

## **Bahrain and Trucial Oman notes 1961-62**

My second overseas posting in Feb 1961 was to 19 Topographic Squadron in Bahrain. My passport contained a visa allowing me to visit "the Sheikdoms of the Trucial Oman and Persian Gulf". At the RE depot Chatham they said "There's a plane going to Aden tomorrow. That is somewhere near Bahrain, jump on that!" So I was stuck, along with 3 others, in a transit camp near the Aden RAF Khormaksar base for nearly three weeks waiting for a flight up the Persian Gulf to Bahrain. Eventually I flew in a RAF Beverly transport plane via Salala and Masira Island to Manama the capital of Bahrain Island. Squadron headquarters was a comfortable Public Works Dept bungalow site just outside H.M.S. Jufair the naval base. Here I spent 9 months in the small survey office, one of a group of bungalows the army occupied for work and sleeping. We co-ordinated the mapping information sent from the field troops in the Oman and Trucial Oman before sending it on to the regimental headquarters in Cyprus.

It was during this time that Kuwait "Emergency" 1961" took place as documented by Tom Cooper in his book of that name. In June 1961 the Middle East state of Kuwait was released into independence from Britain with the agreement that UK would come to its aid if required. On 25 June Iraq unilaterally declared that Kuwait was to be considered part of Iraqi territory and began sending its troops to the Kuwait border. On 30 June Kuwait officially appealed for help. Under the operation name "Vantage" British troops were put into action. As our survey squadron was the only permanent British army unit on the island we set up a transit camp at the Muharraq airport on the far end of the causeway linking the main island to the airport. This was for the hundreds of troops who were flown into this island staging post from UK and other parts prior to them catching a few hours sleep, grabbing some food, then being air lifted to the Kuwait desert. Many troops were unaware of where they had landed, thinking they were somewhere near India. I spent one night helping to manually load a naval ship with ammunition for the conflict which fortunately didn't come to much and was soon over.

I was then transferred into the field at 2 Troop located at Manama, a small outpost some 50km inland from Sharjah in the Trucial Oman (now part of United Arab Emirates). 2 Troop had moved to Oman from Aden in December 1960, its initial base being Ibri and later Manama in the Trucial Oman (not to be confused with the capital of Bahrain with the same name) where I spent my next 9 months. Our camp at Manama consisted of two prefabricated huts isolated from the Trucial Oman Scouts encampment and close to the Hajar Mountain range which ran through the country. Entertainment consisted of a record player, dartboard and table tennis with the monthly film show. Supplies and mail were collected twice a week from the major RAF camp at Sharjah on the coast some 70km away through the desert. The area had been roughly mapped previously by an oil company in about 1948, I particularly enjoyed my time in the Trucial Oman desert, and sometimes over the border into the Oman and down the East coast as far as Sohar. Driving to selected points, taking barometer readings for heights, annotating the aerial photos with camel tracks, marking and collecting names of wells from the local Bedouin seemed an adventure. Unfortunately we did not receive any Arabic language instruction but had to pick it up from the more senior soldiers. Their Arabic was often flavoured with their UK accent, be it from Birmingham or Glasgow.

Our usual routine was to prepare over the week-end for up to two weeks on a mapping expedition before setting off on the Monday morning, usually with two Land Rovers loaded to the hilt. We took plenty of fuel, tinned and dry food, small spare vehicle parts and survey equipment. Five personnel usually consisted of two drivers, one being a mechanic, two Topo surveyors and perhaps a general duties man. Surprisingly we had no radio contact whatsoever and the troop officer would say "if you are not back in two weeks I will come and look for you." Although we obviously took water it was not a problem finding wells in the desert where we could top up by dropping a goat skin scoop on a long rope into the well and hauling up a load, just like the Bedouin did. In some places *falages* or underground water channels, said to have been built by the Persians hundreds of years before, would be on the surface near villages. We usually slept in the open several miles away from the wells as occasionally Bedouin camel trains carrying supplies would pass through at night and we didn't want to get involved with them or woken up when they watered their camels. A serious mechanical problem happened on one trip so we towed the sick Land Rover to the only clump of trees for miles around in order to find the location again. Here, two members of the party were left with food and water whilst the REME mechanic, another surveyor and I drove back to camp by the quickest route taking two days to collect the necessary spare parts to repair the other Land Rover and return to our trees with another Mechanic. Fortunately we found our two mates again after being away for nearly 4 days and were able to fix the problem and return to camp safely. During that incident I crossed some of the highest sand dunes I have ever seen. Although we weren't in what is known as the *Rub al Khali* or the Empty Quarter, as that started about 300km south west of our working area, we were in fact in a very inhospitable high dune desert region interspersed with gravel plains. The Land Rovers were fitted with special sand tyres with little tread and ran on very low pressure giving better traction in the sand. Even that was not always sufficient as one of the two vehicles sometimes became stuck and had to be pulled out by the other one.

