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MILITARY

The Jebel Akhdar War Oman 1954-1959
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 THE JEBEL AKHDAR WAR
 OMAN 1954-1959

War
 Since 1945
 John
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Major USMC
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PREFACE

This paper will examine a tribal rebellion which took place in the Sultanate of Oman during the middle and late 1950s. The causes of the rebellion and the complications presented by terrain and climate along with the operative sociological and political considerations will be examined. Finally, the consequences of this minor rebellion will be viewed with an eye to current strategic realities.

It has been necessary in compiling this paper to use a number of Arabic words, place names, and individual names. None of the standard systems of transliterating Arabic into English has been used. The English rendering of Arabic words is such that the pronunciation by a native English speaker will most closely approximate the Arabic pronunciation used in Oman.

I extend my sincere thanks to Lieutenant Colonel Timothy E. Kline, USAF, the Air Force Special Advisor to the Marine Corps Command and Staff Colleges for his advice in the preparation of this study. My special thanks go to Lieutenant General J.P.B.C. Watts, CBE, MC, Chief of the Defence Staff of the Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces for consenting to be interviewed on his role as commander of "D" Squadron, 22nd SAS during the rebellion.

John B. Meagher
Major U.S. Marine Corps
Quantico, Virginia
1985

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INTRODUCTION

The Sultanate of Oman, or Muscat and Oman, as it was formerly known, was at mid-century one of the least known and backward countries on earth. In the 1950s life in Oman had probably changed less since Biblical times than that of almost any other country.¹

Oman lies on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. To the north and northeast are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; to the south, the North Arabian Sea; to the west, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen; and to the east the Gulf of Man which connects with the Persian Gulf through the strategically important Strait of Hormuz. The Hajar Mountains, of which the Jebel Akhdar, or Green Mountain, is a part, separate the country into two distinct regions: the interior, known as Oman, and the coastal area dominated by the capital, Muscat. The internal geography of Oman has had the effect of dividing the country into an outward-looking society of merchants and seamen along the coastal area and, in the

interior, and inward-looking, conservative, frequently xenophobic society.

During the 1950s, indeed from 1932 until his ouster in 1970, the ruler of Oman was Sultan Said bin Taimur Al Bu Said.² Although the Sultan was the absolute ruler of Oman, religious factors and tribal loyalties limited his real power to govern.

The Ibadhi sect of Islam predominates in Oman. It originated in 657 during the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali. A group called the Kharijites, or seceders, emerged who believed that the principles of Islam were being forsaken. Ali defeated the heretics at Nahrawan in 658 but two of them escaped and settled in Oman. Ibadhism developed from these two fugitives and managed to root itself impregnably in the mountains of Oman even though it was rooted out from the rest of Arabia.³

Ibadhis hold the belief that a leader, or imam, must be elected from among the believers. This belief along with the conservative nature of Ibadhism has occasioned numerous confrontations and conflicts between the coastal-oriented sultans and the conservative imams whose power rests on the tribes of interior Oman. In 1866 a British-supported, coastal-oriented sultan fought and defeated a tribal-backed, interior-oriented imam.⁴ In 1931, the accession of Taimur bin Faisal to the position of sultan provoked a general rising of the tribes. The Imam regarded Sultan Taimur's cooperation with Great Britain to restrict the sale of arms and to limit slavery as subservience on the part of Oman. More importantly, the Imam regarded attempts to limit slavery as contrary to the teachings of the Qoran. The conflict proceeded intermittently for seven years with the tribesmen at one point besieging Muscat only to be defeated by a British force. Finally in 1920, the interior tribes and the Imam reached accommodation with the Sultan through the Treaty of Seeb.⁵

The Treaty of Seeb established the paramountcy of the Sultan and consolidated his control of foreign affairs. It also recognized a measure of autonomy on the part of the tribal leaders including their right to adjudicate internal affairs as they saw fit and the right to elect an imam.⁶ The treaty successfully established a peace between Muscat and Oman that lasted from 1920 until the 1950s.

In the 1950s Oman's population could not have exceeded 750,000. The vast majority of the population was illiterate, in poor health, fiercely independent, and willing to defend that independence from any attempts to impose even the slightest limitations on it. John Townsend has written, "Throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and certainly in Oman, it is essential for a man to be armed. A man who does not carry a weapon is not a man. His virility is in question. A boy at puberty is circumcised and given a rifle or khanjar, both acts are important badges of manhood."⁷

The vast majority of the population was in poor health. Colonel Hugh Boustead wrote of Oman in the 1950s:

Muscat was in deplorable condition....I had seen what could be done in the Hadhramaut and in the Qu'aiti State in particular, with a revenue about one half of what the Sultan of Muscat drew in customs duties; yet here there were no medical services in the whole country. I made a tour soon after my arrival with an economic expert and a representative from the Development Division at the British Embassy in Beirut. The latter told the Sultan after the tour that, in twenty years experience of most of the countries of the Middle East, he had never seen a people so poverty stricken or so debilitated with disease capable of treatment and cure.⁸

At this stage of historical development Oman was an economical and political anachronism. Its only revenue was from customs duties. Roads, hospitals, and schools, other than the Qoranic schools found throughout Islam, were nonexistent. The Sultan ruled as an absolute ruler, but in actuality he was obliged to recognize the real power of the interior tribes.

In the 1950s the influences of mid-twentieth century anti-colonialism and the modern impact of petroleum development were to clash with the traditional, even medieval, factors prevalent in the tribal society that was Oman.

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Chapter 1: The Buraimi Dispute

The Buraimi oasis is located on the border between Oman and the United Arab Emirates. The oasis contains nine villages, three of which belong to Oman and six to the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. In the early 1950s ARAMCO, a jointly owned Saudi-American oil company, believed that oil existed in commercial quantities near the Buraimi oasis.⁹ Saudi territory. This rather tenuous claim was based on the fact that in the nineteenth century, Wahhabis from what is now Saudi Arabia, had occupied all or part of the Buraimi oasis, but their occupation was not permanent. The last occupation by a Wahhabi garrison had ended in 1869 when expelled by the Sultan of Muscat acting in concert with a local tribe.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia also claimed, in an effort to prove its case, that the inhabitants of Buraimi had paid zakat to the Saudi rulers.¹¹

Both Abu Dhabi and Oman requested that Great Britain negotiate with the Saudis on their behalf. Her Majesty's Government already legally represented Abu Dhabi under the terms of the Treaty of Maritime Peace and Prosperity.¹²

A Saudi garrison of forty men under the command of Turki bin Abdulla bin Ataishan occupied the oasis on 31 August 1952 in an attempt to preempt any negotiations concerning sovereignty.¹³ Sultan Said, finding common cause with the Imam Mohammed raised an army of 8,000 tribesmen at Sohar on the Gulf of Oman. This army was in striking distance of Buraimi via the Wadi Jizzi.¹⁴ A standstill agreement was reached in Jiddah between the Saudi and

British governments with the mediation of the U.S. ambassador.¹⁵ The Sultan was persuaded not to take military action and the tribes reluctantly went home.¹⁶ Had the Sultan been permitted to expel the Saudis from Buraimi, as he undoubtedly had the capability, the country may have been spared a bitter period of rebellion.¹⁷

The Saudi garrison was kept isolated in Buraimi by the Trucial Oman Levies. The Trucial Oman Levies were a British officered Arab military force established by King's Regulation Number 1 of 1951 under Article 82 of the Trucial States Order in Council of 1950. Its mission was to maintain peace and good order in any part of the Trucial States¹⁸, that is the seven sheikhdoms which later formed the United Arab Emirates. The isolation of the Saudi garrison took the form of a benevolent siege. No military action took place, but no contact was allowed between the Saudis and the outside.¹⁹

During this period of benevolent siege, soldiers of the Trucial Oman Levies were believed to be selling their own ammunition to their Saudi opponents. The commander of the Levies, Otto Thwaites, with his Jordanian sergeant major, a doctor of the Royal Air Force, and a British REME sergeant set out for Buraimi in a Land Rover. As the Land Rover approached the cordon around Buraimi it was hit by a murderous cross-fire and Thwaites, the doctor and the sergeant major were killed. The REME sergeant drove the buddies out.²⁰ This successful ambush was the only military action of the siege. Unfortunately, it was carried out by the Trucial Oman Levies against its own commander.

