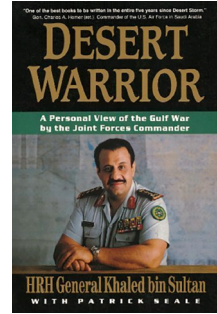


Book Reviews

Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War



By HRH General Khaled Bin Sultan

Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995 (ISBN: 978-0002556125) 364 pages

Reviewed by Group Captain (Retd) Ian Shields

Biography: Group Captain (Retd) Ian Shields retired from the RAF following a 32-year career that saw him command a front-line squadron and reach the rank of Group Captain. He now lectures at BA- and MA-level, and writes for academic and journalistic publications on current issues within defence and international relations; he also commentates on defence and security issues, specialising on aerospace matters. He holds post-graduate degrees from King's College London and Cambridge University, where he is currently researching for a doctorate.

Introduction

At the time of its initial publication, *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War* by the Joint Forces Commander received highly complementary reviews, not just as a memoir of war, but also for the insights it offered into the closed world of Saudi Arabia, and particularly of high politics within the Kingdom. Against the backdrop of current world events, as well as the anniversary of the Gulf War, it is timely to re-read and re-appraise this significant volume.

The book, co-written by Patrick Seale (a leading British Middle Eastern expert and author of several excellent books on the region) is a straightforward read. The General's writing style is one of no-nonsense, and his approach is temporal rather than thematic. The first quarter or so of the book is broad background and covers fairly conventional biographical detail, but does familiarise the reader with the author and his way of thinking. It becomes increasingly interesting as the General advances (rapidly – but then he does have the family connections requisite for Saudi society) to higher command. The bulk of the book covers his experiences and thoughts of the Gulf War as it unfolded, the aims of the Saudi ruling elite, and the fascinating relationship with the allied commanders, especially General Schwarzkopf. For the

war put the Saudi Royal Family in a difficult position: as the guardians of the two holiest sites in Islam (and thus, to a large extent, the self-appointed leaders of the faith) they were in a difficult position having seen a war between 2 states largely friendly to the Kingdom, having to rely on significant Western military assistance, and having to welcome the arrival of large numbers of non-believers into their country. It is when addressing issues at this Grand Strategic level that the book is most interesting, as much for what it does not say as for what it does. For, in its way, this is a very political book and is interesting as much for this aspect of the Gulf War as for the more conventional military recollections. The military aspects of the campaign, the major battles and the odd setback, are written very well and in a very straightforward, largely conventional style familiar to any reader of the memoirs of very senior officers, and especially to those familiar with land campaigns. The air campaign does receive its fair share of attention, although, with his Sandhurst training and Army background, it is unsurprising that this book concentrates primarily on the land campaign.

So has it stood the test of time? A guarded yes. Written fairly soon after the end of hostilities, it had the advantage of immediate memory and personal involvement, but also clearly lacked the longer perspective that time affords. It is, as a military memoir, conventional and highly competent, and offers some fascinating insights into national and regional politics. It is certainly an easy read, albeit that the style is perhaps a little too straightforward to maintain the reader's enthusiasm when trying to read prolonged sections of the book. One wonders to what extent this was a true collaboration between the General and Patrick Searle, or if it was more that the English journalist provided broad guidance on what would be well received in the West? Certainly not a vanity project for the General, but it was also clear that he would not, could not, fully open up about the inner working of Saudi Arabia. And it is this aspect of the book, the behind-the-scenes glimpses, that are the most tantalising but also the most revealing: the Kingdom was, and largely remains, closed. Indeed, where the book perhaps most shows its age and provenance, is when one considers what has happened in, and to, Saudi Arabia since 1995. This book, then, deserves its place among the canon on the Gulf War and has more than enough to offer for a re-read, or – indeed – a first-time perusal. It would, though, be fascinating to read an account of inner high politics since 1995 – and to read a true revisionist history of the Gulf War's High Command and their relationship with the benefit of 25 years of hindsight.

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