



RAF Venoms were used to destroy rebel strong points using their considerable fire power

# **The Jebel Akhdar War**

## **The Royal Air Force in Oman 1952-1959**

By Air Vice-Marshal Peter Dye

The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, following Turkey's defeat in the First World War, triggered the creation of states and international boundaries where none existed before. The straight lines that defined the new political map of the Middle East reflected the handiwork of cartographers rather than geographers or historians. The price for this externally imposed order has been a century of internal unrest – exacerbated by the region's strategic importance, as the main source of the West's oil supplies – and a succession of inter-state conflicts that have attracted rival sponsors engaged in wider political and ideological struggles.

It is possible to regard both the Jebel Akhdar War, and the subsequent Dhofar Campaign, as proxy conflicts of the Cold War – this was certainly the contemporary perspective – but in reality they drew on deeper grievances caused by poor governance, deprivation and economic disparity. To this unfortunate mixture one might also add feudal values, tribal rivalries and the long standing distrust between the interior (Oman) and the coastal towns (Muscat).

### **Jebel Akhdar**

The interior of Oman is dominated by the massive plateau of Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountain) that lies some 80 miles to the southwest of Muscat, the capital city and main port of Oman. It is neither green, nor a single mountain, but a large grey-brown massif covering more than 700 square miles with individual peaks rising to nearly 10,000 feet. It is home to around 58 separate villages and over 700 wadis. Until the construction of roads, it took a 6 hour climb, up a near vertical path, to reach the main plateau at 6,000 feet. The tribes of the area have always been fiercely independent and have successfully defied invaders for centuries.

The rebellion began in 1954 and was, in essence, a power struggle between the Sultan and the tribes of the interior – driven by the prospect of substantial oil reserves. The uprising was quickly suppressed by the Sultan's forces but two years later the rebellion flared up again. With money, training and arms provided by Saudi Arabia, and the vocal support of Egypt, it looked as if control of the interior might be wrested from the Sultan. In the end, the rebels were defeated, but only with British assistance and after an 18 month campaign involving the extensive use of air power, including the employment of air control techniques developed and refined by the Royal Air Force [RAF] in Iraq and Aden over the previous 30 years.<sup>1</sup>

The final assault on Jebel Akhdar was carried out by the Special Air Service [SAS] under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions. This redoubtable feat of arms almost certainly saved the Regiment from disbandment but it also overshadowed the achievements of the RAF in carrying out some 2,000 offensive sorties with just a handful of aircraft – avoiding the need to employ substantial ground forces. The Jebel Akhdar War is now little remembered, but it remains an impressive and instructive example of what joint operations can achieve with modest resources but with clear, consistent and fully aligned military and political strategies. This paper will outline the background to the campaign, describe the role of air power in defeating the rebels and identify the lessons of continuing relevance for counter-insurgency operations.

### **The Buraimi Dispute**

The immediate cause of the fighting in Oman was the longstanding determination of Saudi Arabia to revise her frontiers and extend her influence in south-east Arabia. After the Second

World War these ambitions focussed on the Buraimi Oasis (comprising 8 villages, with a population of about 25,000, 200 miles to the northwest of Muscat) where there was the prospect of significant oil reserves and a history of disputed sovereignty. In 1952 a small armed party from Saudi Arabia occupied one of the villages and refused to withdraw despite protests.<sup>2</sup> The Sultan raised an army of some 8,000 tribesmen to expel the invaders, but was deterred from taking action by the British Government, who hoped to achieve a peaceful solution through the ongoing Anglo-Saudi boundary negotiations.<sup>3</sup> A show of force by 3 Vampires from RAF Sharjah and the deployment of 100 Trucial Oman Scouts, failed to move the Saudis - although the low flying aircraft and leaflet drops brought strong protests about British intimidation and aggression.

