

*The Battle for Ra's Al-Khafji  
and the Effects of Air Power  
January 29- February 1, 1991  
Part 1*





William P. Head

The arches into the Saudi city of al-Khafji. Because the city was within range of Iraqi artillery in Kuwait, it was ordered evacuated on August 18, 1990. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, study by Paul W. Westermeyer, photo by MGySgt Gregory L. Gillispie.)

(Right) Gen. Khaled bin Sultan bin Saud, a prince of the Saudi royal family, was the Joint Forces Commander and General Schwartzkopf's opposite number.

## Introduction

**W**hile familiar with the first Persian Gulf War, many people have forgotten the initial ground engagement of the war took place from January 29 to February 1, 1991, near the small Saudi Arabian town/city of Ra's Al-Khafji on the Kuwaiti border. The engagement indicated the tactics both sides would use during the larger land engagement to come—chiefly the use of Allied air power in support of Coalition ground forces. This initial land battle, along with the air war that began on January 17, 1991, served as a manifestation of the decisive nature of air power both in a strategic role and in its tactical role of supporting ground forces. It was also a critical test of the Saudi and Qatari armies. Although the capture of Al-Khafji was a propaganda victory for Saddam Hussein's regime, its subsequent recapture by Saudi and Qatari ground forces provided a major morale boost for the Coalition and allowed them to continue to prepare for the land campaign that would end the war.

The employment of a highly evolved air power tactical doctrine, born in the deserts of World War II North Africa and subsequently refined by U.S. airmen, proved crucial in halting ground maneuver forces and preserving Coalition forces in harm's way. While no one should discount the value of ground and sea power, Al-Khafji proved the efficacy of air power in the area of tactical close air support (CAS), its unique intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) abilities, as well as its vital nature in the outcome of battles and wars.

For many of those involved in the battle as well as for many analysts, the engagement was a major turning point in the wider war. The commander of the Saudi military forces, Gen. Khaled Bin Sultan, wrote that: "In every conflict there is a moment when the tide is seen to turn. In the Gulf War, the Battle of Al-Khafji was such a moment."<sup>1</sup> If it can be argued that it was a turning point, then one would assume it was a major battle. However, as one author remarked, "Khafji is typically a mere footnote in most Western accounts of the Gulf conflict."<sup>2</sup> A handful of official histories were written about Al-Khafji, most by the U.S. Marine Corps. For that reason I was determined to take another look at the battle, especially from the viewpoint of air power.

Some analysts have countered Khaled's view, describing the battle as a *skirmish*. I would argue that no matter the magnitude or the intensity of the



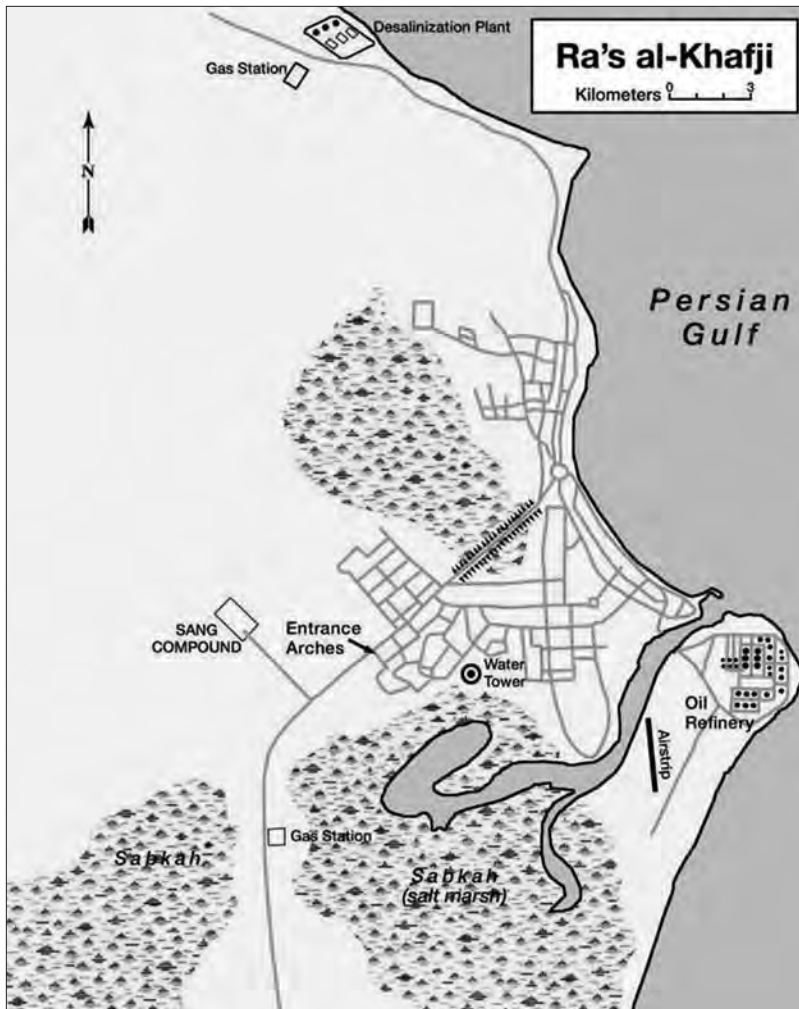
battle itself Al-Khafji should not be minimized. To quote one *Newsweek* article, none of the Coalition forces were present when "the Iraqi army suddenly materialized in the desert night in a surprising tactical offensive" believed it to be a minor affair. Indeed, "a handful of U.S. Marine Corps units and their Arab allies were quickly baptized in the realities of modern war. At some locations, U.S. troops faced enemy attackers no more than twenty-five yards away—and in Khafji, it took more than thirty-six hours of bitter combat to push a sizable force of Iraqi raiders out of the battered town."<sup>3</sup>

The battle was heavily affected by the achievement of air superiority by the Allies during the air campaign begun on January 17. Air superiority allowed ISR, CAS, and interdiction to identify and attack Iraqi command and control (C<sup>2</sup>) and ground forces at will. For this reason, air power not only became the determining factor in the victory at Al-Khafji, but also the decisive factor blunting Iraqi offensive and maneuver capabilities.

This part of the larger conflict began because Saddam Hussein had been unable to bring his air forces to bear and, having lost those few aircraft

**ALTHOUGH THE CAPTURE OF AL-KHAFJI WAS A PROPAGANDA VICTORY FOR SADDAM HUSSEIN'S REGIME, ITS SUBSEQUENT RECAPTURE BY SAUDI AND QATARI GROUND FORCES PROVIDED A MAJOR MORALE BOOST FOR THE COALITION**

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(Above) Map of the battle area.

(Above right) Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.



which had sortied, the Iraqi leader detailed his Soviet-built MiG fighter aircraft to Iran to prevent them from being destroyed by Coalition aircraft. Next, the Iraqi dictator unsuccessfully attempted to provoke the Israelis into the conflict in an effort to cause the Arab nations in the Coalition to withdraw. He hoped to make it a strategic war between the Arab world and the western world. The Iraqis fired Scud missiles at random Israeli targets. The Israelis, showing great restraint, refused to take the bait.

Hussein also tried to draw Coalition troops into a costly tactical ground engagement by shelling Saudi and Qatari military positions and oil storage tanks along the border. The Coalition, led by Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, was still in the preparation stages of the upcoming ground campaign and would not be lured into premature action.<sup>4</sup> Gen. Bernard E. Trainor in his book, *The Generals' War*, claims that Schwarzkopf misunderstood the significance of the Battle of Khafji and that while he was right not to overreact, he never grasped how important Al-Khafji was to Saudi and Iraqi morale and the outcome of the Persian Gulf War.<sup>5</sup>

With his command, control and communications (C<sup>3</sup>) centers in smoldering ruins and his people suffering deprivations from the air war and the embargo, Hussein ordered the invasion of Saudi Arabia by the 1st and 5th Mechanized Divisions and the 3d Armored Division. Their plan was a multi-

pronged incursion toward Al-Khafji, engaging U.S., Saudi, and Qatari forces along the coastline. Hussein's three divisions had suffered losses during the air campaign but were still intact and ready to fight. Relieved to be taking the fight to the enemy, the Iraqi units planned to attack late on January 29. On that date, the Iraqis brought the war to the Allies front door at Al-Khafji with Iraqi ground forces meeting Coalition forces for the first time. While the parts of this offensive force were initially repulsed by Coalition air and ground units, one major Iraqi column did occupy Al-Khafji. In the resulting combat, air power played a key role. As Daniel R. Clevenger stresses in his study of the battle, "Air superiority is prerequisite for the successful application of maneuver warfare. With air superiority, your ground forces are able to move at will, unimpeded by enemy air attack." He concluded: "Without air superiority, your ground forces are vulnerable to attack in both day and night, and will be unable to move without risking heavy loss, loss of unit cohesion and possibly lead to your ground units' destruction."<sup>6</sup>

### Background of the Battle

The first Persian Gulf War began on August 2, 1990, when the Iraqi Army invaded and occupied the neighboring state of Kuwait. Kuwait was originally an Iraqi province but in 1899, the British, with local Kuwaiti support, created a protectorate that detached Kuwait and made it a separate nation in order to initially exploit its port facilities and, later, its oil reserves.<sup>7</sup>

The invasion came on the heels of the inconclusive Iran-Iraq War that had lasted from 1980-1988 with President Ronald Reagan supporting Baathist secularist Saddam Hussein against the



Saudi soldiers move through the evacuated border city of al-Khafji. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, study by Paul W. Westermeyer, photo by Capt Charles G. Grow.)

