

**BRITAIN AND OMAN:
THE DHOFAR WAR AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE**

**A dissertation submitted for the degree of
Master of Philosophy in the University of Cambridge**

by

Lieutenant Colonel John McKeown, Royal Engineers

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necessarily reflect official opinion or thought.**

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PREFACE

Oman is, even now, a little-known country with few available documentary sources for a study. The introductory part of this dissertation is based on the books and articles which have been published on the country. The main body of the paper, the story of the Dhofar War and its significance, is I believe the first attempt to write a reasonably comprehensive account of the ten-year campaign. It is based mainly on the papers, diaries and recollections of British officers who took part. They are listed in the bibliography, and I am deeply grateful to them for their generosity in time, hospitality and access to personal papers.

I should also like to thank Mr Peter Avery, of King's College, Cambridge, for his unfailing encouragement and assistance as my supervisor; Doctor Robin Bidwell and other staff of the Cambridge University Middle East Centre for their generous help; and the Master and Fellows of St John's College, particularly my tutor Doctor George Reid, for their kind welcome to Cambridge.

We can be proud of the contribution of British officers and soldiers to the survival of Oman as a free nation during the Dhofar War: some of them live for ever in that remote land. To them all, and to my Arab and Baluch comrades in the Sultan's Armed Forces, I should like to repeat what my sister wrote to my son when he failed a public examination: "it is better to make history than to write about it".

July 1981

St John's College
Cambridge

GLOSSARY

The transliteration of Arabic words into English in this paper does not, as far as I am aware, conform to any recognised system except that it was what was used by the British elements of the Sultan's Armed Forces: it is known as 'gaysh Arabic' (gaysh-army) or 'Beaconsfield Arabic' (Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, is the location of the British Army School of Languages).

Askar	Local guard.
Bin	Son of...
Dhow/boom	Wooden ship, now normally motorised.
Firqa(t)	Irregular soldier(s), body (bodies) of such, formed from SEPs in Dhofar.
Imam	Religious and temporal ruler. The elected Omani ruler in earlier centuries.
Jebel	Mountain.
Jebel Akhdhar	Green Mountain.
Jebali	Member of mountain tribe, particularly Dhofari.
Khaadim	Literally means slaves, now means Negro members of palace staff.
Khareef	The South-West Monsoon in Dhofar.
MECOM	John W. Mecom oil company.
Qawaasim	Dominant tribe of the Pirate Coast from the 18 th century.
Ramadhan	Islamic religious lunar month during which Muslims fast throughout daylight hours from all food and drink.
Ra's	Point, headland.
Sepoys	British-Indian troops.
Sheikh	Elder of tribe or family.
Shihuh	Tribal inhabitants of Mussandam.

Wadi	Valley, normally dry.
Wahhabis	Militant Islamic fundamentalists who, from what is now Saudi Arabia, conquered most of Central and Eastern Arabia in the 18 th and 19 th centuries.
Wali	Village or area leader appointed by Sultan.
SAF; CSAF	Sultan's Armed Forces; Commander, Sultan's Armed Forces
SON	Sultan of Oman's Navy
SOAF	Sultan of Oman's Air Force
MR	Muscat Regiment
NFR	Northern Frontier Regiment
JR	Jebel Regiment
DR	Desert Regiment
FF	Frontier Force
KJ	Southern Regiment (Kateeba Janoob)
OG	Oman Gendarmerie
DF	Dhofar Force
DG	Dhofar Guard, Dhofar Gendarmerie
SAS	Special Air Service
BATT	British Army Training Team (mainly SAS in Dhofar)
SEP	Surrendered Enemy Person
ANM	Arab Nationalist Movement
DLF	Dhofar Liberation Front
PFLOAG	Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (... or Oman and the Arabian Gulf)
PFLO	Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman)
NDFLOAG	National Democratic Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf
PLA	People's Liberation Army

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CHAPTER ONE

OMAN AND THE BRITISH CONNECTION

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Doorways are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his Hour or two and went his way.

- *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*

The Sultanate of Oman occupies the South-Eastern part of the Arabian peninsula. It is flanked by the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman and on its third side by the great Arabian desert. Saudi Arabia is its neighbour in the desert area, while the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the North and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the South are the neighbouring coastal states. Oman is about the size of Great Britain (300,000 sq km¹). The population, static or declining for most of this century,² has almost doubled in the last decade of substantial economic development to about 900,000.³ Because of the shortage of trained Omanis,

¹ *Oman Facts and Figures*, p. 1.

² cf. meticulous estimates in Lorimer, Vol. 2, pp. 1411-12 (500,000 in 1910) and Townsend, p. 18 (425,000 in 1975).

³ Maxwell letter.

there are over 100,000 expatriates, 80 percent of them Indians and Pakistanis.⁴

The main parts of Oman are two mountain ranges with associated fertile coastal plains and a large mainly desert area separating them. In the North, the Hajar range stretches in a crescent from Mussandam to Ra's al Hadd, the Easternmost part of Arabia. The range reaches 10,000 ft and the Batinah coastal plain watered from these mountains includes a rich agricultural area. The main crops are dates and limes, for centuries an important source of export-income. Fishing is important on the coast. Dhofar, in the South, will be described later. Between the mountain ranges is 600 km of desert from the Gulf of Oman to the fringes of the Empty Quarter, the central desert of the Arabian peninsula.

The Northern tip of the country, Mussandam, is separated from the rest by part of the UAE. This rocky, sparsely populated area projects into the narrowest part of the routes between the Upper Gulf and the open sea. Through this deep waterway, the Straits of Hormuz, is carried 56% of EEC oil, 30% of US oil and 90% of Japanese oil.⁵

Because of its location, and the pattern of monsoon winds, Oman has for many centuries been strategically important to sea-going, trading and

⁴ *Oman '80*, p. 51.

⁵ Whelan, MEED report, p. 5.

imperial powers. It is at the centre of maritime routes connecting India, South-East Asia and the Far East with the Middle East, Africa and Europe.⁶ The Portuguese seized and held coastal Oman during their great period of power in the area in the 16th and 17th centuries. Oman drove out the Portuguese and became a considerable sea-power in the 17th and early 18th centuries, establishing suzerainty over Baluchistan, Zanzibar, and parts of Southern Persia and East Africa. Omani power in its turn declined, to be replaced by Britain as the predominant influence by the 19th century.

Apart from its sea-faring trade (including, for a time, the lucrative slave trade⁷) and overseas possessions, Oman's economy relied on limited agriculture and the export of incense from Dhofar. However, oil was discovered in commercial quantities in 1957 and export started in 1967. By 1975 it accounted for almost all Oman's foreign currency exports. Development as a consequence of oil income has been remarkable with a tenfold increase in GDP between 1970 and 1979, an increase in asphalt roads from 10 to 1,760 km and in telephone lines from 557 to more than 11,000 in the same period.⁸ However, Oman cannot be compared in oil wealth with other Gulf states or Saudi Arabia. Output in 1979 was under

⁶ Colomb, pp. 24-6. Williamson.

⁷ Colomb, pp. 21-58.

⁸ These figures are examples of dozens of equally marked increases listed in *Oman Facts and Figures*, pp. 2-7. See also *Development in Oman 1970-74*.

108 million barrels, equal to 3% of Saudi production or a fifth of Britain's North Sea output.⁹

Oman's importance in world terms does not rest on oil or economy. Rather, it lies in its strategic position at a 'choke point' on a principal oil route. If the flow of oil were stopped through the Straits of Hormuz, or an enemy of the West threatened seriously to do this, it would precipitate a grave international crisis with incalculable consequences. The West cannot continue its present economic course, and could not sustain its planned defences, without the oil which passes in tankers round the Mussandam peninsula.

British Involvement

The English East India Company was incorporated in 1600, and soon began to trade in the Gulf. Portuguese power was declining, and this was hastened by Britain's activities. In 1622, a Persian and British assault expelled the Portuguese from Hormuz. This signified the destruction of their position,¹⁰ although they clung to Oman until 1650.¹¹

⁹ *The Times* supplement, 9 May 1980, p. IX.

¹⁰ Lorimer, Vol 1, pp. 10-28.

¹¹ Lorimer, Vol 1, pp. 400-2.

The Dutch became Britain's main European rival in the second half of the 17th Century, and established a predominant position during much of the period.¹² The East India Company unsuccessfully tried to obtain Omani agreement for a garrison at Muscat in 1659, partly to counteract Dutch influence. Oman enjoyed internal peace and prosperity, and developed as a naval power. Its ships harried the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Mombasa and other East African ports were seized. Dealings with Britain were generally friendly, and British ships were normally safe from the piratical Omani vessels.

Omani expansion was interrupted in the early 18th Century by a contest for succession of the ruler which paralysed the Imam's power abroad and generated two factions at home. In 1737, the Persians, the main target of Omani piracy, invaded Oman and gained supremacy over the country except Sohar. The Dutch helped the Persians but Britain avoided involvement. The Governor of Sohar, Ahmad bin Said Al Bu Said, led resistance and was instrumental in regaining Muscat and expelling the Persians in 1744. He was elected Imam and founded the Al Bu Said dynasty which has governed Oman ever since, despite family and factional resistance and rebellion from time to time.¹³

¹² Lorimer, Vol 1, pp. 40-2, 65-8.

¹³ Lorimer, Vol 1, pp. 402-7.

Ahmad's fifth son, Sultan, was ruler during further expansion of Omani possessions on the Persian coast in 1793-4. Meanwhile the Dutch, by 1688 the ally rather than enemy of Britain, were gradually supplanted by the French as Britain's main rival. In 1798 the French occupation of Egypt and the suspected designs of Napoleon in the East led the British authorities in India to seek an understanding with Sultan.

The first treaty was signed in 1798. Oman agreed to treat Britain's enemies as hers also; to exclude the French and Dutch from Oman or its possessions while they were at war with the English Company; to exclude French vessels from inner Muscat harbour and assist British ships should this lead to conflict; and to allow the establishment of a fortified factory and garrison at the Persian port of Bandar Abbas, then leaseheld by Oman. This first treaty was followed by another within two years, providing for a permanent British political agent in Muscat.¹⁴ These treaties were the forerunners of a series under which Britain took an increasingly dominant position.

Sultan was killed in 1804, after spending years trying unsuccessfully to drive back the Islamic revivalist Wahhabis, who subjugated much of Oman with great savagery. Said, second son of Sultan, became ruler in 1807 and cultivated a closer relationship with Britain over the next 50 years.

¹⁴ Aitchison, pp. 287-8.

In 1809, Britain intervened to subdue Wahhabi-inspired piracy in the Gulf. A predominantly naval force from India attacked Qawaasim pirates and their boats at Ra's al Khaimah, Lingah and Luft. Said marched Northwards with troops, and the fortified town of Shinas was taken in a joint operation.¹⁵ Said's force was rapidly scattered once the British re-embarked, and no permanent advantage followed this first joint British-Omani military venture.

Oman remained almost continuously at war with the Pirate Coast Qawaasim and the Wahhabi fundamentalists. Britain tried to remain neutral, but eventually resolved to make an end of piracy in the Gulf. Nine naval vessels sailed with 3,000 troops from India in 1819, and were joined before Ra's al Khaimah by the Sultan of Oman with two ships and 600 men. Decisive military action at Ra's al Khaimah and other ports resulted in the submission of the local chiefs. A General Treaty of Peace was signed and this, reinforced by determined British patrolling, subdued the old regime of lawlessness and violence. The treaty also contained the first article against the slave trade. An additional benefit for Said was the submission of the rulers of the Bahrain Islands, who agreed to pay annual tribute to Muscat.¹⁶

The first British military involvement in Oman itself, in 1820, met a serious

¹⁵ Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, pp. 114-20. Lorimer, Vol. 1, pp. 643-50.

¹⁶ Lorimer, Vol. 1, pp. 192-9, 650-74.

defeat. A British-Indian force made a rendezvous at Sur with Said and 1,000 fighting men. The British aimed to stop Bani Bu 'Ali piracy, while Said wished to reassert his authority over the tribe, which had embraced Wahhabi practices. The expedition ended in failure, with eight British officers, 400 sepoy and several hundred Omanis killed, and Said himself seriously wounded. A large expeditionary force under Major-General Smith returned in early 1821. In a bitter and bloody battle, the Bani Bu 'Ali were suppressed and their forts and habitations razed. This campaign, and Persian hostility to Britain establishing a military base in the Gulf, led to the decision that the protection of British-Indian trade in the future would be left to naval means.¹⁷

Increasing British naval power led in 1835 to the first Maritime Truce, to be observed by leading sheikhs of the Pirate Coast and their subjects. This was the first of a series of truces which, together with the 1820 General Treaty against piracy, led to maritime security: 'from the year 1835 the tract hitherto described as the Pirate Coast may legitimately, and even more appropriately, be referred to as Trucial Oman.'¹⁸ Oman did not sign the treaties, but was expected to observe their spirit and curb designs on Bahrain and the Persian coast.

Omani-British relations were regulated by a commercial agreement in 1839,

¹⁷ Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, pp. 171-192.

¹⁸ Lorimer, Vol. 1, pp. 210-11.

and anti-slave trade agreements in 1822, 1839 and 1845. Under the latter Said agreed to stop slave-trading to Christian nations, to prohibit export of slaves from Omani African dominions, and to allow British ships to seize Omani slave-trading vessels outside the African dominions.¹⁹ Britain had, by the time of Said's death on board a Royal Naval frigate between Muscat and Zanzibar in 1856, become a dominant political force in the Gulf.

Landen²⁰ identified five major stages in the development of the British position; the first (until the late 18th Century) was commercial, the second (1798-1862) was concerned with politics, and led to the third, the evolution of indirect rule in the second half of the 19th Century, when the establishment of the British Empire in India meant the Gulf assumed strategic and political importance. The two later stages were supremacy (1903-47) and accommodation to the end of the Indian Empire. Said's death therefore came during a major change towards British predominance. This was confirmed by arbitration on the disputed succession by Lord Canning, first Viceroy of India. He decided in 1861 that Zanzibar should become independent of Muscat, but pay an annual subsidy of 40,000 Maria Therese dollars (about £8,500) to the latter. The parts of Said's dismembered empire were ruled separately by two of his sons, as he had

¹⁹ Aitchison, pp. 289-301.

²⁰ Landen, pp. 163-177.

wished.²¹

However, Oman then descended into a decade of dynastic struggle, exacerbated by the loss of Zanzibar, the destruction of the lucrative slave-trade and the renewed encroachment of the Wahhabis, to whom the Sultan was forced to pay annual tribute. The new Sultan, Thuwaini, was murdered by his son, Salim, who was in turn deposed and exiled by an elected Imam, Azzan bin Qais Al Bu Said. Turki, another son of Said, captured Muscat in 1871 and restored the original line. He survived a variety of threats to hand over the sultanate to his son Faisal in 1888.²²

Britain continued to deal with successive sultans, for example Thuwaini agreed to allow telegraph lines across his territory, and in 1873 Sultan Turki agreed to total abolition of the slave trade. Turki was awarded the Zanzibar Subsidy now funded jointly by the British Government and the Government of India. Faisal signed a renewed Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation in 1891, and the next day pledged ‘never to cede, to sell, to mortgage or otherwise give for occupation, save to the British Government, the dominions of Muscat and Oman or any of their dependencies’.²³

However, these happy relations became very strained over later years.

²¹ Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, pp. 525-553.

²² Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, pp. 638-654.

²³ Aitchison, pp. 305-18.

British neutrality in rebellions faced by Faisal, particularly in 1895 when Muscat was occupied for several weeks, caused him to become bitter. The differences were exacerbated by the French, who showed renewed interest in the area and appointed a persuasive Arabic-speaking envoy to Muscat in 1894. In early 1899 Faisal agreed to allow a French coaling station at a small defensible harbour near Muscat. Lord Curzon, the new Viceroy of India, insisted the concession be revoked. British ships moved into position to open fire on Muscat and a warning was given that bombardment was imminent. Faisal was summoned aboard the flagship and capitulated, withdrawing concessions to the French.²⁴ There was a remaining problem with the French, who had been granting flags, and therefore claim to French protection, to Omani shipowners. However, this was resolved eventually by the Hague Tribunal in 1905,²⁵ and there was no further serious challenge to Britain's dominant position.

Britain used this strength to eliminate arms traffic through Muscat. The Sultan's agreement to this led, as had the abolition of slavery, to great dissatisfaction in the Interior. This helped unite tribes under a revived Imamate which, in 1913, attacked Sultanate government areas. This time, Britain did not remain neutral. British ships bombarded rebel-held coastal positions and, in January 1915, the Imam's main force was heavily defeated

²⁴ Landen, pp. 247-252.

²⁵ Aitchison, pp. 280-3.

by sepoys on the approaches to the capital.

Eventually, peace was restored by the Treaty of Seeb in 1920 and the *status quo* of 1913 restored. Sultan Taimur, who had succeeded his father in late 1913, acknowledged that he could not control the Interior. The two parts of the country maintained stable relations throughout the life of the respected Imam Muhammad bin 'Abd Allah Al Khalili who held title from 1920 to 1954.²⁶ The Sultanate in this period suffered from chronic financial problems, and when Said bin Taimur succeeded his father in 1932 he established as his main aim the solvency of his state within its reduced means. The habits of frugality which Said acquired then cost him dear in the 1960s.

Britain maintained its position as the dominant external influence.²⁷

Updated treaties of friendship were signed in 1939 and 1951, Britain continued the Zanzibar Subsidy and paid other subsidies to compensate for the lost arms trade, for defence and development, and from 1921 helped raise, train and command Sultanate forces. In return, Said bin Taimur allowed RAF landing fields on the mainland and on Masirah,²⁸ cooperated with Britain during the Second World War, and granted an exclusive oil concession to a British oil company.

