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Jebel Akhdar and Dhofar: footnote to empire

Since the storming of the Iranian Embassy on 30 April 1980, we have seen an explosion of popular militarism in Britain, an explosion fuelled by the Falklands and Gulf wars. This popular militarism was an essential component of Thatcherism, part of the Iron Lady's attempt to restore greatness to a Britain in decline, to exorcise what she described as 'the Suez Syndrome'. At the very centre of this popular militarism has been the Special Air Service (SAS), celebrated in innumerable histories, autobiographies, handbooks, videos and novels. Re-formed in 1950, the SAS operated in comparative secrecy until, with the storming of the Iranian embassy, it emerged as Thatcher's terminators, as her praetorian guard. Here I examine two little-known wars in which the SAS played an important part and which have, in the course of the 1980s and into the 1990s, become an essential part of the myth. The two wars were fought on behalf of the Sultans of Oman, Said bin Taimur and his son, Qaboos. They were both small affairs that involved only small numbers of British military personnel. Nevertheless, they were both important, first of all for maintaining a British presence and British influence in the Middle East and, secondly, for the part they played in the fortunes of the SAS. The Jebel Akhdar campaign of 1958-59 arguably saved the SAS from disbandment once the Malayan Emergency came to an end, while the later, more protracted, war in Dhofar has been generally regarded as a triumphant success for British counter-insurgency methods, comparable with the success in Malaya. British accounts celebrate this campaign as a major victory against

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Communist guerrillas that was of great strategic importance. Moreover, the success in Dhofar indicated that the SAS had a post-colonial future, either hired out by the British government to assist friendly regimes in the suppression of unrest or else working as quasi mercenaries.

A medieval tyranny

The Sultanate occupies 82,000 square miles between South Yemen and the Gulf and, in the 1950s, had a population estimated at 750,000. It is made up of two distinct territories: in the northeast, Muscat and Oman, a fertile coastal region, and a mountainous interior dominated by 'the Green Mountain', Jebel Akhdar. Southwest, across 500 miles of desert, is the province of Dhofar, an Omani colony that was even worse governed than the rest of the Sultanate.

Since the 1870s, the Sultanate had been a British protectorate, 'a de facto British colony' in Fred Halliday's phrase, ruled by the Sultan but under the effective control of his British advisers.[1] They presided over a backward poverty- and disease-ridden society where the infant mortality rate was 75 per cent and the literacy rate was 5 per cent, where slavery was still practised quite openly (the Sultan himself owned some 500 black slaves) and where mistreatment, mutilation and torture were routinely used to intimidate the population into quiescence and passivity. As Halliday insists, however, Said bin Taimur's regime was not that of an ignorant feudal reactionary who knew no better, but of a man who had been educated at Mayo College, 'the Eton of India', by the British, who regularly spent his summers living in the best hotels in London and who diverted his country's revenues into his personal Swiss bank accounts. He was a despot 'very much of the Duvalier and Somoza kind', but relying on Britain rather than on the United States for support.[2] It is wrong to regard Said as ruling by 'naked terror', however. According to John Townsend, who went out to Oman as an adviser in early 1969, his was more 'a tyranny of indifference to want and suffering backed up by a very genuine threat of punishment if people complained'.[3] He quite deliberately and calculatedly kept his people impoverished and uneducated as a means of political and social control. As he told David Smiley, the commander-in-chief of his army in the late 1950s, if he provided hospitals and clinics to cut the infant mortality rate, this would only cause social unrest by increasing the numbers of the poor and, as for schools and education, 'That is why you lost India.'[4]

Some of the British soldiers in Said's service did have doubts about his regime. In his account of his service with the Muscat Regiment, Ranulph Fiennes, later to achieve fame as an explorer and adventurer, confessed as much:

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> The evidence of my own eyes suggested the British were bolstering a corrupt regime where the Sultan and his chosen few lived sumptuously, enjoying the first fruits of oil wealth whilst the mass of Omanis lived out their narrow lives in squalor and illness benefitting not at all from the culling of their country's riches ... Content that the age-old conservatism of the Ibadhi system would continue to strangle all strivings for change, to smother all revolutionary mutterings, Sultan Said bin Taimur seemed determined to perpetuate the medieval gloom of Oman. And here I was volunteering my services to the military machine that upheld the old man in denying eight hundred thousand Omanis their rightful inheritance; the benefits of human progress, hospitals and schools...

