

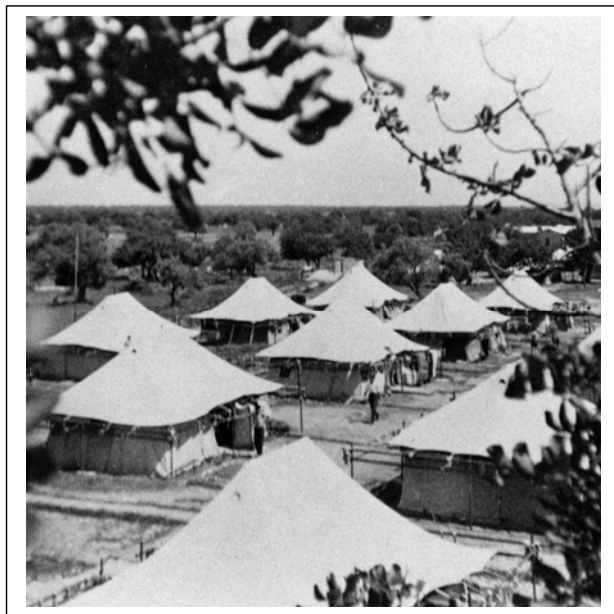
My First Overseas Tour: September 1957 - Sept 1960.

By Colin Price

Cyprus

I was posted to 42 Survey Engineer Regiment at Zyyi, Cyprus, in September of 1957. An early morning 3 tonner drove the party I was to travel with from the guard room at the School of Military Survey down the road to nearby Hermitage Station where, with full kit, we waited for the troop train which came down from Didcot. The train steamed south past Beacon Hill and through the Hampshire country side directly into the docks at Southampton where we boarded the purpose built troop ship, *SS Dilwara*, all white with a yellow funnel. We sailed to Cyprus calling in at Gibraltar, Algiers, Valletta, and disembarking at Limassol some 10 days later.

Then to Wayne's Keep Transit Camp which was mostly made up of 'tatty' 180lb tents and marquees with unsecured walls and guy ropes which flapped constantly in the wind on the plain north of Nicosia. Those of us that were destined for Zyyi were collected a couple of days later and then travelled all the way back down the dusty strip of tarmac past Stavrovouni Monastery perched up on its conical mountain and the village of Kofinou (known as Halfway House) to the south coast.



The Carto tent lines at Zyyi

I joined 22 Cartographic Squadron, OC Major Sleep (known as Gonk) and SSM, WO2 (Granny) Fletcher, where I cut my teeth on large slotted template laydowns for various mapping projects. It was then over the road to the Multiplex Section under Corporal Bunny Burrell working on control bridging to plot 1/100,000 K667 series mapping of the Aden Protectorate on night shifts in the darkened booths in between doing guard duties on the camp perimeter wire, a lonely walk in complete darkness. Also guard duty in the 'dovecot' perched in the centre and high above the MEABS building, the Cable & Wireless run Middle East Arabic Broadcasting Station about a mile west along the coastal track from Zyyi village. The 'dovecot' was an hexagonal lookout post with enough room for about two people to move about in and windows on each face, though manned by only one guard at a time. The sill of the

windows had a switch that controlled the security lights on the high perimeter fence which one switched on if a small red light next to each switch was illuminated if movement was detected on the outside of wire in that sector.

My first production field work was with Corporal Vic Cook when we worked out of Polemedia Camp to the north of Limassol to field check a 1/25,000 map of Akrotiri Peninsular produced by the Regiment. This was the time of the EOKA troubles and I organised volunteers to help swell the small detachment of Royal Artillery Internal Security troops that were stationed in the camp to police the area. We went on 'pussy foot' patrols, cordon and searches and night decoy convoys up the Nicosia road as far as Halfway House police station.

