

Episode Five

First steps into the wonderful world of IT

Finding a new job following the brilliant Redifon Simulation company was clearly going to be a bit of a challenge. I was very much in need of some interview practice as I hadn't attended an interview for many years. Mary-Anne did some helpful research trying to find me an interview with somebody.

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Tel: 01-872 6241

PRIME

I ended up joining the computer industry entirely by accident. The only previous tech experience I had was in noting several PDP11 Digital computers that drove your average flight simulator. That was about the limit of my technical knowledge (and some would unkindly, however truthfully, say that situation didn't alter over the next 25 years). I turned up for the interview with a pretty much unheard-of company called Prime Computer in the UK and having done no preparation or research and really having not a clue about the computer industry in those days. Little did I recognise the great privilege of joining, in its youth, an industry destined to change the world.

I was interviewed by Roger, who was the UK MD, in the bedroom of some faceless hotel near Hounslow in West London. It was an interesting interview and I instantly liked Roger. To be fair, I really didn't have any intention of joining his company before exploring other future career paths. Roger was very persistent. He called me on three different occasions with a hard sell to eventually bamboozle me to join Prime as their first Marketing Communications Manager in the UK.

The only thing going for it, from my point of view, was that it was American, and I had really enjoyed working so much for Heinz, another US based company. However, Prime was a corporate startup and certainly a new experience for me. I saw the move as high risk and little realised just how lucky I was, once again, to be in the right place at the right time!

Unknown to me at the time, Prime was the 'blue-eyed boy' of the New York stock exchange. My stock options proved a great addition to my salary for several years and helped the family to move into a much larger home in Farnham. This appointment turned out to be probably the best bit of luck of my entire career. Somebody somewhere was clearly looking down on me.

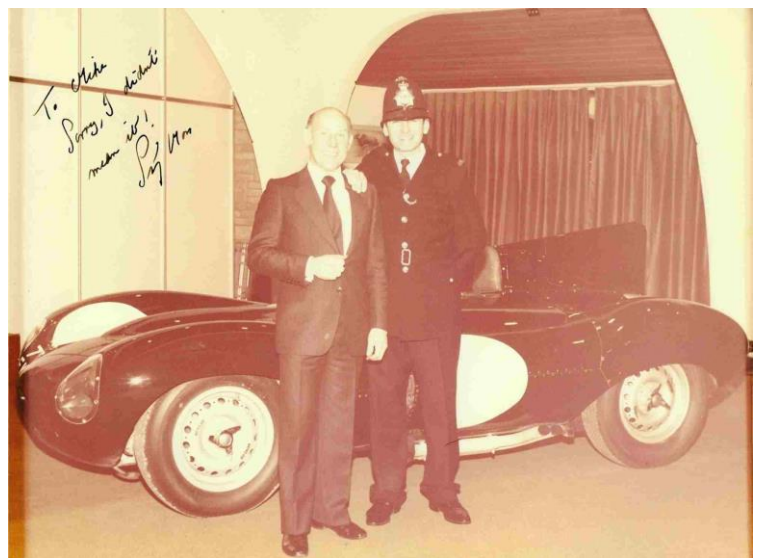
Although the daily commute to Hounslow was miserable, I rode each day in my first decent 'company car' with all petrol paid. My colleagues turned out to be a wonderful group of very highly motivated people, with whom we also socialised extensively. This was the case in every

country I worked with them over the next six years. Prime was to become my favourite employer ever and once again I was given more rope than I deserved to either hang or make myself.



We did some modest advertising and I spent most of that budget on press relations and PR in the early days. I learned a great deal from a wonderful couple, Judith and Donald Ingleton-Ber to improve my media skills, which stood me well for many years to come. I began to discover that that I was 'OK' at running major events (probably from my projects managed both at King's and in the HAC) and perhaps more importantly, that I really enjoyed this- and I had a lot of fun in doing so.

