

1417 FIGHTER RECONNAISSANCE FLIGHT - ADEN 1963-64

by Peter Lewis



**1417 Flight pilots in Aden (Left to Right)
Roger Pyrah, Johnny Morris, Peter Lewis, Jim Dymond and Geoff Timms**

Some time around the end of March 1963, Wg Cdr John Jennings (OC Tactical Wing Khormaksar) sent for me and announced that the Hunter FR10s were to be hived off 8 Sqn to form 1417 Flt, and that I was to command it. I would be given the five Hunters, the four other recce trained pilots, and some dozen ground crew drawn from the three DFGA (Day Fighter/Ground Attack) Squadrons (8, 43 and 208).

The pilots were Johnny Morris, a veteran from flying Mustangs in the South African Air Force in the Korean war; Jim Dymond, a PAI (Pilot Attack Instructor); Tony Rimmer, a past member of the 'APRF (Aden Protectorate Recce Flight)' which had flown Meteor FR9s in the late 50s: and Geoff Timms, a solid, quiet, ex Halton apprentice. We were all over 6ft; all 30 or over; all married with children; and all were 2nd or 3rd tour pilots. All the ground crew were very experienced on the Hunter and were those that the squadrons didn't want because they were difficult to manage!

So we had it all: a QFI/IRE (Qualified Flying Instructor/Instrument Rating Examiner; me), a PAI, someone who knew a lot about aircraft maintenance, and most importantly, someone who had seen real combat and knew a bit about recce against opposition. And we had a set of highly competent groundcrew - who liked to work as individuals - co-ordinated by an extremely wise Warrant Officer who was a Fitter 1 in his time.

The first task was to get the FR10s back into shape. The FR10 was undoubtedly the most beautiful of the Hunters. It weighed lighter than the FGA9s which had to carry ballast to keep their centre of gravity in the right place when carrying a load of external weaponry, and its mark of Avon engine gave a little more thrust than the FGA9 engine. It was a thoroughbred.

8 Sqn had used these lovely aircraft as 'hacks', scorning them because they were not equipped to fire rockets or drop bombs, they had no DME (Distance Measuring Equipment), and worst of all had a funny instrument

layout - the compass was where the artificial horizon should be and vice versa. The radio compasses didn't work, and the 230 gallon drop tanks, the contents of which could be incorporated into the internal fuel gauges, were rarely fitted as they incurred minor flight limitations which clashed with ground attack manoeuvres. The cameras were a mess; many were polluted with sand which scratched the negatives, and some of the nose camera lenses had been sand blasted because their protective 'eyelids' had not been serviced regularly. And last (but by no means least), the harmonization of the guns was way out on most of the aircraft, and the switches which allowed two or all four guns to fire were 'iffy'.

So there was a lot of work for the ground crew; the WO said it would take at least a fortnight's damned hard work to get those lovely jets back to the thoroughbred status they deserved. Which was a blessing in disguise as we reckoned that we needed at least that time to get the rest of the Flight into shape!

We were allocated a drop tank store as our accommodation. With a lot of help from the Station 'Works and Bricks' we did DIY and set to building partitions to give us a ground crew room, a pilots crew room, an office for the engineering WO, a little store, and somewhat against my wishes, an office for the CO - "we don't want him breathing down our necks all the time . . . ". I got a nickname of 'Prussian Pete', and some months later, two little notices appeared on the door to that office; one read 'Be reasonable, do it his way', and the other 'Diplomacy Department. He says and does the nastiest things in the nicest way'.

To facilitate all this, there was some distribution of duties. Geoff Timms kept a close eye on how the preparation of the FR10s was coming along; Jim Dymond - who was a very good artist and photographer as well as a PAI was put in charge of harmonizing the guns and getting the cameras running properly. He and the groundcrew came up with the idea of keeping the cameras in plastic bags in an old fridge - a primitive but effective 'dust free environmental control'!

I cadged the wing T7 (two seat Hunter) whenever possible, and flew with each pilot on a 'QFI/IRE' check ride. A bit laughable really - they were all damned good flyers, but it did demonstrate that we could follow as well as read the dreaded 'Air Staff Instructions'.

Johnny Morris meanwhile gave us all a very hard time on visual recce techniques, and had some masochistic variations on 'Kims Game' with which he sought to tune our ability to remember and reproduce on paper what we had seen. One of his favourites was to stand each of us on a chair whilst he sprinkled mapping pins on the floor behind us. Then it was 'turn round' and you had fifteen seconds (about the time taken to run past a target) to count the pins and memorise the pattern they had formed. It was amazing how good we all got at instinctively working the difference between looking and seeing.

