

Operation DAGUET

30-year anniversary

BY COLONEL OLIVIER PASSOT
French Défense Attaché

The war to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi invasion started on 17 January, 1991: 30 years ago.

France contributed to the campaign to liberate Kuwait called Desert Storm, under the codename of Opération Daguet. The French provided an Army component (Division Daguet), whose mission was to protect the left flank of the coalition forces and to conquer Salman Airbase, a tactical hotspot in Iraq. The air component of Operation Daguet consisted of 40 Jaguar and 30 Mirage fighter aircraft, stationed at Al-Ahsa air base in Saudi Arabia. The naval component was part of international task forces in the Gulf waters.

Several French veterans wanted to commemorate this D-Day, 30 years later. They wrote testimonies of their war to liberate Kuwait. A Jaguar pilot, captain Mahagne remembers when he conducted an air raid over Kuwait, right on 17 January, 1991. He carried out his mission successfully, although he was fired at by Iraqi air defense.

Other veterans recall their experience as combat engineers, in air defense and electronic warfare. To celebrate this anniversary, some of these veterans also sent us original photos that they are happy to share with Kuwaitis and people of all friendly nations who took part in this historical campaign to liberate Kuwait.



General Michel Delion

From liberation of Kuwait to French Army military doctrine

What was your mission during Operation Daguet?

I was executive officer of the 4th battery of the 35th Airborne Artillery Regiment of Tarbes, ground-to-air defense unit. We were equipped with the brand new MISTRAL missiles as well as short-range detection radar. Our mission was to defend units of the Daguet Division against any enemy air threat, plane or helicopter (drones were no threat then). We were engaged in the fall of 1990, by sea, then by road via Yambu, with two airborne firing platoons, gradually reinforced by our brothers in arms from other artillery regiments (11th RAMa and 68th RAA).

At the end of February 1991 we contributed to the liberation of Kuwait by attacking towards the North, covering the West flank of the Coalition. We even reached the Euphrates river.

Describe a highlight of this campaign?

For our generation, the duration of the campaign itself was unusual. I remember numerous highlights.

After several months living in the desert at a forward operating base on the Hafar-Al-Batin side, we rejoined our assault base in the far west of the Allied force. Our first target at the end of February, after crossing the border, was As-Salman Airport. I remember three particularly intense images:

- Mid-February, a heavy rain of bombs dropped by the American B-52s that we observed with our binoculars. We were on the south side of the border, at the foot of a rocky escarpment which at the time seemed difficult to us to cross because it was particularly favorable on the defensive for the benefit of our enemy;
- On February 24, the endless flow of combat vehicles on the few drivable lanes going north, which gave off an incredible sense of power and invincibility;
- Finally, in mid-March, when I arrived in Kuwait city, the image of the airport frozen in time, on 2 August, 1990, with planes destroyed on the runway and the flight schedule that I had the chance to take a picture of.

Did you enter Kuwait? What were your impressions?

I arrived by military flight in Kuwait shortly after the liberation on a short mission for the French Embassy. During the descent before landing, I felt an unprecedented atmosphere: the sky was obstructed by black clouds, which was amplified by thick smoke coming from the burning oil wells. On the road between the airport and the French embassy, traces of the fighting were still clearly visible, mixing soldiers and equipment, including battle tanks.

Upon arrival at the French Embassy, I felt like it was



'mission accomplished'. I looked back at these long months of waiting before the offensive, at this speed offensive, then at the memory of comrades from all nations who had fallen fighting to liberate Kuwait.

What did you learn from this campaign that proved useful takeaways for the rest of your career?

After two first experiences in Central Africa and in Chad, where I had had a first glimpse of life in the desert, then liberation of Kuwait, I was then engaged several times in the Balkans for peacekeeping operations or for combat missions. The large-scale campaign to liberate Kuwait impressed me considerably for the rest of my career, helping me understand the scale and complexity of large coalitions. It was particularly valuable for me when I completed the Staff College (Ecole de Guerre), and when I had commanding positions or when I was in charge of teaching senior officers of the Army, including those of friendly and allied countries.

