

# Introduction: Britain and the 1991 Gulf War

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The publication of the transcript of the Institute of Contemporary British History's Witness Seminar *Britain and the Gulf War 1991* in this edition of *Air Power Review* marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1991 Gulf War represents an opportunity for a formal re-appraisal of Britain's role during the conflict from political, diplomatic, economic, legal, intelligence and military perspectives. The following material captures the oral testimony of key practitioner-participants and examines from strategic, operational and tactical levels of decision-making both policy making and its execution. The oral history was captured during a Witness Seminar at the Joint Services Command and Staff College on 16 March 2011 and was conducted and recorded in front of an audience of expert academics and serving military officers. The transcript of the Seminar – which can best be described as a group interview – has been agreed and redacted by the participants, some of whom have gone 'on-the-record' for the first time (a list of participants is provided below).

The literature relating to the 1991 Gulf War remains largely US-centred. In the absence of an official British history of the conflict, accounts of Britain's role were largely written in the aftermath of 1991 and focused on specific aspects of policy; as an aspect of wider career biographies or Single Service military histories; and at a time when the Cold War was relatively fresh in the memory, reflecting the experiences, strategies and continuities with Cold War policies.<sup>1</sup> From current perspectives, with two decades of 'liberal interventions', counter-insurgency and stabilisation operations in the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia, the 1991 Gulf War is seen as less controversial than the 2003 conflict even though the debates over the termination of the conflict in 1991, the establishment of the no-fly zone and the commitment to saving the lives of millions of Kurds from a potential post-1991 genocide remain part of a wider history of the consequences of western intervention in the Middle East. Together with the concomitant contemporary debates over the ability of the UK to mount a high-intensity warfighting operation in the future, we hope that this reappraisal of the conflict from a British perspective will be of value to scholars and practitioners alike.

The Witness Seminar explored the perceptions, priorities and dilemmas facing British policy makers at the time and addresses gaps in the existing literature on the subject, in particular:

Britain's interests in the Persian Gulf after the retreat from East of Suez; British policy during the Iran-Iraq War and Britain's role in the Armilla patrol; the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the New World Order on British foreign policy and relations with the Gulf States; British intelligence assessments of Iraq; the impact of the reviews *Options for Change* and *Front Line First* on defence planning; reactions to the invasion, including legal issues and sanctions; the importance of the Anglo-American relationship in diplomatic, military and intelligence areas; planning for Operation GRANBY and the Command and Control relationships; the conduct of the operation from Air, Maritime and Land perspectives; the information war and strategic communications; the strategic consequences and lessons of the campaign.

The Witness Seminar is divided into three sections. Section One examines the origins of the conflict up to DESERT SHIELD. Section Two covers the prosecution of the conflict and Section Three covers the aftermath of the conflict. The Witness Seminar material ends with the transcripts of two separate interviews on the Gulf War conducted with Lords King and Wakeham.

### **Background and Origins of the Conflict**

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was preceded by a period of tension in relations between Iraq and Britain. In 1961 Britain used military force to maintain the independence of Kuwait against a previous Iraqi attempt at annexation, and as Freedman and Karsh have noted that for the British 'intervening East of Suez is like riding a bike: you never lose the knack'.<sup>2</sup> Following a declared policy of taking no sides during the Iran-Iraq war and a contribution to the stability of the Gulf in the shape of the Armilla Patrol, Anglo-Iraqi relations in the 1980s were characterised by the importance of the economic relationship and by 1990 Britain is Iraq's third largest trading partner. In this economic relationship weapons sales were important but not without controversy as the case of the 'supergun' attests. While wary of developments of Iraqi nuclear capabilities, and the difficulties over the Bazoft case in March 1990 which led to the recall of the British Ambassador to Iraq, Harold Walker, Britain wanted to restore positive dialogue in the months preceding the invasion.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of the first part of the Witness Seminar was a consideration of the characteristics of Anglo-Iraqi relations in 1990, including the extent to which the invasion caught Britain by surprise and whether Saddam Hussein's posturing had been taken seriously, what accounted for strategic inattention and a preoccupation with East-West developments and what if anything was Britain's position on Iraqi- Kuwait disputes prior to 2 August 1990?

