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Desert Shield

Twenty years ago this month, Iraq seized Kuwait, and the US launched a buildup that led to today's expeditionary Air Force.

By Rebecca Grant

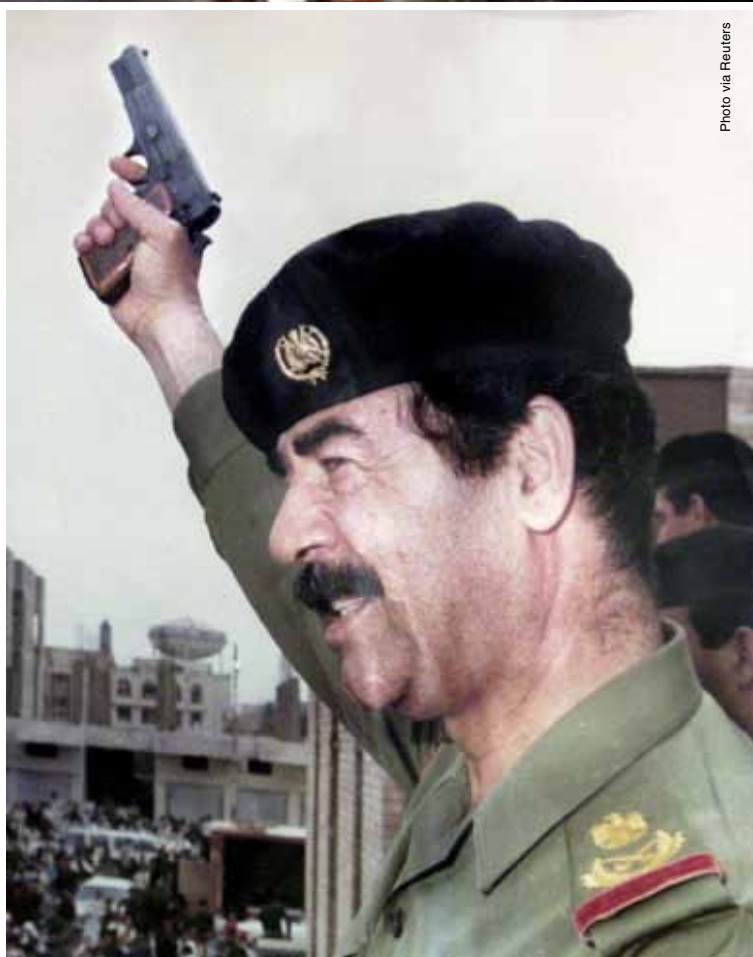


Photo via Reuters



USAF photo

Left: Lt. Gen. Charles Horner, the coalition "air boss" (r), confers with Maj. Hamad bin Abdulla Al-Khalifa of Bahrain's Shaikh Isa squadron. Below: An F-15C preps for takeoff at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

World oil prices, in Saddam Hussein's view, were much too low, and the culprit was Kuwait. In the summer of 1990, the Iraqi dictator demanded that Kuwait stop flooding the market with cheap oil. He further demanded that Kuwait pay Iraq \$10 billion.

Bickering over price and production levels was nothing new to OPEC nations, but this spat was different. This one was about to turn into a war that would shift the focus of American military strategy for the next two decades.

On July 17, 1990, Iraq's elite Republican Guard armored forces started moving from training areas. Within a week, 30,000 combat-ready troops were poised on Kuwait's border.

Gen. Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, remembers the moment well. "My intelligence officer came in and started to show me satellite photos and other intelligence which suggested an Iraqi buildup in the southern part of Iraq," Powell later told the PBS program "Frontline." "It wasn't immediately troubling, because it was just a buildup within their own country."

To the United States, Iraq was certainly no ally. However, Washington had quietly cultivated ties through the 1980s as a way of offsetting Soviet interests and Iranian fundamentalism.

Top left: Iraqi tanks roll into Kuwait City. Left: Saddam Hussein brandishes a gun in Anbar province.

"There was a lot of support at the time for Iraq as a balance to a much more aggressive Iran under [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini," President George H. W. Bush later recounted.

Relations were good enough that, in spring 1990, several prominent Senators met with Saddam in Baghdad. A big agriculture loan was in the works, and the US Commerce Department was reviewing the notion of loosening export controls.

