



ROYAL AIR FORCE OFFICERS' CLUB

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BRYANSTON 2021

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RAFOC REMINISCENCES AND RAMBLINGS - WEEK 170

7th JULY 2023

GREETINGS:

Winter is upon us – Fighting the freeze this July while UK sweats... South Africa one of the most violent and dangerous places in the world... Six months of Fokol: Tembisa Hospital staff in R1 billion tender mafia still operating... SA losing trillions to violence every year... jackals guarding the chicken house... Cyril ducks Phala Phala... Roode uner the bus... The S A government has not authorised sale of arms to Russia since 2020, says Digital Communications Minister Mondli Gungubele – maybe they were virtual sales?... Forget Turkish ships – this Chinese solution to load shedding infinitely superior... New payroll tax and income tax hike needed for NHI – Here we go again... Eskom's new scheme to limit your power... Delville Wood this month... bungling Durban City Council plunged the Durban July into darkness... Boycotting Banyana Banyana bamboozled by Botswana – Lesufi p***es in the soup...

Independence Day this week in the land of the free and the home of the brave (would someone please explain to Poor Old Joe?)... Russian Generals disappear... Russian media to erase all traces of mutinous warlord... 500 days on: Zelenskiy: Russia may be preparing to trigger nuclear plant explosion... France fighting the Crusades in their own back yard... 40 000 French Police deployed to Nanterre's nest of snakes... "shooting the vermin"... China, Myanmar and now Darfur... the horror of genocide is here again.... Israeli jets struck Syrian targets, probably Hezbollah... UK has the hottest June on record... Sunak U-turn on wind farms draws wrath of green Tories... 'Desperate and angry' UK headteachers ready to strike in autumn.... JK Rowling says same-sex toilets sacrifice girls' dignity... Skelm Aussies need to repent in sackcloth and Ashes... Sunak wades into row... Sir Geoff Boycott says Australia should issue a public apology over the stumping – if they are man enough... Mexican mayor married a reptile (Australian?)

RAF 60 SECOND UPDATE:

Welcome to the second episode of the RAF 60 Second Update. Watch below to find out how the Cosford Airshow entertained the crowds, what aircraft flew in Exercise Arctic Challenge, how the Kings Birthday Fly-past was coordinated and how we said goodbye to the Hercules C-130J.

<https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/raf-60-second-update-episode-2/>

NEW CAS STATEMENT ON RAF RECRUITING INQUIRY:



Today, 29 June 2023, the Royal Air Force has released a report following an inquiry regarding recruiting and selection practices. A statement from Air Chief Marshal Sir Rich Knighton, Chief of the Air Staff, can be viewed below and the full report is there.

“Last September, my predecessor, Air Chief Marshal Sir Mike Wigston, instigated an independent non-statutory inquiry (NSI) into RAF recruitment and the circumstances that had led to the resignation of the then Group Captain Recruiting and Selection. I fully supported Sir Mike’s decision to convene the inquiry. The NSI has now concluded and will be published today. It makes 12 recommendations, all of which I have accepted. The recommendations either have been, or are in the process of being, implemented in full. I would like to thank the NSI team for its thorough work, and everyone who participated for their time and their openness. This has been an important process and I’m grateful for the patience shown by those affected while the investigation was conducted, and the report was compiled; it was important that it was given the time to be done properly. In September 2022, we acknowledged that the RAF had made mistakes in the way we had offered places on training courses to people selected to join the RAF. The NSI confirmed that in 2020 and 2021, a total of 161 enlisted aviators, who were either women or from ethnic minority backgrounds, were accelerated onto initial training ahead of other candidates. The belief at that time, based on the understanding of the recruiting process and interpretation of the legal advice, was that this practice demonstrated acceptable, positive action. We now know that it did not, and I apologise unreservedly to all those affected. We accept that some men were discriminated against. This included a group of 31 individuals, who likely missed the opportunity to qualify for a £5000 joining bonus. We have identified those people and are retrospectively offering to award them any financial payment they missed out on. Those involved in Recruiting and Selection throughout this period acted with the best of intentions; but it is clear that people responsible for implementing these policies did raise concerns at the time, and the way in which long-term aspirational goals set by senior leadership to improve diversity in the RAF were translated into personal performance targets was wrong. I apologise unreservedly to the Recruiting and Selection team and the former Group Captain Recruiting and Selection for the cumulative pressure placed on them to achieve those aspirational goals. Those who joined the RAF during this period met the necessary standards, and so entered the RAF on merit. The people who were accelerated into training had already passed all of the RAF’s selection criteria and assessments, so there was no compromise of entry standards and no impact on operational effectiveness. I know the NSI and the circumstances that led to it resulted in the RAF experiencing intense levels of media scrutiny. This has had an effect on the morale of the people in the RAF, and it has been particularly unsettling for those working in our Recruiting and Selection teams. We are ensuring that personnel identified within the report are supported appropriately. We will learn the lessons from the NSI. We have rigorously scrutinised our recruiting practices and continue to monitor our recruitment processes. We will not make the same mistakes again. While I remain determined to improve levels of inclusion and diversity in the RAF, we will ensure that our methods are beyond reproach. We are working hard to restore trust and