One of my first events was to organize a 'sales kick-off' for all the top sales-people across the countries in Europe. I worked closely with the Sales Director, Malcolm, who is still a good friend. I hired as my motivational speaker, Sterling Moss, the famous racing driver. (whom I soon learned to pay in crisp pound notes in a plain envelope). I dressed as a UK policeman arresting Sterling, as he crashed onto the stage driving a racing car in which he'd once won the Le Mans 24hour motor race. The skit was taken from a current UK tv advert at the time, and which went right over the heads of all but the British (yet another useful lesson learned the hard way). Sterling was great fun; I visited his amazing 'high-tech' home in Mayfair and arranged to work with him on a couple of future occasions during my career (one of which taught me another great lesson to be mentioned later). His photo still today sits above my desk to remind me of my many early learning curves, with Sterling standing in front of his car accompanied by me wearing a police uniform and with my hand on his shoulder.



Following the successful opening of the conference with Sterling Moss, I decided to show off the best of 'British' to our European colleagues at a wonderful gala dinner in the City of London that night. This turned out to be my first introduction to a City Livery Company. Richard, one of my good friends from Chiddingfold was a member of 'The Merchant Tailor's Livery Company'. They owned a resplendent Livery Hall, complete with Organ, beautiful candlelight and sensational surroundings capable of dining a couple of hundred guests, accompanied by outstanding food, wines and a full orchestra. By another stroke of luck, the US CEO and management team from Boston flew in and attended the dinner. The ambiance and experience that night not only blew them away (as I soon discovered to my advantage with all American guests) but was equally enjoyed by both the Brits, and our friends from across Europe. At the conclusion of the conference and the gala dinner, luck was once again on my side. The president, Ken Fisher, made me a member of the President's Council, with a free trip to Disneyland in Florida for Mary-Anne and me.



I soon had my first experience of producing TV commercials, by yet another piece of luck. It transpired that the brilliant Lionel Singer, who ran the Australian Prime distributorship, decided that he wanted to produce, what we still believe today, were the first TV slots for the computer industry anywhere.

Lionel was not a man to do things by halves. He persuaded Tom Baker, one of the first actors to perform as 'Dr,Who' ,to feature in the adverts, alongside his adorable assistant Lila. Much to my delight, at the time the trade union rules in Australia made it not only a practical impossibility,



but also one that was too expensive to shoot the adverts in Australia. I was asked to watch over the production in a secret London studio on Lionel's behalf. As you can imagine I really enjoyed, not only meeting Tom Baker, but also catching him with his beautiful assistant Lila, kissing behind the scenery off set. They subsequently married. The ads, which still appear on YouTube, were a huge success in Australia.

Life was beginning to prove just as exciting as with my previous employer. I became promoted to the Marketing Communications Manager for Europe and spent more of my time working with my counterparts in other countries, visiting them on a frequent basis. I'd already fallen in love with Switzerland, and most of our team meetings would take place there, accompanied by our US colleagues, including William, who was to remain a lifelong friend and a brilliant creative director. We all worked very hard and played even harder! William recalls times, when out cross-country skiing, that my sense of direction supposedly saved our team during a snowstorm. He also recollects us all tobogganing down a very steep mountain while holding flaming torches to find our way in the dark.

My career was about to take a very unexpected direction. I was visiting the team in Paris one day and was due to stay in the company flat downtown. When I knocked on the door it was opened by my boss, Peter, an American with whom I had a good relationship. I had enjoyed meeting with his family and showing them around our favourite spots in the UK, when they had arrived to live in Sunningdale. I liked and respected Peter, which had become an essential to me in the

workplace. Peter announced that he was being promoted from his role as a VP for Europe, back to a more senior position in Boston. He announced that he wanted me to take up the role of Director Marketing Communications in Boston-starting on the following Monday!

Surely, a request like this could only have happened in the early days of the IT industry when people asked ridiculous and mad things of their employees! We set about some serious negotiations, which included the company having to complete my decorating plans for our new home in Farnham. -but more importantly our safe return to my old job in the UK should things not turn out too well. Hence, I duly began to commute weekly to Boston on the following Monday, staying in the Hilton Hotel next to the Prime Computer Corporate HQ in Natic until locating a rental home for the family. As a resident of the hotel, I soon learnt that our competition had placed some employees behind the bar to listen into what was going on in my company. This was a useful experience and from then on, I always ensured that the Board meeting rooms were not visible from outside and always swept the room for bugs beforehand.

