

## ***DESERT STORM I:***

### ***Fight Like You Train!***

It was my first combat sortie ever -- finally 14 years of training for war was coming together. Every pilot's first combat sortie is probably their most memorable. Mine ended up more memorable than most because I thought combat was going to be different from training for combat. Well, let me tell you . . . train like you fight, but do not forget to fight like you train.

By way of background, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was a CENTCOM war. USAFE was not invited . . . although Spangdahlem's F-4Gs were systematically being ripped out of our F-4G and F-16 mixed squadrons to support the George Wild Weasels in Bahrain.

It took a couple of bar napkins in the Spangdahlem O'Club with Ed "Victor" to come up with a SEAD campaign flown out of our NATO ally, Turkey. We could attack SAMs all the way to Baghdad. The key was the concept we had been developing for USAFE Wild Weasels once the Viper's got the HARM. Operating at altitude would isolate the surface-to-air threat to just those systems that were guided by radar . . . which we could conveniently destroy with HARMs.

By the time we briefed the Wing Commander and he tasked us to take our concept to the Air Division, Victor was tapped to run the planning cell in Bahrain and departed wing weapons. Even with Victor gone, the concept was a no-brainer. The Air Division sponsored Rich "Snooker Bear" and me to take the brief to USAFE headquarters. Snooker Bear came to Spangdahlem from Texas where he was the resident expert on the Kari system . . . the French Integrated Air Defense System (IADS) they had built for Iraq (or Irak in French) . . . that we were looking to dismantle! His level of detail and knowledge ensured no question could go unanswered.

So, we were well prepared to brief the 4-star when we jumped on the autobahn to Kaiserslautern. Unfortunately, when the sun rose, I looked over at Snooker Bear only to see that he was wearing black polyester pants (probably left over from his disco days) rather than his blue uniform pants. It was too late to turn around, so we came up with a game plan for Snooker Bear to stand behind the podium and not step out to even shake hands.

The brief went well. Apparently, the best concept of operations (CONOPS) that the USAFE staff had come up with was a SOF insertion to take out Iraqi early warning radar sites on the borders of Turkey and Syria. Here, they got a plan that was essentially a back-door SEAD campaign, opening a second front from the north to enable attacks on Baghdad. No one forced Snooker Bear out from behind his podium, so his black polyester pants may become an artifact in a museum.

While our briefing and CONOPS worked its way up to the Pentagon, we in the wing weapons shop set up practice missions flying the Electronic Combat (EC) triad of Weasels, Compass Call, and EF-111s from Germany to an EW range in England. The distances matched closely to what we anticipated from Incirlik to Baghdad. The 23 Fighter Squadron was the remaining mixed element squadron, so they got the nod to train for potential deployment.

Meanwhile, I got orders to deploy to Incirlik to write the electronic combat plans for supporting combat missions ... but only if Turkey would allow the US to fight Iraq from their soil. So far, Turkey only allowed the F-15s, F-16s and F-111Es that were at Incirlik when Saddam invaded Kuwait to stay at Incirlik. If war was declared, the hope was, the Turks would allow the Weasels in. So, I showed up to Incirlik in December and got read-in to the attack plans the EC triad might be supporting. Talk about ugly. The F-111E ops officer rolled out maps showing their night one attack on the Kirkuk Sector Operations Center (SOC). Now the SOC was the highest priority target because it piped the northern air picture down to Baghdad and coordinated the SAM attacks in the north. So, the Varks were planning to hit the most important target on the first mission.

Now imagine if you will, a bunker with 40' of concrete. Against this formidable target, three flights of two F-111Es, flying through SAMs and AAA, would each drop a dozen or so 500 pound bombs. Their tactical surprise would come from flying at night, at low altitude. Their flight deconfliction was accomplished by flying 30 second radar trail, but coming from three different directions. I cringed.

“How many aircraft do you think you are going to lose?” He intimated they might lose two. Next, I asked what he thought those bombs would do to the concrete bunker. He was not aware of the thickness of the bunker’s concrete, but did realize that 500 pounders wouldn’t even make a dent. (I offered that their bombs might take out the cars in the parking lot so the personnel couldn’t drive home though ... he wasn’t impressed.)

