



USAF photo by MSGT. Val Gempis

The Long Deployment

The Air Force arrived in Saudi Arabia in 1990. Who thought it would still be there 10 years later?



THEY have become the unmistakable signs that Saddam Hussein is about to rattle the West's cage once again, and they can be as subtle as the silent flicker of a distant surface-to-air missile launch or as startling as the scream of an F-16 fighter's threat warning system.

On May 2—a day like any other in the no-fly zone over southern Iraq—Air Force pilots saw plenty of these signs. With no warning, Iraqi air defense batteries launched their deadly missiles and opened up with anti-aircraft fire directed at the patrolling Western aircraft. In response, a coalition strike package led by USAF F-16s pounded the offending Iraqi sites with precision weapons. Then, their work done, all aircraft returned safely to base.

May 2 was just another duty day in the Persian Gulf—Day 3,556, to be precise. Southern Watch began officially on Aug. 26, 1992, but USAF units by then had already been operating in the Gulf for some two years. Southern Watch was the successor to Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Desert Calm, the aftermath of the war that had been fought in response to Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The first USAF contingent arrived in Saudi Arabia on Aug. 8, 1990—10 years ago next month.

To the surprise of almost everyone, what was supposed to have been a brief stay in a harsh land has turned into one of the longest and most difficult deployments in Air Force history.

The mission increasingly resembles a low-level war with no end in sight. Air Force pilots—along with coalition partners—have flown more than 200,000 sorties as part of Southern Watch. That number exceeds the total flown during Desert Storm (though the latter took place under far more hazardous circumstances). In the past year, Central Command Air Forces has supplied 35 percent of the total air assets but has flown 68 percent of the total sorties.

Out of Mind

Meanwhile, combat engagements between Iraqi air defense units and US and allied aircraft have become so routine that they rarely rate a mention anymore in major US newspapers.

Since December 1998, coalition pilots in the southern zone have endured about 500 such provoca-

By James Kitfield

Storm damage. In the Gulf War, a coalition smart bomb punched out this bunker used by Iraqi forces occupying Kuwait. Nearly a decade later USAF forces use it as a storage site for C-130 aircraft parts.

tions from Iraq's air defense units. Central Command, which manages Southern Watch, reports that, in the same period, Iraqi aircraft violated restrictions of the southern no-fly zone more than 150 times, often in attempts to lure allied aircraft into "SAM-bushes" further north.

"It is kind of a surreal mission, because a lot of people back home don't seem to be aware of what we're doing," remarked a USAF officer with a hand in Southern Watch. "The concern you sometimes hear from aircrews is that they don't understand, from a policy standpoint, where this mission is heading."

Despite the relative lack of US media attention, Southern Watch has had a profound impact on the Air Force. (A corresponding mission, Operation Northern Watch, is headquartered at Incirlik AB, Turkey, and is managed by European Command. The aircraft of Northern Watch patrol Iraqi airspace north of the 36th parallel. EUCOM and CENTCOM coordinate their no-fly operations via use of a special "hotline" communications link.)

For one thing, the demands of this decade-long desert deployment provided major impetus for the Air Force's decision to reorganize itself into 10 Aerospace Expeditionary Forces capable of handling regular, extended but temporary deployments.

The Southern Watch mission contributed significantly to a breathtak-

Southern Watch Mission

- ✓ To plan and, if directed, conduct air campaign against Iraqi targets as a means of compelling Iraq to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 687, which calls for UN inspections of Iraqi weapons-making potential.
- ✓ To enforce the no-fly zone south of 33 degrees north in Iraq, in support of UNSCR 688, demanding Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein end his suppression of the Iraqi civilian population.
- ✓ To enforce a no-drive zone south of 32 degrees north in Iraq in support of UNSCR 949 to prevent enhancement of Iraqi military capabilities in southern Iraq.

ing pace of operations, causing major readiness problems throughout the Air Force. In May, an Air Force official said that one-third of Air Force combat units are now not fully ready for war—largely as a result of manning and spare parts shortages—the lowest readiness level in 15 years. To many, a large part of the problem comes from "the Sandbox."