Although he considered resigning on a number of occasions, Fiennes convinced himself that the threat of Communist subversion necessitated propping up the Sultanate and that the Sultan's son, Qaboos, was a proponent of modernisation who would bring reform if given time.[5] According to Peter Thwaites, the commander of the Muscat Regiment, the Dhofari guerrillas' shift to the left 'came as a relief ... as balm to a troubled conscience'. It was much easier fighting *against* Communism than it was fighting *for* a reactionary Sultan.[6]

Another British officer in the Muscat Regiment, P.S. Allfree, described a visit to the Muscat prison, the Jelali: 'I had no wish to repeat my excursion; I felt physically depressed and mentally sick. The ordinary prisoners were permanently shackled with ponderous iron bars between their ankles. The tiny water ration, in that steaming furnace, must have been a tantalising mockery. More important prisoners were kept in perpetual solitary confinement.' He was shown a massive block of wood that held prisoners' legs absolutely rigid, unable to so much as flex a muscle; after a while 'the joints would set hard as in the most extreme arthritis' and, if continued long enough, the torture resulted in permanent injury, leaving its victims crippled. This unpleasant experience did not prevent Allfree serving as the Sultan's chief intelligence officer, actually consigning suspected dissidents to the Jellali.[7]

Other British officers in the Sultan's service were not so sensitive and had no reservations about their employer and his regime; indeed, royal autocracy was a perfectly legitimate form of government with which they felt completely at home. Corran Purdon, who was to command the Sultan's army, wrote enthusiastically of Said that you 'could almost touch his royal dignity and presence'. He thought 'he was doing what was right for his people and he was determined that there would be no sudden change to modernity and to possible decadent ways'. Said was 'very hard and tough, and he had little time for the inmates of Jellali'.[8]

Even more extreme was the endorsement that John Akehurst, the

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commander of the Dhofar Brigade in the closing stages of the Dhofar war, was to give to Said:

> I respect the old man's motives and am not so appalled as some by the cruelty and viciousness of his methods. These should not be judged by Western standards; indeed, I often found myself trying to explain to foreign journalists that many aspects of life in the country which were anathema to them were accepted as normal by the inhabitants. Crime deserved punishment, no matter how inhuman. Lopping off the hands of thieves or stoning adulterers did not lead to an orgy of bloodletting. It meant no stealing and precious little adultery.[9]

This support for Said's regime even extended to the institution of slavery. James Morris, the travel writer, who visited Oman at the end of 1955, described the country as 'a little backward Paradise on the sea-shore'. The Sultan was a benign despot who even treated his slaves 'kindly'; indeed, they 'had all the advantages of the welfare state, with one exception: they had to work'. It is perhaps something of a surprise to find such a well-known writer expressing a coded preference for slavery as opposed to the welfare state, but Morris was not alone.[10] David Smiley also considered that slaves 'were well-treated – unless they ran away and were caught, in which case they might well be whipped or put in shackles'. He recalls a quaint custom whereby, 'if a runaway slave could reach the British Consulate and clasp the flagpole in the courtyard, he became free. My most accomplished bugler, whom we named Sambo, was one of these.'[11] It is hard to come to terms with the fact that these comments were written this century. A somewhat less favourable view was presented by a reporter from *The Times* newspaper who visited the royal palace in Salalah after Said had been deposed in July 1970:

> Among twelve slaves presented to foreign journalists some had been forced, under pain of beating, not to speak. As a result they had become mutes. Others stood with their heads bowed and eyes fixed on the ground, their necks now paralysed. The slightest glance sideways resulted in a severe beating or imprisonment. Others had incurred physical deformity from similar cruelty.[12]

British support for this despotism, which continued under successive governments, both Conservative and Labour, and without which it could not have survived, remains one of the most unsavoury episodes in postwar British foreign policy.

Jebel Akhdar

Ever since the conclusion of the Treaty of Sib in 1920, the Sultanate had controlled Muscat but exercised only nominal control over the

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interior of Oman where the tribes had instead given their allegiance to the Imam. This situation continued until the 1950s, with Sultan Said showing no interest whatsoever in trying to regain control of the area. Only when exploration for oil began to get underway did the British decide that it was necessary to secure the interior, something that became increasingly urgent once it became clear that the Imam Ghalib bin Ali had ambitions to establish an independent state. He was encouraged and supported by Saudi Arabia and the powerful American oil company, Aramco. They hoped to exclude the British from the exploitation of any oil reserves discovered in the area.

In September 1955, the Sultan's forces began what James Morris light-heartedly described as 'a healthy old-fashioned little war', invading the interior and marching on Nizwa, the Imam's capital. They occupied the town on 15 December without having met any resistance. Ghalib surrendered, but his brother, Talib, attempted to rally opposition and put up a fight, before being forced to flee. He took sanctuary in Saudi Arabia. While the operation had been a great success, Talib began training and equipping a rebel army with the intention of returning to drive the Sultan's forces out of the interior. In mid-June 1957, Talib and his men landed on the Batinah coast, bringing with them weapons and large quantities of American-made mines that were to play a crucial part in their rebellion. Moving in small groups, they made their way up country and raised the standard of revolt. Ghalib rejoined his brother in the struggle. The rebel forces occupied a number of fortified strongholds and carried out a series of harassing attacks and ambushes that culminated in the destruction of the Oman regiment in July. Ghalib reoccupied Nizwa and drove the Sultan's forces out of the interior. The British responded with a series of air attacks on rebel strongholds carried out by rocket-firing Venom jets, a demonstration of air power intended to intimidate the rebel tribes. They imposed an air blockade on rebel areas which were subjected to regular air patrols in search of targets of opportunity. At the same time, the Sultan's forces were reinforced and they counter-attacked in two columns, advancing on and re-taking Nizwa. The Imam and his brother, with some 600 followers, withdrew to the comparative security of the Jebel Akhdar.

