

MIKE'S GULF WAR DIARY

By

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(From a letter written April 2, 1991)



The photo above was taken minutes before boarding our flight to Saudi Arabia in March of 1991. I'm in the middle row, center, Steve Stoner is just above me, top row center.

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Preface

This story is much larger than the Gulf War, at least for me. There are two essential reasons for my preparation of this document. Firstly, I hope it will add to the general historical base of the Gulf War, given the fact that it is presented from the viewpoint of a civilian deployee. Rarely do you ever get the story of non-military participants in wartime, despite the fact that civilians are the backbone of Military Logistics. Whatever a soldier wears, eats, drives or shoots has likely been acquired and transported to the battle theater through the efforts of Department of Defense civilian employees, and their contractor counterparts. I'm proud to be one of them and I hope this bit of history serves both to enlighten and to alter the common misconception of Civil Service employees.

Perhaps more important for me, is in writing this account I am coming to grips with an experience that didn't end in 1991 with my return home. You see, I've never really returned home. Within a year and a half of my return, I lost my two best friends and with them, the world I knew before the invasion of Kuwait. My mother passed away in June of 1991, and this shock was followed in November of 1992 by the passing of the dear woman I shared with for nearly thirteen years. Then my pre-war world disappeared completely when the budget cutbacks deprived me of the job I loved so much with the Military Traffic Management Command in Bayonne, NJ.

Time though, has it's way of mitigating all circumstances. I have a new job with a wonderful group of people in Picatinny Arsenal in Northern NJ, and Rachel, my new best friend and soon to be my wife, has shown me the path to a new, happy and fulfilling life. But there is still an angry fire within me that needs to be drowned. There are still wounds that need healing - so now I've got to go back to the Gulf.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The period of the Gulf War and more important, the years immediately after, were for me a time of powerful emotions. I am proud of the way the way I've raised myself from the depths of depression that overcame me upon my return, but the battle continues. Unfortunately the evil of prejudice will enter the story. I experienced systematized and sanctioned anti-Jewish bias by the Saudi Arabians, but instead of railing against it, I became consumed by hatred myself. This is wrong and I am ashamed. I've spent recent years trying to overcome this hatred and I'll fight as long as I live to rid myself of the last vestiges of ill-feelings I still harbor. Acknowledging my feelings is part of the process. Therefore, let the reader be forewarned, this document will contain some stark phrases which will frankly describe the prejudice I felt at the time. Remember that those feelings like all the events in this paper are history. I apologize to those I offend.

. . .

You will notice that I name very few of the persons I refer to in this document, I do this deliberately to protect their privacy.

CHAPTER 1: PRELUDE

Like most kids of my generation, I grew up on my father's stories of World War II. There were many things about him I never really understood, about why he never complained, and never let me complain, about being hot or cold or about food or clothing or anything of a domestic nature. I always assumed that his wartime experiences had something to do with this mysterious behavior, but I never could pinpoint an explanation. I was 39 years old when I finally understood all of my father's quirks. In the years since 1991, I've never complained about the weather, or the food, nor can I really tolerate anyone who does. You see, the worst weather in Staten Island is far better than sunshine "over there," and the worst food anywhere "back home" is better than the poorly prepared, insect infested cuisine that was the norm "over there." In the years since 1991, I've never gotten over the pleasure of just being home.

I don't think I'd ever given the Persian Gulf two thoughts until I was forcibly extracted from my comfortable Civil Service existence and dumped, along with plane load of computer equipment and other hapless deployees, upon the dusty tarmac of King Abdul Aziz airbase in Dahrhan, Saudi Arabia. This occurred eight months after some guy named Saddam decided to make a vacation home out of his neighboring Kuwait. I was in shock. Eighteen hours earlier our C-141 transport lifted off from Dover Air Force Base, amid jokes and apprehension and a small sense of adventure. But now we were there, dust, gas masks, Desert Camo Uniforms and one nagging question, "How the hell did I get myself into this mess?"



I don't play the lottery because, back in 1972 I won the most important lottery of my life. The Vietnam War was winding down and so was my Student Deferment. College only kept you out of the draft for 4 years in those days and I was in my fifth year - and about to become eligible for service. Fortunately, I drew number 271 in the draft lottery and spent my year as "1A" without even being called for a physical. (Much to my mother's chagrin, that "1A" on my draft card was the only "A" I would earn that year in College.)

In the mid-seventies, after graduation and avoiding any possibility of military service in Southeast Asia, I made two critical decisions that resulted in my involvement in a war in Southwest Asia some twenty years later. Firstly, I decided to buy a home computer because I really enjoyed writing software as a hobby - in those days "real" computer buffs wrote applications, we didn't buy them. Well, that decided what I'd do for a living, and my second decision decided for whom I'd do it - and that's entirely Dad's fault.

Dad had been a career Federal Employee since I could remember. I looked at my father's benefits and compared them to what my friends were getting in industry and decided that I too would work for the Federal Government. I had an entry-level Federal job and was looking around for something I could

parlay into a career. At the time, Dad was working in Bayonne at the Eastern Area Command of the Military Traffic Management Command (MTMCEA) and he noticed a merit promotion notice for a computer specialist position at the Eastern Management Information Systems Office, the MTMC computer people. He gave it to me and I filled out the application, not really believing that I had any chance of getting the job.

My father had nothing to do with my hiring, EMISO was a separate organization but I wouldn't have had the opportunity if he hadn't brought home that Merit Promotion announcement. They were impressed that someone would actually like to program computers as a hobby and decided to take a chance on me. I guess the day I actually boarded that airplane to Saudi was in April 1980 when I was hired as a computer specialist by EMISO. If not then, certainly the day they handed me a project with the acronym, ASPUR.

CHAPTER 2: BAYONNE

Perhaps I shouldn't try to explain the intricacies of Defense Transportation, it is of almost Kabalistic complexity and could result in the average reader doubting their sanity but I guess a few words of explanation are in order. In the military scheme of things, the Air Force runs the airplanes and air bases, the Navy runs the cargo ships, warships and Naval Bases and the Army, in the person of my then employer, the Military Traffic Management Command, runs overland transportation and cargo ports. The Army runs the ports? Yeah – go figure. Amongst the core competencies of the now defunct Military Traffic Management Command was the development of computer systems to facilitate, track and document the movement of cargo through the Defense Transportation System. One of the numerous projects I got involved with during my tenure with MTMC was a system to assist transportation planners in arranging the necessary sea-lift resources (ships' capacity, port capacity, trucks, rail cars etc.) to be used when a unit has to be rapidly deployed. It was called the Automated System to Predetermine Unit Requirements, ASPUR.

Military Transportation Specialists are incredibly talented, resourceful and patient people. They plan an operation down to the "Nth" degree – and then watch their intricate plans go up in smoke when a General Officer utters two words, "I want!" Generals are, at least in their own minds, never wrong and arguing with them is not an option, therefore flexibility is the key to a transportation planner's sanity and success. Naturally, that same flexibility needs to be programmed into the computer systems the planners use, and an important reason why a programmer needs to be available to make time-critical changes. Most computer systems are developed around business rules that are "engraved in stone," but when "The General" says, "I want!" the stone crumbles – and the programmer goes to work.



My deployment system had been given a pretty good shakeout in the years preceding the Desert Shield deployments. The Army conducts many deployment exercises, some of them are done on paper, simply to test the systems and procedures to be utilized in an actual deployment. Others however, involve actually deploying a great many troops and a good deal of equipment to overseas locations. I had participated in many of them, assigned to deployment ports in places like Savannah GA and Jacksonville FL. There I would get to meet and work closely with personnel from United States Army Reserve Units who trained for the eventuality of an actual deployment. Many of those highly professional and extremely dedicated people would be activated during the Gulf War and their performance would be flawless. I was always impressed every time I got to work with the Reserve Units assigned to MTMC, it was great to meet so many of them when I was in Saudi.

After the usual shakeouts and modifications, my system performed exactly according to specifications during those exercises. I have to admit that I was really proud of that, but the real pride came later.

The largest deployment exercises usually amounted to three shiploads of equipment to Europe or Korea. Little did I know in those days, that over five hundred shiploads of equipment would be ferried to the Persian Gulf. The system was designed to "bug out" a Corps. The Persian Gulf deployment was twice that and the system performed perfectly at twice its design capacity. Remember that flexibility is the key to deployments and I designed a whole lot of flexibility into that system.

