

## For a nation, the Gulf War lasted weeks; for Nebraska-based unit, the mission never ended

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The aircraft, now more than 50 years old, still flies out of Offutt Air Force Base.

Twenty-five years ago tonight, Air Force Capt. Robert S. Hopkins III flew his RC-135V surveillance jet over the Saudi Arabian desert. Suddenly an Iraqi MiG-23 screamed toward him at Mach 1.2, locked in to fire a missile.

On the first day of the Gulf War, the crew from Offutt Air Force Base's 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing — accustomed to flying routine and predictable Cold War missions — was playing a new and unfamiliar role: gathering electronic intelligence in the middle of a combat zone.

Hopkins called for help from friendly F-15 fighters in the area and turned his Rivet Joint jet sharply left to face the MiG head-on — a trick designed to make it harder for the enemy to fire effectively.

His commanders had warned that two of the surveillance planes might be lost to Iraq's air defenses in the first 48 hours of the war, as Navy and Air Force jets rained bombs and missiles on targets across Iraq and occupied Kuwait. Hopkins was determined his aircraft wouldn't be one of them.

The air war that lit up the skies of Baghdad on Jan. 17, 1991, was broadcast live by CNN onto American TV screens. After 39 days of bombing and a short ground war, the Iraqi forces of Saddam Hussein were expelled from Kuwait in a triumph of Western military might. The brief war has faded from Americans' memory, overshadowed by more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But for the Nebraska-based unit now known as the 55th Wing, Desert Storm changed everything. The wing launched a Middle East mission that continues, with no end in sight. And it was the pivotal moment when Rivet Joint shifted from its Cold War task of collecting data for the Strategic Air Command into a weapon for scooping up intel that could be routed instantly to warfighters in the field.

"The full move into the tactical arena happened very rapidly in Desert Storm. It continues to evolve to this day," said John Anderson, 49, of Bellevue, an electronics warfare officer during the Gulf War. "It was kind of a brave new world for everyone at the time."

"After 1990, we really came out of the shadows," said Col. Mohan Krishna, current commander of Offutt's 55th Operations Group, which oversees the wing's missions.

"Originally, it was a Cold War asset. Now it's a whole-world asset."

Lt. Col. David Wolfe had led a 65-man Rivet Joint team from Nebraska to Saudi Arabia just a few days after Saddam's forces invaded and annexed oil-rich Kuwait in August 1990.



55th Strategic Air Reconnaissance Rivet Joint crew members from the 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing pose in front of RC-135V at Riyadh Air Base, Saudi Arabia, during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm.

President George H.W. Bush worried Saddam might try to grab undefended oil fields in neighboring Saudi Arabia, too.

“The Saudis could never have stopped him,” said Wolfe, now 69, retired and living in Bellevue. “President Bush just started deploying assets — whatever was available.”

Rivet Joint’s RC-135s began flying round-the-clock patterns near the Iraqi border, listening in for radio, microwave, radar, electromagnetic and other signals for clues about Iraqi defenses and military tactics.

Despite Saddam’s defeat — in both 1991 and 2003 — and a shifting cast of allies and adversaries, Rivet Joint crews have remained on post in the Middle East continuously: through nearly 9,300 days and 11,700 flights, under four different presidents.

“We were the first ones in,” Krishna said. “And we never left.”

The 55th Wing grew out of a World War II-era fighter unit that was nose-deep in the Cold War from 1947 through the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing partnered with SAC at their shared Offutt headquarters, deploying Rivet Joint aircraft to England, Greece, Japan and Alaska to fly missions mostly against the Soviet Union. It also operated the round-the-clock airborne command post called “Looking Glass.”

The 55th Wing occasionally joined in combat operations — against Grenada in 1982, Libya in 1986 and Panama in 1989-90. But its bread-and-butter missions were contracted with U.S. intelligence agencies and major military commands to gather specific kinds of intel.

“Before, 90 percent of the mission was still sponsored by NSA and CIA and the intelligence commands,” Hopkins said. “After Desert Storm, that flipped.”

The aircraft used to gather the intelligence hasn’t changed for several generations. During Operation Desert Storm, the RC-135s — converted Air Force tankers built on an airframe similar to the commercial Boeing 707 — had already been in use for a quarter century.

The very same aircraft are still flying today. Now, however, they have upgraded engines and vastly improved surveillance gear tucked into the distinctive “cheeks” just behind the cockpit and the radome Rivet Joint crews call a “hog nose.”

“What the airplane does today, the capabilities, have jumped by leaps and bounds,” Wolfe said. “What I would have thought was ‘Star Wars’ at the time has become reality, and past that.”

When Saddam invaded Kuwait, Wolfe and his team quickly deployed from Offutt aboard a C-5A cargo jet with dozens of “risk kits” for fixing RC-135s.

