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**BETTER LUCKY THAN GOOD: OPERATION EARNEST
WILL AS GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY**

by

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June 2007

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DIPLOMACY**

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Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

In 1987 the United States agreed to register eleven Kuwaiti oil tankers under the American flag and provide them naval protection at the height of the Iran – Iraq War. Motivated primarily by Cold War considerations, the United States embarked on a policy of “neutral intervention” whose intended effects were certain to be disadvantageous to Iran. American planners failed to adequately anticipate Iranian reaction to the American policy, which led to a number of violent naval actions and American retaliatory strikes on Iranian oil facilities. Nevertheless, by April 1988, the United States had largely achieved its declared objectives, which were to secure the safe transit of Kuwaiti oil through the Gulf, and forestall the expansion of Soviet influence in the region. On April 29, 1988, however, the United States expanded the scope of the protection scheme, extending the U.S. Navy’s protective umbrella to all neutral shipping in the Persian Gulf. This decision divorced the American policy from its original limited objectives, increased the likelihood of further confrontation with Iran, and laid the groundwork for the destruction of an Iranian airliner by USS *Vincennes* (CG-49).

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE

This thesis examines the Reagan Administration's 1987 decision to register eleven Kuwaiti-owned oil tankers under the American flag and provide them with naval escort through the Persian Gulf during the height of the Iran – Iraq war. The objective is to provide an analysis of the American policy as an example of what has traditionally been called “gunboat diplomacy,” which James Cable has defined, in his influential study, as “the use or threat of limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage or avert loss, either in furtherance of an international dispute or against foreign nationals within the territory of jurisdiction of their own state.”¹

On January 23, 1980, President Carter promulgated the Carter Doctrine when he declared that any attempt by an outside power to gain control of the Persian Gulf would “be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America and such an assault will be repelled by all means necessary, including military force.”² This declaration was made in the shadow of the threats to American interests in the Persian Gulf posed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution. To support this doctrine, the Carter Administration took several concrete steps leading to future American military intervention in the Persian Gulf.³ Every subsequent American President, regardless of party, has adhered to the principles espoused by the Carter Doctrine.

On September 23, 1980, Iraqi forces crossed the border into neighboring Iran commencing a war that was to last eight years. The following day President Carter warned both countries that “it is imperative that there be no infringement of that freedom

¹ James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy 1919 – 1991* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 14. Henceforth referred to as *Gunboat Diplomacy*.

² The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, “State of the Union Address, 1980,” <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.

³ Cecil B. Crabb, *The Doctrines of American Foreign Policy Their Meaning, Role, and Future* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 329. Henceforth referred to as *Doctrines*. These steps included the creation of a Middle East Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), increased military spending, and renewal of an earlier pledge to defend Pakistan. The United States Navy witnessed its Persian Gulf on-station time expand threefold between 1979 and 1980.

of passage of ships to and from the Persian Gulf region.”⁴ Three weeks later Secretary of State Muskie affirmed that the United States had “pledged to do what is necessary to protect free shipping in the Strait of Hormuz from any interference.”⁵ Seven years later the United States was called upon to make good this pledge.

Operation Earnest Will was a seminal event in the history of American involvement in the Persian Gulf. It marked the first time military force was called upon to support the Carter Doctrine. It denoted the passage of responsibility for Persian Gulf Security from Great Britain to the United States and commenced an era of continuous U.S. Navy presence in the region that has extended up to today.

B. IMPORTANCE

The United States, a declared neutral party to the conflict, commenced the operation in July 1987, with the limited objective of protecting U.S. flag merchant vessels from attack. The Reagan Administration considered the threat to American forces to be low under the assumption that Iranian forces would be reluctant to attack American-flagged vessels. The Reagan Administration was vehement in its assertion that the United States was not undertaking the operation to protect all neutral merchant shipping. However, after ten months and five Iranian – American naval clashes, the United States expanded the protection scheme to include all non-belligerent merchant shipping.⁶ The April 1988 decision to expand the scope of the protection scheme resulted in an aggressive naval posture which culminated in the destruction of Iran Air flight 655 by the USS *Vincennes* (CG-49) on July 3, 1988. Ironically, this tragedy provided the Iranian government with the diplomatic cover required to end the war and demonstrates the unintended consequences that are so often associated with military escalation.

Most analyses of Operation Earnest Will consider the American effort to be a success. Indeed, by April 1988, the United States had largely achieved all the objectives set forth by the Reagan Administration in June 1987. However, the perceived success of

⁴ Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf, A History of America’s Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1883 – 1992* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 109. Henceforth referred to as *Guardians*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ To be precise, the scheme was expanded to all non-belligerent shipping not carrying contraband material or resisting legitimate search and seizure by a belligerent under attack outside of declared exclusion zones.

Operation Earnest Will has masked critical errors committed by American planners in formulating the operation. An analysis of Operation Earnest Will as a policy of gunboat diplomacy reveals that the United States failed to adequately consider factors which influenced Iranian response to the provocative American policy.

Operation Earnest Will depended for its success upon Tehran choosing to terminate its attacks on Kuwaiti-owned vessels and, after April 1988, all neutral shipping transiting the Persian Gulf. Such a decision in turn depended upon a number of factors, including the political outlook of the Iranian government, the effectiveness of its administrative authority, the nature of its political support, and the way in which Iran's prior experiences with the United States conditioned its expectations of American behavior. These factors, which are by no means easy to understand, were not carefully considered by American planners, resulting in rather complacent assumptions about the likely Iranian response to Operation Earnest Will. The April 1988 decision to expand the protection scheme to include all neutral shipping built upon these initial errors by divorcing American policy from the limited objectives set forth in June 1987 and increased the likelihood of more direct Iranian – American clashes in the Persian Gulf.