A stalemate ensued with the British anxious to avoid confrontation but willing to show support for the Sultan by increasing the ground and air forces in the area, including the loan of 400 Aden Protectorate Levies and two flights of RAF armoured cars.<sup>4</sup> This had little noticeable effect on the negotiations and by early 1953 it was evident that something else was needed. In the belief that a settlement was still possible, an aerial blockade was initiated to put additional pressure on the Saudi garrison. There were only a limited number of tracks converging on the Oasis and it proved possible to detect approaching caravans out to several hundred miles; using the Trucial Oman Scouts and RAF armoured cars to intercept any suspicious movements. The Vampires at Sharjah were accordingly replaced by Lancasters which had the necessary range and endurance to maintain the blockade. The RAF's visible presence also served to encourage those tribes that preferred

to remain loyal to the Sultan. It was tedious work, however, involving low level flying in extremely high temperatures with the risk of severe turbulence. More worryingly, a number of incidents between dissident tribes and the Levies revealed Whitehall's continuing reluctance to authorise live ammunition or the dropping of warning bombs. The RAF's preference was to use the traditional methods of air proscription: leaflet warnings about continued misconduct; further warnings to permit safe evacuation; and the destruction of selected targets (generally villages or fortified towers). The Air Staff protested that:

*'There will be no solution to this frontier problem in south-eastern Arabia as long as we are denied the opportunity to exercise our proper and well tried methods of air control. In the meantime, we are committed to the present protracted and ineffective aerial reconnaissance to which there is no end in sight'<sup>5</sup>*

The Air Staff may, therefore, have been encouraged by a Time Magazine report that described the RAF's efforts as a 'sort of comic-opera blockade'.<sup>6</sup> The efforts to isolate the Saudis continued through the remainder of 1953, the only change being the replacement of the Lancasters by a flight of six, unarmed, Anson communications aircraft. Eventually, in the summer of 1954, the Anglo-Saudi negotiations produced an outcome. It was agreed that Buraimi and all other disputed territory would be evacuated - other than a small police force from both sides - pending the outcome of a joint arbitration tribunal. The aerial blockade was lifted and the RAF presence at Sharjah reduced to a small detachment.

In due course, British frustration at the slow process of the arbitration process and a suspicion that the Saudis

were covertly reinforcing their police presence led to an air/land operation in October 1955 to expel them. The RAF provided Lincoln heavy bombers as well as transport aircraft to move in the necessary ground forces. Full control of the Oasis was achieved at the cost of just 9 casualties.

Although the Buraimi affair had apparently been successfully concluded, the British Government - sensitive to international opinion and wary of intervention by the United Nations - had shown itself reluctant to employ force of arms in support of its treaty obligations. In the process, it had done little to enhance the Sultan's authority and, arguably, had merely exposed the frailty of his position. More importantly, none of this had dented Saudi ambitions.

#### **The Dispute in Central Oman**

The territory of Muscat and Oman has not always been a single state; moreover, as we have seen, its external boundaries were not well defined.

Although Muscat dominates the coastal periphery, the tribes of the interior have generally regarded their spiritual leader, the Imam, based in Nizwa, as having greater authority. It was only in 1920 that the Sultan of Muscat was formally recognised as having authority throughout Muscat and Oman.<sup>7</sup> When the Imam died in May 1954, a successor Ghalib bin Ali was appointed without reference to the Sultan. Ghalib's brother, Talib bin Ali, had ambitions to break free of the Sultan's control and established links with both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. One of Ghalib's first actions was to declare the oil concessions granted by the Sultan as invalid. Meanwhile, an Imamate office was opened in Cairo pending admission to the Arab League.

When the Saudis were finally ejected from Buraimi in October 1955, the Sultan decided to act against the Imam. In early December he ordered the Muscat and Oman Field Force [MOFF] to occupy Ibri.<sup>8</sup> No resistance was offered to the motorised column which then moved quickly to occupy Bahla, Rustaq and finally Nizwa. The Sultan himself travelled to Nizwa to accept homage from the tribes and to announce that the office of Imam had been abolished. Ghalib was allowed to return to his home village although his brother Talib evaded capture. The immediate threat posed by the Imam's ambitions had been removed, but the Sultan still left a small garrison of the MOFF in the Nizwa area to ensure future good behaviour. Meanwhile, Talib found refuge in Saudi Arabia where over the course of the next year he assembled, trained and armed several hundred supporters who would eventually form the basis of an Omani Liberation Army.

