

ROYAL ARTILLERY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Autumn Meeting

Wednesday 11th October 2006, at Larkhill

A Presentation by Colonel H E P Colley OBE

CRACKER BATTERY AND THE DHOFAR WAR

This is a record of an illustrated talk given by Colonel Hugh Colley and Major Mike Hardy to the Royal Artillery Historical Society on Wednesday 11th October at Larkhill. The record is based on an edited transcript.

The Autumn 2006 Meeting of the Society was held in the Newcome Hall, Larkhill, on Wednesday 11th October at 11 am. 27 members with 10 guests attended, 9 veterans of the Dhofar War and 7 serving-members of the Regiment. Brigadier Timbers was in the Chair.

The Secretary gave out administrative notices, details of the programme for 2007, proposals for 2008, details of the Society's new bank account, and reported progress with the publication of the Proceedings for 2006. He reminded members that he was still seeking information on those Royal Artillery officers who had been the first Directors of the Pakistan Artillery after Independence: Brigadiers L A Harris, R Morley, J H H Willans and R A Lamont.

The Chairman then introduced the speaker, Colonel Hugh Colley, and his assistant Major Mike Hardy. He explained that Colonel Colley had been Commanding Officer of the Oman Artillery and Major Hardy his second-in-command, and thus had detailed knowledge of the operations in the Oman in the 1970s. As they were both well known in the Royal Artillery they needed no further introduction and he looked forward to an interesting talk.

Colonel Colley

Introduction

At Camberley the DS were expected to give presentations from behind a huge lectern like this. Towards the end of one course a student, probably an Australian, shouted out to me from the audience "sir, would you mind standing up?" [laughter]. So today I am going to move from the lectern to centre stage - a position that in the old days was strictly reserved for the Commandant...

I would like to thank the Society for inviting us to talk to you – it is good to see so many friends here. There are some who served in Cracker Battery and I am grateful for the support of many of my comrades from Sultans Armed Forces (SAF). I hope during the talk you will take the opportunity to comment and share experiences.

I will try to manipulate my talk so we can compare the operations in the Dhofar mountains, the skills of the enemy (adoo) and our own tactics to what is going on in Afghanistan today. There are similarities and I suspect the lessons we learned in Dhofar in the 1970's are being relearnt in Helmand in 2006 - especially the need to dominate and hold ground and effectively use the artillery and air support to defeat the adoo. More importantly, however, was the need to have a

well planned and successful civil aid programme to win over the indigenous people to support the legitimate government and isolate the insurgency.

Cracker Battery was a secret and joint operation between the British and Omani Governments and between the Royal Artillery and the Oman Artillery. I was seconded to SAF in 1970 to command the Oman Artillery (OA). SAF, in the main, was officered by British (seconded and contract) with Omani NCOs and soldiers. My officers were a mixture of those seconded from the Royal Artillery (RA), and British and Pakistani officers on contract – the majority of the NCOs and gunners were from Baluchistan and the remainder were Omanis. So we had an unusual situation of operating under three cultures and languages - you can imagine the scope for misunderstanding. Under the direction of Oman Defence Secretary (Colonel Hugh Oldman) and Commander SAF (Brigadier John Graham) I had an Omanisation programme in place to recruit Omani officers and soldiers to expand the current battery to a four battery regiment within eighteen months. Part of this process was the creation of Cracker Battery with the specific task of supporting RAF Salalah.

First, as we are at Larkhill, I would like to start with a story. The scene is set with two British Oman Artillery officers who had just come off a jebel operation - unshaven, camouflage kit, etcetera. Now, these two officers were talking about the problems of being short of everything: short of guns, short of officers; short of boots; short of binoculars; a whole load of things. But earlier that morning we'd received a message saying that a Hercules aircraft was landing in Salalah with some gunner kit. With that we'd got very excited and shot up to the airfield but what we found wasn't a RAF Hercules, but an Iranian aircraft parked in the corner with a very agitated pilot who wanted to get away because of the threat of incoming shells. In that aircraft were thirty 4.2-inch mortars, plus ammunition and, importantly a technical manual on how to use the weapons. To complete this gift from the Shah, the loadmaster, who did not know where he was or who we were, produced with great ceremony a special present - a bag of white plimsolls! As we were discussing our windfall there was a bang on the door and in came this figure; he was quite extraordinary, so smart, dressed in a proper uniform, peaked cap, RA cap badge, creases in his trousers, polished boots and a cane under his arm. Saluting he said "WO2 AIG reporting from Larkhill, Sir!" Out of the blue we now had another surprise and welcome gift.