The Jebel Akhdar is a sheer limestone massif some fifty miles in length and twenty miles wide, with peaks rising to nearly 10,000 feet. On the massif is a fertile plateau at 6,000 feet, with villages and crops that could feed and house the rebel forces and caves in which they could take shelter from bombing. The only approaches were through narrow ravines which were easily defended by machine gun and mortar. It was, as Michael Dewar points out, 'one of the greatest natural fortresses in the world'.[13]

Early attempts to break onto the plateau were repulsed. Indeed, the

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rebels proved much more effective, raiding down from the Jebel and laying mines that caused the Sultan's forces considerable problems. According to P.S. Allfree, the mines were 'an imperial headache ... at the height of the plague, we lost two and sometimes three trucks blown up in one day. We had no wealth of lorries and certainly none to spare, so this was developing for us into something like the U-boat blockade was to Britain.'[14] Another British officer, Anthony Shepherd, complained of how the rebels had come down one night to lay mines 'within a few yards of the camp. The Hussars' water-truck went up on one just beyond the gates, and the camp began to look like a scrapyard for crashed vehicles.'[15] Mines continued to be a problem throughout the campaign. David Smiley complained that he was not 'able to use the German – or Russian – methods of reprisals against the nearest villages whenever there was an incident'. If he had, 'we should have had no trouble'. As it was, even when captured, minelayers were only imprisoned: 'I felt they should have been shot.' Nevertheless, he admits that there were reprisals. After a British soldier was killed outside the village of Muti, he had the place destroyed: 'We went systematically from house to house, setting each alight with paraffin until nothing remained but smouldering ruins.'[16]

The British responded with a relentless air and artillery bombardment of the plateau and the plateau villages that steadily intensified over the course of 1958. According to Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lees, both Venom jets and four-engined Shackleton heavy bombers 'carried out a heavy programme of attacks on cultivation and water supplies ... So effective was this form of harassment that cultivation and movement by daylight in the villages under attack came virtually to a standstill.' To sustain the pressure, night-time bombing and shelling were introduced.[17] Despite this bombardment, by the middle of the year support for the Imam seemed to be increasing among the tribes of the interior and it became clear that the army was going to have to take action to drive him off the plateau.

Enter the SAS

David Smiley was sent to Oman to take command of the reorganised Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), as this army was now known, charged with the reduction of the Jebel Akhdar.[18] It was clear that the SAF was in no state to attempt the operation and so he submitted a plan that required the commitment of British forces: an infantry battalion plus supporting arms. The Jebel would be stormed by a conventional assault accompanied by a small diversionary airborne landing. This was turned down by the British government as too expensive and politically inconvenient. Instead, Frank Kitson, a staff officer at the War Office, put forward a proposal for a pseudo-gang operation which would only

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require forty-odd British soldiers, together with a contingent of 'turned' rebel prisoners. They would be able to infiltrate the Jebel. While the use of pseudo-gangs was considered impractical, Kitson's plan did suggest a method that perhaps the SAS, at that time employed in Malaya, could put into effect. It is doubtful whether the SAS would otherwise have survived the ending of the Malayan Emergency, being regarded as a deep jungle penetration unit. Now they were provided with an opportunity to demonstrate their versatility. There is some justice to Kitson's judgment that the most important effect of the Jebel Akhdar campaign was to be 'that it ensured the continued existence of the Special Air Service'.[19]

Meanwhile the air bombardment was stepped up and at last began to have some effect. Lees gives some idea of the 'weight of this attack':

> during the week ending 12 September, Shackleton's dropped 148 x 1,000lb bombs; 40 rockets were fired by Venoms and a large quantity of 20 millimetre ammunition expended. During the latter part of this month *HMS Bulwark* arrived in the Gulf of Oman and her full complement of Sea Venoms and Seahawks joined in the air attack. In one week, forty-three offensive sorties against plateau targets were flown from the ships as well as ten reconnaissance sorties. Within the confines of a relatively small target area, air attacks continuing for week after week against simple agricultural tribes was a terrifying experience ... There were increasing numbers of reports that villagers were pleading with their Imam Ghalib to go down the mountain and surrender because of the miserable conditions they were being forced to endure resulting from the destruction of cultivation and livestock.[20]

This bombardment of defenceless peasants went apparently unnoticed in Britain.