**IRAQI ARTILLERY DESTROYED AN OIL STORAGE TANK NEAR AL-KHAFJI, SAUDI ARABIA, AND, ON JANUARY 19, THEY BREACHED THE PUMPS AT THE AHMADI LOADING COMPLEX DRAINING 200,000 BARRELS OF CRUDE OIL A DAY INTO THE GULF**

Iranian forces of the Ayatollah Khomeini. In the summer of 1990, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, seemed to indicate to Saddam Hussein that the U.S. would not object to Iraq retaking their former province. Misinterpreting this message, Saddam Hussein's troops marched almost unopposed into Kuwait. The invasion culminated three decades of political conflict with Kuwait, offered Saddam Hussein the opportunity to distract political dissent at home and added Kuwait's oil resources to Iraq's own during a period of economic crisis and declining petroleum prices.<sup>8</sup>

With the urging of President George H.W. Bush who was concerned about his public image, the United Nations (UN) passed several resolutions demanding the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. By August, the U.S. feared that Iraq might also invade its important regional ally, Saudi Arabia, and moved to build a coalition to defend the Saudi peninsula and force the Iraqis out of Kuwait. The Saudi government requested immediate military aid from the U.S.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the United States initiated Operation Desert Shield, the buildup of American and Coalition forces, weapon systems and supplies, to defend Saudi Arabia and commence the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait (Operation Desert Storm).<sup>10</sup>

Caught somewhat off guard by this U.S. led resistance to his occupation of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein attempted to deter Coalition military action by threatening to halt Kuwaiti and Iraqi petroleum production and export. In December 1990, Iraq made preparations to blow up the well-heads at the Ahmadi loading complex as a prelude to totally shattering Kuwait's petroleum infrastructure. On January 16, 1991, Iraqi artillery destroyed an oil storage tank near Al-Khafji, Saudi Arabia, and, on January 19, they breached the pumps at the Ahmadi loading complex draining 200,000 barrels of crude oil a day into the Gulf. At the time it was the worst ecological disaster in human history, one that required years to clean up.<sup>11</sup>

Based on Saddam Hussein's apparent willingness to do anything to stop the Coalition buildup, many Allied political leaders and military commanders feared he might employ chemical, biological or even "dirty" weapons in the upcoming engagements.

Although he did not, Coalition commander, Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, planned and operated as if he might to the very end of the conflict. In fact, what is now clear is that Saddam Hussein's main focus was to play on Western fears of high casualties and to try to detach the Arab part of the Coalition. His offensive at Al-Khafji was built around his belief that if he could inflict enough damage on the Allies, their citizens would demand they end the war.<sup>12</sup> Even U.S. Secretary of Defense, Richard Cheney had declared, "the number one priority' of America was to expel Iraq from Kuwait 'at the lowest possible cost in terms of the loss of U.S. life.'" Certainly, Saddam Hussein had to believe that the longer he could holdout the better his chances were. Tariq Aziz, Iraqi Foreign Minister, told Secretary of State James Baker, "that Iraq could hold out for a year or even two."<sup>13</sup>

Despite Iraqi threats of detaining American civilians, creating ecological disasters and raining missiles on Israel, on January 17, the Coalition launched a massive thirty-eight-day aerial campaign that lit up the night skies of Baghdad, totally disabled Iraqi C<sup>3</sup>, and systematically eliminated its infra-structure, electric grid, food and water supplies, as well as air defense systems. Flying nearly 2,000 sorties a day, U.S., British, French and other Coalition aircraft negated the Iraqi Air Force and seized control of the skies. As noted, on the third day of the campaign, nearly all the remaining Iraqi pilots flew their aircraft to Iran to be interred rather than risk their destruction.<sup>14</sup>

Some sources reported that Saddam Hussein told his commanders, "An air force has never decided a war." Even though it is clear he was concerned about the effect the air campaign might have on Iraqi morale, he was convinced the U.S. was not willing to suffer many casualties in a ground action. Thus, he believed if Iraq could weather the air campaign and draw Coalition ground troops, especially the inexperienced Saudi and Qatari soldiers, into a decisive battle and win, the enemy's alliance might fracture. He also sought to provoke the previously mentioned land battle by firing Scuds at Israel and continuing to threaten the destruction of oil facilities in Kuwait. These efforts proved futile and, thus, he decided to launch a limited offensive in Saudi Arabia designed to inflict heavy casualties on the Coalition and damage their will to fight.<sup>15</sup>

To quote Paul Westermeyer's examination of the battle: "Despite the Scud distraction and the focus on strategic rather than operational targets, the air campaign had an obvious and significant impact on Iraqi forces inside Kuwait. It isolated units from the national command authority, degraded troop morale and made even simple movements difficult, often requiring days of detailed planning."<sup>16</sup>

Saddam Hussein entered the conflict supremely confident that, even if he could not tactically defeat the Coalition, he could force them into a strategic settlement. He reasoned that the American public simply did not have the stomach for any war that led to significant U.S. losses. Based on his limited understanding of America's experience in Vietnam in which she had lost 58,000 killed in eight years, he

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believed that unless Coalition air forces won the war he could bring the conflict to a relatively successful conclusion. He rationalized that Iraq had lost 50,000 in one battle against the Iranians on the al-Faw Peninsula in 1986 and survived to fight another day. To this end, Saddam Hussein declared to his staff: “America is not in the prime of youth. America is in the last stage of elderliness and the beginning of the first stage of old age.”<sup>17</sup>

Saddam Hussein expected an air campaign that would last a week or two, followed by the “Mother of All Wars” that would cause the enormous U.S. casualties he wanted. According to captured Iraqi documents, he selected Al-Khafji as his target because “it had two harbors: one designed specifically for exporting oil, and the other the Iraqis believed was a base for Coalition forces.” He supposed that an Iraqi force in control of the abandoned city would “threaten Coalition naval forces in the Gulf.” Further, Al-Khafji was within range of Iraqi supporting artillery in Kuwait. Last, but not least, it would compel the Saudis to attack his force since they could not allow him to “hold any part of their kingdom for long.” They would have to attack, supported by American Marines “bringing on the bloody ground war Saddam wanted.”<sup>18</sup>

Soon after the Iraqi campaign planning sessions ended on January 28, 1991, an event occurred that seemed to contradict the validity of Saddam Hussein’s notions about air power. Even as Iraqi III Corps Commander Maj. Gen. Salah Aboud Mahmaud prepared to disembark from his helicopter, two F-111 fighters destroyed the very building where he was planning to hold his commander’s conference. According to one source, “He leaned over to his executive officer and told him he hoped this was not a bad omen for the upcoming offensive.”<sup>19</sup>

### Events Leading up to the Battle

As the air war continued with great effect, General Schwarzkopf began to believe that the Iraqis planned to fight a mostly defensive war and that the likelihood of an Iraqi offensive was slim. To this end, he moved the XVIII Airborne Corps and VII Corps 300 miles west in preparation for a sweeping attack that would run around the Iraqi right flank. Schwarzkopf surmised that even if the Iraqis did attack at this point they would launch the offensive from the Al-Wafra oil fields in Southern Kuwait which would have little effect on his plans.<sup>20</sup>

Schwarzkopf already supported the Saudi decision to abandon Al-Khafji since he believed it was tactically indefensible and strategically unimportant. What the planners apparently did not realize was that King Fahd viewed all of Saudi Arabia as sacred. Even when this backwater fell, he urged the Coalition to retake it immediately or utterly destroy it.<sup>21</sup> In retrospect Khaled’s appraisal of the indefensibility of Al-Khafji must be questioned. Surrounded by terrain unfriendly to heavy tracked vehicles, the only access was a two-lane highway that made the town relatively invulnerable. This proved to be the case for the Coalition forces when it came time to push the Iraqis out later.

### You Can’t Tell the Players without a Program: Iraqi Forces

By the end of January 1991, the Iraqi Army had roughly a half-million troops in theater, organized into fifty-one divisions, including eight elite Republican Guard divisions. Since they normally received the best equipment, on the eve of the war, most of the nearly 1,000 T-72 tanks in the Iraqi

Iraqi T-54 was a major weapon along with its T-55 cousins during the battle.



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Army were in Republican Guard divisions. The Iraqi Army in the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations (KTO) also included nine heavy divisions, composed mostly of professional soldiers, but with generally inferior weapons. In fact, most non-Republican Guard armored units had older tanks such as Soviet T-55s and T-62s or Chinese Type 59s or 69s. Thirty-four of these divisions were composed of poorly trained conscripts who were positioned to channel Coalition forces through a number of break points along the front, allowing Iraq's better forces to isolate them and counterattack. One of the main Iraqi weaknesses proved to be its open western flank. Iraqi planners failed to account for tactics like the ones in the Allies' Air Land Battle Doctrine made possible by new technology such as the Global Positioning Systems (GPS).<sup>22</sup>

Iraqi planners crafted their assault plan into Saudi Arabia around the Iraqi III Corps comprised mostly of the 3d Armored Division, 5th Mechanized Division, 1st Mechanized Division of the IV Corps and numerous command units. The overall commander was the III Corps commander, General Mahmoud. In support was the IV Corps, led by Maj. Gen. Yaiyd Khalel Zaki. Its 3d Armored Division had several dozen T-72 tanks, the only non-Republican Guard force that had them. The other armored battalions had T-62 and T-55s, some with Iraqi appliqué armor similar to the Soviet bulging armor or BDD "brow" laminate armor. They also had armored personnel vehicles such as the BMP-1 and scout vehicles such as the BRDM-2. They were supported by numerous types of artillery. They had five infantry divisions along the front that were ordered to remain in their defensive positions hoping to lure the main Allied ground forces into a major engagement.<sup>23</sup>

