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? - CLOSING THE BACK DOOR - ?

Despite the initial impressions to the contrary, there was much confusion during and immediately after the Gulf War. While it was clear that the primary objective of driving Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait was achieved, there were nagging questions about the way the war ended and whether or not the Coalition forces achieved as many objectives as the public was led to believe. But war is chaos, so it is understandable that the real story takes a while to emerge. Over the past year or so, new information has surfaced which adds greatly to our knowledge of what really happened in the war -- and what did not happen. Among other things, we now know that one of the primary objectives of the war as set forth by the military and agreed to by the political leadership, namely, the destruction of the Iraqi Republican Guard forces, did not occur; that most of the Guard escaped out the back door with half its equipment. The reasons why the Guard escaped are now more apparent. With regard to this point, the most important element of a spirited debate ongoing in the military, it would be useful to review the key events and decisions which led to the failure to destroy the Guard.

According to the Department of Defense final report to

Congress on the Gulf War, and his own memoirs, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf's original plan for the ground offensive (based upon the forces available) involved a single corps-sized frontal attack straight into the strength of the Iraqi defenses in Kuwait. This plan was rejected by the senior political and military leadership and a different approach involving an envelopment through the western desert was suggested by Defense Secretary Cheney. As the Department of Defense report states, "Based upon guidance from the Secretary [Cheney], CINCCENT [Schwarzkopf] subsequently directed his planning staff to consider an envelopment by two US Army corps west of the Wadi Al-Batin. *The purpose of the envelopment was to get behind the main Iraqi forces while supporting attacks were conducted by other Coalition forces into Kuwait. The main attack's objective was the destruction of the Republican Guards forces [emphasis added].*"¹ On the basis of this new approach, the U. S. VII Corps plus additional units were assigned to Schwarzkopf, thereby doubling the size of the Coalition force.

The Department of Defense final report, the Army's new doctrine manual FM 100-5 *Operations* (written under the supervision of Gulf War VII Corps commander Lt. General Frederick M. Franks Jr.), General Schwarzkopf's memoirs and interviews after the war all contain explicit statements that the ground offensive plan was to "envelop", "get behind", "isolate", "trap", and "destroy" the Republican Guard. ² There can be no question as to what the plan was. There were only two escape routes out of the Kuwaiti theater, one westward through the Euphrates River corridor and one north out

of Basra around the east side of the Hawr al Hammar marsh. Schwarzkopf's plan called for Lt. General Gary Luck's XVIII Corps to first block the escape route to the west, then link up with Franks's VII Corps as it circled the Guard to the west and then hooked eastward to close the trap. To close the northern escape route, Luck and Franks would have to sweep eastward on a path that in general took them south of the marsh but north of Kuwait. Once the northern route was blocked, the Republican Guard and the bulk of the Iraqi forces would be trapped to the south. In his memoirs, Schwarzkopf described his reasoning behind this plan, "I wanted to pin them with their backs against the sea, then go in and wipe them out." ³ But first, both the western and northern escape routes had to be blocked.

Had this plan been followed and the Guard trapped and destroyed, the Coalition would have been in an extremely powerful negotiating position with Saddam Hussein at the cease fire. Unfortunately the plan was only partially followed. Whereas General Luck quickly blocked the westward escape route, General Franks advanced northward through the western desert in a slow, methodical fashion as though he were impervious to the rapidly deteriorating enemy resistance and the prospect that the war would end before he could trap the Guard. In addition, instead of getting behind the Guard and cutting off the northern escape route, for some unexplained reason, Franks turned the VII Corps eastward prematurely and plowed head-on into the Guard's heavy armored divisions. According to a recently released CIA report on the

disposition of the Republican Guard forces and their reactions as events unfolded during the 100 hour ground war, the path was open for Franks to continue his drive northeast around the heavy divisions and then turn east towards Basra to close the trap as originally planned. Only a couple of infantry divisions west of Basra stood in the way and they should have been easy pickings for his heavy armor. But Franks chose to engage the Guard heavy divisions head-on, foregoing his opportunity to complete the encirclement and trap the main Iraqi forces to the south.

Meanwhile, Schwarzkopf held back Luck's forces and prevented them from closing the trap alone. Schwarzkopf's instructions to Luck to take the time to destroy captured and abandoned enemy equipment rather than bypass it and race towards Basra coupled with the heavy use of "limits of advance" on Luck's lead division, the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, prevented Luck from closing the back door as he had closed the west door. Perhaps Schwarzkopf was fearful of exposing Luck's flank if he allowed the 24th to race eastward ahead of Franks. In any event, restraints on the 24th's rate of advance resulted in Luck's and Franks's forces advancing eastward together shoulder to shoulder literally pushing the Guard out the back door through the northern vent.

