

# Saudis completing war preparations

## U.S. civilians decide to stay



John Mecklin

On the Scene

DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia — This nation, and the hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops in and near it, made final preparations for war in just about every way imaginable.

Marine Wild Weasel jets were readied to begin knocking out Iraqi anti-aircraft defenses in Kuwait. A squadron of helicopters swooped across Dhahran skies. Convoys of fuel trucks crowded the streets. More air raid drills and shelters were held and set up. The highway from Dhahran southwest to Riyadh was packed with civilian traffic fleeing the Iraqi air threat, a Saudi information official said.

The mood was not frantic, but somber and purposeful. And as U.S. troops entered the final hours before today's deadline, so did another group of Americans here.

They are the expatriates. Saudi authorities have not been able to give a precise accounting of the number of U.S. civilians working in Saudi Arabia, but that number apparently runs well into the thousands. Many of these "guest" workers are refusing to let the near certainty of war force them from good jobs, usually with oil companies, and a country they have come to regard as home.

Patty Erstamer and her husband, Mike, live near Jubail, a town north of Dhahran. Both are Texas natives. She is from Houston. He is from San Antonio.

But they've been in Saudi Arabia 16 years, and this is home now. They intend to stay through the crisis.

"We've lived here such a long time, and we know the people real well around here. And we don't think anything's going to happen to us."

While some of her expatriate neighbors have taken "vacations" away from the conflict area, Patty Erstamer said most of those who leave have been in Saudi Arabia only a short time and do not have a true appreciation of it.

The Erstamers have, of course, taken what are now considered normal precautions in this part of the world. They have gas masks, courtesy of her husband's employers, Saudi Aramco. They have stocked a room that can be sealed against poison gas with food and water.

But the Erstamers have been told, and they believe, that American air and ground forces can protect them, even though they live just 200 miles from the Kuwaiti border.

"So far, we're doing OK. We're just waiting to see what happens," Patty Erstamer said.

Meanwhile, another Aramco employee has had a small change of heart. Eric Kelley, his wife and his two children returned from a holiday vacation in the United States just Wednesday. As he ar-

His children don't like the masks, complaining they are too tight. Kelley said it has been difficult to get across the importance of the masks.

"Of course, there's the inevitable: the kids play with them," he said.

One of the reasons he is moving his family south is uncertainty over warning systems near Jubail. Once a warning of Iraqi attack is sounded, and his family is in masks in a sealed room, how does he know when the air has cleared?

"That's probably the hardest thing for us, to know when to come out," Kelley said.

Still, Kelley said he intends to continue working at an Aramco facility near Jubail, commuting the 50 miles north each day and back again, never knowing when war might break out.

Dale Armet is not so much an expatriate as a long-term visitor to Saudi Arabia. He is a project engineer for STARS, a Missouri City company which has set up 11 phone banks on military bases here so soldiers can call the United States. Armet said he volunteered to help set up the satellite communications for the phone banks because he was deferred from service in the Vietnam War and now feels an obligation to help American servicemen.

"Now that I'm over here and it (the phone bank system) is running, to hear people tell they just found out their girlfriend is pregnant . . . it's just neat. It's the experience of a lifetime. It really is," Armet said.

"These kids are very young and a lot of people you're letting call home might not be able to call home after the next couple of weeks," he continued, looking suddenly downcast.

At one base, STARS, in association with a Minnesota-based firm, Military Communications Corp. Inc., has installed a satellite link that connects 144 phones to U.S. operators. Soldiers pay only the cost of long distance service within the United States.

For many soldiers, these on-base phones offer the only chance they will have to call loved ones.

Or not so loved ones. Armet notes that the only major repair problems so far have been phones ripped from walls after soldiers received bad news — the breakup of a relationship, for example.

Because he has had access to many bases while helping to set up the phone banks, Armet has had a chance to speak with hundreds of American GIs. He said their mood, at this point, differs from base to base, and depends largely on how long the soldiers have been in Saudi Arabia.

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Meanwhile, another Aramco employee has had a small change of heart. Eric Kelley, his wife and his two children returned from a holiday vacation in the United States just Wednesday. As he arrived in Saudi Arabia, Kelley said he also intended to wait out the crisis in his home near Jubail. Now, however, he has decided to move his family to a brother's home in Dhahran, which is farther south and theoretically less vulnerable to Iraqi air attack.

Since returning, he said, he simply felt too exposed to remain in the Jubail area. Everyone staying there is taping windows and stockpiling food and water, he said.

Meanwhile, while preparing for the move to Dhahran, Kelley said his family has been practicing.

"We've got gas masks, and we practice every night to see how fast we can get them on," he said.

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On a base where personnel have recently arrived, he said, the soldiers are almost thunderstruck. "They've got this look on their faces, like, 'Gee, I really am over here.'"

Other bases near cities are "almost civilized" in their accommodations, and the soldiers there appear to be in good spirits.

And then, Armet said, there are the bases north, in the desert, serving soldiers who have been in Saudi Arabia since the initial deployment of American forces.

"These guys have been dug in for five or six months. They've got the cold look of war in their eyes," he said.

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