



Panic and glory in the glare of bursting bombs!

Taken from Camel Tails – A Saga of the RSMC

Looking back on this incident, the Saudi thought processes are a bit more transparent than they were some 18-years past. At the time the Saudi Marine Advisors were kept in the dark on external activities, much like the allegorical mushroom and supplied with plenty of fertilizer. ...Ours was not to reason why, ours was but to do or die? Little did I know in those far-off days.

A fairly hot shooting war had been going on between Iraq and Iran for quite some time, with neither side making much headway. Eventually, both sides were sending children in the assault waves with little or no ground gained. Neither side could be said to be mighty warriors cast in the mould of Saladin who opposed Richard in the Crusades. Since Iraq was Saudi's (literal) next door neighbor, it was deemed in the Saudi's best interest to assist the known Sunni Muslim¹ ruling faction in Iraq against the unknown Fundamentalist (Shiite) Muslims currently running amok in Iran. Iran of course had been a model of stability under the leadership (or rule, take your pick) of the Shah, but all reason and restraint collapsed with the restoration of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Several things were seen as potential dangers to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Ayatollah was preaching against any secular ruling hierarchy, pointing out the dastardly sins perpetrated by the Shah in Iran, thus leading true Muslim believers into an unholy way of life. Once brought out of exile and restored to the Iranian leadership, the Ayatollah set out to correct that mistake! Blood flowed, and the people seemed eager to return to their Islamic roots, and all vestiges of Westernism were considered to be a blot on a true believer (not to mention that opposing the Ayatollah was not considered a formula to reach extreme old age)! Brooks Brother's suits were relegated to the trash cans, and traditional Mid-Eastern clothing restored to favor. Women reverted to face veils, Westerners in general, and Americans in particular reviled. Since the Iranians did not consider themselves to be Arabs, but rather Persians, there was a natural animosity between Iraq and Iran. Iran also licked their lips over the vast oil reserves under the sands of Iraq and coveted this as a resource that **should** by the Grace of Allah belong to the/a 'more' faithful Muslim regime.

Conversely, Iraq was a secular dictatorship being run by the Arabian strongman, Saddam Hussein. While Iraq was devoutly Muslim on the unscratched surface, the Iranians considered the Iraqis to simply be paying verbal homage to Islam without supervising its strict observance, as *should* all followers of the Prophet (Peace be upon him). Now if Iran could just wrest the control of the oil deposits from those miserable Arabs so that good Persians, (who were ever so much more devout Muslims than the Iraqis of course), the cause of the

“Enlightened One” would be afforded its just due. It would be but a short step to Iraq’s sister country, the absolute Monarchy of Saudi Arabia. While Saudi pays lip service to being a theocracy, it is actually anything but! Religious police insure Mosque attendance, but make no mistake; it is the Sa’ud Family that rules the Kingdom, NOT the Mullahs! The Iranians have never made any bones about thinking that THEY were the Islamics with enough chutzpa (perhaps a poor choice of words here), to be the titular custodians of the two most holy places in Islam (Mecca and Medina), custodians of the sacred Hajj and then of course, there’s all that oil! Essentially there was a very careful balancing act going on in the mid-East. Make no mistake, the Islamics would band together to defeat the Infidels in a religious war, even if they made mincemeat out of each other afterwards. BUT, when one country has control of virtually everything of value to a Muslim (custodianship of the two Holy Mosques, and the largest known oil reserves in the world), they are willing to bend the rules a bit to keep it.

In a careful tightrope act, Saudi was backing the Iraqis with material (truck convoys left for the front on a regular basis) the Saudis were studiously staying out of the fray (as well they should, with their level of military expertise to actively engage in combat without LOTS of help would have been tantamount to suicide). Unfortunately, when one of the ships of the Saudi Navy rounded the peninsula and headed north towards the fighting, someone put a round or two through a Saudi Ship. This brought on a case of near terminal shakes on the part of the Saudi Navy (and probably the Army too), and it was deemed necessary to start organizing their newly formed Marine Corps into an operating tactical unit – Enter the Saudi Marine Battalion. The following few paragraphs and comments scribed at the time will give you the flavor of the exercise, and given that we had no idea exactly what had tripped their trigger.

Comments from notes taken from Culver’s diary in 1986:

Things are getting a little hectic around here, the Saudis seem to be gearing up for some sort, of perceived threat! Seems one of their Arab or Iranian neighbors put a few holes in one of their Frigates over on the other side of the peninsula. I knew it was a stupid I idea to take the “bungee” cords off of their ships!! The Saudi Navy does much better when their ships are moored to the pier. Their main talent is “Olympic Tea Drinking”, oh well, it’s a living. I suppose.

Part of their “gear up” is trying to get their Marine Battalion off the ground. A couple’ days ago one of our former student lieutenants came by to proudly inform us he was going to be the Battalion S-4. “Great”, sez I, “how do you like it?” “It’s great,” sez he, “by the way, exactly what does an S-4 do?” Hummm..

As a part of this great push, the Navy Commander in charge of the effort of coming up with a working Marine Corp Battalion wanted me to write down a list of all the things that the officers in a Marine Battalion are supposed to do. I came up with a list that was straight out of Marine Corps publications (the same basic information we give our fledgling U.S. Marine Officers). “Not detailed enough,” sez he! I take him a list that is more or less an account of what a company commander does on a daily basis (as best I can remember at my rather advanced age!). “Still not detailed enough.” sez he! Damn!

