

## An Operational Tour - A worm's eye view

51 FST, Salalah, Dhofar Province, Oman 1971.

told to remove all Marks & Spencer labels from our underwear - honest! (that went down even worse). Oman Arab It was a dark and stormy night and in the distance an owl hooted.... I always wanted to write that - but I digress.

It was in fact a fine March afternoon in the techs bunk at the CMH. Sgt Andy Jeppson, myself (LCpl) and Pte Dave Armour were in the middle of our stint as the 22 Field Hospital, Strat Reserve, Field Surgical Team. Our action to date had been getting cold and wet on exercise at Tweseldown and other godforsaken training areas of Aldershot.

Today would be different - we were called to a meeting.... well standing around a trolley in the theatre corridor to be precise. Our leader, Lt Col Thompson (surgeon) with map in hand, announce to one and all, all now included Lt Col Dennis Fitzpatrick (gasman) and WO2 Tom Grant (SRN/theatre), that 51 FST personnel were to be deployed to Salalah.

“Where?” “Salalah, an RAF station in the Province of Dhofar in the Sultanate of Oman”...”Where is that exactly Col?” Finger points...hence the map (preparation and planning and all that).

Why? Special Forces were undertaking operations in Dhofar against the rebels who wished to overthrow Sultan Qaboos (he came to power in 1970), they didn't as he is still in power to this day. As RAF Muharraq in Bahrain and Sharjah (stop over on the way to the far east) were earmarked for closure (allegedly) the chain of evacuation to Cyprus was too long therefore an FST was to be deploy.....oh great! Us.

It would be four-month deployment and all over by middle of the year.... we have all heard of mission creep, we ceased sending FSTs around 1975/6 time.

Now if you are told you are going on Exercise then you know that Ex = playing soldiers for a while then going home. When you are told you are going on an Operation then Op = Oooops I could get hurt and will be away for some time. In this case it was Operation Storm (1971 – 77) although we didn't know that at the time.

Why support Oman? The UK required a gateway to the far east so wanted the use of the Omani island of Masirah so had agreed to supply RAF pilots for their fledgling air force (Jet Provosts), that in turn required UK support staff: ground crew/firemen/sigs/medics/gunners/engineers - the list goes on.

My father had served in Salalah for a period of time during WW2. He said it was a beautiful part of the country and the breadbasket of the Middle East during the war. It was also the source

of Frankincense and Myrrh - the scented gum and resin from the Boswellia and Commiphora myrrha trees - gifts given to baby Jesus on his birthday - today it would be a laptop or iPad.

Feuding had been going on for centuries in this part of the world, Sultan Qaboos (the good guy) overthrew his tyrannical father Said bin Taimur (the bad guy) and shipped him off to live in exile in the Dorchester Hotel in London. The bad guys (Adoo) were in the hills (Jebal) causing as much mayhem as possible. Qaboos (a Sandhurst graduate) wanted to bring the country into the 20<sup>th</sup> century hence dumping his dad - I digress again.

And so, it came to pass, that we were duly told to get our kit sorted, report to Ash Ranges for weapon familiarization, move up to 22 Fld to sort kit, brief the wife/family that we were going on an operational tour in a few days' time (yes that quick) but couldn't say where to (that went down well) and to make matters worse, M&S Jewish.....you could see where they were going with this eh?

We were subsequently joined by Cpl's Steve Strange and 'Jock' Inglis (SRNs), Pte Bob Booth (Clk) [later my life saver], Cpl Dave Gault (Lab) and Captain John Foxley (MO). We were later joined by a Sgt [? Name] (Rad). Of we went with a spring in our step to Ash to play with guns and stuff. One who shall remain nameless turned up at the ranges in whites (don't ask) .... the same person also managed to scatter the crowd when he turned around and with weapon pointing 'up' the range, announce to one all that his 'gun' wasn't working...this was going to be an exciting tour!

On 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971, we the 'Dogs of War' were about to be unleashed upon an unsuspecting enemy. Getting carried away again.