We designed cardboard 'prayer wheels' which we could use for fuel calculations in the air, and for speed adjustments to ensure a correct time on target. Johnny taught us the importance of planning a good IP (Initial Point) which would give the best photographic run past the target whilst maintaining whatever element of surprise was going to ensure a clean getaway; the desert is a very quiet place, and the Hunter will have been heard long before it appeared!

I met one of the 'Arabists' who normally worked in the Lebanon, and was lucky enough to be able to convince him to spend a day with us talking about the Arab culture; the way they approach life and death; the honour of the Bedouin; and a mass of little things which came out in discussion in the flight and later in the bar on the general theme of 'know your enemy'. Something which was particularly interesting was his view that the 'Goolie Chit' and the gold coins were useless to the point of being an incentive to do away with their carrier. In his view, if we came down in the desert, food and water were much more important, and to offer them as a sign of friendship and submission would be more likely to succeed. If the Arab accepted the food and water then you were 'on his face', and he would see you back to your own tribe. If not

Our final flourish was to design a distinctive mark for all our Hunters. Everyone had an input and we eventually went for a sort of arrowhead with a crinkly front end to represent camera bellows. The colours were those of Aden Protectorate (yellow, green and black), and the Station Commander agreed that we could use the Khormaksar crest as a centrepiece - so's not to annoy any of those chaps in the College of Heraldry who have weird names.

Last of all we decided that as there were five of us, and five FR10s, we would not have fin letters, we'd use our initials. All this make-over was plotted to happen overnight; the groundcrew were up for surprising the DFGA squadrons. So the morning when five shiny FR10s called PL, JM, JD, GT, and AR resplendent in their new insignia were wheeled out onto the pan caused quite a stir all round. Quite right too.



**Hunter FR Mk 10 XE614 in Aden.
The aircraft carries the author's initials, PL, on the nosewheel door.**

TRAINING

Johnny Morris devised some testing training sorties for us involving finding and photographing unlikely 'targets' like watering wells way out in the desert; derelict buildings in the bottom of steep sided wadis; watch towers; desert landing strips; and the most difficult of all, complexes of caves recognisable only by the black holes in the sides of hills. He also seemed to have a secret line to the army, and whenever there was a convoy going up to Dhala he'd want photos, and a vehicle count which had to include the various vehicle types.

The 'operational' test was to get a picture of a target at a predetermined time with Johnny sitting somewhere over it without getting bounced by him. One frame of GGS (Gyro Gun Sight) camera cine film with you in the frame represented a 'fail'! We got a bit cocky about this ability, and challenged the DFGA boys to the same game. As far as I remember, none of them got the vital frame of cine, but Chris Golds of 43 Sqn did see the 1417 Hunter on one occasion.

The secret we had worked out was to fly low over the flattest terrain we could find on the run in to the target. Nine times out of ten, it is not the aircraft that the 'defenders', saw, but its shadow 'bouncing' along uneven terrain. Flying so that the shadow doesn't 'bounce' involves going down to 25-30 ft which, at 420kts, is very low indeed, and every so often one pilot would fly chase to the other sitting out at 4 or 8 o'clock and judging

the height of his buddy. Interestingly, getting down to that height is hard work as the tendency is always to creep up to around 40-50 ft and these buddy checks were needed about once a fortnight to keep our eyes in.

Another ruse was to fly over where the waves were breaking on the shore. The motion of the water under the aircraft at roughly 90 degrees to the line of flight is sufficiently distracting to put off the all but the cutest.

Because our role was to get the information and bring it back, we would do all we could to avoid shooting or being shot at. So Jim Dymond and Johnny Morris dreamed up an interesting air to ground shooting sortie for whenever one of the DFGA squadrons was on the range. We would ask for a 'slot' and whatever we were offered, we'd take. But we only allowed ourselves one pass, and that had to be made on time after a navigation/recce training sortie lasting at least 45 min.

And we were not allowed to go above 250ft on the run in to the targets. This was realistic, but meant that gyro gunsight was unreliable as turbulence affected the gyroscope in the sight; but Jim had worked out a way of using the 'fixed cross' (the spot where the guns were actually pointing) to good effect, and provided we used his method we usually picked up a decent score. The Flight average on air to ground was around 60%, a fact of which we were proud, but quiet; there was enough banter about 'the Kodak Kids' without our trespassing on the expertise of the DFGA boys!

