

50th Anniversary Photography Exhibition



HM Sultan Qaboos visits Operation
Simba

December 1972



THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY

الجمعية البريطانية العمانية

As HM Sultan Qaboos took over from his father in July 1970 the chief challenge to Oman's future still lay in Dhofar where since 1964 a small group of British officers, advisors, and trainers had been helping guide the Sultan's forces in their conflict with the Marxist insurgents of the People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG).

Although the new Sultan immediately offered an amnesty to all those who opposed the previous regime and a serious hearts and minds campaign was waged alongside the war, the initial effect on the war was minimal. Indeed, for some two years the rebel activities, strongly supported from PDRY (South Yemen) and other countries grew in intensity. Salalah itself was in some danger.

Operation Simba beginning in April 1972 and the battle of Mirbat, won by SAS and Omani troops in July 1972 turned the tide; the military balance then began to shift increasingly in the Sultan's favour until the campaign was won in 1975.



Operation Simba devised and led by [Colonel Nigel Knocker](#) extended the country's outer defences to Sarfait on the Oman-South Yemen border. The aim was to cut the supply line of the insurgent forces by holding a key position near the border with Yemen. As Commanding Officer of the Desert Regiment Colonel Knocker helped secure the position; this action would prove to be one of the decisive points in the campaign in Dhofar.

To learn more about this pivotal moment, the Anglo-Omani Society spoke to Colonel Nigel Knocker OBE, WO, WkHM ; we also talked about his military career and the wider strategic significance of Operation Simba.

Col Nigel Knocker Interview

What was the background to you going to serve in Oman?

"The background was I was in the Life Guards when I was told about Oman, and for various reasons, I wasn't going to stay in the Life Guards. So I went to the Ministry of Defence and I was told 'right you want to go to Oman?', so I said, 'where is that?' One had never heard of it in those days. It wasn't a place one knew about. But, I was briefed about what was going on in Oman and so that was that. After a good deal of discussion about whether or not I should go, because I was married and it was a two-year unaccompanied tour in Oman, I said 'yes, ok I'll go'. That was in 1971."

What were your first impressions arriving in Oman?

