

Arabian Peninsula Background Notes

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Oman: The 1966 Assassination Attempt on Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur

The small and little-known Dhufar Force (DF) caused a brief flurry of attention and concern in April 1966 when some of its members attempted to assassinate Omani Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur as he carried out an inspection at the force's headquarters. The attempt failed and the Sultan survived until his removal in 1970 by his son Qabus. Sultan Sa'id remained in exile in London until his death in 1972.

Created by Sultan Sa'id in 1955, DF was based at Arzat Camp, a few kilometers east of Salalah, and kept rigidly separate from the British-commanded and -subsidized Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF). After the departure of the last of three British commanders, DF command fell to a succession of Pakistani officers on private contract. Small garrisons were maintained elsewhere on Salalah Plain and the force was employed on ceremonial duties and in guarding the perimeters of the Sultan's palaces. In the mid-1960s, DF acquired a number of

American Commando and British Ferret armored cars.

Initially, the soldiers were Baluch but personnel later came to be a mix of Salalah *khuddam* (slave stock) and *jabbalis* (mountaineers) until the 1966 assassination attempt. Thereafter it was composed almost exclusively of *khuddam*, none of whom were officers, until after the coup in 1970 when it was finally taken over by SAF. DF was subsequently renamed the Dhufar Gendarmerie (DG) and Baluchis were introduced into the unit. DG fought bravely, as shown in 1972 in the defense of Habarut garrison and during the battle of Mirbat. But difficulties in recruiting Dhufaris resulted in its transformation in 1974 into an all-Baluch regular infantry battalion under the name of Southern Regiment (KJ, after the Arabic initials).

In April 1966, the Sultan made plans to inspect DF, as was his usual practice, prior to its seconded Pakistani Commandant, Lieutenant

This is an *Arabian Peninsula Background Note (APBN)* written by J.E. Peterson

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Colonel Muhammad Sakhi Raja, going on leave.¹ In preparation for the inspection on 26 April, a ceremonial guard was paraded in Arzat camp at 0830 and handed over to Staff Sergeant Sa'id Suhayl Bayt Qatan. After inspecting the guard, the Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Raja, went outside the camp to meet the Sultan (who had arrived in three vehicles full of his own armed retainers) and took him in the Commandant's vehicle to the range for a firing demonstration. After about 10 minutes, they returned through the main gate of the camp and the Sultan mounted the saluting dais with Lieutenant Colonel Raja at ground-level on the Sultan's left. A nine-man guard (seven of whom were *jabbalis*) were positioned in front of the guard room about 18 feet from the Sultan. All but two of his servants (who were standing 20 feet to the Sultan's left) were grouped under an arch at the entrance and immediately outside the gate, where their vehicles had stopped.

After the guard commander, Staff Sergeant Sa'id Suhayl, gave the commands for 'royal salute' and 'present arms,' he and one of

1. The account of the incident in this APBN relies on two collections of source material. The first, and most important, collection consists of documentary material and interviews assembled in the course of researching a study of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) of Oman. Supplementary details were obtained from records of the British Foreign Office (FO) in the Public Record Office of the National Archives, Kew, London. In particular, the narrative is a synthesis of two principal sources: ① FO/371/185364, BC1015/22, D.C. Carden, the Consul-General at Muscat, to Sir William Luce, the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 12 May 1966, which consists of Carden's reconstruction of events based on the Sultan's description to him on 7 and 8 May and a debriefing from Lt. Col. Hugh Sanders; and ② an unidentified and undated typed account in the SAF Archives, which appears to have been written not long after the event. Sanders subsequently left a typescript version of events as well. The author's interviews with some of the participants provide additional details.

the privates, Salim Bakhit Bayt Kathir, raised their rifles and fired directly at the Sultan but missed him by a considerable distance. The guard quickly ran into and then out of the guard room, wounding the two non-*jabbali* members of the guard along the way. The Sultan left the dais without help, ordered his servants to shoot the non-commissioned officer (NCO) and soldier who had fired at him, who obeyed but missed, and went to his car at the main gate.² Some of the men went to their trench positions while the Commandant ran off in direction of the east end of the guard room, perhaps headed towards his own house. Lieutenant Colonel Raja came upon another private, Muhammad Tahir Bani Hashim, exiting the rear door of the guard room and, while grappling with the soldier, the Commandant was bayoneted. One of the Sultan's servants saw the scuffle and shot Muhammad Tahir in the head (he died on 1 May).³

