

FLIGHT SERGEANT GORDON DITCHFIED

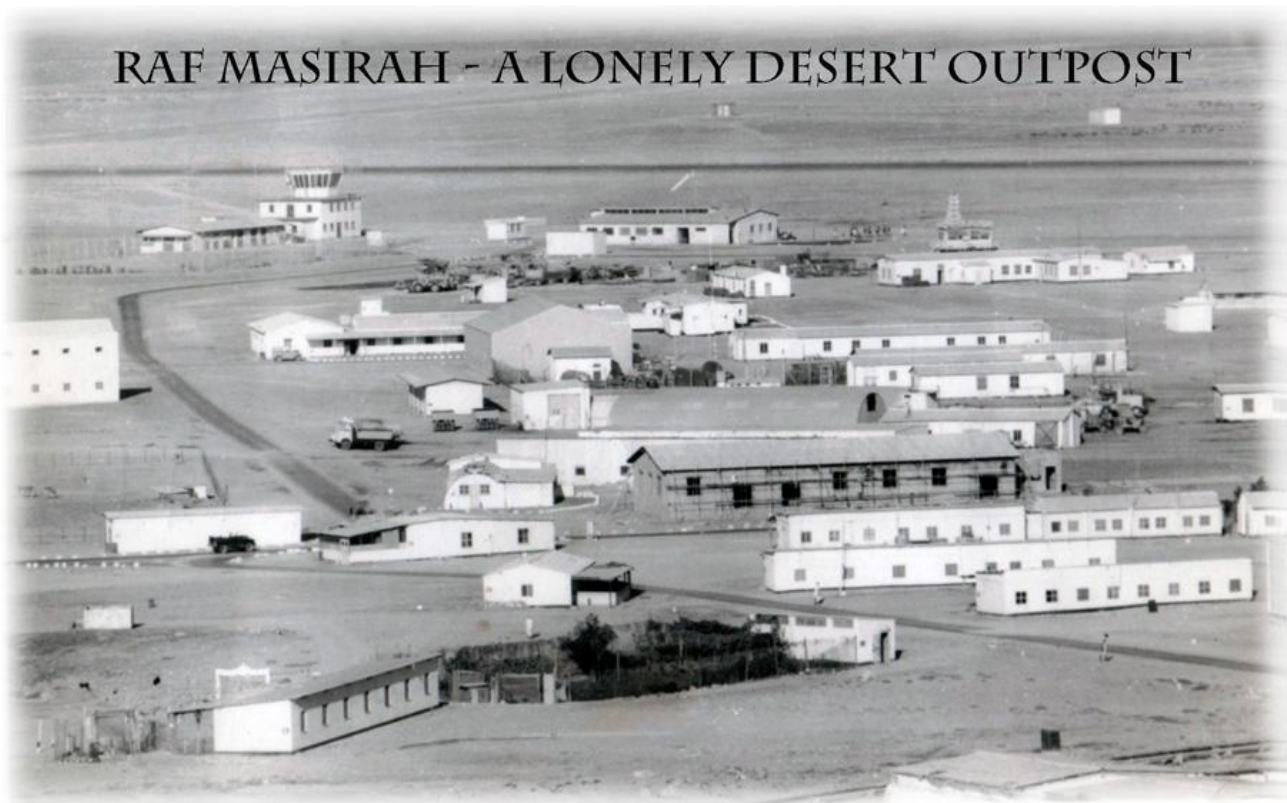
BEM

SS DAPHNE FIRE

MASIRAH ISLAND 1968

Masirah is a rugged desert island lying in the Arabian Sea off the coast of Oman. It's hostile, rocky landscape has made it rather inhospitable, and apart from small fishing communities, it has never had a thriving human population.

The RAF first took an interest in Masirah in the early 1930's when it was used as a refuelling point for Seaplanes; little more than a self service petrol station for airmen. During the Second World War it was developed as an anti-submarine base, and US Forces also established a presence on the island. Afterwards, RAF Masirah as it was now known, became a staging post for aircraft transiting Middle East airfields, particularly flights to and from Aden. Following the British withdrawal from Aden and the Gulf States, Masirah remained an important staging post, providing support for British Forces supporting the Sultan of Oman in his Dhofar campaign. The war against the insurgents was finally won in 1976 and RAF Masirah was handed over to the Sultan of Oman's Air Force on 31 March 1977.