The 1956 Suez crisis did not impact directly on Oman, but the weakening of British authority across the Middle East provided encouragement to those determined to challenge existing borders or bent on overthrowing the old order. On 14 June 1957, Talib and about 200 heavily armed followers landed at two locations on the coast near Muscat.<sup>9</sup> Joining up with Ghalib, the brothers travelled to Wadi Ali in the shadow of the Jebel Akhdar, where the white flag of revolt was raised. Other leaders rushed to join them, including Suleiman bin Himayer, the 'Lord of the Green Mountain', and chief of the Bani Riyam tribe who lived on Jebel Akhdar and in the surrounding villages.<sup>10</sup> The MOFF tried to arrest Talib but were quickly



RAF Station Sharjah was one of the most important British assets in the Middle East during the 1950s. Seen here on the ramp (from left to right) are a Beverley of No 30 Squadron, a Twin Pioneer of No 152 Squadron and a Shackleton of No 37 Squadron

forced to withdraw under constant attack, suffering heavy casualties and losing most of their vehicles in the process. Nizwa itself fell to the rebels on 17 July.

Talib's rebellion had been intended to form one of two simultaneous uprisings, the second being in the Sharqiyah area east of the Jebel and south of Muscat. In the event, Talib arrived later than planned by which time the Sultan had imprisoned the Sharqiyah rebels. Although the situation might therefore have been a lot worse (from the Sultan's perspective), the defeat of the MOFF meant that there was little chance that the Sultan could deal with Talib on his own. Accordingly, he called on the British Government for help.<sup>11</sup> Given the very real danger that the Sultan would lose control of the interior – with serious implications for the entire region – the Government agreed to his request. To avoid wider diplomatic repercussions, it was decided to move quickly, but with minimum force. Three companies of 1st Battalion, The Cameronians, were immediately flown in by the RAF (including one company recalled from Kenya) while a fourth company was placed at 24 hours readiness to move. Three frigates were diverted to the Gulf, to prevent any further reinforcement of the rebels by sea, while Venom fighters and Shackleton maritime bombers,

together with Beverley, Hastings, Pembroke and Valetta transport aircraft, were deployed forward to Bahrain and Sharjah.

The plan was to use air power to weaken the rebel resolve sufficient to allow the Sultan's forces to re-occupy the area. Under Operation BLACK MAGIC, the region to the south of Jebel Akhdar (centred on Nizwa) was formally proscribed.<sup>12</sup> Proscription was, in effect, an inwards blockade that denied the inhabitants of the proscribed towns or villages the opportunity to travel or to work in their fields during daylight hours – on pain of attack. It aimed to disrupt agriculture and trade to such an extent that the tribes would capitulate. To achieve effect, it required a permanent air presence and the willingness to employ force when the proscription was broken.

The first phase, commencing on 19 July, involved intensive photographic and visual reconnaissance to identify the extent of the rebel area and their strongholds (noting those villages not flying the Sultan's red flag while recognising that white flags might indicate surrender rather than rebellion)! Much of the existing mapping was found inaccurate or misleading and provided no reliable information on tracks, watering holes or

spot heights. Although the proscribed area was over 350 miles from Bahrain, and 220 miles from Sharjah, the long endurance of the Shackletons enabled at least one aircraft to be constantly overhead during daylight hours, each mission lasting 9-10 hours.

Commencing 24 July, the fortified towers at Izki, Nizwa, Tanuf, Birkat al Mawz, Bahla and Firq were attacked on successive days. Each operation, using rockets and canon fire, was preceded by warning leaflets (dropped 48 hours in advance) while further leaflets were dropped during the course of the attacks repeating the proscription requirements.<sup>13</sup> The fort at Izki was badly damaged by Venoms, although the thick walls of the main tower at Nizwa proved more resilient against rockets. The barracks at Firq were also heavily attacked. Little or no movement was seen, indicating that the warnings had been successful – other than two vehicles that were set on fire – but many more red flags were reported once the Venoms had departed. Regular patrols using both Venoms and Shackletons kept up the pressure on the rebels while Meteor and Canberra aircraft continued to provide photographic coverage. By now, it was estimated that Talib's forces consisted of some 1,000 dissidents concentrated in the area bounded by Nizwa, Firq, Tanuf and Bahla.

