

# **Commanding a Weasel Squadron in Desert Storm**

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## **Taking the Squadron**

On 16 August 1990, the 561st Fighter Squadron departed Seymour-Johnson AFB in North Carolina, headed east to the Middle East. Operation Desert Shield had begun for our squadron, as it had for so many. Two weeks earlier, Saddam Hussein decided to invade Kuwait and make it another province of Iraq. The world wasn't ready to accept Saddam's action but only one country was willing to lead a coalition to counter him.

I was to take command of the 561st just days after Saddam invaded. Squadron command is an honor and rare privilege that all fighter pilots dream of. Although I had concerns that world events might affect this change of command, it went ahead as scheduled on Friday, 7 August 1990 and the responsibility I was to assume was seriously magnified...take command of a fighter squadron and lead them to war.

Fortunately, the fighter world is all about trust. Even though I assumed command of this Squadron and only knew a few of the people in it, I trusted each of these guys, their training, their desire to get the job done right, and their motivation to succeed. I was never disappointed. We left George AFB, California on 11 August and staged all 24 squadron aircraft for departure from Seymour-Johnson AFB (SJAFB) in North Carolina.

Our destination in the Middle East changed 4 or 5 times in as many days while we awaited our turn to depart. Finally, on the day we were to leave, I was told we were going to Sheikh Isa AB, Bahrain. None of us had ever heard of it. I was certain we could find our way to Bahrain, a small island in the Persian Gulf, between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. But there was absolutely no information available about Sheikh Isa AB. All I had was a satellite photo of a newly finished Air Field at the southern tip of this 25 mile long island. That had to be enough.

Our departure was at 09:00 on Thursday morning, 16 August. So began a 15.5 hour flight following these tankers and others down track. Across the Atlantic, through the Straits of Gibraltar, across the Mediterranean, down the Nile River, left at Luxor, and then straight across Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. Refueling was at predetermined intervals. Altogether, some twenty one times and almost 120 thousand pounds of jet fuel (JP-4) for each aircraft.

As we passed into the night, we could see the lights of Gibraltar on the left and the coastal lights of Morocco on the right. There was no moon so it was dark and much easier to see the lights framing the islands off the coast of Spain and on to Sardinia. The tanker guys made some comment on the radio about his concerns about Libya (Gadafi had allied with Hussein by then). I think we made a comment that he wasn't to worry. We were packing...two AIM-7s (radar air-to-air missiles) each.

I think the most tired I had ever been (up to that time) was when the Sun came up as we approached Cairo. I was exhausted. Not much sleep the night before we left and after almost 12 hours of flying. Prior to the flight we were given two pills. A “no-go pill” and a “go-pill”. Drugs, right? The first one (a sleeping pill) was to help you sleep the night before we left. The second was to give you a boost if you got tired during the flight. Yes...it was an amphetamine. I had had eight previous ocean crossings and drugs always scared me. So, I usually flushed them down the toilet. Don't tell the environmentalist, please. This time, I hung onto the “go-pill” just in case, and sure enough, I needed it. Somewhere south of Cairo, I popped the one and only pill I had, and I have to say, it worked ... well! I felt great for the rest of the trip.

Somewhere around Luxor, we turned east again and headed direct to Bahrain. As we approached Bahrain, we could see the island full length from north to south, and I took a wag (wild ass guess) at a heading to where I thought Sheikh Isa might be. Descending below 8,000 feet, I could see the air base as we approached it from the west, and a voice comes up on Guard Channel (emergency radio frequency that we monitored all the time). It was an American voice who said, “F-4s approaching Sheikh Isa, come up my frequency.” Now I knew we were home free. The airfield looked huge and it was. They told us to land north which was also slightly uphill.

The ramp was completely empty as we taxied in. There was one Bahraini enlisted guy with a pile of sandbags (make shift wheel chocks) and two others, both U.S. One was the U.S. Ambassador Hostler, the other was a one star, whom I did not recognize at first. It turned out to be BG “Buster” Glosson. I had met him once, ten years earlier, and he had changed. But don't we all as we get older. It was hot, it was humid, and we were tired. We still had to get all our down gear on the airplanes and prep them as well as we could. We were still fueled and we were armed, but these guys wanted to chat. It was all I could do to keep from asking them to leave us all alone. We still had work to do. It was the Ambassador who seemed to sense the effort we were having to make, and suggested to BG Glosson they should leave us to it. The airplanes came first, and there were three more cells yet to arrive.

. So began Operation Desert Shield for the 561st Fighter Squadron Black Knights.

## **Commanding in War: Night One Baghdad**

Desert Storm began, 17 January 1991. This date has a lot going on for all of us who were there.

Mine is only one story. Everyone who was there has a story to tell, and this is only the best that I can recall. I remain immeasurably proud of the Squadron I had the honor to lead 30 years ago. Thanks to all who were a part of this...one of the most successful Air Campaigns in aviation history.