On August 2, 1990, an associate and I were planning a business trip to the Azores to tweak up a port system there. I'd been there the year before and really got to like the place. The island of Terciera in the Azores is the location of Lages field, a United States Air Force Base used as a stop over for aircraft moving on to Europe and the Middle East. Supplying the base is the Army's job and a small Army unit is located there to manage sea cargo traffic. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the Azores is the fact that there is a small Navy there – and it's run by the Army! (Didn't I tell you this would be confusing.) It seems that the port there is a little too shallow for large container ships to pull up to a dock, so containers are offloaded onto barges and towed to the dock. The tugs and lighters are manned by Army Personnel. I hope I'm not divulging a military secret here, because I've got to think that if the Navy actually knew that the Army was operating watercraft, they would have put up a pretty big "stink" by now. The average Admiral would choke on his cigar smoke at the idea of a green-suited Army Warrant Officer mastering a working vessel.

Anyway, somewhere in the midst of preparing for the Azores adventure, I remember hearing about the invasion of Kuwait. It meant nothing to me, less than nothing actually, my reaction was something on the order of, "Let them kill each other." As I mentioned earlier, prejudice will enter this story, I'm not proud of it and I've worked very hard in the years since the Gulf War to overcome it, but it was there and has to be addressed. Today, it is my fervent and genuine desire that the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael, who are born of the same father and who, in their own way, worship his God, should one day live together as brothers in their ancestral homes. Unfortunately, that concept remains a pipe dream both today and in 1990 when I began to realize...

I am a Jew. In all honesty, I don't ever remember even thinking those words before the Gulf War. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't one of those non-religions "cultural" Jews. I observed in the Conservadox tradition, always went to Synagogue on Sabbaths and Holidays and kept a Kosher home. But before the war, all of that was mechanical, and I gave it about as much thought as brushing my teeth. I visited Israel once in 1971, found it interesting historically, but didn't develop an emotional connection with the land or people and never had a desire to return. I still don't. I did however, have a political interest in the Mid-East and naturally sided with my "own people." So in 1990, being Jewish meant not liking Arabs or their supporters. My religious practice included a personal stridency. I was and remain committed to owning the most efficient car I can so that I use the least possible amount of Arab oil. Oil was really on my mind in those days, I hated the fact that my gas money was being used to finance Arab Terrorism in Israel and elsewhere. Therefore, when I heard that one Oil Sheik in Iraq invaded another in Kuwait, I was obviously less than concerned.

Well, my attitude changed pretty rapidly when it became apparent that the U. S. Government was obliged to honor a treaty with Saudi Arabia committing the military might of the United States to protect them from a possible Iraqi invasion. Anti-Semites for generations have always harped on the myth of Dual-Loyalty, that Jews could not be fully loyal to any host country for whatever perverse

reasons these Jew-haters could concoct. The fact was, that despite my lack of concern as to which Oil Sheikdom invaded which, and my deep opposition to shedding one drop of American blood to protect an Arab country, there was never a moment of hesitation about doing the job for which I had prepared for so long.

We geared up rapidly. All over the East Coast of the United States, special deployment ports opened up and cargo from the Eighteenth Airborne Corps, whose mission it was to protect Saudi Arabia, began to flow into the ports. The summer of 1990 was brutal for the Reservists and the civilians perspiring in the heat and humidity in places like Beaumont, Texas, Savannah, Georgia and Moorehead City, North Carolina. As bad as deployees like myself had it in



Saudi, the stateside augmentees had it worse. They worked night and day, existing on a few hours rest and pulled off the largest and fastest air and sea deployment in the history of modern warfare. The tanks and trucks and helicopters and ambulances rolled into the ports by convoy or by rail, and with as little delay as possible, were driven or hoisted aboard Fast Sealift Ships and then off to Ad Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

Things in the Headquarters weren't exactly leisurely either. Like everybody else I was working seven days a week, occasionally getting home, but frequently sleeping in my office. Working in the ports was tough, but planning and managing a huge operation like Desert Shield was no picnic either and the Transportation Specialists I supported with were working at fever pitch. We had one consolation though, at least we were home. The best part about programming a deployment management system was that it kept me home, in the headquarters where they needed me. Things started to calm down by the end of October and I actually had a little time to relax.

One amusing incident comes to mind during that time. Everyone knows how conscious the Military is concerning security. I've always taken that seriously, after all, the information my systems handled would be very useful to an enemy in defending against us. One restriction in those days, however, went beyond the limits of security and entered the ludicrous. I wasn't allowed to say the words "Saudi Arabia" on the telephone. You see, Saddam had no idea that we were sending an armored force to Saudi Arabia (yeah, right) and Mike Sturm would tip him off to the whole war plan if he said "Saudi Arabia" on a non-secure telephone line. So they hastily hooked up a STU3, a scrambler telephone, on my desk and now I could talk freely. Dan Rather could say "Saudi Arabia" and show pictures of the deployment to millions, George Bush could talk about it to the nation and the world - but Mike Sturm had to turn the key on his phone and "go secure" before he could say - well - you know what.

I was on that phone, and my other non-secure line constantly in those days. Lots of times, I'd have a

fellow from our European headquarters in Rotterdam on one line and another in Saudi itself on the other. Little did I know then, that I'd be meeting them personally in months.

In November of 1990, President George Bush went on TV and stated that the United States would commit the armored might of the European-based Seventh Corps to take the offensive and liberate Kuwait. Whoa – wait a minute! All of our prior planning and systems development centered about the cold-war paradigm of sending a stateside force to protect Europe – no one ever considered "bugging out" our European based force to the Mid East. George Bush finished his speech and I turned off the TV and started packing – I knew where I was going. My orders came through about a week later, indefinite TDY (Temporary Duty) to Rotterdam in the Netherlands, the Headquarters of the Military Traffic Management Command, Europe.

CHAPTER 3: EUROPE

I've never had the slightest desire to visit Europe for either business or pleasure. As I look back on those days I realize that at the time, my feelings were foolish, but they were quite real. You see, I had only the frame of reference of my grandparents to judge Europe by. For years I listened to their stories of persecution in their native Poland so it's no wonder that I inherited their general dislike of anything European. Europe to me was a land of pogroms and Antisemitism and held no appeal at all.

As much as my grandparents hated Europe, they loved their adopted country even more. They called the United States "*Eretz Yisroel*" literally the "Land of Israel" meaning that for the first time in their lives they could be Jews without suffering systemic antisemitism. They left Europe, both in mind and in body, incorporating themselves fully into an American society that allowed them to prosper economically while affording the opportunity to observe the Jewish religion to the fullest. Many members of my family returned to Europe when our country called during the first and second World Wars. Some still bear the scars of wounds suffered there, my cousin, Sidney Heistein, of blessed memory, was killed in action liberating Italy in 1943. Now it was my turn to return to Europe for a military purpose.

My supervisor for many years was a deeply perceptive, intelligent individual who has an uncanny ability to understand people. He understood my feelings about Europe much better than most because he was of African descent and had his own misgivings about the South. More important, he also knew that I was wrong, but I'd have to find that out for myself. We made a deal years before the Gulf War that he would take the European business trips and I would do the stateside travel. He always told me that I should go to Europe because I'd grow there and would return a better person - but he told me that he'd never force me. Our deal lasted until the exigency of the Desert Shield made it impossible to avoid European travel any longer - and was he ever right about going there. My European TDY was one of the most positive experiences of my life but in November of 1990, I faced it with apprehension.

I've always been a student of World War II and my only historical interest in Europe was in that context. Thus, when I set out for Rotterdam in November of 1990, I experienced two very powerful feelings - both of which were instilled in me by previous generations. There was a strong sense of nostalgia inherited from my father's generation, because I would soon watch, as they did, American Military equipment moving through the ports of Europe. But the strongest feeling I harbored was that of fear, and that feeling was instilled by my grandparents' generation. Here I was, about to set foot on the soil they so despised, wondering would the anti-Semites who were at their heels as they departed be awaiting my return? Neither feeling lasted very long though, because...

There was no time for emotions after we got over the jet lag. Work was twelve hours a day, seven days a week. Then there were the stateside telephone calls all night - MTMC folks back home were working late also, but couldn't seem to understand that an early evening telephone call for them was one o'clock in the morning for me. What the heck, we'd have plenty of time to relax and sleep when Saddam got his. I pitched in where I could, one day writing a program to provide detailed information on what unit's gear was on which ship, the next day hauling a repaired barcode printer to the port of

Antwerp in neighboring Belgium.

