

The Short, Strange Life of PSAB

By Rebecca Grant



An F-16 from PSAB gets into refueling position beneath a KC-135 during an Operation Southern Watch mission.

USAF photo by TSgt. John E. Laskey

For seven years, Prince Sultan Air Base was USAF's indispensable Middle Eastern hub.

For seven years, it was the Air Force's biggest expeditionary operating location and the epicenter of air wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Then, like a mirage, it vanished from USAF operations.

This was the short, strange life of Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia. The US Air Force first occupied the sprawling base in two frantic months from November 1990 to January 1991, then departed. Five years later, USAF and coalition forces moved back into the base. It quickly became a massive facility, home to a state-of-the-art air operations center and serving as the hub for air activity in the region.

Prince Sultan Air Base—known as PSAB—started out under another name. The half-finished base at Al Kharj first came to the attention of Air Force planners in the fall of 1990. Lt. Gen. Charles A.

Horner, commander of US and allied air operations for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, was planning to bring in more aircraft to pummel Iraqi divisions, and he wanted to open up the site so he could base strike aircraft close to battle areas. Al Kharj was a natural fit. Some 50 miles southeast of Riyadh, the base was slated to grow into a major Saudi military installation. However, the Saudis had only built the runway, taxiway, and parking apron.

RED HORSE civil engineering airmen took over in mid-November 1990 with assistance from the 4th Civil Engineer Squadron. Shovel work began Nov. 25. Creating a working air base out of the desert sand was USAF's job, and according to the *Gulf War Airpower Survey*, this turned into one of the biggest challenges facing Air Force engineers during the war.

Step 1 was building a red clay pad 12 inches thick as foundation for the Tent City. A total of 630 temperature-controlled tents followed, along with four kitchens, 26 shower units, a gym, and a power plant with 17 750 kw generators. Aircraft touched down at Al Kharj in early January 1991 and the base had 4,900 USAF personnel deployed by Jan. 17, 1991.

"In less than two months," summed up the official airpower survey, "Al Kharj changed from a base with no buildings to one with tents, dining halls, hangar space, a hospital, electric power generators, and other services to support a population of almost 5,000 Air Force personnel."

Al Kharj became the combat home to the busiest Air Force warbirds: C-130s, F-16s, F-15Cs, and F-15Es.

Lt. Col. Kenneth M. DeCuir was one of the F-15E pilots from the 335th Fighter



USAF photo

An aerial view of Maintenance City at Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia, during Operation Southern Watch. The 363rd Air Expeditionary Wing was the primary unit responsible for Southern Watch during the last years of the operation.

Squadron who went to Al Kharj. “Shortly before Christmas we deployed to Al Kharj and set up shop in Tent City,” he recalled. A sister squadron joined them on Dec. 27, “so we had both operational squadrons in the USAF, and all the LANTIRN targeting pods, too—24 [pods] total.”

The huge effort to prepare Al Kharj paid off in combat effectiveness. The two F-15E squadrons posted 2,172 sorties on missions from hunting mobile Scud missiles to destroying tanks with laser guided bombs.

Digging In

After the 1991 Gulf War, the big base at Al Kharj saw no US activity for five years. Detachments chopped to the 4404th Provisional Wing at Dhahran shouldered the burden of patrolling the southern no-fly zone drawn under UN cease-fire terms.

Then came the terrorist attack at Khobar Towers on June 25, 1996, which killed 19 Air Force airmen.

The Gulf War itself had been notably free of terrorist activity. Base security was on the list of concerns, but host nation security was deemed effective. Indeed, only one minor terrorist incident occurred. Four Palestinians and two Yemenis opened fire on a bus transporting servicemen near Jeddah Air Base. The Saudi security forces whisked them away.

After Khobar, base security became paramount. “We’re looking at all of the forces which are involved in the operational mission—Operation Southern Watch—the deterrence mission that’s going on there,” said Secretary of Defense William J. Perry in a July 1996 briefing just days after the tragedy. “All of them are considered as possible candidates for this move, and that amounts to three or four thousand.”

