

Presentations

Britain and the 1st Gulf War

Hew Strachan

The Entry to the War

From the perspective of 2021, what was extraordinary about Britain's entry to the 1st Gulf War was its lack of controversy. In 2003 Britain fought a second war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq with domestic political consequences that still reverberate. They did major damage to the Labour Party and its capacity to govern; they called into doubt the idea of interventionist wars and their place in British strategy; and they strained the so-called 'special relationship' between the United Kingdom and the United States. What was it that made the 1st Gulf War legitimate in British eyes, when the 2nd was not?

The answer to this question probably does not lie in British public opinion. In 2003, although views were deeply divided before the invasion of Iraq, the public rallied round the flag once Britain's armed forces were committed to combat. That rush of support proved short lived and evaporated as the war lengthened and British casualties rose. In the case of its predecessor, polling at the beginning of 1991, during the air attack on Iraq, Operation Desert Storm, showed an 80 percent approval rating, but that fell to 60 percent when the public was asked about its possible reactions to British casualties in fighting to liberate Kuwait.¹ This fall suggests an underlying continuity in public attitudes to the use of armed force across the two wars, and argues that popular support for both was conditional on the conflict being short and relatively casualty-free.

In these respects the 1st Gulf War delivered. It was everything that the 2nd Gulf War was not: it was clear in its aims; it was short and decisive in its conduct; and it was legally and ethically justified. These are judgements justified by its outcomes, but they do not rest on the hindsight that has accumulated over three decades since 1991. They were evident almost immediately. On 14 March 1991 The Times carried a summation of the war by its defence correspondent, Michael Evans. The headline implicitly contradicted the words of Old Kaspar in Robert Southey's anti-war poem 'After Blenheim' (written in 1796) and simply read, 'Yes, it was a famous victory.'

In 1990 Britain was prepared to accept the risks of war, despite the public hesitation about its possible long-term consequences, for four reasons: the effect of the Falklands War in 1982; the premiership of Margaret Thatcher; the central role of the United Nations in the build-up to war; and the end of the Cold War in Europe, which removed any more immediate and proximate threat to Britain's security.

In 1982 the Argentinian seizure of the Falkland Islands had shocked Britain and its

¹ Stephen Badsey, "The Media War," in John Pimlott and Stephen Badsey, *The Gulf War Assessed* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992), p. 221.

government, so conditioned were they to the nostrums of deterrence rather than of actual war fighting. Public opinion was divided in its attitudes to the Task Force as it sailed south and support for the government dropped after HMS *Conqueror* sank the Argentinian warship, the *Belgrano*, with significant loss of life outside the exclusion zone.² Ultimately, however, the war encouraged the public to rally round the flag. As a result, after 1982 the United Kingdom realised it was still possible to use military force to achieve a political outcome and, more widely, both it and its NATO partners appreciated that deterrence could only be credible if it included the use of war as a possible option.

In 1990 Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister in 1982, was still in office. In the popular narrative, the success of the Falklands War had saved her political career. Although that is probably over-stated (the shoots of Conservative recovery were evident before the invasion), many – including Thatcher herself – believed it. Her reputation, internationally as well as domestically, soared after 1982. As ‘the Iron Lady,’ she embodied the resolve of the democratic powers in facing down the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Moreover, she was well aware that success in 1982 would have been unachievable without the forbearance and then active cooperation of the US, and she established a strong personal relationship with the US president, Ronald Reagan. The end of the Cold War worried her, both because she feared a re-united Germany in Europe and because she thought that Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush, would look to Germany, not Britain, in the conduct of his European policy.

Fortuitously, on 2 August 1990, when the news of Iraq’s seizure of Kuwait broke, Thatcher was already in the United States, staying with the British ambassador. She was due to attend an international conference at Aspen. Realising the opportunity which Iraq had given her to regain the high ground with Bush, she immediately canvassed other allies, pre-eminently France. That same evening, Thatcher stood alongside Bush at Aspen. Both already appreciated that they might need to employ force in response to Iraq’s invasion. Some have credited her with strengthening Bush’s resolve, especially as the crisis unfolded. Charles Powell, Thatcher’s foreign policy adviser, later concluded of the Anglo-American relationship in the second half of 1990, that ‘British officials were treated like virtual members of the Bush administration.’ When on 9 October Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick Hine, Air Officer Commanding Strike Command and to become Commander-in-Chief of Operation Granby (the British contribution to the Gulf War), met General Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the Pentagon, he was surprised by Powell’s hesitation to use armed force. Powell was prepared to give economic sanctions a year or even two to take effect; Hine wanted to use the cooler weather to go to war that winter.³

On 5 August, before her return to the United Kingdom, Thatcher told her Aspen audience that ‘if we let [Iraq] succeed, no small country can ever feel safe again. The law of the jungle would take over from the rule of law.’⁴ She likened Iraq’s aggression to that of

² G.M. Dillon, *The Falklands, Politics and War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 116, 125-9.

³ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little Brown), p. 130.

⁴ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 111; see also pp. 3, 74-6.

Nazi Germany in 1939 (a comparison Tony Blair would also cite in 2002-3).⁵ Although the importance to the west of Gulf oil supplies was never far from Thatcher's thinking, her public statements reiterated these issues of principle and stressed the centrality of the United Nations to world order. Her faith was rewarded. The security council passed a series of resolutions which marched in step with the formation of the military alliance against Iraq and its eventual decision to go to war. The first of these, UN resolution 660 issued on 2 August, demanded that Iraq unconditionally withdraw from Kuwait. Four days later resolution 661 authorised economic sanctions and on 25 August resolution 665 imposed a blockade. On 25 November UN Security Council Resolution 678 approved the use of force to liberate Kuwait. Although the US took the lead in generating these responses, America was not acting in isolation. Above all, supporters from within the region legitimised its position. The invasion had split the Arab League. Some feared, as the Iraqis pushed beyond Kuwait City, that their ambitions might not stop there. Saudi Arabia initially seemed content to wait on developments, but from 6 August it became the fulcrum for a regional alliance which also embraced the Gulf states and Egypt. Importantly, and in contrast to the sequence of events in 2002-3, the crisis precipitated not just a self-interested Western response but also a Middle Eastern coalition concerned for its own defence. The capitalist worry about oil was matched by a principled response to an act of aggression.

None of this would have been possible if the Cold War had not ended in Europe. For the first time in over forty years the United States, the United Kingdom and France did not have to prioritise the continent's defence over the security of other parts of the world. Although the Soviet Union still existed, President Gorbachev was ultimately ready – in an agreement reached at Helsinki on 9 September 1990 – to join the Americans in demanding that the Iraqis immediately leave Kuwait. In 1968 Britain had decided to withdraw its forces from east of the Suez Canal the better to concentrate its efforts on the defence of Europe. Now it could move troops away from western Europe without risk. The comment of one journalist even smacked of insouciance: 'For the British ... intervening East of Suez is like riding a bike: you never lose the knack.'⁶

The Operational Design

In 1982, when the Task Force was sent to the Falklands, Britain seemed to have completed its departure from empire in order to concentrate on its contribution to NATO and its commitment to European defence. A long-running debate on whether Britain should prioritise its global and maritime power or its security at home and in adjacent areas was resolved in favour of the latter. Although the *Economist* had described the Falklands War as 'the empire strikes back,' that conflict did not trigger a fundamental rejection of the continentalist drift in British defence thinking. Throughout the 1980s the Army and the Royal Air Force focused on the better conventional defence of the inner German border.

⁵ Gordon and Trainor, *The Generals' War*, p. 36.

⁶ John Sullivan in *Independent on Sunday*, 2 September 1990, cited in Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, p. 111.

In the British Army, the 1980s were dominated by the intellectual influence of General Sir Nigel Bagnall, who commanded 1st British Corps in Germany between 1980 and 1983, the British Army on the Rhine from 1983 to 1985 and NATO's Northern Army Group (NORTHAG) in 1985. In the latter year he became Chief of the General Staff, a post he occupied until 1988. Bagnall had held a Defence Fellowship at Balliol College, Oxford in 1972-73 and had written a thesis on the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, a conflict whose military lessons had a major effect both on NATO thinking on the conduct of the defensive battle in Europe and on professional military education in Britain in the late 1970s and through the 1980s.⁷

Bagnall's service in Germany alongside the Bundeswehr shaped his concepts in ways that were convergent with trends in the US Army but had different origins. The US Army responded to the Vietnam War by refocusing on 'major' war to the detriment of counterinsurgency campaigning, and from the early 1980s by stressing manoeuvre as the antidote to the defensive use of attrition. The British Army was spared the trauma of Vietnam but, like the Americans, turned away from theories of counterinsurgency and the precepts acquired in the campaigns of colonial withdrawal. At the Staff College and at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, its officers and future officers listened to lectures on the German conduct of defensive battles in the Second World War on the eastern front and in Normandy. Operation Goodwood was the subject of recurrent battlefield tours. Bagnall and his contemporaries were both friendly with and influenced by the German generals alongside whom they served and some of whom – notably Ferdinand von Senger und Etterlin – had fought in the Wehrmacht.

