

The Battle of the Bridges:

Kuwait's 35th Brigade on the 2d of August 1990

by Major Robert A. Nelson

On 2 August 1990, Iraqi forces invaded and seized the State of Kuwait. The Kuwaitis were not prepared for this onslaught and were unable to mobilize and mass their forces in time to prevent or delay the Iraqi forces from achieving their objectives. One brigade, the 35th "Shaheed" Brigade, was able to deploy and, for several hours, delay significant Iraqi forces. This is the story of the 35th Brigade's efforts to defend Kuwait.

Background

Iraqi claims to territory in Kuwait are older than the modern state of Kuwait and are primarily based on territory held by the old Ottoman Empire. After Kuwait gained its independence from Britain in 1961, this dispute threatened to cause war on several occasions.

Shortly after Kuwait gained independence from Britain on 19 June 1961, Iraq threatened to invade Kuwait, claiming that Kuwait was an integral part of Iraq. British troops went to the area and took position on the Mutlaa Ridge until the Arab League could mobilize forces to assist Kuwait. The Arab League nations maintained their forces in Kuwait until February 1963, when a revolution in Iraq toppled the government. The new government issued conciliatory statements and the Arab League forces withdrew.

In the following years, Iraq repeatedly demanded that Kuwait relinquish control of Bubiyan and Warbah Islands, arguing that forces positioned on these islands could control access to the Shatt al Arab and Shatt al Basrah canals. Yet the Kuwaitis had never attempted to control or restrict commerce through the area.

In March 1973, Iraq invaded Kuwait and seized a border post and territory three kilometers in depth in the vicinity of Umm Qasr, along the northeast coast. Iraq withdrew under pressure from the Arab League after securing

low-cost loans from Kuwait. A subsequent border dispute was shelved in 1983 due to Iraq's involvement in the Iran-Iraq war. Kuwait supported Iraq in that war through low-cost loans and use of Kuwaiti port facilities.

At the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq had a large debt. Iraq also possessed a large and experienced army. The crisis leading to the 1990 invasion began to build in the aftermath of the war. On 30 May 1990, Saddam Hussein began to complain of noncompliance on production quotas and oil prices by members of OPEC. A few weeks later, on 15 July, Iraq named Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates as the culprits. Kuwait was also accused of establishing installations to pump oil from the Iraqi side of the Ar Rumaila oil field and, thus, of stealing Iraqi revenues. Further accusations came on the 21st of July when Iraq accused Kuwait of not supporting Iraqi projects concerning commerce and transportation. Kuwait announced on 28 July that it would reduce its oil production. At a further meeting held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait tried to settle the crisis. The meeting on the 1st of August quickly broke down in the face of Iraqi demands for oil, loans, and territorial concessions. The Iraqis probably never intended for diplomacy to succeed. Their forces began moving on the 17th of July and were set in their attack positions by the 1st of August.

Friendly Forces

The Kuwait Land Forces consisted of four brigades, plus the Amiri Guard and the Commandos Battalion. The 6th Mechanized Brigade was in the north, with M113s, BMP-2s, and Vickers tanks. The 15th Mechanized Brigade was south of Kuwait City, with Chieftain tanks and M113s. The 80th Infantry Brigade was in Jahra, with light infantry and some Saladin armored cars. Finally, the 35th Armored Brigade was west of Jahra on the Salmi road.

The 35th Brigade, commanded by then-Colonel Salem Masoud Al Sorour, included the 7th and 8th Tank Battalions, 57th Mechanized Infantry, an antitank company, and the 51st Artillery Battalion. Both tank battalions were armed with Chieftain tanks. While the 7th was in garrison, the 8th Tank Battalion was deployed without its tanks on a routine mission guarding the northern oil fields. In the days prior to the invasion, the commander of the 8th Battalion brought the 3rd Company back from the oil fields.

The 57th Infantry Battalion was equipped with a mix of M113s and BMPs. It also had two companies deployed dismounted, one on Bubiyan Island, and one on Faylaka Island. The brigade antitank company had Improved TOW Vehicles and the 51st Artillery Battalion had M109A2 155-mm self-propelled howitzers.

The Kuwaiti version of the Chieftain tank MK 5/2, although aging, was still a formidable fighting platform. It mounted a 120-mm main gun with a laser rangefinder, ballistic computer, infrared night sight, and target designating capability. Although the Chieftain has a muzzle reference sensor, the 35th Brigade was unable to boresight the tanks on the day of the battle. The weakness of the Chieftain lies in the power train. The tank is underpowered; the engine will only achieve 720 bhp and is very prone to breakdown. Most Kuwaitis describe it as "Good gun, bad engine." The Chieftain was due to be replaced by the M84 in the Kuwaiti Land Forces.

