

NORTHERN IRAQ

Perry D. Jamieson

(revised 30 Sep 2015)

(U) As 2007 drew to a close, Air Force Chief of Staff General T. Michael Moseley pointed out that the United States Air Force had been “in continuous combat since 1990—seventeen years and counting.”¹ The series of deployments that comprised Operation Desert Shield began in August 1990 and continued into 1991. Saddam Hussein then ignored several United Nations ultimatums, precipitating Operation Desert Storm, the massive air and ground assault on Iraqi leadership and national infrastructure and the ejection of its combat forces from Kuwait. That conflict in turn led to other combat operations throughout Southwest Asia, which continued until the time of General Moseley’s December 2007 statement—and beyond.²

(U) The first of these operations in Southwest Asia, Provide Comfort, immediately followed Desert Storm. Within a few days after the Safwan cease-fire, the Kurdish people of northern Iraq, an ethnic minority, began rebelling against Hussein. The Baghdad dictator viewed this uprising—unlike the coalition’s Gulf War operations—as a serious threat to his hold on power and dispatched several divisions to crush the Kurds. In early April 1991 hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees began fleeing their country through the snowy mountain passes into Turkey and Iran.³

(U) On the night of April 5, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 688, which asserted that the wave of Kurdish refugees into Turkey and Iran threatened “international peace and security.” The organization rejected Hussein’s claim that this was an internal issue. Resolution 688 called on the Iraqi government to end its repression of the Kurds and to ensure the human and political rights of all Iraqi citizens. While the United Nations adopted this

declaration, the organization took no steps to enforce its provisions. Nor did the United States support the Kurdish rebellion, or the Shi'a uprising that arose in southern Iraq at about the same time. In "a feckless abdication of a victor's power and responsibility," military historian Rick Atkinson contended, the George H. W. Bush administration "turned a blind eye."⁴

(U) President Bush, however, did take action to deliver humanitarian aid to the Kurds. On April 5, before the UN adopted Resolution 688 that evening, he ordered an airlift of food and supplies to the refugees in northern Iraq to begin in two days. The Joint Chiefs of Staff issued an

Image 1



Operation Provide Comfort: Kurdish women and children pose for a photograph.

alert order for the operation, designated "Provide Comfort."⁵ Maj. Gen. James L. Jamerson, who had commanded Joint Task Force (JTF) Proven Force which conducted a "second front" air campaign from Turkey during the Gulf War, became the commander of JTF Provide Comfort. Established on April 6, 1991, at Incirlik Air Base (AB), Turkey, and manned by personnel from the United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE), JTF Provide Comfort was to conduct humanitarian operations in northern Iraq.⁶

(U) That mission began the following day when C-130 Hercules tactical airlifters began dropping water and meals-ready-to-eat to the refugees. On April 8, Provide Comfort flew nine airdrop sorties. Two French and one British cargo plane arrived and joined the USAF C-130s enabling Major General Jamerson to re-designate the JTF as a *Combined* Task Force (CTF).

(U) It soon became obvious that to save the situation, ground forces would be needed to ensure the delivery of appropriate supplies and the accuracy of the airdrops. On April 10, the U.S. government warned Saddam Hussein against conducting any military operations in northern Iraq and the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized ground forces to enter the region.⁷

(U) President Bush also took another important step at this time, declaring that the United States would support Resolution 688 by enforcing a no-fly zone above 36 degrees north latitude. While the United States and other nations made air drops into northern Iraq, and U.S. ground forces operated there, President Bush put Hussein on notice not to interfere with their efforts. Iraqi aircraft were barred from flying north of the 36th parallel, which included the major cities of Mosul and Irbil.⁸

(U) The United States and other countries had acted quickly, but greater efforts were needed if the Kurdish refugees were to survive at mountain altitudes. The Provide Comfort mission expanded by transporting refugees from mountain passes to transit camps in the valleys. Ground forces protected the Kurds from Iraqi attacks. The CTF Provide Comfort accordingly gained two task forces, made up of Army, Marine, and other units.⁹ U.S. Army Lt. Gen. John M. Shalikashvili became the combined task force's commander; Jamerson served as his deputy.¹⁰

(U) On April 19, Lieutenant General Shalikashvili met with Iraqi military officers at Zakho, Iraq. He told them that coalition forces soon would enter the region to create a security zone, which would protect the refugees and allow them to return to their homes. Several tense

encounters followed, as United States and other allied ground units pressed back the Iraqi forces in the area, cleared the security zone, and shielded the Kurds.¹¹ A-10 Thunderbolt IIs and other aircraft deliberately flew low, slowly, and noisily over Hussein's units. Wary of having their routes of retreat cut by either coalition ground forces or aircraft, the Iraqis withdrew. U.S. Army Lt. Col. John Abizaid, airborne battalion combat team commander, later summarized: "We moved our ground and air forces around the Iraqis in such a way that they could fight or leave—and they left."¹² By May 7, after one month of operations, CTF Proven Force had delivered about 12.5 short tons of supplies, 10.9 of them by air.¹³

