

USAF F-15E fighters from the 4th Tactical Fighter Wing, deployed from Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., are parked at Al Kharj, Saudi Arabia, during Operation Desert Shield.

A Prelude to War

By Rebecca Grant

Twenty-five years ago this month, the Air Force moved to save Saudi Arabia and began tense preparations for the first Gulf War.



At 2 a.m. local time on Aug. 2, 1990, Lt. Gen. Ayad Futayih al-Rawi ordered the Hammurabi Armored Division and the Tawakalna Mechanized Division of Iraq's Republican Guard Forces Command to seize Kuwait. The first of 1,000 Soviet-built Iraqi tanks reached Kuwait City at 5 a.m. and occupied the city that evening.

"I knew the Iraqis could overrun the Saudi oil region in a week," said Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr., United States Army, who was commander, United States Central Command at MacDill AFB, Fla.

The invasion, sparked by spats between the region's oil-producing nations and triggered by Iraq's near-bankruptcy, redefined US geopolitics and American airpower for a generation. But in the summer of 1990, what to do about the problem in the faraway desert was far from certain.

Brazen conquest of a sovereign, oil-rich nation was not the foundation for a new world order. "I had decided in my own mind in the first hours that the Iraqi aggression could not be tolerated," said President George H. W. Bush.

"This was clearly an airpower situation," thought Col. John A. Warden III.

"Schwarzkopf depended on airpower as the essential shield for the buildup of forces necessary to defend the Arabian peninsula," historians Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen wrote in their *Gulf War Air Power Survey* in 1993.

But airpower had to shake off its doctrinal supporting role for the United States to step up to the challenge of Iraq in this new world order.

From August through October, the work of a disparate group of airmen in key senior positions would convince Schwarzkopf and Bush that airpower could be the centerpiece of a joint campaign. Most were fighter pilots with Vietnam service. Their collective efforts—even when at cross-purposes—forged a new template for American warfare with airpower at the center.

NEW ROLES FOR AIRPOWER

In 1990, defense strategy did not feature airpower taking the lead. Warplans postured land forces to block an invasion with some assistance from airpower. The Navy had its Maritime Strategy while the Army had AirLand Battle. The Air Force tended to be parceled to the Army corps commander's scheme of maneuver—or dedicated to the nuclear Single Integrated Operational Plan.

"We'd been working on a set of ideas about how to better use airpower," recalled Warden, who headed the directorate of warfighting concepts under Maj. Gen. Robert M. Alexander, who was director of plans in the office of the deputy chief of staff for operations—a post known as XOX. Warden at the Pentagon had in his directorate small offices for doctrine, long-range plans, requirements, "Checkmate" for operational analysis, and the "Skunk Works" for strategy.

"Let's put a plan together," Warden told his staff on Monday, Aug. 6. "I don't know how we're going to sell it, but let's do it."

The appetite for airpower began with Schwarzkopf.

On Aug. 6, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia consented to host American forces.

Aircraft poured into an unfamiliar theater. Lt. Col. Kenneth M. “Mike” DeCuir deployed with his F-15E unit. “We started setting up our cots in a warehouse,” he later recalled. “I went to the security forces detachment and asked them the best way to prepare MREs [meals, ready to eat] because as aircrew we had never even seen MREs, much less knew how to eat the darn things!”

There was another surprise in store. “Just as we got it all together, we were bused to the Royal Omani Air Force officers mess for dinner,” continued DeCuir, now a retired major general.

CENTCOM war plans had long assumed that “in the first month of any deployment, US and Saudi air threat to extended Iraqi lines of communication was the deterrent,” writes Army historian Richard M. Swain in a 1997 book, *Lucky War*.

But in the then-recent Internal Look wargame, six Iraqi divisions advanced 124 miles into Saudi Arabia, inflicting 50 percent losses on the airborne corps holding Dhahran.

Iraqi tanks weren’t the only threat. Saddam had taken hostages. What if he started executing them? What if Iraqi forces stormed the US Embassy? Chemical weapons were another specter.

“It suddenly dawned on me that I had no military options, or very, very limited military options, to offer the President. ... I asked [Army Gen. Colin L. Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs

USA photo by SSGT. F. Lee Cockran



US military personnel arrive at Dhahran Airport aboard a C-5 Galaxy during Desert Shield.

of Staff] to allow me to work directly with the air staff to develop a package of options,” Schwarzkopf later said in a PBS “Frontline” program.

“He had no ground forces. There was no ground option,” recalled Warden.