Now we had a solution. That very next morning, a truck left the camp and perched on top of the 4.2 mortars and ammunition was WO2 AIG with twenty raw Omani recruits – they couldn't speak English and he couldn't speak Arabic – he was still smart but now he had wisely exchanged his cane for an SLR. With his new command he was airlifted to a battalion operational position on the Yemen border. Within days, he had engaged the enemy. In the first engagements he did all the command post work and then laid every mortar. Progressively, under demanding operational conditions, he established an effective fire unit. Later when the battalion CO reviewed this first all Omani fire unit WO2 AIG decided to smarten up the gunners - he gave them each a pair of the Shah's white plimsolls to wear. All a remarkable tribute to the standards set by Larkhill.

So let's get onto the main subject of Cracker Battery – throughout my talk I will try to strike a balance between the Battery's specialist role and the overall conduct of the Dhofar war.

The New Oman under Sultan Qaboos: 1970 – 1971

To start with I must mention the dramatic changes that took place in Oman the early 1970's under the leadership of the new Sultan Qaboos. In 1970, Oman, a country with a million people, had only 500 children at school, within a year this had increased to 15,000. In 1970 there were 75 hospital beds, but by 1971 there were a thousand beds. In 1970 there were 5 miles of tarmac

roads, and by the end of 1971 this had increased to 300 miles. SAF played a key role in Oman's leap into the 20th Century.

Political Scene – A Threat to the World Economy

Let's go to the political scene (Fig 1 – Map SE Arabia): you will be familiar with the difference between 1967 and 1971 British policy in the Gulf. The strategic importance of Oman is obvious - guarding the Straits of Hormuz, Iran and the Persian Gulf. There you have something like 40-50 miles of restricted navigation, with considerable oil traffic at that time, passing through the most vulnerable narrow area - approximately half of all European oil, a third of American oil, and the total oil of Japan. So you can see and understand the critical position of Oman. Britain provided the stability in the area through a military base in Bahrain and an amphibious task force operating in the Gulf. In 1967 Britain withdrew from the area. The decision to withdraw from Aden and the Gulf had been taken about three years earlier by the Harold Wilson government. Consequently communists and other factions knew well in advance that they could fill the vacuum caused by the 1967 British withdrawal. The sort of events that had occurred in Aden in 1963 demonstrated the vulnerability of Oman. I must say one thing about the map; in rough terms Oman is about the size of Britain and Dhofar is about the size of Wales. In the middle of the 1960s a half infantry company of SAF was responsible for the security of Dhofar.

Communist Insurgency Threat to Oman

The chronology of events in Oman in the 1960s is:

- 1959: British / Oman agreement for Salalah and Masirah airfields
- 1962: Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) first attacks
- 1965: DLF attacks increase
- 1968: Popular Front for Liberation of Oman and Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) established – based on PDRY supported by China and Russia
- 1969: PFLOAG controls Dhofar Jebel
- 1970 (23 July): Sultan Taimur deposed by his son Qaboos

You can see here how the 1968 to 1970 insurgency activity against Oman directly relates to the British withdrawal from the Middle East. Although British interests had reduced in the area Britain was still tied to a 1959 agreement between the British Government and Sultan Said bin Taimur where Britain was to provide seconded officers to command and train the Sultan's Armed Forces, and maintain RAF bases at Salalah and Masirah. The Sultan insisted that the use of Masirah and Salalah were linked; if the British had one we had the other - the significance of this link will emerge later.

Just as you can view the Larkhill course photographs outside in the hall our intelligence sources obtained similar course photographs of insurgents under training in Communist countries, particularly in Peking and Odessa. The intense training and build up of insurgent forces was very professional - particularly the heavy weapons teams. Combine these skills with their intimate knowledge of the mountainous country they were fighting over and the support of the local people, then you probably have the ideal insurgent. This has resonance with the situation in Afghanistan today.

In 1970 a critical situation was looming. This map (Fig 2 – Map Dhofar) illustrates the situation when in 1970 Sultan bin Taimur was deposed by his son Sultan Qaboos. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (called adoo) were in full control of the Jebel and divided into three regiments.

The SAF were totally contained to Salalah Plain and the coastal villages, and had limited freedom of movement between the coastal villages. On the Salalah Plain the adoo laid mines and conducted stand off attacks. SAF operations were limited to battalion attacks from a firm base north of the Jebel and the base on Salalah plain adjacent to the airfield and town. The key issue here was that the adoo held the Jebel which prevented SAF access to Salalah by land routes. During the monsoon period, June to September, resupply by sea was impossible - outside the monsoon resupply was limited by the harbour facilities. In short SAF was therefore totally dependent for troop movement and logistic supplies on RAF Salalah.

Major Hardy

Dhofar – where the war was fought

I will turn now to the ground which was illustrated on the previous map (Fig 2). The Jebel to the east is not unlike Salisbury Plain, rolling ground, lots of grass as a result of the tail end of the Indian monsoon, where much of the coast down here was covered with thick cloud from June through to the end of September. It was very uncomfortable for the locals up there, with lots of midgets, fleas, dampness, scrub typhus, smoke in their caves, but it was wonderful cattle country. In the middle, the vegetation was thinning out, with big wadis running north-south, very small at the top, but by the time they get down to the edge of the Jebel they are several hundred yards wide. Then if one goes right across the border, there is very little vegetation except in the wadi bottom and the features were mainly series of escarpments, with wadis running in different directions. On Salalah Plain there was the coastline, the plain, the foothills, then it rose up to the Jebel proper. There were lots of finger wadis running off these big main ones so in that area there were quite good lateral communications. Then the watershed, and the beginning of the empty quarter.

