

**Talk given to the Bahrain Society  
on 28th November 2007  
by Brigadier Peter Sincock, MBE**

**Dhofar 1972-74**

I am gratified to see that so many people have come to hear an old man talk about a long ago war!! I hope your journeys are justified. I have to say this talk is designed for the Bahrain Society and not for dedicated military historians. If there are any old Dhofar warriors in the audience I warn them that while I will be happy to try to answer questions at the end, I won't tolerate criticisms and arguments !!

I arrived in Salalah, the only place worthy of being called a town then, in May 1972 (a terrifying 35 years ago) to be the Brigade Major (sort of senior staff officer to the Brigade Commander for non-military people) of the then Dhofar Brigade fighting a strong insurgency inspired from Yemen (then known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen PDRY) and Nasser's Egypt, and I was there until January 1974.

I was there at a fortunate time as, with no particular thanks to me, the war swung from Salalah being frequently attacked by mortars, rockets and machine guns to the enemy being driven way up into the jebel and the war being well on the way to being won. For a military man that was a very satisfying state of affairs.

My first experience was visiting a battalion position named SIMBA on the Yemen border with Brigadier John Graham, the then commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces. We watched our Strikemaster attack aircraft bombing the enemy headquarters in Hauf just across the border in PDRY. My inexperienced eye visualised major international repercussions, but in fact the attack won the Sultan much international support and many Arab friends.

Incidentally, we heard later that the first bomb fell straight into the Adoo headquarters building destroying their radios, and news of the attack did not get through to Aden for over a week,, I will go into the establishment of the SIMBA position more fully and the political gains for Oman in a minute.

For my first few weeks, Colonel Mike Harvey was the Brigade Commander. He had a wealth of experience of Dhofar, having previously commanded a battalion of SAF and then being at the end of his tour as Commander of the Brigade. I learned a great deal from him very quickly and his last few days were enlightened by the Adoo's abortive attack on the coastal village of Marbat.

The story of that attack is well known. As a major show of strength and perhaps as a reprisal for our bombing of Hauf, probably more than 300 of their best fighters swept down from the jebel in the early morning and attacked the town with the aim of capturing it, but with no prospect of actually holding it.

With a combination of:

Good luck.

The fact of a relieving SAS squadron in Salalah which was flown in under the low cloud base and landed on the beach.

The heroics of the SAS detachment in the town at the time

And the success of the one Strikemaster which got in under the cloud and flew up the protective wire fence at the moment the Adoo were storming it and did great damage with its machine guns,

we saw off the enemy who withdrew taking most of their wounded and dead with them.

Apologising to those who may have heard it before, maybe I could tell my story of being in the Army & Navy Club in Pall Mall some years later and seeing a friend sitting talking to a very smartly dressed Arab. I went over to say Hullo and asked the Arab where he came from. "Ah" he said "I am an Arab" "I know that", I said, "but where is your home?" We established that he was a Dhofari and so we started talking about my time in Dhofar.

"Were you there at the time of the battle of Marbat?" he asked. It turned out that he had been a fighter with the Adoo on that day!! In contrast to his smart suit and tie, he must have been dressed then in a loincloth, armed with an AK47 rifle and festooned with grenades and ammunition. I asked him how many casualties they suffered that day, saying we thought it was about 80. He said it was nearer 200 when all those who later died of wounds were taken into account. For that attack the enemy command had assembled most of their best fighters and to lose so many really knocked the stuffing out of them for much of the rest of the war.

My new Commander of the Dhofar Brigade was Brigadier Jack Fletcher, who I think arrived in August, and we were very fortunate that he came. He was a dynamic and brilliant leader who revitalised all our efforts and, in combination with General Tim Creasey in Muscat the Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces, he transformed the war during his tour.

I am struggling today from memory because Brigadier Jack sadly died of cancer only a couple of years after leaving Dhofar. I fear I did not keep any diaries or papers from my tour, assuming he would, but nothing substantial has been found. Hence our period from 1972 to 1974 has not perhaps received the credit it is due.