They concluded that the better way to hold the inner German border against a Soviet attack was to rely not on forward defence and firepower, but on manoeuvre and counterstrokes, conducted at the operational, not the tactical, level. Defence needed to be fought offensively and to aim deep, with air and conventional missile strikes against the enemy's support formations and lines of communication. Bagnall set up the 'Ginger group,' ginger because that was the colour of Bagnall's hair and because 'to ginger' in English means to stimulate and to provoke. In 1986 the British defence estimates spoke of the corps counter-stroke as 'giving the Alliance a much better chance of defeating the enemy rather than simply delaying him.'⁸ In 1988 the Higher Command and Staff Course was established at the Army Staff College at Camberley. It focused on the operational level of war and corps-level command, and its aim was to consider the best ways to conduct a counterstroke against a Soviet attack. The first director of the course was Rupert Smith, a brigadier from the Parachute Regiment, who had won a medal for gallantry in Northern Ireland. He excelled in 'thinking outside the box,' in 'gingering' students by asking counter-intuitive and challenging questions, and in recognising that a proper appreciation of the problem was a vital first step in getting the right answers. Upstairs in the same building a new army directorate for doctrine and development prepared

⁷ For what follows, see John Kiszely, "The British Army and Thinking about the Operational Level," in Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Hew Strachan, eds., *British General's in Blair's Wars* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Colin McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War: The British Army's Way in Warfare 1945-1995* (London: Brassey's, 1996), pp. 60-75. For the British Army on the eve of the Gulf War, see Antony Beevor, *Inside the British Army* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990).

⁸ Stephen Badsey, "The Doctrine of the Coalition Forces," in Pimlott and Badsey, *Gulf War Assessed*, p. 75.

the army's first doctrine, *Design for Military Operations*, drafted by Lieutenant-Colonel Tim Granville-Chapman (a Royal Artillery officer who would end his career as Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff) and published in 1989.

Deployment

In 1980 President Carter created the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, which in 1983 was activated as US Central Command. The US and its NATO allies, including the United Kingdom, were worried about the possibility of a Soviet thrust through the Caucasus into northern Iran, aimed ultimately at the Gulf and its oil supplies. With the end of the Cold War, CENTCOM turned its attentions to other threats and in July 1990 war-gamed a conflict with Iraq. By August, therefore, the US possessed a command structure and planning staff for a Middle Eastern conflict. However, it did not have the numbers in place to fight a major war. The evolution of the crisis between the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August and the opening of combat operations in the new year of 1991 enabled not just the political manoeuvring to form the coalition under a UN mandate but also the build-up of forces in theatre.

By February 1991 the US would deploy 530,000 troops to the Gulf and the total allied strength would reach 750,000, of whom 45,000 were British. Almost all these men and women, and their equipment, had to be moved from Germany. The British shipping industry was a pale shadow of the instrument which had underpinned Britain's strategy in two world wars. It no longer owned the tonnage required for such major movements and the Ministry of Defence had no plans for its mobilisation for expeditionary warfare. The United Kingdom therefore relied to a large extent on foreign vessels chartered on the Baltic Exchange. The Ministry of Defence had also forgotten the lessons of the 1956 Suez operation. As then, ships were not loaded according to military needs, so that goods were discharged in the order that they were required for operational purposes. Instead, commercial principles dominated: the object was to get as much cargo on as few as ships as possible, regardless of what was needed when and in what order.⁹

Between August and September the sea-lift requirement of the entire force doubled. In all, 90 percent of what was needed was moved by sea and most of that had to be in theatre ahead of any troops arrived so that they could be fed and supplied from the moment they arrived, which they would do later and mostly by air.¹⁰ The result would be a short-term but significant vulnerability. If supplies were given priority over fighting troops, they would be exposed to a pre-emptive Iraqi attack. In these early stages air power was used to deter the Iraqis but some troops were also needed on the ground. They would in turn buy more time for the procurement of ships and the acquisition of supplies. The disadvantage in the sequencing of these logistic problems would be that combat troops would be deployed while still awaiting all their equipment or, if it had arrived, while still familiarising themselves with its use.

Britain did not have an air-portable light division which could be quickly deployed into

⁹ McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War*, p. 87.

¹⁰ Jeffrey McCausland, *The Gulf Conflict: A Military Analysis* (Adelphi Paper 282, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, November 1992), pp. 10-11.

theatre. In 1988 it had created 24th Airmobile Brigade, and it could have supplemented it with 5th Airborne Brigade (made up of two Parachute battalions and Gurkhas) and 3rd Commando Brigade (of Royal Marines).¹¹ None of these formations was sent to the Gulf. Because the United States wanted more tanks, Britain ended up despatching an armoured division. It was preceded in September by 7th Armoured Brigade commanded by Brigadier Patrick Cordingley, who had been a star pupil on the Higher Command and Staff Course. As more British units came out, the span of Cordingley's command expanded. Eventually it reached nearly 12,000, a strength closer to that of a division than a brigade. The divisional headquarters, that of 1st British Armoured Division commanded by Rupert Smith, arrived in November. It was accompanied by 4th Armoured Brigade, although the name was somewhat misleading. Whereas 7th Armoured Brigade had two tank regiments and one mechanised infantry battalion, the 4th had two mechanised infantry battalions to one tank regiment and so was more accurately a mechanised rather than an armoured formation. The whole division, once assembled, mustered 33,000: a big division despite the fact that it was short of a brigade (the conventional structure assumed three brigades to a division). Its size was due to its enhanced support formations, required for what were expected to be longer-range operations with greater supply needs than had been anticipated in Germany, and due to the fact that the division itself had its own integrated engineers and artillery as well as a reconnaissance regiment.