We have some pictures to illustrate this:

Fig 3 - Typical country of the eastern jebel – rolling grasslands. This fellow is one of the adoo (enemy) who has come over to us - his AK47 has been exchanged for an FN. They were grouped into firqats (tribal militias) run by the British Army Training Team, an SAS Sqn:

Fig 4 - Good cattle country, although the grass is becoming burnt off.

Fig 5 - Towards the west the Jebel becomes more broken ...

Fig 6 - ... with deep wadis and sparse vegetation.

Fig 7 - A typical gun sangar, this one being at the top of the Hornbeam Line.

Fig 8 - Layer training underway while on operations.

Fig 9 - Protected ammo storage.

Fig 10 - Difficult country if the line of march is against the grain.

Fig 11 - "Take five" in a secure area.

Fig 12 - The western Jebel near the Yemen border at the Simba battalion position. The khareef (cloud) covered Salalah plain and much of the Jebel from early June to September.

Fig 13 - In this area the wadis were very steep.

Fig 14 - An O Gp at a Coy CP.

Fig 15 - A Skyvan transport aircraft landing at Simba.

Fig 16 - A gun position supporting operations.

Fig 17 – One of the old US 4.2-inch mortars donated by the Shah of Iran to the war effort in action.

Fig 18 - Ammo being brought ashore from a freighter anchored offshore, there being no harbour or dock. During the khareef the surf was too high for any sea re-supply so all stores had to be stockpiled to cover the period from early June to September.

Fig 19 - A boom (dhow) of the Sultan of Oman's Navy – the main armament was a .50 machine gun.

Fig 20 - Salalah plain looking east, with the town on the coast in the middle distance and the Jebel looming in the background.

Fig 21 - The camp at Raysut, the westernmost permanent position on the plain.

Fig 22 - Typical terrain on the plain.

Fig 23 - Guns forward of their main position engaged on HF.

Fig 24 - A CP on mobile operations on the plain.

Fig 25 - Frankincense trees native to the Salalah area of Dhofar.

Fig 26 - Helicopter operations from RAF Salalah.

Fig 27 - Loading a 75mm howitzer into a helicopter – they could also be underslung.

Fig 28 - One of a pair of US 75mm How which had previously seen service with 33 Airborne Lt Regt. Until late 1973 these were the only guns which could be heli-lifted onto the Jebel and which could outrange the adoo 75mm RCL.

Fig 29 - An Indian manufactured 75mm howitzer. By late 1973 the establishment of the OA Regiment was four gun batteries, each battery comprising two troops of four 25-pdr and one troop of four 75mm hows – batteries of twelve guns.

Fig 30 - Practice for heli-ops.

Fig 31 - The fort and northern perimeter at Mirbat, the easternmost of the coastal towns. The adoo attempted to take it out during the khareef in 1972.

Colonel Colley

Rule number one was that no operation could take place on the Jebel without immediate gun support, supplemented by on call air support of Strikemasters. Infantry operations always had to

operate under the umbrella of gun and air support. When battalion operations deployed from a firm base then they were covered by their close support and under command four-gun troop. If the operation was a Jebel deployment away from the normal base then guns needed to be positioned to provide support.

1971 Pre-Monsoon Operations Failure

In the early 1970s two SAF battalions were deployed in Dhofar. Firstly, the Plains battalion, which was supported by Z Company with machine guns mounted on vehicles for fast running and immediate reaction. This battalion secured the Salalah plain including the airfield and town and it conducted short offensive operations into the Central and Eastern Jebel. The second SAF battalion was based to the north on the Jebel and carried out aggressive operations against the hard-core adoo units in Central and Western Jebel protecting the resupply routes to the Eastern Jebel. In the main both battalions deployed at battalion strength, but in this period operations were limited to about 24 hours. SAF was not able to stay permanently on the Western and Central Jebel – the adoo was too strong. Each battalion had a troop of 25-pounders and a 5.5-inch under command. Single guns were also located at the coastal villages of Taqa and Mirbat. These single guns countered stand-off small arms, mortar and rocket attacks onto the villages and they were critical for the morale of the village people.

The Sultan of Omans Air Force (SOAF) based an operational element in Dhofar consisting of Strikemasters for ground attack, recce and heavy lift helicopters, Skyvan and Caribou transport aircraft. (The Strikemaster pilots also flew a Beaver which the gunners adapted as an AOP with the FOO sitting on the door sill) All operations were totally dependent on this SOAF support based at RAF Salalah.

