

Plus Readers' Letters

Fallout From Khobar Towers

The wing commander was nominated to meet the demand for a sacrifice.

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

On the evening of June 25, 1996, sentries on the roof of the Khobar Towers compound saw two men pull a tanker truck into an adjacent lot and park it against a chain-link fence, 80 feet away. Khobar Towers was a high-rise apartment complex in a densely populated section of Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Among those quartered there were airmen from the 4404th Wing (Provisional), which was flying Operation Southern Watch sorties over Iraq to enforce UN sanctions.

The sentries recognized the possibility of a truck bomb. They began knocking on doors to evacuate the building. Four minutes later, with only the top three floors vacated, the bomb went off. It exploded with the power of 20,000 pounds of TNT, completely blowing away the front of the nearest building and damaging five others.

Nineteen airmen were killed and hundreds were injured by flying glass. The bomb was 80 times larger than the next biggest device ever used by terrorists in Saudi Arabia. It left a crater 85 feet wide and 35 feet deep.

The questions were quick in coming. How did it happen? Who was to blame? The House National Security Committee had a fact-finding team in Dhahran in two weeks. The Department of Defense appointed a retired Army officer, Gen. Wayne Downing, to head an investigation.

Before the Khobar Towers case was settled, it had embroiled Congress, the news media, senior Administration officials, and Air Force leaders. It also figured in the decision of Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman to retire before completion of his tour as Air Force Chief of Staff.

Initial assessments pointed to the ambiguity of intelligence. Secretary of Defense William J. Perry said that "our commanders were trying to do right, but given the inconclusive nature of the intelligence, had a difficult task to know what to plan for." Rep. Floyd D. Spence (R-S.C.), House National Security Committee chairman, said there were "intelligence failures" at Khobar Towers.

Then came the Downing report in September 1996. It put the blame on Brig. Gen. Terry J. Schwalier, 4404th Wing commander. Downing said "it appears that the "fly and fight" mission and "equality of life" took precedence over force protection" and that Schwalier "did not adequately protect his forces." Thus Schwalier was nominated to meet the relentless demand that someone be punished.

The Air Force conducted two comprehensive inquiries. Both found that Schwalier had done all that could have been reasonably expected. Fogleman was fierce in his defense of Schwalier.

He told the Senate Armed Services Committee that if sustaining casualties in an attack can lead to punitive action, it would have a "chilling effect" on field commanders. The decision by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen to override the Air Force's judgment was a factor in Fogleman's early departure.

In July, declaring that Schwalier "could have and should have done more" to defend Khobar Towers, Cohen cancelled Schwalier's previously approved promotion to major general. It was not enough that Schwalier had taken 130 specific actions to improve security in the year before the explosion--or that he had implemented 36 of the 39 recommendations from the most recent vulnerability assessment.

The wing had operated on a "temporary" basis since 1992. Most personnel were assigned on 90-day rotation. In addition to the Southern Watch mission, Schwalier juggled numerous responsibilities. Among them was security against terrorist acts, including suicide bombers, satchel charges, sniper fire, kidnapping, assassination, hijacking, and car bombs on the perimeter. Penetration of the compound by a car bomb was regarded as the leading threat.

Cohen told reporters there were several security deficiencies but that two stood out: the lack of an effective alarm system to warn of impending terrorist attack and inadequate evacuation plans. Schwalier inherited a standard speaker and siren system that the Cohen report said was "plainly inadequate." The siren had not been tested since 1994. Commanders were reluctant to set it off, lest the Dhahran community mistake it as the signal for a Scud missile attack, for which the siren had historically been used. For evacuations, the wing used the "waterfall" method, first alerting top-floor occupants who then helped alert lower floors on their way out. Previous evacuations were completed in 10 to 15 minutes. Cohen faulted Schwalier for not conducting evacuation drills. Six actual evacuations, triggered by suspicious packages, in the past year were deemed "an inadequate substitute for exercises."

(News reports have belabored the absence of Mylar protective window film. Schwalier had budgeted for it, and the Cohen report found it "unlikely that Mylar would have prevented the vast majority of the fatalities," although it might have reduced the injuries.)

Was security insufficient? Yes. Nineteen airmen died and many others were injured. Could more have been done? Again, yes. With the benefit of hindsight, it's an easy call to make. However, the solution ultimately chosen after the Khobar Towers attack--to move troop housing out of the congested urban area altogether--was not available to Schwalier.

Neither justice nor security was well served in the handling of the Khobar Towers case. Perhaps it was satisfying to those who wanted a sacrifice, but it did not help with the real needs of forces in the field for resources, support, and backing from the nation that sent them out.

Fallout From Khobar Towers

Too many active duty and retired chose to remain silent as one of the greatest injustices ["Fallout From Khobar Towers," September, p. 3] ever to occur, at least over the past 30 years, played out in the media and Congress. Any number of people could and should be blamed for the 19 airmen killed during the terrorist bombing of Khobar Towers—except Brig. Gen. Terryl J. Schwalier.

