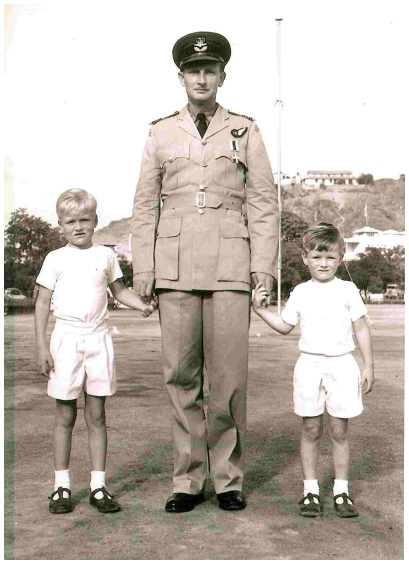

After which Squadron Leader Archibald Alexander 'Jock' Stewart won the Military Cross, and 2 more were awarded posthumously as Britain dismantled its Empire

by Robert Stewart

My father 'Jock' Stewart enlisted in the RAF on 6th August 1942, and trained as an airman pilot/observer. He ended wartime service as an acting sergeant. Commissioned into the RAF Regiment in 1946 he served on 2757 Armoured Car Squadron, and later serving in the Middle East from March 1953. He went on to command No 27 LAA Squadron, also commanding Ground Defence Training Squadron at RAF Catterick.

When I was a young boy I lived with my parents in Aden where he was a Squadron Commander with 1st Battalion the Aden Protectorate Levies (APL) on detachment from the RAF Regiment. We had arrived there in, I think, 1954 and our house (in what is known as the Crater district, the original port city) was a married officers' quarter near RAF Khormaksar where he was stationed.

The city and surroundings of Aden itself was not a particularly dangerous place at that time. It became so 10 years later but what we called up-country, was extremely hazardous. A serious rebellion was developing there. APL soldiers who were policing the area were an obvious target. Matters escalated dramatically in the early months of 1955 leading up to what became the worst APL disaster ever.

The situation had taken a very serious turn following an incident when soldiers were establishing a new supply route. An Arab woman had been shot by the APL, reportedly by accident. But the woman happened to be the aunt of a tribal leader called Ali Mawer who was already very anti-British and pro-Nasser.

Immediately Ali Mawer made a double demand on the Governor of Aden, Sir Tom Hickinbotham. He wanted 'blood money' for the killing and 'shame money' for the fact that the victim was a woman. Tribal law made such provisions. But the Governor did not agree. This led to almost immediate repercussions. Ali Mawer took to the mountains and declared an armed rebellion against the British.

Close to Ali Mawer's main operating area was the Wadi Hatib. At the time there could have been few more vulnerable people in the British Empire than APL soldiers as they struggled up Wadi Hatib to the Government Guard Post at Fort Robat. The almost sheer sides of Wadi Hatib provided perfect ambush positions.

Naturally, the fort had to be resupplied periodically. It was impossible to do so by air because of the cost and exceedingly severe terrain. So, Ali Mawer and his men made great sport out of attacking convoys forced to struggle through the Wadi. From the surrounding heights they were in superb sniper positions. Effectively the convoys had to run the gauntlet through a shooting gallery. Attacks on resupply patrols up Wadi Hatib very quickly became a regular and sometimes deadly occurrence.

Apparently, Ali Mawer masterminded most of these attacks himself - until he dropped dead. They say he suffered a heart attack with the excitement and exertion whilst laying on an ambush. But then his son, Salem Ali Mawer, took over. British Intelligence considered Salem even more effective as a leader than his father. Certainly, APL casualties began to mount. By the beginning of June 1955, a total of seven APL soldiers had been killed and ten wounded - just on operations in the Wadi Hatib.

These attacks in the Wadi Hatib had become so serious and frequent that my father's Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Venice Rodney Marshall, decided he would personally lead the next force responsible for escorting personnel and provisions to from Nisab to Fort Robat. Dad was Second in Command for the operation.

On the morning of 15th June 1955 about one hundred APL personnel, mounted in three Land Rovers and nine trucks, moved into the Wadi. Despite a little sniping the convoy managed to get all the way to Fort Robat. It delivered its supplies and relieved those men due for rotation. Then at 1.30pm the convoy began the return run. But by then Salem Ali Mawer was ready and waiting.

Within a few minutes the force was being heavily engaged from the sheer slopes surrounding it. Almost immediately a young British officer and an Arab soldier were killed. Several others were wounded. Rodney Marshall ordered Dad to evacuate the wounded to a safer place about one mile further down the Wadi. Under intense fire he managed to do this but then, from some retreating soldiers, he learned that Marshall had been killed. To make matters worse the Senior Arab Officer was also dead. The soldiers told Dad that all was lost. My father knew he had to go back into the ambush and get everyone out.

On 10th January 1956 the London Gazette announced the award of a Military Cross to Dad for ... *'gallantry displayed in operations against hostile tribesmen'*. My father's citation said a little of what had happened immediately after he learnt his Commanding Officer had been killed:

'Squadron Leader Stewart assumed command of the Force and immediately organised a volunteer party. He led them back into the area which was under heavy and accurate fire, in an attempt to recover the dead bodies and wounded. Unable to locate the dead body of the Wing Commander he recovered a three-ton vehicle which contained a dead guard and had one tyre deflated by rifle fire. He personally drove the damaged truck back under fire, twice stopping to pick up wounded. More casualties were inflicted during the return passage through the Wadi. In all there were eight killed and seven wounded. Having assumed command of the Force he moved it tactically to an emergency airstrip and organised the evacuation of the most seriously wounded. Sniping ensued during this evacuation and hostile and accurate fire was encountered.'

Both Wing Commander Marshall and the Senior Arab Officer Wakil Qaid Abdullah Amad Aulaqi received posthumous MCs.

Twenty-six years later I was at a drinks party in Germany just prior to going to Bosnia as a lieutenant colonel commanding 1st Battalion the Cheshire Regiment. I was talking to a retired

Army officer who then worked for the local garrison in Wolfenbuttel. By chance he mentioned Aden. I said I had been there as a child in the 1950's. He said he had arrived there in 1958 when the Army took over from the APL.

Suddenly he looked at me closely and asked if I was, by chance, Jock Stewart's son? I said I was. He was delighted, telling me that everyone then knew about Dad. He told me that my father had a huge reputation amongst what he called the old Aden hands. By the time of that cocktail party Dad had been dead for seventeen years (he died at 52) but I was thrilled that other people remembered him. Of course, he was and remains my hero.

Robert 'Bob' Stewart is a retired Army Colonel, the last British Army officer to receive the DSO both for leadership and personal gallantry. He is now MP for Beckenham. His younger brother Andrew retired for the RAF as a Wing Commander, having commanded a squadron of Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft in the 1990's. They are the two boys in the photograph. Their mother Margherita Joan Pallett , born 1919, was with the FANY/SOE during the Second World War but declined to talk about her experiences.

Aden is the temporary capital of the Republic of Yemen as a consequence of civil war and external intervention, having ceased to be a British colony at the end of 1967 when it became the capital of a new state known as the People's Republic of South Yemen which, in 1970, was renamed the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and in 1990 merged with the Yemen Arab Republic to the north to become the Republic of Yemen.