

OPERATION DESERT SABRE: An OPORD for FA in LSCO

By Dr. John Grenier Part II of II

In part one, we focused on the naming, mission statement and overarching concept of execution of Operation Desert Sabre's operation plan (OPLAN). Today, we'll examine its phasing of FA operations.

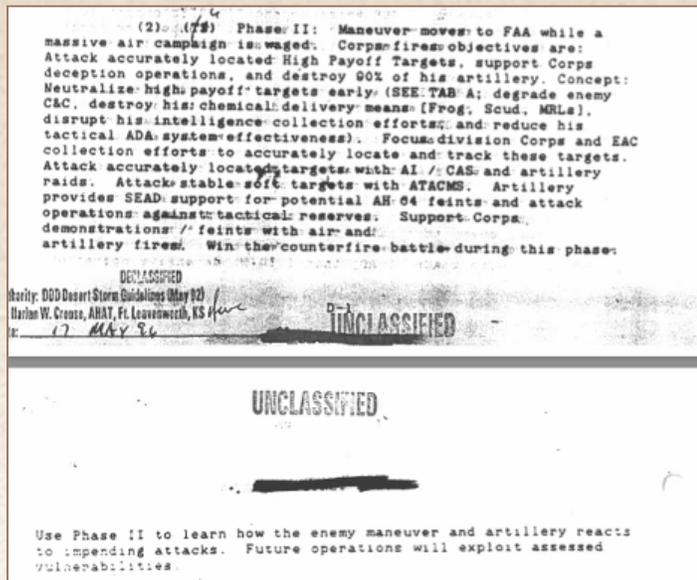


Figure 6

During the air-campaign phase of Operation Desert Shield/Storm (ODS), operational-level cannon and rocket/missile fires from FA brigades (BDEs), vice tactical-level cannon fires conducted from DIVARTYs and their FA battalions and regiments, focused on both the shaping and the intelligence preparation of the battlespace. They also looked to strike high-payoff targets (HPTs), specifically—and most importantly one might argue—the Iraqi chemical-weapons capability. Though, in the end, artillery raids only marginally supported air interdiction (AI) and HPT targeting, ODS saw the first battlefield use of the Artillery Tactical Missile System (ATACMS). The M270 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), which began life as the General Support Rocket System (GSRs) for corps artillery and officially entered the Army's inventory in 1983, launched thirty-two of them in ODS. On Jan. 18th, 1991, 1-27th Field Artillery Regiment (MLRS) launched it rockets against an Iraqi SA-2 SAM site as part of the joint force air component commander's (JFACC) suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) campaign, making it the first VII Corps unit to fire in anger since World War II. The Chief of VII Corps Artillery, Brigadier General Creighton Abrams, noted that the JFACC's staff told VII Corps it was "free to launch whatever projectiles they might have available, provided they did not interfere with the air campaign." Not interfering with the air campaign sometimes proved to be a problem. When the Air Force asked the Army to take out an Iraqi SAM site, the only weapon that could reach it was the ATACMS, which was

moving west with the rest of the VII and XVIII Corps' units on the Tapline Road. By the end of the first day of ground operations (Feb. 24th, 1991), however, ground commanders recognized that "Badly mauled by air attacks before the ground operation and surprised by [VII Corps commander LTG Frederick] Franks' envelopment, Iraqi forces offered little resistance."

