

CONVOY

The distance from Aden to Dhala is 66 miles. Both places are now in Yemen.

In 1959 Aden was a British Colony and Dhala was in the much larger British Protectorate Area where indirect rule was exercised through local Sheikhs.

I was a National Serviceman, a Second Lieutenant, who had volunteered to go to Aden because the 1st Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment was short of junior officers for its one year deployment there. By some clerical error or other I was sent out in early January well before the battalion would arrive in April. I was passed from one unit or the other and moved regularly and had a lot of interesting experiences.

The battalion would be stationed at Little Aden, on the sea shore, east from Aden town and port by about 12 miles. There was a tented camp at Nobat Dukim about 15 miles to the north. This was in the flat lands on the road north to Dhala. Another tented camp was located on a rocky ridge very close to Dhala town. From Nobat the land rose up to 4,800 feet above sea level. The road was not tarmacked but narrow, sandy and rocky. It wound constantly as hills rose very steeply on each side. It was a defile. It levelled out for a short stretch where Fort Thumier was located. This was occupied by uniformed Aden Protectorate Levies and none uniformed Tribal Levies.

After the fort the land rose steeply again to the Kariba Pass. Old soldiers in the battalion likened it to the Khyber Pass known to them from their pre-war India service. There the road became hair-raising. Everyone got out and walked up the winding rocky track to the top of the pass, except the drivers. Walk a little along the pass road and looked down and there was a selection of army and civilian trucks that had left the very narrow road and dropped to the bottom.

I landed at Khormaksa airport near Aden in early January 1959. The Comet aircraft touched down and I stepped out into the warm air that wrapped me in a dream temperature. On the short trip to Little Aden the smells from the palm groves and small villages along the road rose, exotically, to fill my nostrils.

The only one from my Aldershot intake to volunteer for Aden (the old regular drill sergeants there called it the armpits of the Empire) I knew I had made the right decision. Subsequent stays at Nobat and trips north from there into the highlands, confirmed the romanticism of a Lawrence of Arabia fan with the realistic appreciation that here was a country, hundreds of years behind the times in England, I had left temporarily left. All held peacefully held together by British military power.

The resupply convoys started in Aden. I had been on one or two before. There were lots of 3 ton trucks (Bedfords) with food, ammunition, general supplies, people going up to Nobat and Dhala, together with three or four Ferret Armoured Cars and a huge Scammel recovery vehicle, a mobile garage.

In close order the convoy moved up through Sheikh Othman and Lahej, both in the Colony and then passed into the Protectorate area stopping overnight at Nobat.

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The convoy started, after an early breakfast, and the spacing between each vehicle lengthened considerably. In theory were entering the danger zone where the high, rock strewn hillside gave cover for ambushers galore.

We now provided a platoon of infantrymen, split into its three groups. Ten men sections got into three Bedfords. One escort lorry went right to the front of the convoy, another into the middle section and the last one went to the tail end. I got into a small Land Rover with a driver and was officer in charge of the guard platoon. How much control I could have over such a dispersed platoon I had no idea. In each of the guard lorries we had wirelasses that never seemed to work in the terrain we were about to enter.

Being at the back we were soon enveloped in the dust of all the vehicles to our front. Heat, trapped in the narrow winding track, might not have been pleasant but, what the hell, this was like nothing I'd ever experienced in boring old Leicestershire.

Soon we began to gain height. My driver was not the chatty type. His mind was fixated on world affairs and the stupidity of occupying a God forsaken country like Aden when we could hand it back to natives and save millions of pounds on doing the things we were now doing. I secretly thought the same but was glad I was here anyway at this moment in time.

I was used to hearing shots fired in these parts. The locals nearly all carried rifles in the tribal areas. They would shoot at small gazelle hoping to add to the family larder. Maybe they would shoot at other locals to settle some intertribal feud or, if they were in dispute with another tribe, they could be having a running battle with them.

There was the one crack. It was indisputably rifle fire. My driver started to imagine that this was the shot that started the Great Middle Eastern mayhem of 1959 which led to the World War Three outbreak of 1960. He stopped driving for some reason. Above us to east and west the hills towered steeply rocks everywhere offering hiding places for masses of ambushers.