Enemy Forces

Republican Guard units led the Iraqi forces. Originally, this force was Saddam Hussein's security force, but the Guards expanded into a full corps during the Iran-Iraq war. By the end of that war, the Republican Guards emerged as Iraq's striking force, usually the main effort of offensive opera-



The Kuwaitis fought the Battle of the Bridges with the British Chieftain MBT, at left, equipped with an excellent 120-mm rifled gun, but cursed by power train reliability problems. Infantry carriers include the Soviet BMP, above, and the U.S.-built M113.

tions. The Hammurabi Mechanized and Medina Armored Divisions led the Iraqi attack. Each division had three brigades, two armored brigades and one mechanized in the armored division, or two mechanized and one armored in the mechanized division. Each also included artillery, usually three battalions of 2S1 and one of 2S3, with an engineer, commando, air defense, and reconnaissance battalion plus logistics elements. Each maneuver brigade consisted of three tank battalions and one mechanized or three mechanized and one tank. The brigade also had a reconnaissance platoon and mortar battery.

The principal weapons of these divisions were the T-72 tank and BMP Infantry Fighting Vehicle. The T-72 is armed with a 125-mm smoothbore gun with laser rangefinder, ballistic computer, and infrared night vision equipment. The main gun is stabilized on two axes. The Iraqi version has the "Dazzler" device mounted on the turret to defeat ATGMs; however, it is not effective. The main advantages of the T-72 are the low profile and ease of operation and maintenance. The Iraqis had both the BMP-1, with 73-mm gun and AT-3 missile, and BMP-2, with a 30-mm gun and capable of firing the AT-4 and 5.

At 2200 hours on 1 August, the 35th Brigade operations officer learned of the impending invasion and placed the brigade on alert. The officers and men, alerted by telephone, quickly assembled. Soldiers were on leave or unable to report so, in some cases, new crews

were assembled on the spot. CPT Nasser, XO of 7th Battalion, took soldiers and checked their background. If a clerk had been previously trained as a tank gunner, CPT Nasser assigned him to a tank crew as a gunner.

The tanks and howitzers were not uploaded in normal peacetime routine. Ammo upload took most of the night. According to MAJ Khasan Dawud of the 51st Artillery Battalion, the officers and men worked side by side, without any regard for rank. There was a great deal of confusion and speculation, and periodically the soldiers received updates on the situation. Many believed this would be a repeat of the 1973 Iraqi occupation of the border areas.

At 0030 on the 2d, the brigade received information the Iraqis occupied Al Ratka; by 0100, they occupied all of the frontier boundary centers in the north.

From the brigade commander's perspective, things were very confused. There were many tasks to be done and the situation was unclear. A significant number of personnel were still deployed executing routine peacetime guard missions and could not be recalled in time to fight with the brigade. The subordinate units took about eight hours to upload ammunition and supplies. Unfortunately, they were unable, despite their haste, to load everything necessary in the limited time. The 8th Battalion did not load enough water, a critical item in Kuwait in August. The artillery battalion could only prepare seven of their 18 guns. Furthermore,

the guns were not loaded with a complete mix of ammunition. This limited their options later when they executed fire missions. COL Salem departed the camp at 0430 and joined the antitank company. The rest of the units cleared the camp by 0600. They dispersed to deny the Iraqis a good target.