The kit had gone on ahead to Brize Norton and we followed on. Like most Ops it was hurry up and wait. Darkness had fallen when we were woken from our slumber (laid back Dave as we will see could 'relax anywhere). Our leader announced that the RAF were not allowing the weapon bundle on to the aircraft as we didn't have the correct piece of paper.... the officers went into a huddle and as good squaddies we went back to sleep. After a lot of signals to god knows who the RAF Movements Cpl allowed us to board our aircraft (give someone a bit of power etc). The adventure had begun...and like all adventure the excitement soon wore off as we slowly made our way to Bahrain via Cyprus - I think, as still very sleepy.

On arrival in Bahrain we had to wait a day or so for the kit to be transferred from the VC10 to an Argosy. The Salalah runway was too short for large aircraft. The time was well spent getting p\*""^\*d with the RAMC Med Centre Cpl who kept a fridge full of beer in the treatment room.

Once the formalities had been completed (officer job), we boarded the Argosy and were off. Now for those who have never visited this part of the world, RAF Salalah was betwixed the mountains (Jebel) to the front and the town and sea to the rear. As a near circular cantonment, the location was a perfect target for the ne'er-do-wells in the hills. Thankfully not a lot was

happening on our arrival - if it had been the aircraft would have returned to Bahrain with us still on it. RAF for you! (As an RAF brat, I can say that).

Our home for the next few months was a building called a Twyneham Hut - a tin hut to you and me - very 'Little House on the Prairie'. Two doors a few windows, a fridge and a fan - an RAF station without aircon!! The boys were all in together of course whilst the SNCO/WO and Officers skulked off to their respected mess accommodation.

Our first task was setting up camp adjacent to the Medical Centre. After a couple of attempts at erecting an F Assembly under the instruction of Col Fitz - he who was renowned for taking things to pieces and having parts left over - we were ready for business. To make it homelier we erected a lean to for storage and eventually a friendly RE chippy put in a wooden floor and covered it with lino and the RAF lent us an aircraft aircon unit - basically a large tumble dryer hose stuffed through a tent window.

To ensure we felt safe, all new arrivals were offered a ring side seat at a fire power demonstration. At a target in the front, aircraft fired cannon, RAF Regt fired mortars, the RA fire 25 pounders and 5.5 guns from the Sultans Armed Forces (SAF)/ British Army Training Team (BATT) base a few clicks up the road at Umm al-Ghawarif... the enemy was obliterated.

The RAF Regt and RA had two fancy bits of kit - Green Archer which could track incoming and return fire on that location and Zebedee a heat seeking radar - many a camel lost a leg or two wandering the plain at night. To our front outside the wire there were sanger type emplacements called Hedgehogs which were manned by the RAF Regt at dusk.

It took a while to get used to the bangs at night as the RAF/RA were constantly firing off rounds just for the hell of it me thinks - no consideration for our sleep whatsoever.

Facilities were OK, we had the Wobbly Wheel Club (2 cans), local radio, open air cinema (the screen being situated so that Ahmed the Adoo in the hills couldn't get a glimpse of the latest western blockbuster), an open-air swimming pool, excellent food and as many fags as you could smoke! At that time cigarettes ceased by UK Customs were disposed of by sending to troops in faraway places with strange sounding names. If you weren't shot or blown up there was a fair chance you would smoke yourself to death.

Your main priority was to get a tan asap - until you did you were known as a 'Moonie' and as a white spot in a brown landscape you were a sitting duck. Thankfully the 'enemy' were pretty crap at shooting at that time so we were able sit in our deckchairs and watch the activity from the FST tent (conveniently located near the perimeter fence!). 'Our' aircraft dropped bombs and fired cannon at the enemy skulking in the wadies, not quiet 'Apocalypse Now' but very entertaining non-the less.

Another must have was a moustache. Most of the RAF walked around in their itchy bitsy shorts and desert boots looking like a bunch of Mexican bandits on holiday, but sadly not us. He who must be obeyed forbid it saying the upper lip must be clean shaven at all times etc. Spoil sport!

