H056.2 Desert Shield/Desert Storm Part 5 (December 1990)

SAM COX, DIRECTOR OF NAVAL HISTORY, 30 OCTOBER 2020

DESERT STORM DEPLOYMENT, USS *BLUE RIDGE* (LCC-19), August 1990 - June 1991
OPERATION DESERT SHIELD. September 1990 - January 1991.

Early December 1990. Mina Salman, Bahrain.

My nose was seriously out of joint as I listened to the briefing given by the Navy captain from Washington DC. He wasn't even an Intelligence Officer, yet he was briefing much the same material that I had given in previous briefings to the staff. By the end of the brief, I saw the brilliance of it. Because he was an aviator, wearing wings on his chest, he could use the intelligence to do something I really couldn't; recommend to Vice Admiral Arthur, the new Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and the most combat experienced aviator in the Navy, that we discard years of training and doctrine and use completely new and untried tactics for air strikes into Iraq. Only another aviator had the credibility to get away with that one.

Providing intelligence support for planning a bombing campaign in Iraq occupied much of my time throughout the fall. Although we had significant gaps in our knowledge of Iraqi Air Defense capability, such as how many mobile *SA-6* surface-to-air missile batteries the Iraqis really had, we had very detailed intelligence on key parts of it. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq bought a completely new Air Defense Command and Control System from France (called "KARI" -- "Iraq", in French, backwards) to replace their older Soviet designed system, although they still relied primarily on their Soviet-provided SAM systems, particularly *SA-2*, *SA-3* and *SA-6* missiles. Fortunately, the French were on our side during Desert Shield and Desert Storm; their aircraft would be flying along with ours against the very Air Defense Command and Control System that they had sold to the Iraqis. Not being stupid, the French shared what they knew about the KARI system, which was just about everything. As a result, we had very detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the KARI system, and most importantly, how to exploit the weaknesses. The KARI was a very sophisticated system, better than what the Soviets exported around the world, but it could be saturated and overwhelmed with the right electronic warfare and jamming tactics.

The Navy also had new weapons systems, that we didn't have in Lebanon, such as the High Speed Anti-Radiation Missile (HARM), that could home in on Iraqi SAM acquisition and guidance radars, effectively turning the tables on the SAM operators, since the HARM could get to the SAM radar systems before the SAM missiles could get to the target aircraft. If the Iraqis turned on their SAM radars to try to shoot U.S. aircraft, they took a great risk that they would be hit by a HARM. With the understanding of the weaknesses of the KARI system, new jamming and defensive electronic counter-measure systems, and the new suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) systems, like the HARM, we assessed it would be possible to degrade the Iraqi air defense missile network, a network that with the KARI system was even better than the Egyptian air defense system that shot down over 100 Israeli jet aircraft during the 1973

Yom Kippur War. The strike planners I was supporting began to believe that we could fly jets within much of the dense Iraqi SAM coverage, with a reasonable chance of surviving.

Unfortunately, the Iraqis also had well over 5,000 anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) pieces, by far the most dense AAA coverage in the world. Although "smart" Iraqi weapons such as radar guided SAMs could be "tricked" by our jamming and electronic countermeasures, "dumb" weapons like AAA were immune. Once an AAA round was fired, nothing could keep it from going wherever it was aimed. Whether or not a plane got hit by AAA was purely a matter of altitude and probability, the more lead that was fired into the air, the more likely that a jet would fly into it and get hit. Based on my description of the Iraqi AAA threat, our strike planners soon realized that aircraft flying at low altitudes near urban areas or military targets had a very high probability of getting hit by AAA. Unfortunately, our primary tactics called for our aircraft to fly very low. The tactics had been devised during the Cold War, when the low altitude AAA threat was considered the lesser of two evils, compared to the highly lethal medium and high altitude Soviet SAM threat.

Meanwhile an organization in Washington DC, called SPEAR, was analyzing the same intelligence we were, and wrestling with the implications. SPEAR had been established a couple years before the start of Desert Storm at the Navy Operational Intelligence Center in Suitland, Maryland, and was an outgrowth of lessons learned from the botched Lebanon strikes in 1983, and the somewhat lackluster Libyan strikes in 1986. The idea behind SPEAR was to bring in aviators (pilots and naval flight officers) to the intelligence center, give them access to all the most sensitive and highly classified intelligence, so that they could study it and devise operational countermeasures, and produce reports at lower classifications that could be widely shared by the rest of the aviation community. It was a great idea, and worked very well.

At the time of Desert Shield, SPEAR was led by Captain "Carlos" Johnson, an *A-7* attack pilot with combat experience from Vietnam, and he came out to personally brief Vice Admiral Arthur and other senior Navy and Air Force leaders on his findings. I didn't find anything especially new in the intelligence in his brief, but his conclusion was stunning, and the sound of wind whistling through teeth could be heard in the briefing room.