confidence in our recruitment processes, and I am hugely grateful for the hard work of the Recruiting and Selection teams right across the country who continue to achieve the best recruiting performance in defence. The RAF has prided itself over its 105-year history on being a meritocracy, where someone's ability and potential has always mattered more than where they came from or what they looked like. The RAF will continue to be a meritocracy and we will always aim to attract the best people from the widest talent pool, to help make the RAF the most operationally effective force it can be." *Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of the Air Staff*

SWIFT TO SUPPORT:



A Royal Air Force C-17 Globemaster III and Atlas A400M have supported international search, rescue and recovery efforts for Titan Submersible lost in the North Atlantic.

The Royal Air Force support began with a specialist team of movers from the RAF Brize Norton Air Portability Section being flown aboard an Atlas A400M to RAF Lossiemouth. On arrival the team loaded specialist equipment, that had been transported from Aberdeen by road, onto a 99 Sqn C-17 Globemaster III. The Atlas, on returning to RAF Brize Norton, was then loaded with further essential personnel and equipment. The Atlas A400M and C-17 Globemaster III then flew to St John's, Canada, to deliver the equipment and personnel. "The RAF is always ready to support civilian authorities in emergency and humanitarian situations. We hope that the RAF contribution to the international rescue effort is of assistance." *Squadron Leader Simon Philips, C-17 Pilot.* "The RAF stepped up today to support the vital work of the rescue efforts. We are proud to have played a small but vital part, of getting essential equipment and specialists to where it is needed." *Group Captain Jim Lee, Station Commander, RAF Lossiemouth*

ROYAL STANDARD:



The first Royal Air Force Standard of His Majesty The King's reign has been presented to 600 (City of London) Squadron at RAF Northolt.

The Royal Auxiliary Air Force Squadron received the Standard from the Representative Lord Mayor of London, Sir Charles Bowman, during an impressive ceremony and parade. Air Chief Marshal Sir Rich Knighton, the newly appointed Chief of the Air Staff, acted as Reviewing Officer for the parade.

The 600 (City of London) Squadron Standard contains a living history that embodies the Squadron, connects every member of the Squadron, and reminds us of their strong bonds with the City of London. From its very beginning in 1925, 600 Squadron has recruited from the City, and it was proud to be part of London with its aircraft displaying the City Crest. Always at the core of the Squadron are its people – they are what makes 600 Squadron great, and they are the current custodians of this rich history. *Alderman Sir Charles Bowman*

CELEBRATING INDEPENDENCE:

