

Incident at Safwan

by Stephen A. Bourque

The small Iraqi town and airfield of Safwan¹ occupies a special place in the history of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The site of the peace talks that ended this short conflict, it represents the public triumph of America's Cold-War Army. At Safwan, the American military buried the ghost of Vietnam that had haunted the United States for over twenty years.

The village of Safwan also has a less well known meaning. The failure of ground forces to capture objectives in the Safwan area during the war prompted a major dispute between GEN H. Norman Schwarzkopf and his subordinate commanders, that went on to poison relations among senior leaders in the post-war era.² What is often lost in describing the generals' verbal battle, however, is the story of how American soldiers captured the airfield in preparation for the dramatic cease-fire negotiations.

“Safwan is not under our control.”

In the early morning hours of 1 March 1991, the 1st Infantry Division's night operations officer had just settled down to what he anticipated would be a routine shift. The Big Red One's headquarters was on the Basra-Kuwait highway just west of the burning fires of Kuwait's Ar Rawdatayn oil field. The night sky had a red glow overlain with a constant roaring from the flaming wells. Troops did not need flashlights as they moved around in the night. MG Thomas G. Rhame, the division commander, and his principal staff officers had finally gone to bed after almost a week of operations that began on 23 February. *Danger Main's*³ night shift began the routine task of general security, accounting for all soldiers and equipment, and planning for subsequent operations.

Shortly before 0200 hours, the VII Corps tactical operations center's duty officer called to ask if the 1st Division had the area around Safwan under control or observation. Since he had just confirmed the locations of all units in the division, the duty officer said no.⁴ Sud-

denly, the town of Safwan had become extremely important. Over the next 18 hours, two commands from the 1st Infantry Division would confront Saddam Hussein's Army on Iraqi soil in an incident that threatened to reopen the just-concluded conflict.

On 28 February, GEN Powell had ordered GEN Schwarzkopf to conduct a cease-fire ceremony with the Iraqi High Command. Schwarzkopf wanted this site located deep in Iraq so it would be obvious to all who was the victor and who was the vanquished. He also wanted it at a location that the Iraqi delegation could reach by road.⁵ He directed his Chief of Staff, MG Robert B. Johnston, to find the location. Around 2100 hours, Johnston called LTG Yeosock, who was at his command post on the other side of Riyadh, for site suggestions. Without contacting either of his corps commanders, who were familiar with the conditions on the ground, he suggested three possible locations: the village of Shaibah outside of al Basra; Jalibah airfield, about 80 miles west of al Basra; and a location across the Hawr al Hammar causeway.⁶

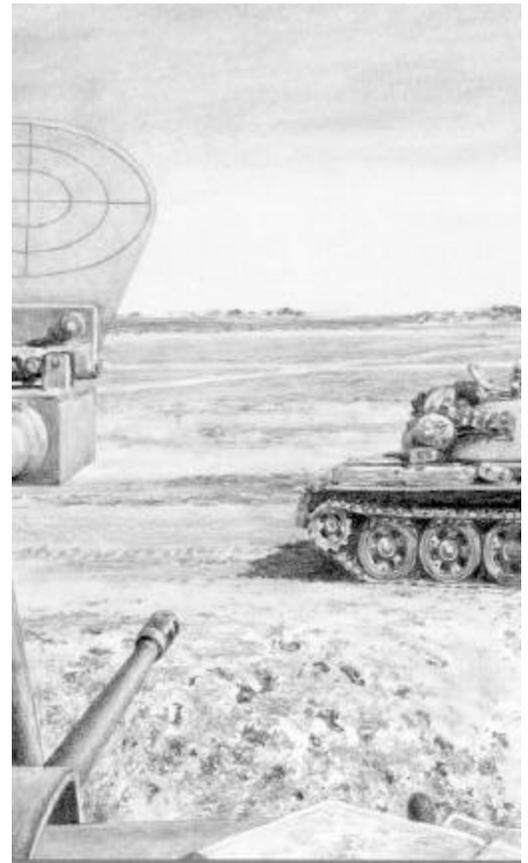
Since only one of these, Jalibah, was under American control, it was the only realistic choice.