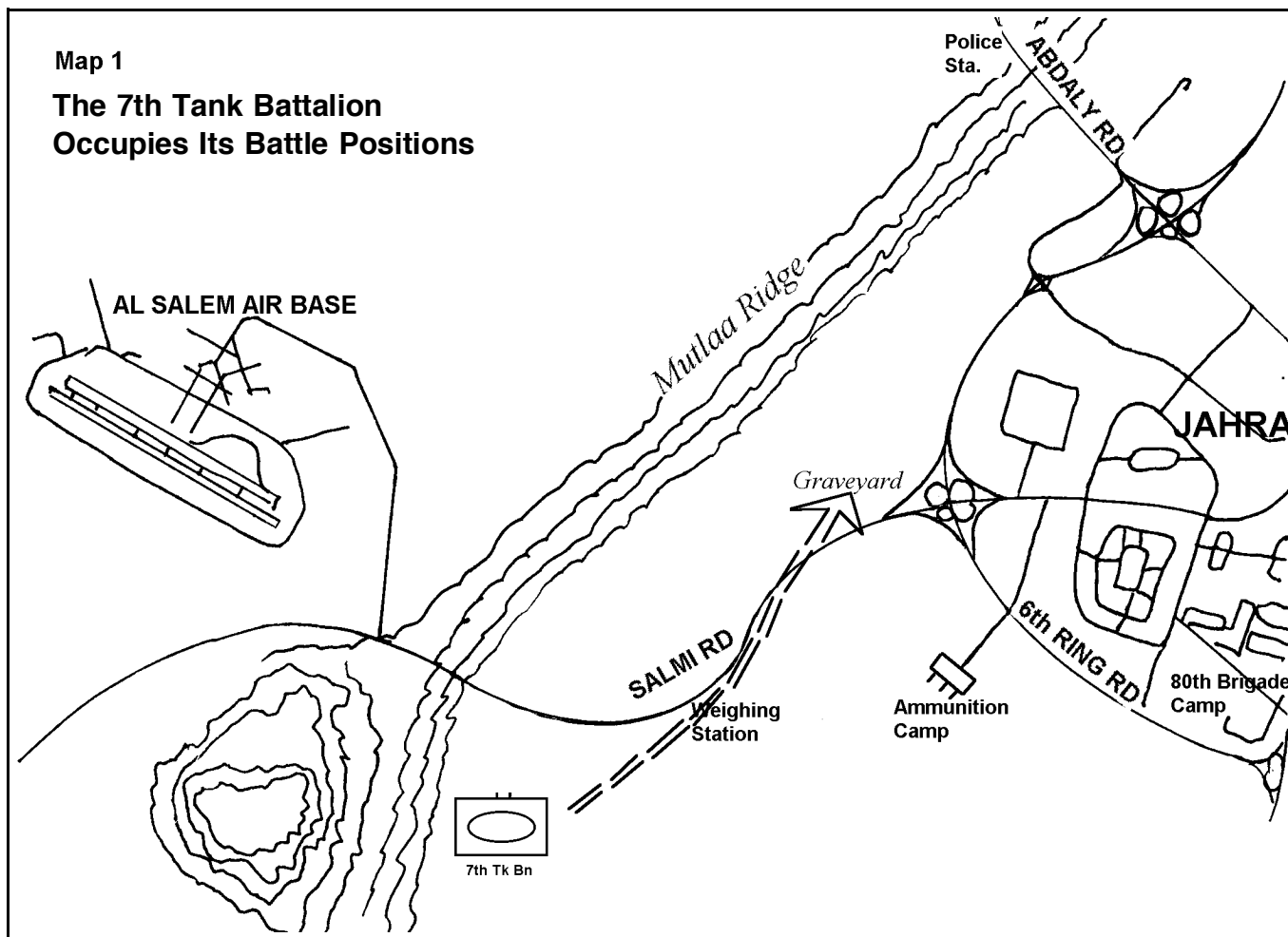
The antitank company initially deployed in two sections, one section went to the Al Salem airbase to provide security, and the second to secure the intersection of the 6th Ring Road and the Salmi Road. During their move east along the Salmi Road, they witnessed an Iraqi air raid on the Al Salem airbase. The remaining forces of the brigade moved out of the camp as they completed assembly. The 7th Battalion assembled three companies with 9, 10 and 7 tanks in each company, plus the battalion commander's tank (which broke down during the movement east). The 3d Company of the 8th Battalion had 10 tanks, the single company from the 57th had about five BMP-2s plus several M113s and, finally, there was a composite firing battery from the 51st Artillery Battalion with seven guns.

The Battle of the Bridges; First Phase

The 7th Tank Battalion led the remainder of the brigade. They moved east along the Salmi Road to the vicinity of the Al Ghanim Oasis and took positions near the graveyard north of the road. At about 0645, LTC Ahmad

Map 1

The 7th Tank Battalion Occupies Its Battle Positions



Al Wazan sent a reconnaissance vehicle forward to the vicinity of the police station on the Mutlaa Ridge to investigate activity on the Abdaly Road. The recon party moved forward and identified Iraqi forces coming down the ridge attacking both east and west of Jahra. COL Salem contacted LTC Al Wazan and directed him to occupy positions in the vicinity of the graveyard (See Map 1). When LTC Al Wazan arrived at the site, COL Salem gave him instructions and oriented him on the enemy force coming down from the Mutlaa Ridge. The Iraqis continued west in column along the 6th Ring Road. COL Salem directed the 7th Battalion to engage, LTC Al Wazan gave the order to open fire. The 7th Battalion began engaging the Iraqi column. The recon party, still forward, cut through the graveyard to escape back to friendly lines without being hit by either side.

The Iraqi forces were elements of the Hammurabi Division, the lead division on the Iraqi northern axis. It attacked with two brigades south along the Abdaly Road and one brigade from Umm Qasr down the east coast. The division

attacked directly south and east of Jahra along Highway 80 as well as west of Jahra on 6th Ring Road. The elements moving east of Jahra were briefly delayed by three Saladin armored cars from the 80th Brigade before continuing their attack into Kuwait City. Those elements moving down the 6th Ring Road apparently did not expect any opposition. They moved in column on the road and did not recon or secure their flanks.

The Chieftains, firing at a range of 1,000 to 1,500 meters, were very effective; the Kuwaitis hit numerous vehicles and caused the column to halt. However, due to confusion at higher echelons, LTC Al Wazan received an order to cease firing and return to garrison. After several minutes, he decided that the order was inappropriate and resumed engaging the Iraqis.