The Southern Watch requirement for combat-ready forces has spurred equipment upgrades and modernization in the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve Command, which are now supplying 10 percent of USAF's deployed Aerospace Expeditionary Forces. In 1999 the Air National Guard contributed KC-135 tanker

aircraft, C-130 airlifters, an HC-130 refueler aircraft—as well as 17 fighter aircraft—to Southern and Northern Watch. Under the new 15-month AEF cycle, the Air Guard will commit over 25,000 airmen.

There Is an Upside

The frequent combat engagements and real-world nature of the Southern Watch mission have contributed to the rise of a combat-seasoned and experienced Air Force—a rare development in peacetime.

"You know, for an extended period after Vietnam, there were a lot of airmen who never even had the opportunity to drop a live bomb," said Brig. Gen. Hugh C. Cameron, deputy commander of CENTAF, headquartered at Shaw AFB, S.C. "Starting with Desert Storm and working for nearly a decade on Southern Watch, we now have a lot of combat veterans who have been shot at and who have put real ordnance on a real target during real-world missions."

The general went on, "There are tremendous benefits associated with that experience. I think Southern Watch was also instrumental in changing the Air Force's view of how it conducts business. You've seen that in our efforts to develop an expeditionary mind-set much like the US Marine Corps."

The southern no-fly zone came into being in 1992 as a result of United Nations efforts to protect Iraq's Shiite Muslim minority in the south. The so-called "Marsh Arabs," who inhabit the delta of the Euphrates River at the southern end of Iraq, had mounted

USAF photo by SrA Greg L. Davis



Workhorse. F-16CJs armed with HARM missiles play a key role in no-fly zone enforcement. Here, an F-16CJ from Prince Sultan AB in Saudi Arabia refuels before returning to its Southern Watch patrol mission.

a postwar rebellion against Saddam and thus had come under ferocious Iraqi air attack. The UN agreed to block Iraqi military flights south of 32 degrees north, and airpower was the chosen instrument.

Lt. Gen. Michael A. Nelson, then commander of CENTAF, deployed with his staff to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and took command of Joint Task Force–Southwest Asia, which ran this operation, soon named Southern Watch. USAF deployed additional aircraft to bring the number of aircraft up to 70 and deployed personnel to about 4,000. Nelson and most of his staff left in November 1992, but Southern Watch continued.

The Southern Watch zone (the northern boundary was changed several years ago; it is now 33 degrees north, which extends to the outskirts of Baghdad) is patrolled by aircraft from bases in Saudi Arabia and other locations in Southwest Asia and from US Navy aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf. CENTAF deployed an Air Operations Center to Saudi Arabia to plan and execute daily flight operations for US aircraft assigned throughout the area.

Since their inception, the two no-fly missions have evolved into twin pillars of the US strategy of containing Saddam Hussein and severely limiting the operational maneuvering room of his military forces. “The no-fly zones are a necessary measure to contain Saddam Hussein’s aggression against the people of Iraq and the region,” said Alina L. Romanowski, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, in testimony before a House committee last March.

She went on, “Operations Northern and Southern Watch have ensured that Baghdad is unable to use fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters against the populations of northern and southern Iraq, a limitation that sharply reduces the effectiveness of regime operations. In addition, Southern Watch also ensures that Iraq cannot secretly reinforce or strengthen its military forces in southern Iraq in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 949.”

Two Bombings

From the outset, Southern Watch represented a significant strain on the Air Force. CENTAF commits to the operation roughly 6,000 airmen and



DoD photo by S/A. Sean Worrell

Aftershock. *The June 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers killed 19, wounded hundreds, and forever changed the US profile in Saudi Arabia. USAF moved all units to the desert air base, and force protection became high priority.*

120 aircraft, the bulk of them from Air Force units. Soon after the end of the Gulf War, this large American military presence began to generate a political backlash among conservative Muslims in Saudi Arabia. Possibly as a result of an increase in local political tensions, two terrorist bombings were launched against the US presence.

