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## **Aden and the Radfan Campaigns 1963 – 1967**

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# **THE ADEN CONFLICT AND THE RADFAN CAMPAIGNS**

## **1963 - 1967**

British military involvement in Southern Arabia dates back to 1839 when it was occupied by troops of the East India Company in order to secure harbour facilities on a coastline where few harbours existed, then or now. Until 1937 Aden was ruled as part of British India but it later became a British Crown Colony and then, with the inclusion of its mountainous hinterland, a British Protectorate. After more than a hundred years spent in the political doldrums, several influences came together during the 1960s to make Aden the focus of attention and which resulted in two related but very different counter-insurgency campaigns, one urban and one in remote mountainous terrain.

The arid, rocky and sparsely populated region north of Aden, known as the Radfan, has not seen any real change for hundreds of years. It was ruled, if that word can be used in this context, by local tribesmen whose main source of income came from robbing travellers who passed through the area. It was a rugged, unforgiving and lawless region that had no natural resources but was strategically important in that a major trade route from the north had to pass through it and the area could be used as a base of operations from which to threaten Aden itself. However, to the north of the Radfan was the newly-established People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), a state encouraged and funded by President Nasser of Egypt, one of Britain's most ardent Arab enemies. The PDRY was also supported by the Soviet Union as part of its Cold War strategy. For the PDRY to export its brand of revolution to Aden and oust the British, its forces had to travel along the Dhala Road through the Khuraybah Pass and the Radfan mountains. The two main challenges posed to British forces in the Radfan was the difficulty in operating in such a remote and inhospitable area and the fact that the enemy were expert mountain fighters who had the advantage of knowing the local geography without reliance of maps or aerial photography. The two Radfan expeditions in 1964 and 1965 were adjudged to have achieved their tactical aim but it cannot be said that they had any long-lasting effect on the developments then taking place in Southern Arabia.

Partly in response to the threat from neighbouring North Yemen, negotiations for a unified state of Southern Arabia commenced in the early 1960s but these were protracted and difficult and resulted in much in-fighting between rival factions as well as a growing number of terrorist incidents against British forces and interests in Aden. The creation of the Federation of South Arabia in 1963 was not welcomed by most of the local population and only served to harden resolve against the British Government. When it became known in 1966 that Britain was going to withdraw from Aden completely the following year the pace of terrorist activity increased greatly. The densely populated Crater district of Aden became the focus of terrorist and counter-insurgency operations during the final years of the British occupation. As political negotiations continued the British armed forces planned the final withdrawal from Aden, which took place in November 1967.

### **Historical, political and strategic background**

A comprehensive and well researched history of Aden is provided by **GAVIN** who covers the whole period of British involvement from 1839 to the military evacuation in 1967. Also the result of meticulous research but with a decidedly anti-colonial view, **MAWBY's** book concentrates on more recent years, from 1955 to 1967, and is focussed primarily on the evolving British political and strategic policy of the various governments in power during that time. Also concentrating on British strategic policy in relation to Aden is **KING's** slim work, its drawback being that it was written four years before the final act of withdrawal and so is an incomplete survey. **PIERAGOSTINI**, an American academic, is more specific and concentrates on the decision processes by which the British Government decided on the final withdrawal from Aden.

A very useful and authoritative first-hand account of the political machinations behind the Aden story is presented by **TREVASKIS** who served as a diplomat in Aden for many years and became the High Commissioner of the Protectorate that he had helped to create. **TREVELYAN** was Britain's last High Commissioner to Aden and as such oversaw the British withdrawal from the Protectorate. The final

chapters of his book tell of the frustrating attempts to create a viable national government from the feuding NLF and FLOSY factions. **JOHNSTON** was present in Aden throughout much of the time when the negotiations were taken place to merge the Protectorates into the Federation and gives a most useful account of the machinations that this involved. **LEDGER's** book gives another first-hand political view as the author was on the staff of the High Commission up until the final evacuation having first experienced operations in Aden as an Intelligence Officer in the British Army. This latter fact probably accounts for the inclusion of information on the military aspects, which is lacking in the other books in this section.

