

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...

# A Political Officer at the U.S. Mission to NATO

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

By Jim DeHart

| **8 a.m.** | We stand on the street outside our house, my 6-year-old daughter and I, waiting for the school bus. It's our morning ritual — often the only time I see her each day.

| **8:20 a.m.** | The car radio blasts French-language news, but I am too distracted by traffic to comprehend. Public transportation is not an option when you work at NATO headquarters, out near the airport. For the first time ever, we are a two-car family.

| **8:45 a.m.** | The political section is quiet. I eat a croissant with my first cup of coffee as the computer fires up. Soon I have a cable on my screen — guidance for today's meeting with a delegation from Bulgaria, one of 10 nations eager to join the NATO alliance. The guidance looks familiar. It should be: last week we told Washington what it should say.

| **9:20 a.m.** | I convert the cable into talking points for the ambassador — all about what Bulgaria must do to meet NATO standards, from fighting corruption to tightening export controls to downsizing its antiquated military machine. The reforms will be tough, but with memories of Soviet domination still fresh, NATO's defense guarantee is well worth the pain.

| **10 a.m.** | I turn my attention to yesterday's unfinished cable on the ambassador's meeting with his counterpart from Uzbekistan, a front-line state in the war on terror. In 1994, NATO's Partnership for Peace expanded NATO's reach from Scandinavia to the Caucasus to Central Asia. Today, there are 45 ambassadors within three-wood range of the U.S. mission — and no shortage of meetings.

| **12 p.m.** | E-mails and phone calls keep me from my cable. As thoughts turn to food, a document from NATO's International Staff pops onto the screen, proposing new tactics to support Ukraine's stability and democratic evolution. In two days, NATO members will meet to discuss strategy. If we want to lead that discussion — and we always do — we'll need instructions, and to get our instructions in time we'll need to propose talking points to Washington tonight. Incoming, outgoing, incoming: we're on an assembly line — only instead of slicing parts off chickens or fastening bolts on a Toyota, we're working with ideas, deleting and inserting pieces to build something called policy.

| **12:10 p.m.** | I forgo lunch in the cafeteria to eat a sandwich at my desk. The paper on Ukraine is a painful read, nuanced beyond meaning and bleeding acronyms. It's the dialect of the international bureaucrat, something akin to English but far more wonkish and opaque: *In light of the NAC decision, modalities for stock-taking in the context of the Charter were agreed by the PC ...* Maybe this is the language I should have learned, French being all but useless here at NATO; only the Francophones care to keep it alive.

| **12:25 p.m.** | I climb the stairs to the third floor to discuss the paper with my Defense Department colleague, then descend again to my office. After this burst of physical

activity, I go to work on a NATO-Ukraine guidance request, leaving aside my earlier cable.

| **2 p.m.** | The sun shines through my window, an event not taken lightly in Brussels. Somewhere out there, restaurants are serving duck and mussels and thick brown beer, or at least I think they are, based on some vague memory. This is the strangest part of NATO — the utter separation from the world outside. With all allies and partners on-campus, there is no reason to venture beyond the barbed-wire perimeter, no need to learn about Belgian society or politics or culture. To top it off, security arrangements in the mission preclude the hiring of local employees, normally the heart and soul of U.S. embassy operations. Without them, our isolation is complete.

| **3 p.m.** | My guidance request cable is done and out for clearance. Comments trickle in from colleagues, but most are too busy with their own cables to offer much. The Balkans, NATO-E.U. relations, missile defense: The volume of work is enormous and the issues complex, making us the masters of our portfolios. For those who want to do “policy,” this seems the place to be. I read and answer a dozen e-mails.

| **4:55 p.m.** | I walk my revised cable to the front office, then chat with the ambassador on the way downstairs. In the conference room, the 19 permanent representatives of NATO (ambassadors from each NATO country) form a giant ring. To our right is the United Kingdom, then Turkey. Directly across from us, separated by the alphabet and yards of empty space, are the French. If only we sat next to them, close enough to swap jokes, maybe things would be different. There are no windows in the room, only ceiling lights in a funky drop-down design, circa 1971.

