The final airmen to leave Iraq found the end of the mission as memorable as the first days of Desert Storm, nearly 21 years earlier.

The Last Days

In mid-January 1991, Capt. Anthony J. Rock, an F-15C pilot assigned to the 1st Fighter Wing at Langley AFB, Va., led a flight of Eagles during the initial air campaign of Operation Desert Storm. The strike package was charged with ensuring air superiority during an attack on Talil Air Base near Nasiriyah in southern Iraq.

Capt. Russell J. Handy, a fellow Eagle pilot assigned to the same wing at Langley, took off on another sortie that day. His mission was to protect the strike package and provide a close escort for EF-111s and F-4G Weasels as they flew toward their objective 100 miles west of Baghdad.

This particular aircraft package also included Capt. David L. Goldfein, an F-16 pilot out of Shaw AFB, S.C. As Handy broke left toward Al Asad, Goldfein headed off in the opposite direction with his eyes on yet another target.

The first night of that complicated air campaign eventually involved more than 600 aircraft and took months to map out. The intent was to dismantle Saddam Hussein’s military, stop his forces from seizing Saudi Arabia, and free the Kuwaiti people.

Long, Tough Road

Operation Desert Storm’s air war lasted just 43 days, but the US effort would continue for another two decades—first through 12 years of enforcing the no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq, and culminating last December after nearly nine years of combat during Operations Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn.

Goldfein, now a lieutenant general, is commander of US Air Forces Central in Southwest Asia. Major General Handy was the senior Air Force officer in Iraq from August 2010 until the last troops left in December. Major General Rock also spent 2011 in Iraq, leading the advisory and training mission during USAF’s final year in the country.

Not one of the three Air Force leaders ever imagined they would be working together to close out the US military mission in Iraq more than 20 years after that first air campaign. “Our first mission was to destroy the Iraqi military. Our mission 20 years later is to build the Iraqi military,” said Handy, as he stood on the ramp of a C-17, minutes after it landed at Talil’s Camp Adder for the last airlift flight out of Iraq.

Handy’s story is not unique. More than 170,000 Americans served in Iraq at the height of operations; most served multiple tours. The operations defined a generation of airmen and left a lasting impression on countless Air Force careers.

The cumulative numbers are staggering. Since 1991, the US and coalition
allies flew more than 500,000 sorties and generated 7,635 air tasking orders in the area of operations. Just since the fall of Baghdad in 2003, remotely piloted aircraft flew more than 415,000 hours of persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions in the AOR and analysts processed over 50,000 of those images. Mobility crews moved more than two million tons of cargo and four-and-a-half million passengers, while security forces accumulated more than 183,000 hours of guard duty, said Goldfein.

“For over 20 years, Iraq has been a defining part of our professional and personal lives,” said Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during the end-of-mission ceremony Dec. 15.

Speaking within a heavily fortified compound at the former Sather Air Base in Baghdad, Dempsey told the assembled airmen, soldiers, sailors, and
marines—who would be, collectively, the last American combat forces out of Iraq—"The road we have traveled was long, and it was tough."

The outcome, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta said at the ceremony, "was never certain, especially during the war’s darkest days."

"To be sure, the cost was high" in "the blood and treasure of the United States and also of the Iraqi people," he continued. Nearly 4,500 American servicemen and some 319 coalition personnel died, and more than 32,000 were injured or maimed. More than 100,000 Iraqis died in the invasion and subsequent sectarian violence that ravaged the nation. Pentagon leaders flew to Sather—named for SSgt. Scott D. Sather, the first airman to lose his life in Operation Iraqi Freedom, in April 2003—not only to end the mission in Iraq, but also to remember the thousands of lives lost.

"Those lives have not been lost in vain," Panetta insisted. "They gave birth to an independent, free, and sovereign Iraq. And because of the sacrifices made, these years of war have now yielded to a new era of opportunity."

Smoke and fire no longer dominate the skies above Baghdad, and the morning rush hour now clogs the highways instead of military convoys. In December, service members deployed to the international zone were able to walk the rooftops of the former Ba’ath Party headquarters, for one last look at the Iraqi capital’s skyline, without worrying about snipers or rocket-propelled grenades.