At times, the nostalgia was incredible. It was eerie to be in Antwerp, fifty years after World War II, moving cargo for the United States Army. The nostalgia reached its peak on one of the three days I had off in my six-week TDY in Europe. It was December 7, 1990, and snow was forecast. I was afraid of being caught in a snowstorm, but I knew that I'd probably never get the chance again if I acted cautiously that day, so I set out for Bastogne in nearby Belgium. It was the most fascinating day I spent in Europe. It happened to be Nuts Day when we were there, everyone was out celebrating the liberation of the town. There were many American guests - once again Bastogne was filled with American Armed Forces personnel in uniform. The center of town is called McAuliff square in honor of the 101st Airborne Division commander who answered the surrender ultimatum of the German forces with the classic expression, "Nuts." A Sherman tank, bearing the markings of the 4th Armored Division sits in the square, the barrel of its weapon pointing down the road from which Patton's forces arrived to affect the relief of the beleaguered city. On the outskirts of town is found the Nuts Museum and a memorial to those who perished in the Battle of the Bulge. It was cold and snowing when night fell, much like the conditions during the battle. I parked the car next to a German armored vehicle on display there, looked out over the landscape, which still looks like the photos and films I've seen and was overcome by emotion. After dark we left Bastogne to return to Rotterdam and stopped on the outskirts of town one last time. At that moment, a fireworks display in town started up. There I was, shivering amid pine trees and patches of snow in the Ardennes, hearing explosions in the distance. Again I was overcome by the nostalgia of the experience.

World War II was on other people's minds also. My father was stationed in the Netherlands East Indies during that war and I wanted to learn more about the history of the campaign from the point of view of the Dutch. My Dutch co-workers told me many stories of the fate of Dutch prisoners taken by the Japanese when they conquered the islands. I remember a conversation we had about the possibility of Germany becoming a part of the Coalition Forces. The usually jovial Dutch suddenly got rather quiet and finally said, "No, we don't want to ever see another German Soldier leave German soil again." In 1990, there wasn't a building older than 50 years in Rotterdam, so complete was the city's destruction by German bombs in 1940. Well, enough history, let's get back to work.

The deployment continued, by barge, by rail and by convoy, equipment was moving all over Europe. In Bremerhaven, Rotterdam, Antwerp and other ports the ships were loaded and sent off to the Persian Gulf. The mighty Seventh Corps, which rolled across Europe to defeat the German invaders in World War II and stood firm against the threat of Soviet expansion during the Cold War, would now leave their European bases to meet the Iraqi invaders of Kuwait. I had the honor of speaking to many soldiers in Rotterdam



and was particularly impressed by a group of combat engineers. They would be the first to set foot on Iraqi and Kuwaiti soil. Before the tanks can roll, these engineers must blast a path for them through the static defenses. I could see the fear in their eyes but they were confident that they would get the job done and pave the way for the liberation of Kuwait. The thought of those guys kept me going, I wanted to make sure they had everything they needed and then some, before the ground war started.

More than the nostalgia, more than the cause that brought me there, the thing that impressed me most about Europe was the Europeans, and particularly the Dutch. The Dutch are the warmest, kindest and friendliest people I'd ever met. We worked closely and formed friendships, talked and shared our experiences. They told us how to get around and what to see, they showed us where to eat and how to order Chinese Food in Dutch. We joked and laughed and marveled at the beauty of the women. I never really noticed when it happened, but it did - I changed, just like my boss said I would. After six weeks of working with convivial people, eating the greatest food (oh, can they bake) and drinking the best beer I ever tasted, I completely forgot how much I was supposed to hate Europe. Gone was the prejudice of my grandparent's generation, now only through my own first-hand impressions would I judge Europe in the future. I felt liberated, cleansed - I really loved it there!

I returned home at the end of December for two weeks. I was really proud of myself after returning from Europe, proud that I had the strength to rid myself of an ancient prejudice. I understand what occurred now, the anti-Europe feelings I harbored were a fantasy, a figment of my imagination imprinted upon me by early childhood experiences. Unfortunately, the lesson I learned in Europe was almost lost on me days after my return because I was soon to be embroiled in an entirely new bout with prejudice. This was no fantasy however, and not a product of a previous generation. I was about to embark for a country where restrictions on Jews are real, where the free practice of my religion was prohibited and where I truly was in danger simply by being a Jew.

Even before I got home, we began to realize that the same need that existed in Europe for systems to document exported unit cargo also would exist in Saudi Arabia when the Gulf War ended. Somebody would have to get all that stuff out of there and, like the European deployment, no systems existed to keep track of the vast amount of cargo that had to be returned to the permanent garrisons of the deployed units. I didn't know it at the time, but I was at the center of major war plans that were being formulated in MTMC Headquarters. The Eighteenth Airborne Corps wasn't enough. The Seventh Corps wasn't enough. Neither were the Marines and the Air Force. No, Stormin' Norman needed his secret weapon - Mike Sturm and his VAX 3400 minicomputer. A paper was circulated in Bayonne, asking for volunteers to go to the Persian Gulf. I never signed it and neither did my hapless co-worker and soon to be war-buddy, Steve Stoner. I'll never make that mistake again, I volunteer for everything now, because who do you think was the first to go? I was "cool" with the idea then, Saudi Arabia was seven thousand miles away and they told me it would be "months before the war would end and months after that before they'd actually need us there." ...And I was dumb enough to believe them!

I returned to a vastly changed MTMC European Headquarters in Rotterdam in early January 1991. Just before my arrival, Dutch television presented a special on the Gulf War and to our horror, they showed pictures of our building, gave the address and identified it as "the place where all Gulf War transportation is being planned." It was a clarion call to every European terrorist to "come and get us!" The normally jovial Dutch were a bundle of nerves, everybody was looking over their shoulders,

checking for unfamiliar cars in the lot, avoiding windows - basically scared of our own shadows. We Americans remained as anonymous as possible, keeping to ourselves, avoiding speaking English where anybody could hear us and trusting nobody that we didn't know personally.

Then the Air War started and our attention turned to the Persian Gulf. The cafeteria had CNN on constantly and several times each day, we watched the news. The "folks back home" saw the scud attacks during the dinner hour, for us it was in the middle of the night. I found a new person to despise then - Peter Arnett of CNN. In my father's day it was Tokyo Rose. Dad told me that nobody much minded her because she always played the best music. Well I minded Peter Arnett plenty. Pete didn't play any music entertain us, he just sang all sorts of propaganda songs for Saddam. How 'bout it Pete - how much were the Iraqi's paying you to broadcast crap like the phony report of the "Baby Milk Factory" being bombed. Yeah right, all those guys wearing crisp new coveralls with "Baby Milk Factory" in English couldn't possibly have been a plant - nice research Pete, even the Inquirer would have laughed at that story. I didn't know who I wanted to see get hit in the head with a cruise missile first - you or Saddam.

My second European TDY was completed at the end of January. I flew home in a nearly empty flight - nobody was flying during the Gulf War, terrorism was on everybody's mind. Me, I wasn't concerned with terrorism on that flight, it was second nature by now and I was tired of being away from home. Unfortunately I only was home long enough to collect my next set of orders and plane tickets - I would spend the month of February in Falls Church Virginia at MTMC Headquarters.

By the end of my second European trip, we were committed to developing a redeployment documentation system to be installed at the headquarters of the soon to be formed MTMC detachment in Ad Dammam, Saudi Arabia. The 7th Transportation Brigade, our brothers in the Transportation Corps, ran the port of Ad Dammam for the last year. MTMC would relieve them, allowing them to return to their homes in Fort Eustis, Virginia. They deserved the rest, the 7th Group unloaded the ships and literally put the weapons in the hands of the war-fighters. They played a major role in insuring the Gulf War victory and deserve great credit.

Then they made it official, "Mike, have we got a job for you." I was too busy with acquiring, setting up and testing the new hardware to understand the ramifications of where I was about to go until they sent me over to the Pentagon to get a Red Passport and a Saudi Arabian visa. I was advised to leave the place where you have to declare your religion on the visa application blank. You see, Saudi Arabia is officially closed to Jews. I saw red, after all it was the Saudi butts that we were saving, "we" included maybe five thousand soldiers on duty in the Persian Gulf that were identifiable as Jewish. Just who the hell did they think they were? How could we justify shedding one drop of American blood to protect this putrid country, so opposed to the fundamental freedoms we stand for?

My co-workers sensed my anger and calmed me down with a whole lot of bad jokes. I boarded the bus to the Pentagon and within minutes faced another crisis - finding the passport office amid the incredible maze of corridors that comprise this enormous building. The Pentagon is about as complicated to traverse as the military bureaucracy itself - if a soldier can find his way through that building, he'll never get lost on a battlefield. And just try to ask for directions, everybody is lost in that building! Perhaps more fascinating was the almost total lack of security there. The MTMC Headquarters

building was at heightened security and I needed all sorts of identification to get in to work. The Pentagon was unguarded, except for a metal detector. I just walked in and started wandering around the hub of the Defense Department. There is a little gazebo in the center courtyard of the Pentagon, at the time, I wondered how many Soviet ICBM's were aimed at that spot.

We finished up our testing, disassembled the equipment and packed it for shipping. "Don't worry, Mike, it'll be weeks before you'll have to go." I started to relax, it was the end of February, the ground war hadn't started yet and things were cool - for about a day.