In addition to the personnel running RAF Salalah the UK units based in Dhofar included a RAF Regiment Squadron for airfield protection, and a Field Surgical Team (FST). The FST was probably the most important unit based in Dhofar. On earlier operations, it would take a long time to get injured soldiers off the Jebel and without instant surgical attention then he could well die, but with a helicopter and an FST you had the best combination for morale.

An SAS Sqn (known as BATT - British Army Training Team) on six-month rotation was located at the SAF base, initially to provide essential skills for the Hearts and Minds Campaign in the coastal villages and later to establish and manage the Firqats – surrendered enemy trained to fight for the Sultan in their own tribal area. For a short period two SAS Sqns were deployed with SAF units for the launch of the offensive on the Eastern Jebel in 1971.

Now I would just like to take you back to the SAF battalion in the north of the Jebel. This battalion, probably in the most vulnerable position, couldn't operate out of that base in less than battalion strength. I will now try and give you some idea of what an operation was like.

First of all the guns would be located in the battalion fire base, commanded by a British officer. He would be the GPO and control the firing. An FOO, another British Gunner would fly in the day before for the operation. He couldn't stay with the battalion because they weren't enough FOOs to go round so he would probably have been transferred from another operation, and would coordinate with the battalion staff using a grid over an air photograph. That air photograph and the grid would be the reference for everybody: the guns firing, the observation, the infantry requesting fire and so forth. On the gridded air photograph the FOO would establish the on call targets, trying to identify the features where the adoo would be firing from or moving to. Targets had to have simple names that every soldier Omani, Baluch or English, could quickly understand and say.

It had to be a name because a name was better than a number. So you end up with a defined target area which would have something like six or seven code-named targets. Because of the lack of British officers SAF battalions worked in half companies so in the command set up the CO would usually direct his half company commanders in English with the platoons and sections working in Arabic. The FOO would be located with the CO but as the gunner team were Baluchi they communicated in Urdu! But all Fire Orders on the gunner net were in English so the FOO somehow had to translate the excited demands of Arab platoon commanders into shells on the ground: that was where the simple target code names came in.

The battalion march out of the base down a tricky escarpment was carefully planned and prepared to ensure secrecy and that no time was lost after last light. The guns in range could support the operation from the base, but the battalion mortars had to be donkey-packed out to a mortar base. The adoo maintained pickets to observe the base and would alert active units of any movement. They would have mined the routes out with anti personnel mines. At least two battalion operations were aborted in 1971 because soldiers trod on a mine – the noise, the crying out with the pain of lost legs and the heroic night casualty evacuation by SOAF helicopter pilots would totally compromise the deployment. You can picture the situation where you have over four hundred men plus the six mules exposed on narrow mined mountain tracks in very difficult going and then having to revert to an orderly battalion withdrawal up cliff edge tracks with the donkeys leading - all under the threat of an adoo counter attack.

Most operations deployed successfully and it was imperative that all sub units were dug in by first light and able to identify adjacent units - if a unit was in the wrong position it had to stay put as any movement would be immediately detected. Guns were kept silent until contact. The first contact was usually just after first light. The adoo surveillance skills and knowledge of the ground was remarkable, detecting SAF units within an hour of first light after which the fire fight would develop. The fire fight and the concentration of adoo firepower in 1971, pre-Monsoon, was too much for a deployed Battalion to hold. We lost a lot of soldiers, either killed or severely injured, body recovery and casevac prevailed and communications became difficult. It was developing into a situation we had to get out of. What were the Gunners doing? There was a lot of difficulty relating the air photograph to the ground and identifying the adoo locations, but you have got to get rounds down quickly. The FOO would have a National walkie-talkie and he would be talking to the British half company commanders and they would be calling for fire based on the pre-planned targets. These targets were usually in the right area but there was a great danger of firing HE onto our own positions. Normally the first rounds fired were smoke – this also helped the scrambled jets, who would be overhead in minutes, to identify the target area.

The adoo tactic was one of rapid movement from one firing position to another – their knowledge and the use of the ground was superb. They wore light clothing and only carried an AK and ammunition. They used the cover of mountain ridges, wadis and scrub to great effect. Their objective was to encircle the SAF deployment and cut the withdrawal route. It needed the mortars, guns and jets to provide cover on immediate withdrawal. You could, in some situations, wait until darkness to withdraw, but the CO's decision, usually about midday when it was extremely hot, was that this option sustained more casualties and risked encirclement. Given more time the adoo could bring up their heavy weapons of mortars and RCLs: the best course was to fall back quickly and disengage the adoo. This rapid break needed all the support that the guns and strike aircraft could provide. The guns would fire a continuous mix of HE and smoke until SAF was clear of the adoo. Before the pull out helicopters would casevac the wounded and if possible extract bodies. The helicopter pilots were marvellous; they were able to come in low from the rear working the contours and put down in a well protected spot