Panetta and the other senior leaders participating in the departure ceremony encouraged the troops to keep their heads high as they left Iraq, knowing they were leaving behind a country that is free of Saddam’s brutal regime, able to govern and secure itself, and that could be a US ally for many years to come—a prospect even more important in light of the “Arab Spring” uprisings of 2011.

"The Iraqi Army and police have been rebuilt and they are capable of responding to threats; violence levels are down; al Qaeda has been weakened; ... and economic growth is expanding as well,” said Panetta.
“This progress has been sustained even as we have withdrawn nearly 150,000 US combat forces from this country. ... We salute the fact that Iraq is now fully responsible for directing its own path to future security and future prosperity.”

Yet its future remains uncertain.

The last US troops rolled across the border into Kuwait just after dawn on Dec. 18. Days later a series of coordinated car bombs exploded across Baghdad, killing at least 70 people and injuring hundreds more. Less than a week later, a suicide bomber set off another car bomb near the Iraqi Interior Ministry, killing seven people and wounding 32 others.

Arguing About Everything

Though not completely unexpected, the bombings have left many to question whether a resurgence of sectarian violence will unravel the progress made over the last nine years.

Panetta warned frankly of the potential danger.

“Let me be clear: Iraq will be tested in the days ahead—by terrorism, by those who would seek to divide, by economic and social issues, by the demands of democracy itself,” he said. “The United States will be there to stand with the Iraqi people as they navigate those challenges to build a stronger and more prosperous nation.”

A small contingent of uniformed American personnel will remain in Iraq under the new mission of providing security assistance. Some 157 of them will serve there under the newly established Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq, a subordinate of the US Embassy headquartered in Baghdad. Its primary mission is to continue building Iraq’s military capacity by offering basic operator training and modern equipment through the Foreign Military Sales program, explained a spokesperson.

It’s a tall order for an organization used to operating with a much larger footprint. In early 2011, nearly 50,000 US troops and thousands of Defense Department contractors provided security, outreach, and training to the Iraqis. Now, the significantly smaller OSC-I team carries the burden of laying the foundation for the new US-Iraqi strategic security partnership.

“That is especially challenging,” said Air Force Lt. Col. Mark Pearson, who is overseeing F-16 sales to Iraq within OSC-I.

“Theyre is a negotiating culture ... based fundamentally upon distrust. ... You argue about everything, and that’s not the way FMS works.”

Pearson said it is “taking us a long time—it’s taking me a long time—to establish the relationships to the point where they will believe what we are saying.”

Active FMS cases with Iraq currently total some $8 billion, and that doesn’t include the long-awaited F-16 sale, said US Ambassador James F. Jeffrey during a roundtable discussion in Baghdad in November.

The US had already agreed in September 2011 to supply Iraq with 18 Lockheed Martin-built F-16 Block 52 aircraft. In December, the Pentagon notified Congress of a proposed sale of 18 more of the fighters, which would bring the total Iraqi F-16 fleet to 36. Including associated support gear and
services, the initial deal is worth $4.2 billion; the follow-on has a value of $2.3 billion.

However, the Iraqi Air Force still has a “long evolution” before it sees a fully operational squadron of F-16s, said Handy.

Lt. Gen. Anwar Hamad Amin, commander of the Iraqi Air Force, said he expects to see an F-16 operational squadron by 2016. However, he reported being pleased with the progress of 10 Iraqi officers training in the US to fly the fighter. The first of them was expected to make his first F-16 flight in January.

The F-16 project “was like [a] dream for me as [an Iraqi Air Force commander],” Anwar said during a news briefing shortly before the US exodus.

Speaking alongside Handy, Anwar pledged that the F-16s would be used “only for the security of Iraq, not to target our neighbor countries.”

Keeping Faith
The news conference was staged in front of a hangar where Iraq’s growing fixed wing capabilities were displayed.

The Iraqi Air Force operates three C-130Es, 15 T-6 trainer aircraft, a number of Cessna 172s for both training and ISR missions, and some Cessna Caravan 208s. The latter are also used for pilot training, though three are armed with Hellfire missiles for operational combat use.