The tanks, bearing barcode labels from which shipping information was scanned directly into my documentation systems, rolled into Kuwait and Iraq. One hundred hours after the Ground War began Kuwait was liberated - mission accomplished. The word came down through channels rapidly - the Saudis wanted their infidel guest workers the hell out of their country - NOW!

My home phone rang at 2130 Hours (9:30PM) on Friday, 1 Mar 1991:

"Get a hold of Steve, you're leaving Sunday."

"SAY WHAT?" I hadn't been back from Virginia two days and had a thousand things to do.

"Hey, what about all that talk about having months to set up the system?"

"Well, you know Mike, we really thought there'd be more time but you're the best man for the job and we really need you!" ...And I was dumb enough to believe them – again!

Saudi Arabia. Oil Sheiks. Camels. Petro-dollars. Sand. No Jews or Pork Products allowed. Unlike Europe I wasn't the slightest bit afraid of going to Saudi. I was by that time mentally prepared for the challenge, but in the worst possible way - burning with hatred. All I wanted to do was get there and piss on the place.

I called Steve and told him to start packing, I'd pick him up Sunday. "SAY WHAT?" Then I fed him the same line of bull they gave me. Steve is anything but dumb and he didn't believe a word I said. I think he started planning his revenge on me that evening - you'll read about it in the next chapter.



CHAPTER 4: SAUDI ARABIA

It was a rather melancholy 39th birthday on April 2, 1991 and I wasn't in the mood for working that day. We were in Saudi Arabia now for about a month and I hadn't had a day off since our arrival. What the heck, it's my birthday and I was lonely, so I decided to take some time out and write a letter to "the folks back home." The following account is drawn from that letter. The story begins on March 3, 1991, with our "basic training" at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland.

Basic Training

It started out pretty good. From our arrival at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, until the minute MTMC (The Military Traffic Management Command) regained control of our lives, everything was highly organized and extremely well managed. Immediately upon checking in to the guest house, we received a detailed schedule of our training that was faithfully followed. The POR (Processing for Overseas Replacement) was orchestrated to the second and proceeded with remarkable smoothness – something absolutely amazing to a second generation MTMC employee, used to a normally confused state of affairs.

We had cable TV in the guest house and the last movie watched there, which turned out to be the last TV I will have seen until my return to "the world" was Full Metal Jacket, a sober account of a group of Marines from boot camp to Vietnam. Little did I know then that this was to be a portent of things to come.

The first day in Aberdeen consisted of lectures on all sorts of protocol, health issues and safety tips. The most amusing lecture, concerning sexual mores in the Mid-East, combined all of these themes. We were instructed that under no circumstances were we to approach Arab women, look at them, talk to them and of course, make no attempt to well, you-know-what with them. Concerning American women in the country, the same restrictions were imposed. We were prohibited by Saudi law to engage in any sexual activities with anyone, anywhere, at any time - but if you do, use a condom!

Our introduction to the rigors of life as a "Combat Programmer" came on the second day with our passage to the dreaded "back room of the gym." Here stood a smiling medic who was to utter the greatest understatement since Saddam said, "Relax! It ain't gonna start today." The medic smiled, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Don't worry sir, this won't hurt a bit!"

Two shots in the left arm, three in the right – and then the coup-de-gras – the "Tush Torpedo!" Now picture this, a short while later, myself and about fifty otherwise healthy, eager Saudi-bound gentlemen were congregated in a waiting room in the Dental clinic where we were to have Dental x-rays taken for identification. The room had plenty of plush seats for everybody – and not one of us could sit down. Mercifully, the pain in the butt soon faded into a fond memory, but the best was yet to come...

That night, my arms were gripped by a pain that dwarfed that of the four broken ribs I suffered in an auto accident two years before. The only thing that kept me from going insane were sweet and as yet,

unfulfilled thoughts of revenge on the MTMC folks that put me in this predicament. Later, I made an abortive attempt to alleviate the pain a bit. I put two Tylenols in my right hand and a glass of water in my left and that's as far as I could go. I literally could not raise my hand high enough to get the pills in my mouth! At least we could look forward to tomorrow when our schedule showed the morning off and a pleasant afternoon of gas mask training... yeah, right!

You know, after two days of schedules met, promises kept and general orderliness, a fellow gets used to the proper way of doing things. That all ended with one phone call. "You're scheduled on a flight leaving Dover Air Force Base, Thursday night. You'll meet up with the rest of your party tomorrow morning and proceed with them." Next day we waited, we watched, we wondered, but of course, nobody showed up.

That afternoon we received our next set of instructions – "OK, don't worry! Get them to rush you through the rest of the training and we'll tell you where to report." Two diligent soldiers followed orders and pulled strings to rush the training process. Much to the chagrin of the Aberdeen authorities, we rapidly finished the processing. Now armed with all sorts of chemical protective suits, helmets, gas masks and other necessities of desert life, we sat down to await our next set of urgent instructions. My father learned the expression "hurry up and wait" during World War II, well, it's 50 years later dad, and nothing has changed. We sat on our duffel bags for over twelve hours.

"Well, I guess you all should come on down here to Headquarters and we'll take it from here." Why not? Wednesday, 2:00PM finds us rolling into Bailey's Crossroads, Virginia - the Bermuda Triangle of Defense Transportation. Normal people enter but...

Our sojourn in Sleepy Hollow did have one good effect. We got a third-hand report that bedding might not be available "in country" so Steve Stoner, my co-worker and I found a K-Mart and bought two sleeping bags. That turned out to be one of the wisest purchases I've ever made. Right now, that sleeping bag is the only thing protecting my normally pampered civilian bones from the "untender" mercies of an Army cot. That inch of polyester is the only pleasure I've experienced in this, you'll excuse the expression, country.



Our day in Virginia consisted of, well, nothing. After hanging around with our thumbs, er, you know where, we finally found out that we were booked on a C-141 cargo flight leaving Dover AFB. Yes, that's where they used to bring the bodies back from Vietnam – you think they're trying to tell us something? Maybe I better cut out the Headquarters jokes! We got a lift to Fort Belvoir where we joined eight other condemned employees of the TCACCIS (a installation level transportation system) Project Management Office and the UNISYS Corporation. At 1700 hours Thursday, we boarded a bus,

got handshakes and best wishes from the TCACCIS Colonel, teary good-byes from friends and relatives and rode off to war.

The Flight

Not five minutes into the trip, a consensus developed amongst the "Ten Horsemen" that there was no way we could leave our lives and country – at least not sober. We told the bus driver to pull over at a deli and hastily procured two cases of Milwaukee's Finest. We arrived at Dover in the only condition a reasonable person could depart for Saudi Arabia – stewed to the gills!

We've all endured aggravating rides on crowded city buses, endless commutes through traffic jams, subway rides to nowhere or the endless car trip with family. All of these are pleasures compared to a flight on a MAC cargo aircraft. The C-141 is a large cargo airplane designed to hold just about anything – except passengers. You sit upon a canvas bench, facing inward along the sides of the ship. This inward-facing position presents no problem with regard to sightseeing because there are no windows to look out of.



You are forced to wear earplugs because the noise is unbearable, as is everything else about the flight. Your back has no support save a nylon cargo net, you have no place to put your feet up, the pain starts after the first hour and there are seventeen more to go.

No possibility of passing the time sleeping, even if I could find a comfortable position, I developed an affliction that caused insomnia throughout the entire flight – Steve Stoner. My war buddy had a number of ways to "thank" me for being the one who had to order him to get into this mess, [see the "immunoglobulin incident" below] one of them was to give me a poke in the ribs whenever I fell asleep. I put up with his annoyance because I



felt that I owed him the opportunity for a little revenge, and also because I remember reading some obscure Civil Service regulation prohibiting a supervisor from assaulting an employee. I didn't have the heart to get him back when he fell asleep because I really like the guy, besides, he's bigger than me.

Then there's the "meal". Our airborne cuisine consisted of a white box filled with various unidentifiable foodstuffs that ultimately sent one third of our group on the fast lane to the latrine. My bout with "the runs" occurred just as we were landing in Saudi – the precise moment that FAA and Military regulations prohibit you from leaving your seat. More pain – it's second nature by now.



Halfway to Saudi. Our layover in Torrejon, Spain.

After an initial eight hours of flight, we stopped over in Torrejon, Spain, where I made another wise purchase, two towels which are the only ones I've seen here. Two hours or so in Spain were followed by another eight hours in the flying dungeon. More pokes in the ribs by Steve, another white box full of poison and then we arrived. Kid, you think the flight was bad - you ain't seen nothin' yet – you're in Saudi Arabia.

We're Here !