An occasional break in the routines of work and camp life for some was afforded when two or three men would swap rolls with sailors from *HMS Leverton*, a coastal mine sweeper number M1161 that had a link with the Regiment. My five days on board had me doing watches at the wheel on patrols round the coast of Cyprus guarding against gun runners and

unauthorized craft in the area. I took my A2 Air Svy Trade Test set by Staff Sergeants Peter Timbrell and Taff Jones, doing the various exercises and theory test on the slotted template table in the Compilation Block, and passed it. Later I was promoted to corporal, and to my surprise I was transferred to 19 Topographic Squadron after it had already left for Aden in May of 1959. The Squadron had moved to Aden after it reformed in the February of that year at the Regiment in Cyprus having been interned in Iraq and repatriated prior to Christmas 1958.

Prior to my move to Aden, whilst acting as a Squadron rear party, I had the task of assembling technical items and stores with which to form a new Tech Office that I was to run for the Squadron. The stores consisted of paper, inks, and other drawing materials, all types of expense stores, technical manuals, survey instruments and complete photographic cover of the Aden Protectorate in the form of 1/80,000 scale F49 photography in triplicate which I collected from 47 GHQ Squadron at RAF Episcopi. Six trucks (four Land Rovers and two 3 Tonners), vehicle spares, 5 drivers and myself as I/C Party were all transported by Landing Ship Tank (LST) from Famagusta docks. The trip took two and a half weeks through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, it being the height of summer it was very hot but it did give us time to acclimatize ready for the heat and humidity of Aden. As the only passengers on board it was a chance to have a long break after all the hard work and effort assembling everything and getting it to the docks on time. The voyage was slow due to the fact that the LST was towing a 'Z Craft' on a 500 yard line, which was a lighter - essentially a flat bottomed water tank with power and a wheel house and a two man crew from the RE Port Squadron. It being the slowest vessel in the formed up convoy it had to drop the tow at Port Said and follow the shipping through the Canal under its own power. This meant a 24 hour wait whilst anchored in Suez Bay until it arrived to then continue the journey under tow.

Aden



The Ma'alah Straight

At that time the Squadron HQ, with OC Major Ian Hart, had offices on the upper floor of the Command Arabic Language School, a large pale blue and white Villa situated on the Isthmus. I ran the Tech Office for about six months. Later the Sqn moved to the ground floor of Flight House, a large block of flats, used as married families hireings, situated on the south side of Ma'alah Straight, a dual carriageway which was the main accommodation and shopping area for Service families. Soon after this Staff Sergeant Alan McVeigh arrived with his family from Kenya to take over the Tech Office function when 89 Field Survey Squadron was disbanded in 1989 and I was made 2i/c of the Office.

Up Country - Aden Protectorate

Later the Squadron was tasked by HQ Survey Branch at Steamer Point to provide photo control by altimeter heighting up country in the Dhalah area about 100 miles north of Aden (Ad Dali on the atlas), close to the Yemen border. At Dhalah on a slight rise about one mile north of the Town there was a tented British Army camp surrounded by stone walls with sand bag lined sangers for mounting the Bren guns in the event of attack. A convoy of fifty military resupply and civilian trucks formed up on a gravel plain about thirty miles north of Lahej to make the weekly journey from Aden. It was a two day trip which meant sleeping in or under the Land Rover, the OC's Rover as it happened, as all others were in use or out of action.

Sergeant Dick Pollard, a Field Troop Sergeant who I had known from Harrogate days, and I plus our driver, Sapper Wesley Quain a Manxman on a 4 to 6 week detachment, were tasked to do the job as we were trained in the sighting of height points for photo control and in altimetry. For technical reasons (reading the base altimeter) we shared a 180 lb tent and Dick

showed that he had a sense of humour once, when one night, I awoke to hear a baboon in our tent. They raided the camp bins regularly at night and occasionally were shot by the guard. I shook Dick and said, "There is a baboon in the tent !" He replied "If its female, let it stay." - It didn't!