While Luck and Franks were pushing the Guard through Basra and out the back door, the Air Force was conspicuous by its absence. The Air Force had already demonstrated the ability to inflict tremendous punishment on Saddam's forces when it caught them in the open on the move. Yet as the bulk of Saddam's forces fled north out

of Basra, the Air Force did not launch a concerted attack to stop them. In recent reports, the Air Force appears to place the blame on (1) bad weather in the Basra area, which contradicts its claim of having all-weather capability, and (2) the Army for intentionally moving the Fire Support Coordination Line (a control measure to prevent friendly fire casualties) north of the Euphrates River and well beyond the Basra pocket, thereby denying the Air Force the opportunity to attack targets near Basra without coordinating with the Army ground commander.⁴ The implication is that the Army was trying to reserve the final acts of victory, and glory, for itself by preventing the Air Force from stopping the exodus alone. If this claim is true, and there is still considerable confusion over this point, then the Army must accept the consequences, for it failed to close the back door and prevent the Guard from escaping.

As his VII Corps was conducting its massive turn to the east and engaging head-on the Guard's heavy divisions which had turned to face him, Franks must have realized that he had blown the opportunity to complete the encirclement as originally planned. His decision to smash into the Guard with a synchronized three-division fist was going to permit many Guard units and other forces to escape. The western most Guard units had quickly set up blocking positions so other units could escape through Basra. Franks was going to accommodate the Guard by attacking directly into the blocking positions.

In the middle of the turn eastward, Schwarzkopf released to

Franks the 1st Cavalry Division which had been held in strategic reserve back in Saudi Arabia. According to VII Corps's historian Lt. Col Peter S. Kindsvatter, Franks had originally planned to use the 1st Cav on his right, or southern most, flank after he made his turn to the east. ⁵ Now, in a desperate attempt to salvage the encirclement plan and prevent large segments of the Guard and other units from escaping, Franks ordered the 1st Cav to race 200 km from Saudi Arabia in 24 hours to a point on the northern most edge of his left flank. ⁶ From there, the 1st Cav would form the northern arm of a last second double envelopment Franks hoped to launch on the evening of February 27, the last day of the war. The 1st Cav would be the northern arm and would finally close the northern end of the Basra pocket. The 1st Infantry Div would form the southern arm as the remaining VII Corps units continued to push in the middle. Unfortunately, when the 1st Cav arrived on the left flank in the late afternoon of February 27, there was no room for it to squeeze through the front and begin the envelopment. Making room for it to pass through would take the better part the next day, so Franks cancelled the double envelopment plan that evening when he learned that a cease fire would go into effect early the next morning. ⁷

Pulling the 1st Cav all the way from Saudi Arabia to the northern most point of his sector in a last ditch effort to encircle the Guard units that had not yet escaped, was a tacit admission that the VII Corps had turned eastward prematurely. There can be no other rational explanation for the 1st Cav's mad dash

north.

The original plan to envelop and get behind the Republican Guard was sound. Schwarzkopf was given all the resources he requested in order to execute that plan. The Coalition had total air supremacy and the Iraqi ground forces had been bombed continuously for 39 days prior to the start of the ground war. The Intelligence assets devoted to the war were the most sophisticated in the world. Higher headquarters and the political leadership did not interfere in the operations in any fashion. Yet the Coalition ground forces failed to envelop, trap and destroy the Guard as the National Command Authority had directed and as the approved plan called for. The evidence strongly suggests that the opportunity to execute the plan as envisioned and accomplish the stated objective was there for the taking. Schwarzkopf in his memoirs has attempted to place most of the blame for the failure on Franks. Many Army participants in the debate have attempted to place the blame on Schwarzkopf, suggesting that Franks was blameless. Franks has chosen to remain relatively silent. The evidence suggests to me that both are equally to blame.

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End Notes

1. United States Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, Final Report to Congress, April 1992, hereafter referred to as Title V, p.230.
2. Title V, p. 230, 262; Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, 14 June 1993, p. 6-16; H. Norman Schwarzkopf, General, U.S. Army, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, Linda Grey Bantam Books, New York, October 1992, p. 383; U. S. News & World Report Staff, *Triumph Without Victory*, Times Books, Toronto, 1993, pp. 169-170.
3. Schwarzkopf, p. 383.
4. Gulf War Air Power Survey, Department of Defense, Summary, 5 May 1993, Part 4, p.12; Lt. Col. Richard B. H. Lewis, USAF, U.S. Army War College Military Studies Paper, *Desert Storm -- JFACC Problems Associated With Battlefield Preparation*, U. S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 15 April 1993, p. 24.
5. Lt. Col. Peter S. Kindsvatter, USA, "VII Corps in the Gulf War", *Military Review*, February 1992, p. 26.
6. Title V, p. 282; Kindsvatter, p. 33.
7. Kindsvatter, p. 36.