# Former British spy contrasts Hollywood glamour with gritty reality of espionage



A former British spy has offered a stark contrast between the glamorous portrayal of espionage in Hollywood films and the gritty reality of life as an intelligence officer during the Cold War. Will Britten, now 65, operated as a member of BRIXMIS (the British Commanders’-in-Chief Mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany), an elite intelligence-gathering unit that functioned behind the Iron Curtain in East Germany. In an interview with The Mirror, he shared insights derived from his experiences in a world vastly different from that of fictional characters such as James Bond.

Britten’s tenure in intelligence began in 1989, a pivotal year shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Stationed in East Germany, he was tasked with collecting vital military intelligence while navigating a landscape that was less about suave encounters and more about the stench of rotting garbage. Recalling a particular mission, he described the unglamorous nature of his work: “In the summer it was absolutely revolting, the stench, bugs, creatures, maggots, you could feel the rubbish moving.” This work involved sifting through rubbish dumps, sometimes located near Soviet military hospitals, where his team had encountered discarded medical equipment, including needles and syringes. Britten noted, “People think intelligence work is glamorous or sexy but, in reality, it’s a lot of grind.”

Britten detailed how BRIXMIS operated in teams of three, constantly on alert to gather intelligence that would ultimately aid NATO’s military posture against the Soviet Union. He explained that their findings often related to the USSR's military advancements, stating, “We found some fascinating military intelligence... Nothing that was classified, but we confirmed that in Afghanistan the Soviets were using chemical weapons through finds on rubbish dumps in East Germany.” The agents used thermal imaging gear, cameras, and cassette recorders rather than the high-tech gadgets associated with fictional spies.

Each intelligence-gathering mission commenced from the Glienicke Bridge, famously known as the ‘Bridge of Spies,’ which served as a renowned exchange point for Cold War espionage. Reflecting on his experiences crossing the bridge, Britten conveyed how it felt to enter a zone governed by communism: “It was like you were in another world... a parallel civilisation different in every conceivable way.” He noted the contrasts in lifestyle and consumer culture between East and West, remarking on how the absence of aggressive advertising created a sense of starkness along with moments of genuine interaction with the local populace.

Among the significant moments of his career was the night of November 9, 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell. Just after 7 PM, Britten received a call informing him of the masses gathering at the Potsdam side of the bridge, surging forward in a bid to break through the Russian military security. He described the scene as “truly unbelievable,” witnessing the emotional turmoil of East Germans who found themselves suddenly liberated from the confines of the Wall. “I took in the sights, sucked up the atmosphere and took an awful lot of pictures. The sheer intensity of emotion was something I had never experienced before or since,” he said.

Britten's career was not without peril; he recalled numerous incidents that could have had fatal consequences. He reflected on the assassination of Captain Robert Nairac, a military intelligence officer who was killed during an undercover operation in Northern Ireland, providing insight into the dangers of intelligence work. He acknowledged the risks inherent in the role, stating, “There’s always the potential for things to go wrong.” Nevertheless, Britten maintained that he never experienced fear during these operations, framing the risks as part of the job.

The reality of espionage, as articulated by Will Britten, reveals a complex tapestry woven with danger, discomfort, and the weight of historical context, contrasting sharply with the fabricated narratives crafted for cinematic audiences. His forthcoming book, "Over the Wall: A BRIXMIS Intelligence Officer Behind the Iron Curtain," set to be published on April 24 by The History Press, promises to delve deeper into his experiences and provide further context about life behind enemy lines.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/a-cold-war-spy-dossier-revealed-with-lessons-for-today> - This article discusses various aspects of Cold War espionage, emphasizing the more mundane and dangerous nature of intelligence work compared to the glamorized portrayals in movies like James Bond, aligning closely with Will Britten's perspective.
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HM-0CPSIq4w> - In this podcast, a former spy shares insights about operating as a liaison officer in East Germany, paralleling Britten's experiences in BRIXMIS and highlighting the gritty realities of espionage during the Cold War.
* <https://www.waterstones.com/book/over-the-wall/will-britten/9781803998565> - This link provides information about Britten's forthcoming book, 'Over the Wall,' which will delve into his experiences as a BRIXMIS intelligence officer, directly supporting his claims about the challenges he faced.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_War_espionage> - The Wikipedia page on Cold War espionage offers a detailed overview of intelligence activities during this period, providing context to Britten's experiences and the operational environment of BRIXMIS.
* <https://spyscape.com/article/cold-war-crazy-10-bizarre-stories-from-bear-pilots-to-flying-boats> - This article presents bizarre stories from the Cold War era, illustrating the peculiarities of intelligence work, which contrasts with Britten’s assertion that real espionage was far from glamorous and filled with daunting challenges.