We've all been there. A long week at work leads to blowing off some steam on a Friday night — which almost certainly leads to blowing some money. When you awake the next day and look at your bank account you cringe at the damage you caused not only to your liver but also to your checking account. But fear not, you're simply following in the well-trodden footsteps of the father of this nation. On Sept 14, 1787, after enduring a suffocatingly hot summer at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, George Washington and his fellow founding fathers had just put the finishing touches on the final draft of the U.S. Constitution. After a long war and what seemed like an even longer political process, a celebratory night out on the town was clearly in order. Nothing like creating a country from scratch to make you want to imbibe. "At City Tavern, the framers' unofficial watering hole four blocks from Independence Hall," wrote in the Washington Post, "Washington was the guest of the Light Horse of Philadelphia, a volunteer cavalry corps that had crossed the Delaware with Washington and wintered at Valley Forge. The First Troop, as the unit came to be known, could fight. And, boy, could they drink." In 2018, the bar tab from that night's revelry was re-discovered by Gordon Lloyd, a professor emeritus at Pepperdine University, while he was sifting through Independence Hall archival documents. The City Tavern bill contained an impressively long itemized receipt of the following:

- 54 bottles of Madeira wine
- 60 bottles of claret
- 22 bottles of porter
- 12 bottles of beer
- 8 bottles of cider
- 7 large bowls of punch (presumably alcoholic)

Keeping in line with the fine tradition of the infantry, 55 soldiers managed to guzzle over 45 gallons of booze that Friday night. According to The Post, nine musicians and seven waiters ran up their own liquor bill — 21 additional bottles of wine — for which the soldiers also paid. In addition, there was the matter of compensating the tavern for a myriad of broken wine glasses, decanters and tumblers. The tab, totaling 89 pounds, 4 shillings and 2 pence, is roughly around \$15,400 today, Lloyd calculated. At a time when water wasn't the safest source to wet one's whistle, who could really blame them? "Inheriting European habits," writes author Rosemary Ostler, "most early Americans avoided water, not only out of fear of pollution but also a conviction that drinking alcoholic beverages was more healthful." While he was no teetotaler, it is unclear whether Washington partook in that evening's festivities. However, sources can neither confirm nor deny that Washington still had a raging hangover three days later when he signed the country's founding document. The notion that Americans loved to imbibe was not lost on Washington. While other revolutionary leaders distilled liquor, George Washington was the only founding father to run a commercial distillery, according to Ostler. In 1799, after one year in operation, Washington earned nearly \$7,500 from whiskey sales, making his distillery one of Mount Vernon's most profitable enterprises. A profit Washington would certainly need if he continued to rack up such impressive tabs. Salud!

USS RONALD REAGAN:

This marks the USS Ronald Reagan's first visit to the country since diplomatic relations between Viet Nam and the US were normalized in 1995 and is the third time a US aircraft carrier has visited the country since 2018. "We are honoured to receive the USS Ronald Reagan and CSG 5 in cooperation with our Vietnamese partners. This visit marks a special occasion as our countries celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the US-Viet Nam Comprehensive Partnership, showcasing our

shared commitment to a prosperous and secure future,” US Ambassador to Viet Nam Marc Knapper said in a statement released via the US Embassy. This routine port call highlights the shared commitment to strong Viet Nam-US relations.



Ronald Reagan CSG Makes Five Day Visit to Da Nang

“We’re excited to come to Viet Nam and appreciate the welcome our strike group has received,” said Rear Admiral Patrick Hannifin, commander, Task Force (CTF) 70/Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 5. “Visits like this reinforce our partnership and commitment to confronting shared challenges in the maritime domain.” Earlier on Thursday, spokesperson for the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Phạm Thu Hằng remarked that the visit is an “ordinary exchange,” that is “meant to contribute to peace, stability, cooperation and development in the region and the world.” The Ronald Reagan CSG is deployed to the US 7th Fleet area of operations in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. The United States’ 7th Fleet is the US Navy’s largest numbered fleet, and routinely interacts and operates with US allies and partners.

