

Desert Storm's End Game

By Lieutenant General John H. Cushman, U.S. Army (Retired)

Could the XVIII Airborne Corps have shut the door? A June 1993 article in *Proceedings* by former Air Force Colonel James G. Burton, entitled "Pushing Them Out the Back Door," blamed VII Corps' use of synchronization tactics for allowing the Iraqi Republican Guard to escape. Eight commentaries by knowledgeable Army authors have since offered rebuttal to the biggest part of Colonel Burton's thesis. What remains to be discussed is how Army forces under General Norman Schwarzkopf did indeed "push them out the back door." There were two basic ways.

At 0400 Kuwaiti time on 24 February 1991, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commanding the Coalition forces in the Gulf War, launched Desert Storm's ground attack. Iraqi resistance at the front quickly crumbled; by 27 February, VII Corps was driving eastward to the Kuwait-Basrah highway, which was clogged with fleeing Iraqis under air attack. The Iraqi Republican Guard was being destroyed; Coalition casualties were surprisingly few. That evening, at 2100 Saudi Arabian time, General Schwarzkopf gave the world his hour-long "mother of all briefings." Thirty minutes after it ended, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had Schwarzkopf on the telephone, to pass along the President's wish to stop the attack as soon as possible. He mentioned 0500 (Schwarzkopf's time) as the hour the President had in mind and asked Schwarzkopf's reaction.

As he gave a tentative assent, General Schwarzkopf added, "I'll check with my commanders." From the moment Schwarzkopf talked to Lieutenant General John J. Yeosock, commander of Schwarzkopf's U.S. Army forces—including the advancing VII and XVIII Airborne Corps—Yeosock's two corps began irreversibly to stop the fighting.

Unfortunately, at the time of General Powell's call, General Schwarzkopf did not know where his leading forces

actually were.¹ Had he known their real situation, he would not have needed to poll his commanders (a strange reaction to Powell's query, in any event); that would have obviated the confusion caused in forward units when they were later given an 0800 cease-fire time. And he would have been in a position to ask that the President hold the cease-fire at least until noon, allowing him to trap the Iraqi forces, which were then south of the Euphrates. The means to do so were at hand, and a large part of the Republican Guard would not have escaped.

The Gulf War was a success. Its outcome fundamentally changed the complexion of the Middle East. It diminished, perhaps eliminated, Iraq's ability to browbeat its neighbors. But the war would have been a greater success if Saddam Hussein had not been able to salvage so much of his army. With a large part of his Republican Guard intact, Hussein reduced the leverage the victors had after the war to make him behave—or even to bring about his removal from power. In the story of how Hussein was able to extract his forces lies a lesson for future U.S. field commanders.

German operational doctrine uses the term *finger-spitzengefuehl* (fingertip touch) to capture a commander's masterful hands-on sensing of the moving tactical situation on the battlefield, together with the situation's risks and opportunities. For the ground war of Desert Storm, General Schwarzkopf did not have fingertip touch; he had not created a command-and-control scheme that would allow it. Lacking this essential fingertip touch in the war's final hours, he evidently did not grasp—and he surely failed to seize—the opportunity to trap all of Iraq's forces south of the Euphrates.

General Schwarzkopf's U.S. forces came to him in Central Command "components"—ArCent (Third U.S. Army), MarCent (I Marine Expeditionary Force), NavCent (Seventh Fleet), and CentAF (Ninth Air Force)—each with a three-star commander.² Over these components he, as CinCCent, wielded powerful new team-building authority, given to unified commanders by the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols legislation.

Under joint doctrine triggered by Goldwater-Nichols, the U.S. joint force commander also could designate a single air authority—the joint force air component commander (JFACC)—for the "planning, coordination, allo-



U.S. ARMY (KUEHNIG)

cation, and tasking” of all the air in the force, regardless of its service.³ General Schwarzkopf designated CentAF commander Lieutenant General Charles A. Horner, who brought into his air-control center people of other services and nations.