I had also discovered the Arabic world and culture. In subsequent contacts with officers from various countries of the Arabian Peninsula, I have always enjoyed talking to those who wore the commemorative medals of this campaign.

What are your current responsibilities?

A major general, I am Director of the French Army Command Doctrine and Education Center. As such, I am in charge of developing future studies and doctrine studies related to air-land combat, which amounts to training approximately 2,000 officers students per year. I am devoted to disseminate French military thinking. I am in charge of Army military history and lessons learned. I have a special interest in strategic studies as I wrote a doctoral thesis (PhD) dealing with 'the history of tactical military thinking'. I am going to take part with great pleasure in the various conferences organized in France to commemorate the 30 years of this campaign.



Général François

The desert experience

What were you doing within the Daguet division?

I was then a young lieutenant, reconnaissance team leader in the 11th Marine Artillery Regiment. In 1990, Europe was in high spirits because of the fall of the Berlin Wall: there was talk of the "peace dividends", and it was thought that there would be no more major war. Like many French people, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait stunned me. With my regimental comrades, we began to prepare to intervene in this distant desert, which stimulated our imaginations. As the holiday season approached, the order fell on a Monday evening, and a few days later the entire regiment embarked in Toulon. As soon as I landed in Yanbu (Saudi Arabia), I joined as a precursor to the French forces already present in Saudi Arabia in order to prepare under the best conditions for the deployment of the 11th RAMa.



What were the main challenges?

Topography! For the first time, we had been equipped with GPS. Artillery requires great topographic precision, and under the conditions we encountered, the challenge to be met was significant, and intellectually stimulating. The aforementioned GPS was not always reliable, and you had to be able to do without it, if necessary. We had therefore implemented navigation techniques similar to those of sailors. We practiced during the rare free time. Fortunately, it all worked out well. My regiment fulfilled its mission perfectly. The phase of land combat was short, and intense. Our soldiers were awesome: motivated, professional, and united in difficult times. The training we received paid off. But the most striking thing for me remains the bond that existed between the members of my reconnaissance team. The mails were hit and miss, and the Internet didn't exist yet. Fortunately, the links between the staff were stronger...

Why did you mention the desert?

I didn't have the chance to go to Kuwait, and only made a few trips to Saudi towns near our deployment areas. So during Operation Daguet, I spent five months in the desert. A desert of sand, rocks, pebbles; cold when we arrived, then hot when we approached summer. The desert is a fascinating environment for a European. Many poets and reporters (Arabs and also Europeans) wrote it before me. My mother mailed me a book called Arabian Sands, written by Wilfred Thesiger. I then read T. E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom upon my return. Yes, the desert is a fascinating place, certainly harsh and ruthless for those who live there, but fascinating.



Colonel Eric NACHEZ

Combat engineers on the field

What was your mission during Operation Daguet?

In 1990, I was 25 years old and a platoon leader, 1st Combat Engineer Platoon of the 2nd Company, 6th Foreign Engineer Regiment. This regiment is the 'youngest' of the Foreign Legion, because it was created in 1984. I spent seven months in the middle of the desert of the Arabian Peninsula from October 1990 to April 1991. First in the region of Hafar Al Batin (Saudi Arabia), then in the area of As Salman (Iraq).

Please describe a highlight of the campaign?

The assault on As-Salman Airport: My platoon, in a VAB (armored vehicle), was at the forefront of the regiment to cross the southern fence of the airport. We had to operate nice and quick to enable the infantry to enter the area safely, and then to conquer the airport held by the Iraqi military. To secure the point of penetration, the engineering section implemented a demining device: the Mine Clearance Line Charge - MCLIC (500 kg explosive bag fired by a rocket). A beautiful and enormous ball of fire cleared the whole area. The infantrymen were able to rush into the breach. It was the 2nd Company of the 2nd Foreign Infantry Regiment that stormed and drove the Iraqi soldiers from the airport.