| **5:05 p.m.** | NATO’s secretary general calls the meeting to order, then gives the floor to Bulgaria’s foreign minister, who describes his government’s plans for further reforms. The minister of defense speaks next. Afterward, the “permreps” take turns critiquing Bulgaria’s efforts; their assessments are candid, sometimes brutal.

| **7:15 p.m.** | The meeting ends. The Bulgarians look tired but relieved; they have survived another test and understand better the work that lies ahead. Perhaps they take solace in being part of Eastern Europe’s historic march toward democracy, human rights, and free markets — a transformation spurred by the lure of NATO and European Union membership.

| **7:30 p.m.** | Back in my office, I catch up on some reading and organize my papers for tomorrow. My guidance request on NATO-Ukraine is fully cleared, so I hit the send button and watch it drop from my queue. Unfortunately, my earlier cable on the Uzbek meeting is still there; and now I owe another cable on the Bulgarians, meaning that I have lost ground since showing up for work this morning.

| **8 p.m.** | I lock up my safe and head down the hall, with a quick good night to those still at their desks. The drive home is quick, the traffic thin as the sunlight fades. The Belgian houses are nice to look at, with their neat little gardens and winding stone steps. I wonder if I will ever be invited into one. But no, we are invisible to the locals, walking among them as if in a different dimension, a parallel world.

| **8:25 p.m.** | Dinner is waiting; a quick reheat in the microwave is all it takes.

As my wife puts our 2-year-old to sleep, I read about NATO in the *International Herald Tribune*. Yes, I think to myself, I worked on that issue, and that one too. At NATO, we are in the thick of it. Never before have I felt so plugged in — and so isolated.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...

## The Deputy Chief of Mission

EMBASSY KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

*By Ann Wright*

| **4:30 a.m.** | My workday begins at U.S. Embassy Kabul. The 100-person Marine detachment is changing shifts, communications officers are pulling the cable traffic from Washington, mullahs are calling Afghans to morning prayer, and first light is peeking over snow-capped mountains surrounding Kabul valley. Colorfully-painted trucks, men in warm shawls on bicycles, boys pulling carts filled with everything from freshly-slaughtered sheep to window glass are passing by the embassy.

| **8 a.m.** | Three Marines march to the flagpole and raise the American flag. No matter how many mornings I see this ceremony in Kabul — ground zero for U.S. assistance to the Afghan people and potentially ground zero for al-Qaida retaliation for the war on terrorism — the daily raising and lowering of the flag are moving. I came in with the first diplomats in December 2001, and I've been here on and off since then. One hundred miles south of here, the largest coalition military action in Afghanistan, Operation Anaconda, rages as coalition and Afghan forces pound a large concentration of al-Qaida fighters.

| **8:30 a.m.** | The U.S. country team meets to coordinate U.S. government activities (except for military operations) in Afghanistan. Chargé d'Affaires Ryan Crocker chairs the meeting. Humanitarian and developmental projects for Afghanistan are the focus of today's meeting. Military, U.S. Agency for International Development, and administrative section representatives quickly agree on a plan of action for two infrastructure projects in Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat. Embassy political officers update us on regional political happenings. The defense attaché comments on local militia factions.

| **9:30 a.m.** | I'm off to a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to go over a proposed schedule for an upcoming congressional delegation (CODEL) visit. We recently had CODELs on three consecutive days, and then on the fourth day Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived. The Afghan interim administration's tiny protocol office coordinates meetings with key Afghan officials for our delegations. With an ever-increasing number of diplomatic and international organization missions in Kabul, the protocol office must assist more and more official visitors. The protocol officers work nonstop, with few functional telephones, computers or fax machines to use.

We provide a proposed schedule of events and meetings, understanding that we will probably not get a response from the protocol office until the morning of the visit.