Ground operations commenced on 6 August with the Sultan's forces advancing south from Bid Bid towards Izki, while the Cameronians and Trucial Oman Scouts, together with a troop of armoured cars, advanced north from Fahud, via Izz, towards Firq. The armoured cars, with additional Land Rovers, trucks and water-bowsers, had all been flown into Fahud by the RAF, using an improvised desert strip. The summer

heat was intense, as was the dust, but both columns were provided with close air support, directed by accompanying RAF air contact teams. Venoms and Shackletons were used to remove road blocks and to destroy rebel strong-points using their considerable fire power. The Venoms were armed with four 20mm cannon as well as carrying eight 3 inch rockets with a 60lb warhead while the Shackletons could drop up to 60 20lb fragmentation bombs as well as being equipped with a forward turret armed with twin 20mm cannon.

The rebels occupying Firq put up strong resistance, despite the weight of rocket and cannon fire.<sup>14</sup> However, a combination of day and night attacks saw the town captured on 11 August. Throughout this operation the Venom support was excellent. *'The pilots' accuracy was remarkable and they were quick to locate and attack targets that must have been difficult to spot in that bare terrain. During the attack ... the Venoms operated a 'cab rank' with a small air contact team with the forward troops, whilst overhead Shackletons circled like hens watching their chicks buzzing below.'*<sup>15</sup>

Nizwa was captured the next day, allowing the two columns to link up at Birkat al Mawz. Unfortunately, the

RAF Venoms attacking rebel forces



3 rebel leaders, Ghalib, Talib and Suleiman had avoided the encircling columns. A new civil administration was established in Nizwa but to secure the area against further rebellion, the forts at Tanuf and Izki were demolished by setting explosive charges while the fortified towers at Sait and Ghumer were destroyed by Venom rocket fire.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the long drawn out struggle at Buraimi, the Sultan's rule had been convincingly re-established in less than four weeks. Although the ring-leaders had escaped, the British Government took the opportunity to withdraw most of its forces – leaving only a few RAF aircraft at Sharjah – in the belief that the MOFF would be able to remove the last vestiges of resistance.<sup>17</sup>

#### **The Siege of Jebel Akhdar**

The remaining rebels, perhaps numbering no more than 600,<sup>18</sup> set up camp in the vicinity of Saiq, on the southern side of the Jebel.<sup>19</sup> Numerous large caves were to be found in the limestone which provided natural shelters against bombing or rocket attack. The plateau was bounded by vertical rock walls and steep escarpments cut by deep wadis which provided the only lines of communication. These were often little more than narrow paths, only passable in single file, and so steep that they could be held by just a handful of lightly armed defenders. Even without opposition, climbing the 6,000 feet to the plateau in the heat of the day represented an immense physical challenge that demanded a ready supply of water and high levels of fitness.

The first attempt to dislodge the rebels took place on 25 September when the



**Shackletons now flew out of Masirah Island, some 175 miles to the south of Jebel Akhdar**

Sultan's forces, assisted by a single Shackleton, advanced to within 8 miles of Saiq before being ambushed. The Shackleton was able to suppress the enemy fire, after some initial difficulty locating the rebel positions in the heavily shadowed wadi, but the patrol was still forced to retreat.

An aerial blockade was now imposed, but the size of the Jebel and the difficulty of spotting movement meant that this was much less effective than at Buraimi. Meanwhile, Talib became increasingly adventurous and moved off the Jebel on several occasions to assert his authority over the local villages and to mine the dirt roads. As a result, the area around the mountains was soon littered with wrecked vehicles.<sup>20</sup> A further attempt to dislodge the rebels occurred on 15 November with an attack on the village of Bani Al Habib. Full air support was provided by Venoms and Shackletons – the latter using 20lb fragmentation bombs. On one occasion, in an effort to achieve greater precision, these were dropped from below the briefed safety height leaving the Shackleton to return to Masirah with over 80 holes in the fuselage and wings.<sup>21</sup> The advance

continued, supported by supplies dropped by Pioneer aircraft; the Venoms using rocket and canon fire against snipers on the upper slopes. Progress slowed, however, and after a further day the attack was called off – well short of the objective.