You will probably know the general political situation in the early 1970's. Sultan Said bin Taimur had been replaced by his son Sultan Qaboos, partly because Said was incapable of bringing Oman into the 20th Century. Oil had first been exported in 1967 and the revenues were building up but not being used for the benefit of the country. The Dhofaries in particular could see that things were not going as they should and many of

them had fled the rule of Sultan Said for jobs and education in others Gulf states and the wider Arab world. They could see quite clearly how the burgeoning oil revenues in richer Gulf states were being used for the benefit of the people. Indeed many of the Adoo's best fighters had been trained in the British led Trucial Oman Scouts in Sharjah. From this dissatisfaction The People's Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (known to us as PFOLAG) was spawned, with generous help from both Russia and China (about the only place in the world where those two countries were cooperating at that time).

However by the time I arrived, Sultan Qaboos knew he could do little for his people until Dhofar was secure and the rest of his country was safe. By then much of the oil revenue was being devoted to winning the war. Britain was increasingly, but covertly, stepping up military support and more openly, political support. Much had already been done with the help of the SAS, to passify large parts of particularly the eastern jebel, farthest from Yemen. Firm bases were established at Jibjat and White City as a result of Operation JAGUAR, which had been led by the SAS. SAS detachments and SAF troops were staying there throughout the monsoon period for the first time. For those of you who don't know the area, the south west monsoon covers much of the coastal area of Dhofar from late May to September. It does not really rain but the whole place is covered in a thick mist which soaks everything. Visibility is very short and it is unpleasant to live in.

The General Purpose Machine Gun had been introduced into SAF at about that time to replace the Second World War Bren gun as the main infantry section weapon. Good as the Bren had been for many years, we soon got word from the Adoo that the war had been fun, but that the introduction of this new machine gun had taken much of the fun out of it and made all it very unfair!

Brigadier Jack's first few weeks were intensely frustrating for him. The monsoon was at its worst and little offensive action could be undertaken. He visited every location where it was possible to go and made several long airborne reconnaissances to the north of the mist line and started on his future design for battle. I remember visiting a place called Mudhai in the middle of nowhere with him and again several times later. Each time a tiny wizened figure would leap out from behind a rock and say he was bin Kabina who had crossed the Empty Quarter with Wilfred Thessinger in the late 1940's. By 1972 he must have been in his 40's but he looked about 150, and of course he always wanted something !

The Brigadier's general strategy, which had been largely formulated in Muscat with General Tim, had three main thrusts:

**First**, it was obvious we could not win the war unless we could cut off the supply of weapons and ammunition reaching the Adoo from PDRY.

**Secondly**, we had to win the battle for the hearts and minds of all Dhofaris, and so the expansion of the Firqat irregular forces formed from surrendered enemy personnel, and improvement of the lot of the people in areas as they became safe, was of great importance.

**Thirdly**, but also of great importance, was to bring the enemy to battle whenever

possible and defeat him!

For those of you who might remember it, there is a direct parallel here with the strategy employed in the fight against the communist terrorists in the jungles of Malaya in the 50's and 60's. All these fitted in with General Tim's main war aim, which was:

### **"To secure Dhofar for civil development"**

The establishment of the SIMBA position on the PDRY border fitted in with the first of these thrusts, to cut off the enemy's supplies. The Jebali name for the area is Sarfait, by which it is better known to us today. The battalion designated to take the position was the Desert Regiment commanded by Colonel Nigel Knocker. He had been in a position out in the desert to the north from where they could not really threaten the Adoo's camel supply routes from west to east through the jebel.

Something had to be done to let the battalion earn its rations instead of sitting in the desert where it could not influence the greater scheme of things. The aim was to move closer to the Yemen border to really cut the supply lines but it was a major challenge to plan and execute the move onto ground they had not seen before. Extensive reconns from the air were carried out and because the position would be close to the sea (albeit some 3000 feet above on almost a sheer cliff) the various subsidiary positions were given nautical names - Mainbrace, Yardarm and Capsten.

The terrain is very rugged and to find a site which met all the requirements was not easy. One essential was a secure source of water, which looked as though it was available half way down the escarpment, which became known as Capsten. The final position was only some 5 kms from the border.

