

OPERATION DESERT SHIELD

The Deployment of USAF Forces

By

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When Operation Desert Shield began on August 7, 1990, other than a handful of embassy "hack" aircraft, only two Air Force planes (and a few support personnel) were located on the Arabian Peninsula. These two planes, KC-135Rs, were operating with United Arab Emirate Mirage 2000 fighters in a refueling exercise known as Ivory Justice. Only five months later, when Desert Storm began, 1,160 Air Force aircraft were based in CENTCOM's area of responsibility, and another 129 planes were located at Incirlik, Turkey, as part of a joint operation known as Proven Force. This remarkable buildup, however, had not been accomplished without Air Force planners suffering some "heartburn" in the process.

Beginning July 9, 1990, and ending on August 4, just two days after Iraq invaded Kuwait, CENTCOM held a command post exercise at Eglin AFB and at Fort Bragg. This exercise, Internal Look, was designed to test various aspects of a brand-new operations plan, 1002-90. Both General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the CENTCOM commander, and Lt. General Charles A. Horner, the CENTAF commander, and their primary staffs participated in Internal Look. This participation proved extremely helpful when Desert Shield began.

1002-90 directed CENTCOM forces to "deploy... and take actions in concert with host nation forces and allies to deter and, if necessary, counter an intraregional attack on the Arabian Peninsula to maintain U.S. and allied access to and protection of key oil resources."

The second draft of 1002-90, issued in July 1990, designated 692 Air Force planes in-theater and another 114 on call, a much greater number than called for in earlier plans. Further, 1002-90 identified 14 specific airfields in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Oman, Egypt, and aboard three aircraft carriers where air units would be located. However, negotiations between the United States

and these countries regarding the use of these fields hardly had begun when Desert Shield started, with the result that case-by-case negotiations were necessary after the operation was underway. As it turned out, political factors and logistical considerations played a much greater role than anticipated, and created planning and deployment problems when it later appeared that certain airfields might not be available.

Although Internal Look proved the feasibility of 1002-90 and that plan formed the baseline for Desert Shield, the actual deployment operation was really an example of what is known as "Crisis Action Planning." This is a time-sensitive multi-phased process and is based on the CINC's assessment of the event then occurring. Generally, it is accomplished within a short period using a streamlined set of procedures. Some analysts consider execution planning (the fifth phase of crisis action planning) as one of the most critical portions in this process. In Desert Shield, this phase took but five hours to accomplish.

This rapid pace, and CENTCOM's initial decision to keep operational planning at very high security classification levels, created confusion, however, and significantly hampered planning for the first deployments. This decision for secrecy meant that many planners at those commands executing the deployments did not have access to the plans and had little idea of what was needed from their organizations. But when it became apparent the "close-hold" procedures were having a deleterious effect on planning, these security caveats were swiftly lowered.

More confusion developed during the operation's initial stages throughout all of the services about where, when, and how their units would deploy. Although 1002-90 specified forces to be deployed and had a detailed timetable for these deployments, it was still in draft form and had not yet

been officially authorized. Because of this, serious problems were created for the planners. Particularly bothered by this was MAC, which had a difficult time tracking its resources during the early days of the operation. Too often, units were not ready for movement when the transports arrived, or vice versa, resulting in an inefficient use of the aircraft. This situation was exacerbated by the continuous changes emanating from CENTCOM and the regrettable tendency of some high-ranking officers to try to "beat" the system by dealing directly with MAC headquarters.

A couple of examples of the problems MAC encountered: On more than one occasion, MAC called a unit to confirm it would be ready to move on the date specified in 1002-90, only to discover that the unit had been disbanded, in some cases up to two years earlier. In another instance, a unit was called to confirm its deployment. The unit told MAC that they hadn't even begun packing to move; they thought the entire affair was just a paper exercise. Needless to say, this unit was dropped from the deployment.

