OPERATION DESERT SABRE:

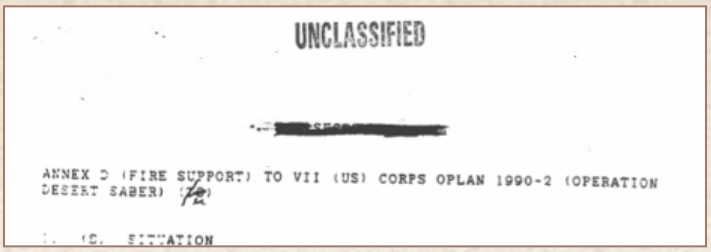
An OPORD for FA in LSCO

By Dr. John Grenier ***Part I of II***

It is clear to anyone paying even the slightest bit of attention that the Army's focus going forward will be Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) against a peer or near-peer competitor. Tomorrow's, or perhaps tonight's, LSCO will involve multiple corps engaged in operations that span the air, land, sea, space and cyber domains—often referred to as Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)—designed to produce theater, strategic and national-level effects and outcomes. The last LSCO in which the Army engaged was Operation Desert Shield/Storm (ODS) in late 1990 and early 1991. In that operation—it is a profound misreading of history to suggest that the 38-day air campaign and the 100-hour ground operations to drive Iraq's army from Kuwait comprised a "war", VII Corps' Corps Artillery proved to be the Army's primary provider of operational-level surface-to-surface fires. As we look to ODS for putative "lessons learned" for the FA enterprise's role in future operations, the most striking point is that today's Army lacks the robust corps artillery DOTMLPF-P (doctrine, organization, training, matériel, leadership, personnel, facilities and policy) that enabled VII Corps' Corps Artillery to fight so efficiently and effectively in Southwest Asia.

Thankfully, we have historical records that can help us identify and gain insight into the matériel and non-matériel differences between the corps artillery of ODS and the amalgamation of Theater Fires Commands, FA brigades (BDEs) and multi-domain task forces that today serve in lieu of World War II and Cold War-era corps artillery. Remember, history offers us context rather than lessons learned about the past. With that in mind, in this and the next issue of the FAPB, we'll offer screenshots from the formerly Top Secret (but now unclassified) Annex D, or the fire support plan, to VII Corps' operation plan (OPLAN) 1990-1992, from which FA "fought" ODS. Annex D, named Operation Desert Sabre, epitomizes a fire support plan that the generation of FA professionals well-versed and trained/educated to conduct AirLand Battle produced at the end of the Cold War. One might ask if LSCO braided with the MDO concept is merely AirLand Battle 2.0 for a "new" Cold War? Regardless, we have cut and pasted snippets from the plan for Operation Desert Sabre and made comments to them. If you want to read the entire annex, contact the FAPB's editors, and we'll send you a copy. In the meantime, we hope this exercise will (1) expose a broad swath of today's FA professionals to the fire support plan that led to the Army's most recent (now almost thirty-five years old) successful LSCO and (2) perhaps inspire those professionals to consider more closely, and think more deeply about, operational-level fires and how they might execute them in the future.

Today's examination of the Operation Desert Sabre OPLAN focuses on its naming, mission statement and overarching concept of execution. Thursday, we'll look at the phasing of FA operations.



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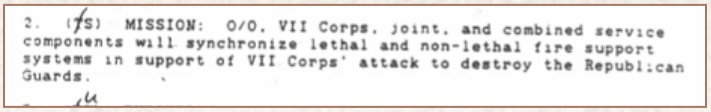
ANNEX D (FIRE SUPPORT) TO VII (US) CORPS OPLAN 1990-2 (OPERATION DESERT SABER) (U)

1. (S) SITUATION

Figure 1

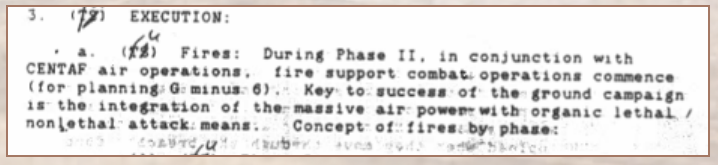
There's the name of the fire support plan and its post-mid 1990s declassification.



