

### 3.

## MOVING THE FORCE IN *DESERT STORM*\*

(excerpts)

pp. 23-24:

The Army's lead elements launched their deployment to Saudi Arabia on August 7 (designated as C-day, for the first day of deployment). This began Phase I of the fastest buildup and movement of combat power across the greatest distances in history.<sup>3</sup> Distances were immense--7,000 airlift miles and 8,700 sealift miles from the east coast of the United States. During that first deployment phase, which lasted from August 7 until November 8, the United States moved about 1,000 aircraft, 60 Navy ships, 250,000 tons of supplies and equipment, and 240,000 military personnel to the Gulf.<sup>4</sup> By historical contrast, the United States airlifted 168,400 to Vietnam in 1965, during the most intense 1-year buildup of that conflict.<sup>5</sup> In the first month of the Korean Conflict, America sealifted 79,965 tons of equipment and cargo.<sup>6</sup> We moved over 2½ times that amount--300,000 tons--during those first 30 days of the Gulf War.<sup>7</sup>

While impressive in gross terms, these numbers conceal that it took over 1½ months to get the first full heavy division, the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized), in place. Nearly 7 months passed before a sustainable force, capable of offensive operations, was fully positioned, in large part because of transport limitations.<sup>8</sup>

p. 26:

When Iraq attacked Kuwait, the CENTCOM Commander [Schwarzkopf] quickly reviewed the bidding. With a focus on rapidly injecting deterrent combat power, it became clear to him that something had to give: There simply wasn't enough quickly available strategic lift to move the range of forces necessary to attain stated objectives--the requirement was greater than the capability. There was the very real threat that Iraq would exploit Saudi Arabia's vulnerability and continue the drive south. The theater commander had to figure out what he could live without for the short run to defend Saudi Arabia, and he decided that the answer was logistics. Thus, Schwarzkopf made the early decision to front load mobile combat units into Saudi Arabia. This order had tremendous impact upon movement.

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### **CLOSING THE WINDOW OF VULNERABILITY**

In the initial stages of the conflict, there was just a thin line of Saudi forces along the border with Kuwait. Saudi Arabia would remain vulnerable until decisive, mobile power

could arrive. Until these forces could be deployed, Saudi Arabia faced a window of vulnerability to the threat of Iraqi attack. As the curtain raised on *Desert Shield*, the theater commander's military options were limited by the time required to move heavy forces over significant distances. Available strategic transport could not meet his required delivery dates. Because of this, holding the key desert ports and airfields was weighed to be more important than closing logistical power into the theater of operations.<sup>13</sup> This decision, though apparently prudent, nearly became our Achilles' heel.

Allocating the most and the fastest strategic lift to combat units results in a force that is critically unsustainable for some period. It also throws an already complex operation--the synchronized buildup of a theater support structure---out of kilter. Our ability to rapidly deploy forces depends largely on strategic air and sealift and the capacity to throughput forces at ports of debarkation. In *Desert Shield*, the early preferential movement of combat forces delayed organizing theater support that future operations would dictate. Logistics forces necessary to clear ports and airfields, as well as ammunition handling and supply, were not available, which limited operational choices. Deployed units became tied to host-nation sources and the strategic lifeline. The initial support structure was built on an ad hoc basis. Resulting impromptu design was then tied to a defensive posture. It was severely stretched when called on to support the offensive in Operation *Desert Storm* and showed early signs of fatigue after only 100 hours of intense combat).<sup>14</sup>

The first show of force units in theater, from the 82nd Airborne Division, lacked significant mobility, survivability, or sufficient firepower to match an Iraqi armored assault. In many ways they were no more than a speed bump in the path of the fourth largest army in the world. It was, however, one of the few forces that could deploy quickly enough to the region. Because the 82nd is lighter and less mobile than heavy forces, and normally deploys with only a few days of supply. CENTCOM planners believed that most of its requirements could be met by the host nation. When they arrived in Saudi Arabia, they created an immediate demand for resupply, but, with the deployment of the airborne division, the line in the sand was drawn.

One reality of modern warfare emerged: Forces poised for rapid deployment grow markedly when faced with a protracted conflict. (This observation has been further reinforced during our recent Somalian experience). Upon alert, steps were taken throughout the 82nd Airborne Division to increase on-hand equipment and supplies not normally authorized--especially additional antitank weapon systems. This added significantly to the transportation requirement and highlighted the propensity to rely on early employment of light forces instead of designing a rapidly deployable force with more firepower.

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If Iraq had continued its attack in early August, prior to U.S. presence, Saudi Arabia would surely have been lost. Sufficient American forces could not have been brought to

bear quickly enough to defend it. Equally important, had Saddam Hussein chosen to invade Saudi Arabia *after the* first U.S. troops hit the ground, this light force--the only type in the Army that can be deployed by air--would probably have been quickly overrun. Only reinforcing with heavy armored forces that arrived weeks later diminished the force imbalance. In the future, we need forces with strategic and operational reach, plus the lethality to fight outnumbered and win.

Iraq's strategy of inaction, and the monumental efforts of deploying units, and military and civilian transporters, allowed *the window of vulnerability* to be narrowed by early October. The local commander was then satisfied that a successful defense could be mounted.

Time became an unforeseen ally. Deployment of forces necessary to execute this primary objective had taken nearly 2 months to complete. Fortunately, the threatened Iraqi assault never appeared. Ability to quickly overcome distance with a sizable force has always been an underpinning of U.S. strategic success. In *Desert Shield*, inability to surge mobile forces *en masse* was our most insurmountable obstacle.

What are the implications?

- There are few places in the world that possess the wealth of resources comparable to the Gulf States. Yet even with this host-nation support, the absence of firm support agreements complicated planning. It placed U.S. and other coalition combat forces at risk when deployed without the full complement of their organic and supporting logistical organizations. As in the past, the fog of war affected the strategic situation.

- The intent of the military operation shifted from defense to offense to eject an invader. The early decision to deploy shooters constrained the effective establishment and ongoing support of the theater logistics structure.<sup>16</sup> An unsustainable force may be deployed for legitimate reasons. But the associated risks of failure in combat and inability to support continuous, lengthy operations, should be recognized.<sup>17</sup> Except when forced entry is required, units critical to the throughput of follow-on forces should be deployed first.

- Finally, light forces are not as light as advertised when facing a heavy threat. This leads to underestimating already critical strategic lift requirements within a system that is unable to meet the planned theater requirements (much less the unplanned).

\* Chapter 3 of  
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*Moving the Force: Desert Storm and Beyond*

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