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## Bob Simon Finds the War

### THE BATTLE OF AL-KHAFJI

Realizing the devastation being wrought on Iraq by the U.S.-led air campaign, Saddam sought a means to force the initiation of the awaited ground campaign. The Iraqi leader knew he could not hold out indefinitely against the massive air power destroying his infrastructure and reasoned he would fare better against the coalition in a battle on the ground. He ordered his military commanders to launch an attack against the coalition in hopes it would be the catalyst for the ground campaign.

The Iraqi attack on the vacated northern Saudi city of Al-Khafji began with a mechanized assault in the early-morning hours of 30 January, two weeks after the beginning of Desert Storm. The Iraqi 15th Mechanized Infantry Brigade of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division took the unprotected city just south of the Kuwait border, virtually without a fight. This bold attack into Saudi Arabia not only came as a shock to the American commanders but also represented a severe challenge to the Saudis—their first test in combat against the feared Iraqi army.

The initial reaction of the Saudi leadership was horror that a piece of Saudi Arabia was now occupied by Iraqi troops. King Fahd ordered the commander of Joint Forces, General Khalid, either to eject the Iraqis from Saudi territory or to have the Americans do it—immediately. Khalid's notion was to shift assets from the air campaign in Iraq to air strikes on Iraqi forces in Al-Khafji. Khalid suggested to General

Schwarzkopf that the U.S. Air Force eliminate the problem (and most of the city) through heavy bombardment by B-52 bombers. General Schwarzkopf counseled against this idea, and in the end it was decided that Arab forces would attempt to liberate the city. Schwarzkopf wanted Arab forces to engage in combat with the Iraqis for two basic reasons: to have the Saudis overcome their hesitation to fight other Arabs and to give the Saudis a success in order to bolster their confidence. A complicating factor for any plan to retake Al-Khafji was that two U.S. Marine Corps ground reconnaissance teams were in the city—their presence as yet unknown to the Iraqis.

The marine reconnaissance teams that had been trapped in the city during the Iraqi attack had now barricaded themselves in an apartment building to make their stand; they had nowhere else to go. Once the Iraqis discovered the presence of Americans, the Iraqi troops moved in. One of the objectives of the incursion into Saudi Arabia was to take American prisoners. Although the Iraqis seized the bottom floors, the marines' tenacious defense of their positions on the upper floors and the roof finally forced the Iraqis merely to surround the building and cease attempts to dislodge the young Americans. The marines' actions at Al-Khafji were relayed word-of-mouth to other Iraqi troops and reinforced the marines' reputation of ferocity in combat. Our interrogations of Iraqi prisoners yielded wild stories about the marines—that each marine had to have killed a member of his own family as a condition of entering the corps, that marines practiced cannibalism on the bodies of their foes, and so forth.

The Iraqis repulsed the initial assault by a Saudi infantry unit into the captured city. The second try to dislodge the Iraqis was heavily supported by U.S. Marine fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships anxious to protect their fellow marines trapped in the city. After the Iraqis began a withdrawal to better defense positions in the city, marine air liaison officers moving into the city were horrified to see Saudi soldiers looting from the dead Iraqi troops rather than consolidating their gains and preparing for a possible Iraqi counterattack. After senior Saudi officers arrived and observed the situation, order was restored, and the Saudis secured the routes into the city for follow-on forces.

In the end, a Qatari army tank unit supported by Saudi infantry liberated the city, again heavily covered by U.S. Marine and Air Force air power. The medium tanks used by the Qataris in the liberation of the city

had been manufactured in France. Within days after the completion of the fighting, the French defense attaché office in Riyadh published a slick color brochure claiming the superiority of French weapons, citing their success at Al-Khafji. We pointed out to the French liaison officers in the MODA building that the brochure failed to include the range of weapons France had sold to the Iraqis. These included Mirage F-1 fighter aircraft, Exocet antiship missiles, ATLAS (automatic tracking laser illumination system) target designators, the Kari air defense system, and the French GCT (grande cadence de tir) self-propelled artillery system—all of which had been used in the invasion of Kuwait and were now arrayed against the coalition.<sup>1</sup>

After the battle, General Khalid flew to Al-Khafji to review the performance of his troops and to inspect the battle damage. Although Al-Khafji was a minor battle in the war, it was significant because it took place on Saudi soil and proved to the Saudis and other Arab coalition members that they could fight other Arabs and could defeat the Iraqis in combat.