“When I left here, I didn’t know where I was going,” Wolfe recalled. En route, he received orders to go to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

For months, Wolfe and Lt. Col. Reggie Stewart — now retired and living in Woodbine, Iowa — would trade off or share the job of keeping Rivet Joint jets flying and crews supplied and housed.

They started with three of Rivet Joint’s 14 aircraft, and seven were deployed there by the time the air war started. Air crews flew missions of 14 or more hours every other day: 12 hours on station, plus an hour or more each way en route. Lt. Col. Michael Cook of Bellevue — now retired from the Air Force and working for the wing as a flight instructor — helped out with missions from the two aircraft he commanded in Greece.

Within days of their arrival, the unit suffered the first U.S. casualty of Desert Shield. A mechanic, Staff Sgt. John Campisi, was struck and killed by a truck while taking a break on the pitch-black airfield.

“Me and a chaplain had to go down to a Saudi hospital and pick up his body,” Wolfe said.

“You never forget something like that.”

The desert took a toll on the crews and the aircraft. Rivet Joint crews developed frequent sinus infections from the low humidity, high level of dust, and the amount of time spent breathing recycled air aboard the RC-135s, said Hopkins, historian and author of “Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker: More than just a tanker.”

Sand and grit sandblasted away at the jets and their engines. Maintenance crews worked 20-hour days in intense heat — sometimes 130 degrees — to keep them running.

During the long months of flying, the crews learned the workings of Iraq's air defenses.

"We had eyes and ears that reached all the way across the region," Wolfe said. "Saddam used microwave communications he thought were secure. We had broken that system."

The Iraqi air forces couldn't stand up against the air power of the U.S. and its allies.

"It was really not much of a fight," said Brig. Gen. Paul Hutchinson, then an Air Force captain, who flew an RC-135 on the first night of the war. "After a couple of hours, it became pretty apparent we were not only overwhelming them, we were taking them apart, piece by piece."

No Rivet Joint jets were lost. Four Air Force F-15 fighters swooped in on that first night of the war to defend Hopkins' RC-135 and its crew of about 30 — though he nearly fell victim to friendly fire when his radar blip merged with that of the MiG, which managed to escape.

"There was a lot of radio chatter in a hurry to clear things up," Hopkins wrote years later.

Like all of the troops in Saudi Arabia, the Rivet Joint crews feared Saddam's chemical weapons and Scud missiles. He never used the chemical weapons, but he launched more than 80 Scuds. Patriot missiles intercepted most, but a direct hit on a U.S. military barracks killed 28 soldiers and wounded almost 100 more.

"There's no doubt about it, people knew we were in a combat zone," said Hutchinson, 57, who now commands the New Hampshire Air National Guard.

Anderson, the electronics warfare officer, said Rivet Joint crews learned to gather information that would be of quick use to units on the ground.

"We'd come down, get a thorough debrief on what we saw and did," Anderson said. "It was used by planners for the next day's missions."

Bush called a halt to the war Feb. 28, 1991, after a five-day ground war that routed the Iraqi forces. Most of the combat crews soon returned home, but Rivet Joint would stay, its reputation burnished by success.

"Before, very few people in the Air Force knew what Rivet Joint could do," Hopkins said.

"After Desert Storm, everybody knew what we could do."

The U.S. and its allies set up no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq to protect ethnic and religious minorities, and the RC-135s proved useful in enforcing them. Demand for their services expanded, with missions during the 1990s in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and other new trouble spots.

A strong focus remained on the Middle East, as the crews perfected their ability to relay intelligence to field commanders in real time.

After the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. had an all-consuming need for intelligence out of Afghanistan and Iraq. By then, Rivet Joint crews could communicate directly with even small units — say, a fire team — deployed in the field.

"We could get there quicker and we could stay there longer," Krishna said. "We've got more communications capability."

About two-thirds of Rivet Joint's jets stayed in the region.

In 2003, Saudi Arabia ordered U.S. forces out of the country because of pressure from Muslim extremists. Rivet Joint and other Air Force missions moved to Qatar and continue to operate there.

Krishna, though, said the events of the last several years — the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Russia's increasing belligerence, China's military buildup — have prompted the 55th Wing to shift some of its Rivet Joint efforts away from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Now, he said, only about half of its aircraft are focused on the Middle East. The fleet has increased to 17, and Great Britain is adding three of its own.

"Because of the way the world has changed, we need more — everywhere, all the time,"

Krishna said. "We have a very broad focus again."

Some Rivet Joint veterans wonder if the program might have faded just as SAC did, had the Gulf War not forced it to change so quickly.

**“Desert Storm redefined the entire reconnaissance community,” Hopkins said. “We didn’t know we would be as amazing as we were. Desert Storm made it look simple.”**

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