After Yeosock passed on his suggestions, he ordered LTG Gary Luck and XVIII Corps to prepare the airfield for the ceremony. Later that night, Luck told him that Jalibah was not the site to use. It had been the target of a violent attack by the 24th Infantry Division on the morning of 27 February.⁷ Unexploded munitions and damaged vehicles were everywhere, and it could not be cleaned up in time for the

proposed meeting. LTG Yeosock now had to call the CinC and tell him to change his plans.⁸

Schwarzkopf had already sent a message describing his concept for the negotiations to GEN Powell. Now he had to call his message back and change the site of the talks. Looking at his map, he selected the airfield at Safwan as the alternate site and redrafted his message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁹ The airfield at Safwan was six kilometers west of the intersection near Safwan. Schwarzkopf had never ordered anyone to seize the airfield. Now it became an objective that should have been taken. Neither Schwarzkopf nor Yeosock called Franks ahead of time to ask him for his assessment of the location.

After the fact, later that night, BG Steve Arnold, the Third Army G3, asked COL Cherrie, the VII Corps G3, about using Safwan for the negotiations. Cherrie told him that it was on the other side of the demarcation line in enemy territory. It was the first the Corps G3 had heard of the airfield at Safwan, and he couldn't understand why the CinC had chosen that location.¹⁰ Around 0130 hours, Yeosock called Franks himself and asked him about the status of the airfield near Safwan and told him about the upcoming conference.¹¹ A few minutes later, one of Cherrie's staff officers called the 1st Infantry Division's main command post.





For almost ten minutes the division's duty officer confirmed to several corps staff officers that no one in the 1st Infantry Division was near Safwan and that unit locations had not changed since the report he rendered at 1900 hours the previous evening.¹² Finally, an agitated LTG Franks had enough and grabbed the telephone from his staff officer. "Do you know who this is?" He shouted at the stunned divisional staff officer, "Get Rhame on the phone now!" Quickly, the duty officer raced out of the TOC and across 50 yards of fire-illuminated sand to wake his exhausted commander.¹³

MG Rhame, awaking from his first decent sleep in over a week, at first thought it was some kind of a joke. Throwing on his trousers and boots, he raced back to his command post that he had left only a couple of hours earlier. There, Franks was on the phone wanting to know about Safwan. In a few minutes, Rhame confirmed that Safwan was not under the control of his division and had never been an assigned objective.¹⁴ By now, almost 45 minutes had gone by since that first call from the corps. Rhame finally asked, "What were his orders?" LTG Franks then gave Rhame a mission to reconnoiter the area around Safwan but not to get decisively engaged.¹⁵

Off the phone with the corps commander around 0240 hours, Rhame radioed his 1-4 Cavalry Squadron com-

mander, LTC Bob Wilson.¹⁶ Like other units in the 1st Infantry Division, the cavalry squadron had only a minimum number of soldiers awake and on-duty. For almost a month it had been on a war footing and few soldiers had been able to get any sleep over the previous four days.¹⁷ Once Wilson was awake, Rhame told him to move as soon as possible to recon the area near Safwan.¹⁸

Franks, meanwhile, had second thoughts about this impromptu mission. At 0308 hours, he called Rhame back and ordered the 1st Infantry Division to stop its movement. At first light, he wanted Rhame to conduct an area reconnaissance to determine if the CinC could use the site as a meeting area. He was to find out if there were any enemy troops in the area, but not to get into a serious fight with Iraqi forces. Finally Franks, under pressure from Yeosock and Schwarzkopf, also asked him to run an "audit trail" on the mission. In other words, had the 1st Infantry Division received the order to seize Safwan crossroads? If so, why was it not accomplished? If not, why not?¹⁹

Schwarzkopf, by his own admission, came "completely unglued" when he found out that VII Corps had not taken Safwan. He shouted at Yeosock:

"I *ordered* you (italics are Schwarzkopf's) to send VII Corps to that road junction. I want to know *in writing* why

my order was violated and why this mission was reported carried out when it wasn't."²⁰

Given the scope of all that Yeosock and Franks had accomplished in the last few weeks, it was a demeaning exercise that seriously soured morale at the end of the war. Months after the conflict, Stan Cherie remembered how irate he was as he read Franks' personally typed reply to Schwarzkopf. Here was a commander who had achieved all that had been asked, and now he was being accused of dishonesty.²¹ Yeosock and Franks each shifted blame to no one, and each accepted full responsibility for unintentionally ignoring the details of the order.²² Of course, the issue was not about seizing the *road junction*, but about an *airfield*. Schwarzkopf had never told Yeosock to seize the airfield.