In 1954, the Buraimi question was referred to an international arbitration tribunal in Geneva and, in August of 1954 as a result of a decision by the tribunal, a Saudi police detachment moved into Buraimi along with a detachment of the Trucial Oman Levies. A fifteen mile neutral zone was established around the oasis.²¹

In September of 1955, the British representative walked out of the Geneva negotiations due to an alleged lack of Saudi impartiality. The British government, in a complete reversal of policy, encouraged the Sultan and the ruler of Abu Dhabi to occupy Buraimi.²² What the Sultan had been prepared to do in 1952, the Trucial Oman Levies were ordered to do in 1955.

The Levies, in the guise of a relief column for its Buraimi garrison, rounded up the Saudi police detachment; installed the Sultan's wali in the Buraimi fort; and invited a detachment of the Sultans Army to establish itself in the oasis. Unfortunately, this was a classic case of being a day late and a dollar short. The Saudis, with money, arms, and promises. had already made their presence felt in Oman proper.²³

British pressure on Sultan Said to refrain from military action against the Saudi occupation of Buraimi resulted in a lost opportunity to bring the country together. The Imam and the Sultan, against a common enemy, had mustered 8.000 tribesmen for the expected battle. The order to go home must have caused the Sultan much loss of prestige among the tribes of the interior. To regain the

oasis as a gift from the British rather than by force of arms must have reduced the Sultan's prestige even further. "Sultan Said had lost face in front of his people, and having done so, the relationship between him and his subjects could never be the same again."²⁴

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Chapter 2: Rebellion and Reaction

The three years between the Saudi occupation of Buraimi and its reoccupation by the Trucial Oman Levies in 1955 were bad years for the Sultan. During that period the Saudis provided gifts of money and arms to the Omani tribes of the interior with the intent of undermining the Sultan.²⁵

In 1954 the much respected Imam Mohammed died and was succeeded by Ghalib bin Ali al Hinai. Various sources report that Ghalib's election as Imam was a direct result of Saudi influence;²⁶ that Suleiman bin Himyar, tamimah of the Bani Riyam tribe, manipulated the election of Ghalib;²⁷ and that Ghalib assumed the position of Imam and was never elected at all.²⁸ Suffice it to say that Ghalib succeeded Mohammed as Imam. He was supported by his brother Talib who was at that time wali of Rustaq and Suleiman bin Himyar---the self-styled Lord of the Green Mountain.²⁹

Relations between the Sultan and the newly installed Imam were ruptured over a dispute concerning the right to grant oil concessions.³⁰ A subsidiary of the Iraq Petroleum Company was intensely interested in some promising geological formations near Fahud. The Sultan, as ruler of Oman, claimed all dealings with the oil company as his prerogative. The Imam, on the other hand, claimed that since the oil was in his territory, anything dealing with it was an internal matter and, according to his interpretation of the Treaty of Seeb, his prerogative.³¹

In an attempt to preempt the Imam, the Sultan licensed oil prospectors to search in the Fahud area, and the tribe which controlled that area actually welcomed them. The conservative Ghalib attacked the tribe that had welcomed the prospectors. He wanted no outsiders in the interior of Oman at all.³²

Her Majesty's Government supported the Sultan in this matter because it seemed to be a good idea to have a British oil company (Iraq Petroleum Company) with an exit to the sea outside of the Strait of Hormuz.³³

It was at this time that the Imam declared the complete independence of the "State of Oman" and applied for membership in the Arab League.³⁴ In October 1955, two British employees of the Iraq Petroleum Company led the Muscat and Oman Field Force north from Fahud to occupy Ibri which had been under the Imam's control. This action was ordered by the Sultan in response to the attack the Imam had directed against those who had welcomed the oil prospectors, and in response to the Imam's declaration maintaining that the state of Oman was independent of Muscat.³⁵ The occupation of Ibri by the Sultan's forces, effectively cut off the Imam from his Saudi support.

Ghalib drove to Bahla with the intention of expelling the Sultan's forces from Ibri but, since he received no support from Suleiman bin Himyar, fell back on Nizwa without taking action.³⁶ The Muscat and Oman Field Force moved from

Ibri and captured Bahla and Nizwa successively without firing a shot.³⁷

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Two days later, on December 15, 1955, the Bartinah Force under Lieutenant Colonel Colin Maxwell stormed the fortress at Rustaq.³⁸

Rustaq is a typical Omani town strategically placed at the exit of a wadi from the mountains, walled with a massive castle, watered by falajes, and with extensive date groves around it. Its main peculiarity is that, as an Omani stronghold, it is on the coastal side of the mountain range; it has served, therefore, as the centre of Omani activity in the east, and has often acted as a capital, or at least sub-capital, for the Omanis.³⁹

Colin Maxwell has been described as a tubby lieutenant colonel with a round, jovial, moon face and dark, military moustache. He was the senior, most dedicated and competent officer in the Sultan's Armed Forces. After British Army service he spent a number of years in the Palestine police and was as a consequence fluent in Arabic. He was trusted and liked by local tribesmen as well as by the Sultan and his advisors. His subordinates always gave him their best effort.⁴⁰

The fortress of Rustaq fell after determined resistance. Talib, the Imam's brother who had commanded at Rustaq, made good an escape.⁴¹

Upon receiving information that his forces had occupied the centers of the rebellion, the Sultan personally led a truck convoy from his southern capital in Salalah in an unprecedented 600 mile trek across the desert to Nizwa to accept the homage and fealty of the interior tribes. He declared the Treaty of Seeb terminated and the office of Imam abolished.⁴²

Ghalib abdicated his position as Imam and returned to his village of Bilad Sait after acknowledging the sovereignty of the Sultan.⁴³ Talib escaped to Saudi Arabia where he engaged in the training of a "liberation army" of Omani expatriates. He also visited Cairo, the Nasserite center of Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism. There he launched a propaganda campaign to discredit the Sultan and gain support for an Oman independent of Muscat.⁴⁴ Suleiman, after pledging his loyalty to the Sultan, retired to his village of Tanuf.⁴⁵

James Morris has provided this interesting account of Suleiman bin Himyar's arrival in the Sultan's camp near Nizwa to render his homage:

We saw approaching us from the mountains a moving pillar of dust, quite unlike those surging clouds that had, in the past few days, heralded the arrival of so many camel trains. It was either a tribal band of unprecedented character, or something totally different, peculiar to the Green Mountain, like a camel drawn dray or a sledge pulled by mules. As the pillar grew nearer, and we were able to look into it, as you light into the interior of a small tornado, we saw something infinitely more astonishing: a perfectly good, well-kept, fairly modern American convertible. It

had never occurred to anybody before that there was a single car in these remote regions; and indeed Suleiman's was the only one. The sight of it careening out of the mountains toward us, bouncing recklessly over the rough track, was wonderfully inconsequential and inspiring. The roof of the car was closed, but on the boot there sat a Negro slave, armed with a rifle, with his feet sticking through the back window into the inside of the car; and when it stopped outside the camp this slave jumped off like lightning, as promptly and neatly as any duke's footman, and opened the door with a flourish.⁴⁶

Suleiman's car, no doubt a product of Saudi largesse, was later destroyed by a British air strike on Tanuf. A 1953 Chevrolet is still recognizable in the rubble of the village.

The first phase of the rebellion ended in humiliation for the rebels. Ghalib was forced to abdicate the office of Imam; a humiliated Suleiman retired discomfited to his village of Tanuf; the Sultan had crushed the rebellion, but Talib had made good his escape to Saudi Arabia and as the only free agent abroad, vowed to return at the head of a Liberation Army.

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Chapter 3: Rebellion Rekindled

At the end of 1955 the interior of Oman was quiet. Suleiman bin Himyar, and his 1953 Chevrolet, were at home in the village of Tanuf. Ghalib bin Ali, the former Imam, was in his own village of Bilad Sait, and Talib bin Ali, Ghalib's brother, remained exiled in Saudi Arabia. Talib, however, was restless.

Throughout 1956 and 1957, in addition to propagandizing in Cairo, Talib recruited and trained a number of expatriate Omani laborers working in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷

Talib planned a two pronged campaign of liberation. The rebels were to hit the Sharqiyah and central Oman simultaneously. Talib's chief lieutenant, Salih bin Issa, had a brother, Ibrahim, who was designated to lead the rebellion in the Sharqiyah. In March of 1957, Ibrahim, with about seventy followers, returned to Oman. No action was taken against the rebels by the Sultan's Armed Forces during April or May. The Sultan, however, opened negotiations with the rebels and in early June invited Ibrahim to Muscat for discussions. Ibrahim accepted the Sultan's hospitality and journeyed to Muscat where immediately upon arrival he was clapped into the sixteenth century Portuguese prison fortress of Jelali which overlooks Muscat harbor.⁴⁸

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Shortly after Ibrahim's imprisonment (on 14 June 1957) Talib landed at Suwaiq on the Batina coast with 100 men while another 100 landed north of Sohar.⁴⁹ The rebellion was afoot again.