Staff Sergeant Sa'id Suhayl, who had left the guard room with Muhammad Tahir, was caught by another servant apparently attempting to escape through a gap in the perimeter fence. The servant first stabbed him with a dagger and then shot him dead through the eye. Meanwhile, Second Lieutenant Sattar Shah (also a seconded Pakistani officer) and the Force Sergeant Major (FSM) came out of the

2. Hasan Ihsan Nasib was the NCO in charge of the Commando armored cars, which had been prepared for the Sultan to inspect as well. In his account, Hasan Ihsan put the Sultan into his Commando and carried him across the *khawr* to open ground where the Sultan transferred to his own car and left for the NFR camp. Author's interview. Sanders, in his typescript account, remarked "How they missed at a range of twenty two feet I shall never know."

3. This is according to the anonymous account in the SAF Archives. In Carden's version, Raja struggled with Staff Sergeant Sa'id Suhayl and was bayoneted by him, who then was killed by the Sultan's retainers.

orderly room and shouted orders to stand to as an alarm was rung. Second Lieutenant Sattar Shah was shot from behind and the FSM was wounded, although it is unclear who their assailants were. At about the same time, Sergeant Sa'id Muhammad Bayt Sa'id, who had been instructing a recruit training squad near the range, seized a rifle and ran towards the main gate. Taking cover in a small trench he fired eight rounds at the Sultan's servants outside the main gate, killing two and wounding a third, as well as a small boy. He was arrested later in the day hiding in the gardens at Ma'murah.

During the ensuing lull, the Sultan, outside the camp by his own cars, saw that Lieutenant Colonel Raja was seriously wounded and offered to drive him to his own doctor in Salalah but then agreed to Raja's request to be taken to RAF Salalah. Before leaving with Raja and Second Lieutenant Sattar Shah, the Sultan put Captain Noor Muhammad, the DF Adjutant and Training Officer (who had come in from the rifle range), in charge and told him to arrest the *jabbalis* and arrange for the other wounded to be taken to hospital. The Sultan and his escort of servants subsequently arrived at the NFR camp at Umm al-Ghawarif at about 1015 hours. Described as remaining "phenomenally calm" throughout the episode, the Sultan exchanged courtesies with Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Sanders, the CO of NFR, and matter-of-factly remarked, "Now Sanders, I want you to go out there and see to things."

An NFR party, consisting of one and a half platoons (the maximum available) with a Provost aircraft in support, reached the DF camp at 1050 hours and deployed into three parts: the first covered the main gate with a rocket launcher while the other two groups

entered the camp from opposite sides.⁴ Captain Noor Muhammad, who had established control by this time, came through the main gate in a Ferret and told the CO of NFR that he had placed 22 soldiers in the guard room, many of whom were armed, while 19 *jabbali* and Bayt Kathir soldiers had absconded with rifles. NFR then entered, searched the camp, and disarmed the remaining soldiers.

After hearing the report from the CO of

4. The gates, not surprisingly, were locked and Captain Colin McLean ordered his NFR section to reverse their trucks back up to the fence and jumped over the top. The NFR was assisted by a northern Omani in the force who had helped a year or so before when Sultan Sa'id had asked NFR to evaluate the capability of DF to deal with the burgeoning dissidence in Dhufar. Author's interview. Sergeant Hasan Ihsan, the NCO in charge of the armored cars, later related that, worried about the consequences, he had organized his soldiers to capture as many of the assailants as possible and locked them up. When Lieutenant Colonel Sanders arrived and surrounded the camp, he used a megaphone to order everyone inside to surrender or they would be attacked. Sergeant Hasan shouted back that he was in charge, everything was under control, and they would not surrender. When Sanders insisted, threatening to attack, Sergeant Hasan responded by pointing out that NFR's Land Rovers were no match for DF's Commandos. Sanders then ordered Sergeant Hasan to come out to him but the latter insisted that the CO come inside. After Sanders entered, the matter was straightened out and Sergeant Hasan handed over control of the camp to NFR. Author's interview. In Sanders' typescript account, he had instructed the Provost pilot, Flight Lt. Martin Purdy, to make dry attacks at low level over the camp to distract DF's attention while Captain McLean broke in from the side and Captain John Clarke and his sections cut off escape from behind. When the main gates swung open and a Ferret emerged, Sanders ordered a 3.5-inch rocket launcher lined up on it and for Purdy to be prepared to fire at the armored car from the Provost as well. Captain Noor Muhammad quickly made his presence in the Ferret known and reported that he had contained the situation already.