(U) With the refugee zone secured, the U.S. military anticipated transferring responsibility for the refugees to a civilian organization. On June 7, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, who supervised a wide variety of relief agencies, assumed the mission. Lieutenant General Shalikashvili began withdrawing coalition ground units, a movement completed by mid-July. A battalion task force stationed at Silopi, Turkey, and the air forces based at Incirlik continued to protect the Kurds. On July 24, as the emphasis shifted back to aerial operations, Shalikashvili returned command of CTF Provide Comfort to Major General Jamerson.¹⁴

(U) With the pullout of coalition ground forces, what would soon be known as Operation Provide Comfort I ended in mid-July 1991. Allied aircraft had flown more than 3,800 airdrop, 3,600 fighter, and 9,300 support sorties. During a follow-on operation, designated Provide Comfort II, the United States, United Kingdom, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey continued to field residual forces that deterred Hussein from renewing his attacks on the Kurds.¹⁵

(U) The USAFE continued to provide the bulk of the aircraft and personnel for Operation Provide Comfort II, and the CTF flew 13,997 sorties in 1992.¹⁶ By 1993, however, USAFE's declining strength as it drew down in size made the command's support of Provide Comfort

more difficult. On any given day that year, USAFE provided 1,700 to 1,800 personnel to the operation and during 1993 the CTF flew 13,841 sorties, roughly the same as the previous year. By mid-August 1993, Air Force leaders agreed that beginning on January 1, 1994, all major commands would furnish manpower to the CTF on a fair-share basis.¹⁷ Provide Comfort II ended on December 31, 1996; Operation Northern Watch succeeded it on the following day.¹⁸

(U) Operation Provide Comfort was the first major humanitarian relief effort by the United States following the end of the Cold War. Its success strongly suggested that, with the Soviet Union no longer a military rival, the United States more easily could deploy air and ground forces overseas, even near the borders of the former Eastern Bloc. Most significantly, the outcome of Provide Comfort – the first large, sustained U.S. military effort on Iraqi soil¹⁹ – influenced Department of Defense (DoD) officials such as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Paul D. Wolfowitz, who would prove receptive to future humanitarian operations in Iraq.²⁰

(U) While Operation Provide Comfort's purpose was to bring relief to the Kurdish refugees, its successor, Operation Northern Watch (ONW), enforced the no-fly zone established in Iraq above the 36th parallel and monitored Iraqi compliance with UN Security Council directives. Operating from Incirlik AB, CTF Northern Watch would consist by the end of the decade of about 1,600 personnel, mostly Americans, but British and Turkish forces would make critical contributions as well. The task force typically comprised fifty-plus aircraft²¹ including the F-15C Eagle, F-15E Strike Eagle, F-16CG and F-16CJ Fighting Falcon, KC-135 Stratotanker, HH-60G Pave Hawk, M/K/HC-130 Combat Shadow, RC-135 Rivet Joint, E3B/C Sentry, C-12 Huron, and U.S. Navy EA-6B Prowler. Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) contributed SEPECAT Jaguar ground attack aircraft and VC-10K transports; the Turkish Air

Force flew a combination of F-4 and F-16 fighters. A U.S. Army Patriot missile unit also served briefly during Operation Northern Watch.²²

(U) For pilots, Northern Watch missions could be monotonous or they could be dangerous. Lt. Col. Peter P. Bartos, an F-15C pilot who logged more than sixty-five combat hours on Operation Northern Watch, described the missions he and others flew as “a game of cat and mouse,”²³ which pitted U.S.-led coalition aircraft against Iraqi air defenses. When Lieutenant Colonel Bartos and his comrades entered the northern no-fly zone, he related, the “Iraqis would comply by keeping their aircraft well clear or by grounding their aircraft entirely during our four to five hour missions. They would also routinely take pot shots at us with their antiaircraft artillery (AAA), and on occasion with their surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).”²⁴

(U) Bartos and other ONW pilots operated over a region that, unlike southern Iraq, featured sharply mountainous terrain. An observer on a Northern Watch KC-135D flight during the morning of August 2, 1999, entered in his journal:

We could see into Iraq to [the] south (hazy) and north to Mt. Ararat (peeking out of clouds). Flew over very jumbled and convoluted mountains—Zagros chain extended—and bleakly hospitable, but also strangely exciting and even romantic—saw jagged upthrust columns and eruptive piles of red and blue grey rock, and also canyon walls and long mesas whose walls were red and showed aeons of exposure . . . here and there small little villages with lots of tin roofs reflecting brightly (and hotly) thru the haze.²⁵

