

“The Iraq War”

by Sean M. Maloney, PhD

Master Seaman Steve St. Amant was aboard the frigate HMCS Toronto as Canada prepared for war in January 1998: “We were heading for Portugal when the Captain told us that we were headed for the Persian Gulf to be part of the effort to confront Saddam Hussein. Jaws dropped and one young guy started crying. We stopped in at Crete and loaded up with our Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical defence equipment. The Anthrax Vaccines were brought on board. It was very, very tense. Toronto was tasked to escort a tanker through the Straits of Hormuz up to Kuwait. On our way, we heard ‘Assume weapons posture RED.’ We all woke up: ‘Holy fuck, this one’s for real!’ “

The latest phase of the Iraq War is about to begin. The first phase, commonly called The Gulf War (1990-91), led to the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the imposition of sanctions and disarmament. The second phase, which started in 1992, has largely remained hidden from view. So too has Canada’s role, of which Operation DETERMINATION in 1998 was part. In the lead up to the next phase this fall, it is important that Canadians understand the nature of the conflict, the fact that their representatives have been involved in it for over ten years, and why continued involvement is important to Canada.

The second phase of the Iraq War was characterized by covert operations, a protracted air campaign, aggressive intelligence gathering, and maritime interception operations to assure the integrity of economic sanctions. It also featured the use of UN disarmament inspections and a UN peace

enforcement force. The purpose of the second phase of the war, as declassified American documents state, was to protect the physical security of “ the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, deter aggression, counter threats to peace and stability in the Persian Gulf and maintain access to key oil resources...and protect vital interests [related to] Weapons of Mass Destruction.” Saddam Hussein chose not to honour his commitments to the United Nations in 1991. He deliberately and flagrantly took steps over the past decade to ensure that the Persian Gulf region remains unstable, which is to his benefit externally and internally. His aggressive behaviour is reminiscent of the behaviour of 1930s Germany.

From 1991 to today, American, British and at times French aircraft have been forced to conduct a deadly cat and mouse game with Iraq’s air defence forces. In almost weekly events since January 1998, Iraq tracks and in many cases shoots at the coalition aircraft of Operations NORTHERN WATCH and SOUTHERN WATCH, established to monitor the No-Fly Zone and protect the Kurdish enclave. In practically every case, coalition aircraft return fire with anti-radar missiles and other smart bombs.

On four occasions from 1994 to 1998, Iraqi mechanized forces have manouvred to threaten Kuwait or Jordan. These moves have prompted flyover reinforcement of American and British forces stationed in the region. In one example, Operation VIGILANT WARRIOR (1994) deposited 28 000 coalition personnel and 300 coalition aircraft in the Persian Gulf to deter Iraqi moves.

The twilight war continues in the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq as Saddam Hussein supports his Kurdish factions against Western-backed Kurds for control over vital sanction-busting routes into Turkey. CIA and other coalition covert operations designed to disrupt those routes and other efforts to back a coup increased after the 1996 Iraqi mechanized attack against Irbil. It is all reminiscent of the Cold War.

The United States has never been alone in dealing with Iraq. Canada has conducted ten operations in the region which played a supporting role in the overall strategy. Operation VAGABOND (1988-1991) was the first display of Canadian interest in the Persian Gulf region: it involved the deployment of a signals regiment and military observers to support UN peacekeeping efforts at the end of the Iran-Iraq War: Canadian personnel, incidentally, spent several months observing Iraqi Republican Guard armoured forces. The objective was to stabilize the Gulf for western interests using the United Nations as a surrogate force. Operation FRICTION (1990-91) was Canada's contribution to maritime sanctions enforcement against Iraq: it was later augmented with CF-18 fighters and served as Canada's Gulf War contingent. Objective: compel Iraq to leave Kuwait using military force.

Operation ASSIST (1991) was the provision of a medical unit to PROVIDE COMFORT, a multi-national operation to bring humanitarian assistance to the Kurds displaced into southern Turkey. PROVIDE COMFORT, according to declassified Canadian documents, was also designed to maintain the coalition's position in northern Iraq not only to stabilize Turkey but also for the conduct of subsequent operations against the Hussein regime. The extensive use of this area for covert operations, preparations for coup attempts against Hussein, and sanctions-busting throughout the 1990s is well understood by analysts, though ignored by the press.

The trials and travails of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in its efforts to identify and strip the Hussein regime of its biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons as well as their long-range ballistic missile systems and Gerald Bull superguns have seen plenty of media coverage over the years. Canada was an enthusiastic supporter of UNSCOM and its efforts: Canadian personnel constituted Operation FORUM. FORUM also involved significant information gathering on Hussein's nuclear, biological, and chemical arsenals.

At first glance, the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM) appears to be a traditional peacekeeping mission. It is not. Declassified Canadian documents explain that UNIKOM is a peace-enforcement mission which essentially made Kuwait a huge UN protected area. The buffer zone, established without Iraqi consent, is really a protective barrier extending 10-15 kilometres into Iraq and five into Kuwait. It serves as a 'thin blue' warning line so that Kuwaiti and American forces can mobilize if Iraq forces prepare to attack (as they did four times between 1994 and 1997). Over the years, Canada contributed observers and a combat engineer regiment to UNIKOM.

