

OMAN 1975 : THE YEAR OF DECISION

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By the end of January 1975 the long Dhofar War was well into its tenth year. Government Forces, comprising the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) and an Iranian Brigade, had recently secured important areas but at a stiff price. The enemy, the Peoples Liberation Army, controlled politically by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, (PLA and PFLO), appeared as resilient and skilful as ever, certainly still well supplied. None of us present could see the end; yet victory was only ten months away.

These final months illustrated in concise form the important lessons of counter revolutionary warfare and my purpose is to record events while they are fresh to mind. To set this period in perspective it is necessary to outline earlier events and I do this, as briefly as possible, acknowledging that I am covering in a few lines a campaign of nine years involving as demanding a variety of terrain and climate as can be found anywhere. I am not covering at all the rapid expansion of SAF, an immense task carried out by my immediate predecessor, Major General Tim Creasey, in difficult operational and administrative circumstances.

THE FIRST NINE YEARS

The war began in 1965 with a rebellion of Dhofari subjects against the backward and uncaring regime of Sultan Said bin Taimur, the ruler of the Sultanate of Oman, of which Dhofar was the somewhat forgotten Southern Province. The rebels rapidly gained control of large areas and by the time the ruler was deposed in a bloodless coup by his son Qaboos they were near to achieving their aim of a separate autonomous state.

With the advent of Sultan Qaboos, civil development was started in earnest and the oil revenues, unused by his father, were deployed to hustle the Sultanate into the twentieth century. Dhofar received its share and the original reason for rebellion vanished. However, the British had meanwhile withdrawn from the neighbouring territory of Aden which, having become the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY), adopted, in classic Marxist style, the so far successful Dhofar rebellion. Inspired and supported alternatively by Russia and China, PDY developed the provincial separatist movement into a war against the Sultanate with the aim of toppling Qaboos, a strategy which if successful would have given the Communists control of the Straits of Hormuz and thus control also of the oil supply to Western economies.



To meet this new threat Sultan Qaboos, assisted and advised by the United Kingdom, expanded and modernised his small Armed Forces so that within three years SAF grew into a well equipped, well balanced force of two large Brigades, an air force of some 80 aircraft and a small navy capable of controlling territorial waters. About half of this was involved in Dhofar, the remainder were in North Oman, resting, recruiting and retraining, or in supporting roles. Dhofar Brigade, eventually based on five battalions with appropriate supporting arms and services, was responsible for the conduct of all operations except in the comparatively small area allotted subsequently to the Iranian Brigade.

The battle ground, Dhofar, is a province the size of Wales. Its mountains rise sharply from the sea except for some 50 miles of coastline where the Salalah plain extends up to six miles inland. The mountainous area (called the Jebel) is wooded, thinly in the East where there is a great deal of cattle grazing, and very thickly in the West where the mountains are more rugged and visibility and going are difficult. Further inland the vegetation ceases abruptly and the mountains descend to a flat sandy plain, the Negd. When operations started there was but a single coastal dirt road, Salalah to Mirbat, and a jeep track through the Jebel to Thumrait. Annually during the monsoon season June to September clouds roll in from the Indian Ocean and, blanketing the Jebel, bring considerable rain. Due to the varying height of the ground the clouds extend no more than a mile or two inland at Sarfait in the West but up to about fifteen miles in the East inland from Tarqa. The wooded and grazing lands correspond to the area affected by the monsoon and are the areas which support life and provide cover for military activities. They thus became the areas of most operational importance.

The strategy adopted by the Sultanate was based on winning the confidence of the population, the military aim being "to secure Dhofar for Civil Development". It would have been neither possible nor desirable to attempt resettlement of the nomadic hill people accustomed for centuries to constant movement in search of grazing and water, yet for development there needed to be a pattern of government activity and centres of contact with the population. To this end military successes were followed immediately by access tracks and well drilling equipment. The wells became centres of gravity for the population and were consolidated as Government centres by the construction of clinics, schools and Government shops.