(U) Patrolling this mountainous terrain became the responsibility of Brig. Gen. David A. Deptula and Turkish Brig. Gen. Savas Sanlitürk, who co-commanded the unit. Well known for his contributions to the planning for the Operation Desert Storm air campaign when he was a lieutenant colonel, Deptula

Image 2



General David A. Deptula

provided aggressive leadership of CTF Northern Watch during his tenure from April 1998 through October 1999. He personally led a total of 82 Northern Watch missions.²⁶

(U) The Iraqis had a large number and wide variety of SAMs, a principal hazard to the CTF Northern Watch air patrols. Brigadier General Deptula later recounted what was, perhaps, a typical engagement that took place in December 1998. Three days after Christmas, two F-16CJs operating together suppressed two SAM installations with high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARM), while four F-15Es attacked an SA-3 site. “Three out of four F-15Es,” Deptula later stated, “dropped two GBU-12 500-pound precision-guided bombs each for a total of six, all ‘shacks’ [direct hits] on either the radar and optical tracking unit or the command-and-control van. The guy that didn’t drop . . . couldn’t get a positive target ID [identification]—[his was] the kind of superior judgment displayed throughout the entire mission.”²⁷

(U) Missions similar to the one Brigadier General Deptula described were conducted under well-defined rules of engagement (ROE), but in January 1999 a series of SAM attacks led coalition airmen to conclude that the rules then in place constrained their ability to respond to Iraqi provocation. By February, the Americans, British, and Turks agreed on a change in the ROE, which provided that if engaged by SAMs, Northern Watch forces could respond by targeting any element of Hussein’s integrated air defense system. This change, Deptula explained, allowed his fliers “the flexibility to respond, not just against the gun or missile that is firing at us,” but also “the whole array of equipment and architecture that goes along with it, which is just as threatening as the missile or the gun.”²⁸ Deptula and his pilots exploited the opportunities offered by the new ROE. During the 11 months between December 1998 and November 1999, Northern Watch aircraft delivered more than 1,000 weapons against some 240

targets, claiming destruction of more than 140 large-caliber AAA guns, 30 SAM radars, 15 SAM launchers, and 10 radar relay, communications, and jamming sites.²⁹

(U) Beyond the cold statistics of AAA and SAMs destroyed, Northern Watch missions could become quite individual and personal, as one combat pilot's account demonstrated. Lieutenant Colonel Bartos, who flew with the Air Expeditionary Force X's 71st Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, launched a two-ship patrol mission on November 2, 2000, and headed south through the eastern part of the no-fly zone toward Irbil. As the F-15 flight approached a location called Peanut Hill just outside Kurdish-controlled territory, an Iraqi Roland antiaircraft missile climbed toward Bartos. Fortunately, the Iraqis fired when the Eagles were out of range and it dropped away harmlessly and exploded below him.³⁰ Bartos and his wingman were leaving contrails, a dangerous condition in the clear Iraqi sky. South of Irbil a second SAM reached out above 50,000 feet and headed straight toward his aircraft. Bartos outran the Iraqi missile, later recalling, "I instinctively knew I had plenty of airspeed as I heard the wind rush increase over the canopy and felt the F-15's controls increase their responsiveness. I dared not look forward to see my airspeed, altitude, or my exact attitude or I'd lose sight of the quickly approaching SAM."³¹ Bartos saw the flash of the SAM as it detonated a few miles behind and above him and his wingman at their exact previous altitude. Bartos and his wingman later learned that the attacks were no accident. A popular Iraqi officer had been killed on the previous day and his buddies vented their anger on the first two jets into the no-fly zone on the following day. Further, in 2004 Bartos spoke with an Iraqi general who confirmed another thing that U.S. fighter pilots had surmised: coalition aircraft often encountered antiaircraft fire or surface-to-air missiles because Hussein ordered his operators to shoot, or be shot themselves.³²

(U) While acknowledging Saddam Hussein's ruthlessness and recognizing the continuing need to counter his aggression, some analysts criticized the enforcement efforts of Northern Watch and its counterpart over southern Iraq. They faulted Northern and Southern Watch as open-ended operations that lacked a clear objective. Still others disagreed. A State Department official stated in June 1999: "We maintain a robust force in the region, which we have made clear we are prepared to use should Saddam cross our well-established redlines. Those redlines include: should he try to rebuild or deploy his weapons of mass destruction; should he strike out at his neighbors; should he challenge allied aircraft in the no-fly zones; or should he move against the people living in the Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Iraq."³³ Retired General and former Air Force Chief of Staff Merrill A. (Tony) McPeak declared: "The bombing isn't hurting us, and it is hurting Saddam." Lt. Col. Paul K. White was both a veteran of the air operations over Southwest Asia after the Gulf War and a judicious student of them. In a 1999 book, he concluded: "Washington's nine year [1991–1999] effort to contain Iraq's aggressive behavior has generally been successful. . . . U.S. air power, through enforcement of the Iraqi no-fly zones and air strikes during times of crises, has been the key element in that success."³⁴

(U) The effectiveness of Operation Northern Watch cannot be evaluated in isolation. Its counterpart over southern Iraq, discussed in the next chapter, should also be taken into account. Northern Watch, working with other U.S. operations and policies in Southwest Asia during the 1990s, effectively contained Saddam Hussein.