Margaret Thatcher was in the United States at the time of the invasion and in her absence the Cabinet Overseas and Defence Committee agreed to impose economic sanctions. Freedman and Karsh note that eight days prior to the invasion the Defence Secretary Tom King announced *Options for Change* and that there was a 'concern in Whitehall that an "out of area" crisis might be used to obstruct these cuts'.<sup>4</sup> The Seminar examined Britain's initial reaction to the Iraqi invasion, including an assessment of the British wider economic interests in the region

and the 50,000 strong ex-patriot community. The diplomatic aspects were discussed: British relations with states in the Middle East, the state of Anglo-American relations and the supposed British role in stopping George HW Bush 'wobbling'<sup>5</sup> and Britain's role in the passage of the UN Security Council Resolutions on the crisis in August 1990.

Following the 9 August 1990 announcement of the initial deployment of British forces as part of Operation GRANBY, there were debates about the use of force, composition of the force package from a British point of view and the effectiveness of sanctions. Part of Saddam Hussein's strategy was the use of hostages and human shields as part of his aim of dividing international opinion and the coalition that was forming against him. The Seminar examined the debates within Britain on the use of force and sanctions, the importance of the hostages, the extent to which a cross-party consensus existed, as well as how the kind of forces and messaging about coalition intentions and resolve were determined during the build-up of DESERT SHIELD, including why Britain did not decide to send land forces until mid-August and why a British aircraft carrier was not deployed.<sup>6</sup>

During the early part of the crisis and the building of the Coalition against Saddam Hussein, changes occurred in relationships between states that had previously experienced less friendly relationships. The Seminar considered Britain's diplomatic role in maintaining the unity of the Coalition, British assessments of Russian policy, Britain's role in the co-ordination of the EC's diplomacy, Britain's relations with Iran and Syria and British attitudes to the peace initiatives that took place between July and November 1990.

In October and November 1990 the naval blockade was reinforced by the first ever air embargo in history. The death of 19 Palestinians on Temple Mount presented an opportunity to link the Iraq-Kuwait issue with the wider Middle East peace process. Military preparations, extra deployments of forces, the clarification of command and control arrangements and speculation about the nature of the war were made. In the midst of these preparations, Mrs Thatcher resigned and John Major became the new Prime Minister. The Seminar discussed the effectiveness of the naval blockade (7,500 challenges to ships in the Arabian and Red Seas until the end of the war) and air embargo, British views on the attempts to link Kuwait to more general issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the organisation of the War Cabinet and Ministerial roles, the command and control relationships with the Americans and the extent to which British forces would have operational flexibility, predications about the nature of the conflict and how long it would take, including the possibility of mass casualties and the effects of the change of Prime Minister.

On 29 November 1990 UNSCR 678 set the deadline for Iraqi withdrawal as 15 January 1991 and authorised 'all necessary means' to force withdrawal in the absence of Iraqi compliance. President Bush offered to hold direct talks with Iraq and Major visited Washington in December 1990. Saddam Hussein released Western nationals in Kuwait and Iraq. In the last remaining days of peace there were a number of last minute diplomatic initiatives including the talks between

US Secretary of State James Baker and the Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, a peace plan from the French government and UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar's visit to Baghdad. The Seminar discussed Britain's part in the formulation of the UNSCR 678, the challenges presented in achieving this use of force resolution and whether Britain really believed that a peaceful resolution to the crisis could be found.

### **Prosecution of the Conflict**

In mid-January 1991, once the UN deadline passed, the air campaign commenced. The members of the Coalition discussed war aims. Coalition strategy focused on military, economic and political targets and to destroy Iraqi war making capabilities now and in the future. The Royal Air Force played an important part in the air campaign, initially flying low-level sorties against Iraqi airfields with notable losses, before transitioning to medium level missions. The Seminar discussed the issues of war aims, Anglo-American military planning and the options examined: direct attack versus indirect hook, the possibility of a 'nuclear' option, and how targeting decisions were made: WMD capabilities, electricity, command structure, problems with civilians and holy places. The discussion moved on to consider the value of the British military contribution, the challenge presented by Scud attacks on Israel and Saudi Arabia and the use of Precision Guided Weapons.