We had a nice 'party piece' for visiting VIPs taking a march past or a salute. With a little connivance from the control tower, as 'General Salute' was called, an FR10 would make a low photo pass and land. By the time the VIP had inspected the parade and was back on his dais, say 10 mins, the film would have been developed and printed by the MFPU (Mobile Field Photography Unit) and he would be presented with his picture as he left the parade ground.

By the end of April, I was able to tell the Wing Leader that we were ready for ops.

OPERATIONS

Until the war in Radfan really warmed up, 1417's main task was Operation 'Ranji'. This involved a sweep of the coast from Riyan to the straits of Bab el Mendeb looking for 'gun runners' landing weaponry for the insurgents inland. We found a few, but not many. However, 'Ranji' was also a catch-all for other recce ops, and three were especially memorable.

At this time, the Russians were sending warships out to Indonesia, and the Shackleton squadron would patrol the south end of the Red Sea watching for them. On one occasion, they spotted a Skoryy class sub chaser which had hidden amongst the little islands off the east coast of Ethiopia whilst it refuelled. The Russians did not have a 'Resupply At Sea' system as the RN have, and they transferred resupply whilst stationary. The Shackleton spotted the sub chaser on its radar going like hell out into the Indian Ocean. They were low on fuel (having been up all night) and could not catch it to take a picture. Could 1417 help?

We'd try. The Shackleton climbed to keep the Russian on its radar for as long as it could, and gave us its course and speed (about 32 knots I think) and I plotted an intercept some 180 miles out to sea and scrambled (probably in XE614/PL). Some accurate flying was required and when I estimated that I was some 40 miles (6 minutes) away I let down to as low as was sensible. The Skoryy appeared on the horizon roughly where it should have been and I lined up for a pass down its port side for happy snaps. Piece of cake!

The photos were developed, and produced a nasty surprise: every gun on the port side was leading me, and the covers were still on the guns on the starboard side!

If that had been for real . . . They'd seen me coming from way out!

A similar sortie in XE614/PL involved looking for a suspected Russian warship off Hodeida. The weather on this trip was unusually poor, with a lot of Cu Nimbs about. I was about to throw the game away when I spotted a ship about 10 miles away under a very black cloud. I turned towards it, and was delighted when the cloud

base started to lift. The ship turned out to be an innocent cargo ship, but I simultaneously noticed that suddenly there was no horizon; big Cu Nimbs' bases are like an inverted saucer, so grey sea, grey cloud, no horizon: time to climb.

Up I went, and for about the first 5000 ft it was a bit bumpy, (to be expected). But then every thing went mad. There were flashes of blue and yellow light, and the aircraft began pitching and rolling all on its own; I reduced to 'penetration' speed, clamped my feet on the rudder pedals, and clamped the stick in both hands supported by both knees. The accelerometer was 'off the clock' in both directions (minus 4 to plus 12); the artificial horizon had toppled; the G4 compass was rotating gently - like a roulette wheel slowing down I thought at the time; the radio compass was swinging wildly from one bearing to another, sometimes going through all 360 degrees; the airspeed indicator was fluctuating plus or minus 30 knots, and the climb/descent indicator was bumping against the 'up' stop. The only stable instruments were the turn and slip indicator (and even it was having its moments), and the altimeter which was climbing at an alarming rate.

I've no idea how long all this lasted, except that it seemed to be a long time; but it all stopped as suddenly as it had started and I was in blue sky with that towering white mountain behind me. None of the instruments looked trustworthy, and I could not see any land; so I just turned towards the sun (home was in that rough direction) and concentrated on level flight to relax and think; I then noticed that I was at 56000 ft so began a descent to something more sensible!

Eventually, the compass and the radio compass came back; the artificial horizon (now I didn't need it) re-erected itself, and I headed for home. A very gentle straight in approach and landing and the aircraft went straight into the hangar for a stress check. The fatigue meter showed that it had been a very rough ride indeed, but that apart, the thoroughbred was just fine.