On 27 March 1968, with the Aden stations already closed, and Sultan Qaboos yet to come to power, Masirah was fairly quiet airfield, and life on the sunny island was pretty laid back. A supply ship, SS Daphne was anchored off shore preparing to unload cargo, and a new CO had just taken over the duties of Station Commander.

The following is from the Station Operations Log of the day:

OPERATIONS RECORD BOOK OF RAF MASIRAH

FOR PERIOD MARCH 1968

COMPILING OFFICER Flt Lt A.E Howard

Dated 27 March 1968

Squadron Leader RJ Spears left the station on the 27 March after handing over to the new CO Squadron Leader R.F. Gratton. Half an hour after the departure of the Argosy the events aboard the Daphne began.

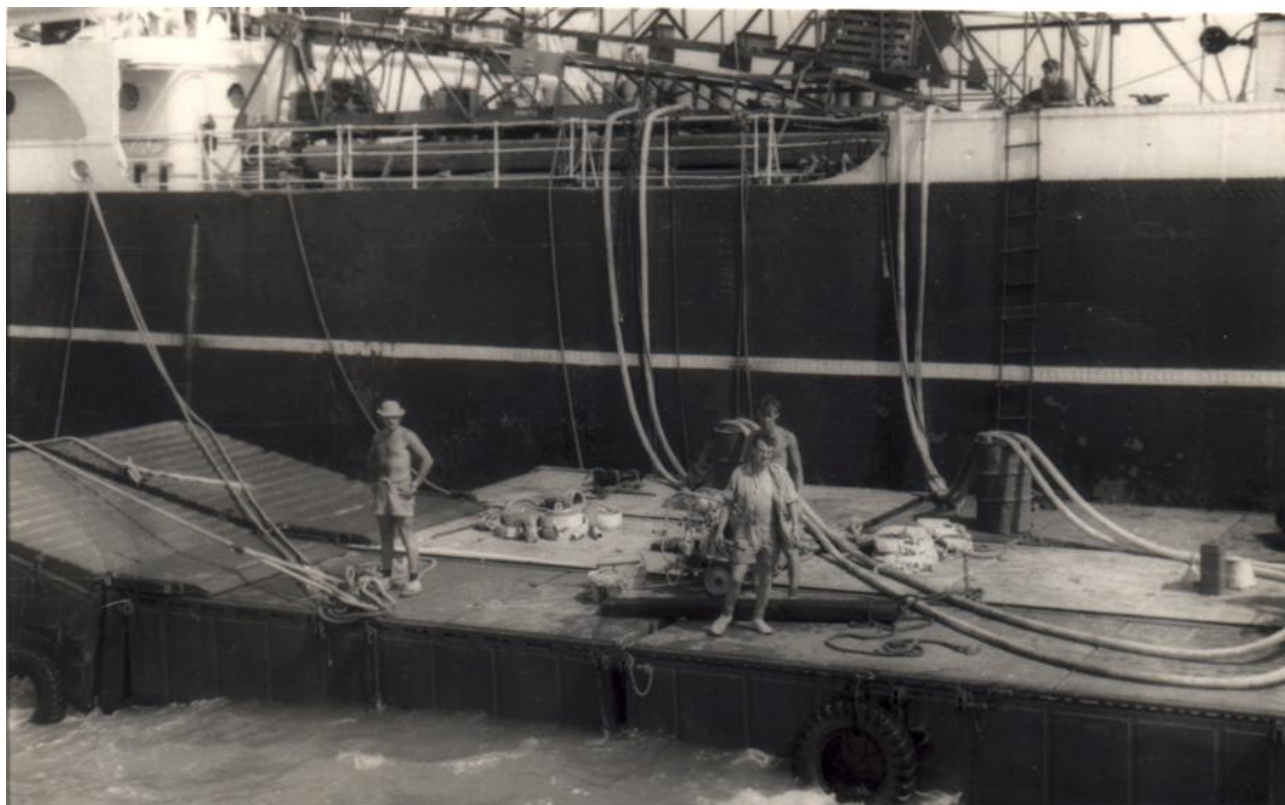
The SS Daphne anchored off the coast of the Island preparatory to discharging cargo for Messrs Wimpey. The Master Paulos Ambietles radioed RAF Masirah requesting assistance in fighting a fire on board his ship. RAF Masirah responded by sending men and equipment which were taken by sea to Daphne by a detachment of the Royal Corps of Transport using Uniflotes. Operations were hampered by a rough sea and the men of Masirah and RCT displayed resource and courage in a dangerous and difficult situation. The fire was located in No 4 Hold and between the decks area and although hampered by bulky deck and hold cargo the fire was extinguished at 14.30 on Friday the 29 March. During operations, the No 4 Hold had to be flooded and the Master requested assistance in pumping out. Pumping out now complicated by a mass of loose floating cargo continued until the Hold was clear at 06.00 on the 31 March. The ship weighed anchor at 10.15 on the 31 March and sailed for Daman. It is very doubtful whether the ships crew using their own inadequate equipment could have prevented the Daphne from becoming at least severely damaged and probably a total loss.