#### **You Can't Tell the Players without a Program: Coalition Forces**

Across the border in Saudi Arabia, the Coalition had steadily increased its forces throughout January from approximately 200,000 soldiers, 750 aircraft and 1,200 to 3,600 tanks and more than 600,000 personnel—500,000 of them American.<sup>24</sup> One key aspect of the buildup proved to be the presence of the vast numbers of aircraft. If the Coalition planned to take the offensive at some point—and they did, U.S. doctrine called for a three to one ratio in manpower in order to attack enemy positions. In fact, by January 1991, the actual numbers of ground forces for the two sides were roughly equal. What gave the Coalition an advantage was the multiplying effect that air superiority provided. Senior Allied leaders had formulated a war plan based on the Air Land Battle Doctrine which, as one source declared, "enabled them to exploit the intangible benefits of information dominance and air superiority." Saddam Hussein's lack of respect for air power and the constant degradation of his forces by Coalition air forces proved to have a profound impact not only on the outcome of the Battle of Khafji but the Gulf War in general.<sup>25</sup>

During the buildup of forces, the United States constructed observation posts (OPs) all along the Kuwaiti-Saudi border to gather intelligence on Iraqi forces. Each OP was placed near a Saudi border fort described by Marines as "Beau Geste" forts. Navy Sea, Air and Land (SEAL), Marine Reconnaissance and Army Special Forces personnel operated these outposts. They located OP 8 farthest east, on the coast, and seven other OPs every twelve miles stretching to the panhandle of southernmost Kuwait, better known as the "Heel." Since many



Captured Iraqi T-62.

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planners believed the coastal highway which ran to Al-Khafji was the likely invasion route, OPs 7 and 8 proved to be the most important because they overlooked this route. Senior leaders placed three companies of the 1st Marine Division at OPs 4, 5 and 6, also known as Task Force Shepard. Personnel of the 2d Light Armored Infantry Battalion of the 2d Marine Division established a screen between OP 1 and the Al-Wafra oil fields.<sup>26</sup>

Saudi military officials assigned the defense of Al-Khafji to the 2d Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigade and a Qatari armored battalion attached to Task Force Abu Bakr. The Second's 5th Battalion set up a screen north and west of Al-Khafji, just under OP 7. A Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigade consisted of four motorized battalions, each with three line companies or roughly 5,000 soldiers. The Saudis also deployed: Task Force Tariq composed of Saudi Arabian Marines and a battalion of Moroccan infantry; Task Force Othman comprised of two "Mechanized Ministry of Defense" brigades; and Task Force Omar made up of two Aviation Brigades. These afforded screens at a position two miles south of the Kuwaiti border. They established their main defenses twelve miles south of the screen. Most of the Arab units were commanded by General Khaled. Coalition planners combined the forces around Al-Khafji into Joint Forces Command-East placing Joint Forces Command-North in charge of defending the area between OP 1 and the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border.<sup>27</sup>

After consulting with senior Saudi and Coalition leaders in August, Khaled had ordered the town evacuated due to its proximity to the Kuwaiti border and the fact that the town lay north of vast "sabkhas" or salt marshes. One Marine Corps captain described it as "a patch of desert that has some kind of underlying moisture that causes a thin, mud like crust to develop on the top, which cracks in the heat, but is easily penetrated by a vehicle and very soft underneath—you get stuck in it in a huge way."

This feature forced vehicles onto the coastal highway and made it difficult to provide large logistics supplies to forces in the town.<sup>28</sup>

Khaled's choice has been criticized by some analysts because Al-Khafji was surrounded by the "sabkhas." This feature forced the Iraqi's main assault forces down the main highway between Kuwait City and Jabayl in order to avoid getting bogged down in the muddy desert around Al-Khafji. A well defended town might have forced them to find an alternative route or confront withering fire from the Coalition forces facing them. Instead, Khaled was determined to defend the border with "firepower and not manpower." To quote one source, "the General's plan was to take them on with air power and with supporting arms." This seemed to make sense because "the desert afforded the Saudi forces the opportunity to attrit the Iraqis as they crossed the expanses of the desert toward Khafji." Critical to the success of such a plan was a "tripwire to announce the Iraqi attack." Khaled had no such troops. For this reason the Iraqis seized the city without opposition from the Saudis.<sup>29</sup> The only thing that saved the Allies from complete surprise was the "eyes" of the E-8A Joint STARS aircraft airborne that night.

### Iraqi Objectives

By January 26, 1991, U.S. Marine Corps reconnaissance patrols obtained enough intelligence to estimate that the Iraqi military had massed nearly 60,000 troops and 240 tanks of all kinds near the Kuwaiti town of Al-Wafra. Divided into five divisions, these units were generally under strength since hundreds and later thousands of Iraqi conscripts deserted rather than die defending Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.<sup>30</sup>

In retrospect, it seems clear that Iraqi plans aimed at not only seizing Al-Khafji but, if possible, continuing on to capture the vital Dammam oil fields. Tactically, they envisioned a four-pronged assault with the 1st Mechanized Division passing through the 7th and 14th Infantry Divisions to protect the flank of the 3d Armored Division which would provide a blocking force west of Al-Khafji allowing the 5th Division to capture the town itself. With this accomplished, the 1st and 3d forces would pull back into Kuwait, leaving troops of the 5th to wait for the expected Coalition counterattack. As noted, Saddam Hussein hoped the Coalition would suffer terrible casualties in their efforts to retake the town which would erode their resolve to fight. He hoped to capture dozens of Allied troops and use them as a bargaining tool to end the conflict in his favor. The Iraqi dictator ordered his generals to make "a Lightning Strike' into the 'Kingdom of Evil.'"<sup>31</sup>

It should be noted that while the Iraqi military was not the greatest army in the world neither was it the worst, nor were their leaders stupid. If they were to realize Saddam Hussein's goal of breaking up the Arab Coalition, Al-Khafji was the perfect place to make their attack since the area nearby was primarily defended by Saudi and Qatari forces.



Reconnaissance teams used this building in al-Khafji as their observation post. The building was hit by fire from Iraqis and Saudis during the night engagements, as well as shrapnel from American air and artillery strikes. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, study by Paul W. Westermeyer, photo by Cpl Charles H. Ingraham III.)



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Many Iraqi leaders reasoned that since the Saudi military had never been tested in a modern engagement that their forces must be *marginal* at best. While the entire plan was risky, at least this one part seemed to make sense. If it worked they might even be able to take the Damman oil fields and truly threaten the Saudi power structure. Ultimately, the plan failed but not for want of trying or planning. It failed due to air power and a Saudi/Qatari force that was much better than anticipated.<sup>32</sup>

Once underway, Coalition leaders could only make an educated guess as to what Saddam Hussein had planned and what Iraq's objectives might be. Years later, retired Air Force Gen. Charles A. Horner, then, the Joint Forces Air Component Commander, recalled that the defense of Al-Khafji was not high on anyone's priority list, "because we didn't really understand what the objectives of the Iraqi army were." Now we know the Iraqi attack on Al-Khafji was a gamble designed to lure Coalition forces into ground engagement while they could still maneuver their mechanized forces in the KTO and deal the Allies a bloody defeat.

As early as the commencement of Desert Storm on January 17, the Iraqi military had indicated on numerous occasions they wanted to take the initiative and use their tactical units to alter the course of the conflict. The Scud attacks against Israel and Saudi Arabia that began on January 18, bear this out. Roughly two-thirds of these Scud attacks took place over the following ten days. When this failed to initiate a war with Israel, Saddam Hussein ordered two Kuwaiti oil fields set on fire on January 22. They opened the manifolds on offshore terminals pumping oil into the Gulf. This too failed when two F-111 fighter-bomber strikes closed the pumps using Precision-Guided Munitions (PGMs). The Iraqi dictator was further frustrated as the air campaign expanded its attacks to include hardened aircraft shelters. As noted, this was when (January 25-29, 1991) Hussein dispatched his remaining eighty aircraft to internment in Iran.<sup>33</sup>

While it is conjecture, one can effectively assume that at this point, Saddam Hussein must have concluded he had misjudged the effectiveness

and resolution of the Allied air campaign. By this point, he had to have realized that if the Iraqis were to take the initiative their only choice was to gamble with an immediate mechanized offensive across the Saudi border to engage Coalition ground forces.

One thing Allied intelligence should have known was that during Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, Iraqi ground forces often made probing attacks into Iranian defensive lines. Frequently, the Iranians defenders counterattacked only to find they were caught in an Iraqi trap in which they suffered heavy casualties. This was on the minds of the Iraqi planners as the nurtured their plans for Al-Khafji. They realized the assault itself had little chance of a clear-cut victory. Still, they believed they could use their tried-and-true methods and lure the Coalition forces into a pursuit that would leave them badly bloodied and perhaps cause them to reconsider the entire war.

