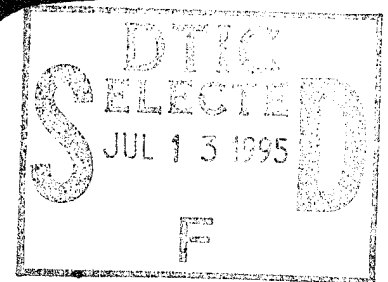


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DESERT STORM

BY

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Personal Experience Monograph
"Desert Storm"

CDR David M. Birdwell, USN

Completed as part of the Course
Requirements for Graduation from the
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Desert Storm Monograph

Introduction

The involvement of USS Sampson (DDG-10), in Desert Storm actually began much earlier than most people realize. The deployment of USS Saratoga (CV-60) and USS Wisconsin (BB-64) on 7 August 1990, was a long-standing, well-planned, and routine deployment to the Mediterranean Sea. Early in the planning process, the deployment began to take shape as one which would center on the Battleship Battle Group (BBBG) concept, given the availability of Wisconsin. Such operations tend to focus on at-sea maneuvering and training of surface warfare personnel, due to the absence of the requirement to conduct those flight operations specific to an aircraft carrier.

In the early months of 1991, concern was expressed with the projected cost of the deployment, then designated "Med 3-91." Ultimately, Commander, Cruiser-Destroyer Group Eight, RADM Nick Gee, elected to delete USS Sampson from the deploying group because of the costs associated with the operation of two Adams Class destroyers. The Norfolk-based USS Coyningham (DDG-17), was already scheduled to participate. That decision was made prior to the second pre-deployment fleet exercise (ADV FLEET-EX), and came as a disappointment to the Sampson. The ship was given a modified (reduced) participation in that exercise. Shortly thereafter however, a catastrophic fire occurred on board Coyningham which ultimately led to her removal from the deployment schedule and the insertion of Sampson in her place. Sampson now had less than three

months to prepare for this operationally intense, six-month deployment.

The Deployment

On 7 August 1990, USS Sampson deployed with the USS Saratoga battle group from Jacksonville, Florida, having fully completed all pre-deployment preparations. There was much chatter on the ship about the recent invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. Everyone felt that our deployment orders would change, but at the time we left port on that Tuesday morning, our orders were to proceed with the Mediterranean deployment plan. Within two days however, we receive a message from CCDG-8 to cancel our previous plans and make best speed for the Red Sea. We were fortunate that the weather in the Atlantic was excellent; in fact, the ocean was completely calm and seas were flat. Saratoga increased speed and quickly pulled in front of the group. The remaining surface combatants rendezvoused with the Norfolk group within a day, and made the transit as a smaller, surface action group.

Good weather prevailed until we were well within the Mediterranean Sea. As we neared Port Said, the weather deteriorated and the transit south through the Suez Canal was made more difficult because of it. The fog produced in the early morning hours of 21 AUG 90 reduced visibility substantially; although the radar navigation track was excellent, at one point I could not see the bow from the pilot house. At that point, I recommended and the captain agreed that we should anchor. We

stayed there at anchor for more than two hours and resumed the south bound transit just as soon as the fog lifted. It was the first time I had anchored in the canal and I hope I never have to do it again.

The remainder of the transit through the canal and the Gulf of Suez was routine and uneventful. As we neared the Red Sea however, it became apparent that some type of inspection procedures would be enacted with respect to vessels carrying cargo manifested to Iraq. The intentions of the battle group commander had been promulgated for some time and his instructions were clear. On 24 AUG 90, USS Sampson was ordered to stop a merchant vessel destined for Aqaba, Jordan, and to inspect her cargo for contraband. This would be the first boarding and search operation in the Red Sea and it occurred about ten miles from the Straits of Tiran. Almost as if on cue, the master of the merchant vessel asked over VHF radio, channel 16, "by what authority were we (stopping and searching) his vessel in international waters." That channel is almost always crowded with chatter; now it was dead silent as this merchant master and the world waited for a response. The response from Sampson was swift and sure: "In accordance with United Nations sanction 661, you are requested to stop your engines and prepare to receive my inspection team. Do you understand?" The merchant vessel's response came moments later, "I understand you USS Sampson. I am stopping my engines now and will be ready to receive your team soon." Later, we would learn that a news team had monitored and recorded this

conversation. It was played on that evening's news back in the states, along with footage of Sampson.