¹ (U) Report (U), Gen T. Michael Moseley, "The Nation's Guardians; America's 21st Century Air Force: CSAF White Paper," 29 Dec 07.

² (U) Report (U), Moseley, "The Nation's Guardians: CSAF White Paper," 29 Dec 07.

³ (U) Perry D. Jamieson, *Khobar Towers: Tragedy and Response* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2008), p 16; History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: pp lxvii, 383-84 (info used is U).

⁴ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, p 16; Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p 490.

⁵ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, p 17; History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p lxvii (info used is U).

⁶ (U) Richard G. Davis, *On Target: Organizing and Executing the Strategic Air Campaign Against Iraq* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2002), pp 209–213; History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p lxvii (info used is U); History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1993 (S), 27 vols, 1: p xlvi (info used is U).

⁷ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p xlvi (info used is U); Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, 1993), pp 340–348.

⁸ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, p 17; Paul K. White, *Crises After the Storm: An Appraisal of U.S. Air Operations in Iraq since the Persian Gulf War* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1999), p 10; Peter P. Bartos, "A Day on Northern Watch: November 2, 2000," *Air Power History* 54:1 (Spring 2007), text and map, p 18.

⁹ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p xlvi (info used is U); Scales, *Certain Victory*, pp 342–343.

¹⁰ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p xlvi (info used is U).

¹¹ (U) Scales, *Certain Victory*, p 348; History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p lxix (info used is U).

¹² (U) Scales, *Certain Victory*, p 349.

¹³ (U) Scales, *Certain Victory*, p 349; Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p 9; History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p lxix (info used is U).

¹⁴ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: p lxix (info used is U); Scales, *Certain Victory*, p 353.

¹⁵ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1991 (S), 33 vols, 1: pp lxix, lxx (info used is U); History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1993 (S), 27 vols, 1: pp xlvi–lxix (info used is U).

¹⁶ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1992 (S), 29 vols, 1: p xxxvi (info used is U); History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1993 (S), 27 vols, 1: p lxix (info used is U).

¹⁷ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1993 (S), 27 vols, 1: p lxix (info used is U).

¹⁸ (U) History of United States Air Forces in Europe, 1996 (S), 36 vols, 1: p xliv (info used is U); Briefing (U), Andrew Lambert, King's College London, "The No-Fly Zones of Iraq," slide 40, undated briefing.

¹⁹ (U) Scales, *Certain Victory*, p 352; Ricks, *Fiasco*, p 8.

²⁰ (U) Ricks, *Fiasco*, pp 6–11.

²¹ (U) John T. Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine* 83:2 (Feb 2000), pp 32, 35; Briefing (U), Lambert, "The No-Fly Zones of Iraq," slide 46, undated briefing.

²² (U) Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine* 83:2, p 36.

²³ (U) Bartos, "A Day on Northern Watch," *Air Power History* 54:1, p 18.

²⁴ (U) Bartos, "A Day on Northern Watch," *Air Power History* 54:1, p 18.

²⁵ (U) Journal (U), Richard P. Hallion, "Reflections on Operation Northern Watch," entry for 2 Aug 99. Dr. Hallion, Air Force Historian, 1991–2002, made this unpublished journal available to the author in Jun 2008.

²⁶ (U) Web site (U), Official Air Force biography of Lt. Gen. David A. Deptula, <http://www.af.mil/information/bios/bio.asp?bioID=5213> (Accessed August 2007); Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine* 83:2, p 35. The characterization of Deptula's leadership of CTF Northern Watch is based on a 6 Jun 2008 discussion with Dr. Hallion who visited Deptula's ONW headquarters at Incirlik during Aug 1999.

²⁷ (U) Web site (U), Official Air Force biography, Deptula; White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 62.

²⁸ (U) Briefing (U), Lambert, "The No-Fly Zones of Iraq," slide 52, undated briefing; Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine* 83:2, p 35.

²⁹ (U) Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine* 83:2, p 34.

³⁰ (U) Bartos, "A Day on Northern Watch," *Air Power History* 54:1, pp 18–20.

³¹ (U) Bartos, "A Day on Northern Watch," *Air Power History* 54:1, pp 20–21.

³² (U) Bartos, "A Day on Northern Watch," *Air Power History* 54:1, p 21.

³³ (U) Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine* 83:2, p 35.

³⁴ (U) Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine* 83:2, p 35; White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 88–89.