Whilst taking turns on the base altimeter wherever we were at the time, we each trekked miles in the mountains including Jebal Jihalf, a big one west of Dhalah, escorted by a couple of APL (Aden Protectorate Levy's - Arab soldiers, - they climbed like mountain goats, and had British Officers and some SNCOs.) Our Kit was carried by camels, also very good in mountains. The APL had fresh walking compositions called goats, a herd of about ten which they drove behind the camels! We lived with the local tribesmen and where possible in APL outposts, it being a bit hairy at the time with Yemeni intruders infiltrating the border and skirmishes were frequent at the time. We both learned a good smattering of Arabic quite fast, enough to get by which helped with communicating with the Arab soldiers.

At one point I got heat stroke which took the form of worn cartilage in my hip joints due to the climbing, very painful, and had to be stretchered on the back of a camel to a Government rest house at Awabil very close to the border and miles from anywhere. Dick radioed to Aden for advice which was, "Rest and take more Salt". So we had to rest up for about a week for me to recover and I took on the base altimeter reading job. One skill gained whilst at Dhalah, was when given the chance to drive the Land Rover to and from Dhalah air strip on which Dick gave me some brief driving instructions. Driving up country like that, on and off the roughest of roads, tracks and wadi beds does teach one to control a vehicle in four wheel drive and high and low ratio. The Air Force gave the camp token support from RAF Khormaksar when a Hawker Hunter (I think from 8 Sqn RAF) buzzed the camp at low level a couple of times a day.

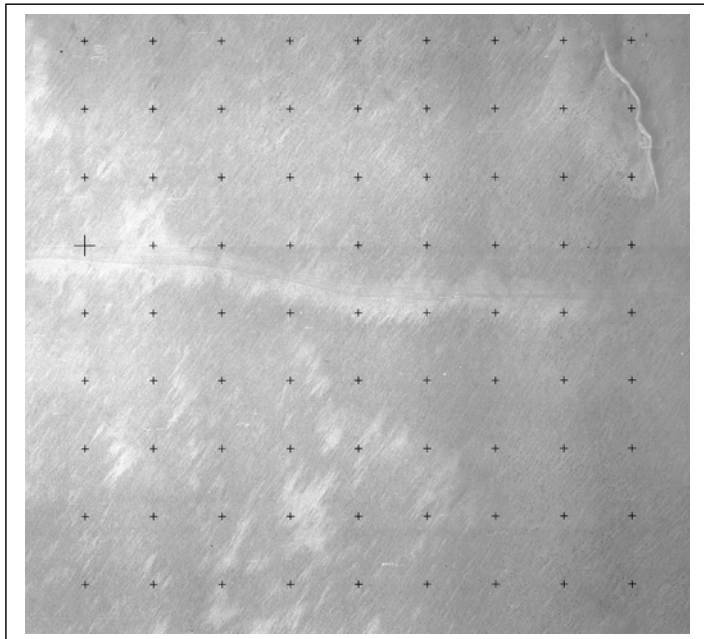
Civilian Detachment - Oman

Later that year I was sent to Oman to carry out a task on a detachment from 1 Troop based at Niswa. It meant that I had to be issued with civilian clothes consisting of grey flannel trousers, long sleeved white shirts and black shoes - and a grey trilby hat offered as part of the issue which I did not sign for. In the event I wore my suede desert chukka boots as did most of the men at the time. Eventually I travelled from RAF Khormaksar in a Hastings transport as a lone passenger sitting on a large bundle of freight keep nets. Flying at height, destination Bahrain, even over what was the baking Empty Quarter whilst dressed in KD uniform it was freezing and very uncomfortable for the whole journey. My flight was originally meant to be by Beverly, known locally as the RSM Bev Bus (calling at Riyan, Salalah, Mazirah) which on occasions flew on to Bahrain via Sharjah but for various reasons it never did took off on my scheduled flight. We were called forward to the departure hanger seven mornings running to catch that aircraft, I did emplane once and the aircraft taxied to the west end of the runway, revved up its engines and then taxied back to the hard standing with fuel dripping from one of its wings and a fire tender in close attendance.