In terms of naval operations, FLAG and BARRIER were the 1991 and 1992 deployments of Canadian destroyers and frigates as part of maritime interception operations in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to enforce the embargo. Operations PROMENADE and TRANQUILITY, however, were different. Even though three Canadian frigates operated as part of the interception force at various times in 1995, some were available during Operation VIGILANT SENTINEL (August-December 1995). This successful operation deterred an Iraqi attack against Jordan and Kuwait. Thousands of troops were flown in and the nuclear carrier task group USS Theodore Roosevelt deployed to the region. Operation AUGMENTATION (1998-2001) involved the rotating use of five Canadian frigates attached to American aircraft carrier battlegroups involved in sanctions enforcement, deterrence operations (Operation DESERT THUNDER -October 1998) and in support of strike operations against Iraq (December DESERT FOX -December 1998).

Finally, there was Operation DETERMINATION. When the Hussein regime continued to harass and interfere with UNSCOM's efforts to identify and dismantle weapons of mass destruction, a massive multi-national force was assembled. HMCS Toronto and a number of Canadian aircraft were part of this force. Hussein was able to stall yet again until Operation DESERT FOX in December 1998.

These are not a series of isolated Canadian deployments: they all relate to Canadian policy in the region which supports American strategy. Key participants include France, Australia, The Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom. All five participated in DESERT STORM, PROVIDE COMFORT, UNIKOM, and maritime operations. The United Kingdom, Turkey, and France were part of the NORTHERN WATCH/SOUTHERN WATCH forces, while Australia, France and the United Kingdom operated alongside Canada and the United States in the 1998 crisis.

It is clear that Canada has played a supporting role throughout the 1990s. Why not stay out of the fray? Why should Canada take active measures against Iraq as part of the coalition?

The collapse of UNSCOM in 1998 accelerated Iraqi nuclear weapons development. There is enough detailed information available in open source literature, including studies by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Iraq Watch, and the International Institute for Strategic Studies as well as three published memoirs by former UNSCOM personnel to conclude that a nuclear capability is nearly within Hussein's grasp.

Iraq's weapons of mass destruction will be used to counter coalition efforts to deter Iraqi ground operations and enforce sanctions. This will open the door wider to better technology and equipment. When Iraq has improved its stockpile, it will start to threaten surrounding countries. Iran will accelerate its nuclear weapons programme: there is no containment strategy or regime capable of preventing this. If either country develops a large enough capability, it will cancel out Israel's nuclear deterrent. Israel will therefore not be able to deter conventional military operations directed against it, with obvious consequences. If Hussein permits the remnants of Al Qaeda or similar groups access to such weapons, they will be used against targets in North America, Europe, or Israel. And they only need one. Lack of conventional action by us now may result in a Israeli pre-emptive nuclear strike later. Do we want to risk that?

Canada is not some small, isolated, irrelevant country: we are part of the globalized marketplace and we have strong economic and cultural ties to the United States and the European nations. Canada has a strategic tradition of confronting totalitarianism when it threatens Canadian interests: the Second World War; the Cold War; in the Balkans and against the Milosevic regime in Kosovo, and against Iraq in the 1990s. Indeed, there was a symbiotic relationship between Belgrade and Baghdad. They cooperated in 1998 and 1999 to pull the West off balance: when the United States and United Kingdom were distracted with DESERT FOX, Milosevic increased ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. When NATO attention was focused on Kosovo, Iraq increased its aggressive behaviour towards the Kurds, Kuwait, and coalition air forces. Perceived weakness breeds aggression.

In the 1990s, Canada focused on the Balkans as the primary theatre for stability operations and the Persian Gulf remained a secondary theatre: something akin to the European and Pacific theatres of war during World War II. Now that the Balkans are as stable as we can make it, it is time to shift our attention and our limited forces elsewhere to more important areas as we started to do with Afghanistan.

Numerous analysts fear the consequences if the West attacks Iraq, particularly in the Islamic world, the effects on the United Nations and so on. Many are deluded into thinking that a new UNSCOM can solve all of our problems by continuing to deal with this patently treacherous man and his disgustingly violent regime. But what are the consequences if we do not confront this regime now?

Is it in Canada's best interests to permit Iraqi acquisition of nuclear weapons? Is it in Canada's best interests to allow the Persian Gulf region to be so destabilized that economic shock waves rebound throughout Europe and North America, our closest trading partners?

What are the consequences for Canada if we do not participate effectively in taking down Saddam Hussein? We will lose what little credibility we have

left with our closest allies. Combined with more revelations that our government coddles terrorists and polling that our population is perceived to be anti-American, we will be increasingly marginalized. We will lose any form of national respect not dependent on the UN for external validation. Do we as a people want to be able to say we participated in stopping this vile regime in keeping with our proud anti-totalitarian traditions? Can we not be proud that we contributed to preserving North American security? Polls suggest that Canadians don't feel a sense of identity or history. National identities are not built on passivity in the face of crisis. They are forged, as this nation was, in war. It may be time for that.