We were nervous on that first boarding. The direction we received was very clear in intent and we were prepared for obvious contingencies. Although a Coast Guard team was ordered in, they had not yet arrived in-theater, so we would have to carry out the operation with ship's company. The experience we had gained with Coast Guard teams in boarding and search procedures during Law Enforcement Operations in the Caribbean now paid great dividends. Just two weeks before deployment, I had installed two new, scanning, bridge-to-bridge transceivers in the pilot house. The intent was to provide reliable communications between the bridge and our small boats, as well as stations ashore. We were focused on the number of entering and leaving port operations on our schedule and were preparing for those operations. I had also ordered replacement hand-held transceivers and spare battery packs which operated on the same frequencies to allow our shore parties reliable communications with the ship. Although we were preparing for a different set of operations, we were ready for the boarding and search assignment. Lastly, we had to have some sort of standard procedures for radio communications. My hobby of Amateur Radio helped out a great deal here. I elected to establish the following procedures on Sampson: first, all communications with the merchant vessel would occur from the radio on the starboard side of the bridge and would shift to one of four single digit, simplex channels following the initial contact on channel 16. Next, the

boarding and search team would all have radios set to channel 77. I needed a high-end channel with simplex architecture and "77 Sunset Strip" came to mind -- no kidding, that's where it came from. These communications occurred from the radio on the port side of the bridge and confusion was virtually eliminated. By placing both radios on scan with auto-stop enabled, we were able to answer radio traffic and monitor both parts of the on-going operation -- all with some degree of security, since no one knew yet just how we were operating. When the Coast Guard arrived, they would have encrypted, hand-held radios. We would have to "make-do" until they arrived. As it was, it worked great and we drafted a very detailed message delineating all the above, and it was immediately adopted as standard operating procedure -- including "channel 77."

The Red Sea is normally crowded with shipping. Very large vessels carry every conceivable commodity to and from countries in Southwest Asia. A common cargo for large merchant ships is rock phosphate; you can almost smell this disgusting raw chemical from the deck house of a destroyer. During search operations, this fine powder gets in clothing and folds of skin and it burns. Large merchant vessels with their holds full of this chemical were the easiest to search. It was some of the smaller vessels that took most of our time. I specifically remember a vessel I searched as being particularly difficult. It was a smaller container vessel, one which shipped hundreds of large, sealed containers to various destinations. As I examined the cargo manifest, I was interested

in ultimate destinations as well as the nature of the cargo. Although the merchant master had all papers available, they were hardly "in order." The poor administration procedures of some vessels, like this one, contributed to long boarding operations.

It was two days later, on 26 AUG 1990, that Sampson diverted a vessel for carrying prohibited cargo. This was the first diversion of a merchant in the Red Sea and was closely monitored by everyone, including other civilian ships. Conversations with the merchant over bridge-to-bridge radio were normally conducted on channel 16, a recognized "hailing frequency"; ships routinely contact another ship on this channel and then both shift to a different frequency, as channel 16 is normally very crowded. Here, however, we decided to carry out the conversation in its entirety, on channel 16. The silence on that channel was a clear indication that people were listening instead of talking. Everyone wanted to know what America would do once a vessel with prohibited cargo was identified. Would it be escorted to its intended port or diverted outright? How committed to diversion was the United States? Would force be used if a merchant refused to change course? The cargo it carried was clearly military in nature, but we waited until our boarding team was back on board Sampson to speak to the merchant. Our next communication was clear; this vessel would not be allowed to proceed to its intended port of Aqaba, Jordan. At first, the merchant master was upset, he did not like the direction given him. If he could not go to Aqaba, where could he go? After complaining a bit, he asked that very question. Sampson's response was that he

should contact his owner for guidance, but that Aqaba was no longer an option. Pivotal to the operation was this merchant's compliance with the directive; he was the first, and others would follow what happened here. Everyone was watching and listening. Sampson repositioned to place herself between the merchant and the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba; to proceed, the merchant would have to go through the warship. Ultimately, the merchant remained in the area for the next two days before proceeding south and back to its last port of call. The message was clear -- America's resolve was to enforce United Nation sanctions in the area. Almost immediately, conversation on the radio centered on the boarding and inspection operation, but it would be some time before the amount of merchant shipping began to decline.