Talib's landing was undetected. He proceeded inland to his home village at Bilad Sait. There he proclaimed a restoration of the Imamate. His brother Ghalib, who had been living peacefully since paying homage to the Sultan, allowed himself to be persuaded to reassume the title of Imam.

The Sultan's Oman Regiment renamed from the Muscat and

Oman Field Force on 1 March 1957, on learning of Talib's presence in Bilad Sait, mounted Land Rovers and drove to arrest him. The road to Bilad Sait twists and turns for about twenty miles through steep canyons, any of which provide perfect ground for ambush. There was of course great concern for lines of communication, but a friendly tribe, the Ibriyin, had agreed to seize the heights and hold them against the possibility of ambush.⁵¹

The battle was joined then the Sultan's soldiers arrived in the village. They used artillery, mortars, and machine guns on the towers of Bilad Sait. The rebels returned rifle fire. The Sultan's artillery consisted of two Kipling 75mm screw guns, whose sole source of ammunition, anywhere in the world, was the Imperial War Museum in London. This battle raged for seven days and nights.⁵²

Suleiman bin Himyar, hearing a Radio Cairo report that the British had lost confidence in the Sultan and that oil in significant quantities had been discovered on Jebel Akhdar, joined the rebels and declared war in the name of his tribe, the Bani Riyam, and all its affiliated tribes.⁵³ (The Bani Riyam is a major tribe of the interior of Oman, about 15,000 strong, and settled primarily on the Jebel Akhdar plateau.⁵⁴) This meant that all of the Jebel Akhdar and every town and village in the foothills were swept swiftly into revolt. In Arabia when a village is in arms every man in the village becomes a fighter.

Since the Ibriyin failed to arrive and protect the heights, the Sultan's Oman Regiment found itself trapped between Bilad Sait and Suleiman's armed and aroused villages. Vehicles of the soldiers were repeatedly ambushed and destroyed by mines. They had no choice but to fight their way out over twenty miles in 120 degree heat through narrow mountain canyons and still narrower village streets. Every window seemed to frame a rifleman.⁵⁵

Not many of the Sultan's soldiers returned. At one point during their withdrawal, leading soldiers had to elbow away the rifles sticking out of village windows in order to pass. Drivers abandoned vehicles and headed for the hills. Only a small contingent fought through. The British officers all survived.⁵⁶

Remnants of the Sultan's force made for the oil camp at Fahud eighty miles away. There the regiment, having suffered enough casualties to be listed ineffective, was disbanded. The Imam's white flag again flew over his capital of Nizwa--surrendered without a fight by the local governor.⁵⁷

As the Sultan's Oman Regiment fought for survival near Bilad Sait, Sayyid Tarik, the Sultan's half brother and viceroy of the interior, left Al Hamra with a small force. He was attacked by about 200 Bani Riyam near Tanuf. Sayyid Tarik escaped with three dead and five wounded. At Izki Suleiman's men ambushed a number of vehicles headed for Muscat carrying Sayyid Tarik's wounded causing additional casualties. As a result of Suleiman's ambush a number of the wounded died of thirst.⁵⁸

On 16 July 1957, the Sultan, through the consul-general in Muscat, officially requested British assistance.⁵⁹ His request for assistance referred to a fifteen year treaty of

friendship which had been signed between the United Kingdom and Oman in 1951.⁶⁰ British assistance was essential. The Sultan's forces were weak and he could not hope to cope with Saudi Arabia, primary financier of the rebellion.⁶¹

The Sultan's army was extremely weak. Composed of the Muscat Regiment of 120 men used primarily for palace guard duties, the Batinah Force of 200 men commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Colin Maxwell, and the Sultan's Oman Regiment of 300 men.⁶² A great many of the Sultan's soldiers were Baluchi who had been recruited in Gwador, now part of Pakistan.⁶³ Gwador was until September of 1958 a dependency of the Sultanate having been given to Sultan bin Ahmed in 1784. The Sultan of Oman's Land Forces still recruit heavily there.

The Baluchi soldier has been described as a steady and dependable fighter on the defensive who might be effective in the offensive, if well lead. Colonel David Smiley, while serving as commander of the Sultan's forces, observed only one Baluchi soldier run away during a fight. When questioned later the soldier responded, "When I joined this army, Sahib, jet was not explained to me that I should have to fight."⁶⁴

Britain responded quickly to the Sultan's request. This positive response was, however, potentially dangerous for Britain internationally. "No power is more vulnerable than that of an empire in the process of dissolution; and now, after the Suez catastrophe, every move by Britain was subject to hostile scrutiny, particularly by the Russian-backed coalition of Egypt, Syria, and the Yemen."⁶⁵

Britain answered the Sultan's request for a number of reasons. The Royal Air Force had been given base privileges on Masirah Island during World War II in return for a military subsidy. The Sultan had continued Masirah's use as a quid pro quo for RAF assistance.⁶⁶ It was hoped that the Sultan would tend to favor British oil exploration and commercial interests. Preservation of the regional status quo was the cornerstone of British policy and to refuse the Sultan would provide a basis for questioning British presence along the coasts from Aden through the Persian Gulf.⁶⁷ It should be remembered, however, that although Britain had treaty obligations with the Trucial States, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Aden; it had no obligation to come to the aid of Oman.⁶⁸

Britain's assistance was not without condition. Due to her recent humiliation in Suez and the expected United Nations' reaction to British military involvement in Oman it was decided that British involvement had to appear to be changing the worst aspects of the Sultan's government. It was therefore agreed to render British military assistance on the condition that Oman accept some form of developmental assistance. Colonel Hugh Boughstead was named as the head of the new Development Department.⁶⁹

The British agreement to assist Oman was formalized in what finally became an "Exchange of Letters between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Sultan of Muscat and Oman concerning the Sultan's Armed Forces, Civil Aviation, Royal Air Force Facilities, and Economic Development in Muscat and Oman." The agreement was finalized in this form on 25 July 1958 and promised seconded British officers for the Sultan's

army and enabled the RAF to use facilities at Masirah and Salalah.⁷⁰

Britain responded to Oman's request by providing immediately one company of the Trucial Oman Scouts, recently having undergone a name change from the Trucial Oman Levies. Royal Marine non-commissioned officers assigned to Her Majesty's ships in the North Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf were ordered to Oman to stiffen some platoons until seconded officers could arrive from the United Kingdom, and the RAF provided considerable additional assistance.⁷¹

The first group of seconded Royal Marines arrived in Oman on 29 March 1958 headed by Lieutenant R.F. Gray, R.M. and included seven non-commissioned officers and one Marine. By the end of the conflict these Marines would be augmented by men of 3 Commando Brigade. Twenty Marine officers and 63 non-commissioned officers would serve in Oman during the Jebel Akhdar revolt. Marine casualties were two killed and three wounded.⁷²

A short time after this initial effort was landed, three companies of the 1st Battalion of the Cameronians and a troop of the 15/19 Hussars arrived.⁷³

The initial British military reaction was to attack with air. First, the RAF bombed the Jebel Akhdar plateau with Shackleton bombers from Aden. This bombing was largely ineffective as the RAF had orders only to bomb caves and water systems, not villages. The attacks came at the same time each day allowing the rebels ample opportunity to take cover. Later, Venom fighters based in Sharjah attacked targets with cannon and machine gun fire.⁷⁴ Aircraft were also used to broadcast propaganda. On one occasion the rebels sent a message to the opposing commander demanding that the loudspeaker on a Pembroke be repaired as they could not clearly hear the message being broadcast.⁷⁵

The rockets of the Venoms did little damage to the primitive mud walls of the several forts nor could they penetrate the solid rock of the great fort at Nizwa. Additionally, since the Imam's flag was white, many pilots did not engage legitimate targets because they believed the fort of village flying the Imam's standard to have surrendered.⁷⁶

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Reliance on air power reflected a British policy practiced in the region since the 1930s. Aircraft were expected to interrupt the normal life of the tribesmen to the extent that any revolt would come to a rapid end when faced with attack from the air. The airplane, with its mobility and capacity for observation, when used in the desert environment against primitive tribesmen was expected to be devastating. It was for this reason that the principal British headquarters in the Arabian Peninsula was commanded and staffed principally by officers of the RAF.⁷⁷

