

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 5
Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 15

December 2001

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Recommended Citation

Buse, Darin (2001) "A Soldier's Diary of Desert Storm," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss3/15>

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A Soldier's Diary of Desert Storm

A soldier relates a vivid first-hand account of his close encounters with landmines and his personal experiences as a Psychological Operations Team Sergeant in the Middle East during Operation Desert Storm.

A U.S. Marine patrol walks across the charred oil landscape near a burning well during perimeter security patrol near Kuwait City in 1991. c/o AP



by Darin M. Busé

Introduction

To say the mood was celebratory would be an understatement. As the last few thin-skinned vehicles crossed back through the burm that only days earlier had been breached, a shower of tracer fire and flares pierced the evening sky. The once neat file of Bradley fighting vehicles, 113 track vehicles, M1 Abrams tanks, trucks and hummvees now mobbed together in the desert just inside the border of Saudi Arabia. As a Psychological Operations Team Sergeant, I had never before been in such company as the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment. I was not prepared to witness the efficiency and over-

whelming power that a unit of this nature could disseminate. Among cheers, blowing horns and the ever-present sound of bagpipe music, courtesy of my loudspeaker operator, SPC. Ferguson, there was a moment to reflect and wonder about those that were left behind. During the course of the conflict, our unit had encountered a number of displaced Iraqi civilians trying to escape the incredible devastation. How would they go on after all that had transpired? How could we ever calculate how the debris that was left by this operation would affect these people and how it would change their lives and ours from this day forth?

Prior to the onset of Desert Storm, my team—Sgt. Elswick, Spc. Ferguson and myself—spent several

weeks being assigned and reassigned to different portions of the Third Armored Cavalry's area of operations. We were a part of the Psychological Operations effort but were fortunate enough to have a linguist from the Quaiti military assigned with us named Asher. He and I spent many hours discussing the differences and similarities of our cultures and nations and had established a good working relationship.

An Unusual Mission

As the highest-ranking member of our team, I was asked to attend the operations briefings held daily in the Troop Tactical Operations center (TOC). One of the scout units had accidentally driven through a flock of sheep being moved through our area of responsibility. The XO was anxious to resolve the incident before it became common knowledge. Because there had not yet been a civil affairs element attached to support the unit, Asher and I were given the job of finding the shepherd and making reparations to him. While preparing to go, I began to gather my thoughts of what I would say to win the heart and mind of this poor shepherd.

The two of us drove across the desert for what seemed to be an eternity, running into different segments of Third ACR, asking

directions and moving on. We finally came upon a small detachment. We asked if they had heard of the incident with the sheep and they confessed that they were the ones who had caused the tragic event. They were able to give us precise directions to follow, and within minutes we were hot on the trail. The trails that were left in what seemed to be an endless span of sand made a huge X in the terrain.

I had been given a small book of Arabic phrases earlier that I was now intently rehearsing. After the third or fourth rise, a small cloud of dust could be seen in the distance. The nearer we came, the more distinguishable the forms became until we could make out the shape of two Land Rovers, a Mercedes flat-bed truck and a herd of camels, sheep and goats.

Dangerous "Junk"

The moment of truth had come. Asher shouted something once or twice and all of us came to a stop. A dark slender man climbed out of the truck. He was dressed in a long somewhat white shirt and loose trousers with his kufiyya (the traditional Arab headgear) piled high on top of his head. He walked toward us, his arms wide open with a great smile that showed large gaps along the sides of his mouth where teeth once resided. His hands came together, then were quickly extended many times until they came to rest on the forearms of my friend. I was depending heavily on the initial contact to be a positive one, and so far I was pleased. Asher introduced me and said that the man's name was Nacer, more precisely Nacer bin Abdul bin Hamad Al-Batani. In the best Arabic I could muster, I boldly proclaimed, "Salaam Alaikom." He responded with an explosive laugh and replied, "Salaam Alaikom," and wrapped his arms around my neck. Not surprisingly, I was taken aback by this. Several times I tried to broach the subject of the sheep, but to no

avail. Soon evening was upon us.

I was getting anxious, not relishing the thought of driving back in the dark given the difficulty we had coming so far in daylight. I tried again to bring up the sheep and was stopped with an invitation to dinner. To my amazement, in the short time that we had been talking, the little band had assembled their camp and was busy preparing the evening meal. Asher and Nacer excused themselves to pray while I sat in the truck plotting my next move, troubled by the fact that nothing was being accomplished.

Rich-colored tapestry pillows lay on all sides, and the scent of spice hung heavy. Two of the women came in with large platters. As we ate, I was careful not to use my left hand to show respect for that custom and tried to discern the subject that was of such great importance to Nacer. It obviously wasn't the sheep he had lost. He continued on even while pouring strong dark tea into a cup and handing it to me.

A boy came into the tent holding a tattered blanket wrapped around some object that he was cradling like a baby. He handed it to his father. I swallowed hard as he uncovered an intact projectile separated from its shell casing. I could not identify its origins and did not care to get a closer look to see.

