

SOUTHERN IRAQ

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(U) Like Operation Northern Watch, Southern Watch developed after the close of the Gulf War when the coalition victory provided a minority sect of Muslims in a portion of Iraq the opportunity to rebel against the central dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi dictator viewed this Shiite uprising in the south, like that of the Kurds in the north, as a serious threat to his power. Taking advantage of a loophole in the Safwan cease-fire agreement that allowed armed Iraqi helicopters to operate in the no-fly zone, Hussein used his Soviet-built Mi-8 Hip and Mi-24 Hind gunships to attack the Shi'a, as he soon would the Kurds. In a continuous series of devastating strikes against largely unarmed civilians, the Iraqi army killed an estimated 20,000 Shi'a, including women and children. The Iraqi dictator brutally crushed both rebellions.¹

(U) United States leaders initially refused to support the Shiite rebels, or curb the Iraqi slaughter. The administration of President George H. W. Bush weighed its options after the Gulf War and determined to extract U.S. troops from the region as quickly as possible. The president held a fundamental belief—expressed in early April 1991—that the coalition that conducted Desert Storm did not intend “to settle all the internal affairs of Iraq.”²

(U) President Bush initially adhered to this position, but as months passed and Hussein persisted in brutalizing the Iraqi people, the commander-in-chief decided that the United States must protect the Shi'a and ensure that the Iraqi dictator did not strengthen his military position in southern Iraq. More than a year after the Gulf War ended, the Bush administration changed its policy. By late July 1992, reports had multiplied that Iraqi aircraft from Tallil Air Base (AB)

were operating against hapless villagers in southern Iraq. As a result, the United States proposed, and the United Kingdom and France supported, a decision to conduct aerial patrols in the southern region of Iraq and suppress any aircraft or helicopters Hussein sent against the Shiites.³

(U) On August 26, 1992, President Bush announced that the three nations would enforce a no-fly zone over southern Iraq similar to the one previously established to protect the Kurds.

Image 1



An F-15 takes off from Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia in support of Operation Southern Watch.

This zone comprised airspace over Iraq south of 32 degrees north latitude, an area roughly the size of Iowa. The President cited Hussein's harsh repression of the Shi'a, and the need to enforce United Nations Security Council Resolution 688. Later, in October 1994, the Security Council also adopted

Resolution 949 which limited Baghdad's authority to deploy military forces in southern Iraq.⁴

(U) The United States designated the enforcement of this no-fly zone as Operation Southern Watch (OSW). Joint Task Force Southwest Asia (JTF SWA), a unit of United States Central Command (CENTCOM), assumed responsibility for OSW. The Air Force component of CENTCOM was U.S. Central Command Air Forces, provided by the Ninth Air Force, headquartered at Shaw Air Force Base (AFB), South Carolina. The JTF SWA operated from a headquarters in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.⁵

Image 2



388th Tactical Fighter Wing F-16 with LANTIRN navigation pod mounted on the right side of the engine.

(U) The 4404th Composite Wing (Provisional) contributed the air component of JTF SWA and its primary mission was to enforce the provisions of the southern no-fly zone. While the 4404th was predominantly equipped with fighter aircraft, it also flew a variety of airframes as diverse as the EF-111A Raven, F-4G Wild Weasel, and C-130 Hercules. The 4404th's wide variety of aircraft offered a wing commander what Brig. Gen. Terryl J. (Terry) Schwalier, who commanded the unit from July 1995 until July 1996, called "wonderful" opportunities. "You got to deal with every aspect of air power," Schwalier later related. "You had fifteen, sixteen types of aircraft over there at any one time."⁶ Most of the 4404th Wing's assets were based at Dhahran AB, Saudi Arabia, and from that location the unit launched one hundred or more Southern Watch sorties each day. "We would fly seven days a week," Brigadier General Schwalier recounted. "It was intense, is the best way to describe it."⁷