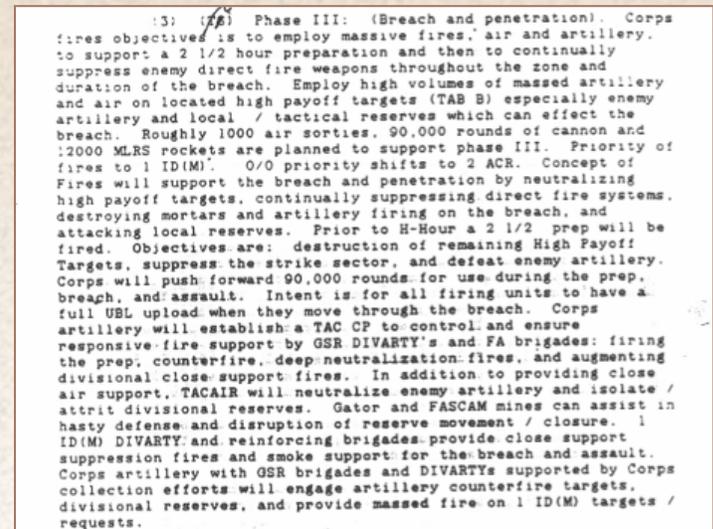


Figure 7

The overarching plan for the ground phase of ODS in VII Corps' sector called for 1st Infantry Division (1ID) to breach the Iraqi defenses on the corps' front. 1st Armored Division (1AD), 3rd Armored Division (3AD) and 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment (2ACR), while 1ID occupied the Iraqis on its front, scooted through and around the west end of the Iraqi defenses to execute an envelopment of the enemy forces in southern Kuwait. XVIII Airborne Corps, in the meantime, conducted a larger, broader envelopment in the west and positioned primarily the 24th Infantry Division (24ID) in the Euphrates River Valley to cut off the Iraqi Army's retreat into Iraq. General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained to the American people the general concept of the plan for the Iraqi Army: "First, we're gonna cut it off, then we're gonna kill it." A key to keeping the Iraqi Army in place to enable its annihilation was 1st Cavalry Division's (1CD) deception efforts at Wadi al-Batin. 1CD would temporarily paralyze Iraqi forces while 1ID breached the Iraqi defensive line to the immediate west of the wadi. The fire support plan points to the massive and overwhelming volume of FA fires that VII Corps' Corps Artillery intended to rain down on the Iraqi forces to support both 1ID's breach operation and 1CD's deception scheme. At the same time, the Corps Artillery aided DIVARTYs in winning the counter-battery fight. Indeed, the Redlegs responsible for operational fires in the FA BDEs had full plates. Note that once 1ID breached the "Iraqi Berm," 1st UK AD would pass through

the Big Red One's lines and execute an envelopment of the mostly Iraqi conscript—not the elite Iraqi Republican Guard Forces Command (RGFC)—divisions in southwest Kuwait. Of course, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. 1ID's breaching operations took longer than expected, and 1st UK AD fell behind schedule in passing through the American lines. At the end of the first day of ground operations, Lieutenant General Franks grew concerned that a gap, which RGFC mechanized infantry and armor might exploit, had opened between 1ID, 1AD and 3AD with 2ACR, then advancing at breakneck pass toward their objectives to the north. He decided to suspend operations of his armored units (then twenty miles inside Iraq) for the night "but continue other combat operations such as aviation and artillery." He hoped the pause might give his infantry and cavalry divisions, plus the British tankers, time to cross the berm... "We would then resume offensive operations at first light."

