

Strategic bombing — Hunter style

In the mid-1970s, active service for RAF personnel was hard to come by, but for a small number of adventurers there was always the Sultan of Oman's Air Force. Dissidents were continually trying to overthrow the Sultan of this modest Middle Eastern country and the SOAF regularly found itself involved in attack operations to discourage such moves. Against the current background of war in the Yemen, John Clementson recounts the story of the Hawker Hunter in Omani service and of its secret strategic use against the Yemen in 1975.



Below: A strangely-deserted perimeter fort at Thumrait being overflowed by a No 6 Sqn Hunter FGA.73 of the Sultan of Oman's Air Force in 1986. (Photo via author).

ON SUNDAY, August 1, 1993, the Hawker Hunter of No 6 Squadron Royal Air Force of Oman flew for the last time. For 18 years and four months the RAFO Hunters operated from RAFO Thumrait, the Forward Strike Base in the Nejd desert in Dhofar in the south of the country, and not surprisingly their record in the Sultan's Air Force has been exemplary.

The Hunters arrived at Thumrait in March 1975, a gift from King Hussein of Jordan, at a time when the country was in the midst of a bitter ten year war in Dhofar Province in the south of the country. The enemy was a determined Marxist insurgency backed by the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), by the then Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

By 1975, the basic Hunter airframe and engine were beginning to give way to later, more modern, aircraft but the type remained Britain's most successful post-war fighters. Some 2000 were built and even today, the type still survives in service in the Swiss and Chilean air forces, over 40 years after the prototype's first flight on July 20, 1951.

Flying at over 700 kts with a range of nearly 500 miles with two 230-gal drop-tanks, RAFO Hunters at first mounted four 30 mm Aden cannon and carried two 1,000 lb bombs or 18 Sura rockets. For RAFO (then called the Sultan of Oman's Air Force or SOAF), the Hunter represented a big step forward in capability, particularly in Fighter Ground-Attack (FGA); the BAC Strikemaster was previ-

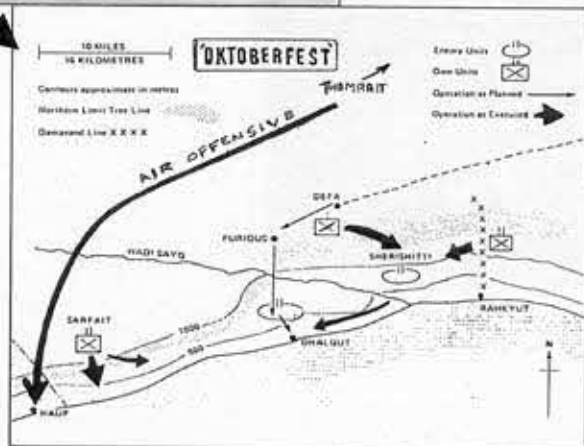




Above: Classic lines of the Hunter — marred only by the two AIM-9P Sidewinders and drop tanks — shown to effect in this view of an aircraft over a barren landscape. (Photo, Rolls-Royce). Inset: Badge of No 6 Sqn, RAFO.



Left: Map of Oman showing the main air bases and below, a sketch-map of the 1975 'Oktoberfest' offensive against guerrilla targets across the border in Yemen.



ously the Air Force's main combat type.

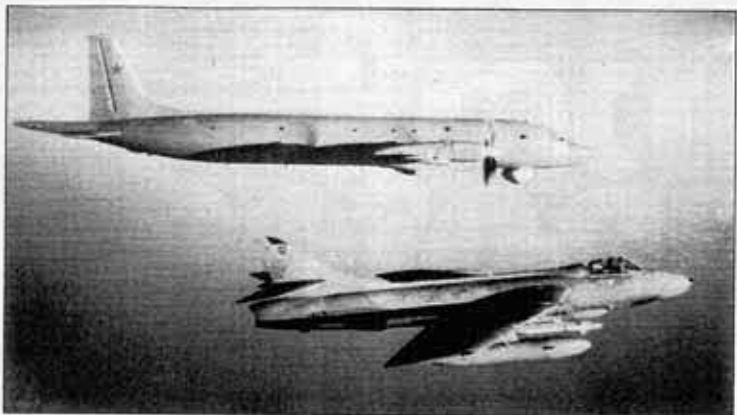
There were 31 Hunters in total, most built at Kingston, Blackpool, Coventry or Amsterdam in the late-1950s as Mark 6s with a few Mark 4s. Three of them were T.66B two-seat trainers, six were F.6s, two were FR.10s and the remainder were FGA.73s. The last arrived on April 26, 1975. (In 1980, two additional T.67s were acquired from Kuwait.)