This is the story of that incident:

On 27 March 1968 the SS Daphne, a Greek registered cargo vessel, was anchored off the Omani Island of Masirah in the Arabian Sea, preparing to discharge supplies for Messrs Wimpy, when a fire was discovered in the hold. Due to the severity of the blaze, the Master of the ship, Captain Paulos Ambietles, radioed the RAF Camp, requesting assistance to deal with the incident. The Station Commander, Squadron Leader RF Gratton, who was only a matter of hours in post, readily agreed and Flight Sergeant Ditchfield, then SNCO IC Fire Services, took charge of the operation to ship personnel, pumps and equipment out to the stricken vessel.

The Daphne, which was lying some three miles offshore, was reached using Royal Corps of Transport Unifloats, commonly known as "Rhinos", which were flat bottomed metal platforms primarily used for unloading cargo. George Edwards, one of the first to arrive, later described the outward journey "pleasant and uneventful" though at the time he had no idea as to the scale of the incident.

Once aboard, Flight Sergeant Ditchfield took full command of the Fire-fighting operations including the direction of the ships crew members who were assisting. SACs George Edwards and Jock McVey were ordered to operate a trailer pump from the Rhino while he and SAC Ian Easter got to work in the hold. At this time it was evident they were dealing with a major fire, so Flight Sergeant Ditchfield radioed ashore requesting more personnel and equipment. As a result more fire-fighters and members of the station guard force were dispatched, along with another trailer pump, more hose and copious supplies of foam liquid.



By the time the back-up vessel arrived the sea had become quite choppy and it was a difficult job to get everything required up on to the deck of the burning ship. At that latitude the risk of sun stroke was a real danger, and for those working on the Rhino, being buffeted around on rough seas and bouncing off the Daphne in shark infested waters was undoubtedly a frightening experience. The danger of sharks was exacerbated when several of the foam liquid drums burst and discharged their contents straight into the sea. In those days the only concentrate used was

protein foam which was primarily ox-blood and similar ingredients which naturally attracted predatory sharks.



Operating from the Rhino

On board the fire was still burning fiercely, and Flight Sergeant Ditchfield personally made four attempts to enter the hold and locate the seat of the fire. A consolidated attack had to be maintained to prevent the fire spreading to dangerous cargo, and increasing the ever-present risk of an explosion. As the evening drew in, the surplus personnel were ferried ashore, leaving Gordon Ditchfield with his fire-fighting team aboard the Daphne and two more fire-fighters manning the trailer pumps on the Rhino. This task was made even more arduous when the Captain decided that the constant buffeting of the two vessels was too dangerous, and the Rhino crew was ordered to move away from the burning ship. George Edwards and Jock McVey spent most of the night lashed to the Rhino as it rode the choppy sea. Despite having to keep station fifty feet from the Daphne, they kept themselves busy looking after the two pumps and hose.