The little hatch on the C-141 is pulled open and you get your first glimpse of the Kingdom – a dusty airport tarmac. It's all downhill from there. After a bus ride past the Jaguars and F-15's, we were deposited at the passenger terminal, a crowded, dirty hangar, and left to fend for ourselves. Remember that Saudi Visa that pissed me off so much a few weeks earlier? Well, I didn't even need it! There was no passport check, no customs, just ten guys, seven thousand miles from anywhere important, wondering how we got into this mess and how we were going to get the people that ordered us to "volunteer" for this mission.

After a bit of time it became obvious that no one was coming to meet us. Worse than that, we had no phone numbers for anyone here and couldn't find anyone willing to help us. The Saudi Syndrome had begun – nobody knows anything about anything, and nobody can get anything accomplished. I finally cajoled some Air Force officer into letting me use a phone and got through to the MTMC Emergency Operations Center in Virginia. They gave me the local phone number of the MTMC-SAUDI staff duty officer who arranged transportation for us. We deplaned at about 2:30AM and finally were on the road to our quarters after dawn.

Now, picture this. Steve and I have been up for over 48 hours, traveled thousands of miles and have just been led up 5 flights of stairs to the grimy apartment that would serve as our home for our stay in "The Kingdom." We're barely able to stand and seeing double. At this point we're met at the door by a rather high ranking official from MTMC headquarters, who in a gravelly and low pitched voice greets us with, "Welcome to Vietnam!" Steve and I looked at each other and I'll never forget the look of shock on his face. I must assume he saw that same look on my face. You could have knocked both of us over with the flick of a feather.

Our Accommodations



Al Khobar is a little seaside village just east of the main runway of King Abdul Aziz Air Base which is also the Dhahran International Airport. The major feature of AL Khobar is the huge Khobar Towers apartment complex [which was made famous later as the sight of a deadly terrorist bombing.] This sprawling group of four, six and eight story apartment buildings has remained fully unoccupied for many years because no self-respecting Arab would be caught dead there. Then came the U. S. Army. Khobar now housed thousands of troops who are brought in from the field, cleaned up and put on flights home.

Amongst Khobar Towers' many permanent residents are myself and my comrade in computers, Steve Stoner. We have one room of a five room, fifth floor apartment to ourselves. We share one of the bathrooms with two others and there are a total of eight in the apartment. We expect to be getting more in our "family" soon, but right now, we're keeping our mouths shut about the fact that our apartment isn't fully occupied. Furniture consists of a canvas Army cot – period. You see now why the sleeping bag is my most prized possession.



There is some truth to the popular story that I had a fight with a high-ranked Headquarters person over a cardboard box that I wanted to use as a night table. What actually happened was that after I unpacked it he grabbed it for himself. Understand that garbage tends to take on new meaning when you have nothing. I tried to con him into giving up the box by telling him that I saw rat excrement in the box when I unpacked it. Well, I lost the fight and he slept with the box beside his "rack" for two weeks until he left. I'm not really sorry I lost that argument though, because I actually did see rat droppings in the box! I have my own box now anyway.



Now comes the fun part – the description of the lobby. It seems that Arabic plumbing is about as sixth-century as the rest of their psyche. Every time someone in our eight-story building flushes a toilet, that is the few that work, the first floor apartment floods with raw sewage. Although the door is well sandbagged, a considerable amount of the stuff seeps out anyway and flows into the lobby. What a wonderful way to start and end the day – a walk through human waste.

After wading through the "Perfume River," you have a short walk to the mess hall which is located in a subterranean parking garage. That wouldn't be so bad but they have never cleaned the place. You eat on plastic plates on plywood picnic tables that are never washed. It's amazing how quickly you get

used to certain things. A flea hops across my bread and I just keep on eating – extra protein. The food, what I can eat of it, is reasonably good. At least I haven't been sick yet. A slightly more varied menu is available at the Air Base in a clean mess hall, but once you get used to filth as a way of life, the convenience of Chez Concrete is the best reason to eat there.

It seems to me that the national motto of Saudi Arabia is "Where there's filth, there's life." We all seemed to have the impression that Saudi was a sandy desert – it's actually nothing but dust and rocks. Dust is everywhere and it gets into everything. Being here is like living inside a vacuum cleaner bag. You take a shower and fifteen minutes later you feel dusty. Your clothes get dirty the minute you put them on, so I don't bother washing them. Again, human resiliency triumphs, after a while, the whole dirtiness thing just feels normal.



Dhahran sits in the middle of a bump of land that extends into the Persian Gulf. Khobar, our dusty bedroom community, is just to the east of Dhahran on the Gulf Coast. About twenty miles north, on the top of the bump, is the seaport of Ad Dammam. King Abdul Aziz port is a major shipping center and is

quite busy offloading all the riches of the world that petrodollars can buy. Next to another overflowing, open sewer, is the one-story, white building that houses MTMC-SA. My place of business is a mobile home beside the main building which, thank goodness, has a functioning air-conditioner – that is when the portable generator is running. It's amazing how much I've accomplished since coming here because work and sleep are the only things that keep your mind off the misery of living here. There simply is no other entertainment available short of watching the antics of my partner, Steve.

Steve

I think if it weren't for Steve Stoner, I would probably have assaulted someone by now. We seem to get our bouts with anger and frustration at different times so that one of us is always in a position to calm the other one down. Steve has become my personal supply sergeant, he always seems to be able to go and say the right thing to the right person and get us what we need. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't have a roll of toilet paper – that's how well they take care of you here.



The typical Saudi evening consists of enduring Steve while he preens and shows off his muscles during his pre-run warm-up. This is followed by the blessed half-hour when he is actually out running – just enough time to recover before his return. The two hours after his run are filled with ravings about "Man, that was one of the best runs I ever had!" I'm not the only one who had the distinct honor of hearing his incessant descriptions of the pleasures of running and exercise. Steve always opens up the double doors to the adjacent room to ensure he simultaneously annoys the two hapless soldiers living there. Luckily, Steve always seems to come down from his runner's high just before one of us is about to assault him.



There is, of course, the famous immunoglobulin incident. Just after getting our "rear area" shots at Aberdeen, Steve decided there was no time like the present to get his revenge on me for getting him into this mess. About fifteen minutes after getting hit with the "Butt Bomb", Steve came up behind me and cheerily inquired, "Hi Mike, how are you feeling?" Simultaneously, he grabbed me rather forcibly by the buttocks - or I should say, THAT buttock. After hitting the fifty-foot ceiling of the gym, I completely forgot all my supervisory training about violence in the workplace, and proceeded to try my best to murder one of my employees. Only now can I appreciate the humor of the situation, it will be funnier still when I fill out Steve's performance rating.

Sightseeing

The trip between Dammam and Khobar takes us past some of the most famous sights of the Gulf War. We pass the site of the warehouse where all those soldiers were killed after a direct hit by a Scud. The warehouse was torn down just after we arrived. The Patriot batteries, which defended Dhahran air base, are located just in front of our housing complex. In a shallow tidal area next to the highway leading to the port, we show all the newly arrived people the carcass of one of the Scud missiles that was reported as having "fallen harmlessly into the Persian Gulf." We string them along for a few days and, after they snap a few pictures, we reveal it to be what it actually is, the remains of a small boat.

If we go to the air base for a meal, we pass the Dhahran International Hotel, where all the news broadcasters had their stages set up. I still don't know what the blue domes are because we never got around to having our pictures taken on one of the stages, but the flashing lights you always saw behind Dan Rather are anti-collision strobes on top of the light stanchions of the King Fahad University stadium. Those news people really had it tough, the stages are two steps from the pool (I think the blue domes were the cabanas) and two steps from the bar.



Them

[Another warning here, my own bias will be evident in what you are about to read. Please understand that it was tough to be over there, bailing out a country, all the while reading anti-Jewish and anti-Israel propaganda in their English language newspapers. It bothered me then, and still bothers me today. What you are about to read isn't exactly politically correct but I prefer to leave it as I wrote it in 1991.]

It's interesting how little you actually see of the Saudis themselves. Outsiders seem to do everything here (including fighting their wars.) Indians, Pakistanis and other non-Saudis do all the work, but the Saudis have all the top managerial positions. The only time you ever actually see them is on the highway where Abou Ibn Oilwell zooms by in his Mercedes at 150 miles per hour, his "rag and fanbelt" headdress blowing in the breeze. At prayer time though, wherever they are they pull over, lay their rug in the dirt and do their thing. The fact that the Arabs consider this dust bowl holy ground really tells you something about them.

