

MEDIC INA SECRET WAR



In 1972 British assistance to Oman included a large SAS contingent and pilots for the Sultan's air force. This was supposedly secret, but the rebels attacked the base at Salalah and all was revealed. One of the British medics describes a tour of duty in this secret desert war.

Above: A battle casualty undergoes surgery in the operating theatre established on the north side of Salalah airfield. In the oppressive heat the operating team wore the bare minimum of clothing.

“You, young fella, are off to RAF Salalah in April”.

That was how I was greeted one morning in early 1972. There were two questions that troubled me: where was RAF Salalah, and why was I, a Brown Job, being posted to the Blue Jobs? After all, I was quite happy, enjoying life in a military hospital in West Germany.

It was not long before both of the questions were answered, but in those early days of the war in Oman information was scarce: it was still a 'secret war'.

Operation Storm, to give the British involvement its official name, has been well documented, especially in the books covering the SAS involvement. Wherever British troops are involved in

any numbers, medical support is provided, to which end I found myself flying out as a member of 55 Field Surgical Team in support of the British Army Training Team. The flight out via Cyprus and Masirah Island was preceded by a week in Aldershot being issued with the usual mounds of ill-fitting kit, drawing weapons, and being used as a pin-cushion.

Home at Salalah

As the Andover circled over the coast of Dhofar on its final for landing at RAF Salalah, we got our first glimpse of what was to be our home for four months. The aircraft touched down, and as the back

ramp came open the heat hit us. All we could see was barbed wire stretching for what seemed miles, watch towers, and every building surrounded by sandbags and burmoils (oil drums filled with water or rocks) as protection against shell fire.

The outgoing Team greeted us with two pieces of information. Firstly, if the siren sounded we were to get under cover, because it meant that we were about to receive incoming mortar or shell fire; and secondly, they were leaving on the aircraft on which we had just arrived. Not much of a handover.

One thing they failed to tell us we discovered for ourselves the next week, much to our embarrassment. We were seated in the Junior Ranks Club having a

cold drink when suddenly the wail of the siren pierced the morning quiet. Glasses and chairs flew as we dived for cover. But everybody else stayed where they were as we, the "whities from Blighty", cowered as we waited for the crump of incoming shells. Did we not know the siren was tested at this time every week? With red faces, we picked up the chairs and cleaned up broken glasses and spilt orange juice.

The Field Surgical Team was located under canvas, next to the Station Medical Centre, on the north side of the airfield right behind the wire facing the *jebel* (the mountainous desert). Just so that we did not get lonely, the fields guns were located right near us, and they were one of the targets every time the enemy fired at the airfield! That really cheered us up. The tents themselves were well protected, but a bit old and looked as if



Above: The operating tent did not inspire confidence at first, but it did stay up. Plans were afoot to replace it with an aluminium hut but the casualties from the attack on Salalah were treated under canvas.

they would fall down at any moment. Plans were afoot to build aluminium huts for the operating theatre and ward within the next few months.

Life over the next few weeks was a steady stream of battle casualties intermingled with civilians whom we treated on a hearts-and-minds basis, time off to swim in the pool on the airfield, and the occasional alarm at night while we watched films in an open-air cinema. MASH was shown just as we arrived, so we were immediately renamed and that became our radio call-sign.

Old sweats

The 8 June 1972 saw us just over half-way through our tour. We were no longer whities from Blighty; we were old hands, and now on the downhill stretch towards the end of our tour. Or so we thought. The day had been relatively quiet and we had spent the afternoon swimming. An alarm at 1800 did not have any great significance to us; except that it was slightly earlier than we were used to. No rounds actually landed on the airfield.

Just after that, we received a message that an aircraft was bringing to us an old *Jeball* with a shrapnel wound to his leg. We met the Beaver at about 19.30 and took him straight into the operating theatre and began to explore his knee joint. I was scrubbed opposite the surgeon, a large Irishman with a character to match. We were debating what to do. Could we save this joint, which was quite extensively damaged, or would it be



Above: 55 Field Surgical Team's first customer one morning in 1972. This Omani soldier lost a foot to an anti-personnel mine in the mountains that towered over the airstrip. He was casevaced by helicopter and flown to Salalah.

Medic in a Secret War

better to take off the leg and get an artificial one made?