Iraq's unusual military moves were hard to interpret. As a precaution, the US deployed two KC-135 tankers to the United Arab Emirates for air defense exercises. Navy ships spread a picket for air defense attack warning across the Gulf. The commander of USAF's 9th Air Force and commander of US air forces in the Persian Gulf region

was Lt. Gen. Charles A. Horner. From his headquarters at Shaw AFB, S.C., Horner put on alert both the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing with its F-15Cs at Langley AFB, Va., and the 363rd TFW with its F-16s at Shaw.

On July 24, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak flew to Baghdad for a meeting with Saddam, who assured him that he did not intend to attack Kuwait.

The US ambassador in Baghdad was April C. Glaspie, a career Foreign Service officer. She scheduled a meeting with Saddam for July 25. At that meeting, Glaspie famously said, "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait."

Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of US Central Command, was summoned to brief Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Powell at a meeting in Washington on Aug. 1. There, Schwarzkopf told the two top defense officials that, while Iraq was capable of crossing the border, CENTCOM's analysts believed they would stop at the oil fields and not try to seize the entire country.

They were wrong.

On Aug. 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Saddam announced that the emirate would be annexed and thereafter considered to be the 19th province of Iraq. Iraqi forces bypassed the Rumaila oil fields and occupied Kuwait City itself. They rounded up hostages and started issuing Iraqi license plates to all vehicles in Kuwait City.

Photo via Robert F. Dorr





Army paratroopers prepare to board C-141s at Pope AFB, N.C. C-141s hauled a massive amount of troops and cargo.

“Shocking,” said Mubarak later. “I couldn’t believe that this could happen in the Arab world.”

Glaspie, recalling the moment in a 2008 interview with the Lebanese newspaper *Dar al Hayat*, said that Saddam was “a megalomaniac,” and that he thought the US government “did not have any guts, that we would not fight, and certainly not for that little [piece] of desert that was Kuwait.”

Saddam made “the pretty intelligent decision that he could probably get away with it,” said Richard Haas of the National Security Council staff.

At first, the US simply condemned the invasion. “We’re not discussing intervention,” President Bush said Aug. 2. As Cheney later explained, “We really needed some time to come to grips with this basic, fundamental question of our strategic assessment of what this meant. Did it matter that he’d taken Kuwait?”

Modified on the Fly

Bush had traveled to Aspen, Colo., for a meeting with Margaret H. Thatcher, the British Prime Minister. She had no doubts about the need for international action. “I thought we ought to throw him out so decisively that he could never think of doing it again,” Thatcher later said.

Their discussion strengthened Bush’s growing resolve, and three days later he made an announcement: “This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait.”

No one knew Saddam’s ultimate goals, and the early fear was that Iraqi forces would next move to capture Saudi

Arabia’s eastern province, with its vast oil reserves. With Kuwait already under Iraqi military control, defending Saudi Arabia was the top priority.

On Aug. 6, Schwarzkopf, Cheney, and Horner met with King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. The king quickly consented to host American forces. Schwarzkopf left Horner in Riyadh to take charge as “CENTCOM forward.”

The ever-present question for Horner was: “What will we do if the Iraqis come across the border tonight?”

“Intelligence estimates now said that Saddam Hussein could throw 150,000 troops and 1,200 tanks against us in a heartbeat,” Schwarzkopf later wrote.

“Those first few nights were pretty strenuous,” Horner said later. “We didn’t have very much to stop ’em.”

The US government set in motion what it code-named Operation Desert

Shield, a plan to deter an attack and contain the damage if it did come. Airpower was the first and most potent striking force in theater.

The first Air Force C-141 touched down in Saudi Arabia on Aug. 8. F-15C fighters arrived, and US Navy aircraft carriers steamed into position. Airlift control elements fanned out to airfields across the Persian Gulf to direct the influx of air and ground forces.

The first contingent of F-15Es touched down at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, recalled Mike Decuir, one of the senior squadron pilots at the time. Still in their cockpits, they were “greeted by the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing vice commander, who said, ‘Get the hell out of here, we’re having alarm blacks [possible chemical attacks] all the time. Go here.’” And he gave them a yellow sticky with the word “Thumrait” penciled in.

The overwhelming requirement for Operation Desert Shield in August 1990 was to build up enough airpower to deter attack, to provide a response option, and of course, move other forces into position.

