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The Great Escape

By Rebecca Grant

In the Gulf War’s final hours, Iraq’s Republican Guard escaped the clutches of their adversaries, fled to Baghdad, regrouped, and lived to fight another day—soon.

How did this happen? On the war’s last full day, Feb. 27, Schwarzkopf allowed his judgment to be clouded by confusion about the position of his forces and the nature of the Republican Guard escape plan. He announced “the gate is closed” on the Guard, stoking pressure for a ceasefire. President Bush acceded, the shooting stopped, and the Iraqis slipped the noose.

Col. Douglas A. MacGregor, who fought with the US Army’s 2nd Ar-

Iraqi armed forces parade through Victory Square, Baghdad, in December 2000.
mored Cavalry Regiment and wrote an influential book, *Breaking the Phalanx*, compared the result of the Gulf battle to that of the 1863 Confederate maneuver victory at Chancellorsville. Both, he said, “bore no abiding fruits.”

The land offensive began on Feb. 24. It was Phase 4 of Schwarzkopf’s war plan. Phase 4 called for two US-led land corps to drive north through breached Iraqi infantry positions, turn east, and trap the Republican Guard.

The Republican Guard Forces Command fielded six full divisions. There were three of armor—the Tawakalna, Medina, and Hammurabi—and three of motorized infantry—the Nebuchadnezzar, al Faw, and Adnan. Three of the divisions had spearheaded the invasion of Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990, but they had redeployed to interior positions and were replaced at the front by infantry.

The replacement divisions, inferior in quality, had been arrayed along the Saudi border with Kuwait and Iraq.

In the war’s first 38 days (the airpower-only phase), coalition air attacks reduced Iraqi front-line units to one-half of prewar strength. Air strikes had also weakened the Republican Guard but not to the same extent.

Coalition air forces focused first on hitting the three armored divisions. By the time Schwarzkopf launched the ground offensive, the Tawakalna was judged to be at 58 percent of prewar strength, the Medina at 54 percent, and the Hammurabi at 77 percent. The Guard motorized infantry divisions did not suffer such heavy attacks. Coalition planners estimated the Nebuchadnezzar at 88 percent of prewar strength, al Faw at 100 percent, and Adnan at 83 percent.

The Nebuchadnezzar and al Faw divisions were positioned along Highway 8, an east–west artery running along the Euphrates River. The Adnan

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was positioned east of the junction of that road and Highway 6, another artery running north–south between Kuwait and Basra.

Against this Iraqi force, the coalition deployed two corps, each well-suited to its task.

In the east, VII Corps, commanded by Lt. Gen. Frederick M. Franks Jr., was formed of heavy forces. Its powerful spearhead comprised the 1st Armored Division, 3rd Armored Division, and 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment. Plans called for it to charge north and destroy the three Republican Guard armored divisions.

In the west, XVIII Airborne Corps, commanded by Lt. Gen. Gary E. Luck, blended medium and heavy forces, giving it speed and agility. The spearhead of its northward charge would be the 24th Mechanized Infantry, 101st Air Assault, and 82nd Airborne Divisions, working with France’s 6th Light Armored Division. The XVIII Airborne Corps was to drive north as fast as possible, then wheel east along Highway 8 and capture Basra. By doing this, it would cut off the retreat of the three Guard infantry divisions.

With VII Corps and XVIII Airborne Corps closing with the enemy, US Marines and other forces would move to liberate Kuwait.

As planned, the ground operation opened on Feb. 24, at precisely 4 a.m. The breaching operations went so well that the main attack began several hours ahead of schedule. The battered Iraqi front-line divisions collapsed soon after the coalition attack had pierced the defensive line.

Fighting swirled during the period Feb. 24–26. The two coalition corps surged forward and met resistance, which led to some tactical victories such as the Battle of 73 Easting (against Tawakalna units) and Battle of Medina Ridge (against Medina units).

The Republican Guard in contact with coalition forces weren’t fighting to hold ground but merely to buy time and cover a withdrawal. The Guard heavy forces were no match for US forces. The skirmishes pitted brigade-size Guard units against American divisions with far superior soldiers, training, and weapons.