Similarly, while placing sea-launched cruise missiles and carrier aviation under the tasking authority of the JFACC, Schwarzkopf called on his naval component commander to direct the sea campaign. He charged NavCent commander Vice Admiral Henry A. Mauz, Jr.—later Vice Admiral Stanley R. Arthur—to conduct sea and coastal operations with the U.S. Navy forces he commanded and with other U.S. forces (Coast Guard and Marine units and occasionally Army helicopter elements) over which he had operational control, and to pull together other nations’ naval contingents in the Coalition’s sea effort.⁴

Organizing his land forces for combat presented General Schwarzkopf with a different problem. Below the brigade or battalion level, land formations of different nations and services do not mix well—their required teamwork is intricate, and their detailed ways of fighting differ from nation to nation and Army to Marine. Force proficiency comes only by working together for weeks and months.

General Schwarzkopf had under his command the U.S. Army’s land forces and those of the U.S. Marine Corps. He would be given operational control of the British and French land contingents; of division size and accustomed to working with Americans, they could come under U.S. corps or equivalent command. Arab national authorities, however, would not place their forces under his direction; they insisted on Arab-only chains of command. Schwarzkopf’s solution for this was the Coalition, Coordination, Communications Integration Center, a bilateral arrangement for achieving Saudi-U.S. teamwork. Schwarzkopf headed the U.S. side of the center; his coun-

terpart was Lieutenant General Khalid, son of the Saudi Minister of Defense and a member of the Saudi royal family.

In August 1990, the Marines began deploying Marine expeditionary brigades to Saudi Arabia; as these arrived they were reconfigured into the I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) of two divisions, one large air wing, and a sizable force service support group. Headquarters I MEF had been at Camp Pendleton, California; its commander had long been double-hatted as Commander MarCent. Only recently named to command, Lieutenant General Walter E. Boomer arrived in-country on 17 August. Some part of MarCent was to be held afloat in a position to carry out amphibious operations.

The Commander ArCent, General Yeosock, was triple-hatted. He was also Deputy Commander, Forces Command (headquartered at Fort McPherson, Georgia, it consisted of all stateside Army forces, active and reserve), and Commander Third U.S. Army, which was a planning headquarters for the U.S. Army’s CentCom employments.⁵

The U.S. Army is uniquely qualified to establish and operate a rear area logistic support organization. By 10 August, Army Major General William G. Pagonis was establishing for General Yeosock a “provisional theater support command.” Its mission, assigned by Schwarzkopf, was to provide theater-wide support for the reception, onward movement, and sustainment of Coalition forces.

On 8 November, the President announced a doubling of the U.S. forces in the Gulf. More reserves would be called up; the two-division MarCent would receive two more MEBs; the Army’s VII Corps would join XVIII Airborne Corps; Third Army would be a two-corps, seven division force; and, with I MEF, General Schwarzkopf would have three corps-sized U.S. land formations. While it would have been possible for him to combine Army and Marine divisions in three mixed corps-sized formations,

it made more sense—because time for cross-training was short—to keep Marine divisions under I MEF and Army divisions in the two Army corps.⁶

I MEF would fit well in a plan that placed it along the Gulf coast near its logistic bases and in a position to link up with a deeper amphibious operation should that be called for. There, along with Arab Joint Forces Commands on each flank (JFC-North and JFC-East), it could breach the Iraqi barriers and retake Kuwait City.⁷ VII and XVIII Airborne Corps, with their stronger logistic structures (and with the British and French divisions under their operational control), could be moved overland westward and sustained in a deep envelopment of the Iraqi defenses.

General Schwarzkopf had three options for the command-and-control of his U.S. land formations:

- ▶ He could create a separate land forces commander.
- ▶ He could double-hat himself as land forces commander, directly commanding ArCent/Third Army and MarCent/I MEF, both of which would have operational and logistic responsibilities. (ArCent, commanding the 22nd support Command, also would have a theater logistic responsibility.)
- ▶ He could take direct operational control of the Army corps—orders for operations would come directly from and corps battle reports would flow directly to Schwarzkopf's command center. Yeosock would assist

Schwarzkopf in planning; he would stay entirely current on plans and operations; he would with all his assets support the corps, but he would not decide on or direct the corps' operations.