'Ranji' was also used for surveillance of the port at Hodeida. The Intelligence men on the hill were very interested in what was being landed there, particularly some large crates that they had heard of. One of them came down to the wing, and in John Jennings' office it was suggested that some photos would be a great help; not that they were telling us to go of course, that might cause an international incident, but it would be nice. JJ agreed that it would be nice, but quite out of the question But he had an idea

So I took off without signing for anything telling the tower it was an air test - or something - and off to Hodeida. I 'sussed' the area from about 10000 ft and 10-15 miles out taking a couple of shots with the starboard facer (just in case we had to do this again sometime) and decided on the photo run direction; north to south at about 500 ft looked good with a long burst of port and nose cameras.

Let down, gentle turn to starboard, and line up. No problem, but then I saw an airfield a couple of miles inland which no one told me about. And as I get abeam the Port snapping away happily, I saw a pair of MiGs turning on to the runway. The photo shoot was all but over, so nose down and out to the coast, low over where those waves are breaking over the shore, flat out. Pure funk!!

I didn't see the MiGs again and I guess they didn't see me again either. Back to base to some very sideways glances from both ground and aircrew - what on earth is the boss doing bugging off without signing up?

The port and nose films are developed and printed - no title strips - and delivered to JJs office; I didn't even see them. But the starboard facers come back to me - and they were useful to others on a couple of occasions, I think. We never discussed these missions with anyone - not even the other pilots.

But there was an interesting aftermath. One afternoon on the beach, one of the air traffic controllers (a Pole, who, in his time had been a WWII night fighter ace) confronted me and in a very loud voice asks what the hell 1417 is doing breaking air traffic rules - their radar is telling them that we are not doing what we'd said we would. I tell him to shut up - and eventually pull rank in a very grotty manner until, by the look on his face, the penny dropped.

In December 1963, twelve FGA9s and an FR10 were sent down to Nairobi ostensibly to provide a flypast for the independence celebrations - 'Uhuru'. The Hunters were based on the small military complex on the dual civil/military Airport; but on the far side of the airfield there was a Beverley transport full of weaponry - just in case. All the Hunters flew with full 30mm gun packs on every sortie.

Two days before Uhuru, I was ordered to carry out a sweep following the railway from Nairobi to Mombassa to photograph and note any gatherings that might be the least bit hostile looking. Nairobi airport is some 7000 ft above sea level, and the recce was to be at midday; this would be an interesting take off!

And so it proved. At maximum all up weight, I went right to the very end of Nairobi's enormous runway; resolved to put down 10 degrees of flap once I was rolling (we never really needed to do that in Aden, even at midday), and ran up to full power before letting off the brakes. Poor PL began a gentle crawl down the runway and rolled and rolled and rolled with the airspeed increasing very slowly. Dropping the flaps at the last possible moment, I just got airborne at the very end of the runway, but despite a very rapid undercarriage clean up, was in a more or less stable flight condition raise the flaps and I'd sink into the ground; raise the nose up and I'd stall. But the Riff Valley came to my rescue; the ground drops away dramatically a couple of miles from the end of the runway, and I was able to put the nose down, get some airspeed, clean up the flaps and begin to fly normally.

Exercise Biltong was, on the face of it, a communication exercise mounted out of Bahrain. In fact, it was a thorough recce of an area to the east of a line running south from Abu Dubai down to Masirah. It was something to do with illicit oil prospecting I think, but provided Johnny Morris and I with some interesting navigation problems.

There were no maps of the area at all, so we'd cross in over Abu Dubai and fly an accurate speed and heading to trace out a very elongated and narrow rectangle. If we saw something, we'd note the time and then create a sort of plot of its bearing and distance from Abu Dubai after the flight. The other would then fly that bearing and distance and if he found the something too we'd say 'that's where it is'.

On one of these sorties, Johnny had found something well to the south, and there was just enough light left to check it out. Sure enough, he'd found an unusual encampment with what looked like some pretty technical vehicles which were duly photographed. The low sun would have given the PIs some good shadows to work off, and one very low pass would probably have given them mug shots of the people on the ground - most of whom looked surprisingly oriental.

I finished the 'sweep', by which time the sun was setting, and as fuel was getting a bit tight (all that showing off for happy snaps) I started a climb out to return to base at high level. As I climbed, I followed the setting sun, with all the marvellous colours that come with sunset over the desert. Beneath, was the dark, and gradually, in what had seemed in daylight like an empty wilderness, little pinpricks of light began to appear; the Bedouins, I supposed, cooking their evening meals.

At 40000 ft with the sun all but gone; the sky turning purple; the pinpricks of lights of humanity below; the stars not quite out yet and a light frost forming on the canopy there came a strange sensation: as if a little voice was asking "who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?" Some have labelled moments like this a 'nearness to God'.