NFR, the Sultan ordered the *khadim* element of DF to return to normal duty and assigned temporary command to Captain Noor Muhammad, followed later by NFR's Captain Colin McLean. Red Company under Major Arthur Brocklehurst and half of B Company of NFR pursued the escapees up Wadi Darbat and engaged them in a firefight at the head of the wadi but it is unclear whether any were captured.⁵ Not surprisingly, the incident destroyed the Sultan's confidence in the DF. Thirteen of its *jabbali* members had escaped, 35 were held in custody, while another five on leave were not expected to return. Only the 50 *khuddam* were left in the force. But, despite advice that DF should be disbanded, the Sultan insisted on keeping it.⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Raja and Second Lieutenant Sattar Shah had been flown to Aden by the RAF, where the lieutenant died the next day. Another casualty of the Sultan's displeasure

5. John H. McKeown, "Britain and Oman: The Dhofar War and Its Significance" (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1981), pp. 30-31. McKeown states that one SAF soldier was slightly wounded and blood was found after the engagement, but that a further week of patrolling in the area produced no additional contacts. It has not been possible to corroborate this account from any other available source.

6. Two days after the incident, the Deputy Commander of SAF (DCSAF), Lieutenant Colonel Colin Maxwell was summoned to Salalah to discuss the incident and the future of the DF. He attempted to persuade the Sultan to disband the remnant of DF on the grounds that it could not be trusted and its existence would always tie SAF troops to Salalah in case it mutinied again. But Sultan Sa'id ignored the advice, partly because he had confidence in his *khuddam* and partly, as he said, because the DF might prove useful if SAF were to mutiny. FO/371/185364, BC1015/22, D.C. Carden, the Consul-General at Muscat, to Sir William Luce, the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 12 May 1966.

was the DF commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Sakhi Raja. Sultan Sa'id apparently felt that the commandant had abandoned him at the commencement of the firing and he remained unprotected until his servants reached him and escorted him to his car. Although he later conceded that the commandant's motive in leaving him alone probably was to attempt to stop the shooting and to rally the loyal *khadim* element, Sultan Sa'id appears to have retained a feeling that Sakhi Raja had disregarded his safety and ordered his replacement.⁷

It appears that the Arab Nationalists' Movement (ANM), a pan-Arab leftist political movement active among Palestinians and Lebanese with cells in Kuwait and Yemen, had penetrated DF since at least 1962. Sergeant Sa'id Muhammad Bayt Sa'id, who had fired upon the Sultan's servants from outside the main gate, was the ANM leader within the DF, and as commander of the guard, would have led the attack on the Sultan. Although he was removed as commander the night before the inspection, possibly as a security precaution, the new commander, Staff Sergeant Sa'id Suhayl Bayt Qatan, was also an ANM member and the plot was able to go ahead.⁸ The Sultan's custom

7. In Salalah after the attempt, Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell also attempted to persuade the Sultan that Sakhi Raja (who had been Commandant of DF since January 1962) had acted honorably but the Sultan was not entirely convinced and demanded his removal. A "communications snare-up" resulted in the Sultan's agreement that Sakhi Raja could return to the Force until a replacement arrived, apparently in November 1966. Maxwell wrote up his notes on the incident and his discussion with the old Sultan some years later when Sakhi Raja wrote to SAF asking for financial assistance on account of the wounds received at Arzat. SAF Archives.

8. These details came to light years later, following a broadcast over the PFLO's Voice of the Revolution Radio. On 25 May 1978, the weekly "Lives

of inspecting the Force before the Commandant proceeded on leave undoubtedly enabled advance planning of the attempt and thus accounted for the report in Cairo's al-Ahram on 19 April that the Sultan had been wounded while reviewing his units of his forces operating in the Dhufari mountains.⁹ On 4 June 1966, the Dhufar Liberation Front issued a communiqué in Cairo claiming that the Sultan had been killed and that 'British imperialist authorities' in Oman had deliberately concealed the news to give time to choose a 'stooge' successor.¹⁰

of the Martyrs" program told the story of Sa'id Muhammad Salim Bar Kanah Bayt Sa'id. This account held that Sa'id Muhammad, a soldier in the DF since 1959, had joined the Dhufari nucleus of the ANM in 1962 and eventually had been put in charge of the ANM cell within the DF. Following his capture, he was sent to Muscat along with other prisoners for interrogation before incarceration in Fort Jalali. Released under the 1970 amnesty for Dhufari prisoners, he rejoined the PFLO and was killed in the Western Sector of Dhufar on 4 January 1975. SAF Archives. The same source notes that although it was not known to the intelligence services in 1966 that the ANM had penetrated the DF, suspicions about Staff Sergeant Sa'id Suhayl had been reported to the Sultan.

