

Keystone Battle Brief

The Battle of Al-Khafji

28 January-1 February 1991

Notes were created from Paul W. Westermeyer's
U.S. Marines in Battle: Al-Khafji, 28 January – 1 February 1991

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(Slide 1)

I. Situation:

A. Background

After concluding a brutal and mutually destructive eight-year war with Iran (1980-88), of which Iraq was the aggressor, the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein led Iraq into another war. In August of 1990 Iraq invaded and overran Kuwait, the small but wealthy nation along Iraq's southeast border. The Arab community and world at large condemned Saddam's actions and formed a Coalition under the leadership of President George H. W. Bush to both protect Saudi Arabia from potential Iraqi aggression and to drive Saddam out of Kuwait should diplomatic measures fail. Saddam had his forces dig in and steadily refused to withdraw, making decisive action from the Coalition inevitable. When Saddam realized fighting was unavoidable he hoped to achieve victory by forcing the Coalition, particularly the United States, into a costly war of attrition. A war which he knew his people could endure and the Americans could not.

(Slide 2)

Background (Continued)

On 17 January 1991 Operation Desert Storm began with a massive Coalition air campaign. The campaign was highly effective and, after the first week had passed, went on for longer than Saddam and his generals had anticipated. With his forces in both Iraq and Kuwait getting hit hard Saddam elected to force the Coalition into a ground fight so that his proclaimed "Mother of all battles" could begin. A largescale spoiling attack into Saudi territory was planned.

(Slide 3)

B. Al-Khafji

The Saudi coastal town of al-Khafji, was identified as the objective for the operation. The town lay approximately seven miles below the Kuwaiti southeastern border. Al-Khafji had been evacuated on 18 August 1990 soon after the invasion, because of its proximity to Kuwait and vulnerability to Iraqi artillery. North of the town was a water desalination plant, and to the south there was an oil refinery, a pier, and a small airstrip. Southwest, beyond the town's outskirts, was a Saudi Arabian National Guard compound. The town was made difficult to defend by large *sabkhas* or salt marshes that lay to the south of it. The *sabkhas* were very difficult for vehicles, especially heavy ones, to negotiate and naturally channelized all vehicle traffic onto the coast road. The city was picked by the Iraqis for two main reasons. First, it was close, being entirely within the protective envelope of Iraqi artillery positions in Kuwait, ensuring the attack could thus be supported. And second, it was thought to be strategically important to the Coalition, mainly because it possessed two substantial harbors, one of which handled oil exports and the other was incorrectly believed to be a Coalition base.

Lower Left: Pictured is the arches into the Saudi city of al-Khafji which proclaim that "The municipality and residents of Khafji welcome the honorable visitor."

(Slide 4)

II. The Iraqi Plan:

A. Operational Plan

Part of the reason the Iraqis were bent on attacking what they thought was a major Coalition hub was the belief that in doing so they might be able to capture many American military personnel. Saddam believed American POWs would give him extra leverage over the Coalition and accordingly placed a high priority on the capture of American personnel. Regardless, the operation was not seen as a skirmish or limited raid, but rather as a battle intended to win the war by destroying the Coalition's will to fight. The operational plan for implementing Iraq's strategic goal of beginning a ground war of attrition, was relatively straight forward. Five infantry divisions, the *18th*, *8th*, *29th*, *14th*, and *7th*, would remain along the Kuwaiti border and defend part of the 'Saddam Line,' the name given to the massive Iraqi defensive works by U. S. forces. The line consisted of a belt of minefields, antitank obstacles, and triangular brigade strong points. Iraqi engineers had designed and constructed the belt based on lessons learned in their 8-year war with Iran. The attacking forces would be drawn from elements of the Iraqi *III* and *IV Corps*, namely the *3d Armored* and *5th Mechanized Divisions* from the *III*, and the *1st Mechanized Division* from *IV Corps*.

(Slide 5)

B. Armored vehicles used

The armored battalions of these divisions were equipped with a combination of T-54/55 and T-62 main battle tanks while their mechanized infantry battalions were equipped with BMP-1 armored personnel carriers supported by BRDM-2 scout vehicles. Their divisional artillery was lavishly equipped with various models of 152mm and 155mm howitzers as well.