In combating the rebellion, first priority was the recapture of Nizwa, the Imam's capital and the largest town in the interior. A plan was devised to send a force, nominally under the command of Sayyid Ahmad bin Ibrahim, the Minister of the Interior, from Muscat in the direction of Nizwa, via the Wadi Sumail.⁷⁸ Another force commanded by

Colonel S.L.A. Carter, MBE, MC, composed of one troop of 15/19 Hussars, "D" Company and Support Company of the Cameronians, three squadrons of the Trucial Oman Scouts, and a company of the Northern Frontier Regiment was to advance from Fahud to Nizwa. The operation was commanded by Brigadier J.A.R. Robertson, CBE, DSO.⁷⁹

Sayyid Ahmad's column was actually commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frank Haugh. Haugh's departure from Muscat was delayed because the Indian contractor who was to have provided transport did not arrive on time. The trucks finally did arrive and the Muscat Regiment left Bait al Falaj, the headquarters of the Sultan's Armed Forces, in fish trucks and rattle trap Land Rovers. While enroute Haugh's column was joined by a number of loyal tribesmen who hoped to take over the villages of Suleiman bin Himyar and Talib as they were seized.⁸⁰

The third day out from Bait al Falaj, Haugh's column encountered a number of tribesmen on a hill near Mutti, the first of the rebel villages encountered. A strike of two RAF Venoms was called in. No ordnance was delivered on the first pass and the rebels cheered and laughed derisively at the airplanes. On the next pass cannon fire ended the laughter and the rebels fled through the village and into the foothills.⁸¹

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On 6 August, Carter's forces began to advance from Fahud. They reached Izz, which surrendered without opposition, the following day. By 8 August Carter's soldiers had suffered ten cases of heat exhaustion, seven of which had to be evacuated.

While advancing on Firq, the lead element of the column the Trucial Oman Scouts, came under rebel small arms fire and were held up. Even with the assistance of RAF Venoms and the fire of machine guns and mortars, Carter's force was unable to advance. At 1500 Carter withdrew his leading elements two miles to the rear and encamped for the night. The next day was spent in rest, maintenance, and the planning and preparation for resuming the attack.

The village of Firq is dominated by a hill to its southeast. Carter's plan called for the Cameronians to seize this as a base from which to support the attack of the Trucial Oman Scouts up the wadi. During the night of 10 August patrols of 15/19 Hussars probed the enemy positions and discovered that the rebels held not only Firq but also the lower slopes of the dominant hill. It was then decided that after the RAF straffed the rebels the next day, the Cameronians would seize the hill in a night attack and be in position to support the Trucial Oman Scouts in a dawn attack up the wadi. The plan was carried out with minimum casualties.

The two elements of Brigadier Robertson's force met at Birkat al Mauz, eight miles east of Nizwa on 12 August and advanced to occupy Nizwa.⁸² Talib, the Imam Ghalib, and Suleiman bin Himyar fled into the Jebel Akhdar. Nizwa and the foothill villages were occupied by the Sultan's forces in August of 1957 and in September all British units except 15/19 Hussars and elements of the Trucial Oman Scouts were withdrawn. The 15/19 Hussars was replaced by the 13/18

Hussars shortly thereafter.⁸³ 13/18 Hussars was itself eventually replaced by a squadron of Life Guards.

This phase of the rebellion ended as had the first. The Sultan's forces controlled the flat lands around the base of the jebel and the rebels occupied and controlled the heights thought to be impregnable.

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Chapter 4: Stalemate

In those days Oman Proper, the Green Mountains, the domain of the Imam, was a legendary land redolent of romance. There, it was said, the dry and forsaken wastes of sand gave way to green-clad hills, sparkling streams, castellated cities with bannered turrents and spice-rich markets; mountains soared to the clouds and beyond, carpeted with misty meadows, where grapes and pomegranates, walnuts and nectarines dropped ripe into the outstretched hand... there reigned the Imam, cloaked in mystic splendour, and there stalked Suleiman bin Himyar, Lord of the Green Mountains, King of Nebhania, unchallenged tyrant of the verdant plateau...⁸⁴

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It would not be long before the Sultan's soldiers had an opportunity to compare this romantic image with the stark reality that was the Jebel Akhdar.

The Jebel Akhdar is an elevated plateau measuring about twelve miles from north to south and eighteen miles from east to west. Its average elevation is 6500 feet and it is locked behind sheer cliffs of rock and shale, some rising 10,000 feet above the surrounding plain.⁸⁵ Since many of the rock walls are almost vertical, any of the tracks to the top could be made impassable by rebels. The approach is so difficult that the rebels assumed that, once safely on the plateau, they had nothing to fear.

The principal rebel leaders were the Imam Ghalib bin Ali, his brother, Talib, and Suleiman bin Himyar. Ghalib's principal contribution to the rebellion was an air of legitimacy he provided by his position as Imam. He was, however, in the hierarchy of the rebels, clearly inferior to Talib and Suleiman.

Talib, however, was a man of much quality. The commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces has written of him: Talib, in particular, for all that he was a Saudi puppet, was a man of courage and ability, even of a certain integrity, far superior to either of his principal colleagues. If he had shown a little more initiative in his tactics, and made more use of ambushes to cover the mines he laid on our roads, he might well have forced us to withdraw our garrison from around Nizwa - as at one moment he very nearly did.⁸⁶

It is difficult to uncover any redeeming qualities in Suleiman bin Himyar. Suleiman had wanted to establish a sheikhdom on the Jebel Akhdar independent of both the Imam and the Sultan, under either, U.S. or British protection. He was despotic, ambitious and medieval, and often demanded first night privileges with new brides on the jebel.⁸⁷ Among Suleiman's more charming traits was his custom of visiting a

village and selecting a companion for the evening. He would place his walking stick over the lintel of the door and retrieve it when he had finished with the lady of the house. The stick told one and all to keep out.⁸⁸ This description has been provided of Suleiman on the occasion of his meeting with the Sultan at Nizwa which was described in Chapter 2:

Suleiman was a big man with a powerful face, rather Dickensian in concept, and a triangular gray beard. On his head was a twisted blue and white turban. His aba was blue, gold edged and filmy. In his hand was a cane with a carved end, and in his belt a curved Omani dagger of splendid ostentation.⁸⁹

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The Imam's fighters had certain qualities not possessed by either the Sultan's soldiers, who were predominantly town dwellers or fishermen, or the British. They were accustomed to the intense heat of the Arabian Peninsula and totally familiar with the area in which they fought. Intimate knowledge of every track and waterhole was important. Tribal and family loyalties and alliances, permitted rapid, reliable, and extensive intelligence. Physically thin and requiring almost no logistical support, they were possessed of tremendous endurance and could negotiate the most difficult mountain terrain quickly and soundlessly. Finally, they were belligerent people by nature and were quick to react to the slightest provocation. This belligerent tendency is perhaps best characterized by a saying common among the tribesmen of Central Oman, "Oh God, have mercy on Mohammed (the prophet) and me and no one else."

Once established on the jebel, the rebels began to resupply themselves in earnest. Saleh bin Issa continued recruiting and collecting cash, weapons and stores in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, and shipping them to Jebel Akhdar.⁹⁰ Saleh shipped his goods by sea to Sharjah in the Trucial States and then overland to the Batinah coast. From the coast supplies were shipped by truck to Awabi via Rustag and then carried over the foothills to the high plateau. In this manner land mines, .50 caliber machine guns, mortars, ammunition, and radios were provided to Talib's fighters.⁹¹

The first major shipment of arms from Saudi Arabia to the rebels included ten mortars, four anti-aircraft guns, 100 carbines and 52 additional Omani rebels recruited earlier by Saleh while working as laborers.⁹² Saleh's resupply efforts supported a steady increase in rebel strength.⁹³

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The RAF, not yet convinced of the futility of using the airplane as the primary weapon against desert insurgents, continued daily flights against the rebels. During this stage of the war and RAF Venom failed to return to base. The Sultan's forces sent a woman, since women could not be stopped or searched by either side, to inquire as to the condition of the missing pilot. The typewritten reply indicated that the pilot had died in a crash.⁹⁴ (The rebels took advantage of the informal agreement not to stop or search women and used them as couriers to carry information and ammunition.)