Now this is crazy! Heck, how dadgummed detailed can you make such a list? I finally decided to go “whole hog” (upppss, another Freudian slip, sorry). I’ve now got a list that includes suggested time slots for “head-calls²,” together with suggestions on how many squares of appropriate tissue to use depending upon the severity and volume of the “call of

nature!” I’m thinking of adding a paragraph to cover head-calls in the field, including the appropriate granulation and color of sand to use for sanitary purposes (they don’t get toilet paper in their field rations!). If I don’t get sent home for this little treatise, I’m bullet, proof!

Back to present day:

After my departure from the World’s Largest Litter Box at the tail end of 1987, we had no idea that Saddam would allow his megalomania to overpower his common sense. The war between Iraq and Iran had petered out due to a lack of young cannon fodder, and the final realization that the Iraq-Iran War was a futile and essentially un-winable endeavor. Both Iran and Iraq breathed a sigh of relief when the war ended in a virtual stalemate. Iraq looked southward towards their neighbor, Kuwait and in 1990 mounted out an expedition to reduce the “mini-country” to possession to act as a jumping off point for his real target, Saudi Arabia.

Saudi of course panicked and called for their white knight (the United States) to come to their rescue. Based on the actions of (or lack thereof) President Jimmy (the Wimp) Carter during the Iranian takeover of the American Embassy in 1979, Saddam gambled that we would do nothing. Saddam of course, guessed wrong! This time he had not taken into account the fact that Saudi Arabia had a history of deliberately holding down the oil prices in the OPEC community, thus earning the enmity of their fellow Arabic nations, but securing the tacit friendship and assistance of the United States. Don’t forget Americans *like* affordable gasoline prices. The invasion of little Kuwait offered us the excuse of liberating a small defenseless country, and since Saudi didn’t have the military expertise to throw out the oppressors, the job obviously fell to the country that had been the recipients of historically low gas prices. Enter the defenders of right and freedom!

Saddam was betting on Arabic Blood being thicker than oil and the entire Arab (if not Muslim) world flocking to the colors and taking up arms against the infidels. The Saudis threw their considerable weight around and convinced their fellow Muslim countries that “there but for the grace of Allah, goes the rest of the Mid-East.” Since Saddam was not a particularly well liked strongman, and did not have the persona of a Muslim Ayatollah, it became fairly easy to convince other Muslim countries to help defeat his “power play.” To allow Saddam to take over a relatively helpless Kuwait, “there *INDEED* but for the grace of Allah go I,” was the perception, and quite probably they were exactly right... The Saudis knew that they were next on Saddam’s list. Saddam of course had his eyes on the oil, power and the control of the two most holy sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina. With those, he would have virtual control of the entire Arab world, and Iran would not be in a position to do a damned thing about it!

The only possible fly in the ointment was keeping Israel from screwing the goose! Obviously Israel could not be included in the coalition, as no Arab Country would have participated, and the deal would have become Muslims against Infidels regardless of flavor, and then Muslim against Muslim in the dust-up that followed! If Saddam had thrown one missile that struck Israel and caused a retaliatory strike, the deal would have unraveled like a ball of yarn. The United States, it will be noted, soothed the ruffled fur of Israel by supplying them with Patriot Missiles for defense, and with the admonition that financial aid would cease if they did not toe the party line and refrain from shooting back! Although not kept on the front page in the news, everyone was treading on very thin shelled eggs for the entire period of hostilities.

Following the 1st Gulf War, I again trudged back to the *World’s Largest Litterbox*, to be assailed with a “new” Saudi Military persona! After all, they had personally won the first one quite handily, and now were wearing “Pattonesque” uniforms with binoculars around their

necks posing on book covers while writing about their glorious victories against their enemies. Self-deception is a marvelous thing!

In retrospect it's well that we were able to get that first Saudi Battalion of Camelnecks squared away to defend the shores of Ras Al Gar, and make sure that our Battalion Staff Officers knew how to schedule head calls, using the appropriate number of sheets of tissue! I've always wondered what granulation of sand they used in the field?

ROC

End Notes:

¹ While the Sunnis and the Shiites are both of the Muslim persuasion (*kinda', but not quite like Baptists and Methodists – there is much more animosity between Muslim factions!*), they have different views on the subject, stemming originally from the **“real”** inheritors of Muhammad's leadership following his demise. Both think **they** are correct which leads to (sometimes violent) conflict. As a comical example in Jeddah during the annual Hajj (obligatory pilgrimage, once in a lifetime trip to Mecca for the faithful), the Shiites have special busses with the tops cut off to allow them to be closer to Allah (true story!). I've always wondered what their submarines look like? Hummm...

Saudi has a Sunni majority whereas in Iraq there is a Shiite majority. Through Saddam, the Sunnis ran the country with an iron hand, and kept the Shiites under their thumb resulting in a seething discontent of the more numerous Shiite majority. Unlike Iraq, the Saudis do not openly persecute the Shiites. The Shiites in Iraq however, were definitely treated as second class citizens and are now looking for revenge! This does NOT bode well! The Saudis may have been originally backing Saddam for a well thought out reason. A Shiite uprising could stand the entire mid-East on its head!

² “Head-call” is “Navy-Speak” for a call of nature... The Army would speak of going to the Latrine, and a civilian would simply utilize the bathroom.