The door was wide open for airpower. Developing America’s response followed two tracks: the immediate, executable options and the much wider campaign to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Both were on Schwarzkopf’s mind when he called Gen. John Michael Loh, Air Force vice chief of staff, on the morning of Aug. 8.

“I need a full-blown air campaign plan, not the limited, AirLand battle and defensive plan I am getting from

AFCENT,” Schwarzkopf told Loh. “Can you help me?”

“The center of gravity shifted from MacDill to Checkmate,” Loh said.

“I thought Schwarzkopf was dyed-in-the-wool green Army and didn’t know airpower,” Loh said later. “I was wrong.”

Still, Schwarzkopf was not an easy customer. “Burly, emotional, and brilliant, Schwarzkopf earned the handle ‘Stormin’ Norman’ early in his career primarily because of his outspoken personality and his volcanic outbursts,” said the official US Army history of Operation Desert Storm, *Certain Victory*.

“When he was edgy, it was normally with senior officers. He was great with the troops. ... Lieutenant colonels and above were fair game,” observed retired Lt. Gen. Buster C. Glosson in his 2003 book, *War With Iraq*. In 1990, Glosson was a brigadier general, in Bahrain as deputy commander, Joint Task Force Middle East, embarked on USS *LaSalle*.

“Schwarzkopf wants whatever we’ve got right now,” Loh reported to his boss, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Michael J. Dugan, a day later.

Warden and his boss Alexander briefed Schwarzkopf at his headquarters in Tampa, Fla., on Aug. 10. The concept packaged six days of air strikes against targets in Iraq and Kuwait, designed primarily to cut Saddam’s control by hitting air defenses, airfields, telecommunications, and suspected weapons of mass destruction sites.

Schwarzkopf told them it was exactly what he wanted. The briefing opened

USAF Capt. James Dygert checks a rotor blade on a UH-60A Black Hawk helicopter during Desert Shield.

USAF photo by CMSgt. Don Sutherland





USA photo

Schwarzkopf's mind to a further possibility, according to his "Frontline" interview. "I then realize, sitting in that room, that this strategic air campaign would have to be a precursor to any offensive campaign."

MAKE IT JOINT

Schwarzkopf was sold on the value of airpower but there was much more work to do. Back in Washington, Powell listened to Warden's briefing. The J-3, Army Lt. Gen. Thomas W. Kelly, questioned airpower's effectiveness. Powell half-sided with Kelly at first. "This is different," Loh interjected. "We've got precision and stealth."

Finally, Powell authorized Loh to continue the air campaign planning, but to make it more joint.

"By that afternoon we'd gained 100 or so more people, mostly from the Air Force and Marine Corps," Warden recalled.

The plan was "50 percent theoretical and 50 percent pragmatic," according to Loh. "We needed real targets and real missions" in the plan, he summed up.

The task fell now to Lt. Gen. Charles A. Horner, air component commander.

Schwarzkopf had left Horner in Riyadh to take charge as CENTCOM and work immediate air strike options. According to the book, *Every Man a Tiger*, the omnipresent question to Horner was, "What will we do if the Iraqis come across the border tonight?"

"A cutup as a youngster, he'd matured a bit but was still cheeky, something of a jester with friends," said Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, who took over as Chief of Staff in October 1990. "Scruffy, a little disheveled," McPeak added; Horner was not textbook military.

"When it came to the mission and the people entrusted to him for its accomplishment, he was engaged, deeply serious, the opposite of frivolous," said McPeak.

"Primary defense continued to rely on airpower and a thin line of United States and Saudi units along the Kuwait border," stated the Pentagon's official "Conduct of the Persian Gulf War" report.

"Initially the tasking was to support the troops of the 82nd Airborne who were the first to arrive and were pretty exposed up along the Kuwait-Saudi border," said DeCuir. "We expected a massive push of armor should the Iraqis come south, and the airborne guys were lightly armed and not prepared to repulse an armored invasion." The F-15Es were loaded with Rockeye munitions and waited.

In this tense environment, Horner saw the Air Staff briefings as just a start. In theater, the task was to build immediate options to shield Saudi Arabia from attack.

"John Warden and I looked at the problem of air campaign planning differently," Horner later wrote. "He viewed it as an almost Newtonian science, with the targeting list being an end unto itself, while for me, air warfare revolves around the ATO [air tasking order], logistics, joint service and allied agreements, and the million and one little things."

"In the interim we had a D-Day plan, a defensive campaign, in case the Iraqi army came," said Horner in his PBS "Frontline" interview.

"Have we got a bombing plan now," Schwarzkopf told Powell. "If you want to execute an air attack by itself, we're ready."