An important development, at least for the longer term, was the visit to Oman by the Undersecretary of State for War, Julian Amery, in January 1958. Following discussions with the Sultan, it was agreed to provide additional civil and military assistance, including gifts of equipment, and to create an air force with pilots seconded from the RAF. These steps recognised the need to address the wider implications of the insurgency (both political and economic) and to provide the Sultan's Armed Forces with greater indigenous capability – something that would more than prove its worth during the Dhofar campaign.<sup>22</sup>

Over the next 6 months the military effort focussed on trying to tighten

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the aerial blockade. A 'sky-shouting' Pembroke (broadcasting aerial messages in English and Arabic, as well as a musical selection from 'High Society') was brought in, together with a leaflet dropping campaign designed to weaken Talib's support amongst the villagers. The Pembroke was of questionable value as the rebels sent a message complaining that they could not hear what was being broadcast.<sup>23</sup> On another occasion, the aircraft was so badly hit by small arms fire that the pilot had to make an emergency landing at Firq – after jettisoning the loudspeakers. Thereafter, 'psyops' was conducted by flying in two 5.5 inch howitzers from Aden and firing daily (but at irregular hours) on the plateau from the valley below.

Meanwhile, the air campaign increased in intensity, both Venoms and Shackletons being employed in a sustained programme of attacks on water supplies, crops and livestock. The Shackletons now flew out of Masirah Island, some 175 miles to the south of Jebel Akhdar. This reduced the transit time, compared to Bahrain or Sharjah, as well as allowing operations to be conducted largely out of the public eye.

Cultivation on the Jebel Akhdar plateau depended upon a system of ancient irrigation channels (falaj), including aqueducts, water tanks and dams, terraced fields and wells.<sup>24</sup> The use of 1,000lb bombs was authorised for the first time, but this was more challenging than it might seem as the Shackleton crews were trained in anti-submarine warfare rather than bombing. There was no reliable topographic information, making the standard bombsight ineffective. Heights had to be estimated, which greatly reduced accuracy. However, if the Shackletons

dropped lower than 8,000 feet, to ensure greater precision, they inevitably came within range of heavy small arms fire (including .5 inch Brownings).

There were few signs that Talib was ready to surrender. In fact, he grew stronger through the early part of 1958, gaining new recruits and additional weapons and money smuggled in from the coast – notwithstanding the naval and aerial blockade. In response, a further squadron of Trucial Oman Scouts and two troops of armoured cars were deployed to the area to bolster the investing forces. Air operations continued against the plateau during the course of which the RAF suffered its only fatality of the campaign when Flt Lt Owen Watkinson, from the No 8 Squadron detachment at Sharjah, crashed in his Venom after failing to pull out of a strafing attack. His grave can still be found near the village of Saiq, with the substantial remains of his aircraft.<sup>25</sup>

It was argued that the only solution lay in a full scale military operation. Options included a parachute descent on the plateau or a helicopter-borne

assault. Both strategies looked extremely risky given the high altitude and the potential resistance.<sup>26</sup> The small carrying capacity of the available helicopters suggested that it would take some time to assemble a strong enough force to withstand a rebel counter-attack. The final proposal involved a 4 battalion attack on the Jebel, including a battalion-sized airborne assault, together with substantial air assets and an enhanced naval presence. Not surprisingly, given the Cabinet's reluctance to deploy any more regular units, the plan was rejected out of hand.<sup>27</sup>

Part of the explanation for this rejection, beyond political sensitivities, was growing evidence that the air operations were at last beginning to have an effect. During the week ending 12 September, Shackletons dropped 148 1,000lb bombs and the Venoms fired 40 rockets – together with large quantities of 20mm ammunition.<sup>28</sup> Intelligence reported casualties amongst the rebels while there were stories that some villagers had urged the Imam to surrender.

A radically different approach was now developed that envisaged a squadron of the SAS scaling the mountain to secure a route for the Sultan's forces to capture the plateau. This would involve fewer ground units, although it still demanded substantial air support. The revised proposals were formally agreed by the Chief of the Defence Staff on 13 November. The lead SAS elements actually arrived in late October, with a full squadron (80 personnel) arriving from Malaya (via Masirah) in 2 RAF Beverley transports on 18 November. During this period, there was a temporary pause in the bombing to allow negotiations to take place as Talib had indicated a desire



SAS troops after securing Jebel Akhdar

to surrender. It became soon clear, however, that this was merely a ruse to gain some respite from the blockade and so the air campaign recommenced on 22 November.

