

MY DESERT SHIELD/STORM EXPERIENCE

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Operation Desert Shield/Storm, 08/20/90 - 03/18/91

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17 September 2006

Class 57

Abstract

Desert Shield and Desert Storm were critical military operations in maintaining some kind of stability in the Middle East region. The primary reasons for these operations were to prevent a possible invasion of Saudi Arabia, and to liberate Kuwait from invading Iraqi forces. After Saddam Hussein defied sanctions and refused several requests from the United Nations to withdraw from Kuwait, a coalition force of about 20 nations initiated military action to forcefully eject invading Iraqi troops. The result was a decisive victory for the US-led coalition force, which drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait with minimal coalition casualties. This is my experience as I recall serving in these operations.

My Desert Storm Experience

It was August 1990 and I was stationed with B Company, 50th Signal Battalion (ABN), 35th Signal Brigade, XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg NC, as a 76Y (Unit Supply Specialist). I had just gotten married on 8 August and was still on leave in New York when the Middle East crisis began. I had been watching the developing story on CNN and told my new bride that it was only a matter of time before I would get a phone call telling me to return to Fort Bragg. I packed by bags and loaded the car in anticipation of that call.

That call came on a Sunday, 3 days later. My platoon sergeant told me to stop by the staff duty desk for a modified packing list and have my stuff ready to roll as early as that Monday. Part of the unit was already gone by the time I got there. It would be about 2 weeks and several attempts before I actually departed.

Our chartered flight arrived at King Fahd Airport, Saudi Arabia, approximately 0400 one morning and the temperature already felt close to 100 degrees. A sergeant standing at the bottom of the stairs to the aircraft handed each Soldier four bottles of water as we stepped off the plane and told us to start drinking. It did not take long to realize why. By the time the sun came up the temperature was up to well over 100 degrees.

The S-4 (logistics) section had been on the ground for about 3 weeks and had contracted for some commercial tents, which they had erected on the outskirts of the partially completed King Fahd Airport. We had our individual sleeping bags and air mats, but the container with our cots had not made it in country yet. We scrounged around in a nearby dump and built make-shift cots from plywood and whatever usable scrap we could find. They were not pretty, but they kept us reasonably comfortable and gave us a measure of peace-of-mind knowing that scorpions and other critters could be crawling around on the ground at nights.

We associated the term “desert” with hot climates, and were not in anyway prepared for the cold night-time temperatures we would face. Our tents were made of a thin cloth-like material and did not offer much protection either. The S-4 section was able to locally procure some kerosene heaters which helped a whole lot, but had their own dangers. By the end of the war we had lost a tent and badly damaged a (Highly Mobile Multi-Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) as a result of using these heaters. Most units did not bring the doors to their vehicles and there was a rash of HMMWV door thefts as a result. We had to stencil our unit information on vehicle doors to stop this problem.

Despite being out in the desert living on T-Rats with the bare minimum, morale was pretty high. Chess, crap, and spades became our games of choice. We did daily Physical Training and even set up a make-shift gym in a pre-fabricated frame tent. No one had much of an idea what was going to happen. We got a lot more information from CNN than we did from unit leadership. There was much concern about NBC attacks so we spent a good amount of time going through masking and decontamination drills. We were located with the rest of the battalion and had set up a concertina perimeter with guard shacks around our tents, making us a small compound within the larger compound around the airport area. The Air Force had set up operations at the nearby airport terminal so we had to adjust to the deafening scream of fighter jets going by.

Boredom was a constant threat but the unit continued to train and carry on business as best as possible to keep us occupied. The generator mechanics always seemed to have more than their fair share of work. Our generators were not keeping up very well in the harsh desert environment and they were constantly fighting to keep them going despite a shortage of certain spare parts. We were getting tired of our staple of T-rations and Meal-Ready-to Eat (MREs),

which the dining facility occasionally substituted with a cup of ravioli or something similar. The Army and Air Force Exchange Service eventually set up a trailer exchange nearby and a local rotisserie chicken and burger shack popped up down the road.

In contrast to our meager living conditions, the Air Force guys down the road were living in air conditioned tents, and had a catered dining facility. We all joked about switching over and joining the Air force.

We continued listening to CNN and General Norman Schwarzkopf's press conferences to keep pace with the continuing build-up and political developments. We were all thrilled with how "Storming Norman" handled questions from the press, and we would all gather around the radio to listen. It would be another four months before we would leave our initial base camp.

At the time, 35th Signal Brigade was the largest signal unit in the world, and the only airborne signal brigade in existence. Its mission was to deploy in support of XVIII Airborne Corps units during worldwide missions, providing rapid communications during combat operations and operations other than war. The companies of the 50th Signal Battalion (ABN) would be split into teams that supported various corps units.