Within a week of the first US aircraft arriving in theater, large numbers of men and materiel were flowing into Saudi Arabia. Air Force E-3 AWACS aircraft, F-15C fighters, MH-53J Pave Low helicopters, and KC-135 tankers were all present in Saudi Arabia. Within days, KC-10 tankers, RC-135 Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft, and F-117 stealth fighters were bedded down at bases throughout the Gulf region.

“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



US Army M1A1 Abrams tanks test their guns in the harsh desert climate. The arrival of heavy armor allowed US forces to begin planning for an offensive.

armored invasion,” said Decuir. “We loaded 12 Mk 20 Rockeyes on our jets and stood by.”

USAF’s A-10 Warthogs would join the Army’s 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and beef up the defensive line to deter attack.

“I was in the bar at Nellis Air Force Base [Nev.], doing a specialized upgrade training, when we watched the news of the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing [deployment] on TV,” recalled then-Capt. Michael Isherwood. Two weeks later, he was at the unfinished King Fahd Airport, living with three others in a single room of a trailer left by airport workers.

Airpower in 1990 had many new technical capabilities. Laser guided weapons had been used effectively against bridges and other targets since Vietnam. Now planners could match precision weapons from aircraft such as the F-111F, Navy A-6, and the stealthy F-117 with impressive battlefield surveillance. The impact on Iraqi forces—if they dared move south—could be devastating if the right forces were in place.

That was just what Schwarzkopf had in mind.

The morning after he returned from Saudi Arabia to CENTCOM headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., Schwarzkopf called Air Force headquarters at the Pentagon. With Horner in theater indefinitely, Schwarzkopf wanted help expanding the air campaign plan. Gen. John Michael Loh, USAF vice chief of staff, offered his assistance.

Schwarzkopf’s request dovetailed with a planning effort already in motion to expand the targets and concepts for a full air campaign against military targets in Iraq as well as Kuwait.

Several Air Staff planners watched CENTCOM’s standard war plan unfold. To them, it didn’t appear CENTCOM was tapping the right air forces or working from a full plan. “The Air Force initially began to deploy what was in the off-the-shelf CENTCOM 1003 OPLAN,” said then-Lt. Col. David A. Deptula. “The problem was that it was outdated and had not kept up with precision weapon delivery capability of our aircraft, so the deployment plans were modified on the fly.”

On the initial list were F-111Ds—capable, but not the latest models. “I asked Loh, ‘Why aren’t we sending F-111Fs?’” Air Force Secretary Donald B. Rice recounted. “We had to get the F-111Fs released from their



USAF photo by Rose Reynolds via Warren Thompson

EF-111s (foreground) and F-111s (background) such as these operated out of Taif in Saudi Arabia. If Iraqi forces came across the border that August, it would have been airpower blunting the attack.

commitment to NATO for deployment to the Gulf. ... I wanted to get all our precision guided capabilities over there that we could.”

The other big question was where to bed down forces. “In some places, there was nothing but concrete. In other places, the Saudi princes had built a big infrastructure,” Rice said.

“Desert war historically has been won by those who have envisioned it more like a war at sea—with wide flexibility for maneuver and envelopment and associated air operations—than by those who have conceptualized it in terms of traditional land combat,” summarized Air Force historian Richard P. Hallion in an August 1990 memo for planners working for Col. John A. Warden III, Pentagon “Checkmate” division chief.

Hallion pointed out that while air attack had mixed effects on civilian morale in World War II, history proved it devastating to enemy forces in the field.

Speed Bumps

Warden pulled together a wider plan named “Instant Thunder.” He briefed it first to the Air Staff and then to Powell and a Joint Staff audience Aug. 11; to Schwarzkopf in Tampa Aug. 17; and to Horner in Riyadh Aug. 20.

That was also the day the buildup of forces in Saudi Arabia reached a critical point. The Army’s 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized) arrived, and defenders now “had a capability of fighting in place,” Horner later told “Frontline.” “Up to then, we had light troops, ... and quite frankly, they’d have been speed bumps to the attacking Iraqi Army.”

With the defensive prospects looking up, Horner kept the best of the Instant Thunder material and searched for someone who could fold it into a full-fledged air campaign—ranging from strategic attacks to heavy air attrition of Iraqi armor.

“I was in a fog about who to pick. Then, just like in cartoons when the lightbulb comes on over somebody’s head, it hit me. Buster Glosson!” Horner recounted.

