

# Airpower in Operation Desert Storm

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On 16 January 1991, coalition air forces launched the campaign to liberate Kuwait and eliminate Iraq's ability to threaten its neighbors. Smart strategies, smart weapons, and smart airmen characterized the campaign. Campaign planners analyzed the enemy as a system, orchestrated attacks to de-

grade enemy capabilities in the air, and degraded the regime's political control of the state. This strategy was made more feasible by the first widespread use of precision-guided munitions. Still, smart aircrews were often the key to success, as was the case when F-111F pilots noticed that enemy tanks retained heat longer than the surrounding sand and initiated "tank plinking" operations.

Yet, friction and a thinking enemy prolonged the campaign. The weather was the worst on record, degrading both bombing and bomb damage assessment. The political consequence of Iraqi Scud surface-to-surface missile attacks diverted coalition airpower to protect Saudi territory and to preserve the coalition. Finally, Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia in an apparent attempt to force an attrition ground battle that would end the one-sided campaign in the air. The resulting battle for Khafji demonstrated both the potency and limitations of airpower. Our having too few forward air controllers reduced the effectiveness of direct air support to friendly ground forces, yet air rendered reinforcing Iraqi units combat ineffective *before* they contacted friendly ground forces. In the aftermath of the battle for Khafji, airpower destroyed retreating Iraqi formations as they returned north to Kuwait.

Overcautious joint command and control procedures and an insufficient number of forward air controllers limited the effectiveness of airpower when coalition ground forces launched the long-awaited offensive to liberate Kuwait. As Iraqi forces surrendered or retreated, ground commanders insisted on extending the fire sup-



port coordination line (FSCL) far in front of their rapidly advancing troops. Many Republican Guard forces escaped the tightening noose because aircraft could strike targets inside the FSCL only under the direction of a forward air controller. Coalition air forces had too few controllers positioned with land formations to regulate the amount of airpower flowing into the battle area. More Republican Guard forces escaped when coalition leaders halted operations after liberating Kuwait. The surviving Republican Guard crushed the revolt by the Iraqi people after the coalition's self-imposed cease-fire, thus tainting the apparent victory and setting the stage for a decade-long standoff between coalition and Iraqi forces.

Time has added perspective to many assumptions made shortly after the Gulf War. Many analysts believed that we would never again encounter a situation that would allow airpower to be so effective. Experiences in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan have proven otherwise. Still, it now appears that ground forces could have been more effective in the first Gulf War if they had been given a few more hours to surround the Republican Guard. Perhaps the most valuable lesson available from the Desert Storm experience is that the effectiveness of air *and* ground power depends on the wisdom with which both are employed.

## To Learn More . . .

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