The strike aircraft support was invaluable but the strike pilots also had target identification problems. The guns would fire smoke to indicate the target area and then immediately check fire, so the jets could attack without any delay. As soon as the jets pulled up the gun fire continued, so there was no gap between gun and aircraft engagement. This tight coordination procedure was critical to prevent the adoo from exploiting a lull. However, the safe-guarding of the aircraft was paramount - in SAF the Air Force was actually under the same command as the Army. We knew the pilots and we had beers together in the Mess. We recognised their voices and call signs when they were overhead - it was total camaraderie and professionalism combined. You knew when you called up Tango 6, or whatever, that a friend was there - that was the sort of thing that went on in that period. It was important that the infantry had confidence in the guns and jets to cover their break clean and rapid withdrawal. An illustration of army-airforce co-operation is one occasion when the guns ran out of smoke and the Skyvan pilot, doing resupply, taxied off the airstrip into the gun position with his engine running while ammunition was extracted down the ramp and the shells fed direct into the guns - a classic example of the effective army-airforce command relationship.

Defending RAF Salalah

I have tried to give you a taste of Jebel operations, so now I will move onto the key role of RAF Salalah. The airfield was critical to operations as it was the only access to Salalah Plain and town during the monsoon. It was a flying base for SOAF, RAF and civil transport but most of the air traffic was conducted by SOAF supporting ground operations and civil development programmes. However, the base was managed by the RAF under the 1959 agreement.

In early 1970 the air field started to come under adoo heavy weapon attacks. Initially these attacks were from 82mm mortars - very accurate Chinese mortars. A RAF Regiment squadron deployed two 81mm mortar detachments to provide a response, in conjunction with Oman Artillery (OA) guns positioned at the nearby Umm al Ghawarif (UAG) SAF camp. In April 1970 the mortar and gun response were augmented with two Green Archer mortar locating radar and detachments initially from 22 Locating Battery. The 82mm threat was contained by establishing an outer perimeter with defensive posts called Hedgehogs, where the RAF mortars were located. This effectively put the adoo mortars out of range of the vulnerable buildings and aircraft.

However, the threat increased dramatically when the adoo deployed 75mm RCL in stand off attacks in early 1971. The 75mm RCL shown in this picture (Fig 32) below was captured from the adoo - it is of American origin but not dissimilar to the Chinese RCLs which the adoo mainly had. This weapon became part of the OA Light Section so the three soldiers in the picture are actually SAF. We could easily and quickly deploy it by helicopter. With a range of 7000m this versatile weapon could be fired, by the adoo from the cover of Jebel scrub and target airfield operations. The RCL teams had been well trained in Russia or China - they would recce well before an engagement and prepare the firing position. Just before last light they would manhandle the RCL into position, fire off two to three rounds, and then scoot. They were so quick that they could be away before the first round had landed. This type of stand off attack was a severe threat - firing at will these weapons would have a serious impact on flying operations. Although they were tempted to fire during increased airfield activity the adoo usually chose last light. The OA guns at UAG were the only immediate response to these RCL attacks. As the attacks became more frequent the guns had to be dedicated to this counter fire role during daylight - at night the guns could be moved for harassing tasks.

This is a picture of a Hedgehog OP (Fig 33) and mortar defensive post on the airfield outer perimeter which was set up to hold off the adoo mortars. These Hedgehogs were manned by three

to four men. They were constructed of 70 gallon burmails full of water or sand and very exposed on the gravel plain. In the photograph is the DRA, Mervyn Janes, with the Cracker Battery Commander, Henry Sawrey Cookson and Mike Hardy, 2IC OA. The OA gun position was about two miles away to the flank. There was a slick procedure with the air traffic control for counter fire to incomers. In the first instance landing aircraft/helicopters were immediately diverted out to sea and those on the ground returned to the protected areas. The guns, which were loaded and layed on likely firing areas, would fire instantly the control tower gave clearance. After the adoo shells had impacted the jets would scramble to attempt to target the adoo withdrawing. It was critical that the pilots – civil aircraft could also be landing – were sharp in diverting and soon got the message when they realised that shells were landing on the airfield!

1971 Post-Monsoon Launch of Major Offensive and Cracker Deployment

I have described SAF operations in the Western Jebel, the key role of RAF Salalah in supporting SAF, the shelling threat to airfield operations and the need for dedicated artillery support to the airfield. Early 1971 had seen SAF in a very difficult situation. As the year progressed the political situation under the new Sultan Qaboos stabilised and SAF was enlarged with re-equipment programmes in place. The plan was for a major offensive against the adoo on the Eastern Jebel post monsoon in September. Operation Jaguar (a joint SAF and SAS operation) was planned to establish the Sultans Government permanently on the Jebel. The terrain was not as fierce as in the west and was dominated by cattle rearing grasslands. The adoo was not as strong as the units in the west but nevertheless they included hard core elements and heavy weapon teams. In effect the planned operation was a two battalion type operation and had to have dedicated artillery support. OA which, by now, was an enlarged battery, did not have sufficient resources to support Western Jebel operations, Eastern Jebel operations and protect RAF Salalah. This is the foundation of the Cracker Battery story.