Captain Johnson stated that we could defeat the KARI and SAM systems with our new capabilities, but there was nothing we could do about the AAA. He recommended to Admiral Arthur that we should throw out our standard tactics and fly our strike aircraft above 15-20,000 feet, above the effective AAA altitude, but right in the heart of the *SA-2/SA-3/SA-6* envelope, which he argued could be defeated by HARMs and jamming. This would have been considered suicide tactics only a year or so earlier, and now Captain Johnson was arguing that, based on the intelligence and new electronic warfare tactics, our aircraft would have a relatively "safe" sanctuary above 20,000 feet.

There were clearly a lot of aviators in the briefing room who still thought it was suicide. If I had made such a radical tactical recommendation, I would have quickly been shown the door. The discussion was heated, but Captain Johnson eventually carried the day with Admiral Arthur, and the fact he was an experienced aviator made all the difference. Then he had to convince the Carrier Group and Airwing Commanders, and hardest of all, he had to convince the U.S. Air Force and General Horner, the Joint Force Air Component Commander, who was in charge of the air and strike campaign planning. It was an uphill fight, but Captain Johnson eventually prevailed, for the most part.

On the first night of the war, one Navy airwing, the *Saratoga*'s, opted to stick with the traditional low-altitude strike tactics; they flew into a buzz-saw AAA barrage at H3 airfield in western Iraq, loosing one A-6 over the target, another heavily damaged A-6 crashed in Saudi Arabia while trying vainly to get back to the carrier, and several others were shot up. Based on the post-mission pilot debriefings describing the astonishing density and intensity of the Iraqi AAA, it was a near-miracle the *Saratoga* Airwing's losses weren't worse. After that strike, Admiral Arthur issued orders taking away the option from Airwing Commanders.

It turned out that Captain Johnson was right and the new tactics worked. In my view, Captain Johnson and SPEAR, and the intelligence they used, were responsible for saving dozens if not hundreds of U.S. and Coalition pilots and aircraft that would otherwise have been shot down by Iraqi AAA. He was a real hero of Desert Storm.

Several years later, when Captain Johnson made admiral, he gave his captain's shoulder boards and insignia to me, which I have worn with pride. (2020 update; I passed them on to then-Commander Trey Whitworth, then the U.S. Navy SEAL Development Group (DEVGRU) N2 and now the Joint Staff J2, and he subsequently passed them on.)

December 1990. Mina Salman, Bahrain.

Within the first 30 seconds of the brief, it was clear that we had made a serious tactical error on how to brief the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC), Lieutenant General Horner, on the capabilities of the Navy's *Tomahawk* land attack cruise missile. Within three minutes, the briefing was over, as Vice Admiral Arthur called a halt to General Horner's unexpected attack on our briefer, asking the Air Force general to, in effect, "take it inside" the Admiral's office where they could settle it man-to-man.

As the two three-stars left the briefing room, the rest of us on the NAVCENT staff seethed with anger. We had assumed that the Air Force had left the *Tomahawk* missile off the Strike Plan (the Master Air Attack Plan) because they did not understand the capabilities of the relatively new system that had not yet been tested in battle. General Horner's comments, which dripped with arrogance and condescension, made it obvious that he had complete technical mastery of the *Tomahawk's* capability, and despite his understanding, he had absolutely no intention of including it in the plan. He wasn't sidelining a key Navy capability out of ignorance, but because he could.

The Navy was having a very hard time adapting to the new official joint doctrine, stemming from the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols legislation mandating more "jointness" in U.S. military operations, which was radically changing the way the Navy was used to conducting air and strike operations. In the past, the Navy and the Air Force would divide up the target country by space and/or time. The Navy would have an area and block of time to do its thing, and the Air Force would have an area and time to do its thing. Within their assigned areas and time, each service operated pretty autonomously. An example was the Libya strikes in 1986. Although the strikes were simultaneous, Navy aircraft off the carriers struck targets in eastern Libya, while Air Force *FB-111's* flying from the United Kingdom struck targets in western Libya, although the Navy provide all the fighter cover and suppression of enemy defense (SEAD) capability for both parts of the operation.

Under the new doctrine, the Joint Force Air Component Commander was responsible for running the entire air campaign and integrating all the Service Components into a coherent and efficient operation, at least in theory. From the Navy perspective, it would have been OK if the Joint Force Air Component Commander was actually "Joint," and the new doctrine did state that the Service Component that provided the "preponderance" of the air power and the best means to command and control the air war would be designated as the JFACC. The reality was that under any conceivable scenario, the Air Force Air Component Commander would be "dual-hatted" as the JFACC. A typical JFACC staff would consist of 95% Air Force personnel and a handful of liaison officers (LNO's) from other Services, who were usually scrounged from other commands, and typically treated by the Air Force like the outsiders they were. Although it certainly seemed logical that the Air Force should be in charge of the Air War, the reality is that the Air Force had a very good understanding of Air Force goals and objectives in the Air War, but very little experience or understanding of the roles, missions and requirements for Naval Aviation.