Although the Americans wanted the British to bring tanks, they – and not a few Britons too – were worried about the performance of Challenger, the army's new main battle tank, which like many heavy tanks had problems with its power-to-weight ratio. Optimised for use in Europe, its gun and armour were good, but there were concerns about how its engines would run in the heat and dust of the desert.¹² To ease these fears, the tanks of armoured regiments remaining in Germany were stripped of parts to ensure the serviceability of those sent to theatre. Not one of the eight Scorpion light tanks in the reconnaissance troop of 4th Royal Tank Regiment remained able to run and its Chieftains – Challenger's predecessor – were also cannibalised.¹³ By the time the 14th/20th Hussars were told they were going to the Middle East as part of 4th Armoured Brigade, they had only one serviceable tank remaining as the regiment had been plundered in order to equip 7th Armoured Brigade.¹⁴ The principal source of concern was Challenger's power pack, one of which was expected to fail every five kilometres. In the event the average worked out at between six and eight kilometres, with 279 power packs changed for a total of 211 Challengers. The system held, thanks not least to the brevity of the land campaign. In 7th Armoured Brigade, 104 out of 117 tanks were still ready for action after four days' continuous advance.¹⁵ Moreover, heat proved less of a problem for most of the vehicles (provided the water supply for hydraulic engines was maintained) than sand. The dust

¹¹ Badsey, "Doctrine of the Coalition Forces," pp. 74-5.

¹² Peter de la Billière, *Storm Command: A Personal Account of the Gulf War* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 177, 264-5.

¹³ Stuart Crawford, *Sending My Laundry Forward: A Staff Officer's Account of the First Gulf War* (Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2014), pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War*, p. 88.

¹⁵ Patrick Cordingley, "The Gulf War: Operating with Allies," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, April 1991, p. 20.

penetrated every nook and cranny and the consumption of grease soared as crews struggled to keep the engine parts moving.

The pre-war attention to the principles of operational command meant that Smith personally and those under him had a reasonably clear idea of how to fight the division. Less satisfactory was the command structure above the division. The overall British commander in the Middle East was General Sir Peter de la Billière, a former infantry and then SAS officer who was near the end of his career. He had no say in his choice of staff, which was appointed in an *ad hoc* way, and not infrequently in response to the wishes of regiments not represented in the division to have a share of the action. On 25 July 1990, the government published *Options for Change*, its defence review responding to the end of the Cold War. The reduction and reorganisation of the army which it announced encouraged regiments to seek publicity in order to make their case for survival. Headquarters British Forces Middle East, which was based in Riyadh, was a somewhat odd choice of vehicle for these inward-looking ambitions. It was not a single-service command, but had tri-service responsibilities, for which there were few precedents and little collective experience. Not until the actual onset of hostilities did it gel.¹⁶

De la Billière confronted friction at two levels. The first was with the Ministry of Defence in London. He was angered by the tendency of the Secretary of State for Defence, Tom King, to intervene in the military chain of command down to the tactical level. He criticised King's obsession with the press and he found the political control of issues like rules of engagement to be too tight.¹⁷ What he struggled to grasp, as did all British service personnel in theatre and facing an enemy to their front, was the depth of the political crisis to their rear. Margaret Thatcher's leadership of the Conservative party was under challenge. Back in Britain, two former Chiefs of Defence Staff, Lords Lewin and Bramall, said publicly that there could not be a change of prime minister in the middle of a war.¹⁸ Their protests had no effect: by the end of November 1990 she was out of office and replaced as prime minister by John Major. If there were possible implications for the morale of the British forces in the Gulf as a result of such divisions, Major put them to rest by travelling to the Middle East in January 1991 and impressing both de la Billière and Smith.

De la Billière's other issue was his relationship with General Norman Schwarzkopf, the US CENTCOM commander, under whose authority he was placed. At the military level, Anglo-American relations were not as close as those at the political. De la Billière felt he was never fully taken into Schwarzkopf's confidence. American doubts about the British were reinforced when they discovered that the military assistant to Hine, now tasked with overall responsibility for Operation Granby, had left a computer on which operational plans were stored in his car. It was stolen. Britain initially endeavoured to cover up the loss and the computer was eventually recovered without any of the information on it being leaked. However, both the breach of security and the subsequent delay in confessing it did little to foster trust.

¹⁶ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, pp. 57-8, 62; for an account of the functioning of his headquarters, see Crawford, *Sending My Laundry Forward*, esp pp. 73-84.