Shortly after midnight on August 2, the JCS issued a warning order concerning the Middle East situation and alerted General Schwarzkopf to initiate execution planning not for 1002-90, but for the deployment of a force utilizing a CENTAF rapid reaction plan published a couple of years earlier. This plan was designed for contingencies ranging from a show of force to limited defensive counterair and/or air-to-ground operations and was tied to all CENTCOM contingency plans. Undoubtedly, General Powell was still uncertain about a U. S. response to the situation. Unfortunately, the limited distribution of this order and its reference to the rapid reaction plan, not 1002-90, indicated to the affected commands that a response would be limited and almost exclusively an Air Force task. Thus, when the order came directing the implementation of 1002-90 it was a shock

to all concerned.

Schwarzkopf, in turn, passed the order on to Horner, and directed Horner to return to him by 7:00 that morning recommendations on what options the CENTAF leader believed necessary. Actually, Horner had already placed on alert the basic rapid reaction package which consisted of less than 1600 personnel. When he replied to Schwarzkopf later on August 2, Horner estimated that this force, in a worst case scenario, could be in place no later than 48 hours following notification and be ready for use 18 hours later.

On Friday, August 3, President Bush directed General Powell to begin setting out the military options for a response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Down at MacDill, General Horner and his air planners labored throughout the night and very early on the 4th preparing the air portion of the briefing. Later that day, Schwarzkopf and Horner travelled to Camp David to brief the President and other high-level officials. Using figures supplied by Horner, General Schwarzkopf told the group that his first priority was air power to gain air superiority, followed by naval, and then, land forces. By C+120, he believed his forces would be ready for combat.

On August 5, Secretary Cheney led a team, including Generals Schwarzkopf and Horner, to Saudi Arabia to brief the Saudis on the situation. Following these briefings, the Saudis requested the deployment of U.S. forces to their country. At 8:50 pm EDT on the 6th, the JCS issued the first deployment order for the operation that became known as Desert Shield. (Actually, it was not until August 9 that the operation was named Desert Shield.)

However, even before the operation began, deployment plans were unraveling. The uncertain regional situation, coupled with an almost constant fluctuation in requirements confounded the

planners as they wrestled with a seemingly endless number of changes as to which units would deploy and to where.

The first deployment order issued by the JCS directed the movement of two F-15 squadrons, AWACS aircraft and the necessary tanker support, along with two carrier battlegroups, the 82d Airborne's ready brigade, and some maritime positioning ships. There was a major omission in this order - no allocation of airlift or sealift assets. Without such an allocation, Schwarzkopf could not earmark for his components the lift that would assist them in developing and refining the deployment data. Also, Schwarzkopf issued further deployment orders on the 7th, creating requirements that were double MAC's capabilities. This lack of allocations, coupled with the decision to increase the forces sent to Saudi Arabia, created serious planning problems that were not overcome until September 10.

Meanwhile, at Langley, the 1st TFW had been on telephone standby since August 1, so its deployment was no big surprise to the wing. On the afternoon of the 7th, a little over 20 hours after receiving the deployment order, the first of 24 fully-armed F-15s took off from Langley bound for Dhahran. The flight to Saudi Arabia took about 15 hours non-stop flying and seven air refuelings. At 4:00 pm (Dhahran time) on August 8, the last flight of F-15s touched down. It was a highly successful deployment; all but one of the planes reached Dhahran on the first try. Within four hours of their arrival, the first F-15s were standing CAP alert. Actually, the first aircraft to arrive in the AOR were five E-3 AWACS aircraft which landed at Riyadh about three hours before the 1st TFW's F-15s.

SAC also began preparations for the movement of its aircraft to Southwest Asia. Seven B-52s of the 42d BMW (chosen because it was the only readily available conventional bomber unit), left Loring AFB for Diego Garcia on August 11, followed by seven more "Buffs" the next day, and a final

6 aircraft on the 14th. These were the first of 74 B-52s which flew their missions from Diego Garcia, Jeddah, Moron, and Fairford during Desert Storm. This initial deployment later created some maintenance problems for the wing. The crews believed it was urgent that they get to Diego and so they set a good pace en route. This speed, coupled with the fact that each bomber carried a full load of 45 750-pound bombs and that many heavyweight refuelings were made during the 20-hour flight, led to situations in which the Gs older model engines were "overtopped." Consequently, during Desert Shield/Desert Storm some 122 engine changes were required, over half the result of this one deployment.