Did you enter Kuwait? What impacted you

Fabien RICHARD

Air campaign with Kuwait fighter pilots

What was your mission during Operation Daguet?

I was responsible for planning Electronic Warfare missions within the Kuwaiti Air Force in Taef (Saudi Arabia) in October 1990. Then, I was transferred to Dhahran (also in Saudi Arabia) in February 1991. There, I helped Kuwaiti fighter pilots planning and preparing for electronic warfare missions. I was then working on the Mirage F1 CK2, equipped with countermeasures.



Did you enter Kuwait, what were your impressions?

I arrived in Kuwait one week after the liberation. It was a surreal experience. The border between Arabia and Kuwait no longer existed. All you could see in the sky was black smoke from oil well fires. The beaches were mined, the buildings had been looted, the shops vandalized. The streets were cluttered with wrecks of vehicles and even dismantled boats. Even more horrifying, there were corpses of Iraqi soldiers on the ground, on what was called the 'highway of death'.

What did you learn from this campaign, and what were the takeaways for the rest of your career?

Oh yes! This campaign has left a mark on me forever. Afterwards, I realized that these few weeks transformed the bond that attached me to Kuwait and made it unwavering. I feel like I was directly involved in the liberation of this country that I knew very little at the time. These fights almost made me become Kuwaiti! Since 1990, I have not stopped working in Kuwait, and have many Kuwaiti friends. Today I commemorate my 30 years of cooperation with the Kuwaiti armed forces! It wouldn't have been possible if I hadn't been in this war.

What are your current responsibilities?

I am a consultant in a defense consulting company. I work with several international companies.



COLONEL ALAIN MAHAGNE

Ahmad Al-Jaber Airbase attack 17 January, 1991

Which unit were you in when Operation Daguet launched?

I was posted at the 11th wing, at the 2/11 'Vosges' squadron based at Toul Rosières. This squadron was equipped with single-seat Jaguars.

How long did it take to prepare for the war?

The deployment had been prepared since October 1990, it took two months to be completed.

Aircraft (Jaguar, Mirage 2000 RDI, Mirage F1 CR) and personnel gradually arrived at Al Ahsa (Saudi Arabia). I was deployed on 1 January 1991.

When the Air operations started, 24 French Jaguars were on-site.

How many French airmen were there at Al Ahsa?

We were roughly 600 people there, renewed every two months.

Can you highlight a key event during your stay?

The strongest event of my military campaign is - and will always be - the first mission that

was executed by French airmen over Kuwaiti territory. It took place on 17 January 1991. I was number 11 out of a 12-Jaguar-strong patrol. The target that had been assigned to us was Ahmad Al Jaber Airbase, where Saddam Hussein was stationing 'Scud' missile batteries and fighter jets. Chemical weapons were also stored there. Divided

in two groups of six, we took off early in the morning to first join with three tankers at high altitude, near the Kuwaiti border.

After refuelling, we headed to our target, we were quickly caught under enemy fire. As we were approaching, the danger considerably intensified, bullets and missiles were now raining on us.

In extreme conditions, I managed to drop my four bombs on Iraqi tanks that were half-covered by sand. Soon after, I heard a terrible sound and I felt a terrible blow to my head. Simultaneously, I was violently



pushed backwards. A bullet had pierced my canopy, I got blind for interminable seconds, which inevitably scared me. As our loyal Jaguars were flying out from hell, a warm sticky liquid poured down my neck, I was undoubtedly injured.

Alone, more and more severely affected by a terrible pain, and facing a navigation system failure, I saw one aircraft flying to me. I identified a Jaguar, then got confirmation this was my leader's.

Instinctively, I kept position around him. He perfectly guided me back to Al-Ahsa Air base where, despite my unsustainable headache, I managed to land my plane. Once controlled, I shut down the engines and I fell unconscious.

My skull was fractured, and I finally had ten stitches. I was the first French military personnel to be wounded in the first Gulf War. Do you remember something special on arrival at Al-Ahsa?