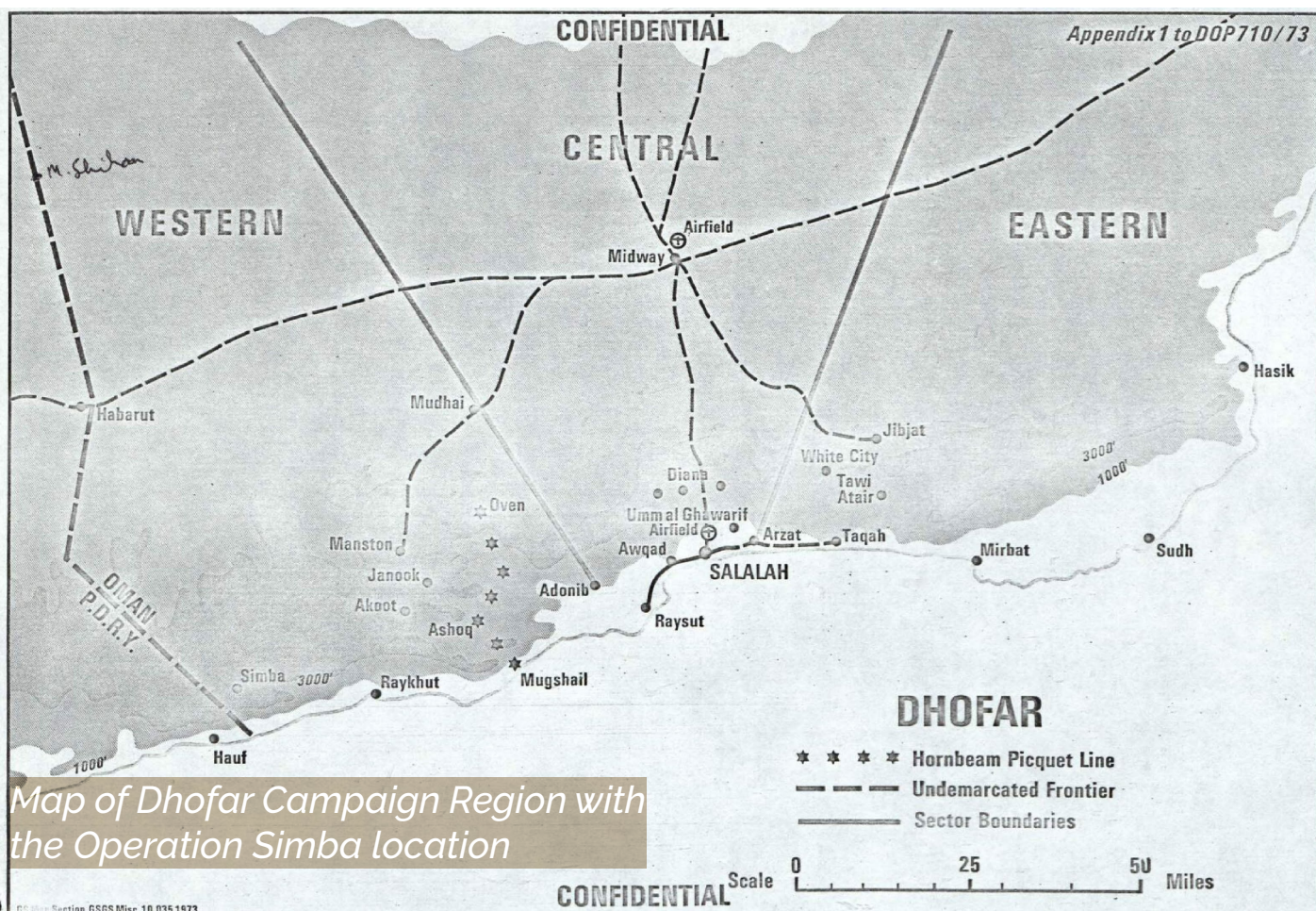
"It was quite a shock when one arrived there because it was in the days just after the coup. My first impression when I got there was that this was going to be a pretty tricky setup, and I started off by going to join the Desert Regiment which I was a commander of up in Bid Bid. They had just fought in Oman and they had just got back from a tour in Dhofar. And I thought 'well I better find out pretty quickly what's actually happening in Dhofar.' So I went down there to see the setup which was just as well I did. I went down to a place called Akoot, which had been where the Northern Frontier Regiment had been and when I got there I thought 'Wow, this looks pretty tricky.'"

What was the plan before Operation Simba?

"There was an interesting situation because the commander of the Dhofar Brigade was a chap called Colonel Mike Harvey. He had commanded the Northern Frontier Regiment at one stage and he was the sort of guy who was very keen on judo and he would tear up telephone directories and do things like that. When he briefed me early on he drew a couple of circles on a map and said: 'This is where the adoo (enemy) is, this is where you are, and you go and take them out.'"

"Mike Harvey's plan was to advance forward towards the Sherishitti caves, the adoo's stronghold, in a frontal attack. That is, advance on a forward slope down to the Sherishitti Caves area, a slope partly in scrub and partly in open country. Extremely risky, and this was Harvey's original plan. I thought 'No, this is not really a practical solution.' So I said that I wasn't going to do it. But as luck would have it he went on leave back to the UK so I got hold of Commander Sultan's Armed Forces (CSAF) John Graham and he agreed with me and said he would back me up.

My impression of the situation in Dhofar was that it was very serious. I thought if we didn't do something drastic quite soon we would lose it. The adoo were up on the jebel (mountain) and they had just driven the Northern Frontier Regiment off the jebel. From this point, the adoo would be able to open fire on RAF Salalah unless something drastic was done. So what was done was that the RAF Regiment were brought out and they managed to hold the adoo back and in the meantime build a series of what was known as 'hedgehogs'. They were fortified positions with mortars inside and communications back to HQ Dhofar Brigade based in RAF Salalah Base. Five or six of these hedgehogs were built in total."



How did you go about picking the location for Operation Simba?