A more recent book by three Civil Servants with personal knowledge of Aden is that by **HINCHCLIFFE, DUCKER and HOLT**. The first two authors were based in Aden during the final years and frequently came into contact with the military operations in the theatre. Another offering from an Arab specialist is provided by **LITTLE's**. He was a newspaper correspondent who spent most of his career reporting on Arab events in the Middle East and his position perhaps gave him a more objective viewpoint of the British rule in Aden, although he was not privy to the internal politics in the same way as many of the previously cited authors. **HARPER** (*Last Sunset*) also gives a foreign correspondent's point of view of the campaigns in Aden and attempts to cover both the military and the political aspects of the events. **HOWARD's** article in the RUSI Journal of 1964 provides some useful political and cultural background and commentary of the creation of the Federation of South Arabia. Finally, **PETERSON's** book widens the scope of the works previously cited by looking at British and American involvement in the defence of the Persian Gulf region as a whole during the 20th Century. The author includes sections on Aden as an integral part of explaining British policy in the region, although much of the book concentrates on the search for Gulf security particularly in relation to the Iran-Iraq War and Western responses.

### **The military campaigns**

Without doubt the most comprehensive and best researched account of the military operations in Aden and Southern Arabia is the book by **WALKER** (*Aden insurgency*). The author supplements research in official and other published works with evidence from interviews with nearly 50 men and women who participated in the campaigns. While setting the scene against the historical and political background, the emphasis is very much on the military aspects of the conflict itself at all levels. This book is essential reading for any serious, in-depth study of the subject. More recently **WALKER** has written a more succinct account of the Aden conflict as a chapter in *Counterinsurgency in modern warfare* edited by Marston and Malkasian.

Other books on the military conflict in Aden and the Radfan are few and far between and much less recent than either of Walker's offerings. **PAGET's** study of Aden in *Last Post* as an insurgency and counter-insurgency operation benefits from the fact that he served in Aden in the Coldstream Guards in 1965 and prior to that had experienced insurgency operations in Palestine. He covers the Radfan campaigns and the urban anti-terrorist campaigns in Aden itself in equal measure.

Although there are very few books that concentrate solely on Aden, there are a number of works that have discrete chapters or major sections on the campaigns that are well worth looking at to gain a quick overview of the topic. One of the most recent books of this nature is by **NEWSINGER** who devotes a concise chapter on, as he puts it, "*The struggle for South Yemen*". Another author looking at Aden from the point of view of a British counter-insurgency and anti-terrorist operation is **MOCKAITIS** who provides a single chapter on the campaigns. Other authors with discrete chapters on military operations in the Aden conflict include **ALLEN, CARVER, DEWAR, and LAPPING**, with the texts by Carver and Dewar being perhaps the most authoritative and useful. **HARPER's** chapter in Major General Thompson's *The Imperial War Museum Book on Modern Warfare* and the very short piece in **ARNOLD** are also worth looking at. **THOMSON's** DRP contrasts the insurgency in Aden with that of Malaya and Borneo and concludes that it was political primacy and healthy socio-economic development that enabled the successful counter-insurgency campaigns in Malaya and Borneo but the absence of which blighted the British efforts in Aden. **DUNNE's** DRP looks at Aden

(and Malaya) as a source for lessons relating to the Comprehensive Approach and how these lessons could be employed in present day operations in Afghanistan.

An interesting contemporary account of Federal Regular Army (FRA) participation in Operations Nutcracker and Rustum in 1964 is given by **EDWARDS** (*Report on FRA Operations*) in a paper that has survived from the Army Staff College archives. Although restricted to two specific campaigns the report gives a unique British view of the capabilities of the FRA in the Radfan as a whole. Several periodical articles are available on the Aden campaigns, one of the most useful being **HEATHCOTE**'s analysis on the 1964 Radfan campaign as given in a lecture to the RUSI the following year. A later and more concise account of the Radfan operations was given by **SLATER** in the *British Army Review* in 1981 to which **LUNT** added his opinions on the origins and aims of the campaign. An early account and assessment of the Aden operations is given by **PAGET** (*Emergency in Aden*) which concentrates on the political background, command and control, intelligence, and civil-military co-operation aspects. Lastly, **HUDSON**'s account focuses on the tactics involved in the counter-insurgency operations.