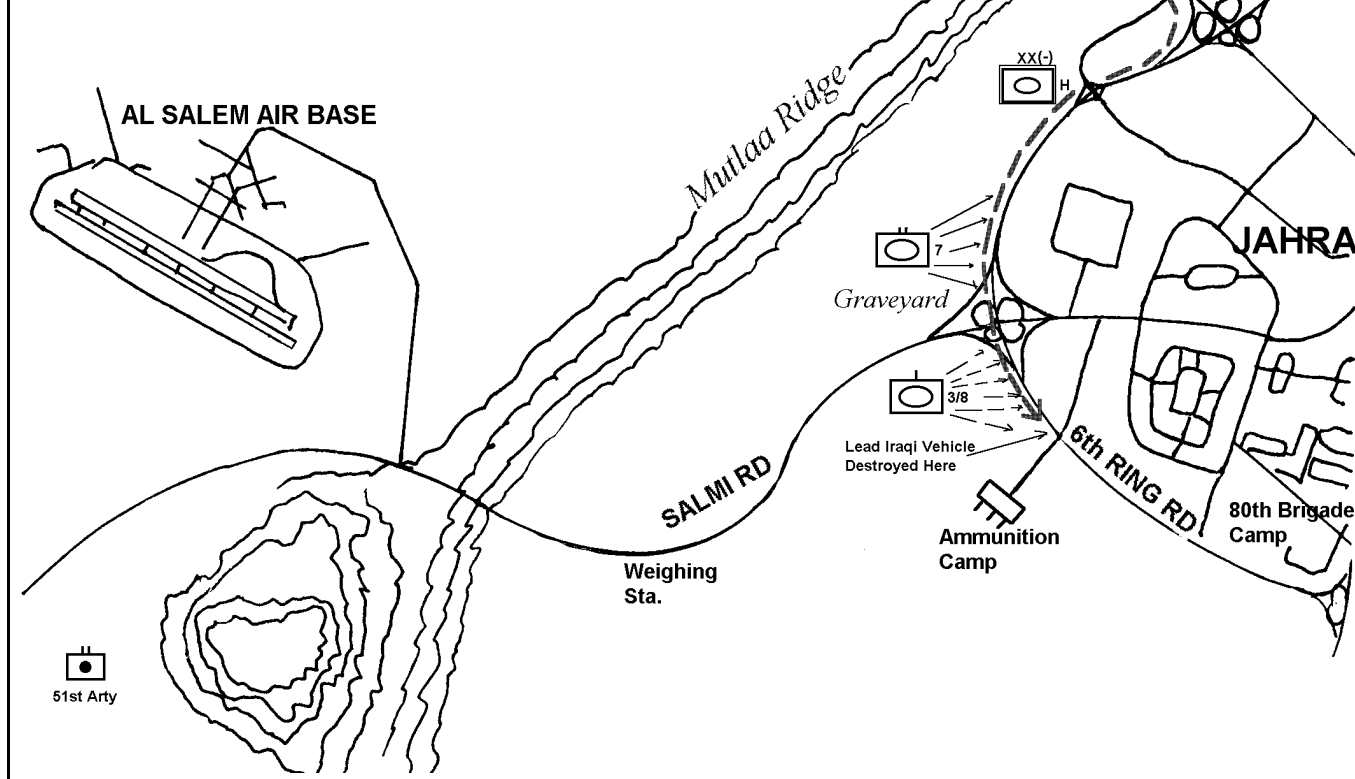
While the 7th Battalion engaged the Iraqis from the north side of the Salmi Road, the 8th Battalion arrived on the south side. The 3d Company commander, CPT Ali Abdulkareem, received an order to move his company across the 6th Ring Road and attempt

to free the 80th Brigade, trapped in garrison by the Iraqis. The 6th Ring is a six lane divided highway with concrete barriers separating the north and south lanes and not easily crossed. The Iraqis controlled the two northern bridges and there was a long detour to reach the next bridges to the south. CPT Ali moved forward in his tank, covered by his company, to conduct a personal reconnaissance. Due to the difficulties in finding a crossing site and continued Iraqi movement south on the 6th Ring Road, the 8th Battalion was subsequently directed to tie in with the 7th Battalion and stop Iraqi movement along the 6th Ring.

When CPT Ali closed on the southern flank of the 7th Battalion, LTC Al Wazan at first did not recognize them. He thought the Iraqis were attempting to turn his flank from the south and directed a TOW platoon to move to cover his flank. He said later, "You know, I almost killed my friend. I gave the order to prepare to engage and we had our fingers on the trigger. But then, thank God, we saw the Chieftains and stopped." This was to be a very lucky day for CPT Ali.

