



The Evolution of the Oil Industry

By Paul Knocker (B 49)

One of Britain's unrecognised gifts to the world were a series of navigation charts covering the Persian Gulf, and this very brief summary is intended to get this on the record for posterity, as well as registering my appreciation of a valuable learning experience, with a professional team of the Royal Navy's Hydrographers as well as the Captain, First Lieutenant, the engineers and all the ship's crew.

My first appointment as a Midshipsman in the Royal Navy was to HMS Owen, one of two survey ships, the second ship was HMS Dalrymple – both distinctively painted white. In the 1950s, these ships took it in turns, over a period of around five years, to complete a detailed survey of the Gulf, with the aim of producing a complete set of Admiralty standard navigation charts. They started with a complete blank as there were no charts for this area.



After the passage through the Med, calling at Malta, Port Said, Aden and Salalah, we finally moored at Khor Kalaya, Bahrein in November 1954, the official base for the surveying programme, with our team of expert hydrographers and all the vital equipment needed, including the specially equipped survey boats. Our assignment in the Persian Gulf was for nine months, we were then relieved by HMS Dalrymple, and set course for our passage to the UK.



There was a great deal of interest in the prospects of a major oil discovery in the Middle East before the war, mainly by British geologists and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later to become British Petroleum). One of the key players in the 1920s/1930s was New Zealander: Major Frank Holmes who did much of the hard graft in Saudi Arabia with an agreement to search for water (and oil)!

Who mapped the ME oilfields? The region was largely uncharted and unexplored, but accurate maps would play a vital role in finding oil and determining the concessions. Files in the India Office Records indicate the extent of the boundaries, and for the British administrators, the most authoritative map of the time was *Hunter's Map of Arabia* produced by Lt Fraser Hunter before the First World War, with an index of place names in both English and Arabic.

The first big breakthrough in Saudi Arabia came in March 1938 when an American owned company, ARAMCO, struck oil in the Damman field, the largest source of oil in the world at that time. This discovery changed the physical, human, political geography, and the future economic prospects for Saudi Arabia, the Middle East and the world.

Initially pipelines to the Med were the preferred route for exporting the crude oil and securing the revenue, but they suffered sabotage and claims, which eventually resulted in them being shut down. ARAMCO were also developing on site refining capacity, large tankers and the port facilities. The first 'super tanker' was the Universe Apollo, 104,000 tonnes, but for safe navigation in the Gulf and through the Gulf of Oman, they needed the charts.



The story at the time was that the Americans had contracted a Survey Ship and crew, for which they had to pay a huge premium because of the time limitation. Then a smart executive in the company suggested that they visit the Admiralty in London, where they could purchase a complete set of detailed navigation charts covering the Gulf ... for £15 each!

The rest is history.