On Nov. 13, 1995, a bomb was detonated in Riyadh at a Saudi National Guard Office used by American trainers. Killed in the attack were five Americans and two Indians. Then on June 25, 1996, a massive truck bomb demolished the Khobar Towers apartment building in Dhahran, killing 19 airmen and wounding 500 other US personnel. The perpetrators never have been publicly identified or captured.

US and Saudi officials responded by redeploying most Air Force and allied personnel to Prince Sultan AB, a desolate and remote installation located near the town of Al Kharj, some 60 miles southeast of Riyadh. According to Air Force officials, the trauma of the bombing and transfer to Prince Sultan reinforced the sense among airmen that Southern Watch is a dangerous mission requiring a completely no-nonsense attitude.

“Thanks to a lot of help from the Saudis in building new apartments at Prince Sultan, we’re now out of our tents and enjoying facilities that include a PX, dining facility, gym,

and a swimming pool,” said Cameron. “That has greatly improved the quality of life for our forces.

Security is the uppermost consideration, however.

“Our location way out in the desert doesn’t lend itself to people getting off base and touring around,” remarked Cameron. “That atmosphere of an expeditionary base reinforces an attitude that this is a very serious, real-world mission. That works against any of our people getting complacent, whether it’s the aircrews or our security forces.”

Southern Watch has been a prototype of the kind of continuous deployment to expeditionary bases that increasingly has taxed Air Force personnel and resources.

Air Force men and women assigned to Southern Watch found themselves separated from their home bases and families for unpredictable and extended periods each year. Bases back in the United States were often left short of required personnel. With so many of the most experienced pilots and frontline aircraft deployed to Southwest Asia, home-station training suffered.

Because such deployments were considered temporary contingencies, it was difficult to bring in reserve forces that required advanced warning and scheduling of operations. Smaller units with specialized capabilities in very high demand for real-world missions—surveillance and reconnaissance, combat search and rescue,

electronic countermeasures, suppression of enemy air defenses—were stretched to the breaking point.

The AEFs In Action

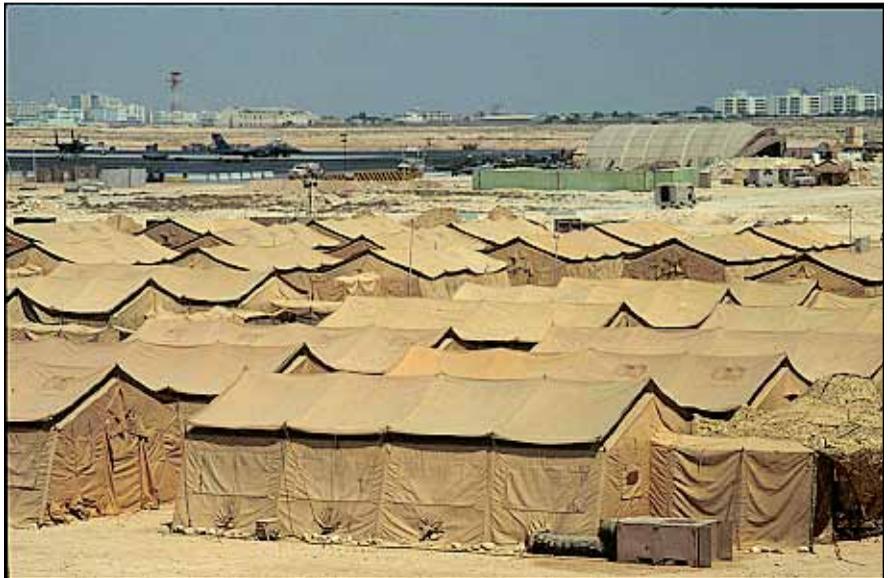
USAF responded by reorganizing its operations to become an Expeditionary Aerospace Force. Active, Guard, and Reserve forces were reorganized into 10 deployable AEFs designed to be employed two at a time for 90 days over a 15-month rotational cycle. Not surprisingly, when the first two new AEFs began their cycles on Oct. 1, 1999, AEF 1 was assigned to support Southern Watch.

