

17 January 1991

The date marking the first day of the Air War against Iraq

While some were watching the events on TV back home, we were going about our business onboard ship, making sure things were all squared away and we knew what was expected of us should the Powers that Be decide that we should attack Iraq.

History shows that the decision was made to attack Iraq, and for us in the Gulf it was the middle of the night.

I was a Fire Control operator on the Frigate HMAS Sydney and my job was the Surface Panel the Harpoon and CWIS (Phalanx). As the change of watch occurred and I was getting my brief, my mate said, **“It was happening tonight but we were not to tell anyone else.”**

As we closed up, for a seven-hour watch (we worked 5 hours on 5 off 7 hours on 7 off), there was constant chatter on the radio circuits around the operations room and a sense of something was about to happen. From memory the Gunnery Officer also told us that the **First Strike** was going to happen soon, and ships being ships, rumors floated around but we were told to say nothing, not even to the lookouts on the Gun Direction Platform.

Then the First Strike started, the guys on HMAS Brisbane had Tomahawk Missiles fly overhead and we could see from the radar screens, the activity from the Carriers. We were trying to take it all in, the chatter from the circuits above our heads and all the activity in the Operations Room. But it seemed to take forever before, we could tell others what was happening and then from memory with reluctance the CO made the announcement we were at War.

My memory was so bad when I came home I have had to rely on other's to help me recall what went on in the Gulf, but there are things that have stood out.

We had a constant threat from **mines**, and had mine lookouts posted day and night, these men would be right at the front of the ship looking forward to see if there were any mines in front of the ship. The **Chemical threat** was also another main one and we had chemical detectors around the ship, which went off so much that they were discarded as faulty and nobody took any notice of them.

A sailor from the HMAS Brisbane one day when he was mine lookout, the chemical alarm went off and he was left outside like the Canary in the Mines, if he became sick the ship knew there was a chemical attack.

As the HMAS Sydney had 2 Helicopters we were assigned CSAR (Combat Search and Rescue) in the NAG (Northern Arabian Gulf). This took us up close to the coast of Kuwait and the burning Oil Wells. We had to sit in our designated position for about 2 weeks and not move out of a box. The threat from **mines was so bad** that every time we went to our mess deck we had to close the hatch (***it gave you a coffin feeling***) and also all hatches below the water line were closed in case we hit a mine and flooding occurred. Some of the crew chose to sleep above the water line just in case.

The mine threat was brought home to us when the one of the Amphibious Carriers and the Destroyer USS Princeton hit mines 18 miles from us. On another occasion as we sat at our console, we felt the ship lean and a ripple was felt in the bulkhead as if there was an explosion. After asking what had happened and the Ship 5 miles away asking if we were okay, it was put down to a sonic boom.

At times we were only from what we were told 20 seconds away from a missile attack, if it occurred. When we left our station and a British ship took over from us, she destroyed an incoming missile.

We were never told very much as to what was happening in the War and we thought that people watching it on TV knew more than us. This was made clear to us as we sat at the console and was trying to take it easy, and then one of the Electronic Warfare people (Spy's we called them) came to us and said "**What the Fuck are you blokes doing?**" Being an Ex Survey sailor, I said, "**Watching a game of cricket between the West Indies and Australia,**" he then told us that there were heaps of Iraqi jets ready for take off and heading our way and **to bloody pay attention**. The Coalition aircraft destroyed some of these planes and some of them ended up in Iran, but it was just that we were not told what was going on that made me worry.

We were constantly told to us that if we did not do our job properly, 220 shipmates would die and everyone would hate us at home for not doing our job. Women and children were being tortured, then murdered in Kuwait and to keep our minds on the job, **OR ELSE!!**

We had some blokes that could not hack it and were sent home for one reason or another, but it was our shock to find that one guy in particular had a yellow streak painted on his overalls and was called gutless amongst other things because he was sent home. So when we arrived back in Sydney we went on mass and drank heavily with this young bloke to show our support for him. Some of the sailors at the Penguin Piss Bar asked us what we were doing and we said showing support for our mate.