Then-Brig. Gen. Buster C. Glosson was in Bahrain as deputy commander, Joint Task Force-Middle East, embarked on USS *LaSalle*. He arrived in Riyadh on Aug. 21 and “became the engine that drove the Desert Storm air campaign,” in the words of historian Richard T. Reynolds.

By the end of August, the shield was stronger. A capable force including 10 combat wings was in place. “Saudi Arabia had absorbed more of our troops and military hardware than it had in its own armed forces,” observed Schwarzkopf.

“One more week and Saddam will have waited too long. ... He’ll be in deep trouble,” wrote Glosson in his diary on Aug. 28.

A comprehensive plan was taking shape by the time the air planners briefed Schwarzkopf on Sept. 5.

Deptula had come with Warden’s team and stayed in theater assisting Glosson, including flipping slides in the first, tense brief to Horner. Deptula recalled the larger challenges of building and selling the air campaign that fall: “convincing the Air Force, Joint Staff, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the CENTCOM leadership of the value



Airmen load a Mk 117 bomb onto a B-52 Stratofortress during prewar preparation.

of an air campaign as the centerpiece of Desert Storm; getting sufficient numbers of precision capable aircraft and weapons into theater rapidly; overcoming the visceral separate service component doctrines and dogma and turning those perspectives into a unified air campaign effort; dealing with an intelligence process, architecture, and culture that was then unresponsive to the demands of rapid planning and precision conventional air operations."

Outclassed

The buildup went on. In six weeks, Military Airlift Command surpassed the tonnage totals of the Berlin Airlift. Eventually, 145 C-130s formed an intratheater airlift web. C-5s and C-141s handled most of the passengers and air-delivered cargo, with the Civil Reserve Air Fleet activated for the first time ever to carry the rest.

Then, Gen. Michael J. Dugan, Air Force Chief of Staff, was abruptly fired by Cheney. Dugan had told reporters that airpower would play the leading role in an Iraq conflict, and advocated targeting downtown Baghdad. Cheney

was outraged, and Dugan was out on Sept. 17—soon to be replaced by Gen. Merrill A. McPeak.

By October, a three-phase air plan was mature enough to brief to President Bush. Schwarzkopf dispatched Glosson to Washington. Bush "had an understanding of airpower execution that not very many people in politics have," Glosson realized as he worked through the charts. Bush and others peppered him with questions about the plan, but their buy-in was evident.

"The White House is very comfortable with the air plan," Powell later reported to Schwarzkopf.

By Nov. 1, the Air Force alone had brought in 700 aircraft, more than half of them combat types or "shooters," and more than 31,000 people, said McPeak. "At this point, CENTAF [Central Command Air Forces] by itself easily outclassed the entire Iraqi Air Force," he said. Additional forces

were continually arriving.

There were public relations problems at home, however, and it was difficult generating support for a war to liberate Kuwait. Early planning estimates forecast heavy casualties—and Vietnam

still cast a long shadow over domestic opinion. "There was very little public support in the United States for the idea of going to war in the Persian Gulf," said Secretary of State James A. Baker III. "In fact, it was overwhelmingly opposed."

The plan demanded more troops, but the Administration waited until Nov. 8 (two days after the 1990 midterm elections) to announce that more than 200,000 additional personnel were headed to the Gulf.

This represented a shift, as the new forces explicitly were to provide the coalition with the ability to attack Iraq. As Bush noted in his announcement, the next phase was "to ensure that the coalition has an adequate offensive military option should that be necessary."

In contrast to the domestic debate, international resolve was strengthening. Some 30 nations contributed military forces to the coalition. Gulf state allies, Germany, and Japan piled up monetary contributions totaling \$54 billion to defray the cost of operations.

Most important, on Nov. 29, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 678, authorizing members to use "all necessary means" to restore Kuwait's sovereignty unless Iraq was out by Jan. 15, 1991. It was the first such resolution since the Korean War in 1950. The US had fought with allies before, but this international coalition was a colossus.

In fact, the White House was convinced of the necessity for war. "He was going to throw that son of a bitch out of Kuwait, regardless of whether the Congress or the public supported



The 23rd Fighter Wing posted this sign at its deployed location, King Fahd Arpt., Saudi Arabia, noting the Flying Tigers' far-flung deployments.

