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Outside the van the rest of the missile crew — about 100 people in all — put on gas masks and knelt behind sand bags.

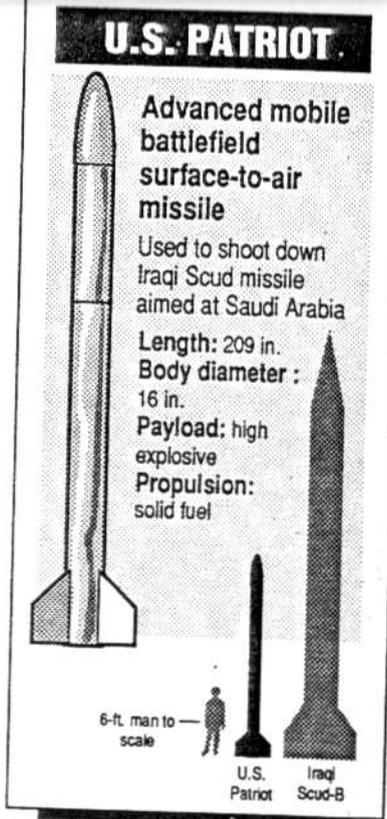
At 4:28 a.m., the Patriot launcher fired its missile. It arched upward, swerved once, and twice, then found the target, invisible on a moonless light.

"I was standing outside my tent about three kilometers (two miles) away," said Neel. "I saw the explosion, but it didn't register immediately. Then I thought, 'My God, that's one of mine.'"

The firing of Scuds at Israel and one of the largest airfields in Saudi Arabia prompted a day of missile-hunting by allied air forces.

In a press briefing in Riyadh, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf said allied planes had destroyed three loaded Scud launchers that were in position to threaten eastern Saudi Arabia. Allied forces also returned to attack other mobile launchers at the same location Friday afternoon.

A false air raid alert was sounded in Israel at about 10 p.m. Friday Tel Aviv time. At least one hotel in eastern Saudi Arabia also sounded



AP/The Houston Post

Three nights of alerts have taken an obvious toll on Dhahran residents and visitors. Streets were virtually empty all day, and many civilians were sleeping in shifts and staying in telephone contact with friends throughout the night

Gulf skies become fields of fire for missile hunters

BY JOHN MECKLIN
 OF THE HOUSTON POST STAFF

11/19/91

A-1

EASTERN SAUDI ARABIA — The air war against Iraq turned into a missile hunt Friday after Iraq fired Scud missiles at Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Lt. Col. Leeroy Neel of Houston was the battalion commander whose Patriot missile defense battery shot down a lone Scud fired toward an air base in eastern Saudi Arabi.

"We detected it, tracked it, launched and intercepted an unfriendly ballistic missile," Neel said. The interception, which occurred about 4 a.m. Friday over Saudi Arabia, marked the first time the Patriot anti-missile missile had been fired in combat.

"We didn't expect it at that moment," Neel said. "It was there, we reacted properly and it was gone."

Several people who saw the destruction of the Scud described the Iraqi missile as a slow-moving white light in the sky. As it neared the Dhahran area of Saudi Arabia the white light was met by a faster-mov-

ing red light spiraling up from the ground. First Lt. Steve Kirik had a front-row seat, strapped in at the controls of his Air Force F-15 before takeoff.

"I'm sitting in my jet, getting ready to go," recalled the stocky 24-year-old from Moline, Ill. "I looked over at my port engine, and there it was. It was like a big, brilliant flare. It jumped off the ground, snaked back and forth a couple of times and then BOOM."

The result was a spectacular fireworks display for thousands of servicemen who had donned gas masks and crouched behind bunkers in anticipation of imminent attack.

Coast Guard Lt. Col. Paul Milligan said he was standing guard at a hotel when he saw the interception, but he did not immediately realize what had happened.

"It was one of those things you kind of put together afterward," he said. Milligan said strips of tape that detect the presence of chemical weapons were placed outside the hotel. None changed colors, as they

Crewmen aboard the missile

MISSILES: Gulf skies become fields of fire for Scud hunters

From A-1

would if chemicals had been released.

Neel, 42, said the Patriot system located and downed the Scud in a matter of minutes. Within that interval, the anti-missile battery detected the Iraqi missile coming across Saudi Arabia's northern border, locked radar onto it and displayed its arc on a green television screen. The Patriot's internal firing mechanism then triggered automatically.

Neel's crews wear chemical warfare suits 24 hours a day and have been on Scud alert ever since Operation Desert Storm began early Thursday.

They spend their days in a dark van full of computers watching green television screens, waiting to see the telltale parabola that lets them know that an enemy ballistic missile is inbound.

"I knew right away what it was," said 1st Lt. Charles McMurtrey, the 27-year-old Montgomery, Ala., native who was the duty officer on watch when the Scud crossed the Iraqi border a little after 4 a.m. "There's no way you can confuse it."

When McMurtrey hit the alarm, the base public address system sounded a siren and announced, "Condition Red, Condition Red, don your gas mask." In this war,

any report of Iraqi attack raises fears of chemical warfare.

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AP/The Houston Post

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Some material in this report came from the official pool dispatch.