As far as personal kit goes thankfully we had the foresight to bring out our own desert boots as the army issue leather sandals (de riqueur in the tropics as far as MOD (A) was concerned) otherwise we would have looked like group of Jesus's disciples on an away day.

Whilst not FSTing, Bill the born leader decided that we should carry out some 'Hearts and Minds' stuff in the town of Salalah. They had a hospital that required sorting (having taken about 15 years to build) and a number of patients that required treatment. Climbing aboard the borrowed RAF ambulance we headed in to town. The building was single story and looked quite modern. My first job was to remove a very old POP from an even more ancient local. The POP had been on his arm some six months as he had refused to have it removed in case his arm fell off! Advancing towards him with a large pair of plaster shears his eyes bulged and his mouth frothed - in seconds it was off and to his amazement his arm (rather grotty and smelly) remained attached to his body. He left smiling. Asking what was the burn like marks on his other arm the interpreter said it is where he was burnt with a poker - although they chewed Khat the poker was a more instant analgesic, by burning the opposite limb it hurt more than the fractured one so he felt less pain there ...well if it works for you...then again, no Boots the chemist on the street corner here.

After sorting out a few plasters I was deployed to the theatre to instruct two locals on how to blitz prior to moving in some rudimentary kit. Two guys, two buckets and two mops...go! I went off to see what the others were up to. On my return the two guys, two buckets and two mops were still in the same position.... aaaah! Using some inappropriate language and hand gestures (my only Arabic being 'Imshi'...'Go away'...and I did want my only source of labour doing that) the born leader walked in...to cut it short I was ordered to report to him that evening after our evening meal.

Other tasks were sorting out a mountain of drugs which had been forwarded following a request for all RAF Med Centre to send any unwanted medicines. Being OTTs and not dispensers we were a little overwhelmed - so a signal went off to send over a dispenser. Keith 'Willy' Warnock arrived a few days later. Amongst the mountain was bottles of Victory V Lozengers and birth control tablets - I ask you! We never suffered from sore throats or colds and as birth control pills cost money in the UK most found their way back home - amazing how many you can stow away in a Bluey. Willy sorted us out eventually with the majority being burned as out of date or not required on voyage. Off he went back to the UK.

So, after the condemned man had eaten a hearty meal, off I went for a bollocking. After being told that I shouldn't speak to the locals like that I was asked what I had to say..." With respect Sir (officers don't like that), you deal with the palace and government staff - I have to deal with

these sorts of guys, it is what they understand". Not impressed with my viewpoint he confined me to camp (oh joy). I was allowed to drive the guys to and from town, the rest of the time was cleaning kit and making swabs - yep we were making our own swabs.

Reprieve for me came in the form of a Cholera outbreak. The boys were sent into town to vaccinate the locals (those that wanted it that is). We found that sticking a needle into them (with whatever fluid) was OK, if you gave them a pill it ended up over the wall outside the hospital.

I was tasked with joining Captain Jones, the BATT medical officer, visiting outlying villages to sterilise wells and vaccinate as appropriate. Many head men were quite aggressive and wouldn't allow us into their compounds in case we 'saw' their wives hence the reason we were accompanied by Askari guards. Visiting an Arab house can be a joy or a nightmare in one case tripping over a dead donkey in the front yard! Sadly, Captain Jones, a really nice guy, drowned a few weeks later while swimming in the sea off Salalah beach. His body was kept in the camp cold store until repatriation. I was to meet up with his wife a couple of years later in Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, Abdul was becoming a better shot. It was rumoured that they now had Chinese gun layers.

It was a peaceful afternoon, I was laying on my bed, Jock was attending to his ablutions and Dave was reclining in a deckchair outside. His hobby was exciting the randy donkey. We had one male donkey on camp and if you made the right donkey sound "hee-haw" this enormous penis would appear and this five-legged donkey would charge about looking for the sound.... Dave was a past master - his virginity I'm pleased to report remained intact.

