

Lt. Gen. Charles A. Horner was the man in charge of orchestrating the phenomenally successful air war against Iraq during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. He was the first-ever wartime joint force air component commander, a position created in 1986.

That made him the single air commander for the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and coalition air operations, answerable directly to the theater commander, Army Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr. This meant Horner oversaw 100,876 coalition air sorties from Jan. 17 to Feb. 28, 1991.

In a December 2015 interview, he discussed being the first JFACC, control of the air, Saddam Hussein's strategy, two surprising lapses, and where Iraq's center of gravity truly lay.

Horner had been commander, 9th Air Force, and commander, US Central Command Air Forces at Shaw AFB, S.C., since March 1987. That also made him the JFACC for Central Command.

CENTCOM had run a war game called Internal Look against a notional Mideast enemy—strongly resembling Iran—short-

ly before Iraq invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990.

"Suddenly, real-world intelligence looks like war game intel," Horner said.

He hurried to Tampa, Fla., to meet with Schwarzkopf. He listened as the CENTCOM staff briefed the outline of a ground campaign. "You could see Schwarzkopf's hand in it," said Horner. Next came air.

"It was terrible," Horner recalled. "Like AirLand Battle. No thought to it. Schwarzkopf was getting ready to go into a rage."

Before that happened, Horner interjected, "Can I have a minute here?" If he were to brief President George H. W. Bush, Horner told the general, "Here's what I'd tell him." Horner continued, "I just talked about effects, basing, potential responses."

Impressed, Schwarzkopf ordered Horner to join him the next day and brief the President.

At Camp David, Horner briefed Bush on air options. "That went pretty well because nobody knew anything," Horner

said. Bush said his objectives were to limit loss of life, both Iraqi and allied. Bush sent Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney to Riyadh to confer with King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. This, Horner said, "was the most welcome news in the world." The US was not going to run the show unless it was in agreement with its allies.

"THAT'S WHEN I GOT BUSTER"

By Aug. 6, Horner was in Saudi Arabia, designated by Schwarzkopf as CENTCOM's forward commander in charge of all US military forces flowing into the theater until Schwarzkopf arrived at the end of the month.

"My initial staff came from the US Military Training Mission in Riyadh," Horner noted. Soon others deployed from his 9th Air Force staff. Those in the Tactical Air Control Center in Riyadh "had worked together in Blue Flag and [Joint Chiefs



HORNER'S GULF

Ground crews refuel F-4G Wild Weasels for a mission during Desert Storm.

of Staff] exercises. We had probably the only staff that could build an air campaign plan. The only target list we didn't have was stuff the CIA was holding back."

Horner's duties as CENTCOM forward meant he had to find someone else to run air planning—and fast. "That's when I got Buster," he said of then-Brig. Gen. Buster C. Glosson. "I called Buster and said, 'I need a planner.' Buster jumped ship [from the Navy's USS *La Salle*, where he was attached to the Joint Task Force Middle East] and came to Riyadh."

Also, "I got Corder to offset Buster," Horner said. Maj. Gen. John A. Corder

was deputy commander of operations for CENTCOM Air Forces in the Persian Gulf from November 1990 through the end of Operation Desert Storm in March 1991. The intense, intellectual Corder was a B-52 navigator turned Vietnam pilot with special expertise in electronic warfare.

Most of all, Horner said he wanted senior commanders around him who weren't "yes men."

Desert Storm was a coalition fight. "We can lead as long as we don't act like we are in charge," Horner decided. "All allies were treated equally."

He said, "People around the world look up to the United States Air Force but they do not want to be overshadowed." It was incumbent on USAF to listen to the allies "very carefully."

Horner went out on a limb to share intelligence when it affected coalition operations. "We took down security walls. You can't have an ally and have secrets. We didn't give them sources, but we gave them information."



DOD photo

WAR

By Rebecca Grant

The air commander calls Desert Storm a hard-fought win for airpower.



By far the most important relationship was the one Horner had already established with Schwarzkopf. Combat in Vietnam had given them a common perspective.

“Vietnam was such a disaster for us that we swore it would never happen again,” Horner said. The generals had different experiences but “similar views” on how to do things better.