In August 1990, with a one-corps Third Army, General Schwarzkopf chose the second option. When it later became clear that he would have a two-corps Third Army, he stayed with that choice, bringing in a three-star Deputy CinCCent, Lieutenant General Calvin A. H. Waller, to relieve himself of some of the details of land force direction and air/land coordination.

There were cogent arguments for the second option. The CinC was doing high policy and theater strategy; he was in daily touch with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; he needed to work personally with the Saudis, British, French, Navy, Marines, and all the rest; he had the key role dealing with the media; he had to supervise the air war's planning and execution. He could reasonably have said that there were not enough hours in the day for him to take on this part of General Yeosock's established duties.

He could also say that, in principle, the CinC is not a war fighter; that strategic, not operational, direction is his role; that he surveys the scene, allocates forces, and provides mission guidance. He could claim that directing the operations of the corps of his Army component was not

his business but rather the job of his Army component commander, who had resources and expertise for that task (even though that would place another command center, located in Riyadh not far from his own—itsself 300 miles from the fight—in the chain between the CinC and his frontline Army commanders, inevitably delaying and possibly garbling battle reports and orders).

Making a case for Schwarzkopf's choice, the draft Army history tells of Yeosock's detailed planning sessions with his corps and division commanders and of the time he and they spent in war games and map exercises. It describes the elaborate ArCent war room, with its nearby all-source center linked to a comprehensive worldwide intelligence system and with its integration of operations/intelligence and logistics.

General Schwarzkopf laid out the land war concept of operations, he guided ArCent in periodic sessions where commanders described their plans, and he approved ArCent's final operational scheme. Yet the draft Army history tells of the contradictions in his relationship with Yeosock. On one hand, Schwarzkopf wanted the operation to go his way, which called for getting into Yeosock's tactical plans in detail; on the other hand, he sought to let his subordinate commander command his own force.

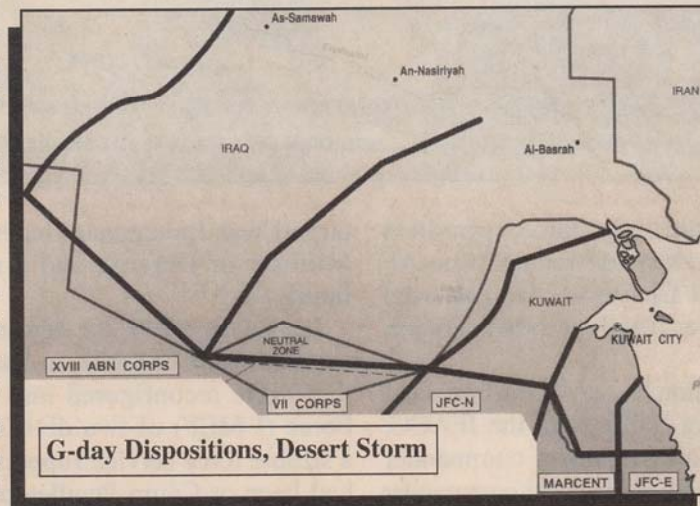
The dilemma was inevitable. Some 75% of

Schwarzkopf's land combat power resided in ArCent's two corps. They contained nine (seven U.S., one British, and one French) of CentCom's 11 non-Arab divisions. They would carry out the action that ultimately would be decisive in Desert Storm: the destruction of the Republican Guard. With personal responsibility for mission accomplishment, General Schwarzkopf could not simply turn that action over to a subordinate; he had to intervene. Leaving Yeosock in the chain of command set up an air of ambiguity: Who was in charge?

"You've got it" may have been General Schwarzkopf's words to General Yeosock, but "I've got it" was his action.

This problem came to a head in the celebrated Schwarzkopf clash with VII Corps commander Lieutenant General Frederick M. Franks, Jr., over the latter's slowness in the first two days of the attack. The problem lay in Schwarzkopf's acceptance of VII Corps' time-consuming opening scheme, then in his frustrated last-minute effort to move VII Corps' attack up by a day. Schwarzkopf relates, "I began to feel as if I was trying to drive a wagon pulled by racehorses (the rapidly moving XVIII Airborne Corps) and mules." But he wasn't in the driver's seat, Yeosock was.