¹⁷ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, pp. 77-8, 179, 320; Peter de la Billière, *Looking for Trouble: An Autobiography - from the SAS to the Gulf* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 400.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 14 January 1991.

That this occurred in mid-December might have had major consequences for the British 1st Armoured Division and its role in the coming campaign. When 7th Armoured Brigade first arrived in theatre, it was based in Saudi Arabia, ostensibly to defend it from Iraqi attack, but from November it was readied for the liberation of Kuwait. Placed as a counter-attack formation under the command of 1st US Marine Division, it was located on the eastern flank, close to the Gulf, and Cordingley could imagine leading his tanks into the occupied state. Schwarzkopf's plan, however, prioritised the destruction of the Iraqi army in the field over freeing Kuwait. The role of the forces on his right wing would be to fix the Iraqis in place, committing them to an attritional and defensive battle, while to the west he planned to use a reinforced left wing to envelop them in a massive right hook across the desert. His intention was to cut their communications with Iraq from their rear. On paper it was a simple and classic manoeuvre, but the distance and the terrain created enormous logistic demands, not just for fuel but also for water. The need for the latter would ramp up exponentially as casualties mounted.

De la Billière wanted the 1st British Armoured Division – of which 7th Armoured Brigade was now part – used not on the right but on the left, in the main thrust on the desert flank. He was influenced by three considerations. First, the US Marine Corps, unlike the US Army, did not use NATO standard operating procedures, so confusion might arise between it and the British. Secondly, he was concerned that the Marines' approach to combat could cause unnecessary British casualties in what would be largely a holding – and therefore subordinate – operation. If British troops were going to be killed, he was anxious not only to keep those losses as light as possible but also to ensure that they would be incurred as part of the main effort. So, thirdly, de la Billière was determined to extract the greatest political effect from Britain's military contribution, both to impress its American allies and to shape the outcome of the pending review in the army's favour.

On 27 November de la Billière briefed Patrick Cordingley on his thinking before Rupert Smith (who was privy to de la Billière's intentions) arrived in theatre. Cordingley was not happy. In its expanded state, 7th Armoured Brigade was consuming a million litres of water per day and he could not see how the whole division could be resupplied in the desert. In the event the logisticians would be reinforced and Smith would plan his movements so as to secure the available wells, but Cordingley had a further point. Would the British 1st Armoured Division, 'a scratch organisation that has never trained as a division,' operate effectively attached to a US corps with whom it had never tried out 'the kind of manoeuvre warfare' that Cordingley imagined was being planned? His brigade had trained with the Marines and, felt loyal to them. Moreover, the battle in which they would be engaged, although potentially more dangerous, would be tactically easier.¹⁹

Cordingley's doubts were echoed from above by Norman Schwarzkopf. The CENTCOM commander shared the worries about the Challenger tank's mechanical reliability and was unhappy about the complexities of a redeployment from one flank to another. Moreover, the

¹⁹ Patrick Cordingley, *In the Eye of the Storm: Commanding the Desert Rats in the Gulf War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), p. 107.

Marines wanted to hold on to the armoured brigade with which they had trained.²⁰ The military case for the move from one flank to another was further weakened by the fact that it would have to wait until mid-January, when the air war would have commenced and so would provide cover from Iraqi observation. As further protection, the division would be moved not as a united body but seriatim, in individual units. It would therefore be temporarily unbalanced as a fighting unit. Despite these doubts, de la Billière got his way. 1st British Armoured Division was moved from right to left and subordinated to VII US Corps. It would have its chance to show its mettle in manoeuvre warfare, to make its case for the army as a whole in the eyes of the British government and to demonstrate that it could operate alongside its American allies.

Rupert Smith was sensitive to the military concerns. He was aware that the division was under-trained (in itself a comment on the state of the British Army on the Rhine and its readiness to meet a Soviet offensive) and saw its redeployment as an opportunity for more training time. He also wanted to buy time to develop the independent judgements of his subordinate commanders in accordance with the sorts of principles propagated by the Higher Command and Staff Course. In the last days before the ground war opened British 1st Armoured Division conducted two 48-hour exercises, but it still had not fully trained with its artillery or close-air support.²¹

Operations

The operational model which the British and Americans had developed was dubbed 'Airland Battle': manoeuvre would be enabled by air power, and air attack – by striking deep – would hinder the capacity for the enemy to manoeuvre in response. In the event the conduct of the Gulf War did not integrate the air and land components in an Airland Battle. Instead it was fought in two separate stages, first as an air battle, Operation Desert Storm, and then as a land battle, Operation Desert Sabre.