In the aftermath of the conflict, Air Force analysts concluded that the Iraqis initiated this "major offensive" for five reasons. First, they hoped to improve the morale of the Iraqi troops who spent endless days and nights hammered by Coalition aircraft. Second, they believed they could easily defeat the untested Saudi force and inflict heavy casualties on the Americans. Third, they hoped they could create dissension among the Arab and non-Arab forces. Fourth, they anticipated capturing troops that would provide important intelligence. Lastly, they believed from such an attack they could gather more data on the disposition of enemy forces along the border and more information on what they had planned. These Allied experts believed that the primary goals were the first three, especially number two.<sup>34</sup>

It was with these goals in mind, that Saddam Hussein and his advisers created the III Corps' offensive. They reasoned the time must be right since Coalition air attacks had concentrated on eliminating the Iraqi integrated air defenses, destroying weapons storage sites and obliterating their C<sup>2</sup>. While air attacks in the KTO intensified, "fewer than 1,000 sorties had been flown against fielded military forces during the first week of the

An Air Force A-10A Thunderbolt patrols over the desert during the Gulf War. The aircraft carried AGM-65 Maverick air-to-ground missiles and was one of the primary providers of close air support during the Battle of al-Khafji.



air war. Many of these were directed at “the Hammurabi Division of the Republican Guard and other front-line infantry divisions farther west.” Reports by U.S. Central Air Forces planners concluded that as of January 29, Iraqi forces remained at eighty-one to ninety-nine percent of full strength. It was now or never for the Iraqi military!<sup>35</sup>

### The Battle Begins

Between January 25-27, 1991, Saddam Hussein met his two corps commanders in Basra. General Mahmoud assured him that he would take Al-Khafji by January 30. During his return to Baghdad, in a foreshadowing of future events, Saddam Hussein’s convoy was strafed and run off the road. Even though the dictator survived, several vehicles were damaged. He was now more determined than ever to strike at the source of his torment. From January 26 to 28, they prepared for the attack.<sup>36</sup>

One advantage the Iraqis possessed was surprise, and it was probably more of an advantage than they could have guessed. Not that there were not subtle hints and actions that warned Coalition forces along the front, but at headquarters many planners and leaders were convinced the Iraqis could not muster any kind of an attack. To quote Scott Williams’ paper on the battle, “the CENTCOM staff suggested that the war was going tremendously well for the allies.” With the Coalition enjoying total command of the skies, many claimed that “the Iraqi command and control apparatus had ceased to function and that the Iraqi III Corps, operating in the KTO, was functioning without direction from Baghdad.” They further argued that “Iraqi logistics capability had been diminished to the point that soldiers in the field were subsisting without adequate food and medical supplies.” In conclusion, they reasoned that, “the Iraqi military situation was so dire that it would preclude offensive actions—or would it?” Much as they had done in December 1944 just before the German offensive in the Ardennes Forrest, staffers misinterpreted the intelligence they received and underestimated their enemy.<sup>37</sup>

During January 29, Allied intelligence received several warnings suggesting that Iraqis were poised

for an attack. The best came from two brand-new E-8A (today E-8Cs) Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (Joint STARS) ISR aircraft which used their highly sensitive computerized radar-tracking capabilities to spot the deployment of Iraqi forces in an area near the Saudi border.<sup>38</sup> In addition, OPs 2, 7 and 8 also detected Iraqi troops reconnoitering along the border. Groups of air-naval gunfire liaison Marines called in air and artillery strikes throughout the day due to this increased enemy activity. Armed with this data, Lt. Col. Richard Barry, commander of the forward headquarters of the 1st Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Intelligence Group, dispatched messages to senior commanders warning of the possibility of a surprise attack.<sup>39</sup>

As the general Iraqi offensive moved toward the Allied defenses through the Al-Wafra forest, they came under attack from Harrier “Jump Jets” employing “Rockeye” cluster bombs. Simultaneously, their supporting convoys were struck by American A-10 *Thunderbolt II*s using their GAU-8 Gatling guns mounted in their noses and firing spent uranium armor-piercing rounds. Some of the units were cut to pieces. However, the main component continued on.

Late on January 29, fifty-eight Iraqi tanks, supported by 1,800-2,000 mobilized infantry troops, transported in several armored vehicles, moved against a U.S. Marine Corps screening patrol in and around Al-Khafji. At the same time, the war’s first ground engagement had already occurred near OP 4, built on top of the Al-Zabr police building. Iraqi plans called for elements of the 6th Armored Brigade to take the heights above Al-Zabr. Here they came into initial contact with Coalition units. At 10:00 p.m., Marine Corps personnel at the OP noticed large groups of armored vehicles through their night vision goggles and tried unsuccessfully to communicate with their battalion headquarters. Around 10:30 p.m., Task Force Shepard commanders ordered Coalition soldiers at the OP 4 to fire on the Iraqi column. Thoroughly outnumbered, they were staggered by the overwhelming Iraqi response and directed to withdraw south.<sup>40</sup>

As the Marines departed, forward fire control

**AROUND  
10:30 P.M.,...  
COMMANDERS  
ORDERED  
COALITION  
SOLDIERS...  
TO FIRE ON  
THE IRAQI  
COLUMN.  
...OUTNUMBERED,  
THEY  
WERE STAGGERED  
BY  
THE OVERWHELMING  
IRAQI  
RESPONSE  
AND  
DIRECTED TO  
WITHDRAW  
SOUTH**



**FORWARD AIR CONTROLLERS BEGAN CALLING IN AIR STRIKES AGAINST THE IRAQIS AS THEY CAME INTO THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE TOWN**

teams to the west also fired and fell back. Forward air controllers (FAC) began calling in air strikes against the Iraqis as they came into the outskirts of the town. Caught at least partly by surprise, Allied leadership now had to evaluate the Iraqi's intent, contain their forces and eventually retake Al-Khafji. The attack could not have come at a worse moment since Coalition Army units "were in the midst of a three-week redeployment from their positions in the coastal areas to attack positions more than 200 miles west." Schwarzkopf worried that an alteration of this redeployment would "upset the timetable for the upcoming attack." Containing the offensive and expelling the Iraqis from Saudi soil was essential.<sup>41</sup> However, his initial comment upon hearing of the attack was that it was "about as significant as a mosquito on an elephant."<sup>42</sup> In retrospect, it must have been a bloody big one!

When news of the battle became known, Schwarzkopf explained to reporters, "The mere fact that they launched these attacks indicates they still have a lot of fight left in them." It had been that night around 10:00 p.m. that Joint STARS data on Iraqi movements had begun to reach Brig. Gen. Buster Glosson at the Tactical Air Control Center. After he conferred with Gen. Horner, personnel in the Joint Forces Air Control Center (JFACC) directed a Joint STARS aircraft to aim its search for enemy troop movement over the KTO and concentrate on the area near Al-Khafji. Not only did the E-8A crew see movement by the 5th Mechanized Division as it closed in on Al-Khafji entering its outskirts, but they also identified ele-

ments of the 3d Armored Division as it advanced through the adjacent Al Wafra forest. They spotted elements of the Iraqi 1st Mechanized Division west of Al-Khafji as it probed across the border. Soon after these engagements took place, the Coalition withdrawal commenced.<sup>43</sup>

Locating the Iraqi offensive units proved to be an ironic twist since the E-8A crews had expected a routine night mission. With Operation Desert Storm 12 days old and the pre-disposition of forces for the ground campaign underway, E-8 Joint STARS crews had planned to spend most of the night of January 29 probing western Iraq for Scud sites and observing territory in front of American Army's VII Corps. Around 9:30 p.m. and within minutes of reaching their cruising altitude, they had fanned their sensors over southern Kuwait. It was here they had first spotted the Iraqi units moving on Al-Khafji. While the Battle of Al-Khafji would last about 36 hours and end four weeks prior to the beginning of the main ground campaign in late February, it marked a watershed in the debate over the decisive nature of Air Power against enemy maneuver forces. It demonstrated that Air Power, alone, could halt mobile enemy armored forces at night, on short notice, and without a synchronized ground counterattack. It was a fact not lost on senior airmen. Air Force Chiefs of Staff Gens. Michael J. Dugan, Merrill A. McPeak, and Ronald R. Fogleman later declared, "all have recognized Khafji's significance as a marker of air power's increasing ability to meld sensors and advanced weapons under central control to gain the advantage over enemy forces on the ground."<sup>44</sup> ■

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  33. Rebecca Grant, "The Epic Little Battle of Khafji," *Air Force Magazine* (February 1998), Vol. 81, No. 1, pp. 28-34, [hereafter "Epic Battle"], p. 28.
  34. Clevenger, "The Battle of Khafji," p. 15.
  35. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29; Spirit 03. For a general overview of the Air War and its decisive influence on the outcome, see Hallion, *Storm Over Iraq*, especially pp. 121-268.
  36. Titus, "The Battle of Khafji," p. 6; Westermeyer, "Marines in Battle," p. 22; Spirit 03; Grant, "Epic Battle," p. 28.
  37. Williams, "Khafji," p. 7.
  38. The Northrop Grumman E-8 Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (Joint STARS) is a U.S. Air Force battle management and command and control (C2) aircraft which locates, targets and tracks ground vehicles and some aircraft, collects imagery, and relays tactical pictures to ground and air theater commanders. It was still in its early stages of development during the First Persian Gulf War.
  39. Williams, "Khafji," pp. 38-41; Westermeyer, "Marines in Battle," pp. 22-3; Spirit 03.
  40. Clevenger, "The Battle of Khafji," "Introduction and Executive Summary," pp. 1-13; Stanton, "Saudi Guard," p. 8; Westermeyer, "Marines in Battle," pp. 23-26; Williams, "Khafji," pp. 41-3.
  41. Grant, "Epic Battle," pp. 28-30.
  42. Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf War*, p. 365.
  43. Grant, "Epic Battle," p. 30.
  44. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 34.

*The Battle for Ra's Al-Khafji and the Effects  
of Air Power January 29-February 1, 1991  
Part II*





William P. Head

(Overleaf) An A-10 swoops in for attack.

