

BY AN OLD HYDROGRAPHER

'As it Was'

Foreword by Steve Ritchie Until 1959 the two triangulation networks on either side of the Persian Gulf had never been connected, so that ships' navigators, when changing their fixes from one set of coastal features to the other, might experience an apparent shift in position of up to three miles. The need to remedy this state of affairs had recently become even more urgent, as the Persian Gulf Lighting Service was about to establish a Decca Navigation chain with stations on either side of the Gulf. I had been instructed as Captain of HM survey ship *Dalrymple* to attempt a closure between the two networks across the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow entrance to the Gulf.

So on Sunday 15th November 1959 Chester Read and Geoff Hope landed with a small party of recorders to be based in a camp near Ras al Khaimah. Here they were met by Mr Derham of Qatar Petroleum Company, who had established a dump of fuel for the use of a helicopter, provided for a week by the Consortium Oil Company. Operation 'Link' entailed observing the angles and the lengths of the sides of the quadrilateral contained by the stations on Fine Peak and Jabal Shamm on the Musandam Peninsula and Kish Kuh and Jabal Biscoe, two stations in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company triangulation of 1949-1951 on Qishm Island. Poor visibility closed in before all the necessary observations had been made. However, surveyors from *Dalrymple* completed the operation the following year, when two helicopters were available.

To describe the difficulties encountered by the surveyors on the mountains I asked Chester Read to give me an account of his experiences, and this spirited account is what he gave me.

"On the first arrival of the helicopter in the afternoon we attempted a helicopter recce of Fine Peak, but found it cloud covered. The pilot, seeking to engender confidence in himself and machine, and so as not to waste the entire mission, took us out over the open sea to demonstrate 'auto-rotation', the procedure in the event of the single engine failing. To this day, I remember my acute unease as he switched off the engine and we plummeted like a stone towards the water of Hormuz from 5,000 feet. And this was despite having the benefit of briefing via the intercom of the pilot's intentions. My surveying recorder, Gilligan, in the rear of the cockpit had no such knowledge and, failing to interpret my distraught gestures of reassurance, he thought his last moments had come. Only after we landed back at Ras al Khaimah (having dispersed goats and camels in all directions on the approach) did it emerge that he had never flown before in any type of aircraft.

"On the first full day, we 'landed' near the Peak (the correct description is, I think, a 'wheel touch') and this with me standing on the external step of the machine and directing the pilot 'back a bit' or 'right a foot' over the headset intercom. When I finally stepped off onto terra firma it was to find I had forgotten to take off the headset and was near suspended by its cord.

"The day and its first observations passed uneventfully and successfully, and the take-off seemed satisfactory in mid-afternoon until the ashen-faced pilot confided that we had 'fallen off' Fine Peak rather than lifted off. Apparently the increase of humidity during the day, together with our altitude, caused much decreased lift from the rotor. Because of this danger, the pilot determined on a two-stage approach to and from the Peak in future.

"Accordingly, next day, the machine put down on a patchily cultivated plateau about a thousand feet below the summit, and I offloaded with half the gear whilst the pilot went on to put down Gilligan on the Peak with the remainder. I suddenly felt very lonely and vulnerable as the helicopter dwindled into the height and distance, and in the light of all we had been briefed upon concerning the mountain men and their axes. My concern was, to say the least, sharpened by whoops and yells from figures converging in leaps and bounds from nearby mountainsides. I unholstered the clumsy Naval-issue revolver from my waist, but I don't think that it ever occurred to me that I might actually have to shoot anyone with it. And this was especially so as they got closer and I realised that the twenty or so of them were all women. Gathered round me, they jabbered and shrieked incomprehensibly and excitedly, and tested between forefinger and thumb the quality of my brief tropical clothing 'and eyed my dangled revolver with covetous recognition. How, I wondered, would this pinching progress? Would I be ill-mannered in Arabic terms if I did not pinch them back? And what would be my captain's reaction if I confessed to 'giving' my revolver to a pack of women? (Not to mention a Tellurometer etc.)

"Fortunately, such horrid conjecture was curtailed by the clatter of the returning helicopter, echoing and re-echoing across the ravines and steep mountainsides. The ladies scattered excitedly to a safer distance as it approached and touched down. When the pilot throttled back the rotor to idling, a few of the bolder ones came back to assist me in loading the gear.

"For the benefit of the ex-RAF. pilot I extended to them a leisurely and even affectionate farewell, in what I hoped was nonchalant RN fashion reflecting such an everyday encounter.

"The ladies, for their part, were ill-rewarded for their interest. As the throttles went forward and the down draught increased for take off, they were scattered with their flimsy garments 'not always in correct attachment' across the scorched plateau like a large-scale and highly coloured kaleidoscope glimpsed through a dust storm and gesticulating angrily.

"Arrived at Fine Peak and reunited with Gilligan and the gear, I looked across the arcs to the south over blue, brown and purple ridges of mountain and ravine, and to the north the almost sheer drop of over 4,000 feet to the sea below. No one, I concluded, could approach up this cliff, and I would have ample warning and view of other directions. Accordingly, I removed the unwieldy webbing and revolver and laid it upon a convenient rock out of the way of the surveying operation. Shortly afterwards, eyes glued to electronic distant prospects in the visor of the Tellurometer, I was startled to hear, and then turn to see, Gilligan greeting a pair of hands and a bearded face which had appeared over the impossible cliff edge. As the rest of this agile mountaineer followed, it came as little surprise to note that he was carrying a long-handled and exceedingly sharp looking axe – the raison d'être for the revolver so uselessly distant. Would he perhaps be followed by chums? And all out for vengeance for the awful dishonouring of their ladies on the plateau below?

"Happily, not so. The sole tribesman was incoherently affable, noisily interested, albeit very disappointed at the –picture– on the Tellurometer. The upside-down figures in the theodolite were more amusing to him, but his real bonus came when, on being offered a Rowntree's wine gum, he took the whole box as a naturally offered present and disappeared back down the cliff from whence he had come. Perhaps to this day he and his ladies talk of this visitation and crave wine gums in the mountain fastness of Musandam."

Chester Read