I would not argue with them, and some lines from the Rubaiyat came to me:

One moment in annihilation's waste, one moment at the well of life to taste . . .

At the end of 'Biltong' Johnny Morris came up with a ruse. Why didn't I fly back across the Rub al Khali alone? We'd take off as a pair; he'd have radio failure; and I'd carry on. So that's what we did. I used the cruise climb technique allowing XE614/PL to drift up to some 50000 ft as the fuel burned off. When I eventually switched to the Khormaksar frequency, there was obviously anxiety about my fuel state. When I told them

that I may have to burn off before landing, they were relieved, but disbelieving. In fact, the big 230s emptied on the descent, and I landed with damn near full internal fuel. Two hours thirty five minutes, and could have gone on for another 45 minutes (at altitude). The first crossing of the 'Empty Quarter' in a single engine jet I like to think.

The next morning, XE614/PL which had brought me back the day before, refused to start. There were sand blockages in some of the transfer valves apparently; the thoroughbred had showed her mettle again.

The strike on Harib fort began as an RAF classic. The wing had a stand down for two days apart from one recce Hunter and four DFGAs at two hours standby. So there was one hell of a party at someone's house which went on a bit.

At around 4.00 am there was a beating on the door, and there was Roy Bowie, the wing ops officer, saying "get down to flights, we're going to start some nastiness".

The Wing Leader, John Jennings (JJ) had laid on a mass of toast and coffee, but as the briefing started, the adrenalin took over; I'm convinced that it is the best hangover cure there is.

The fort was to be leafleted fifteen minutes before 8 Hunters led by JJ struck. Sid Bottom (8 Sqn) and I were to carry the leaflets in our raised flaps and I was to photo Sid's leaflets going down on the fort. We were then to pull up to 30000ft and keep an eye open for any opposition which might choose to join the party. Once the strike was over, I was to photograph the fort again.

It all went smoothly until, whilst filming Sid's leaflets I saw at least one and probably three AA guns on the ground just to the south of the fort. There followed an agonizing fifteen minutes: break radio silence and warn the strike boys, or keep quiet?

As the strike was going in from 20000ft, the gunners would have to be pretty good to get a result, and they probably weren't that good; so shut up and sit tight.

I need not have worried! JJ led the eight Hunters down, and his salvo was a 'pickle barrel' shot. I guess he must have hit a magazine or something as there was a huge yellow flash and a 'mini mushroom' of dirty brown/black smoke. I reckon that the other seven could only fire into the smoke and hope for the best, but there were no more big explosions.

I told Sid to join the others and go home as it was going to take some time for the smoke to clear and allow a decent photograph. The smoke cleared after about half an hour, and I made the second pass. The fort was an awful mess, and there were several bodies lying about around where the guns were. The thought occurred that JJs salvo had probably blown bits of the southern end of the fort all over the poor sods.

So far so good. I reckoned that I hadn't exposed too much film (a short length of film gives the MFPU a chance for a really quick turnaround), and that I'd got the line about right on the second run. So now it was just wait and see.

The MFPU did a smashing job, and the film was on the light bench by the time I'd walked in and signed up. The photos were good, and I marked the two I wanted printed up and went into the debriefing with them. I handed them to JJ, and his face lit up with a smile which was a mixture of pride and relief. All he said was "Thank you 1417".

That was enough; and in the eyes of the DFGA boys, we'd arrived.

The Radfan war was to strengthen the links between DFGA and Recce considerably. The root of this was the maps - or lack of maps. By and large, the only large scale maps we had were the 'White Maps' which were originally surveyed by Philby in the late 1940s. These were supplemented by 'chocolate maps' (so called

because they were mainly brown) which were just reproductions of the aerial photographs taken by PR Canberras overlaid with minimal information of place names, roads and tracks, and wadi beds. There was the odd spot height, but no contours, so we all had to learn to translate the shading on these maps into what a hill, plateau or wadi would actually look like when we got there.

But the most crucial factor was place names and their locations. Often, the place name had not changed, but the location had; the locals had just moved the whole place anything up to fifteen miles from where it last was - perhaps in Philby's time! The army or the SAS would call for a strike and name the place (no grid references, they didn't have our maps) and unless there was an FAC (Forward Air Controller), the DFGA boys could not find the target. Even when there was FAC control, they often had to be talked in from positions many miles away.