While his problem could have been foreseen in November, in mid-February—when it was clear that the



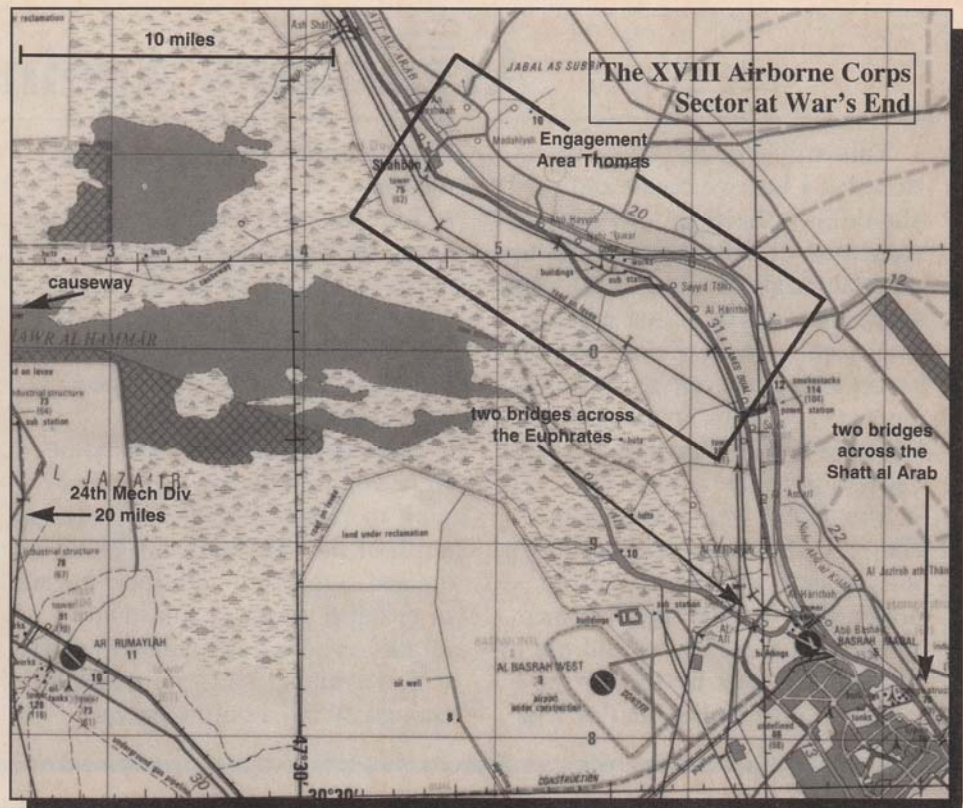
war's end might come quickly upon launching the ground attack—it became essential that Schwarzkopf himself direct the two corps. By then he had the free time to do it, and he had the “trusted” General Waller, who “had come up through the Army as an armor officer.” From a forward command post, Waller, as Deputy CinC, could help Schwarzkopf exercise fingertip touch.⁸ Yeosock could support by, for example, providing staff expertise for a land operations cell in Schwarzkopf's command center.

The Gulf War's round-the-clock fighting in a trackless desert—often in the rain with command posts ever on the move—made it even more difficult than usual for commanders to know where lead units were. Thus it was even more urgent for General Schwarzkopf to take measures that would permit his knowing just that in near real time. Although not the only cause (garbled reporting was another), failure to streamline his land formation chain of command led Schwarzkopf to lose track of his lead units in the last hours of Desert Storm, contributing to his failure to grasp his opportunity to trap Iraq's forces.

At midnight 27 February, the 24th Mechanized Division, with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment attached, was refueling and rearming. It was preparing to attack within hours to destroy the Republican Guard in its zone and to seize the causeway crossing over the Euphrates. These formations faced a demoralized, ineffective enemy. At 0330, the division commander learned from corps that a cease-fire had been called. Following orders, he suspended operations.