George Edwards Jock McVey and Ian Hulse onboard the RCT Rhino Platform

By the following morning the fire was well under control and it was decided the danger of explosion had passed. There were still some hot spots that had to be checked and monitored, but the overriding priority now was the increasing danger of the vessel becoming unstable and sinking, due to the vast amounts of water that had been pumped into the hold during the fire-fighting operation. Flight Sergeant Ditchfield ordered a trailer pump to be brought on board the Daphne from the Rhino, and the task of pumping out the hold was got underway. By now the hold was full of debris which would repeatedly block the suction hose and hamper the pumping operation, making it a long and protracted job. One of the biggest culprits for this was a large consignment of sanitary towels; and having had to dive into the flooded hold several times to unblock the hose, George Edwards described the memory as somewhat bizarre having spent the last year on a male-only island.

At this stage, arrangements were again made on shore to get fresh personnel out to the incident. SAC Steve Harrison was one of those detailed to attend, and this is how he described his experience:

I was on the off-duty crew as the shift pattern was 24hrs on 24 off. I recall being in my room or around the billet area when we were told to report for duty as some of the duty crew had been dispatched to a ship fire and we had to cover for them on the Crash crew in order to keep the manning requirements and release some of the duty crew to the incident.

Masirah was only a staging post and incidents were few and far between so all the lads left on the section were very keen to get to the action, for myself it wasn't to be for a couple of days. In the meantime we were kept busy organising kit that was requested from the scene also I remember us having to load 5 gallon drums of foam compound by hand on to a trailer, and in the mid-day heat it was hard work and smelly if a drum split, still in those days I was young and fit.

We received the news; I think it was on the second day that the fire had been extinguished by the lad's which was good work as RAF Firemen never received any training on ship fires. The lads were led by Flight Sergeant Gordon Ditchfield; also on board was Ian Easter, Jock McVey and George Edwards. I cannot remember who else. Some of us were told that we were going on to the ship to assist and relieve some of the lads so I was excited at the prospect.

When we arrived at the jetty we were told that we would be going to the ship via a tug which had arrived that belonged to some Omani company, so we embarked on to the tug, the sea swell was very large and a bit scary but exciting. As we came to the ship you knew it was going to be tricky to say the least getting on board the Daphne. A Royal Corp of Transport (RCT) Rhino platform was at the side of the ship on which trailer pumps were lashed down and fireman manning them holding on for sheer life. With the swell you could see the platform rise from about 20ft down the side of the ship then nearly up to the deck. The captain of the Oman tug thought it to dangerous and we had to return. We were then transported out on another smaller vessel and finally had a thrilling transfer to the rhino platform. I talked to the lads on the rhino manning the trailer pumps one was George Edwards as I recall, then we had to get aboard the Daphne. This was no easy task as the only access was via a rope ladder, the technique was wait till the rhino platform rose on the immense swell then calculate that it was at its peak then grab the rope ladder and I think the words-'Geronimo and F.....Hell comes to mind. The sight of the platform disappearing below you and crashing in the side of the Daphne was not a comforting one. Still this was what I had joined the RAF for, excitement and adventure.

When we got aboard I remember the deck was a shambles with allsorts of pallets, empty foam drums bits of metal and of course hoses. There was still work to be done, the ship was listing quite a lot so the hold had to be pumped out, and also there was some concern that there were some hot spots or some problem down below that had to be investigated. I can remember (see photograph 2) that this task fell to Sgt John Farrell (I can't remember who