So 1417 often went looking for the missing villages. We'd make some assumptions about where it might be, and then just fly from where it was supposed to be to where we thought it might be with bursts (to make the film last) from all three cameras. If we found the village, we'd give the DFGA boys the key pictures and a briefing to supplement the chocolate maps on what to look for. This raised the success rate considerably, but didn't work every time.

Early in the campaign, attempts at 'proscription' were made. This involved dropping leaflets on specific areas warning the inhabitants that they were in an area which was, or was about to come, a war area; this (political) device had worked successfully in Iraq and India in the days of Empire, as it denied insurgents sustenance. One morning, I was ordered to leaflet a plateau in Radfan where intelligence had reported a massing of potentially active insurgents, and it was due to be struck by the DFGA later that day. If I was fired on, which was considered unlikely, then I was to fire back.

I approached the area at low level (below the height of the plateau) by way of a wadi which led to it, and as I climbed to make my run across the area I saw a crowd of people. As I got closer, I saw that they formed a rough circle. In the middle of the circle were three tripod mounted 18mm machine guns - a very effective AA weapon - surrounded by some 20-30 civilians of all descriptions, including women and children. But outside them were nine or ten others with Kalashnikov assault rifles all pointing inwards! The concept of 'Human Shields' existed in 1964, long before the first Gulf War.

Then the 18mms opened up on me; subsequent events are best forgotten.

As the war hotted up, the SAS would often find caves where the opposition was hiding out. As the DFGA boys used to tip in from 15-20000 ft for these strikes, they hadn't got much time to acquire the targets which were little more than black holes on a hillside. So 1417 went and found them first, and using the telephoto nose camera, produced a 'gunsight' picture which was given to every pilot on the strike. This helped them a lot, if only because it relieved them of working out the best IP and attack direction. Quite what the effect of a strike on a cave was, I never asked

There was a visit to Aden by a party of MPs, and on the day they came to Strike Wing, things were pretty busy 'up country'; the DFGA boys were going at it hammer and tongs, and 1417 was supporting them with pre and post strike photographs. Returning from one of these missions, I saw a civilian hanging about 1417's flight line.

Now 1417 had an Arab 'sweeper' - a lovely little man who kept the offices immaculate; made coffee for everyone - including the ground crew; and was a general 'go-for'. As the ground crew got to know him, they would let him help on turnarounds; nothing technical - pushing trolleys, unreeling the heavy refuelling hoses, passing tools and so on. To him, this was a real treat.

On this sortie, I had fired the guns - at what, I can't remember; so when the armourers saw the smoke on the gun ports, they geared up to change the 'gun pack'. (The Hunter was designed for fast turnarounds, so a magazine full of ammunition replaced the used one which was then taken away for reloading). The sweeper delighted in helping with this activity whenever he could, and so it was on this day.

The MP ignored me as I got out of the aircraft, and walked up to the 'sweeper' to ask him if he was not ashamed of himself helping the RAF to fight his people. He got a surprise; the sweeper glared at him fiercely and said "No! Boss Pete is fighting the enemies of my tribe!". Collapse of stout party - labour/pacifist perhaps.

The next day, we found the sweeper out on the line polishing the nose camera 'eyelids'; he'd really shone them up, and was a bit hurt when we told him that they might reflect the sun from a long way away, and that was not good.

Some time later, there was a timid knock on my door, and the sweeper appeared with a roll of newspaper in which there was a 'Kunja' - the traditional Arab knife of the area. It differed from the better known 'Gambia' - as its scabbard is curved, not hooked. The knife was fairly primitive in appearance but had a lovely horn handle. The scabbard was made from silver - almost certainly smelted Maria Theresa Dollars.

The knife, he informed me, was a gift from his tribe, but I must pay for the scabbard - 500 shillings; that was the custom! He was a bit upset when he noticed that I did not wear it when flying, but time and a lot of patient explaining eventually soothed him. I wish I could remember his name and I wonder what happened to him?

The Army soon wised up to the benefits of having photographs of the terrain they were to fight over, and became regular customers. On one occasion, they asked for complete cover of a wadi some nine miles long which involved using all of XE614/PL's three cameras at about 200 ft. As our cameras only had 50 seconds of film in them this meant that even at maximum speed, we would not get the whole of the wadi, although the nose camera with its telephoto lens would give something at the end of the run.