Unifying airpower was one essential fix. There had never before been “one guy running the air war.” When Horner had been a major at Tactical Air Command headquarters, Gen. William W. Momyer “was our four-star and he’d been in North Africa in P-40s. He’d talk to us about the importance of getting control of the air in terms of a single manager for the air.” Momyer told cautionary tales about how the lack of unified command led to frustrations in North Africa and later Vietnam.

The Goldwater-Nichols military reorganization of 1986 authorized combatant commanders to designate a single air commander, but it was up to the CENTCOM boss to make the call.

Schwarzkopf decided to do that. Hence, Horner was the JFACC, the Area Air Defense Commander, the Airspace Control Authority, and the Coordinating Authority for Interdiction.

Horner used that authority planning the opening of Desert Storm on Jan. 17, 1991. “Gain control of the air,” Horner decided. “That’s what I’m going to do before anything else. We never did it in Vietnam.”

“Much of the strategic targeting played into command of the air,” he said. Navy analysts at what is now the Joint Warfare

Analysis Center at Dahlgren, Va., prepared a secret study of the air defense system in Iraq. Brig. Gen. Larry L. Henry devised a wave of drones and electronic countermeasures to deceive and activate the air defense system to expose it to attack.

APPORTIONING AIR?

Horner already had intelligence suggesting Iraq’s integrated air defenses would crumble: In 1988, he had met with a Pakistani fighter pilot in Islamabad. “He’d been thrown out of Iraq by the Russians for teaching tactics. The Russians disqualified him because that was contrary to Russia’s ground control intercept (GCI) model of air defense. This led me to conclude Iraq had a very good regional air force and we studied how to take it apart. Take out the radars and the Iraqi pilots were blind.”

Technology was on America’s side, too. “The technology we had at our fingertips, the world had failed to comprehend,” Horner said. He did recall thinking, “If stealth doesn’t work, we will lose the entire war.” TAC chief Gen. Wilbur L. “Bill” Creech “chided me for having doubts. But that was a vicious, vicious environment,” Horner said of Iraq’s air defenses.

Horner spent little time speculating about what impact strategic targeting would have in isolation. “Let’s see how it works” was his attitude toward it. He later concluded that his strategic planners were guilty of “mirror-imaging” the adversary. Hitting intelligence, electricity, etc., wasn’t getting at Saddam’s true priorities.

Schwarzkopf tasked the air component to degrade Iraqi divisions by 50 percent. Every night Horner and staff drove over to

the Saudi Ministry of Defense headquarters to brief Schwarzkopf on current air strikes and plans for the next night. “Schwarzkopf liked the way Buster briefed. Buster was a detail guy,” Horner said. “I’m not.”

“The strategy all along was to hit tanks and artillery,” Horner recalled.

“Schwarzkopf was concerned about the lives of his infantry,” Horner said. Schwarzkopf told him to kill Iraqi armor and Iraqi tanks and artillery so when the ground war began it would take away their ability to inflict casualties on coalition ground forces.

Schwarzkopf especially wanted to hit Iraq’s vaunted Republican Guard. For Horner, there never was an artificial distinction between strategic targets and ground force targets.

In their earlier work on CENTCOM war games, Schwarzkopf had asked how Horner would apportion air.

“Nobody knows how to apportion air,” Horner explained to his boss.

“You can’t do it. What you’ve got to do is tell me what you want done, how you want to do things. I will put together the best air plan to accomplish that or assist you in accomplishing that, and then after we fly it we’ll say, ‘Well, so many sorties for close air support, so many for interdiction, so many for counterair.’ And that’s the way you apportion air. It’s all after the fact. It’s all accountants, record keeping. Anybody that says, ‘Well, we’re going to do 30 percent close air support’ is a damn idiot. Fire them.”

Schwarzkopf kept the role of land component commander, and a dispute about air support might set up Horner



US Army photo by SSgt. Dean Wagner

USAF photo by TSgt. Joe Coleman



DOD photo by Ken Hackman

to oppose his boss. “I will get in very stringent arguments with you,” Horner told Schwarzkopf in 1989, but “once you make up your mind as unified commander, that’s what we’ll do.”

