

OMAN 1975 : THE YEAR OF DECISION

Major General K Perkins

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 However, the British had meanwhile withdrawn from the neighbouring territory of Aden which, having become the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY), adopted, in classic Marxist style, the so far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~~^a 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.

To us the former were the wells, clinics and food which the civil aid Department, under an ex Gurkha ex SAF officer Martin Robb, provided in the wake of military success, often with considerable assistance from British military engineers. Civil development, when it arrived, would involve the civil ministries. In an attempt to remedy the situation I steered a civil development plan through the National Development Council at which the Sultan endorsed my proposals. Alas, they floundered through lack of money and I did not endear myself to the hawks and arms salesmen when I suggested that it made more strategic sense to spend money on measures to ensure a contented population rather than on expensive weapons for the future. Failure to apply more resources among the suspicious and difficult jebali population undoubtedly prolonged operations in the Centre and East and by mid June when the monsoon closed in there were still 150 enemy remaining there.

Fortunately their capability had been greatly diminished by the debilitating effects of the Damavand and Eornbean Lines and constant pressure from the Northern Frontier Regiment and the Southern Regiment, led respectively by Lieutenant Colonels John Pollard and John Gordon-Taylor. The forthcoming offensive in the West would have been frustrated through lack of resources if the Centre and East had not been sufficiently in hand for us to thin out there. Although unspectacular, the operations of these two regiments between March and June were a prerequisite to the final offensive.

To release infantry battalions for more aggressive operations the Oman Gendarmerie had been brought from Northern Oman to garrison the road Salalah - Thumrait. The unit led admirably but being neither equipped nor established for extended operations it was soon in need of a break. Jordan came to the rescue and provided 91st Special Forces Battalion to hold the road from February to September. This was a well trained, aggressive and experienced unit which would have been more at home in the West where the absence of civilians in the areas of immediate contact allowed operations to proceed unhindered by rules of engagement or the niceties of civil relations. In theory I had permission to use the battalion anywhere but, because the Western Area was undoubtedly the toughest, there would have been a good deal of political unease had I deployed the Jordanians there while SAF was still engaged in clearing up the East. Positioned in a quiet area the unit chafed under the Queensberry Rules and failed to appreciate the severity of the campaign elsewhere, so that the word spread that the war was being prosecuted with insufficient vigour. It took me a visit to Amman, an audience with King Hussein and a visit to the Western Area by senior Jordanian officers to put the record right. In addition to assistance with infantry, Jordan also sent an engineer company which remained throughout the war and undertook a variety of civil and military tasks.

And so the monsoon 1975 closed in, shrouding the operational area in cloud. Helicopters had been stockpiling positions and engineers working around the clock to improve the tracks to those positions lucky to be so served. The important question was: would the Damavand Line bite?

It would bite only if frequently patrolled otherwise the enemy would undoubtedly create gaps. Patrol routes were limited by the nature of the task and susceptible to ambush. On one particularly nasty occasion a platoon was ambushed among enemy mines in a position where, because the monsoon prevented helicopter evacuation, the wounded were subjected to a fourteen hour man carry, including a night stop. It was not surprising that some of the casualties died in the process. Because the Iranian pilots were less experienced in monsoon conditions than those of the Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF) I had agreed the latter would undertake particularly hazardous casualty evacuation and some very determined and skilful flying had resulted but on this occasion no pilot could have succeeded. As an aviator and a soldier it seemed to me that no excuse was required but I found that in the interest of allied harmony I needed to give a full explanation of why even the most experienced helicopter squadron in the world could not cope at ground level in eight eighths cloud.

The Iranian pilots though relatively inexperienced were extremely brave. Their gunships flew at about 500 feet over enemy held ground looking for trouble, which was often first manifest by a burst of machine gun fire through the floor. The gunships had a very limited value and I discouraged their roving search and destroy missions which could achieve but little in the thickly wooded mountains and which sometimes resulted in a hazardous rescue operation for shot down pilots and crewmen.

By July it was apparent that the Damavand Line had reduced sharply the supplies getting through to the Centre and East. In that month 29 enemy surrendered, the previous monthly average for 1975 being 14. With luck we thought we might end the war in mid-1976 and we planned accordingly.