²⁶ Peterson, pp. 169-77.

²⁷ Peterson, pp. 142-3. Landen, pp. 406-9. Albuarna, pp. 47, 52-3.

²⁸ *A History of RAF Masirah*.

In 1952, Saudi Arabia, lineal successors of the Wahhabis, occupied part of the Buraimi Oasis for the first time in 80 years as part of a long-standing dispute over the borders. Imam Muhammad rallied his men to the Sultan's side, and their forces were only restrained from military action to expel the Saudis by British, and indirectly American, pressure.²⁹ However, when Muhammad died two years later, his elected successor Ghalib bin 'Ali al Hin'i was a Saudi supporter, and began moves to seize full control of Interior Oman. Sultanate and Imamate planned to capture Ibri and, in 1954, Sultanate forces arrived first, cutting direct Imamate communications with Buraimi. In October, 1955, the occupation of Buraimi Oasis was ended by the British-led Trucial Oman Scouts and Sultanate forces. Ghalib's Imamate was then finished by a two-pronged attack on Nizwa and Rostaq. Sultan Said capped the reunification of his country with an epic journey across the desert from Salalah to Nizwa.³⁰

However, Ghalib's brother Talib had escaped to Saudi Arabia, from where he arranged for arms and men to be smuggled into Oman. In June 1957, he returned with more trained guerrillas and Ghalib was proclaimed Imam once more. Sultanate forces were routed, and Sultan Said appealed for aid. Despite Arab League opposition, British forces were supplied which drove the rebels into the fastnesses of the *Jebel Akhdhar*, from which the available

²⁹ Kelly, *Eastern Arabian Frontiers*, pp. 159-164. Maxwell letter.

³⁰ Landen, pp. 418-21. Peterson, pp. 180-3.

forces were unable to dislodge them.³¹

Following meetings in 1958, Britain agreed to strengthen the Sultan's forces and second officers to train and command them.³² Under the first commander of the reorganised Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), Colonel David Smiley, a determined assault on *Jebel Akhdhar* by British and Omani forces led by two squadrons of the Special Air Service was completely successful in January 1959.³³

Northern Oman was secured for the Sultanate for the first time in almost two centuries. The next problems were to arise in the Southern Province of Dhofar, where the seeds of rebellion were being sown as the *Jebel Akhdhar* campaign reached its successful conclusion.

³¹ Landen, pp. 421-2. Peterson, pp. 183-4.

³² Albuarna, p. 54.

³³ Smiley, pp. 72-88.

CHAPTER TWO

DHOFAR AND TRIBAL REBELLION

There is the tragedy, a collision course set between an old way of life and rule and the new requirements of modern democracy. It is plain for all to see, and everyone sees it, except for old Said bin Taimur bin Faisal bin Turki bin Said bin Sultan bin Ahmed bin Said Al Bu Said sitting in his decrepit castle by the sea in Salalah.

- Ian Skeet

Dhofar is sharply different from the rest of Oman. Between June and September, its mountains are bathed by the South-West monsoon (the *khareef*), resulting in rich pastures, with dense tropical vegetation, bright butterflies and flowers. There are almost as many cattle as people, and during the *khareef* they wade knee-high in brilliant green grass. It has been compared by British officers serving there with parts of Devon, Yorkshire, the South Downs or the jungle growth of Malaysia.¹

The people are also different. They are more volatile, darker and finer

¹ Purdon, BAR article. Thwaites, *Arabian Command*, p. 7.

featured than Northern Omanis, and speak their own languages. Although now an ethnic mix, the mountain people, the *Jebalis*, are descended mainly from the aboriginal inhabitants. Like the Mussandam Shihuh, and unlike the people in Central Oman, they survived the migration of Arabian tribes into Eastern Arabia nearly 2,000 years ago. The population on the plain has a strong Negro element.² The population is estimated at between 40,000 and 60,000.³

The coastal plain is 60 km. long but nowhere more than 14 km deep. The coast, with Indian Ocean rollers breaking over white sands, is fringed with coconut palms. The area round Salalah and other villages is rich in crops including wheat, maize and various fruits and vegetables.⁴

Mountains rise steeply from the plain or sea, are honeycombed with caves and deeply incised with *wadis*. Although the luxuriant vegetation dies with the South-West monsoon the *Jebalis* and their cattle survive by a combination of hardiness, careful husbandry of surviving vegetation and semi-nomadic pursuit of water. The main traditional trading resource was frankincense,⁵ giving the area the name of the Frankincense Coast. Its cultivation and tapping, long a major economic resource of Southern

² Hawley, pp. 77, 98-9.

³ *The Times* Supplement May 9, 1980, p. V.

⁴ *Southern Region – Dhofar*.

⁵ Phillips, pp. 179-201.

Arabia, has now all but ended.

North of the mountains is the Negd, a barren gravel-plain. The only vehicle access from Dhofar to the North runs through the mountains to Thumrait in the Negd and then 500 km North-Eastwards to Northern Oman.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Dhofar was ruled by a former buccaneer and slave-trader who settled in Salalah.⁶ His 25-year rule was described as enlightened, but he was assassinated at Mirbat in 1829. Sultan Said bin Sultan despatched a force from Muscat to annex the province but the force was soon withdrawn. A second annexation took place in 1879 at the invitation of a leader of a revolution against a Moplah priest who had fled India and established personal leadership in Salalah.

From 1879, Dhofar remained continuously under the Sultan's rule through his appointed *wali*. Rebellions were frequent. In 1880 and 1883, there were risings which the small local garrison could contain. In 1885 and 1887, more serious rebellions needed forces from Muscat to restore the situation. The most serious rebellion, in 1895, was ended only when British assistance was accepted and an Anglo-Omani force sent by sea in 1897. There were minor uprisings until 1900, when the end of foreign intrigue by the displaced Moplah in Constantinople, and the permanent transfer of the

⁶ This paragraph and the next are from Lorimer, Vol. 1, pp. 589-601.

unpopular *wali* “whose proceedings were generally characterised by energy rather than discretion”, led to peace.

Sultan Faisal was the first to visit Dhofar, his son Taimur spent more time at Salalah than in Muscat, and Said bin Taimur became a permanent resident. He married a Dhofari, mother of the present sultan. Said asserted his authority throughout the plain and mountains, but his medieval restrictions, refusal to acknowledge Dhofari grievances and bitter reaction to expressions of discontent led to the rebellion which was to become the Dhofar war. Said’s rule was harsh and reactionary, and his distrust of other Omanis led to a personal government totally unsuited to a modern state.⁷ Years of frugality had made him wary of spending money, but in any case his inclinations were against development. “We do not need hospitals here,” he told Colonel Smiley.⁸ “This is a very poor country which can only support a small population. At present many children die in infancy and so the population does not increase. If we build clinics many more will survive – but for what? To starve?”

“Said bin Taimur was one of the nastiest rulers the world has seen for a long time,” according to a Western anti-Sultanate writer.⁹ A balanced view requires some explanation for his actions. The habits of frugality during

⁷ Skeet, pp. 163-203.

⁸ Smiley, p. 41.

⁹ Halliday, p. 275.

years of national bankruptcy made him temperamentally unable to spend money at an appropriate rate for either development or security needs when oil revenues began in 1967. It is disingenuous to compare his rule with that in Western societies: a glance at the neighbouring states of post-colonial South Yemen or Iran during and after the Shah indicates that Said had no monopoly in repression or cruelty. In most ways he was out of his time: his rule should be compared with earlier despots rather than modern rulers. He tried to keep the modern world out of Oman. He was understandably excessively sensitive about security, both because of his own dynastic and national history and because of the revolutionary turbulence he saw everywhere about him.

The conventional picture of Said *bin* Taimur is totally black, but there are shades of grey. He was courteous, generous to those he trusted. He did start, though much too slowly, the modernisation of Northern Oman. However, he regarded Dhofar as a personal feudal estate. It remained completely undeveloped, with few amenities, roads, schools or medical facilities. Said's people had genuine grievances. As Dhofaris went to work in the oil-rich Gulf states in the 1950s, they saw development elsewhere which heightened their disillusionment.

The hostility received powerful backing in the early 1960s from two movements, which ensured that a local uprising became a powerful and sustained campaign, continuing long after the initial grievances had been

rectified. Pan-Arab Nationalism was sweeping the whole Arabian peninsula in a way reminiscent of Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' over Africa: the mood was not uniform nor particularly ideological, though its greatest expression was anti-colonialist and therefore anti-British. The second movement, however, was both ideological and well-directed, and may best be called scientific socialism: it was manipulated, reinforced and disseminated by China and the European Communist powers, which linked it with anti-colonialism so that the whole ferment in the region became a mixture of Arab Nationalism, scientific socialism, anti-colonialism and general disorder intending to precipitate change.¹⁰

By the early 1960s, there were various organisations amongst expatriate Dhofaris. The League of Dhofari Soldiers, a largely apolitical group, was composed of Dhofaris in police or armed services (at one time over a quarter of the police in Qatar and Kuwait originated in Dhofar and a squadron of the Trucial Oman Scouts was Dhofari). More politically committed exiles joined the Arab Nationalists' Movement (ANM), and some went by way of Kuwait to Syria for guerrilla warfare training. The Dhofari Benevolent Society broke from the ANM and started, under the guise of aiding the poor and building mosques, to collect funds and recruit members for armed rebellion. The various dissidents established links with

¹⁰ Accounts of this from, respectively, anti- and pro- Western commentators are in Halliday and Kelly, *Arabia, The Gulf and the West*. The ideological background is prominent in publications of the Gulf Committee, London, and KROAG, Copenhagen.

Imamate representatives in Saudi Arabia and with the wider ANM in Cairo and elsewhere.

Within Dhofar, a disgruntled ex-employee of Sultan Said, Mussalim bin Nufl, led the Dhofar Liberation Front, which was emerging from the earlier groupings. A member of the Bait Kathir, he and fellow tribesmen found additional cause for dissatisfaction in MECOM oil exploration in Kathiri territory. The first 'military' action, apart from minor sabotage at RAF Salalah in December 1962, was an attack led by bin Nufl on MECOM vehicles in April, 1963. An *askar* (local guard) was shot and a company vehicle pushed over a cliff at Aqabat al Hatab on the Salalah-Midway track. Bin Nufl then fled to Saudi Arabia, while leaflets denouncing the Sultan were distributed ostensibly by an organisation called Dhofar Arab Youth.

Bin Nufl was welcomed in Saudi Arabia by the Imamate organisation and sent to Iraq with dozens of other Dhofaris for military training at a camp near Basra. He later returned to Dhofar with arms and other supplies, and attacked various targets. Several RAF vehicles were damaged, the concrete ramp at Aqabat al Hatab was dynamited and in September a machine gun and rifle attack was made on MECOM's camp at Raysut.¹¹

Dissident activity was increasing towards the end of 1964, and for the first

¹¹ Halliday, pp. 314-317. Kelly, *Arabia, The Gulf and The West*, p. 134. Price, pp. 3-4.

time Sultan Said decided that SAF should enter Dhofar. Colonel Anthony Lewis, CSAF, made a reconnaissance in October. At the end of November a company of the Northern Frontier Regiment (NFR) ground its way across the ‘desert curtain’ separating Northern Oman from Dhofar. The journey, in three-ton Bedford trucks, took three days.

The military prospect was unpromising. SAF consisted of only two battalions and a gendarmerie. “Our force was ... designed only to cope with Northern Oman as the Dhofar Province was forbidden to us,” according to Colonel Lewis.¹² “It was not until Mussalim bin Nufl, the disgruntled and sacked gardener belonging to the Sultan’s entourage, had caused enough trouble that we were allowed to enter Dhofar. We therefore had a cold start for getting to know the enemy, the inhabitants and the terrain.”

In territorial terms, a tiny force in a country as big as Great Britain was suddenly faced with rebellion in a province, previously unvisited, the size of Wales. The local Dhofar Force, which had been founded in the 1950s by a British officer, Major St. John Armitage, had degenerated after his departure into an ineffective static guard.¹³

The small NFR force under Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas DalGLISH, who had

¹² Lewis letter dated 24 November 1980.

¹³ Lewis, letter dated 31 March 1981.

flown ahead of his company with a Desert Intelligence Officer (DIO), had no proper maps. Their first task was to establish the route across the mountains, following the oil company track. Because the dissidents were supplied from Saudi Arabia, the company patrolled the desert North West of Dhofar *jebel*, checking tracks near Mudhai and Habarut and *wadis* on the North of the *jebel*. A half-company patrolled West from Salalah through Raysut to Mughsayl, and East to Taqa and Mirbat. Then Colonel Dalglish drew the first outline map, and in the absence of any contact with dissident tribesmen or attacks on civilian targets by them, the force withdrew from Dhofar after little more than a month.¹⁴

The War Starts

This first series of incidents and the short NFR visit were not regarded as the start of the Dhofar War. Months of apparent calm followed, and the Sultanate dates the start of the war from May 1965 when SAF forces permanently deployed to Dhofar. Later SAF documents indicate that the NFR visit was regarded as an armed reconnaissance.¹⁵ The DLF date the start of their campaign from their first action after a congress in June 1965.

¹⁴ Interview with a senior intelligence official in Salalah. He was the DIO who accompanied Colonel Dalglish.

¹⁵ For example, *DLF Background Notes*, undated typescript issued by Lieutenant Colonel Harvey to NFR in 1967. This chronology is a source for dates and events from 1962-67.

They commemorated this action by naming their magazine “9th June” and later by calling a unit the 9th June Regiment.

In early 1965, the DLF infiltrated back into Dhofar. Bin Nufl returned by the end of February and 27 rebels led by Aamr bin Ghanim followed in March. In May Iranians boarded an Iraqi *dhow* suspected of smuggling arms to Iranian rebels. A search revealed it was carrying arms to Dhofari rebels, several of whom were aboard with important documents.

Armed with more information, and warned that Dodge trucks had left Saudi Arabia with more arms and rebels, SAF redeployed to Dhofar. Said bin Taimur considered he faced a small tribal rebellion, and when Lieutenant-Colonel Trevor Alexander flew ahead of two companies of his Muscat Regiment (MR) on 23 May 1965 for Operation Rainbow he was given a month to clear out 60 rebels in two groups.

The rebels convened their first congress at *Wadi* Kabir in Central Dhofar on 1 June 1965. They elected an 18-man executive and issued a ringing declaration condemning the Sultan’s regime calling on all Dhofaris for support.¹⁶ Their first armed action followed on 9 June when the driver of an oil company vehicle was murdered by machine gun fire.

The two MR companies entered the *jebel* from the North side, using NFR’s

¹⁶ Quoted in full in *PFLOAG Documents*, pp. 11-13.

crude maps and local guides, and started to probe down the *wadis*. The first clashes of the war occurred on 12 and 14 June. In the first action, SAF killed Aamr bin Ghanim's brother in an ambush. In the second a SAF soldier was wounded when a Land Rover hit a mine. The first airstrip was cleared to evacuate the wounded man by Beaver, and named "Hero's Field".

MR's Reconnaissance Platoon, led by Captain Mike Butler, joined Major Richard John's company to check a report that arms and ammunition were hidden near the brackish Thint waterhole. Three empty Dodge vehicles were found, the enemy having abandoned them and hired camels to move the arms. The cache was found by a soldier on his morning walk away from the waterhole: the subsequent search revealed large quantities of ammunition and some weapons.

Patrolling continued throughout the central *jebel*, and a further ammunition cache found and destroyed. Conditions for the SAF soldiers were harrowing. Once away from their vehicles, the troops could be resupplied only by the two Beaver aircraft. Two companies had to be supplied in six different locations. Jerricans of water and radio batteries were padded and dropped from the aircraft at low level. Soldiers existed on half a gallon of water each a day, which in the heat was not enough even for drinking. The soldiers' cheap desert boots issued cracked within days and hockey boots were dropped in to replace them. Inferior quality clothing rotted as the

monsoon started. Heavy radios and vehicle batteries were tied onto a camel as a mobile command-post. After more than a month of these conditions, the troops walked down into Salalah.

In Salalah, a highly successful cordon and arrest operation had taken place on 18 June. Colonel Alexander had been supplied with a list of 33 suspects, and had flown in an extra company. Security before the operation had been total. The first the RAF commander knew was that there was no breakfast because the cook was delayed by the cordon. Arrests were made by palace *khaadim* (slaves), summoned by ringing the palace bell after the cordon was in place. All 33 suspects were caught.

In what was to become a familiar pattern, calm descended with the monsoon. Conditions were difficult even for foot movement on the *jebel*. Perpetual rain and mist restricted vision to a few yards. After the arrest operation and arms finds the Sultan and his advisors believed the rebellion had been smashed. Colonel Lewis wrote soon afterwards of a successful short campaign in Dhofar.¹⁷

Patrols and other operations continued, with a company at Raysut. Some notable operations took place, associated with professional and daring flying by the few SOAF pilots. Gant's Hill, on the border and later abandoned to the PDRY, was turned into a landing strip after a Beaver

¹⁷ Lewis, undated draft article.

made a touch and go landing on a totally unprepared area, and then returned with a few heavily armed MR soldiers who moved rocks and planted bushes to indicate the cleared strip.