#### **THE BOB SIMON CONNECTION**

Immediately following the seizure of Al-Khafji by Iraqi forces on 30 January, the Iraqi III Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Salah 'Abbud Mahmud Al-Daghastani, had ordered two additional brigades of other III Corps divisions—the 26th Armored and the 20th Mechanized Infantry Brigades—to move toward the city. These follow-on forces were to consolidate Iraqi gains, reinforce the 15th Brigade, which was already in the city, and prepare to repel the inevitable coalition counterattack. These forces were to move from their positions in Kuwait about forty miles to the west of the coastal road and advance southeasterly through Saudi Arabia toward Al-Khafji. The advance was stopped in its tracks by U.S. Air Force, Marine, and Navy fighter aircraft. The Iraqi units never reached the city.

The movement of the 26th Brigade into Saudi Arabia, which had been planned for some time, was key to Iraq's capitalizing on its thrust into Al-Khafji. In fact, the route of march from the brigade's positions in southern Kuwait to Al-Khafji had been thoroughly reconnoitered days earlier. However, we did not know of this reconnaissance effort until long after the smoke had cleared and Al-Khafji was back in coalition hands.

Later we were able to piece together from our interrogations of Iraqi prisoners of war a picture of the Iraqi reconnaissance operations prior to the battle of Al-Khafji. At around eleven o'clock on a moonless night in late January, a five-man Iraqi reconnaissance patrol had slipped over the Kuwaiti border into Saudi Arabia. The team was to determine a suitable route for the 26th Brigade to move into Al-Khafji when ordered to do so. *As the team cleared the berm on the Saudi border, they had found themselves facing a surprised group of four men in a Chevrolet Caprice sedan.* Unwittingly, CBS newsman Bob Simon had found the war.

Journalists during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm faced many restrictions on their movements—constraints imposed for operational security as well as for the journalists' own personal safety. Normally, these individuals were required to have military escorts. Occasionally, however, one or two of them would set out on their own for a particular story, despite the rules. During one such excursion Bob Simon was attempting to get as close to the Kuwaiti border—the Iraqi front lines—as possible. He was in the company of three others, at least one of them a fellow American.

We determined later that Bob Simon had been captured by that Iraqi reconnaissance patrol from the 26th Armored Brigade. However, at the time, all we knew was that Simon and his team were missing. When they failed to return from their trip, a search was mounted. Shortly thereafter, their car was found empty, except for some expensive camera equipment. There were no signs of a struggle, no signs of injuries, and no bodies. Had they been killed by Bedouins, or captured by Iraqis, or had they sneaked into Kuwait on foot in search of a story?

About two weeks after the battle of Al-Khafji, I was on duty in the C3IC. The C3IC served not only as the liaison between U.S. and Joint Forces Command units but also as the main Saudi armed forces command post. Not satisfied with the volume and quality of reporting we were getting from Saudi military intelligence based on their interrogations of Iraqi deserters and prisoners, we had asked that the Saudis forward to us daily by fax the raw, handwritten field interrogation reports. We had provided a standard questionnaire to be used with all captured Iraqi troops. I noticed that while the Saudi interrogators generally followed the questionnaire, they did not follow up on affirmative answers. For example, if a question like "Do you know of plans for future attacks on coalition positions?" was answered with a "yes," the response

was noted simply as such, with no amplification as to where, when, who, and so forth.