Suddenly bang!! then the alarm, Abdul managed to put three shells right into the ORs location. I ran for the shelter, Dave being Dave, casually folded his chair and followed. Jock was just leaving the toilet block as the first landed, he ran this way...bang...he ran that way bang...it was pretty scary to say the least - Jock survived unscathed, the only casualty being a cook running back into the cookhouse - he received a chunk of shrapnel in his back - thankfully he recovered quiet quickly...well you need all the cooks you can get in this sort of environment?

The SOP was that should an incident last longer than ten minutes after the alarm went off you were to go report to your duty station. Nothing ever lasted more than ten minutes thankfully as our duty station was at the other end of the camp. We really didn't fancy playing 'catch me if you can' with a round, of any size. The SNCO and Officers were exempt that run as they were quartered near the medical centre.

We were on one occasion required to stag on (facing the town side) as intel had an idea there was going to be a ground attack. Sitting in a trench at night isn't fun. Anything moving and you were allowed to fire (only bad guys outside the wire after dark). Noise - "Where?" .... "There" ... one who shall remain nameless, cocked his weapon pulled the trigger and his magazine fell

off - all that training at Ash wasted. A pistol was found by the wire in the morning by the RAF Regt. We weren't invited back!!

Each morning the fence line would be inspected and the nearby roads flailed by the engineers to ensure safe passage. Adoo had a habit of laying mines on the road under cover of darkness. Our friendly RE Sapper 'Taff' never used the road, he and his faithful windowless grey truck took the scenic route just in case.

The Adoo were becoming more daring. Lying in bed one night I said to Bob "Hear that noise" - "Yes" said Bob. Having become accustomed to bangs it was nothing new. "Right listed carefully - loud bang then soft bang is out going - soft bang then loud bang is in coming" .... pause..." That is soft then loud" ...." Oh shit" ... just as the alarm went off.... Abdul was becoming really annoying. They would 'creep' down a wadi with mortars/small artillery pieces in bits, reassemble, fire off a few rounds, dismantle and vamoose whilst Green Archer was calculation and the RAF Regt/RA retaliated in kind.

And so, days turned into weeks, doing what we had to do in a hot sweaty tent whilst the Adoo attempted to disturb our now boring routine.

A rumour started that we were to be visited by a CSE (Combined Services Entertainment) Show. For those who have never experienced such a show it is an event not to be missed - or so I thought. Coupled with the show we were to have time off and a few beers to boot.... subject to Abdul of course! The day came, the plane landed, the crew set up in the dining room and soon the place was buzzing. The dancing girls came on - eyes bulged and nasty thoughts came to the fore.... I digress again. Following a few acts, it came time for the star of the show - Ivor Emmanuel...WHO? If you had seen the 1964 film ZULU then you might know him otherwise..... Following the show, the cast jumped aboard their aircraft and were gone.....the Army boys and the Rock Apes not on stag decamped to the pool for beer and beer. I was at this point slightly tipsy from two cans that I thought it would be a good idea to 'nudge' a RAF type into the pool along with his tray of drinks - for some reason he didn't find it as amusing as did I. I went for a swim and was just getting out of the pool by the ladder when suddenly I was pulled under by my feet. Two strange feet appeared on my shoulders and pinned me to the side of the pool.... running out of breath my short life passed before my very eyes, I kid you not. Suddenly above me was a red mist 'heaven'....no blood. Bob Booth had seen what was happening, dived in and head butted the guy on my shoulders, I shot to the surface like a Trident missile (those paying attention will be aware of course that Trident wasn't deployed until 1972) - I am ever grateful to Bob as without his intervention who knows what the outcome would have been.... the RAF types stayed away from the FST guys after that.

Life goes on as they say. We (the boys) managed a couple of trips down to the beach for a swim. On the first occasion, after stripping off, we left our clothes at the top of the steep sand bank, Jock placed his behind the rise the rest of us in front of the rise. On returning to get dressed

Jock's clothes had disappeared - we assumed a local gentleman would now be wearing them in the town. Trying to be sympathetic to his plight and trying to control our amusement we returned to camp.