After a few weeks, much of the SAF force was withdrawn leaving John's company to garrison Dhofar. Sultan Said himself sited the new tented camp for the company at Umm al Ghawarif. Most of MR, against Colonel Alexander's wishes, returned to the North over the Midway road, almost impassable in the monsoon. It took 14 days to extricate their vehicles from the morass, and even then two were abandoned. Fortunately, the Dodge vehicles left by the Front had been towed in, repaired and were in use.¹⁸

SAF success continued. The *Wali* of Dhofar heard of arms being unloaded from vehicles near Mudhai. A half-company left Salalah and drove over the *jebel*. Searches at Mudhai and a burned-out Dodge truck nearby revealed large quantities of machine guns, mortar bombs and other arms and ammunition. Two and a half Bedford loads of supplies were removed and others destroyed. The find of new material caused a stir not only in Oman but in British military headquarters in the Gulf. A Shackleton aircraft was sent along the Border, and Hunter aircraft put on standby.¹⁹

¹⁸ Sources on MR's tour are as follows: John interview; Alexander letter dated 18 May 1981; Goss interview; Lewis letters and article; Brocklehurst interview; Intelligence official interview; *Military Press Brief Dhofar*.

¹⁹ John interview.

It became clear after the 1965 monsoon that rebel groups were on either side of the Salalah-Midway road, later renamed the Red Line by the DLF. Most actions were hit and run attacks on the Red Line. Direct SAF-DLF confrontations resulted from probing SAF patrols in the *wadis* debouching onto Salalah Plain.

In September, a company group of NFR under Major Edwards relieved MR. At Taqa, a stand-off night attack in early October wounded one *askar*. A more determined attack on Mirbat one month later, when the DLF used scaling ladders, led to several killed on both sides. MECOM vehicles continued to be a major target for both mines and ambushes. On 2 October 1965 the MECOM camp boss from Midway was killed when ambushed on the Midway road. One serious result was that the mainly Italian drivers refused to work without protection.²⁰ This, plus other demands on SAF, prompted the decision to raise a third battalion.

In February 1966, another DLF convoy from Dannam arrived. Bin Nufl led an attack on the small garrison at Mudhai. A Piston Provost aircraft assisting the spirited defence spotted and attacked two Dodge vehicles in a *wadi*. The vehicles disintegrated as ammunition in them detonated. A third vehicle was found and destroyed after air and ground searches. A fourth was found abandoned. Arms and ammunition including Lewis guns, mortars, mines and plastic explosive were recovered, and Bin Nufl was severely wounded.²¹

²⁰ Foulds letter dated 18 March 1981.

²¹ Goss interview and *DLF Background Notes*.

Further Sultanate reaction included immediate reinforcement of Dhofar. The Commanding Officer of NFR, Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Sanders, led a small tactical headquarters, a further NFR company, Red Company (cadre of the planned Desert Regiment) and the Reconnaissance Platoon.²² A detachment of Oman Artillery included two 5.5 inch guns Colonel Sanders had sent from Malaya for the *Jebel Akhdhar* way nearly ten years previously.²³ SOAF provided usually two Provosts for ground support fire, and Beavers. The solitary boom of the Coastal Protection force, later to develop into the Sultanate Navy (SON), operated off Dhofar outside the monsoon: it was armed with a Bren gun and a two-inch mortar and commanded by a retired RAF officer, Group Captain Jaspar Coates.²⁴

SAF aims were: securing the oil company road from Raysut to Midway, where the Reconnaissance Platoon watched the North-West approaches; trying to bring the enemy to battle, though with two companies this was like looking for a needle in a haystack; protection of the RAF base; wherever possible, and against the Sultan's wishes, limited 'hearts and minds' with a small medical team.²⁵ NFR patrolled the *wadis* around the Red Line, and in a sharp action in the Naheez in March 1966, Captain Alan Woodman, a former Royal Marine, was among several SAF killed. He was the first

²² Brocklehurst interview.

²³ Foulds letter dated 14 January 1981.

²⁴ Lewis letter dated 31 March 1981.

²⁵ Foulds letter dated 18 March 1981.

Briton to die in the campaign.

The rebels' most spectacular operation in this period was an attempted assassination of Sultan Said on 26 April 1966. The NFR companies were on the *jebel* when the Sultan visited the Dhofar Force camp. Members of a DLF cell within the force fired on the Sultan. Unbelievably Said escaped (perhaps a comment on the training of the Dhofar Force). The Force commander, who had been warned by SAF of threats within his ranks and the need to review security,²⁶ was badly wounded. Said became even more suspicious, and was seldom again seen by his Dhofari subjects, many of whom believed he was dead.²⁷ He ordered stricter measures, including a blockade of the *jebel* which alienated uncommitted tribesmen who found it increasingly difficult to get food.²⁸

Colonel Sanders, in Salalah with only HQ and administrative staff, disarmed the Dhofar Force almost single-handed.²⁹ More than 20 mutineers escaped. Red Company, under Major Brocklehurst, and half of B Company, NFR, followed up the *Wadi Darbat*. Major Foulds remembers local women shouting warnings to the rebels. At the head of the *wadi*, there was a prolonged engagement after which blood was found in rebel

²⁶ Lewis letter to Sanders, 21 March 1966.

²⁷ Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p. 319.

²⁸ Playfair, pp. 27-8.

²⁹ Goss interview.

positions. One SAF soldier was slightly wounded. The force spent a week patrolling the area without further contacts.³⁰

B Company NFR had suffered a setback two days after arriving in Dhofar, when the rebels first used a rocket launcher on 24 May 1966. The company commander, Major Hamish Emslie, had escorted Major Brocklehurst's company on a *jebel* move. Major Emslie appeared to take no precautions against ambush when returning to the Midway road, was caught in a *wadi* and killed by a rocket fired into his vehicle. Other vehicles were trapped, and enemy picked off SAF soldiers, killing eight and wounding six.

However, Aamr bin Ghanim, enemy group leader, was killed by Major Emslie's orderly who was blown out of the Land Rover but survived to fire on the rebels as they approached.³¹

There was another early monsoon contact before operations reduced and MR replaced NFR. C Company MR, newly arrived in July were ambushed in the *Wadi Darbat* and suffered six casualties, one of whom died. A sign that the war had not developed the bitterness that came later with Communist take-over was provided when NFR moved to support the MR evacuation. While NFR soldiers were building sangars and ground-sheeting up for the night, an enemy group passed by but did not open fire 'because

³⁰ Foulds letter of 18 March 1981 and Brocklehurst interview.

³¹ Foulds letter, Goss and Brocklehurst interview.

the soldiers all looked so wet and miserable!’³²

Monsoon operations were confined to small patrols, night ambushes on tracks and waterpoints (one caught the father of a Front member carrying letters containing valuable information), cordons and searches on the plain and escorts over the Midway road.³³ After the monsoon, there were further actions in the *wadis* around the road and an attack on Mirbat.

The campaign so far had been successful for the SAF, though limited by shortage of men and equipment. Enemy supply from Saudi Arabia stopped when King Feisal realised the threat to traditional monarchs generally.³⁴

The alternative safe base over the Aden Protectorate border was reduced in October 1966 when the Irish Guards cordoned and searched Hauf and arrested 22 Dhofaris. The operation had been requested by SAF.³⁵ In the first 18 months of the war, SAF lost 19 killed and 38 wounded, but had inflicted similar casualties on the Front which had few active fighters.³⁶

In early 1967, two MR companies under Colonel Alexander mounted operations to cover the North-West approaches and the border near Gant’s

³² Foulds letter of 14 January 1981, quoting an intelligence report.

³³ Foulds letter of 18 March 1981.

³⁴ Playfair, p. 28.

³⁵ Goss interview.

³⁶ Lewis paper dated 19 December 1966.

Hill. Cordons and searches were mounted on the plains and *jebel*. The only enemy initiatives were ambushes on the Midway road, which led to SAF casualties but also to rebels killed or captured. By the 1967 monsoon, Dhofar was quiet. The 60 rebels on the *jebel* had had no resupply since early 1966. Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Thwaites arrived at this time to command MR, and found the DLF 'virtually finished'. The difficulty was to find any enemy.³⁷

At the end of 1966, Colonel Lewis considered there was military stalemate. Because of manpower and equipment shortages SAF was unable to destroy the rebel movement, though it was in a poor moral and physical state. He recommended increased military measures such as collective punishments against tribes and evacuation of free-fire zones. He also pressed for political moves. 'Rebel movements have only been finally destroyed by leniency. A rebel who has no prospect of surrender terms will fight to the bitter end once he is committed to the movement. If there is some opportunity of pardon, this thought when his morale is low will weaken his resistance and lead him to capitulate. I feel that now is the moment to offer some terms for amnesty to the rebel rank and file.'³⁸ Typically, Said bin Taimur accepted harsher tactics but rejected political moves.

There was a strong feeling in SAF that Said was being badly served by

³⁷ Thwaites interview.

³⁸ Lewis paper.

senior advisors, including British expatriates. Officers have stated that the direction of the war suffered, with Sultan Said not being fully informed of the true position and orders being passed which probably did not emanate from him. Conversely, there was resentment at SAF officers having direct access to the Sultan in Salalah at what was virtually a medieval court.

In late 1966 and early 1967, political moves would probably have ended the insurrection, particularly if accompanied by some alleviation of the poor living conditions of *jebalis*. ‘We were talking to people on the *jebel*, particularly the *sheikhs*,’ recalled the senior intelligence officer at the time. ‘They said if His Highness would give some reasonable terms they could pull most people out of the conflict. But HH said he would concede nothing – they were no more than cattle thieves. If he had made concessions then, the whole thing would have broken up.’³⁹

Such concessions can only work when offered from a position of strength, and 1967 was the last time Sultan Said could have ended the campaign in this manner.

³⁹ Interview, Salalah, 19 May 1981.

CHAPTER THREE

COMMUNIST REVOLUTION

A rebellion is like someone dropping a lighted match or cigarette in a forest. A leaf catches fire, and unless you stamp on it immediately, before you know where you are the surrounding trees have caught fire and there is a roaring and spreading conflagration.

- Major General Corin Purdon

The newly formed Desert Regiment (DR), understrength and not fully trained, was sent to garrison Dhofar from September 1967 to April 1968. This was when the whole situation changed in the enemy's favour, although full effects were not felt for months. The UK started to withdraw from bases in East Aden Protectorate in August and in short order withdrew from Aden itself by the end of November 1967.¹ The Socialist Revolution followed, and the committed Marxist-Leninists in Aden began to supply bases, equipment, training and direction for the Dhofar rebellion.²

In a foolish diversion of effort, Said bin Taimur ordered the building of a fort at Habarut in November 1967. The building took until almost the end of DR's tour.

¹ Kelly, *Arabia, The Gulf and the West*, pp. 1-46.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 127-136.

With pressure off in Dhofar, and active support from South Yemen, the DLF took fresh heart. In December 1967 or January 1968, the rebels received resupplies from Hauf. Within days, a DR company was engaged by 40 DLF East of the Midway road and lost three killed and seven wounded. Enemy casualties were higher, but it was a measure of their confidence that battle was joined. There were mine incidents, and DR positions were attacked with mortars and machine guns. At the end of DR's tour, the CO, Lieutenant Colonel Brian Barnes, said the war would go on for a long time. His battalion, he felt, had done a workmanlike job of containment without materially shortening the war.³

A major military effort was now needed. The time for concessions had, for the moment, gone. The DLF was becoming increasingly politicised. Aid from Communist regimes was pouring in through the PDRY. China provided arms, ammunition and military advisers, and trained 30 members of the DLF as military leaders and political commissars at the Anti-Imperialist School in Peking.⁴

From April 1967, Oman had a new CSAF Brigadier Corin Purdon who made vigorous prosecution of the war his priority. 'From the time I arrived ... I pressed for the urgent provision of helicopters, the secondment (from Britain) of SAS, for

³ Turnill interview, 13 March 1981. Colonel Turnill succeeded Colonel Barnes as CO of DR in December 1968.

⁴ Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p. 331 where he states that dozens of Dhofaris were trained in China. Kelly, *Arabia, The Gulf and the West*, p. 137. Yodfat and Abir, p. 106. *Military Press Brief Dhofar*. Playfair, p. 30, lists other sources on Chinese involvement.

permission to raise another infantry battalion, and for a Hearts and Minds effort. We were unable to convince Sultan Said bin Taimur that once we had more infantry and the mobility, logistic and casevac (casualty evacuation) support given by helicopters, we could put an end to the war ... I and my COs were well aware of this, as we had all taken part in a number of recent counter insurgency campaigns such as Cyprus, Malaya, Aden and Borneo, but the Sultan hated spending money and just would not listen to us.’⁵

“Dhofar was sucking in more and more troops and resources”, according to John Crompton, SAF’s Brigade Major from September 1966 to April 1969. “There were always pleas for more, and we did not have the resources despite thinning out the North.”⁶

Brigadier Purdon’s appeals for British assistance were unwelcome with Aden recently evacuated and withdrawal from the Gulf planned. ‘Having tried by every channel to get helicopters, extra infantry and the SAS, I eventually wrote a paper to the then Commander British Forces Gulf (now Field Marshal Sir Roland Gibbs) ... everything was at last agreed. However, the forest fire had taken hold, and the tragic delay in agreement had allowed the enemy to increase in numbers,

⁵ Purdon letter dated 3 December 1980.

⁶ Crompton interview. He was a valuable source in establishing the chronology of events over the next three years of the war.

equipment and training, thanks to the Soviet bloc involvement.”⁷

British assistance was more than two years away when Lieutenant Colonel Michael Harvey, a veteran of Palestine, Korea (where he had been decorated for breaking out of the Imjin River trap), East Africa and Aden, took NFR to Dhofar in April 1968. He had rigorously prepared his battalion. “I thought I knew quite a lot of anti-guerrilla work,” wrote one of his company commanders, “having served in India, Palestine, Mau-Mau, Cyprus, Egypt, etc, but I learned more in three months with Mike Harvey than all the knowledge I had accumulated before. He loathed Communism, could practically recite Chairman Mao’s little red book off by heart and could put himself in the enemy’s shoes in an uncanny way.”⁸

This opinion was shared by CSAF. ‘Mike Harvey was an outstanding battalion commander, all his operations were meticulously planned, tactically sound and invariably aggressive. Under him, NFR dominated the *jebel* and held the initiative throughout their tour of operations.’⁹

Based on his deep knowledge of guerrilla tactics and a close study of Dhofar, Colonel Harvey developed a successful strategy to deal with the enemy. Senior officers in Oman in 1968 consider the war could have been won by military

⁷ Purdon letter dated 3 December 1980.

⁸ Foulds letter dated 18 March 1981.

⁹ Purdon letter dated 10 February 1981.

means if adequate resources had been available. The strategy involved concentration on successive limited areas to bring the enemy to battle and break down their large groups into smaller less effective ones. Operations were to extend into the Western Area to frustrate resupply, as well as actively to control the plain and operate into the central *jebel* from a new position above the Midway road. Concentration was to be on the parts of the *jebel* where enemy moving into Dhofar would be funnelled.¹⁰

Operations started within a week of NRF's arrival. Two companies moved into the *Wadi Sayq* deep in the Western area and captured two PDRY soldiers. One company was ambushed on the way back, losing one killed and two wounded, but after this first big operation the "contact-kill" rate increased markedly in SAF's favour. By the end of NRF's tour, they had killed certainly 48 enemy against seven SAF losses, and probably killed at least a further 26; 47 enemy were confirmed wounded, against 11 SAF; 29 prisoners had been captured.

In May, the desperate need for helicopters for casualty evacuation was illustrated. In the *Wadi Hinna* Richard John was severely wounded in the chest and shoulder and had to be carried out in a nightmare 12-hour journey. One month later, a major operation in the Hinna led to three enemy killed and a further four captured: one was wearing Chinese insignia, providing the evidence to convince sceptics

¹⁰ Harvey, *Future Intentions and Tasks*.

that the Chinese were involved.

In the move West, a base was first established at Janook, and then after the Monsoon at Defa, bringing Rakhyut within 25 pdr gun range. The seaside village was then taken with artillery support. Strong fighting patrols moved from the bases, bringing enemy groups to battle, though not cutting enemy resupply and movement because of the limited time groups could operate in the treeline. Even staying at Defa involved a half-company operation every ten days to collect water. An old man at Rakhyut reported secret arms caches in the *Wadi Sayq*: probably the first real information about the huge stores complexes in the Sherishitti caves. The first operation against Sherishitti was mounted. The enemy defended fiercely though they lost at least two killed.

In August, the change from tribal rebellion to Communist revolution culminated at a congress in the *Wadi Hamrin*. The newly elected 25-man General Command included only three of the original 18-man DLF executive. The Front was renamed the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAF), with the aim of spreading armed struggle throughout the Gulf. The ideology was officially changed from nationalism to Marxism-Leninism and the revolutionary transformation of Dhofar planned. Political instruction of military cadres and the whole population went together with military training.¹¹ Some

¹¹ *PFLOAG Documents*, pp. 8 and 14-16, where the Congress statement is reprinted. Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, pp. 366-370.

rebels did not accept the changes, and the Communists' method of ensuring compliance with the new order was brutal and effective: Dhofaris were tortured and executed in large numbers.

On 10 August 1968, Salalah was attacked for the first time when mortar bombs fired from the mouth of the *Wadi* Jarsis landed within 1000 metres of RAF Salalah. The next day B Company of NFR engaged 50 enemy in the Jarsis, killing 10 and wounding six for the loss of one SAF wounded. After the monsoon, positions known as Hedgehogs were established between Salalah and the *jebel* to counter enemy mortar teams.

A strong attack on Mirbat by the Front in late August, when rocket-launchers and mortars were used, was followed by a major NFR operation at the village and its surrounds in early October which led to eight more enemy killed and the capture of automatic weapons.

The two naval *dhow*s, under command of a Royal Marine, Jeremy Raybould, carried out amphibious landings. The Rakhyut and Mirbat operations were mounted in this way, and further landings were made in the far West, enabling SAF troops, including CSAF himself, to look over Hauf. Once the Front covered the few possible landing places, however, the operations had to be restricted.

