

55 Field Surgical Team RAF Salalah 1972

Peter Starling

Where British Forces serve in any significant numbers there will also be found medical support dependent in size on local facilities and the actual number of personnel in the force involved.

With the build-up of the British Army Training Team (BATT) in Dhofar in the early seventies surgical support was provided by sending in a Field Surgical Team (FST). This was established on the airfield at Salalah and at the time of the author's tour was located adjacent to the Station Medical Centre (SMC) close to the perimeter wire. On my arrival in late March 1972 the FST was housed in old tents and surrounded by burmails which offered some protection against shrapnel from the Adoo recoilless rifle (RCL) fire.

The early weeks were kind to us with a slow trickle of casualties coming in from actions on the Jebel or from mines laid on the Raysut Road. Time was found to visit the Hedgehogs and to drive to the fort at Mamura. Our mornings were spent, where possible, treating Dhofaris down at the local hospital in Salalah. Being a keen weapons enthusiast, a highlight of my early days in Dhofar was a trip up to the late Spike Powell's "museum" and armoury. I can remember too my amazement the first time I saw his gunships come rolling on to the airfield.

After some weeks our old tents were swapped for prefabricated buildings erected by the Royal Engineers. These were opened with due ceremony by the OC RAF Salalah, who was, if I remember correctly, Squadron Leader Honey, and a big sigh of relief was heard from Chief Tech Spice, the RAF Senior NCO, as we were finally getting out of his medical centre, and his hair!

I am sure many readers will recall the night of 8th/9th June 1972 and the attack on the airfield which resulted in the Officers' Mess being shelled. I can clearly remember the constant wailing of the sirens throughout the night to warn us of further incomers heading our way and the all-night operating session to treat the wounded from the Mess. The coming of dawn afforded us the opportunity to view the resultant damage of the previous night's attacks.

The ensuing weeks were occupied by a mixture of treating the steady flow of casualties that arrived from the Jebel, working in the local hospital, afternoon trips to the beach and games of volleyball. The highlight of the evenings was the open air film show occasionally disturbed by the siren which sent us all scurrying for cover.

Time in our tour was getting short. The end of July was fast approaching and with it, we hoped, the Hercules aircraft that would take us back to our families.

This rather peaceful existence was abruptly disturbed very early in the morning of 19th July, with an initial call to the runway to await the arrival of a Strikemaster inbound with its hydraulics damaged by ground fire over a coastal town called Mirbat. The rest is history and has been detailed in many of the books about SAF and the BATT. For us, the day's events gradually unfolded and by lunch time the SOAF Hueys began to arrive with their pitiful cargoes of wounded, both enemy and friendly.

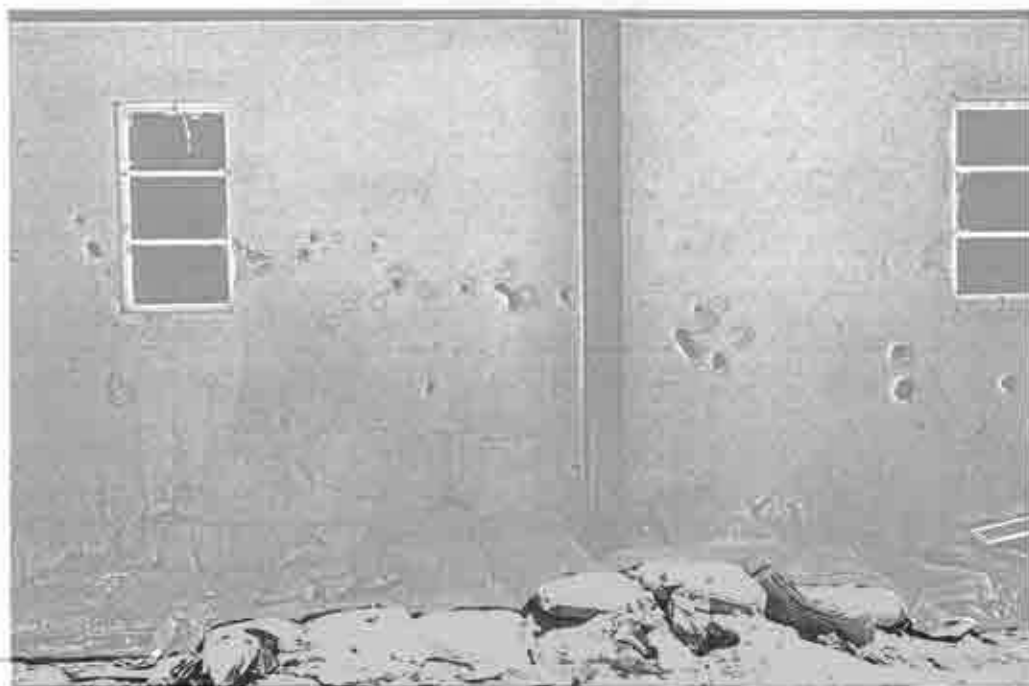
The Medical Centre at UAG took the more lightly wounded off our hands as we began thirty-six hours of continuous surgery on the more serious cases. Follow-up surgery occupied our final days in Dhofar until after the customary farewell celebrations we boarded Yimkin Airways on Monday 31st July 1972 for our return flight via four days in Cyprus.

Time in Oman remains firmly embedded in my memory. Hopefully the future will one day afford me an opportunity to return and to experience for myself the many changes that have taken place since those distant days.

(Peter Starling joined the RAMC in 1964, at the age of 15, and on entering regular service two years later trained and was qualified as an Operating Theatre Technician. He was detached to 55 Field Surgical Team RAF Salalah in early 1972. Subsequently he was commissioned into the Administrative Cadre of the RAMC in 1988 and has since served in both regular field ambulances and military hospitals, and was adjutant of 32 Field Ambulance in the Gulf War. He is now the Regular Training Officer with a TA Field Ambulance in Scotland and lives in Dundee.)



Chief Tech Spice with a local casualty. Artificial legs by Airwork.



The rear of the Officers' Mess after the attack.

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