As I scanned the day's sheets of faxed hand-written Arabic questionnaires, something caught my eye. An Iraqi prisoner, a noncommissioned officer, had responded to a question about coalition prisoners by claiming that he had captured a team of American journalists in late January—about the twenty-sixth, as he remembered. No information followed that statement. There was no clarification, just that one entry. The report was in stack of about fifty other reports. But the reference to a team of American journalists could not be overlooked or ignored; after all, the news broadcasts were flooded with the story of Bob Simon's disappearance. I pointed out the report to the C3IC shift commander, the well-respected Saudi infantry officer Brig. Gen. 'Abd Al-Rahman Al-Marshad, and asked if he could find out which unit had interrogated the prisoner and sent in the report. He told me the report had originated from an element of the Royal Saudi Land Force 8th Mechanized Brigade, then occupying defensive positions on the Kuwaiti border. I asked Brigadier General Al-Marshad, with whom I had developed a close professional relationship, to have the brigade locate the prisoner and bring him to Riyadh immediately.

I met the prisoner the next day at a special detention area on the outskirts of Riyadh set up to handle high-ranking and special prisoners. By this time, we had obtained detailed information from CBS not only on Simon's car, clothing, and equipment but also on the three colleagues with whom he had last been seen. The Iraqi prisoner appeared confused that he was the center of such attention. I asked him to tell me why he thought the men he claimed to have captured were journalists. He described Simon's camera equipment accurately. I asked why he thought they were Americans. He said he initially believed they were Americans because they were wearing "American cowboy" trousers—which, after a few descriptive phrases, I understood to be jeans. More importantly, he told me he had asked the men who they were and they had replied that they were journalists from an American news network. Finally, he told me that he had checked their passports: two of them were American.

The Iraqi sergeant went on to explain that he was a member of a patrol of five soldiers who had carefully crawled through the Iraqi lines and obstacle belts and then across the Kuwaiti border and over the berm that had been erected on the Saudi side. Upon clearing the berm,

they had immediately come upon a dark sedan with four occupants. The mission of the five Iraqis had been to find a suitable route of march for the 26th Brigade to move southeast (he had not known at the time that the route was to be used for a supporting attack after the 15th Brigade's assault on Al-Khafji, which was set to kick off in a few days). The team had not been looking for prisoners—in fact they were under orders to avoid enemy contact of any kind in order not to alert the coalition to Iraqi interest in the area or to impending offensive operations. With this in mind, the Iraqi sergeant had decided to take the news team into custody, escorting them back into Kuwait and turning them over to the brigade intelligence officer. From there, he was told, the news team had been immediately moved to Al-Basrah and then on to Baghdad, where they were to have been turned over to the Iraqi Intelligence Service, the Mukhabarat.

The information provided by the young prisoner coincided almost exactly with what we knew of the time and place of Simon's disappearance. The sedan was found exactly as the prisoner had described it—doors open and cameras inside. His description of the team's clothing matched with what we had been told by CBS. I notified the CENTCOM *director of intelligence, Brig. Gen. Jack Leide, that we had fairly reliable information on the whereabouts of Bob Simon. We immediately briefed General Schwarzkopf, who called the president of CBS News to inform him that we had reason to believe that Bob Simon was alive, albeit a prisoner of the Iraqis. Since it was well known that Simon is Jewish and might be falsely accused of being a spy for Israel, CBS went public with the fact that they had been told by "Department of Defense sources" that their reporter was alive and being held prisoner in Baghdad. This international announcement put the Iraqis on notice that Simon's predicament was no secret and that they would be held accountable for his safety. We may never know what plans the IIS had for Simon or what, if any, difference the public announcement had made. He was later released unharmed.*

I met Mr. Simon three years later in Damascus, Syria, while he was covering the visit of President Clinton and I was serving as the air attaché at the U.S. embassy. I explained how we had "found" him, but I asked that he not use the account in a news story. True to his word, he never has.