SAC's tanker force also began deploying to support the movements to Southwest Asia. By August 8, some 81 tankers were in place at Mildenhall, Lajes, Moron, Zaragoza, Andersen, Clark, Diego Garcia, Al Dhafra, and King Khalid International Airport. Eventually, by the start of Desert Storm, SAC had over 300 tankers committed in CENTCOM's area of responsibility, in Europe, and spread across the Atlantic and Pacific.

Many of the units participating in Desert Shield came from the Air National Guard and the Air Force Reserve. Both SAC and MAC relied heavily on personnel and aircraft from both of these organizations. In MAC, more than 90 percent of the command's aeromedical evacuation specialists and 60 percent of the command's tactical airlift personnel were in the Guard and Reserves. In addition, 39 C-5s and 16 C-141s were assigned to the Guard and Reserves. Two C-5 and five C-141 associate wings also flew the aircraft of their affiliated active duty wings. Virtually all of these units and aircraft served during Desert Shield.

The operation also saw the activation for the first time of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF).

The CRAF, consisting of a number of commercial cargo and passenger aircraft, eventually provided transportation for about 64 percent of the troops and 27 percent of the cargo during Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

In the first major operational deployment of the F-15E, aircraft from the 4th TFW arrived at Thumrait on August 10. Thumrait was not the base originally intended to be used by the F-15Es. When the 24 planes took off from Seymour Johnson, they were going to Seeb. However, halfway through their flight, the Omanis told CENTAF that the Es could not use Seeb. The Omanis gave as reasons for this action, incompatibility of their radios with the F-15s; insufficient ramp space; and lack of fuel. The real reason, I believe, is that the Omanis could not bring themselves to allow fighter and bomber-type aircraft so near to their capital city. (In some respects, the Saudis were the only ones on the Arabian Peninsula taking seriously the Iraqi threat.) CENTAF passed the word on to the squadron to land at Dhahran, but soon further changed the destination to Thumrait, located at the opposite end of Oman from Seeb. The squadron did not receive this change, however, and landed at Dhahran. Eventually, 15 of this first batch of F-15Es reached Thumrait.

About six hours after the F-15Es left Seymour Johnson, the first of 24 F-16Cs of the 363d TFW departed Shaw on a 16-hour, 8-air refuelings flight. Although they were heading for Sharjah, as was now becoming commonplace, the squadron received news in mid-flight of a change in landing sites. Instead, the F-16s went to Al Dhafra, UAE.

Desert Shield required a great deal of tactical airlift and C-130s of the 317th TAW moved from Pope, to Masirah between August 9 and 11. Two more squadrons arrived by August 16th, bringing the number of C-130s in the AOR to 48. All three squadrons began operations within two

days of their arrival. Eventually, some 144 C-130s, gathered from active duty, Reserve, and Air National Guard units, operated in Southwest Asia. Much of the C-130 activity consisted of hauling prepositioned munitions and equipment from storage sites on the Arabian Peninsula to the various CENTAF bases. Prepositioned supplies played a major role in Desert Shield's success. These prepositioning sites held about 76,000 tons of supplies (the equivalent of 3,422 C-141 loads or approximately 10,000 sorties), including shelters, vehicles, medical supplies, rations, fuel, etc. Additionally, four cargo ships were also assigned specifically to the Air Force. (Each ship contained the materiel equivalent of 1000 C-141 sorties.) These vessels contained preloaded ammunition, fuel, refrigerated and dry cargo, airfield construction equipment, and other supplies. The land sites and the prepositioning ships also contained about 48,000 tons of older-type munitions.

