

True life Experiences of Airman Over the Skies of the Middle East

—Steve Johnson

My past life in the Air Force was interesting, to say the least. Two years before the Gulf War—when the Iran-Iraq War was going strong—we were sent to refuel early warning and control (E-3) aircraft. The planes were part of an operation designed to keep an eye on the countries embroiled in the fierce conflict between the two nations. At the time, the Saudi government allowed us to live in a hotel in downtown Riyadh. We kept a very low profile, wearing dress pants and collared shirts when we walked the streets. We did not live on a military base, and for security reasons we had to dress like the locals to blend in.

Muslim culture adheres strictly to its religious beliefs, and if you break their laws you can be killed without malice. I saw what they do to people who break their religious laws first hand. We were down town one Friday afternoon near “the souk,” an open air market. A big, black Suburban truck pulled up and stopped in the middle of this concrete square. Crowds of people gathered around to watch. The back door of the Suburban swung open and a man in a dark robe got out with two others chained from head-to-toe. A big wooden block was removed from the back of the vehicle. I couldn’t see the faces of the people who were chained, but I could tell one was a male and the other female. I was with members of my crew and we turned to walk away from what we knew would be a public execution. But the crowd blocked us. I had heard stories of the same thing happening to other military members who were downtown at the souk...

When the Gulf War started two years later, I was twenty-nine years old. Our second daughter had just been born and our other daughter was two-years old. I left for Saudi Arabia about three months after my youngest daughter was born. I was stationed at an air base outside the capital city of Riyadh.

One night, we were flying a mission to refuel a flight of six, F-16 Fighting Falcons on a bombing run over Iraq. The mission was uneventful until we began

the return to our recovery base at King Khalid International Airport. On our first approach to the runway, we saw a bright flash coming from the direction of the city lights in the distance. The light got larger and larger as we got closer. Ten seconds later, I heard the sound of a Patriot missile battery launching two intercept missiles at what we had since realized was a Scud missile from Iraq. The Saudi air traffic controller stopped talking to us on the approach frequency and we flew blind in the ILS pattern for about five minutes.

Eventually, an American controller took over for the Saudi who had run away. The first Patriot missile missed the Scud and the second glanced off of it. As a result, the Scud was knocked off course and it changed direction. I found out after we landed that the missile hit a warehouse in Dhahran. The warehouse housed an Army National Guard unit from Pennsylvania. Fifteen guardsmen were killed and thirty-five were injured.

We were present when the air war first started on January 16th, 1991. Our mission was to take four F-117A stealth fighters into the heart of downtown Baghdad. From there, we were to hit and neutralize an Iraqi military communications center. I woke up four hours before our scheduled takeoff time and took a shower. As I got dressed for the mission, I thought about my family and whether I was ever going to see them again. I thought a lot: “Is this going to be my last night on earth?” and “Will I come back?” were among the thoughts I had.

I went to the dining hall and got something to eat. I hadn't slept much leading up to what would become the most dangerous mission of my Air Force career. Was I going to be on the first tanker shot down? I had seen pictures of people who were prisoners of war and I did not want to become one myself. We had parachutes and we had to wear them when we got in the aircraft. I knew we were no longer doing training missions. Rather, we were taking a real part in a real war. All those months of training were finally going to be put to the test. People were going to die tonight, and I was going to play a part in it. I went to the

armory to sign out a 9mm pistol with forty rounds of ammunition. I hoped I wouldn't have to use them.

I flew with a four-person crew. We had an aircraft commander, a co-pilot, a navigator and a boom operator. The boom operator was the only enlisted member of the crew. The rest of the crew were commissioned officers. This was going to be the first night of the air war against the forces of Iraq and I was going to be a small part of the grand plan.