VII Corps now had one last combat mission to perform. At 0350 hours, Franks called Rhame again, and laid out his mission for seizing Safwan. "Intent is to not take any casualties." The corps' log read, "If you run into enemy forces, then stop and report to CG VII Corps."²³ LTC Wilson's 1-4 Cavalry Squadron still had the mission. It was to move to and seize the airfield near Safwan and occupy it in preparation for the surrender ceremony. Rhame, passing along Franks' guidance, told him to avoid combat (and re-starting the war) if possible, but to defend himself

as appropriate. These orders, from Wilson's perspective, were just what he needed: clear senior commander's intent, maximum flexibility for the ground commander in an unclear situation, and no hint of the tension and politics taking place between division, corps and army headquarters.²⁴ Wilson had a fairly powerful force at his disposal, two tank-reinforced ground troops, two air cavalry troops, and an Apache attack helicopter company.²⁵

Movement to Contact

Wilson moved out at 0615 hours with his two ground troops moving cross-country, north-north-east. The ground scouts moved quickly in standard traveling overwatch formation. With the Safwan Mountain (Jabal Sanam) as a guide, A Troop moved in the eastern and B Troop moved on the western sides of the zone.²⁶ Forward of each ground troop was an aerial scout-weapons team (SWT) consisting of OH-58 scout helicopters and Cobra attack helicopters. The AH-64 Apache company was kept on the ground at a holding area ready to respond if Wilson's troopers got into trouble.²⁷

Rhame could tell Wilson little about the enemy situation. The 1st Infantry Division's Main Command Post had only recently reorganized after the ground offensive, and its G-2 (Intelligence) section was unable to provide the squadron with any information on the Iraqi's composition or disposition.²⁸ The aviation scouts, however, were soon reporting dozens of abandoned Iraqi army vehicles on the way to the airfield. Rhame ordered Wilson not to slow-down and destroy any of these vehicles so he could get to Safwan before the Iraqis could react.²⁹

As the ground troops approached the mountain, around 0700 hours, A Troop swung to the east and B Troop moved to the west. The squadron had been expecting a large runway, but A Troop's soldiers crossed the narrow asphalt strip thinking they were on an unfinished four-lane highway. Initially it appeared deserted, but a few moments later, the air scouts discovered tanks and other vehicles in revetted positions on the northern side of the airfield, oriented towards the south and west. Behind the dug-in armor, the Iraqis positioned many more tracked and wheeled vehicles.³⁰ What the 1-4 Cavalry Squadron had found, defending about 1500 meters north of the airfield, was an entire Iraqi armored brigade. Three battalions were on line and an additional battalion positioned in depth. All of the Iraqi combat vehicles were in pre-

