

Sirri: the War that Never Was

In the light of our current difficult relationship with Iran, it is interesting to share Johnny Graham's reminiscences of the war he nearly started single-handed!

My first posting in December 1951 was to the Political Residency in Bahrain, then a state 'in special treaty relations' with Britain.

Defending the Thin Red Line

My role was at the bottom of the political section under the eye of a more senior officer who never let a draft through without extensive corrections of style as well as



substance. There was one area however in which I thought that I held unrestricted sway. Every month the Navy submitted a programme of visits by the two frigates based in the Gulf, H M Ships *Flamingo* and *Wren*. I used to look up the proposed ports of call on the map and if they were within the territories of our Protected States, or in the case of small islands were underlined in red, I signed them off. If on the other hand the proposed visit was to a foreign port, I would send off a telegram to the responsible British mission, embassy or consulate, asking them to obtain permission from the local government for an operational, ie not ceremonial, visit.

Visits to Iranian ports were out, as our relations with Iran had been broken off following the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, later BP. On one occasion the proposed programme included the small uninhabited island of Sirri. It was

underlined in red on my map and I signed it off. The next I heard was when agitated telegrams started to arrive from the embassy in Tehran that was looking after British interests, reporting official protests from the Iranian government, at

that time led by Mossadeq. Our frigate had duly arrived at Sirri to find it occupied by half a dozen Iranian soldiers and the Iranian flag flying from the flagpole.

Hoisting the Union Jack

In the true spirit of Lord Cochrane, a landing party went ashore, locked the Iranians in their hut, hauled down their flag, hoisted the Union Jack and sailed away. Luckily for me, given the state of our relations with Iran, we were not inclined to respond to their protest. However I was summoned by my boss. On no account was I to approve visits by the Royal Navy without consulting him. He accepted that Sirri was underlined in red on the map, this was on account of a claim to the island by the Ruler of Ras al Khaimah, one of the Trucial States, but the Indian and then British Government, believing that it was ill-founded, had never pressed it on the Ruler's behalf. Much chastened I could only comfort myself that we had certainly pressed it now! While I never received a letter of thanks from Ras al Khaimah, I learnt always to check my facts

John Graham