By now it should be obvious that the position of the

rebels was relatively strong. The rebels had about 180 sharpshooters on the jebel with a backup of about 500 armed tribesmen and Saleh's resupply efforts were making them steadily stronger.⁹⁵ The Sultan's officers realized the enormity of the task which confronted them since only one organized army had ever penetrated the Green Mountain. In the tenth century the Persians stormed the mountain incurring heavy losses and fought a victorious battle on the summit at an elevation of 9,000 feet.⁹⁶

As the rebels got stronger, patrols departed the jebel on a more and more frequent basis to lay mines in the wadis used by the Sultan's soldiers. Over 150 vehicles including eighteen Ferret scout cars were destroyed between March and November of 1958.⁹⁷

It was at this stage of the rebellion that arguably the most essential assistance provided by Britain to the Sultan was forthcoming. This essential assistance was the assignment of Colonel David Smiley, MVO, OBE, MC as Chief of Staff.⁹⁸ Smiley was of medium height with fair hair. A previous assignment had been as military attache to Stockholm.⁹⁹ He had also been in charge of the Sovereign's Escort of Royal Horse Guards and had parachuted into the Balkans during World War II to organize Yugoslav partisans.¹⁰⁰ His active service during World War II also had taken him to Italy, Greece, Albania, and Thailand.¹⁰¹ Smiley's assignment in Oman required him to call on his experiences as a diplomat, courtier, and fighter alike. Prior to Smiley's posting, the Secretary of State for War, Julian Amery, had cautioned him: "We give the Sultan help; we sometimes give him advice; but we do not give him orders."¹⁰²

The arrival of serving British officers on secondment to Oman caused an administrative problem. For reasons of the Army Act serving British officers had to be commanded by a serving British officer. Before Smiley's arrival the commander of the Sultan's Armed Force was nominally the Sultan, but the real commander was a British mercenary named Waterfield whose title was Chief of Staff.¹⁰³ On Smiley's arrival Waterfield became Military Secretary; Smiley became Chief of Staff. The title Chief of Staff still did not satisfy the requirements of the Army Act. The Sultan intervened:

We shall begin by changing your appointment from Chief of Staff to Commander. After all you are not my Chief of Staff, you are the commander of all of my forces - not only of my army but of my navy and air force as well, small though they may be. You will therefore be called El Caid, "the commander."¹⁰⁴

The air force and navy to which the Sultan referred amounted to two Pioneer aircraft and one motor launch respectively.¹⁰⁵

Those British officers, or more precisely officers of British nationality, in the service of the Sultan prior to Smiley's arrival had no official connection to the British army. They had severed ties with the army by resigning or retiring. The basis for their service in Oman was purely contractual. They rendered military service to the Sultan in

return for money. They were mercenaries in the strictest sense of the word. Friction between the two groups-- the contract officers and the British seconded officers-- was bound to develop. A contract officer has written:

It was sad and unavoidable, that some suspicion and disharmony should develop between the two elements in our army: the Sultan's regulars and the British Army annexures. We were conscious that we had to be bailed out of trouble; we were touchy, quick to detect a slight and to take offence; and we tended to look for the newcomers sniffing at us. They in their turn must have felt the subterranean resentment. They disliked our cliqueishness, our assumption of knowing best, our air of having been there from the beginning when things were bad. Some of them were in fact pretty offensive, and even insubordinate, but these were few, and they were in any case the less distinguished element.¹⁰⁶

Smiley found the Sultan's forces to be in poor shape. Morale was low. No efforts had been made to stop the rebels from reinforcing.¹⁰⁷ At the time of Smiley's arrival in Oman, this force consisted of the Northern Frontier Regiment of 450 men reinforced by a troop of two 5.5 inch guns and two 75mm screw guns; the Muscat Regiment of 250 men, used primarily for garrison duties; two squadrons of the Trucial Oman Scouts, one at Ibri and one at Izki; one troop, later two of Ferret scout cars of the 13/18 Hussars (four scout cars to a troop); and one Royal Marine officer and eight NCO's attached as junior leaders to the Northern Frontier Regiment.¹⁰⁸ Radio Cairo's Voice of the Arabs attributed British strength at between ten and twenty thousand.¹⁰⁹

The rebel mining campaign had become increasingly effective. Every officer in the Northern Frontier Regiment had been affected by mines at least once.¹¹⁰ Two to three vehicles were being blown up every day.¹¹¹ The mines were, fortunately, not large enough to seriously damage the vehicles and they rarely caused casualties.¹¹²

The first priority of the Sultan's Armed Forces was to isolate the rebels from their source of supply. To this end, Britain attempted to persuade the United States to stop supplying mines to Saudi Arabia. The alleged U.S. response was that the mines were supplied as part of a military assistance program and the manner in which they were used was of no concern to the supplier.¹¹³

The army attempted to blockade the jebel by stationing detachments at the base of every known track. On October 6, 1958, Northern Frontier Regiment occupied Tanuf and a squadron of the Trucial Oman Scouts occupied Yanqul at the northwestern end of the Hajar Range closing the last major supply route from Saudi Arabia. As the blockade was intensified aggressive patrolling was instituted and although minor casualties were incurred, morale soared.¹¹⁴

In an attempt to get the rebels into the open a plan was devised in which soldiers would advance up the jebel during the day in strength and appear to spend the night on its slopes. They would, however, withdraw quietly during the night. At dawn the rebels were expected to assemble in order to repulse these perceived intruders. The RAF would then appear and blow them to bits.¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, during the

night withdrawal someone tripped over a rock and accidentally fired his Bren gun almost severing the leg of a Royal Marine corporal and tipping off the withdrawal. The corporal died enroute to the hospital. The aircraft arrived as scheduled and dropped numerous 1,000 pound bombs which hurt the Sultan's soldiers watched the display from above while the Sultan's soldiers watched from below.116

During the second week on November, a patrol led by Major Tony Hart of the Muscat Regiment found an unguarded route to the top of the jebel. Hart's route involved a six hour climb from Hajar, above Awabi, and involved negotiating steps carved into the jebel centuries before by the Persians.117

Awabi was one of the historical strategic strongholds of Oman. On the seaward side of the Jebel Akhdar there were only two significant entrances to the plateau along its entire length; and here the jebel flanks did not rise stark and straight skywards out of the plain, but were fringed by a wide skirt of black lava hills which if they had not been overtopped by the green mountains would have been respectable mountains in their own right. These also were penetrated by only two or three paths. Awabi lay astride the plexus where two of the routes throug the black hills met to join in the approach to the plateau.118

Major Hart's discovery allowed the Sultan's forces to position a force on the plateau, but the top of the Awabi track was on the opposite side of the plateau, about eighteen miles away from the rebel stronghold, which was in the vicinity of Saiq.

[Click here to view image](#)

The blockade and intensified patrolling hurt the rebels and they asked for a truce:

One day a woman arrived in Nizwa with a message from the Imam to Sayyid Tarik suggesting a truce during which both sides would refrain from hostilities including bombing and shelling on our part and mine-laying on theirs. The ostensible purpose was to allow time to work out an honourable agreement between the Sultan and the rebel leaders; the real reason, we suspected- and captured documents later proved us right- was that the enemy was hard pressed by our blockade and demoralized by our successes in action against him, and needed a breathing space to recover. Nevertheless, we agreed, and for two weeks the skies were clear of Shackletons and Venoms, our guns were silent, and our transport- and that of the oil company's- passed freely along the roads. Not surprisingly, the terms proposed by the rebels proved unacceptable to the Sultan, and so we went back to war.119

Under Smiley, the Sultan's Armed Forces were clearly winning the war and Smiley was certain, that given sufficient time, the rebels would be defeated. The main uncertainty was how much time would it take.

Chapter 5: From Stalemate to Victory

In 1958 the rebels were firmly established on the great

plateau of the Jebel Akhdar, and the Sultan's forces controlled the base of the jebel. As mentioned previously, the Jebel Akhdar covered an area of about eighteen by twelve miles. There were simply insufficient forces available to completely blockade this vast area, and the quality, or lack of it, of the forces which were available precluded an assault. Oman, therefore, looked toward to a long war of attrition, involving ambush and counter-ambush, mining and basically ineffective air strikes, in which neither side could deliver a decisive blow against the other.