Central Command officials say that AEF rotation has helped inject an extra measure of predictability and cohesion into Southern Watch.

“Besides helping the Air Force to develop a more expeditionary mind-set, the AEF is building a team concept into these deployments,” said Cameron. “Before, with base support functions, especially, you had a lot of individuals coming from different bases. With the AEF, those people will train together in advance as a unit, get to know one another, and thus be better prepared to fall in on a remote location and get on with business.”

However, many deployed forces still must come from the US-based wings of 9th Air Force. For this reason, officials claim, manning shortages persist.

“I only have so many civil engineers, military police, and public affairs people, and when



Staff photo by Guy Aesto

Nomads. Tent cities (such as this one in Doha, Qatar, used by an AEF in 1996) were early signs that the Air Force was shedding its garrison-based past in favor of an expeditionary future.

they are assigned to Southern Watch, I take it out of my hide,” Cameron noted. “Yet the demands at this base don’t go away. The AEF concept has [instilled] a whole new discipline in how we analyze our manpower requirements for Southern Watch. We’re constantly asking ourselves, how many people do we really need over there? We know the answer will have a direct impact on our operations tempo back at home base.”

The forward deployed forces of Southern Watch have seen their

share of action over the past eight years. For example, on Oct. 14, 1994, a newly assertive Iraq began moving ground forces toward Kuwait. President Clinton ordered an immediate response. Within days, CENTAF’s new commander, Lt. Gen. John P. Jumper, and most of his key staff members had deployed to Riyadh, where Jumper took command of JTF-SWA.

Soon, at Jumper’s direction, the Air Force had embarked on Operation Vigilant Warrior, which saw the rapid expansion of CENTAF air assets to more than 170 aircraft and 6,500 personnel. Iraq soon recalled its troops and the crisis passed, but the US decided to retain in the theater some 120 aircraft and 5,000 USAF personnel. Moreover, in the wake of the crisis, Kuwait for the first time permitted the Air Force to permanently station fighter aircraft on its soil. A squadron of A-10 attack aircraft bedded down at Al Jaber AB in Kuwait City.

Many, in retrospect, have said that Vigilant Warrior was a precursor to today’s AEFs. The concept was taken up, studied, and refined over the next several years.

In October 1995, as a result of Iraqi threats, Jumper once more became concerned. Specifically he was worried about CENTAF’s inability to deliver a full complement of airpower against a Gulf aggressor should there be no US aircraft carrier on station in the

USAF photo by TSgt. James D. Mossman



Up Close. An F-117 ground crew at Al Jaber AB, Kuwait, prepares for another day’s operations. The stealth aircraft have made frequent visits to the base, situated virtually next door to Iraq.

A Decade in the Desert

area. (Carriers did not remain on Gulf station constantly but rotated in and out several times a year.) In response, Jumper developed the concept of a squadron-sized AEF which would be able to deploy to the region on two days' notice.

Late in 1995 came the first deployment, AEF I, consisting of 18 aircraft from the 20th and 347th Fighter Wings, which deployed temporarily to Bahrain. (Roman numerals were used to designate these early concept AEFs.) In March 1996, the Air Force deployed to Jordan its AEF II, consisting of 30 fighters, four tankers, and about 1,000 personnel. Soon, new AEFs were deploying to the region several times a year.

Desert Strike

In late 1996, Southern Watch forces became embroiled in yet another combat action. Saddam Hussein launched his forces into the UN-protected Provide Comfort zone in the north, routing Kurdish rebels in the process. The US responded on Sept. 3, 1996, by launching Operation Desert Strike. B-52 aircraft and warships in the Gulf launched a total of 44 cruise missiles at targets in southern Iraq.

In late 1997, Iraq was harassing UN weapons inspection teams, banning them from Saddam Hussein's "presidential palaces" and other sites. As the Clinton Administration planned a response in early 1998, the question was whether Air Force units based in Saudi Arabia would get permission to launch strikes from Saudi soil.

