

THE BRITISH MILITARY MISSION SAUDI ARABIAN NATIONAL GUARD

by Jim Tanner



logistics and signals advisors. A medical advisory team (SANGMED) arrived in 1981, departing in 1991, while communications expertise became established in SANGCOM, set up in 1973 to provide communications for the Guard nationwide. It was never part of the British Military Mission.

Throughout, the Mission's main business of internal security has meant the team has been predominantly infantry officers (although it currently also contains two Explosives Ordnance Disposal officers) and in recent years has focussed largely on supporting the 1st Special Security Brigade. Today the team stands at 11 strong: eight officers and three warrant officers commanded by a brigadier, who is known in the Guard as the Senior British Advisor. The majority are based in Riyadh but there is an infantry advisor in Jeddah, Taif and Dammam and all find themselves increasingly in demand across the Guard for advice and training support.

The Mission has a unique status in both the Kingdom and the British Army. Unlike all other teams abroad on what is called 'Loan Service', the British Military Mission is seconded to the National Guard and all members are, effectively, full members of the Guard. All wear Saudi uniform and badges of rank and carry Saudi identity documents and the confusion this can cause is replaced very quickly by a typical Saudi smile. Members must be volunteers and family accompanied service is very strongly encouraged, if not insisted. Postings are for two to three years, although officers have stayed longer (one previous Senior British Advisor managing over seven years!). Longer service is much preferred by the Guard once they have got to know and trust an individual for, once this has happened, very strong friendships develop. For their part, British officers are rewarded by being part of an organisation that is particularly proud of itself and forward-looking. Insha'allah, the British Military Mission will continue to support the Saudi Arabian national Guard for many years to come.

Although the Saudi Arabian National Guard has its foundations in the very beginnings of the Kingdom under King Abdulaziz Al Saud, it owes its current form to the military reorganisation instituted in the early 1960s. The National Guard proper was established in 1963 under the then Crown Prince Abdullah and that year a British Military Mission to the Guard was set up. It has been in existence ever since.

The National Guard, over 100,000 strong (and bigger than the British Army) might best be described as central to Saudi security mechanisms. The heart of its manpower lies with the noble Bedu tribes and, while it complements the other armed forces of the Kingdom - the Army in particular and, increasingly, the Interior Ministry - its unquestioned loyalty to the Saud places it in a special position. Its principal task is the maintenance of security and stability within the Kingdom and it possesses its own armoured forces, artillery and an expanding air wing. The majority of its forces are to be found in the light infantry brigades and the irregular forces of the Fawj - a militia of nearly 30,000.

Since its onset the British Military Mission has focussed largely on providing advice and some training in internal security. Given the skills developed in the British Army over years of withdrawing from Empire, the near 30 year campaign in Northern Ireland and, latterly Iraq and Afghanistan, British experience is eagerly sought and the United Kingdom recognises the importance of this function in guaranteeing the future stability of the Kingdom.

The Mission has varied in size over the years, starting out with just two officers in 1963 and being at its largest in the late 1970s and early 1980s when around 20 Royal Engineers were employed to assist with the building of two National Guard hospitals. Composition has also varied over the years, at any one time including medical, armoured, artillery,

