In late 2007, a delegation from the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army Navy visited the Defence Medical Services which incorporated a short visit to the Institute of Naval Medicine. Subsequent to this, staff talks between First Sea Lord and Admiral Wu, the Chinese Navy Chief of Staff, identified naval medicine as one of four potential areas of co-operation between the two Navies. The Institute of Naval Medicine was approached in October 2008 regarding the possibility of taking a small team to China on a working level visit to the Chinese Naval Medical Research Institute in Shanghai before the end of the year. The initial response that it would be a very small team was assuaged by the offer of funding from the Centre, which lead to a team of four from the Institute flying to Shanghai in early December for perhaps the first working level visit by any UK Royal Navy delegation.
The team was lead by Surgeon Captain David Brown (Medical Officer-in-Charge), and included Surgeon Commander Paul Turnbull (Head of Submarine and Radiation Medicine), Dr Adrian Allsopp (Science Director) and Dr Bob Bridger (Head of Human Factors). They were accompanied throughout the working parts of the visit by Captain Andrew Tate, Navy and Air Attache, Beijing.

The Visit
The team were met off the flight by the Deputy Director of the Laboratory, Senior Captain Zhang, who was accompanied by Commander Huang who would be our staff officer throughout the visit and interpreter, Susie. After checking in, and our initial briefing, we were whisked off to the centre of Shanghai for a tour and a visit to the Urban Planning Centre - which showed the development of Shanghai including a huge model of the full city. The evening marked a welcoming banquet hosted by the Command team from the Institute and a chance to get to know each other in relatively informal circumstances.

The next three days consisted of a series of visits to different sections of the Medical Research Institute including a fascinating museum, an impressive 500m deep diving saturation chamber and a submarine escape chamber, entered by a torpedo tube.

The Institute also housed a series of laboratories covering submarine and ship atmosphere control, health and hygiene and acoustics - partly mirroring what is held at INM. The academic exchange involved a series of presentations from the PLA Chinese Navy on the Institute, the medical organisation of the Chinese Navy, diving medicine research, submarine medicine and the use of traditional Chinese medications in radiation protection. These were given in an impressively adorned conference room, however when the UK reciprocated, our presentations were in a large lecture hall with an audience of up to 200 Chinese doctors and scientists. Although translation throughout was excellent (Powerpoint slides were translated overnight) it became clear that a large proportion of the audience could speak excellent English and the UK team faced informed and challenging questioning. There was particular interest in submarine escape and rescue (the Chinese Navy is procuring a rescue system from the UK) and in human factors. Dr Bob Bridger is known in China, having published one of the few Ergonomics text books which has been translated into Chinese. In an otherwise immaculately timed visit, it was a rare compliment that these serials were allowed to overrun.

There was of course the social side to the visit to Shanghai which is a modern and vibrant city. This consisted of visits to the famous Yu gardens, the City museum, the Jinmao tower (one of the tallest buildings in the world) and an evening river cruise enabling us to see the lights of Shanghai in the most luxurious surroundings. For our shopping, we were accompanied by our formidable staff officer who reduced prices by an order of magnitude as well as checking on the quality of everything from silk to pearls. We were extremely well looked after whenever we ventured from the hotel and the ubiquitous watch sellers and other hawkers were efficiently moved on.

The highlight though was the food, ranging from 14 course “working” lunches to meals in private rooms in impressive restaurants and formal banquets. We were able to reciprocate with a western dinner laid on by the hotel, which went down very well although the Chinese aversion to dairy products was challenged by the cheese-board!

The final stage of the visit was a visit to Beijing to meet with the medical and logistics department of the PLA Navy. Although we were expecting this to be a low level visit, in the end, we had a formal meeting with Admiral Xu Li Li, the Political Head of the Logistics department and a banquet hosted by her Executive counterpart Admiral Ling Yongquing. They were both interested in the visit and encouraging of future formal liaison between the two Institutes and more broadly the two Navy’s medical services, as well as hosting perhaps the most impressive banquet so far, alternating between western and
Chinese regional courses.

In the same action packed day, the group managed to include an early morning visit to a frozen Tianemen square and Forbidden city, where our uniforms were the source of as much attention by Chinese tourists as the sights! After the leaving banquet, we were whisked out to climb on a snow covered Great Wall before returning to Beijing and on to Shanghai for our flight home.

