

The less-known part of the Gulf War

FOURTEEN NATIONS, ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY HELICOPTERS

Thirty years ago, in the Operation Desert Shield / Desert Storm, one of the most important tasks was managing the helicopter force of the naval units deployed to the Arabian-(Persian-) Gulf. This task was assigned to a helicopter pilot, who flew in war and peace and had extensive experience.

Marc Liebman is a veteran of two wars. After he got his naval aviator wing in 1969, he became helicopter pilot in the U.S. Navy and flew from decks of different type of warships and shore bases. He gained his combat experience in the Vietnam War and he served in active duty and in reserve as well in the 1970s and 1980s. He spent nearly 5.000 hours in the air and took part in search and rescue, combat search and rescue, special operation, anti-submarine and logistics missions. During occupation of Kuwait, he was the commanding officer of a Naval Reserve Unit that belonged to Carrier Group Seven. They were getting ready to deploy with the battle group centered aircraft carrier USS Ranger in the late fall of 1990. The plans were changed after Iraq occupied Kuwait and Marc Liebman got a command task in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm: he was responsible for 140 helicopters from 14 nations and the naval rotary wing operations over the Gulf.

- What was your task exactly?

- It evolved over time. At first, we were just going to augment the staff watch standers and fill our assigned billets. Mine was long range operational planning and tactics, others had billets in every aspect of naval warfare. Initially, the focus was on strike planning, mine warfare, and shipping surveillance. Before we deployed, we worked out of the Naval Reserve Center in Dallas and several of us made trips to the Arabian Gulf to meet with Central Command. Later we worked aboard the U.S.S. Ranger and made trips to other ships as well as to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

- How many people worked in your team?

- Twelve.

- Who was your supervisor to whom you had to report?

- Commander, Carrier Group Seven. The battle force command structure is complicated because there are commanders, who is responsible for multiple tasks but this is how the simplified version worked. All the naval forces in both the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf were under the command of the Naval Component Commander for Central Command. Under his command was Battle Force Zulu, the 90+ ships in the Arabian Gulf, Battle Force Yankee, 30+ ships in the Red Sea and the amphibious forces in Task Force 156 of 40+ ships. Within each Battle and Task Force there are what the Navy calls warfare commanders and the list is long so I am going to list only a few. Within Battle Force Zulu, the officer responsible for anti-air

warfare is known as Zulu Alpha, the air wings all worked for Zulu Papa. Anti-Surface warfare which had the responsibility for shipping surveillance and sinking the Iraqi Navy during Desert Storm was the responsibility of the officer designated Zulu Sierra. He was the Commander of Carrier Group Seven as well. I was Zulu Lima, the officer in charge of helicopter operations worked for Zulu Sierra. To help with the shipping surveillance, Zulu Sierra had a land-based commander who tasked all the RAF Nimrods, Aussie, Canadian and U.S. P-3 Orions, and French Atlantiques flying from bases in Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Oman and all the carrier-based S-3 Vikings.

- Where did you get the task from?

- CENTCOM laid out its long rang strategic objectives and then had specific objectives, i.e. blockade the Arabian Gulf to Iraqi shipping, destroy the Iraqi Navy, take down specific oil platforms, etc. these were passed down to the CENTCOM Naval Component Commander who was also the Commander, Battle Force Zulu who passed it on to Zulu Sierra who passed it along to Zulu Lima (me). We knew what was required and then let the Naval Component Commander know how what we were doing and if we needed any additional resources.

- You were responsible for 140 helicopters from 14 nations. When were these forces available and what types of helicopters belonged to it?

- As the ships arrived in the gulf, they were integrated into Battle Force Zulu. I'm doing this from memory, but the Canadians brought their version of the SH-3 called the CH-125, the Aussies had H-3s as well and SH-2Gs, the Italians had Bell 412s, the Royal Navy flew Lynxes and the French Navy operated the Gazelle. The U.S. Navy had H-3s and SH-60Bs and I had command and control of two U.S. Army detachments flying the OH-6.

- How could you describe your typical day during Desert Shield?

- Long! Typically, I was awake about 18+ hours. On any one day, I'd get about 4 hours continuous sleep and took 1-hour catnaps. I was, as were the other members of the staff, living on adrenalin. Each day typically, I was the watch commander on a four-hour watch in the battle group command center which we appropriated for our role. Other daily tasks included reviewing the next day's tasking plus monitoring the current day's operations. Mix in reading intelligence information and formal intelligence briefs and answering messages and it was a pretty full day. Some days, I flew out to the ships whose helicopters we were tasking. Other days, I got to fly in one of the H-3s from the Ranger.

- What was the biggest challenge in this phase of operations?