It seemed a reasonable assumption that the enemy in the Centre and East would wither on the vine, the Damavand Line having cut the roots. Final fulfilment of the military aim, to secure Dhofar for civil development, would then rest on clearance of the area between the Damavand Line and the PDRY border. The most attractive option at first sight was to deploy at Sarfait in strength and establish a barrier there, thus repeating the success of the Damavand Line and denying the enemy the ability to resupply anywhere in Dhofar. This course would entail some logistic risk as all troops would be dependent upon helicopter resupply. More significant, I thought, was the political risk as it seemed that we would be inviting hostilities with PDRY regular forces.

Moreover, these would be close to home while we would be at the end of a tenuous logistic link with its terminal vulnerable to concentrated artillery fire, and we would still have a guerilla war behind us. We therefore concluded that a better course, albeit more pedestrian, would be to establish a third obstacle just out of gun range of FDRY on a line extending North from Dhalqut. D Day was chosen as 21st October, a month after the expected end of the monsoon to allow time for the replenishment of stocks and the withering of at least some of the luxuriant vegetation which, resulting from the monsoon, would assist the enemy in defence.

The post monsoon plan in sequence envisaged:

- a. Between July and mid-October the driving of a road Westward as far as Defa with the intentions of providing a logistic approach and deceiving the enemy into thinking that our objective was the Sherishitti area.
- b. On D minus six and four, diversions by Dhofar Brigade at Sarfait and the Iranian Brigade on the coast South of Sherishitti.
- c. On D Day a land approach from Defa, initially East to Furious then swinging South to the high ground overlooking the formidable Wadi Sayq. On D plus one a helicopter assault across the Wadi followed within two days by exploitation South to Dhalqut.

These operations would involve drastic tanking out in the Centre and East but the prize was worth the risk. By Christmas we considered we would have cleared between Danavand and the new line and would be well placed to advance towards the border, where we thought we might arrive in strength by mid-1976.

In the event a very different operation evolved, the seeds of which had already been sown by the intrepid officers of C Company the Muscat Regiment, which had taken over Sarfait in May. These four officers were Major Gordon, ex Gurkha and now a contract officer, Captain Paxman, a seconded Coldstreamer, and Lieutenants Hilal Ali and Mohammed Said, the latter an ex enemy who had returned home when Sultan Qaboos came to power. Bored with merely observing the enemy held stronghold below Sarfait they successfully ambushed enemy supply trails in this area in May and June. This necessitated descending a precipitous 600 foot scarp, negotiating enemy minefields by night and laying up by day, a prospect which had understandably deterred their predecessors at Sarfait. Later, when the post monsoon plan was made, a somewhat similar but larger operation was scheduled as the Dhofar Brigade diversion.

On August 14th Operation Badree, to secure the line of a road to Dofa, began. Operation Waagid Badree went in early as a deception. (Badree is Arabic for early; Waagid Badree means very early. Not much security there, deliberately.) The lack of immediate reaction to either operation reminded us again that a guerrilla force takes time to react at strategic level, the reason for timing six days in advance the deception for the post monsoon operation. Badree drove parallel to the Coast, North of the tree line and monsoon area. It ran through areas liberally sprinkled with uncharted anti-personnel mines from the previous December and January operations and an armoured bulldozer was invariably in the van. The road construction attracted a good deal of hostile fire and led to a number of sharp engagements after one of which, Captain Simon Marriott, an armoured car troop commander seconded from the 17/21 Lancers, described an RPG 7 missile as "like a cricket ball approaching mid-on". Operation Badree also tempted the enemy into premature use of SAM 7 when a Strikemaster was shot down and Flight Lieutenant Roger Furlong, a seconded pilot, successfully ejected and was rescued. Thus SOAF were given time to revise their tactics before the all important October operations.

PFLO was now virtually unable to influence events East of the Damavand Line. In the absence of a supply of ammunition, heavy weapons had been cached and the enemy remaining were concerned mostly with survival. In the West the tempo of enemy activity had increased with Dhofar Brigade and Iranian positions under increasing fire. Three companies of PDRY regulars were operating between Sarfait and Sherishitti and PDRY 85mm guns had, from their sanctuary West of the border near Ham, joined the bombardment of Sarfait. One of the reasons for our choice of venue for the post monsoon operations, the avoidance of hostilities with PDRY, was being negated by PDRY itself. As a precaution I ordered Dhofar Brigade to put 5.5in guns at Sarfait so that we could match the PDRY 85mm guns for range. The 5.5in guns were moved by Iranian Chinook helicopters. We speculated on enemy reactions: which we thought would centre on the more obvious course, an offensive close to the border. The immense logistic activity pointed to a SAF offensive at the end of the monsoon and all we could do was to conceal the area in which the blow would fall and persuade the enemy to spread his resources. We thought we could achieve this by avoidance of any preparatory bombardment of the intended objective, threatening gestures from Dofa, building new observation posts at Sarfait and, finally, the diversionary attacks. When it was all over we learned from surrendered enemy that they had considered our objectives to be in the Sherishitti area and had not appreciated our intentions concerning the Dhalqut line. They had, however, not fallen for our activities at Sarfait.