WAGNER GOTHs AND VANDALS:



It is easy to understand what African rulers see in the mercenary group Wagner. Its fighters can be deployed quickly. It brings sophisticated arms with it and can apply force speedily and ruthlessly. Alternative sources of military muscle have flaws: United Nations missions lack robust mandates; African Union (AU) forces lack the arms and motivation; European Union interveners bear the legacy of colonial repression. The US has little interest in Africa beyond supporting fights against Salafi terrorists. The Wagner Group was set up by Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2014 as a private military company to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine that year. For over a decade, Prigozhin could not operate without Russian president Vladimir Putin’s permission. During this period the interests of Russia and Wagner might have differed – but they did not compete and they heavily overlapped. Of course, the Wagner rebellion that began on 23 June 2023 (*after this article was first drafted*) and then fizzled out makes Wagner’s future in Africa highly uncertain. Since completing my dissertation on

Soviet-American competition in Africa in 1992, I have followed the great power competition on the continent. This has included the slowly escalating Sino-American competition in Africa over the past 20 years. I was re-alerted to the “return” of Russia to Africa in preparing a textbook, *Africa’s International Relations*, published in 2018. Based on this experience my view is that Wagner is likely to continue to bring misery to the African continent in multiple forms. No outsiders are likely to stop it. Its presence will continue also because individual African actors, state and non-state, benefit from its presence. Its utility to certain regimes helps explain the African Union’s conspicuous silence on the menace it poses. The passivity towards Wagner also reflects a deeper ambivalence about Russia and Russian imperialism. Overall, Wagner has done nearly nothing to make life better for Africans: its activities have served to entrench dictators and undermine democracies; to extend and deepen civil conflicts; to murder innocent civilians; to exploit natural resources for Russia’s gain; and to vilify the only alternative that Africans have to China for investment. This means that, in due course, the AU and responsible African governments are likely to resent Wagner’s presence and regret their failure to oppose it. Wagnerian misdeeds - Wagner has helped abusive regimes maintain power on the continent. It assisted Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir to train troops, guard resources and suppress dissent between 2017 and his overthrow in April 2019. It has helped nascent dictatorships consolidate power. This has included its role in Mali where elections are being stalled and the military regime has invited Wagner forces in. Wagner joined the civil war in Libya in October 2018, eventually sending in over 1,000 troops to assist the rebel leader Khalifa Hifter’s Libyan Arab Armed Forces. This is Russia’s clearest violation of international law in deploying Wagner. Wagner’s use of mines and booby traps, which killed many civilians, also violated laws of war. In the Central African Republic (CAR) Wagner has engaged in direct combat with a coalition of rebels. According to a leading research centre, 40% of combat engagements between December 2020 and July 2022 involved Wagner. In Mozambique the government has hired Wagner to fight an al-Shabaab-linked group. Russia and Wagner are involved in the civil war that broke out in Sudan in April this year. Everywhere it goes, Wagner has been indifferent to human life, indiscriminately killing civilians as well as Islamic militants and other insurgents. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project research group found that between 52% and 71% of Wagner’s uses of force in the CAR and Mali targeted civilians. There are a number of reasons for this involvement. Firstly, the Russian government has been on the lookout for military bases in Africa. Even before Wagner first got involved in Africa in 2017, Russia already had military cooperation agreements with 18 African countries. These have ranged from democracies like Ghana and Nigeria to ungoverned Eastern Libya, which has become a logistics hub for Russia as well as Wagner. Secondly, Russia is using its redoubtable propaganda apparatus to spread misinformation about the US and Europe in Africa in support of the Ukraine war. Thirdly, the motive is profit. Aside from the government payments it receives, Wagner has negotiated agreements for exclusive access to gold, diamonds and uranium resources in several places it operates in. These include the CAR, Mali and Sudan. A vacuum of opposition. There appears little chance that any major forces from inside or outside Africa will seriously oppose its activities. Individual African actors, state and non-state, benefit from its presence. This small number of beneficiaries will stymie action against Wagner’s mercenaryism, which is banned under international law. Nor is there likely to be collective pressure under the umbrella of the AU. It can only organise collective action – as it did against apartheid – when there is a broad consensus on an issue. The same analysis applies to Africa’s numerous regional economic communities. These have recently taken a larger role in security, but none has taken an anti-Wagner stance. On top of this is the ambivalence of a number of African countries towards Russia. Twenty-four African states either abstained or were absent for the UN General Assembly Resolution that condemned Russia’s illegal annexation of parts of eastern Ukraine. Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Zambia all voted in favour. What about Africa’s leading regional powers? Ethiopia and Nigeria are influential enough to matter. But each is too preoccupied with internal problems to take up the matter. Only South Africa could take a stand against Wagner. But it won’t. The African National Congress, which rules South Africa, has a deep nostalgia for Soviet assistance during the apartheid days. South African elites also value both Russia and China as counterbalances to the perceived western dominance that they still loathe. And the country relishes the prestige that comes with membership in the BRICS group. Nor is there likely to be any effective international mobilisation

