

In a matter of weeks, the Air Force established a more secure hub for Southern Watch operations and moved there without missing a beat.

Miracle in the Desert

By Bill Gertz

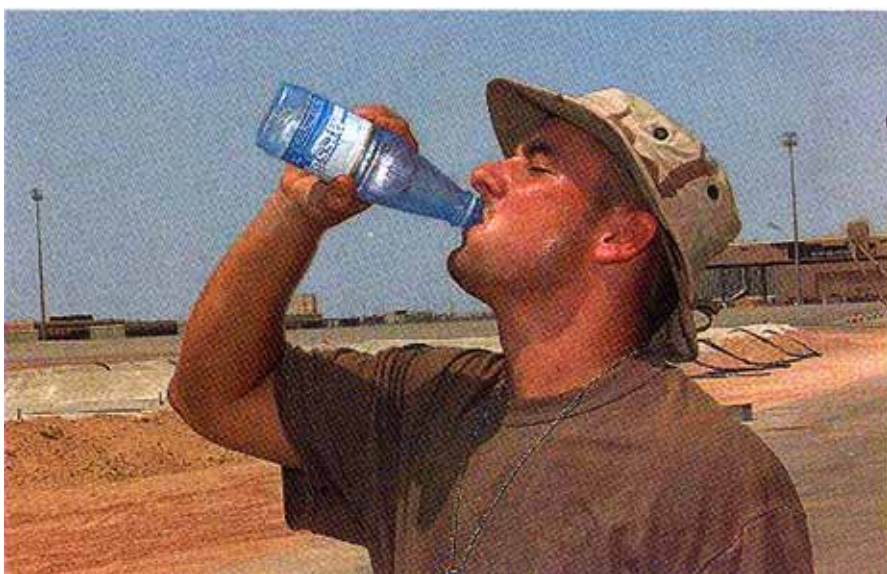
UNTIL recently, Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan AB was nothing more than this: a remote patch of terrain in the blazing Arabian desert, a 13,000-foot runway buried in sand, with lots of camel spiders, scorpions, and heat-loving insects.

What a difference a few weeks can make.

With a short, furious burst of activity in late summer and fall, the Air Force transformed the site into its newest overseas base, bringing in thousands of airmen, scores of aircraft, tons of supplies, and hundreds of pieces of equipment formerly located two hundred miles away at Dhahran AB. Brig. Gen. Daniel M. Dick, the commander of the 4404th Composite Wing (Provisional) and officer in charge of Prince Sultan and seven other bases, said the facility has become the new hub of Operation Southern Watch, the mission to patrol the skies over southern Iraq.

