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Feature Sample

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Scoop feature in the period between Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the commencement of the Gulf War.

All photography of military establishments, equipment, aircraft and personnel was banned by the Saudi Government but Ian Bennett not only set up a visit to the US Airforce base at Dhahran, but also bagged a scoop interview with Lt Col Tom Sack and permission to photograph attack aircraft and most of the First Tactical Fighter Wing operation in Saudi Arabia.

The feature was subsequently carried by the leading UK military aviation magazine,

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GULF CRISIS

UPDATE

"IF YOU CAN PICTURE this, we arrived on August 8, when aircraft were coming in at the rate of ten minutes per plane. There are 25 parking spaces out there, and all 25 were full".

Not the heavy schedule of a busy commercial airport, those words were in fact how Lt Col Thomas Sack described the arrival in Saudi Arabia of the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) of the US Air Force. Wave after wave of giant C-5 transports and the smaller C-141 and C-130 variants, comprised perhaps the largest and fastest military build up known. They had but 36 hours notice, and were installed within a week. Not just transported thousands of miles, but installed and set up with maintenance facilities, munitions and a complete air transportable hospital.

Such haste presented a whole new set of ground rules. With the formation of a multi-national force came cultural differences. Rapid deployment of such a huge force, and the logistical problems of transporting it halfway around the world, resulted in some measure of initial confusion. Equipment failures were common in those early days

also, as aircraft, ground crews and aircrew fought to master unfamiliar surroundings and a hostile climate.

There would be more to come, President Bush announcing that a further 150,000 personnel would be arriving in Saudi Arabia in the weeks following Thanksgiving, so the scene would be repeated.

Appropriately the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing was the first to arrive in Saudi Arabia, first to be operational, and first to set up their field hospital. Of a total manpower of 6,000, around half are currently in Saudi Arabia, with three F-15 Eagle squadrons and one helicopter squadron.

Director of Operations, Col Bob Summers, considers the 1st TFW as being the front line guys in support of everyone else. His squadrons comprise 24 to 28 F-15s each which, in addition to their air-to-air fighter role, are deployed on escort, recce and sweep duties.

The Colonel claimed an advanced radar that can even see a cruise missile with its small section, and that surprise was unlikely. "Can Saddam see us? Well I suppose he can, but if he is watching, then he must be scared stiff."



THE FIRST TFW WAS FIRST

Ian Bennett and Vic Marelle visit the USAF's 1st Tactical Fighter Wing also based at Dhahran

Aircraft are up flying all the time, with a number of support aircraft also on 'five minute alert'. Those flying are in position to intercept any kind of a threat from across the Saudi-Kuwaiti border, Sack also claiming that "If a threat actually materialised, in less than five minutes we could have most of these alert aircraft up."

Pilots and crew are on constant alert, though perhaps relaxing close by. Aircraft are fully ready for flight, many of the safety pins have been removed, and cockpits are far from 'safe'. "From bells sounding to wheels in the wells takes less than

five minutes, the only thing to delay them would be the aircraft in front taking off."

Each F-15 Eagle is armed with eight air-to-air missiles (AAMs) and a single 20mm Gatling gun firing 100 rounds per second. Though there is slight over-capacity, the normal loading gives 9 seconds worth of ammunition and a more convenient accountability. Missiles are a combination of four Sidewinder AIM-9M and four Sparrow AIM-7 AAMs.

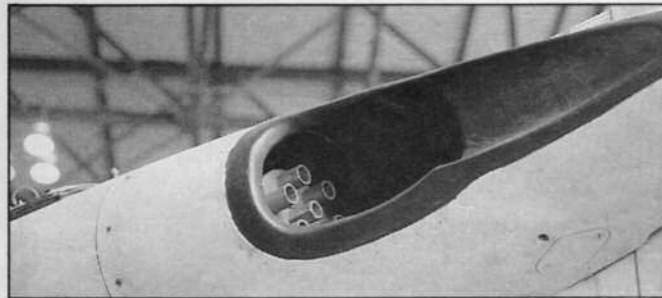
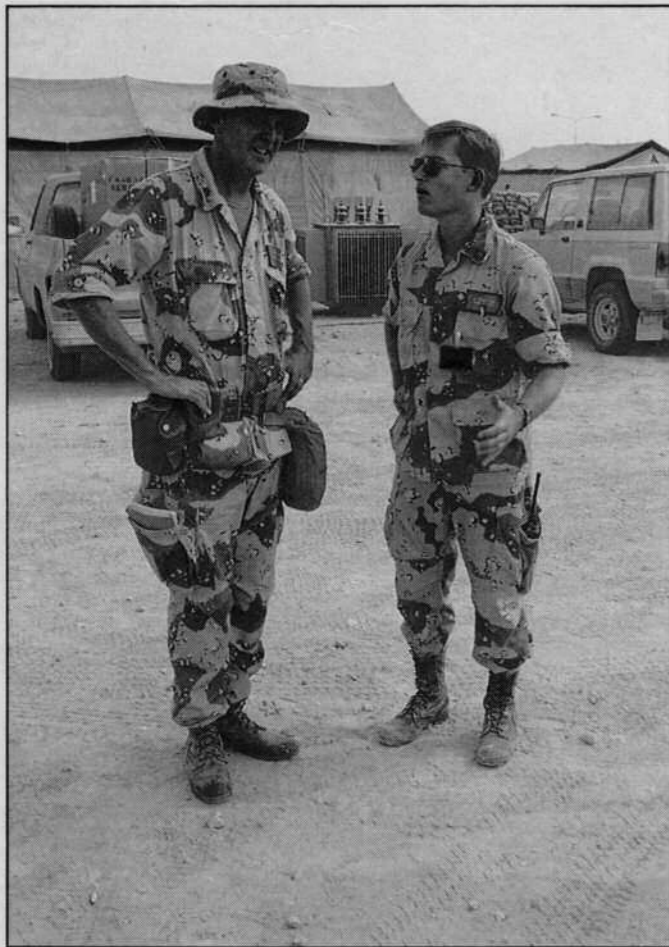
But behind the sharp end of any military operation must of necessity be a team of largely unsung heroes. A myriad of support services to keep the show on the road: maintenance facilities keeping the aircraft operational, medical facilities doing the same for pilots and personnel.