My first night, moving with my family to the United States as a resident, proved rather unusually interesting. As a member of the Honourable Artillery Company in the City of London, by tradition anybody visiting Boston at the time of a formal event for our sister Regiment, (The Ancient and Honourable Artillery Company of Massachusetts) were invited to the dinner in Faneuil Hall. It was then our duty to pass on the good wishes of the HAC members in London, to those at the dinner and to toast our sister Regiment.

On this occasion I found myself sitting next to a delightful and most interesting gentleman who suddenly was called upon to deliver a speech. He turned out to be Governor King of Massachusetts and I followed him with my short speech.

On arrival at work the next morning there were two surprises waiting for me. First, news of my meeting with the Governor had caused quite a stir in the Board Room. Secondly, in their great wisdom, the Board members had decided to sack Ken, the founder of the company, and to replace him with an interim CEO. I was handed a statement to read over to the Wall Street Journal, which clearly indicated that it was a 'sacking' rather than a resignation. Clearly not only an unfair slur on a brilliant entrepreneurial leader, but also placing a dangerous story in the media which was bound to result in adverse stock market reactions. I went into my office, closed the door behind me and 'softened' the statement to the journalist. This was going to be a pretty interesting new role for me! How many times since then have I seen IT companies banish their founders and replace them with a team of culturally inappropriate folk or attempt to merge organisations which were bound to fail for the same reason.

We found a modest family rental property in Wellesley, a pleasant suburb of Boston, perhaps more famous for its posh Ladies College. I found myself, for the first time, enjoying a much more informal, relaxed, very open and diverse society. Living next to us on one side was a delightful couple, both of whom were doctors. On the other side lived a senior policeman from Boston, who somehow managed to get me a US driving license without taking a test.

Life was excitingly very different, but not without its challenges. We had no credit rating and found it tough to buy a car, sign up for utilities and amenities generally. We took our own refuse to the dump each week, which featured a wonderful exchange library and our children's first bikes all came off the dump! During the winter months after leaving work, I could drive to the nearest golf course where I was able to put on my cross-country skis and have a fabulous evening on a five-mile circuit all beautifully illuminated.

Boston was a great place in which to live and bring up a family. Our weekends were spent exploring the White Mountains to the north or Rhode Island and Cape Cod to the south. A fabulous part of America which would be hard to match anywhere in the world.

My good friend Roger, who had initially interviewed me in England, also moved with his family to Boston at the same time. We were both, of course, the first employees to be transferred from a subsidiary to the Corporate HQ. Roger, who was rather senior to me, lived on the smart side of Route Nine in Wellesley with the millionaires- and we lived on the more modest side, but all enjoying this wonderful new 'All American' experience. There's nothing like living in a foreign country, versus having visited it numerous times before on business. Everyone should grasp a similar experience anywhere at least once in a career.

I well remember my first staff meeting on the first day. I had a brilliant team of managers organising a team of over 100. I think that even my assistant Patti was probably better qualified than myself. Thankfully nobody had a clue as to what an HNC qualification was, as nearly everybody in Prime seemed to have graduated from Harvard or one of the great colleges of Boston. As I opened the staff meeting, one of my female managers, who was a very bright and clever lady, announced that she had been selected by my management team to suggest that I had arrived in America as a European 'sexist'. Having never heard the term 'sexist' before I took this clearly to be a compliment. Thinking carefully about my response, I realized that this must have been a pleasant word of welcome. I turned to Lynn and thanked her very much for her kind comments. The team around the table just collapsed in immense laughter, which must have been heard throughout the building. The subject was never ever raised again, except by the CEO later that afternoon, who had heard through the grapevine, that I had clearly made quite a stir with my team already.

I soon learned that I would rarely see any of my management team on a Friday afternoon. They all mysteriously seemed to have appointments either with the printers in Rhode Island, with the PR team meeting a journalist, or the advertising team visiting the agency downtown. I was now in the world of long and exciting weekends but found myself working amongst people who only had two weeks annual leave, versus my negotiated five week leave. I never had the courage or heart to query where anybody was on a Friday.

With my reputation for running sales kick-off meetings already affirmed by the US management team, I was duly given the role of running the kick-offs around America and elsewhere. Working with a wonderful team that seemed happy to go along with completely off-the-wall ideas and whose creativity, largely through William (who later married my wonderful assistant Patti) were to set some new standards for craziness in the industry.