From this point boardings began to assume a predictable pattern; it was all closely monitored by the merchants, so it was necessary to be uniform in our requests of them. Each ship conducting boarding operations used the same language during each operation. Each followed the same set of procedures and in a short time, the merchants all knew what to expect. It was like the rules had changed, and everyone knew why; as long as the United States maintained the standards, search operations would proceed at a predictable pace and with regularity. Within two weeks, a pattern had been established and merchants were themselves, anticipating our questions and answering them in order -- the same order we had planned on asking them -- even before those questions were asked.

It was interesting to me how quickly the merchant community complied with the new order of things in the region.

We had now been at sea for an extended period. It had been more than a month since the ship had made a port visit, but the crew was aware of the situation and spirits were high. It came as a great surprise when RADM Nick Gee flew to the ship to award us with CCDG-8's coveted "8-ball" award for superior performance. We were the first (again) to receive this award on the deployment and you could see the pride in the faces of the crew. What was a *real* surprise was the admiral's offer to send us into port! I had never heard of Safaga, Egypt, but by now, I was only too happy to try it out. At least at anchor, we could get a full night's sleep and some much needed rest. The next day, he changed the visit to Hurghada, Egypt, because of a better logistics chain and improved port facilities, and set the date for 19 SEP 90.

After some scurrying about, we found the port on our charts; the Egyptians spell it with a "G." Because two submarine pinnacles were highlighted on the harbor chart and because the soundings were a decade old, we asked for the British admiralty chart. Although the two pinnacles presented no hazard to navigation as charted, I wanted more information on them. I was disappointed that these failed to show the existence of any pinnacle at all; nonetheless, I plotted an anchorage with an approach that took us between the two, now nicknamed "Twin Peaks." The actual approach was uneventful, but the off-setting wind made anchoring somewhat difficult. Our third attempt was successful and we set the anchor.

Later, we placed a boat in the water and sounded the inner harbor. Not only were the two submarine pinnacles actually there, they had a height which reduced navigational draft to six meters. Had we disregarded them, we would have gone aground and this valuable port would have been jeopardized as an attractive liberty option. That is no small thing; during the conflict, US Navy ships would average two, three-day port visits *per week* in this port. Later, a small facility would be constructed at the airport to support material and personnel transfer. In time, hotel shows, tours to local attractions, and shopping would all expand to meet the new availability of American dollars.

Because this port visit would be the first for the Red Sea Battle Group, a detailed report would be required to ensure that each ships could plan ahead. I compiled a list of each major area of concern to a ship and assigned an officer or chief to each of those areas. Each returned with a detailed report on all I had asked for; I consolidated their individual reports and drafted a very long message on what ships could expect in Hurghada. It was very well received by the Battle Group and was still being referenced in ships' post-visit reports when Sampson left the Red Sea.

Back to the Med

It was not long before an old wardroom discussion point re-surfaced. Prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Sampson had been scheduled to participate in Naval On-Call Forces, Mediterranean

(NAVOCFORMED) 2/90. Our participation had been filled with another ship of the Battle Group, the frigate USS Thomas C. Hart (FF-1092). The NATO obligation in the Mediterranean would be honored, but all missile shooters were initially ordered to the Red Sea. After the nature of the operation was better known, it was decided to rotate units in different positions and locations to cross-train each other just in case a unit had to be removed from the force for some reason. In early October, Sampson was ordered to proceed north back through the Suez Canal, to rendezvous with the NAVOCFORMED 2/90 group and relieve USS Thomas C. Hart, who would assume Sampson's duties in the Red Sea.