Patrols by the SAS started almost immediately from posts located at both the southern and northern approaches to the Jebel. The intention was to flush out the rebels and map the routes to the plateau. These patrols were largely conducted at night as moving in the heat of the day, in the face of well-concealed snipers and machine gun posts, was impractical if not suicidal.<sup>29</sup> Air attacks continued on known rebel positions, including caves, sangars and machine-gun posts while Venoms provided additional fire power, allowing patrols to disengage safely when counter-attacked. Although some early successes were achieved, and a significant number of rebels were killed or wounded, the quality and strength of the opposition led to the decision to fly in a second SAS squadron.

The final assault took place on the night of 26/27 January 1959 using a route discovered through aerial reconnaissance. After a gruelling nine and a half hour climb up a narrow track, eliminating an enemy outpost on the way, the SAS reached the plateau and dug in to await the rebel counter-attack. To make better time, they had had to abandon their heavy packs en-route, and were extremely relieved, therefore, to receive 9 containers of supplies in a dawn air drop from 3 RAF Pembrokes. The arrival of these unarmed transport aircraft broke the last vestiges of rebel resolve as the descending stores (under pink canopies that served as temporary tents) were mistaken for parachutists. The anticipated counter-attack never

materialised and the entire plateau was occupied the next day without further fighting. The cave that had served as Talib's headquarters was discovered, together with abandoned arms and documents. The rebellion literally melted away, together with the main leaders who found refuge elsewhere in the Middle East. According to the Times, the SAS operation was, '*a brilliant example of economy in the use of force*'.<sup>30</sup>

The revolt was now effectively over. In fact, it was quickly discovered that the blockade had been much more effective than imagined and many tribesmen were close to starvation.<sup>31</sup> Bringing in food supplies became the main priority. Some sporadic activity in the form of sabotage and mine-laying continued for a few more years but there was no appetite for rebellion, either on the Jebel or across the wider Nizwa region.<sup>32</sup> The Sultan's authority over the Interior was now complete, although, as a precaution, an airstrip was constructed on the plateau together with an access road from the base of the Jebel.

### Conclusions

The efforts of the SAS in securing Jebel Akhdar, and eliminating the last vestiges of the rebellion, have tended to obscure the earlier phases of the war, as well as the RAF's overall contribution. Since the successful night assault is credited with saving the SAS from disbandment, the emphasis is perhaps understandable. Less explicable are some of the conclusions drawn about the role of air power in defeating the rebellion and in counter-insurgency operations in general.

It is claimed, for example, that the Jebel Akhdar War '*demonstrated the limitations of air power and the need to use ground*



The ruined village of Wadi Bani Habib, a 'rebel stronghold' of the Jebel Akhdar War

*forces to concentrate insurgents before air operations could be of use'.<sup>33</sup>*

Another commentator, noting that air proscription failed to subdue the rebels in the Jebel Akhdar, has observed that '*air supremacy was no substitute for action on the ground*'.<sup>34</sup> Others have implied that the 'failure' of air proscription in Oman marked a turning point in how counter-insurgency campaigns would in future be conducted.<sup>35</sup>

There is, of course, an element of truth in these criticisms but it is simply wrong to suggest that air power failed. Air proscription - in the form of an aerial blockade - clearly worked at Buraimi, although the lack of political will limited how quickly this could be achieved. When there was a determination to

act decisively, witness the British Government's response to the Sultan's request for assistance in July 1957, air power gave this political intent some very sharp teeth; within a matter of days.

It is also worth recalling that air proscription, as practiced in Aden and the Protectorates, invariably involved ground forces or the threat of ground action in the form of the Aden Protectorate Levies and RAF armoured cars.<sup>36</sup> While some recalcitrant tribes did capitulate simply as a result of leaflet dropping, this ignores the key role of political officers. In essence, air control was about achieving political effect. The use of forward air strips facilitated this outcome by giving political officers access to the tribes (as well as providing a potential base for future air operations). Air proscription formed just one thread (albeit an important thread) in a continuing engagement with local rulers in which they permitted their actions to be constrained (and sometimes punished) in return for political (and often financial) advantage. Amongst the tribes of the Protectorate, the 'rules' of air proscription were understood and largely respected in as much as they allowed issues (generally banditry) to be resolved quickly with the minimum, if not the total absence, of casualties – while preserving the authority of all those involved.

Without the logistic and close air support provided by the RAF in the first phase of the Jebel Akhdar War, it is difficult to envisage how less than 200 British regulars and roughly the same number of local forces, could have seized Nizwa and the surrounding region from nearly 1,000 well-armed rebels backed by thousands of sympathetic villagers.