The Chinese Navy Medical Branch

The Peoples Liberation Army is huge with over 2 million personnel in uniform. It was difficult to get an exact figure for the size of the Navy but it is thought to be in excess of 200,000 personnel. The Chinese Navy is going through a major expansion in capability including the aviation, submarine and medical areas, although the Government still pursue the policy of non-intervention in other countries affairs.

At present they have medical officers on all major platforms, and a mixture of western and Chinese medical capabilities to draw on. For Role 2 afloat, they have a variety of solutions available ranging from bolt on modular units on landing ships to fitted out facilities, and have a number of ambulance vessels. However the jewel in their crown will be the acquisition of dedicated 300 bed hospital ship which is currently fitting out and likely to be the largest such vessel with the exception of the two USN giants, Comfort and Mercy. How the ship will be used outside of disaster relief is still not clear.

The medical department, runs both shore based hospitals and the Naval Medical Research Institute. It is subordinate to the logistics department. In a relatively flat Command structure, although there are one and two star equivalent medical officers, they are in clinical or academic positions with Headquarters and Command positions held by Senior Captains reporting to the two star logistics officers.

The Peoples Liberation Army Naval Medical Research Institute

A description of the Peoples Liberation Army Naval Medical Research Institute forwarded by its Director follows this article. The current
Commanding Officer is Senior Captain Tao, a chemist by background with Senior Captain Huang Xiaohu as the Political Commissar.

Food, Drink, and Customs
The uniformly high standard of the food provided was eye opening and generally of a higher quality than that experienced in Hong Kong. Invariably meals would consist of many different small courses often individually plated. Seating arrangements were very formal in that the host was seated on the left of the principal guest and facing the door. It was obligatory to try everything provided although equally polite to leave a little at the end to show that you had eaten enough. Chopsticks were de rigueur and led to several dexterity competitions where the UK came off surprisingly well. The end of the meal was marked by soup, and what might seem a very abrupt finish with the hosts getting up and departing. For food, there was quite often a western course (usually very rare steak but occasionally enhanced by escargots), many varieties of dumplings and surprisingly a relative absence of rice.

Wine was served with the meals (red - good, yellow - an acquired taste), but predominantly for toasts, with beer or orange juice available for rehydration. Banquets were accompanied by Maotai. Toasting was constant on an individual and organisational basis, and culture required the toaster and subject of the toast to rise and drain glasses, up ending them to show they are empty, to the sound of “Gambei”. Lessons rapidly learnt were, that it is not good to rehydrate on beer and do not try to out drink Northern Chinese/political officers/admirals.

The hotels and infrastructure were exceptionally high quality and relatively good value. One does not need to worry about comfort here.

Formal discussions were invariably held with the two principals sitting next to each other in armchairs, accompanied by interpreters and the
The more embarrassing part of the visit was the gift presentation ritual for which invariably UK delegations are ill prepared and are constantly complicated by ever changing official calls. The generosity of our Chinese hosts as portrayed by some of the gifts now on display at the Institute is something that we will struggle to reciprocate.

The Future
Make no mistake, China is a major Naval power, and their technology is increasing rapidly. This is evident in the efforts they are putting into naval medicine and occupational health and hygiene in its broadest sense. They have obviously set great store by on this visit as evidenced by their hospitality and the interest of senior Naval Officers, not least their Chief of Naval Staff. The respect in which they hold our work, I take as a tribute to our Institute of Naval Medicine, however we see the potential for a broader liaison in other areas of naval medicine, for example in Role 3 care afloat. This has included an offer by Admiral Xu Li Li to visit their new hospital ship, once the build is complete and to share advice on equipping and manning. The Chinese have shown considerable interest in our PCRF and at least two delegations have visited RFA ARGUS.

We have agreed to an exchange of unclassified publications and will contribute to each others journals. However, more visibly we intend to have an annual visit programme which will involve INM welcoming a Chinese team to the Institute in late 2009. These initiatives have received strong support from central staff and the FCO and it is hoped will play a valuable part in bringing our Navies closer together in a non controversial area and as technology moves on, I believe we will be in a position to learn much from our new