AS THE IRAQIS MOVED INTO THE CITY, EVERYTHING ELSE SEEMED TO BE GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN

Not everything went well for the Coalition forces at Al-Khafji. During the withdrawal, the Marine's LAV-25 and LAV-AT anti-tank vehicles repositioned to block and engage the Iraqi units as they came out of the other side of Al-Khafji, just in case they continued forward. Vision was poor, and one commander of an anti-tank vehicle asked permission from C-2 to fire on what appeared to be an Iraqi tank. Once the okay came, they fired hitting a fellow LAV-AT only a few hundred yards in front. In spite of the disaster, the LAVs held their ground engaging the Iraqi tanks with their autocannons. While they could not destroy the tanks, they did disorient the Iraqis causing them to take up defensive positions in the town.

At this point, several A-10 ground-attack aircraft arrived. Not possessing the sophisticated targeting devices of other aircraft such as the AC-130s, the pilots had difficulty identifying enemy targets. Aircraft dropped flares to illuminate the area, one landing on an Allied vehicle. Their radio operator tried frantically to alert the aircraft as to its position and identity. It was too late, an A-10 had fired an AGM-65 Maverick air-to-ground missile which struck the vehicle killing the entire crew except for the driver. To prevent further *friendly fire* incidents, C-2 ordered the company to withdraw. The Coalition had lost eleven killed in these fiery explosions.<sup>1</sup>

As the Iraqis moved into the city, everything else seemed to be going according to plan. What they did not realize was that a small group of Marines were cut off and hiding in the town on the roof tops of buildings where, as it turned out, they could direct CAS and artillery fire. Throughout the engagement, the Joint STARS E-8A aircraft continued reporting on the movements of the various Iraqi units in and around Al-Khafji.<sup>2</sup>

In one official Marine account of the situation, they wrote that the first Iraqi units to enter Al-Khafji were members of the 15th Mechanized Brigade. They were "unopposed by ground forces." The only thing that slowed their advance were periodic attacks by Air Force AC-130 gunships and Marine AH-1W Super Cobras.<sup>3</sup> Even with this chaotic situation unfolding, General Schwarzkopf refused to be lured into Saddam Hussein's trap. He ordered his commanders to use Marine, Saudi, and Qatari forces in the area, supported "vigorously" by air power, to retake Al-Khafji. To increase the margin of safety and avoid a repeat of the earlier catastrophe, the Marines initiated a phased redeploy-

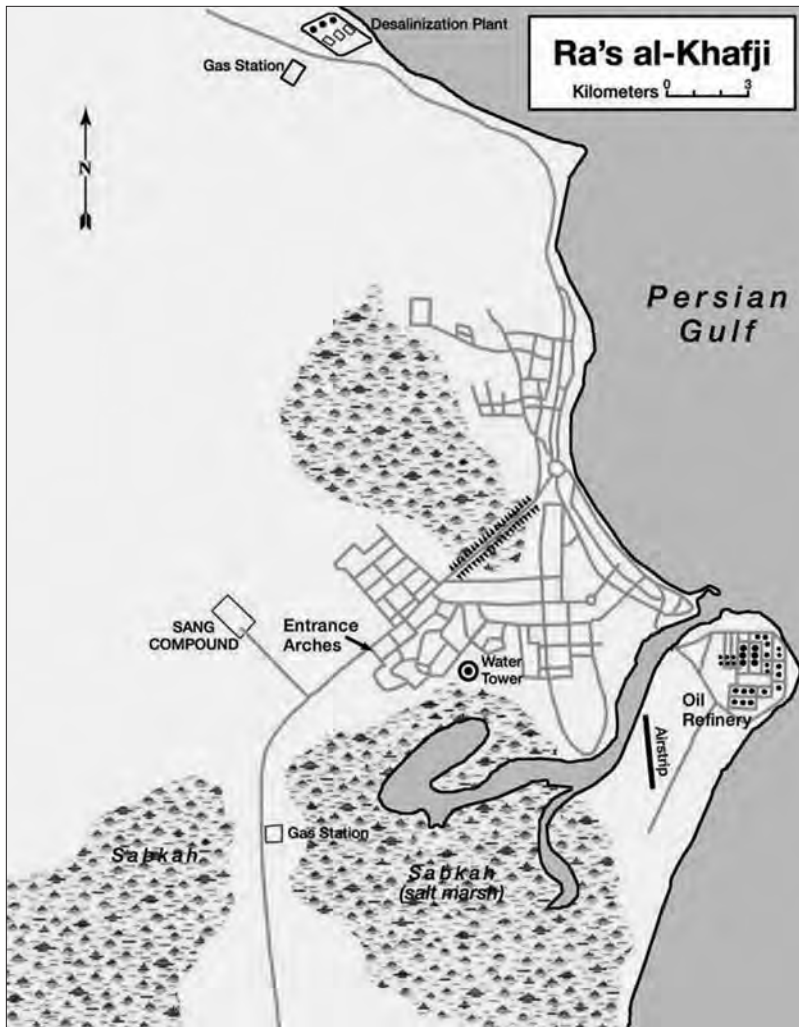
ment in their sector to put a buffer of about ten miles between themselves and the Iraqis. Coalition leaders realized that with air power capable of constant and deep sorties, the ground units would not require reinforcements.<sup>4</sup>

According to General Schwarzkopf, General Khaled happened to be in the area inspecting his troops when the Iraqis attacked. When Khaled contacted headquarters, Schwarzkopf suggested that, "If they are still there in the morning, you'll be able to go in and clear them out." Khaled later informed the general he was making preparations to retake the city. Schwarzkopf responded, "That's great; that's exactly what your forces should be doing. We'll give you all the air support you need." A short time later, Khaled's deputy Maj. Gen. Abdulaziz al-Shaikh came to see Schwarzkopf and reported that King Fahd wanted U.S. air forces to destroy the town rather than let the Iraqis have it. It took a while but Schwarzkopf finally calmed the King, and the Saudi, and Qatari forces began their counter attack.<sup>5</sup>

As these discussions unfolded, conditions at the front became temporarily tense since the Saudis believed they were not receiving the necessary air cover they needed during their efforts to set up their forces for a counter-attack. They believed it was absolutely necessary to take back *sacred* Saudi territory from the Iraqi invaders. As the withdrawal unfolded Gen. Charles Horner and Joint Force Air Component officers directing air assets realized that OP 4 and the Marines needed air cover more than anyone, at least for the time being. As soon, as they reached relative safety, Horner directed his aircraft to support the Saudi and Qatari assault forces. The general relished the opportunity to use air forces against this major Iraqi attack and prove the efficacy of U.S. air power. This fact was soon conveyed from Schwarzkopf to Khaled who—now satisfied that his forces were being shown the respect they deserved—prepared for the counter-attack.<sup>6</sup>

As the combat continued, personnel at the Air Operations Center began altering previously scheduled sorties already airborne in order to attack the moving Iraqi forces which had been targeted by Joint STARS sweeps. To assure maximum coverage and to decrease enemy lethality, controllers directed air attacks into the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations (KTO) from different altitudes and directions using "kill boxes," which measured roughly thirty miles by thirty miles and were subdivided into four quad-

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rants. To quote one account, “planners pushed a four-ship flight through each kill box every seven to eight minutes in daytime and every fifteen minutes at night. In the designated area of the box, a flight lead was free to attack any targets he could identify within the allotted time.”<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately Schwarzkopf’s plan of operation allowed the air component, especially aerial interdiction, to operate independently. The Air Tasking Order had already assigned hundreds of missions against Iraqi forces such as the Republican Guard in the KTO—some in the region where the three divisions attacking Al-Khafji had assembled for the offensive. With these air assets already flying through the “kill boxes,” air controllers passed them to the Marine forward air controllers to support forces near the occupied city.

The very fact that Coalition pilots found it easier to recognize Iraqi armor once they were on the move increased the number of kills and basically ended friendly fire issues. As Rebecca Grant wrote in her article on the battle, “Near Al Wafra, an A-10 pilot described the sight of a column of vehicles as ‘like something from A-10 school.’” Grant also quotes A-10 pilot Capt. Rob Givens as declaring later, “I, myself—one captain in one airplane—was engaging up to a battalion-size of armor on the ground” and “keeping these guys pinned for a little bit.”<sup>8</sup>

From the outset, Air Force AC-130 gunships became a significant part of the engagement. That first night as crews lingered on alert, the word came for them to hasten their aircraft to the region near Al-Khafji. Once over the battlefield, they attacked elements of the 5th Mechanized and 3d Armored Divisions as they reached Al-Khafji. A single gunship targeted the lead column and, using its rapid fire weapons and 105mm cannon, devastated the enemy as they entered the town. While they took some fire from anti-aircraft guns and missile launches, the speed of their assault prevented the Iraqis from bringing to bear the vast majority of their heavier anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) or shoulder-fired SA-7 Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs).