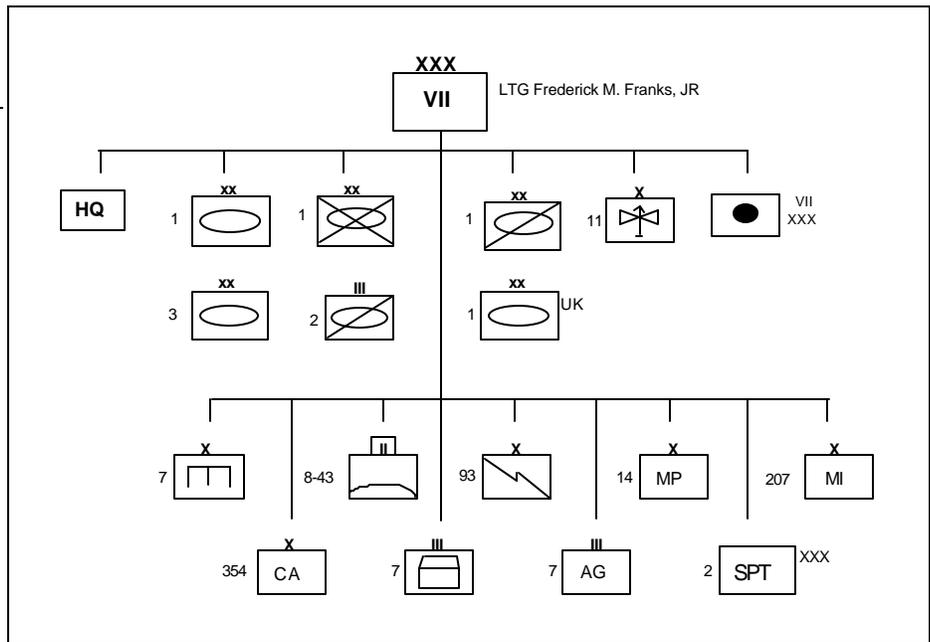


Fig. 1
U.S. VII Corps Organization as of February 1991.

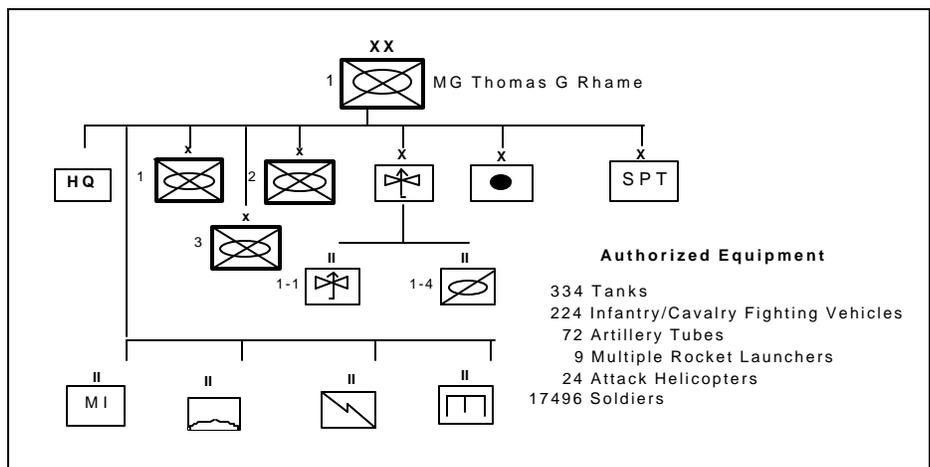


Fig. 2
Organization of the 1st Infantry Div. (Mech), February 1991

pared positions.³¹ Wilson reminded his commanders not to fire, unless fired upon or in danger,³² but to continue in a steady advance on to the airfield. The troopers were nervous and some feared that they would be the first casualties in a renewal of the fighting. Courageously, they drove their combat vehicles within the range of the Iraqi weapon systems and occupied the airfield.³³

With the cavalry squadron on the objective, Rhame ordered Wilson to move his air-scouts to the important road junction, about five miles east of Safwan Mountain. As the air cavalrymen continued to investigate, they found the area full of other Iraqi tank and mechanized units. As the squadron's scouts watched, hundreds of Iraqi vehicles continued to move north and away from the Americans.³⁴ The 1-4

Cavalry Squadron had obviously arrived at the southern boundary of the Basra pocket.

Around 0830 hours, LTC Wilson moved forward to the airfield, dismounted from his Bradley, and approached several "well-dressed and well-fed" Iraqi soldiers whose uniforms indicated that they were from a Republican Guard unit. Their equipment appeared in very good shape and Wilson noticed trucks with fresh vegetables and other supplies. Wilson then spoke, through an interpreter, with the senior officer at the site. He told the Iraqi colonel that the airfield at Safwan was under U.S. control and that he must move his men and equipment immediately. Obviously disturbed by Wilson's words, the Iraqi officer left to speak to his commander.³⁵

and he was here to secure the site for the cease-fire negotiations. The Iraqi commander told his junior enlisted soldiers to leave and surrounded Bills with about 15 to 20 officers and senior soldiers. The Iraqi LTC then left to confer with his superiors. A short time later he returned with additional soldiers, wearing the black leather jackets, camouflage uniforms and berets of Iraqi commando units.⁴² To Bills, the situation looked as though it had taken a turn for the worse.