I pulled out the Kari maps Snooker Bear had made and showed him the radar sites that produced the picture in the SOC and had no SAMs, only AAA. I suggested that he might want to consider bombing the radar sites as a warm-up ... completely wiping out the radar picture to those folks in the bunker making them totally ineffective! He asked if he could do that? “Hey, they are your guys you are putting at risk, just tell the general that’s what you want to do.”

I had to laugh when that Ops O rolled out the new attack maps in front of the boss with the plan to hit the radars. The general remarked, “This is great! I thought you were going to lose a couple of aircraft going after Kirkuk.”

Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful trying to convince the F-111s to practice bombing on the range from medium altitude. But hey, it’s a big sky and AAA rounds are pretty small. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, when the war kicked off the night of 17 January 1991, the Weasel squadron was still enroute. But since this new set of target threats was pretty benign, the F-111s opted to attack ... just like they had trained, low and fast with a 2-ship on each radar site.

We got some early radio chatter about battle damage on a couple of Varks and my heart sank. All their aircraft made it back to Incirlik despite the damage. And after landing, the real story came to light. The lead F-111 in each element screamed over the target area dropping bombs and waking up a shitload of roosting birds. So, all the “battle damage” was to wingmen and accompanied by feathers from the bird strikes!

The Eagle top cover said their attacks were pretty cool to watch. They could see the flight's ground track by the muzzle flashes and remarked, "You know if you were up here where we were, there wasn't any AAA." And so began the migration of the Varks from low altitude to medium altitude to even a cruise climb by the end of the war! Now don't broach the subject about their bombing accuracy ... they had never trained to drop bombs from up at those altitudes, so you just couldn't expect to find their battle damage assessments with the first recon pass!

Because I was in the EC planning cell, I went on shift after a 1700 dinner at the O'Club where the bell was ringing, and there was massive partying from the day's composite force strikes. I'd hit the Incirlik McDonalds at 0600 for breakfast, and yes, they even served beer, but without the bell and the bubbas to party with.

My brother Lips showed up from his 17 Air Force staff job and was flying his ass off ... and here I was as a wing weapons officer watching everyone else fighting the war. Finally, the night of 21 Jan, I got on the schedule. Lips and half the rest of the squadron were giving me pointers from their first missions. Take this, don't take that. Whatever you do, don't look at the HARM shot, you'll be blinded. I was pretty psyched by the time I briefed and suited up.

This particular sortie was a night defense suppression sortie supporting B-52 and F-111 strikes on targets near Mosul. The plan was the Weasels were first in, going south of Mosul and turning north to be pointed at the radars when the bombs went off. The Iraqis by this time were aware of the HARM shots and would hold fire until the bombs hit because whoever dropped those bombs was now in their SAM envelope.

I was the F-16C "killer" part of the hunter-killer operations with F-4Gs leading each mixed element for targeting our AGM-88 HARMs. The fourteen, night weather air refueling hook-ups all went smoothly -- just like training (although don't ask what my night currency was at this point). The jet was working (except for HaveQuick, which I was sure I had screwed up . . .) and we dropped off the tanker and pushed south toward the Iraqi border and my first real fence check.

All those switches I had only touched during training I got to flip, because this sortie was for real -- this was combat! My heart was going a mile a minute, but there was absolutely nothing going on in Iraq. It was dark and quiet, no sounds or threats on my radar warning receiver (RWR). We were blacked out except for the F-4G formation strip lights -- we had to fly visual formation for our HARM shots since the lead had all the targeting information. The moon was non-existent. The push was on time and we headed deep into Iraq to support F-111E and B-52 attacks.

My head was on a swivel-- looking for the AAA shell that had my name on it. But it was deathly quiet . . .until the first bombs went off! That's when all hell broke loose. The AAA started and lit up the sky. Radars that were dormant now lit up RWR systems and my slead was calling me, "Hawk 4, slapshot, Roland 317 degrees."