Self-evidently, the involvement of external sponsors made defeating the insurgency more problematic than simply occupying territory – for both air and ground forces. The aerial blockade and bombing campaign certainly weakened tribal support for the rebellion but it was never going to deter Riyadh or Cairo from continuing to supply arms, money and equipment. However, physically severing this life-line proved extremely difficult. As a result, the rebellion's centre of gravity became the Jebel itself. Removing Talib and his confederates from their power base would probably have been achieved over time, as attrition wore down their resolve, but time was not on the side of Government.<sup>37</sup> Military operations against the rebels, and the suffering inflicted on local tribesmen, fed the propaganda machine – allowing Britain to be portrayed as an imperialist power engaged in suppressing a popular uprising against a despotic ruler.

Recent work on counter-insurgencies and the role of air forces has recognised the essential contribution of air power, in partnership with ground forces.<sup>38</sup> Successful counter-insurgency requires a unity of effort across multiple agencies (including political and economic). An analysis of the RAF contribution to the Jebel Akhdar War makes this abundantly clear. Employing no more than 50 aircraft, and flying some 2,000 sorties,<sup>39</sup> air power delivered:

**Speed** – Rapid deployment of ground forces and additional air assets enabling operational and strategic surprise.

**Sustainability** – Effective support to operations in the heat of the summer, over extremely difficult terrain, employing forward air strips to sustain the advance and evacuate casualties.

**Intelligence** – An accurate picture of enemy held territory and progress of the close battle while enabling independent action to be co-ordinated between separate ground units on different lines of advance.

**Fire Power** – Substantial fire power, beyond the small calibre weapons and limited indirect fire available to the ground forces.

**Leverage** – Leveraging the tactical and psychological impact of aircraft in the close air support role, enabling lightly armed infantry to take and hold objectives otherwise beyond their reach.

**Low casualties** – As in the Protectorates, air power largely obviated set piece battles or close fighting, reducing casualties on both sides.

**Political credibility** – Aircraft represented a relatively low 'political' footprint (compared to ground forces), giving the Government more room for manoeuvre without drawing international criticism.

The Jebel Akhdar War was successful because military force was applied within a strategy that balanced the ends, ways and means. It is to be regretted that the achievements of the RAF have been overlooked in the wider debate about the efficacy and relevance of air control; as if one needs to choose between employing solely air power or solely ground power in conducting counter-insurgency operations. This polarisation has set the tone for much of the subsequent argument about the best way to tackle counter-insurgencies. *'Downplayed, taken for granted, or simply ignored, air power is usually the last thing*

that most military professionals think of when the topic of counter-insurgency is raised.<sup>40</sup> At times, it has appeared that the issue is more about primacy than military effect. The 'either air power or ground power' school of thought ignores the obvious conclusion that both are essential in any counter-insurgency campaign and that neither can be effective without clear political direction.

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### Notes

1 For a history of air power in the region see 'RAF Air Operations in Southwest Arabia', Air Power, Insurgency and the 'War on Terror', HMSO,

London, 2008.

2 Numbering some 40 men under the command of Turki bin Abdulla.

3 Meagher argues with some justification that if the Sultan had been allowed to act quickly and decisively, as he originally intended, the country might well have been spared the subsequent rebellion. Meagher, *The Jebel Akhdar War, Oman 1954-1959*, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1985.

4 Pending recruiting action to bring the Trucial Oman Scouts up to a strength of 500.

5 Lee, *Flight from the Middle East*, pages 115-116.

6 *Time Magazine*, 5 October, 1953.

7 Under the Treaty of Sib.

8 The Muscat and Oman Field Force, later redesignated the Oman Regiment, comprised some 300 effectives.

9 Some sources, including NA/WO3337/9, put the number as closer to 70.

10 Morris, *Sultan in Oman*, pages 104-107, Faber, London, 1957, provides a vivid but less than flattering pen-picture of Suleiman.

11 Two days after the fall of Nizwa, in accordance with the 1951 Treaty of Friendship between the United Kingdom and Oman, the Sultan asked for the "maximum military and air support which our friend Her Majesty's Government can give." Lee, *op cit*, page 125.