In evaluating this initial day it is important to realize that, as the skirmish near OP 4 concluded, elements of the Iraqi 5th Mechanized Division swung south and crossed the Saudi border near OP 1. In turn, a screening company of the Saudi 2nd Light Infantry Armored Battalion spotted the Iraqi unit comprised of nearly 100 Soviet-made Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty (BMP) fighting vehicles. Command and control vectored A-10s and Harrier jump jets to the area. This column was soon followed by another group, this one consisting of twenty-nine T-62 tanks. American and Coalition F-16 fighter aircraft soon joined the engagement destroying the lead tank with an anti-tank missile. The battle continued in this manner near both OPs 1 and 2. By morning, most of the Iraqi vehicles had been shattered by Allied air power.<sup>9</sup>

As we have seen, the primary attack group of Iraqi tanks and vehicles crossed the Saudi border to the East along the coast and seized Al-Khafji. Troops of the 5th Mechanized Battalion of the 2d Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigade observed the Iraqi tanks until they received heavy fire and withdrew under direct orders. Units of the 8th and 10th Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigades acted in similar fashion. The withdrawal orders proved prudent since, in one case, Iraqi T-55s approached the border with their turrets in reverse, indicating they were surrendering. As the Saudi units advanced, the Iraqis suddenly reversed their turrets and opened fire forcing a Saudi retreat. It was at this point that Coalition commanders in the area sent three AC-130s to the area. During this engagement, they destroyed thirteen enemy vehicles forcing them to take refuge. Still, with all the Coalition ground forces having appeared to pull back, the Al-Khafji road was left open to the remaining Iraqi units.<sup>10</sup>

Around midnight of the first day, even as the AC-130s had performed their lethal orbiting *dance of death* with great precision, the Iraqis entered Al-Khafji. It was at this point that two six-man 1st Marine Division reconnaissance teams found themselves cut off from their escape route and trapped inside the city. Rather than panic, they quickly occupied two apartment buildings in the southern sector of the city and called artillery fire on their position to force the Iraqis to halt their search of the area.

**THE...FACT THAT COALITION PILOTS FOUND IT EASIER TO RECOGNIZE IRAQI ARMOR ONCE THEY WERE ON THE MOVE INCREASED THE NUMBER OF KILLS**



The remains of two of the 6th Armored Brigade's T-62 tanks, destroyed on the night of January 29, 1991, lie abandoned on the sand in front of Observation Post 4.



## ALARMED BY THE IRAQI SUCCESS, GENERAL KHALED QUICKLY CONTACTED GENERAL SCHWARZKOPF REQUESTING A CONCENTRATED AIR AND GROUND ATTACK

What began as a mistake soon became a blessing as the Marines called in artillery and air strikes rained reprisal on the Iraqis throughout the night. Fixed-wing and helicopter gunships assaulted enemy tanks and artillery with *extreme prejudice and accuracy*.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout, Iraqi forces nearly located the Marines. According to Scott Williams as well as Gordon and Trainor, "To encourage the Iraqis to move away from the building, he [Cpl. Ingraham] had called for artillery fire and air strikes on the street around him." Concerns for the Marines increased when one of their number was wounded by artillery shrapnel from U.S. fire. Khaled urged a rapid response by his forces in an effort to rescue the trapped Americans.<sup>12</sup>

It was at this point that the Iraqis in Al-Khafji reported to Baghdad that the Saudi town was theirs. Radio broadcasts in the Iraqi capital declared "victory" saying, "We have expelled the Americans from Arab territory." Thousands of people poured into the streets chanting, "O Saddam, from Khafji to Damman!" People all across the Muslim world, even in places like Indonesia, Pakistan and Malaysia, demonstrated in favor of Iraq's apparent success.<sup>13</sup> At least at first, Saddam Hussein had accomplished one of his goals to become a major leader in the Arab world.

## Counterattack

Alarmed by the Iraqi success, General Khaled quickly contacted General Schwarzkopf requesting a concentrated air and ground attack. Schwarzkopf, with his main air and ground forces focused on preparations for assault on the Iraqi right, opted to retake the city using Arab forces supported by air power. The task fell to the 2d Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigade's 7th Battalion, composed of Saudi infantry and two Qatari tank companies attached to the task force. Plans called for them to be supported by U.S. Army Special Forces and Marine Reconnaissance personnel.<sup>14</sup>

The original plan called for attack forces to surround the buildings where the Marines were trapped and free them. A second force would then execute a frontal assault up the main highway directly into the town. This became more daunting when the Coalition discovered that the Iraqis had nearly 1,500 men in Al-Khafji. While the local Marine commander Col. John Admire, promised the Arab force robust artillery and air support, he later recalled, "We didn't do a lot of planning. We just drew it out in the sand and went for it. I emphasized that the Arab force would do the main attack."<sup>15</sup>

For the attack, these units were placed under the command of Saudi Lt. Col. Abdul Matar. The

The Saudi National Guard battalions, which freed al-Khafji from the Iraqis, employed Cadillac Gage V-150 Commando light armored vehicles, some of which were equipped with a M220 launcher for the BGM-71 TOW antitank missile.



**IT WOULD BE THE FIRST TIME ANYONE IN THE QATARI ARMY HAD EVER FIRED A SHOT IN ANGER**

operation began around 5:00 p.m. on January 30. The Arab components soon linked up with elements of the 3d Marine Regiment, just south of Al-Khafji. The plan called for a direct assault on the town by all units. It would be the first time anyone in the Qatari army had ever fired a shot in anger. Fifteen minutes of preparatory artillery fire opened the attack. As the nighttime battle unfolded, a platoon of Iraqi T-55s engaged a Qatari tank company south of the city. The Qatari French-built AMX-30 main battle tanks destroyed three T-55s and captured a fourth. Throughout this phase of the engagement, the attacking forces were supported by artillery fire from the 11th Marine Regiment. At first, the attack was slowed by heavy Iraqi fire but soon, the Saudis reinforced the assault units with two additional companies of their 7th Battalion. Even so, the Iraqis did destroy one Saudi V-150 armored personnel carrier.<sup>16</sup>

As the frontal assault ground on, components of the 5th Battalion and 2d Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigade, supported by the 8th Ministry of Defense and Aviation Brigade moved north of Al-Khafji to block Iraqi reinforcements attempting to reach the city. They were supported by a robust air power component that completely stopped Iraqi efforts to reinforce the defenders in Al-Khafji, but not everything turned out well. During the night, a unit of U.S. Army heavy equipment transporters got lost and stumbled into the city. While most were

able to withdraw under heavy fire, one truck was hit and the occupants were wounded and captured.

The 3d Battalion, 3d Marine Regiment quickly sent thirty men to rescue the two soldiers. While they did not find the two truck drivers, they did find the destroyed Qatari AMX-30 with its dead crew. They brought the bodies back to Coalition lines.<sup>17</sup>

The initial assault was not successful. Paul W. Westermeyer writes in his Marine Corps History Division account that, "Despite their [Saudi's] efforts the 7th Battalion was not able to retake Al-Khafji nor was it able to relieve the reconnaissance teams still trapped in the city. Part of the problem had been Khaled's collegial desire to rescue his American comrades trapped inside the town who were running out of food, water and luck." Initial planning had resulted in a frontal attack comprised of very little subtlety. Even though they did not retake Al-Khafji immediately, they withdrew to positions closer to the town and adjusted their plans by sending the 5th Battalion, 2d Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigade north to block Iraqi movements in or out of the town. They were soon joined by a battalion of the 8th Ministry of Defense and Aviation Brigade. In addition, Coalition air power in the form of F/A-18s, A-10s and AV-8s provided CAS during the daylight hours and AC-130s during the night. With Allied air forces now focused on Al-Khafji the Saudis and Qataris were in position to deliver the *coup de grace*.<sup>18</sup>

A head-on view of an AC-130 gunship, armament bristling on its side.



**AS THE DAWN BEGAN TO BREAK THROUGH, THE AC-130Hs WERE ORDERED OUT OF THE AREA FOR FEAR OF BECOMING A TARGET FOR SHOULDER-FIRED SAMs**

### The Tragedy of “Spirit 03”

The “Spirit 03” became a prelude of one of the worst tragedies of the entire Gulf War. In the early hours of the morning near sunrise, AC-130 call sign “Spirit 03” was shot down by an Iraqi SAM killing all fourteen crew members. The event was a great shock that rippled through the entire Coalition. At first, it had seemed the fixed-wing gunships were invincible. Each night since the Iraqis had first launched their attack, the gunships *licked their chops* at the prospect of plentiful targets, minimum anti-aircraft defense and no enemy aircraft. They feasted on the enemy columns during each of the three nights. However, as the dawn began to break through, the AC-130Hs were ordered out of the area for fear of becoming a target for shoulder-fired SAMs. Three gunships were airborne that morning and the first two had destroyed numerous armored personnel carriers. Air attacks destroyed some vehicles, damaged several more, and forced crews to abandon others. The net effect was to strip the enemy of its ability to achieve the surprise, momentum, massed effects and dominance that are the bases of successful maneuver.

The crew of gunship “Spirit 03,” or T/N 69-6567 nicknamed “Ghost Rider,” had planned to spend the evening of January 29, searching for Scud sites. However, when the Iraqis attacked their mission changed. Over the next two nights they found them-

selves focused on destroying the forces of the 5th Mechanized and 3d Armored Divisions. On January 31, they and other gunships were busy with so many high value targets under her guns that the crew was reluctant to withdraw with their mission incomplete. One account reveals their eagerness to finish their task, “Allied pilots were thrown into a bloodlust type of frenzy, which put them and their crews in danger.” As for “Spirit 03,” they simply stayed on site too long. At 6:00 a.m., their luck ran out when suddenly an enemy man-portable shoulder-fired SAM, a SA-7 “Grail,” struck the AC-130H. The ensuing explosion hurled the gunship skyward. In spite of desperate efforts to save the aircraft, it crashed just after 6:30 a.m. killing all fourteen crew members. It was the worst single loss of the air war.<sup>19</sup>

Bloodlust does not explain the tragedy since their sacrifice was a supreme effort to provide CAS for embattled Marines on the ground. One of the last of three AC-130s on station, “Spirit 03” was preparing to “bug out” when they received a radio call from the Marines requesting the destruction of an enemy missile battery. Facing increasing AAA fire and now illuminated by the light of the breaking day, the crew of “Spirit 03” elected to stay. No sooner had they eliminated the target when they were hit by the SAM.<sup>20</sup> As Generals Clay T. McCutchan and Steve Wilson recalled years later, “it was a tragic loss that affected every single mem-

The crew of a Marine LAV-25 scans the desert. The LAV-25 was the backbone of the light armored infantry battalions, an untried concept prior to the Battle of al-Khafji. The battalions were used in a traditional cavalry role, providing a screen in front of the main body of I Marine Expeditionary Force.