The XVIII Corps' 101st Airborne Division (air assault) had, on the morning of the 27th, established Forward Operating Base Viper. All day, four battalions of Apache attack helicopters from Viper had struck Iraqi columns in Engagement Area Thomas. That evening, the 101st was preparing to launch a brigade task force from Forward Operating Base Cobra farther west. Carrying some 80 vehicle-mounted antitank missile launchers, the task force was to refuel helicopters at Viper. At mid-morning of 28 February, it would, with Apache and air support, assault and seize objectives in Thomas and block the highways from Basrah to the north. There would be no need for infantry and armor to fight their way into Basrah and capture the crossings there.

Except for an eastward movement of the 24th Mechanized Division—which occurred after the official cessation of hostilities and included seizing the causeway—neither the 24th's nor the 101st's planned actions took place.⁹ Republican Guard units south of the Euphrates immediately began to flow north. Two days later General Yeosock's morning briefer told him that the Iraqi forces



“... continue moving out of the Basrah pocket . . . conducting hasty and deliberate river crossings to save remaining forces.”

Aside from lacking fingertip touch, General Schwarzkopf seems to have failed to trap the Republican Guard because of his mind set to destroy it. On 14 November he had said to his assembled commanders, “We need to destroy—not attack, not damage, not surround [but] destroy the Republican Guard.” To the commander XVIII Corps on 26 February he said, “You are to destroy all war-fighting equipment. Do not just pass it on the battlefield.” Of the 27 February situation, he writes: “Central Command's Army corps were now moving inexorably east, like the piston in an enormous cider press” His words to General Powell that day: “I want to . . . totally destroy everything in our path.” In his postwar interview with David Frost, he said that his plan was for “a battle of annihilation.” Such a mind set did not allow for trapping the enemy, even though he had the forces at hand which could have done just that.¹⁰

Casualties on both sides also were a consideration. Schwarzkopf writes: “[W]e'd kicked this guy's butt, leaving no doubt in anyone's mind that we'd won decisively, and we'd done it with very few casualties. Why not end it? Why get somebody else killed tomorrow? That made up my mind.” He says that he told General Powell, about 2400 on the 27th, “Our objective was the destruction of the enemy forces, and for all intents and purposes we've accomplished that objective.” Powell then went ahead with plans for the President to announce an 0800 local time cessation of hostilities.

But Schwarzkopf relates that he later called Powell: “If we call this cease-fire, we're going to see Republican Guard T-72s driving across pontoon bridges . . . Powell came back later and said that the White House now understood

Arguments Against

This article offers a line of action that I believe could and should have been followed in the execution of Desert Storm. Rationales through which one can challenge that line of action include:

- ▶ Any movement of Coalition land forces into positions north of the Euphrates would have been unacceptable to key Coalition partners, especially to the Arabs.
- ▶ The action would have conflicted with an essential, although unspoken, Coalition objective, which was to leave Iraq's armed forces at a level that would not invite either attack by Iran or the potential dismemberment of Iraq

among its Kurdish and Shiite populations.

- ▶ Television images of destruction along the "highway of death" north of Kuwait in the hours before General Schwarzkopf's briefing were building in the President and his advisors an urgent need to "stop the killing."
- ▶ U.S. casualties up to this point were gratifyingly low. An air assault to establish blocking positions north of the Euphrates might have created significant additional losses in pushing toward a gain that might have been difficult to justify.
- ▶ The eventual outcome was good enough. Why should General

Schwarzkopf and his masters in Washington have tried to calibrate it more precisely?

Each of these has a counter. In essence, my argument is that the eventual outcome was not good enough, and that, with fingertip touch stemming from more suitable command-and-control for the ground war and an operational insight that used available capabilities to trap the demoralized and ineffective enemy in the war's final hours, a better outcome was achievable—and that, in considering what might have been and how it might have been, there are important lessons for the future.

that some tanks would get away and decided to accept it."

If General Schwarzkopf had from the outset also been thinking in terms of trapping the enemy, and if he had fully grasped his lead forces' actual situations, plans, and capabilities when queried late in the evening of 27 February, he could have replied (without polling his commanders) to General Powell, "Give me until noon local time tomorrow. By then I'll have the highway north of Basrah blocked and the Euphrates causeway secured, and we'll have the Iraqis trapped." He could have told the Chairman that, in view of the enemy's demoralized condition, casualties would be few.