Map 2

Engaging the Hammurabi Division on the 6th Ring



CPT Ali positioned his company south of the Salmi Road to cover the two bridges over 6th Ring. A car pulled up driven by one of the battalion's gunners who was on leave. This soldier was one of the best tank gunners in the battalion and joined CPT Ali's crew. CPT Ali scanned the sector and identified an Iraqi command vehicle under the southern bridge that crosses 6th Ring Road. He gave the order to fire, but his company did not respond at first. He gave his gunner the order to fire and destroyed the vehicle under the bridge. (The burn marks are still visible underneath this bridge.) The Iraqis were now trapped on the road. The rest of the company, following CPT Ali's example, now began engaging the Iraqis (See Map 2). At first, all tanks fired at the same target, CPT Ali quickly directed his crews to distribute their fires across the entire front. The enemy did not respond aggressively, abandoning their vehicles and hiding along the road. A tank platoon attempted to maneuver against the 3rd Company by going around the artillery camp and attacking from the east. The company destroyed them.

While CPT Ali's company engaged the Iraqis on the road, a flight of 30 HIP helicopters flew across his front toward Jahra. Although CPT Ali wanted to engage them he was not able to elevate his gun high enough. He was not concerned until he saw a HIND at the trail of the formation. He recognized the threat but could not bring his gun to bear. The HIND turned and hovered as if it was preparing to engage. Again, CPT Ali's luck was with him. The HIND hovered for a few minutes, then turned to follow the rest of the formation.

Iraqis continued to come down the 6th Ring Road, apparently unaware of the situation. A convoy of cargo trucks loaded with soldiers passed in front of 8th Battalion. The Kuwaitis engaged the trucks, and several hundred troops dismounted. Instead of deploying to fight, most of the soldiers merely sat down on the side of the road to await the outcome of the day's events. Some Iraqi infantry moved into the ammunition camp on CPT Ali's right flank. His flank tanks received small arms and RPG fire, but took no losses. Ali also

destroyed a 2S1 still mounted on a transport, indicating the Iraqis were still unaware and unable to react to the 35th Brigade's fires.

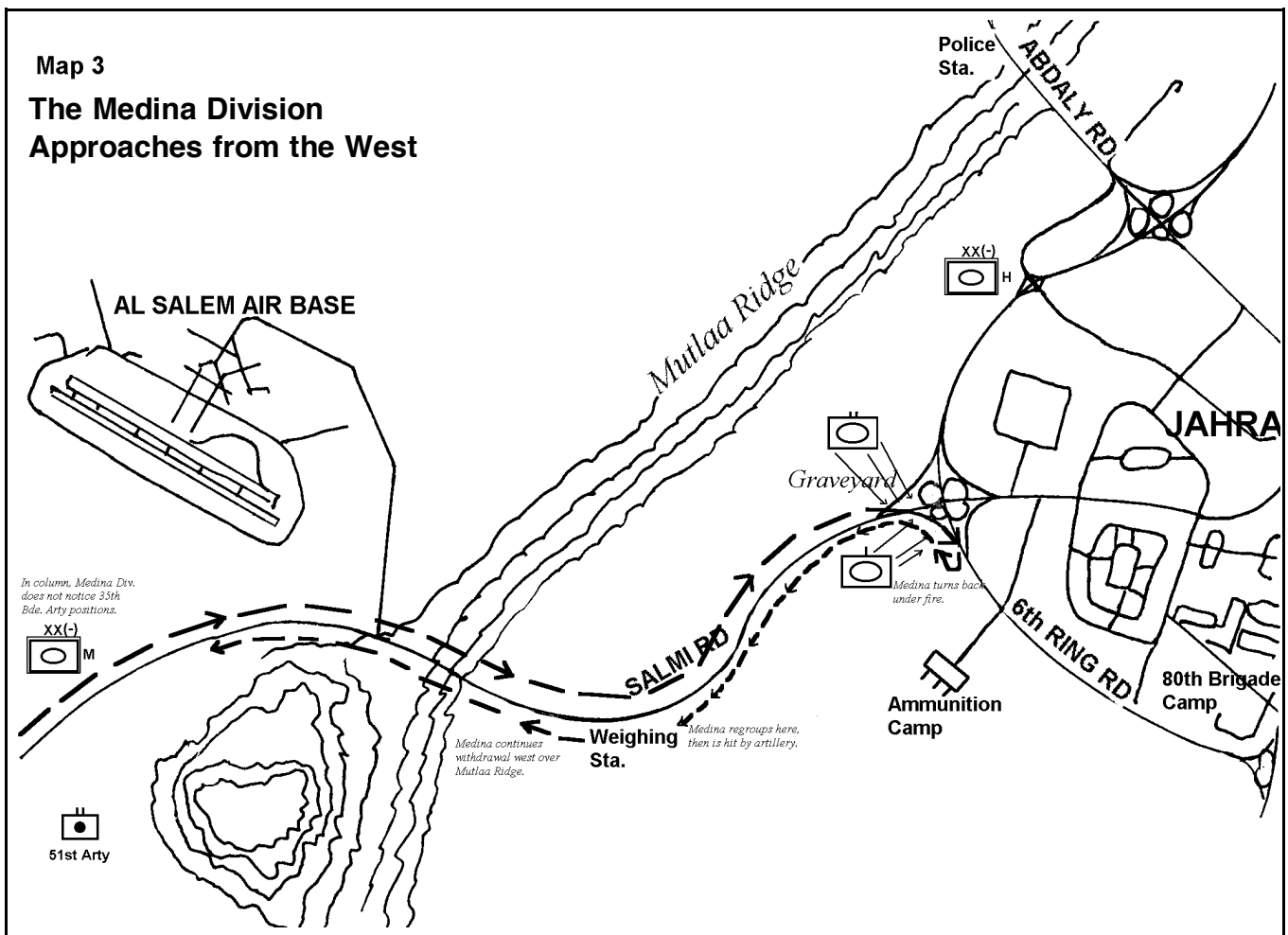
Events slowed down along the 6th Ring Road. The Kuwaiti artillery continued to engage the Iraqi soldiers sheltering among the wrecks and behind the embankment along 6th Ring Road. Some Iraqi soldiers attempted to surrender, but the Kuwaitis turned them back because they did not have enough soldiers to secure prisoners. The Kuwaitis took advantage of the lull in the fight to send vehicles back to the brigade camp to replenish ammunition.