Several regimental histories also include chapters on operations in Aden. The nature of the conflict in the Radfan as well as the terrain lent itself to Special Operations as carried out by the SAS and the works by **CONNOR**, **GERAGHTY**, **KEMP**, and **STRAWSON** all have discrete chapters on the campaigns. Like the SAS, the Parachute Regiment also served in the Radfan as well as serving a tour in Aden itself during the final months of British occupation. The books by **ARTHUR**, **NORTON** and **THOMPSON** all give a brief glimpse of operations by the Paras during the Aden conflict. The two articles by **BALDWIN** illustrate the difficulties faced by the Royal Engineers in building roads, airfields and encampments in Aden. A very personal account by **MITCHELL** of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders' tour in Aden is included in the author's autobiography. The Royal Marines also played a prominent role in the conflict and the book by **YOUNG** devotes four chapters to 45 Commando's operations, usually in conjunction with the Army, in both Radfan and the town itself. **STEVENS** provides a very comprehensive account of 45 Commando's participation in the 1964 Radfan campaign in which the author played a leading role. Another personal account is the article by **BANKS** in *Brassey's Annual* where he gives a company commander's view of 45 Commando's operations in the same campaign written about by Stevens, his commanding officer. Yet another personal account, but at a much higher level, is provided by **BLACKER** who was an infantry brigade commander during the 1964 Radfan campaign.

Information on the friendly local forces in Aden is quite scarce with the history by **EDWARDS** (*The Gaysh* which reprises parts of his earlier official report) being the most useful as it covers the creation and operation of the Federal Regular Army, albeit in one slim chapter as most of the book is devoted to more distant history. The small volume by **LORD and BIRTLES** is merely a listing with brief details of the many and various military forces, British, Indian and local, that have served in Aden since 1839. It could be useful in constructing an ORBAT or pursuing further research as it lists, with dates, all British military formations that served in Aden from 1964 to 1967. Information on the organized opposition, primarily the NLF and FLOSY, that British and friendly forces faced during the Aden conflict is even rarer with just the work by **NAUMKIN** being widely available. However, this work, by a Russian academic and Middle Eastern specialist who lived in Aden after independence, is both detailed and comprehensive, although somewhat nationalistic, and is well worth studying to gain an insight into the forces that constituted the enemy in Aden.

### **Air Operations**

The terrain in the Radfan, the paucity of roads and the dangers of travelling in what was in effect enemy-occupied territory for much of the time, placed great emphasis on air operations in support of the ground forces. Helicopters and transport aircraft became vitally important for moving troops, artillery and supplies and reaching remote mountainous locations that were otherwise inaccessible. A large airstrip was constructed at Thumeir in the heart of the Radfan and smaller strips were built at other locations. Transport aircraft including the Blackburn Beverley with its, useful short take off and landing capability, were instrumental in moving troops and supplies to forward areas in quantity from

where helicopters moved troops further forward. Offensive operations were also undertaken, especially by the Hawker Hunters of the Khormaksar Strike Wing, and these operations, always under the direction of forward air controllers, were useful demonstrations of air power by being able to reach areas where ground-based artillery could not.

The closest we have to an official history of the RAF's contribution to the Aden conflict is **LEE's** study of the RAF in the Middle East theatre post-1945. As the senior RAF commander in theatre in 1961 and later AOC of all RAF forces in the Arabian Peninsula, the author has a unique insight into the issues surrounding air operations in Aden during the 1960s and devotes much of his book to the Radfan campaigns and support for the Army in general. The importance of the helicopter has already been mentioned and **DOWLING's** detailed and comprehensive study highlights the contribution of the RAF support helicopters to the Radfan campaign, especially the Westland Belvedere which could carry larger loads than any other type. The series of papers in the **ROYAL AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY JOURNAL** read at a symposium in 1988 provides much useful information and analysis. This slim volume consists of 15 brief papers ranging from high-level political and military overviews, to reviews of the various roles: strike, reconnaissance, helicopter and fixed-wing transport, and maritime.

Two very useful student papers, both emanating from the US Air University, analyse the concept of air control in the Aden context. **MULLIS** looks at the use of air power since the early days of air control during the 1920s while **BARRETT** concentrates on the 1960s campaigns in the Radfan. Information on the use of air power in Aden also appears in the books by **CORUM and JOHNSON** and by **TOWLE**, although the passages in both books are tantalizingly brief.

**DORRELL** provides a general survey of the RAF in Aden and other parts of the Middle East during the period when the Radfan operations were very much the focus of operations while **WALPOLE** gives a full history of the reconnaissance work done by the Hunters of 1417 Flight in Aden. **HOBSON** highlights the vital work of the Beverley crews in keeping the forward troops supplied during the campaigns, often in dangerous and difficult conditions.

Two personal accounts of air operations in Aden are by **BAIN** who devotes several chapters to flying the Hunter and other aircraft in the theatre, and **SEVERNE** whose autobiography includes his tour as an Operations Officer at Khormaksar, thereby seeing air operations from a different perspective.

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