

TAC NEWS

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November-December 1995

Armor for Khafji Military Operations in Urban Terrain: The Allied Counterattack on R'as al-Khafji, January 1991



W44 Soviet-built T-55M



VN8 Cadillac Gage Commando



RC2 Chinese-built K-63 APC



N112 French-built VAB-VC1

General Norman Schwarzkopf characterized the Iraqi capture of the Saudi Arabian oil-refining town of R'as al-Khafji as "about as significant as a mosquito on an elephant" (Atkinson, 212).

While Gen. Schwarzkopf was correct about the importance of the battle in the larger context of the Gulf War, the Battle of Khafji provides a number of lessons about urban battle tactics and an opportunity to game some of the command and control problems inherent in conducting a modern battle. In addition, Khafji illustrates the complexities of coordinating a multinational combined arms force under any conditions. While the final Allied victory in Khafji may never have been in doubt, several of the potential outcomes could have seriously undermined Allied unity or resulted in much higher Allied casualties.

The Saudi-Qatari counterattack on R'as al-Khafji was just part of a larger action fought from Khafji on the coast to the point where the Saudi-Kuwaiti border bends sharply northwestward (known as "The Elbow"). While the actions fought by the U.S. Marines and Saudi border troops inland from Khafji are interesting in their own right, it is at Khafji where the real drama was played-out — had the Saudis and Qataris fondered or, worse yet, been defeated, the morale of the Arab allies would have suffered. The drama in Khafji pitted a defender with 10 years of experience fighting the Iranians (but precious little urban combat experience) against attackers who had little combat experience of any kind but had extremely high morale and the advantage of air superiority — from the beginning the outcome was very much in doubt.

Operational Overview

While space here precludes an in-depth analysis of the events leading up to the Allied counterattack on Khafji, a couple of brief notes are necessary to provide context for an analysis of the fight to recapture the Saudi city.

- *Seizure of Khafji* A brigade level attack on the border posts north of Khafji was the prelude to an attack on R'as al-Khafji. While Saudi and Qatari forces and Allied airpower inflicted heavy losses on the Iraqi columns, Khafji fell to troops of the Iraqi 15th Mechanized Infantry Regiment on January 29th; the civilian population had been evacuated two weeks previously due to Iraqi artillery fire on the city. Trapped within the ghost town, two U.S. Marine forward observation parties took shelter in courtyards and on the roofs of buildings while the Iraqis dug in. Saudi and Qatari troops conducted a planned withdrawal to secondary positions to provide a base for mounting a counterattack on Khafji.
- *Reinforcement of Khafji* When it became obvious that the enveloping attacks were failing, the Iraqi command sought to reinforce the understrength force in Khafji proper on January 30th by moving forward units of the original brigade that had remained in positions astride the border berm. By this point, the Allies had properly gauged the scope and intentions of the Iraqi movements and these daylight

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reinforcement columns were doomed before they started.

At the operational level, the Coalition night battles at "The Elbow", around al-Wafra, and at the Saudi border outposts opposite Khafji present a number of interesting tactical and logistical problems for the wargamer. However, the Allied counterattack on Khafji provides the most interesting coordination problems — in addition to the dilemmas that normally confront a commander in the conduct of an urban battle, recreating Khafji in miniature challenges the gamer to command forces controlling up-to-date equipment and supported by cutting-edge technology but saddled with inexperienced commanders, poorly disciplined troops, and interoperability problems between forces that had no experience with joint operations.