2. (TS) MISSION: O/O, VII Corps, joint, and combined service components will synchronize lethal and non-lethal fire support systems in support of VII Corps' attack to destroy the Republican Guards.

Figure 2

Note the focus on the synchronization of "lethal and non-lethal fire support systems." In 1990-1991, considerations about how to best produce both kinetic and non-kinetic effects on the battlefield were in their infancy. An old saw during the Cold War had been that the Army's job was "to kill people and break things." By 1990, reconsiderations of both the totality and validity of that assumption had emerged. Today, space and cyber fires are generally conceptualized as non-kinetic and non-lethal.



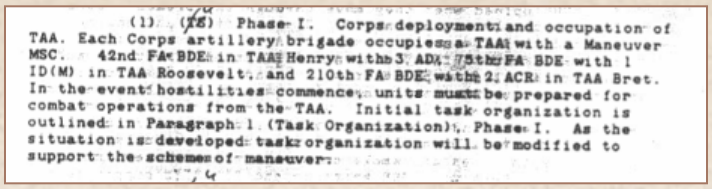
3. (TS) EXECUTION:

a. (TS) Fires: During Phase II, in conjunction with CENTAF air operations, fire support combat operations commence (for planning G minus 6). Key to success of the ground campaign is the integration of the massive air power with organic lethal / nonlethal attack means. Concept of fires by phase:

Figure 3

The Army in 1990-1991 focused on AirLand, not LandAir, Battle. FA fire support did not commence until over one month into the 38-day air campaign. During the air phase of ODS, U.S. and Allied aviators flew 109,076 sorties and dropped 88,500 tons of bombs. That proved truly a staggering amount of precision and non-precision lethal firepower. The RAND Corporation's post-operation study of ODS noted that "Air power

was, for the first time, an equal partner of land and sea power in modern combat. Indeed, given the special circumstances of the war, the performance of air power made it first among equals." One is tempted to ask if land power will regain its position as first among equals in our nation's next war? In general, there's always another "next war," but the mood today seems to place "the next one" not in the abstract but in the immediate sense.



(1) (U) Phase I. Corps deployment and occupation of TAA. Each Corps artillery brigade occupies a TAA with a Maneuver MSC. 42nd FA BDE in TAA Henry with 3 AD; 75th FA BDE with 1 ID(M) in TAA Roosevelt; and 210th FA BDE with 2 ACR in TAA Bret. In the event hostilities commence, units must be prepared for combat operations from the TAA. Initial task organization is outlined in Paragraph 1 (Task Organization). Phase I. As the situation is developed task organization will be modified to support the schemes of maneuver.

Figure 4

At the time of the publication of Annex D, VII Corps' Corps Artillery consisted of three in-theater active-component FA BDEs (42nd FA BDE, 75th FA BDE and 210th FA BDE). The fire support plan attached them to U.S. maneuver formations at tactical assembly areas spread along the Tapline (Trans-Arabian Pipeline) Road between the U.S.' Arab-nation partners in Joint Forces Command-North to the east, located directly south of the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia border, and XVIII Airborne Corps to the west. The 142nd FA BDE from the Arkansas and Oklahoma Army National Guards (ARNGs) was enroute to Southwest Asia, and once it arrived in theater, it added support to 1st Infantry Division (1ID) and 1st (United Kingdom) Armoured Division (1st UK AD). The corps' deployment proved a monumental logistics undertaking: VII Corps "resembled a mini-army [as in WWII-era field army] more than a traditional corps." It consisted of 142,000 Soldiers, 1,587 M1A2 Abrams tanks, 1,502 Bradly fighting vehicles, 669 FA pieces and 223 attack helicopters. Today, the U.S. Army fields four corps, ten active-component and eight ARNG combat divisions; the 1990 U.S. Army consisted of five corps and sixteen active and twelve ARNG combat divisions. Do not forget that XVIII Airborne Corps—the second corps required for the LSCO—contained three FA BDEs, as well. Tomorrow's FA commanders and planners will not have the luxury of so many Soldiers and the abundance of matériel with which to work in the next LSCO. On Thursday, we'll look in more detail at the specifics of Desert Sabre.

Dr. John Grenier is the FA Branch/USAFAS historian at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Graphic Depiction of Allied Order of Battle and Major Movements in ODS