Operation Desert Storm was a compromise plan which reflected on the one hand the ambition to destroy Iraqi forces from the air and on the other the ambition to decapitate the enemy, rendering him powerless by taking out his leadership and command. Conventional thinking in the US, from Colin Powell downwards, wanted to use air power as a means to annihilate the Iraqi army as an effective fighting body, so marching in step with Schwarzkopf's manoeuvre on the ground. Colonel John Warden's design for an air campaign, first published in 1988, saw a state in terms of five concentric rings, with the inner ring made up of national leaders; the field forces were the fifth and outer ring. Warden wanted to attack not the Iraqi army's ability to manoeuvre but the capacity of Saddam Hussein and the Baathists to govern. Warden proposed to short-circuit the ground battle by removing the brains which directed the body. The metaphor was not dissimilar to that employed by J.F.C. Fuller and the early proponents of armoured warfare at the end of the First World War. Fast, mobile tanks could penetrate through enemy defences and target command headquarters, so rendering their

²⁰ Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam, 1992), pp. 455-65.

²¹ Rupert Smith, "The Gulf War: The Land Battle," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, February 1991, vol 137, no 1, pp. 1-5.

subordinate formations rudderless and inchoate. In 1918, the targets were operational; in 1991 they were strategic and societal.

The problem confronting Operation Desert Storm was the lack of good intelligence. Iraqi forces maintained radio silence and so minimised the opportunities for the acquisition of signals intelligence. Perhaps more significant was the absence of up-to-date human intelligence. Warden's concept of concentric rings of power, with Saddam Hussein at the centre, misread the structure of the Iraqi state and underestimated the power of separate tribes and families.²²

The deficit in human intelligence presented de la Billière with an opportunity to find a role for the SAS. Given his own extensive experience of special forces' operations in the Middle East, he feared that Britain's switch to a European continental commitment would rob the SAS of its desert expertise. Schwarzkopf was doubtful, arguing that aerial reconnaissance could fulfil the same functions. Eventually, however, de la Billière again got his way and the SAS crossed the border into Iraq as Operation Desert Storm developed. They could not make good the gaps in political intelligence at the top of government, but they did relay information on Iraqi positions, water supplies and in the later stages of the conflict gave early warning when Iraq targeted Israel with Scud missiles.²³

Operation Desert Storm, which began on the night of 16/17 January 1991, lasted 43 days. It involved 2,400 combat and support aircraft, which flew 110,000 sorties. The Royal Air Force, with 3.5 percent of these assets, flew 4.8 percent of the operational sorties. It expected losses ranging from 2 percent (those of the Israeli air force in 1967) to 10 percent (based on those of RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War); the United States Air Force planned for a worst-case outcome, a 20-percent rate. In the event total allied losses were extraordinarily light, 60 aircraft over six weeks or 0.03 percent per sortie. However, those of the RAF were disproportionately high. It lost twelve Tornado fighter-bombers, five of them on low-flying sorties. Before 1990, in anticipation of operations in northern Europe, pilots had assiduously practised low flying in order to dodge the Soviet radar screen. The challenges in the Gulf were different in terms of terrain and weather, and air forces were being strengthened by Smart technologies for navigation, guidance systems and target acquisition, although these were still in their early stages. De la Billière lobbied for pilots in the Gulf to be permitted to fly at higher altitudes, above 15,000 feet, but encountered strong opposition from Hine (which the latter later denied) and from the Ministry of Defence, which stuck doggedly to Cold War practices.²⁴

Operation Desert Sabre commenced on 24 February 1991. By then 25 of Iraq's 43 divisions were reckoned to have lost half or more of their combat effectiveness. In 1993 the *Gulf War Air Power Survey* would dent the more inflated claims for air power's achievements

²² John Andreas Olsen, *Strategic Air Power in Desert Storm* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), is essential reading; see also John A. Warden III, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1989), and John Andreas Olsen, *John Warden and the Renaissance of American Air Power* (Washington DC: Potomac, 2007).

²³ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, pp. 191-4, 221, 225, 266-7.

²⁴ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, pp. 229, 274; R.A. Mason, "The Air War in the Gulf," *Survival*, vol 33, no 3 (May/June 1991), pp. 211-29; Gene I. Rochlin and Chris C. Demchak, "The Gulf War: Technological and Organizational Implications," *Survival*, vol 33, no 3 (May/June 1991), pp. 260-73.

and by the end of the twentieth century air power theory would revert to the argument that the moral effects of air power were more damaging than the material. However, that was not the conclusion at the time. The land war defied all expectations by lasting only four days. The speed of the Iraqi collapse on the ground was adduced as proof of the decisive effect of attack from the air.

