

New Statesman

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I am writing under siege. I was woken this morning by a dawn chorus of F-111s screaming over the roof at fewer than 200 feet, and they have been at it ever since. Whenever these NATO exercises take place — and it feels like every few weeks — the ever-considerate United States Air Force posts a notice outside the village shop: "Residents may wish to note that during the period 16-20 May 1988 the 20TFW RAF [sic] Upper Heyford will conduct an exercise to test the operational capability of USAF in support of NATO. During this period there will be an increase in the flying activity between approximately 6am to midnight, although there may be flying outside these hours." Why not just say they'll be flying 24 hours a day?

There is more: "Other NATO air forces will carry out low-level simulated attacks on the airfield. Residents will notice an increase in activity on the station. Residents may also notice 19 Sqn personnel and their Rapier surface-to-air missile fire units in locations both on *and off the station.*" (my italics). On Monday morning I conducted an extensive tour of local hedgerows but, as usual, found no Rapier missiles at all. If the Russians break down my door tomorrow night I shall be entirely defenceless.



Late news: it's now after midnight and the USAF is still "buzzing" my house in support of NATO. I rang the base a minute or two ago and was put through to a Major Swaggart in the command post. Could he tell me how long this bombardment was going to continue? "No sir." But surely he must know whether it would finish soon or go on until dawn? "Yes sir, but I'm not authorised to give you that information." Why not? "Because it's none of your business." At this I suggested that it was my business — and, knowing these air force boys' taste for rough language, I added: "It's my fucking country." The major met the challenge brilliantly. "Sir," he replied, his voice as flat as Norfolk and as sweetly innocent as Shirley Temple. "If you want to talk to me, could you keep it clean?"

**Francis Wheen**