against Wagner. This is because western condemnation would go unheard or even backfire. As Joseph Sany, an esteemed peace-building expert at the US Institute of Peace, observed recently: “Western condemnation of immoral Russian violence and corruption” is tone deaf because it’s “tainted with hypocrisy by the west’s history in the continent. The US, in any case, has few options to deter Wagner as American leaders are rarely focused on the continent. And France has increasingly withdrawn from Africa. The only relevant external great power for Africa is China. But, in my view, China will play no role in constraining Wagner. For the time being, at least, the Ukraine War has made Russia and China allies. In addition, China has extensive business interests, particularly sourcing minerals from Francophone and Lusophone African states. Lastly, China has been deploying its own private security companies on the continent, mainly to secure access to minerals. These organisations are not yet directly involved in politics, like Wagner, but their presence serves to legitimise further the use of private security companies. *Written by John F Clark, Professor Politics and International Relations, Florida International University. Republished with permission from ISS Africa. The original article can be found at [here](#).*

CORRECTION:

In the last issue of Ramblings, on Page 6, towards the end of the piece on Sunderlands, the words “AS HER MAJESTY...” appear. This is the start of the next piece, on a new biography on Eric “Winkle” Brown by Paul Beaver. Due to printers Gremlins the head of the article and pictures below disappeared into the ether...

FLYING ACE WHO MADE TOP GUN LOOK TAME:

Eric ‘Winkle’ Brown played a vital role in the Battle of the Atlantic, survived a U-Boat torpedo — and holds the world record for the most aircraft carrier landings. No wonder his bravery is legend. Eric ‘Winkle’ Brown may not be a household name, but he certainly should be, and this thumping great biography by Britain’s leading aviation historian deserves to put that right.



© COLLECT Captain Eric Brown



© BBC/Eric Brown With test pilots at AeroFlight, Farnborough. Eric in the darker FAA uniform

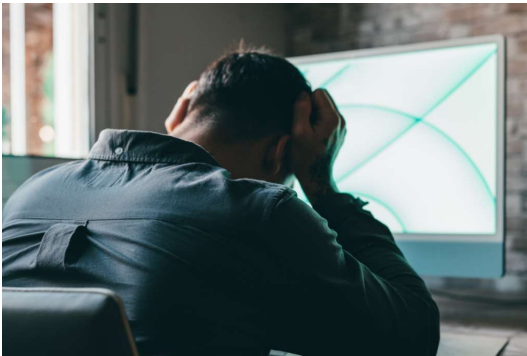
WHAT PRICE CHEAP AIR TICKETS?



Air tickets are cheaper than they have been previously this year; however, this does not necessarily spell good news for the industry and consumers, says Jonathan Ayache, the CEO of airline startup ‘Lift’ speaking on the latest episode of BusinessTalk, he said that air travel demand has not fully recovered in South Africa since the pandemic.