D Squadron of 22 SAS, about sixty strong, arrived in Oman on 18 November. They were, according to Allfree, 'the coolest and most frightening body of professional killers I have ever seen'.[21] They immediately began aggressive patrolling to clear the lower slopes of the Jebel and identifying possible routes onto the plateau. December saw the first incursions onto the plateau from both the north and the south sides where they encountered fierce resistance. This decided the SAS commander, Colonel Tony Deane Drummond, that reinforcements were needed for the final assault, and so, on 9 January 1959, A squadron was flown in. Morale, Peter de la Billière, recalled, was

> soaring. Even by our own high standards we were incredibly fit: people's skins were peeling and splitting with sunburn, but most of us had faces and arms tanned the colour of horse-chestnuts, and we rejoiced at the challenge of the hard climbing with which the Jebel

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> presented us. In every way this was an ideal operation for the SAS. Unlike in Malaya, where we hardly ever set eyes on the enemy, here we saw adoo every day: once we were up in the mountain, pretty well any Arab was fair game.[22]

The plan of attack involved the SAS breaking onto the plateau in strength on its south-west side, while diversionary measures directed Talib's attention elsewhere. It worked without a hitch. The rebels left a strong detachment watching the Tanuf track onto the plateau and reinforced the Aquabat al Dhafar position. Only two men were watching the approach the SAS attackers actually used and they were killed in a grenade attack. Once the attackers were on the plateau in strength, the rebels either surrendered or melted away. They quite correctly recognised that they had no chance of defeating well-trained, wellarmed troops with strong air support in a stand-up fight for control of territory. Their guerrilla tactics, that had proven so effective in harassing the Sultan's Armed Forces, were of no use once the SAS had got on to the plateau. It would have taken conventional infantry attacks to have driven them off and this the rebel forces were not organised, trained or equipped to make. The Imam had lost his stronghold (both he and his brother escaped to Saudi Arabia) and all that remained was for the defeated rebels to be mopped up. The SAS had successfully broken the back of the rebellion with the loss of only three men killed and one wounded.[23]

Smiley was subsequently to complain about the way 'the SAS received the entire credit for our success', while the Sultan's Armed Forces 'were totally ignored, although they had suffered the highest casualties'.[24] This was to become a regular feature of operations involving the SAS. For the SAS, however, the Jebel Akhdar operation was 'a turning-point'. In de la Billière's words, 'We had shown that we were a flexible force capable of adapting quickly to new conditions. We had demonstrated that a small number of men could be flown into a trouble spot rapidly and discreetly, and operate in a remote area without publicity – a capability much valued by the Conservative government of the day.'[25]

The Dhofar War

Dhofar is the southern-most province of the Omani Sultanate, a distinct tropical region, about the same size as Wales, adjacent to South Yemen and separated from the rest of Oman by five hundred miles of desert. The province has relatively heavy monsoon rainfall (thirty inches a year) which creates a forty mile wide strip of green along the coast. Within this strip, the coastal plain is dominated by the mountainous hinterland, the Jebel, which is ideal terrain for guerrilla

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activity. Beyond this tropical strip of plain and mountain lies the desert, stretching to Saudi Arabia. Dhofar had a population estimated at between 30,000 and 50,000 in the 1970s. According to Fred Halliday, while Oman was a British colony, Dhofar was an Omani colony, ruled even more oppressively than the rest of the sultanate.[26] The Sultan himself had taken up residence in the Dhofari capital, Salalah, in 1958 and was consequently able to satisfy his great dislike for the Dhofari people at first hand. As he told Corran Purdon on a number of occasions: 'If you are out walking and meet a Dhofari and a snake, tread on the Dhofari.'[27]

The Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) was founded in 1962 by Dhofaris living and working in exile. Before the end of that year, the first smallscale attacks had begun. The guerrilla campaign only developed slowly, but the Sultan failed to take any effective counter-measures. Said's dislike of the Dhofaris precluded any concessions, and his army, such as it was, had not the strength successfully to intimidate the Jebel tribesmen. After members of his bodyguard attempted to assassinate him on 28 April 1966, Said imposed a virtual blockade on the Jebel in retaliation, but only succeeded in driving the population into the hands of the DLF. By the end of 1967, the rebels were strong enough to dominate the Jebel but not to pose any serious threat to Jelalah with its RAF base. At the same time, the Sultan's forces could mount operations into the Jebel but were not strong enough to remain there and pacify it. The situation was one of stalemate.

This changed in November 1967 when the British were expelled from South Yemen and a revolutionary government took power, committed to liberating the Gulf from the control of the British and their Arab allies. The new People's Republic of South Yemen not only supplied the rebels with military assistance (weapons, training, safe bases) but also brought about a radicalisation of the DLF. The humiliating defeat inflicted on the British in the struggle for South Yemen strengthened the revolutionary nationalists within the DLF. In August 1968, the DLF became the People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) under the control of a radical faction led by Muhammad Ahmad al-Ghassani. The rebels went onto the offensive.