Sometime about mid-December we began preparing for a possible January roll-out towards the Iraqi border. The United Nations Security Council had set a deadline of 15 January for Iraqi forces to withdraw from Kuwait and it looked quite likely that we were going in if they did not meet the deadline.

As we celebrated Christmas that year, there was a lot of speculation about what would happen over the next few weeks. There were many theories about Saddam Hussein's capabilities but the most troubling was the possibility of facing chemical or biological weapons. As much as

we trained for it, the thought of operating in a chemical or biological environment did not sit well with most of us.

We set out in a convoy around 12 January well before day break. We headed to King Khalid Military City, commonly called KKMC. There were endless columns of vehicles convoying towards the border area. Huge tank-hauling tractor trailers, fuel trucks, wreckers, signal rigs, and other military vehicles all worked their way northwards. Sandstorms brought us to a complete stop on several occasions. Fine, powdered sand flew everywhere and we just had to sit and wait it out.

I was a part of the headquarters (HQ) section of Bravo Company and was driving the second vehicle in the convoy with my platoon sergeant and two other occupants. After several hours of driving, my platoon sergeant took the wheel and told me to take a nap in the back seat. At some point later I was awoken by a tap on my shoulder. We had come to a stop at an intersection and the convoy commander asked me to hold traffic as a road guard until our vehicles get through. As I shuffled to get my weapon loose from the stack in the middle of the HMMWV, my platoon sergeant instructed me not to worry about the weapon and told me that the trail vehicle would pick me up shortly.

I am not sure exactly when the trail vehicle went by but after a little while I realized that the vehicles coming through were not from my convoy. I got out of the intersection and looked towards the direction my convoy went. It was starting to get dark and had started to rain by now. I saw some tail lights in the distance and it looked like a column of vehicles was pulled off to the side of the road. I was considering walking towards them but they took off before I could get started. I decided to stay right there since they would soon realize what happened and come back

and get me. There I was over an hour later, wet, cold, hungry, and without a weapon. The last convoy had passed through and there were no more vehicles coming through.

A lone HMMWV eventually came by and the driver pulled over to inquire what I was doing out there. It was a warrant officer from a quartermaster unit that had setup camp a little way down the road. I explained my situation and told him I wanted to stick around so my unit would know where to find me. He said there was no way he was going to leave me out there but he would contact the XVIII Airborne Corps liaison for KKMC who would contact my unit and let them know where to find me.

Back at their camp they treated me to a good meal and I got to sleep in a comfortable heated tent. I even had a chance to call home. The corps liaison was not immediately able to contact my unit but informed me that they wouldn't be too far down the road and I would be back with them by morning.

My commander and first sergeant came and got me the next morning. They said that the convoy commander failed to radio back to the trail vehicle to pick me up. As my platoon sergeant explained to me later, it was more than 2 hours before they realized I was missing. He had assumed that I was hanging out with the guys from the motor pool but started looking for me after he realized all my stuff was still in the truck. Once they realized what happened, they spent most of the night trying to find me. They had pulled over in a muddy area and were basically camping out in their vehicles so they did not have communication established with the Corps Liaison until the next morning.

The following few days were not as exciting. We setup camp, built bunkers and fighting positions, and the signal guys did their thing with their high-speed communication equipment.

We were out in the open desert off a road dubbed “Pipeline Road” due to the large oil pipeline that ran alongside it.

On 16 January the night got a little crazy when Scud warnings sounded and everyone scrambled to Mission Oriented Protective Posture four (MOPP 4). The air war had begun and U.S. and allied aircrafts would continue to pound Iraqi targets in Kuwait, Baghdad, and other areas of Iraq up until the ground offensive which began 23 February.

That is when we moved into Iraq and provided signal support to the war fighters. We stayed in Iraq for no more than four days but we were packing up and moving every 24 hours while we were there. It was during one of those pre-dawn moves that a vehicle caught fire from a kerosene heater someone mistakenly thought they extinguished. We all left out of there with calloused hands from digging new fighting positions everyday.

Following this short period of excitement, we headed back towards our initial base camp outside the King Fahd Airport. The rainy season had begun and what was left of our Saudi cloth tents were not holding up very well against the rain. They provided shelter from the sun but we had to turn to our wet weather gear for protection against the rain. It would be another two months before we recovered, got our vehicles and equipment to the port, and touched down at Pope Air Force Base for the short ride back to Fort Bragg.

Conclusion

The mission was an overall success. This was the first deployment for most of us. The NCOs of my unit did an outstanding job coordinating movement, setting up defenses, and ensuring fast effective communication capabilities to supported units. Our biggest setback resulted from our lack of knowledge about the environment prior to deployment. Through teamwork and creative thinking we overcame those oversights and accomplished the mission.

References

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