



OUR HEROES . . .

Remembering

Operation Desert Storm -- from a Navy Reservist's Perspective

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This year, 2016, marks the 25th anniversary of Operation Desert Storm, and I have seen a number of reminders of that fact. Those reminders have included transcripts of interviews with General Colin Powell remembering Desert Storm, various recollections of the late General Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf, and even reminders from my employer, acknowledging the anniversary of my being plucked out of civilian life in early January 1991, shortly after the Christmas holidays, for a government paid trip to the Middle East, specifically the Persian Gulf. I was in the U.S. Naval Reserve at the time, an officer in Naval Embarked Advisory Team Detachment 105 (yeah, that's right, NEAT.....what's the Navy without acronyms?) Our unit mission was to serve aboard civilian Maritime Prepositioned Ships (MPS), to provide these vessels secure naval telecommunications capability with accompanying U.S. Navy warships once these MPS vessels joined up with a Naval Amphibious Task Group. Given the expected nature of the conflict (desert warfare), I was reasonably confident that the Navy Reserve (except for perhaps some SeaBee and cargo handling units) would not be mobilized, and that's what I told everyone who asked me if I thought I would be mobilized. Boy, was I wrong about that! But I was thinking that way in 1990 - 1991 because the Reserve forces had not been mobilized in any significant numbers since World War II, and at that time I believe we were still experiencing the benefits of the naval buildup during the Reagan years.

So I was among the fortunate few Reservists to have been mobilized in support of a major military operation in nearly 50 years. "Lucky me," I thought. But upon reflection, it was an important growing experience in my life (even though I was in my mid to late 30's at the time), as I was placed in charge of a group of men who primarily had been civilians, unexpectedly removed from their comfortable routine, and unexpectedly taken away from family and friends for who knew how long. But we quickly bonded in a way that only those who have served (and those who are reading this) can understand and appreciate.

That bonding served us well as we arrived in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), boarded our assigned vessel, the MPS ship Motor Vessel 1LT Alex Bonnyman (named for a WWII Marine, who fought in the Pacific, and was awarded the Medal of Honor). Waiting for our arrival aboard Bonnyman, in addition to the civilian crew, were an active duty Marine Corps logistics unit, a Navy Reserve cargo handling unit, and a Navy Reserve amphibious SeaBee unit. My own Reserve unit previously had annual training stints aboard other MPS ships, so the surroundings, though different from Navy ships, were not unfamiliar to us. However, we did notice one addition to our assigned ship when we arrived aboard that we didn't observe aboard the MPS ships on which we had performed our annual training duty..... three 50 caliber machine gun mounts, one forward, one to port and one to starboard. Next to the mount I saw as I came aboard the ship, I noticed a makeshift sign next to the mount (handwritten by a creative Marine or sailor) which read "USMC CIWS" (the latter acronym

standing for "close in weapon system").

Initially our orders were to proceed through the Strait of Hormuz, exit the Gulf, rendezvous with the approaching amphibious task group in the Arabian Sea and re-enter the Gulf in company with the task group. However, those orders changed, and we were to return to the UAE, and rendezvous with the task force after it entered the Gulf. This is when it got a bit interesting for us. Some members of my unit were topside, installing our communications antennas and connecting our communications equipment, when the Marines onboard, carrying their weapons, began taking positions along the starboard side of the ship. The gunnery sergeant in charge of the Marine unit, politely and professionally, asked me to suspend our equipment installation efforts and take my unit back inside the skin of the ship. So I, with two of my sailors, climbed down the nearest ladder, and I undogged the nearest door and led my men inside.....a fan room! (Okay, so I didn't remember the layout of the ship as well as I thought I had). From the confines of that fan room I heard the sound of a single shot and nothing else. After the passage of a few more minutes, we



Feb., 1991 at Al Jubail, Saudia Arabia

emerged from the "protection" of the fan room, and everything seemed back to normal.

So I headed to the pilothouse where I saw the Gunny briefing the ship's captain on what had occurred. I learned from that briefing that several small boats had been approaching our ship from the direction of Iran. An attempt was made fire warning shots from the starboard 50 caliber mount.....but it had, well, let's just say malfunctioned! One of the Marines then fired a warning shot with his M-16, which caused the small boats to scatter and exit the area (leaving me reasonably certain that these were not suicide bombers). But that's not the end of the story.

The following day, the Gunny approached me and with a chuckle in his voice and informed me that the makeshift sign "USMC CIWS" next to the

starboard 50 caliber mount, had been altered overnight. Someone had used a marker, and "elaborated" on the "CIWS" part of the sign, so that it now read "Crap It Won't Shoot!" He said he thought it was funny, but some of his more junior Marines were less than amused, and suspected some sailors had a hand in it. So I dutifully inquired with the members of my unit at morning muster if any of them knew who "edited" the Marines' sign. After the initial snickers subsided, nobody in my unit took credit for the creative change. However, I can't speak to the guilt or innocence of the cargo handlers or Phib CB's. But as our time in the Gulf went on, whatever bad feelings resulted from the unsolicited creativity with the Marines' sign, had passed. By the time the Gulf War ended, the sailors and Marines aboard Bonnyman, active and reserve, from different parts of the country, and different backgrounds and walks of life, had bonded in the face of adversity, despite a bit of a rough beginning. That is probably the most cherished memory I have of my experience in Operation Desert Storm on this 25th anniversary of that conflict.

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