In these skirmishes, however, VII Corps won only tactical successes. It had not yet closed the road leading north, which thus remained open to the Guard. Coalition tank battles with Tawakalna forces served as a screen for the withdrawing Medina and Hammurabi. These brigade-sized actions allowed Iraq to organize “a classic battlefield retreat,” Schwarzkopf later acknowledged.

According to a declassified CIA study, Iraqi forces had as early as Feb. 25 detected that coalition movements were far more rapid than anticipated. While coalition dominance of the air and the stranglehold on communications obscured much of the offensive’s intent, the collapse of the Iraqi front line was clear enough.

High-flying U-2s detected that Iraq had built a defensive line south of the Hawr al Hammar causeway that crossed the Euphrates River marshlands. From this position 29 miles east of Basra, the Nebuchadnezzar, Adnan, and al Faw divisions had a chance to protect Highway 8 and the causeway escape route.

In the XVIII Airborne Corps operating area to the west, Iraqi moves also were well-staged. “Apparently calculating that the coalition planned to cut Highway 8 and drive toward Al-Basra,” the CIA report noted, “the Iraqis began a major redeployment of Guard forces to block the coalition’s advance.”

On Feb. 26, the 24th Mechanized Infantry took Talil Airfield and seized Al Jalibah Air Base. Meanwhile, elements of Republican Guard infantry moved west, toward a defensive line crossing XVIII Airborne Corps’ advance. What’s more, two Guard armored brigades moved up in support.

The coalition leaders knew that a screening operation was under way. However, at this critical point, they lost track of the extent to which the Guard and other Iraqi forces were jammed up south of Basra.

Coalition leaders thought the Guard had redeployed north of the Euphrates. They had not. They were, in fact, herded together in a 1,700-square-mile area south of the river. Five Republican Guard divisions were hemmed in, with river crossings to their north and east and coalition forces advancing from the west.

They’d set themselves up to be destroyed in detail by either air or ground forces.

Franks’s spearhead had achieved 109 miles of advance just before midnight on Feb. 26. Luck’s forces had plunged northward and wheeled to the east in a giant enveloping move. To the south, Marines and other forces had taken major objectives around Kuwait City.

Speedy success caused two twists in the tactical situation.

First, very early on Feb. 27 (1:35 a.m.), a Radio Baghdad broadcast ordered Iraqi forces to withdraw from Kuwait. They fled along Highway 6, bringing more Iraqis into the congested area south of the city of Basra. Second, the two US–led corps began to outrun their supply lines and wear out their combat power.

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out their troops, who had been in action 48 hours. Soon, they would need to pause.

The first hours of Feb. 27 saw a resumption of rapid combat operations. In the west, XVIII Airborne Corps launched a fresh series of attacks and pushed within 62 miles of Basra and Highway 6. In the east, VII Corps pressed northward until early evening.

No one knew it at the time, but Feb. 27 was a day in which the coalition missed a golden opportunity to destroy the Guard.

At 1 a.m. that day, Franks and Luck each activated a Fire Support Coordination Line that effectively gave the Iraqi forces a sanctuary from air interdiction and blocked coalition air from bringing its full weight to bear.

The FSCL was a vital safety measure marking off a special protected area (inside the FSCL, where Close Air Support strikes were to be carried out under the control of forward observers) from regular areas (beyond the FSCL, where interdiction could take place).

The Joint Force Air Component Commander, USAF Lt. Gen. Charles A. Horner, allocated 1,200 sorties a day for what he called “push CAS,” in which two-ship and four-ship formations would cross the battlefield every few minutes. Strikes inside the FSCL had to be controlled by a Forward Air Controller.

However, if the flight got no immediate tasking from a FAC, it could fly beyond the FSCL and strike targets under direction of an F-16 or A-10 “Killer Scout.” If the Killer Scout had no targets, the flight continued to predesignated bomb dump sites.

The effect was to increase the number of strikes beyond the FSCL, and so, those targets were the ones where airpower had its best shot at the Republican Guard forces.

In the early phase of the land offensive—that is, in the period Feb. 24–26—the air and ground components placed FSCLs in locations that had been worked out before the war.

