

## WAR ... AND INACTIVATION

While the wing's aircrews continued their normal operations in Germany and Turkey, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein resumed a war of rhetoric against Kuwait. As the summer heat in Southwest Asia intensified, so did Hussein's war of words. A buildup of troops, tanks and armor vehicles, artillery, and air power in the southern part of Iraq soon followed. On August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces crossed the border into Kuwait, forcing the Kuwaiti royal family and existing government to seek refuge in neighboring countries. The United Nations condemned the invasion, calling for immediate withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Within days of the Kuwait invasion, the United Nations authorized formation and deployment of a coalition force, consisting of air, ground, and naval units from many countries. That force initially aimed to protect other nations from Iraqi aggression and to demonstrate the worldwide resolve to guarantee Kuwait's independence. United States forces began arriving in the Middle East in large numbers, constituting the largest movement of American troops since the Vietnam War. Eventually, the coalition's strength would reach nearly 500,000. The 50th Tactical Fighter Wing contributed its share to this force, deploying two dozen aircraft, crews, maintenance specialists, and a variety of support personnel, including security police combat teams, to various units. The 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron contributed the bulk of the wing's aircrew contingent, deploying as a unit to serve with units of the 363d Tactical Fighter Wing.

Although not tasked for deployment immediately after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the wing's command staff and representatives from United States Air Forces in Europe began developing plans for the movement of a number of the wing's aircraft, crews, and support personnel. Returning to Hahn following an October 1990 training deployment to Zaragoza, Spain, Lieutenant Colonel Ed Houle, commander of the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron, received notice to prepare his unit for possible deployment. Originally scheduled for a Thanksgiving Day movement, plans changed and called for the deployment of the 10th within 72 hours of the outbreak of hostilities, should that happen. Pilots scheduled to separate or return to the United States before June 1991 transferred to the 496th Tactical Fighter Squadron, while pilots from the 496th filled the

resulting vacancies in the 10th. The squadron selected its best 26 aircraft and 35 crews for the deployment. Special arrangements allowed those pilots who had not flown as part of the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron to conduct training with the unit to familiarize themselves with squadron flight operations. It appeared the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron, after 45 years of peacetime service, would again take to the air to stop an aggressor.

As the final days of autumn passed and winter began, plans again changed. Word came that the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron would deploy on January 15, 1991, to fill out the combat strength of the fighter wing at Al Dhafra, United Arab Emirates.



A 10 TACTICAL FIGHTER SQUADRON F-16C like those deployed to the Middle East during the Gulf War

United States Central Command readjusted this date twice, finally establishing a deployment date of January 1, 1991. Meanwhile, crews continued to train and make other preparations. The 313th Tactical Fighter Squadron selected six F-16Cs and eight pilots as potential replacements for lost jets and crews. While the 10th prepared for movement, the United Nations continued to strengthen its ultimatums to Iraq. Eventually, the United Nations Security Council issued a resolution authorizing use of force if Iraq did not withdraw from Kuwait by January 15, 1991.

Thirty F-16Cs left Hahn Air Base for Zaragoza, Spain, on December 29, 1990. Six served as airborne spares to replace any of the original 24 that might not complete the trip to Al Dhafra. For those 30 pilots, and the 10 others aboard Military Airlift Command airlifters, for the maintenance and support personnel accompanying the fighter squadron with hundreds of tons of equipment, DESERT SHIELD had begun. Scheduled to continue to the United Arab Emirates on the following day, the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron's crews were delayed at Zaragoza by heavy fog—the very condition they had attempted to avoid by staging from Spain instead of Hahn. While

hundreds of personnel at Zaragoza Air Base, Spain celebrated and welcomed the new year, thirty pilots of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing fired their afterburners, drowning the sounds of celebration, and lifted into the darkness bound for the Middle East and the near certainty of combat.