The Bedouin were usually friendly who offered us thick coffee and camel yoghurt, which put me off yoghurt for life. We swapped tins of army jam, biscuits, boxes of matches or salt tablets for fresh eggs and the occasional goat. They were usually more heavily armed than us with their old long barrelled Martini-Henry rifles. We usually only carried a light machine gun for protection particularly when working over the border in the Oman. At New Year 1962 a truck from 2 Troop at Manama including myself travelled to the camp of 1 Troop at Tarif on the coast near Abu Dhabi for a social visit.

A survey trip up the west coastal plain from Sharjah, through Um al Quain to Ras al Kaima and beyond made a change from the desert terrain.

The nearer to the coast you got the more humid it became. This area was more inhabited with numerous wells some padlocked with iron grills for private use and permanent *barusti* palm leaf dwellings occurred. It always amazed me that water from a well only twenty metres from the beach could be sweet to drink yet some wells 50km inland could taste really bad. Part of our mission was to re-establish an old oil company survey trig point at the sheikh's palace in Ras al Khaima. When we reached the port of Ras al Khaima the tower of the palace was easily found and after explaining our job and seeking the sheikh's permission we were ushered in and offered typical Arab hospitality of thick coffee. We were then escorted by an armed

guard up the internal stairs of the white washed building to the top of the tower. I will never forget as we passed anti rooms on our way up, seeing prisoners manacled by their arms out stretched to the walls, something I am not likely to see again.

About 100km north of Ras al Khaima, at the very tip of the country, a narrow sea passage is formed known as the Strait of Hormuz, which separates the Persian Gulf from the Gulf of Oman with Iran, or Persia as it used to be known, on the other side. Although that northern area was not part of our mapping requirement, as the land was in the Oman, we proceeded towards our work boundary and came across a large village entirely deserted which had some high rocky cliffs behind it. After driving around for a while and looking at the deserted mosque, we found ourselves near the bottom of the cliffs where we heard some rumbling sounds. Looking up to the ridge line we caught a glimpse of some Arabs darting for cover having rolled large boulders down towards our vehicles. No damage was done fortunately so we vacated the area. On returning to camp the incident was reported to our troop officer who in turn passed it onto the Trucial Oman Scouts, TOS, whose camp was near to ours at Manama. TOS was a local army with usually British officers in command. I found out some time afterwards that the TOS had sent a patrol to investigate the abandoned village and reported that some local tribe had decided to cut themselves off from the rest and moved away north but had left some guards to protect their old village. On another trip the sand gave way to a garden growing roses and cucumbers at an experimental research station where water was piped into the small area to bring life to the desert.

To keep up with the news back home we received free copies of the English "Daily Mirror" paper stapled into a heavy booklet covering the whole week. These arrived at our camp a month or so after they were published, so by then it was history. Someone reading it found an article reporting that the Minister of Defence, John Profumo, had stated in London that "there were no British troops in the Oman." Although our camp was in the Trucial Oman we frequently went over the border into the Oman to carry out our mapping work. As it was nearing Christmas 1961 we sent him a Christmas card from his non existent troops. To his credit he came to visit our little camp some time afterwards along with his wife, film star Valerie Hobson. The minister spoke to me, asking to explain how I went about making a map.

Towards the end of my tour with 19 Topo Sqn I volunteered to go to Aden to be attached for one month to the Special Air Service (22 SAS) who were conducting a joint 'training operation' with the Rhodesian SAS. This operation is mentioned twice in the Fantana Collins book of 1983 "Who dares Wins" The story of the SAS 1950-1982 by Tony Geraghty. The squadrons involved during May-June 1962 were D Sqn from Hereford UK and C Sqn from Rhodesia. I was with D Sqn and in typical SAS fashion they were very heavily armed and we drove a lot at night and hid up under camouflage during the day. This made it difficult for me to annotate the aerial photographs of the area we were travelling through. The area was very rugged with some "sky scraper" like mud buildings seen as we drove inland along narrow rough mountain roads into the edge of the Hadhramaut region. Here we passed through towns like Ahwar until we reached the coast at Bir Ali about 500km NE of Aden. I remember coming into an Arab village early one morning and seeing local prisoners holding huge ball and chain manacles coming down to the well for a drink. It was the

first time that British troops had been in the area for over ten years and prior to Aden becoming the independent Communist state of South Yemen in 1967. I haven't been to any places much worse than the Crater City and surrounds of Aden. Spending a short time with the SAS in a harsh operational environment, without doing any actual fighting, still gave me an insight to their dangerous way of army life which was completely different to that of our mapping units. After a month in the Aden region I returned all the way back to our survey camp at Manama near Sharjah where I only stayed a short while before being posted back to England in Aug 1962. Since then I have enjoyed reading a couple of books of that region, one a factual account "Arabian Sands" by Wilfred Thesiger an explorer of that region in 1946. The other a novel with many factual descriptions by Hammond Innes called "The doomed Oasis" written about the Buraimi region in 1960, just before I was in the Trucial states.

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