(U) On December 20, 1992, four months after President Bush declared the southern no-fly zone, the 33d Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) arrived at Dhahran from Shaw AFB. Commanded by Lt. Col. Gary North and consisting of 18 F-16 Fighting Falcons equipped with Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night (LANTIRN) pods, the unit deployed for a standard 90-day OSW tour. Two days later, the 33d TFS began operating over the southern no-fly zone, flying what its aircrews called standard OSW profiles. Four F-16s would launch from Dhahran, proceed north to the Saudi Arabia-Iraq border, take on fuel from a KC-135R Stratotanker, patrol the no-fly zone for thirty to forty minutes, and return to base.⁸

(U) On December 27, Lieutenant Colonel North led four F-16s on an Operation Southern Watch mission. The Eagle pilots soon learned from the transmissions between another flight of F-15s and an E-3 Sentry airborne warning and control system aircraft that Iraqi fighters were particularly active in the no-fly zone that morning. It proved to be an eventful patrol. North soon spotted an Iraqi MiG-25 Foxbat fighter 20 miles inside the no-fly zone and launched an advanced medium-range air-to-air missile (AMRAAM). "I saw three separate detonations," he later recalled. "The nose and the left wing broke apart instantly, and the tail section continued into the main body of the jet for one final, huge fireball."⁹ North also had scored the first air-to-air kill credited to a U.S. F-16 and to the AMRAAM.¹⁰

(U) Soon after the encounter, in the first week of 1993, Iraq began moving SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missiles (SAM) into the southern no-fly zone. Although the deployment did not violate UN resolutions, it clearly was provocative. On January 6, the Bush administration called on Hussein to remove the missiles or risk retaliation by the United States and its allies.¹¹

(U) The dictator rejected this ultimatum and sent about two hundred Iraqi soldiers a short distance into Kuwait where they seized hardware that included four Chinese-built Silkworm

missiles abandoned by the Iraqis during the Gulf War. On the night of January 13, U.S., British, and French aircraft flew sorties into the southern no-fly zone. However, limited by cloud cover, they struck only 16 of 32 intended targets.¹² During a daylight raid five days later on January 18, the three allies reprised the effort with tremendous success. Seventy-five aircraft delivered high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARMs), laser-guided bombs, and conventional unguided bombs on a series of air defense targets, rendering Iraq's southern air defense system virtually inoperable.¹³

(U) On January 20, 1993, William J. Clinton succeeded Bush as President, and his administration determined to continue the no-fly zone policies of its predecessor. On January 19, 21, and 22, while the presidential transition was taking place, U.S. fighters on Provide Comfort patrols attacked SAM batteries that threatened their mission. In the south, the Iraqis, who earlier in the month had advanced into Kuwait, returned to their barracks.¹⁴

(U) The crisis of the 1993 inaugural period thus passed without major incident, but tensions continued in the region over the next few years. A UN embargo on Iraqi oil sales plunged the country's economy into disarray, and in October 1994 Saddam Hussein deployed Republican Guard and other forces to southern Iraq, again threatening Kuwait. The U.S. countered with a mobilization of its own in the region, designated Operation Vigilant Warrior. The Iraqi units pulled back to the north. It was in this context that the UN Security Council passed Resolution 949, which supplemented the no-fly zone in the south with a no-drive zone that barred Iraqi tanks and other heavy vehicles from the area.¹⁵

(U) On the night of June 25, 1996, terrorists bombed the Khobar Towers, a complex located in a populated area of the eastern province of Saudi Arabia that housed Air Force

Image 3



Khobar Towers terrorist attack, June 1996.

personnel supporting Southern Watch. Earlier the DOD decided to move the airmen from this urban setting to the more secure Prince Sultan AB, located at al Kharj, a remote location about seventy miles south-southeast of Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Following the

bombing, Secretary of Defense William J. Perry accelerated this move. Khobar Towers personnel—joined by those from Eskan Village, a facility about a dozen miles from Riyadh—began relocating in early August, completing the change of base within 45 hectic days.¹⁶