The first people to blame are those who planted the bomb. No one foresaw that a bomb of this magnitude would and could be built and delivered undetected to the edge of the tower complex. This is probably where the blame should begin and end.

Throughout the Oklahoma City bombing trial no one put blame on anyone except Timothy McVeigh and possibly a few others who were part of the scheme. Maybe there were security lapses and maybe people in charge of security and safety of the federal complex in Oklahoma City could have been blamed for not doing better. However, the process pinned the blame where it belonged—on McVeigh.

In the case of the Khobar Towers bombing, if we want to further enlarge the circle of blame, then the next person or persons I would charge are the people who made the decision to house Americans at a site where a common-use road abutted the buildings. I would bet that many high-level State Department, Defense Department, Congressional, and Saudi government officials signed off on that decision. Second only to the terrorists, these are the people who are to blame for the 19 people killed in this bombing.

Instead, we blame the commander who inherited a bad decision made by these higher-ups. Schwalier is an outstanding officer. To place on him the responsibility for cutting through all the bureaucratic red tape is truly a great miscarriage of justice.

In the end, it was only Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman who stood proudly by his commander and retired with him. The Air Force now is short two outstanding officers. I hope that many in Congress, the Joint Chiefs, and DoD realize that we know that the sacking of Schwalier had nothing to do with justice or accountability.

Col. Gene E. Townsend,
USAF (Ret.)
San Antonio

I am sorry, John T. Correll, but you have it all wrong! Your logic and reasoning may very well be the way a civilian should be treated when, as CEO, a terrorist strikes one of his/her plants, operations, or groups of personnel. But a military commander is an entirely different matter.

A commander is responsible for the mission readiness of the unit commanded and that includes equipment, personnel, and facilities. Protection of all assets against all threats is basic to meeting that responsibility. Schwalier was in command of a combat unit, in a combat zone, although in friendly territory, and his was a combat mission.

There is no argument that a terrorist threat existed. A successful method of attack had been adequately demonstrated in Lebanon when terrorists blew up a similar barracks in a like manner, killing over 200 Marines. The terrorists remembered how they did it—a military commander must remember as well!

Schwalier accepted the responsibility when he assumed command! The other arguments you make to vindicate Schwalier's failure to fulfill his command responsibility are pure eyewash and of the red herring variety. It doesn't matter that Schwalier took 130 specific actions to improve security or implemented 36 or 39 recommendations from the most recent

vulnerability assessment. The bottom line is 19 American airmen died, and Schwalier had the command responsibility to protect those airmen from terrorist attack and ensure his command's maintenance of combat readiness! He did not meet that responsibility!

Brig. Gen. Gerald E. McIlmoyle,
USAF (Ret.)
Annandale, Va.

Congratulations on your editorial. The intervention of the Secretary of Defense was unwarranted, unnecessary, and unwise. Too many years as a politician seems to inculcate in an individual the overwhelming need to find a scapegoat, but: "Please, Lord, let it not be me." His action in micromanagement only shows how far we have come from the founding concept of the Office of the Secretary of Defense—to set policy.

Verne Orr
Pasadena, Calif.

Verne Orr was Secretary of the Air Force from February 1981 to November 1985.—the editors

Thank you for the details of Fogleman's early retirement. I commend him for the courage to resign in the face of obvious injustice by those in superior positions. That marks him in stark contrast to others during Vietnam. Had they his courage and opposed Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert McNamara, things would have been different.

I have no problem with civilian control over military in setting of policy, strategy, and goals. I have a great problem with them calling tactical shots, especially in defiance of sound military doctrine. Most of all, I have trouble accepting uniformed leaders who did not speak out against what they knew was wrong, and who by their silence, allowed men to be wounded, die, or spend long years as POWs. Had these politicians possessed Fogleman's courage, Vietnam's outcome would have been drastically different.

Lt. Col. Wallace H. Little,
USAF (Ret.)
Fort Walton Beach, Fla.

Air Force Magazine
Letters
January 1998

Objection to Khobar Decision

I just finished reading the opinions expressed in the Air Force Magazine's "Letters" section regarding the "disciplinary" action following the Khobar Towers tragedy. I think Brig. Gen. Gerald E. McIlmoyle, USAF (Ret.), has it wrong for several reasons [November, p. 6].

First, we were operating in someone else's sovereign territory; second, it was peacetime; third, although I don't know the details, I'm sure that the politicians in both Washington and Riyadh both had some constraints on [Brig. Gen. Terry J.] Schwalier's ability to act; fourth, it was Gen. [Ronald R.] Fogleman's call, and that is history. I suspect that Fogleman had more information on the issue than did McIlmoyle.

Lt. Col. Gerald P. Hanner,
USAF (Ret.)
Papillion, Neb.