The start of the operation was 16 April with a company being flown in by helicopter to a position where it could dominate what became Mainbrace. The next morning was unseasonal mist and rain and further occupation had to be delayed. As soon as the weather improved more companies and weapons and ammunition were flown in and a start was made on digging in and sangar building. Barbed wire, pickets and corrugated iron were dropped from aircraft, which, to say the least of it, was hazardous to those on the ground ! The build up continued as quickly as possible and defences were gradually improved. The airstrip was ready in 48 hours and the ability to land fixed wing aircraft was essential. However the weather continued bad and the first casualties were two soldiers killed by a lightning strike. The enemy began to react violently and shelling from across the border was heavy.

Next it was planned to occupy the Capsten position which was right on the enemy's main camel track. Enemy reaction was violent and sadly the position became untenable, with resupply almost impossible and casualty evacuation too difficult. Evacuation was successfully completed but these few words cannot do justice to the hazards encountered.

Meanwhile the enemy, being no fools and similar in some ways to the Taliban of today mounted a diversionary attack on our border fort up in the desert at Habrut. Troops had to be moved from SIMBA to reinforce and this was the point when we attacked Hauf as described earlier. Soon afterwards a Caribou aircraft was hit by artillery and destroyed. We saved the pilot's seat and it was in position outside the command post during at least the next two years from which the Commanding Officer could sip his evening whisky or coffee.

The mounting of the operation was a great strategic success with considerable political and financial gains for Oman. General John Graham, CSAF at the time, summarised them as follows:

1. Generally in 1972 SAF was under considerable pressure in many places so it was essential that offensive action was seen to be taken. A bold strike was needed to grip world attention. Manpower was becoming a problem as Pakistan had temporarily suspended recruiting of Baluch soldiers, a traditional recruiting base for Oman's forces.

2. Much of our equipment was becoming obsolete with spares becoming difficult to obtain.

3. There were difficulties supplying SAF with good British seconded personnel because of the demands of the Ulster situation.

However The actions at Habrut and Hauf were well received internationally and the Sultan was able to make a strong case for Oman at the United Nations which transformed the general attitude in favour of the Sultanate. It gained direct material Arab support from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and importantly from The Shah's Iran, of which more later.

The Sultan received encouraging messages from the Gulf States, North Yemen, Tunisia, Syria, Egypt and Libya. And, of course, the Sarfait position was held until the end of the war in 1975 and played a big part in our winning.

But let us get back to more general matters within the Dhofar Brigade.

The Brigade, with its Headquarters just outside Salalah town, was a very large brigade by British standards. The main components we had under command at that time were four infantry battalions (of which two were Omani and two Baluch), the Armoured Car Squadron with its Saladin armoured cars, most of the Oman Artillery, Z Company commanded by an irrepressible Rhodesian called Spike Powell, the Dhofar Gendarmerie (a comparatively less well-trained battalion of locals), those Strikemasters, Caribous, Skyvans and helicopters of the Oman Airforce as were in Dhofar at any time, and of course those ships of the Sultan's Navy when ever the weather allowed them to be in Dhofar waters.

In addition there was a highly efficient logistic back-up overseen by my fellow staff officer in the Headquarters, Major John McCallum. I should say here that he achieved a great deal with this small logistic tail. Although is was probably about a quarter the size of the tail needed by a British brigade in Germany! Spike Powell and his Z Company were designed to keep Salalah plain clear of the enemy by patrolling and ambushing the most likely places the enemy would use. He was a very colourful character who had his own ideas on defeating his enemy. He came with a background of the Rhodesian SAS and had

had many close shaves with various enemies. Sadly, he was to lose his life later when the civil airliner he was in going on leave was brought down by a rebel missile over the Kariba Dam in Rhodesia.

As the monsoon mists cleared in September, leaving the jebel looking as lush and green as Salisbury Plain, we were able to get down to serious work. The Northern Frontier Regiment, at that time the battalion on Salalah plain began to push out and into the foothills with the aim of removing the Adoo from the areas he needed to hit Salalah town with his rocket launchers.

The Muscat Regiment, by then on the SIMBA position, took on a more active role, patrolling further out and dominating more closely the routes into Dhofar the enemy might try to use. In the eastern area, the last few weak contacts with the enemy showed it was safe for civil development to begin in small but encouraging ways. Wells were dug, limited medical facilities were established (often manned by SAS troopers doing jobs one somehow does not associate them with !) and the first efforts at educating Jebali children were started. A civil development officer was appointed who, despite his unfortunate acronym of CLOD, began to gain the trust of the Jebalis and achieve results.