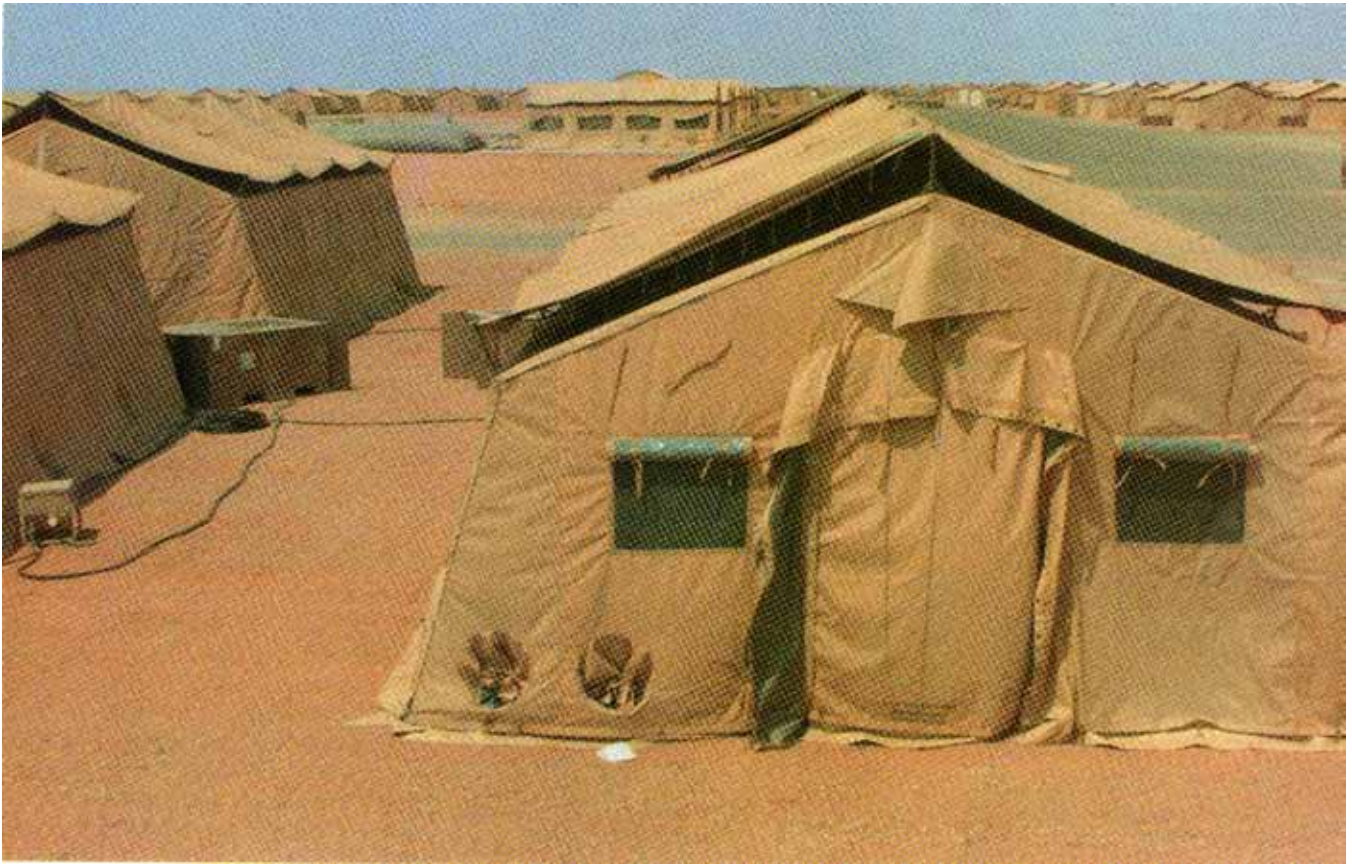
"We have risen like a phoenix out of the desert," said General Dick. "This is Air Force combat airpower at its finest."

The new site hums with nonstop activity. Prince Sultan AB, built during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War period but virtually abandoned soon afterward, has become a sprawling city comprising some 700 semipermanent tent structures that house 4,500 US airmen and soldiers and British and French personnel. The inventory of allied fighter aircraft deployed at the base includes Air Force F-15s,



USAF photos by SSgt. Angela Stafford

Rising "like a phoenix" out of the desert, according to Brig. Gen. Daniel M. Dick, commander of the 4404th Composite Wing (Provisional), Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia (opposite), gave US and allied air forces a safer place from which to launch their air patrols over Iraq. Above, A1C Jason Taylor of the 2d Supply Squadron, Barksdale AFB, La., copes with the blistering Saudi heat.



F-16s, and EF-111s, plus French Mirages and British Tornados. Some F-16s are equipped with the AGM-88 High-Speed Antiradiation Missile (HARM)—a key weapon in suppressing Iraqi air defenses. Also on hand are the Air Force's E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft, HC-130 and KC-135 tankers, and RC-135 Rivet Joint electronic reconnaissance aircraft.

The huge relocation project was launched by US Central Command following the June 25 terrorist bombing of Khobar Towers in Dhahran, a blast that killed 19 American airmen and wounded 500 others. By using an unguarded service road, the terrorists were able to drive an explosives-laden truck close enough to devastate the high-rise residence. The disaster convinced senior Defense Department and service officials that it was time to find a safer location.

