Northern Watch and Southern Watch over Iraq were defining events in the birth of a new expeditionary Air Force.

Legacy of the Air Blockades

THE United States and its coalition allies began enforcing no-fly zones over both northern and southern Iraq more than 10 years ago. This military endeavor became a key feature in the foreign policy of three presidential administrations, consumed tremendous resources, returned benefits in coalition-building and intelligence, and led to a dramatic restructuring of the Air Force.

The two operations—known as Northern and Southern Watch—also created a template for similar "aerial blockades" used with great effectiveness in the Balkans. This formerly unprecedented use of airpower now is another tool in the military–diplomatic toolbox.

Northern and Southern Watch have helped contain the military adventurism of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, protected Kuwait, enforced economic sanctions against Iraq, and fulfilled, to a degree, their stated original purpose: stopping the repression of the Kurdish people of northern Iraq and the Shiite Muslims of southern Iraq.

The two operations were a continuation of the 1991 Gulf War, punctuated by occasional periods of intense combat. Coalition aircraft have been shot at or threatened more than a thousand times by Iraqi air defenses and have retaliated with hundreds of missiles and bombs. Nearly 10 times more sorties have been flown in these "peacekeeping" operations than in the all-out war that preceded it.

For the Air Force, which has carried

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor

An F-15 from the 1st Fighter Wing, Langley AFB, Va., during an Operation Southern Watch sortie. The two no-fly zones have cost the US about $12 billion so far—not counting wear and tear on aircraft and service members.

USAF photo by TSgt. Jack Braden

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An F-15 takes on fuel during a nighttime no-fly zone patrol. Northern and Southern Watch are useful "labs" in which to test new concepts and equipment, but the operations take a toll on training.

most of the burden of the no-fly zone patrols, the operations have been a particularly defining event and directly shaped its post–Cold War structure.

Coming and Going

"We reconfigured in order to deal with this commitment," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper told *Air Force* Magazine recently. "There's no doubt about that."

Jumper, a former air component chief in US Central Command—advocated a new, "expeditionary" mindset in the mid–1990s, when the service's Cold War–style garrison structure was overtaxed by the pressures of deploying to multiple crises and contingencies.

"We couldn't go on the way we were going," Jumper said. Air Force units were "meeting themselves coming and going" in perpetual pickup deployments to the Middle East.

Jumper's predecessor, Gen. Michael E. Ryan, restructured the Air Force into 10 Air Expeditionary Forces in 1999, mainly to deal with the burden of running the Iraqi no-fly zones. The Iraq operations required constant and nonstop deployments of fighters to patrol the zones, AWACS radar airplanes to control the fighters, intelligence and surveillance aircraft of all types to monitor Iraq, and tankers to keep them all fueled and flying.

The collection of 10 AEFs provided a mechanism by which Air Force people could know in advance when they and their machines might be deployed, so they could prepare both professionally and personally. The AEF system also allowed them to know when they would come home to reconstitute their units through training and maintenance and have family time.

Ryan noted at the time that, for the first couple of years, the senior Air Force leadership expected the operations to be temporary, and so the Air Force did not immediately "institutionalize" around them.

The New Steady State

Now, Jumper said, Northern and Southern Watch are part of the "steady state" of Air Force operations. They are expected, planned for, and counted as part of the routine operating requirements of the service, as has long been true of deployments in South Korea and Europe.

One senior USAF officer noted that "for people retiring now with 20 years [in the service], they've spent half their careers at this."

Besides helping contain Iraq, the no-fly zones have helped the US build a better military relationship with other countries in the Gulf region. This has produced standardized procedures, air traffic control, air tasking orders, and joint exercises and training. Another result has been an alliance in practice if not name between the US and the nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council. These relationships have given the US access and alternative basing options if its relations sour with any particular member. As relations with Saudi Arabia cool over US intentions toward Iraq and the ongoing war on terrorism, a welcome for a US air operations center in the region was found in Qatar.

"Our relationships with the other GCC [countries] have really blossomed since we became less Saudi–centric," one Pentagon official observed.

Enforcement of the zones has produced a windfall of intelligence, much to the benefit of the United States.

USAF has "developed a very solid understanding of how the Iraqi air defense system is working," a senior USAF official observed. "They have evolved—not quite as fast as we thought they would—over 10 years of watching us, but they have evolved."