Why Cracker?

A formal request was made to the British Government for a UK battery to provide direct support for RAF Salalah which would release OA guns to support Jebel operations. We had in mind a 7 Para RHA battery as they had four-gun batteries of the 105 mm Italian Pack Howitzer – absolutely perfect if we had to move the guns forward onto the Jebel. The UK Government was adamant in 1971 that no more formed UK army units would be deployed in Dhofar other than the SAS and the FST. We entered into negotiations seeking a solution. It was finally agreed that the UK would supply Royal Artillery officers, NCOs and technical staff on a three-month attachment and Oman would provide, from OA, 25-pdr guns and Omani JNCOs and gunners to man them together with ammunition and logistic support – this was the Omani-British composite battery which we called Cracker Battery. The UK RA contingent of twenty one all ranks turned round three every months between September 1971 and April 1975; with the RA locating elements a total of about three hundred all ranks. There was a timely factor to the creation of Cracker Battery; I was sent on a diplomatic/military mission to Jordan – probably the first between the two countries – with a shopping list focussed on building up OA to regimental strength. In addition to all the training assistance the Jordanians offered twelve 25-pdr guns. King Hussein endorsed all this assistance and added a gift to the Sultan of some fine Arab horses. Everything arrived in Oman within weeks, including the horses, which luckily were gladly taken on by a seconded cavalry officer in SAF HQ in Muscat. With the gun problem solved the Cracker people – the British element – were in Dhofar within two weeks and in a short time integrated with the Omani gun detachments thereby releasing the OA Battery to support the SAF/SAS post-monsoon offensive on the Eastern Jebel.

Cracker in Action

Cracker 1 deployed in September 1971, under Major Freddie Williams, and the UK element consisted of 6 officers with 15 NCOs and soldiers while OA provided the Omanis to man the guns. The gun position, located within the inner airfield perimeter, consisted of a command post and three (later four) 25-pdr guns. The observation officers were deployed forward at the RAF Regiment Hedgehogs defence positions on the airfield outer perimeter. Cracker Battery Commander reported to CO RAF Salalah and worked closely with SAF Dhofar HQ and OA. He also took command of the RA locating elements and set up a Joint Operations Centre for airfield defence. The coordinated command and control system developed procedures for countering the RCL stand off attacks. The UK element turned round every three months and, in the main, individuals were detached from UK and BAOR RA light and field regiments. They became known as Cracker 1 to 13 – covering September 1971 to April 1975. Each Cracker formed up at Larkhill. They were retrained on 25-pdrs and the old-fashioned artillery board in degrees and yards. The incoming Cracker flew in from Cyprus and the outgoing flew out that day on the same aircraft – not much time for a handover. There were language issues but the gun drills and fire orders were in English, so the response fire was not affected. Just as the UK element changed every three months, so did the detachments of OA gunners, which meant a lot of turbulence. In many ways this was not an issue because each succeeding Cracker improved the drills and procedures with the RAF as well as developing the relationships with the OA personnel. However, three months in a static position was probably the maximum period.

It was the early Crackers (1 to 5) in 1971-72 which experienced the most hostile attacks. There were about thirty attacks between April and December 1972. One attack of four shells hit the Officers' Mess area causing a number of casualties – some serious, some not. (Capt Pete Starling, in the audience: 'I was in the FST – Yes, a total of 16 were injured, two seriously with the loss of both legs').

Cracker 6 (December 1972 to March 1973) continued to experience RCL attacks, but there was a significant increase in the threat with adoo firing Katyusha rockets at the airfield. These had a range of about 10km and therefore the weapon teams could approach through the tree line and target the airfield from the jebel scrub. The Cracker gun position was reinforced with an OA 5.5-inch gun to reach further into the Jebel with a heavier shell. An important change of role occurred in Cracker 7 (March to June 1973). The Katyusha shelling had become accurate and aircraft were damaged placing the air operations at risk. SAF responded with Op Diana by establishing companies on to the edge of the Jebel to deny adoo firing positions. The Cracker gun position was moved forward to the outer perimeter in direct support and the FOOs located in the forward positions. Cracker became fully integrated in SAF offensive operations.

Cracker 8 and Cracker 9 continued to support the Diana operations, which also became a patrol base for the firqats. The Katyusha threat continued against the airfield and an OA light gun battery of 75mm guns was deployed to reinforce the protection. Cracker support to SAF and the Diana operation continued with the deployment of Cracker 10 through to Cracker 12. As SAF operations on the western Jebel progressed the intensity of the threat to RAF Salalah swiftly diminished. With Cracker 13 (December 1974 to April 1975), when it was judged the threat had ceased, the Cracker story came to an end.