"I realised when we were in Akoot that we had to get out of it because the adoo were right up close to it. Every day they would come in and mortar the position, mine the tracks coming out, and it was quite clear that we had to get out of it and do something more realistic and drastic. We decided that we would go right up to the border area, close to Hawf and Yemen, and cut the adoo supply line. A very good ex-army pilot called Nick Holbrook would join me in various recces (reconnaissances) up there and we realised that if we were going to make a success of a position in that area we were going to need an airstrip. So we looked around and we found what we thought was quite a reasonable area with a flat bit of jebel off the Wadi Sarfait, and we thought that looked ok.

"So we decided we would go and land on the area where we thought we could put in the airstrip and just look around and see what would happen. We would do a diversionary attack on the adoo so that they didn't quite twig what we were actually doing. We landed and realised straight away the whole position was dominated by a feature, which I later called the yardarm, which dominated the actual airstrip area. We realised we would need to take this as a first start."

Operation Simba position dominating Wadi Sarfait with troops and sangars set up on the plateau



"We landed and just to keep the adoo guessing, took some mortars and mortared down below the escarpment to hopefully confuse the adoo about what we were actually going to do. The Sarfait position was up on the top of a jebel and dominated down towards the sea. It also dominated Hawf, the border town in Yemen. So we thought if we could cut the adoo's supply line, that would stop them from getting mines, ammunition, and stop them getting through to the Eastern area of Oman. In the end, coming back years later, we realised it was the position that won the war, which I found satisfying."

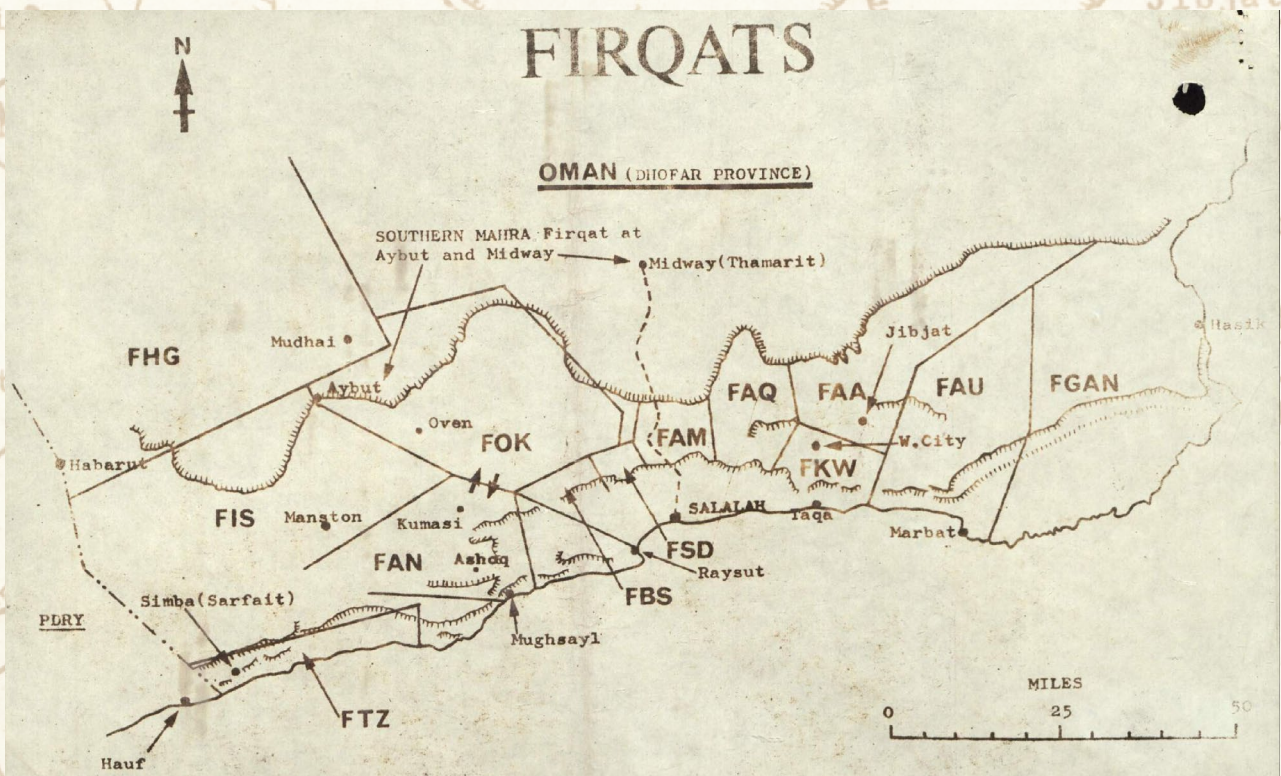
What do you remember of the operation day?