This turned out to be an interesting time for the ship. The role of this Nato Sea group changed many times but the focus seemed to be the protection of merchant shipping in the Mediterranean Sea. The group pulled into port frequently and as planned, was in port Bari, Italy, on 13 OCT 90, for the birthday celebration of the US Navy. That social event was "a happening" and introduced Sampson to the group. Represented were Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Great Britain, Germany and Turkey. A few days later, on a Sunday morning, we were invited to the German destroyer, Luetgens, for a celebration of the reunification of Germany. It was a quiet and meaningful event. All of these in port times together made for improved operations at sea. We now knew the voice at the other end of the radio line and the payback in operational proficiency was tremendous. Although the Greek commodore was in charge of the formation, frequent deferrals were made to us. As our unified

operations improved at sea, I got the feeling that if this group had to fight at sea, it would be effective. A fundamental care existed for each other's welfare which surfaced repeatedly, especially when each ship petitioned its government for services and permission to enter port. Overnight, we had approval to do things which normally took days. What a great way to operate!

I became a big fan of this group, although each country would rotate ships though. That was necessary, given the extension of the activation of the force for the duration of Desert Storm and Desert Shield. Politically, the implications of such a force operating at sea were impressive and some of my fondest memories were of discussions of operations with these fellow men of the sea.

An interesting option surfaced in late October, as Sampson was about to receive orders back to the Red Sea. We were to pull into Alexandria, Egypt, and moor alongside USS Yellowstone (AD-41), a destroyer tender. This would allow us to use the tender facilities to repair some nagging equipment problems. It also presented the first real opportunity for a NATO operational force to enter port in a non-NATO country; my understanding was that the diplomatic arena was busy. Ultimately, permission was not requested (probably for diplomatic reasons) and Sampson left the group when Hart took our place.

Back to the Red

Our six weeks in the Med were up and it was time for us to head back to the Red Sea. By now, the boarding and search

operation was refined and many ships had more than two dozen boardings. Some ships from other nations joined our Red Sea effort, but we only operated with French and Portuguese units. The impact here was the same as that in the Med; namely, this was a large international effort. It was during this time that Sampson stopped a Korean merchant coming out of the Gulf of Aqaba. When the inspection team arrived on that vessel, they found the crew inebriated and its captain unconscious. The story by embarked journalist Molly Moore describing the death of the ship's cook (and the funeral celebration following his passing) was published in the Washington Post a few days later. Operations in the Red Sea continued but the number of merchants transiting the area was now significantly less. Normally, the Red Sea is very crowded with traffic; our radar scopes were usually filled with surface contacts in this area. But now there was a noticeable decline in merchant shipping and the numbers of boarding dropped, too. Port visits to Hurghada were now a matter of routine and the navigation aspect was well known.

It was about this time that I remember a terrific message traffic backlog beginning to develop. Various administrative reports were suspended and eventually canceled. It was noticeably more difficult to get traffic in the system and radiomen grew increasingly frustrated at the operating habits of other ships and shore stations. The shift from Med to Red brought a change in satellite coverage and I think that shift made the message traffic congestion in the Red Sea area stand out. Ultimately, the situation

would get so bad that only operationally immediate and flash precedents could enter the system. Whatever the solution is, we must solve this critical issue before we take the troops into conflict again. I think that it is best to add additional resources -- satellites, transceivers, teletypes, and the like -- because the nature of war machine craves information. The flap over the Air Tasking Order is a classic example of message traffic insufficiency and the solution lies in additional message resources, not in marginal improvements made by improved circuit discipline.

It is now December, 1990, and tourism in Hurghada had declined steadily, as tourists were reluctant to come here. The area is a popular vacation spot for Germans and some of the hotels are even owned by German individuals. Now however, the impact of the conflict was being felt in the pocketbooks of the Egyptians. As traffic now was minimal, we began to look forward to the rotation to the Mediterranean, and the approach of the Christmas season. Sure enough, we were soon ordered back, and this time we were to moor alongside Yellowstone for a two-week availability (repair period), which would put us in port Izmir, Turkey, for both Christmas and New Years.

Turkey

Although we didn't know it at the time, we had been to the Red Sea for the last time on this deployment. Although we were a part of the NATO group, everyone was on a temporary standdown to allow

repairs and maintenance. Unlike so many other deployments to the region, all of which put me at sea for major holidays, this Christmas period would be in port. I was thankful for that but missed my family. The building hostilities in the Arabian Gulf dampened the holiday spirit but sentiments of local residents in Turkey were not anti-American. They weren't pro-American necessarily, they were just anti-Iraqi. The predominant Muslim philosophy and religion is somewhat subdued in western Turkey. It is a cosmopolitan part of the country and vastly different from the staunch fundamentalism found in the eastern regions of the country. Today's Turkish citizens are productive businessmen and the country is quite progressive. It is a very nice place.