Saudi Arabia had allowed enforcement of the no-fly zone but was unwilling to let its bases be used for attacks on Iraqi targets. Kuwait gave its approval, and other Gulf states offered help. USAF units in those countries were joined by B-52s sent to Diego Garcia and naval aircraft aboard a second carrier sent to the Gulf region.

Evidently, Saudi Arabia was fully prepared to permit Air Force fighters to strike Iraq from its bases—if Washington was serious about knocking off Saddam. The rulers of the kingdom had come to the conclusion that there would be no serious attack. Saudi concerns were not without merit. The US for years had tried only to "contain" Iraqi aggression with "pinprick" strikes, having no

Aug. 2, 1990. Iraqi forces invade Kuwait, threaten Saudi Arabia.

Aug. 8, 1990. First USAF F-15 fighters arrive in Saudi Arabia, initiate Desert Shield.

Oct. 31, 1990. USAF force in Gulf reaches 700 aircraft and 32,000 personnel.

Nov. 8, 1990. President Bush announces plans to greatly expand US forces and to use troops to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Nov. 29, 1990. UN authorizes use of military force to eject Iraq.

Jan. 17, 1991. Coalition launches massive USAF-led air campaign against Iraqi targets in Iraq and Kuwait.

Feb. 28, 1991. Iraqis give up, coalition suspends operations.

March 1991–August 1992. Desert Calm redeployment of forces to US. Control of USAF elements passes to 4404th Wing (Provisional) at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

April 5, 1991. UN authorizes Provide Comfort to protect Iraqi Kurds from Saddam Hussein's forces.

Aug. 26, 1992. UN establishes Southern Watch to protect Shiite Marsh Arabs from Iraqi air attack.

Dec. 27, 1992. In first serious challenge to no-fly enforcement, Iraqi MiG-25 radar locks onto USAF F-16, which quickly shoots down the Iraqi aircraft.

Oct. 14–Dec. 21, 1994. Vigilant Warrior increases US air assets to 170 aircraft and 6,500 troops. Iraq ceases threatening moves toward Kuwait.

October–December 1995. AEF I deployment of 18 aircraft to Bahrain.

March–June 1996. AEF II deployment of 30 fighters, four tankers, and 1,200 troops to Jordan.

June 25, 1996. Bombing of Khobar Towers kills 19 airmen.

June–October 1996. US redeploys forces from Dhahran to remote, high-security Prince Sultan AB at Al Kharj and to Eskan Village near Riyadh.

August–September 1996. Saddam Hussein attacks Kurds in northern Iraq. US responds with Desert Strike—B-52 raids and Navy cruise missile attacks on targets in southern Iraq.

October 1997–May 1998. Iraq harasses UN weapons inspectors, threatens to shoot down USAF reconnaissance aircraft. US deploys more forces to region.

Dec. 16–19, 1998. Desert Fox, a 70-hour air campaign, attempts to punish Saddam Hussein for barring weapon inspectors.

January 1999–July 2000. Increased Iraqi SAM and anti-aircraft artillery attacks on coalition aircraft enforcing Southern Watch.

military impact. Indeed, the crisis of early 1998 faded away without the US taking action.

The Iraqi strongman clearly was frustrated at being kept in his "box" by international sanctions, weapons inspections, and no-fly operations. Yet he was determined to continue his clandestine development program for Weapons of Mass Destruction. As a result, he expelled all UN weapons inspectors and, when it was clear the inspectors would not be allowed back

into Iraq, Washington and its allies decided to respond.

In December 1998, the coalition launched Desert Fox, a desultory, four-day campaign of strikes from the south against Iraqi targets. DoD officials insisted the mostly Navy airstrikes set back Iraq's ballistic missile programs by one to two years, degraded the infrastructure used to conceal Weapons of Mass Destruction programs, and reduced the Iraqi regime's ability to exercise



Into the Sandbox. Capt. Bill Peris, F-15 pilot at Kadena AB, Japan, prepares for a 2000 AEF deployment to Saudi Arabia. The long deployment has drawn in units from around the world.

effective command and control over its forces.