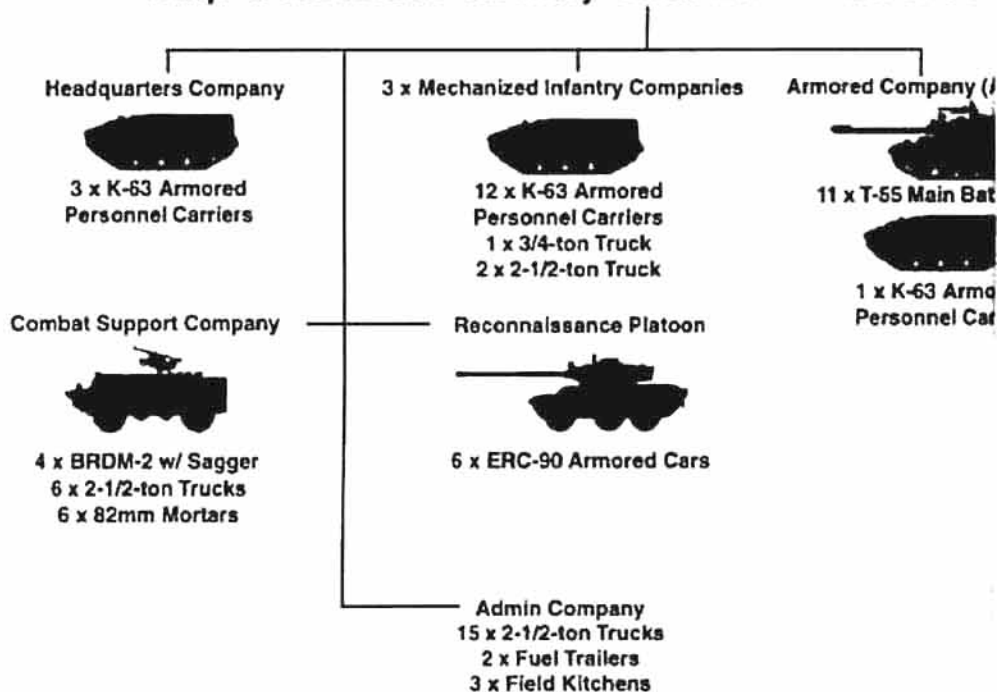
The Counterattack

As the front stabilized and the Iraqis were pushed back from the Elbow and the Wafrah Forest region, coalition commanders turned their attention to retaking Khafji. While there was some discussion of merely encircling Khafji and starving the Iraqis out, the 12 Marine forward observers trapped in the town decided the issue: Khafji had to be retaken within 36 hours. (Atkinson, 209) Since Khafji was in the sector assigned to the Arab coalition armies, responsibility for the attack fell to the 2nd Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) Brigade under Colonel Turki al Firmi.

At 9:00 P.M. on January 30 a battalion-strength Saudi-Qatari task force began a reconnaissance-in-force of the southern suburbs of Khafji tasked with discovering the strength and extent of the Iraqi defenses; they were also ordered to find the besieged Marine forward observers and then conduct an orderly withdrawal in preparation for the main attack the next morning. (Atkinson, 209) The probe quickly degraded into a free-for-all. The Saudi-Qatari forces pushed into Khafji at high speed, firing wildly with heavy machine guns and small arms; Corporal Lentz, the commander of one of the Marine patrols trapped in the town, even reported that the Saudis fired TOW missiles indiscriminately at targets of opportunity, forcing the Marines to hunker down in their houses, preventing their withdrawal. (Atkinson, 209) The Iraqis responded with wild firing of their own. The reconnaissance force withdrew after midnight having failed

Iraqi Mechanized Battalion Order of

Iraqi Mechanized Infantry Battalion + Attached



to either make contact with the trapped Marines or to effectively gauge enemy strength or dispositions since the coalition forces' lack of fire discipline prevented accurate estimation of the sources of enemy fire.

After the Saudi withdrawal the Iraqi commanders, probably sensing that the Allied attack was imminent, attempted to move reinforcements up from the area of the border berm. Sighted by the American forward observer teams still trapped in the town, artillery strikes were called in to destroy the columns. Following the artillery barrage, Allied planes pounded the remaining Iraqi vehicles; again, though, Allied planes attacked Saudi vehicles in the Khafji area that they had mistaken for Iraqi targets. Despite their vulnerability to air attack, the Iraqis were still able to inflict losses — just after dawn on the morning of January 31, Iraqi SAM operators shot down a AC-130 gunship that had loitered over its target for too long. However, the cumulative effect of the Allied air bombardment overcame the meager Iraqi anti-air defenses in the area; none of the reinforcements dispatched from the border areas is known to have reached Khafji. The stage was set

for the final counterattack to clear the town.

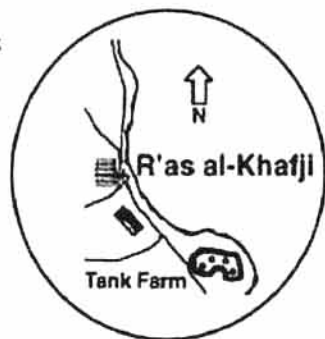
Around dawn on January 31, the 2nd SANG Brigade returned in force to Khafji's southern approaches. Despatching two Qatari mechanized companies north of town as a blocking force, Saudi troops supported by a company of M60A3s again launched a sloppy attack, with APCs careering through the deserted streets and punctuated by indiscriminate machine gun, ATGW, and tank fire. (Atkinson, 210-211) The attack bogged down when pockets of unexpected Iraqi resistance stymied Saudi attempts to dislodge them and finally stalled when a Saudi APC was destroyed by Iraqi tank-killers. Colonel Turki despatched reinforcements to stabilize the situation, but they were delayed when they stopped to pray along the route of march.