Schwarzkopf had not set a date for the ground attack because it depended on the air campaign’s progress. With air superiority in hand, subordinate ground commanders grew restive.

“Army guys, if they’re airborne corps commanders or they’re [from] Korea, you can work with them,” Horner said. “If they come from Europe or they’re infantry or mech, you’ve got to hit them with a two-by-four before they begin to understand” the proper use of airpower.

DELIBERATE DECEPTION

Selecting targets became a colorful debate. Targets nominated by ground forces didn’t always check out. Often, “they were using old photos and bad imagery,” Horner explained. “Underling generals that would try and stir the pot” were a problem, he said.

Horner assured Schwarzkopf, “I’m going to give you more sorties than you can possibly use. There will be no reserve close air support system. The Tactical Air Control Center can divert any sortie to a target if a ground unit needs it.”

“Saddam had convinced himself he could win by inflicting casualties. He learned lessons from Vietnam, too,” said Horner. “His strategy was to let us attack into his soft units—infantry—then hit us with his Republican Guard and inflict enough casualties that the American people would demand we quit.”

Left to right: A truck burns on Highway 8 after Iraqi forces retreated from Kuwait. For the coalition, gaining control of the air involved destroying aircraft shelters like this one at Jalibah AB, Iraq. A satellite communications antenna in Kuwait lies in ruins. Lt. Gen. Charles Horner marches in a celebration parade in Washington, D.C., in June 1991. He was the first JFACC, the single air commander for US and coalition air operations. Horner said of Iraq’s air force, “We studied how to take it apart.”

Under pressure from the air war, Saddam attempted to start the ground battle his way. Three experienced Iraqi divisions attacked the Saudi border town of Khafji.

Why Khafji? “He thought he was attacking the 82nd Airborne and could rip into them with his tanks,” said Horner. The Iraqis had fallen for a deliberate radio traffic deception making it appear the XVIII Airborne Corps was gathering south of the town.

Saddam’s plan failed when an E-8 JSTARS ground surveillance aircraft—a still-experimental platform rushed into operational service for the war—spotted the armored vehicle movements. Schwarzkopf approved a buffer zone, pulling all coalition forces back several miles to allow air strikes to hit the Iraqi formations rapidly. “We did that early. No troops were within artillery range of the border.”

With the buffer in place, Horner redirected air strikes against the lead elements. “Most of his losses were north of the border,” said Horner. “A dug-in Army is tough to kill; an army on the roads is a piece of cake.”

Horner believed as JFACC he should look ahead and anticipate problems. In his book *Every Man a Tiger* he wrote that his “two chief anticipatory lapses” were Khafji and the effect of Saddam’s Scud tactical ballistic missile attacks on Israel.

Saddam believed that attacking Israel—and provoking that country into an armed response—would split off some of the Arab members of the coalition who regarded Israel as an enemy.

“We were under a lot of pressure about the Scuds,” Horner said, and he even received a phone call from Cheney. “I can’t stop everything,” he explained to the Defense Secretary. “I could put more effort on it but it will take away from attacks on the Iraqi army and Baghdad.”

Scud attacks diminished as American F-15Es and other jets hunted for the Scud transporter-erector-launchers scattered across the Iraqi desert. To Horner, though, the solution was Patriot missiles—designed to intercept aircraft but useful against ballistic missiles as well.

“Scuds were a psychological weapon and Patriots were a psychological answer,” he concluded.

On at least one occasion Horner thought he’d be fired, he told an audience at a Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies



Horner takes notes during a Desert Storm meeting. By mid-February 1991, the coalition controlled the air, and the Republican Guard was nearly decimated.

presentation in 2011. On Feb. 7, 1991, two F-15Cs shot down two Iraqi Su-22s and one Su-7 attempting to flee to Iran, Horner recalled.

"I called Schwarzkopf and said, 'I've got good news and bad news.' He said, 'What's the good news?' 'We shot down [three] Iraqis.' 'What's the bad news?' 'We shot them down 40 miles inside Iran. And we knew we shouldn't have been there but fangs came out and they missed the street signs and they went roaring past.'"