In early 1969, the Front were losing battles but not the war. Their numbers and equipment were increasing, while SAF's strength was static. It was not until October 1969, for example, that Said bin Taimur agreed to order helicopters and

to raise a fourth battalion.¹² Some new weapons were being received. The first Strikemaster aircraft replaced Provosts, leading to a marked increase in airborne firepower. FN rifles were issued, enabling individual soldiers to match enemy fire.

At this critical time, the aggressively successful NFR were replaced at the end of their tour.¹³ MR, the new battalion, was bravely and competently led by Lieutenant Colonel Thwaites, but did not have NFR's experience. Roulements bedevilled SAF's conduct of the Dhofar war, leading to the later assertion that SAF did not have seven years' experience but one year's experience repeated seven times.

It was obvious to MR soldiers who had been on the 1966-7 tour that the situation now was very different. The enemy were more active, better led, better armed and more confident. A platoon of uniformed enemy with red stars in their hats marched across the Western *jebel* in three ranks, as if on a parade ground.¹⁴ Contacts had risen from one or two a week to two or three daily. Initially,

¹² Letter from Said bin Taimur to Lieutenant Colonel Harvey dated 12 October 1969.

¹³ Sources for the section on NFR's tour were: Purdon, letters dated 13 December 1980 and 10 February 1981; Harvey, personal file and interview; Foulds letters dated 18 March and 15 April 1981; interviews with Brocklehurst, Shillinglaw, Crompton and John. The political developments are covered in Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, pp. 361-386, Playfair, pp. 31-33, Price, p. 4, and Kelly, pp. 135-7.

¹⁴ Brown interview.

Colonel Thwaites continued to apply pressure in the West. He led the first large-scale MR operation into the Sherishitti area on May 25, when two companies moved into position over the caves by night. In the morning, when supporting aircraft arrived, the whole area erupted with fire. It was obvious that a large enemy group was defending the area. One company withdrew with wounded, and the second stayed out for two more nights against accurate mortar and small arms fire. An enemy ambush was sprung as the second company withdrew. The operation was a sobering experience, although considerable casualties had been caused to the enemy by artillery fire.¹⁵

The Defa company, from where the Sherishitti operation was mounted, withdrew. Small arms and mortar fire had been coming into the position daily, and operations out were difficult. Resupply vehicles hit by mines littered the track to Mudhai. Enemy were getting behind the small airstrip and there was concern that they could take out the position during the monsoon. The company initially withdrew to Janook.¹⁶

Colonel Thwaites decided he could not maintain forces in the West, and decided to make a line of positions from Mughsayl to Idlewild on the Northern side of the treeline. By the monsoon, there was nothing West of Mughsayl, and the Western

¹⁵ Thwaites interview.

¹⁶ Brown interview.

approaches were abandoned to the enemy. Rakhyut, guarded only by a few *askars*, was overrun in late August and most male inhabitants massacred.¹⁷

According to Halliday, this ended SAF's attempt to isolate Dhofar from the revolution in South Yemen, and opened the way for an intensified offensive on the Red Line, Salalah and the Eastern *jebel*. An overall assessment at the 1969 monsoon was that SAF could hold Salalah and contain the enemy, but not suppress them.

During the monsoon, the enemy built up in strength and sophisticated Communist bloc weapons. After the monsoon, battalion operations had to be mounted to open the road to Midway, and faced determined opposition. CSAF joined Colonel Thwaites on the second operation: 'We had battalion HQ and three rifle companies clearing from the plain towards Midway, and two rifle companies (B Coy MR under Roger Brown and A Coy NFR under David Shillinglaw, both splendid aggressive leaders) clearing down towards us. We had the fire support of two 5.5 inch mediums and three 25 pounders, and air support from SOAF Strikemasters ... We put in a battalion attack early on from our main body, and altogether I think we put in four more attacks at company or above strength before we met Brown and Shillinglaw's companies at Aqabat Jasmeen.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p. 324, reports only that the governor was arrested, tried, convicted and shot, but numerous reports gave the number executed as up to 80.

¹⁸ Purdon letter dated 10 February 1981.

After the road opening, in which the enemy used the Sphaghin 12.7 mm AA machine gun for the first time, one company mutinied and its commander was replaced. CSAF gained Said bin Taimur's agreement for a further company in Dhofar and renewed his request for British assistance. There was concern in Britain about the situation and discussions on giving direct assistance.

Brigadier Purdon and Colonel Thwaites both felt that with assistance, particularly helicopters and more infantry, the enemy could be defeated. This was optimistic, probably because of inaccurate estimates of the enemy. SAF were well outnumbered, with 2,000 organised PELOAG fighters and a further 3,000 militia. Virtually the whole *jebel* population supported them, either by conviction or coercion.¹⁹ MR continued to protect Salalah and sent out large fighting patrols, but operations were short because of inability to resupply groups away from base. Later accounts have stated that MR were driven off the *jebel*, but this is inaccurate: Major Brown's company, for example, spent only two weeks of their 12-month tour at Umm al Ghawarif.²⁰

On 6 January 1970, the Front tried to carry the ground war onto the plains with an attack on Taqa by 50 fighters supported by mortars and rockets. MR relieved the hard-pressed garrison, but infiltrators continued to fire from positions including the mosque. Said bin Taimur ordered its destruction, but SAF, trying to win

¹⁹ Intelligence official interview.

²⁰ Brown interview.

round the population, demurred. Said then sent in *khaadim* to demolish the mosque with picks and shovels.²¹ The Front captured Sudh, in March, but SAF reinforcements again restored the situation. Although ground attacks on the plain had failed, the Front continued stand-off attacks on RAF Salalah and the Hedgehog positions.

Concern in Britain increased, and immediate aid sent to defend RAF Salalah included radars to locate enemy mortars. The CO of 22 SAS Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel John Watts, was sent incognito to report. "I was horrified. The road was cut and the only resupply was by air or sometimes by sea ... There were no Dhofaris in SAF, which was virtually an army of occupation. Everybody on the *jebel* was with the enemy, some convinced, some out of boredom, some intimidated: SAF had only a few *Jebali* guides. It was crazy – we were on a hiding to nothing fighting a people. There were signs of counter-revolution, with Muslim-Communist arguments. The latter were better armed and organised and ruthless, absorbing some Dhofaris and shooting others. A clash was coming and therefore the Government had a chance of getting some Dhofaris on their side. The idea must be to pick up the Muslim rebellion, but to do this a national aim was needed."²²

²¹ Brown interview.

²² Watts interview.

Watts hesitated, for the only way to win was to take advantage of the divisions and encourage virtually civil war. His strategy for SAS employment covered five fronts: intelligence, an information team to give facts to the *Jebalis*, a medical officer supported by SAS medical assistants, a veterinary officer, and the raising of Dhofari soldiers to fight for the Sultan. The military front was deliberately last: civil development was more important, and using an appeal aimed as much at the heart as the head Colonel Watts enlisted the support of British diplomatists in Bahrain, who had earlier been chary of a “British Vietnam”. However, the plan was shelved in London. While Said bin Taimur was so intransigent, direct involvement of British units was ruled out.²³

Said had not softened in his approach to his Dhofar subjects – “evil and dangerous men – I want you to destroy them” he told the new CSAF, Brigadier John Graham.²⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel Turnill, who moved to Dhofar in April 1970 with DR, felt success would only come if the political situation improved so the alienation of the people changed, a point he stressed to Colonel Watts.²⁵ Initially, the political situation changed for the worse. On 12 June, a new revolutionary group called the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf carried out an attack at Izki and laid mines at Nizwa and Bidbid.

²³ Watts interview and Jeapes, pp. 28-31.

²⁴ Graham interview.

²⁵ Watts and Turnill interviews.

Fortunately, an NFR company under Major Charles Hepworth was staging through Izki, promptly followed up virtually wiping out the attackers.

NDFLOAG had committed most of their military leaders to the Izki attack for experience. Further arrests were made in the capital area, and NDFLOAG was rapidly neutralised. However, SAF now faced a threat in the North as well as in Dhofar. There had been a previous scare in December 1969, when an attempt to infiltrate arms through the *Wadi Jizzi* had been betrayed by locals.²⁶

Colonel Turnill was ordered to maintain the situation in Dhofar while the rest of SAF dealt with the North and developed plans to reinforce Dhofar.²⁷ Essentially, it was a holding operation, in which he had to avoid casualties in a force whose morale was now fragile. Brigadier Graham ordered the withdrawal of the last SAF position on the *jebel*, overlooking the Midway road, because it was difficult to resupply and served no tactical or political purpose.²⁸

Company-strength patrols moved onto the *jebel* above Mughsayl, above Taqa and from the North towards the head of the *Wadi Darbat*. In each case they met strong resistance and withdrew to avoid major casualties. In the action from the North, the company was pinned down throughout a day with the company commander reporting continuous fire: at nightfall they made a textbook

²⁶ Graham and Johnston interviews. Major Johnston was an intelligence officer in Northern Oman at the time.

²⁷ Graham papers dated 23 June 1970.

²⁸ Graham interview.

withdrawal and saw their vacated positions being stormed by more than 100 enemy. SOAF flew courageous low-level missions in support, and several aircraft were damaged. Squadron Leader Peter Hulme scored an important success when he sank a PFLOAG boom on 21 May, killing six of the crew.²⁹ Major Powell's 'Z' force of mobile machine-gunners provided plains protection.

Then, on 23 July 1970, came decisive political change. Qaboos, Said bin Taimur's only son, deposed his father in a coup. There was a brief struggle in the palace, during which Said was wounded twice, once by an accidental shot from his own pistol.³⁰ He abdicated, and was flown away for medical treatment and to permanent exile. Qaboos, who had received military training at Sandhurst and had been virtually confined to house arrest since his return, became the new Sultan. He was received with rapturous acclaim by Dhofaris dancing and singing around the palace and houses of Salalah. The scenes of jubilation were repeated in Northern Oman as the news spread.³¹

²⁹ Turnill interview and Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p. 325.

³⁰ Letter from Said bin Taimur to Col. Harvey, 4 August 1970.

³¹ General Graham and Colonel Turnill have photographs and film showing the remarkable scenes of jubilation round the palace.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONVALESCENT OMAN

To say that the twentieth century is just round the corner would be hasty indeed, but that it is now on the horizon is something that few doubt. And what is clear is that the decision to wrest the reins of power from incompetent hands, unwilling to loosen their grip, may have prevented more violent reactions, the effects of which would be felt throughout the Persian Gulf.

- Paul Martin, *The Times*, 31 July 1970

Sultan Qaboos immediately began to announce measures to transform his country: his uncle Tariq bin Taimur returned from exile to join the new administration; some of Said bin Taimur's British advisors were asked to leave and locals retired; numerous restrictions were abolished; the grudging pace of development was forced by plans for schools, clinics, houses, roads and other social and economic projects; prisoners were released; unity was promoted by a change in the country's name from Muscat and Oman to the Sultanate of Oman, and a new flag designed; efforts were made to bring Oman into the wider comity of nations, and in 1971 the country joined the Arab League and the UN; educated Omanis abroad were invited to return and help development; SAF was to be expanded to ensure the nation's security; rebels were offered an amnesty and financial help.

However, the administration to carry forward these plans was not present. State documents were found in unsorted heaps all over Salalah palace, amongst 33 truckloads of arms and ammunition. The manager of Muscat branch of the British Bank of the Middle East had to be recalled from leave to reassure the new Sultan that the country was solvent. Development of ministries and civil service over the next few years has been described elsewhere;¹ we are concerned with the armed forces and security, and the prosecution of the Dhofar War had to wait for months before any additional impetus could be generated towards victory.

SAF, in the absence of any other organised body, was involved at all levels in administering the country. CSAF and the Military Secretary, Colonel Hugh Oldman who had been CSAF before Colonel Lewis, sat on Sultan Qaboos's advisory 'cabinet'. General Graham had to take the minutes of the first meeting, the day after the coup, when decisions were made to lift restrictions, to allow free movement, to establish schools and allow SAF doctors to treat *Jebalis*. At lower levels, soldiers had visited every village in the country to exchange old currency for new banknotes and coins; in the absence of a police force, apart from that in the capital, soldiers had to change the system of driving from left to right by changing signs and directing traffic; in the absence of a medical service, they had to undertake medical care including dealing with cholera.

¹ Peterson, pp. 203-213. Townsend, pp. 77-97 and 122-164.

The expansion, and the absorption of assistance from Britain which began to arrive within weeks, strained the tiny and in some cases inexperienced staff at HQ SAF. The Dhofar Force was absorbed into SAF, renamed the Dhofar Gendarmerie (later Dhofar Guard) and given some of the few British officers. Training and promotion of Omanis, previously held to lieutenant rank, was organised. Recruitment and training took a major effort; initially, recruitment of Baluchis was stopped, but later an officer was sent to Pakistan to recruit a further 1,000 for a new Baluch Guard force, to free SAF for offensive operations. Construction companies' sites and personnel needed to be guarded. Civil development in Dhofar needed SAF assistance to begin its work.²

Meanwhile, there was still a threat in the North, though NDFLOAG effectively admitted its impotence in December 1970 when it met with PFLOAG and was later absorbed by it.³ In the Mussandam, an Arab Action Party plot in late 1970 tried to raise Shihuh factions against the Sultanate, necessitating the despatch of SAF troops.

In Dhofar, in parallel with the amnesty, DR was stopped operating against enemy groups on the *jebel*. This was probably a mistake by the Sultan, though taken with the right intention of allowing Front members to respond to the amnesty.

² Details of the heavy involvement of SAF in civil administration were given by General Graham in an interview on 14 April 1981.

³ A joint communiqué issued after a PFLOAG/NDFLOAG meeting is given in *PFLOAG Documents*, pp. 18-20.

The effect was to allow the Front to build up its strength and move in further heavy weapons. The time of government concessions is a fragile one, when the relaxation of restrictions encourages rebels to try to secure even more as quickly as possible. Taking the heat off the enemy gave them the chance to pour in men and equipment and enabled them to build up bigger groups and close their ranks against possible major defections.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA), as Front fighters were called, continued stand-off attacks on DR bases and RAF Salalah and, on 12 August, on a convoy on the plain. Taqa was mortared several times. At the end of September, the arrival of extra heavy weapons was disclosed when 75mm shells from recoilless guns were fired at a DR patrol base.

The first British unit, appropriately, was an army medical team. By the end of August, after an RAF field surgical team replaced the small army detachment, 600 people a day were being treated at Salalah. An SAS advance party arrived in September, following acceptance of Colonel Watts's paper now the political situation had so dramatically changed. The first group of 20 SAS began to implement the five-front plan: the troop soon had small civil action teams at Taqa and Mirbat, treating medical and veterinary problems; an intelligence team was collating information; Radio Dhofar, a small transmitter in an old shack, was broadcasting to the *jebelis*, supplemented by leaflets and noticeboards; military development, apart from self-defence by the formidable small SAS teams,

awaited larger numbers.⁴ RAF Regiment radar teams and Royal Artillery officers and signallers were provided to help ensure the security of RAF Salalah.

SOAF was building up with aircraft which had been ordered some time before. Helicopters began to arrive, and Skyvans which could carry Land Rovers or a surprisingly large load of troops or equipment. At last SOAF was becoming equipped to support ground operations effectively, to enable troops to remain on the *jebel* and evacuate casualties rapidly. Strikemasters were hitting enemy beyond the range of ground operations or support weapons: at the end of November SOAF aircraft attacked an enemy HQ in the Wadi Darbat, causing several casualties. The speed of reaction, and flexible switching of operations around the *jebel*, allied to army-air cooperation possibly unparalleled since World War 2, made a notable and increasing contribution.⁵

In early December, a DR company at the mouth of the Darbat contacted 100 enemy armed with machine guns and a 75mm RCL, and SOAF swept in with immediate support. The enemy lost several killed and the gun was probably also destroyed. DR followed up, and three further enemy were killed and 12 wounded.

⁴ Jeapes, pp. 32-54.

⁵ Hall interview.

As significant as the build-up of Government forces was dissension amongst the PLA, where the Muslim-Communist split led to signs of counter-revolution in September. On 12 September, tribesmen in the Eastern Area arrested 40 PLA members newly arrived from the PDRY to hand over to the government. PLA reinforcements from the West and Central areas crushed the counter-revolution ruthlessly and executed its leaders. Conscription of young men of two tribes was ordered. Children were forcibly removed for indoctrination in camps near Hauf. SEPs to the government increased markedly.⁶ Bin Nufl surrendered with 16 of his followers, declaring that the DLF aims had been achieved. He was followed by two *sheikhs*, one of whom led more than 80 people to the government side. Former members of the Front said later that Communist killings were the main reason why the Front did not win the war in 1970, when the PLA was at its strongest. Executions alienated large numbers of people.⁷

In early 1971, SAF went onto the offensive after the months of marking time. DR, who had held the situation against more than twice as many enemy, were replaced by NFR and MR who had benefitted from SAS training teams. A tiny Dhofar HQ was established under Colonel Harvey, now back as area commander. The SAS began to train groups of SEPs into *firqat* so that Dhofaris could carry the war back into their *jebel*. The *firqat* were one of the main factors in winning the

⁶ PFLOAG papers, pp. 21-24. Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, pp. 334-335. Kelly, p. 143.

⁷ Interviews in Muscat and Salalah.

war, and with their SAS training teams were considered by many members of the Front the main ground threat.⁸ Jeapes has described raising, equipping and training the *firqat* and taking them into battle: it was a difficult, demanding, frustrating task.⁹ Understandably, there was suspicion from SAF members who saw recent enemy well equipped and better paid than SAF. The *firqat* were not a cheap option, and were not always trustworthy or effective: on some days they were outstanding, and on others refused to obey orders. Nevertheless, the war would not have been won without them, and their success is a great tribute to the professionalism and patience of the SAS. It was also important that there was an organisation to keep SEPs employed and paid. Eventually, there were over 3,000 members of *firqat* – most of the fighting strength of the Front.