"Al's Garage"

Prince Sultan AB is part of a 250-square-mile Saudi military complex situated near Al Kharj, 50 miles southeast of the capital of Riyadh. During the Gulf War, American troops

jokingly referred to it as "Al's Garage." Coalition forces have constructed the new base around the existing airstrip and apron that were located within the complex's 22-mile perimeter. Now the entire area is considered an ultrahigh-security sector and is patrolled around the clock by hundreds of Air Force Security Police.

Since the bombing, US forces throughout the region have been placed on their highest state of alert, on guard for more terrorist attacks using vehicle bombs or possibly artillery or rocket attacks using chemical or biological weapons.

"We still assess the terrorist threat to be very high, and we are taking appropriate measures," said Maj. Gen. Kurt B. Anderson, commander of the Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia located near Riyadh.

For General Anderson, the biggest challenge of the relocation was to make the move and still carry out the mission—patrolling the skies over southern Iraq up to the thirty-third parallel north. The air exclusion zone was extended one degree closer to Baghdad, the Iraqi capital, following Iraq's attack on the Kurds in northern

Iraq early last September. To prevent gaps in coverage, air operations planners made sure the Air Force never moved all of a particular aircraft type at the same time.

"I would suspect that anybody watching what we were doing didn't even notice a blip in the performance of our mission," said General Anderson. "The sequencing of the relocation was such that we were able to continue our mission unabated."

Defense Secretary William J. Perry has called the six-week initial relocation effort from Riyadh and Dhahran "a logistics miracle." He pointed out that US military personnel transformed the empty base "from scratch" into a modern facility boasting an excellent runway, air traffic control tower, headquarters office, and maintenance buildings—and of course, hundreds of air-conditioned tents.

"All the while they were . . . moving, they maintained [more than] 100 sorties a day without missing a beat in support of this expanded no-fly zone," said the Pentagon chief.

Secretary Perry approved the relocation in July as part of a Pentagon "Force Protection Initiative" aimed at

keeping American troops safe from terrorist attack, including the possible use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists. He warned, "We cannot deal with those attacks adequately just by moving fences and just by putting more Mylar on glass. We have to make some fundamental, drastic changes in the way we configure and deploy our forces."

Forty-Five Days

A key assumption of the initiative is that the troops will be safer if they are moved away from urban areas, a major principle behind the desert relocation, said General Dick. "We, in fact, moved two entire air bases—over 78 aircraft, over 4,000 people, and about 25,000 tons of equipment—in 45 days," he said. "We did it in a hostile environment—hostile in terms of the threat from terrorism being very high as well as in the middle of combat operations against Iraq."

General Dick considers his forces to be prepared for any type of terrorist threat, and he maintains that the central location of the air base within the Saudi complex is the key to its security. The sprawling desert base has been designed with force protection in mind. "This place is just tremendously more secure than Dhahran or Riyadh," said General Dick. "We have great defense in depth."

In the first layer of security, Saudi Air Force police and foreign con-



USAF photos by SSgt. Angela Stafford

These F-15 maintainers do their part in helping to move the 25,000 tons of equipment necessary to transfer operations from Dhahran AB to Prince Sultan AB in 45 days without interrupting the mission.

tractor personnel man checkpoints at the five entrance gates. The complex's perimeter is surrounded by a six-foot-high chain-link fence topped with triple-strand barbed or razor wire. Heavily armed Saudis check all who enter.

The perimeter of Prince Sultan AB begins some 15 miles further into the complex. There, a visitor encounters another six-foot-high perimeter security fence. Twenty-four miles of concertina wire have been stretched around the site to deter any intruders. The perimeter fence has only two entrances—an American gate and a Saudi gate. All

non-Saudi coalition forces use the American gate and must pass rigorous screening.

"There's an extremely tight security process," said General Dick.