The decision was taken out of our hands. Two large explosions filled the air, followed by shrapnel raining down on the roof of our new aluminium hut. This was followed by the siren (we thought it was meant to give us prior warning of attacks after picking up the rounds on the locating radar). The door of the FST flew open and our male nurse shouted for us to get down on the floor: we were under attack. When you have a patient on the operating table with his knee joint laid open to the world, you can hardly leave him to protect your own skin. Our surgeon's words are as clear now as they were then: "This f... ing leg is coming right off", and it did, in the shortest time I have ever seen an amputation done!

By now, small-arms fire had joined the sound of our own guns replying and sending rounds towards the *Jebel*. The Officers' Mess had taken direct hits, and nine casualties were being carried into the surgical team. We began a long night of exploring all the wounds and trying to clean up the injuries, interrupted by another five attacks on the airfield. We were lucky that no-one had been killed.

BATT out of hell

As a result of this incident the British presence in Oman came into the public eye. Someone had talked about it and the newspapers got hold of it, and reporters began to arrive to try to find out about the "secret war". My mother sent me a newspaper cutting about the attack, saying she hoped that it was nowhere near us. I hadn't the heart to tell her it was just a few yards away.

The end of our tour was in sight. The latest news was that we would hand over on 31 July and stage via Cyprus. It was 19 July: that gave us 12 days.

We were roused early and told to get down to the airfield as quickly as possible. There had been an attack at Mirbat, a town up the coast, and a big battle was raging. One of the Strikemasters that had flown up there to give some support had



Above: The surgical team's oil drums are filled with sand, offering protection against small-arms fire and shrapnel.

received ground fire which had damaged its hydraulics, and it was expected to make a forced landing. Luckily it got down without any problems, but while down on the airfield we noticed a large group of SAS loading into the Sultan's helicopters. We did not realise the significance of this until later in the day.

Sketchy information began to come in. A large enemy force about 250 strong had attacked Mirbat, where a nine-man SAS civil action team, the Dhofar Gendarmerie and the Omani Artillery were located. There were wounded, but the helicopters could not get in to evacuate them due to ground fire. The SAS we saw loading up were being flown up to help fight off this concerted attack.

It was lunchtime before the Hueys were able to get in and our first casualties began to arrive. Some of them were members of the SAS Team. More Hueys followed, and the numbers of wounded began to mount. The less seriously wounded were sent up to the Omani camp a few miles away, and we began to sort and prioritise the more seriously

Below: Enemy dead await removal to the town. The field surgery did not only deal with battle casualties; local tribespeople were treated too as part of the 'hearts and minds' effort.



wounded. Frantic signals were sent to Masira and Cyprus for extra help and supplies, and an offer of help from a group of SAS medics was gratefully accepted.

The wounds were many and varied: abdomens, chests, head wounds, many limbs, and even an enemy soldier shot along the length of his penis. Don't ask me how. The enemy dead were taken into the town for display, and we began 30 hours of operating.

Gallows humour

One of the enemy was believed to be a political commissar and had been shot in the leg, which fractured his femur. He was adamant that the battle was a great victory for the Adoo, as the enemy were called, and would not believe that it was the other way around. We set to work. We did not have the sophisticated traction apparatus that one would normally use in a fracture of this kind, so we sent for the camp carpenter, who turned up with some wood and his tools and we began to construct a form of frame above the bed.

As we progressed, the patient's mood seemed to change and he began to tremble. We called our interpreter, who told us that he was frightened because he thought he was about to be hung and the traction frame we were constructing was the gallows!

We finished operating on the casualties in the evening of the next day and then slept the sleep of the dead until the following lunchtime, by which time an aircraft had arrived from England to evacuate the wounded SAS members.

The last few days of the tour were a bit of an anti-climax. We carried on treating the wounded who needed follow-up operations, and the morning of 31 July saw us on the airfield, straining our ears for the sound of the approaching aircraft carrying our relief team. As it landed and they disembarked, they were met by our eager faces. Did people really have skin as white as that? Our handover was quick; after all, we were leaving on the same aircraft. As we lifted off, we thought back over the last four months and wondered what it would be like for the new team. Oh blimey, we forgot to tell them about the testing of the siren. ...