On the second occasion, and learning from the first, Jock placed his clothes with ours in full view from the sea. It was not to be his day yet again. As he turned towards the sea a huge wave (the Indian Ocean can be quite fearsome at times) took out his false teeth...oh how we laughed! The upside was that Jock got a trip up to Bahrain to have a new set made...at least he went home fully clothed this time.

Sadly, whilst swimming in the same area on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1971, Captain Ian Jones RAMC drowned.

I met Captain Jones widow in Hong Kong in 1973. A good friend, Trevor Long (SRN), suggested that we go out to dinner to celebrate his birthday and my wife Lin's birthday. Prior to dinner in the revolving restaurant in the Hilton Hotel we stopped off for a drink at the 'Bull & Bear' pub. This was a new concept in Hong Kong - a 'pub kit' flown out from the UK complete with 'plastic' wooden beams! Once our drinks had been served, Trevor said "There is a lady here who wants to meet you" "Me - why?" "You knew her husband in Oman". This lady came across, she was the establishments mama-san (look it up). It transpires, that the lady in question was Mrs Jones. She had left the UK following his death, moved to Australia and was now worked here. Her question to me was "Can you tell me how my husband died" .... stunned and somewhat taken aback I replied "No". I didn't want to go down that route. "But I know someone who can tell you, Lt Col Fitzpatrick". Fitz was also now in Hong Kong. I took her number and passed it on to a very quizzical Col Fitz. He did contact her. Mrs Jones had been told, by the powers that be, that he had passed away on operations in Oman, nothing about drowning. Why not?

Although our guns were bigger than Abduls he still kept having a go at us. Dozing on my pit following a hearty lunch (as was most of the camp) there was an enormous bang - the heavens had fallen on our tin roof! A piece of shrapnel came through the side of the hut, skimmed over Jock's head, he felt the heat of it (he was sitting on his bed), split his locker and landed in my bed space (now have as a souvenir). The second shell landed next to the adjacent hut. We ran outside to find the next hut riddle with holes from about waste high. Entering the hut, we expected to see an awful bloody mess...what met our eyes was amazing. Six guys were laying on their beds, total stunned, but not a scratch on them. The distance of the impact from their hut and trajectory of the projectile was such that it took out the upper half of the hut. Had they been standing or sitting it would have taken them all out.

This incident saw Jock taking his helmet with him wherever he went. If anything untoward was going to happen it was going to happen to him which made the rest of us feel so much better.

The Station Commander decided that something must be done.

Although 'we' had high tech kit (for the time) to hit back at the Adoo the station commander felt 'his' men (including us thankfully) must be better protected when the Sh1t hit the fan - literally! The DS solution was to retrieve the empty 50-gallon fuel drums (burmoils) from the dump, fill with water and place around the buildings two high and two deep supplemented with sandbags. It was a task and a half but completed quiet swiftly as it was in all our interests to do so. Our accommodation became quiet dim inside but we all accepted it with good grace.

Apart from work, eat, write letter, watch movies and sleep there was relatively little to do. Some of the guys tried to make gardens outside their huts others like myself had plastic models sent out. Once built, a model aeroplane would be attached to a fan blade with a piece of string and the fan slowly increased in speed until she was flying, then increased some more, until like a demented bee would fly off and hit the nearest object - once again Jock's helmet saved the day.

One of my models arrived with the pilot missing, so I assumed that if I complained to Airfix e.g "Sitting in the middle of nowhere making your models is my only salvation etc, etc...." you get the drift, then Airfix would send me at least a model of the Cutty Sark or the Thermopylae as compensation. No such luck. A few weeks later a small package arrived, inside one plastic pilot - bastards!

Another hobby was 'spitting' around a line off ants to encircle them then watch to see what happened - utter confusion in ant world.... another day nearer departure.

One day I was sitting having lunch when this local enlisted kitchen hand asked me if I could arrange to have his baby son circumcised.... "I will give you 100 Rial" ...." No". Allegedly, the babies out in the sticks were tied to a bed and a piece of cotton tied around the foreskin and left until it 'fell' off. Ouch! Hence the request.

