

# THE LAST OUTPOST

*Noel Spencer*

I was in the Air Force for a number of years and there is one story I tell in particular when I've had a few. It's the story of a young Marine from Lancashire he must have been about 18 years old. This guy was posted to Aden where there was a real insurgency, not a lot different from what is happening in Iraq at this moment in terms of troops involved. His particular unit of Royal Marines had been helicoptered into the volcanic Radfan Mountains. You'd think you were on the moon; the terrain is absolutely horrendous like the volcanoes were last Wednesday.

They would hole up where they could at night and on this particular occasion they holed up in this fort, derelict, you've seen films like *Beau Geste...* What happened was when they were looking to relieve themselves they would go out and squat in the rocks and have a crap. The dissident tribesmen, as they were referred to although a lot of them were equipped with very modern weapons like AK47s, there were still a lot out there with the old traditional ten-foot rifle that would fire a ball this big. This is what happened to this young lad; he was squatting and someone took a hit at him and it went through his head – took half his head away.

They managed to get the helicopters to evacuate him to a place called Queen Elizabeth Hospital and he was there for about ten days. At the time I was involved in this very intensive operational work that they call Casavac, casualty evacuation, based at RAF Lyneham, and so he

was evacuated on this Casavac flight. I can remember reading his notes as we flew him back. Every day they expected him to be dead and the notes would read something like, 'if he's still alive, give him this...' We dropped him off at Lyneham and then he got taken off to a Royal Naval hospital.

This period of my service was very intensive and I flew around the world several times in a relatively short period of time and I would stop off in some very bizarre places, but all you would see is the airfield, then off again. And then I got a posting to Chessington in Surrey where there was a RAF rehabilitation unit. I'd not been there very long when I was put on reception. They used to hand me the medical records of the people coming in and I've looked at this record and I've recognised the name of the young Royal Marine. I thought I'd check how he was. I remember him being pushed off the ambulance and he was probably about half his body weight and slumped over in this wheelchair with a shock of dark hair. He hadn't got speech, no movement to speak of, and they took him up to this hospital and then begins the rehabilitation.

The best possible place you could be for injuries of that nature, and some of the recoveries have bordered on the miraculous, is the RAF. They'd got the best doctors, internationally respected surgeons and physicians. They were the best. Then you had the remedial gymnasts and the teams that would work people, and when I say work people I mean work. You would get people coming in who had lost both legs going out of their mind with bloody boredom, didn't give a shite about anything, and then they would become the most passionate, almost like religious converts. You'd see 'em come in and within a short period of time you'd see the transformation with these guys, and of course, they would be the greatest motivators of the next batch.

I used to take the young Marine at the weekends because we lived in a cottage very

near Chessington Zoo and we'd take him home on a weekend, show him the zoo, what have you, and then after another nine months, got posted to bloody Aden. In fact I was there for the last engagements, right to the last day. But I lost contact with the young Marine and he was still slumped in the wheelchair when I left.

And then after about four, maybe five years I got this parcel from RAF records office and in it were cuttings of this young Marine walking down the aisle with a bride on his arm. It was amazing. I'd never seen a gun shot that severe and there he is walking down the aisle. He'd remembered me and written to the Records Office to let me know.

There was another story of a journalist. He was a German and he had come to cover the last days of Empire in Aden. This guy had got off the plane, booked in at the hotel, and written a card to his wife, gone out to post it and then these guys had come up and shot him three or four times in the back of the head as he posted the card.

This happened on what was called the Maalla Strait – Murder Mile. There used to be a roundabout at the entrance with a pillarbox on top and they used to call it the Al Mansura Picket. This was most fired-on place on earth. They used to man it with volunteers. Anyway, we picked this journalist up – he was dead when we got there – and we took him up to the Steamer Point Hospital.

It was in the final days when what we were doing incrementally were moving from the various states into the perimeter around the airfield, so towns you could previously drive through became no-go areas. I used to drive around with the NLF flag stuck on my jeep and I used to get cheered, but there were rival factions, and you see what is happening between religious groups in Iraq, this was largely a political divide, some backed by Nasser in Egypt and others were being supplied by the Communist Bloc – a lot of weapons coming in from there. There was real rivalry as to which group would have power after we left. There were Marxist

guerrillas that emerged as a powerful force during the conflict, and the key was that the army, which we had equipped just weeks before we left, plumped to support the NLF. That triggered a very bloody reprisals. There were incidents when we were being pleaded with at the hospitals by the medical personnel that we pulled away from. The streets were absolutely littered with bodies and it wasn't just the individuals involved in the politics, but families as well. Absolutely horrendous.

Anyway, because of the withdrawal, this journalist gets stuck in the Steamer Point Hospital. Some days after, probably two or three days, and this is getting very close to the end, when we had pulled out from this area we get this call from the senior medical officer, 'We've got to go and pick him up. The Germans are sending this plane and they want him back. So what we are going to do is get a group together and you are going to be running it. You are going to be in charge. You will have so many marines (I can't remember how many now) as an escort and you are going to be in the ambulance. We are then going to make arrangements for you to meet up with the head of police in Maalla at midnight. He's going to give you keys to the hospital and you are going to get into the mortuary, get him out and bring him back here to be embalmed.'

Well, we knew there was going to be a bit of a problem because every night this area was like a bloody firework display with the AK47s and tracers going off. When you think about it risking lives for a corpse was daft, but you never thought about it at the time. This was a request the German government had made and the British government had agreed.

So anyway, we were in the ambulance, marines in the lorries, and a couple of jeeps and we are all armed to the teeth, even the medical personnel. I think I had a Stirling sub-machine gun, a .38 revolver and an SLR rifle. We had to go through this Maalla Strait to get to this hospital. We had arranged to meet the police, but they had just recently revolted and murdered

some of the DLI. They had not only murdered them, but thrown the bodies in the streets and then run over them with vehicles. So the police were a bit unreliable to put it mildly.

We got there and there is gunfire going off all round. We are stood at this junction wondering what to do, and all of a sudden I see this guy running up the road with a bunch of keys. So we grabbed the keys, I think there must have been about 350 keys on this bunch.

We get to this hospital and it's in total darkness. It's been trashed, ransacked and all the windows smashed and everything. We are creeping about, gunfire going off, and we get into the mortuary with torches. There were probably about fifteen or twenty fridges where there would be a body. We had opened one of the other freezers and noticed on the floor there was this head just slung in. I believe this guy had transgressed a bit of a truce in some way and they beheaded him. Then we checked the other freezers. 'Here he is, yeah.' We could tell – ginger hair. 'Right OK, let's get him out.' 'Can't get him out, must be stuck.'

I think what had happened was the Red Cross had shoved him in and trapped his arms under the runners and rigor mortis had set in. So I had to reach in and yank the arms free and in doing that for some reason the clots where he had been shot in the head opened up and just poured out. I had one of these silver watch straps and I remember scraping the blood out for days. Eventually we gets the journalist out and now we had to take him to this place to be embalmed. There was no stopping at the Al Mansura Picket. Away we were! There were lots of stories like that.

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Bolton  
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