



In This Issue

Oman

Going Strait

Written by John Lawton

As the small but deadly Omani gunboat slashed through the cobalt blue waters of the Strait of Hormuz, its captain's voice crackled across the airways to the immense, high-riding oil tanker in the distance: *"Omani warship calling Japanese tanker: I am on interception course. I will keep clear. Repeat, I will keep clear."*

Lieutenant Commander Sa'id Soud al-Mauly - at 30 the most senior Omani in his country's tiny navy - repeated his warning three times before the startled voice of the Japanese tanker master crackled back. *"I will change course. Repeat, I will change course."*

Our navigator smiled. "He's got a guilty conscience," he said, pointing to the gunboats glowing instrument panels; they showed that the Japanese tanker was inside the international traffic lane - but only just.

"No, maintain your present intention. Repeat, maintain your present intention," ordered Commander al-Mauly over the radio as we swept by with a final word: *"Thank you for your cooperation..."*

Had the tanker been *outside* the international navigation channels - two miles wide in each direction, with a two-mile-wide separation zone in between - Commander al-Mauly might not have been so polite, and would have reported the violation to Japanese authorities as part of Oman's efforts to lessen the hazards of navigation and protect fishermen in what is today one of the most important - and most crowded - waterways in the world. He knows, from experience, that about five percent of the ships that pass through the strait— some 18,000 vessels in 1982 - try to cut fuel costs; they clip the corner off the right-angle-shaped Traffic Separation Route and take the shorter but more hazardous channel closer to the rugged Omani coast. The Omani Navy's small fleet of fast gunboats, therefore, keeps a close eye on transiting vessels from the moment its radar picks them up.

Keeping merchant shipping flowing safely through the strait and out of Omani coastal fishing grounds is just one of the many tasks performed by the Omani navy. Another is the prevention of gun running and smuggling; shortly before our visit a ketch carrying \$1 million in gold had been seized. A third is interception of dhows carrying illegal immigrants, and still another – the most important of all – is implementation of Sultan Qaboos' commitment to peaceful passage of all oil tankers and other international shipping in and out of the Arabian Gulf.

To carry out such tasks – and also patrol Oman's other 1,930 kilometers of coastline (1,200 miles) – is a formidable challenge for a navy that in 1982 was composed of just two missile craft, four gunboats and four inshore patrol vessels. But Oman's navy is confident it can do the job – particularly since the recent delivery of the first of three new ships, each armed with six Exocet missiles, and the installation of computerized radar – which provides an immediate readout of every vessel passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

Because the strait is the gateway to one of the world's main sources of petroleum, the Omani navy – like other armed forces in and around the Gulf – continues to give much thought to its safety.

Hormuz, however, is less vulnerable than it seems. Sunken tankers or other large ships, for example, would not block the strait – even though many people think so. It may look narrow on a map, but the strait is actually 45 kilometers wide (28 miles) and, in places, 88 meters deep (290 feet). "We would simply mark the ships with buoys and sail around them," one senior Omani navy commander said. Mining the strait, he added, was equally improbable.

Furthermore, two of the Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, have built new alternative export outlets for their oil via the Red Sea and the Mediterranean – one of them Saudi Arabia's new 1,202-kilometer Petroline (747 miles) from the Eastern Province oil fields to the new port of Yanbu (See *Aramco World*, November-December 1982), and the other, Iraq's 987-kilometer pipeline (613 miles) from Kirkuk to Yumurtalik on Turkey's Mediterranean coast.

And although there was some tension in the Strait of Hormuz in the past, "there is very little tension now," Commander al-Maully assured us as we turned about at the meeting of Oman's territorial waters with Iran and headed back to base.

Later, back at Operational Center on Goat Island at the tip of the Musandam Peninsula (See page 38), logs kept by the navy dispelled yet another myth about the Strait of Hormuz. Far from the tanker-every-minute legend, the naval logs showed that even at its busiest, in spring 1980, an average of 77 ships passed through the strait each day – in both directions. In 1982, the number was down to 50. The Japanese tanker, in fact, was the only vessel we had encountered during our entire two-hour patrol of the strait.

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