With fixed, strategic targets, "I was still disturbed by the issue of 'effects-

JSTARS' first operational mission was during the Gulf War in 1991. The new ISR aircraft would show its mettle tracking Iraqi forces as they moved toward Khafji to launch a surprise attack.

based' targeting," Glosson wrote in his book. "For leadership, communications, aircraft shelters, and general facilities, the concept of a few bombs to cause paralysis, not destruction, was OK. For other targets, this was very definitely not OK. NBC [nuclear, biological, chemical] sites, bridges, mobile assets—all these needed a hard kill, not an 'effect.'"

Another divide formed over how and when to hit Iraqi ground forces.

In the Aug. 11 briefing, Warden told Powell he had "no plans at all to attack the Iraqi army in Kuwait." He wanted the Iraqi army to give in to the pressure of attacks on strategic targets in Iraq and go home.

"I don't want it to go home," Warden recalled Powell saying. "I want a smoking tank on every kilometer marker from Kuwait to Baghdad." Warden, in contrast, "hoped we would never have to execute the attack on the Iraqi army."

There was no debate as far as Schwarzkopf was concerned. He was eager to use superior US airpower to full advantage, for it gave him something Saddam didn't have. "Obviously one of the very, very great strengths that we had was our ability with strategic airpower and tactical airpower," he later explained in "Frontline." He was mindful of Iraq's "tremendous advantage on us on the ground, numbers wise," and intended for airpower to help offset it.

"One of the main goals that Schwarzkopf always had, and I think Powell as well, was to get the Republican Guard," Horner attested in the same PBS program.



USN photo by JO3 Gerald Johnson

President George H. W. Bush speaks to military personnel during a Thanksgiving visit to Saudi Arabia during Desert Shield in 1990.

Turning the theoretical plan into an executable ATO depended on intelligence. Commanders struggled with intelligence and communications and the shortage of precision-capable aircraft in ways hard to credit 25 years later.

Intelligence support was “my No. 1 problem,” Glosson later stated.

Identifying and collecting data on targets for a massive air campaign demanded unprecedented support. Loh leaned on Air Force intelligence at the Pentagon to help the air campaign planners. Their initial reaction was “that’s not our duty; those in the field should do it,” he recalled. Then there was the problem of transmitting intelligence and targeting imagery to the theater.

“There were computers around but not many were interconnected,” Warden said. Planners packed crates of target folders containing high-resolution pictures onto Dugan’s airplane when he visited the theater in mid-September. Another time, a major was sent from the Air Staff to Riyadh on a commercial flight via Paris with a briefcase of more top-secret files.

A classified fax machine was put in at Checkmate and another in the “Black Hole” secret planning room in the basement of Royal Saudi Air Force headquarters.

L-r: Gen. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of US Central Command, and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz listen to Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney answer questions from the media during a press conference in February 1991.

As to precision, it rested with the laser guided weapons targeting pods of the F-111 and F-15E, the Navy’s coveted A-6 carrier-based attack aircraft, and the F-117 stealth fighter.

Stealth was the other linchpin of the coming campaign. Leaders from around the Air Force and all the way up to Secretary of State James A. Baker III wanted to know if it would work.

Glosson dispatched F-117 pilot Maj. Robert D. Eskridge to fly a sortie from the base at Khamis Mushait, Saudi Arabia, shut down communications and slip into the F-117’s clean configuration as if for an attack, and skim parallel to the border for five or six minutes. The Iraqis never saw him.

All this was done in great secrecy. Outside, few grasped the value of stealth and how air superiority would allow them to layer interdiction and close

air support to take down the world’s fourth largest army in position. The F-15’s 33-to-zero air-to-air kill ratio, the ability of the F-111 to destroy an Iraqi tank with one plink from a guided bomb, and the test article JSTARS that tracked Iraqi forces on a sneak attack toward Khafji, Saudi Arabia: All this lay in the future.

Conventional wisdom doubted the US military and airpower in particular. A Brookings Institution scholar predicted between 1,049 to 4,136 deaths and more than 16,000 US casualties, while Army models of maneuver warfare estimated 9,000 casualties, USAF historian Richard P. Hallion later recorded.

“There was very little public support in the United States for the idea of going to war in the Persian Gulf. In fact, it was overwhelmingly opposed,” said Secretary of State Baker on “Frontline.”

Except for Schwarzkopf, America’s most senior military commanders were uneasy with airpower, too.

Loh served five weeks as acting Chief of Staff after Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney fired Dugan during the runup to the war. He faced constant squabbling during meetings of the Joint Chiefs.