Photo courtesy of Michael Isherwood

him,” Robert M. Gates, who was on loan from the CIA as deputy national security advisor, said of Bush.

For all their resolve, senior leaders were privately dealing with a major unknown. What weapons of mass destruction would Iraq unleash?

Horrifying precedent existed. During the long Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, Iraq repeatedly and effectively used poison gas against Iran.

The Air Show Begins

On Aug. 20, 1988, a cease-fire between Iran and Iraq went into effect. Five days later, Saddam began poison-gas attacks on Kurdish villages in northern Iraq. In 1989, State Department officials told Baker that Iraq was working on chemical and biological weapons, and that terrorists were operating out of Iraq.

Gates remembered a widespread view “in the government at the very highest level” that “there was a real likelihood that Saddam would use chemical weapons.”

Biological warfare was another worry. Iraq had opened four biological weapons complexes in 1989. Horner and Glosson already had plans to target suspected biological weapons bunkers early in the campaign, but intelligence sources were uncertain about what Saddam might truly have on hand.

One remedy was to vaccinate as many as possible. “Powell called me in one day and simply told me that we weren’t properly prepared to deal with the potential that Iraq would use biological agents against our forces,” said then-Brig. Gen. John P. Jumper, whom Powell tasked with solving the vaccine shortage problem.

By December, Horner had “an embarrassment of riches” at his disposal, according to McPeak.

Military will was also strong. “Nearly all US military officers occupying leadership positions were Vietnam veterans, united by a firm resolve not to repeat what we saw as the mistakes that led to defeat there,” said McPeak. “People at the top, epitomized by Colin Powell, believed we must be ‘decisive,’” and that meant providing more than enough force to tackle the Iraqis.

Crews waiting in the desert wondered if they’d get a chance to fight, or just be sent home. “The atmosphere during this time was mixed. There was a lot of ‘BIV’ [back in Vietnam talk] from the older pilots,” Isherwood recalled. Within the A-10 wing, there were only

two or three pilots with combat time.

Last-minute adjustments included importuning the Saudis to bring F-15Es closer to a base at al Kharj, just 621 miles from Baghdad itself. The ambitious attack plan called for the F-117s to make the first strikes deep in Iraq.

One last hurdle remained. In Washington, Congress had a joint resolution up for a vote. It authorized Bush “to use United States armed forces” to enforce the UN resolution. But would it pass?

“It is not an option for the Congress of the United States to disapprove what we for months have asked others to support. It is unthinkable that our government would now lose its will,” said Sen. John C. Danforth (R) of Missouri.

The vote came on Jan. 12, 1991. Intense debate led to a Senate authorization for war by a vote of 52 to 47. The House quickly passed a similar resolution.

January 1991 saw the coalition force grow to astonishing totals. Nearly 540,000 ground troops from 31 countries were in place. More than 660,000 total military personnel were in theater—nearly half a million of these were Americans. Some 1,800 combat aircraft and numerous supporting aircraft had deployed.

Across the Kuwaiti border waited up to 43 Iraqi divisions. Most were not at full strength, but one postwar estimate placed the number of Iraqi troops at around 330,000. With them were 4,200 tanks, 2,800 armored personnel carriers, and 3,100 artillery pieces. Seven hundred combat aircraft and a fully integrated air defense system laced with sector operations centers awaited the fate planned for them by Horner.

The A-10s were ready. “The wing commander came around and talked to the boys,” said Isherwood. “He said there was nothing to be ashamed of if



USAF photo by Rose Reynolds via Warren Thompson

On Jan. 17, 1991, F-117 stealth fighters like these hit Baghdad with the first bombs of Operation Desert Storm.

you had the jitters. He said before his first couple of combat missions, he threw up.”

“The Air Force had been ready to go for some time, but the Army was stretched getting set,” McPeak said. “My view was the Army could continue to prepare while watching the air show.”

More than five months of massive buildup, with a major shift over time from defensive forces to offensive capabilities, was now complete.

H-Hour, 3:00 a.m. in Saudi Arabia, Jan. 17, 1991, passed with a low hush of activity in the semidark tactical air control center in Riyadh. Already, F-117s were in Iraq, flying in radio silence toward their targets. One F-117 slewed a laser guided 2,000-pound bomb into a telephone exchange building in Baghdad.

The command center’s television, broadcasting CNN, went to blue-gray static. Up went the cheer. The war was under way. ■

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