On one return trip from town we came across a Brit guy walking along the road carry his kit and weapon. Transpires he was with an SF patrol up the coast when he became ill, As there were no helicopters available was left to find his own way back when recovered. He had hitched a lift on a Dhow to Salalah and a lift from us to the BATT base - our first glimpse of a SF trooper. We were later to meet a few in the Wobbly Wheel Club. They kept themselves to themselves - had a beer and went home. One who fractured his wrist refused to have an anaesthetic as his mates were going to bring in a few beers for him that night. Uncle Bill - "No gas no beer" - he had the gas.

Our time was coming to an end. Like most coming to the end of a tour the days were counted off with precision until the final day arrived. Some guys were known to sleep under their beds with the mattress on top of them - no need to take risk so near to departure. As well as making sure you left with all fingers and toes intact you said a small prayer to your god to ensure your aircraft arrived and took off with you onboard without hindrance from Abdul. Some had their



tours unceremoniously extended thanks to a random round striking just as the aircraft was on its landing approach - whoosh off he went back to whence he came.

Our arrival back in Bahrain was most welcome and we were fated like conquering heroes. A reception was laid on, photos taken and newspaper articles written about members which were then sent to their local home paper back in the UK. Sadly, I didn't make the reception. The night before I had a few too many and the hangover was such that the thought of a curry lunch sent me back under the covers. The night before we had visited the Blue Moon nightclub in Manama (the capital). I say we, it was the two Dave's and myself. The prices were so extortionate that we had one drink between us and three straws. It was fun watching the drunken merchant seaman being fleeced by the bar girls.... continuous drinks being bought for them then being tipped into the flower pots...what a waste. We walked back home much the poorer. At one point we were stopped by an Arab taxi driver who asked for a light - leaning forward to give him a light he touch my hand and said "You want go with me for jiggy, jiggy over there" pointing to a dark playing field....my one Arabic word came in useful at last along with a few English expletives and an offer of a punch in the mouth saw him roar off!

Slowly we made our way back to Britannia House (RAF transit hotel) and met the other boys. Feeling hungry after our expensive night out we asked for something to eat and sharply told that the kitchen was closed. As we were having a good moan about it the main door to the lounge opened and in trooped an RAF flight crew lead by a Squadron Leader.

Sitting down they were presented with large plates of food and a very large salver of steaming hot chips. We were really peed off about this. Bob (Booth) a big lad...sauntered over, requested some chips and told in no uncertain terms to go away. Unperturbed, Bob reached over, and like a fair ground toy grab helped himself to a large handful of the steaming chips and sauntered off to share with his fellow ravenous colleagues leaving a stunned Sqn Ldr and an equally stunned crew speechless.... don't mess with a hungry RAMC clerk!

Soon we were back in the UK and swiftly transported to the CMH to a welcome home party organised by the unit. Families were there to great us and much food and drink taken. They say that the second thing you do when you arrive home is put your bags down....in my case I was the first. Met by a heavily pregnant wife (which of course I was aware off) and an excited two year old toddler...what I wasn't aware of was that my good lady had fractured her ankle and was hobbling around in a BK POP...oh joy!

It was now 6<sup>th</sup> July 1971. Was the tour a good one? Yes it was. Was it exciting? Yes it was. Did I learn anything? Yes I did. Would I do it again? No I wouldn't.

It is alleged that the RAF guys were given gold watches by the Sultan but not us. It is a fact that many teams after us made money from doing private work. There was of course the medal, GSM 'Dhofar', which at the time was a valuable bit of silverware.... but as the conflict went on

until 1976 that financial value was of course diminished due to the numbers that subsequently served.

There was one good thing that came out of it though. Two years ago, my eldest grandson Benjamin had the opportunity to go on a school exchange to Oman. Part of the selection was an interview. I told him to say that one of the reason he wanted to go was that if he met the Sultan he would ask him if he could collect his grandfather's gold watch...it raised a laugh from the committee and he got the gig.

Benjamin's photos showed a modern, vibrant, scenic and peaceful country far different from what we saw in 1971.

The End