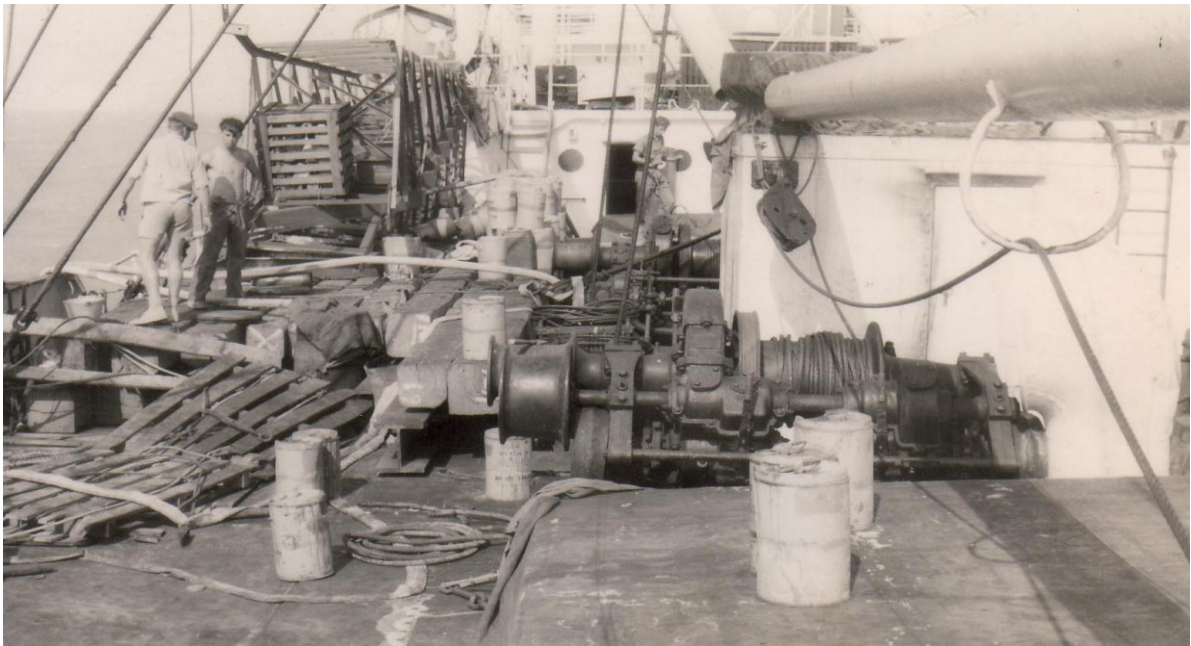
else) If I recall it wasn't a fire service BA that was used but a ships one and could have been a remote one at that. As I recollect the others on the ship (apart from the lad's on the platform) was Paul McGhee and Andy Andrews, but I cannot remember who else. It was hard day at the office and I returned to shore that evening. So my part was only a small one compared to the others involved but it is all about team work and support. It's nearly 40 years on and memories fade, but I do know that we had to return to shore, (if it was that day or another day I don't remember) on the rhino platform (or another one) firstly because no one would risk the transfer again as the seas were still rough and also one of the trailer pumps had 'blown up' and needed to be repaired to continue with the pumping out of the hold. I cannot remember who was aboard with me but remember the journey back to the shore. The trailer pump was strapped down in the middle of the platform and there I was with a couple others hanging on to it as we rode the swell. I admired the Army guys who were in control of the massive engines at the rear of the platform, it was quite a feat to get us back, and again the thrill of it was immense. That is my recollections of that time and looking back it was a unique incident and it was good to be part of it. I did grace the shores of Masirah once again about 4 years later but no ship fires on that tour!

I was only 20 years old at the time and during my 25 years service of all the lads involved I only came across George Edwards and Paul McGee again. Yet in April 2002 out of the blue I received an email from Gordon Ditchfield saying 'I remember you' I was amazed at the detail in which he remembered me and I was quite taken aback, he wanted to know about my career and family and it was a pleasure to exchange information about our lives after so many years. So we managed to 'talk' by email a few times before he sadly passed away. I always remember him being a tall guy who exuded authority but was a gentleman. I wish I could have met him one more time. It would also be good to meet again all those guys from that time.



Steve Harrison, John Farrell & Smiler Meeson

Having checked out all potential hot spots and given everything sufficient chance to cool the fire was official declared to be extinguished at 1430 hours on Friday 29 March, though pumping-out operations continued until 0600 hours on 31 March allowing the Daphne to weigh anchor at 1015 bound for Daman.



Aboard the Daphne

Following the incident Flight Sergeant Ditchfield was awarded the BEM. The final few sentences of his citation concluded as follows:

Despite fatigue irregular meals and very little sleep Flight Sergeant Ditchfield directed his limited resources and his largely inexperienced fire fighting force with energy courage and determination. Throughout under exacting conditions he displayed outstanding devotion to duty. His calm and efficient leadership gave inspiration and personal example were major factors in countering this major emergency which might well have led to the loss of the ship His performance was in accord with the highest traditions of the Service

Gordon was also voted *Man of the Year* and was featured in a 1968 television documentary about the Royal Family.