9. FO/371/185364, BC1015/22, D.C. Carden, the Consul-General at Muscat, to Sir William Luce, the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 12 May 1966.

10. The communiqué gave a circumstantial account of the alleged assassination, including the names of Corporal Sa'id Suhayl Qatan who led the attempt and Private Muhammad Tahir Barham who, after shooting the Sultan, bayoneted him and both later died of their wounds. After a two-hour battle in which the Commandant, his deputy, and two were killed, along with eight wounded, 20 of the attackers were said to have escaped to the hills and 28 were jailed. The Sultan was rushed to Salalah for urgent treatment. Although most of the Cairo press featured the story, al-Ahram did not carry it. FO/371/185364, BC1015/26, British Embassy in Cairo to the Foreign Office,

A conversation in Salalah shortly afterwards between David Carden, the British Consul-General in Muscat, and the Sultan gave a depressing view of the situation in Dhufar. The Sultan opined that the young men of Dhufar, especially from the *badu* and *jabbalis*, were forced to go abroad for work but brought back discontent and paid no heed to their *shaykhs* or fathers. On Salalah Plain and among his *khuddam*, the Sultan felt his position was strong enough thanks to the presence of SAF and his northern Omani tribal retainers from al-Hawasina and the Bani 'Umar. Apart from construction of a hospital and some future possibility of mechanised farming on the plain, the only measures the Sultan could take were restrictive: finishing the construction of a wire fence around Salalah, preventing Dhufaris from going abroad, and eliminating *badu* and *jabbalis* from DF.¹¹

The failed attempt followed a remarkably prescient British debate on the consequences of a successful assassination of the Sultan and his son Qabus. In early April, the Consul General in Muscat, David Carden, ventured his opinion that such a development would result in the Dhufari rebels setting up a provisional government of their own, probably under the influence of Egypt and Iraq. Too small to be viable by itself, Dhufar would fall within the orbit of South Arabia. In Muscat, succession most likely would go to Sayyid Tariq b. Taymur, over Sayyid Shihab b. Faysal or his son Sayyid Thuwayni. But any successor faced the possibility of revolt in the interior of northern Oman. If the Al Bu Sa'id were ousted, Carden reflected, Britain would probably lose

telegram 341 of 5 June 1966.

11. FO/371/185364, BC1015/22, D.C. Carden, the Consul-General at Muscat, to Sir William Luce, the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 12 May 1966.

the Royal Air Force (RAF) stations at Masirah and Salalah, as well as overflying rights. In addition, the confidence of other Gulf states in HMG would be undermined, although Carden thought the oil company operations would not be seriously affected as long as oil was being exported. To minimize the negative impact in case of an assassination, Carden suggested that immediate steps should be taken to get the Al Bu Sa'id to nominate the successor most likely to have broad support, i.e. Sayyid Tariq, and to get companies of SAF throughout Oman to demonstrate their continued loyalty to the Al Bu Sa'id family and the successor.¹²

The Political Resident, Sir William Luce,

added that considerable chaos would occur in Oman even with succession by Sayyid Tariq. The British government would probably demand the withdrawal of seconded officers, which would lead to the complete collapse of SAF. A civil war between the coast and the interior would mean that the oil-producing area would be in the hands of one faction and the terminal in the hands of another, with the pipeline running through the lines of conflict. The rebels in Dhufar might not be able to capture Salalah if the SAF company were still present but in any case the rebels could be driven back into the mountains only by the intervention of a ground attack from Masirah.¹³

12. FO/371/185363, BC1015/16, D.C. Carden, Consul-General, Muscat, to Sir William Luce, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 2 April 1966.

13. FO/371/185363, BC1015/16, Sir William Luce, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, to D.C. Carden, Consul-General, Muscat, 18 April 1966.