He said that demand is currently around 80% pre- Covid – which is roughly the same as April last year, marking the last 12 months as relatively flat, whereas the rest of the world has recovered beyond the pandemic. The CEO said that the country's domestic macroeconomic situation is reducing the number of people who can afford to fly to South Africa. This is despite the consumer perception that more people are travelling. Supply and demand is a principle which plagues the airline industry, as seen in early 2022, when the liquidation of umbrella company Comair – which operated Kulula.com and was the domestic partner for British Airways in South Africa – wiped out 40% of domestic airline capacity, ramping up ticket prices and forcing other airlines to rapidly boost capacity. Ayache said that the industry is actually now seeing the opposite – there is now an oversupply with low demand. This is also due to the seasonality of the domestic market, where January, February and March are busier while May, June and July are quieter. "There's an oversupply, which seems great for passengers right now because they can get a return trip to Johannesburg for cheap; however, it is not sustainable. You see what happened with Mango (and) Comair – it's not good for competition," said the CEO. He said that airline companies need to grow but also have a duty to act responsibly. As reported by News24 earlier this week, Ayache believes that dominant airlines are providing tickets below the cost of operating flights and should be investigated by the Competition Commission. He said that certain airlines have pursued "excessively optimistic and aggressive growth strategies" in the past year; however the gradual rebound of passenger volumes and demand has now created challenges and increased pressure for all domestic airlines. The impact of this behaviour has been to drive down the pricing of tickets to unsustainably low levels. In the short term, this may seem like a good thing, especially for the public. It's actually very detrimental in the medium to long term as seen after Comair's exit, said the CEO. Looking ahead for the industry, however, Ayache said that he sees opportunity and an upward trajectory for the airline industry once the economy starts to recover and the country 'gets on top' of load shedding. (*BusinessTech*)

“QUIET QUITTING” - JA, WEL, NO FINE...



There has been an increase in employees disengaging emotionally, mentally and sometimes physically from their work – a trend now known more widely as 'quiet quitting'. The trend involves employees disengaging from a job and doing the bare minimum and has raised eyebrows as a worrisome trend taking its toll on everyday businesses. Ncumisa Madinda, a member solutions executive at Momentum Corporate, said that this trend is a dangerous phenomenon that often masks underlying emotional and mental health issues.

According to Madinda, this trend speaks volumes about the pressing need to prioritise employee wellness and address the underlying factors contributing to this rise in mental health issues. When employees disengage, productivity plummets, decreasing creativity, innovation, and overall performance. As these individuals silently suffer, organisations face the risk of losing valuable talent, resulting in increased turnover rates and decreased employee morale." "This vicious cycle perpetuates a toxic work culture, hampering personal and professional growth," said the executive. A recent Mental State of the World 2022 report revealed that South Africa ranked among the lowest-scoring countries as socioeconomic fluctuations led to a deterioration of employee mental health. While 'quiet quitting' is often associated with younger employees, the mental stresses that underpin the trend are not alien to older employees. Madinda noted that people approaching retirement often face the daunting realisation that they have inadequate savings, leaving them overwhelmed and helpless. "Financial pressures create a breeding ground for mental distress, forcing people into a silent resignation from their work and life ambitions," said Madinda. She said that the energy crisis is also often overlooked for having a deteriorating effect on employees' mental state. "Frequent power outages and uncertainties surrounding energy availability further contribute to stress and anxiety, leaving individuals grappling with personal and professional challenges. This is particularly

true in remote and hybrid working environments.” As a result of these compounding negative factors, South Africans have more reason to quit quietly. To combat this, it is up to employers to prioritise employee wellness by creating a supportive work environment that will foster open communication, promote work-life balance and provide access to mental health resources. Ultimately, employers can support employees, reversing the trend and fostering a healthier, more productive workforce.

Late last year, found that quiet quitting is only an unlawful way of leaving an occupation if an employee ends up doing less than they are mandated to do so in terms of their employment contract.

MEMBERS NEWS:

Philip Weyers writes from the land down under:

Greetings Gentlemen, Hope all well in my Motherland! Unusually cold here at the moment, or so I'm told. Friday night was down to 3°C, 17° below my acceptable night temp with occasional rain. And I can't even blame those incompetent thieving ANC clowns for it. The Labour Party is in the hot seat here and I find them also nauseating, though for very different reasons! As undertaken previously, attached a word version of my impressions should it be of any interest. Be well, take care and see you in a month or two!

CHEERS FOR NOW:

The world is a less peaceful place (would you believe it?)... Your Ed joined the ranks of the unemployed and quit gainful employment last week after 8 years with Bidvest Bank (watch this space)... Ministers Mbalula and Mashatile could give Sunak lessons – not only Putin is suffering from fantasies...