My first distributor sales conference was in Hawaii. Oh, can you believe my new life in the USA beginning like this! Not everything went well. The first firework from my firework display, with everybody standing around the pool with their cocktails, sadly landed amid the waiting fireworks. There was a magnificent one-minute firework display that resulted with everybody having to jump into the pool with their drinks. It got even more fun from here.

My next sales kick-off was in Atlanta in one of those wonderful tall tower blocks. I had always gone for completely insane ideas to motivate the sales teams and to provide them with helpful information to make them successful, but events that they would always remember. Later in my career I mixed this with visits to countries rarely visited by most sales teams. On this occasion we laid out the gala evening dinner in an unexpected figure of eight with clearance between the tables to accommodate a team of mad mini-motorbike riders. That would suddenly, unannounced, race into the room driving in a figure of eight track between the tables. Eventually

on the last lap they were to be jumping through hoops of fire. Sadly, the local fire department discovered our plans at the last minute and we were banned from the fire jumping bit (probably just as well for I was not insured against burning down the hotel). I quickly learned to set no expectations in the sales environment because what never happens never gets missed.

A few days later, we ran a sales kick-off in Dallas which offered some equally exciting opportunities. The theme was the 'Year of the Thoroughbred'. I was determined that we would train the US Vice President of Sales to ride a horse. This help was kindly provided by the CEO of one of my competitors, who had a wonderful indoor horse arena. Our VP was a fast learner and did well. The plan was that, as the conference doors swung, four beautiful Dallas 'Cowgirls' would enter the conference hall followed by the VP on horseback. Sadly, I had forgotten to warn the 'follow spotlight' operator to avoid pointing the spotlight directly into the eyes of the horse as he entered. Yes, you guessed it! The magnificent horse performed a magical 'Hi Ho Silver' act standing high on its back legs with my VP gripping on like grim death. The Dallas Cowgirls naturally fled, having probably never even been near a horse before. Fortunately, our VP was rescued by Carol, our wonderful events manager and an experienced horsewoman, who grabbed the reins of the horse.

The audience had no clue that this wasn't part of the plan. Our VP arrived amidst tumultuous applause. The kick-off went extremely well, and the VP never mentioned the incident again. I had experienced a few 'behind the scenes' discussions with the hotel manager earlier. He hadn't warmed to the prospect of allowing a live horse into his hotel (quite sensibly, but a big budget works wonders on the disbelievers). Eventually I had to agree to pay for the removal of the revolving front doors to the hotel. I had to also agree to follow the horse, with a broom and shovel, as it walked over the beautiful, lush carpets of the reception area. Fortunately, I didn't have to use the shovel on this occasion.



There was no doubt that being an Englishman had its advantages. Appearing to be what everybody thought was a classic 'English Gentleman' I got away with murder, especially when seeking budgets to run events or product launches. I suspect that many of my American colleagues felt more than a little jealous that everything I asked for I got. I played the British card at another sales conference which coincided with the Margaret Thatcher's Falkland's war (every American saw her as a great heroine of the times). I discovered a First World War British army uniform, rifle and tin helmet, together with putties, in a second-hand shop in Boston. Marching smartly from the back of the conference room to the speaker podium, I then read out a fabricated telegram from Her Majesty, announcing that I had been temporarily relieved of my military duties in the Falklands to address them at this conference. Simple little tricks like this seem to work wonders, ably helped by not minding too much looking like an eccentric fool!

Whilst working with Prime I had yet another positive experience with the US cops. I had got lost and was rushing back in my car from New York to Boston when I was trapped by radar doing 85 miles an hour through a city parkway. Quite stupid of me, especially as I was trying to read a map at the same time. I was stopped by the cop, who when I produced my English driving license,

apologised profusely, saying that unfortunately he had already called ahead to the courthouse. It would be necessary for me to appear before a judge! On this occasion he would allow me to drive my own car following him to the courthouse. I'd never been in a court before in my life and barely understood anything that the Judge said to me.

When I was asked how I pleaded, I turned to the cop next to me and asked for his advice. To which he simply replied, just apologize. I was unable to pay any fine because they wouldn't take American Express, but this was not apparently a problem, as the Judge very generously paid whatever I owed! On re-entering the court, having taken off his gown, he came up to me and apologized for having delayed me for such a long time. As the owner of the local hotel in the town would I please join him as his guest for a late lunch? Not only was I mightily relieved but accepted his kind offer. My first encounter with the English police could not have been further from this situation-but more about that later.