(Slide 6)

C. Division-level

The *5th Mechanized Division [III Corps]* would drive south along the coast road to al-Khafji, while the *3d Armored Division [III Corps]* would drive through the al-Wafra ‘forest’ (oil fields) to the coast road, cutting al-Khafji off from the south. The *1st Mechanized Division [IV Corps]* would drive across the berm defended by Coalition forces between the ‘heel’ and ‘elbow’ of the Kuwaiti/Saudi border (see map) and then pass south to screen the *3d Armored Division’s* flank. After a response had been provoked and prestige gained, the Iraqi forces would retreat behind the Kuwaiti border defenses. The attack was set to be launched at 2000 on 29 January 1991, and al-Khafji was to be occupied by 0100 on 30 January 1991. The resulting operation and consequential Coalition response would constitute the first major ground combat of the war and be known collectively as the Battle of al-Khafji (28 January-1 February 1991).

(Slide 7)

III. Coalition Forces:

A. I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF)

The Gulf War would be the largest deployment of Marines since the Vietnam War. The Marines were the first combined arms task force to arrive and General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the United States Central Command commander, chose the Marines, fighting alongside Arab members of the Coalition, to evict the Iraqis from Kuwait proper. The I Marine Expeditionary Force was the main Marine element on the ground and included both the 1st and 2d Marine Divisions. Covering deployed Coalition forces were a series of observation posts strung out every 10 to 12 kilometers along an approximately fifteen-foot-high berm that roughly followed the Kuwaiti-Saudi border. Going east to west from the coast to the 'Heel' ran OP-8, OP-7, OP-2, and OP-1 (see map), and running north between the 'Heel' and the 'Elbow' ran OPs 4, 5, and 6, OP-4 being just north of the 'Heel'. At the time of the Iraqi offensive, Task Force Shepherd (1st Light Armored Infantry Battalion) of the 1st Marine Division had companies on a screening mission in vicinity of OPs 4, 5, and 6. 2d Light Armored Infantry Battalion, 2d Marine Division, established a similar screen in front of the al-Wafrah oil fields and OP-1, between Task Force Shepherd and the Joint Forces Command-East area of operations along the coast. These Marine light armored infantry battalions employed Light Armored Vehicles or LAV-25s, including attachments of AT versions of the vehicle. The Marine Corps' 1st Surveillance Reconnaissance and Intelligence Group (SRIG) controlled Observation Posts 8, 7, and 2, with ANGLICO (Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company) teams being at OPs 7 and 8. 1st SRIG also had elements at the desalination plant north of al-Khafji.

(Slide 8)

B. Saudi forces organization

The United States' most crucial partner in the Coalition was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi military forces were divided into two distinct services, the Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) and the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG). The Ministry of Defense and Aviation consisted of nine ground unit brigades and formed the regular component of the Saudi military. The Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), in contrast, only had two mechanized brigades, and though they would support the MODA brigades in time of war, their real purpose was to protect the royal family from internal rebellion. The SANG units were highly favored and received the best of training and equipment. American military assistance to Saudi Arabia included assigning American officers and civilian contractors as advisors to the Saudi National Guard. Both Saudi services were attached with U.S. Army advisors and Special Forces teams at the brigade level, while the Marine Corps also attached air naval gunfire liaison teams to coordinate Marine air and artillery support. Specifically, 1st ANGLICO was attached to Joint Forces Command East.

(Slide 9)

C. Joint Forces Command-East

Joint Forces Command-East's area of operations extended along the Kuwait/Saudi border from the coast west to just east of the al-Whafrah Oilfields. The Saudis had three brigades in the JFCE area, 2d SANG with an attached Qatari armored battalion, the 8th Mechanized MODA, and 10th Mechanized MODA. Each brigade deployed a battalion-sized screen 20km

north of their positions and approximately 3km south of the border. The Saudis also had a Task Force of Saudi Marines with a battalion of Moroccan infantry on the coast south of al-Khafji, but they were still being stood up as a unit and were not combat ready.

(Slide 10)

D. Armored vehicles used

The Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) units employed Cadillac Gage V-150 Commando light armored vehicles. Because these units did not have tanks organic to them, Qatari armored units, using French built AMX-30 MBTs were used to bolster them. The Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) mechanized units used American built M113 AFVs while MODA armored units used M60 MBTs. Marine ground units involved in the first stages of the Battle of Khafji used LAV-25s (Light Armored Vehicles).