I turned to 317 degrees, rolled out of the bank and selected Roland and Range Unknown on the ALIC and hit the pickle button. I even averted my eyes for the HARM shot. I opened my eyes to look down at my line-up card and decided that wasn't too bright so looked up just as the HARM launched. Damn, it was bright. I called "Blind" to my lead.

He was busy engaging another site and called, "Magnum." I saw the HARM launch only a couple of miles away. I turned toward his position and locked on to a contact there calling, "Hawk 4 is buddy lock." There was no answer. . . damn I thought, I locked on to the wrong F-4!?

Now, I was in deep Kimchi. I was in Iraq as a singleton with AAA going off all over the place. It was time to make a retreat. The F-111s were all RTB, as were the BUFFs. Most of the support jets were calling off-station, so they were leaving too. But I was alone deep in enemy territory.

I'd been through enough Green and Red Flags to know that I was in danger. A single-ship over Nellis ranges almost invariably becomes a mort. I was determined that that would not happen to me. Good belly checks and a good radar search would carry me through my first baptism of fire.

And it did. I made the border -- feet dry -- alive. . . and that is when bitching Betty got my attention, "Warning! Fuel low. Fuel low." I looked down and sure enough my fuel low level light was on even though I was still showing 6000 pounds of fuel! All that training-- all my focus across that border had been on the threat. I hadn't done a fuel check. . . my wing tanks had fed on the tanker, but apparently stopped when I tank inerted on my first real fence check. Now I was 275 miles from the prime divert base with 1200 pounds of usable fuel.

I fessed up, declaring an emergency and cussing at myself for screwing up and jeopardizing this beautiful airplane. I requested a snap to the nearest tanker and hoped it was the aircraft beacons I was seeing north of me. The response was west of me for 275 miles. Damn. The snap to Diya Bakir was also a non-starter. That was when the EWO in our element called, "Standby for coordinates to Batman."

I climbed, selectively jettisoned tanks (so we didn't lose any ALICs) and typed in coordinates for this Turkish Air Base half the distance of our divert base. When I got to 40,000' the max range cue indicated I was going to make it with zero fuel. That's okay because the system doesn't include the descent. For the first time, I finally took a breath.

Jon passed me the frequency for the Batman tower. I called the tower controller, "Batman, Batman, this is Hawk 04. I am 10 minutes out with emergency fuel for landing."

"Hawk 04, this is Batman, you cannot land here." That wasn't what I expected to hear. But, by this time, I was beginning my descent and looking down could see mountain tops but broken clouds in the valley. The holes were dark where Batman was supposed to be and I didn't know if these were clouds or fog.

“Batman, this Hawk 04, I must land, I am emergency fuel. Can you please turn on the airfield lights.”

“Hawk 04, this is Batman. You cannot land here.” Again, not what I wanted to hear, but the controller had turned on the rotating beacon because as I spiraled down over the base’s coordinates, I could see the trees light up from the beacon in some of the holes.

Okay, it wasn’t ground fog! So, I ducked through a hole pointed at Batman and felt like I was in the trees -- I estimated a 700’ ceiling but hadn’t looked at . The only light on at Batman was the beacon, so I called him again, “Batman this is Hawk 04 with emergency fuel. Could you please turn on the airfield lights, I must land.” At this point I was indicating 400 pounds and I didn’t even know which direction the runway was.

The controller was adamant, “Hawk 04, you cannot land here.”

Fortunately, the lights of the city illuminated the bottoms of the clouds because I saw the reflections of the runway. It had just rained. I was 90 degrees to the runway so dropped my gear with the landing lights on. The controller stepped up the pitch of his call, “YOU CANNOT LAND HERE!”

“Batman, I am out of fuel and must land immediately. Please turn on the runway lights!” As I started my low, circling approach, he turned on the runway lights. It was at this point I realized the rest of the radio call he hadn’t stated, “You cannot land here because the runway is closed, there are men and equipment on the runway doing construction.”