Probably my worst travel experience ever also took place with Prime. During my annual visit to the Hanover Show in Germany I was led astray by the German Country Manager. Enjoying time with both him and his sales team until 7.00am, I arrived back at my hotel room just in time to change my clothes, pack my case and race to the airport. I was on route to Frankfurt, where I needed to change a flight for a lunch meeting in Paris- and to continue later that day to our home in Boston. I fell asleep in the airport lounge in Hanover to be woken up by all my fellow passengers rushing down the jetway to board the plane. I instantly fell asleep once on board again until the plane descended for its landing at Frankfurt. I couldn't ever remember seeing high snowcapped mountains at Frankfurt previously- and was a little alarmed when the captain announced our arrival in Geneva, Switzerland. The flight attendant refused to believe that I had been allowed to board the wrong plane-which I strongly contested. My next mistake, when asked by Swiss immigration how long I was visiting Switzerland, was to foolishly say twenty minutes, if he would refrain from asking me further questions. Lesson-never ever argue with immigration control! Somehow, I transferred to a Paris flight within thirty minutes. I was alarmed once again on landing to find myself at, what for me, did not resemble Charles de Gaulle airport. The French had opened a new Paris terminal that very week, clearly to make my heart pound even faster. After a bus transfer to the correct Paris terminal, where my luggage would have arrived from Frankfurt, I approached the Lufthansa desk. Somehow the duty manager guessed who I was. He calmly announced that my unescorted luggage had arrived at Frankfurt airport, where it was quickly destroyed as a suspect terrorist bomb.

I nearly fell asleep in my bouillabaisse soup during our lunch meeting in Paris and was suspiciously questioned by US immigration officials later that evening as to why I was traveling so light. I decided not to explain.



One of my best travel experiences at Prime ended up becoming a part of the IT industry history. I was putting finishing touches to the Prime Computer stand at a show in Anaheim, Los Angeles, when I noticed someone opposite our stand struggling. He was clearly not as practised as me, after all my years of exhibition attendance, so I decided to give him a hand. On the final day of the show he asked me if I would like to attend a party that night to celebrate the launch of his new company. I duly enjoyed a great

Tex-Mex party and BBQ in a semi desert location. We were all presented with huge Mexican hats and had a great time. As the evening and the speeches unfolded, I discovered that I was a lucky guest of a start-up company called APPLE! My helping hand on his stand earlier had been for none other than Steve Jobs! If only I had returned home with that Mexican hat. As a lucky guest, I enjoyed free entry to Disneyland for the rest of the night from 10.00pm to 4.00am-with not a queue in sight.

I got to do some interesting travel during this time, as my responsibilities became global. I well remember setting off on a day trip to Australia to present to the Australian sales force a one-hour pitch. Having an extensive family in Australia I was lucky enough to connive a day extension on my way back to the US. A quick visit to the Prime office in Perth, which nobody had ever visited from the corporate HQ, would inevitably uncover at least one surprise.

The sales numbers from this remote and wonderful city were quite exceptional. On arrival at the office I discovered, in the entrance foyer, that they had constructed a permanent bar. This was used for customer entertainment (and naturally the local sales team) every Friday from lunch until the last 'man fell'. Judging by the consumption rates that I witnessed, they should have



taken out shares from the local famous 'Swan brewery'. Before nightfall I was sworn to secrecy before I left the office. Absolutely no alcohol was permitted past the doors of corporate HQ in Boston. I never ever shared the story until now.

It was with Prime that I experienced my first global product launch. I don't think anybody believed that our initial plan would ever work. But luckily for me, it did. We hired a large

marquee in the grounds of a beautiful French chateau a few miles to the south of Paris for presentations to our European customers and prospects, together with the international IT media. We flew in the Paris media in a fleet of helicopters, knowing that they would never turn up to an event more than five minutes from the centre of town. We were hot news for the customers- and they duly nearly all accepted the invitation for the launch of our new Supermini Prime 2250. We were going to demonstrate the first transatlantic 'pack switching' capability of 'minicomputers.