We have never experienced any situations that could be construed as putting us in physical danger – at least not from the war. Terrorism is always on our minds, but our biggest fear comes whenever we have to drive anywhere. There is no "weapon of mass destruction" that Saddam could have used against the Saudis that could have killed as many people as automobiles kill each day. I honestly believe that the Islamic Clerics should add a fifth tenet to their religion – "Thou shalt stay out of automobiles!" The Saudis and their guest workers are simply the world's craziest drivers. When they're not driving at supersonic speeds, they're cutting sideways across three lanes of traffic to get off at an exit. The average Arab driver cannot stand to be behind anyone – he (she's are not allowed to drive) will jump curbs, cross medians, do anything possible to get ahead of the vehicle in front of him. Arab driving skill is clearly reflected in their highway fatality rates. Fatal accidents occurred almost every day we were here, and the highways are lined with wrecked vehicles which are mangled beyond recognition.

Us

I'm writing this account on my birthday, Tuesday, April 2, 1991. The weather has changed considerably from when we arrived in early March. At first, the prevailing winds were out of the north which brought all the smoke from Kuwait oil well fires over us. It always looked like a thunderstorm was on the horizon but that really was the smoke. It was cool and damp and we got an occasional sprinkle. Now the winds are coming from the south and the hot weather is starting. When I was in Rotterdam, a scant four months ago, the sun barely rose above the horizon, even at midday. Here, the sun is almost directly overhead. We have already gotten into the 90's and the veterans say, "wait till it really gets hot!"

Some further snippets of life here in the war zone. The members of the 82nd Airborne Division, with whom I have the honor of sharing a mess table, have taken to trading pictures of dead bodies. "I'll trade you two arms and a leg for a torso." I hear some guy was busted trying to carry home an arm in his duffel. The soldiers have been aptly described as "children with guns". They are very young but they come out of the desert subdued and somewhat grim. After a few days, however, they unwind and become quite spirited. Its good that they are going home, I'm glad we're helping out with that.

Khobar Towers is well guarded and frequently patrolled. I make sure that I carry my ID on my person constantly, the weapons and ammunition carried by the sentries are quite real and I have no uniform or other means to distinguish myself as an American. I feel a bit of pride as I pass the Bradley Fighting Vehicle just behind the car maze at the main gate. It bears a cannon ready to deal with anyone crazy enough to try to run the gate, and a barcode label and stenciled Transportation Control Number which were generated by the systems I work on. There is another reason however, that guards posted at every gate at Khobar Towers. It's not so much to keep intruders out - but to ensure that American female

joggers, dressed in tank tops and shorts, don't stray into the Saudi areas where they can be arrested for indecent exposure!



The standard greeting around here has become, "Who'd you piss off to wind up here?" Another favorite pleasantry is, "It's a beautiful day in the Kingdom!" This is usually uttered as we walk to work and inhale the scent emanating from the open sewer. We always answer, "Every day is a beautiful day in the Kingdom!"

Beyond my earlier comments about the Saudi Syndrome, I think it is best not to dwell on the way we are being treated here. I don't feel I will come away from this experience with anything really beneficial but, should I ever be in a position of authority and be in charge of arrangements for guests, I will think of my experience here and know what not to do.

If we are vexed by the fact that we are ignored by the MTMC-SAUDI staff, we are doubly annoyed by the continual attention of the "National Bird of Saudi Arabia." The Saudi fly is your constant companion, he will get into your eyes, ears, mouth and anywhere he feels he can find a meal. The only defense against them is to simply get used to them – that's the only way they won't bother you. Luckily, the mosquitoes haven't come out of hibernation yet.

Me



I guess I have to say that the high point of my stay here was the time I had my picture taken in a captured Iraqi Hind helicopter. You know, that's the type of chopper that Rambo shot down - although he wouldn't have if I were at the controls. The low point was basically the rest of my stay. My 1991 account of the Saudi trip ended here, but there was to be much more to the story. Little did I know at that point, that the world I left behind would cease to exist on my return.

I was very proud of the work I did there however. No system for the redeployment of unit cargo existed at the time and I basically used my knowledge of the subject matter to design and write a system consisting of some thirty programs. It would accomplish the documentation required for the redeployment mission, soon to be called Operation Desert Sortie, and provide information for transportation planners in various formats.



My work in Saudi Arabia continued as the Jewish Holiday of Passover approached. One of my favorite war-stories from my father was when he in the Netherlands East Indies on the island of Biak and was

blockaded by the Japanese for a year. They existed on whatever rations that could be flown in until Admiral Nimitz broke the blockade just before Passover. The Jewish troops had nothing in the way of Passover food and weren't looking forward to being able to celebrate the holiday. My father said that a minor miracle happened that day on the eve of Passover. The first supply ship that unloaded after the blockade was broken contained a shipment of Passover food, thereby allowing the garrison's Jewish soldiers to celebrate their holiday.

For me, no miracle occurred during Passover of 1991. I had neither motza (unleavened bread) nor wine, nor could I find out if or where services or a Seder (the Passover ritual meal) would be held. True, there were services held and these items were available, but communications were so poor (remember, the Saudi Syndrome) that I was unable to make contact with a chaplain of any faith. I smuggled a pair of *Tephillin* (Phylacteries, Jewish religious articles) and a *Siddur* (prayerbook) into the country, amongst the very few that have ever been in Saudi Arabia, and had at least that to comfort me. I had no premonition, no feeling of impending doom, I just missed my family and my life back home and was really depressed throughout the holiday. I existed for eight days on powdered eggs and potatoes, the only semblance of Passover food I could muster.

My dear friend Steve Stoner left for home just after I wrote the letter that spawned this account. I couldn't see him suffering in that place any longer than necessary and had been begging him to go home for several weeks. He didn't want to leave me there alone and stayed on until we both witnessed another horrible accident where two Warrant Officers we had been working with were killed in a collision with a truck - days before their departure. Steve looked at me and said, "You're right, I've got to get out of here, this place isn't safe." He started the transportation arrangements that afternoon.

Simply put, Steve Stoner is the finest human being I've ever had the privilege of knowing. I regret that I had to be the one to put him through this experience and the difficulties he also experienced after his return, but like me, he emerged from this stronger, happier and generally better than he was before - I'll value his friendship forever.



On the way home Steve phoned the office and found out that they had been trying to get in touch with me because my mother had been hospitalized with what later turned out to be terminal cancer and her

doctors were requesting my presence to aid in her recovery. It took them 4 more days to reach me with that news and another week to arrange transportation out of there. My Saudi TDY (Temporary Duty) ended where it began, on the dusty tarmac of Dhahran Airport. After spending a night sitting on my duffel bag in the dirt, at 0400 I boarded the flight home on 15 April 1991.

There is one powerful image that will remain with me forever and which ultimately changed - or rather, restored - my life. Nearly every window in every building we were in was taped up to keep it from shattering from explosions. Three tapes were placed on each window, two in the shape of an "X" and one horizontally. You'll have to draw a sketch of this to visualize what I'm saying, however at the confluence of these strips of tape, there appeared a six-pointed Star of David. The image had a different meaning to me in 1991 than it does today. Then, it meant that as usual, whenever and wherever the Armed Forces of the United States meets an enemy, there are included in their ranks a large number of people of the Jewish faith. I had a lot of hate in me then and I enjoyed the thought that, according to Jewish War Veterans estimates, myself and some five thousand people of Jewish background were urinating and defecating on that country daily. Today, the image of those Stars of David in every Saudi Arabian window has a completely different meaning. Freed now from the bondage of mindless hate, I see it as proof ancient teachings of my religion, that though I felt abandoned and alone in a "God forsaken" place, no place on Earth is God forsaken - and no person, least of all myself, is abandoned by Hashem. That image was one of the sparks that kindled the religious rebirth I experienced in the years since the Gulf War that helped me return to a happy and fulfilling life. Now in 1998, I finally feel that I've returned home. But it was a long trip back.

CHAPTER 5: HOME

It's impossible to describe the feeling as our World Airways contract flight lifted off from Dhahran Airport. Two hundred fifty soldiers and one civilian (me) breathed a collective sigh of relief as we turned westward towards our homes. We'd all be up for over 24 hours and most of us fell asleep as soon as we were airborne. For me as usual, there were mixed emotions. I was finally "outta here," leaving forever this most despised of places, but there was also the concern over my mother's condition and, believe it or not, the concern over leaving my project. The system was completed and operational, but there were many improvements that could have been made. Well, my replacement was already being prepped for the trip and would depart for Saudi as soon as I briefed him.

The flight was a far cry from the C-141 cargo flight coming over, real seats, real food – trust me, even airline food was a tremendous improvement over "Chez Concrete." Under my feet were four M16 rifles and the aircraft was loaded with small arms of every type – I never felt so safe on an airplane before or since.

We landed in Rome but security concerns kept us aboard the DC-10 while they fueled and re-catered the aircraft. I heard an Italian ground agent speaking to one of the flight attendants in the beautiful Italian accent that so many of my neighbors had in the Brooklyn neighborhood I grew up in and suddenly I felt a warmth that I hadn't known for months. I was getting close to home.

