

ALWAYS walk in my footsteps," Dad said to my sister and me as we approached the beach.

We were aged seven and eight, and always thought it was great fun to follow Dad's long strides – but his words were loaded with meaning. You see, Dad knew the beach could be full of mines and if he made one false move, he would be blown to pieces in front of our eyes but he would have protected and saved us.

That was just one of the things that came with living in Aden in the mid 1960s. Aden was a British Colony, but in 1963 there began a period of violence against the British forces by various nationalist groups determined to regain independence and to enforce withdrawal of the British troops.

For me, though, it was a terrific time. My strongest memories of Aden are quite different from the ones that my parents would recall. In the searing heat, school only lasted until lunchtime – I remember sipping chilled cherryade in the playground with the resulting red lips and tongue which I cheekily poked out at my playmates.

The trip to school in the morning was always very exciting as the school bus was guarded front and rear by armoured tanks in case we became terrorist targets. It always made me feel rather important and special – a frisson that never really left me throughout my stay in Aden.

WE took a picnic down to the beach and played every afternoon; building sandcastles, burying each other in hot grainy sand and digging holes to sit in.

I learned to swim in the warm buoyant Gulf of Aden; Mum could sunbathe on the beach yet still watch my sister and me in our distinctive blue and yellow

My sister and I within a doorway

Growing Up In Aden



swimming hats bobbing up and down amongst the waves. We also had great fun playing beach games with the lanky Arab boys.

Carpet sellers were another colourful feature of beach life. Their knowledge of the English language was confined to the sentence, "You wanna buy a carpet?" We found on our return to England that we had somehow managed to accumulate five!

Crabs were a constant source of fascination to us. We would catch them on the beach, place them gingerly in our buckets until they were piled high, then turn the bucket upside down and watch the crabs scuttling away in all directions.

The oil tankers, far out on the sea's horizon, would regularly spill their waste into the sea and it would settle on the beach overnight. The following day we would find seaweed caked in oil, but somehow none of that seemed to worry us. It was all exciting, and something new to poke about and investigate. The oil always seemed to disappear again with the tide. I was tanned, healthy, young and innocent, and at that time, these environmental hazards didn't cause me the slightest bit of concern.

Bombs exploded through the night but Mum and Dad dismissed them light-heartedly with, "It's only fireworks," and we were content to accept their explanation.

Ants, though, were a constant irritation. One night my sister surreptitiously fed her teddy bear with food, and crumbs were still left around his mouth

The reality of Aden in the 1960s was bombs, land-mines and the threat of violence. For me, as an eight-year-old, it was all about chilled cherryade and picnics on the beach.

when she cuddled up with him in bed. An hour later she and the bear were heaving with ants, her hair alive with them.

Pandemonium broke out, and Mum subsequently spent hours protecting the flat with the strongest ant repellent. It was an uphill struggle though – as soon

as one path was blocked to them, the persistent creatures found another way in. Amazingly my sister wasn't marred by the experience.

MY greatest memory of my time in Aden was Christmas Day.

We ate cold chicken drumsticks on the beach. In the evening at a children's Christmas party run for army personnel, a helicopter flew down from the jebels (mountains). Out stepped Father Christmas, resplendent in red with a sack bulging with presents for us all.

Just as he put his foot on the last step, the whirring propellers created a breeze and up flew Santa's robe to reveal . . . khaki army trousers and boots! The adults roared with laughter as we children stood perplexed by all the mirth. My sister and I wore home-made blue and yellow dresses, respectively, with matching bows in our hair as we all sang Christmas carols with the magnificent mountains as a backdrop.

Eventually though it

became increasing unsafe to remain in Aden. In the middle of the night we were taken by heavily guarded car to join the ocean liner, *The Fair Star*. Ours was one of the last liners to sail through the Suez Canal before its closure in 1967.

It took us two weeks to reach Southampton. We returned on a typical grey, drizzly morning in Britain. It was a sad time for us all as Dad had to remain in Aden to conclude his work. We were fearful for him, and apprehensive, too, because a new chapter was about to begin in our lives. Britain withdrew from Aden in 1967 and a new period of history began.

In spite of everything we endured, it was a privilege and an experience to have been there. ■



By Abigail Williams