However, after a short, tense stand-off, this Iraqi unit and all of the others on the airfield received orders from their superiors to leave. By 1200, the entire airfield complex was clear of Iraqi troops. BG William Carter, the 1st Infantry Division's Assistant Division Commander (Maneuver), flew to Wilson's location and told him that he was now under the approaching 2d Brigade's operational control.⁴³

The Roadblock

The stand-off wasn't over yet, however. While most of the 2d Brigade moved cross country, its supporting 45 Field Artillery Battalion moved directly up the Basra road. At the village of Safwan, an Iraqi infantry unit stopped as it tried to move through the town. This unit was from Saddam Hussein's home town of Tikrit and had no intention of moving.⁴⁴ Around 1100 hours, COL Moreno arrived with armored reinforcements and asked to see the senior Iraqi officer. Soon a major arrived, but Moreno wanted a more senior officer. Soon a command car arrived with two generals and a civilian government official. Moreno calmly told the group that he was bringing his forces to Safwan for the peace negotiations and they had to stop blocking the road. The Iraqis didn't understand, and actually thought they had the Americans surrounded. Moreno demanded to see a more senior official.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, LTG Yeosock was under increasing pressure from Schwarzkopf to get the area secured. After 1500 hours he called directly down to MG Rhame and told him the following:

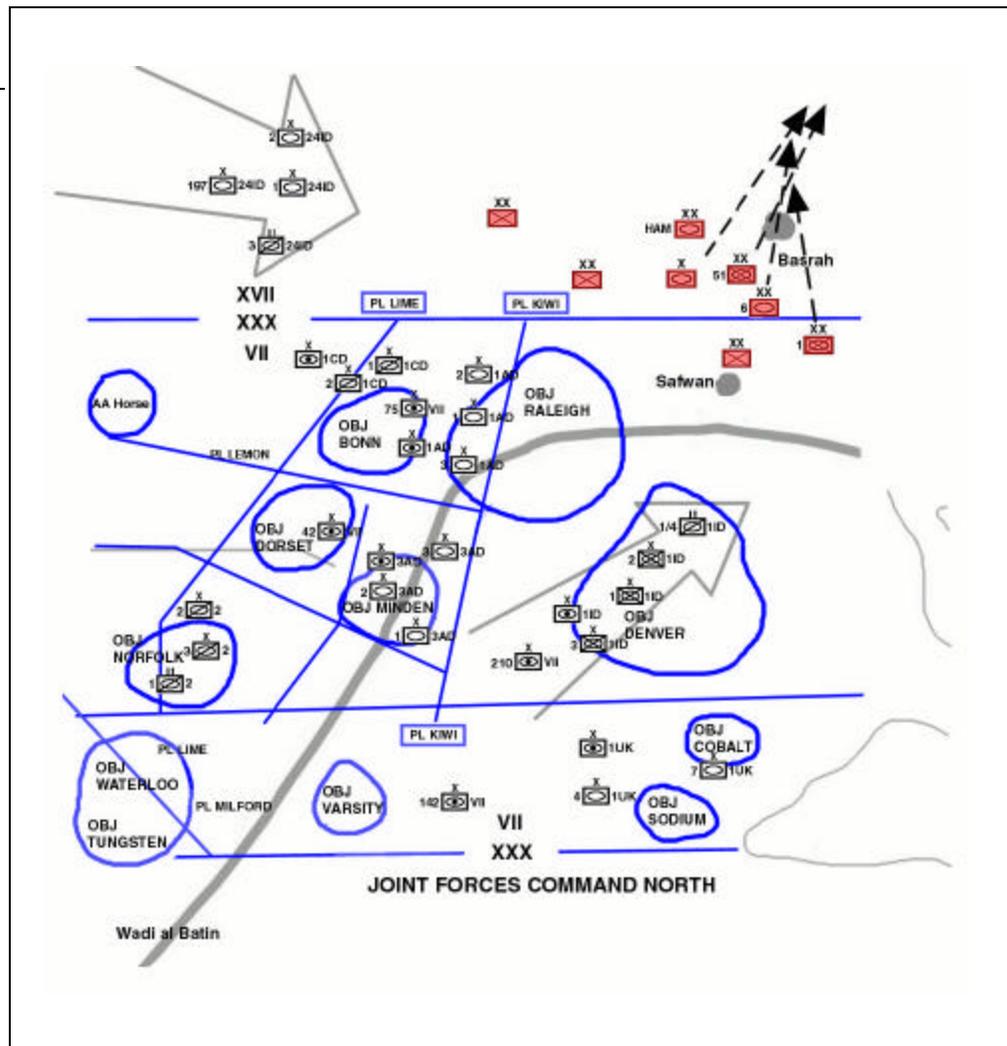


Fig. 4
Situation, 0800 Hours, 28 February 1991

- (1) We must have the airfield.
- (2) CinC ordered us to take it.
- (3) Must show that we have wrecked the country to humiliate them. Must show knocked out buildings and equipment.
- (4) Go into airfield at Safwan with overwhelming combat power.
- (5) Force Iraqi units out.
- (6) Use PSYOPS to convince them to leave. Invite them to surrender.
- (7) If not, use combat power. If they fire, destroy them.
- (8) Attempt to avoid contact. Request permission from CinC before committing to combat.⁴⁶

Yeosock, under obvious pressure from Schwarzkopf,⁴⁷ was obfuscating the issue. Did he want Rhame to force the Iraqis out or not? These were garbled instructions that left the disposition of the problem to the commander on the

ground. From the perspective of VII Corps and 1st Infantry Division officers, if something went wrong, Yeosock and Schwarzkopf would have a subordinate ready to sacrifice.

Ending the Impasse

Ultimately it didn't matter. Rhame, not known for being indecisive, had already decided to end the standoff. Ten minutes before Yeosock called, Rhame ordered Moreno to tell the Iraqis to move or die by 1600 hours.⁴⁸

Tony Moreno was tired. The infantry colonel had been commanding from the confined quarters of his Bradley fighting vehicle for over a week. Both MG Rhame and BG Carter were at his headquarters providing all the supervision he needed. Once he received Rhame's instructions, he jumped at the chance to end the standoff. He deployed his forces for an overwhelming display of combat power, moving the 1-4 Cavalry now un-

der his operational control, and his other three battalions to surround the airfield and the town around 1500 hours. He drove his M2 Bradley right up to the recently arrived Iraqi delegation. On his way out of the vehicle, Moreno hit his mouth on its hard metal, causing his lip to bleed. As the somewhat intimidated Iraqi delegation began reading a statement, Moreno cut them off.

Spitting a wad of blood at the feet of the surprised Iraqis, the stocky Hawaiian pointed his finger and said "If you don't leave by 1600 hours, we will kill you."⁴⁹ Just at that moment a tank battalion arrived to add emphasis to Moreno's threat. Tanks moved right up to the enemy command vehicle as the Iraqi officers looked on, horrified. Moreno, again, told them to move. The Iraqi commander requested some more time, and Moreno consented, but emphasized that at 1630 hours, "I'm coming through."⁵⁰

The Iraqi general left to get his soldiers moving out of the area. A short while later he reappeared and thanked COL Moreno for not killing his soldiers. Then he asked if he could leave some of his tanks to help secure the negotiation area. An amazed Moreno told him no and drew him a map of where he should move his soldiers to. "Anything within three kilometers of that box when the sun rises we will kill." The Iraqi general nodded in agreement and departed.⁵¹

Conclusions

The Iraqi units soon left and the 1st Infantry Division began preparing the site for the negotiations. Rhame, Moreno, and Wilson had pulled off a demanding mission without a loss. In his memoirs, Schwarzkopf says his threat to use force was "bluffing."⁵² Yeosock is much more candid, and was concerned that Safwan could have become a place the Iraqis chose to stand and die, forcing the Americans to violate the cease-fire on Iraqi soil.⁵³

What does this minor incident about an obscure crossroads in the Iraqi desert say about the U.S. Army at the end of the cold war? At the tactical level, the Safwan incident shows the folly of relying on only high-technological solutions. Soldiers on the ground, backed by conventional firepower and attack helicopters under the control of the ground commander, convinced the Iraqi soldiers to leave without a fight. The result was no bloodshed on either side and an acceptable site for peace negotiations. No amount of high-tech weaponry could have attained that political objective.

