

# Historically Speaking

## Desert Storm at 20, Part I

By **BG John S. Brown**

U.S. Army retired

*This month's "Historically Speaking" is the first in a three-part series commemorating the 20th anniversary of Operation Desert Storm.*

January 17 marks the 20th anniversary of Operation Desert Storm. Many characterize the period from January 17 to February 24, 1991, as an "Air War," distinct from the hundred-hour "Ground War" that raged from February 24–28. While convenient as a notation, this radically understates the role of ground forces prior to February 24 and considerably understates the contribution of air forces after that date. Prior to February 24, ground forces provided the defensive shield that made all other operations possible, systematically compromised Iraqi border defenses and positioned themselves for a climactic offensive from an unexpected direction.

Saddam Hussein had bested Iran in an eight-year war that ended in 1988, but accrued huge debts as a consequence. The costly conflict left him with a war machine capable of fielding up to a million men and of reliably sustaining perhaps half that number. Soviet largesse and international arms bazaars enabled him to equip his forces with a formidable panoply, including 5,500 tanks and 700 fighter aircraft. Kuwait was small, weak and oil-rich. Iraq and Kuwait had squabbled about boundaries and oil rights before, but it nevertheless came as a shock when Iraq's Republican Guards overran Kuwait within a few days of August 2, 1990. The disruption of Kuwaiti oil supplies had immediate consequences for the interdependent world economy. Had Saddam Hussein continued his aggression, the disruption of Saudi Arabian oil supplies would have been catastrophic. Although Japan and several European nations were more dependent upon Saudi oil than the United States, only the United States was capable of quickly reinforcing the desert kingdom. Setting aside traditional antipathy to foreign troops in lands sacred to Mohammed, King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud approved American intervention.

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps deployed more, further, faster from a cold start than ever before. A brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division began deploying on August 8. Wags among the early arriving paratroops referred to themselves as "speed bumps," but over the next two months an airborne division, an air assault division, two heavy divisions and an armored cavalry regiment, plus supporting troops and aircraft, arrived in Saudi Arabia under the command of XVIII Airborne Corps. The defense of the peninsula, code named Desert Shield, ultimately mustered 120,000 American troops with 700 tanks, 1,400 armored fighting vehicles and 600 artillery pieces. These were joined by some 32,000 troops with 400 tanks from local Arab allies. Desert Shield presented a formidable defense in

depth. Attacking Iraqis would have been hammered by precise fires from successive positions, followed by crushing counterattacks deep in the desert. The coalition commanded the seaward flank along the Persian Gulf and had air supremacy. A taste of the Iraqis' probable fate, had they attacked in force, was offered during the abortive

Iraqi attack on Khafji, Saudi Arabia, in late January 1991.

Desert Shield lived up to its name, but world order would not be convincingly defended if Saddam Hussein retained the fruits of his aggression. United Nations mandates and diplomacy failed to dislodge him. President George H.W. Bush resolved to evict him from Kuwait by force. To this purpose the VII Corps—three American heavy divisions and an armored cavalry regiment reinforced by a British armored division—deployed from Europe following a November 8 announcement by the President. Two U.S. Marine Corps divisions reinforced with a U.S. Army armored brigade deployed to the theater as well, as did a French light armored division and further Arab forces. Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the United Kingdom each provided a division equivalent or more to the fight. Kuwait provided two brigades and Qatar the framework for a brigade more. The Gulf emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey provided critical basing for coalition air, naval and special operations forces. The ultimately agreed-upon coalition objectives were to liberate Kuwait, restore the Kuwaiti government, free prisoners and defang Iraq to the point that it was not a threat to its neighbors—particularly with respect to chemical and nuclear weapons.