I told him to start up and drive on. He said the Bedford in front had vanished from view and might have been hit and blown up. I said I had not heard an explosion. He said that I had been asleep which might have been true. I couldn't see the Bedford either and by now it should have appeared from rounding the bend to our front.

Better find out what had happened was his point he thought. I agreed and got out of the Land Rover pulling my pistol from the holster and looking at every bush that could be hiding a ferocious tribesman and his mates.

I looked behind me and saw the Ferret Armed Car had stopped and the man in charge leaning out of the turret taking a swig from a flask that wasn't the right shape for a water bottle. Behind him the Scammel Recovery Vehicle was stopped as well. The driver was having a pee and his mate had lit up and was puffing away.

I said to my driver to get on the wireless to the lead truck and tell them we were stopped to investigate an incident. He said that these things never worked in the mountain regions so why try. I told him it would be something to do while I sorted things out.

I started walking up the track.

Suddenly one of the platoon section soldiers burst out from behind the bend that must be hiding the 3 tonner. He was running and shouting, 'His shoulder's been shot to pieces. His shoulders been shot to bits. Bring the morphine, quick!'

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Morphine!? Nobody told me I had to carry morphine! I was sure it had not been on the convoy instructions. Morphine? I knew I'd faint at the sight of blood and gore.

I walked on round the bend and there was the Bedford. Its bonnet was firmly embedded in a largish bush that looked quite prickly. There were no soldiers sitting on the benches that ran along each side of the truck. They were just visible hiding away in the bush and surrounding boulders.

I walk toward the truck my heart pounding. Then I notice the cheeky face of Private Perryman grinning at me through the hole in tail flap. That was there to show, at night times, the red light if the tail gate was down loading or unloading.

As I got nearer Perryman said, 'Here, Sir, I reckon what I just got is a Blighty touch. Don't you?'

The corporal, who had stayed in the truck, looked over the tailgate and said, 'Take a look, Sir. He's been bloody lucky, I reckon.'

I clambered up and looked over. Perryman was lying on his stomach with his shorts and pants pulled down to his knees. The Corporal poked a finger into the first very small hole, flecked with a smear of blood. This was the hole where the bullet had entered Perryman's backside. Then he poked into the second, slightly bigger hole where the bullet had come out and pinged around the floor of the truck. I never found out whether they had found the bullet.

His shoulders were intact. Not a scratch on either. Did this flesh wound hurt? It stung slightly apparently.

This is what had happened. The soldiers sat on the benches with their backs leaning on the side of the vehicle. The bullet went through the metal side of the lorry, through Perryman's water bottle, through his shorts, underpants, backside and made a noise as it scattered around the floor.

Perryman took a while to react, before saying, 'Somethings odd! I think my water bottle's leaking' He took his bottle of his belt, saw the holes and said, 'My bum feels sore.' He felt it and his skin and said, 'There's something wrong down there.'

Then things moved fast as he and others realised he'd been shot. Someone shouted to the driver that they were under attack and to head for cover and Perryman was got onto the floor while they the corporal stayed to get his pants down to examine the wound and the rest jumped out and sought shelter.

I shouted to them to get back into the lorry and drive fast to catch up with the convoy. Still holding my pistol, like some film gunslinger, I walked back to the 'jeep'. The Ferret Armoured Car had a better wireless than we had. I told him to message the convoy commander and tell him what had happened and that we were now on our way again.

So we got to Dhala for offloading, overnight stop and return in the morning. No more shots at us. No more excitement or bizarre injuries. What, however, might await us on the next day's return journey? My picture of a peaceful, exotic land had been subject to a bit of revision.

I don't remember whether Perryman was flown back to Aden, as a casualty of war. Old National Servicemen's memories just fade away in time!

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The return trip was, however, riotous. The RAF's top brass in Khormaksa couldn't wait to dust off their battle plans. Fighter jets screamed up and down the road at very, very low heights. So low they were swinging between the bends and we could see the pilot's faces. Crazy! They must have loved it. They scared us stiff as we waited for the first one to crash.

Next time I was with A Company in Dhala we had a lot of shooting at us, one night, from the Yeminis across the border. In Oman all the tracks were potentially mined.

Well, I had volunteered to go to both places so I couldn't complain.

John Riley © Feb.2026