It is important to realize the great physical difficulties to be encountered during active campaigning on the Arabian Peninsula. A mile climb up the Jebel Akhdar in the Arabian summer with the usual burdens of food, weapons, water, and ammunition would cost an individual between one and two gallons of sweat.¹²⁰ Of fifty British soldiers who served in Oman, other than soldiers of the Special Air Service (SAS), 45 were evacuated for heat exhaustion, two died.¹²¹

Convinced that the rebels could not be defeated in the foreseeable future with the forces available, Smiley went to Sharjah on 13 June 1958 to meet with Christopher Soames, then Secretary of State for War, and General Firbank, the Director of Infantry to ask for more British assistance. Smiley was informed that any decision to increase British assistance was a political decision and not a military one. In any case, the maximum assistance that could be made available was two battalions. Smiley asked for either a Royal Marine Commando or a unit of SAS, as he did not believe standard infantry to be sufficiently physically fit to be of value.¹²²

Smiley's request for assistance reached Whitehall. The reaction there was to recommend a four battalion assault on the jebel to include a battalion-sized airborne assault. Prime Minister MacMillan's response to this recommendation was to reject it out of hand.¹²³

British headquarters in Aden forwarded another plan calling for a British battalion, in coordination with the Sultan's Armed Forces, to assault the jebel in conjunction with an airborne assault.¹²⁴ Factors of altitude and wind would have precluded the airborne assault and the British foreign office objected to any use of British troops because it feared repercussions in the United Nations where Saudi Arabia and Egypt were denouncing British intervention in Oman.¹²⁵ Senior officers in both London and Arabia could see no solution to the war without increasing British forces.¹²⁶

General Sir Frank Kitson, then a major and now commander in chief of United Kingdom Land Forces, suggested that small teams might be formed in the villages at the base of the jebel. These teams could capture insurgents and these same insurgents, under threat or bribe, could guide small teams of soldiers to the top of the jebel where they would locate and kill the leaders, Suleiman, Ghalib, and Talib.

The problem with Kitson's plan was the paucity of personnel with the required skills to execute it. In any case Kitson flew to Aden to attempt to sell his plan to the British commanders there.¹²⁷

General Hamilton, then Director of Military Operations,

on hearing of Kitson's plan and the difficulty in finding qualified personnel to execute it, suggested the use of SAS.¹²⁸ Kitson's original plan was revised and officers were ordered to Oman to organize intelligence collecting cells to be capitalized on by the SAS.¹²⁹ Sayyid Tarik, the Sultan's half brother, lived in Nizwa castle and controlled the only sources of information loyal to the Sultan. He would prove to be the best source of guides and interpreters.¹³⁰

The commander of the SAS, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Deane--Drummond, DSO,MC, did not support Kitson's initial plan, but wanted to get involved. Kitson and Deane-Drummond worked together to find a mutually acceptable proposal that would also be acceptable to Whitehall.¹³¹

Deane-Drummond was a regular officer of Royal Signals. He had led the SAS with great skill and success in Malaya. In World War II he parachuted into Arnhem and spent two weeks hiding in a cupboard in a house full of Germans before making his way back to friendly lines.¹³² Described as having a prominent nose, a clipped military moustache, and something of a Monty look,"He had marched into the Muscat venture...without knowing the first thing about it and immediately set about explaining just how the SAS would deal with it.¹³³

Smiley welcomed SAS assistance but only on the conditions that no extra demands be made on his strained administrative and logistic resources and that anyone operating in Oman be unreservedly under his command.¹³⁴

Kitson and Deane-Drummond travelled to Muscat from Sharjah in a Pembroke to confer with Smiley. Kitson described his first glimpse of the Jebel Akhdar as follows:

Soon after taking off, the ground below us started to rise into range upon range of small hills.

Gradually the hills became bigger until in the distance ahead of us we saw the Jebel Akhdar, a monstrous rock-like projection which seemed to hang on the horizon for miles.¹³⁵

In Muscat, Smiley, Kitson, and Deane--Drummond agreed that SAS would start patrolling in the normal way under their own troop commanders. The later stages of the campaign were left purposely vague.¹³⁶ With Whitehall approval, Deane-Drummond left for Malaya to round up "D" Squadron, 22nd SAS, under Major Johnny Watts. His problem was to assemble, retrain, and move to Oman within fifteen days.¹³⁷ In addition to "D" squadron, one squadron of Life Guards and a detachment of Royal Signals were ordered to Oman.¹³⁸

Deane Drummond arrived in Malaya at the end of October 1958 and located his "D" Squadron thirty miles inside the jungle on the Thai border, where they had been engaged on operations for the previous six weeks. Within 48 hours the entire squadron had relocated to Kuala Lumpur some 250 miles away. The distance was closed by forced marches and floating downstream on river rafts.¹³⁹

Major Watts and his squadron were flown to Masirah Island. There they were picked up by RAF aircraft from Aden and flown to a dirt strip at Azaiba. The pilots did not know their destination until told by Watts.¹⁴⁰ The squadron

arrived at Bait al Falaj, headquarters of the Sultan's Armed Forces, on 20 November 1958.¹⁴¹ The squadron had a strength of eighty men divided into four troops of sixteen men each and a squadron headquarters.¹⁴²

Watts was told upon arrival in Oman that the problem must be solved by April of 1959 or the squadron would be withdrawn.¹⁴³ April 1959 was the next scheduled United Nations debate on the Middle East. Additionally, domestic political considerations dictated that there be no serious number of casualties.¹⁴⁴

The SAS soldiers had a problem in contrasts in Oman. In the jungles of Malaya visibility was rarely greater than 25 yards and concealment was not a problem. In Oman the visibility was 30 miles and the Omani rebels were adept at melting into the rocks.¹⁴⁵ In order to cope with the problem of concealment, SAS did all of their work at night in Oman.

Their initial acclimation to Oman was accomplished by extensive training in the area between Ruwi and Mina al Fahal, now in the heart of a growing urban area.¹⁴⁶ They then moved into the interior with two troops patrolling from Tanuf and two troops from Awabi.¹⁴⁷ The initial three or four weeks of patrolling from Tanuf provided valuable information on rebel habits, movements, and dispositions.¹⁴⁸

Tracks had to be discovered by patrolling but most of the potential guides had been pressed into service by the rebels. There was great evidence of treachery. One "friendly" tribal leader who had been placed in charge of anti-mining on a mountain track was found to be mining the path himself.¹⁴⁹

No maps existed other than one very crude drawing. Guides could not speak English. None of the SAS soldiers could speak Arabic. At one point during the early stage of SAS involvement in Oman, Major Watts, in disguise and two guides, one of whom was crazy and the other a bandit, sought a route up the Wadi Halfayn to the plateau. The guides had to be forced along. The party, although it never reached the plateau, passed through rebel sentries twice and finally returned just before dawn.¹⁵⁰

During this early period SAS under-rated the skill of Talib's fighters. They revised such opinions when Corporal Swindell, a recent recipient of the Military Cross in Malaya, was killed instantly by a long range sniper shot.¹⁵¹ On another occasion the SAS surrounded a cave used to store weapons and ammunition. At first light, after making a ten and a half hour march in order to approach the cave from an unexpected direction, they fired 3.5 inch rocket launchers and machine guns into the mouth of the cave. According to Deane-Drummond, "Even such withering fire did not cause the rebels to panic or surrender. They quickly dropped into fire positions and returned the best they could."¹⁵²

During this introduction to war on the jebel, Major Watts concluded that the RAF bombings on the plateau were counter-productive and had them discontinued. Airpower, however, continued to play a role in suppressing the rebellion. RAF fighters based at Sharjah were scheduled to arrive over the jebel at dawn to provide covering fire for the withdrawal of SAS patrols. Time on station was short and

timing had to be precise. Close air support was so close that some injuries were received by soldiers being hit by falling shell casings from aircraft cannon.¹⁵³

During December of 1958, "D" Squadron killed between twenty and thirty of the enemy at a cost of one killed. This rate of exchange was expected to end the rebellion in a few months by the simple process of attrition. It was believed that as more of Talib's men were killed, he would be forced to take an increasingly active part in the fighting personally, and consequently would increase the chances that he would be killed.¹⁵⁴ A further tightening of the blockade on the rebels, in order to prevent the escape of their leaders, was also considered. It was thought that they might surrender if their chances of flight and survival here reduced.¹⁵⁵

Smiley disagreed. He reasoned that if the object had become attrition, then that object could best be achieved by getting a second SAS squadron. The Foreign Office was initially opposed, but the Ministry of Defence supported the idea and succeeded in convincing the Foreign Office.¹⁵⁶

Major John Cooper with "A" Squadron, 22nd SAS, arrived in Oman on 12 January 1959 and relieved "D" Squadron which returned to Bait al Falaj for a rest. The jebel patrolling had ruined the soldiers boots and they were issued hockey boots as a substitute.¹⁵⁷ "A" Squadron deployed to the north side of the jebel near Awabi to become familiar with the terrain and get acclimated.¹⁵⁸