From early February 1991, the air war continued with a shift of focus to attacking Iraqi forces in Kuwait. An Iraqi incursion into Saudi Arabia at Al Khafji was repulsed. The Coalition war aims were reiterated as the liberation of Kuwait and not the deposal of Saddam Hussein. A significant distraction from the war for the British occurred on 7 February, when Downing Street was mortared by the Provisional IRA. The Coalition then had to deal with the negative repercussions of the Al Firdos bunker bombing, in which a military command centre was struck by precision munitions, only for it to transpire that the facility was being used as a shelter by Iraqi civilians. On 15 February Saddam Hussein declared he was prepared to withdraw from Kuwait but he made this dependent on the acceptance of what the Coalition saw as unacceptable conditions, and the war continued. With a ground offensive imminent, the USSR, as a formerly close ally to Iraq attempted to achieve a peaceful end to the war, but all attempts at an 11th-hour peaceful settlement were thwarted. In its consideration of this period, the Seminar discussed the British contribution to the air, sea and land campaigns; the degree of the distraction caused by the IRA bombings on 7 February against Downing Street and then on 18 February at Victoria and Paddington stations. Saddam Hussein's threat to use weapons of mass destruction were considered, along with the possibility of the Al Firdos bunker bombing incident as being a possible threat to Coalition unity.

With peace proposals rebuffed, the Coalition ground assault began on 23/24 February, lasting for 100 hours. The Iraqis respond by setting fire to Kuwaiti oil wells and with further Scud attacks as the Iraqi army retreated in the face of overwhelming coalition forces. Air attacks on withdrawing Iraqi forces along the Basra road represented the final stage of the ground war. The Seminar discussed whether the Iraqi ignition of Kuwaiti oil wells was a surprise and

whether the comparative lack of resistance experienced in the 100 hours had been expected, and to what extent the images of destruction on the Basra highway were significant in terms of strategic decision-making. The question of how to ensure the safe treatment of large numbers of Iraqi prisoners was also addressed, along with the degree of the seriousness attached to discussions of marching on Baghdad.

### **Aftermath of the Conflict**

Offensive Coalition operations were suspended on 27 February 1991 with the liberation of Kuwait, while the British Ambassador to Kuwait, Michael Reston, returned to the country to reopen the British Embassy after the site was secured by members of the Special Boat Service delivered by RAF Chinook helicopters. On 1 March, cease-fire terms were negotiated and there was speculation about the future of Saddam Hussein and what would happen internally within Iraq. In response to the challenge posed by the Shia and Kurdish rebellions, Iraq soon broke the terms of the truce and the USAF shot down an Iraqi Su-22 in response on 20 March. Two days later, another Su-22 was shot down by a USAF F-15, while the pilot of an Iraqi PC-7 being used in the attack role ejected as USAF fighters approached his aircraft.

On 3 April, UNSCR 687 set out the terms for the formal cease-fire which Saddam Hussein accepted three days later. Over 1 million Shia and Kurdish refugees created a serious problem for the international community, leading to John Major launching his Safe Havens initiative on 8 April 1991. The Seminar discussed British policy at the point of conflict termination and the importance of returning Kuwait to normal as soon as possible. The participants moved on to consider the British view of the potential prosecution of Saddam Hussein for war crimes, and views on what Saddam Hussein would do next, specifically in relation to the Kurds and Sh'ites, before addressing concerns with the refugees fleeing to Iran and Turkey and the response through Major's 'Safe Havens' initiative.

British and American support for the safe haven policy and the policing of no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq saw the commitment of those two nations' forces from April 1991 to 2003, a deployment ended only with the launching of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

The Seminar concluded by discussing how near Saddam Hussein's strategy of seeking to divide and rule the international community during the 1991-2003 period came to succeeding and whether or not the survival of the Saddam Hussein regime represented 'unfinished business'. The impact of the conflict on Britain's status and reputation while considering issues such as the effect of the war on the implementation of the *Options for Change* defence review, and what could be learned about Britain's armed forces in the post-Cold War era, as well as looking at the results of the conflict for British policy in the Middle East and the wider Middle East peace process.