"L-Day was the day we were going to mount the operation. The evening before all the helicopters came up with various people. It so happened that that night the heavens opened and poured with rain, which was just not what we wanted. At Akoot we had quite a big mess tent, and that night the water ran through the mess tent forcing everyone to sit there with their feet up. 'Good start' we thought! Come the next day the clouds were down, visibility was awful, this was in the morning and it was absolutely impossible to do anything so we waited. The forecast was that the weather would improve, which it did. So come the afternoon, the cloud lifted and we said 'right, we're going.'"



A Skyvan landing in Eastern Dhofar in 1971 as part of the hearts-and-minds campaign

We landed on the various positions with great success and with no response from the adoo at all. They simply didn't realise what was going on, and we realised that the yardarm feature did dominate the position.



"The adoo reacted eventually and started shelling and mortaring, but without much success, and we were able to pinpoint where they were. The idea was to secure the position and build an airstrip which we did with great fun because it had to be cleared of stones and lots of soldiers physically had to remove stones from the strip. Eventually in came a Skyvan and landed, and it was quite fun, a great cheer went up all around the position, all the soldiers cheered and clapped! We were then able to unload supplies and everything we needed.

However, the adoo reacted in a clever way. They decided to attack a Sultanate fort at a place called Habarut right on the PDRY-Oman border and we had to safeguard the position. When we realised they were attacking from across the border the jets were called out and dealt with the adoo forcing them to eventually withdraw. But it was a clever move because I then had to send half a company up to this position to secure it. Meanwhile, back at Akoot the adoo decided they would attack that. There were only a few soldiers and armoured cars and I had to send a couple of platoons back to Akoot from Sarfait to secure the position."

What was the importance of the Capstan position?

After we secured the Simba position we decided to try and secure the Capstan position. I decided to name all these positions because we were close to the sea after nautical terms: yardarm, capstan, and so on. At Capstan we thought we would be able to get water which was obviously fundamental especially in that time of year, April or May, as it was getting very warm. We moved down to Capstan overnight with two companies from the Desert Regiment commanded by an excellent Royal Marine. Down we went, down to Capstan position. Could we find water? No.

By that time the adoo had started to react pretty heavily, and were attacking the Capstan position in force. We had to decide what we were going to do, so I went down and we landed in cover where I realised we either had to get out of the position pretty quick, or reinforce it. The only answer was that we would have to get out of Capstan and withdraw. We were also getting casualties down there and it was difficult to find a way to get soldiers out. So we decided we would withdraw from Capstan overnight and a Royal Marine company went down over the escarpment down into the Capstan position, got everything out, and then climbed back up the face of the Jebel. It was an amazing achievement, I remember thinking back about my initial briefing at the Ministry of Defence, no one ever thought one was going to be involved in this kind of thing!



*Civil Aid Development project at Jibjat
aided by the British Army Training Team
(BATT)*

What do you remember about the visit of Sultan Qaboos to Operation Simba pictured here?

"The fact about the picture above is that it was taken when HM came to the Simba position when the Muscat Regiment took over from us. He did come to visit us, the Desert Regiment, very soon after we put in the position. He was very interested in what was going on and our future plans. Of course, he had been with the British army with the Cameronians in Germany, so he was pretty savvy in military matters. His first reaction, when he was briefed by Brigadier Graham about plans for Operation Simba, was positive, he said 'yes go ahead.'



Eventually the Muscat Regiment took over the position at Simba, that is the time when Sultan Qaboos visited in that picture. What was also interesting was that when the adoo had continued their various attacks the Jordanians had produced a squadron of engineers, the UAE had provided some support, and the attacks on Sarfait had been drawn to the attention of the United Nations. The UN said the Dhofar War had drawn the attention of the world, that was a good move for us, and no one thought that this would happen. As luck would have it, the Iranians came into the act in 1973 and they produced helicopters and masses of soldiers. This ultimately meant the position at Simba could be handed over to the Muscat Regiment to take over. Our soldiers were flown out, and their soldiers were flown in so it was a direct crossover."