A further essential step was the interruption of enemy supplies which were dispatched regularly from PDRY by animal train and routed through the Jebel. A significant step was taken in 1972 with the construction of a 35 mile wire and mine obstacle, called the Hornbeam Line, across the enemy supply routes into Central and Eastern Dhofar. It was a bold imaginative step absorbing as it did a great deal of already scarce engineer effort in an obstacle which could not be an absolute barrier as there would never be enough troops to cover every yard by observed fire. Parties of men managed on occasions to get through but, being a barrier to animal trains, it soon had a significant effect upon morale and capability to the East. The enemy suffered crippling shortages of supplies and



the restriction on movement seriously hampered the provision of reinforcements and evacuation of wounded.

In an attempt to throttle enemy supplies near source a battalion had been established in 1972 at Sarfait (sometimes called Simba). However, the nature of the ground, a series of sheer scarps stopping down some 4000 feet to the sea, and the enemy strength, thwarted this intention. The battalion remained beleaguered and dependent upon air resupply but it distracted a good deal of enemy attention and, as subsequent events unfolded, was essential in the final operations which led to the sudden collapse of the enemy.

At the height of the war the enemy mastered some 2000 hard core guerillas and 3000 militia, the latter operating part time and being virtually indistinguishable from civilians. Military pressure from the expanding government forces and civil development produced a steady stream of defectors, who after 1972, were usually enlisted into the Firqa, a force based on tribal divisions which, acting as a Home Guard, provided assistance to the regular forces. Training and administering the Firqa was undertaken by the Special Air Service as part of British assistance. Their role in Dhofar has frequently been misrepresented. A few dedicated men, besides providing a framework within which the indigenous population could protect themselves, acted in the vanguard of civil development, bringing modern medicine to the Jebel for the first time. They were not, as sometimes maliciously portrayed, ruthless killers although their military excellence in self defence was a prerequisite to survival in a harsh and hostile environment.

In 1973 the Shah of Persia, mindful of the Communist threat to the Gulf, sent a well equipped battalion task force which opened the track Salalah to Thumrait permitting its development into a black top road. In 1974 this force was increased to a brigade group complete with ample helicopter support, giving the Sultanate sufficient strength to move into a highly geared offensive. It was decided to establish a second obstacle, similar in nature and intention to the Hornbeam Line, running inland from about half way between the Hornbeam Line and the PDRY border. In this area the tree line was closer to the coast and the enemy supply lines were forced into a more confined area. Therefore the obstacle could be shorter and more effective. In a period of intensive operations during December and January the Iranian Brigade, assisted by SAF, fought their way South to the coast and established a series of strong positions on which the Damavand Line was subsequently based. Iranian support undoubtedly tipped the scales; without it the war would have dragged into a stalemate as SAF alone had insufficient troops to achieve a clear decision.

It was estimated that there were now some 850 hard core guerillas remaining within Dhofar, 250 being East of the Hornbeam Line. They seemed far from finished being still as skilful and determined as any guerillas anywhere. To make the Damavand Line effective would take a great deal of work in very difficult country and the enemy were unlikely to sit supinely by.



The Western area contained the main enemy stores areas in Dhofar and was regarded by him as home ground for which he would undoubtedly fight yard by yard. The end of the war was not yet in sight.

### THE YEAR OF DECISION

Dhofar Brigade was now deployed with its centre of gravity in the Central and Eastern areas. Stretched across the Jebel from the Hornbeam Line to Mirbat were three battalions, supplemented by a reserve battalion and well supported by armoured cars and artillery. Away to the West, holding the border positions, were a battalion with artillery at Sarfait and a company of Oman Gendarmerie with armoured cars covering Habrut and Makinat Shihan. The Iranian Brigade of two battalions with artillery were centred on some dominating features between Rakhyut and the edge of the tree line some eight miles inland. In theory the way ahead was clear: create a completely effective obstacle along the Damavand Line, defeat the enemy to the East of this and then clear him out of the West. Military history as written by the participants has usually been at pains to illustrate how closely the grand design was translated into action but in Dhofar the design was unfolded somewhat more empirically. In war one does what one can!