DR, in their last big operation in the *Wadi Darbat* on 12 January killed three enemy. One carried a copy of Chairman Mao's little red book in Arabic, in which he had written "Read this daily for your improvement."¹⁰ In fact, China's support of the rebellion was already declining and she was being replaced by Russia as the main outside power. China, suspicious of Russian 'revisionism' and her expansionism in the Middle East, supported governments threatened by national liberation movements in the early 1970s and withdrew support from the

⁸ Interviews with former Front members.

⁹ Jeapes, pp. 55-68.

¹⁰ Colonel Turnill still has this copy of the little red book.

movements.¹¹

NFR on arrival established Haluf, 20 miles North of Salalah, the first time a complete battalion had been based on the *jebel*. Under orders given by Brigadier Graham and pursued vigorously by Colonel Harvey, NFR under Lieutenant-Colonel Karl Beale began weekly battalion-sized operations. The aim was to break down the large enemy group in the North Central area into smaller, less effective and more defensive units. The battalion moved by night into an enemy area, with fire support from three 24 pdr guns at Haluf. From first light, battle was joined. The enemy at first moved in strong bodies and were prepared to hold ground and fight. They skilfully tried to lure SAF units forward or tried to outflank them. The operations, under the name of Hornet, were successful in breaking down the self-confident enemy into small sub-units. Firefights were intense and casualties mounted. On the first Operation Hornet, on 27 January 1971, NFR killed four enemy, wounded 10 others and captured one at the cost of only one wounded. On the subsequent four operations, in February and March, NFR lost seven killed and eight seriously wounded, but the enemy casualties were about three times as numerous. The Front were paying the penalty of guerrillas who stand and fight regulars equipped with artillery and jets.¹²

¹¹ Shichor, pp. 180-2.

¹² Graham, Harvey and Smyth-Piggott interviews. (Major Smyth-Piggott was a company officer in NFR.) Venn, pp. 4 and 7-8. Capt (now Lieutenant Colonel) Venn was the first general staff officer in HQ Dhofar Area. His account is a major source for the account of operations over the period he covers.

MR who replaced DR on the plain in February 1971, under Lieutenant-Colonel Fergus Mackain-Bremner launched operations into the *wadis* on the South side of the *jebel*, but without major contacts.

Firqat started operations, with the first, *Firqat Salahadin*, retaking Sudh in an unopposed operation on 23 February 1971, after which 38 enemy surrendered.¹³ Then in mid-March, a *firqat*-SAS operation was mounted onto the *jebel*, first to the highest point overlooking Mirbat, and subsequently into the treeline to Tawi Attair. The group stayed for two weeks on the *jebel*, killing with the assistance of air strikes at least nine enemy. Several PLA surrendered, and the operation generally was a major success, demonstrating that the *firqat* would fight effectively against their former comrades.¹⁴ After this, *firqat* accompanied SAF on major operations, acting as guides and fighting together with their SAS teams: SAF were best at seizing ground and securing it to provide a firm base for *firqat* patrols, supported by SAS where necessary.¹⁵ The *firqat* continued to be temperamental on occasion, and after a mutiny in one in April 1971, it was decided to stop multi-tribal *firqat* and in future to base them on tribal areas.¹⁶

¹³ Jeapes, pp. 69-79. Venn, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Jeapes, pp. 80-96.

¹⁵ Jeapes, p. 122.

¹⁶ Graham interview. Jeapes, pp. 109-11.

SOAF scored some spectacular successes, killing about 14 enemy breakfasting in the *Wadi Jarsis* on 17 February and two days later detonating ammunition in the *Wadi Jardoom* by firing rockets into stores caves. The new Armoured Car Squadron had its first major contact on 21 February, meeting 25 enemy and killing three. In Salalah, patient intelligence work identified a Communist cell, and leading members were arrested in an MR cordon operation.¹⁷ Royal Engineers, part of British assistance, were soon working in civil aid and on operations. A sign of the improving situation before the monsoon was that a two-man RE team could drill for water, unescorted, within half a mile of the *jebel*.¹⁸

In April and May, battalion, two-battalion and joint SAF-*Firqat* operations brought enemy groups to battle, causing casualties and encouraging surrenders. On 8-10 April, a company of MR with *firqat* secured an airstrip at Ashoq and destroyed a ramp with explosives that had been man-packed on the long approach march.¹⁹ On 24 April, MR and NFR closed on the Midway road from South and North against strong enemy resistance.²⁰ On 4-5 May, a joint MR/*firqat* operation on *Jebel Aram* attempted to capture a 75mm RCL: SAF and the *firqat* each lost a soldier, and two enemy were killed. In this last operation, helicopters for the first

¹⁷ Venn, pp. 13-15.

¹⁸ Graham interview.

¹⁹ Douglas interview.

²⁰ Smyth-Piggott interview. Venn, p. 16.

time evacuated casualties.²¹ By early May, there were more than 220 SEPs.

In May NFR established a new position at Akoot, out of the treeline but only 5000 metres North of Sherishitti. It was fired on by 75mm RCLs on the day it was established, and continued to draw regular fire. NFR mounted regular battalion operations into the treeline, the first in the Western area for two years.²² MR established themselves above Raysut to protect harbour development, and operated into the foothills.²³ An MR officer in an armoured car was killed in July by an RPG2 round at the mouth of *Wadi Jardoom*. SOAF lost three aircraft during the late monsoon: a jet crashed near Mudhai and another hit by enemy fire crash-landed near Salalah, and a Caribou which sheered off landing at Akoot because of enemy fire crashed when its load shifted.²⁴

The third PFLOAG conference in June at Rakhyut contained the usual rhetoric about the armed struggle worldwide and the fundamental place of Marxist-Leninist theory,²⁵ but much discussion centred on defections from the Front and government success. The Front's military and even political activities, were

²¹ Jeapes, pp. 112-132. Venn, pp. 17-22 (Capt Venn and Colonel Harvey went on this operation as riflemen in an MR company). Douglas interview.

²² Smyth-Piggott interview. Venn, p. 24.

²³ Brown interview.

²⁴ Venn, pp. 24, 28 and 34.

²⁵ *PFLOAG Documents*, pp. 30-34.

criticised and suggestions made to try to win support by copying successful government methods such as providing medical treatment to locals.²⁶ The monsoon military activities of the Front were confined to stand-off attacks on static positions, including a mortar and gun attack on the Hedgehog positions and Salalah airfield where several aircraft were slightly damaged.²⁷

By mid-monsoon 1971, the immediate post-Coup military aims had been achieved. The enemy in the Central Area had been fragmented and stopped from moving up the scale of revolutionary warfare to large unit action. The fight was being carried to all parts of the *jebel*. SAF was increasing in strength and equipment. Dhofaris were fighting for the Sultan. There was, however, no permanency about the military successes. It was essential to establish a centre on the *jebel* to serve as a military base and focal point for the local civil population. The need was demonstrated in July by a remarkable drive of 1,000 cattle and goats into Salalah from the Eastern *jebel* by *firqat* who brushed aside armed opposition with SAF help.²⁸

Urgent military success was necessary. The economy and the morale of sections of the population was under considerable strain. This was reflected in recruitment and discharge rates in SAF, with the loss to better-paid jobs of long-service NCOs

²⁶ Jeapes, pp. 129-31.

²⁷ Venn, p. 30.

²⁸ Venn, pp. 29-30.

after several years' service in Dhofar. Civil unrest erupted in Northern Oman in September with strikes and civil disorder in the capital.²⁹ In June, three causes were seen for concern in Dhofar: lack of government support for the people, largely because of the small financial and material support for an inexperienced and small administration; lack of visible progress by SAF on the *jebel*; and lack of voluntary cohesion amongst the Dhofaris, whose tribalism obviated a common front against PFLOAG and Communism.³⁰

Accordingly, Operation Jaguar was planned by CSAF to seize and maintain a permanent base on the Eastern *jebel*.³¹ The area was chosen for many reasons. The abortive counter-revolution took place there in late 1970. Most SEPs were from the area, and it was the homeland of the strongest tribal *firqats*. There was a personal attachment to the Sultan whose mother belonged to the area. The open, rolling uplands provided long fields of fire and mutually supporting positions. There was less widespread scrub. Airstrips could be rapidly cleared. The enemy was far from resupply at Hauf, 100 miles to the West. UK pressure had to be resisted to direct operations into the less favourable Central area to reduce the threat to RAF Salalah. The threat to Salalah and the reaction in London to stand-

²⁹ Graham interview.

³⁰ DIO Dhofar *The Causes of Unrest*.

³¹ Sources for Operation Jaguar were as follows. Watts interview. Graham, interview, papers and diary. Harvey, papers and interview. Jeapes, pp. 133-42. Venn, pp. 30-31, 34-38.

off attacks were a constant factor: troops better employed on offensive operations were tied to Salalah to calm British fears.

Throughout the monsoon, preparations for Jaguar went on. Stocks of ammunition, food and water were built up. The helicopter force and strike squadron increased in size and all ground units received GPMGs and 81 mm mortars. Static positions were handed over to the Baluch Guard and Dhofar Gendarmerie, and deception operations planned.

Timing of the operation was critical. It had to be after the monsoon for air resupply, to maintain ground control and to maximise supporting fire. It had to be as early as possible before *Ramadhan*, due in mid-October, when strict Muslims might fast instead of fight, despite a dispensation from religious leaders. The date chosen was Saturday, 2 October 1971. On 1 October the *jebel* was still clouded with monsoon mists. October 2, however, dawned with a fine, clear sky and windless conditions.³²

CSAF appointed Colonel Watts to command two squadrons of SAS, two companies of MR and one of the new *Jebel* Regiment (JR), about 300 *firqat* and supporting artillery and Baluch Guards. The operation started with SAS/*firqat* groups making a difficult and arduous all-night march to secure an old airstrip called Lympne. The conditions were demanding, but no enemy or mines were

³² Graham diary.

met, and the area was secured before first light. SAF troops and further *firqat* were flown in by helicopter from first light, the first time the helicopter force was used in this role, and after the airstrip had been cleared the stock-piled stores were flown in by fixed wing aircraft. By nightfall, the force was firmly established. Enemy reaction had been light.

The next phase was a push South to link up with a SAS/*firqat* diversionary group from Mirbat who appeared to have drawn the main enemy body. The *firqat*, who had thrown away their tinned rations on the night approach, refused to go.

Colonel Watts, noting that Lympne airstrip was unsatisfactory, decided to move South West to Jibjat which was more central to the Eastern *jebel*. This was secured and the force moved onto the plateau. The SAS squadrons, each with *firqat*, moved down the West and East sides of the *Wadi Darbat*, overcoming fierce resistance. After several days of continuous fighting, the enemy withdrew into *wadi* bottoms, leaving the plateau to government forces. A new position known as White City was established by the West group, and this became a major government centre with a clinic, school and shop opened by the Sultan a few weeks later: the first permanent government social service on the *jebel*.

Three groups of *firqat* (out of five) decided they would not fight during *Ramadhan*, and prevented full exploitation of the position gained on the East side of the Darbat in the fierce fighting. White City, where the *firqat* continued action, was an excellent base for fighting patrols and Colonel Watts moved his headquarters there. *Firqat* persuaded locals with their animals to accept

government protection, and soon White City held hundreds of goats and cows which the locals wished to sell. The goats were flown back to Salalah in plastic bags in every returning aircraft, and plans were made for a second cattle drive.

Before this happened, however, fighting intensified. The JR company, SAS and *firqat* moved west to take a ridge at the head of *Wadi* Arzat, and a White City group seized a waterhole to their West. Enemy reaction was vigorous, particularly at the waterhole, where the hardest fighting of the whole operation took place over several days. Eventually, the group at the waterhole withdrew, conducting a running battle back to White City's supporting fire.

The cattle were then driven across the plateau and down to Taqa. The safe arrival of 500 cattle was symbolic of the success of Jaguar, in which government forces had secured *jebel* areas and started development and trading. The battles had been fierce, and casualties on both sides considerable: the SAS, for example, had more than 20 casualties among its 120 men.³³ But Operation Jaguar marked a real turning-point: government forces were on the *jebel* to stay.

Operation Leopard was launched in late October to complement Jaguar. Patrol bases were established by helicopter-borne troops across the enemy resupply routes from Mughsayl on the coast to near Haluf. JR, who had replaced MR,

³³ Watts interview.

established the bases with two additional companies from DR, who had replaced NFR. The aim was to ambush the main trails to prevent enemy resupply to the Eastern *jebel*. For two months, the deployment was successful, but later the enemy learnt to infiltrate through. The Leopard Line was the prototype of the linear blockade which was to become increasingly important: it also recalled the stop-line which Colonel Thwaites had attempted in the same area with his limited force in 1969.

With the Leopard Line restricting enemy resupply and frustrating enemy RCL teams from shelling Raysut, and White City and Jibjat firmly held, operations to dominate parts of the Eastern area followed. After *Ramadhan*, Red Company flew into White City and operated in the upper reaches of the *Wadi Darbat*. In January, a company of JR with *firqat* in support started Operation Panther against an enemy group near Tawi Attair, a natural 200 feet deep ‘sump’. A further SAF/*firqat* group struck South East from White City into the bottom of the Darbat. The operations harried the enemy and captured stocks and ammunition in caves: significantly, none of the stores was of recent origin.³⁴ Between the start of Operation Jaguar and mid-February 1972, the PLA lost at least 82 killed and 53 surrendered or captured, for government losses of 14 killed and 58 wounded.

³⁴ Venn, pp. 38-44.

Civil development, crucially important to consolidating military successes, was however lagging, despite backing from SAF, 30 per cent of whose logistic efforts were supporting it.³⁵ However, a further 30 families with 500 cows moved from White City to Taqa on 27 February, and the next day a water drilling rig for White City left Dubai.³⁶ SAF commanders were concerned about civil development, and foresaw heavy demands on officers, aircraft and vehicles until the civil aid team of Robin Young and Michael Butler was given more money, staff and transport.³⁷

Throughout this period planning and preparations for the next major operation were made. The aim was to establish a border position in the far West dominating enemy resupply routes. Operation Simba would establish a major base deep in the 'liberated area', and force the enemy to deploy weapon teams against a strong *jebel* base rather than soft targets on Salalah plain. Once it had been established, the Leopard line, which was expensive in men and partly ineffective, and in any case could not affect the West, could, it was hoped, be abandoned.

At the head of *Wadi Sarfait*, an area suitable for an airstrip would be protected by the encircling arms of two *jebel* ridges, the Southern one of which overlooked the

³⁵ Harvey letter to Graham, 30 June 1972.

³⁶ Venn, p. 43.

³⁷ Graham and Harvey papers and interviews.

main enemy resupply route down a 1,000 ft sheer cliff. A further jagged pinnacle of rock on this lower plateau was to be seized to dominate trails on lower scarps down to the beach itself. The operation was initially mounted from Akoot, which was then abandoned for a closer support base first at Janook and later at Manston.³⁸

Firqat went first by helicopter and then on foot by night to secure helicopter landing zones. The next morning, 16 April, the main force led by Lieutenant-Colonel Nigel Knocker (DR) flew in and began rapidly to build protection against expected enemy reaction. The main positions, Yardarm to the North and Mainbrace overlooking the plateau, were secured without enemy reaction. Freak torrential rain, however, delayed the build-up and the move to Capstan at the far edge of the plateau. By the time the move came ten days later, the enemy had started to mine routes out of the positions and were firing shells onto Yardarm and Mainbrace.

‘We took the Capstan position and could have held it, but there was no water. If we had gone straight onto it at the start we could have gone down to the sea, and water was later found near Capstan itself,’ according to an officer on the operation.³⁹ ‘As it was, we held on for five days, then a relief company stayed for

³⁸ Sources for the account of Operation Simba were as follows. Graham and Harvey interviews and papers. Venn, pp. 45, 47-50. Smyth-Piggott interview.

³⁹ Smyth-Piggott interview.

another five days, and then everyone withdrew to the main positions.’

His assessment is probably accurate, though Capstan would have been isolated by the monsoon. Under the original plan, the move to Capstan and the sea should have been before enemy reaction was organised, and a Royal Engineers squadron was waiting at Salalah to wire the line in. As it was, not only was the move delayed, but the PDRY attacked Habarut, and the only available troops to relieve the tiny garrison (led gallantly by a junior officer Hassan Ehsan, now one of the first Omani brigadiers) were from Sarfait. Habarut garrison was also supported by the first Omani airstrike over the border against the PDRY fort opposite Habarut.

Simba was left, therefore, with Mainbrace and Yardarm as unassailable strong-points which dominated the former main enemy supply route but could not directly interdict alternative routes. As months and then years passed, the position became increasingly a static firebase and centre for disaffected Mahra to surrender. This was far from the stranglehold planned by Colonel Harvey, who like the Sultan and other Omani leaders had always seen the key to enemy defeat lying in strong action in the West. ‘It is like dealing with a burst pipe in a kitchen. It is pointless mopping up the floor while the pipe is still flowing. First turn off the tap (i.e. Hauf) and then mop the floor.’⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Harvey interview.

Simba has been criticised as premature,⁴¹ soaking up men and equipment, including helicopters for resupply, which would have been better employed expanding softer areas in the East. Once taken, Sarfait had to be held on political grounds: it was unthinkable to abandon the prestige border base. Many officers saw it as ineffective, since it could not totally deny enemy resupply.

