

Major General Sir Hugh Beach – some Pugwash recollections 2002-2019

By Christopher Watson

Hugh Beach, who died on 4 September 2019, was born on 23 May 1923 to Constance and William H Beach (who was latterly a Major-General & engineer-in-chief of the Indian Army). Hugh was educated at Winchester and Peterhouse, Cambridge (getting Firsts in both parts of the Mechanical Science Tripos). In August 1941, he joined the army (Royal Engineers), and had distinguished active service in WW2, and then rose through a series of senior operational and staff posts to become Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the United Kingdom Land Forces 1976-77 and then Master General of the Ordnance (Army Board member for Procurement) from 1977-81. Retiring from the army in 1981, he became Warden of St. George's House Windsor Castle 1981-86, and Director of the Council for Arms Control 1986-89.

Throughout this whole period he took a strong interest in International Affairs, and lectured and contributed chapters to over two dozen books, as well as publishing a number of monographs, articles and book reviews. These were mainly on defence policy, arms control and disarmament, but they also raised ethical issues concerning war and peace. In 1999 he co-authored, with Nadine Gurr, a book on British nuclear weapons policy. He never had technical responsibility for these weapons during his army career, but nuclear matters were necessarily built into the tactical planning and exercises for which Hugh was responsible.

By pure coincidence, he and I were both elected to the Executive Committee of the British Pugwash Group on the same day - 19 April 2002. Our backgrounds could hardly have been more different. He came from a military family, and he had strong links with the UK nuclear weapons establishment, as well as those of a Pugwash persuasion. I came from the Oxford theoretical physics Department. After Hugh and I met each other in 2002, we rapidly developed a lifelong friendship, and we collaborated on many Pugwash-related projects. Below are just a few examples of Hugh's output during his time as an active Pugwash member.

In 2003 Hugh circulated to the BPG a draft **Report on 'Tactical Nuclear Weapons'** inviting comments. I drew his attention to my National Service experience of ferrying an atomic cannon across the Rhine, and writing an essay on the use that I would make of having such a weapon at my disposal. Hugh was suitably horrified at the responsibilities that the army gave to a young subaltern in those days. 'It makes my blood run cold'. He was convinced that such weapons had no value in modern warfare.

Later that year, Hugh circulated a paper he had written on **“The concept of Preventive War: Old wine in a new wineskin”**, discussing the evolution from mediaeval thinking to current ideas (eg the use of ‘preventive strikes’ to counter terrorist threats and WMD proliferation). In a subsequent lecture on **“Military intervention and the Just War”**, he extended the discussion to include suicide bombers and concepts such as ‘proportionate force’ or ‘humanitarian intervention’.

In 2004, the UK government started to make public its discussions with the US about Trident replacement. Hugh participated in internal BPG discussions, helping us to formulate new arguments. Early in 2006 he circulated a draft contribution to a book on **‘Trident Replacement’** for which he had written a chapter, highlighting the existing British Trident system’s dependence on US support. Within BPG, drafting started on a paper called **“A time to phase out the UK nuclear deterrent?”**

This led to a joint Pugwash/Chatham House meeting on Trident, at which Hugh was chosen to chair a session and present a paper on **‘Trident: the options - Ethical, Legal and Social’**. The joint meeting was attended by senior representatives from Parliament and NGOs, though not by anyone from the Government.

In 2007, BPG decided to set up an **independent BPG project on the management of the UK stockpile of Pu**. Hugh agreed to be a member of the project working group. The final version of the report on this project was printed in 2008, and published at a presentation co-hosted with Vertic. A press release for this meeting prompted an item in the BBC news that evening, and a later government response.

Between 2007 and 2011 International interest in the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons grew. The starting-point was a letter by the US ‘gang of four’ (Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn), endorsed by Gorbachev, and shortly followed by a UK ‘gang of four’ (Rifkind, Hurd, Owen & Robertson) letter in the Times. Perhaps responding to these shifts in the wind, in 2008, Hugh circulated a draft paper on the **‘Uselessness of Nuclear Weapons’**, which he subsequently re-named as **“What price nuclear blackmail?”**

An unforeseen outcome of these developments was that MoD began discussions with Pugwash on a possible collaboration on various aspects of nuclear weapon disarmament. The first topic to be selected by MoD was a **peer review of work in progress or planned within MoD on the verification of Nuclear Weapon dismantlement**. After some delays while we obtained security clearance for a team of five (including Hugh), the work at AWE on verification was presented to us and we were allowed to see some of the equipment being developed. Much of this was to implement an ‘information barrier’ between the weapon and inspectors, so they could not access information about the design of the weapon, which according to MoD would be a violation of the NPT. After our briefing Hugh

wrote to me wondering whether the UK could allow MoD to relax its interpretation of the NPT on this.

During 2013 he participated in a debate in the media over the future of the 'British Deterrent', writing articles with titles such as the **"Flaws in the argument for British Trident"** and **"How would Britain fare as a non-nuclear weapon state?"** He attempted to get a summary of his views published in the Telegraph as a letter to the Editor in April 2013, but this was turned down. However essentially the same letter was published in The Times a few days later with what he modestly called 'star treatment'.

In 2014 he wrote an article which was published by RUSI, titled **"The UK's Nuclear Deterrent"**, which sought to rebut the arguments for maintaining a British deterrent indefinitely. He circulated this to BPG friends with the words "my swansong I suspect" or "probably my last effusion". Shortly thereafter he moved from his home in London to an Anglican retirement home – The College of St Barnabas in Lingfield.

Hugh Beach was a very private man, except in the specialised world of nuclear weapons policy. In our e-mail correspondence over 17 years we exchanged over 2000 messages, but only a handful related to his deeply-held religious beliefs – eg. he sent me an article he published in the Clarion about Edward Reynolds, a distinguished 17th century Anglican divine, who wrote the General Thanksgiving prayer. Reynolds was a Fellow and later Warden of Merton College and (briefly) Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, before being dismissed by Parliament in 1650 for his refusal to subscribe to its Presbyterian doctrines, but after the restoration of the monarchy was re- elected as Warden of Merton. Hugh also sent me a long and passionate article entitled "the Hydropolitics of Palestine" which he had written about the religiously-motivated tensions in the Middle East.

Hugh was a very reliable supporter of British Pugwash, participating fully in the work of its Executive Committee, and contributing incisively to its thinking on world affairs. He will be much missed.