

1/16/91
A-10

In Saudi Arabia, an uneasy calm amid winds of war

EASTERN SAUDI ARABIA — During the last day before the U.N.-imposed deadline passed for Iraq to quit Kuwait, dozens of American servicemen and women arrived and left an air terminal run by the Military Airlift Command. Outwardly, they did not seem any different from soldiers moving throughout Saudi Arabia over the last week.

But Tuesday was indeed different.

War seemed very near, and all people were not equal. Some of those soldiers knew they would be away from the Middle East and out of harm's way before the deadline for Iraq to leave Kuwait.

Others, like Richard Naus, a 27-year-old Army sergeant from Fort Hood, were coming into Saudi Arabia with the possibility of major fighting just hours away.

"Let's just say my adrenaline is flowing. I'm just trying to get back to my unit before something happens," said Naus, who returned Tuesday to Saudi Arabia after an emergency leave.

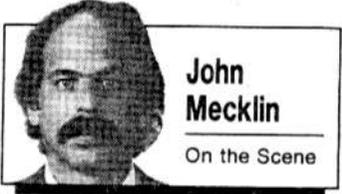
This would be his second tour of duty in Desert Shield, away from his wife in Killeen. He said he expected war within a week. Waiting for a ride back to his unit, he had absolutely no enthusiasm in his voice.

"It's really hard to redeploy when you know what you're facing," Naus said. "I'd say two things: One, I hope we don't go to war. And two, if we do, I hope it's short and very hard on them (the Iraqis)."

Naus was re-entering a Saudi Arabia battened down for war.

On the military front, American servicemen spent deadline day drafting wills, repairing damage to fortifications caused by three days of intense rain, and completing final training runs.

Military convoys were everywhere on roads leading north, and machine guns cracked and howitzers thudded at a Marine practice base.



John Mecklin
On the Scene

At an Army installation, soldiers made out wills as the Jan. 15 deadline came and passed with no indication Iraq would withdraw from Kuwait.

Many soldiers do not expect immediate war, but they do expect hostilities to break out soon.

"They are somber. They are mulling this stuff around in their minds," Army Capt. Clint Esarey said. "They're a lot more serious. You might not see all the antics you saw before."

Deadline day was sunny and cool, and the brisk weather also seemed to spark civilians to a higher state of readiness.

The highway from Dhahran to Riyadh again was packed with traffic, cars lining up 30 deep in all three lanes at a checkpoint on the highway leading southwest and away from Iraq's airplanes and missiles.

Civilians were finally to be seen wearing small green satchels carrying gas masks. Grocery stores were full of shoppers, and most of the shopping carts were full of bottled water and staple foods.

In the main shopping mall in Al Khobar, a city located about 250 miles south of the Kuwaiti border, crowds gathered in electronics stores to watch banks of televisions. There was almost no conversation, and no one had any intention of buying anything.

When asked what all these people were watching, one "shopper" said, "Only the news. Only the news."

The televisions were tuned to either of two stations. On the first: the nightly news, dominated by Persian Gulf events. On the other: a man demonstrating how to help a young girl don a gas mask.