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Desert Shield and Desert Storm

20 Years in Retrospect

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In 1898 John Hay famously characterized the Spanish-American War as a "splendid little war." On the 20th anniversary of Desert Shield and Desert Storm, US Airmen might say the same about those two operations.

An international response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Desert Shield was a buildup of coalition forces in the Persian Gulf region. For months the prospect of what Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein threatened would become the "mother of all battles" worried Western leaders, who noted that the Iraqi military—one of the world's largest—boasted extensive Soviet-made weaponry and troops battle-hardened by an eight-year war against Iran. Flux in the international situation added to the uncertainties faced by US policy makers. The Berlin Wall had fallen the previous year. The Soviet Union appeared to be in terminal decline but remained heavily armed. Airpower would play a major role in any combat operation against Iraq, but the legacy of the Vietnam War gave US leaders nagging doubts about airpower's potential effectiveness.

The concerns about airpower proved unfounded. When Desert Storm began in January 1991, coalition airpower vindicated itself in dramatic fashion as television viewers around the world watched laser-guided bombs hit targets with seemingly unerring precision. Stealth aircraft slipped past Iraqi radars to strike heavily defended facilities with impunity. Coalition aircraft went "tank plinking" at night, using infrared sensors to detect armored vehicles hidden in the sand and then destroying them with guided bombs. Following weeks of air attacks, a blitzkrieg-style 100-hour ground offensive, lavishly backed with air and space power, swept Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Desperate Iraqi soldiers even surrendered to remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) used by the US Navy as spotters for its gunfire. Victory came swiftly and with few casualties. It was a good time to be an Airman.

Twenty years later, it is still a good time to be an Airman, but many uncertainties linger. Since Desert Storm, precision-guided bombs and RPAs have become much more prevalent and advanced, yet the international situation remains highly turbulent. Now fighting a second war in Iraq, we confront an array of regional powers and terrorist threats. US air and space power has no equal during conventional combat, but Airmen wrestle with how best to apply it in counterinsurgency operations. "Splendid little wars" have been scarce of late, but pausing to reflect on how Airmen triumphed during Desert Shield and Desert Storm can inspire us to devise innovative new ways to achieve our national goals around the world. *Air and Space Power Journal*, the professional journal of the US Air Force, is a forum for discussing the latest means of applying air, space, and cyber power. ✪