As a result of your service you were presented with an OBE, what are your thoughts on this and Operation Simba looking back?

At the end of the day we had fought for this country. A lot of people had given their lives for it and we had saved the country. Everyone at the time wanted to establish bases in Oman and that is why Sarfait became so important with the UN. So I found it very satisfying that at the end of the day, after all the ups and downs, the trials and tribulations, it was actually that position that had won the war."

OBE Letter of Recommendation for Col. Nigel Knocker

<p>DO NOT WRITE IN THIS MARGIN</p>		<p>1. To be completed in accordance with current instructions and forwarded to Ministry of Defence (MS3), Stanmore, Middlesex. 2. NOT to be used in connection with campaign stars or medals. 3. No abbreviations, except those officially authorized, will be used. 4. Whenever possible, typescript should be used. 5. This recommendation will NOT be considered unless the personal particulars of the individual are correctly</p>	
<p>Lieutenant Colonel Knocker completed in July 1973 an outstandingly successful two year tour in command of a battalion of the Sultan's Armed Forces on very active operations against a well armed and determined enemy.</p> <p>During the first year of his tour he was responsible for a number of large scale battalion operations in Western Dhofar where the enemy was at his strongest and were operating over short, interior lines of communication. In particular he was personally responsible for the detailed reconnaissance, planning and execution of the battalion - plus heliborne Operation Simba, widely acknowledged by both the enemy and our own forces as the most successful operation yet mounted on the jebel. It is a tribute to his meticulous planning and sound tactical sense that the objectives were gained with minimum casualties, and that the positions he selected are still held over a year later and despite constant reappraisal in the light of operations, cannot be altered to advantage.</p>			
<p>Honour or Award for which recommended</p> <p>OBE</p>		<p>Award for which finally approved by Ministry of Defence (For Ministry or Defence use only)</p>	
<p>Name (in blocks) and official designation of initiating officer</p> <p>MAJOR GENERAL TM CREASEY - COMMANDER SULTAN'S ARMED FORCES</p>			
<p>Date 9 August 1973</p>		<p>Signature <i>TM Creasey</i></p>	
<p>Remarks of Brigade (or equivalent) Commander</p>		<p>Remarks of Divisional (or equivalent) Commander</p>	
<p>Signature</p>		<p>Signature</p>	

By 1975 the Dhofar War was at an end. A combination of tactical military operations and heart-and-mind campaigns aimed at civil development defeated the Dhofar insurgency. With British, Iranian, and Jordanian support HM Sultan Qaboos managed to secure his legitimacy against the insurgency and continue Oman on a path of development. Operation Simba played a central role at the turning point of the Dhofar War. By cutting off the supply lines that supported the insurgent forces Colonel Nigel Knocker's plan helped win a war that in early 1970 Oman had seemed at risk of losing.

To learn more about Operation Simba and Col Nigel Knocker's time in Oman see *Storm Front* by Rowland White, and *Oman's Insurgencies* by J. E. Peterson. For internal British government documents about Operation Simba from the official archive now declassified see [FCO 8/1865](#), [FCO 8/2022](#) and [FCO 8/2023](#).

Photo Credits:

- "Map of Dhofar Campaign Region with the Operation Simba location" in Arabian Gulf Digital Archives, [FCO 8/2022, pg. 9](#).
- "Operation Simba position dominating Wadi Sarfait with troops and sangars set up on the plateau" from Brian Harrington Spier, Oman Dhofar 1972, [wikimedia.org](#).
- "A Skyvan landing in Eastern Dhofar in 1971 as part of the hearts-and-minds campaign" from Brian Harrington Spier, Oman Dhofar 1971, [wikimedia.org](#).
- "Firqats Map" in Arabian Gulf Digital Archives, [FCO 8/2022, pg. 92](#).
- "Civil Aid Development Project" from Brian Harrington Spier, Oman Dhofar 1972, [wikimedia.org](#).
- "Recommendation for Award for Knocker" in National Archives, [WO 373/175/123](#).