After a couple of days in *HMS Jufayr* where the Squadron had a bungalow, I flew by RAF Twin Pioneer to Firq airstrip five miles south of Nizwa, the ancient capital of Oman dominated by the great circular sand coloured fort. I was greeted at the camp just south of the town by 1 Troop's commander, Lieutenant Henry Rogers. I recall that the acting troop Sergeant was Corporal Klon Goldup who was doing the job of running the technical tasks as well looking after the administration and discipline matters. I stayed there a few days whilst preparing my limited equipment and stores to set off south. The camp was situated on rising ground about 100 meters east of the Niswa road with a long high jebal ridge running north/south behind it.

The journey south of about 150 miles by road in a couple Land Rovers to my destination via the Adam Gap took the best part of a day. My task was to replace a Corporal Wilshire, I think was his name, (I never did meet him, due to my delay at Khormaksar,) as a guest of Petroleum Development Oman, (PDO), Survey Party 15, at Uwayfi, an encampment south west of Nizwa on the north bank of the Wadi al Umayri. It consisted of eight to ten American style luxury

caravans, one used as the survey and communications office, another as a Medical centre run by a Balochi medic, a mess marquee and a couple of luxury tents, called Swiss Cottages used to house visitors and temporary guests like myself. To service the camp the Company had constructed an airstrip surfaced with hard packed clay about 500 meters north of the camp.



F49 photography of the desert

Lance Corporal Mervin Baker, a 3 year 'regular' from 1 Troop, was as my driver. He had also previously driven for Corporal Wilshire a stripped down Army Mk 1 Land Rover painted grey to tone in with the Oil Company trucks. My task was to annotate 1/80,000 photography with the 'goings' and surface feature information and to use the Oil Company height data to control the photography for photogrammetric plotting. This data, as I remember it, consisted dyeline maps of the desert portraying the grid of graded gravel tracks at 5 kilometre spacing. The tracks had been heightened by levelling and marked along them at 1 kilometre intervals by numbered wooden pegs. It was not an easy task

to mark most of these points on the photos with any accuracy due to the poor quality F49 photography flown

long before the Oil Company had started work in that region but I did my best by raying in from easily identified land marks. The terrain in that region, being mostly gravel and sandy plains, was quite flat interspersed by shallow wadis and spreads and the variation in height of each height point was quite small. We came across salamanders basking in the sun and small herds of Arabian gazelles that fled at great speed when we approached. 1 Troop were I believe given permission to hunt and shoot the gazelle by the Sultan's representative interpreter and guide who was domiciled and embedded with the Troop.

This work took us north and east from the camp where the survey and seismic parties were operating in the Natih and Jabal Fahud areas which were in my area of interest. It was in the Natih structure, that we came across one party and we watched seismic charges being detonated. (In geological terms, Natih is a collapsed dome, oval in shape and about ten kilometres in length and four wide, marked by tiny elongated hillocks in the south of no more than a couple of feet high, to sand stone cliff edged ridges on the inner side of the structure, about fifty to sixty feet high in the north marking rim of the dome.)

Working in temperatures of over 100 degrees meant starting off early and without a canopy it was difficult keeping the 9"x 9" photos flat as they curled tightly when exposed to the sun which one had to do when using the hand stereoscope to try to make identifications on them, frustratingly difficult at times. We continued our daily work and in the evenings I was given the height information that I required covering the area for the next day's task that I set myself. This was handed to me by the Chief Surveyor in the office trailer and would I inform him of our direction of travel and proposed destination the next day in case of any problems or breakdown. It was at one of these evening liaisons that I was informed that the Information could no longer be released. No reason was given but strong Chinese whispers advised me that analysis of recent seismic work revealed that oil had been discovered in the area that we were working in. (Note. Major oil wells now exist in the Natih and at Jebal Fahud locations.) I continued working with what information I had in reserve and spent the days annotating the photos with the desert 'goings' information.

Sad News

My stay and the work unfortunately came to an end when I had sad news that my father had died when Lieutenant Rogers with a small party in two Land Rovers arrived quite late in the evening. They had travelled all day and into the night over rough terrain to hand me an MOD signal informing me he died on the 29th of January and I received the news on the 1st February 1960. I will always be grateful to Henry and his men for what they did for me that day. I spent most of that night completing unfinished work and packing clothes in order to return home.