(U) It was a particularly inopportune time for U.S. troops to relocate. While OSW airmen were in the middle of this massive undertaking, Hussein chose to challenge the existence of the no-fly zones. The Iraqi dictator declared both the southern and northern zones null and void and on August 30 dispatched armored columns that overran Irbil, a Kurdish city in the north.¹⁷

(U) For the United States, this challenge demanded an immediate military response, dubbed Operation Desert Strike. General John M. Shalikashvili, by then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conferred with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz through the night of September 2–3. The monarch, however, decided not to let the United States utilize bases within his kingdom to mount attacks against Hussein. Turkey and Jordan took the same position.

Denied the use of these installations, President Clinton ordered cruise and Tomahawk missile attacks into Iraq which the Air Force and Navy launched on September 3-4. The President also unilaterally expanded the southern no-fly zone from the 32d to the 33d parallel, depriving Hussein of two air bases and a large training range in the process. The northern edge of the Southern Watch no-fly zone now approached the Baghdad suburbs.¹⁸ Hussein had lost sovereignty over 60 percent of his airspace.

(U) At the end of 1998, the United States launched a much larger effort against Iraqi operations. Operation Desert Fox, conducted from December 16 through 19, proved to be the most intense action in Iraq between the Gulf War of 1991 and the Baghdad campaign of 2003. Its origins dated to the resolutions calling for inspecting and dismantling Saddam Hussein's nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programs that the UN passed after Desert Storm.¹⁹ Throughout the 1990s, the Iraqi leader defied the international community, putting himself at loggerheads with the UN by adamantly refusing to allow inspections. On December 15, 1998, the frustrated chief inspector for the UN Special Commission, Richard Butler, sent the UN Security Council a report detailing the dictator's latest efforts to obstruct inspections.²⁰

(U) On the night of December 16, President Clinton ordered Operation Desert Fox, a series of strong, sustained air strikes against Iraq that ran for four consecutive nights. The

Image 4



B-1 Lancer long-range bombers first committed to combat in support of Operation Desert Fox.

President's timing was poor, however. The domestic political context within which he announced the air strikes produced partisan suspicions that such military action against Hussein was intended to undercut pending

impeachment proceedings against the President then under consideration by the House of Representatives. In truth, Saddam Hussein had resisted UN inspection efforts for years. For most American observers, Operation Desert Fox was well justified no matter how unfortunate the timing.²¹

(U) The operation featured massive air strikes. During the first night, a task force escorting the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* fired more than 200 cruise missiles at Iraqi targets, while the *Enterprise* launched an array of U.S. Navy and Marine aircraft. On the following nights, Royal Air Force (RAF) Tornados took part, as did USAF B-52s carrying air-launched cruise missiles and F-16CG, F-16CJ, F-15C, and F15E Strike Eagle aircraft. B-1 Lancer long range bombers joined the fray, the first time the Air Force committed them to combat. A second carrier, the USS *Carl Vinson*, also entered the Arabian Gulf accompanied by six warships armed with Tomahawk missiles. Over the course of the operation, the coalition flew 650 aircraft sorties against about 100 targets, while the Navy launched 325 Tomahawks and B-52s delivered 90 air-launched cruise missiles. The total of 415 cruise missiles was nearly 100 more than were launched during the entire Gulf War.²²

(U) Although underestimated at the time, Operation Desert Fox scored significant successes. The coalition's ordnance struck about 80 percent of intended targets, and intelligence estimates concluded they set back Iraqi programs for the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by a year or longer. Estimates of casualties among Hussein's elite Republican Guard ranged from 1,400 to 2,000 killed.²³ On December 19, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry H. Shelton presented a positive analysis to reporters: "I am confident that the carefully planned and superbly executed combat operations of the past four days have degraded Hussein's weapons of mass destruction programs, his ability to deliver