Battle of the Bridges, Phase Two

At about 1100 hours, the 35th Brigade received information about a force coming from the west towards Jahra. The Kuwaitis identified an armored force approaching from their rear. The Kuwaitis thought this was a Gulf Cooperation Council force moving up to reinforce them. Some of the

Map 3

The Medina Division Approaches from the West



vehicles flew green flags that the Kuwaitis first took to be Saudi Arabian. CPT Khasan walked over to question the lead vehicles. As he approached, he realized that this was an Iraqi force because it was equipped with T-72s and BMPs, but he was too committed to turn around. He asked the crew of the lead vehicle their identity and location of their commander. The crew answered, Khasan turned around, walked back, and passed the information to the brigade. The Iraqis continued to drive east along the Salmi Road between the 7th and 8th Battalions. When the lead vehicles turned south on the 6th Ring, Kuwaitis fired into them. The 7th Battalion turned to engage along their right flank and rear while the 8th Battalion engaged a company-sized force to their front on 6th Ring Road.

These Iraqis were the lead brigade of the Medina Division. This division attacked from the west along the Salmi Road. Like the Hammurabi, they were still in column on the road and had no idea of the resistance by the 35th Brigade. Information found after the war indicated there was no direct contact

between the Hammurabi and the Medina Divisions. In fact, the Medina drove past the artillery firing positions and reserve tanks of the 35th Brigade who were south of the Salmi Road in the vicinity of the Al Salem Airfield.

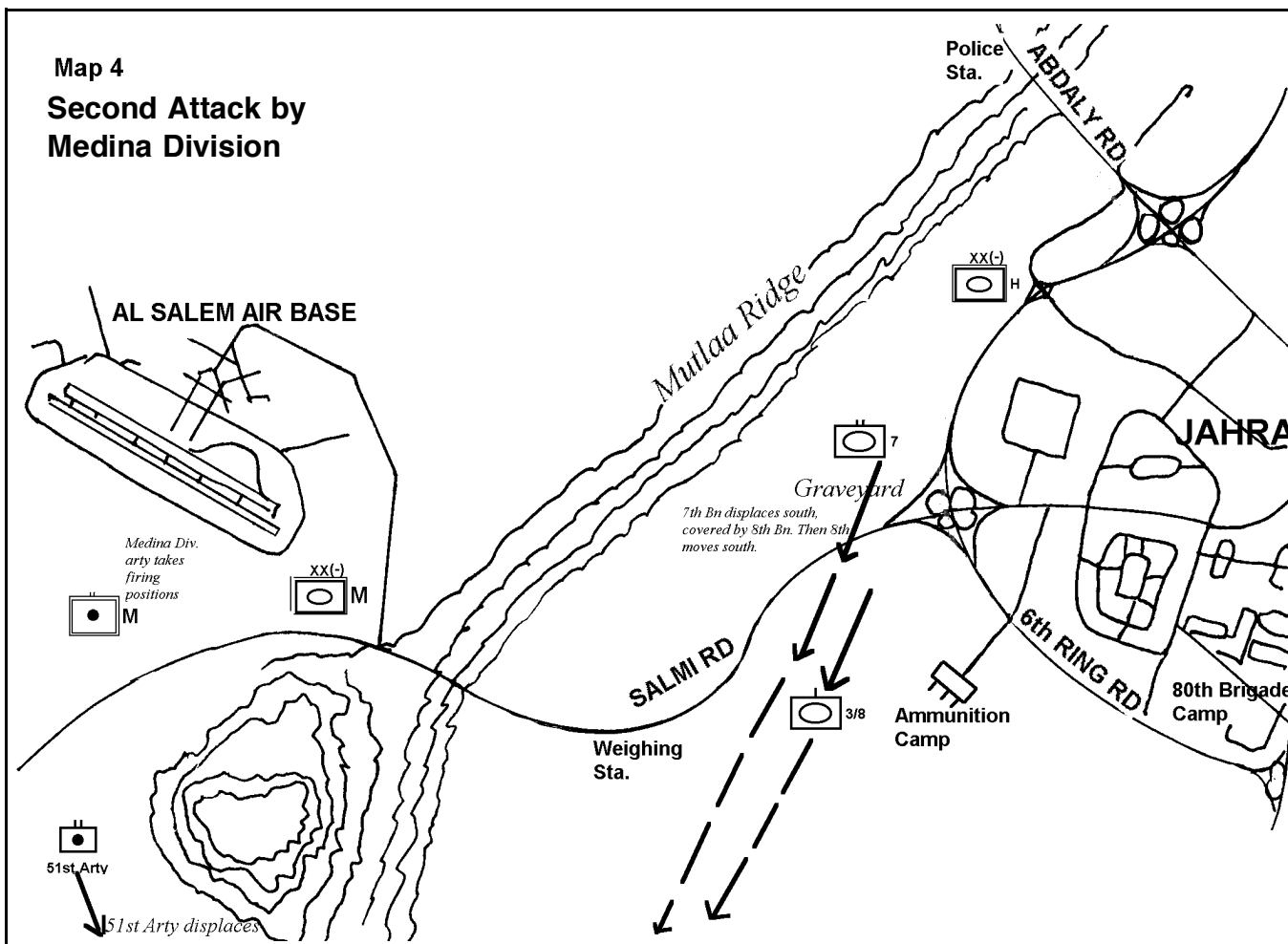
The fires of the 7th and 8th Battalions caused heavy casualties and attrition in the lead brigade. The Kuwaitis captured six prisoners. The brigade operations officer, LTC Suleiman Al Huwail, questioned them and they identified themselves as members of the Medina Division.