Smiley and Deane-Drummond set up a joint headquarters to coordinate the efforts of the Sultan's Armed Forces, the SAS, and the RAF. An RAF officer was obtained from Bahrain to perform the functions of air liaison officer. A tactical headquarters was established in Northern Frontier Regiment's camp near Nizwa to which Smiley and a small staff moved in early January.¹⁵⁹ Smiley delegated tactical command of all forces operating against the rebels to Deane-Drummond.¹⁶⁰ [Click here to view image](#)

Because of the April deadline for the withdrawal of British troops, only three months were available to successfully resolve the situation. A night attack on the jebel during a full moon was decided on as the course of action offering the best chance of success. The decision to attack during a full moon meant that the last weeks of January, February, and March were vital. Smiley and Deane-Drummond decided to assault during January so that in case of failure there would be two more opportunities.¹⁶¹

The primary objective of the assault was to establish a foothold as soon as possible atop the jebel near the rebel strongholds at Saiq, Bani Habib, and Sharaijah, and to hold for aerial resupply. Surprise was essential in order to avoid casualties.¹⁶²

It will be remembered from a previous chapter that Major Tony Hart had discovered an unguarded track to the plateau on the north side of the jebel. A small base was established near the head of the track. The enemy reacted by entrenching in that area, thus making an attack from the north improbable of success. The shortest routes to the top on the south side of the jebel were the tracks from Tanuf

and Kamah. Both were well guarded.163

An aerial reconnaissance by Smiley and Deane-Drummond revealed a possible route to the top of the rebel. The route was a sloping ridge east of the Wadi Kamah. It was unguarded and the two commanders thought that it could be climbed in one night. They provided code names for key features on the route; the top was named Beercan; the first peak, Pyramid; a connecting ridge between two slopes, Causeway; a crest about a third of the way up, Vincent; and a peak beyond Beercan overlooking Bani Habib, Colin.164

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SAS would lead the assault. There were strict instructions from Aden that all other units, Life Guards, Trucial Oman Scouts, and the Sultan's Armed Forces were to support the SAS. Diversionary attacks were to be planned and other units would follow SAS to occupy successive terrain features as they were uncovered. These units would then support a consolidation on the jebel. If no serious opposition was encountered, the SAS was to push on to Bani Habib, Saiq, and Sharaijah. Others would open up the track from Kamah for donkey columns to bring up supplies. The death or capture of Talib, Ghalib, and Suleiman bin Himyar were of extreme importance.165

The night of 25 January was chosen for the attack. In order to confuse the rebels, several diversions were planned for the weeks prior to 25 January. Between 8 and 22 January, "D" Squadron and "A" Company, Northern Frontier Regiment patrolled from Tanuf and drove the rebels from an observation post nearby. During the same period, "A" Squadron, SAS and one squadron of the Trucial Oman Scouts conducted probes on the north side of the jebel from Hajar toward Aqabat al Dhafar. "C" Company, Northern Frontier Regiment patrolled from Izki into the Wadi Muaydin and lost one killed and several wounded.166 The rebels knew something of major importance was imminent but had no intelligence on which to base a counterplan.

Major Malcolm Dennison, Smiley's intelligence officer, said to him, "I'm prepared to bet, that if we call the leaders of the donkey men together on the night before the assault, and tell them in strictest confidence and under the most ferocious penalties that the following night they'll be leading their donkeys up the Tanuf track, Talib will have the news within twenty-four hours." Smiley agreed with Dennison, the donkey men were told, and Talib had the news in twelve hours, not twenty-four.167

[Click here to view image](#)

The plan was very simple and was to be executed in three phases. During the first phase, "A" Squadron was to occupy Vincent and "D" Squadron was to occupy Pyramid, Beercan, and Colin before first light. During the second phase "C" Company, Northern Frontier Regiment would relieve "A" Squadron on Vincent and a troop of Life Guards (dismounted) would take over Pyramid. In the third phase, "A" Squadron would consolidate on Beercan and "D" Squadron would consolidate on Colin.168

The plan also called for two groups of irregulars to participate in the attack. On the south, fifty tribesmen of the Bani Ruaha led by Major John Clarke, a contract officer,

would accompany the SAS. In the north, two hundred Ibriyin and a platoon of the Muscat Regiment would create a diversion and if unopposed, climb the jebel via two tracks from Awabi.¹⁶⁹ It will be remembered that the Ibriyin was the tribe that failed to occupy the heights during the Sultan's Oman Regiment's attack on Bilad Sait thus subjecting it to successive ambushes and near annihilation. This was an opportunity for the tribesmen to redeem themselves.

Before the attack, Smiley asked Clarke, "Do your boys know what they're supposed to do?"

Clark responded, "Yes, they know what they're supposed to do. God only knows if they'll feel like doing it."¹⁷⁰

After dark on 25 January a reinforced troop of "D" Squadron was withdrawn from Tanuf and taken by truck to the Wadi Kamah to join the remainder of the squadron.¹⁷¹ The task to be accomplished was extremely simple. Climb the mountain before first light without forfeiting the element of surprise.

While the task to be accomplished was uncomplicated, execution proved extremely difficult. Each SAS trooper carried a Bergen rucksack, sleeping bag, sweater, one gallon plastic water container, rations for two days, one hundred rounds of ammunition, two grenades, a para smock, a change of clothes, and two or three canteens. The total weight of each soldier's individual equipment was between eighty and ninety pounds.¹⁷²

The enemy to be encountered numbered about 250 hardcore fighters backed by 600 to 1,000 armed tribesmen. Their arms included the .303 Enfield rifle, light machine guns, .50 caliber Browning machine guns, 81 and 82mm mortars, and U.S. and British mines. A major source of arms for the enemy had been British war reserve material that had been pre-positioned near the Suez Canal. It was lost to Nasser once the canal was nationalized. Some eventually appeared on the Green Mountain.¹⁷³ The Omani units that participated in the attack, the Muscat Regiment and the Northern Frontier Regiment, were considered by Major Watts to be incapable of offensive action.¹⁷⁴

During the assault a serious obstacle was encountered at Causeway. At 0300 Major Watts made the decision for the leading unit, his own "D" Squadron, to cache their rucksacks and begin climbing the precipice. This decision to cache equipment and climb was a critical one. It probably kept Watts and his troopers from being caught in the classical dilemma of mountain warfare, being caught short of the crest at daybreak looking into the enemy guns.¹⁷⁵

The march to the summit was basically unopposed. The only enemy encountered were two men with a .50 caliber Browning machine gun who were discovered asleep in a cave. A guard was placed over them and the attack proceeded.¹⁷⁶ The leading unit reached the summit before first light after a climb of nine and a half hours and the occupation of Beercan, Colin, and Bani Habib was accomplished. The only sign of enemy activity was twenty tribesmen of the Bani Riyam who wanted to surrender.¹⁷⁷ During subsequent operations on the plateau, Life Guards held the heights.

They had taken the Biza Machine guns off their Ferret scout cars and made the ten hour climb with them.¹⁷⁸ The Biza machine gun is a 7.92 mm gun weighing 54 pounds.

Deception operations had been completely successful. The rebels had concentrated their forces at Aqabat al Dhafar, at the opposite end of the plateau from the SAS assault, and along the track above Tanuf.¹⁷⁹

In an attempt to put this night approach march of the SAS into perspective, in December of 1982, I hiked from the village of Kamah to Saiq via the Wadi Kamah. While probably a slightly greater distance than the route negotiated by SAS, it is by far an easier climb. My load was minimal: one meal, a change of clothes, and four canteens. I departed Kamah at 0600 and arrived at the Jebel Akhdar Battle Training Centre above Saiq at 1730 in no condition to fight. SAS had made its climb, at night carrying eighty pound loads. They used two and a half hours less time than I had. [Click here to view image](#)

At first light Venoms from Sharjah appeared over the plateau to provide support if needed. Three Valettas from Bahrain made nine container drops of supplies onto Beercan.¹⁸⁰ The Rebels believed that the resupply drop was in actuality a drop of airborne reinforcements and organized resistance ended.¹⁸¹

With the arrival of the majority of Smiley's forces onto the jebel, the search for the rebel leaders began in earnest. Wendell Phillips asserts that the leaders escaped down an unguarded track.¹⁸² Smiley states that the leaders escaped with the help of tribesmen loyal to the Sultan and made their way to the Sharqiyah ¹⁸³ and Watts states that Talib and Ghalib were not on the mountain at all and that Suleiman made his escape by bribing those tribesmen that were guarding the Wadi Halfayn.¹⁸⁴ The important point is that none of the leadership was captured.

