

Cordingley, Patrick. In the Eye of the Storm: Commanding the Desert Rats in the Gulf War. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996.

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The Gulf War of 1991 generated a shelf full of books, perhaps the most successful being the writings of the Commander-in-Chief, and a corporal in the Special Air Service. Patrick Cordingley saw the war from a rank roughly midway between those millionaire authors, as a brigadier commanding the first British contingent to the Coalition Forces the 7th Armoured Brigade, otherwise the "Desert Rats."

Cordingley kept a diary during his five months in Theatre, so he has been able to describe his experiences in considerable detail. These experiences include: the surprise redeployment of his brigade from North Germany to Saudi Arabia; reaching operational status and coming under command of the US Marines; coping with representatives of the host country the Saudi Arabians, the news media from UK, and the various levels of British authority; switching from the Marines to 1st British Armoured Division as the latter became operational, training, anticipating, and finally fighting a short but fierce war.

It is a good account, and by exposing his own fears, frustrations and occasional mistakes, the author keeps the reader on side. This is important, because there is an inevitable tension between Cordingley the commander and Cordingley the author. As a brigadier, loyalty to troops and duty to superiors set very severe limits on criticism; consequently, as author, clashes of personality and opinion have to be cooled or omitted. The book is therefore a fitting record of achievement, and an important text for current and future generations of soldiers, but it may have rather limited appeal beyond the defence community and military buffs.

The transition from peace to war imposes psychological strain on any army, and in the case of a brigade that last saw action in 1945, those problems could be severe. Cordingley describes the importance he attached to realistic field training, right up to the last moment, to generate confidence, team spirit and tactical efficiency. The closer the "real thing" is to recent training experience, the less terrors it will hold. For it is in the unknown that terror lurks, however well it may be controlled.

The unknown was a dominating factor in the build up to Desert Storm. Would the Iraqis attack Saudi Arabia before the Coalition Force was ready? When, if at all, would the Coalition launch an attack, and what would be its objectives? Would the Iraqis use chemical or biological weapons or both, and what use would they make of their Scud missiles? How well would they fight? Would the Coalition's (particularly the US) sophisticated weaponry work under rugged combat conditions? How well and for how long would domestic opinion support the war? And, full circle, how well would our men fight, the commander included?

The scale of the opposed military deployments and the multitude of nations involved made all present conscious of being at a crucial moment in history. Whatever the mission, it was absolutely essential to get it right; there might not be a second chance. Besides

piling on the strain, this somewhat apocalyptic atmosphere attracted politicians, senior public servants and military, all requiring attention and time. For their part, the Saudi Arabians kept tight control over their own territory, and permission to train with live ammunition was hard won. And there were the news media.

Media-bashing is an established sport, particularly among the military. In Patrick Cordingley's case, however, he really asked for trouble when he tried to tell reporters what their job was, then ignored the official line from London and spoke of "considerable casualties." The subsequent headlines and comment blew the remark out of proportion, but that's Show Biz. Later, and in various ways, the press and public gave the troops strong support. Nevertheless, the experience led the author to ask: "I wonder if commanders can now be ruthless enough, in a television age, to pursue the enemy to the limit, if the stakes are anything less than national survival."

Because it was short lived and the Iraqi resistance crumbled, we are apt to classify the actual ground fighting in Desert Storm as an anti-climax. At the strategic level, this may be justified, but for the troops in the leading tanks and armored carriers, it was hot while it lasted.

This part of the book is particularly useful, as these are a few first-hand, informed accounts of the tank and infantry fighting. Two new devices worked well: the satellite navigation systems that reported your position within ten metres; and night vision devices that enabled tanks to engage their opponents at long range in total darkness. Indeed, like the aircrews, soldiers were selecting targets from computerized screens that resembled arcade games. Reality mimicked virtual reality.

The firepower unleashed on the unfortunate Iraqis was incredible, far exceeding any previous war. Moreover, when put to the test, most sophisticated systems worked. British equipment in the Gulf was good, but it was clear that in many areas the Americans are now in a class by themselves.

Yet, for all the brilliance of systems, none of the attacking forces had the vaguest idea of what lay in wait for them beyond the Iraqi minefields when they advanced across the border. Apparently, battlefield surveillance has not improved since the Somme. And although night vision devices enable an army to fight round the clock, no one has developed soldiers who can operate indefinitely without sleep.

The author is now Major General Cordingley, marked, perhaps, for stardom. Because he is a good soldier, we may be sure that no future command, however illustrious, will ever match the thrill of leading the Desert Rats into the eye of Desert Storm.

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