Ranulph Fiennes, an officer in the Muscat Regiment, writes of how:

> newly trained adoo bands with modern weapons had arrived in many regions of the Jebel. Their tactics were imaginative, their shooting accurate. Weapons such as heavy 81mm mortars and Russian machine-guns were now in adoo hands. It was no longer safe for Army units to travel in the Jebel at less than half company strength, some sixty men ... As the last monsoon mists lingered over the Jebel, four Land Rovers of the Northern Frontier Recce Platoon were ambushed in a gulley between three adoo machine-guns. The

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> leading two vehicles and their crews were shredded. Total slaughter was averted only by a shift in the mist cover.[28]

By the summer of 1970, the guerrillas 'were in control of roughly two-thirds of Dhofar'.[29] The Sultan's forces were penned into a coastal enclave around Salalah, which was effectively under siege. The final straw for the British was a rebel attempt in June to open a new front in Oman with attempts to seize the towns of Izki and Nizwa. These failed, but they sealed Said's fate. On 23 July 1970, the Sultan was forcibly deposed in an almost bloodless coup (he shot himself in the foot) and the British installed his son, Qaboos bin Said, in his place. The new Sultan, a product of Sandhurst and a former British army officer, was thought a better figurehead for the reconquest of Dhofar. His father was flown into exile in Britain and kept in secluded luxury in a London hotel, where he died in 1972.

Shortly before this 'palace revolution', an SAS team headed by Colonel John Watts had visited Dhofar and drawn up plans for a sustained counter-insurgency campaign. Rebel control of the Jebel had to be contested and broken by determined military action and rebel lines of communication with South Yemen had to be severed. Instead of this bringing in its train reprisals against the local people, Watts recommended a 'hearts and minds' effort to be conducted on 'five fronts' and spearheaded by the SAS. The five fronts campaign would involve the establishment of an effective intelligence apparatus, the provision of medical treatment, the provision of veterinary assistance and a programme of agricultural development, the establishment of a psychological warfare capability, and the raising of local militia forces, the *firqats*, to help fight the PFLOAG.[30] Literally within hours of Said's removal, an SAS team was on its way by air to Dhofar, ready to begin the implementation of Watts's plan.

A model counter-insurgency campaign

In his memoirs, Peter de la Billière, who commanded 22 SAS for part of the Dhofar conflict, describes it as 'the most important and far-reaching ever fought by the SAS. Our involvement ... rolled back and finally dissipated the tide of Communism which threatened to overwhelm Southern Arabia.'[31] Even taking into account his pronounced tendency to exaggerate the role of the SAS (he gives them credit for turning the tide in Malaya, for example), on this occasion there is some justice to his claims. Tony Jeapes, an SAS Squadron commander in Dhofar, in his account of the war describes it as 'a model campaign ... one of the most successful campaigns of modern years'. He emphasises, however, that it was a very small scale war: 'an infantry brigade with a strong air force and some naval support on the one side,

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and about two thousand guerrillas on the other', and the casualties 'were few, measured in hundreds rather than thousands'. Moreover, it was 'a war in which both sides concentrated upon winning the support of the civilians of the Jebel Dhofar and which was won in the end by civil development, with military action merely a means to that end'. The role of the SAS was, he insists, 'critical' and 'it is fair to say that without the SAS the war would not have been won'. This is not to say that the SAS won the war on their own, but rather that they made the victory of the Sultan's Armed Forces possible.[32]

The reconquest of the Jebel had two interrelated components: first, the establishment of a military presence, the ending of PFLOAG domination and the severing of rebel lines of communication with neighbouring Yemen, and, second, the consolidation of military success through civic action, through a 'hearts and minds' programme that was intended to win the local people over to the Sultanate. These two aspects of the campaign against the PFLOAG went hand in hand, each making the success of the other possible. From this point of view, it does seem legitimate to characterise it as a model counter-insurgency campaign. One vital development made the waging of such a campaign possible: the increasing revenues that Qaboos was receiving from the exploitation of the Sultanate's oil reserves. This made possible both the modernisation of the SAF, the dramatic increase in spending on welfare and development projects and the regular payment of large numbers of surrendered rebels. Whereas, in 1971, the government spent $60 million on economic and social development, by 1975 expenditure had risen to almost $1,000 million.[33] Without such massive resources, Qaboos would have been forced to rely on repression carried out by a badly equipped army, with the very real likelihood that the war would have been lost. It must also be said that, as far as the British government was concerned, it was only the need to safeguard the Sultanate's oil reserves that made the prospect of the overthrow of the regime unacceptable, that prevented the British from cutting their losses and abandoning Qaboos, as they had the sultans and sheikhs of South Yemen. It was only the oil that made Dhofar worth fighting for.

Early in 1971, the SAF launched Operation Hornet, an incursion into the central region of the Jebel that achieved some success when the rebels attempted to stand and fight rather than slipping away. Other operations were carried out in the western and eastern regions. These attacks certainly shook the rebels, but the SAF was not yet confident or strong enough to establish permanent military bases. With the onset of the monsoon in June, SAF units withdrew back to the coastal plain and the PFLOAG quickly reasserted its control, eliminating anyone who had collaborated with their enemy. The monsoon brought rain, mist and cloud that closed down air support and left the SAF vulnerable to attack. Clearly, if the Jebel was to be pacified, some way had to be

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found to overcome this problem. Only once this was accomplished could the Civil Action Teams that were to win the allegiance of the local population get to work.