The Journey Home

The oil company had regular resupply flights by Aden Airways DC-3 (Dakota) into the air strip which luckily was due to arrive at some time during the morning of the next day and would fly me to Muscat. 1 Troop had arranged compassionate leave for me and made all the travel arrangements to get me home to UK. The next day started early with the unusual sound of rain on our tent. During the morning a rumbling, getting ever nearer and louder reached our ears that eventually turned out to be the Wadi al Umayri in spate. Water, six to ten feet high from the mountainous area to the north east was roaring down the water course bringing everything from rocks to scrub, dust and spume before it.

Doubts were voiced whether the Dak would be able to land when the rain became heavier as the day wore on. My situation however was radioed to the pilot and despite the slippery clay surface on the strip he landed safely. I said my farewells to Lance Corporal Baker and thanked the oil company staff and we took off heading north east flying below the cloud base. On reaching the mountains in the Jebal Akdar area the rain became heavier and the cloud base lower. The route took us along the Sumail Gap, a deep wadi valley through the jebals which carried the treacherous road from Muscat to Izki and Nizwa where many a military and civil vehicle had foundered or blown up by mines. By this time we were flying along what seemed like a V shaped tunnel formed by the steep sided jebal walls and the black clouds above. At the water shed there was only about 200 feet clearance to fly through, which was lucky as there was virtually no turning back due to the limited width of the valley at that point. On landing safely at Seeb, the Muscat airstrip, I was taken the HQ SAF (Sultans Armed Forces) for a night stop over and was then flown to Bahrain the next day by RAF Twin Pioneer, the standard runabout in that area at the time.

After a night stop over at the Squadron bungalow I boarded a BEA Vickers Vanguard at the civil side of RAF Muharraq for the long flight to Blighty. Whilst I waited to board some sort of ceremony was taking place because it was the first time a BOAC De Havilland Comet and a Boeing 707 had arrived on the Airport apron, or that was what I was told at the time. My aircraft had few passengers so I was offered a luxury seat in 1st class which I did not refuse and we took off up the coast of Saudi Arabia for Kuwait which was then a sand strip running parallel to the beach south of the city. Our route took us over the arid desert region following roughly along the north side of the Saudi Iraq border to Damascus Airport which was shared by civil and military aircraft. In the hour or so wait before re boarding the flight, I witnessed Syrian Air force Russian built Mig 15's being towed by tractors to the end of the runway before starting their jet engines prior to take off.

The rest of the flight was via Ankara, Istanbul, Athens, Rome, Munich, and a night stop over in Brussels due to London being fog bound. We were put up in a small hotel in the centre of the city for the night and despite my sorrow it was too much of a temptation not to venture out and see the city landmarks. I was twin room as I had been teamed up with a Royal Marine who boarded at Munich and was on compassionate leave like myself. On landing at Heathrow the next day, feeling very cold, I made my way home via Waterloo and Portsmouth Harbour Station, the Gosport ferry and arrived home early in the afternoon to find that my father was to have his funeral service the next morning. I had made it.

Return To Duty – Oman

I returned to Aden after my allotted four weeks leave and was ordered to wait for a flight back to 1 Troop in Oman. The flight this time, though uneventful, was by the Bev Bus. I proceeded to Nizwa via the Squadron bungalow and then RAF Twin Pin to my destination at Firq. Lance Corporal Baker had been withdrawn from Awayfi a couple of weeks after I had left in haste five or six weeks earlier and was by this time decivilianised and back driving for the Troop on field tasks. On occasions, at about sundown, the camp was fired at from palm groves about 800 yards west of the camp over the Nizwa road and a wadi, then the routine was to man the sangers made from kerosene tins filled with sand, positioned to cover the arc. Nothing unusual I was told. Insurgents at that time were becoming bolder and the troop lost a 3 ton water truck driven by Sapper Jock Robertson when an anti-personnel mine took the front off side wheel of his truck whilst crossing the rocky wadi bed on his way to fill up with water from the open falage close to the town. He was uninjured.