The Airwork contract engineers managed to put 16 of them in the air inside six months, with about nine becoming combat-ready. No 6 Sqn formed in June 1975 with five Hunters and seven pilots and commanded by a squadron leader seconded from the RAF. Two of the pilots were Royal Jordanian Air Force volunteers and the rest were either RAF Loan Service or British and Commonwealth Contract Officers. Today, nearly all are Omanis under an Omani Wing Commander. From the outset, 'Six' became in many ways (they would claim in all ways!) RAFO's premier fighter squadron, famously blooded in war and efficiently engaged in peacetime military operations.

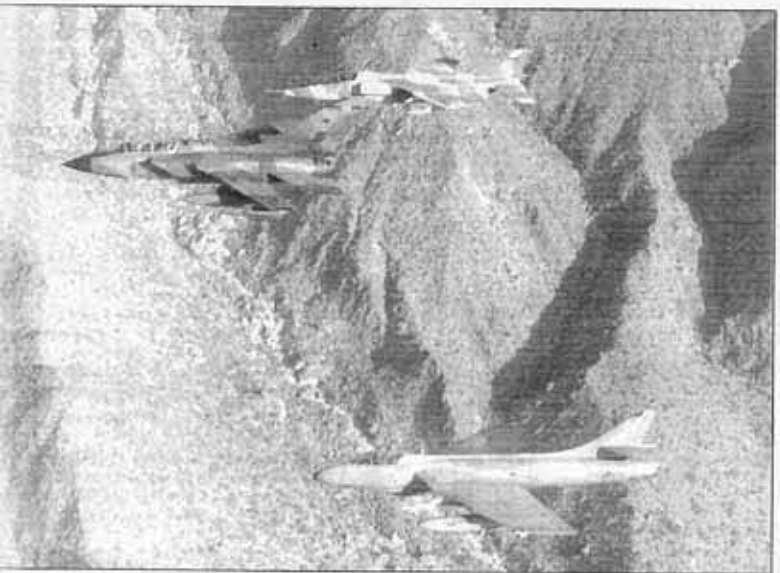
Initial sorties

For the first few weeks, the pilots conducted intensive training on their Hunters, impatiently sweating on their call to active duty. It came on September 3, 1975, with an Air Defence call to scramble and intercept two intruder aircraft reported approaching the Omani Coast over the sea south-west of Salah. They turned out to be Bell Huey helicopters of the Imperial Iranian Air Force (allies of Oman in the war) on their way to their inland base at Manston (now Aydim). Something of an anticlimax, but later scrambles — and there were to be many — did not end quite so peacefully.

Gradually, more Hunters were declared airworthy and then battle-worthy. They began to put in some operational close air support sorties in response to requests from troops of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) against guerrillas on the Jebel.



Above: A setting sun casts long shadows down the fuselage of a Soviet Naval Il-38 May being escorted away from the Omani coast by Hunter No 849 in 1986. Below: A more friendly formation was flown in early-1984 when 27 Sqn RAF visited the Sultanate and conducted joint exercises with its Tornado GR.1s and SOAF Jaguars of 8 Sqn and the Hunters of 6 Sqn.



Below: Following their withdrawal from RAFO service in August 1993, the surviving Hunters were distributed around the bases as 'gate guards' and ground instructional airframes. No 841 is now in the Sultan's Armed Forces Museum at Bait Al-Falaj, near Muscat. (Photo, author).