Belligerent and Militant

The nature of Southern Watch changed dramatically after Desert Fox, with Saddam Hussein adopting a more belligerent and militant attitude toward coalition aircraft.

The Iraqi dictator's behavior leaves little doubt in the minds of Central Command leaders about the threat he continues to pose to the region, or the need to keep him boxed in with Southern and Northern Watch.

Marine Gen. Anthony C. Zinni, CENTCOM commander in chief, recently told Congress: "Iraq has not forgone its missile and WMD programs and continues to resist the reintroduction of United Nations arms inspectors. ... Despite claims that WMD efforts have ceased, Iraq probably is continuing clandestine nuclear research, retains stocks of chemical and biological munitions, and is concealing extended-range Scud missiles, possibly equipped with [chemical or biological weapons] payloads. ... The Iraqi regime's high regard for WMD and long-range missiles is our best indicator that a peaceful regime under Saddam Hussein is unlikely."

There have been near-constant provocations of allied aircraft enforcing Southern Watch in the wake of Desert Fox. In the first month, Iraq committed more than 70 no-fly-zone violations, involving more than 100

Iraqi aircraft, as well as 20 SAM firings at allied aircraft. Iraq tripled the number of SAM batteries in southern Iraq. In addition, Saddam Hussein reportedly has offered a bounty to any member of his forces who downs an allied aircraft.

"Clearly, he wants to shoot down an American airplane," Zinni stated at a Pentagon briefing following Desert Fox. He added that Saddam may want a Western pilot "to parade in Baghdad."

Zinni continued, "He obviously has not succeeded in convincing Arab leaders in the region to support him. They obviously feel that he's been responsible for everything that's happened. ... He's much more isolated. [An argument] could be made as to whether these [provocations] are becoming acts of desperation."

In response to provocations, US operational commanders in charge of Southern Watch have been given greater flexibility. They can not only defend their forces but also target Iraq's entire air defense system.

CENTCOM officials estimate that, since late 1998, the coalition's aircraft have destroyed some 30 percent of Iraq's air defense network. In 1999, USAF forces dropped

roughly 1,200 munitions on Iraqi air defense sites. The combined Southern and Northern Watch Operations, meanwhile, cost an estimated \$1.1 billion annually.

"Our operations in the no-fly zones also provide other operational military benefits," said DoD's Romanowski. "Coalition responses have caused a significant degradation of Iraqi air defense capabilities in the zones, a development which will minimize the threat to our forces if more sustained military conflict in Iraq is ever necessary. Furthermore, our control over 60 percent of Iraq's airspace permits us to assess Iraqi military movements and other developments that might threaten Kuwait or Iraq's other neighbors. Enforcement of the no-fly zones thus provides us with critical early warning of any Iraqi aggression toward its neighbors to the north or the south."

In the meantime, American airmen are left to fly and fight in a remote hot zone. The unique demands and limitations in such a mission color every aspect of Southern Watch operations.

Iraq's state-controlled media contend that the allied bombings have claimed the lives of 290 Iraqi civilians. For their part, CENTAF officials point out that pilots err on the side of caution and will do so again if Saddam Hussein reverts to his familiar tactic of placing air defense sites in civilian areas.

"We constantly emphasize to our forces that this is not World War III but, rather, a UN mission, and we certainly don't want unwarranted civilian casualties," said a CENTAF official. "We're very careful to attack only military targets and avoid civilian casualties, which is showing more concern for the Iraqi people than Saddam typically exhibits."

As for Air Force pilots assigned to Southern Watch, few are complaining—as in past years—that the mission essentially boils down to "boring holes in the sky." Said Cameron, "You certainly don't hear that anymore. Every time our crews go into 'the Box,' they know there's a pretty good chance they'll get shot at. That keeps everyone on their toes."

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