12 The area to the south of Jebel Akhdar was divided into 5 sectors, numbered 1-5, east to west.

13 The Venoms could drop leaflets from their split flaps.

14 On 8 August, Flt Lt Turner, operating out of Bahrain in Shackleton WL800, flew close support for the attack on Firq in a sortie lasting over 10 hours. Some slight damage from small arms fire was experienced. Further close air support was provided on successive days until the town was captured.

15 NA/WO 337/9.

16 Tanuf lies ruined to this day. It was subsequently claimed that the RAF's fierce bombing had destroyed the village. MERIP Report No 36, April 1975.

17 It has been suggested that a more vigorous pursuit of the rebels would have led to their total defeat, avoiding the need to lay siege to Jebel Akhdar. NA/WO 337/9, page 18.

18 There are conflicting assessments of rebel numbers, ranging from less than 150 to 600 hard core members.

19 Other rebel villages included Sharaijah, Al Ain, Al Aqor and Bani Habib.

20 De la Billiere, *Looking for Trouble*, pages 135, Harper Collins, London, 1995. Talib reputedly laid at least 120 anti-tank mines during the course of 1958.

21 Flt Lt Watson in Shackleton WL801. The incident occurred during their second sortie of the day.

22 Gilchrist, Dhofar: A Case Study in the Application of Air Power, *Sultans Armed Forces Newsletter*, 2002.

23 Meagher, *op cit*, page 10.

24 WO/337/8, Reconnaissance Report.

25 The crash occurred on 30 August 1958. According to Colin Richardson, Flt Lt Owen Watkinson flying Venom FB4 (WR552) crashed into the plateau while strafing goats. Richardson, *Masirah – Tales from a Desert Island*, page 211, Scotforth Books, 2003.

26 The few Sycamore helicopters that were available could only carry 3 soldiers with their equipment.

27 Frank Kitson provides an excellent description of how these political concerns constrained the military planners in their efforts to bring the siege to a close. Kitson, *Bunch of Five*, pages 163-201, London: Faber, 1977.

28 Additional attacks were conducted by Sea Venom and Seahawk Aircraft embarked on HMS Bulwark.

29 De la Billiere, *op cit*, pages 131-151.

30 Cairo Radio reported that in the attack 120,000 British troops had been employed while Moscow embellished the story further, claiming 13,000 paratroopers had been dropped. In the last month of fighting total casualties were: Sultan's Armed Forces (including British), 13 killed and 57 wounded: Rebels, 176 killed and 57 wounded. NA WO/337/9 refers.

31 Kitson, *op cit*, page 201.

32 "The inhabitants of the plateau were in a wretched state: their villages had been wrecked, their fields left untilled. The ancient Falaj system was in ruins and the people themselves had been living miserably in caves." *ibid*, page 150.

33 Peterson, *Defending Arabia*, page 84, Croom Helm, Beckenham, 1986.

34 Mawby, *From Tribal Rebellions to Revolution: British Counter-Insurgency Operations in Southwest*

Arabia 1955-67, para 23-26.

35 For example, Hoffman has written that "one of the main results of this short-lived conflict was the abandonment of the traditional policy of air control. Faced for the first time by a truly formidable enemy, Britain realized that it was no longer possible to control the restless tribes or maintain order on the Arabian Peninsula through air power alone." Hoffman, *British Air Power in Peripheral Conflict 1919-1976*, pages 76-81, RAND Corporation, Research Report R-3749, 1989.

36 Witness the successful expulsion of Yemeni forces from the Western Protectorate during 1925 which involved aerial attacks on forts and other strongholds in conjunction with ground operations by friendly tribes.

37 A point recognised by Kitson, who comments that "the combined effect of air action, the blockade and patrolling done by the SAS squadron had gravely weakened the enemy position." Kitson, *op cit*, page 195.

38 See, for example, Corum & Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003) and Vick, *Air Power in the New Counterinsurgency Era* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation Report, MG-509, 2006).

39 A total of 429 Shackleton sorties were flown in which 1,540 tons of bombs were dropped and 7,000 rounds of 20mm cannon fired. Nearly 1,500 Venom sorties were flown in which 3,718 rockets were fired together with 271,060 rounds of 20mm ammunition. Lee, *op cit*, page 138.

40 Vick, *op cit*, page 109.