These Army-support missions often began with a garbled radio cry for help from an Omani NCO Forward Air Controller (FAC) with a hard-pressed SAF infantry patrol, ambushed and pinned down somewhere on the Jebel. As the scramble-bell clanged in the Thumrait crew-room, two pilots on Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) jumped into Land Rovers and raced to the dispersal area. Each Hunter had an Airwork mechanic waiting on the wings as the pilots struggled into their cockpits and strapped in. Well inside four minutes, both aircraft were airborne. In the target-area, instructions from the FAC lined up the Hunters for rocket and strafing runs against caves, rocks and clumps of bush concealing the *Adoo* ('enemy'). The guerrillas of the Peoples Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf, fighting on their own home ground against what they saw as an alien oppressor backed by an ex-colonialist power, were fearsome fighters — reckless, tenacious and resourceful. But air attack was the signal for even the bravest to forget all else except survival.

Thus far, Hunters repeated the successes of their No 1 Sqn Strikemaster predecessors who had protected SAF troops on the Jebel in similar fashion for over six years. However, for the Hunters, those Army support operations were but a prelude to the main event.

Crucial air power

The part played by the Hunter in the final stages of the SAF counter-insurgency campaign in Dhofar was crucial — some would say decisive. The PFLO guerrillas posed a formidable challenge, a rural insurgency ten years in the field (1965-1975), well-armed and consistently re-supplied from across the Yemeni Border. By 1975, support from the Yemen (formerly the British Aden Colony/East Aden Protectorate) not only consisted of headquarters buildings, training-camps, storage compounds, ammunition dumps and safe havens, but also included PDRY infantry operations inside Omani territory and artillery bombardment on SAF forward positions on the frontier.

Hunters against the Yemen

The final SAF operations of the campaign — nicknamed 'Oktoberfest' — combined efforts by land, sea and air. An obvious threat to their success was the action taken by PDRY regular forces, in particular their artillery, which bombarded the hill-top airstrip and fortifications of the encircled SAF forward positions at Sarfait. SOAF, in flying missions of reconnaissance, re-supply, casevac, and close air support, had hitherto always acted in support of the Army in tactical roles. Now, for the first time, the Air Force would be called upon to act independently against what were in effect strategic targets.

By a courageous decision made by HM Sultan Qaboos in October 1975, the Hunters were flown in a systematic campaign of cross-border raids on PDRY gun-emplacements and on PFLO targets in and around the Yemeni port of Hawf. The act was diplomatically sensitive:

apart from hitting foreign installations and risking civilian casualties, there was a possibility — albeit remote — of a retaliatory air defence effort mounted by MiG-17 *Fresco* and MiG-21 *Fishbed* fighters from Yemen airfields to the south, possibly piloted by Russian and Cuban pilots.

British pilots seconded from the RAF were officially screened from cross-border sorties and the operations remained secret for years afterwards.

The raids continued for six weeks, supported by bombardments by the Sultan's artillery batteries and subsequent operations by SAF infantry regiments, supplemented by allied Arabian diplomatic representations. The Hunter strategic air offensive — the use of independent airpower against strategic targets — demonstrated to the Yemeni people the impotence of their government to protect them and convinced the PDRY Government

that the price of its support of the PFLO could shortly prove to be disastrously high. The tactical results were not immediate: Yemeni guns were not completely silenced. However, the strategic outcome was to be spectacular: the complete withdrawal of Yemeni logistic support to the insurgents in Dhofar. Within two weeks of the final Hunter raid, the Sultan was able to declare his southern province of Dhofar as being 'safe for civil development'.

Hunters in RAFO

The Hunters have remained at Thumrait ever since. Their primary operational role has been to share with 8 and 20 Sqns equipped with Jaguars in maintaining a 24-hour stand-by QRA for close air support, air defence, and interception of intruders into Omani airspace and the Thumrait Air Defence Interception Zone (ADIZ). Their main 'trade' over the years, has been Soviet

Naval Il-38 *May* ASW patrol aircraft and these have been intercepted and escorted out of Omani airspace.