Coalition pilots have developed a solid understanding of Iraqi geography, particularly how the Iraqis deployed their air defenses. However, one senior USAF official warned against the view that US pilots have been "getting combat experience."

While it is true that the venues of Northern and Southern Watch are considered combat zones and patrols take off with live ammunition and have made an average of 70 strikes per year over the last five years, most pilots are "just boring holes in the sky," the official reported, actually getting less valuable training than when they are at home. The no-fly zone patrols have been "accumulating hours without training events."

Another side benefit of the no-fly zones has been the ability to try out new concepts and equipment, officials reported.

Generating New Concepts

"It's a wonderful 'battle lab,' " one said, noting that new systems like Predator have been the subject of no-fly zone experiments, as were new techniques and tactics. He added that the current high-order functioning of the modern Combined Air Operations Center owes much to the running of the no-fly zones.

"These operations have forced us to reconcile our size with a multiplicity of taskings," he said. Concepts like the AEF and reachback—

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wherein forces deployed abroad can rely on home-based specialists to provide information and expertise without actually deploying forward—were spurred by the need to manage the watches more efficiently, he said.

"These things all came about as a child of necessity," he added. "When we hit the wall on optempo and perstempo, we knew we had to do some radical things. And that in turn has made us more flexible and more expeditionary, so, on the whole, it's been a good thing."

An F-16 from the 27th Fighter Wing, Cannon AFB, N.M., patrols southern Iraq carrying a load of AGM-88 HARM. USAF aircraft supporting the no-fly zone operations carry a mix of air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions.

Uncalculated Costs

Still, the no-fly zones have created a drag on the Air Force that could only be partially measured in dollars. While running the two zones has cost the Defense Department about $12 billion—as defined in annual supplemental funding bills approved by Congress over the last decade—there have been other costs in terms of the rapid aging of aircraft and overwork of USAF people.

Jumper said that, while it's true the zones are causing the Air Force to fly some aircraft more than expected, "it remains to be seen" whether this will actually wear out the fleet. He noted that the majority of missions do not involve violent maneuvering and the aircraft would be flying at home anyway. "So, we're sort of looking at that to see what's really going on, and we haven't found the answer to that question yet," said Jumper.

Northern Watch was the first no-fly zone. It began as part of Operation Provide Comfort, the effort to provide humanitarian relief and some protection for the Kurdish people of northern Iraq who attempted an uprising in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. Iraqi attack helicopters went after the Kurds to repress their revolt, and coalition allies established a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel on April 10, 1991, to provide a "safe haven" for the Kurds.

Coalition aircraft were sent to patrol the zone and were cleared to shoot down any Iraqi military fixed-wing aircraft in the exclusion area. Coalition aircraft were authorized to defend themselves if fired upon by aircraft or ground unit. Patrol aircraft carried a mix of air-to-air weaponry and air-to-ground munitions, such as the High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile, or HARM, and laser-guided bombs with which to attack Iraqi radar, missile, or artillery sites that fired on them.

As part of the cease-fire talks at Safwan, Iraq was prohibited from flying fixed-wing aircraft in its northern and southern regions. US Central Command chief Army Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf had, however, acceded to an Iraqi request to fly helicopters, thinking the aircraft might be the sole means of long-distance communication in a country where the telephone lines and other communications infrastructure had been cut or destroyed. Schwarzkopf later admitted he hadn't considered the possibility of helicopter gunships being used to subdue an insurrection. The no-fly zones subsequently closed this loophole.

Provide Comfort was renamed Northern Watch on Jan. 1, 1997, with headquarters at Incirlik AB, Turkey, and orchestrated by US Air Forces in Europe. British aircraft patrolled intermittently in the northern operation. France had flown patrols during Provide Comfort but stopped in December 1996.

USAF photos by TSgt. Jack Braden

Gen. Michael Ryan restructured USAF into the Expeditionary Aerospace Force in 1999, largely to deal with the burden of running the no-fly zones. Tent cities, such as this one in Qatar, are common sights in Southwest Asia.

DOD photos

Operation Southern Watch was similarly born of Iraqi repression, this time against the so-called "marsh Arabs" of southern Iraq. In response to air attacks against this group, the US announced that Iraq, after Aug. 27, 1992, could not fly military aircraft below the 32nd parallel. Patrols for Southern Watch initially were flown by French and British forces, as well as US.