The mined water truck

My time at Nizwa was firstly taken up by tidying up the work I had done with the Oil Company down in the desert and sending it back to Aden. It was then my roll to use my skills as a topo surveyor doing point identification reports (PIR), names collection and sighting height control points being carried out by the Troop who were working on control for K668 1/100,000 map series at the time.

My driving skills learned down on Dhalah airstrip were put to good use when the OC, Major Hart, made a visit to the Troop and I drove him on a two day tour of the country south of the Adam Gap which took

us over some rough ground and steep sided wadis. As a result of that trip I got a 'Pink Slip' from the 2i/c, Captain Lower, on my eventual return to Aden prior to leaving the Middle East. When requested he consulted the OC about my driving skills he was reported to have said, "That's OK, he was a bit fast when he could have gone slow and a bit slow when he could have gone fast but for beginner was pretty good." I exchanged the Pink Slip for a full license on my return to Blighty in 1960 and as a result have never taken a driving test.

Tour's End

My time with 1 Troop came to a sudden end whilst assisting a party to move its kit up onto Jebal Akhdar. The detachment was air lifted in three or four trips by a RAF Single Pioneer from Firq to a short airstrip at Saiq, 6,300 feet up on the Mountain. I shall never forget the runway for it ended on the edge of a cliff a good 1,000 foot drop, if not more. Whilst unloading the second load a message came through on the aircraft radio that I had been posted and was to return to Bahrain on the same Pioneer we were using. So a hasty journey had to be made to return to camp at Nizwa, pack and get back to Firq to fly out late that afternoon. The lateness of the hour meant that we had to land at Sharjah, stay the night and proceed to Bahrain the next morning. A chance meeting that evening was when I bumped into an old junior school friend from my childhood days in the form of Captain David Neil, SAF. A pleasant encounter that helped shorten a very hot and sticky evening. The rest of the trip back to Aden passed without incident.

My Next Posting (In Brief)

My posting sounded exciting and vastly different to the desert environment I had been used to for the past year and a half, it was to be - France, which I journeyed to after a few days stay HQ RE at Chatham.

My new posting was HQ Allied Forces Central Europe – AFCENT- based in Fontainebleau in the Cour Henry Quatre (IV), part of the Palace of Fontainebleau that was the original administration area and servants quarters to the palace. AFCENT and the British Army Camp Support Unit in Cartier Chateau on Rue Saint-Merry in the town could not have been more different to the open air freedom of the desert. I was to be on a three year posting in my secondary trade of topographic draughtsman serving in Plans & Police Division. Little did I know that in fact it was a general duties draughtsman's job.

My office was situated in a small room of maximum dimensions ten by eight feet with a semi-circular indent on one wall containing a circular window making it very restricting. It housed a large draughting table, a high stool and a store cupboard for my inks, drawing instruments and stencils. This small room was positioned in the Main Portico of the Porte du Chateau overlooking the main gate to the HQ from which I was privileged to see most of the visiting dignitaries and the elaborate international guards of honour that formed immediately below me. However it felt like a prison compared to where I had come from.

Though I enjoyed the international working environment and the detachments to the Nato Conferences at Palais Dauphine/Palais de l'Otan at the west end of the Avenue Foch in Paris, (now the Paris University Dauphine), stencilling name plates for doors and designing conference signs and view graphs was not my forte so at the earliest opportunity I applied to attend the next A1 Topo Surveyor course at Hermitage and was accepted. I was replaced by Corporal Denis Evans (a draughtsman of 54A Intake of Harrogate like myself) though I never saw him to hand over the baton, sad to say. I stayed in France for one year and two weeks and then I and my export quota grey Triumph Herald had had enough so we motored home with a sigh of relief and paid the little amount customs duty that was outstanding.

Next stop Hermitage!

Photograph Acknowledgements

Zyyi tent lines: Mick Gowlett

Ma'alah Straight: Peter Wood

Mines truck: Henry Rogers