We built a full stage mock-up of a City office from some fictitious company. We told the story of this new, amazing super minicomputer through live actors running live demonstrations. All the actors, including myself, were of course well-rehearsed employees. But here is the rub. This was a simultaneous global product launch, daring to perform live transatlantic messaging. We built an identical set of staging. With different employee actors, all working from the same identical script at the same moment and moving around the stage at precisely the same moment.

Being a complete cynic of anything to do with technology in front of a live audience, I mistrusted the entire exercise. We built a backup scenario using fifty slide projectors, just in case the



messaging across the Atlantic failed. We would at least be enabled to get the ‘story’ across. Well, blow me down, to my complete amazement the technology worked.

But one more test was yet to challenge us. Whilst I was conducting a question-and-answer session from the 300 customers and media present following our live presentations, I

was somewhat alarmed when a ‘disbelieving’ and miserable customer from the Bank of America addressed me. He announced that he had the access codes of his New York bank and that he had not really believed we were live message transmitting across the Atlantic. My heart was pumping furiously as I handed the piece of paper to Roland, our chief technician, asking him to attempt to access the customer’s New York Branch of his bank. It worked-the audience went mad and the product, and its reputation were made for life.

Thank goodness that I really didn’t understand the degree of risk that I and my team had taken during this product launch. But it taught me to be even more off the wall and risk taking in future global product launches. People from the team still talk about this product launch on both sides of the Pond and I frequently see it appearing in social media stories. To a brave and fantastic team, fond memories and a great sense of pride.

We had worked with a British staging company called ‘Spectrum Communications’ both in France and Boston. They were truly brilliant, and I subsequently worked with them on several occasions in other companies for product launches around the world. I was very grateful to be awarded a special and generous gift for the work on this product launch, which I treasure to this day.



For the second time in my career, I was to learn that all good things eventually come to an end. My boss, Peter, was replaced, along with many other Directors (including my good friend Roger), by a senior management team from IBM. The culture change from a company where everyone pulled together changed overnight- some may say for the better. I had enjoyed being highly motivated by both reward and recognition in my role. My support team that had tempted me to

live in the US had gone and I learned through the grapevine that my new boss clearly had plans to replace me with somebody he knew from IBM. My US visa only permitted me to remain in the country only when working with Prime. I and my family were in trouble.

As my son Tim wasn't settling into the US school system very well, I decided to use this as an excuse and to ask to return to my old job in Europe. I'd been checking very carefully my negotiated contract for my move to the US and began to realise, that at least my midterm future was safe. I announced my wish to return to Europe with my boss, who then verbally and angrily threatened to physically follow me to Europe, where he would break my arm, should I mention to any of the European country management that things were not going too smoothly under the new IBM team.

I don't know if it was the sheer shock of being spoken to like this that prevented me from walking straight into the office of Joe, the new ex IBM CEO, whom I really liked and seemed to relate to well. Anyway, I decided to reap my revenge by taking as much from my boss's budget that I was able. At the time the dollar was at \$2.5 to the pound. Knowing that my boss would have to pay for the return of all my goods and chattels, including my family, I rushed out to the shops. I purchased a four-poster bed from Bloomingdale's, a gas fired barbecue(which hadn't even arrived yet in the UK), a beautiful oil painting from Cape Cod and a complete US wooden play frame with slides and tent, a few pieces of furniture -oh and of course, not forgetting my sunfish sailing boat. We had quite a time unwrapping all of this from the huge ship's container.

It took me all of one week to tell the Prime country managers of this experience. I understand that recently my old boss passed away and I know that he was liked by many, so I must forget and forgive, -but never mess with a Grant!

My wonderful Prime stock options, that I had enjoyed over many years, became not worth the paper they were printed on. Although I enjoyed returning as the Marketing Director for Europe, there was clearly no future for me in the company. Very sadly, the company made some bad strategic mistakes and lost its way like many other IT successful startups, and it slowly disappeared off the face of the earth. The good news for me was that by now I was able to look over the horizon and into the crystal ball. I was luckily well away from Prime well prior to its demise.

It had been undoubtedly my favourite IT company to work with. It originally had the most wonderful culture, fantastic people with whom to work. Many of the 'Primates' have stayed good friends to this day on both sides of the Pond some 30 years later. I and others will remember Prime Computer with great affection and admiration.