The operational doctrines developed by NATO powers in the 1980s had stressed tempo over firepower, manoeuvre over attrition. To fulfil these expectations, Schwarzkopf's plan used speed and deception, with a limited advance on his right flank to draw in the Iraqi forces defending Kuwait City before the major blow was delivered from the left. Movement continued at night, aided by satellite navigation, with thermal and optical gunsights allowing tank crews to engage the enemy in the dark. The British 1st Armoured Division covered around 300 kilometres in three days. However, it would be wrong to see this success, as so much immediate post-war analysis did, simply as a triumph of manoeuvre over attrition, of offence over defence. Manoeuvre did not remove the need to engage and destroy the enemy. Firepower enabled movement. Patrick Cordingley noted that he had more artillery support than Montgomery had had on 23 October 1942 at Alamein – a battle planned specifically around firepower. The multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) proved particularly effective in reaching into the depth of the Iraqi positions, and both Cordingley and Smith recognised in their different ways how much they had failed to anticipate the centrality of artillery to their success.²⁵

Rupert Smith's own use of the division was in any case more cautious than allowed for by the stress on manoeuvre and deception. He knew that he had in his hands 'the modern British Army; there wasn't anything else, at least not to be redeployed at any speed.'²⁶ He therefore had to fight the division in such a way as to be able to pull it out of a hole and to reinforce its own successes. He also wanted the division to be in at the kill, and so he had to use it sparingly, so that it could come through intact after a long struggle. He therefore planned a larger number of smaller engagements, fought quickly, rather than a smaller number of larger ones. However, after 100 kilometres Smith found that there were no more targets to be acquired and realised that the battlefield lacked the depth that he had expected. The desert itself was simply a space within which to manoeuvre, without clear objectives. Its key objectives were the water supplies he needed to maintain the tempo of the advance. After four days, at 0800 on 28 February, as the division swung east towards the Gulf, north of Kuwait City, a cease fire came into effect.

Legacy

On 28 November 1990 Cordingley had briefed the British press. In response to a question from David Fairhall of the *Guardian* about likely losses, he had replied that, 'I think it right that the British public should be made aware that a war such as we could fight in the Gulf will result

²⁵ Cordingley, *In the Eye of the Storm*, p. 2; Cordingley, "The Gulf War: Operating with Allies," p. 20; Smith, "The Gulf War: The Land Battle," p. 4.

²⁶ Smith, "The Gulf War: The Land Battle," p. 1.

in large numbers of casualties. It is inconceivable that if two armies of the size that are facing each other here went to war there would not be considerable casualties.’²⁷

He was then pressed to be more precise. At that stage intelligence estimates were presenting the Iraqi army as much bigger than it actually was, a consideration which increased the relevance of the press questioning. On 15 January 1991 Schwarzkopf was working with an estimated Iraqi strength of 540,000, when the real figure a month later was put at around 350,000.²⁸ Cordingley’s chief of staff, Major Euan Loudon, said the brigade was planning on an overall casualty rate of 15 percent. ‘That’s over one thousand, five hundred men from your brigade alone,’ one journalist responded. The following day in London the *Evening Standard* warned its readers ‘to prepare for a bloodbath.’²⁹

Cordingley was acting responsibly: he was trying to prepare the British public for the realities of war. His own calculation of possible losses was far higher than Loudon’s. On 30 November *The Times* reported him as saying that the rate would be 10 percent per day, a rate that would obliterate his brigade if it were sustained over time. In the event British casualties, and those for the coalition as a whole, were remarkably light. Of the 15 British soldiers killed and 43 wounded, nine and eleven were the victims of a friendly-fire incident when their vehicles were incorrectly identified and attacked by pilots of the United States Air Force. After the war, the press worried less about the death rate and more about so-called ‘Gulf War syndrome,’ a number of differing complaints which were attributed to the inoculations administered to the troops, some of them in the anticipation that Saddam Hussein would use chemical and biological weapons.

When comparisons were drawn with the pre-war estimates, the conflict seemed virtually casualty-free and extraordinarily short. That was the case especially in terms of land operations, whose length of four days contrasted with the 43 days of air war. As a result, the Gulf War seemed less a throw-back to the Cold War and more a harbinger of the future. The operational level of war and the idea of Airland Battle had been developed in the 1980s for application in inter-state conflict within Europe. It was intended for use in ‘the Third World War’ but was then transported to and applied in the Middle East. Here the impact of Smart technology suggested that such methods had a bright future and would secure the military dominance of the US and its allies. It was claimed that, although Smart bombs had constituted only 10 percent of the total dropped, they had inflicted 75 percent of the damage, and that F117 Stealth fighters, which were 2 percent of the total force, had struck 31 percent of the targets.³⁰

For the United States in particular, the Gulf War provided an opportunity to confirm the value of independent air power, possessed of near-global reach thanks to air-to-air refuelling and a network of US and other bases. It was recognised that the use of air power at scale would increase the demands of intelligence acquisition, an area of weakness in 1990-91. The effects

²⁷ Cordingley, *In the Eye of the Storm*, p. 110.

²⁸ Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero*, p. 408; Roland Dannreuther, *The Gulf Conflict: A Political and Strategic Analysis*, Adelphi Paper no 264 (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, winter 1991-2), pp. 56-7.