The Iraqis withdrew towards the west along the Salmi Road, temporarily halting to regroup at a truck-weighing station located about three kilometers from the 7th and 8th Battalions positions (See Map 3). The Kuwaitis quickly brought effective artillery fires on this point, causing additional casualties and confusion among the Iraqis. LTC Fahad Ashush, the 51st Artillery Battalion commander and CPT Khasan Dawud, the 2d Battery commander were forward acting as observers. The guns were manned by composite crews of all ranks because the battalion had

not fully assembled. MAJ Nabil Saleh, the battalion XO, commanded the guns. These fires caused the Iraqis to continue to withdraw to the west over the Mutlaa ridge. Unfortunately, the Iraqis established their own artillery in firing positions just north of the Salmi Road on the west end of the Mutlaa ridge. They placed accurate fires on the Kuwaiti positions. Several rounds hit near the brigade command group, seriously wounding the artillery battalion commander, LTC Fahad. MAJ Nabil, the battalion XO, took command of the battalion.

While the 51st Battalion was engaging the Medina Division, a Kuwaiti A-4 Skyhawk appeared. It flew around the Kuwaiti artillery position twice and attacked the Iraqi columns just to the north along the Salmi Road. The artillerymen were concerned that they might also be targeted because they were close to the Iraqi force. They had good reason to be concerned. LTC Majed Al Ahmad, an A-4 pilot, flew one of the strikes against the Iraqis along both the Abdaly and Salmi Roads. Due to the rapid pace of the invasion, he

Map 4
Second Attack by
Medina Division



was not given a clear picture of events on the ground nor was a forward air controller or communications available with the ground forces. Under the control of the Al Salem Airbase controller, he hit both the Hammurabi and the Medina Divisions with a total of five MK-82, 500-pound bombs. He was unaware of the positions of the 35th Brigade and could not identify the Chieftains during his bomb runs. MAJ Majed targeted the Iraqis because he was directed by the controller at Al Salem to hit the columns on the road. He returned to Al Jaber Airfield after being hit by a surface-to-air missile.

The Iraqis threatened to attack the artillery with a company of BMPs and fired several rounds of 30mm in their direction. Although several rounds hit the position, the Iraqis were firing armor-piercing instead of high explosive ammunition and did not get a direct hit or cause any casualties. The gunners prepared to engage them with direct fire and the Iraqis did not continue the attack. The artillery moved south and east to new firing positions that were farther away from the Iraqis and less exposed.

The Medina regrouped and attacked again, this time with two brigades deployed. The unit commanders informed COL Salem they were running short of ammunition, in particular tank main gun rounds. Most tanks were down to two or three rounds of main gun ammunition. COL Salem requested reinforcements and support from headquarters, but there was no additional support available. To prevent the brigade from being encircled between the Hammurabi and now-deployed Medina Divisions, COL Salem directed a withdrawal to new positions south of the Salmi Road. The 8th Battalion covered the 7th Battalion's initial move (See Map 4).