As can be seen, the 1991 Gulf War was a complex affair with a number of lasting effects. It was seen as a successful mobilisation of the international community and the UN, while being

represented as a British success in large-scale conventional conflict which, commentators such as Colin McInnes suggest, allowed Britain to 'punch above its weight' diplomatically.<sup>7</sup> The Seminar thus provided an opportunity to consider an array of matters as they were perceived by key participants, and the transcript, published here for the first time, offers some fascinating insights into the Conflict as well as some correctives to aspects of the popular narrative which became established in the aftermath of the war and which, perhaps surprisingly, have undergone little modification until now.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example: General Sir Peter de la Billière, *Storm Command: a Personal Account of the Gulf War* (London: Harper Collins, 1992); Charles Allan, *Thunder and Lightning: The RAF in the Gulf – Personal Experiences of War* (London: Stationery Office Books, 1991); John Peters and John Nichol, *Tornado Down* (London: Michael Joseph, 1992); 'Andy McNab', *Bravo Two Zero* (London: Bantam Press, 1993); Brigadier Patrick Cordingley, *In the Eye of the Storm: Commanding the Desert Rats in the Gulf War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996); Lord Hannay, *New World Disorder: The UN After the Cold War – an Insider's View* (London: I B Tauris, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh quoting John Sullivan in the Independent on Sunday, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991*, London 1993, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> Farzad Bazoft, a freelance reporter who had lived in Britain since the age of 16, had been investigating a story about Iraqi missile capability for *The Observer* newspaper, and was arrested by the Iraqi police as he awaited a flight to London. Coerced into a public admission of guilt, he was convicted of espionage in 1989 and hanged in March 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991*, London 1993, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> C.f. Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991*, London 1993, p. 228.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Keohane, 'British Policy in the Conflict, in Alex Danchev and Dan Keohane (eds.), *International Perspectives on the Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991* (Basingstoke, 1994), p.162.

<sup>7</sup> Colin McInnes, 'The Gulf War, 1990-1', in Hew Strachan (ed.), *Big Wars and Small Wars: the British army and the lessons of war in the twentieth century*, (London, 2006), p. 163.

**Table of Witnesses and their Positions in 1991**  
(in alphabetical order)

<b>Witness</b>	<b>Position in 1991</b>
Professor Gordon Barrass	Joint Intelligence Committee
General Sir Peter de la Billière KCB KBE DSO MC DL	Commander British Forces, Middle East 1990-91
Field Marshal Sir John Chapple GCB CBE DL	Chief of the General Staff
Captain Chris Craig CB DSC	Senior Naval Officer Middle East, December 1990-March 1991
Major General Patrick Cordingley DSO	Commander 7th Armoured Brigade
The Right Honourable Lord Hamilton of Epsom PC	Minister of the Armed Forces
Lord Hannay of Chiswick GCMG CH	Britain's Permanent Representative to the UN (September 1990)
Marshal of the RAF Sir Peter Harding GCB FRAeS	Chief of the Air Staff
Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick Hine GCB GBE	Joint Commander British Forces
Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Johns GCB KCVO CBE FRAeS	HQ Strike Command, 1989-91; AOC No 1 Gp, 1991-93
Air Marshal Ian Macfadyen CB OBE FRAeS	COS, then Commander HQ British Forces Middle East, Riyadh, 1990-1991
Major General Mungo Melvin OBE	Headquarters 1st (United Kingdom) Armoured Division (SO2 G3 (Plans))
Sir Alan Munro KCMG	HM Ambassador to Saudi Arabia
Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Julian Oswald GCB	First Sea Lord
Lord Powell of Bayswater KCMG OBE	Private Secretary to the Prime Minister
General Sir Rupert Smith KCB DSO OBE QGM	Commander 1st Armoured Division, 1990-92
Sir Harold Walker KCMG	HM Ambassador to Iraq
Sir Michael Weston KCMG CVO JP	HM Ambassador to Kuwait
Rear Admiral Philip Wilcocks CB DSC	Commander HMS Gloucester
Air Chief Marshal Sir William Wratten GBE CB AFC	AOC No 11 Group, 1989-91; Air Commander British Forces Middle East and Deputy to the Commander, November 1990 to March 1991

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