- The different national rules of engagement (ROE). While CENTCOM established the overall ROE, each country was free to add their own restrictions. Some did, so we had to "task" around them so they didn't violate them. Problem two was the wide variety of capabilities of the helicopters.

- What was the task of rotary wing forces during first days of Desert Storm?

- During Desert Shield, our primary role was shipping surveillance and enforcing the blockade of Iraqi ports. At any one time, there are 5,000+ ships in the Arabian Gulf. We had to monitor each one pretty much every day. Initially, we flew shipping surveillance, plane guard, logistics – mostly personnel transfers – and counter-smuggling operations. Oman and the U.A.E. were and are still worried, about what was coming south, out of Iran, more than what was going north. Refugees coming out of Iran were vetted and most sent on their way. However, there were concerns about Iranian operatives wanting to infiltrate. On day one of Desert Storm, our missions changed. Added to the above, we were now tasked to find and destroy the Iraqi Navy, support SEAL operations, fly combat search and rescue within the Arabian Gulf and the Shat al Arab, hunt for mines, and later, support assaults on oil rigs used by the Iraqis for anti-air warfare and intelligence gathering.

- How did it change as the operations advanced?

-Once the Iraqi Navy was destroyed, looking for mines that were floating around the gulf, SAR and CSAR and capturing Iraqi occupied oil platforms. We became involved capturing Qaruh Island (the official records state that the Kuwaiti Marines took the island, but the reality was that it was captured two days before by an Army flight of two OH-6s under our command and control.

- How did your daily schedule change when Desert Shield became Desert Storm?

- It didn't other than it got more tense.

- How were the task shared between U.S. and coalition helicopters?

- Based on their national ROE and the capabilities of the helicopters, we were assigned tasks.

- Can you give an example of this?

- During the battle group workups, the U.S. Navy SH-60B helicopters began working with the Royal Navy Lynxes to create hunter killer teams. While this was not a new idea, before Desert Shield, not much training time was devoted to perfecting the techniques needed. The SH-60B's only offensive weapon at the time was the Penguin anti-ship missile. It is a great weapon but once launched, it flies out to the largest IR target and that's what it hits. With 100s of oil platforms in the Northern Arabian Gulf, the Penguin's inability to discriminate between a ship and an oil platform meant we could not use it. However, the Royal Navy had the Sea Skua missile. While it did not have the range of the Penguin, it was guided by the fire control radar's beam to the target. What the Lynx did not have was the search radar. The SH-60B had a great radar that was designed to find ships, periscopes and snorkels along with a very good electronic surveillance suite. The SH-60Bs would fly at 3,000 feet (1,000 meters) and its APS-124 radar could see the oil platforms, ships and the British Lynx that didn't have IFF. It took the SH-60 crews just a few hours of training to figure out how to vector the Lynx

within range of target. During Desert Shield, we practiced the tactic so when the war broke out, we were ready. The SH-60 crew at 2,000 - 3,000 feet (600-1,000 meters) and well out of range of the Iraqi ships SAM and AAA envelopes would vector the Lynxes at 200 feet (60 meters) to within 8 – 10 miles (15-18 kilometers) from the target. Once the Lynx's fire control radar acquired the Iraqi ship, the crew fired the Sea Skua missile. We used this tactic to take out, if I remember, 14 ships. Later on, we also used it to sink fast moving boats trying to bring Iraqi commandos into Saudi Arabia.

- How could you use your previous experiences?

- I think that my experience both as a helo pilot who flew a variety of missions and understanding of what helicopters could do vs. perceptions played a big role. As a helicopter pilot, I could relate to the challenges the detachments crew faced. I also grew up in Germany so I could also relate to the European experience. Then, it was a matter of leading the team, giving them the tasking and letting them work out the details based on the guidelines provided to me and we provide to them.

- What was the biggest challenge for you during Desert Storm?

- Operationally, it had to be the 15 sets of ROE, i.e. 1 for each country plus one from Central Command. However, administratively, it was the enemy within that caused the most headaches. I don't want to get into the details, but the U.S. Navy and some respects, the DOD, was not prepared for the administrative load that recalling thousands of reservists at one time entailed. The bureaucracy imploded and let's leave it at that.

- What was the most important experience or lesson that you - as naval helicopter pilot - learned in the Gulf War?

- There are two. One, the SH-60B proved its value as an anti-ship/maritime strike weapon. Since then, the Navy has expanded its capabilities, weapons and sensor suite. Second, and this is a negative, but combat search and rescue and Navy Special Warfare support continue to be a bastard stepchild of the U.S. Navy's helicopter community. After Desert Storm, the Navy has, despite the lip service, gotten out of this business. In the next conflict, it will hit back.