Although I cannot remember the date, it must have been in March or April 1973 that the first hints of Iranian help materialised. The massive help they finally gave has been well documented, but those first hints were little short of comedy. I was working quietly in the headquarters one day at about lunchtime when the Air Force duty officer told me there was a strange C130 Hercules aircraft calling and saying he wanted to land. The Brigade Commander had gone home to lunch so I made the momentous decision to scramble two Strikemasters to go and have a look at it. They reported that it had no recognisable markings but it was determined to land. We decided it could land but be escorted to a deserted corner of the airfield. I went out in my Landrover and the door opened and an enormous figure emerged. He descended, embraced me and said he had been sent by the Shah of Iran to see what help the Shah could give to his friend the Sultan !

I suppose that contacts must have been made at a high level between the two Governments, but news had not filtered down to Salalah ! However, soon a steady stream of C 130's was pouring in bringing an unimaginable stream of men and military hardware until a complete Special Forces battle group with helicopters was assembled. I soon discovered that the well known pose of American servicemen and film stars lounging in a Jeep is in fact the most comfortable position in which to sit in one !!

Brigadier Jack decided that their first operation should be to open the Midway Road, running from Salalah north through the Jebel to the desert beyond. SAF had not used the road for years. Having been at the British Army Staff College at Camberley not too long before, I knew a bit about laying on a text book Orders Group for my Brigadier. We did it all correctly and their Battle Group Commander (that same huge officer who had greeted me from their first Hercules) and his staff went away knowing exactly what they had to do. Brigadier Jack told their Commander to come back the following day and tell us what his plan was. At the appointed hour the Iranian stood up and after a deep breath said:

"We are the Iranian Special Forces and we are trained to march four miles in the hour in full kit. It is twelve miles from the bottom to the top of the jebel and we will therefore take three hours !"

"Ah" said my Brigadier, "but are you going to place any pickets on high points, what about enemy mines, what will be your immediate action on contact with the enemy, where will your artillery and mortar support be, how will your casualties be evacuated? And I am sure many more queries were raised.

One could almost see the Iranian's mind churning and after a bit he stood up and again launched into his "We are the Iranian Special Forces " speech! The Brigadier and I prompted him into making a workable plan and Colin Boxall-Hunt, my assistant on the operations side in the Headquarters, was ordered to go with them. Much to our amazement, the Adoo were obviously so surprised that there was no opposition for several days. Later they were often attacked and their immediate action was to open fire with all weapons in 360 degrees, which I can tell you from having been with them a few times was a terrifying business. Sadly, I think they took many more casualties from their own fire than they did from the enemy. However, they occupied ground we did not have enough troops for, they absorbed a lot of enemy ammunition and their helicopters were an invaluable asset to add to our own slender resources.

Before the 1973 monsoon set in the Brigade Commander went on leave and kindly suggested that my wife, Ginnie, could come out and that we could use his house. She certainly enjoyed her time there and had many experiences the previous twelve years as an Army wife had not prepared her for !!

During the Brigadier's leave, Nigel Knocker brought his Battalion back to Dhofar, this time to be responsible for Salalah, the Plain and the jebel foot hills. He was acting brigade commander and although I suspect he had been told not to do anything too dramatic, we had a good time together. One factor reared its head again at this time and that was the need to keep the Adoo weapons out of range of Salalah town, and particularly the RAF station, so we set about making plans accordingly.

This was given urgency on 8 March 1973 , when the enemy carried out a very accurate rocket attack on the RAF part of our base from the mouth of one of the wadis across the Plain. Five rounds landed in quick succession on the officer's mess and our own aircraft dispersal pan. They damaged three helicopters, two Strikemasters and quantities of stores, to say nothing of everyone's peace of mind !! It was carried out in broad daylight in spite of all our defences. There was a line of what were known as hedgehogs, manned by the British RAF Regiment. They were a series of mini forts built of oil drums filled with rock and sand and containing a mortar locating radar to spot the position of enemy mortars and rocket launchers. Fire support was organised by British artillery officers calling for fire from the Omani artillery set up on the Plain.