Cracker Training Role

Cracker had a secondary role of training OA recruits. In 1970 OA was at about battery strength but with a serious shortage of officers – particularly FOOs. The battery was committed to supporting

Dhofar operations and required to maintain a presence in Northern Oman. SAF had three battalions with a fourth being raised. It was recognised that the artillery had to be expanded rapidly to provide support to the four battalions and tasked to form a four-battery Regiment in eighteen months. Any gunner would appreciate that this was a tough task particularly in recruitment and training. OA recruits were selected from SAF Training Regiment – usually the best recruits - on completion of their basic training and sent to the OA training troop at Rostaq in Northern Oman. At Rostaq they were trained to a basic standard to earn their white lanyard. The white lanyard was regarded as the symbol of excellence and when it was awarded to the recruit, usually by one of the infantry COs, it was customary to place it on the recruits shoulder. All qualifications and ranks were awarded this way – establishing the loyalty between the individual and his superior. The Oman Artillery was formally visited by Sultan Qaboos when he took a white lanyard parade (Figs 34 and 35) – it was one of his first public engagements in Oman. It was a great boost for all our young Omanis, including our first Omani officer commanding the parade.

The gunners, which included gun detachments and technical staff, were transferred by transport aircraft, probably the first flight in their lives, to Salalah and attached to Cracker Battery. They manned the guns and command post in action and the UK element trained them in ten weeks to Gunner Standard Three. Considering the language problems and that the Omani had not been to school and had little education it was remarkable that the British and Omanis achieved so much together. On completion of their tour with Cracker Battery in Salalah the Omanis were then sent to reinforce the OA batteries in action on the Jebel.

There were amusing aspects. During gun drill in Rostaq they would pretend to load and fire and when ordered to load in Salalah in response to RCL incomers they did exactly the same. The first rounds they fired were in action. In one white lanyard parade an Omani on being presented his lanyard took it off and threw it on the ground at the feet of the Senior Officer taking the parade. It transpired later that he did not consider he had earned it as he knew he had made a mistake during the gun drill demonstration (Fig 36).

A Success Story

Three final points:

First - the Cracker concept was a most valuable contribution to the defence of the Salalah airfield. If flying operations had been curtailed and the airfield had become unusable then the war may well have taken a difficult course.

Second - it was a welcome experience for the RA personnel who benefited from the operational conditions, otherwise they would have been in Northern Ireland or BAOR. Some volunteered to do subsequent tours and others applied to join the Oman Artillery.

Third - some three hundred RA officers and men had been detached from their Regiments. The blend of the British officers and men and the young Omani gunners was a great success. Friendships were fostered and the British elements left Oman with a respect and admiration for the Omani people.

Brig Timbers

Hugh, will you take the odd question? We have time to take just one or two if we may.

Questions

Lt Col Gourd: What was the origin of the title Cracker Battery?

Speaker: Bearing in mind that the original purpose of the RA detachment had been the location of enemy mortar firing points - Green Archer was one of the first equipments to be deployed – this was normally the province of artillery intelligence, so the name came from the standard appointment title for Artillery Intelligence – Cracker.

Maj Kirkham: Hugh was talking about the close cooperation on operations between infantry, gunners, air and on occasions, Navy. Can I just say why I personally on the ground found it so easy? As an FOO, not only could I talk to my commander I could talk to the helicopter pilot, I could talk to the Strikemaster pilot, I could talk to Skyvan pilots and on occasions when it happened, I could actually talk to the Navy. That was as an FOO on the ground. One other thing, which encapsulates the attitude of the Omani soldier: when I was at Rostag, minor transgressions were punished by banning the soldiers from going on guard.

Capt Pete Starling: I just wanted to mention bit more about the close cooperation if I could. I was a member of the Field Surgical Team between April and August 1972, which, as has been said, was a very busy time, but it is perhaps morbid curiosity among the gunners - they wanted to spend all their free time in the surgical team, which actually proved very helpful to us, especially on 9 June when they hit the Officers' Mess, and after Mirbat when we couldn't actually have managed if they hadn't. So the gunners that were not on duty at the Battery were coming in and picking up swabs, washing instruments, and in return we would go down and fire the 25-pdrs. The Battery did cause a bit of a problem because they had a bad tetanus case which happened just as the team I was on was coming out in the first week of August. So of course every time you were firing HF we needed to know so we could be there to hold this poor chap down because for people with tetanus any sort of sudden noise causes a big problem, but we found there was good liaison between Cracker and the surgical team in that period.

Lt Col Gray: Can I bring things right up-to-date, because of the relevance to what's going on in the Afghan operation and there are lots of them and they come out particularly as a joint firing operation and the CO 19 Regiment is working hard to prepare his people to go through that. But your first point, about that sergeant major that climbed off the aircraft, there is a man just like that about to turn up in Afghanistan to teach them how to fire D30s – the Russian gun. So, we are still doing that and that's still going on.