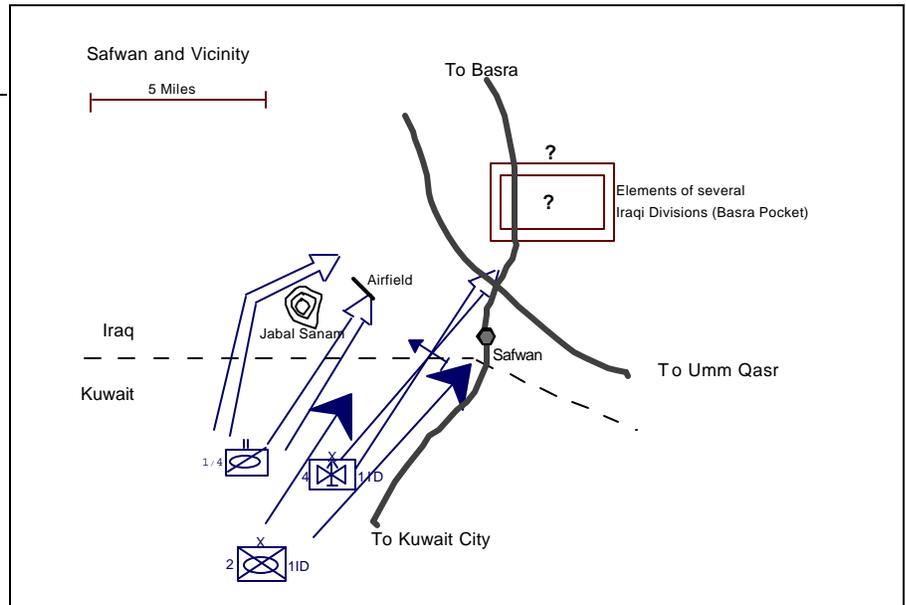


Fig. 5

1st Infantry Division units move to secure Safwan Airfield, 1 March 1991.

The Safwan incident highlights the effect of personalities on the conduct of war. The tactical chain of command was based on clear bonds of trust and mutual admiration. Six years after the incident, Bob Wilson still had nothing but praise for Rhame's clear general orders on seizing Safwan. In their interviews after the war, Rhame and Cherrie often spoke of how they trusted and believed in General Franks' leadership.

The incident at Safwan, therefore, presents the victorious Gulf War Army in a different light than seen by the public in 1991. Safwan refutes the image of the perfectly executed, clean, "high-tech," military operation most Americans believe took place in the winter of 1991. It was conclusive proof that the strength of the Army rested on the shoulders of its officers, noncommissioned officers, and individual soldiers.

Notes

¹This article benefited from assistance and advice from many people, both military and civilian, who helped to make this story as accurate as possible. Of special note are LTC (Ret.) John Burdan, BG Bob Wilson, COL Mike Kendall, COL (Ret.) Rick Swain, LTG Tom Rhame, BG Stan Cherrie, COL Dave Gross, and Dr. Susan Canedy. Versions of this paper were presented before the Association of Georgia State University Historians and the 1997 Ohio Valley History Conference.

²Tom Donnelly was the first to publicly address the tensions between General Schwarzkopf and his subordinate commanders at Safwan in his article "The Generals' War," *Army Times*, 2 March, 1992, p. 8. Schwarzkopf added fuel to the

fire by his own brutal account of his dispute with Yeosock and Franks in his autobiography, written with Peter Petre, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 550-551. Rick Atkinson, *Crusade* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) and Robert Scales, *Certain Victory* (Washington, D.C.: GPO 1993) generally ignore the entire controversy. Michael R. Gordon and LTG Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 438-443, continued to stir up this controversy without any serious analysis of its causes. The best account of the causes of the controversy is found in Richard M. Swain, "*Lucky War*" *Third Army in Desert Storm* (Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: U.S. Command and General Staff College Press), 1994. General Franks' perspective on the Safwan controversy is found in Tom Clancy and GEN Fred Franks, Jr., *Into the Storm: A Study in Command* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), 445-460.

³Nickname for the division's main command post.

⁴Author's notes, 28 February-1 March 1991. During this period the author was a member of the 1st Infantry Division's G3 Operations Staff.

⁵Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, 549.