We started the brief a little before midnight going into the 17th of January. I briefed the twelve ship (12 pilots and 12 EWOs) the standard “crap”: start, taxi, takeoff, Joker/Bingo, and all the stuff that we pretty much had in the can since September. This took about 20 minutes and I closed with a final thought: Things are going to be busy for most of the next 4 hours and

change. Part of it will be boring but as you get closer to the target, the intensity will climb and it is likely that fear on some level will raise its ugly head. When that happens, remember one thing...find something to do, to get it out of your head. Wind the clock! We had a tiny little analogue clock in the cockpit that probably worked maybe half the time, but it had a tiny little knob in the upper right hand corner that supposedly kept the clock working. Wind the clock! It was something to do.

We split to individual 4-ship briefings (Coors 31, Lonestar 41, and Michelob 51). I thought the beer call signs were a nice touch. Distinctive, recognizable, unforgettable, and as the Air Campaign progressed...folks would know who the Weasels were. The call signs came up a few days prior to the beginning of Desert Storm. I received a phone call from one of the planners in Riyadh, who asked what we would like to use. I thought for a few seconds, remembered we had been without beer or alcohol of any sort for months, and asked if we could use beers as our call signs. He responded, why not.

We stepped at 00:25, for a 00:55 start, and planned to have all 12 airplanes armed and on the runway for a 01:25 takeoff. Emotions were high as all of us taxied past the Flag at the end, just prior to the arming area. Just seeing Old Glory for the first time since we arrived on this little island, I am quite certain we were all proud, determined, and very ready at that point.

My biggest concern was the communication plan. As much as I wanted to simplify the frequencies and keep things as basic as possible, it seemed that every time I looked at the Frag for the previous four months, they would add something new to complicate the process. So I drew up a "Thumbnail Sketch" that had all this data on a basic map, going to and from our pre- and post- refueling, and another from the Fence into the Target and back out. As dark as the cockpit was, I could at least put this info on my knee with the red flood light aimed at it, to keep things straight. The red light protected night vision after all. Right?

Without a word on the radios, and at least three automatic frequency changes, we departed Sheikh Isa, as we headed west to our refuelers (Tuna 64 flight), about 400 miles into the Saudi desert. "Budman" Redmond, my Pitter, ran a very slick stern conversion to the lead tanker that rolled us out at about a half mile, directly behind our tanker. Like clockwork, we refueled at FL210. We finished with a lot more gas than we had planned. Better too much than too little.

Dropping off the tanker, we descended trading altitude for airspeed, did our final Fence check: frequencies, lights (all external lights went off except formation lights which were visible to each other but not from the ground). We spread our formation to attack and headed for our individual. It's amazing how fast an F-4 can go in Military power at 20,000 feet with three bags and a full load of weapons.

Timing was perfect. The Cruise Missiles and the F-117s were targeted to poke the hornet's nest and wake up the Air Defense network so that we had radars to shoot at. As we approached Baghdad, I could see explosions, maybe a half dozen or so, followed 30 seconds to a minute later by an ever increasing crescendo of AAA being randomly fired like a water hose, spraying the night sky. Radars came up, one at a time, all over the city. Budman and I had an SA-2 and an SA-3 designated to us on the east and northeast side of the city. Magically, the SA-2 came up just as though they knew our TOT and didn't want us to miss it. Budman locked, the

missile was happy with it, I confirmed, and away went the missile. I forgot to close my eyes and sure enough, it was extremely bright at night and I was blinded by the rocket motor coming off the rail on our right side. Night vision returned eventually and Budman was already looking to find our other “target”. Budman spotted the SA-3, in about the right area, so he locked, we confirmed and away went missile number two. I was smarter this time and looked away as it came off the left side. With our missiles gone, I made a hard turn to the right to our egress point. Lots of ground fire now but as far as I could tell, none of it aimed. I always thought it convenient that every seventh round was a tracer bullet so you could see where the fire hose was spraying the bullets.

Budman picked up a radar contact on the nose at maybe 20 miles, headed at us at high aspect and low altitude. He was located in about the position of the EF-111 (Drill 71), but Drill should have been above us. Could it be Quaker 11 (F-15 Sweep on our east)? I asked Budman not to lock him and keep searching above and below the contact. If he’s a bad guy, I’m thinking he ain’t alone. Remembering that, 20 miles at high aspect is 60 to 80 seconds to “merge plot”, 30 seconds later, I’m asking Budman to come back and lock the guy up which he did at about 8 miles at left 11 o’clock. We still can’t confirm good or bad, so I start a turn into him. It was just about that time, closing to the nose and maybe three miles, our contact became a fireball. Turns out, this was a lone Mirage F-1 that was coming after us, and our eastern sweeper, Quaker 11, had launched a max range stern shot on the guy, and he was gone.

Our next order of business was to return to egress, join the Coors flight crossing the Saudi border, and find the tankers for post refuel. Lonestar and Michelob were doing the same behind us. Once we had our fuel, we headed home to Sheik Isa. My personal, next thing, as I am sitting in the “hotpits” refueling was to count the returning airplanes. All twelve of ours landed. All missiles fired and no losses...so much for the computer models that had given me a fairly bleak view of the first wave. We had beaten the odds.

**Editor’s Note: These and more stories are in the Wild Weasel Museum Stories of the Wild Weasel!**