

# Soldier in the sand

By **LT. GEN. (RET) SIR SIMON MAYALL KBE CB**

FORMER MIDDLE EAST ADVISER AT THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE (SERVED IN THE SULTAN'S ARMED FORCES 1985-1987)



**SIMON MAYALL** joined Greenhill in 2015 after a career with the British Army, where he held a series of roles including Commanding Officer, 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards, Commander, 1st Mechanised Brigade from and Deputy Commanding General for Multi-national Corps (Iraq). He served as Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Operations) from 2009-2011, Defence Senior Adviser (Middle East) from 2011-2014 and Prime Minister's Security Envoy to Iraq from 2014-2015. He holds an MA in Modern History from Oxford University and an MA in International Relations from King's College London. His book *'Soldier in the Sand'* is published by Pen & Sword.

Sir Simon Mayall serving alongside Omani officers and soldiers

The passing of His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos early in 2020 was a huge sadness, not just for the people of Oman, but for all those many people around the world who had such respect and admiration for the His late Majesty's strategic vision, judgement, humility, and love of his country and his subjects. He was genuinely the *'father of his country'*, and it was a small comfort that he lived into the 50th year of Oman's *'Renaissance'*, although not long enough to see it marked at the 2020 National Day celebrations.

Among those who mourned His late Majesty's death were the many British officers and non-commissioned officers who had had the privilege of serving in the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) during His late Majesty's 50 year rule. I had been one of those British officers fortunate enough to have been *'seconded'* to the Sultan's Army, and from early 1985 until late 1987 I commanded E Squadron, equipped with British-built Chieftain tanks, in the Sultan of Oman's Armoured Regiment. The Regiment, which had grown from a small squadron-sized organisation during the Dhofar War, was initially stationed in Seeb Camp, north of the International Airport. However, in 1986, in line with His late Majesty's plans for the overall expansion of the Armed Forces, the Regiment moved to a new camp, Sha'afa, built near the interior

city of Nizwa, and designed to hold an armoured brigade, in due course. In the years after I had returned to the British Army, these ambitious and far-sighted plans came to successful fruition, as was seen during the demanding *Saif Sareea* exercises of 2001 and 2018, during which the SAF demonstrated an admirable level of professionalism.

From its foundation in 1744 under the His late Majesty's predecessor, Ahmad bin Said al Busaidi, Oman had an enviable reputation as a military force in the region, and wider, and the early Oman Navy developed a formidable presence in the Indian Ocean, second only to Great Britain. In 1798, in the light of Napoleon Bonaparte's plans to invade British India, via Muscat, Britain and Oman agreed a Treaty of Commerce and Navigation. In 1800, the two countries declared their intention that *"the friendship of the two States may remain un-shook till the end of time, and till the sun and moon have finished their revolving career"*, and so it has proved to be over the intervening two centuries.

I arrived in Oman on the 15th anniversary of His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos's accession, and on the 10th anniversary of the SAF success in the South. His late Majesty had invested heavily in His Armed Forces, not simply as the guarantors of Oman's security and territorial integrity in a volatile region, but also as a vehicle for further social development, via



education and a whole range of personal and technical training, and to continue to help build a sense of modern nationhood. Those British servicemen who had fought in the Dhofar War, or who served across the SAF at its conclusion, absolutely understood the importance of the SAF in His late Majesty's vision and ambitions for His country.

By the time I arrived in Oman, the period of maximum British contribution was rightly coming to an end, as the competence and confidence of the Omanis in modern doctrine, tactics and equipment grew year by year, and as their own officers and NCOs became more experienced. The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, which His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos had attended, continued to make its contribution to the officer-corps of Oman. By 1985, most Omani infantry units only had a single British officer, normally the second-in-command, who was responsible for the training programme. However, in the armoured, artillery and engineer regiments the British presence remained thicker on the ground, because of the technical demands of those elements of the force, and I was fortunate enough to have one of the last remaining command appointments.

Serving alongside Omani officers and soldiers was an absolute delight, as anyone who served in SAF will testify. The natural charm, hospitality and generosity of the Omani culture permeated the Armed Forces, and our combined commitment to the Sultan and the SAF meant that we worked together in great harmony, despite the occasional language difficulties. The work could be hard, difficult and demanding, given the heat and the terrain, but it was always hugely professionally satisfying, and personally uplifting. Sitting around a camp-fire, laughing and joking with the Omani officers

and soldiers after a long day on the firing ranges, while sipping strong Omani coffee out of small, finjaan, cups, was the stuff of dreams, and of startlingly vivid memories. How lucky we were.

I was fortunate enough to have met His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos several times, both during my service there and later, and to have returned to the Sultanate on many occasions, both for business and pleasure. My most recent visit was in early 2020, with a dozen other retired British officers who, between 1977 and 1995, had all served in the Armoured Car Squadron, the Sultan of Oman's Armoured Regiment, or the Sultan's Armoured Brigade. Our host was Fareeq Ahmed Harith al Nabhani, the Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces, and a great and admired friend of all of ours. He had answered the late Sultan's 'call-to-arms' in 1975, as a 15 year-old boy from the *Jebel Akdhar*. He had served in the Armoured Car Squadron as a gunner and driver, and had subsequently been selected to go to Sandhurst for officer training. He and I had served alongside each other in Seeb, as Majors and tank squadron leaders, before he went to the British Staff College in Camberley. His subsequent rise to Chief of Staff of the Omani Armed Forces represented everything that was best about modern Oman, the SAF, and the close relationship between Britain and the Sultanate.

The Sultan's Armed Forces now have a new Supreme Commander, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. I know that every British officer and NCO who has served in the SAF, or is currently serving, will join me in wishing His Majesty the greatest of good fortune on His accession, on Oman's 50th, 'Renaissance' Anniversary, and for the continued success and well-being of His Armed Forces. E

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