

VRC-50 Fujairah Det

It began the night Operation Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm, January 16th 1991. There we were, huddled around a portable radio, wrapped in government issue wool blankets, listening to the *play by play* of the beginning of the end for Iraqi forces in Kuwait. As hot as it gets in the Middle East during the summer, it was a cold, cold January night. After we had off loaded the COD's and set up shop, as it were, in a very small civilian hangar, the Maintenance Chief rewarded us with cases of cool, unrefrigerated San Miguel Beer. But I'm going to back up a bit. The detachment that ended up in Fujairah started out as a modified Diego Garcia Det in support of the fleet in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

We left Cubi Point in October 1990 knowing we were going to Bahrain in support of fighting vessels assigned to Operation Desert Shield. We also knew we were relieving the Diego Garcia Det that utilized the US-3A (Miss Piggy) as long-range carrier on-board delivery. We stopped at Diego Garcia in route to Bahrain, but, if memory serves correctly, it was just overnight. We knew this was different because the detachment that would become Fujairah Det was made up of Sailors qualified to work on C-2's and US-3A's. In fact, the detachment was predominantly C-2's. I recall three C-2's and one US-3A. Foodog C-130's provided detachment support as needed.

When we arrived in Bahrain we were assigned an office space at the Bahrain Airport. It was an odd workspace for aircraft mechanics but we made the best of it. The office next to ours was occupied by an RAF detachment called UK MAMS. I don't think I ever knew what MAMS stood for, but essentially they provided logistics support for the RAF transports. We'll get back to them.

We were initially assigned quarters at an insignificant local hotel. The accommodations were spartan but no one was complaining. We knew we were fortunate to not be sleeping in tents or aboard ship. A small bus was assigned to our detachment to ferry us to and from work. I think it was about two weeks later that we moved into the Ramada Inn. The Navy had leased an entire floor for us. We looked completely out of place but we were seasoned overseas vets. The Ramada Inn would remain our home until our move to Fujairah. They did our laundry and provided a decent breakfast.

Work was always an adventure. The Bahrain Airport was the hub for mail going to the troops. Remember *any service member* mail? Anyone that served in the Armed Forces of the United States during that conflict will remember it. We felt the support of the American people. There was obviously a campaign on the home front to provide the men and women in uniform essentials, as well as, a few distractions. *Any service member* care packages consisted of toothpaste, deodorant, toilet paper, books, and geedunk (junk food for you civilians). But we were only a very small part of the military activities at the airport. Most of the military contingent came from the United Kingdom. The RAF did things right. They had a tent chow hall with a buffet as good as any in Las Vegas.

Liberty was surprisingly good for an Islamic country during a military engagement. We managed to find bars in hotels staffed by Filipinas living abroad. Some of us were actually brave enough to befriend the Brits from UK MAMS. I'm embarrassed to say I don't remember their names, but they left an indelible impression on me just the same. They consisted of about six uniformed personnel.

Their OIC was a junior officer. She was green, but appeared to handle her duties, and most importantly, she was respected by her troops. The senior enlisted man was a veteran with about 18 years under his belt. He had the age-old task of training a junior officer. The other 3 or 4 guys were capable junior enlisted men. The Brits enjoyed some perks we didn't have. They had a phone. Not just any phone. Their phone made long distance calls to the United States. And those of us brave enough to speak to the Brits had authorization to use it (thank you, friends & allies throughout Great Britain). They also had an apartment for quarters. Christmas 1990 was spent with UK MAMS at their, not so humble, abode. Thanks for the beer and fond memories.

I had the pleasure of spending some time with *real fighting men*. I spent about two weeks in the 47th Army Field Hospital surrounded by wounded Soldiers. No, I wasn't injured in combat. I was playing host to some indigenous bacteria I picked up while shaving. It was not my finest moment. Essentially, I had an infection that became the world's biggest pimple. I must say that, as a Sailor, I had had little contact with Soldiers, but the medical staff at the 47th Army Field Hospital treated this lowly 3rd Class Petty Officer with the utmost professionalism. I could not have been more impressed. That is how I spent New Year's Eve 1990; in the hospital, swapping *sea stories* with some of the finest young Americans of my generation.

Back at Foodog Det Bahrain it was business as usual. Parts, people, and mail; ship to shore and vice versa. We wouldn't know Fujairah existed for another week. At this point we were all just thinking about getting back to the Philippines. That fateful day did eventually come.

The morning of January 15th 1991 started out like any other for our motley crew of P.I. hooligans. Showers were taken, breakfast was consumed, and the bus was boarded for what seemed to be the millionth time. It was on our way to work that we got the feeling something big was happening. It was in the air the way ozone is in the air, right before a thunderstorm.

Upon arrival at the airport we were ushered into the office. The OIC assembled us for an informal *Quarters*. As Sailors we had heard the phrase, "loose lips sink ships" enough to make us blue in the face. No one actually said it but everyone was thinking it, "this is the real deal, be careful, think Op Sec." We got our orders. Approximately half the Det would load our aircraft with all that was VRC-50 Det Bahrain, while the other half would return to the Ramada Inn to collect our personal belongings. I was on the Ramada Inn team. We were given strict orders to NOT check out. Essentially, collect all personal belongings and return to the Det, speak to no one.

In retrospect, this was *the* moment. The operation that all the training from boot camp to the present had prepared us for. There wasn't time for skylarking, or questioning, or scuttlebutt. It was the mission. Although we weren't taking enemy fire, or launching the *alert 5 fighter*, we were all completely focused on the mission. Load everything & everyone, and get all of our aircraft in the air.

We must have landed at Fujairah International Airport around 2200 on the 15th. We were still in *complete the mission* mode so the time was not important. Our new orders were *off load everything & set up shop*. The shop was a civilian hangar where one might work on a Cessna. After the off load we were given bedrolls and MRE's. Some were too tired to eat, others were too hungry to sleep, all were relieved that *the mission* was over and successful. Then a Foodog C-130 arrived. It must have been around midnight. I recall it was shortly

there after that the blankets, radio, and San Miguel appeared. Rumors started to spread about the war; this was it. We, the coalition forces, were going into Kuwait. The radio confirmed our suspicions, the hostilities had started. It was a sobering moment.

Eventually we slept.

Have you ever arrived at a new place during the night? Remember how, in the light of day, things looked totally different. Fujairah International Airport looked nothing like the name would imply. International Airport? It's a runway with a few buildings. The main building was the passenger terminal. It was two stories; the first had a small duty free shop and a bar staffed by the ubiquitous Filipinas. The second story was a restaurant. At least two other buildings were small hangars and the other main building housed office spaces. We occupied one hangar and the office spaces. Maintenance Control was officially located in the hangar but one could usually find the Maintenance Chief in the office kitchen. Yes, the office had a small kitchen. It became the off duty hang out. We would buy booze at the duty free and either, leave it with the bartender, or take it to the kitchen. I drank too much; we drank too much. This was the end of the *work hard, play hard* Navy, and we worked hard.

After spending about a week sleeping on bedrolls under our workbenches in the hangar, we got proper berthing. The Navy struck a deal with the United Arab Emirates for use of barracks at a U.A.E. Military base about 25 minutes from the airport. After sleeping on bedrolls at work, a Government Issue cot was heaven. The barracks were open bay as were the facilities. We were issued U.A.E. ID cards for entry onto the base. There was no alcohol allowed but we were content to drink in the Kitchen or the airport bar. This became our routine.

Slowly people would be relieved of their duty and transferred back to Cubi Point. When March rolled around and I became *the last of the Mohicans*. I recall pushing up the chain of command to be replaced. I was never so glad to leave a place.

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