Horner was referring to pilots hot for battle who pursued the enemy too far. Would repercussions from Washington prompt Schwarzkopf to fire Horner? "I knew he'd call the Pentagon. I'm waiting for Schwarzkopf to say, 'Chuck, come up to the office, I need to talk to you about something.'"

Horner tore out a page out of his notebook and wrote a letter of resignation. He did this in part because "the generals didn't write their letters of resignation in Vietnam. They tried to cope with idiocy. I'll tell you, it was the saddest moment of my life." Horner went back to work and waited for "the shoe to drop."

"[I] went the next night. ... It doesn't drop. Went the next night, the next night, the next night. Finally I lost the letter. I wish I had that letter to this day."

By mid-February, the campaign was a success, both in control of the air and in attrition of Iraqi ground forces. "Tank plinking"—dedicating individual bombs (usually those with precision guidance) to specific armored vehicles, one at a time—and other tactics were decimating the Republican Guard.

"I'm the one who called it tank plinking," Horner recalled. "I liked the idea that the tank wasn't invincible."

PERFORMANCE OF AIRMEN

The ground war took just four days to send what was left of Iraq's invaders running for home.

Horner concluded long after the war that Iraq's most vital center of gravity was the backing Saddam got from the Republican Guard—the elite, better-trained, better-equipped, better-treated, most loyal units.

"While we bombed secret police headquarters, that had little effect," said Horner. "When the Republican Guard became combat ineffective, Saddam knew this could cause him to lose power. That's why Saddam asked to withdraw from Kuwait," Horner said of Saddam's back channel bid for the USSR to arrange a deal prior to the ground war.

The proof came years later, when Horner talked with an Iraqi general who had defected. They met in London. Horner said the Iraqi "was with Saddam Hussein all through the war" in a bunker under a residential area. The Iraqi said that when the US announced cessation of offensive operations, Saddam was euphoric, announcing that the Iraqis had won.

Saddam's goal was simply to stay in power. "It wasn't to defeat the Americans," Horner observed.

Horner offered some thoughts on "lessons" from Desert Storm.

"First was how [the] political leadership conducted themselves: They were perfect. Iraq out of Kuwait: It was a political objective that was military achievable. We were all very glad we weren't asked to go north to Baghdad in 1991. The Saudis didn't want us to go; we didn't want to go," Horner noted.

Second was the performance of airmen. "It always comes back to Creech.

You push authority and responsibility down" to lower levels, Horner said. He related how he visited a bomb dump at Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates. An airman told him "those guys in Riyadh are dumber than dirt," said Horner. The ATO called for 2,000-pound bombs, but the bomb dump at Al Dhafra didn't have any, so the airmen took it upon themselves to load aircraft with 1,000-pound bombs so pilots could still fly their missions.

"A good call," Horner said.

Squadron leadership had input—again, unlike Vietnam. In Desert Storm, "flight leaders could make a decision and they had a voice. They could call the TACC and say, 'This is bull,'" Horner said.

That didn't mean flight leads always got their way. At one point, some B-52 pilots sought to avoid a mission due to the threat of SA-6 surface-to-air missiles. "I told them to go north," Horner said.

Desert Storm confirmed the value of investing in advanced technology.

Airpower is dependent on technology. "We catch a lot of hell for it because it's expensive. But if you think about the impact of stealth, precision munitions, ISR, we've fundamentally changed the way wars are fought and the way that people die in battle. That's a good thing. But we've got to continue with our technology development," he told the Mitchell Institute audience.

The war also proved that airpower could take the lead.

"We didn't have to fight ground force on ground force," Horner asserted. "Immediately after, the Army went into a defensive crouch" about who had done what in the war, and what it meant for the future. Tempers flared when USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Merrill A. McPeak gave a detailed briefing about the air campaign in March 1991, in which he said Desert Storm represented the first time in history an army had been defeated by airpower.

Nevertheless, Horner said, quoting ballplayer Dizzy Dean, "If you done it, it ain't bragging." ★

Rebecca Grant is president of IRIS Independent Research. Her most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "Flexibility in the Storm," appeared in the February issue.