As D Day approached doubts arose in the helicopter squadron over the coup de main across the Wadi Sayq, involving a first lift of two parallel streams each of six helicopters who would be overtaken in flight by Hunters tasked to bomb and strafe the landing zone while artillery and armoured car fire neutralized flanking areas. The helicopters, AB 205s, were fitted with exhaust shields against the heat seeking SAM 7s but these by no means guaranteed immunity. Low flying was therefore necessary to reduce exposure to SAM 7 and this put aircraft at considerable risk to the AK 47 and Shpargin heavy machine gun. The majority of "helis" were on contract, some with as much as six years operations behind them and many suspecting they were already living on borrowed time. Their apprehension was understandable but under the leadership of Wing Commander Alan Hastings, the SOAF station commander at Salalah, it was not allowed to effect morale.

And so the monsoon cleared leaving the country a bright verdant green, On October 15th, after last light, C Company of Fusiliers Regiment led by Major Ian Gordon descended from Sarfait in the wake of an engineer troop under Captain Ted Wells who had spent the previous night hand clearing a route through enemy mines. (Baby vipers were on hand to blast lanes should the break out stall, but were not needed.) In a brilliant operation, repeating on a larger scale the ambushes of four months before, C Company seized a prominent feature called Capstan which had long since rocked the battalion on Sarfait. There the company sat in caves and hastily constructed sangars to await the considerable enemy reaction which we were sure would follow.

The following morning, still only D minus five, I arrived at Dhofar Brigade Headquarters en route to visit C Company. I was met by a smiling John Akshurst who had asked me to call early to discuss something too important to risk discussion by wireless. He announced that while incomers were, as usual, making life hazardous on the main position, the enemy had so far apparently ignored the diversion. He thought we should reinforce success and in anticipation of my approval he had ordered some preliminary moves as the intended D Day battalions were still deployed elsewhere. Reports I had received the previous day of SAM 6s having just arrived in FDRY caused a few moments of consideration but it seemed unlikely that the missiles would arrive opposite Sarfait in time to influence this battle. Thus a decision was made to switch the main operation to Sarfait that night and months of planning went out of the window. A hasty conference ensued, attended by Air Commodore Erik Bennett my air force commander, Captain Philip Brooke-Popham my naval commander, Colonel Stuart Green my Chief of Staff and Lieutenant Colonel Bugs Hughes who was Dhofar Brigade's gunner. The areas of doubt were the ability of the helicopter squadron to maintain the force this far forward and the threat that FDRY guns near Sauf might prevent consolidation.

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I had for some months been under political pressure to retaliate against PDRY because of their support of PFLO but had resisted on both political and military grounds, the former because I wished to limit the conflict and the latter because I was doubtful of the ability of aircraft to destroy well concealed guns in the difficult terrain. However PDRY had itself widened the conflict by the increasing artillery bombardment and the political reasons for retaliating were now more compelling. More important was the need to shoot back in the interests of morale. I therefore decided that at first light on the morrow the Hunter Squadron which had been tasked to support the Iranian diversion on D minus four, would be switched to military targets in the area of Hauf. I also ordered the 5.5in and 25 pdr guns on Sarfait to harass these targets between air attacks. The possibility that the Sultanate would one day be forced to retaliate had been aired diplomatically so that no one could justifiably accuse us of aggression. To assist in the increased logistics task I ordered a naval coaster to operate off Sarfait as a resupply point for helicopters. Thus was the plan completely changed, without the issue of a single piece of paper.

John Akhurst put Lieutenant Colonel Ian Christie, commanding the Muscat Regiment, in immediate command of the thrust to the sea. Under him were a hastily assembled collection of companies from his own battalion, the Frontier Force and the Southern Regiment. By first light the following morning he was on all his objectives and dug in. Hauf lay under a pall of smoke and the enemy showed no inclination to interrupt the fly-in of consolidation stores. It was 17 October, officially only D minus four, and the fate of the PLA in Dhofar was sealed.