IT WAS A TRAGIC LOSS THAT AFFECTED EVERY SINGLE MEMBER OF THE GUNSHIP COMMUNITY

ber of the gunship community.” No one who flies gunships has forgotten, nor doubtless ever will forget, the event.<sup>21</sup>

### Bringing the Battle to a Climax

Even as the gunship misfortune unfolded, the Saudi and Qatari forces pushed into the outer defenses of Khafji. As January 31st dragged on, the Iraqis decided their only hope was to send in reinforcements from Kuwait to reinvigorate the offensive and, once more, try to lure the Coalition into a costly ground battle. Late that night, Iraqi commanders sent in fresh troops of the 3d Armored and 5th Mechanized Divisions hoping they would arrive just before sunrise. Coalition forces near Al-Khafji were unaware of this action. Once again air power proved its merit. This time a Joint STARS E-8A spotted columns moving along the coastal road toward Al-Khafji and at other points just inside Kuwait. Air controllers immediately directed airborne assets to strike these Iraqi units. Early in the morning of February 1, an E-8A recorded several of the air strikes which decimated the Iraqi relief columns and forced most of the survivors off the road into the desert. Air power alone halted mobile vehicle columns—something few believed possible.<sup>22</sup> “Without even realizing it, January 31 became the Air Force’s finest day. They had repulsed a three-division attack and thwarted a major Iraqi initiative.”<sup>23</sup>

Not only had the gunships and attack aircraft been efficient, but the use of BLU-82 “Daisy Cutter” ordnance by Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) crews literally annihilated the Iraqi armor in and around Al-Khafji. At one point, Iraqi General Salah, alluding to Saddam Hussein’s calling Al-Khafji the “mother of all battles,” declared “the mother was killing her children” and then requested he be allowed to withdraw the survivors.

Coalition aircraft had flown 267 sorties against Iraqi units without disrupting air attacks in Kuwait. The results had been devastating for the Iraqis. On the last day, Marine, Saudi, and Qatari forces, supported by AC-130Hs, made their final push into the town, finally uprooting the Iraqis. Coalition forces lost three armored vehicles while destroying twenty-four enemy tanks and thirteen other armored vehicles. During the three days of combat, Allied air power remained overhead ready to spring into action against any and all targets at a moment’s notice. All totaled, the gunships and other CAS aircraft left more than 300 Iraqi vehicles smoldering wrecks between Al-Khafji and Kuwait. As Horner noted, “The systems that were especially effective were the AC-130 gunship patrolling the coast road just offshore in southern Kuwait.” One Iraqi veteran of the Iran-Iraq War later declared that Coalition air power “imposed more damage on his brigade in half an hour than it had sustained in eight years of fighting against the Iranians.”<sup>24</sup>

AS THE MORNING OF FEBRUARY 1 DAWNED, THE SAUDI FORCE PUSHED ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE TOWN, MOPPING UP OPPOSITION TROOPS AS THEY WENT

Another Iraqi captain with the 5th Mechanized Division lamented “that his brigade, who had been tasked to support units in Al-Khafji, was stopped short of the border by a combination of air power and Arab tanks.” After action reports reported that this division was less than 50 percent effective after the battle. General Horner later declared, “Khafji was a tremendous victory for Air Power,” and it was a tremendous victory overall in terms of what happened in Operation Desert Storm, because it laid the final nail in the coffin of the Iraqi Army.<sup>25</sup>

The final assault by the Saudis and Qataris unfolded slowly but surely throughout January 31. Pressing their attack from the north and south soon crushed formal resistance. As the morning of February 1 dawned the Saudi force pushed all the way through the town, mopping up opposition troops as they went. General Khaled soon declared victory and the recapture of the Al-Khafji. While a few Iraqis still had to be rooted out and others surrendered over the next few days the battle was over. To the Saudis it had been a great victory. For the Americans it was a relief since it meant their larger plans for the larger land war could continue as planned. Last, but not least, for the Air Force it proved the decisive power of its air assets.<sup>26</sup>

One last aspect of the battle was an attempted landing by Iraqi amphibious forces along the coast with plans to move into Al-Khafji. As the boats made their way through the Gulf waters towards Al-Khafji, U.S. and British aircraft caught the Iraqi boats in the open and destroyed the Iraqi amphibious force. As the remaining twenty Iraqi patrol boats, tankers and mine sweepers attempted their escape, perhaps to Iran, Royal Navy forces attacked them at what became known as the Battle of Babiyan. Only three boats survived the engagement. Even though sporadic Iraqi resistance continued in the area, by the end of February 1, 1991, Al-Khafji was once again in Coalition hands. The Marines who had been trapped inside had been rescued. Their services had proved vital in destroying the Iraqi units and vehicles as well as liberating the town.<sup>27</sup>

#### **The Aftermath: Wins, Losses and Significant Results**

The air campaign continued, alone, for nearly four more weeks before the short-lived ground campaign began. Throughout February, various aircraft performed myriad tasks from B-52s stationed at Diego Garcia carpet bombing Iraqi positions in redoubts to fighter-bombers using PGMs shutting off oil leaks and extinguishing oil fires purposely started by the Iraqis. Air Power eradicated whole Iraqi brigades arrayed in combat formations in the open desert and prevented effective Iraqi resupply to forward deployed units engaged in the actual fighting. It also stopped hundreds of thousands of Iraqi troops from achieving the force concentration essential for anything approaching victory in the upcoming land battle.<sup>28</sup>

During the battle for Al-Khafji, Coalition forces

suffered forty-three killed and fifty-two injured. This included twenty-five Americans killed; eleven from friendly fire and fourteen in the loss of “Spirit 03.” The U.S. had two wounded and two more captured. The Saudi and Qatari forces lost eighteen killed and fifty wounded. Two Qatari AMX-30 tanks and ten Saudi V-150 armored vehicles were destroyed. According to Freedman and Karsh, in their article “How Kuwait Was Won,” the Iraqis had seventy-one killed, 148 wounded, and 702 missing. An official U.S. source claimed that 300 Iraqis lost their lives, and at least ninety vehicles were destroyed. Another source suggested that sixty Iraqi soldiers were killed and at least 400 taken prisoner. It also believed that eighty armored vehicles were destroyed. No matter which numbers the reader might accept, what is clear is that the battle in and around Al-Khafji was an Allied victory that eviscerated three Iraqi heavy armor divisions.<sup>29</sup>

At first, the Iraqi capture of Al-Khafji had been a propaganda victory for Iraq. On January 30, Iraqi radio declared they had “expelled Americans from the Arab territory.” This euphoria was short-lived. Within forty-eight hours, Saudi and Qatari troops, supported by massive air power, had retaken the city without committing large numbers of Allied ground forces. Saddam Hussein had not drawn the Coalition into his trap, and the ground campaign began on schedule on February 24-25. Significantly, the victory also raised the confidence of U.S. military leaders in the abilities of the Saudi and Qatari armies.

It is also important to realize that following the engagement at Al-Khafji, Coalition officials began to conclude the Iraqi Army was a “hollow force” or a “light beer” version of the Soviet ground forces which had trained and supplied them. General Schwarzkopf, in particular, was convinced this was the resistance that the Coalition ground forces would face later that month. Coalition leaders discovered that air power and its continued use was wearing down the Iraqi forces in the field. For example, sixty-two B-52 bombers flew 1,600 sorties against the roughly 540,000 Iraqi forces positioned in the desert. By the time the ground offensive began, fewer than 250,000 remained in Iraq and 100,000 in Kuwait. Significantly, the equipment captured had shown “a lot of rust and lack of proper lubrication.” This showed that the Iraqis lacked training and supervised maintenance.” Last, but not least, it was a huge morale boost for the Saudis who had successfully defended their own territory.<sup>30</sup>

#### **Significance for Air Power**

Air power had been the cornerstone of this victory along with the courageous efforts of Marine, Saudi, and Qatari ground units. Allied air units had detected the Iraqi units and responded rapidly to prevent the Iraqis from dictating the terms of the battle. Instead, the Harriers, A-10s and later AC-130s halted the enemy’s initiative. Once the Iraqi force became a stationary force, air power carefully destroyed its force with impunity. As one

Capt Douglas R. Kleinsmith poses with his air-ground liaison team. On the night of January 29-30, 1991 Kleinsmith's team was cut off from Coalition forces by the Iraqi advance. They evaded the enemy by maneuvering through the sabkhas and returned to Coalition lines.