²⁹ Cordingley, *In the Eye of the Storm*, pp. 111-13.

³⁰ McCausland, *The Gulf War*, p. 62.

were to prioritise signals intelligence over human intelligence and secret sources over open material, with the result that in 2002-3, as in 1990-91, there were significant blind spots in terms of broader cultural and social understanding.

For the United Kingdom the wider narrative which played out after the war was somewhat different from that in the United States. It was seen not simply as the dawn of America's unipolar moment but also as an indication of the strength of the United Nations in the post-Cold War world. In the US, Colin Powell and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were criticised for their reluctance to embrace an early recourse to war and their failure to align the military options with the political objectives. The growing view in the US, that the war had ended prematurely and unsatisfactorily because it had not completed the destruction of the Iraqi army or toppled Saddam Hussein, was less powerful in Britain. Here instead was a model for limited war which proceeded in step with UN Security Council resolutions and which in fulfilling the last of those – the authorisation of the use of force to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation – had fulfilled its political objectives.³¹

By 1994, the Secretary of State for Defence, Malcolm Rifkind, produced a defence review called *Front-line First* to replace that published in 1990. He explained Britain's global role and its potential for expeditionary warfare in terms of its membership of the United Nations Security Council and its concomitant obligations. The Gulf War was linked with the Falklands War in demonstrating that a short, sharp conflict could be a very effective way to deliver policy. Such views survived 1997 and the ousting of the Conservative government by Labour. They were reinforced by the Kosovo conflict in 1999 and underpinned the belief in war's utility in 2002-3.

The implementation of the war's consequences for the armed forces proved messier. While the British 1st Armoured Division was deploying to the Middle East, the Ministry of Defence was completing *Options for Change*, its first post-Cold War review. The low level of casualties favoured the manpower reductions which the government had in mind. The infantry was to be cut from 55 battalions to 39 and armoured regiments from 19 to 11. Artillery, signals and engineers were reduced in proportion but the Army Air Corps was spared, a recognition of the attack helicopter's role in the Gulf War.³² In the RAF, those who had opposed flying at altitudes of below 15,000 feet were vindicated but as a result it, like most other air forces, was slower to recognise the utility of unmanned aerial vehicles than it might have been. At the turn of the century, the Royal Air Force was content to regard weaponised drones as a form of artillery and therefore a matter for the army. Even more extraordinarily, given the recovery of an appetite for operations outside Europe, Britain largely ignored the contribution of sea power and the Royal Navy. Both the importance of merchant tonnage to expeditionary warfare and the navy's role in the blockade of Iraq were written out of a narrative which focused on aeroplanes and tanks.³³

³¹ See Michael Howard, "Think Hard on Total War," *The Times*, 19 February 1991; see also Lawrence Freedman, "The Gulf War and the New World Order," *Survival*, vol 32, no 3 (May/June 1991), pp. 195-209.

³² McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War*, pp. 22-5.

³³ See Andrew Lambert, "The Sea War," in Pimlott and Badsey, *The Gulf War Assessed*.

Although the operational level of war was now sanctified in British military thought, and although the need for the army to exercise corps command remained a national policy objective within NATO, immediate practices were to prove discordant. In 1992, Sir Peter de la Billière retired, taking with him the direct experience of coalition command in wartime. Sir Rupert Smith soldiered on for another decade. He was later to say that his stint as Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff between 1992 and 1994, a post which had oversight of all United Kingdom operations, proved more important for his thinking than his exercise of divisional command (which he defined as purely tactical) in the Gulf. The latter was consonant with his Cold War experience; the range of his responsibilities on the defence staff meant that thereafter he integrated ‘civilian national and international decision-making processes’ into subsequent commands, and particularly as the multinational commander of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the Balkans in 1995.³⁴

The ultimate result was his articulation of what he saw as a new form of war, which he called ‘war amongst the people.’ This conceptualisation saw the Gulf War, not as the culmination of an evolutionary process that had begun in the 1930s with Soviet operational art and with the German victories in western Europe in 1939-41, but as a way point in the shift to a new paradigm, ‘in which political and military developments go hand in hand.’³⁵ This insight – an old and even Clausewitzian one – may reflect less change over time and more Smith’s rise up the ranks which confronted him more directly with war at the interface between the political and military. However, it proved entirely apposite a decade after the 1st Gulf War, when the United States, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, formed a second coalition, this time to invade Iraq itself. In 2003, military action was not as closely coordinated with either UN Security Council resolutions or with regional partners. This time too, as the conflict became protracted, the civil-military interface would force itself down to lower levels of command, redefining the idea of the operational level of war and affecting even tactics themselves.

³⁴ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. xiii, 186-7.

³⁵ Smith, *Utility of Force*, p. xiii.