The most memorable experience of the flight home occurred two hours later on our approach to Shannon Airport in Ireland. There was a solid undercast that prevented us from seeing the ground until we were on short final. Then we broke out of the clouds and I couldn't believe my eyes – before me was a verdant splendor that was beyond anything I ever experienced. Deeply green grass, beautiful trees, lakes and streams - I was overwhelmed. After a month of filth and rocks and dust the contrast was powerful, I never dreamed a country could be so beautiful. I'm a movie buff and I probably had seen *The Quiet Man* a dozen times before. I always assumed that the rich greenery of the landscape was faked in the movie, but it wasn't - Ireland was that beautiful. Like the Stars of David in the Saudi windows, the beauty of the Irish countryside also bore religious significance because at that moment I began to lose that feeling of abandonment I suffered from for weeks. I felt the need to thank Hashem for delivering me from a dangerous situation. The other passengers were feeling an entirely different need.

Two hundred and fifty soldiers and one civilian deplaned and most made a mad dash for the "gin mill." Some of them had been there for over a year and nobody had a "taste" in all that time. That bartender wished he had four hands, I never saw so much liquor being poured at one time. What the heck, they won the Gulf War and deserved a "belt." True to my heritage, (you know us Jews, at a party we go around looking for a "Designated Drinker") I just wandered around looking out the windows and reveling in Ireland.

There will always be a special place in my heart for Ireland. I'll never forget the lush greenery and the feeling I got as we landed in Shannon. Every year since, I celebrate St. Patrick's Day in my own way,

watching The Quiet Man and praying for peace and prosperity in that most beautiful of countries. As always, Hashem works in strange ways and now I have a new reason to celebrate – March 17 is the birthday of my fiancée, Rachel.

It was a mellow group of heroes that crossed the Atlantic Ocean to our next stop in Gander Newfoundland. After landing, our aircraft had to stop rolling for a while to let a moose cross the taxiway. It was fifteen degrees Fahrenheit that day and we were in our shirtsleeves, but nothing was going to keep us inside that aircraft. The flight attendants told us about how good the ice cream was in the Gander terminal, but ice cream wasn't on anybody's mind that day. Both the aircraft and the soldiers "tanked up" in Gander and we were off on our final leg to Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina.

The stops along the way were fun, but the feeling of finally touching American soil was phenomenal. I really have little desire to travel abroad these days for the simple reason that I still haven't gotten over the joy of being back home after that forcible separation. Yes Dorothy, there's no place like home. Some of the first people I spoke to in Charleston were MTMC employees of a small unit called a MATCU (sorry, I've forgotten the meaning of the acronym) who service military airplane passengers. They smiled when they heard that I was a fellow MTMC employee, and proceeded to give me the exemplary service they offer all Military travelers. I'd missed the last flight to Newark that day so they got me a ticket on the first flight out in the morning, then they made a reservation for me at a motel for the night.

As I left the airport a group of local people met us at the door and clapped and waved little American flags. I realized then that I had just gotten more of a welcome than most of the troops returning from Vietnam had experienced– here's to you guys, at least one member of my generation appreciates your sacrifice.

I got into the motel room in Charleston and dropped my duffel bag on the floor. I was still dusty from Saudi Arabia and for the first time in weeks it started to bother me again. I felt dirty, incredibly dirty – deeper than just the physical sensation, I felt unclean in my soul. I needed to cleanse myself of Saudi Arabia as best as I could - first I'd start with my body. I went right for the shower and scrubbed for a half-hour. It was a pleasure I had almost forgotten about – Saudi water was incredibly hard and soap barely worked there, oh did it feel good to scrub with good old American soap and water. Emerging from the shower, I felt human again and I called home to let everyone know I was "back in town." That done, I turned on the TV and experienced a completely new form of culture shock. We had no TV in Saudi, no billboards showing pictures of women – all the women there were in Desert Camo Uniforms, which aren't exactly form-fitting. Sure it was just regular broadcast TV, but after nothing at all for weeks, I was, er, rather turned-on looking at all those images of women in normal clothing where you can see a little of this and a little of that. This was anything but a religious experience and I called my then girlfriend again and let her know what was happening. She understood and told me she'd be ready when I got there - she missed me plenty too. She had been complaining about having some kind of pain in her back for a while, but it didn't concern me at that point, I was more worried about my mother.

As the cab pulled up to my block the next morning, I was delighted to see a whole lot of yellow ribbons

on the trees. I knew that they weren't there just for me - but some were – all my neighbors knew where I was. I got into my house and dropped my stuff in the garage. I immediately stripped and threw everything in the washer, I didn't want to bring one speck of Saudi dust upstairs. Nobody was home when I arrived. I changed my clothes, jumped into my car and set out for the hospital. Dad was there and my family reunion took place in my mother's hospital room. My mother's condition was bad. I brought her a piece of MRE (Meals Ready to Eat) bread, the field-rations we ate for lunch, she tried it but was too sick to swallow it. Her illness would consume me for the next two months. My reunion with my sweetheart went a little better although her back still hurt.

The next morning I returned to Bayonne and hugged all my co-workers and passed out the MRE's I brought back as souvenirs. It's an unwritten rule that Government supervisors aren't supposed to get along with their employees, but I loved all those people and couldn't wait to get back among them. I have to mention two more names here, those of my dear friends Erma Garland and Joe Bongiorno. All through the Saudi trip and the European trips before that, they maintained contact with my parents and kept me up on what was happening home. I never will forget what they did for me, Erma and Joe's kindness helped me survive the experience.

My boss gave me that afternoon off and I left for the hospital, deeply concerned about my mother. Moments later I saw one of the base cops with his light bar flashing and realized he was after me. "You didn't signal a left turn." Less than 24 hours after my return to "the world," I'm getting a ticket for the most insignificant offense imaginable. I asked him to give me a break, I'd just gotten back from the Gulf War, and deeply regretted my terrible offense. He said, "I did give you a break, your driver's license expired, I'm not writing you up for that." ...And you wonder why I was always angry in those days?

Steve and I had gotten a bunch of coupons for freebies when we were in Saudi. When we tried to cash them in we began to understand the distinction between military and civilian deployees to the Gulf. You couldn't avail yourself of any of those premiums without a military ID. "But I was there!" - "Sorry, civilians don't count." It was the same story all over. It's clear now that I really needed help when I got back. Military Gulf War Vets have a whole network of official and unofficial assistance available to them, for us there was and remains nothing. The Gulf War Syndrome is real, thank Hashem I didn't suffer from it personally, but I know civilians who did. The Military hasn't exactly shined in the way they approached the problem of GWS for soldiers, but we civilians were completely forgotten. We've received nothing in the way of assistance for the stress and illnesses we suffered as a result of our deployment.

The final insult occurred on June 10, 1991. The Commanding General of MTMCEA said that any Military personnel who had been to the Gulf could have the day off to march in the parade in Manhattan. We called him and asked him if civilian deployees could also have the day off to march because we knew that there was a civilian contingent in the parade. His answer was the usual – "Sorry, civilians don't count." I watched the civilian contingent march on the news that night – the next day I was off anyway – early in the morning my mother passed away.

Things were falling apart rapidly in my life. I hadn't even begun to come to grips with the whole Gulf War business when I lost my mother, who happened also to be my best friend. A week later I got up

from *Shiva* (the week of mourning in Jewish practice) and went to see my girlfriend. She was still complaining about the pain in her back which was getting worse and had been to see the doctor. A few short days after my mother's death I learned that my lover also had terminal cancer.

I lost my other best friend fourteen months later in November of 1992. The day of her funeral was the lowest point of my life, I had nowhere to go, nobody to turn to. I was always close with my father, but he took my mother's death hard. He was in a deep depression that continues to this day and I couldn't confide in him, nor could I give him the support he needed. I was alone now, with only one thing on my mind – hatred.

Cancer killed my mother and my lover, but you couldn't have convinced me of that. No, it was those lousy rag-head, Arab SOB's that had to start a war that took me away from home just when everybody needed me most. Amazingly enough, I actually knew that my bigotry was wrong, I even wrote and publicly spoke about it at the time, but my hatred intensified none-the-less. My anger wasn't confined to Arabs either, I got into fights with everybody, even friends. I was lucky though, because my friends understood what was happening to me and stood by me until I came to realize that I needed to get a grip on myself.