In its secondary or training role — the Hunter has proved an ideal intermediary between Basic Flying Training (on Strikemasters of No 1 Sqn of the Sultan Qaboos Air Academy at RAFO Masirah) and the front-line Jaguars.

The challenges of the new Gulf geostrategic dimensions during the war-torn 1980s were met by the RAFO Hunters most spectacularly in a series of allied exercises with the navies and air forces of the USA and UK. Repeatedly, the Hunters acquitted themselves well, their tight turning capability often succeeding in aerial interception and dissimilar air combat training (DACT), against the latest carrier-borne combat aircraft of US Navy. The 'invaders' invariably acknowledged their contribution with rueful generosity, and the RAFO Commander's expanding collection of trophies attested to the effectiveness of the RAFO contribution.

The last hurrah

It came as a surprise when, in October 1987, the venerable Hunters were called upon once again to take offensive action and fire their weapons in anger. Fittingly, the role was ground-attack. A convoy of military Toyota Landcruisers was reported as having rolled across the desert border, deployed into two fighting formations and dispersed to threaten a number of SAF Observation Posts in the Wadi Shihhan area. A Hunter pair roared off the Thumrait runway to investigate, their mission officially described at first as 'extra range practice'.

As the armoured cars actually fired on outpost sangar-positions of the Omani Western Frontier Regiment, the Hunters were cleared to attack. First passes were met with SA-7 *Grail* SAMs, but the missiles were skilfully evaded and the action developed into search-and-destroy. In a series of incidents over the next four days, this particular ground threat was totally eliminated. It was the last time the RAFO Hunters would fire their weapons on active service.

Hunter farewell

The RAFO Hunter swan-song was planned for July 1993. Starting some weeks earlier with several bombing sorties on the ranges to expend redundant bombs, and continuing with fire-power demonstrations, official fly-pasts and a round of parties, the Hunter went out not with a whimper but a bang. The final fly-past of five Hunters was quite unforgettable.

With the farewell festivities over, the nine remaining Hunters will continue in service — but (with one exception) on the ground. The exception, the veteran Hunter No 845, returns to Jordan, its earlier home, in a fitting gesture of gratitude — where it will be kept flying, in a new RJAF Museum. Some of the other aircraft will become Gate Guards for RAFO bases, or used in aircraft static displays and in airframe training. The record of the RAFO Hunters over 18 years is unique and will remain a proud memory within the Service. ♦



Above: Hawker Hunter FGA.73A No. 828 when serving with the Royal Jordanian Air Force in the early-1970s.

Omani Hunters

THE origin of the Hawker Hunters operated by the Sultan of Oman's Air Force, later Royal Air Force of Oman, dates back to 1975 when King Hussein of Jordan presented the Sultanate with his entire surviving fleet of 31 aircraft, 16 spare Avon engines and support equipment. Prior to that, the Royal Jordanian Air Force had been a Hunter user since 1958 when it received a number of ex-RAF F.6s supplemented by some more in the early-1960s. Almost all were destroyed during the Israeli attack on the RJAF at the beginning of the Six-Day War of 1967. The losses were made good by three single-seaters supplied by Saudi Arabia and orders for 18 FGA.73s, 73As and 73Bs placed with Hawkers and delivered between 1968 and 1971. By the time of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the RJAF was operating 35 single-seaters and three two-seaters. Attrition reduced the strength to 19 and to these were added 12 examples previously flown by Abu Dhabi.

Thus, the Hunters delivered to Oman were a mixture of versions from a variety of sources and only about 18 were operational at any one time, the remainder being kept in storage for spares and as attrition replacements. Aircraft reported as being supplied are as follows:

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|----------------|---|
| Hunter T.668 | — 801, 802. |
| Hunter T.67 | — 803, 804 (both ex-Kuwait AF). |
| Hunter FGA.73 | — 811, 816, 817, 825, 826, 827, 832. |
| Hunter FGA.73A | — 828, 829, 831, 840, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847. |
| Hunter FGA.73B | — 841, 850, 851. |
| Hunter FR.10 | — 853. |

Below: Hunter No 826, an FGA.73, in SOAF markings of a style adopted for a brief period in the late-1970s.