These prepositioned munitions, a rather basic mix of conventional ordnance, were not the munitions CENTAF really preferred, that is, high-tech "smart" weapons. However, when these weapons had been prepositioned, they were readily available. Also, "smart" weapons storage was generally restricted to those areas, such as Europe, where their use was deemed critical. Finally, the Air Force believed maintenance and security for the more advanced weapons was too expensive. Eventually, CENTAF units did receive "smart" weapons in quantity.

By September 11, just a month after Desert Shield began, CENTAF had 29,756 people and 674 aircraft in the AOR. In addition to those aircraft already mentioned, CENTAF now had RC-135s, F/EF-111s, A-10s, F-117s, and other types. The emphasis now shifted from building the force to sustaining it.

By mid-September, sustainment had become extremely important to the deployed units. From the

beginning of the operation, Schwarzkopf's top priority had been to get "shooters" in place. Sustainment and resupply were quite a ways down his priority list, thus most of the units initially depended solely on their war reserve spares kits (WRSK), which, theoretically, contained enough spare parts to sustain a unit in combat for 30 days. However, there were some instances where deploying units cannibalized parts from aircraft that were not deploying (including F-15E parts right off the McDonnell-Douglas assembly line in St. Louis) so that there were enough spare parts for those aircraft that were going.

Also, movement of spares and other supplies were disrupted by the initial accelerated deployments and by the continual changes as to which units would deploy and when. Supplies stacked up at various U.S. bases while awaiting shipment to the AOR. At one point, over 100 pallets of spares were sitting on TAC ramps awaiting airlift, although the planes were already in the AOR. You might think that 100 pallets is no big deal, but 100 pallets of WRSK can represent from 5 to 10 fighter squadrons worth of spares, a very significant number. Fortunately, Iraq gave us time to prepare, otherwise immediate combat may have resulted in aircraft unable to perform their missions.

Another serious problem, primarily during Shield's early days, was that beddown locations were classified and that, too often, supplies were shipped with no specific address or unit, causing supplies to stack up in the AOR, primarily at Dhahran, the main aerial port of debarkation. It got so bad that C-130s, on their first sortie of the day, would carry personnel from various units to Dhahran and leave them to roam the supply dumps looking for their shipments. At the end of the day the C-130s would return to pick up the people and whatever supplies they had found.

Meanwhile, because of the multiplicity of units assigned to the various bases, provisional units

had been established. The first such unit was the 17th Air Division (Provisional), activated at Riyadh in late August to exercise operational control of SAC tanker and reconnaissance assets in the AOR. (The bombers came under Schwarzkopf's operational control, who delegated this control to Horner.) All of the tanker, bomber, and strategic reconnaissance units also received new provisional designations. In December, this organizational structure was modified to reflect additional units stationed at the bases, and was further modified at the start of Desert Storm.

On October 31, MAC designated and activated at Riyadh the 1610th Airlift Division (Provisional). The division eventually provided oversight and guidance to more than 70 MAC provisional units located in the AOR. Then, on December 5, TAC designated and activated two new provisional air divisions, the 14th and the 15th. The 14th Air Division had operational control of 10 fighter wings, and the 15th had operational control of eight electronic combat, C², reconnaissance, and miscellaneous units. Originally designated as deployed, the units assigned to these divisions were now redesignated as provisional organizations.

When he briefed the President on August 4, General Schwarzkopf indicated that his forces could be ready to undertake offensive operations by C+120, a date subsequently fixed as December 5. CENTCOM initially forecast that by C+120 it would have 15 fighter and 2 bomber squadrons, 3 carrier battle groups and a battleship, a Marine expeditionary force, 2 mechanized divisions, an airborne division and an air assault division, plus other units. Actually, by November 8, when Desert Shield's first phase ended, CENTCOM had more than 1,900 Coalition aircraft, including 723 Air Force planes, and almost 236,000 U.S. troops in the Gulf region. Another 103,000 non-U.S. ground troops were also in place.