The first casualty of the southern operation was the pilot of an Iraqi MiG-25, who locked his radar onto an Air Force F-16 on Dec. 27, 1992. The MiG was promptly shot down. Soon thereafter, Iraq began moving more anti-aircraft batteries into the no-fly zone.

The no-fly zones were not specifically created at the behest of the United Nations, but they flowed from UN resolutions concerning Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Resolution 688 specifically demanded that Iraq cease repression of its civilian population. Security Council Resolution 678 authorized the use of "all necessary means" to implement Security Council resolutions and restore peace and security in the region. Later, Security Council Resolution 949 called for Iraq not to build up its forces in the southern region near Kuwait, and the southern no-fly zone is there in part to prevent that from happening.

Enforcing UN Resolutions

The US and UK created the exclusionary zones to fulfill the UN resolutions, but Iraq never acknowledged the authority of the coalition to impose such controls. Nor did it ever accept them. Iraq views coalition aircraft flying over its territory as "aggressors." It has fired more than a thousand missiles at patrol airplanes or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft monitoring Iraqi compliance with weapons controls in the ensuing decade.

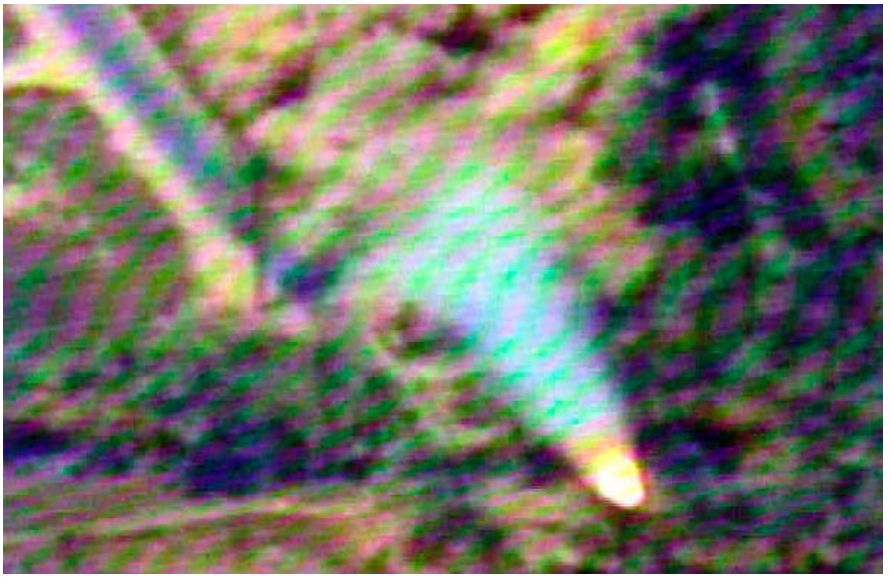
Through 11 years of enforcement of the no-fly zones, the coalition lost not a single manned aircraft to enemy fire, despite the fact that Iraqi air defense operators became more cunning and went to school on American air operations in Bosnia and Kosovo in the intervening years. At least three pilotless drones have been lost to accidents or enemy fire, however.

Senior Air Force leaders tout the professionalism of their people—and that of aviators from the Navy, Marine Corps, and UK, who also fly such missions—as playing a big part in avoidance of losses during the hundreds of thousands of sorties supporting the two operations. However, they conceded that another factor was sheer luck.

One Air Force general observed that USAF "sweated every day, flying single-engine aircraft way into Iraqi territory. Mechanical failures happen, and you always have the chance of the 'golden BB,' " the pilot's term for a lucky shot.

The darkest hour of Northern Watch, however, occurred on April 14, 1994, when USAF F-15 pilots patrolling the northern no-fly zone spotted two helicopters below. They were not aware that US Army Black Hawk helicopters, carrying military and humanitarian relief officials, were in their area. The F-15s shot down the Black Hawks, killing all 26 people aboard.

In August 1996, Iraq unleashed a brutal ground action against the Kurds north of the 36th parallel. While ground forces were not prohibited under the no-fly zones, the US warned Iraq that its repressive acts would not go unchallenged. Less than a week later, the US launched Operation Desert Strike, a punitive sea- and air-launched cruise missile attack against surface-to-air missile



Photographs show an Iraqi truck-mounted surface-to-air missile battery tracking and firing on coalition aircraft in July 2001. Over the three-year period ending in 2001, Southern Watch logged some 1,200 provocations.

sites and command and control sites in southern Iraq.