However, the enemy had to deploy against it weapon teams and ammunition which otherwise could have been used further East. ‘Sarfait was the most important position to us,’ according to a former Front member.⁴² ‘Even though we could get supplies past the position it stopped us moving freely. It was like having someone’s hands round your throat.’ Also the final enemy collapse came when a secure line was seized and held from Simba to the sea three years later. Brigadier Graham saw the position as very important in a political-strategic sense: it convinced doubters in the Arab world that Oman was worth supporting and could retake and hold Dhofar. The first Arab assistance had already started with three intelligence officers from King Hussein, and within weeks of Sarfait being taken a senior Jordanian general and delegations from other Arab armies visited it to assess progress.⁴³

⁴¹ For example, Jeapes, p. 75, and Watts interview.

⁴² Interview, Salalah.

⁴³ Graham interview.

However, Simba cost lost effort elsewhere, and this was increased by the disinclination of later battalions to patrol aggressively out of the position until Lieutenant Colonel Ian Christie and MR began bold ambushing of the lower scarps during the 1975 monsoon.

On 7 May monsoon redeployment started. Tawi Attair was evacuated, as was the Leopard treeline position. However, White City was reinforced, and for the first time SAF held positions throughout the monsoon on both Eastern and Western *jebel*. The PLA marked 9 June by firing rocket and mortar rounds into static positions. At RAF Salalah a shell struck the officers' mess wounding a dozen people, some seriously.

However, the Front had lost the military initiative and wanted to regain it. They needed to shake people's increasing confidence in the government. They debated trying to take out White City, but decided it was too strong. They considered Jibjat, but this was on the edge of the monsoon-affected area and too open. They therefore decided to take Mirbat by storm, and execute government supporters before moving triumphantly back to the *jebel*. The date chosen was 19 July, and enemy groups gathered from the Central and Eastern areas to build up an assault force of almost 300 men heavily armed with RCLs, mortars and MGs as well as personal automatic weapons.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Sources for the account of the Battle of Mirbat are as follows. Jeapes, pp. 143-158. Venn, pp. 55-57. Watts interview. Interview with Front member, Muscat.

Mirbat was garrisoned by a platoon of DG, a *firqat* and an eight-man SAS team led by Captain Michael Kealy. The enemy planned to overwhelm this small garrison with a mass assault under a shell and mortar bomb barrage from *Jebel Ali* just North of the town before dawn. However, in heavy monsoon mists the enemy fell behind, and the attack started late. Their plan to take out silently an eight-man DG piquet on *Jebel Ali* failed when the commander and two *askars* escaped to raise the alarm.

When the attack started, heavy fire was directed onto the BATT and *Wali's* houses on the North edge of the town, and onto a fort 300 yards away near the North East corner of the perimeter wire. About 200 enemy closed in from the North and East sides of the fort and town, and began scrambling over the wire. Captain Kealy called for jet strikes if possible and for a helicopter to evacuate wounded. He then ran under heavy fire to a 25 pdr gun emplacement beside the fort. Two SAS men with him were shot down beside the gun which was being fired over open sights. Captain Kealy and one other trooper continued to fight off the enemy who were coming round the fort. Inside the battered fort, the small garrison was pinned down by the hail of fire.

It was at this stage that the enemy's late start brought their attack to grief. Three Strikemasters, led by Squadron Leader Stoker, were able to fly in along the shoreline only feet above the surface and under the low cloud base. They caught the enemy in the open along the town wire with rocket and machine gun fire. The Strikemasters, flying almost at ground level, were hit by return fire but the attack

on the fort was halted.

By chance, the SAS squadron in Dhofar was about to be relieved and the new squadron was rapidly taken by helicopter as close as possible to Mirbat. Two ten-man strike groups and the squadron command group drove into enemy groups East of the town and fought through. Meanwhile the jets had struck at enemy weapon teams on *Jebel Ali*, and an NFR platoon also moved by helicopter re-occupied the *jebel*.

The scene after the battle of Mirbat, in which Captain Kealy won the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), was horrifying. The area, particularly around the wrecked gun emplacement, was covered with dead and wounded. Thirty-eight enemy dead lay within the perimeter wire, while other dead and wounded had been carried away. Several enemy, some wounded but three unscathed, were captured. It was a comprehensive defeat for the PLA, caused by the gallantry of the small garrison and the SOAF pilots who were able to fly in at almost ground level because the attack was in daylight. When the battered PLA force regathered, recriminations started: executions followed, and other fighters fled to the government.

Never again would the PLA risk a major attack off the *jebel*. “If Operation Jaguar was the beginning of the end for the enemy, then the battle of Mirbat was the end of the beginning.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Watts interview.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RENAISSANCE

For the enemy: it was difficult to see how he could win, but he could possibly. For ourselves: it was difficult to see how we could lose, but we could possibly. The prospect was for a long drawn out war of attrition bleeding the country white...

- General Sir Timothy Creasy

Oman was now out of its convalescent period and into the Renaissance, as the development and modernisation after the coup has become known.

Militarily, the position was transformed. By the end of the 1972 monsoon government forces in Dhofar totalled more than the whole strength of SAF before the coup. Equipment, particularly of SOAF, was greatly improved.

Permanent positions were held on both Western and Eastern *jebel*. The enemy was on the defensive. At this time, the SAF team which had led the transformation was due for relief, with Brigadier Graham and Colonel Harvey returning to service with the British Army, in which both were subsequently decorated and promoted. In keeping with the new size of SAF, they were replaced respectively by Major-General Creasey and Brigadier Fletcher.

Brigadier Graham before leaving warned that SAF would long continue to

play a cardinal and irreplaceable role in the life, security and development of the Sultanate as a whole. Unless substantial political, financial and military aid was granted by friendly states soon, the strength, motivation, armament and leadership at sub-unit level of the forces could only deteriorate. Any internal security problem in Northern Oman would hasten this process.¹ This was Brigadier Graham's sober assessment of the strain the Dhofar War was placing on Oman, consuming over half the country's revenues. He, as other senior officers before him, had been disappointed at limitations on British help: Britain provided military assistance only on repayment, and provided equipment, often tardily, on a commercial basis.

General Creasey, however, was a forceful man who intended to put SAF onto a proper footing with adequate staff and appropriate combat support. His arrival coincided with an increase in oil produced in Oman and later in its price. The Sultanate also started to receive major assistance from Iran and Jordan. He therefore had resources not available to his predecessors. General Creasey relegated the Defence Department, which had controlled both budget and defence equipment procurement, to bookkeeping and contract control. A National Defence Council was established, presided over by the Sultan and including cabinet ministers and CSAF. Within the forces, General Creasey saw his trump card as SOAF, a type of asset the enemy did not possess. He saw the need to improve infantry firepower with

¹ Graham papers.

new GPMGs and mortars. It was necessary to increase the number of battalions, and to improve their organisation to avoid, for example, mixed Baluch-Omani units, which had always been difficult to control. The artillery needed air-portable guns. SAF contained no engineers, of prime importance in an underdeveloped country both for military operations and civil development. The staff needed strengthening in numbers and quality, the intelligence organisation needed reorganising and a SAF organisation for the *firqat* was necessary. General Creasey devoted himself to these tasks, and ordered Brigadier Fletcher to free troops from static positions and strike at the enemy principally in two areas – North of Mughsayl and the Eastern *jebel*.²

At Simba, MR were heavily mortared as they took over from DR in June, suffering nearly 20 casualties before they strengthened the defences. They carried out patrols and ambushes, culminating on September 5 in a battalion operation to locate an enemy RCL and search a cave complex. A gruelling six-hour night march was followed by a fierce battle. Four of MR were killed and nine wounded, but enemy casualties were heavier. An ambush in early October killed seven PLA members. Enemy reaction was intense. More than 1,000 rocket and mortar rounds were fired onto the position during December. Few casualties were caused to the well-protected troops.

² Creasey, pp. 7-18.

NFR, who had been in Dhofar since May and had provided two companies to reinforce DR for Operation Simba, took over operations further East.

North of Mughsayl, Operation Hornbeam was mounted with the same aims as Operation Leopard, using helicopter-borne patrols. In December, enemy groups were attacked and ammunition, stores and food found. In the East operations led to hard contacts, causing enemy casualties but costing NFR eight killed and six wounded. SEPs continued to move to the government, including two political commissars.³

In December 1972, a PFLOAG attempt to raise rebellion in the North was thwarted after an SEP spotted a Northern Omani whom he had last seen with the PLA in Dhofar. Careful following of his contacts was followed by the arrest on Christmas Eve of 39 PFLOAG members. After questioning them, a further 38 arrests followed and arms caches were found containing mortars, grenades, anti tank mines, light machine guns, several cwt of TNT, more than 100 automatic rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Not a shot was fired during the operation, though the ringleaders, including five SAF officers and NCOs, were later executed for treason.⁴

In January, the Baluch Guard was formed into the Frontier Force (FF), a

³ *Newsletter*, No. 11, pp. 12-13, 15-19. Smyth-Piggott interview.

⁴ Intelligence official interview. *Newsletter*, No. 11, p. 6. *Newsletter*, No. 12, p. 5.

regular battalion. This was to be followed one year later by the formation of the Southern Regiment (KJ – *Kateeba Janoob*) from the Dhofar Gendarmerie. This provided two additional battalions capable of offensive operations. Also in January 1973, aid from Iran began with the arrival of Iranian Special Forces. In February, accurate enemy fire onto the landing strip at Sarfait prevented fixed wing resupply. The immediate provision of nine helicopters by the Shah enabled resupply to continue and prevented evacuation of the position.⁵

General Creasey could now force the pace of the war and avoid the long process of attrition with its attendant dangers. Sultan Qaboos announced National Defence Priorities of security of Salalah Plain, maintenance of frontier positions, and operations on the Eastern Dhofar *jebel*. He decreed that all civil ministries give highest priority to civil development on the *jebel*. ‘This clear announcement of our aims enabled me to maintain course with a consistent and steady plan and theme for operations without ever being forced to divert men or resources to eye-catching or other expedient or seemingly desirable short term projects – or what in other areas are called political initiatives.’⁶

A company of JR took over the Sarfait positions in January 1973, together

⁵ Creasey, p. 26.

⁶ Creasey, pp. 27-28.

with troops from FF. The rest of JR operated from Manston against enemy groups to their South. In February, a fierce battle took place near Janook, from where fighting patrols were led deep into enemy country by Major Paul Wright, a seconded officer who had previously served with the SAS. Surprise was lost when a soldier trod on a mine, and enemy reaction was sudden and violent. Under heavy fire, the patrols fought their way back to the patrol bases. Major Wright conducted a six-hour battle mainly without seeking personal shelter. He was finally killed by a mortar bomb, and was posthumously awarded the Sultan's Gallantry Medal (Omani equivalent of the Victoria Cross), the first seconded British officer to be so decorated. Staff Sergeant Salim Khalfan, whose platoon covered the withdrawal of the fighting patrols, was also awarded the Gallantry Medal.⁷

In early March, accurate RCL fire from the mouth of the *Wadi Jarsis* damaged three helicopters and two Strikemasters at Salalah. The Hedgehogs were not effective against the long range RCLs. Positions astride the *Wadi Jarsis* and the Midway road were therefore seized by DR. From the positions, named the Dianas, fighting patrols were mounted to drive the RCL teams out of range of Salalah. Successful ambushes and arms finds followed.

DR also operated in the Eastern *jebel*, where White City and Jibjat, now

⁷ Gallantry Medal citations, quoted in *Newsletter*, No. 12, pp. 9-10.

connected by a graded track to Midway, dominated the area. Operations from them had considerably reduced enemy activity. FF, on Operation Hornbeam, held positions astride enemy resupply routes throughout the monsoon.⁸

The Hornbeam Line

Although operations were successful, progress was relatively slow. It became increasingly clear to General Creasey that he could not dominate the enemy in the large area without further measures. He therefore decided to build a physical barrier to separate the fertile and relatively well populated area of the East from the barren Western *jebel* so that he could isolate the enemy in the East and deal with them in isolation. The result was a remarkable feat of combat engineering by a Royal Engineer squadron, Jordanian engineers and SAF assault pioneer platoons in the six months from December 1973. Over 15,000 coils of barbed wire, 12,000 pickets, 12,000 reels of wire and nearly 4,000 anti-personnel mines were procured and shipped from Europe, India and Pakistan.

RAF Wessex helicopters were hired to help move the stores to the *jebel*. The obstacle belt was then built in extreme heat up, down and across nearly vertical slopes, in territory nominally held by the enemy. After completion

⁸ *Newsletter*, no. 12, pp. 8, 23-33, 37. Ryde and King interviews.

of the 50 km long Hornbeam Line, camel trains with weapons and ammunition were stopped, though groups of men were able to infiltrate.⁹

While the enemy could still slip past the positions, 122mm *Katyushka* rocket launchers were brought into Central Dhofar for the first time late in 1973. These and other stand-off weapons were the main enemy threats during the second half of the year, with 2,300 rounds fired at Sarfait (including shelling from 85mm guns in the PDRY), and more than 1,000 incomers at Hornbeam positions. In the East, civil development gathered pace, with Civil Action Teams (CAT) consisting of a leader, schoolmaster, medical orderly and shopkeeper established. Well-drilling teams operated North of the *jebel*.¹⁰

At the end of 1973 DR and JR returned to the North. FF handed over the Hornbeam Line to NFR and moved to Sarfait. MR took over in the Central and Eastern *jebel*. KJ manned the Hedgehog and Diana positions, provided small garrisons at Taqa, Mirbat and Sudh and later assumed responsibility for all the Eastern *jebel*. In December, an Iranian task force based on a parachute battalion group was placed under command of CSAF. He launched the Iranians into a night assault on 19 December to open the Midway road for the first time since 1970. The operation, on the Front's

⁹ Creasey, pp. 29-32. Reid letter dated 30 April 1981.

¹⁰ *Newsletter*, No. 12, pp. 8-9.

‘invincible’ Red Line, was almost unopposed and the Iranians established mutually supporting positions along the road known as the Jasmines. SAF then had land communication with the North and a barrier in depth to the Hornbeam Line.¹¹ Against opposition, the Armoured Car Squadron opened the track from Raven’s Roost to Jibjat for the first time since 1968.

The campaign now aimed at writing down the enemy in the East and building up civil development in safe areas. The method was to secure an area by conventional operations, drive in an access route for a drill, establish a water supply and distribution system, erect accommodation for the CAT, and then hand the area over to *firqat*. Each centre was initially the target for enemy stand-off attack, but over the next 12 months, particularly post-Monsoon 1974, 20 government centres were successfully opened on the Eastern *jebel*.¹² At Tawi Attair pumps at the foot of the ‘sump’ distributed water via a main pipe and branches to troughs which supplied up to 5,000 cattle with plentiful water.¹³

MR operations supported by *firqat*, artillery and armoured cars, concentrated East of the Midway road. Company operations in the *Wadi* Dut and *Wadi* Ayn early in the year led to fierce contacts with enemy groups, who suffered considerable casualties and surrendered in growing

¹¹ Creasey, pp. 32-5.

¹² Creasey, pp. 32-5.

¹³ Jeapes, pp. 176-7. Reid letter.

numbers. The operations culminated before the monsoon in a battalion operation to clear a large part of *Wadi Dut*. Arms, ammunition and over eight tons of food, representing most of the enemy's accumulated monsoon stocks, were found and removed.

During the monsoon, all *jebel* positions were maintained, including Tawi Attair. FF were in the East, with KJ at Sarfait. NFR continued to man the Hornbeam Line: in a contact early in June, five enemy trying to cross on foot were killed. MR held the Dianas and Hedgehogs, but concentrated with *firqat*, armoured cars and artillery groups to harass the PLA on the Central *jebel* in July and August.¹⁴

The Front, seriously weakened by defections, held another congress in August. PFLOAG was renamed PFLO, dropping the aspiration of spreading the revolution throughout the Gulf. More autonomy was given to regional groups, and more emphasis given to the wider political, as distinct from purely military, struggle. The armed struggle was still stressed, particularly by the Dhofaris. In October, a SAF road block near Rostaq stopped a vehicle containing arms, explosives and several PFLO leaders, who had been trained at a Palestinian camp near Beirut. Further arrests followed, and a selective campaign of assassination was frustrated.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Newsletter*, No. 14, pp. 11-13, 16-19, No. 15, pp. 3, 7-8.

¹⁵ Price, pp. 6-7.

The end of the 1974 monsoon brought a roulement of Omani battalions, and a new Dhofar Brigade commander, Brigadier John Akehurst. His instructions from General Creasey were to hold Sarfait, deny Hornbeam, hold the Midway road for construction of a blacktop road and secure the East to free troops for major operations in the West.¹⁶ General Creasey wanted to concentrate troops for offensive operations West of the Hornbeam Line, leaving *firqat* and civil development to keep the Eastern *jebel* quiet.¹⁷

Concerned by the defensive attitude at Sarfait, Brigadier Akehurst ordered KJ to patrol out. An attempt on Friday, 13 September, 1974, ended in a bloody mine incident. The ruling factor at Sarfait was that everything, including water, had to be flown in by helicopter: the supplies they could fly in defined the number of soldiers who could be maintained, which was not enough to break out of a position with exit routes heavily mined and facing daily shelling.¹⁸

Brigadier Akehurst defined the brigade military mission as “To secure Dhofar for civil development”. He standardised and mounted on almost a weekly basis the operations to establish *firqat* in their tribal areas in East and Central Dhofar. One to *Jebel* Khaftawt became the first of the Hammer

¹⁶ Akehurst, p. 8.

¹⁷ Creasey, pp. 36-7.