But intelligence agencies now estimated that over 420,000 Iraqi troops, almost 3,600 tanks, and 2,400 artillery pieces were in the vicinity of Kuwait. Additionally, the Iraqis were believed to have 445 fighters and 401 fighter-bombers and bombers in their inventory. If the Coalition forces were to be victorious, additional troops and equipment were needed.

Schwarzkopf told General Powell on October 22 that CENTCOM would need to double in size if it was to go on the offensive. So, on November 8, President Bush authorized the deployment of an additional 150,000 troops, and Desert Shield's second phase commenced. With the President's decision, General Schwarzkopf requested several hundred more follow-on aircraft. The JCS formally issued the deployment order on November 16. One of the more notable deployments during this phase was that of the E-8A Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System, or J-STARS aircraft. Only two of these aircraft were in existence and were still undergoing testing. Nevertheless, the E-8s proved to be highly successful during Desert Storm.

With the imminent arrival of these new aircraft, CENTAF sought additional fields on which to base them. One of the most important of these was Al Kharj, about 60 miles southeast of Riyadh. This field was under construction when Iraq invaded Kuwait and had a 13,000-foot runway finished. A major munitions depot had just been completed when Desert Shield's second phase began, but other than that, little was standing at Al Kharj. One officer commented later, "The highest thing [there] was a taxi light that stood one foot tall." RED HORSE and Prime BEEF teams, and other civil engineers began work on the field on November 25, and by the start of the war, they had laid down more than 200,000 cubic yards of clay, erected over 700 tents, and constructed more than 100 other structures. When construction was completed, Al Kharj (which received the nickname "Camel Lot")

housed approximately 4,900 personnel, plus 122 F-15C/Es, F-16s, and C-130s.

When the UN deadline for the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait expired on January 15, 1991, CENTCOM intelligence credited the Iraqis with approximately 546,000 personnel, more than 4,000 tanks, almost 3,000 armored personnel carriers and other infantry vehicles, and 3,100 artillery pieces in the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations. Facing them was a Coalition force from 31 countries of over 540,000 troops (of which more than 454,000 were American). The Air Force's contribution to this total was 48,679 personnel and 1,160 aircraft.

Operation Desert Shield lasted just 163 days, yet it produced one of the largest displays of USAF strength in the history of that service. As stated earlier, this remarkable achievement was not accomplished, however, without creating confusion for too long a time about where, when, and how units would deploy, a result of 1002-90 still being in the draft stage.

Although 1002-90 identified specific airfields, along with aircraft types, to be used, negotiations for the use of these fields were barely underway when Desert Shield began. Together with CENTCOM's rapidly fluctuating requirements, the inability to identify what bases deploying aircraft would use compounded the planners difficulties in securing the use of these bases. Then, when base rights were obtained, often the bases were not those the planners anticipated using, often resulting in the deploying units not having the proper (or any) data on the airfield to which they were going.

The ability to supply and sustain the air units in the Gulf played a key role in Desert Shield's and Desert Storm's success. This part of the war, however, was not a full-fledged success. Munitions and other supplies were not always located where they were needed; delivery of supplies too often were delayed because of the inability to keep track of where and to what units these supplies were going.

Nevertheless, despite this logistical nightmare, few (if any) CENTAF units suffered any appreciable degradation of their combat readiness.

Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm were remarkable for what the Air Force described as "the speed, range, flexibility, lethality, and precision of modern airpower." Luckily, the Gulf War was fought at the right time ~ before planned cuts in the entire U.S. defense structure really began to affect the services; in the right place ~ in a region with a well-conceived in-place airfield infrastructure, and with an ample supply of prepositioned equipment; and against the right enemy ~ one which, although strong militarily, was ill-served by its leadership. Planners of the next war cannot assume the same favorable circumstances. Finally, notwithstanding the impressive performance of various weapon systems in the Gulf War, ultimate success was really measured by the performance of the people involved. This success could not have been achieved without the tremendous efforts of Air Force men and women world-wide in support of Desert Shield and Desert Storm.