With the arrival of reinforcements, Saudi officers were able to rally their troops and reduce the Iraqi positions using the supporting tanks and ATGWs to flush the enemy troops out of their strongpoints; as the day wore on, the mere presence of Saudi troops in the streets caused the demoralized defenders to surrender in increasing numbers. As the Allied forces pushed into the center of Khafji, the Marine reconnaissance teams made a dash for friendly lines under intense sniper fire, but

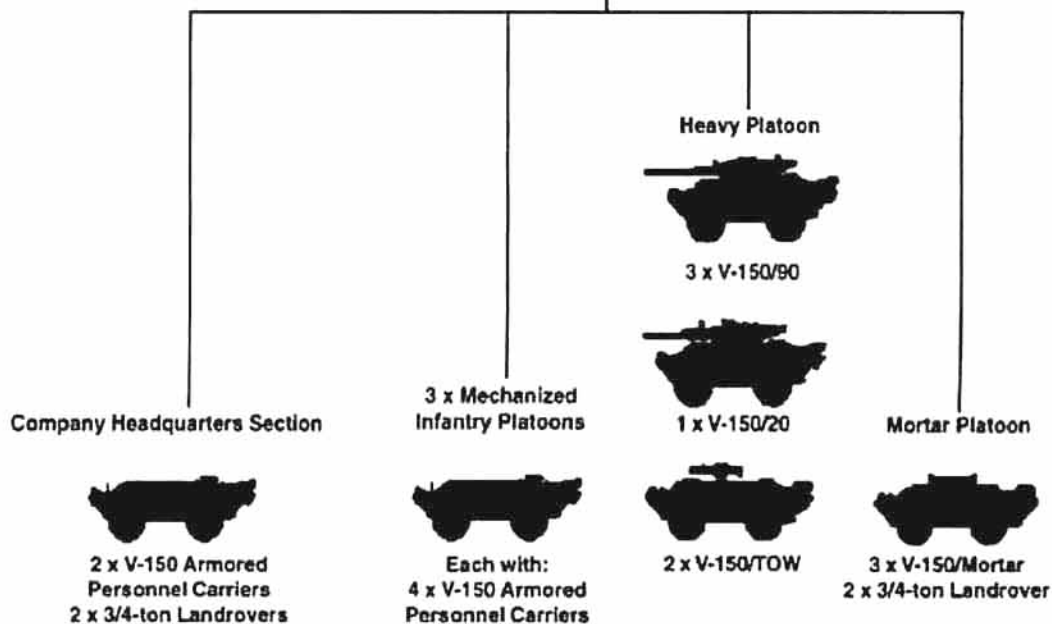
Battle

-55 Company

SANG Mechanized Company



Map Not To Scale



Saudi Arabian National Guard Mechanized Company Order of Battle

by the end of the day Iraqi fire had diminished considerably. By midnight on January 31, R'as al-Khafji was declared secure.

Summary and Recap

The recapture of Khafji was hardly a resounding triumph of Allied arms. Problems of interunit cooperation and forward air control, a lack of discipline among the green SANG troops, and a reliance on heavy firepower over maneuver to achieve the Saudi victory exposed some of the operational weaknesses of the Saudi army. However, while the Saudi officers demonstrated an inability to exert tactical control over their units and the Saudi troops themselves were too impetuous to fight a 'by the book' urban battle, a combination of high Saudi morale, overwhelming air superiority, and an ineffective Iraqi defense were enough to permit the recapture of Khafji and defeat the only Iraqi offensive to take and hold a Saudi city.

On a tactical level, Khafji highlighted a number of tactical snippets of interest to gamers wishing to develop modern urban combat scenarios:

- The presence of the American Marine forward observer teams was vital to the final Allied victory in Khafji. Time and again, the observers called in and adjusted fire on Iraqi positions and reinforcement columns while they themselves were in great danger of being discovered and often under heavy fire from the Saudi forces in the area and from their own artillery strikes. While the Saudi combat troops proved to be poor partners to cooperate with (firing wildly into American positions as well as Iraqi ones, the Saudis also failed to coordinate properly to effect the withdrawal of the American troops during either SANG foray into Khafji), coordination between the Marine F.O.s and higher echelons were excellent — in fact, the existence of forward observers *ahead* of advancing troops not only aided in firing effective artillery concentrations in support of the Saudis but also provided higher headquarters with vital intelligence about Iraqi positions and movements that the Saudi 'reconnaissance'

mission failed to provide, permitting the operational headquarters to plan the attack that finally retook the city.