Sniff and Dip

All vehicles entering the coalition sector are searched. Bomb-sniffing dogs are used to check for explosives. (The General jokes that "the only good dog is a bomb-sniffing dog.") Fuel and water trucks entering the base are "dipped" with probes to make sure no hidden areas within the cargo have been hollowed out to hide explosives.

The entrances are equipped with concrete barriers, which force vehicles to snake their way through. This security feature, known as "serpentineing," is designed to prevent a heavy vehicle from crashing through the gate at high speed. Garbage trucks and sewage vehicles must be empty when they enter the compound, so that the police know that they do not contain explosives.

Concern about foreign terrorists entering the base also has led to tight restrictions on admittance by so-called third-country nationals—foreigners employed as construction workers or in other contract occupations. Third-country nationals entering the base must be escorted at all times by security guards. Their identification cards are impounded for the duration of their time on the base.



When the Air Force returned to Prince Sultan AB, disused since the end of Desert Storm, it found only a K-Span structure, some vehicles, and a runway. All the necessary equipment, such as these fuel bladders, had to be brought in.

Once on the American part of the air base, visitors must pass through at least four checkpoints before being allowed to enter the tent city. Each checkpoint is guarded by armed airmen and, in some cases, British Security Police.

Concrete Jersey barriers like those used in highway construction surround the runway and parking areas. The barriers are doubled where the coalition portion of the base joins the Saudi portion.

Air operations also are carried out with security in mind. Departures and arrivals are scheduled in ways that minimize the risk of attack by terrorists armed with shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. For air and missile defense, the coalition has deployed a battery of Patriot missiles at the air base.

The size of the base and its location away from urban areas are major boosts to force protection. "Its sheer size gives us a lot of capability, both in being able to conduct surveillance around the area where we are living and operating generally," General Anderson said. "Anybody who would be interested in trying to conduct an operation would have to travel great distances to get to our people."

RED HORSE Rides Again

As always when it comes to major deployments, Air Force construction and engineering personnel played the key role in the desert relocation project.

On August 8, Capt. Don Keel of

Huntsville, Ala., project engineer for the 823d Civil Engineering Squadron Rapid Engineer Deployable, Heavy Operational Repair Squadron, Engineer (RED HORSE), was the first of the builders to step off the airplane at Prince Sultan. There to meet him and his crew was a handful of troops from the 89th Security Police Squadron at Andrews AFB, Md., and the 49th Security Police Squadron at Holloman AFB, N. M.

Captain Keel already had served a tour in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where he helped build another tent city for Americans on peacekeeping duty. When he and the other RED HORSE

troops arrived at Prince Sultan, they encountered blistering 120° heat and little else. However, after Bosnia, Captain Keel had come to Saudi Arabia with no illusions. "It was about what we expected," the Captain recalled. "There was nothing there."

The only structure on the base was a rusting K-Span round metal building constructed during the Gulf War. Nearby were a few Army Humvees (High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles) and trucks in storage; they had been left there and never retrieved. The engineers got them working and started using them. Within several days, about 200 RED HORSE



At first, USAF RED HORSE units did most of the heavy lifting. They handled the equivalent of 25 C-5 loads of lumber, canvas, generators, and other supplies so that arriving troops would have places to eat, sleep, and do their work.

engineers had set up the first tents to house themselves, and then they set off at a frantic pace to build the TEMPER (Tent, Extendable, Modular Personnel) quarters for the forces due to arrive in just a few days.

"We lived on bottled water in those early days," recalled MSgt. William Davison, of Newaygo, Mich., part of the 823d RED HORSE advance team. "We drank it, and we ended up bathing in it."

The weather was a factor in the beginning, with August heat sometimes pushing temperatures over 130°. Several airmen became ill from the harsh conditions. During the day, bottled water became so hot it was almost undrinkable. As a result, most construction work was carried out at night when temperatures were relatively cool—around 100°. At night,



Despite the base's isolated location, sprawling size, and tight security, terrorism remains a concern. Operational flights, such as this KC-135 arriving from Grand Forks AFB, N. D., are staggered in ways to minimize the risk of attack.

said Sergeant Davison, the crew could erect 40 to 50 new tents at a crack.