When it was over, the US proposed creating a third no-fly zone, this time in western Iraq.

A senior USAF official familiar with the proposal said such an exclusionary zone offered the benefits of being able to watch the western Iraqi desert more closely; Iraq had tended to deploy its Scud missile launchers in the area. It also would have given the coalition an opportunity to "get between" Israel and Iraq and better monitor the border with Jordan, which was considered "porous" and a key smuggling route in defiance of the economic sanctions against Iraq.

However, France, the UK, and Saudi Arabia vetoed the idea of a western no-fly zone. Instead, the limit of the southern zone was moved northward, to the 33rd parallel, just south of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. This move effectively included the areas of interest in the west that the US most wanted to observe.

France objected to the expansion of the no-fly zone and limited its patrols to the 32nd parallel.

The other coalition allies also introduced new terms for the zones, pledging a disproportionate response if allied aircraft were attacked or threatened while performing patrols or if Iraq attempted to repair anti-aircraft sites the coalition had destroyed within the southern zone. This response was limited to the sites that had made a direct attack on coalition aircraft, however, and created the chance for Iraq to exploit this rule.

"You never want to be predictable," said Maj. Gen. Leroy Barnidge Jr., who was deputy commander of Central Air Forces in 2000–01. Predictability of operations could have allowed the Iraqis to set up hidden anti-aircraft sites at times or places where coalition aircraft were known to transit, allowing them to launch a surprise attack that could have knocked down coalition aircraft. Alternately, Iraqi aircraft would sometimes flirt with the no-fly zones, hoping to lure coalition aircraft into what former CENTAF commander (now US European Command deputy commander) Gen. Charles F. Wald termed "SAM–bushes."

The rules were changed, permitting coalition aircraft to attack any site in Iraq deemed an enabling part of its integrated air defense system or command and control network. Retaliations no longer had to take place within a set period, either. The new rules of engagement permitted the coalition more flexibility in its responses, as well as greater unpredictability.

Rules Change

Maj. Gen. David A. Deptula was commander of Northern Watch from April 1998 to October 1999. The new rules, he explained to *Air Force* Magazine in 2001, could be summed up as follows: "When they act in an aggressive fashion, with the intent to kill or harm our people, the response needs to be one which reduces their capacity to do that in the future."

Thus, an Iraqi air defense site "painting" coalition aircraft with search-and-track radar near Baghdad one day might be answered with the destruction of a communications node a hundred miles to the south a week later.

A US Central Command spokesman said coalition aircraft have been threatened or fired on "thousands of times" in the last decade but have only retaliated about 500 times. During the five-year period ending in December 2002, coalition forces responded an average of about three to five times per month.

Not counted in those statistics is Operation Desert Fox, a four-day operation in December 1998 intended to punish Iraq for its expulsion of UN arms inspectors. The raid focused on places where Iraq was suspected of developing, making, or hiding weapons of mass destruction, as well as air defenses, communications nodes, Republican Guard facilities, airfields, and an oil field at Basra, believed to be illegally exporting oil. It was after Desert Fox that the rules of engagement for the no-fly zones expanded to include any threatening capability of Iraq's, not just those that had directly threatened patrol aircraft.

Due partly to its larger area, and partly because of the location of sensitive Iraqi sites, Southern Watch has typically seen much more activity than its Northern counterpart. Over the three-year period ending in 2001, Southern Watch logged more than 1,200 provocations and responded about 125 times. By contrast, Northern Watch logged only about 400 violations but mounted 161 responses.

As the rhetoric between the Bush Administration and Iraq heated up in 2002, so did the number of provocations and responses. In 2002, "Iraq fired at coalition aircraft nearly 500 times," a CENTCOM spokesman reported. About 90 retaliation missions were flown in response.

This official added that since the approval, on Nov. 8, 2002, of UN Resolution 114, which governs Iraq's disclosure of weapons of mass destruction, Iraq fired on coalition aircraft on 32 of the first 47 flying days. ■

USAF photo by MSgt. Dave Nolan

AFRC pilots Col. Chip Taylor, Fort Worth, Tex., and Maj. Mike Vaught, Phoenix, plan the morning's alert mission. Various international efforts have done nothing to slow Iraqi attacks on coalition aircraft.