Those roles were reversed in the early days of Operation Desert Shield, when a vast air transportable hospital took on the high profile end of the wing. A fully equipped 50 bed hospital, it took two C-5A Galaxy aircraft to move, and when troops arrived in Saudi Arabia, was the only show in town between the Air

■ Top: A US Eagle in an Saudi hangar. One of the 1st TFW's F-15s undergoing a 100 hour check at Dhahran.

■ Left: Lt Col Tom Sack, left, with a medic outside the Wing's medical facility at Dhahran.

■ Below: The cutting edge of the F-15 Eagle — its single 20mm M61 six-barrel rotary cannon. (Photos: Ian Bennett).



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Force, Army and all military personnel. Arriving on August 12, it was set up and seeing patients by the 15th. Though a facility for 1st TFW and associated support personnel if there is conflict, anyone will be treated, regardless of the colour of their uniform.

Housed mainly in tents, but with portables in sterile areas, facilities

in the 50 bed hospital are extensive, with internal medical physicians, surgeons, orthopaedic surgeons, a psychiatrist, dental surgeon and OBGYN.

Desert conditions are firmly denied access, with walls sealed to floors, both of which are padded, and the tented hospital fully air conditioned throughout. Mattresses are air filled, decorated Christmas trees are in evidence on the wards, laboratory and operating rooms are impressively equipped. Within the first four months of operation, 657 patients passed through the X-Ray facility alone, with everything from broken fingers to fractured skulls.