No-fly zone operations moved to PSAB. “It’s sad, but we just weren’t safe in Dhahran. And it’s safe here,” said Brig. Gen.

Daniel M. Dick, commander of the 4404th Wing, in a *New York Times* interview.

Airmen at Prince Sultan swung into action to make it the hub for Operation Southern Watch. Conditions were harsh for the first arrivals. Concertina wire and an earthen berm encircled the base. Airmen slept in crowded conditions. It required a long walk to get to the latrine tents.

Of course, security was tight. Airmen were not allowed to leave the base—not that there was any place to go, except for the town of Al Kharj proper, several miles away.

“Welcome to Prince Sultan Air Base, which lacks a control tower, water, fuel, electricity, and a sewage system of its own, but now is home to 4,200 American personnel and 78 warplanes lured by its splendid isolation,” wrote a visiting *New York Times* reporter a few months after the move. Isolation was the first thing that struck most arriving at Prince Sultan.

“It sort of gives you the impression of a prison,” said Lt. Col. Joseph Worrell, the air wing’s chief civil engineer, in a *New York Times* interview in late 1997. Carving an operational base out of the desert was one matter, but what about making it the kind of base that could help airmen maintain top levels of professionalism in a desert half a world from home?

USAFRED HORSE teams quickly constructed a Tent City to house some 4,000 airmen, most rotating for 90 to 180 days. No trees or grass adorned the living area. It would be almost three years before the Saudi government completed construction on a new dormitory, the Friendly Forces Housing Complex, that offered improved living quarters and included a gymnasium, dining halls, base exchange, and a large in-ground pool surrounded by emerald AstroTurf.

“By the time the base complex was completed in 1999, it had cost the government of Saudi Arabia more than \$1 billion and covered well over a hundred square miles,” found Air Force historian Daniel L. Haulman.

Food was also a priority. Baskin-Robbins ice cream set up shop as did other popular vendors such as Pizza Inn and Burger King. In time, the exchange provided a small haven of food, shopping, and diversion. “It’s a little sliver of America in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula,” enthused CNN’s war correspondent Wolf Blitzer, who visited the base in December 2002 as forces there prepared for intensifying action against Iraq.

For all that, there was no mistaking that at PSAB the mission was the focus. The facilities were “modest but more than

USAF Photo by S/A. Richard M. Helleman



A1C Chris Culross stands guard at a control point at PSAB. The base was well-guarded, remote, and huge.

adequate,” said retired Gen. John D. W. Corley, who served at Prince Sultan as CAOC director in 2001 and 2002.

Playing by New Rules

“No expense was spared in providing them with the amenities needed to keep the morale high, and the airmen knew that,” Col. James Moschgat, the last commander of the 363rd Air Expeditionary Wing, said in a 2003 *Airman Magazine* interview. “They had great quarters, good food, and great recreational facilities.”

PSAB was a front-line combat assignment for airmen conducting Operation Southern Watch. It became a rite of passage for many units deployed there on rotation. The base’s purpose was to host fighters, tankers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft, and airspace control assets flying continuous patrols of the no-fly zone over southern Iraq.

E-3 Sentry AWACS were of course a constant presence, with the 552nd Air Control Wing supporting frequent rotations. Also among the PSAB tenants was a U-2 detachment—calling themselves “Desert Dragons,” a twist on their moniker.

The delicate landing process for the U-2 was put to the test in PSAB’s intermittent wind and sandstorms. “U-2 pilots landing in Southwest Asia work their tails off to keep that airplane in position,” Capt. Spencer Thomas, a deployed U-2 pilot, told *Airman Magazine*.

U-2s landed at PSAB with wings cooled by high-altitude flight but covered also in gritty fine desert sand.

Fighters sometimes chased Iraqi jets flying too close to the no-fly line. The U-2 flights, for example, often provoked the Iraqi Air Force to attempt intercepts

of the high-altitude spyplane. Iraqi pilots drove their MiGs to high altitudes then lobbed missiles. In doing so, they often overstepped the no-fly zone bounds.