In order to maintain maximum pressure on the enemy the Iranian diversion went in as planned. The Iranians had now increased their Brigade by a battalion group and volunteered naval fire and logistic support. Preceded by bombardment from three Iranian frigates and air attack by Strikemasters, half a battalion flew in to seize a feature on the coast South of Sherishitti. The operation attracted heavy opposition and casualties were immediately incurred in close quarter fighting on the objective. With determination the Iranians dug in supported by courageous action of a S&F forward observation party under Captain Gordon Allen, who, having been spotted from their helicopter as it traversed the position under fire, were responsible for the continued coordination of an artillery, air and naval fire plan. The enemy recognised the new position as a direct threat to his supply area and it was not a place to show ones head for several days.

I now said that I thought the war might be over by Christmas, but that had been said in 1974 and I hedged my bets particularly as shelling of Sarfait was continuing at a brisk rate. John Akehurst now let the Frontier Force loose and in the three weeks to 18 November, under the inspiring leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Salusbury-Trelawny, a seconded Coldstreamer, they cleared the enemy North of the Wadi Sayq and captured Sherishitai with its immense quantities of stores and ammunition. In the last week of November Muscat Regiment pushed Eastwards from Sarfait leaving only the Darra Ridge, a large feature running along the coast inland from Dhalqut, to be cleared. By now it seemed virtually certain that those hard core enemy who had neither been killed nor surrendered had either fled to PDRY or had given up and gone to their homes. (91 surrendered in November, five times the previous monthly average for 1975.) The final operation to clear the Darra Ridge was in a holiday atmosphere. John Akehurst and I moved with the leading company and somehow became the leading scouts. Being unencumbered with equipment we got some way ahead and, accompanied by Jonathan Salubury-Trelawny, arrived early on the scarp overlooking Dhalqut, the last village in Dhofar to be recaptured. We might well have gone on down but it would have upset Dhofar Brigade's press arrangements for the following day, and in any case we could hardly liberate the place without a national flag, which none of us had.

Dhalqut was entered the following day, 2nd December, the official date of the war ending, and the Darra Ridge confirmed clear by 8th December. Subsequently in December a further 107 enemy surrendered, but the leading scouts of 1st December swore they were not from the Darra Ridge.

The D Day air attack upon Hauf had covered all known military targets and the PFLO Headquarters. It had involved six Hunters with bombs and rockets just after first light and a further strike of four aircraft early afternoon. The attacks were continued at intervals until 21 November but the enemy made good their losses and damage and, reinforced by 130mm guns, continued to fire. They introduced tactics of fire and movement and became adept at using the mountainous terrain for concealment and protection. It was apparent that the duel was one we were unlikely conclusively to win and I called off the strikes when diplomatic activity behind the scenes attempted to wear PDRY from its involvement with PFLO. It took some weeks for the PDRY guns to fall silent and even as I write (mid 1976) the PDRY-PFLO relation is unclear. However, the sustained air attacks on PDRY were complementary to political activity which eventually reduced border tension.