Crucial in this respect were the activities of the SAS, usually no more than a hundred strong, operating as a British Army Training Team (BATT). They were responsible for raising the *firqats*, a local militia cum pseudo gang that enlisted surrendered or defecting rebels. As early as February 1970, the increasing radicalisation of the revolutionary movement had seen some defections, with one group, led by Salim Mubarak, deciding to throw in its lot with the new Sultan rather than remain with the PFLOAG. A crucial factor here was the PFLOAG's hostility to Islam. This particular defection not only provided vital intelligence that had hitherto been in short supply, but also provided the core of the first *firqat*, the Firqat Salahadin, that went into action for the first time in February 1971. The *firqats* were to play an important role in the defeat of the PFLOAG. They proved a continual source of intelligence and local knowledge, fought the rebels using their own methods against them and, moreover, offered any rebels whose commitment might be weakening a permanent reminder that surrender could be both safe and profitable.

'Hearts and minds' campaigns are not soft-hearted exercises in sentimentality carried out by social workers in uniform. Alongside the reforms and concessions, the material advantages, that are intended to win over the 'hearts' of the local population, there is the use of force to focus their 'minds'. The population have to be convinced of the power of the government and of the ability of the security forces to inflict punishment if support and assistance is extended to the rebels. Only in this way would their 'minds' be won over. In Dhofar, this use of force involved a war waged against the civilian population in those areas of the country under PFLOAG control, a war carried out primarily from the air. Fred Halliday, who paid a number of clandestine visits to the liberated areas later wrote of

> the suffering inflicted on the population. In the border area I went through the civilian population were forced to live in the deeper caves ... Everybody one met had lost animals in the recent fighting; and many had lost members of their family. A growing number of refugees from the west and the central region had moved out of the combat zones and on to the Yemeni side of the border. In addition the economic blockade had led to intense malnutrition, especially in the east and the centre as a result of the cutting off of imports from the coast and the systematic SOAF (Sultan of Oman's Air Force) burning of crops at harvest-time. Among the population as a whole, the consequences of malnutrition, tuberculosis and anaemia were increasing.

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He goes on:

> By bombing and shelling the liberated areas the British forced the population to move out and to flee to safer areas. The British poisoned and blew up the wells, burnt villages, set crops and food stores on fire, shot herds and cut off food supplies. This policy, already consistently applied in the Radfan, was one of all-out attack on the population who supported the revolution.[34]

The battle of Mirbat

In October 1971, a determined effort, Operation Jaguar, was made to establish permanent bases on the Jebel. A strong force, composed of two SAF companies, two SAS squadrons, five *firqats* and supporting arms (nearly 800 men), commanded by Colonel John Watts, moved onto the eastern Jebel. After some skirmishing, they occupied the village of Jibjat and established a stronghold known as 'White City' at Medinat Al Haq. The consolidation of this military success by the activation of civil action programmes took much too long, to the disgust of John Watts. Nevertheless, this was a first significant success.[35] Other operations were carried out to disrupt rebel supply lines. Much further to the west, on the Yemeni border, Operation Simba saw the SAF establish a stronghold at Sarfait in April 1972. The garrison was not strong enough to dominate the surrounding area and remained under virtual siege. Sarfait was subjected to continuous shelling, both by the rebels and by Yemeni artillery, and had to be resupplied by air. It had been hoped that the stronghold would provide a base from which rebel supply lines across the border could be threatened, but this proved to be too ambitious an objective at this time. Instead, all that was achieved was to tie down troops holding a fixed position which could not be exploited, when they could have been better employed elsewhere. Nevertheless, despite setbacks and difficulties, as the monsoon season approached in 1972, the military situation had been successfully transformed, with the SAF taking the offensive.

The PFLOAG leadership responded with a daring counter-attack. In mid-July, a force of heavily armed guerrillas, perhaps 300-strong, equipped with two 75mm recoilless rifles, a Carl Gustav rocket launcher and a number of mortars, attempted to overrun the seaside town of Mirbat, some forty miles from Salalah. Taking advantage of monsoon cloud cover which would prevent air support, they hoped to capture the town before reinforcements could arrive. They did not intend to try and hold it, but were going to execute the local Wali or Sultan's representative and other collaborators before retreating back to the safety of the Jebel. This would be a humiliating setback for the

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Sultan's regime. It would effectively deter any Dhofaris from rallying to his cause and might even force the SAF to withdraw from the Jebel in order to defend against any further rebel attacks.

Mirbat's defences consisted of two mud-walled forts, one held by a force of twenty-five gendarmes and the other by thirty *askars*, the Wali's personal bodyguard, and a fortified BATT-house occupied by Captain Mike Kealy and eight SAS. There was also a sixty-strong *firqat* whose members lived with their families in the town itself. The heaviest weapon available to the defenders was a 25 pounder howitzer outside the gendarme fort. A barbed wire fence surrounded both the town and the two forts. Earlier, rebel movements had been reported in the nearby Jebel that came down near to the coast and thirty *firqa* had been sent to investigate. The likelihood is that the guerrillas believed the SAS would have gone with them. They were mistaken.

