



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

The Gulf War, 1990–1991

After a brutal eight-year war with Iran that left Iraq deeply in debt and militarily exhausted, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein turned his ambitions toward oil-rich Kuwait as a means to relieve his economic crisis and expand regional influence. Accusing Kuwait of overproducing oil and siphoning from Iraqi fields, Saddam launched a surprise invasion on 2 August 1990, quickly seizing Kuwait and capturing its capital, Kuwait City. The international community condemned the aggression, with U.S. President George H. W. Bush leading a swift diplomatic and military response. Fearing that Iraq might continue its advance into Saudi Arabia—a critical U.S. ally and major oil supplier—the United States launched Operation Desert Shield, rapidly deploying forces to defend the kingdom and deter further Iraqi expansion. This marked the beginning of a massive multinational Coalition buildup in the Persian Gulf, setting the stage.

The Marine Corps responded quickly to the crisis, deploying the 7th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (7th MEB), which arrived in mid-August and rapidly became operational by falling in on prepositioned equipment from Maritime Prepositioning Squadron Two. As a fully integrated Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF), the 7th MEB brought a balanced force package of armor, artillery, logistics, and both rotary- and fixed-wing aviation assets. Shortly after its arrival, the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (13th MEU) and the 4th MEB also deployed



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to the Gulf, further strengthening the Marine presence. On 3 September, I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF), commanded by Lieutenant General Walter E. Boomer, assumed operational control of Marine Corps forces in

Collect

Preserve

Promote

Support





Saudi Arabia. I MEF included the 1st Marine Division, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing (3d MAW), and 1st Force Service Support Group, with the 2d Marine Division joining the area of operations in October. By 17 January 1991, as tensions escalated and Operation Desert Shield transitioned to Desert Storm, 3d MAW aircraft were already flying combat sorties in support of the Coalition air campaign.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf, 1990–1991: With Marine Forces Afloat in Desert Shield and Desert Storm*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Gulf War, 1990–1991: Liberating Kuwait*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf, 1990–1991: With the I Marine Expeditionary Force in Desert Shield and Desert Storm*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf, 1990–1991: The 3d Marine Aircraft Wing in Desert Shield and Desert Storm*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf, 1990–1991: Combat Services Support in Desert Shield and Desert Storm*](#)

On 29 January 1991, Saddam launched an advance into the Saudi border town of Khafji, initiating the first major ground engagement of the Gulf War. Coalition forces—including U.S. Marines, Saudi Arabian National Guard units, and Qatari armored companies—responded swiftly and, backed by overwhelming air and



War Horse by Jason Breidenbach.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

artillery support, succeeded in retaking the town by 1 February. Notably, friendly fire incidents accounted for 11 U.S. Marine fatalities during the battle, reinforcing how the fog of war posed a



grave and unpredictable threat. While this engagement did not involve traditional naval gunfire, it marked a pivotal early test of Coalition coordination and highlighted both the lethality of air-ground integration and the risks inherent in coalition operations.

On 24 February 1991, Operation Desert Storm's ground campaign began as Coalition forces surged across the line of departure to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. The initial mission for Marine ground forces was to breach the extensive and heavily fortified obstacle belt



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along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border, clearing the way for the 1st and 2d Marine Divisions. Marine combat engineers led the effort, using explosives, mine-clearing line charges, and heavy equipment to carve lanes through minefields, berms, and trenches—thereby facilitating the rapid advance of maneuver elements. Once inside Kuwait, the Marines pushed north with objectives that included seizing the city of al-Jahra and isolating Iraqi forces. On 25 February, they

intercepted and decisively destroyed an Iraqi armored force threatening the Burqan oilfields through coordinated air and ground attacks. The following day, the 2d Marine Division secured al-Jahra, while the 1st Marine Division advanced to and captured Kuwait International Airport, achieving key strategic objectives and signaling the collapse of Iraqi defenses.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf, 1990–1991: With the 1st Marine Division in Desert Shield and Desert Storm*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf, 1990–1991: With the 2d Marine Division in Desert Shield and Desert Storm*](#)
 - [*Desert Voices: An Oral History Anthology of Marine in the Gulf War, 1990–1991*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in Battle: Al-Khafji, 28 January–1 February 1991*](#)

By 27 February 1991, Saddam Hussein's forces were in full retreat toward Iraq, prompting President George H. W. Bush to declare a ceasefire the following day. Over the course



of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the Marine Corps suffered 68 fatalities—24 killed in action and 44 from non-combat causes—and 92 Marines were wounded. The campaign demonstrated the overwhelming power and effectiveness of joint U.S. and Coalition forces, underscoring the West's technological and operational superiority in modern warfare. The speed and precision of the Coalition's victory left a lasting impression on both allies and adversaries alike. In the years that followed, U.S. opponents increasingly turned to asymmetric and irregular strategies, seeking to avoid direct, conventional confrontation with American military power.

On 1 March 1991, just one day after the ceasefire that ended combat operations in Desert Storm, disaffected Iraqi troops and anti-regime civilians launched an uprising in Basrah, triggering a wave of revolts across southern Iraq. Shortly thereafter, Kurdish populations in the north rose up against Saddam Hussein's regime,



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leading to the rapid fall of nearly every major city in the Kurdish region to opposition forces. The Baathist government's response was swift and brutal: regime forces violently suppressed both uprisings, executing mass reprisals that shocked the international community. In the north, the crackdown triggered a humanitarian crisis, as hundreds of thousands of Kurds fled into the mountains along the Turkish and Iranian borders to escape government retaliation. In response, U.S. European Command stood up a joint—and later combined—task force to launch Operation Provide Comfort, a humanitarian and security mission to protect Kurdish refugees and deliver aid. The Marine Corps contributed civil affairs teams, elements of the 24th MEU (Special Operations Capable), and forward observers from 2d Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, who played a key role in coordinating air and fire support while supporting relief operations in northern Iraq.

On 13 April 1991, Marines entered northern Iraq to join British, French, Spanish, and Italian NATO forces in distributing humanitarian aid and establishing a secure zone from which



Iraqi military forces were excluded. Marine Brigadier General Anthony C. Zinni served as deputy commanding general and chief of staff of Combined Task Force Provide Comfort, overseeing these multinational efforts. The Marines remained in the region until July, when Coalition forces established a formal no-fly zone over northern Iraq to protect the Kurdish population from further Iraqi air attacks. In August 1992, a second no-fly zone was declared over southern Iraq to safeguard Shi'a communities. Both no-fly zones were enforced for the next decade, with Marine aviation units regularly deploying alongside U.S. Air Force and Navy aircraft to patrol and maintain air superiority, ensuring continued protection for vulnerable Iraqi populations.

- For more information, see:
 - *U.S. Marines in the Gulf War, 1990–1991: Liberating Kuwait*
 - *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*
 - *Humanitarian Operations In Northern Iraq, 1991: With Marines in Operation Provide Comfort.*

To see all of the History Division's Gulf War publications, [click here](#).