Our next lunch is a **Ladies Lunch at 12h30 for 13h00 this Friday 7 July at Wanderers Club, Illovo**... Price remains R250 per person, which includes wines at table. Hamilton Wende will be addressing us, and he has confirmed. You are too late to make a booking, sorry if you did not action your thoughts.

Meantime, enjoy this week's read, as the winter chills set in with a vengeance...

As we Commemorate the Battle of Delville Wood, part of the great Battle of the Somme in 1916, its timely to be reminded of the great slaughter by one of its victims, Philip Bainbrigge, Schoolmaster at Shrewsbury School before his death in the trenches. One of his pupils at Shrewsbury was Neville Shute, the aviator, author and founder of the Airspeed Aircraft Company, who records these lines in his autobiography "Slide Rule."

IF I SHOULD DIE:

If I should die, be not concerned to know the manner of my ending, if I fell leading a forlorn charge against the foe, strangled by gas, or shattered by a shell, nor seek to see me in this death-in-life mid shirks and curse, oaths and blood and sweat, cold in the darkness, on the edge of strife, Bored and afraid, irresolute, and wet. But if you think of me, remember one who loved good dinners, curious parody, swimming, and lying naked in the sun, Latin hexameters, and heraldry, Athenian subtleties of *δῆς* and *παις*, Beethoven, Botticelli, beer, and boys.

TAILPIECE:

MATT

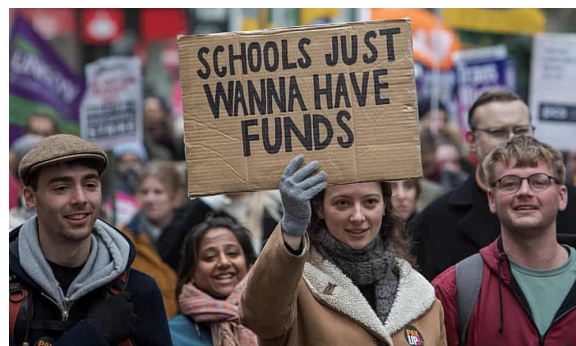


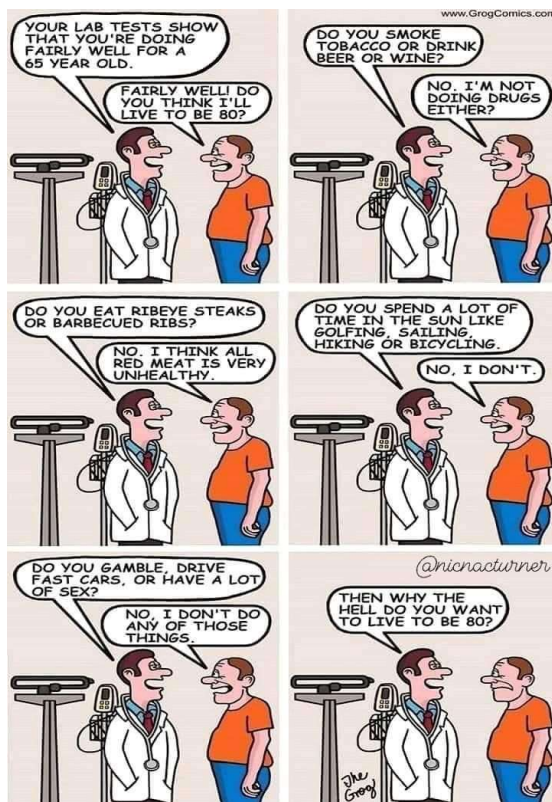
*'Now the river water has
really hit the fan'*

MATT



*'Being Labour leader is a lot
like playing James Bond:
everyone wonders who
will replace you'*





THE RIDDLE, MYSTERY AND ENIGMA OF PRIGOZHIN'S COUP ATTEMPT

by Gerard Baker – The Wall Street Journal June 26, 2023

One thing is clear after the rebellion in Russia: The US was right to support Ukraine after Putin's invasion last year.