Saddam Hussein had confidence he could hold on to his gains. His forces dug in in depth behind formidable protective barriers: embankments, barbed wire, minefields and booby traps. Infantry defended well forward, backed up by capable artillery and local mobile armored reserves. These were backed up in turn by formidable divisions of the heavily mechanized Republican Guard. Massive stockpiles were built up to support units along the front or reinforcing it. Saddam's forces were exposed to air attack in the open desert, but the country was ringed by radar stations integrated into sophisticated air defenses. These bristled with more than 7,000 antiaircraft guns and 16,000 surface-to-air missiles. Iraqi forces in Kuwait and southern Iraq totaled 550,000 and could draw upon substantial reserves. For all this might, Saddam's greatest source of confidence was psychological. He famously opined of Americans, "Yours is a society that cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle." He did not have to win in a conventional sense; he only had to make victory so costly that Americans would cease to pursue it.



U.S. Army/SSG Lee Corkran

*U.S. military personnel arrive at a base camp in Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Shield in August 1990.*

Fighting began on January 17, 1991. The first rounds of Desert Storm were laser-guided Hellfire missiles fired from AH-64 Apache attack helicopters speeding undetected through the darkness 75 feet above the desert floor. The helicopter pilots' daring feat knocked out critical radar stations and was made possible by terrain-following radar, satellite navigation, night-vision goggles and precision-guided munitions. This package was theretofore untested in combat.

Further technological wizardry poured into the fray: F-117A Nighthawk stealth bombers with hull designs virtually invisible to radar, EF-111A Ravens with jamming equipment to spoof or disrupt enemy electronics, laser-guided GBU-27 bombs delivering 2,000 pounds of explosives with extraordinary precision, BGM-109 Tomahawk and AGM-86C cruise missiles skimming along at undetectably low levels, AGM-88 high-speed antiradiation missiles homing in on radar emissions, and E-3 airborne warning and control system aircraft coordinating hundreds of aircraft speeding through the air at the same time. Patriot air defense missiles streaked upwards to intercept incoming Scud missiles and deployed to Israel to encourage that nation not to enter the war. American helicopters ranged freely through southern Iraq, in some cases even landing to take prisoners. In 38 days, the coalition's deep battle smashed Iraqi air defenses, secured air supremacy, smothered Iraqi command and control, isolated the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations, attrited Iraqi ground forces, and cut off supplies to Iraqi forward units.

Meanwhile, coalition ground forces along the international border engaged in technologically assisted siege craft

**BG John S. Brown**, USA Ret., was chief of military history at the U.S. Army Center of Military History from December 1998 to October 2005. He commanded the 2nd Battalion, 66th Armor, in Iraq and Kuwait during the Gulf War and returned to Kuwait as commander of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, in 1995. He has a doctorate in history from Indiana University. His book, *Kevlar Legions: A History of Army Transformation 1989–2005*, is forthcoming.

of their own. Dominating hours of darkness with night-vision devices, they picked off enemy outposts, corroborated satellite imagery of enemy defenses, thinned out Iraqi artillery with effective counter-battery fire and effectively blinded their opposition along the length of the frontier. Artillery raids chipped away at Iraqi defenses and morale, as did controlled probes on the ground.

Once enemy capabilities for reconnaissance and surveillance were hopelessly compromised, coalition forces dramatically repositioned, setting themselves up to attack from an unexpected direction. Direct approaches into and out of Kuwait ran along the Persian Gulf and up the Wadi al Batin. These had been prioritized during Desert Shield, and the Iraqis knew the coalition had concentrated athwart them. They considered the desert vastness west of Kuwait too trackless to support the expedient movement of large mechanized forces. In this they overlooked the improved mobility of M1 Abrams tanks and M2/3 Bradleys, the dramatically improved mobility of such support vehicles as Humvees and HEMTTs, and the battlefield debut of global positioning systems. The XVIII Airborne Corps and VII Corps surreptitiously redeployed from the coastal corridor deep into the desert, shifting unit centers of gravity as much as 300 kilometers. Meanwhile, the 1st Cavalry Division feinted up the Wadi al Batin, and the Marines kept up pressure along the coast. The massive redeployment went undetected. The stage was set for the grand offensive. ★

#### **Recommended Reading:**

Atkinson, Rick, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993)

Scales, Robert H., Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, 1993)

Swain, Richard M., *"Lucky War": Third Army in Desert Storm* (Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 1994)