think, just about everybody, including Iran, which wasn't included in -

Miles Pomper

That's my question, were the Iranians and the Syrians in your Track II?

David Griffiths

Yeah. But this again – this – this was the beauty of carrying on with the Track II because, in fact, we had some Iranians who were coming to one, but they just had a visa problem. So just about everyone was there, and over the course of that, any of the problems that we had in the ACRS thing were political – people were told, well "You can't come or you can't do this." Some countries came with mandates that other things were more important – the nuclear issue hung over everything. We kept saying that it doesn't matter about all of that. If two ships collide at sea, you've got a political problem, even if it was the result of an accident. So we need to have this technical side providing a level of stability that lets all this other stuff gets sorted out.

Miles Pomper

Yeah. So I mean, if you were going to do this kind of new process, and you included the Iranians and so on, would that you think you would have to change the agreement at all? Or is it they just kind of sign up to what's there. How would How would that work?

David Griffiths

The Incidents at Sea Agreement?

Miles Pomper

Yeah.

David Griffiths

Well, I'd say dust it off. I would say, have an educational session. And in fact, Peter Jones and I were involved in facilitating a similar agreement between Malaysia and Indonesia some years ago. And what we did is, we had a workshop in Malaysia for all of the ship's commanding officers, air squadron commanders, and did an educational thing – here's what America and the Soviet Union did, here's what different countries have done – there's a lot of these agreements around the world. So we had an educational session in Malaysia, we had a session in Indonesia, we had a joint session, and then we stepped back and let them negotiate. We were involved sort of as informal academic advisors, and they got on with it. But I would say that, to start this again in the Middle East, it needs an educational process to start with. Because there are so many subtleties in this. Again, I would highly recommend the book on – and I'm gonna hold it up because I think this is a great book – it's called "Incidents at Sea" by David Winkler. He originally wrote it about the Cold War, but he's now done a second edition to talk about U.S-China experience. But the story of how that initial Soviet-American agreement was negotiated is a good example of the kind of stuff I'm talking about – the human factor, getting to know each other, mutual trust. So yeah, I would say, if any country's interested, have an education session for them. So they can talk internally without having to deal with anybody else. And then when everybody's got a basic level of education on it, then bring some people together. I would say it would be useful to bring people together on a Track II educational thing – do it through a university, have a conference on incidents at sea with people from the countries that are interested in being involved. Now having a background – because if they come in cold, then there's a lack of confidence, there's a defensiveness – but if they've had a basic briefing and then get together, and if it's Track II, then there's no commitment either way and to explore the idea. And if people then think it's a good idea, then you toss it over to the Track I level.

Miles Pomper

Do you think I mean, there's obviously within the last few months, there's been these agreements between Israel and a few of the Arab states, the normalization and so on? Would that, how might that change such a process in the future?

David Griffiths

Well, to me, again, because I see the importance of keeping this purely technical, it should be irrelevant. Those people were in the same room for our discussions. The fact that they have some political agreement now makes no difference whatsoever. The key thing is, are you willing to talk to the other folk and put together something that will allow you that if some accident happens at sea? If there's some misunderstanding, that you can sort it out. These demonstrations that we had, for example – again it was a very set-piece bit of theater. But what we did is – we had in the Mediterranean thing out of Venice – we had the American ship actually manning a weapon. And so, on our side we were thinking, "What the heck are they doing?" And we threw in all sorts of complications. And we then asked the people around us, "What are you going to do?" And they said, "Well, shoot! These guys are threatening us." Then we revealed what was happening on the American ship, and it turned out to be something absolutely innocent, but it was time-dependent – they had to do this with this weapon system because of a satellite pass or something. But we showed how something that was perfectly innocent could have ended up with people shooting each other. And so no politician wants that.

And I've – in the course of my work – I've had occasion to sit down with political leaders, who are saying, "How can we talk to those guys?" And I'm saying, "Well look, while we're sitting here, some very junior officer could be making a mistake at sea. And all of a sudden, you have a political crisis that you never wanted. This is what it's doing – it's protecting you politically, from having something happen, that you don't want to happen." And if we can get that message across to political leaders – Peter Jones, I think, had a very good expression and he used to talk about "political space" – so if you're going to do these things, formally, on a Track I level, then for the politicians to define a political space. "Work within that, as naval experts, don't go outside of it. You're not there to solve a political problem. You're there to stop incidents at sea." And if everybody understands that dynamic, it can work very, very

well.

Miles Pomper

Great. Okay. Was there is there anything sorry, again, about starting late, is there anything I didn't ask about that you think I should?

David Griffiths

Um, I don't think so. I think we've covered most of it. And again, if I may, just as a plug: this book "Order from Ashes" – and I think I sent you an email with the details – but I've written a chapter in there which almost was my swan song – everything that I've learned from all this Middle East, I think I've put into one very long chapter with lots of footnotes. But it says pretty much everything I would want to say. But it concludes by emphasizing the operational focus – not there to solve a political problem. Honesty and openness. If you're there to score points, well forget about it. It has to be "Look, we're gonna sit down in the same room, we have a common interest in not having things happen we don't intend to happen" – that kind of frankness. It has to be discreet. It's no place for making points. And again, that focus has to be simple. You start getting into complex legal text and that's useless at sea where things happen quickly – they're very complicated – so simplicity is important. The collegiality, the having fun together, the fact that we would meet in casual civilian dress, the fact that we could laugh at each other. It takes time to build that, but it built surprisingly quickly. Get somebody who can sing, because that's always fun. But, we're all human beings, and that's an important thing. And finally, practicality – and somebody writing about the U.S.-Soviet Union Incidents at Sea Agreement once said that it has to be practical, it has to be simple – "If it doesn't work in adversity, then it's not worth the paper it's written on." So, practical focus.

Miles Pomper

Great. Well, thanks.

David Griffiths

I put in plugs for books.

Miles Pomper

No, we'll definitely take a look at it.

David Griffiths

So that's it for me. If there's anything else, you know, by all means, get in touch. I'll be happy to correspond with you on any of this.

Miles Pomper

Great, thanks. And once we've got the transcription, we'll be sending you a copy of the transcription to make sure that no errors or interpretation and so on.

David Griffiths

No problem.

Miles Pomper

All right. Thank you. Have a good day.

David Griffiths

Thank you. It's been nice meeting you.

Miles Pomper

You too. Take care.

[End of transcript]