This year, Iraq is slated to receive the first of six new-build C-130Js, said Lt. Col. Corey Wormack, USAF deputy within OSC-I.

“They are ... very capable, modern aircraft,” said Handy. “Because we operate those same systems, by definition, that strengthens our partnership.”

The Iraqi Army generally operates rotary wing assets and has 96 helicopters. It’s expected to field 135 airframes by the end of 2012, said Col. Scott Alpeter, Army aviation chief for OSC-I.

Although discussions continue in Washington about Iraq’s ability to defend its own airspace now that the United States has left, Handy said he has faith in Iraq’s air capabilities.

“I’m very confident in not only the Iraqi Air Force’s capability to operate these aircraft, but also in our willingness to continue in a long-term partnership role with the Iraqi Air Force,” he said. “As you know, when the Iraqi government purchases an aircraft through [FMS], they are not just purchasing an aircraft, ... they are purchasing a capability to operate that aircraft for the long term.”

Members of the 447th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron at Sather continued to provide around-the-clock training to the Iraqis in the final days. They taught basic skills required to secure an air base and suggested ways to make best use of limited manpower so the Iraqis could fill capability gaps after the Americans left.
The fledgling Iraqi security forces, which operate just one truck and one small Humvee, now control wide swaths of areas they weren’t allowed to enter not so long ago. The average member of the ISF is just 17 years old.

Iraqi troops, though, are well aware of the shortcomings and many worried about what their future would entail.

“We depended on US soldiers a long time; now there is empty space and we have to take control,” said an Iraqi private. He spoke through a translator and asked that his name not be used for security reasons.

“We don’t know how it’s going to go,” he said. “We would rather [the US troops] stay.”

Handy said individuals will have to determine for themselves if it was all worth it.

“Sacrifice is a very, very personal thing,” he said a few days before the last troops left Iraq.

“For me to stand up here and say a sacrifice was worth it would be putting words in the mouths of a family who may have lost a loved one.” This was something he was not willing to do, though he said Americans should rest assured that the monumental cost of war also brought significant improvements in the lives of the Iraqi people.

Surreal

“I would say there are tremendous things you can put in the ‘win’ category for our time here in Iraq. The sacrifice was huge but the opportunities are great because of that.”

Many troops were still grappling with that question, though, as they waited at an air base in Southwest Asia for their chartered flight back to the United States.

Some doubted the US really was going to leave, even as they lounged on their luggage outside the passenger terminal waiting to make their way through customs. The US rarely leaves countries where it has fought long and hard, as its continuing but invited presence in Germany, Japan, and South Korea attests.

Those reflecting on the momentous mission generally summed it up in just one word: “surreal.” They were honored to have played a role in history and happy to be leaving a sovereign and democratic Iraq behind, but many also said they knew there was more work that could have been done had the US military stayed longer.

“Six months ago, I didn’t think we would be here,” waiting to leave Iraq for good,” said CMSgt. Ward A. Hanning, who served as the Air Force’s senior enlisted advisor in Iraq since January 2011 and racked up more than 23,000 miles over the area since the beginning days of the first Gulf War. “I really thought there would be some type of political agreement” that would keep US forces in-country longer.

Such a deal was in negotiation, but ultimately faltered on the Iraqi government’s refusal to grant US troops immunity from prosecution.

On the evening of Dec. 17, Handy, Rock, and Hanning boarded a C-17 in Kuwait headed back to Talil to pick up the last airmen and soldiers to be airlifted out of Iraq. When the ramp opened up in Iraq, Rock stared out with a mixture of excitement and disbelief.

“This was my first target on my first day” in Desert Storm, said Rock of Talil’s Camp Adder, as he gazed out at the flight line. “You can’t make this stuff up.”

Minutes later they were strolling in to the passenger terminal with pockets full of challenge coins and huge smiles on their faces.

“Anyone call for a taxi?” shouted Rock.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” joked Hanning.

After all 65 airmen and 55 soldiers claimed their seats for the last flight out of Iraq on the last night of Operation New Dawn, the team of Iraqi air traffic controllers, who were trained by US airmen under Rock’s command, radioed, “Farewell, friends.”