“Vuono wanted to start with a simultaneous ground campaign. Gray fought everyday for an amphibious landing,” said Loh, referring to Army Chief of Staff Gen. Carl E. Vuono and Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Alfred M. Gray Jr. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Frank B. Kelso II wanted to divide the theater into “route packages” a la Vietnam, with a northwest package from carriers in the Red Sea to attack from the west and protect Israel, and a northeast package from carriers in the Persian Gulf attacking targets in Kuwait.

USN photo by Photographer’s Mate 2nd Class Susan Carl





USAF photo by A1C Heather Stanton

“He would leave the middle for the Air Force working with the Army,” said Loh.

WINNING THE WHITE HOUSE

Much rested on an effective plan, and the first group to convince was President Bush and his senior Cabinet officials. On Oct. 11, Glosson was scheduled to brief the air campaign plan to Bush.

Schwarzkopf told “Frontline” he wanted to brief the President himself. But “Colin felt that my arrival in Washington, D.C., could not be done in secret and that that would gin up a whole great deal of speculation within the Washington community as to why I was there.”

Schwarzkopf designated Glosson to brief the three-phased air campaign while Army Lt. Col. Joseph H. Purvis covered the ground phase. He warned Glosson and Purvis to stick to the brief he’d approved or he’d kick them out of theater and terminate their military careers.

“This meeting established airpower as the dominant force for Operation Desert Storm,” said Loh.

It almost didn’t happen that way. Glosson prebriefed the Joint Chiefs the day before the White House meeting. Powell took him aside afterward. “You’ve got to make sure when we go to the White House tomorrow we don’t oversell the air campaign,” Powell implored.

Glosson returned to Secretary of the Air Force Donald B. Rice’s office with Loh and McPeak and vented his frustration.

“Don’t change a chart,” Loh said

“I’m going to give the President a factual briefing and let the chips fall where they may,” Glosson decided.

“Give the President the briefing you and I discussed,” Schwarzkopf told Glosson by telephone from Riyadh.

“The air campaign was an offensive plan; it was what we were going to do whether they attacked or we attacked,” Glosson summed up.

When the briefing started, “I hadn’t gone far before I realized that he had an understanding of airpower execution that not very many people in politics have. I am sure his insight was based on his own experience as a naval aviator and as head of the CIA,” Glosson wrote of Bush.

Bush, Baker, and Cheney asked questions on topics ranging from TLAM accuracy to the role of Turkey. What will Saddam Hussein be able to do after Phase I, the President asked Glosson.

“He will not be able to effectively communicate with his people: He will lose C2 [command and control] to his forces, and he will have significant problems reinforcing Kuwait because of LOC [lines of communication] cuts. He will have to deal with disruption throughout the country,” answered Glosson.

Schwarzkopf said Powell told him that “the briefing on the air campaign had gone wonderfully, the briefing on the ground campaign had gone terribly.”

The negative reaction to the one-corps ground offensive served Schwarzkopf’s purpose, for he had another land campaign plan up his sleeve. “He had an alternative that started a flank, a little bit of a left hook. He needed more forces and then he would develop a much better land campaign, which is what happened,” said Horner.

By the end of October, all the arguments were settled. “Our air campaign became the vanguard of the overall joint

F-117s on the flight line at Holloman AFB, N.M., as another F-117 takes off in the distance. The value of stealth would be proved during the desert campaigns.

force campaign and stayed relatively intact,” said Loh.

“I have today directed the Secretary of Defense to increase the size of US forces committed to Desert Shield to ensure that the coalition has an adequate offensive military option should that be necessary to achieve our common goals,” the President announced later in October.

On Nov. 29, 1990, the United Nations authorized the use of force to free Kuwait. “When he got the UN vote through, ... I knew then we were going to go to war,” Horner said.

By January 1991, the coalition lined up to defend Saudi Arabia and to expel Iraq from Kuwait had grown to tremendous size. Approximately 540,000 ground troops from 31 countries were in place. More than 660,000 coalition soldiers were in the theater, and almost half-a-million of them were Americans. Some 1,800 combat aircraft and numerous support aircraft were deployed.

Across the border of Kuwait waited 43 Iraqi divisions. Most were not at full strength, but postwar estimates put the number of Iraqi troops at about 330,000, supported by 4,200 tanks, 2,800 armored vehicles, and 3,100 artillery pieces.

Seven hundred combat aircraft and a fully integrated air defense system was in place, ready to take out attacking coalition forces.

On Jan. 17, 1991, Operation Desert Shield came to an end and Desert Storm began. ✪

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