LESSONS

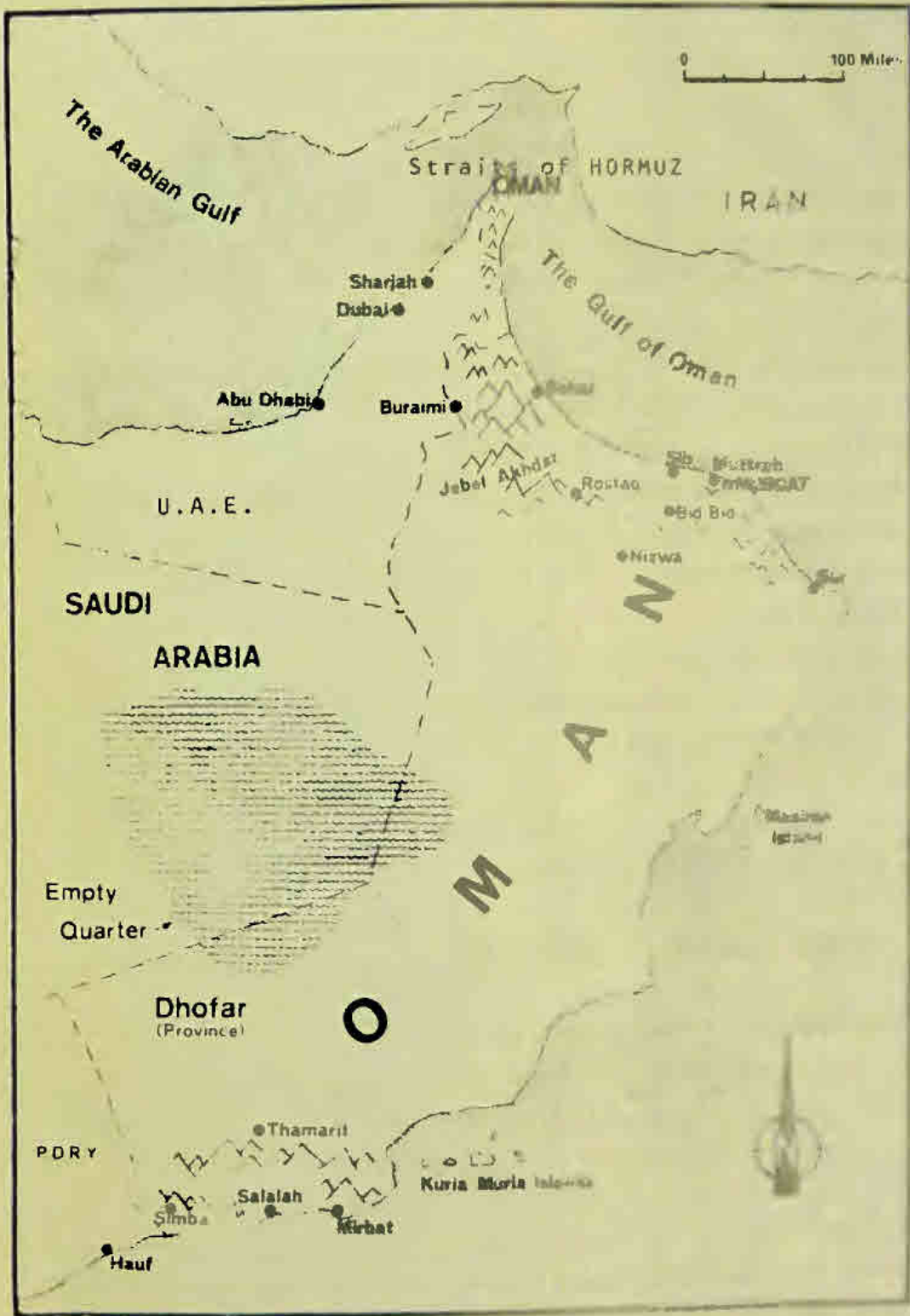
The Dhofar War combined conventional war with counter revolutionary operations so that the lessons are both military and political. I doubt if any are new although some are seen in a new light and others have not been recently practised elsewhere, at least within our own Armed Forces.

Guerrilla operations in familiar terrain will succumb to regular forces only if the latter exploit the flexibility which results from their better communications, mobility and logistics, and their superior fire power. To do this they require good intelligence, a high level of training and slick inter-service procedures. If one of these elements is missing the regular forces are liable to become a ponderous organisation unsuited to anti-guerrilla operations.

Active operations such as those of the Dhofar War remind us again that the man is more important than his equipment. In peace time we tend to be mesmerised by the latter. Its maintenance detracts from training and its handling on exercises from more important issues. During peace time manoeuvres the most difficult part of the business is the coordination required to get APCs, helicopters, armour and other paraphernalia to the objective at the right time with everything working; when the infantry debauch the problem is virtually over. In war the real problem has just started. Similar considerations with different emphasis arise in the air and at sea where all else is pointless if weapons, men and supplies are not delivered accurately on time. The crucial bit of the business is the ten per cent or less in face of the enemy and we should keep it as simple as possible.

Military success alone will achieve little unless in support of civil objectives. It is well established practice to exercise joint civil and military control but this is insufficient in itself and civil plans must be put into action as soon as possible after military success has opened the way. Inevitably local pressures will impinge upon priorities and commanders should be alive to the issues.

A counter revolutionary war cannot be won by military means only. The military create conditions in which political forces can operate while politics, often involving opinion abroad, produce a favourable environment for military success. Senior military commanders can no longer afford the luxury of leaving politics in war only to the politicians.



OMAN. STRATEGIC POSITION

difficult country and the enemy were unlikely to sit supinely by.



MAP 60

MAKINAT SHIHAN
(15 MILES)

THAMARIT

HORNBEAM
LINE

HABARUT

3000

3000

PORT

DEFA x DAMAVAND

SALALAH

TAOA

MIRBAT

OFURIOUS

LINE

SAYO 1000

MERSHITTI

LIARRA

RAKHYUT

SARFAIT

DHALQUT

HAUF

MILES