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Air Force pilot reported the enemy vehicles “were lined up in columns on roads, they were easy to find, they were easy to strike.” Indeed, the Central Air Force (CENTAF) showed that by the end of February 1, Coalition aircraft destroyed forty-four of the 5th Mechanized Division’s tanks. In short, one of Hussein’s finest units had all but been destroyed. According to one Defense Department report “only 20 percent of the division made it back.”<sup>31</sup>

General Horner believed, “the Coalition seized the initiative by using airpower to turn the tables on the attacking Iraqis.”<sup>32</sup> The General further declared:

*The Battle of Khafji did validate the idea that air power could be used to defeat the enemy army before it closed with our own ground forces, that it could feed the battle indigestible chunks for our own friendly ground forces. Khafji validated what a lot of airmen had been saying for a long time.*<sup>33</sup>

They had done so in the most efficient and effective way possible. Rather than have to destroy most or all of the units as the Army believed was necessary to halt enemy maneuver forces, they had stopped their advance by the mere threat of destruction. General Schwarzkopf had established a goal of 50 percent attrition but the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) found that Allied air forces had halted the Iraqi 5th Division by destroy-

ing fifty-one of its 160 vehicles. Fortunately, as many analysts have recommended U.S. air power has grown in efficacy over the past twenty years. One source says, “Airpower is actually more effective in target identification and weapons employment than it was in 1991.” Thus, “the operational lessons of the Iraqi offensive at Khafji remain intact: ‘Dominance in the air can strip the initiative from an enemy maneuver force—and do it with an efficiency that makes air power the decisive weight in the operational balance.’”<sup>34</sup>

In many ways the Battle of Khafji confirmed the ability of air power to not only act effectively in its role of CAS but halt, devastate, and repel large concentrations of mobile maneuver ground forces. It demonstrated, once and for all, the strategically decisive nature of air power in modern conventional combat. Rebecca Grant writes, “Khafji demonstrated to all but the most ingrained skeptic the ability of deep air attacks to shape and control the battle and yield advantages for engaged ground forces. In 1991, air power identified, attacked, and halted division-sized mechanized forces without the need for a synchronized, ground counterattack.”<sup>35</sup>

It is worth asking what would have happened had the Coalition not had air superiority? Likely, as not, Saddam Hussein’s attack would have succeeded. One need only recall that during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the Iraqis frequently lured Iranian forces into bloody land battles that not only

Operating as part of the Marine air-ground task force, AV-8B Harriers provided needed close air support during the Battle of al-Khafji.



**SOMETIME AFTER THE BATTLE AT AL-KHAFJI, MAJ. GEN. CHARLES D. LINK, USAF, (RET.) CONCLUDED THAT THE U.S. SHOULD PUT MORE EMPHASIS ON AIR POWER AND LESS ON LAND POWER**

cost thousands of lives but devastated the Iranian nation. Clearly, the American public would never have accepted such casualty numbers and they may have forced a withdrawal. Instead, air power blunted the Iraqi attack and eventually devastated Iraqi ground forces.

Sometime after the battle at Al-Khafji, Maj. Gen. Charles D. Link, USAF, (Ret.) concluded that the U.S. should put more emphasis on air power and less on land power. He believed that, "If we are to take to heart the lessons of Khafji, we must reexamine how we spend our defense dollars." During the ensuing decades this notion gained support with the number of aircraft in all services increasing fivefold. By 1998, Joint STARS had reached full operational capacity. Stationed at Robins AFB, Georgia, it has also seen an upgrade to the E-8C. Modern military air power affords battlefield commanders with a rapid reaction force capable of transmitting target information for strikes that can impede enemy offensive initiative and subsequently lead to the denigration of their forces and ability to fight back. Faced with this situation, one can conclude that, no enemy maneuver force has a reasonable hope of successfully realizing its objectives.<sup>36</sup>

While Operation Allied Force and Enduring Freedom both confirmed to some degree the lessons from Al-Khafji and the First Gulf War, Operation

Iraqi Freedom and the protracted nation-building efforts of the Allied powers in these conflicts placed emphasis once again on the importance of ground forces. However, with the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011 and the initiation of a phased drawdown from Afghanistan, it is more important than ever to re-examine the paradigm of Al-Khafji and decide how to employ U.S. military units and weapons in an effective composition for future American force structures. With cuts in military spending seemingly on the horizon, one must decide what the U.S. military should look like in the future. For those who have studied the lessons of the First Gulf War, the conclusion is plain; an investment is needed in air power. These students have seen the examples of the efficacy of modern technology when coupled with modern aviation. For them the operational lessons learned from the Iraqi offensive at Al-Khafji remain intact. They realize that control of the skies can and will stifle the offensive ability of any enemy maneuver force, thus, making air power "the decisive weight in the operational balance."<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the best way to conclude this work is to quote the renowned military historian David MacIsaacs who said of air power in World War II that it "showed beyond all cavil that air power, especially when applied as widely and in as many directions as the United States could, dominated surface

warfare.”<sup>38</sup> As if he had known what future historians would say, in 1942, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, a great proponent of mobile warfare, concluded, “The future of battle on the ground will be preceded by battle in the air. This will determine which of the contestants has to suffer operational and tactical disadvantages and be forced throughout the battle into adopting compromise solutions.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the performance of air forces dur-

ing this battle confirmed in every aspect the prognoses and pronouncements of both these military professionals. In fact, Coalition air forces in this battle followed U.S. Air Force doctrine to the letter. Its “employment in that engagement (Battle of Khafji) isolated the battlefield, destroyed follow-on forces, halted the Iraqi offensive, and demonstrated to the Iraqis the futility of further offensive action.”<sup>40</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. Williams, “Khafji,” p. 45; Westermeyer, “Marines in Battle,” pp. 27-30; Stanton, “Saudi Guard,” pp. 8-9; “Spirit 03;” William P. Head, *Night Hunter: A History of the AC-130 Gunship*, Air Force Special Study (Warner Robins ALC Office of History: Robins AFB, Georgia, 2012), pp. 316-26, [hereafter *Night Hunters*].
2. Clevenger, “The Battle of Khafji,” “Introduction and Executive Summary,” pp. 1-36; Spirit 03.
3. Westermeyer, “Marines in Battle,” p. 22.
4. Grant, “Epic Battle,” pp. 30-32.
5. Schwarzkopf, *Hero*, pp. 424-26. It should be noted that most of the Qatari forces were comprised of Pakistani mercenaries or Qataris of Pakistani national origin.
6. Westermeyer, “Marines in Battle,” pp. 22-25.
7. Grant, “Epic Battle,” p. 30-31.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
9. Westermeyer, “Marines in Battle,” pp. 25-26; Head, *Night Hunters*, pp. 326-29.
10. Williams, “Khafji,” pp. 46-47; Stanton, “Saudi Guard,” pp. 9-10.
11. Westermeyer, “Marines in Battle,” pp. 29, 31-34; Stanton, “Saudi Guard,” pp. 9-11; Head, *Night Hunters*, pp. 335-340.
12. Williams, “Khafji,” p. 41; Gordon and Trainor, *The General’s War*, p. 280.
13. Williams, “Khafji,” p. 19. Original quotes from Alan Cowell, “War in the Gulf: Iraq; Hussein is Controlling Plans for Ground War, report says,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1991, Section A; p. 11; Youssef M. Ibrahim, “Choosing Sides in the Mideast, A Fear that the War is Only the Beginning,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1991, Section 4; pp. 1, 3.
14. Williams, “Khafji,” pp. 19, 52-56; Schwarzkopf, *Hero*, pp. 424-26.
15. Williams, “Khafji,” p. 44; Gordon and Trainor, *The General’s War*, p. 280.
16. Williams, “Khafji,” pp. 23-25; Freedman and Karsh, “How Kuwait Was Won,” pp. 33-34; Westermeyer, “Marines in Battle,” pp. 27-29.
17. Stanton, “Saudi Guard,” pp. 9-11; Williams, “Khafji,” pp. 23-25.
18. Westermeyer “Marines in Battle,” pp. 28-30.
19. Gordon and Trainor, *The General’s War*, p. 284; Interview by Author with Maj. Gen. Clay T. McCutchan and Maj. Gen. Steve Wilson, 29 January 2008, Eglin AFB, Florida, Transcript, pp. 11-14 [hereafter McCutchan/Wilson Interview]; Titus, “The Battle of Khafji,” pp. 17-18; Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1993), pp. 210-13; John T. Quinn and Jack Shulimson, “U.S. Marine Operations in the Persian Gulf War, 1990-1991,” in William P. Head and Earl H. Tilford, Jr. *The Eagle in the Desert: Looking Back on U.S. Involvement in the Persian Gulf War*

- (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1996), pp. 211-12; Head, *Night Hunters*, pp. 328-329; Williams, “Khafji,” p. 46.
20. Spirit 03; Head, *Night Hunters*, 328-40.
21. McCutchan/Wilson Interview, p. 14.
22. Clevenger, “The Battle of Khafji,” Appendix B: “Interview with Gen. Charles Horner, USAF (Ret.), CENTAF Commander during Operation Desert Storm,” Feb. 26, 1996.
23. Williams, “Khafji,” p. 16.
24. Clevenger, “The Battle of Khafji,” Appendix B: “Interview with Gen. Charles Horner, USAF (Ret.), CENTAF Commander during Operation Desert Storm,” Feb. 26, 1996.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 28 and Appendix B. Also see Palmer, Scott and Toolan, *An Assessment of Airpower*, p. 5.
26. Westermeyer, “Marines in Battle,” pp. 31-33
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33; Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf War*, p. 392.
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29. Freedman and Karsh, “How Kuwait Was Won,” pp. 11-15.
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31. Grant, “Epic Battle,” p. 33.
32. *Ibid.* p. 33.
33. Palmer, Scott and Toolan, *An Assessment of Airpower*, p. 2.
34. Grant, “Epic Battle,” p. 34.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. Lt. Col. Charles M. Westenhoff, *Military Air Power: The CADRE Digest of Air Power Opinions and Thoughts*, (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University, 1990), p. 25.
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40. Palmer, Scott and Toolan, *An Assessment of Airpower*, p. 27. Original found in “Global Engagement: Air and Space Power Organization and Employment,” Air Force Doctrine Document 2, Maxwell AFB, Alabama: HQ Air Force Doctrine Center, Draft Version 8, p. 10.