The JFACC's primary tool for managing the Air Campaign was the "Air Tasking Order" (ATO). Under the ATO process the Navy (and other Services) had to determine how many aircraft sorties were required for defensive purposes. This allowed the Navy to fly fighters to conduct fleet air defense and to conduct other air missions over water. All other air sorties were designated as "excess" and were available for use by the JFACC as the JFACC saw fit. Any mission flown by the Navy over land was under the control and direction of the JFACC. The Navy was allowed to nominate land targets to be struck, but the JFACC made the decisions as to which targets would be struck, in what priority, and by what asset. For example, the Navy could nominate a missile boat in port as a target, and the JFACC could choose to strike it with Navy jets, or *B-52's*, or British *Tornados*, or any other aircraft - or chose not to strike it at all, in which case all the Navy could do was resubmit the missile boat as a target for the next ATO cycle. For any target that was not on or over the sea, the JFACC could and did dictate to the Navy what targets to hit, when to hit them, and with what weapons. The JFACC also controlled all the "big-wing" tanker assets, which in Desert Storm was the single most crucial factor in limiting the amount of Navy strike sorties that could be flown. Even though the Navy had actually paid for 10 *KC-10* tankers in the early 1980's, the Air Force had total control of how all tanker assets were used, and the Navy frequently was left high and dry. All the directions for air missions and tanking were published by the JFACC in the ATO.

The ATO "cycle" took 72 hours from target nomination to mission execution. This worked fine for fixed strategic targets that didn't move. There were provisions in the ATO process for more rapid and flexible targeting of mobile tactical targets, but the JFACC had complete control over when to implement those processes, and would only do so when it suited the JFACC. With an air campaign as large as Desert Storm, the ATO was a huge, unwieldy document that choked Navy communications systems. It is widely known that the Navy had to resort to flying *S-3* aircraft into Riyadh to pick up hard-copies of the ATO and fly them out to the carriers, but for some reason it is much less well known that the Air Force did the same to ensure reliable delivery to its dispersed air wings and squadrons.

In the run up to Desert Storm, General Schwarzkopf effectively abdicated all responsibility for the Air Campaign to the Air Component Commander, Lieutenant General Horner and left it to Horner to resolve any disputes that arose between the Services over the use of air power. Horner used (some in the Navy would say abused) his authority to the fullest. Although Navy LNO's attended the appropriate JFACC Joint Targeting Boards and other Joint Boards, in reality all the key targeting decisions were made in a USAF-only organization embedded in the JFACC called the "Black Hole" led by Brigadier General Buster Glosson, which could and frequently did overturn or ignore targeting decisions made by the Joint Boards. The Air Force ran the Desert Storm Campaign their way, with little more than lip service to other Service

needs. Although *Tomahawk* missiles were incorporated into the Air Campaign, it took intervention from the highest levels in Washington to force the JFACC to do it. Desert Storm was the first real test of the new JFACC doctrine, and from the Navy perspective, it proved to be everything the Navy feared. (2020 comment: It got better in later campaigns.)

Late December 1990. Manama, Bahrain.

As we finished desert at the staff Christmas Party in a hotel in Bahrain, the Operations Officer suggested we should sing some carols. There wasn't exactly an overwhelming enthusiastic response, but we dutifully launched into a truly lame rendition of Silent Night. There was an awkward silence as we finished the first carol. I suspect we all had much the same thought, "Who are we kidding? We all know we're going to war. And besides, I still have a ton of work to do tonight." The Christmas Party was over. Wordlessly we shuffled out, heading back to the ship.

Four and a half months of incredibly intense work had pretty much numbed us all. I remember watching and reading about all the frenetic diplomatic activity in the last weeks of December and early January to avert war. I don't remember feeling much emotion about it. It was simply something beyond my control. I think the prevailing attitude on the staff was mild hope that the diplomats would pull some sort of rabbit out of the hat miracle, but we all doubted it. What none of us wanted was interminable delay as the diplomatic process ground on forever, leaving us in limbo as to whether we would ever go back to our families in Japan. No one wanted war, but most of us were resigned to the prospect. The expression, "The way home is through Baghdad," was heard with increasing frequency, along with, "Let's get on with it." It was clear from the pace of the buildup that we would reach peak strength by mid-January, and most of us assumed the war would start around then. For my part, I believed the diplomatic activity was just delaying the inevitable. The quote from Mr. Spock in Star Trek seemed appropriate, "Diplomacy; the art of prolonging a crisis."