In the early hours of 19 July, the guerrillas launched an assault on the gendarme fort, advancing under a barrage of artillery and mortar fire from off the Jebel. The attacking force was broken up by machine gun fire from the BATT-house and their attempts to knock out the howitzer and to storm the fort failed. Even after this initial assault was held, the rebels still seemed to have victory in their grasp, given their superior numbers and firepower. The weather let them down. The cloud cleared enough for Strikemaster jets to provide air support, pounding them with cannon and rocket fire, and for helicopters to fly in SAS reinforcements. The guerrillas were caught out in the open, badly hurt and forced to retreat. They were under continual air attack and pursued by the SAS. They had suffered a serious defeat in a battle that had lasted only five hours.[36] Two SAS troopers and two gendarmes had been killed in the fighting, but rebel losses were considerably heavier. Thirty-eight bodies were recovered, but most estimates place their fatalities at double that number at least. Another twelve rebels were captured. The rebel dead were flown back to Salalah and 'put on public display in the main square for several days ... so the local people could see for themselves that the law was being carried out and that the Sultan and his forces were winning the war.'[37]

According to most accounts, the battle of Mirbat was the turning point in the Dhofar war. John Watts described it as 'the beginning of the end' for the PFLOAG; Tony Jeapes considered it 'a milestone'; and for Peter de la Billière the battle was 'a shattering reverse' for the rebels and 'the turning point'.[38] In a recent popular history of the SAS, Anthony Kemp argues that 'the successful defence of Mirbat broke the back of the adoo resistance ... the rebels had been decisively beaten'. He writes of the war being 'destined to linger on'.[39] These claims are exaggerated. Undoubtedly, the PFLOAG had suffered a serious setback, but one from which they could certainly have recovered if they had not already lost the strategic initiative in the war. Decisive in this

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respect was the establishment of permanent strongholds on the Jebel and the beginning of its effective pacification. There was still to be considerable fighting, in which the SAS was to play only a minor role, before the rebels were finally defeated. Moreover, a good case can be made that the PFLOAG suffered an even more serious, if much less well known, reverse in December 1972, when the Sultan's intelligence service broke up a network of underground revolutionary cells in Oman. There were seventy-seven arrests, followed by the execution of ten of those involved and long prison sentences for the rest, including thirty-two life sentences. This was a more serious blow than even the defeat at Mirbat.[40]

Pacification and defeat

Even after the victory at Mirbat, the SAF remained too weak to press home its advantage. The war continued, but more troops were required for offensive operations to secure the Jebel. With the British unwilling to increase their commitment (at its height this amounted to around a thousand military personnel, including officers serving with the SAF, the SAS and a RAF contingent), the Sultan turned elsewhere. Towards the end of 1973, he received welcome reinforcements in the form of a 1,500-strong Iranian battle group despatched by the Shah. This well-equipped American-trained force was used to open the Midway Road from Salalah through the Jebel to Thumrait in the north. The rebels made a determined effort to prevent this and successfully ambushed Iranian troops on a number of occasions, but the road was kept open. Indeed, it was converted into a modern made-up motorway. This was a major success, opening up the central Jebel and greatly strengthening the government's position. Most British accounts of the war, it should be noted, seriously downplay the Iranian contribution to the Sultan's eventual victory. There can be little doubt that if it had been British troops who had opened the road, it would be regarded as a crucial episode in the winning of the war.

While operations continued on the Jebel, in the central and eastern regions of Dhofar a major effort was made to cut rebel supply lines. To this end, in March 1974, British and Jordanian engineers were brought in to construct a thirty-five mile long barrier, the Hornbeam Line, inland from the coast near Mugsayl. This was intended to cut the central and eastern regions off from the western region, making it much more difficult for the rebels to send in weapons, supplies and reinforcements. The barrier consisted of a barbed wire fence reinforced with mines and ground sensors, and with the high ground dominated by SAF outposts. Construction was completed by the summer of 1974. This never completely stopped supplies getting through, but considerably reduced the quantities: instead of camel trains making the

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journey, now only small groups of guerrillas on foot and with what they could carry got through. Later, the Hornbeam Line was backed up by another barrier, the Hammer Line, built as a long-stop further to the east. Once these were in place, the successful pacification of the central and eastern regions became only a matter of time.