Southern Watch demanded full combat readiness. “I remember being impressed with the mission capable rates,” said retired Maj. Gen. Felix Dupre, who visited PSAB in the late 1990s as a wing commander of deployed forces. PSAB’s good morale made it possible. “You were flying combat and carrying weapons. The motivation was high.” That motivation also showed up in the care taken with flight line operations and maintenance back shops. Expeditionary it was, but airmen still took time to arrange bins and tools to make the workspace function as close to the home facility as possible.

It wasn’t only USAF airmen who got to know PSAB. Four-person US Navy and Marine Corps EA-6B crews provided electronic warfare support to coalition operations and regularly rotated through PSAB, although the Navy fliers at least were normally carrier-based. Marines made multiple deployments including one in May 2002 where they racked up 730 hours and 188 combat sorties in three months. Another Navy squadron deployed to PSAB in February 2002 for a Southern Watch mission.

Conducting combat operations from Saudi Arabia was not always smooth. The Saudi government had much to say about what the American tenants could and could not do at PSAB. Dupre recalled a rule against visiting wing commanders flying operational sorties—a practice perfectly routine at bases in Turkey supporting Operation Northern Watch, the other no-fly zone.

The years from 1999 through early 2003 were a blur of activity at PSAB, which became the heart of a mini air war over Iraq that intensified after Operation Desert Fox in December 1998. Bursts of belligerent Iraqi activity continued as Saddam Hussein refused admittance to UN inspectors.

“PSAB was a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week, 365-days-per-year operation,” said Corley.

Responses in the southern zone often fell to airmen from Prince Sultan. “This year alone, Operation Southern Watch coalition aircraft have been fired upon 206 times,” said USAF Gen. Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a news briefing in September 2002.

Iraqi fighters increased their airspace incursions, too. “The most recent incident occurred on Sept. 24, when three Iraqi MiG-25s violated Operation Southern Watch airspace, flying deep into the no-fly zone area,” Myers reported.

By then, the desert base had grown a new state-of-the-art command and control center. Joint Task Force Southwest Asia shifted operations to PSAB in mid-2001 when a new combined air operations center, or CAOC, opened.

“The Prince Sultan Air Base CAOC was the most capable and sophisticated command and control system anywhere in the world when [Operation] Enduring Freedom kicked off,” wrote Benjamin S. Lambeth in his book *Air Power Against Terror: America’s Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*.

The facility was a gem. Spanning 70,000 square feet, the CAOC boasted 100 T-1 lines and feeds from ISR sensors in air and space. The CAOC set a new standard with a floor clustered with liaison officers huddled at computer monitors. Wall-size screens high above the darkened floor ran live feeds of the battlespace picture or drilled down to specific images piped from individual sensors such as those aboard Predator remotely piloted aircraft.

The improvements had come just in time. After Sept. 11, 2001, PSAB became the central command and control node for the Enduring Freedom air war.

Commanders gave the center high marks. “I think the CAOC is a new weapon system itself,” said Lt. Gen. Charles F. Wald, who led US and coalition forces at the start of Enduring Freedom. PSAB produced an air picture over Afghanistan within two days of 9th Air Force’s forward deployment. The CAOC allowed commanders to redirect the air war as needed. A prime example was the operations center’s ability to send new target coordinates to bombers



DOD photo

Terrorists detonated a truck bomb outside the fence of the Khobar Towers housing complex near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 US airmen in 1996. The attack led the Air Force to move to PSAB, which was desirable because of its isolation.

launching from Diego Garcia as they made their long flights from the Indian Ocean to Afghanistan.

Corley said Prince Sultan's CAOC "enabled us to work across coalition lines to plan command and control for the greatest effectiveness."

Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, then commander of 9th Air Force and US Central Command Air Forces, also praised the CAOC, but the connections weren't perfect. Moseley recalled one occasion when he had to step outside the building so he could telephone Pakistan's Air Chief on his cell phone.

PSAB was more than ready for Operation Iraqi Freedom, launched in March 2003. "The troops here are very well-prepared. We have been here for about 10 years now and so everyone is very familiar with the environment and the theater," Lt. Col. Fritz Koennecke told CNN in late December 2002.