While none of the leaders was captured, their headquarters cave revealed a wealth of information. Smiley reported finding boxes of documents and bundles of letters giving the confidential details of the organization of the rebels and their sympathizers.¹⁸⁵ Watts reported finding swords, khanjars, walking sticks, and among the documents a manuscript chronicle of the Bani Riyam which was hundreds of years old.¹⁸⁶

With the surrender of Sharaijah, the Jebel Akhdar War ended.¹⁸⁷ The SAS had suffered three casualties in their attack. A bullet hit an Energa grenade being carried in the pack of a soldier setting off the grenade, killing the soldier, and wounding two soldiers behind him.¹⁸⁸

At the conclusion of their assault both squadrons of SAS were exhausted. As follow-on forces arrived atop the plateau to continue the process of disarming the rebels, the two squadrons of SAS marched down the mountain from Saiq to Nizwa. Their physical exhaustion occasioned a nearly total breakdown and straggling was epidemic.¹⁸⁹ Straggling or no straggling, the rebellion was finally snuffed out in a three month effort after four years of futility and failure. The London Times described it as "a brilliant example of economy in the use of force."¹⁹⁰

Two weeks after the assault, Major Malcolm Dennison

received confirmed information that the rebel leaders were hiding in a certain house in the Sharqiyah. A plan was developed to surround the house and capture the rebels. The commanding officer of the Northern Frontier Regiment had been ordered to remain in Nizwa and not interfere with the plan to capture the leaders. He found out about the rebels sanctuary and its location and ignoring his orders, set out to capture the rebels himself.

He gathered a small party and drove to the house, knocked on the door, and asked if the Imam was there. The owner of the house of course answered in the negative. The officer then turned on his heel and left believing that he had demonstrated the information received concerning the rebels hideout to be false.

Talib, who was hiding, in the house is reported to have asked Suleiman, "Shall I shoot this stupid Nasrani?"

"No, he's not worth it. Let him be," responded Suleiman.¹⁹¹

Shortly after their uninvited visitor called on them, all three rebel leaders made good an escape by sea to Saudi Arabia.

EPILOG

The Jebel Akhdar War was, by any standard of measurement, a minor affair. No great armies clashed. No great captains emerged. The war was fought and the rest of the world took no notice.

A small, highly efficient, superbly fit organization attained victory in a situation that had stymied a more orthodox and conventional force for four years.

From the point of view of the army as a whole the most important effect of the campaign was that it ensured the continued existence of the Special Air Service. The regiment had been formed in Malaya for operations deep in the jungle and might well have been disbanded at the end of that campaign had it not been able to demonstrate that it had a use outside the jungle as well.¹⁹²

The accomplishments of the SAS the Yemen, at Princess Gate, in Northern Ireland, and in the Falklands are a consequence of the high level of performance demonstrated in Oman in the 1950s. This conflict and the fighting experiences on the Green Mountain ensured the continued existence for that elite organization.

In a broader view, the Sultanate of Oman is important for any calculation of U.S. strategy applicable to Southwest Asia scenarios. Oman, with Iran, controls the strategic Strait of Hormuz. This water course is essential to the movement of a large percentage of the free world's energy supplies. Oman has agreed that in the event of a crisis (with prior consultation and agreement) it would allow U.S. forces access to certain Omani facilities. The deployment of U.S. forces to Southwest Asia in the absence of these facilities would be extremely difficult at best.

The current strategic importance of Oman is apparent. Oman later faced a much more serious threat in the late 1960's and early 70's than the minor tribal rebellion of the 1950's. In the 1960's the Dhofar Rebellion, heavily

supported by the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of China, came close to toppling the regime. Had the Dhofar rebels been successful, a peoples' democracy would have been established within Oman. A Yemeni style peoples' republic in control of the Strait of Hormuz would be an incalculable complication on the international scene today.

The victorious resolution of the Jebel Akhdar War insured that the Sultan of Oman could concentrate his forces and efforts against the enemy in the Dhofar Province without concern for a rebellion in central Oman. The necessity of actively prosecuting a war in Dhofar while being required to isolate rebels in central Oman would have seriously jeopardized the successful resolution of the more serious threat in Dhofar. Therefore, Oman's victory in the Jebel Akhdar was an important ingredient in the successful conclusion of the Dhofar Rebellion and a stable, progressive government remains firmly in place in this important strategic area.

GLOSSARY

aba- flimsy outer garment worn by Omani men. Resembles a cloak.
akhdar- green.
Energ grenade- anti-tank rifle grenade.
falaj- irrigation system peculiar to Oman in which underground irrigation channels carry water from the heights to the oases at lower elevations. The underground channels are intended to inhibit water loss due to evaporation.
jebel- mountain.
khanjar- curved dagger worn by Omani men beginning at the age of puberty.
Nasrani- Christian
REME- Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
sayyid- lord, sir, or in modern usage, mister.
tamimah- paramount sheikh
wadi- valley, canyon, arroyo.
wali- local governor or mayor.
zakat- traditional tax prescribed by Islam for the care of the poor.

PERSONALITIES

Ahmad bin Ibrahim- Omani Minister of Interior, nominal commander of column which engaged rebels at Mutti.
Amery, Julian-- British Secretary of State for War at the time Smiley was assigned to the Sultan's Armed Forces.
Boughstead, Hugh, Colonel- head of British Development Division in Oman.
Carter, S.L.A. ,Colonel- Commanded column that attacked from Fahud to Nizwa via Izz and Firq. Occupied Nizwa with column under Lt.Col. Haugh.
Clarke, John, Major- British contract officer who led irregulars in the assault on Jebel Akhdar.
Cooper, John, Major- Commander, "A" Squadron, 22nd SAS.
Deane-Drummond, Anthony, Lt. Col.- Commander, 22nd SAS.
Dennison, Malcolm, Major-- Intelligence officer of Sultan's Armed Forces.
Ghalib bin Ali al Hinai- last Ibadhi Imam and one of the rebel leaders.
Haugh, Frank, Lt. Col.- Military commander of column that moved from Muscat to Nizwa in August 1957 and engaged the

rebels at Mutti. Linked up with Colonel Carter's column at Birkat al Mauz and occupied Nizwa.

Hart, Tony, Major- Contract officer, discovered unguarded track up the Jebel Akhdar from Awabi.

Ibrahim bin Issa- rebel who attempted to foment revolt in the Sharqiyah.

Kitson, Frank, Major- British planner who devised the initial plan for SAS involvement in Oman. Now a general and commander U.K. Land Forces.

Maxwell, Colin, Lt.Col.- Led attacks on Rustaq and Nizwa. Retired as a brigadier and currently lives in Oman.

Robertson, J.A.R., Brigadier- Commanded the two pronged attack on Nizwa during August 1957.

Said bin Taimur al bu Said- Sultan of Muscat and Oman from 1932 until 1970.

Saleh bin Issa- Supplied rebels with arms, equipment, and men from Damman, Saudi Arabia. Propagandized for the revolt in Cairo.

Smiley, David, Colonel- British commander of the Sultan of Oman's Land Forces.

Soames, Christopher- British Secretary of State for War. Met with Smiley in Sharjah to discuss increased British military presence in Oman.

Suleiman bin Himyar- paramount sheikh of the Bani Riyam tribe. Self-styled Lord of the Green Mountain.

Swindell, Cpl.-- SAS soldier killed by sniper on Jebel Akhdar. A recipient of the Military Cross in Malaya.

Taimur bin Faisal al bu Said- Sultan of Oman whose accession in 1913 occasioned a tribal uprising.

Talib bin Ali al Hinai- Brother of the Imam Ghalib and military leader of the revolt.

Tarik bin Taimur al bu Said- Half brother of Sultan Said, viceroy of the Green Mountain.

Thwaites, Otto, Lt.Col.- Commander of the Trucial Oman Levies at the time of the Buraimi Dispute. Killed in an ambush by his own men.

Turki bin Abdulla bin Ataishan- Saudi governor of Buraimi.

Watts, J.P.B.C., Major- Commander of "D" Squadron, 22nd SAS. At the time interviewed for this paper was Major General and Commander, Sultan of Oman's Land Forces. Now a Lieutenant General and Chief of the Defence Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces.

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