¹⁸ Akehurst, pp. 7-10 and interview, Warminster, 10 March 1981.

positions, patrol bases against groups between the Hornbeam Line and Midway road. A JR Hammer patrol coincided with the only major Hornbeam Line crossing, when 80 enemy, harried by airstrikes and artillery, sustained considerable casualties and lost many more by defection to the government.¹⁹ A major operation by FF in October opened the road from Taqa to Mirbat. FF's CO, a brave officer but with little experience of administration, was relieved soon afterwards and replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Salusbury-Trelawny. Over the next few months he sorted out the administration and turned FF by early 1975 into one of the main striking forces of SAF.²⁰

Operations in the West

In December, major operations in the West began. The Iranian Task Force on the Midway road was relieved by SAF and reinforced by a further battalion. Manston became a major airhead. The Iranian force was launched with *firqat* guides and support with a major objective for each battalion. One was to capture Sherishitti, and the other to seize Rakhyut and develop a new cross-*jebel* barrier. The inexperienced Iranian troops faced heavy fire from determined enemy groups. First the Sherishitti battalion was stopped and pulled back after suffering many casualties. The battalion heading for

¹⁹ *Newsletter*, No. 15, March 1975, p. 3. Creasey, pp. 31-2.

²⁰ Akehurst interview.

Rakhyut met light opposition at first, but inside the trees met stiff resistance which caused dozens of casualties. They pushed on South until the SAF officer at the front, Major John Braddell-Smith, was killed. He had been the main inspiration and his loss, coupled with the death of the CO and several of his HQ, caused the advance to grind to a halt. All the Iranians were then concentrated onto the group who were to establish the new positions, the Damavand Line. SAF were ordered to mount a major diversionary attack onto Sherishitti to reduce pressure on the Iranians.²¹

The SAF operation had to be mounted quickly. JR was relieved of its Central Area positions and concentrated at Manston. It was joined by Red Company, armoured cars, artillery, SAS and *firqat*. The plan was to move by helicopter to Defa and then press on Eastwards on foot past the prominent Zakhir Tree into the treeline to the high point denoted 980 on the map. From there, picquet positions were to be established above Sherishitti where a precipitous *wadi* cut through the main West-East scarp. Above the scarp, this *wadi* ran through open ground for over 100 metres. The stores caves were honeycombed along the walls of the *wadi* below the scarp. Once the picquets dominated the high ground overlooking the *wadik* and the tumbled plain below, it was planned that a company should move into the cave complex.

²¹ Akehurst, p. 11. Shillinglaw, interview. Gardiner, letter dated 15 May 1981 with citation for Gallantry Medal (posthumous) for Major Braddell-Smith. Jeapes, pp. 193-4.

The troops did not reach the caves and Operation Dharab has been described as a catastrophe because of a chaotic first phase, after which the CO of JR was removed from command, a slow advance which gave away the priceless advantage of surprise, a wrong route taken by the leading company which brought it to the wrong side of the *wadi*, and the loss of about 25 killed. However, the Iranians moved into Rakhyut without significant opposition and the PLA suffered even higher casualties than SAF which led them to stop using the Sherishitti caves as their main stores complex. Significantly, the PLA never claimed this operation as a victory.

The essence of the plan was surprise, with a one-day move from Defa to Sherishitti, 6,000 m East. However, the fly-in of troops and equipment to Defa was disorganised, and it was well after first light before troops headed for the Zakhir Tree. There were skirmishes with enemy groups from there to Point 980. The *firqat* guides were reluctant to press on into a hard enemy area. Momentum was lost, and it took the first day to establish a firm base at Point 980. By nightfall there were 500 troops in a small area within mortar range of Sherishitti. At last light, an enemy patrol probing the position caused several casualties. The next morning, however, three enemy dead were found with their weapons, including a British GPMG.

With surprise lost, and a new commander, the group stayed at Point 980 through the next day while a deliberate approach to Sherishitti was prepared. Red Company led the advance with the aim of rounding the *wadi*

to the North and taking position East of the clear ground. In the thick thorn-bushes, the company led by *firqat* guides did not go far enough North. When they came to the edge of the clear ground they were still West of the *wadi*. The company split into two groups to give fire support. A JR company attempted to move across the open ground. They were met by a hail of fire, which killed the company commander, Captain Nigel Loring, and twelve of his men. A fierce firefight took place, with jet, artillery and mortar strikes to counter the enemy's rocket-launchers, mortars and heavy machine-guns. Eventually, still under fire, SAF and SAS men recovered the wounded from the open ground, and the whole force withdrew to Point 980.

Two companies moved to the Southern edge of the ridge to a position named Stonehenge because of its rock formations. Heavy weapons were sited to engage Sherishitti caves 3,000 m East. GPMGs, two .50 Browning machine guns and two 106mm RCLs were joined by two armoured cars once a bulldozer cleared a route through the scrub. Heavy fire was directed at the caves over the next ten days. Searches led to finds of large amounts of arms and ammunition. The whole force withdrew after mining the main enemy route.²²

²² Sources for Operation Dharab were as follows. Akehurst, p. 11 and interview. Jeapes, pp. 194-203. Interview with King (Red Company commander). Shervington letter and undated paper (he commanded the companies at Stonehenge). *Newsletter*, No. 16, November 1975, p. 8.

SAF now needed a major success to bolster morale. This came three weeks later when a Jordanian Special Forces battalion took over the Jasmine positions, enabling seven companies to be assembled under Colonel Salusbury-Trelawny for an operation against the 9th June regimental HQ from the Hornbeam Line. The large force was handled skilfully, with companies engaging enemy while others moved by forced night marches or helicopter round the flanks. The operation was completely successful, and for the first time an enemy HQ was routed after some spirited fighting. Large quantities of arms and ammunition, including a *Katyushka* rocket launcher, were found in the *Wadi* Ashoq. The Hornbeam Line, which had been regularly shelled before the operation, became completely peaceful.

After the success of Himaar and a further operation by JR in March West of *Wadi* Jarsis, the Central area was cleared of large groups of enemy. As the monsoon broke in June, the only significant enemy units were West of the Damavand Line.²³

Post-Monsoon Operations 1975

Consideration of how to clear this remaining area had started months earlier. In March, Major-General Perkins, the new CSAF, decided to establish a new line. Consideration of turning Sarfait into a complete block had been rejected because guns in the PDRY could neutralise Sarfait's

²³ Akehurst, p. 12 and interview. Douglas interview. *Newsletter*, 16, p. 11.

build-up by helicopter, and the Sultanate response would have to be air attack across the border. This would risk open hostilities between the Sultanate and the PDRY, which SAF would have to fight with guerrillas behind them. A line beyond the range of the PDRY guns, however, would cut the enemy in West Dhofar into two, and facilitate further operations because fire support from the new line would range from Sarfait to Damavand. It was recognised that a likely enemy response would include increased shelling at Sarfait, and therefore airstrikes over the border might still be necessary. The operation was to start within a week of the end of *Ramadhan*, which in 1975 fell at the end of the Monsoon.²⁴

In the meantime, several significant events took place. Hunter aircraft, a gift from Jordan, arrived: this would enable airstrikes across the border to be made, if necessary, with more confidence. SON received two Tropical Patrol Vessels and a coastal freighter, the *Al Sultana*: SON was now able to operate in Dhofar waters during the monsoon. At Sarfait, MR started aggressive patrolling onto the lower plateaus, involving descending a precipitous 600 ft scarp down a route which had been pioneered by DR, negotiating enemy minefields by day and laying up by night.

²⁴ Sources for the final series of operations were as follows. Perkins, *Oman 1975. The Year of Decision*, letters with papers dated 24 and 27 November 1980. Akehurst, pp. 12-19 and interview. *Newsletter*, No. 17, pp. 2-3, 12-14, 19-25. Douglas interview. Reid letter and diary. Interview with former member of Front, Muscat. Present writer's *Summary*.

The plan for post-monsoon operations envisaged a ground approach from Defa to Furious and a swing South to seize and hold the heights over the formidable *Wadi* Sayq. A helicopter assault would then be launched over the *wadi* onto the Darra ridge overlooking the coastal village of Dhalqut, the Southern extremity of the line chosen for development by Brigadier Akehurst. The helicopter hop over the *wadi* was dangerous because anti-aircraft weapons or even properly sited small arms might shoot down the helicopters. Elaborate deception plans were made, including diversionary moves from Sarfait towards the sea, and towards Sherishitti from North and South.

The first diversion began on 14 August. A route North of the treeline was taken and cleared as far West as Defa. In addition to threatening Sherishitti, this prepared the ground for the main operation. There were sharp contacts both in establishing the road and in patrols out to locations such as the Zakhir Tree. Five days after the start of the operation, Brigadier Akehurst was at Defa when a Strikemaster was shot down nearby by a SAM-7 missile. 'In my opinion the enemy made a serious mistake by showing his hand so early,' according to Brigadier Akehurst. 'A concentration of SAMs on the Darra ridge and kept for surprise until our October attack would have been devastating. Now we could take our precautions and minimise the effects.'²⁵

²⁵ Akehurst, p. 15.

By flying above the effective height range of the missile, careful routing, use of the Hunters which could outrun the missile, and other means, the SAM-7 threat was greatly reduced.

In Western Dhofar, enemy operations increased over the late monsoon, with SAF and Iranian positions under increased fire. At least two companies of regular PDRY troops were between Sarfait and Sherishitti.²⁶ PDRY guns above Hauf were shelling Sarfait. One reason for the rejection of Sarfait as the main objective of post-monsoon operations, the avoidance of direct hostilities with the PDRY, was being negated by that country. As a precaution, General Perkins ordered 5.5 inch guns to Sarfait to match the 85mm guns' ranges. Iranian Chinook helicopters flew them in.

With D Day fixed for 21 October, the two main diversionary operations began. On 15 October, an operation from Sarfait secured the Capstan feature after two nights of dangerous hand-clearing of mines. The enemy knew that any move from Sarfait was planned to be a diversion, and there was no resistance. By midday, Brigadier Akehurst talked to Colonel Christie about the unexpected rapid success. 'I asked him what he thought he would need to carry on down to the sea. After some discussion he decided two more companies. In the next two minutes I threw seven months of planning and 40 pages of operation orders out of the metaphorical window ... and set about the preliminary moves of assembling

²⁶ Former Front member, Muscat.

the two companies, issuing orders and loading the SON cargo ship to be ready to deliver defence stores and supplies by ship to shore helicopter as soon as possible.²⁷

When General Perkins arrived next morning from Muscat, still five days before D Day, he showed equal flexibility, approved Brigadier Akehurst's change of plan, and ordered Hunter aircraft to attack gun and mortar positions across the border. And so, at dawn on 17 October, gun positions and other military targets across the PDRY border were attacked by SOAF aircraft and artillery. PDRY troops initially fled, leaving the Front alone to man anti-aircraft defences for five days.²⁸ The result of the attacks on the guns was immediate: incomers onto Sarfait totalled 78 and 120 on 16 and 17 October, but dropped to 26, 25 and 47 on the following three days. At this stage, the SAM-7 missiles and MGs fired at the Hunters did not cause any casualties.²⁹

Two SAF reinforcement companies lifted in by helicopter established positions along 4,000m of the lower scarp during the night of the 16/17 October. By dawn they held a wide corridor to the sea. Small arms attacks were driven off with the loss of only one killed and one wounded. On the same day, the last diversionary attack went in, and was a much bloodier affair.

²⁷ Akehurst, p. 17.

²⁸ Former Front member.

²⁹ Figures from present writer's Summary.

This took place on a bone-shaped coastal ridge between the *Wadi Sayq* and Rakhyut. From their strong point above Rakhyut, the Iranians had to seize the other end, thus threatening a move North to Sherishitti or West across the *Wadi Sayq*. They moved by helicopter, under cover of a tremendous barrage of fire by ships of the Iranian Navy, aircraft, artillery and mortars. The operation began inauspiciously, with troops dropped at the wrong place and having to re-embark with considerable delay to move to their planned objective. They then faced close fire as they dug in on the forward side of the slope. The first assault company was decimated, with over 20 killed and wounded within an hour. However, *Saeed*, the new position, was consolidated, and drew much of the PLA's fire over the next few days.

At Sarfait, the PDRY artillery supplemented by heavier calibre guns was used in fire, move and conceal operations designed to avoid the retaliatory SOAF strikes. Shelling was maintained at a rate of more than 200 rounds a week for the next few months. Two Hunter aircraft were shot down and others damaged. Oman stopped retaliatory action across the border on 21 November, thus establishing a strong diplomatic advantage. International influence, particularly from Saudi Arabia, eventually achieved a PDRY ceasefire.

At the height of the shelling from the PDRY, two SFE troops and assault pioneers cleared mines from the alignment of the new obstacles and built a barrier to the sea. The large quantities of stores necessary were ferried by helicopters from Al-Sultana lying offshore.

The next task was to mop up the remaining enemy groups in the Western area. FF cleared the heights North of the *Wadi Sayq*, and pressed on to Sherishitti. The PLA and PDRY troops, with their secure route back to their safe base blocked and increasing pressure on all sides, pulled back to the Darra ridge. Later they left Dhofar by the arduous, waterless, routes North of Sarfait. FF took the Sherishitti caves without opposition, and over 100 tons of arms and ammunition were found. In the last week of November, MR started to push Eastwards from Sarfait, and FF concentrated for the final push onto the Darra ridge.

A company with BATT and *firqat* support crossed the *Wadi Sayq* from *Saeed* and seized the East end of the Darra ridge. Meanwhile the rest of FF moved by Iranian landing ship to Dhalqut and took the coastal town unopposed. The only area not held by government troops was then part of the Darra ridge. FF and MR companies moved towards each other across this area and, in the unemotional words of a Special Force Routine Order issued on 4 December:

“At 1100 hours on the second day of December 1975, the Frontier Force made physical contact with the Muscat Regiment on the Darra ridge. This is the first time since Operation Simba that ground troops have got through to the Sarfair battalion. It also represents the end of organised resistance by the so-called People’s Liberation Army within Dhofar. His Majesty the Sultan was advised at 1200 hours on the same day that Dhofar was secure for civil development.”³⁰

The war was over.

³⁰ SAF order cited.

CHAPTER SIX

THE DHOFAR WAR: SIGNIFICANCE AND LESSONS

The military create conditions in which political forces can operate while politics, often involving international opinion, produce a favourable environment for military success.

- Major General Kenneth Perkins

In Dhofar, an insurgency campaign started by people with real grievances and legitimate aims was taken over by a Communist revolutionary movement which received the full range of support available from Russia and other Communist states. In a classic campaign, the Sultanate was helped to defeat the insurgency and is now a prosperous, stable and pro-Western country. Oman is in a most important location because of its proximity to vital supplies of oil and the routes necessary for its transport. The victory is therefore one for the West as a whole.

The above paragraph summarises the significance of the campaign. It was a rare victory in a period when the combination of real grievance and Communist exploitation of it proved irresistible in many countries with vastly greater Western support. The war was small compared with other campaigns,

but the reasons for victory, the principles which led to it, cannot be attributed solely to the scale of the campaign. Analysis of the lessons is therefore of wider significance.

Political Reform. The first, and fundamental, factor in winning the Dhofar War was the change of Sultan in 1970. Sultan Said could probably have retrieved the situation in 1967 by some liberal measures, but by 1970 he was demonstrably incapable of the necessary reforms and was in any case losing the war. The enemy was rapidly gaining in strength. His own forces were not expanding fast enough to meet the threat because he would not pay for it and Britain and potential Arab allies would not further support his discredited rule. Therefore by 1971 the Sultanate would have been lost without the change of ruler and the immediate liberal reforms introduced.

Selection and Maintenance of a National Strategy. Following the change of ruler, there was a clear strategy of defeating the rebels so that civil development could take place. This national aim and its maintenance without vacillation or short-term expedient political moves was of great importance in ensuring that effort was eventually directed by both civil and military authorities towards the same end. General Watts's 'Five Fronts' were an important contribution to the development of the national aim, but the clarity, attainability and maintenance of a strategy are more important than its detail: would it really have mattered if he had selected water-supply and track access to government centres instead of medical and veterinary assistance?

Unified Command at National and Military Levels. Unity of command at both national and military levels made the maintenance of the strategy easier to achieve. Nationally, the Sultan, guided by advisors, ruled by decree: one-man rule has many attendant dangers, but a strong ruler can maintain a firm and consistent line. The National Defence Council was important, and can be employed under any form of government. CSAF commanded all the armed forces, and this led to a united effort without the inter-service problems besetting many larger forces. Resource allocation and operational planning were under a single commander and headquarters, and the resulting team effort extended down to lower levels. The remarkable degree of integration and easy operating procedures between British officers of the ground, air and sea elements was partly a function of the smallness of the force, but also a reflection of the unified service.

Civil Aid. Civil aid to fill the vacuum after the enemy had been driven out was vital in gaining people's support. The Civil Aid Department was small, but the dedication of its few officers, the use of a simple standard plan and help from SAF overcame the lack of resources. More priority should have been given to the department to enable it to expand services in secure areas quickly and without calling on limited military resources. The other civil services were also developed too slowly, giving SAF a burden of additional responsibilities. An effective and nationwide police force, for example, was not in being until the final year of the war.

The *Firqat*. The *firqat* were important both in getting *Jebalis* to fight on the government side and in providing a ready means of employing SEPs. The original idea of a crusading *firqat* force sweeping Westwards against the strongpoints of Communism had largely to give way to the establishment of tribal *firqat* in their own areas. The *firqat* were also expensive and a security risk. However, with their SAS training teams they constituted much feared fighting teams in important operations in the early 1970s. They continue to be highly useful, in an area of few suitable opportunities, for employing *Jebali* men.

Permanent Amnesty. The policy of welcoming back former enemy without fear of punishment was very important in giving members of the PLA a way out. They did not face the necessity of having to fight to the bitter end. This led to a constant drain of defectors from the Front which increased where government military pressure reduced their morale.

