

20 years later: Florida Guardsmen reflect on Operation Desert Storm

Written by [Sgt. 1st Class Blair Heusdens](#) // October 20, 2010 // [Feature Stories](#), [News](#)

ST. AUGUSTINE, Fla. (Oct. 20, 2010) – Twenty years have passed since members of the Florida National Guard went to war in the Gulf as part of an effort to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Today, some of those Florida Guardsmen who left their families to face the unknown are still serving within our force and within our communities.

Florida National Guardsmen receive the call to duty

Florida's first units to mobilize for Operation Desert Storm were the 743rd Maintenance Company out of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and the 325th Maintenance Company out of Lake Wales, Fla., on Oct. 11, 1990. A total of 17 Florida National Guard units were activated and nine were deployed overseas to serve in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and Germany.



This oil on canvas, painted by Ronald Shelley in 1992, shows a military camp at Al Shalah where the Florida National Guard's 743rd Maintenance Company of Fort Lauderdale spent time providing essential maintenance services for American and Allied Forces during Operation Desert Storm.

Most of the units called to active duty had 10 days or less between the time they received the alert until their arrival at the mobilization station. In the days and weeks leading up to the war, the Soldiers and Airmen of the Florida National Guard gathered their equipment, put their affairs in order and said goodbye to their families in record speed.

“All of the Soldiers showed up and had a good attitude,” said Col. Don Mason, who is currently deployed to Kuwait as commander of the 53rd Special Troops Battalion and on his third deployment as a Florida Guardsman. As a captain, Mason commanded the 705th Military Police Company during Operation Desert Storm. “From what I remember, everyone was excited. Most of us had joined during the Cold War, but that was going away. We thought, ‘We’ve been training for all these years and we finally get to go off and do something.’ We were glad to do our part.”

The Soldiers underwent training at mobilization stations – most cycling through Fort Stewart, Ga. – before their units were assigned missions. Although this process is streamlined now after years of deploying Soldiers overseas, this was not the case in 1990, when the size of the mobilizing force was the largest since the Korean War.

The Soldiers trained for the war, but feared the unknown. Much training time was dedicated to chemical defense training. News reports spoke of chemical weapons threats and intelligence reports generated serious concern that Iraq would possibly use Scud missiles armed with chemical or biological warheads.

“When we landed in Saudi, it was actually during a Scud alert,” said retired Maj. David Shoar, who was a platoon leader with the 269th Engineer Company and is currently the Sheriff of St. Johns County, Fla. “We got off the planes and the alarms were going off.”

The warfront

Florida Guardsmen participated in various missions overseas during Operation Desert Storm, including equipment and vehicle recovery, tank retrieval and maintenance, unexploded ordnance disposal, construction support, medical support, detention operations and signal operations.

The Florida National Guard units that deployed overseas were the 743rd Maintenance Company, the 325th Maintenance Company, the 221st Explosive Ordnance Detachment, the 269th Engineer Company, the 202nd Medical Group, the 653rd Signal Company and the 705th Military Police Company. Some of these units have since changed or been disbanded, while others are still around today, and continue to serve overseas in support of current operations.

Well before the air war began in 1990, the first Florida National Guard Soldiers were on the ground in Saudi Arabia. Florida Guardsmen continued to arrive in theater to support their active duty counterparts.

“The experience drove home the importance of accountability of people,” said Shoar. “They pound [accountability] into you at Officer Candidate School, until you get off that plane at three in the morning and everyone has their mask on and you have to find your 36 soldiers while there’s a siren going off, you don’t quite understand.”

In addition to chemical threats and the anxiety of the looming war, Florida Guardsmen and their families also had to deal with another unknown – the length of time Soldiers would be deployed overseas.

“We didn’t know how long we were going to be there, we were in the middle of nowhere living in tents,” said Mason. “Everyone dealt well with the unknown.”

In addition to the Florida units deployed to the Gulf, the 144th Transportation Company was deployed to Mannheim, Germany, in support of Operation Desert Storm with the mission of hauling cargo throughout the country and transporting MREs and mail.



Airmen from the 125th Fighter Wing deployed to Panama to take over the air sovereignty mission for an active duty Air Force unit that was deployed in support of Operation Desert Storm.

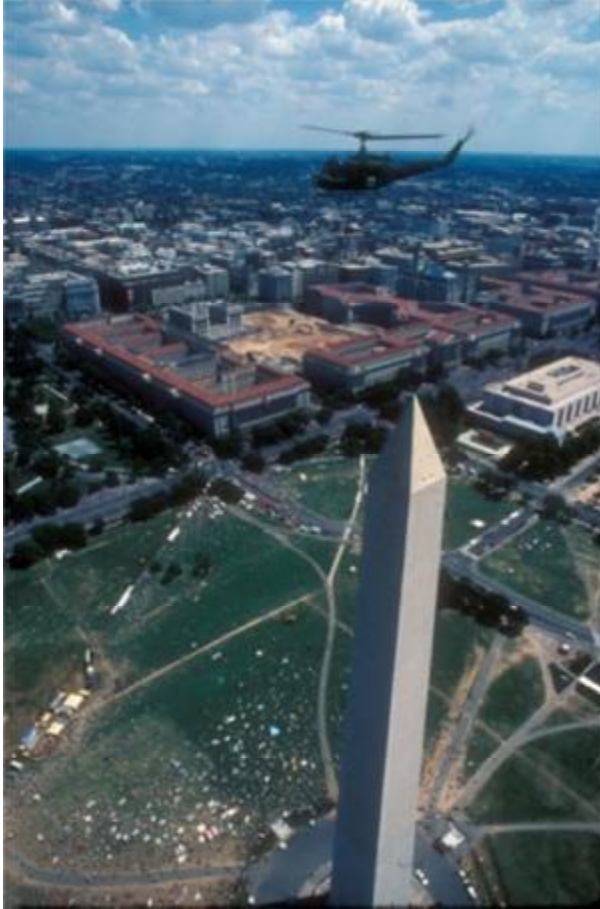
The Florida Air National Guard also played an important role in Operation Desert Storm. Volunteers from the 290th Joint Communications Support Squadron and 114th Communications Squadron deployed to Saudi Arabia; the 125th Fighter Wing provided air transport of personnel and equipment overseas and other volunteers served in various locations and positions overseas and in the U.S.