Arriving only two weeks before the deadline imposed by the United Nations, 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron pilots and support personnel had precious little time and much to do. While pilots received initial briefings on flight operations, maintenance specialists prepared the F-16s for their next flights, only two days off. Aircrews learned that they would not employ the low-level procedures they had practiced for use in Central Europe. Instead of low-level ingress and 10 to 30-degree dive angles, they would deliver their payloads from nearly 20,000 feet with ingress angles near 60 degrees. As training progressed, crews from the 10th began sitting alert with crews of the 17th and 33d Tactical Fighter Squadrons, hoping that they might be the first to strike if war erupted.

Capt. Evan "Ivan" Thomas explained the feeling.

Why, I'm sure you're asking yourself, would anyone *want* [emphasis in original] to go fly into combat, especially in the skies of today's battlefields with countless radars, heat-seeking missiles, and good, old-fashioned anti-aircraft guns? It's a hard thing to explain.

Think about whatever activity you like most in life ... riding your motorcycle, or maybe just playing baseball. Now imagine that it's your job, with pay and everything. ... You love baseball. You've worked hard to be one of the best players, and you and your family have sacrificed a lot to get you there. You practice every day, but the practice is a little different than usual. Some days you do batting practice, but since real baseballs are expensive, you use whiffle balls to 'simulate' real ones. Other days you work on fielding, only with half the team because the rest are 'simulated'. When you work on base running, you have to 'simulate' the throw to the bag, because a real throw might be dangerous.

A few times every year, your whole team gets together and plays full out, real bats and balls, and everything, against a 'simulated' team. But you've never actually played a game, you've never competed for the win. Now you have a chance to play in a big game, a real game, with every man, woman, and child in your country rooting for your team. The only catch is that there are a few people with pistols in the stands. If you make an error, they might take a shot at you, but they're not very good shots. Or are they?

January 15, 1991 passed with Al Dhafra's crews and much of the coalition forces watching events unfold on cable television news. International news broadcasts,

beamed via satellite, told of Iraq's refusal to withdraw and the resulting discussions on how the U.N. coalition would proceed. January 16, 1991 was much the same. Then, with a click of the second hand, DESERT SHIELD became DESERT STORM. At 0400 local, January 17, the first 40-plane strike package left Al Dhafra for targets in Iraq. Pilots of the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron flew their first combat sorties of the war later that afternoon, led by squadron commander, Lt Col Edward H. Houle, call sign "Julio." The assigned target for the eight-ship element of the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron, call sign "Sabre 1," was Al Taqaddum Airfield, near Baghdad, a round-trip of more than 1,400 miles and an eight-hour mission for crews accustomed to training flights of only one to three hours duration.

For nearly six weeks, crews of the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron conducted attacks on Iraqi targets, including airfields, communication centers, and military command centers. Iraq sent up few fighters to intercept the coalition's attackers. Those that did fly were shot down or chased to the Iraq-Iran border. After the initial attacks against airfields, command centers, and communication facilities, the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron crews received new orders. Iraq had begun using their SCUD missiles in retaliation against the coalition's offensive air strikes, targeting both coalition forces and Israeli civilian population centers. Israel responded to these attacks by threatening to enter the conflict—a development that would have jeopardized Arab participation in the coalition. In response, United States Central Command ordered search-and-destroy missions against Iraqi mobile and fixed SCUD launchers.

Attacking those targets put the F-16 pilots of the 10 TACTICAL FIGHTER SQUADRON, as well as pilots of the other SCUD patrol aircraft, at greater risk. Not only were the launchers heavily defended, a good kill meant locating and identifying the SCUD's associated radar once it was activated for launch. Once located, pilots had to reach the target and make their attack while jamming Iraq's defensive radars. The squadron's first SCUD patrol mission began on January 19, 1991--only three days into DESERT STORM. Capt. Mark Hebein, flying a lead aircraft in one of the first "SCUD buster" packages, described the mission:

We are sent in a forty-ship package to western Iraq, a very long way away with no return tankers scheduled at the present time. Oh boy! Found the site we were looking for and encountered AAA, SA-2s, and SA-6 SAMS. Took out three SCUDs.