Had he done so, not only would the world have seen a true example of fingertip touch, but Saddam Hussein would have been more surely in the victors' grip, there would have been no nagging aftertaste of a Desert Storm flawed because too many of the enemy got away, and history might well have taken a different turn.

¹General Schwarzkopf's autobiography, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (Bantam, 1992), pp. 473-477, gives two examples. On 28 February, when Schwarzkopf "entered the war room. . . [he] was told that. . . the 24th Mech [was] at a road junction just south of Basra." The 24th Division was nowhere near there. And Schwarzkopf writes that the "situation map" that morning was "clearly marked" and his operations staff chief had "personally [given him] confirmation" that the Safwan road junction was occupied early on the 28th. It was not.

General Schwarzkopf's book and the draft U.S. Army history of the Gulf War, prepared for the Chief of the U.S. Army Center of Military History, are the primary sources for this article. One might expect that CentCom by now would have produced its own history of the Gulf War; it has not. General Schwarzkopf himself is responsible for this lapse. CentCom's assigned historian at MacDill AFB, a major in the Army Reserve, was called to active duty in August 1990 and spent the war in a transportation terminal company. Although substitute historical support was offered to him, General Schwarzkopf ordered that there be no CentCom command historian in the theater; there was thus no systematic recording of data or collection of documents for historical purposes at that headquarters in Desert Shield/Desert Storm. General Schwarzkopf took with him into retirement a massive file of Desert Shield/Desert Storm documents collected by him, along with the daily notes maintained by his executive officer. To all of this he has denied access by the CentCom historian, who returned to his post in early 1991, and by other official historians. By mid-1993, the CentCom historian had

completed the task of reconstructing CentCom's records of the Gulf War. Using this material, writing of the official CentCom history will now begin.

²CentCom is U.S. Central Command; CinCCent is its commander-in-chief; ArCent is U.S. Army Forces, Central Command; NavCent is CentCom's U.S. Navy forces; MarCent is its U.S. Marine Corps forces; and CentAF is its U.S. Air Force forces. U.S. Coast Guard forces in the theater operated under U.S. Navy command and with U.S. Navy logistic support. Commander ArCent also had the title Commander, Third U.S. Army.

³Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 1 December 1989, p. 197

⁴Operational control ". . . normally provides full authority to organize commands and forces and to employ those forces as the commander in operational control considers necessary to accomplish assigned missions. . . [it] does not, in and of itself, include authoritative direction for logistics or matters of administration, discipline, internal organization, or training." Joint Publication 1-02, op cit., p. 263.

⁵Forces Command is both a major Army command and a "combatant command" reporting through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense, the latter status deriving from its mission of land defense of the 48 states. It has only Army forces assigned and its principal staff officers (who use joint staff designators) are all Army, except for the J-5 (plans) who is Air Force. In the summer of 1993, this structure was revised in light of the expanded mission of U.S. Atlantic Command.

⁶An Army armored brigade could readily be, and for the ground war was, placed under I MEF.

⁷This scheme also would help make the Iraqis think that the Marine force was the main attack.

⁸Third Army had a forward command post, which reported only to Yeosock in Riyadh.

⁹The draft Army history on the Gulf War (pages 427-435) describes an action that began the night of 1 March with the 24th Division "moving forward in zone" to a north-south line four miles west of the causeway "looking for abandoned equipment," inasmuch as "the division had reconnaissance elements beyond the causeway road complex." This action triggered a company-sized fight (escalating to battalion, then brigade) with the Iraqi columns that had been using the causeway to flee north. The result was the destruction of 81 Iraqi tanks, 95 personnel carriers, 8 wheeled armored vehicles, 5 artillery pieces, 11 Frog missile launchers, and 23 trucks. The division lost one tank (the result of an Iraqi tank exploding alongside it), and one man wounded. By the time the action ended on 2 March, the division had moved six miles forward, "enough to control the causeway line of withdrawal."

¹⁰General Schwarzkopf also may not have grasped the air assault capabilities of the 101st Airborne Division.

General Cushman has commanded the 101st Airborne Division and the combined field army that defends South Korea along the Demilitarized Zone. He also served as Commandant of the Army's Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.