The 125th Fighter Wing received a unique opportunity during Operation Desert Storm. As active duty Air Force units were called overseas to support the air war, the Florida Air National Guard was notified and given 72 hours to deploy to Panama to take over the mission of maintaining the sovereignty of Panamanian airspace and addressing the issue of illicit drugs that were being transported. This rapid deployment tested the Florida Air Guard's strategic defense mission and put their new aircraft to the test.

"We'd done a lot of training deployments," said Maj. Gen. Emmett Titshaw, the Adjutant General of Florida, who commanded Florida's 125th Fighter Interceptor Group during Operation Desert Storm. "But Desert Shield and Desert Storm was really a change in direction for the Air National Guard from a strategic position. Essentially, the Air Force has been at war since Desert Storm; because we've been enforcing the no-fly zones over Iraq, Turkey and Saudi Arabia."

The stateside mission

Among the Florida units that were activated, some stayed within the United States to fill positions vacated by active duty Soldiers and perform other essential missions in support of the war effort. The units activated to provide support in the U.S. included the 153rd Finance Support unit, the 199th Medical Company and the Health Services Liaison Detachment.



A Florida National Guard UH-1 Huey helicopter flies near the Washington Monument in Washington D.C. as part of the National Victory Celebration, honoring the service members who took part in Operation Desert Storm, June 8, 1991.

These units provided valuable assistance helping Soldiers through the mobilization process, providing medical staff to support medical operations in the U.S. and air assets to support medical evacuations in the U.S.

Florida's elite Soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group, were also activated and trained to deploy, but never mobilized overseas. However, after the war ended, the 3-20th participated in Operation Provide Comfort, providing humanitarian assistance to Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq.

Coming home

The coalition forces declared a cease-fire, Feb. 28, 1991, just 100 hours after the ground war began. The entire nation united to welcome the troops home after the successful, "whirlwind" war. Parades and celebrations took place across the country as service members were reunited with their families.

“I’ll never forget coming home: it was one of the most emotional times in my life,” said Shoar. “We got to Fort Stewart that night and our families were there as we marched across the field at two in the morning. It was such an emotional time and such a happy time. We were treated like conquering heroes.”

It was a far cry from the atmosphere Soldiers came home to after Vietnam. Many who served in Operation Desert Storm were Vietnam veterans and had the opportunity to receive the welcome home they never got.

“One of the things that was startling for me was I had several Vietnam vets under my command and it was very interesting to watch those guys and good to see them come home and get treated right,” said Shoar.

The Florida National Guard had the honor of participating in the victory celebration held in Washington, D.C., on June 8, 1991. It was the largest victory celebration since the end of World War II. Soldiers from Florida’s 199th Air Ambulance Company, which conducted medical evacuation flights in the U.S. during Operation Desert Storm, took three UH-1 “Huey” helicopters to participate in a flyover of the Capitol region during the celebration. The unit’s commander, Maj. Homer Venture, selected a crew of nine Vietnam veterans to support this mission.



Florida National Guardsmen with the 199th Air Ambulance Company took part in the National Victory Celebration, in Washington D.C., June 8, 1991. Top row from left: Don Darden, Jack Klotz, Chuck Dick, Douglas Pope, Charles Mount; Bottom row from left: Danny Lux, Jim Wellmon, Robert Atkins, John Popin

Retired 1st Sgt. Jim Wellmon, a member of the 199th who deployed to Vietnam, in support of Desert Storm and, years later, to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, recalled the atmosphere that day in the nation’s capital at the victory celebration.

“We had all been treated rather badly in the 70s,” said Wellmon. “When we were walking across the Mall that day, kids came up to us asking for our autograph.”

Operation Desert Storm, while a major military success, was not all celebration. Families across the nation were affected by the nearly 300 deaths that occurred during the operation. Florida's Sgt. Tracey Brogdon with the 325th Maintenance Company was killed May 21, 1991, in a vehicle accident in Saudi Arabia. Brogdon was one of only three female American Soldiers killed during the war.

The Florida National Guard's more than 1,600 mobilized Guardsmen became part a larger force of their active duty and reserve counterparts. In all, 37,848 National Guard Soldiers were certified and deployed to Southwest Asia and another 10,132 Soldiers were deployed throughout the U.S. and Europe in support of Operation Desert Storm.

Today, 20 years after the first troops landed in Southwest Asia for Operation Desert Storm, Florida Guardsmen continue to support operations in Kuwait and other parts of Southwest Asia. The mission today is different, but Florida Guardsmen continue to play an important role in bringing peace and stability to the region.