Getting dark now and heading for home low on gas with no place to land. Where are the tankers? Forty jets find two or three tankers with a little gas. The weather is getting bad. We proceed in the dark in the clouds hopping from tanker to tanker, finding them on radar and slowly closing in to finally see them maybe 2,000 feet away if we're lucky.

None have enough gas to get the four of us home, so we have to go find another! Everyone has spatial disorientation so bad no one knows which way is up, including me, the leader. Finally, after the fourth tanker, we have enough fuel to get home. 700 miles later we descend into our home drome in the middle of the desert. No lights to speak of. It is so black, we call it the black hole. You can't even see the runway until on final. After a 7.2-hour flight we land and hit the bar for a well-deserved beer. This night shall forever be known as "the mission from hell." Aircraft #385.

After several days of "SCUD busting" operations, the Al Dhafra-based fighter crews returned to offensive attacks against larger targets such as airfields, communications, and command facilities, as well as non-conventional weapon industries. One particular airfield, Al Taqaddum near Baghdad, was so heavily defended that pilots suggested one could ski on the flak. This led to the phrase, "I'm going east of the lakes, and ski Al Taqaddum."

On January 23, the mission again changed. With most of the strategic targets eliminated, the time had arrived to concentrate on Iraq's Republican Guard units occupying Kuwait and Iraq's southern region. At a press conference, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained, "Our strategy against the Republican Guards is simple. First, we cut them off, next we kill them!" For the Al Dhafra-based crews, this meant bombing any military targets on the road and destroying any pontoon bridges being constructed across the Tigris River. In addition, the wing's crews dropped leaflet bombs over Iraqi positions and civilian centers. For the next month, emphasis centered on preparing the battlefield for the eventual ground war and serving on SCUD alert.

When the ground war began on February 25, crews began flying combat air patrols, protecting and supporting coalition ground forces. This mission, however, lasted only three days. On the morning of February 28, 1991, the offensive ceased to allow Iraqi units to withdraw. The Gulf War ended. The 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron lost one aircraft and one pilot had become a prisoner of war. Captain Bill "Psycho" Andrews had been shot down and captured on the afternoon of February 27. Iraqi forces provided him with no medical treatment for the broken leg he suffered while

ejecting from his aircraft and he received beatings during interrogations. Fortunately, he remained a POW for only one week, released to representatives of the International Red Cross in Baghdad on March 5. Captain Andrews received the Air Force Cross for heroism on May 20, 1991.

After a brief interlude, crews returned to combat air patrols to enforce cease-fire accords that prohibited Iraqi aircraft from operating within defined areas. This provision of the cease-fire sought to protect coalition ground forces, United Nations personnel who would monitor Iraq's compliance with Security Council resolutions, and civilian populations. The reduced, monotonous level of activity after the hectic pace of the air war soon bored many. Crews and support personnel alike looked forward eagerly to leaving Al Dhafra for home and family.

When they returned to Hahn Air Base, Germany, in the late spring, the wing's pilots, maintenance specialists, and other support personnel found that much had changed during their brief absence. Although greeted with praise and honors, euphoria over the triumph against Iraq and the liberation of Kuwait soon ebbed. The outcome of the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe that began in the late 1980s had been a decision to reduce the American presence in the West. Selected units were to inactivate and return to the United States. Their home bases would realign and take on new units and missions or close. While the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron had been engaged in combat thousands of miles away, wing officials had received word that the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing was to inactivate and Hahn Air Base would close. With only a few months remaining, the returning forces joined the rest of the wing in preparing for inactivation, scheduled for September 30, 1991.

The final months at Hahn Air Base were hectic ones indeed. There was much work to be done. Aircraft had to be prepared to fly out to their new units. Logistics folks had to prepare aircraft parts and spares kits, as well as other equipment, for redistribution to other United States Air Forces Europe units or for transportation to units that would receive the wing's F-16s. Assignments for the wing's remaining personnel had to be identified, processed, and executed. Despite the emotions that came with closing the unit and the base, the men and women of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing set about their tasks and inactivated the unit as scheduled.