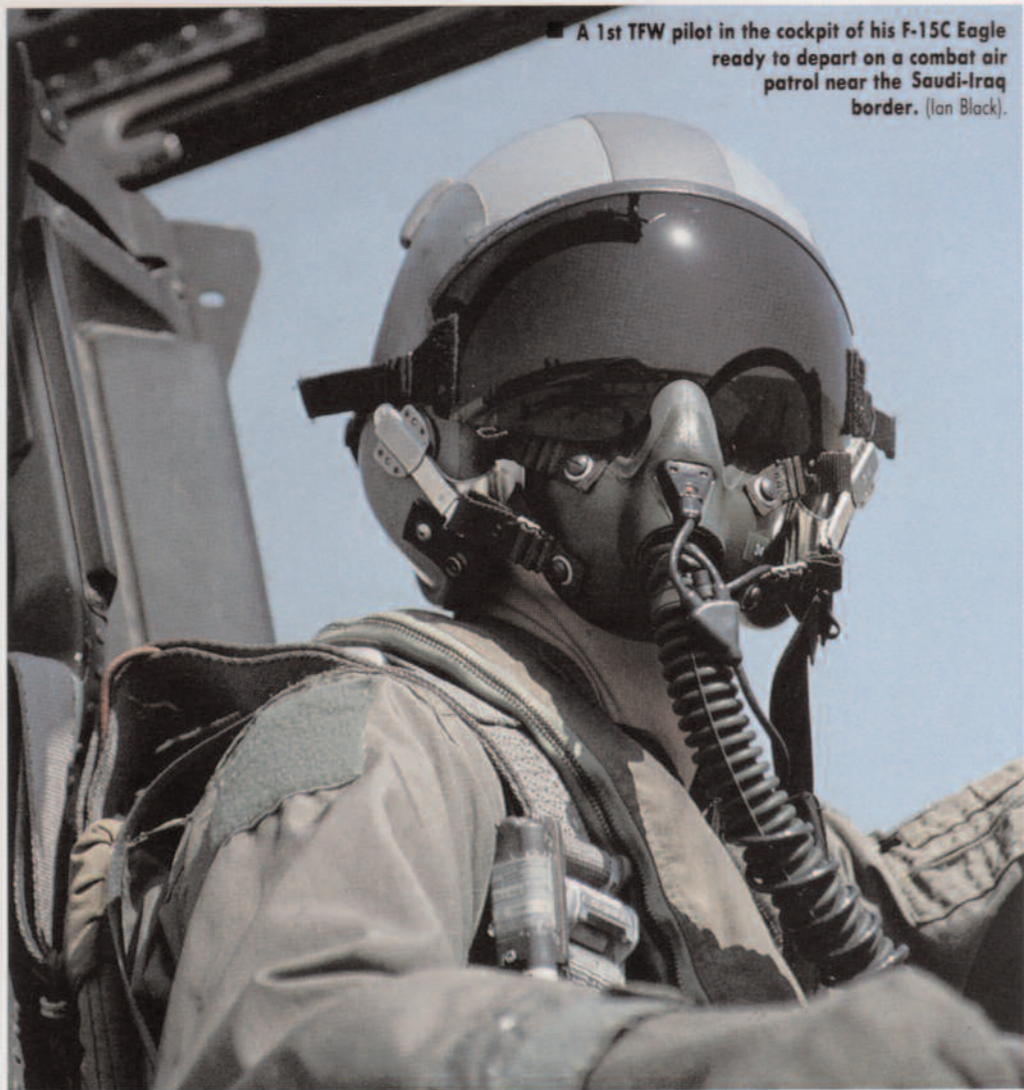
"When we left Langley it was 90°F and we thought that was hot, but when we got here it was 123°, rising to 135°" stated Col Summers. "That's about the biggest problem we had when we got here. It affected many, and the airplanes didn't like it either. Each airplane is like a person and needs time to adjust. To expand and contract. We had lots of problems. But we've



■ One bright spot on a low-vis grey Eagle. (Ian Bennett).

pulled through all that now. "Every 100 flight hours we bring the airplane in and do an inspection. Those inspections build up. At the 600 hour mark we tear the airplane apart, and that takes around ten days. Damaged canopies are changed, we do thermal intake repairs and a lot of things are replaced as time-changed items. There are antennas, fins, probes all over the place. They are sharp, very sharp. And they bite. We call them Eagle bites.

"The average life of a fighter is 20 to 25 years, and our philosophy is



■ A 1st TFW pilot in the cockpit of his F-15C Eagle ready to depart on a combat air patrol near the Saudi-Iraq border. (Ian Black).



■ A pair of 1st TFW F-15C Eagles, wearing different grey schemes, wait under the Saudi sun in a sunken 'flow-through' revetment. (Ian Black).

that when an airplane goes to the bone yard it's got to be able to do what it could do the day it was built. The Saudis operate F-15s like we do and Tornados like the Brits, it makes the whole maintenance operation that much easier". Significantly, those whose speciality it is to repair aircraft battle damage, remained at Robbins AFB in Georgia.

Though aircraft still have names painted along the fuselage, pilots rarely fly their personalised aircraft. When assigned to fly, a pilot will just get what he is assigned, although if he particularly wants to and his plane is available, an attempt will be made to try and bring them together. It's now more of a tradition, except for the Wing Commander.

Any time he flies, he flies his own airplane. The vertical fin on his plane has three colour flashes, and three stickers on the side intake. That's his plane.

Will conflict materialise? Following the UN security council resolution sanctioning the use of force if Iraq does not withdraw from Kuwait by the middle of January, the possibility is heightened. Most hope that the threat alone will be sufficient to return the region to the status quo, though confident that the assembled multi-national force can effect a swift victory.

Yet even against the possible use of chemical weapons, Sack remains optimistic. "In a real world situation, should Saddam Hussein use chemical weapons against us, what you have to realise is that they are only going to affect a small part. People are under the impression that if he drops just one SCUD missile in here for instance, it will affect the entire area. It's not. They've got a very small radius. But if he does hit us, then we have a compound with a facility where decontamination will be carried out. People will enter at one end and progress through. Every ten feet represents another stage in decontamination".

For everyone's sake, let's hope that is one facility that just is not needed.



■ Fuelled and armed, an alert Eagle in an alert hangar at Dhahran. (Ian Bennett)



■ The Eagle has landed. The 71st TFS commander touches down at Dhahran after a training mission. (Paul Jackson).



■ Four AIM-9M Sidewinders, on the top rack, and four AIM-7 Sparrow air-to-air missiles are loaded on the F-15 Eagles.



■ A fully loaded F-15, carrying eight AAMs and three external tanks, stands under an aircraft shelter in the munitions preparation area. (Photos: Ian Bennett).