Information Policy. The information services, one of the five fronts, became important because they were scrupulous in broadcasting only the truth. Radio Aden broadcasts from the Front were clearly propagandist and exaggerated (over the years, they claim to have killed in action more than three times the total strength of SAF) and the contrast was marked. The reliable reports from Muscat and Salalah about military success and civil development helped *Jebalis* make an informed decision on whom to support – a government meeting the needs for which the rebellion had originally

fought, or Communism which in practice depended on coercion and was incompatible with Islam.

General Military Lessons. Numerous military lessons are learned from such a campaign as Dhofar: a Dhofar Brigade document in 1971 included 17 foolscap pages of single-space typing on the lessons learnt in 1970-71. It is inappropriate to attempt such a detailed analysis in this paper, but it is necessary to list some of the military lessons because they were particularly important in Dhofar, were contentious, or because they help to define the sort of international assistance which is necessary.

Command and Control. SAF clearly suffered from lack of continuity in Dhofar. Until 1971, there was no long-term commander in the province, and the commanding officers of each roulement battalion had to cope with a changing situation and military requirement. British seconded officers changed every 18 months. Not surprisingly, hard-learnt lessons had to be rediscovered time and again, and newly-returned battalions had to feel their way back to operational effectiveness. The necessary staffs and staff systems were not available even in HQ SAF, which meant that the problem of lack of continuity could not be overcome from there. Battalions in Dhofar felt they did not get adequate support from Muscat. Before the coup, the chain of command was obscure: CSAF in theory reported to the Sultan, but in practice advisors inside the Defence Department had more access, tendered military advice and passed on orders which may or may not have originated with Sultan

Said. Within Dhofar, the local SAF commander normally had frequent access and therefore influence. The lessons are clear, and were mostly applied after 1970: adequate, appropriate and properly trained staff are essential, and the chain of command must be clear.

Intelligence. The military branch suffering most from lack of continuity and correct staffing was probably intelligence. There was always a great deal of information, but until 1970/71 there was no team to collate it and produce military intelligence. The strength of the enemy was consistently under-assessed, and real-time operational intelligence was rare. The lack of reasonable maps was a serious handicap in the early years of the war although aerial pictures and local guides partly overcame the problem.

Concept of Operations. Minimum bases-maximum mobile operations was a sound concept to avoid tying down troops in static locations and free them for the important task of finding and bringing to battle enemy groups to break them down and make them defend their own areas. These 'fix and destroy' operations need to precede the 'clear and hold' pacification operations. Constant pressure to garrison such places as Taqa and Mirbat with regular troops had to be resisted, but conversely there is a strong body of opinion that Sarfait was put in too early. The old idea of fortified lines to isolate sections of territory which can then be cleared proved sound, and the opposing view to Sarfait being put in too early is that it was a partial block on enemy supplies and tied down enemy weapons teams and other groups. Certainly, operations

at Sarfait affected what went on around Salalah, while operations to the East of the plain did not. Operations from Jaguar onwards can be seen as the classic method of working from soft areas progressively into harder ones, but it would be naïve to see Dhofar as simply this: from the secure plain to the *jebel* was a total change of environment involving a sudden change of heights, and therefore a straightforward “oil-slick” operation was not appropriate; in Dhofar, the insurgents did not disappear into the people but into the rugged terrain – the great majority of the population were under government control throughout the war; finally, what brought about the final collapse of the enemy was the total sealing of Sarfait. An earlier effort to close the border at Sarfait and reduce operations elsewhere would probably have brought an earlier end to the war: if Operation Simba had been totally successful in 1972, there would have been no heavy rockets, SAM-7s or regular PDRY troops in Dhofar, and no way out for wounded Front fighters. A major lesson which should not have to be re-learned so frequently is that bases need to be the source of aggressive fighting patrols, or much of their effectiveness is nullified.

Relative Strengths of Forces. In an insurgency campaign, the government side needs many more infantry soldiers than the guerrillas. The latter are in their own environment, which they know and are better suited to move through and live in. They can choose the time and place for moves against government positions, while government forces must first find the enemy. Government troops must carry in supplies, while insurgents can live with local assistance and cache their weapons until the chosen time to use them.

Above all, the government must move to find the enemy, whilst time is on the latter's side and he can lie low. If government forces try to establish their own bases in the enemy environment, troops are tied down guarding and supporting it – and a further prestige target is available for the enemy to attack at leisure. A country like Oman does not have a sufficient population to support large numbers of battalions, and therefore some outside troop involvement is indicated, as well as measures to increase the effectiveness of the available infantry such as helicopter transport.

Balance of Forces. SAF achievements invariably outstripped civil government's capacity, and operations outstripped the capability of their logistics to support them. It is important to maintain an adequate logistic organisation as well as adequate command facilities, and the need for government agencies to have the capacity to respond to military operations in pursuit of the National aim has been stressed in the paragraph on civil aid. The balance of arms within a force is also necessary, and forced or rapid expansion should not neglect elements such as military engineers.

Airpower. The importance of airpower in Dhofar can hardly be overstressed. Aircraft provided the flexibility for operations throughout the theatre, with a quick response and the capacity to carry the battle beyond the range of ground weapons. Troops could be moved rapidly to unexpected areas, and could be maintained and supported with fire. The enemy faced a constant threat in what otherwise would be safe areas. Rapid evacuation of

casualties was a priceless asset. The need for air support, particularly from helicopters, was recognised from the start of the war, and the delay in acquiring them was a major reason for the lack of success in early years.

Seapower. Naval forces did not have such a prominent role in Dhofar, though the capacity to deny enemy resupply or free movement along the coast was important. Fire support onto coastal positions was supplied without the necessity for bases being held, and limited but useful amphibious operations took place. The stationing of Al-Sultana close to Sarfait but out of range of enemy weapons was an important element in enabling the final post-monsoon operations to be quickly and successfully prosecuted. Sea movement of men and supplies was always useful. Naval forces share with air forces the fact that they can be available for operations without being based in a country, and this is useful in a delicate political situation.

Weapons. Although most engagements were at longer ranges, the use of automatic weapons in closer contacts proved devastating in sudden weight of fire. Capacity to return automatic fire is necessary to win the firefights. On the other hand, lighter calibres did not penetrate sufficiently through thick vegetation and wounds caused were often minor. The value of GPMGs with their range, ability to cut through thick foliage and cause instant incapacity to wounded enemy was high. Important lessons on the value of artillery were re-emphasised: shells were a major cause of casualties in contact battles, but against properly dug-in and protected troops such as those at Sarfait

conventional artillery was a minor threat. Speed of response and economy demanded an order of response mortars-artillery-airstrike, but for want of cheaper weapons during the war expensive and slower options often had to be used. The ability to control supporting fire was extremely important, and this is a skill which demands more priority in training. Mines are an important weapon in this type of campaign, with enemy supply routes and government patrol routes from bases as natural targets. The necessity for troops to be able rapidly and effectively to dig or build adequate protection was a wartime lesson sometimes neglected in peacetime training, and reverse slope positions were invariably less costly in casualties.

International Assistance

Leadership. British officers and NCOs led the military effort at every significant level throughout the war, and there is no doubt that this was decisive in maintaining the long struggle and the final victory. Lack of basic education and advanced military training, and the requirement to lead mixed Arab-Baluch units and coordinate sophisticated outside assistance, meant that local officers would not have been able to cope.

Expertise. Apart from leadership, there were many skills and disciplines which had to be supplied from outside. The SAS, with their wide range and deep knowledge, particularly of irregular operations, and their mental and

physical robustness, were a critical factor in turning the tide after the coup. The air force, navy and more technical or involved sections of the ground forces and the staff all called for expertise not held by Omanis.

Equipment. Some items of equipment together with their operators were not available locally, and are unlikely to be available in other small or Third World countries facing insurrection. Radars or sound-ranging devices to locate the sources of enemy stand-off fire are an obvious example. Supply of other weapons and ammunition such as mortars and automatic weapons was very important: tardiness in providing mortars, for example, meant that more costly alternatives had to be used. Supply of equipment needs to be on the right financial terms: Oman was spending more than half her income on prosecuting the Dhofar War, and a more sympathetic attitude could have been taken to the charges for support. If an outside government is prepared to provide officers and men to fight for an ally, it should be prepared to follow up with material support which is at least as generous.

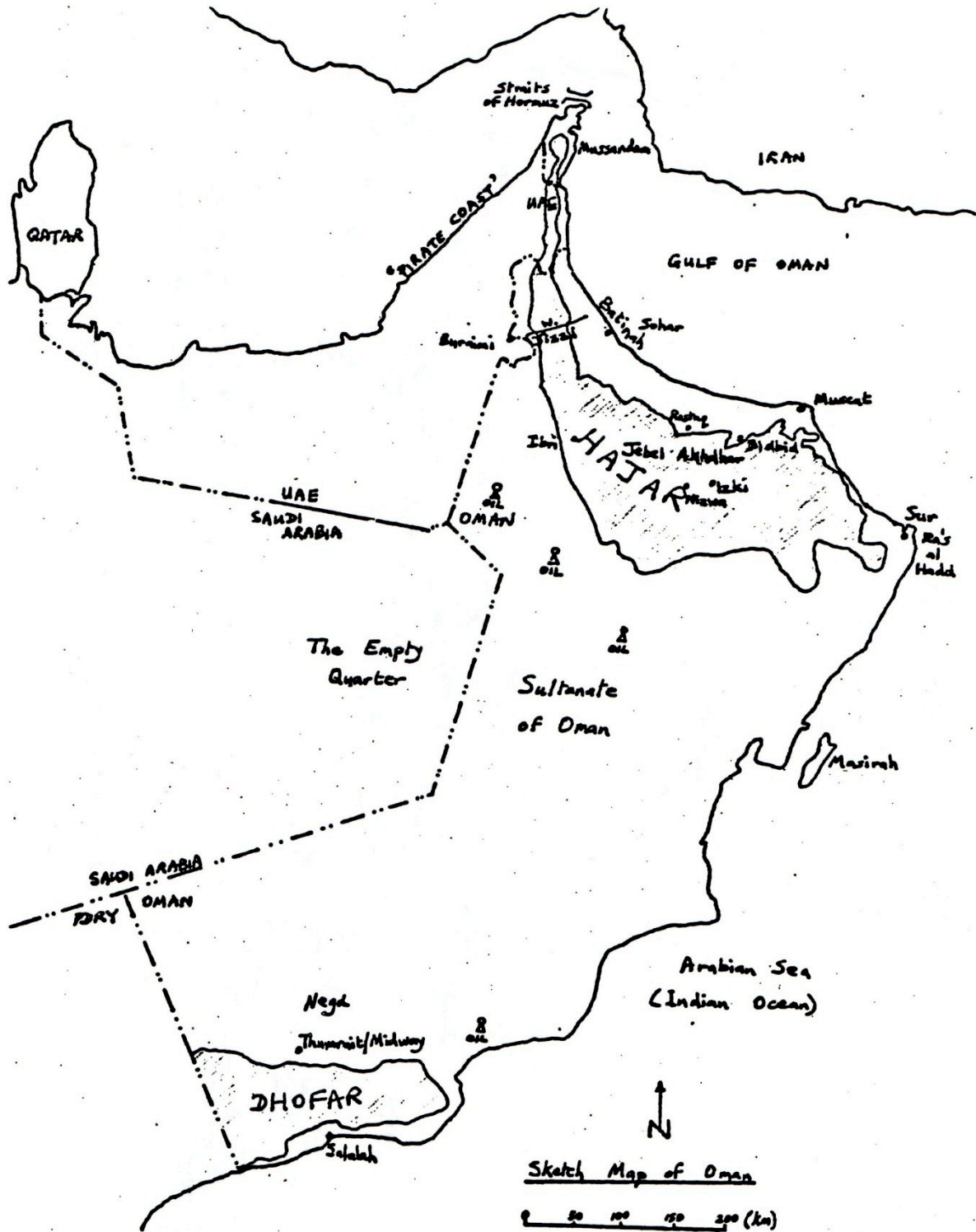
Troops. There was clearly a need for formed bodies of troops as well as individuals to serve in Dhofar. On political grounds, these are best provided by states with similar ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds, such as the Jordanians and Iranians who assisted Oman after 1972. Large numbers of European troops would have changed the whole nature of the conflict, from a local counter-insurgency campaign to an international conflict all too easily misrepresented as neo-colonialism or imperialism. This is clearly why the

Russians use Cuban troops as surrogates in the Third World, and is a feature of the internationalisation of conflicts in Third World countries.

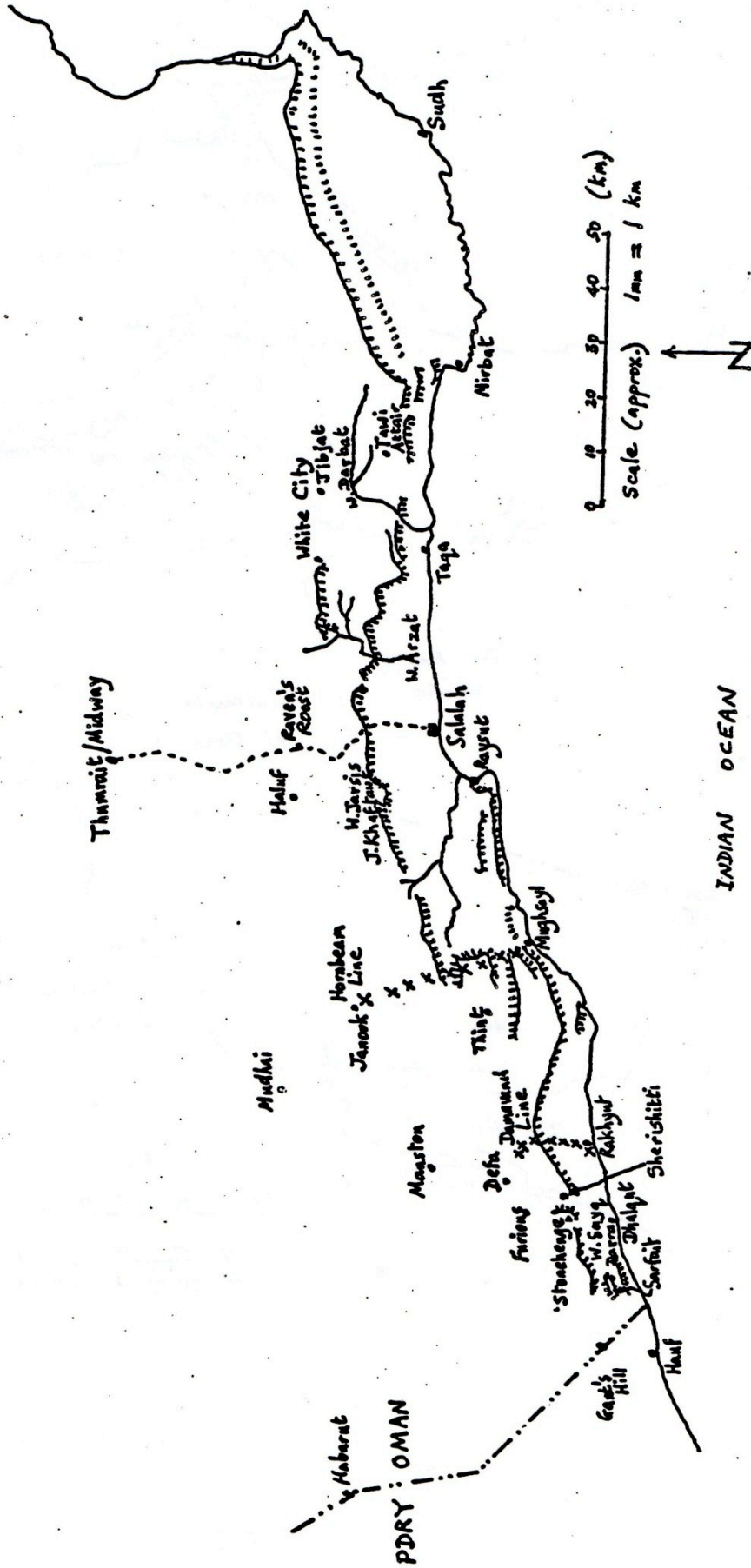
Scale of Assistance. The amount of assistance needs to be tailored strictly to a country's needs. The less that is provided to achieve success the better: otherwise the nature of the conflict may again be changed, leading to an increased need for further military assistance to fight a different war. Also, it is important that the victory is clearly that of the threatened country and not of its ally. This principle applies to weapons and training, and not just to troops: at almost opposite ends of the scale in this regard were the highly effective but lightly-armed *firqat*, led by small groups of SAS who shared their life and hardships, and the Iranian battalions, heavily armed and supported but best suited to static operations and holding ground in strength.

Timeliness. While one might consider that Britain was prudent in waiting until the political conditions were right before committing extra assistance, earlier help would have led to a shorter war. The factors important in this regard are accurate assessments of situations and the international assistance being received by insurgents, the capacity to respond with appropriate military, civil or political support, and the political will to provide the necessary assistance.

The Future. International assistance, mainly from Britain, enabled Oman to overcome a Communist-led insurgency. The alliance of interests and continuing British influence and presence in Oman indicate that a similar success could be achieved again if necessary. Other countries face similar threats, and have similar links with Western countries. For success, the help needs to be both timely and judicious, providing unobtrusively only the capabilities which the host country cannot at present meet but avoiding the temptation to take over the war and change the nature of it.



Sketch Map of Dhofar



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2. 'Papers' refers to documents, letters maps and other items contemporary with the events described.
3. 'Letters' include in some cases papers produced after the war by individuals.
4. This bibliography is a select one, and does not attempt to include all written sources: only those which were used, or provided useful background to the dissertation.

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