Then, on Feb. 27, things changed. The leaders of VII Corps and XVIII Airborne Corps, perhaps anticipating rapid and dramatic maneuvering on that day, set the FSCLs in their corps areas well beyond the actual lines of advance achieved that day.

Poor placement of the FSCLs carried a high cost. Two Guard divisions, the Nebuchadnezzar and Adnan, were completely inside the XVIII Airborne Corps FSCL. Likewise, the VII Corps FSCL sheltered the Medina and the main body of the Hammurabi. Only the al Faw division was completely outside any FSCL on Feb. 27.

The overextended FSCL boundaries meant airpower could only attack under the guidance of a Forward Air Controller. The catch was that FACs operating with Army units were not in contact with the main body of the escaping Republican Guard units. The ground forces were moving fast but still not fast enough to cover all of the ground they’d staked out.

When XVIII Airborne Corps began its Feb. 27 operations, its FSCL for that day was 54 miles to the east. At the end of the day, it was still 30 miles from its fire-control line.

Late in the day, Horner got the Army commanders to move back the FSCLs. Still, the new “Horner line” only opened up the area north of the Euphrates, an area known to be target-poor.

Data from the postwar Gulf War
The day’s events had left coalition forces poised for total victory. Under orders from Franks, US commanders stopped their forces at 6 p.m., fixed positions, and prepared for resumption of the offensive. Luck’s XVIII Airborne Corps was set to roll through the rest of the Nebuchadnezzar and Adnan’s western defenses and cut them off. He moved his command post forward, gave the 24th extra artillery, and approved an air assault to seal off Basra.

Schwarzkopf spoke on the telephone with Gen. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “I want to continue the ground attack tomorrow, drive to the sea, and totally destroy everything in our path,” said the commander.

This war-winning attack was to begin within hours—that is, early on Feb. 28. It was not to be.

“Instead of a final, climactic battle on 28 February,” wrote Army historian Richard Swain, “offensive military operations came unraveled in the early morning hours.”

What happened? The plans of Franks and Luck were done in by Schwarzkopf himself at an unusual press briefing in Riyadh.

It was 9 p.m., local time, when Schwarzkopf opened his briefing. It was televised live in Washington, D.C., where it was 1 p.m. “We’ve accomplished our mission,” Schwarzkopf said. He assured listeners that his forces had slammed shut all routes out of southern Iraq. He suggested that, while scattered units might be getting away, the bulk of the Republican Guard was trapped.

Powell, watching the performance in Washington, seized the opportunity to tell Bush the coalition was “within the window of success” and that he should stop the attack, which now would be perceived as “killing for the sake of killing.”

Evidently, Bush agreed. He soon announced that a cease-fire would take effect at 5 a.m. local time on Feb. 28. Informed of this move, Schwarzkopf said, “I don’t have any problem with it.”

It was now 11 p.m., local time. With the cease-fire six hours away, US commanders concentrated on disengaging their troops from the enemy. However, around midnight, Schwarzkopf appeared to waver and took a last stab at the Republican Guard. The cease-fire slipped to 8 a.m. With the time left, Schwarzkopf said, Luck and Franks should destroy as much of the enemy as possible.

At 6 a.m., Franks launched a last-gasp VII Corps attack. The 1st Armored Division destroyed 100 tanks and armored personnel carriers, according to Army historians. Meanwhile, XVIII Airborne Corps wasn’t able to engage before the cease-fire took effect.

At 8 a.m., the coalition halted offensive operations.

The cease-fire didn’t affect the Republican Guard at all. They kept going north. On March 1, Guard armored and mechanized forces were 60 miles north of Basra. On March 2, some were 124 miles north. On that day, the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division spotted Iraqi tanks and vehicles moving north. It attacked and destroyed 185 of them, but it was too late.

Most of the Republican Guard units made it back safely to Baghdad. Within weeks, these forces had brutally suppressed Kurd and Shiite rebellions against Saddam. They continue to support his grip on power today.

Such was the price of the rush decision to halt the Gulf War offensives.

Rebecca Grant is a contributing editor of Air Force Magazine. She is president of IRIS Independent Research in Washington, D.C., and has worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Grant is a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association’s Aerospace Education Foundation. Her most recent article, “In Search of Lawful Targets,” appeared in the February issue.