weapons, and his ability to militarily threaten the security of this strategically important Persian [Arabian] Gulf region.”²⁴ Military analyst Kenneth Pollack asserted that “Desert Fox actually exceeded expectations.”²⁵ David A. Kay, who led International Atomic Energy Agency inspection teams into Iraq during the 1990s and later headed the Iraq Survey Group that searched for WMD stockpiles, linked the success of Operation Desert Fox to the collapse of many of the dictator’s weapons programs. The Iraq Survey Group concluded that after 1998 these efforts, with the exception of missile building, “withered away and never got momentum again.” Kay and his team interviewed two hundred officials from WMD programs. He expressed surprise at their accounts. “For me, it was a bit of an eye-opener,” he acknowledged, “because I’d always denigrated Desert Fox. What I failed to understand was that it was cumulative, coming on top of eight years of sanctions.”²⁶ Most telling, perhaps, was not the physical destruction brought about by Desert Fox, but its psychological results. The raids left Iraqi air defense personnel demoralized and despairing. They realized that as long as Hussein was head of state, they would never be able to establish viable production programs. And beyond the positive assessments, the allies suffered no casualties, which itself was praiseworthy. Two days after the operation, U.S. Marine Corps General Anthony C. Zinni, CENTCOM commander, pointed out: “Even in peacetime, exercises of this scale can be dangerous and can be very, very trying; to do this without any casualties in the environment our forces faced was truly remarkable.”²⁷

(U) Operations Desert Fox and Southern Watch successfully contained Saddam Hussein, weakened his military establishment, and subverted his power base within Iraq. The connection between Southern Watch and air operations that preceded the Iraq War was particularly important. With the wisdom of hindsight, Col. P. Mason Carpenter, chief of Headquarters

Central Command Air Forces' Strategy Division, later stated: "Operation Iraqi Freedom strategy began within Operation Southern Watch."²⁸

(U) During the six months before the Baghdad campaign, from October 2002 until March 2003, the coalition maintained air superiority throughout the Southern Watch area. No Iraqi airfield remained active south of the 33d parallel. Only tactical surface-to-air missiles, such as Rolands and SA-6s, stood in place.²⁹ General John P. Jumper, Air Force chief of staff from September 6, 2001, through September 1, 2005, pointed out that during the ten months before Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the coalition "flew about 4,000 sorties against the integrated air

Image 5



Army and Air Force troops moving forward to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

defense system in Iraq and against surface-to-air missiles and their command and control. By the time we got to March [2003], we think that they were pretty much out of business."³⁰

(U) Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, CENTAF commander and the OIF Combined Forces Air Component Commander (and Air Force chief of staff, 2005-2008), exploited this situation in

the Southern Watch zone to deceive the Iraqis and to prepare the coalition airmen for OIF. “We worked the [OIF] strategy,” Colonel Carpenter related, “into the air operations of OSW.”³¹ In what the Air Force designated Operation Southern Focus, General Moseley increased the number of OSW patrols, building them into a gradual but relentless air campaign, a seamless prelude to OIF.³² During the weeks before the Baghdad campaign, the coalition flew nearly 800 Southern Watch sorties a day.³³

(U) At least three factors motivated Operation Southern Focus. First, it provided a deception effort, inuring the Iraqis to seeing large numbers of aircraft over the southern no-fly zone. When the “big push” of OIF came, as Colonel Carpenter put it, “they couldn’t tell that from another OSW mission.”³⁴ Second, Southern Focus offered coalition aircrews the most realistic training and preparation possible. The “pilots got to fly the area where they would be going into combat,” Carpenter pointed out, a “huge advantage.”³⁵ Third, sorties over the southern zone prepared for OIF by degrading military communications, surface-to-air missiles, electronic warfare radars, and other Iraqi defensive systems.³⁶

(U) The success of Operation Southern Focus and related operations underscored the fact that the Gulf War was not an isolated event. Beginning in August 1990 and extending into the next century, the USAF continuously operated over Southwest Asia at a high tempo. For years the Air Force sustained combat operations on a major scale. When the nation’s civilian leaders called on the service to contribute to Operation Iraqi Freedom, it was more than well prepared.³⁷

¹ (U) Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p 5.