Yes we came home and worked our bums off all the way painting and decorating making the ship look pretty again, for the Public on our arrival. Tim Fischer had the displeasure of being told to get fucked by one of the young blokes because he commented on the paintwork, and then he said that, the government supported us. Yes he and others came out to the ship and said we are supporting you, but was told to get fucked anyway.

On arrival in Sydney, I was on duty being a non Sydney native and a single bloke so others took time with their families, It was rumoured our Buffer had a phone call from his wife asking for a divorce, **WELCOME HOME BUFFER!!!!**

It was also said and I do not have the figures to prove it but the Supply ship HMAS Success had a percentage of 33% of the crew who became single upon return from deployment to the Gulf.

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For me I became very ill and drank heavily as I did not know what was happening to me. I asked for a transfer to go back to the West and I did, transferring to the Warship HMAS Derwent that had just come out of refit, and was working up again to go away. So for me it was like going **to War all over and I crumbled, call me weak but it happened.** But when I went for help I was told that the ship was too busy for me to help and go back to work.

I asked to see the Chaplain who happened to be one of the Chaplains in the Gulf with us, and was told that if I killed myself or anyone else on the ship then I could see the chaplain to get help.

Well I jumped ship for a few days then after some major coaxing I handed myself in only to be treated like I killed someone and scorned by all, but Chaplain Casey said that the treatment I received was also pretty much the same as other Gulf War veterans by members of the Defence Force. It seemed other Defence Force members did not like us to get our medals as nobody was killed and as they watched the War on TV said we did nothing

After much hassle and treatment that I would not do to an animal I was discharge medically unfit in 92 and went through the process of applying for a pension from the Department of Veteran Affairs. I was knocked back for the Service Pension because I was told that I was too young, and then I was granted that and went about the disability pension. After a lot of help by the advocates at the RSL, I was granted a TTI then after 18 months or so was granted a TPI pension.

The Treatment that Gulf War Veterans received by members of the ADF, is now being duplicated by other Veterans, it seems that the bad treatment given to the Vietnam Veterans by the World War 2 diggers is happening to Gulf War veterans and Peace Keepers, it is not all Vietnam Veterans and I must stress that but a vocal minority.

As it looks as though Australia may commit others to the Gulf and with the Royal Australian Navy still there since 1990 has the Gulf War finished for me, there has been no closure.

What treatment will these men and women receive when they come home?

Will they have to wait 30 years for a welcome home parade as the Vietnam Veterans did or will the majority of the Public and Ex Service community just forget them as they are doing to us?

Will they get a Debrief in the form of a questionnaire asking them if their training prepared them for WAR?

I might not have fought in the Jungles or the Desert like so many of the Troops before me did, my duty was at sea with the Royal Australian Navy, as that is the career I chose.

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Every War is different, from the Boer War to the Gulf War, men and women sacrifice so much for their service, no questions asked and some pay the ultimate price with their life.

While others come home with physical and mental wounds never able to return to work or the things that they enjoyed before going away.

I do not class myself a hero or anything special far from it. I was an Australian Sailor that helped a married mate when asked and I volunteered to take his position and would do the same today, if I were able too.

I am not asking for the world but just asking to remember ALL VETERANS no matter the conflict and no matter what job they did.

Who were the real enemy Saddam or Those waiting at home and is the War really over?

Philip Steele

40 years old

Gulf War Veteran

I am in receipt of a TPI Pension

Married with no children

After spending some much time doing nothing, I try to assist Ex Service men and women where possible, through the TPI WA and now at the National Younger Veterans Forum. It is with the help and guidance of some Vietnam Veterans that I have come out of my shell to do what I do (some say I should go back to my shell).

My family does not really understand the pain I go through sometimes but do support me in what I do.

Families are the forgotten people in times of conflict and do it harder than us away sometimes and deserve much more recognition than they do.