Well with 250 pounds of fuel indicated, there wasn’t an option to go around. The men and equipment on the runway were scrambling off the sides of runway when I rolled out on final with my landing lights on them.

I touched down long to miss any tools and looked back as I passed them, but realized I had forgotten to turn on my defog in the descent ... the canopy was completely iced up except for the HUD. Hmm, guess I should have run the checklist, but very glad I didn’t go around.

As I came to a stop, I raised my canopy to see as the tower controller called, “Hawk 04 you must hold your position.”

“Copy Batman, Hawk 04 is holding my position.” I was happy to comply with whatever instructions the tower gave now! A follow-me truck showed up giving the international hand signal/shrug for “WTF?” I made the international signal for I need fuel. He responded with the international arm wave for “Follow me!”

So, I followed his truck and just cleared the runway when the engine started to surge. I didn’t need any more excitement this night, so I switched off the EPU and shutdown the motor before it flamed out, preventing a safety incident.

The 'follow me' truck came back when I stopped and all my lights had turned off. He gave me the WTF0 sign again, and I gave him a cut signal and the international signal for I need chocks!

By the time the follow-me driver got back and chocked me, I was surrounded by Turks. A staff car pulled up as I managed to shimmy down the side of the jet. With my feet firmly on terra firma, I was covered with sweat a whole bunch embarrassed, but happy to meet my new best friends.

General Toksoy introduced himself as the commander of Batman. He asked me, "Major Dittmer, what kind of missile is this?" pointing toward the HARM.

"Sir, that is an AGM-88 High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missile, a HARM."

"Where is your other one?"

"Sir, it is in a Roland near Mosul, Iraq!"

He slapped me on the back and pumped his fist – which got the crowd going! "Come with me!"

So, he drove me to their command post talking all the way. I learned that they kept the base blacked out for fear of an Iraqi attack and I was lucky the base defense AAA didn't engage me.

When we descended the stairs into the bunker, he pulled a curtain back on their "big board" with all the Iraqi threats. My map was considerably more up to date, so I crossed off the SAMs we had killed and he brought out tea and doughnuts.

Next asked, "What can we do for you?"

"Sir, I need fuel in my jet."

"It is fully fueled," was his response.

"Sir, I need a flight plan."

"Your flight plan is filed."

"Sir, I need a ride to my jet."

"Come with me." And so I started up on the taxiway and launched from the runway in time to catch the last of the package. When I called squadron ops and squawked Code I, they asked about the fuel problem which I had fixed when I jettisoned the tanks!

When I landed, I ended up in front of wing leadership and shared my story, embarrassed because I hadn't done my fuel checks. The wing DO then shared a hair raising story about his first combat mission in Vietnam. Then the General one-upped him with his hair raising first mission story. I sheepishly looked up, "So, I'm not grounded?"

“No you learned that you need to fly like you trained!” I learned my lesson. Fly like you train. Check your gas -- check your systems. Don't change your go, no-go criteria for combat. There really is no difference between combat and peacetime training.

So, this was the end of my first flight adventure, but I'll continue with the rest of the story. I reached out to the snake eaters on the base who regularly fly their blacked out C-130s into Batman. I asked them to deliver a case of Raki to Gen Toksoy and handed them a note pass to him. The note thanked the General and the men of Batman for opening up the runway, saving a valuable airplane and quite possibly saving my life. I asked him to pass some of the Raki to his crew and to have a drink in honor of my gratitude.

The general sent me something back in return. A couple of burley SOF dudes knocked on my BOQ door, “Sir, we've got something for you.” They handed me a box wrapped like a birthday present with a card attached.

In the box was four bottles of Turkish wine. Gen Toksoy's note said, “In Turkey we say when a man's life is saved, he is reborn. Your new birthday, Maj Dittmer, is now 21 Jan. We hope you will drink a toast in our honor, as we will drink one in yours. Perhaps we will meet again under calmer circumstances.” I couldn't have said it better myself.

Kurt “2-Lips” Dittmer