Vladimir Putin delivers remarks in Moscow, June 24. Watching events unfold in Russia this weekend was like viewing an accelerated newsreel of modern Russian history. For a while it was 1917 all over again, with a little 1905 and 1989 thrown in. A revolution erupting after a disastrous foreign war. In his remarks on Saturday, Vladimir Putin invoked the 1917 precedent, revealing that he sees himself as more Nicholas II than Vladimir Lenin. Then there was the symbolic spectacle of a lightning march on Moscow. As social-media feeds filled with images of military convoys rolling along highways and pictures of defensive bulwarks hauled into place at the gates to the capital, it was suddenly a re-enactment of 1812 or 1941. Unlike Napoleon and Hitler, Yevgeny Prigozhin seemed to have gotten his timing right, bearing down on the city in the accommodating midsummer sun. As the climax seemed to near, an optimist could see hints of 1953 and the death of Stalin—the decades-long rule of a brutal dictator ending in chaos and ignominy, accompanied by the merest hope of something springlike to follow. Somewhat disappointingly, it turned out to be 1991, another dime-store coup that folded like a cheap suit on its first encounter with reality. Unlike that final, desperate bid to rescue communism from the ash heap of history, this one didn't last even a few days. No detention of the beleaguered leader in his Black Sea dacha, no drunken infighting among the coup plotters. Just a few fiery words, some video vignettes, and it was back to barracks, boys. Everything that happens in Russia elicits a library of conspiracy theories. Even some Western officials, as they attempted to digest this strange spectacle, wondered if it all might have been staged. Mr. Putin is a master of false-flag operations. Was this a scheme to demonstrate the calm invincibility of the great leader, a warning that as he faces down his enemies at home, he will show the same resilience abroad? There was even room for a helpful cameo role for Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, Mr. Putin's most faithful stooge, to burnish his fading credentials as hero of the Soviet Union. You could be forgiven for believing anything. But this seems improbable. It's hard to see how it helps the Russian leader to have his leadership denounced by a close ally and then, after he had threatened to demolish the mutineers, to sign up to what amounts to a gentle plea bargain. More likely the sheer impossibility of his supposed mission became evident to Mr. Prigozhin and he took whatever bargain he could to extricate himself and settled for spending the rest of his days in the lovely idyll of Belarus, where he is doubtless being lined up for an early appointment at an open window in a tall building. The image Mr. Putin's Russia presented these last few days isn't one of strength but of a crumbling husk of a former empire, and its main value should be as a powerful rebuttal to the strange little army of Putin apologists in the U.S. It will be some time before we understand what just happened and what it portends for Mr. Putin, his regime and the war in Ukraine. But we can surely already see that the abortive Wagner mutiny has revealed how wrong the critics of America's support for the war have been. Mr. Prigozhin's denunciation of the invasion and the official Russian *casus belli* is a rebuke to the voices in the West who blamed the U.S. and its allies for the Russian violence. If even the Wagner Group's leadership can see through the official Kremlin fictions, is it too much to ask that prominent American political leaders and so-called strategic thinkers cease peddling them? The weekend coup attempt should also quiet the voices of those who argue that U.S. support for Ukraine is some distraction from the larger challenge of China. The longer this war continues, the more

damage is done to Russia's capability and prestige, and the more ineptitude it exposes in Moscow, the greater the headache for its ally without limits in Beijing. It is clearer than ever that Xi Jinping has shackled himself to a twitching corpse, one booby-trapped with nuclear weapons, but a dead weight all the same. Long live that alliance. A retired senior military figure told me recently that for years a key aim of U.S. military strategy has been to develop weapons designed to inflict maximum damage on Russian tanks, armoured personnel carriers and artillery. As he noted with a grim smile, that is exactly what those munitions have been doing — with the added bonus that not a single American life has been put at risk. Why would we stop inflicting that damage on China's biggest ally now? And now that the Putin regime's enfeebled rottenness has been laid bare, why wouldn't we intensify our efforts to help Ukraine pursue its justified defence to a logical conclusion?

(Sent in by Clive King)