

The RAF and



Dr Franco Grima

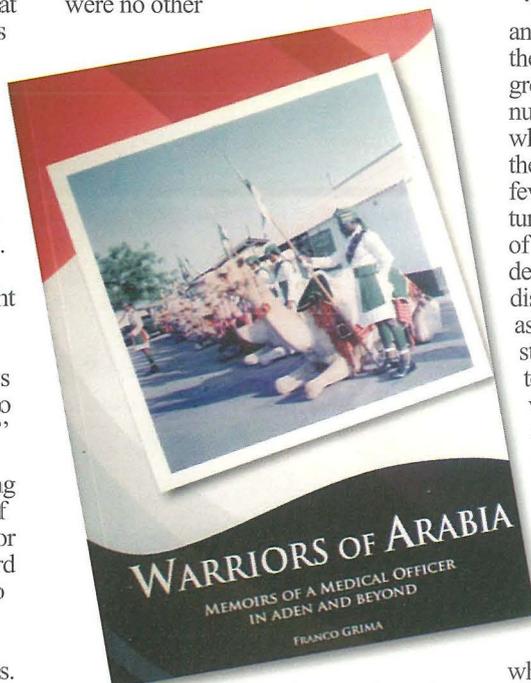
Dr Franco Grima's comfortable home in Naxxar is a far cry from the outposts which saw him embarking on his journey in military medicine as an RAF medical officer. He sits calmly across the study and asks what I would like to know. There is much to be told and part of his story which was penned in diaries over several years has been merged into a book of memoirs that was published last June. Franco Grima's story harks back to the 1960s when as a young doctor who graduated in 1958, he joined the Royal Air Force and trained as flight surgeon at No 4 Flying Training School in North Wales. He soon volunteered to be seconded to the Arab Army of the Federation of South Arabia, now part of Yemen..

by **Marika Azzopardi**

"I had always fancied joining the Services, perhaps due to my fascination with the air scouting movement as a youth. There was a certain something that lured me to join and sure enough I was immediately thrown in at the deep end. Between 1962 and 1965, I served as a young battalion medical officer on the border with Northern Yemen in desert and mountain areas. There were no roads and we relied on air supplies brought in by planes that also airlifted emergency cases down to Aden. Aeroplanes had to land on makeshift landing grounds. At night we would light up landing grounds by parking Land Rovers and other vehicles with their headlamps lit up. This guided the pilots to find their way on territory that had to be blacked-out because of enemy fire."

It was an experience that saw him facing all sorts of dangers but also a wealth of new challenges that your average doctor would not have encountered in his ward rounds. The main responsibility was to care for Arab soldiers stationed in this far-flung outpost, and in the simplest scenario this involved long sick parades. These were men who faced ambushes, mortar attacks and road mines on a daily basis. Primary care was extended to the

troops' families and also to the local tribes. Franco Grima's responsibility was particularly trying since there were no other



doctors along the border with Northern Yemen. The Imam of Yemen claimed Aden and all of

Southern Arabia and he kept inciting tribes and rebels to cause trouble.

"It was not just about injuries, burns and serious trauma but also about treating the locals who presented with a lot of gross pathology. There was an incredible number of tropical diseases, some of which were particularly common, as in the case of helminths, malaria and other fevers. I also encountered several tropical tumours like mycetomas, as well as cases of trachoma. I frequently doubled up as dentist and for the purpose used a discarded airplane seat as a dental chair as it proved to be particularly strong and steady." Tribal women were often taken to him during the last stages of childbirth when both mother and child were at risk. The more extreme cases, like ruptured uteri, complicated births or severe haemorrhages generally had to be air evacuated.

Talking about some of the more traumatic experiences, Franco Grima relates something of the struggle for independence and the military threat which the country found itself in at the time. He mentions the Radfan campaign, north of Aden, when a number of SAS soldiers went to locate rebel strongholds

beyond

in the Radfan Mountains. "Some of the soldiers were unfortunately caught, killed and decapitated. International media reported they were beheaded but in reality the men had been first killed and then decapitated, the heads being taken as trophies of war. Eventually the heads were recovered for a ransom some months later. But in the meantime, we had to retrieve the bodies of these men. Intelligence reports indicated the whereabouts of the bodies and we went into the mountains to get them. I was the one who picked up those bodies." And he goes on to recount his close shave with death when a landmine blew up a truck behind him just after he passed a stretch of road. "The gravel or sandy roads were peppered with mines. The rebels would cover the plunger with flat bread to protect it from sand and gravel so the mine did not explode immediately but only when enough pressure had been placed on it to trigger it off."

Franco Grima also served in Bahrain in the Gulf and in the Sultanate of Oman during the Dhofar rebellion in the Qara mountains. Back in the UK he served on a number of stations including V-Bomber and Tornado Stations.

Franco Grima was later posted to the Ministry of Defence in London with varied duties including arranging the transport of serious infectious disease cases from overseas, to overseeing occupational hygiene standards. After a Masters degree in Occupational Medicine at London



Dr Grima treating a child with a severe laceration of the scalp caused by a camel bite

University, he was posted to the RAF Institute of Community and Occupational Medicine at RAF Halton, Buckinghamshire. He was also subsequently appointed as the first RAF consultant in Occupational Medicine. "One of the projects at hand was measuring noise levels. We had to measure the footprints of RAF aeroplanes as they took off over neighbouring villages. The government provided funding for house owners to fit double glazing if they lived in an area disturbed by high levels of noise pollution caused by military aircraft." Eventually he took over the command of the whole institute which offered training for doctors, nurses and physiotherapists. In the eighties he helped several Maltese medical students whose course was interrupted, to get cadetships to continue their training in London.

Listing all of his varied placements in the RAF is impossible; he did the rounds of many RAF stations around the UK as Senior Medical Officer for a number of years including a two-year post as II Hospital Registrar at the RAF Hospital Nocton Hall in Lincolnshire. Franco Grima retired in 1992 with the rank of Group captain. He then worked as an occupational

physician at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, and in 1995, returned to Malta where he presently offers consultancy services to industry on matters of occupational health.

"Yes, Occupational Medicine is a new area, but one which is becoming increasingly important due to the introduction of stringent EU directives. With the Health and Safety Authority being established in Malta only a few years ago, this is a fledgling field with only 13 specialists to date." Certainly the levels of occupational health he seeks to promote today are a far cry from the conditions he worked in when he was posted in southern Arabia. He concluded that "The RAF has always been professional and disciplined and has proved to be an excellent school for my self-discipline, both on a professional and personal basis." □

'Warriors of Arabia – Memoirs of a Medical Officer in Aden and Beyond' by Franco Grima, published last June. The book is available at Agenda outlets and all leading bookshops. For enquiries contact the author on francogrima@onvol.net



A stark warning for Amir Shaqel and all the rulers: "From today we are going to cut off the ears of all collaborators"

National Liberation Front leaflet threatening to cut off the ears of all collaborating rulers