The 51st Artillery Battalion set ten kilometers to the south and prepared to fire. They were delayed in firing while observers moved into position and then again by communications difficulties. MAJ Nabil had difficulty contacting the brigade commander to help cover the repositioning. CPT Nasser, XO of the 35th Brigade, took charge of the tanks of the two reserve platoons and prepared to attack the enemy. Commu-

nication was re-established and the attack canceled.

While his company covered the movement of the 7th Battalion, CPT Ali stood on his turret to gain some relief from the heat. For no apparent reason, his driver moved the tank about ten or twenty meters. The driver had never moved the tank without specific directives before. As soon as the tank moved, an Iraqi main gun round hit the position they just vacated. After the 7th Battalion set, the 8th Battalion began to move and again, CPT Ali was misidentified as Iraqi and almost engaged.

The brigade continued moving south to a subsequent position to escape the closing Iraqi pincers. While repositioning, they received a directive from higher headquarters to move toward the 15th Brigade camp to replenish and continue to defend. However, higher headquarters did not have an accurate picture of the battlefield and communication was tenuous at best. Joint headquarters informed COL Salem to take whatever action he considered necessary. He decided to withdraw to position his back against the Saudi border



Members of the Kuwaiti 35th "Shaheed" Brigade and the Chief of the U.S. Office of Military Cooperation Kuwait. From left to right: Major Ali Abdulkareem, Major Nabil Saleh, Major Nasser Dowailah, Brigadier General Ivany, Brigadier General Salem Al Sorour, Colonel Ahmad Al Wazan.

and secure his flanks and rear against envelopment during the night. Thus, the brigade continued to move south and set on the Saudi border, arriving at about 1630. The brigade remained in position through the night. LTC Ahmad Al Wazan, along with a recon element, moved into Saudi Arabia and made contact with the border police and informed them who they were and the brigade situation. The brigade entered Saudi Arabia the following morning. After the last units withdrew into Saudi Arabia, an Iraqi airstrike hit the vacated positions.

The Saudis assisted the brigade in reorganizing and resupplying. While some units, such as the 7th Battalion, were relatively well supplied with water during the fight, others were suffering badly from a lack of water and all suffered from fatigue. At one point, both Kuwaitis and Iraqis alternated purchasing water from the same roadside vendor, soldiers from both sides calmly lining up to pay.

Conclusion

The 35th Brigade was able to inflict heavy casualties on the Iraqis and delay the movement of two divisions. Had the Kuwait Army had been able to organize the entire force into a cohesive defense, they may have delayed the Iraqis long enough to allow the Gulf Cooperation Council Forces to assemble and reinforce them.

The Kuwaiti armed forces continue to face this challenge today. Iraq and Iran both present a significant long-term threat to peace and stability in the region. Kuwait must look to the lessons of the Battle of the Bridges as it con-

tinues to modernize and develop its ability to defend itself.

Postscript

Brigadier General Salem hosted the members of the United States Office of Military Cooperation-Kuwait on a staff ride of the Battle of the Bridges on 8 April 1995.

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Interviews

Ahmad Al Wazan, Colonel, Executive Officer, 35th Shaheed Armored Brigade. Colonel Al Wazan was a lieutenant colonel and commander of the 7th Tank Battalion at the time of the invasion.

Ali Abdulkareem, Major, Commander, 8th Tank Battalion. Major Ali was a captain and commander of the 3d Company of the 8th Tank Battalion on the 2d of August. He had just returned to Kuwait after completing the U.S. Army Armor Officer Advanced Course in June at the time of the invasion.

Bader Al Dehani, Major, Executive Officer, 63d Battalion, currently acting as an assistant operations officer in 26th Brigade. Major Bader was assigned to the 35th Brigade intelligence section

during the invasion.

Khasan Dawud, Major, Executive Officer, 51st Artillery Battalion. Major Khasan was a captain and commander of the 2d Battery, 51st Artillery Battalion during the invasion.

Majed Al Ahmad, Lieutenant Colonel, Operations Officer at Al Jaber Airbase. Majed was a major at the time of the invasion. He flew A-4 Skyhawks from Al Jaber Airbase.

Nabil Saleh, Major, Commander of the 51st Artillery Battalion, also serving as an assistant operations officer at Land Forces. Major Nabil was the XO of the 51st Artillery Battalion at the time of the invasion. Major Nabil had recently returned to Kuwait after completing the Field Artillery Advanced Course in the Spring of 1990.

Salem Masoud Al Sorour, Brigadier General, Commander, Kuwait Land Forces. General Salem was a colonel, commander of the 35th Brigade during the invasion. He led the brigade back into Kuwait during Operation DESERT STORM.

The following officers reviewed this article:

BG Salem Al Sorour, COL Ahmad Al Wazan, COL Nasser Khames Al Zaabi, MAJ Nabil Saleh, MAJ Nasser Dowailah, MAJ Ali Abdulkareem, and MAJ Suleiman Al Huwail.

Major Robert A. Nelson is currently assigned as the training advisor to the Kuwait Land Forces. Previous assignments include 3d ACR, 1st Armored Division and the National Training Center.