(Slide 11)

IV. The Battle:

A. 28 Jan

On 28 January, the night before the attack, *3d Armored Division's* columns were caught by U.S. air power while moving into position in al-Wafra and were decimated, temporarily stopping that prong of the attack dead. Iraqi movements north of Al-Khafji were spotted by the Coalition, but not interpreted properly, in part because the enemy movements were seen likely to be a response to recent and coinciding artillery raids conducted by the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force on 26 and 28 January.

(Slide 12)

B. 29-30 Jan

On the morning of 29 January, the Iraqi elements had moved to their assembly areas successfully. Coalition air power had already inflicted significant losses, but those losses had resulted from routine strikes in Kuwait and chance attacks against Iraqi forces caught moving in the open. The bulk of the Coalition's air effort remained focused elsewhere and no attack was expected. At approximately 1930 elements of *6th Brigade, 3rd Armored Division* attempted to cross the berm at OP-4 starting the first ground action of the war. The berm was defended by a Marine reconnaissance platoon, 2d Platoon, Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, and Company D, 3d Light Armored Infantry Battalion (reinforced), TF Shepherd. Before withdrawing some of the recon Marines engaged and surprised the approaching Iraqi tanks. The surprised Iraqis reacted by delivering a massed volume of inaccurate return fire. The Marines from TF Shepherd then called in close air support, fired ATGMs, and used the fire from their LAVs 25mm canons to mark the advancing enemy armor for aircraft.

(Slide 13)

29-30 Jan (Continued)

The Iraqi attack was contained, but sadly, two friendly fire incidents occurred. An LAV-AT "Green Two" was destroyed by one of its fellows when it was mistaken for an enemy vehicle and another LAV-25 "Red Two" was destroyed by a malfunctioning Maverick air-to-surface missile. Eleven Marines were killed in these vehicles. During the course of the five-hour fight for OP-4 the Iraqis would lose 22 vehicles and scores of men.

(Slide 14)**29-30 Jan (Continued)**

At 2115, while the battle for OP-4 was raging, OP-1 came under attack from a brigade of the *5th Mechanized Division*. The attack was halted and the brigade mangled by air power directed by Company A, 2d Light Armored Infantry Battalion. Soon after, elements of the *1st Mechanized Division* attempted to penetrate the berm at OP-6. The OP was unoccupied, but Company C, 1st Light Armored Infantry Battalion (reinforced), TF Shepherd moved in to block the position at 2230. Supported by air power, Company C stopped this thrust with no casualties. The attacks on OPs 1 and 6 ended in the early hours of the 30th with many Iraqis at OP-6 surrendering at first light. Just after a 0720 sunrise the Iraqis would make a final try to break through at OP-4. Company A, 1st Light Armored Infantry Battalion, which had moved in so that Company D could consolidate and reorganize, called in airstrikes from A-10s and Marine Corps F/A -18s which smashed the attack.

(Slide 15)**29-30 Jan (Continued)**

Starting around 2200, elements of *5th Mechanized Division* begin moving down the coast road to Al-Khafji. They quickly overran the Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO) and Recon teams at OP-7 and OP-8. The teams were forced to escape and evade but suffered no casualties. ANGLICO members were still able to call in eight Marine AH-1W Cobras. The Cobras, making first contact with the Iraqis at 0100, ensured that the Iraqi advance was not unopposed. The three Saudi screening battalions were under orders not to resist and withdrew from their camps ahead of the advancing columns of enemy APCs

(BMP-1s). Iraqi mobile artillery shelled the Saudis as they fled down the coastal road. 1st SRIG was also forced to flee the desalination plant north of Al-Khafji and by 0200 30 January the *5th Mechanized Division* occupied Al-Khafji. Two 3d Marine recon teams remained hidden within the town, however.

(Slide 16)

C. 30-31 Jan

Later that morning two trucks from the US Army's 233d Transportation Company drove into al-Khafji by mistake and the drivers of one of the vehicles were captured by Iraqis. A rescue patrol from 3/3 was launched and found the truck, but the drivers had already been captured. The existence of this rescue mission would later lead the media to mistakenly point out that the recapture of Al-Khafji was a Marine led operation rather than a Saudi/Qatari operation supported by Coalition air and artillery. The Marines would be instrumental in supporting the Coalition actions though. Namely, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines provided artillery support and the Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367 swooped in on targets in the city. At 1100 30 January 2d SANG, which were equipped with V-150 Armored cars, and Qatari armor (AMX-30s) attached launched a hasty counterattack down the main road, but the Iraqis were able to easily repulse it. The ANGLICO teams made use of copious amounts of Coalition air to whittle down the defenders in al-Khafji and at 0830 31 Jan, SANG and Qatari forces again attacked al-Khafji. One SANG battalion was also sent to block the town from the north. The main Saudi assault was repulsed, but the battalion blocking force in the north stopped the *15th Mechanized Brigade* from reinforcing the Iraqi Forces in al-Khafji. Throughout the

night Coalition air continued to whittle away the Iraqi *5th Mechanized Division*; and fighting continued.