To begin with there was a shortage of barbed wire for the Damavand Line. Indian sources were already behind on a large consignment ordered for another purpose. The entire British war reserve, had it been available for purchase, was said to be insufficient. There was then the question of the form of the obstacle. To my engineers it seemed simple: on the enemy side a triple concertina fence windlassed between angle irons and booby trapped, then a mine field and finally on the home side a simple fence to keep out cattle and humans. Yet there were exasperating discussions and I had to visit Teheran to get work started. However once our allies had begun they spared no effort, bulldozing miles of rock and bush, driving half a million angle irons, and placing thousands of mines and booby traps. The enemy soon recognised the significance of this activity but although he subjected the engineers to a great deal of artillery and mortar fire and caused a considerable number of casualties (including my ADC, Captain Hassan Ehsan, during a visit to the work) he failed to prevent the obstacle being completed in good time. The Iranians had scored a notable victory.

Meanwhile Brigadier John Akehurst, the Commander of Dhofar Brigade, had lost no time in returning to the offensive. The Headquarters and elements of the enemy 9th June Regiment (1) had settled in the Wadi Ashoq, a deep winding ravine in the mountainous country between the Hornbeam and Damavand Lines. In the last week of February two battalions, directed with panache, routed the enemy and destroyed the Headquarters, in the process refurbishing morale which had become a little frayed during the January fighting.

(1) Named after the anniversary of the Dhofar Rebellion.



It was necessary first to secure the important heights above the wadi and the picqueting alone might well have absorbed a brigade. However, by good appreciation of the effects of convex and concave slopes and the skilful use of helicopters, the Frontier Force plus companies from Desert Regiment, Jebel Regiment and the Southern Regiment cleared both the heights and the wadi. The former, consisting of limestone rocks scoured by centuries of wind into natural weapon emplacements, could have been designed for defence and were finally secured only after a couple of well coordinated set piece attacks involving all arms and fighter ground attack in support of well led infantry. The country was open with barely a vestige of cover and the series of actions demonstrated tactical lessons available only through experience. Reading the battle, deciding when to withdraw from exposed positions to avoid covering fire and when to reoccupy to meet the counter attack were instinctive actions for Major Kuda Bux, a bearded piratical company commander in the Frontier Force who had never been to a cadet school of any sort ( or probably any other sort of school!)

To prevent the enemy reinforcing the Wadi Ashoq I ordered the Iranian Brigade to secure ~~the~~<sup>a</sup> feature Northeast of Rakhyut, an action which I judged would pin down any available reinforcements. This episode illustrated the sensitivity which pervades allied operations. The Iranians had suffered more heavily than SAF during the December and January fighting and were still suffering more heavily in the course of constructing the Damavand Line; predictably they were hesitant. However, after a delay of 24 hours half a battalion were lifted by helicopter to the objective, or at least so I imagined. To show willing and to foster good relations I followed immediately and accompanied by an unhappy looking brigade commander, unhappy perhaps because my Chief of Staff, Colonel Stuart Green, had told him that I was driving, we flew low over the objective. The pilot, John Heathcote a seconded pilot subsequently killed in action, climbed sharply away when we spotted advancing infantry still some two miles distant. I landed to spur on the troops but the objective was not taken and, although the operation was almost certainly responsible for the lack of enemy reinforcement of the Wadi Ashoq, the additional Iranian casualties led to somewhat strained atmosphere for a few days. The Iranians were nothing if not courageous but on this occasion I obviously failed to convince them that others were also being as brave.

In the East and Centre, the 1st Brigade continued to hunt the enemy in an area where the civil population were still largely apathetic. There had been civil aid in plenty but no civil development. To avoid any blurring of this vital issue John Akhurst and I differentiated clearly on all occasions between aid and development.