I quickly asked Asher, "How do you say danger?" Nacer grinned. He went on to say that many men, women and children had been hurt and killed by similar articles of war left behind. They collected them for the value of the metal and for whatever else could be inside. He knew how to identify some landmines and demonstrated in the air how he uses a wire-like probe to locate them in the sand and then dig them out by hand. He took great pride in finding them and boasted of how well he taught his sons how to do this. Surely he knew the risk he was putting himself and his children in? I thought back to when we first came up behind the truck and

remembered how it bounced and shook as they moved along, not in my mind the best means of transporting UXO.

A Tense Extraction

Asher and I made our way back to the area where the troop we were supporting was bivouacked. I reported that all had been forgiven and also about the ordnance that we had seen.

We were called up to the burm to play a surrender appeal over our loudspeaker system. We went through the prerecorded tape several times but there was no response. We couldn't see any Iraqi soldiers, but we heard the sound of 450 watts carried miles across the desert.

To be honest, I don't remember much of anything about breaching the burm that divided Saudi Arabia from Iraq, with the exception of the shrill sound of Scotland the Brave being played as loud as I have ever heard it right over my head. The pace was furious and the wake utter devastation.

Two Kuwaitis look at a display of landmines left by Iraqi troops after the Gulf War at the Gulf War museum. c/o AP



Middle East



■ Mine fields laid by the occupation forces of Iraq to thwart the advance of the multi-national forces in Kuwait. c/o UN

Day after day, we would come upon a decimated airfield or the burning shells of Iraqi tanks. Countless numbers of their soldiers surrendered without any resistance. Those who did resist died. We moved so quickly through the campaign that we easily lost track of what day it was. There were momentary pauses in the progression, but for the most part we were constantly on the roll. It seemed as though no time had passed when we heard over the radio that a cease-fire had been declared. Physically and mentally exhausted, we gathered ourselves for the long ride back into Saudi.

In a desperate attempt to slow the Coalition forces down or to prevent us from overtaking their retreat, some Iraqi units laid hasty mine fields and fled without making any plans or maps of where they laid them. Many of the diagrams of mine fields were hard to read or were destroyed. The greatest potential for danger was not the intentionally placed explosives but the widespread use of tactical bombing. On at least one occasion my team was following behind a heavily armored column when loud popping sounds—which we mistook for an engine backfiring—could be heard ahead. Then we were informed over the radio to be cautious of the detonated ordnance left from scatter bombs.

The ordnance and engineer units had followed close behind the advance into Iraq to identify and mark potential hazardous areas. It seemed everywhere we looked there was a new

danger. Being in a humvee was wonderful for speed and comfort until you realize that yours is the thinnest-skinned vehicle in the column. The things that could kill us were no longer on the opposite side of a M1 tank, but just under our feet. Some areas were easy to avoid—they were clearly marked with long ribbons of white tape—but many were not. The burnt out carcass of a BMW leaning sideways next to a 10 by 10 crater was a grim indication that this was likely a place to steer clear of. We had no way to protect ourselves.

Ideally, the person driving would keep our tires directly over the deep impressions made by the tanks or Bradleys we were following. Unfortunately for us, the drivers of the tracks were doing the same thing, but they were considerably wider than we were. Most of the time we could only line up one set of tires at a time so we still ran a 50-percent chance of running over something. Considering that the conflict was over and we were just trying to egress safely, those odds seemed unbalanced. It had been suggested from the onset that we line the floor of our hummer with sandbags. While on the move, some of these were used to reinforce the hatch door in the roof. Immediately after the 113 we were following rolled over an unexploded shell and slipped a track because he strayed off the “groove,” we refilled and replaced every one.

Conclusion

Although not common, active mine-sweeping equipment was being used to clear passages to travel through, but the idea of them being able to adequately eliminate the hazard was unfathomable. The number of places that posed a threat and the size of those areas were too numerous to count. The trip back to the rear area was no less nerve-racking than the forceful entry into combat. Tired, hungry and filthy, many emotions overflowed. The nights seemed longer

and the days hotter. Never had there been a more welcomed sight than when the long lines of traffic merged together and turned to the right, running parallel to the vast mound of soil and sand that stretch between the war and safety. Just hours before, no one had had the energy or desire to even smile, but now nothing could contain the jubilation. Never before had any military force done what we had. We had the technology, the training and the drive to go all the way.

Quick thinking and decisive action coupled with caution and careful deliberation brought my team and I safely home. I attribute this success to the mighty men of Third Armored Cavalry and those who support them.

It has been 10 years and I still raise my feet off the floor if I’m driving and hear a car backfire, yet I can be counted among the lucky ones. I still have both of my arms and both of my legs. I have a beautiful nine-year-old son who is my inspiration and my joy. I am alive and living in the greatest nation on earth. This cannot be said for all that were there and are still there today. As long as there are unrecovered munitions in any former combat area, it cannot be said for those to come. I can only hope and pray that the same can be said for Nacer, the striking Bedouin man who I will always consider a friend. ■

Biography

Darin M. Busé was an Airborne Physiological Operations team sergeant assigned to the 1st and 9th Psychological Operations Battalions, 4th Physiological Operations group, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. During his two tours of duty, he was able to represent his unit in Central and South America and supported the 75th Ranger regiment during Operation Just Cause, Panama. While in the Persian Gulf, he led a tactical team in support of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment during Operation Desert Storm.

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