It was clear that the hedgehog line was inadequate to meet this new threat and such attacks could have far reaching political consequences, maybe even the withdrawal of RAF support.

Nigel's plan for what was known as Operation Diana, was to move parties of his soldiers onto the foothills of the jebel to dominate all possible launching sites, much aided by parties of our Firqat forces who knew the ground well and often got wind of attacks from relatives on the jebel. This series of positions and active patrolling between them calmed the situation. One such patrol discovered a very large dump of enemy ammunition and mines. Its destruction by a happy party of SAS troopers made a very satisfactory bang! This happened to coincide with a visit by Lord Carrington who was then Minister of Defence. You may know he had won an MC during the Second World War and he was in his element. As he was assessing future British involvement in Oman that ammunition find could not have been more timely. He went away suitably impressed.

Offensive patrolling continued, more permanent positions were added and no further attacks on us took place for nearly a year, when the enemy acquired an new launcher with double the range. As the 1973 monsoon approached we were all busy building up supplies on the jebel positions that would remain for the four months when only limited flying would be possible. General Tim Creasey in Muscat was a tower of strength and seemed to have the ability to cower officials in MOD London into giving us much more help than perhaps they had bargained for. An example was how he somehow managed to get a British Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel diverted to sit off the SIMBA position making water with its desalinaters. Our helicopters were then able to ferry it up the escarpment on a very short flight, so avoiding the long haul from Salalah. On another occasion he procured 81mm mortar ammunition from British stocks after a disastrous fire in the ammunition depot in Muscat.

I remember at about this time General Sir John Mogg, the Adjutant General in London, came out to see for himself what all the seconded officers were getting up to. I was deputed to take him round several positions on the jebel. At one an Adoo started to fire a 12.7mm Spargin machine gun at us. "Get down, General" I said. "HO HO" he said "I haven't been shot at for years. What fun !!" and up he bobbed. I felt a dead general would not be good for my career and I persuaded him to move on.

So much was going on in so many places and we were definitely getting the upper hand. Except that as I mentioned just now, the enemy's new rocket launcher, the 250mm Katusha with a range of some 20 Kms was able to hit us from previously safe areas. Pieces of rocket casing we recovered showed that they had been manufactured in the Soviet Union only six months before. When you think that they had been flown to Aden, brought across PDRY in trucks on their very limited roads, Cameled across the border and through the jebel and then man handled into a firing position, this was a very considerable achievement. It shows how strong the Russian support was. Brigadier Jack christened them "Katy Ushers", I suspect to indicate to people that they were not perhaps as terrifying as they were at first thought. Their great weakness was that they were not very accurate at long range.

One of the last major operations I was invloved in was the planning and execution of Operation Hornbeam, a line of positions stretching north from Mughsayl, well to the

west of Salalah plain. It was designed to hamper further the enemy's ability to move war-like stores within reach of their targets. It proved to be a great success and, later with another line, the Damavand Line put in by the Iranians, it really cut off their supplies.

My time in Oman was drawing to a close and I was due to leave in January 1974. So what had been achieved during my time? We had killed a lot of enemy. We had received over 1,000 surrendered enemy fighters and incorporated them into the Sultan's Armed Forces as Firqat. We had progressively made it more difficult for the enemy to get supplies through to where he needed them to use. We had integrated the Iranians into the overall plan for the defeat of the Adoo. And we had made a start on the all important civil development on the jebel to show the population the Sultan valued them all as Omanis.

It was a thoroughly interesting and professionally satisfying period for me personally and I would not have missed it for anything. Although when I was first told to go, I wondered what I was letting myself in for !!

When a party of us went back to Dhofar at the end of 2005, we could not believe what we were seeing. Roads everywhere (even all the way to the Yemen border), traffic lights, street lights stretching away up the Midway Road where we had had so much trouble with the first Iranian operation, nice cars causing near traffic jams, new barracks wherever SAF units are stationed and officers' messes that British regiments cannot even dream about.

But above all, wherever we went we saw happy, confident Omanis with great pride in their country, so the sacrifices and efforts we had all made together were totally justified.