Editorial

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

The Measure of Airpower

THE Persian Gulf War of 1991 set a high standard for airpower. It began with a 38-day air campaign that destroyed Iraq's command and control system, closed down the bridges and supply routes, and put the world's sixth largest air force out of business for the duration of the war.

Iraqi tanks moved from their entrenched positions but twice—in the ill-fated lurch toward Khafji and, later, in the desperate retreat from Kuwait—and were shot to pieces by airpower on both occasions.

Before the ground offensive started, the casualties and desertions reduced Iraqi troop strength by at least half. Two-thirds of the armor had been destroyed. In just four days, coalition ground forces rolled over what was left of the world's fourth largest army. US personnel losses were 615 killed and wounded rather than the 20,000 casualties that had been anticipated.

There were memorable feats of precision attack. In the most famous example, a fighter rolled in on the Iraqi Defense Ministry in Baghdad and tucked a bomb neatly down the air shaft. In another instance, F-111Fs hit an oil-pumping manifold from 20 miles away with a precision guided bomb.

The Gulf War standard for airpower has loomed large in the various force alignment exercises of the 1990s—the Bottom-Up Review, the Quadrennial Defense Review, and most recently, the National Defense Panel report—with critics attacking it and defenders defending it in the competition for resources.

What even airpower advocates tend to overlook, though, is that the Gulf War standard is seven years old, says Brig. Gen. Charles F. Wald, who becomes USAF director of strategic planning this month. The Air Force today meets a higher standard than it did in 1991.

■ Precision attack missions in the Gulf War were flown by a few kinds of aircraft. Only the F-117s, the F-111Fs, and a squadron of F-15Es were equipped to deliver laser guided bombs. By contrast, says Wald, the Air Force has about 450 precision droppers today, and the number increases steadily. Furthermore, the Navstar Global Positioning System receivers used in the Gulf War were handheld models. GPS was not yet wired into the aircraft. Today, it is integral to F-16s and B-2s, adding to their prowess in precision attack. F-15Es will soon be similarly equipped.

The Gulf War standard was spectacular, but it is seven years old. Today, airpower meets a higher mark.

■ Some of today's premier systems had little or no involvement in the Gulf War. The B-1B bomber lacked a conventional attack capability. The B-2 was still in flight testing. The deep-looking Joint STARS surveillance aircraft was there in the form of two developmental prototypes.

Today, the conventionally armed B-1B deploys as part of air expeditionary forces. The B-2 has demonstrated that it can strike 16 targets on a single sortie. Joint STARS is in great demand for the whole gamut of theater operations.

■ The capability to attack at night and in weather was quite limited in Desert Storm. LANTIRN (Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night) pods were scarce. Presently, about 400 Air Force aircraft have them.

Operations in the Gulf were delayed by bad weather. Wald says that with today's systems, notably the B-2, "you can see through weather with the radar and pick out cars in the parking lot." In the near future, he adds, the Air Force will have almost routine capability to drop guided munitions "day or night, in almost all weather short of a hurricane."

■ Intelligence in the Gulf War was "stovepiped," primarily fed from the battle area to Washington and then back to the theater. Sometimes the combat forces got the information they needed in time to use it. Sometimes they didn't. Today, the shooters are in the loop to get intelligence directly from the sensors.

"You can focus your radar on the same thing the off-board synthetic aperture radar is looking at," Wald says. "The commander has real-time targeting. The intelligence capability at wing level at Aviano Air Base in Italy today is probably 10 times better than [theater commander Gen. H. Norman] Schwarzkopf had in the Gulf War."

It is fashionable once again to disparage airpower. Newspaper analysts tell us that the four-day ground offensive, not the air campaign, was decisive in the Gulf. They do not explain how, before the ground offensive began, the Iraqi force came to be so depleted, demoralized, and unable to conduct coherent military operations.

The General Accounting Office has tried twice to prove that aerial precision attack doesn't amount to much. The Pentagon's main war planning model rates airpower as less effective than its actual performance in the Gulf. When budget reduction candidates are identified, airpower leads the list.

The nation's top defense leaders were right in 1991 when they said airpower was the decisive element in the Gulf War. It is perverse that seven years and many improvements later, airpower is still fighting for respect.

It is not an automatic assumption that airpower will be decisive in every case, but it is the best thing we have going for us. It is difficult to imagine a future conflict of any major scope in which landpower or seapower could survive —much less be decisive—without airpower. ■