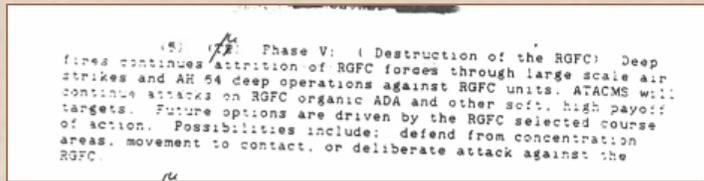


Figure 9

As General Powell noted, the operational focus of ODS, which tightly dovetailed with a clearly defined and stated U.S. national policy and Central Command (CENTCOM) strategy, was to destroy the Iraqi Army, especially the seven armored and mechanized infantry divisions (the Hammurabi, Medinah, Tawakalna, Al Faw, Baghdad, Nebuchadnezzar and Adnan) of the much-vaunted RGFC. The planned Phase V of Operation Desert Sabre suggests how VII Corps' Corps Artillery might support attaining that end state. But most, though not all, of the RGFC aligned against XVIII Airborne Corps formations. Once the route was on in the VII Corps sector, and after 1st UK AD chewed like bubble gum through the Iraqi conscript divisions in Southwest Kuwait, the battle became one of U.S. forces chasing down Iraqi forces to hopefully annihilate them before they could escape north of the Euphrates River Valley. However, "When the troops move hundreds of kilometers in 100 hours, as was the case in the Gulf War, the artillery does not fire very much," Brigadier General Abrams observed. Despite the slaughter of Iraqi soldiers—courtesy of the U.S. Air Force—along the "Highway of Death" to Al-Basrah, most of the RGFC escaped to fight another day, in March 2003 in fact, when the U.S. invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime. That said, "In 90 hours of continuous movement and combat, VII Corps destroyed more than a dozen Iraqi divisions, an estimated 1,300 tanks, 1,200 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, 285 artillery pieces and 100 air defense systems and captured nearly 22,000 men. At the same time, the best Iraqi divisions destroyed only 7 M1A1 Abrams tanks, 15 Bradleys, 2 armored personnel carriers and 1 Apache helicopter. And while killing unknown thousands of enemy troops, VII Corps lost 22 soldiers killed in action."

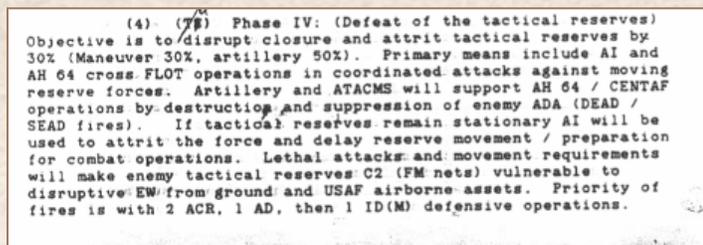


Figure 8

Once VII Corps' heavy formations moved around Iraqi defenses in the south and were running freely in the "open desert" to the north, the Corps Artillery planned to change focus to attriting any tactical reserves the Iraqis might be able to throw against 1AD, 3AD and 2ACR. Long-range missile and rocket fires, in addition to tactical airstrikes from Army aviation, defined those operations. One after-action report of 1AD explained how these operational fires generally played out: "As the division closed to about 10 to 15 miles, artillery, rocket launchers and tactical missile batteries delivered preparatory fires." Psychological operations (PSYOPs) teams followed with broadcasts of surrender appeals. "Only once did the Iraqis mount an attack after a broadcast." "That night 2ACR and 3AD oriented east and encountered isolated enemy units under conditions of high winds and heavy rains." It seemed that the only thing that might slow "The most awesome array of armored and mechanized power fielded since World War II" was weather and/or a shortage of fuel. The Iraqi artillery was not much of a factor. As Brigadier General Abrams noted, "Although the Iraqi artillery did not fire back during the 1ID's breach on Feb 24th, they did fire when VII Corps attacked Republican Guard units on Feb. 26th–28th. The response was routinely rapid and lethal. The Firefinder (Q37) radar would pick up the incoming trajectory, compute the point of origin and pass the targeted grid location to the fire direction center. Accurate, devastating fires, usually from the MLRS, would arrive at the Iraqi positions within a very few minutes [italics added]. Before MLRS and GPS, that kind of response would have been almost inconceivable on a highly mobile, desert battlefield where surveyed positions for the radars and firing units had once been unattainable."

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None can question that VII Corps' Corps Artillery's operational-level fires proved a key enabler and supporter of the corps' smashing success. The Army certainly "loved it when the plan came together." However, we need to be careful when we look to the future through lens of the past: it is unlikely that we will be able to replicate the situation of ODS, and one might question if we should even want to since we no longer have the corps artillery for our current corps.

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