A key part in the pacification of the Jebel was played by the Civil Aid Teams (CATs) that followed after the SAF. Very much the brainchild of the SAS, these were meant to provide the local population with tangible, material benefits that would win them over to the Sultan's cause. Once an area was considered secure, a CAT would move in and establish a centre. A well would be dug, a school and a clinic would be established, a market would be set up and a mosque would be built. Various longer-term projects would be initiated, such as roadbuilding schemes and programmes for the improvement of livestock. A vital part in all this was played by religion, with the government proclaiming its devotion to Islam and condemning the rebels as atheists and the persecutors of religion. According to Tony Jeapes, 'Civil Aid was ... one of the success stories' of the war. By June 1975, thirty-five wells had been drilled and 155 miles of road opened up on the Jebel.[41] A measure of their success was the growing number of defectors from the rebel army and the growth of the *firqat* force that, by the end of the war, had increased to around 3,000 men. The 'hearts and minds' dimension to the campaign secured the rear, ensuring that the guerrillas never returned. What made this possible, of course, was the oil wealth that the Sultan now had access to.

At the end of 1974, the new British commander of the Dhofar Brigade, John Akehurst, was in a position to turn his attention towards the western region. By now, rebel strength had been reduced to around 800 guerrilla fighters, with perhaps another thousand men in their home guard. They were still to put up a determined resistance. At last, in December, Akehurst launched a two pronged attack towards Rakhuyt, the last settlement of any importance still in rebel hands, and towards Shershitti with its heavily defended complex of caves. Rakhuyt fell to the Iranians but resistance was unexpectedly fierce and Shershitti could not be taken, with the SAF and SAS suffering 'a bloody repulse'.[42] Enough had been achieved, however, for the Iranians, with Jordanian help, to begin the construction of another barrier, the Demavand Line. This would cut off the contested border area from the rest of the western region so that supplies and reinforcements could no longer get through. While the western region was being cleared, preparations were made for a final offensive to secure the border. The final defeat of what had by now become the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO) was only a matter of time.

The last offensive was launched in October 1975. By now, the guerrillas had been reinforced by 300–400 regular troops from the

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People's Republic of South Yemen. Akehurst ordered air strikes against guerrilla bases and artillery positions across the border, much to the consternation of the British government. At the same time, the strengthened garrison on the border at Sarfait at last broke out to join up with forces advancing from Rakhuyt. After heavy fighting, the Shershitti caves were cleared and the Yemeni forces, together with the remnants of the rebel forces, retreated across the border. Defeat was complete. In November, ninety-four guerrillas surrendered and the following month another thirty-six, among them a number of senior guerrilla leaders. On 4 December, Akehurst informed Qaboos that victory was his.[43]

Artillery exchanges and air strikes across the border continued into the new year, until an agreement was finally reached with the People's Republic in March 1976. There were also many isolated groups of guerrillas still at large and scattered throughout Dhofar. How dangerous they could still be was demonstrated on Christmas Day, when, only a couple of weeks after he had announced victory, Akehurst was visiting troops in the eastern region. He was flying by helicopter to Tawa Atair when, below him, he saw a lone guerrilla who 'began to fire his AK47 at us'. Much to Akehurst's discomfort, the helicopter was hit seven times and forced to crash land, although without any casualties. Six months later, when the man finally came in to surrender, he was, Akehurst somewhat ruefully remarks, 'rightly very proud of himself'.[44] All that remained, however, were mopping up operations and the activities of the Civil Aid Teams, consolidating the military victory into a political one. The SAS were finally pulled out in September 1976.[45]

The British had, according to one counterinsurgency expert, produced 'a textbook counterinsurgency campaign to add to their renowned victory in Malaya'.[46] How valid is this assessment? In reality, the Dhofar war was a very small-scale conflict in which the Sultan was able to bring overwhelmingly superior force to bear on the PFLOAG insurgents. This military superiority, together with the ability, courtesy of his oil revenues, to finance development in the Jebel and to buy loyalty, gave him a decisive advantage. The guerrillas' courage, self-sacrifice and endurance were, in the end, not enough to overcome this. While Dhofar was certainly a British victory, it was a victory achieved in the most favourable circumstances with the odds very much on its side.

And one battle in particular has proved crucial to the ongoing glorification of the SAS – the battle of Mirbat, discussed above. Why did this brief five-hour engagement come, in hindsight, to be seen as so important, been celebrated as the moment of decision? The answer is quite simple: the battle has a useful ideological function – in general terms, as a celebration of the British soldier hero and, in more particular terms, as part of the myth of the SAS. It has become another

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Rorke's Drift. The best of British manhood demonstrated their courage and prowess against overwhelming odds in an exotic setting. In Michael Dewar's words, it 'is a wonderful tale of derring-do'.[47] The romance of Empire is combined with the excitement of a heroic stand against the menace of Communism. The British are triumphantly shown to be still the same people who had, in earlier years, ruled much of the globe. As well as this validation of British masculinity, focus on the battle of Mirbat served to invert the reality of a war in which Goliath successfully passed himself off as David. Instead of hard-pressed guerrillas being remorselessly ground down by superior forces with complete air superiority, Mirbat supplies a dominant image of the war as one of the outnumbered SAS holding off waves of Arab fanatics. As such, it provided a vital element in the SAS myth that is peddled in modern Britain, and that sells British military prowess abroad.

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