⁶Richard M. Swain, "*Lucky War*," *Third Army in Desert Storm*, 293; and Yeosock Interview, 29 June 1991.

⁷Jason K. Kamiya, *A History of the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division Combat Team During Operation Desert Storm* (Fort Stewart, Ga.: 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized), 1992), 29.

⁸GEN John Yeosock and COL Richard M. Swain, "Interview with GEN John Yeosock," 27 June 1991.

⁹Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, 549-550.

¹⁰Cherrie Interview, 12 September 1991.

¹¹VII Corps Tactical Operations Center (TAC), Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entry 3.

¹²1st Infantry Division TAC, Staff Journal, 28 February 1991, entry 83.

¹³Author's notes, 28 February-1 March 1991.

¹⁴Rhame Interview, 26 July 1991; and VII Corps TAC, Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entry 3.

¹⁵VII Corps TAC, Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entry 3.

¹⁶Author's notes; and 1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," *ARMOR* (May 1991), 19. This article is a published version of the squadron's formal after-action report.

¹⁷Stephen A. Bourque, "Desert Saber: The VII Corps in the Gulf War" (Ph.D. diss. Georgia State University, 1996), 215-228. The 1-4 Cavalry Squadron began screening the 1st Infantry Division's attack sector on 3 February. It had been on a war-footing, therefore, for over four weeks.

¹⁸LTC John Burdan to author, 19 March 1997. Burdan was the operations officer (S-3) during this period. 1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 19.

¹⁹VII Corps TAC, Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entry 3.

²⁰Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, 550-551.

²¹Cherrie Interview, 12 September 1991.

²²Franks sent a letter to GEN Schwarzkopf conveying this message: Cherrie interview, 12 September 1991; and Clancy and Franks, *Into the Storm*, 456. Yeosock, according to his assistant LTC Mike Kendall, did the same: Kendall, note to author, 18 September 1997.

²³VII Corps TAC, Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entry 6.

²⁴BG Bob Wilson, "Some comments ref. Safwan," Memo to author, 8 May 1997, 1.

²⁵1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 19.

²⁶Wilson, 8 May 1997, 2; Burdan, 19 Mar 97.

²⁷1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 19.

²⁸Burdan, 19 March 1997 and author's notes.

²⁹1st Infantry Division Main Command Post (G3 Operations), 1 March 1991, entry 8; and, 1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 19.

³⁰Burdan, 19 March 1997.

³¹1st Infantry Division Main Command Post (G3 Operations), Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entries 9-14, 46; and 1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 19; and Rhame Interview, 26 July 1991.

³²BG Bob Wilson, Note to author, 10 Jul 97.

³³Burdan, 19 March 1997.

³⁴1st Infantry Division Main Command Post (G3 Operations), Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entries 15-30.

³⁵Wilson, 8 May 1997, 2-3.

³⁶Wilson, 8 May 1997, 3-4.

³⁷Burdan, 19 March 1997.

³⁸1st Infantry Division Main Command Post (G3 Operations), Staff Journal, 1 Mar 91, entries 31, 36 and 40; and 1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 20; and Rhame Interview, 26 Jul 91, and Burdan, 19 Mar 97.

³⁹1st Infantry Division Main Command Post (G3 Operations), Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entry 43; and Rhame Interview, 26 July 1991.

⁴⁰1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 20; and Swain, "Lucky War:" *Third Army in Desert Storm*, 297.

⁴¹1-4 Cavalry Operations Staff, "Riders on the Storm," 20.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Wilson, 8 May 1997, 4-5.

⁴⁴1st Infantry Division Main Command Post

(G3 Operations), Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entry 46; and Swain, "Lucky War:" *Third Army in Desert Storm*, 297.

⁴⁵Jim Tice, "Coming Through: The Big Red One Raid," *Army Times* (26 Aug. 1991), 18; and 1st Infantry Division Tactical Operations Center (TAC), Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entries 29, 30.

⁴⁶VII Corps TAC, Staff Journal, 1 March 1991, entries 25, 33.

⁴⁷Colonel Mike Kendall, Note to author, 15 July 1991.

⁴⁸Rhame Interview, 26 July 1991.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Tice, "Coming Through," 18.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, 552-553.

⁵³Yeosock Interview, 29 June 1991.

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