² (U) Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), pp 454–456; Thomas L. Friedman, “Decision Not to Help Iraqi Rebels Puts U.S. in an Awkward Position,” *New York Times*, 4 Apr 91, p A–1.

³ (U) Gordon and Trainor, *The Generals' War*, p 459; Perry D. Jamieson, *Khobar Towers: Tragedy and Response* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2008), p 17.

⁴ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, p 17.

⁵ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, pp 17–18.

⁶ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, pp 18–19.

⁷ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, p 19.

⁸ (U) 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), pp 15–16.

⁹ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 19.

¹⁰ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 1–19.

¹¹ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 21–22.

¹² (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 22–23.

¹³ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 24.

¹⁴ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 25.

¹⁵ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 30–32.

¹⁶ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, pp 181–183. For an excellent short account of the Khobar Towers bombing, see Rebecca Grant, “Khobar Towers,” *Air Force Magazine* 81:6 (Jun 1998), pp 41–47.

¹⁷ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, p 184.

¹⁸ (U) Jamieson, *Khobar Towers*, pp 183–184; White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 40–41.

¹⁹ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 47; Ricks, *Fiasco*, p 19; Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2006), p 12.

²⁰ (U) Perry D. Jamieson, *Lucrative Targets: The U.S. Air Force in the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2001), p 172; Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, p 13; White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 50–59.

²¹ (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 59; Ricks, *Fiasco*, p 19; Rebecca Grant, *The First 600 Days of Combat* (Washington: IRIS Press, 2004), pp 85–86.

²² (U) White, *Crises After the Storm*, pp 59–60; Ricks, *Fiasco*, p 19. See also, Gordon I. Peterson, “Operation Desert Fox: Military Goals Achieved,” *Sea Power* 42:2 (Feb 1999), pp 15–19.

²³ (U) Peterson, "Operation Desert Fox," *Sea Power* 42:2, p 16; White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 60; Ricks, *Fiasco*, p 19.

²⁴ (U) Peterson, "Operation Desert Fox," *Sea Power* 42:2, p 15.

²⁵ (U) Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002), p 93.

²⁶ (U) Ricks, *Fiasco*, p 21.

²⁷ (U) Peterson, "Operation Desert Fox," *Sea Power* 42:2, p 15; Ricks, *Fiasco*, p 19; White, *Crises After the Storm*, p 60.

²⁸ (U) Report (U), Col P. Mason (Mace) Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise: The Operation Iraqi Freedom Air & Space Strategy: Initial Assessment," n.d., p 3. The author acquired a copy of this study paper from the files of Headquarters Air Force's Checkmate Division on 19 Feb 04; Col Carpenter wrote it sometime between Apr 2003 and Feb 2004.

²⁹ (U) Report (U), Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise," n.d., p 4.

³⁰ (U) Grant, *The First 600 Days*, p 91.

³¹ (U) Report (U), Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise," n.d., p 4.

³² (U) Report (U), Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise," n.d., p 4; Discussion (U), Perry D. Jamieson, Air Force History and Museums Program, with Col P. Mason Carpenter, U.S. Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Military Committee, 01 Sep 05; Grant, *The First 600 Days*, p 91. A tape of the Carpenter interview is held by the Air Force Historical Studies Office.

³³ (U) Report (U), Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise," n.d., p 4; Discussion (U), Jamieson with Carpenter, 01 Sep 05.

³⁴ (U) Discussion (U), Jamieson with Carpenter, 01 Sep 05; Report (U), Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise," n.d., p 4.

³⁵ (U) Discussion (U), Jamieson with Carpenter, 01 Sep 05; Report (U), Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise," n.d., p 4.

³⁶ (U) Discussion (U), Jamieson with Carpenter, 01 Sep 05; Report (U), Carpenter, "Deliberate, Disciplined, Proportional and Precise," n.d., p 4. On Operation Southern Focus, see also Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, pp 69–70.