Because the wadi bed was about 1000 ft below the plateau, the sortie had to be flown between 1 and 2 pm when the shadows would be at a minimum. At that time, up there, the air became very turbulent so it was going to be a bumpy ride at 540kts. And the final piece of grief was that at 0.9 mach, the Hunter undergoes a nose down trim change which at a sensible altitude is not a problem as you just switched in the 'flying tail' which effectively turned the tailplane into a slab which could cope perfectly well with transonic aerodynamics. Too well in fact, as it made the aircraft very frisky in pitch, and it was madness to use it much below 500 ft.

So the prospect was one of riding this trim change on a bumpy day and an interesting trip. And so it turned out; some 20 seconds into the run the accelerometer was off the clock (again!) in both directions; so back in the hangar for a stress check. And again, XE614/PL the thoroughbred was fine, apart from a hole in the fin where someone had taken umbrage at being photographed.

Occasionally, we were sent out into the open desert when there was a rumour of a meeting of the opposition, or the collection of weaponry. On these occasions, we were told that if fired on, we should fire back provided that would not interfere with the mission which was a picture of the event. On one such mission, I was certain that a group of some four land rovers and a fair few camels had opened up on me as I went past - guns pointing in my direction and little yellow flashes. So rather than just go home, I turned through 180 degrees, and gave them the benefit of all four Aden Guns firing alternate HE/Ball for about 3 seconds - probably around 150-160 rounds.

Unless the airspeed is 300kts or less it is unlikely that you see your rounds strike, and at 480kts you most certainly do not, so what effect I'd had I'll never know. The vibration of all four guns is quite noticeable, and they knock the speed back a bit; as I opened the throttle and pulled up, horror of horrors, the fire warning light came on. The drill for this is, basically, eject as there is a fuel tank sitting around the jet pipe. But there was no way I was going to join the crowd I'd just visited as there was every probability that they were a bit angry.

So, no smoke in the rear vision mirror and normal JPT (Jet Pipe Temperature); a gentle turn and still no smoke in the mirror. Then an inspiration: I felt back to where the fire warning test switch is to find that the 'desert survival pack' had come loose from its mounting with the vibration from the guns, and had fallen on the switch. Lift it off, and the fire went out . . .

Thereafter, these packs were taken out of all the FR10s. If you'd ejected they'd be nowhere near you, and no one in his right mind was going to crash land in the sort of terrain we were flying over. We recommended that the DFGA boys did the same thing.

Quite often these missions involved taking off just before dawn, and I loved those flights. Flying low over the desert into a rising sun is a truly beautiful experience, and again, the Rubaiyat had the words:

*Awake, for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that put the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! The Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.*

The SAS were very active in the Radfan and did a lot of surveillance of the enemy resupply routes. One morning there was a message that a camel train had been spotted the previous night, and was resting up near the Yemen border. I was sent up for a look-see, but despite being pretty sure I was in the right place, saw nothing. Then a voice (on the R/T Operational frequency) said "they're there"; that's all. So I looked more carefully.

There was a sort of a track which followed the dried up bed of a stream, and which went through the odd pool of water which had not dried up. I noticed that the colour of the track above these pools was different to that below them and remembered some of Johnny Morris' training - the camels' wet feet had probably washed the sand off the path below the pools. And then, suddenly, what had appeared to be just rough boulders, turned out to be couched camels; but no sight of any humans.

Time to help the Army; I turned round, and gave the camels no more than a two second burst of four guns, then turned again to photograph what I'd done. There was that brown/black smoke (as at Harib) all over where the Camels had been, and no hope of any pictures.

On return to base, I asked Johnny Morris to go back up there and do some pictures, but he came back without any; he said that there were so many vultures in the air and on the ground there was no way he was risking a bird strike just for my photo album!

There was a strange aftermath to this episode. Many years later, when I was out of the RAF and holidaying on the West Coast of Wales with the family on Dinas Head, I was having a lunchtime pint in a Pub called 'The Sailors Safety' when a voice said "Its Peter Lewis isn't it?".

"Yes, but do I know you?"

"Better than you know; do you remember some camels up in the Radfan?"

"Yes"

"And someone telling you they're there?"

"Yes"

"Well that was me"

The speaker was the local postman.

Not all missions were one hundred percent in their execution, notwithstanding the fact that they were successful; luck sometimes intervened. One such mission involved getting some nose camera shots of some caves in the end of a wadi the bed which was some 1500 ft below the Radfan plateau. I knew the wadi fairly well having been there several times before, and in the usual good weather that Aden offered, the mission would have been purely routine.