- Anti-tank missiles like the TOW and Apilas missiles deployed by the SANG troops in Khafji are not only vital for destroying enemy armor, but are extremely useful for destroying fortified positions, creating 'mouseholes' for entry into an enemy held building, and for eliminating troops holed-up in the interior rooms of a building. With respect to the latter, a post-battle inspection of Khafji by a French observer discovered that an Apilas missile had penetrated the exterior wall of the post office complex and proceeded through four interior walls (Aviation Week); the destruction wrought in the five interior rooms through which the missile passed can leave little doubt that any units holding positions in those rooms would've been decimated. The report, quoted in *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, goes on to detail several other instances in which the liberal use of ATGMs against buildings forced the Iraqi defenders to abandon

structures or surrender.

- While the indiscriminate heavy machinegun and small arms fire of the Saudis and Qataris is blamed for many 'friendly fire' casualties among the Allied forces (the fire was so wild that low flying coalition pilots thought that they were encountering anti-aircraft fire), it was also generally effective in suppressing and demoralizing the Iraqis positioned in the town. The Iraqis obviously were able to employ some

effective fire of their own (witness the tank-killers' destruction of the Saudi mechanized spearhead), but the evidence suggests that the incessant Allied artillery and small arms fire broke the Iraqis already brittle morale. In addition, the volume of fire generated by the SANG forces kept the Iraqis from using the streets to redeploy troops or move up supplies to frontline positions; since the Iraqi forces didn't make any attempt to fortify the town nor did they employ traditional

urban tactics (i.e., use of 'mouseholing' to allow tactical movement between adjacent rooms and buildings), the Saudi suppression fire was more than enough to pin and defeat the poorly led Iraqis.

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Random Events & Tactical Tips

While most reports attribute Qatari tankers and Allied airmen with the destruction of 80-90 tanks in the initial assault on R'as al-Khafji, it is unclear just how many tanks managed to make it into the town. Since initial estimates suggested that the Iraqi attack force encompassed 80-100 T-55s and modified T-55s, the destruction of 80 of this number leaves a maximum of 20 or so available for operations in the town.

While it appears that the reconnaissance mission and the counterattack on Khafji were too chaotic for Allied warplanes to provide close air support, Rashid and Shaheen report that U.S. Marine helicopter gunships were available to support the final attack on the town. (Rashid and Shaheen, 343) The Qatari blocking force is reported to have had flights of Saudi Tornados and F-5s, as well as U.S. Marine Harriers and Qatari Mirage F1s, in support.

The U.S. Marine forward observer teams tended to call in artillery strikes only when Allied warplanes were overhead in order to confuse the Iraqis into believing that airborne forward observers were adjusting the fire on the town. (Friedman, 200)

Iraqi tank-killer teams were able to knock out three Saudi APCs and armored cars during the course of the battle. In all three cases, the vehicles were reported to be traveling at high speed with no dismounted infantry on ambush overwatch. (Friedman, 200)

It was discovered after the battle that a number of Iraqi vehicles were equipped with night vision equipment designed by the American firm Hughes; Baghdad reportedly purchased the equipment through the Dutch concern, Delft. It is unclear whether this was night-vision equipment to allow driving and limited targeting through light enhancement or whether the vehicles were in fact kitted-out with thermal targeting equipment. (Friedman, 202 and 409)

The Saudi Arabian National Guard troops were largely recruited from Bedouin tribes; since the growth of facial hair was a point of pride with these tribesmen, it was reported that they would be particularly susceptible to chemical warfare casualties because facial hair prevents the optimal operation of gas masks and related respiratory equipment.

While the Iraqi attempt to use coastal craft to land blocking forces on the Persian Gulf coast was unsuccessful (the daylight convoys were decimated by Allied warplanes using cluster bombs and rockets), it may have been possible for them to reinforce the city at night.

After the battle, there were numerous reports of Iraqi officers forcing their troops to advance at gunpoint. In one case, an Iraqi tank battalion commander is said to have shot his machinegunner for not firing on Qatari AMX-30s. (Friedman, 408) There were also cases of Iraqi troops fighting bravely and with some tactical skill (witness the ambushes that destroyed the three Saudi APCs). The Iraqi forces employed in the battle of Khafji were not green troops, but the Iraqi officers lacked the ability to motivate the veterans who hadn't eaten or received supplies in several days and had been subjected to intensive artillery and small arms bombardment in defense of a city which they had no hope of holding.

Images appearing in
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