In addition to building housing tents, Captain Keel and his team put up temporary administrative, industrial, and storage buildings. They set up about 40 of these.

Things moved slowly at first, but once the logistics train got rolling, the base grew rapidly. By the time the RED HORSE team had left 45 days later, they had built 10 aircraft hangars and 625 air-conditioned TEMPER tents. The RED HORSE team had handled the equivalent of 25 C-5 airlifter loads of lumber, canvas, vehicles, power generators, supplies, and other equipment, Captain Keel said.

Sergeant Davison was proud to be working in the desert heat. "I saw my mission there as supporting our troops and moving our troops to a safe environment," he said, "and once again RED HORSE does it with class."

For Captain Keel, the task was to set up a new air base. "It's very rare in our careers to be able to build an Air Force base out of nothing but a K-Span," he observed. "We had Southern Watch fighters flying out of there in no time."

Phase Two Begins

The first phase of the buildup covered initial construction of tents and the setting up of basic infrastructure for air operations. The RED HORSE teams accomplished this mission in a

record 45 days. By October, the second phase of base construction was well under way. Plans called for replacing the TEMPER tents and temporary facilities with semipermanent modular structures resembling trailers. Air Force officials said they expect to complete the last phase of construction by spring.

Providing equipment and structures for communications and air traffic control were also key features of setting up the new base. Col. Thomas Verbeck, director of Command, Control, and Communications for Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia, brought in about 100 Air Force technicians to wire the base, so that air operations could resume with little interruption. The first task was to make sure the base had landing systems capable of handling fighters and heavy aircraft.

Tanker Airlift Control Elements also set up air traffic control at the base. The airmen came from the 615th Air Mobility Operations Group at Travis AFB, Calif.

TSgt. Steven Easterling, of Brooklyn, N. Y., said summer heat on the Arabian peninsula was oppressive. "You try to stay inside as much as you can," said the manpower management specialist at Prince Sultan. "And you drink as much water as possible."

By October, some of the officers had moved out of their tents into trailers as work continued on more permanent structures. For Sergeant Easterling, the best part of the mission was getting a chance to help build the newest base in the US Air Force. "I'm glad that I'm a part of it," he said, adding that he volunteered for the assignment.

The most visible aspect of improved security for Sergeant Easterling is the absence of major roads passing close by the base. "In Dhahran, they had roads coming right by, as you can see from where they left [the bombing truck]. There is no way they can get into here like that."

The most difficult aspect of life at Prince Sultan during the initial relocation for Sergeant Easterling and other airmen was the lack of communications capability. The base still has no commercial incoming telephone lines. Contact by telephone can be made only through Defense Department DSN lines.

"Since August, it's gotten a lot better," said Sergeant Easterling, noting that the Air Force has installed a local area network that allows airmen to receive cable television. During leisure hours, the troops can watch football games piped in from the United States by satellite. In all, the airmen at Prince Sultan can get 11 television channels.

In the beginning, food was poor. Airmen got few cooked meals, eating mostly the ubiquitous meals, ready-to-eat. Now, airmen are served meals in three dining facilities. As a morale booster, they are served special meals on their birthdays. Recreational equipment, including free weights and exercise machines, have been moved down from Dhahran, and there are plans to put in a swimming pool.

After the RED HORSE teams had set up the basic infrastructure, the major force redeployment took place. Other Air Force personnel then took over for the RED HORSE units and continued construction work. General Dick said he was astonished by the spirit and determination of the Air Force personnel during the desert relocation.

"The relocation truly was a logistics miracle," he said. ■

Bill Gertz covers national security affairs and defense for the Washington Times. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "The Fast Pace of Special Ops," appeared in the September 1996 issue.