A month after my lover's death, I needed to get away and spent a long weekend with another close friend Paul Samuels in Falls Church Virginia. Paul and I used to work together in Bayonne and he moved down to Virginia to accept a job in Headquarters. I was in fragile condition at that point and needed both to be with someone but also needed to have some time alone. Paul knew exactly what to do, and more important, when to leave. We didn't plan to see anything in particular, but somehow wound up going to visit the five museums in DC that are devoted to Jewish interests. One of the places we visited was the National Museum of American Jewish Military History. The Museum is affiliated with the Jewish War Veterans and preserves the history of Jewish participation in the United States Armed Forces. I was captivated by the place, I knew about it through my father who is a member of the JWV, but couldn't grasp its impact until I saw it that day.

Some weeks before, I received a thousand-dollar award for my Gulf War activities. I couldn't bring myself to keep the money and started looking for the most anti-Arab organization I could find to donate it to. It was lucky, or maybe prophetic, that I hesitated because I resolved that day to donate the thousand dollars to the NMAJMH and took out life membership as soon as I got home. It was the first positive thing I'd done since returning from the Gulf and I continue to support the Museum to the maximum extent I can. It's important to me to see the stories of sacrifice and service of American Jews preserved, I only wish I could live closer so that I could visit there more often and volunteer some time. My life membership plaque hangs proudly in my office, along with the Jewish War Veterans calendar and all the certificates I got for the Gulf War. I mounted my life membership pin in the same display case that holds the two medals I was awarded for the Gulf War, for me, these symbols must be forever linked.



My visit to the NMAJMH was the beginning of my recovery, there I transformed an act of hate to an act of charity. New forces were at work now which were drawing me into what would become an entirely new life. Now identity was becoming an issue, I began feeling the need to develop a more up front identity as a Jew. I began to join secular Jewish organizations like Chaverim, an organization of Jewish amateur radio operators. I was being led somewhere, but I didn't know where yet.

My fiancée asked me just recently about why I have to be "in your face" about my Judaism. The Saudi's taught me that, Rachel. Ironically, they led me back to my religion - and that caused me to lose my virulent hatred of them. There was no need to be "in your face" in Brooklyn or Staten Island, I never experienced the sting of anti-Semitism and never had to give my Jewishness a thought. Kosher food was plentiful, Synagogues are all over, and there were many Jewish activities and opportunities to learn and socialize. There is an old Yiddish saying about the difficulty of keeping all the tenets of the Judaism, "It's hard to be a Jew." Well, in New York, it's easy to be a Jew.

Things were different in Saudi and it wasn't only the Arabs who were making it difficult. A non-Jewish officer told me a story about a promise made by one of the top staff members of the Third Army. As the story went, the General promised that all American soldiers of the Moslem faith would be given the opportunity to make the *haj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon hearing this, a group of Jews asked that same General if they could make arrangements to go to Israel to pray at the Western Wall – many of them felt that this was the closest they would get to Israel in their lifetimes. The request was denied, citing "security concerns," and the lack of direct flights between Saudi and Israel. I can't verify the story, but I do believe it. Prior to the Gulf War, Jewish soldiers had never been able to obtain permission to wear yamulkes, (skullcaps) the uniform regulations were always cited as being sacrosanct. Now we were in Saudi Arabia, with its strict restrictions on women, and suddenly we were able to bend the regulations to permit women soldiers to wear kerchiefs to cover their hair. What a

classic double standard.

Thus, in Saudi, for the first time in my life, I experienced the pain of Diaspora. It was there, not in the comfort of Brooklyn or Staten Island, that I finally came to understand true essence of Jewish tradition and Jewish aspirations. Saudi Arabia made me understand why we mourn the loss of the Temple, why our people were scattered and why we pray for the coming of the Messiah. All the previous Passovers I spent with my family, eating good food and reciting the story of the Exodus, could not teach what one dismal, lonely Passover in Saudi taught me. As I sat in Khobar, munching the potato chips that Steve Stoner somehow got to keep me from starving, I learned the essence of freedom.

There were other forces that helped with my recovery. Flying has also helped, in a big way. After my mother died, one of my neighbors presented me with the opportunity to join Richmond Pilots, a flying club on Staten Island. I earned a Private Rotorcraft-Helicopter rating two years before the Gulf War and through Richmond Pilots, earned an airplane rating. I used to love getting up there alone, viewing the terrain from up high and wondering at the works of Hashem. Nothing has ever relaxed me and calmed me down like the "stress" of flying an airplane. No more "Lone Eagle" stuff for me these days though, I've got a copilot now, my fiancée Rachel, and I haven't truly enjoyed flying alone since we met. I can't fly as much as I used to, I don't have to time to get out there for a day because of the responsibilities I have as care-giver for my father but I'll be back. I owe a lot to Richmond Pilots.

The Gulf War was losing its grip on me. My new association with Judaism now began leading me toward learning more about it's practice. Being "in your face" about secular Judaism was satisfying for a time, but now I needed to get to the core of my religion. I began to read a commentary on the Torah that was written in Turkey during the eighteenth century. Each of the twenty volumes of the *Meam Loez* had great impact on me and I found myself leaning toward Orthodox observance. Most important though, was the change in attitude it brought about. I read many teachings about hate, how it destroyed the Second Temple and how it keeps a person from fully realizing their potential in both the religious and secular areas. My experience in Saudi Arabia made me yearn for the coming of the Moshiah (Messiah) and now I began realize that my hatred of Arabs was anything but hastening the day of deliverance. I began to lighten up.

As I delve deeper into Jewish practice, I find less and less need to hate, I harbor less capacity to dislike others. The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said, "If you spend your time doing good, the bad falls away." The cleansing process I began with that half-hour shower in Charleston is nearly complete now, becoming a Sabbath Observer and keeping the Jewish Dietary laws have had a purifying effect on my soul, I can't pollute it any longer with hatred. I believe in the End of Time, the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael will live together in peace, until then the conflict which began with these two brothers will continue – but I don't personally have to participate in it. I'm still politically aware and I still get angry at events happening between Arabs and Jews, but I fight every day not to backslide into hatred. I like the feeling of cleanliness I have now, I no longer feel the dust of Saudi Arabia on me. May Hashem give me the strength to expunge all vestiges of hatred that I may still harbor.

I suffered one more setback since the Gulf war. The BRAC, the Congressional Base Closure and Realignment Commission recommended the Military Ocean Terminal in Bayonne for closure. My job

would still be there, but I'd have to move to either Fort Eustis, or Falls Church, Virginia. I had a third option, to avail myself of the Priority Placement Program and hope to get another job here in the New York Area. I had no choice, I had to accept PPP and remain here because of my father's deteriorating condition. Thorough PPP, was able to secure a position in Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey, although I began there with a great deal of bitterness, the feeling was short lived.

Despite the fact that I lived with my father and spent lots of time caring for him, loneliness was still a part of my life. I needed a new best friend. I had a personal ad on a web page for Jewish Singles called The Jewish Singles Connection. I met many quality women there but never hit it off with anyone. When I left Bayonne, I canceled the ad, because I didn't have a home email address at the time or access to the Internet. After I got a new email account at Picatinny I checked into the sight again to put up a new ad. Before I began, I reviewed the female ads and saw a new one that caught my eye – it was from a lady in Bayonne NJ. I answered the ad and we exchanged emails for a month before meeting. It was magic from the first date, not a mindless sexual attraction, but a true meeting of two souls each yearning for a new focus in life. Rachel is the best thing that ever happened to me, the answer to all my prayers. Through our relationship I finally was able to get over the loss of my mother and my lover and move on. I was wallowing in the past before Rachel, she's given me a future.



Now, with this document, I am finally getting the Gulf War entirely out of my system. It's the last thing I have to do before we marry, Rachel deserves all the love and attention I can give her and I can't have the ghost of the Gulf War come between us. Writing this paper has worked, it's been about two months in the making and I've been able to relive my experiences and shed the tears I should have years ago. As I look back now I realize that everything I endured did turn out for the best. I can never return to the world I knew before that time, but I'm comfortable in the new one I built. The Gulf War led me on a torturous, but rewarding road to spiritual and physical happiness by bringing me back to my religion. Losing my job in Bayonne was not the end of the world. True, my job in Picatinny frightens me, I have responsibilities in areas I am not familiar with or trained for. It's difficult, very

difficult to learn new things at this point in my life, but I want to excel in the same way I did in Bayonne and will keep trying. There is one thing better in Picatinny, there are more opportunities for religious observance there than in Bayonne. Among them is a Torah lesson given by a local Rabbi given each Wednesday. Midway between each Sabbath and in the midst of a workday, it is the perfect time to refresh my spirit and learn a little. Funny how I find faith and optimism in everything I do these days.

The Gulf War will always be with me, I can live with that now because it doesn't control me any more. Now, every year at Passover I eat some potato chips to remember that somewhere in the world, Jewish members of the Armed Forces are on duty, alone and missing their families as I did in 1991 - and each day I revel in the sheer pleasure of just being home again.

Completed, with the help of Hashem, December 6, 1998