Shortly after 1 JAN, we were ordered to re-join the NATO group at sea. We operated with our old friends staying at sea for about a ten days before returning to port, now in Antalia, Turkey. This was a convenient port and was easy to get into and out of. We made five successive visits to this port, operating with the NATO group in between port visits. We followed the progress of the conflict closely and the mood of the civilians in Turkey. After the start of the air campaign, the local support for America, and George Bush personally, was overwhelming. The general feeling was that Iraq would seek a cease-fire soon, but that never happened. Later, when the ground war forced a resolution, the local populace was ecstatic. By now, we had been ordered to Naples, Italy, as part of the NATO group and deactivation of the NATO group was now being discussed for the first time. It was now early March and everyone

was anticipating our relief and return home. It was almost as if the job were complete and sailors, for the first time, began to ask me when I thought we might return home. Additionally, the administrative aspect of my job began to surface repeatedly and from different angles.

The prospect of our return forced the decision on several issues which had been placed on the back-burner. Sampson was nearing thirty years of commissioned service and was scheduled to be decommissioned in June. That process is a lengthy one and culminates in a large and complex inspection to determine the usefulness of the ship for further service. Discussion to the contrary notwithstanding, it can be a political issue, especially if a new ship is found "unfit for further service." If the crew was to be allowed to take leave following our return, and if the decommissioning was to occur as scheduled, the "In Service" inspection would have to be conducted during the transit back to the states. The ship had now been at sea for eight months without a significant upkeep period and the prospect of facing such an inspection without a period to prepare for it was not particularly attractive. We decided to go ahead anyway with the "out-chop Insurv."

Finally, the tasking to return home arrived. We were to join the Saratoga Battle Group as they transited the Mediterranean. What welcome news! Not only were we returning, but we would all return together. The Norfolk, Virginia group would arrive in home port on the same day the Mayport, Florida group would arrive.

Almost immediately, we began to receive tasking messages from our parent squadron with respect to administrative matters. There were awards to finalize and reports to submit which had been suspended during the conflict. The flood gates seemed to open all at once. Administratively, the burden was overwhelming. And then, there was this important inspection to stand for without the benefit of an availability. Almost in self-defense, I began to think of the deployment in strategic terms to help identify the important from the trivial.

As I compiled statistics, a few notables came to mind:

Nautical miles steamed:	47,215
Number of hours steamed:	8,794
Days underway:	178
Gallons of fuel burned:	4,122,251
Number of Suez Transits (one way):	4
Number of days in the Red Sea:	71
Number of underway replenishments:	61
Number of merchant boardings:	36
Number of merchant diversions:	2
Number of visitors hosted:	4,000
Number of reenlistments:	18

Although the crew was excited about our return, this one last inspection loomed ominously on the horizon. We decided to give it our best effort. The crew was allowed to participate in the inspection schedule determination and it was their call. They attacked the task with a vengeance. They were cleaning, making repairs to items, both large and small, almost without prompting. Hundreds of small, but important tasks were performed which may never be properly recognized. I am convinced that the crew's participation in the decision process accounted for the sterling performance of the ship during the inspection. In short order, and

almost record time, the ship was found "fit for further service." Specific mention was made of the cleanliness of the ship, a comment which made me particularly proud.

Post-Deployment Reflections

This was, perhaps, the most meaningful deployment of my career, not so much for what I contributed, but for what I learned. I took away from Desert Storm lessons about listening to others, about bending with the blowing winds of change, and about applying common sense solutions that were never taught to me in any school. The guidance we received from seniors was the clearest guidance I ever remember, not for its detail, but for its brevity. The most rewarding times professionally, were when we were given an objective and allowed to work out the details on our own. Not only does that reduce message traffic, but it streamlines operations. It also produces people who can think on their feet and that's a good way to conduct business.