Goodbye Abaya

Operation Iraqi Freedom was both crescendo and final curtain for PSAB. Plans called for combat aircraft such as F-15s and F-16s to operate from the mega-base, but the process of readying for war made it clear the Saudi hosts were uncomfortable with the presence of such a large, active base. The US worked hard not to aggravate Saudi sensitivities.

"Upon arrival in country everyone was briefed that one bad PR incident could jeopardize the entire mission," noted one service member who spent time at PSAB. For years, female service members leaving the base were required to don local garb and barred from driving.

Conditions at PSAB led one A-10 pilot to file a lawsuit protest. Lt Col. Martha E. McSally challenged a Department of Defense policy ordering female service members deployed to Saudi Arabia to wear dark robes called abayas when off base. McSally challenged the policy as "ridiculous and unnecessary." Her contention was that women should be able to wear uniforms on official business and dress in long pants and long-sleeve shirts when off duty.

Shortly after McSally's lawsuit made international headlines, Army Gen. Tommy Franks, CENTCOM commander, altered the policy. It turned out the Saudi government had only asked the State Department to ensure embassy women dressed conservatively. Abayas were never formally required.

Other delicate negotiations came down to the wire just before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. "We've had very productive

USAF photo by TSgt. Jack Braden



Maj. Jonathon Guertin, a U-2 pilot, prepares to fly a Southern Watch mission from PSAB. The sandy, windy conditions of Saudi Arabia made landing the aircraft tricky business.

meetings regarding military cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the event of military action against Iraq," State Department official Richard Boucher announced Feb. 26, 2003.

That day, newspapers reported that the Saudis granted formal permission for PSAB to be used in the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Operation Iraqi Freedom began March 19.

Once again, PSAB pulled its weight in the air campaign. Fuel was a metric showing just how far PSAB had come since 1996. Prince Sultan Air Base operated at maximum rates during major combat operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom from March 19 to May 1, 2003. During that time, the 363rd Fuels Management Flight issued more than one million gallons per day. Officials had previously expanded the fuel storage capacity at Prince Sultan from two million to more than 15 million gallons.

As OIF pressed on, PSAB's days were numbered. Another base built up from sand was already waiting.

In 1996, the government of Qatar had begun laying out a mammoth airfield soon to be called Al Udeid. Like the early days at Al Kharj, when RED HORSE teams first arrived in the fall of 2001, the Qatar base initially "was nothing more than a runway and a field of sand covered by two-dozen tents and a few warehouses," according to military analyst John Pike.

"We had thought through an alternate location as a backup," Corley said of the Qatar site.

Command and control and operations remained at PSAB as Operation Iraqi Free-

dom began—but not for long. Airmen and other troops began removing equipment and relocating it to Qatar as quickly as possible. A handoff of C2 responsibilities occurred even before Iraqi Freedom's major combat operations phase ended.

In Saudi Arabia, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz stepped forward for a joint news conference on April 29, 2003.

"We agree that since the mission of these forces has come to an end, there is now no need whatsoever for their presence," the prince said. "But this does not mean that there is no friendship between our two countries."

"All air tasking orders began coming from Al Udeid yesterday," announced Navy Rear Adm. Dave C. Nichols Jr., coalition air component deputy commander.

"By transferring the command and control from Saudi Arabia to the air base in Qatar, [aviators] will not face the same difficulties they have had in Saudi Arabia in recent years in getting approval for specific operations," Richard W. Murphy, a former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia told CNN.

The CAOC move was followed by steady withdrawal of US aircraft.

Air Force spokesman Brig. Gen. Ronald Rand summed up the American presence by the end of summer 2003 thusly: "US airplanes zero."

After seven years as one of the most important Air Force operating locations in the world, the US presence at PSAB was no more. ■

Rebecca Grant is president of IRIS Independent Research. Her most recent article for Air Force Magazine was "Linebacker I" in the June issue. Also see "The End of the Cold War Air Force," this issue, p. 40.