(Slide 17)

D. 1 Feb and aftermath

On the morning of 1Feb the 2d SANG Brigade, the Qatari armored battalion, and the 8th MODA Mech. Brigade, heavily supported by Coalition air, launched the third attack on al-Khafji and retook it from the remaining Iraqi forces. During the confusion of the fighting the Marine recon teams were able to safely withdraw. The aftermath of the Battle of Khafji included severe losses for the Iraqis, including scores if not hundreds of vehicles destroyed and hundreds of dead, wounded, and captured. Coalition forces were not without losses, however. The Saudis lost 7 V-150s, 2 Qatari AMX-30s and suffered 18 dead. The Americans lost 2 LAVs and 1 AC-130 and suffered 25 dead. 3 Marines were also wounded and two U.S. Army soldiers captured.

(Slide 18)

V. Significance:

A. To the Gulf War

The Battle of Khafji (28 Jan-1 Feb) was the first major ground combat of the war.

The Iraqis suffered severe materiel and equipment losses during the four-day battle, with *6th Brigade, 3d Armored Division* getting mauled and three brigades of the *5th Mechanized Division* being nearly destroyed. Despite these losses, the Iraqis viewed the battle as a propaganda victory, especially as they had conducted the operation in the teeth of superior

Coalition air. The Coalition gained new strength from the battle and a confirmation that it could effectively deal with its Iraqi opponents. Throughout every part of the battle the importance of air power was profoundly illustrated.

B. To the Marine Corps

The significance of the Battle of al-Khafji to the Marine Corps can best be described as an increase in confidence. The Corps would see many of its tactical and operational philosophies justified under combat conditions. The maritime prepositioning ships program, for one, proved its worth, enabling Marines to be the first combined arms task force in Saudi Arabia. The light armor screens had performed better than foreseen and the ANGLICO teams had proven to be indispensable. During the battle, Marines had also been able to test and prove the air ground task force concept within the joint environment. Marines came away with a better understanding of what to expect from the enemy they faced and a greater confidence in their Saudi allies. The friendly fire instances of the battle were unfortunate, but they would prompt an investigation and improved safety measures that helped limit the number of similar events for the remainder of the war.

(Slide 19)

VI. Discussion and Review

Question #1: Why did the Iraqi Army attack al-Khafji? Did their plan make sense; why or why not?

Answer #1: The Iraqi Army attack on al-Khafji was a large-scale spoiling attack intended on putting an end to, or at least interrupting, the successful Coalition air campaign and bringing the Coalition prematurely into a costly ground war. The plan put much faith on armored units

unsupported by air, and as a result the Iraqis suffered severe casualties with only the brief capture of a minor target to show for their efforts. The Iraqi action did force the Coalition to begin local ground action and served to force limited concentration of some of the Coalition's air power. The cost in Iraqi lives and equipment clearly outweighed the benefits gained though.

Question #2: What was the general course of the Battle of Khafji over the four days in which it was fought?

Answer #2:

- The battle began with Coalition air bombing elements of the Iraqi offensive forces as they moved into position, yet unaware of the Iraqi operation.
- The Iraqi division launched near-simultaneous attacks at several OPs along the berm that marks the border of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These attacks were blunted and stopped by Marine screening forces and supporting airpower but the Iraqi *5th Mechanized* was able to overrun the Coalition positions to its front and push south to capture al-Khafji.
- Saudi/Qatari forces counterattack the Iraqis in an effort to retake al-Khafji while Marines provide air and artillery support.
- The third counterattack is successful and the town is recaptured.

Question #3: What is a lesson that can be learned from the Battle of al-Khafji?

Answer #3: There are many possible answers to this question, but perhaps one of the greatest lessons to be learned from the battle is a reminder of the importance of airpower and how it should never be overlooked.

(Slide 20)

VII. Suggested Reading:

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