David, calm down! On second and more reflective thought, don’t!

Brian Winkel, Department of Mathematical Sciences,
United States Military Academy, West Point NY 10996 USA Brian.Winkel@usma.edu

Abstract: We recount our relationship with David Kahn as co-founding editors of Cryptologia, both in specific incidents and broader experiences.

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It was back in the early days of Cryptologia, perhaps even before 1980, when I got a call from Lou Kruh, a fellow founding editor. He and Cy Deavours (another founding editor) were in Lou’s Manhattan - New York, where else - office on a speaker phone. It was early, come to think of it, as I had never seen or used a speaker phone! They were calling me in Michigan where I was teaching. This was about a serious matter. Lou explained that they had heard (rumor, letter, BITnet – I said it was a long time ago) that I was submitting Cryptologia papers to the National Security Agency for approval. I had worked for NSA in the late 60’s and understood and appreciated their mission, but I had never thought to submit anything we were publishing to them for approval. Of course, to set this call in perspective, we need to know that there was a bit of a chill when, in 1977, a “rogue” NSAer suggested that the RSA team should not be discussing their proposed algorithm, you know the one! So it is understandable that someone, somewhere, somehow might think we were seeking NSA blessing and approval for our publication efforts.

So here I am on the phone, Lou is talking mildly, as is Cy, but then there is David. Now, you need to recall that David is, in addition to the paramount mover for some of us into cryptology through his writing, a journalist. This means he is a staunch supporter of the First Amendment of our Constitution. You think you know what it says, but here it is, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” Check out that part about freedom for speech and the press. Get it? Well, David got it, lived it, and had it flowing in his blood. And his blood was raging in anger that we might be doing such a thing, contrary to the First Amendment. He was very excited when we began the journal, for it would be a place for colleagues to share their passion, their scholarship, and their ideas on a subject long held hush-hush, i.e., secret writing! Our journal was to be a place, not of secret writing, but of open writing, of uncensored writing, of responsible writing!

Back to the phone. I grew up in New York (means New York City or surrounding metropolitan areas – not the part with cows!) and so I had been privy to “earthy” vocabularies and their ubiquitous use. Now I was the target of accusations from David and a very rich vocabulary describing my possible behavior vis-à-vis submitting authors’ works for approval to the government. After a few minutes of rant the voice diminished as it moved from close to the speaker to further from the speaker and I heard, “David, calm down!” Have you ever seen Earl Weaver argue in Baltimore with the umpire. He does not give up. Neither does David. Now he voice moved closer to the speaker and the harangue got louder and I got
the point. When I finally got a chance to speak I assured the assemblage that we were not submitting authors’ works to the government for any reason and that if I ever got a manuscript that seemed questionable I would certainly consult with them and not act unilaterally. Silence. Then a quieter David said, “I am glad to hear that. I believe you.” We had come to an agreement, we trusted each other, and we understood what we were about in Cryptologia. The rage (and I agreed with David on the principle) was over and the collegiality was in place again. I learned about the passion of this man for truth, for freedom to express truth, and for a sense of responsibility in knowing the truth that journalists possess and preserve for us all, and David possessed and understood this feature of our Constitution in rich measure. We were a team, again.

This did not mean I was off the hook on other issues. I would get occasional letters, phone calls, and eventually emails. They would always start out with praise for my work as Managing Editor and for the efforts I put forth in running the journal “office.” But then the “but” would come, and while it was gentle, it was firm and it was always correct. Whether it was in the way we laid out the article, the appearance of the graphical images, the ordering of the articles in the issue, or the selection of the cover art, David would point out how it could be improved. He never just said something was wrong without making a suggestion on how to improve it and the suggestion was always spot on! While I tried to take it all in, to make sure I got it right the next time, I had learned how to give constructive feedback from David, a lesson more important than the corrections he was offering me.

Through the years I have sent many manuscripts to David for consideration and sometimes he would get back to me, other times he would contact the author directly. This was in the day of paper transmissions, pre pdf’s. When I would get an envelope from Wooleys Lane where he lived I would open it and find perhaps a new manuscript I had not seen which was sent to him first and he forwarded it to me or I would find a manuscript I had sent to him for his comments and opinion. Always, I would find a sure hand-guided set of words in between lines – be the paper single- or double-spaced. David’s writing was smooth and flowing, always in pencil, and always clear, both in legibility and intent. There was an arrow indicating, “move this here and that there.” There was a word slashed out and another in its place. There was a phrase rewritten so as to make the mud of the original crystal clear. It was amazing. It would go on at this high level for page after page, paper after paper – never stopping, never faltering, always producing clarity. I still edit papers for another journal, but I always feel inadequate – but blessed – by having seen, up close, the marvelous skill David displayed with helping others to communicate better through editing.

I am forever grateful to David for his courage to stand for what is right; the gentleman in him that gave me proper feedback; the gentle script, the elegant way with the language that made awkward writing into poetry of the moment; and the patience David displayed in helping me (and Cryptologia) to become better. Thank you, David.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brian Winkel has had the privilege and honor of working with David Kahn in helping to begin Cryptologia and in learning from him how to edit and present the stories which make up the 30 years of his own editorship. He continues to practice (and practice and practice) editing in his role as Editor-in-chief of PRIMUS – Problems, Resources, and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate Studies and is ever aware of David’s presence as he works the words.