Keith Brigstock: Can I ask about the locating aspects? You said there was a sound ranging base and Green Archer deployed. Where did the manpower come from?

Speaker: The majority came from 22 Battery and 94 Locating Regiment. They were on temporary duty as an ERE commitment. Their deployment was very successful.

(After note). The locating elements, unlike Cracker Battery, were normal units detached from 22 Locating Battery and 94 Locating Regiment. Their presence in RAF Salalah was not published in the public domain. The Sound Ranging Base (SRB) was particularly effective in locating the Katyusha firing positions. Towards the end of the war in 1975 a SRB was deployed on the Jebel in the SAF position overlooking the Yemen border. This position was subject to regular shelling but the war finished before the SRB had time to be effective – the mountainous country was more difficult than the Salalah Plain.

Maj Peter Moss: What was the tour length of the seconded officers and what proportions were they to those in Cracker?

Speaker: Seconded officers were on two to three-year tours including language training. In early 1970s Oman Artillery had less British officers than Cracker, although we were deploying two to three batteries in action supporting three battalions plus. One British Officer would be on the guns and the other with the infantry CO coordinating the mortar, guns and jets. The demand for FOOs and shortage was so severe that on occasions an FOO would commute from one battalion/SAS operation to another. The FOOs were vulnerable just as they are in Afghanistan. I had two injured FOOs and OP signallers out of battle during the busy 1971 post-monsoon offensive. The situation improved from 1973 as more seconded and contract officers were recruited.

(After note) There were two gunners seconded in the infantry role and one was a contract helicopter pilot – they were a valuable bonus. Also the OA conducted pre-deployment training in fire observation with each battalion before operational deployment. The SAS attended fire and observation courses and 25-pdr training at Larkhill before deployment to Dhofar. The aim was to get the infantry/SAS to engage targets direct. This was successful as long as the OP used the correct English fire orders - the Baluchi and Omani gunner signallers did not speak English – they only recognised the correct fire order. Target descriptions were never sent as they would not be understood. It was in the interest of the infantry OP to get it right first time.

Maj Schuster-Bruce: You mentioned the Jordan School of Artillery. Can you tell us a bit about the training of Omanis for the NCOs and Numbers 1.

Speaker: The Jordanian Artillery was very supportive of OA and tailored a package of courses to meet our requirements. The Omanis had very little, if any, formal education so the courses had to be very basic but importantly the instruction was in Arabic. NCO selection and training was a very interesting exercise - the existing OA battery provided a few NCOs to the three new batteries but otherwise they were virtually all gunners about sixteen to twenty years old. The process for selecting them for promotion was a sort of natural selection. The training troop put six to eight recruits on a gun and the best man became the Number 1 and a man who was good at fiddly thing became the Number 3. On pass out they would probably be promoted to the equivalent of a Lance Bombardier (we used Arabic ranks). We had to fast track all the potential quality to provide a reasonable NCO structure for the new batteries deploying in action.

(After note) Jordan also sent officers to assist the OA Training Troop but we were not allowed to use them in action. Saudi Arabia sent an artillery Colonel!

Brigadier Timbers thanked Colonel Colley and Major Hardy for their presentation which had clearly generated a great deal of interest, not least among the serving Regiment who could see the very obvious parallels with current events in Afghanistan.

The Meeting finished at 12.35 pm and the members moved to the RA Mess for lunch.

(Fig 37)

Illustrations:

Fig 1	Map 1 - SE Arabia
Fig 2	Map 2 – Dhofar
Fig 3	The Adoo
Fig 4	Grassland
Fig 5	The Jebel
Fig 6	Wadis
Fig 7	Gun Sangar
Fig 8	Gun layer training, on operations
Fig 9	Protected ammunition storage
Fig 10	Difficult country for lateral movement
Fig 11	Smoke break
Fig 12	The Khareef
Fig 13	Steep wadi country
Fig 14	O Group at a Command Post
Fig 15	Skyvan landing at Simba
Fig 16	Gun position supporting operations
Fig 17	4.2-inch mortar in action
Fig 18	Resupply over the beach
Fig 19	A dhow of the SAF Navy
Fig 20	Salalah
Fig 21	Camp at Raysut
Fig 22	Terrain on the Plain
Fig 23	Gun forward on an HF task
Fig 24	Mobile CP
Fig 25	Frankincense trees
Fig 26	Helicopter operations
Fig 27	Loading a 75mm how into a helicopter
Fig 28	Ex US 75 mm how
Fig 29	Indian 75 mm how
Fig 30	Practising for helicopter operations
Fig 31	Mirbat
Fig 32	RCL
Fig 33	Hedgehog
Fig 34	The Sultan taking a pass-out parade
Fig 35	Royal Salute for the Sultan
Fig 36	Gun drill
Fig 37	5.5-inch