A few days after the Christmas Party, on Christmas Day, several of us went out into town for a quick dinner. We were all feeling tired and glum. So as not to compound our misery by reminding ourselves of Christmas and home, I suggested we go to an Arab restaurant instead of one of the western establishments in Manama. We all agreed. As we walked in the restaurant for a meal of shwarma and kabobs, the place was packed with local Arabs, but was decked out in green and red bunting and tinsel, complete with Santa Claus, tree and "Christmas Special" mezze dinner. I guess the proprietor was a Lebanese Christian or something. The surprise incongruity actually lifted our spirits, at least for a short while. I did learn a valuable lesson during the dinner; in dim light, cauliflower and sheep's brain look nearly identical, but the taste is quite different. Yuk.

Early January, 1991. Mina Salman, Bahrain.

"Gee, as if we don't have enough to do," muttered someone as we reviewed the message. The bad situation in Somalia resulting from the collapse of the Said Barre government had taken a dramatic turn for the worse as inter-clan fighting raged in the capital of Mogadishu. The U.S. Ambassador was asking for urgent emergency evacuation for the U.S. embassy staff as well as numerous foreign personnel from other embassies.

We all believed that war in Kuwait was only a few days away. A non-combatant evacuation (NEO) of Mogadishu would have to be planned and executed in very little time. The plan turned out to be daring, the execution even more so.

Two U.S. amphibious ships, the *Guam* and *Trenton* were tasked to steam from their station in the Gulf of Oman toward Somalia as fast as they could. We struggled to try to get intelligence about Mogadishu to the *Guam* and *Trenton*, which didn't have the same communication and intelligence capability as the aircraft carriers. I'm not convinced they actually received everything we sent, but we gave it our best shot.

Two *CH-53* heavy lift helicopters, with embarked Navy SEALs and Marine Security Force, were launched at extreme range from Mogadishu. The flight was an epic. The only way the helos would be able to make it all the way to Mogadishu and have enough fuel to fly back to the *Guam* would be with two risky nighttime air-to-air refuelings from a Marine *KC-130* tanker, something that hadn't been done before. The plan also required the *Guam* and *Trenton* to keep closing Mogadishu at maximum speed, or else the helos wouldn't be able to make it back with a maximum passenger load. The dangerous refuelings were successful and the helos pressed on. One of them suffered a broken hydraulic line, spraying the whole interior of the helo with hydraulic fluid; the crew pressed on anyway, struggling to fix the leak in flight. Dodging ground fire, the helos had some difficulty finding the designated helo landing zone. In the end, the mission was a complete success, evacuating the U.S. Ambassador, the Soviet Ambassador and over 250 other western staff, and even delivering a baby on ship, as Mogadishu descended into the chaos and starvation that led directly to the ill-starred U.S. and U.N. intervention in 1992-94.

There was little time for elation. The *Guam* and *Trenton* were ordered to return to station at maximum speed. All of us turned immediately to full focus on impending combat operations in the Gulf, which is why my recollection of some of the details of the Somalia NEO, deemed Operation Eastern Exit, is a bit fuzzy. I do recall having a bit of a juvenile gloating reaction. Throughout 1990, the U.S. Atlantic Fleet had been preparing for a potential NEO from Monrovia, Liberia, designated Operation Sharp Edge, which they executed just after Saddam invaded Kuwait, the first in a series Liberia evacuations. For a year, the airwaves seemed flooded with messages about preparations for Sharp Edge, one would have thought it was the biggest thing to happen in the Atlantic Fleet in a decade. I couldn't help comparing Sharp Edge with the far more dangerous Eastern Exit and being reminded of the Army recruiting commercial, "We do more before breakfast than most people do all day."

My version was, "We do more in NAVCENT in two days than the Atlantic Fleet does all year." (A statement that while exaggerated still holds mostly true today.)(2020 update: yes, this is definitely a cheap shot.)

In another couple days, the *Blue Ridge* was underway for battle. Desert Shield was over.

In the next episode – (Part 6 January 1991) Onset of Operation Desert Storm.

Source (Me. Although I wrote these pieces by memory a number of years after the fact, the best pretty comprehensive source for information on the U.S. Navy during Desert Shield/Desert Storm is still the two-volume set of “Desert Shield at Sea: What the Navy Really Did” and “Desert Storm at Sea: What the Navy Really Did” both by Marvin Pokrant (the NAVCENT/C7F CNA Rep during both operations): Greenwood Press, 1999. (It wasn’t cheap.) Also useful is the Department of the Navy, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, “The United States Navy in Desert Shield, Desert Storm” of 15 May 1991 which has the best chronology and other facts

and figures. I would note that these are more “PC” than my account. Also, “Shield and Storm: The United States Navy in the Persian Gulf War” by Edward J. Marolda and Robert J. Schneller: Naval Historical Center, 1998.)