But this was February, when there is often a layer of cloud sitting over Radfan and the surrounding hills; only about 1500 ft thick, but covering the plateau. When I got to the wadi, I saw that I would be flying into a wadi the tops of which were in cloud, through which I would have to pull up once the photos were done.

I decided to fly at 300 rather than 420 kts as the camera would need to be slowed right down to make the most of the (for Aden) poor light, and in I went. The run was only about half complete, perhaps 3 miles out from the target, when self preservation took over and I pulled up through the cloud thinking 'abort'. But then pride took over, so I went out to the edge of the cloud, let down to low level again, and made another run. This time, I got a bit closer, but once again, 'chickened out'; and set off for home.

But half way home, pride cut in again: I just had to go back for one more try! This time, I would fly at 320 kts with 10 degrees of flap to give me then sharpest rotation into a climb that the Hunter would do, and I went. I got my photos and rotated up through the cloud and back to base.

But the photos were under exposed (although the best achievable) and not much good for the customer.

The next day, the cloud had gone, so I went back again and got some decent shots. But in getting them, I realised that the day before, my pull up through the cloud had taken me through a V shaped depression in the wadi end, and that had I been 20 yards left or right I would have flown into the wadi wall. I then came to know what 'fear in retrospect' really means.

What would probably have been the most interesting Op of all was as bizarre in its conception as it would have been challenging in its execution. There was some trouble in or around Zanzibar, and there was to be a pacification exercise involving landing marines to secure the airfield, followed by the army who wanted their close support Hunters with them. The problem was that no one knew if the airfield was operational, or if the runway had been obstructed.

So, 1417 would take off about an hour before the show was due to start, and go and have a look at the airfield. If it was OK, the Marines would secure it, and the DFGA boys who were airborne but not up to their point-of-no-return would keep on coming. The 1417 Hunter would hang about making its fuel last as long as possible, and then land on the newly acquired airfield and await the arrival of everyone else. If the airfield was not serviceable, then Nairobi if there was enough fuel - which was unlikely - or find one of Her Majesty's nice warships and eject beside it. The latter option also applied if the marines could not secure the airfield in time. But it never happened.

There is a little cameo from this whole thing which Liz and I still smile about. The beginnings of this episode involved my being knocked up at some ungodly hour, and told to pack some kit as I'd be away from home for a bit. This I did, and when Liz drowsily asked when I'd be back, all I could say was "I don't know"; to which she said "Have you got enough handkerchiefs?". We were kept on the base at Khormaksar, incommunicado, for some three days before the whole thing was called off, and we could go home again.

At the time, I don't remember ever thinking about what Liz - and the other wives - went through at times like those; it must have been miserable for them, miles from home and beset by uncertainties. But go through it they did, never complaining about that side of their lives. Late back with the shopping, or from the bar - that was a very different matter.

It was odd, to say the least, to get up at 4.00 am, fly four or five missions some of which involved shooting and probably killing people, and then sit down with a wife and three children for a late lunch. The 'switch off' from violence had to be complete - until tomorrow. I now firmly believe that wives and families have no place in war zones.

In all, I flew 112 operations in Aden, most of them routine and uneventful, but some quite character forming. The flight had been tasked for 601 operations, 600 of which had been successful; the one which was a failure was when the last sortie of the day had to be abandoned when the aircraft refused to start! Towards the end of the tour I realised that something strange was happening: when it came to having completed an 'Op', I couldn't remember walking out to the aircraft; transiting to the target; or coming home. But from the IP through to the breakout, I could give a faultless 'frame-by-frame' debrief of everything. It was as if I'd been converted into an automaton programmed for perfection. A bit spooky really.

FOOTNOTE:

This account was originally compiled by Peter Lewis in 2003 at the request of his children and grandchildren. In May 2008, Peter became aware that XE614/PL survives in the collection of the Queensland Air Museum at Caloundra, Australia. This abridged account of Peter's time in Aden was prepared at the request of QAM and is reproduced here with the author's permission. Where log book evidence exists, specific references to XE614/PL have been retrospectively added to the account where appropriate.

POSTSCRIPT (05APR09):

Peter Lewis has recalled that while he was in Aden he spent some time on HMS *Centaur* advising Sea Vixen crews on reconnaissance techniques. One of the Sea Vixens on *Centaur* at that time was QAM's XJ490.