Greater efforts by American planners to understand the dynamics of post-revolutionary Iranian domestic politics, including the importance of the Iran – Iraq war to the Iranian regime, the significance of Tehran's use of Shi'a symbology to describe the conflict, and Iranian perceptions of the United States as its ultimate nemesis in the region, if not the world, could have lead to less optimistic assumptions with respect to Iran's acceptance of Operation Earnest Will. Doubtless the operation would have proceeded, but a more thorough analysis of Iranian incentives in confronting the United States would have resulted in planners deducing more realistic expectations regarding the potential for escalation. Better assumptions would have facilitated more informed risk management and greater appreciation of the dangers and cost of becoming directly involved in the Iran – Iraq conflict.

The April 1988 decision to expand the protection scheme “lowered the threshold of crisis”⁷ and set the United States Navy on a course towards direct confrontation with Iran. Closer adherence to traditional principles of gunboat diplomacy, in which

⁷ Janice Gross-Stein, “The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place,” *International Security* 13, no. 3 (1988), <http://links.jstor.org>, 156 (accessed May 2, 2006).

limitations on risk are a paramount concern, would have revealed the danger of the United States becoming a belligerent in the Iran – Iraq War and may have given pause to those advocating more direct American involvement in the Persian Gulf.

C. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This thesis begins with a study of the Carter Doctrine and an historical review of American naval operations in the Persian Gulf between 1945 and 1981. An examination of the “Tanker War” focused on the period between 1981 to 1986 provides the context surrounding the 1987 Kuwaiti request to register eleven vessels under the American flag. The Reagan Administration’s strategic objectives in complying with the Kuwaiti request are closely examined. A discussion of gunboat diplomacy as a concept provides a framework for a critical examination of the American operation. A detailed description of the first nine months of the operation, to include the military clashes between the United States and Iran during this period, provides the concrete historical context in which the April 1988 decision to expand the protection scheme was reached. American objectives in expanding the protection scheme will be detailed. Finally, the consequences of the April 1988 decision to expand the scope of maritime protection will be discussed within the context of gunboat diplomacy

The preponderance of existing literature concerning Operation Earnest Will considers the American effort in the Persian Gulf to be a success. Walker,⁸ Politakis,⁹ and De Guttry¹⁰ approach the operation from a legal standpoint. Palmer provides a detailed history of United States Navy operations in the Persian Gulf until 1992.¹¹ Navias and Hooton discuss Operation Earnest Will within the context of the Tanker War.¹² Cordesman¹³ and Crist¹⁴ provide detailed histories of the Iran – Iraq war and

⁸ George K. Walker, *The Tanker War, 1980 – 88: Law And Policy* (Newport: United States Naval War College, 2000).

⁹ George P. Politakis, *Modern Aspects of the Laws of Naval Warfare and Maritime Neutrality* (London: Keegan Paul International, 1998). Henceforth referred to as *Maritime Neutrality*.

¹⁰ Andrea DeGuttry and Natalino Ronzitti, eds., *The Iran – Iraq War (1980 – 1988) and the Law of Naval Warfare* (Cambridge: Grotius Publications Limited, 1993). Henceforth referred to as *Law of Naval Warfare*.

¹¹ Palmer, *Guardians*.

¹² Martin S. Navias and E.R. Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping During the Iran – Iraq Crisis, 1980 – 1988* (New York: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 1996). Henceforth referred to as *Tanker Wars*.

Operation Earnest Will respectively. Karsh¹⁵ and Joyner¹⁶ provide detailed descriptions of American objectives in reflagging the Kuwaiti tankers.

The April 1988, expansion of the protection scheme elicited no strong debate or Congressional hearings of any kind. McNaugher attributes this shift in American policy to pressure from the Kuwaitis to exert more effort against the Iranians and also due to the frustration of American naval officers who had to watch helplessly as neutral merchant shipping was attacked by Iran.¹⁷ O'Rourke contends, without providing supporting documentation, that the Reagan Administration had been receiving pressure to expand the protection scheme from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and American ship owners operating vessels under foreign flags as well as frustrated naval officers.¹⁸ Johnson attributes the lack of Congressional response to the American escalation as being due to "the victorious euphoria that was pervasive in Washington" following Operation Praying Mantis.¹⁹ Crist asserts that the decision was made in order to increase pressure on the Iranian military.²⁰ No source critically examines Operation Earnest Will as an example of Gunboat Diplomacy.

¹³ Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War Volume II* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990). Henceforth referred to as *Lessons*.

¹⁴ David B. Crist, "Operation Earnest Will" (PhD diss, The Florida State University, 1998).

¹⁵ Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran – Iraq War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Christopher C. Joyner, ed., *The Persian Gulf War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran – Iraq War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 191, 193.

¹⁸ Ronald O'Rourke, "Gulf Ops," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 115 (May 1989), 47.

¹⁹ Christopher C. Joyner, ed., *The Persian Gulf War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 135.

²⁰ David B. Crist, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2006.

D. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter I discusses the purpose and importance of the thesis. A description of the research methodology and major sources used in the thesis follows. A review of existing literature introduces the reader to the major sources influencing the thesis's central argument.

Chapter II focuses on American involvement in the Middle East prior to the Iran – Iraq War. A discussion of the Carter Doctrine sets Operation Earnest Will within a strategic context. The chapter examines United States Navy involvement in the Persian Gulf between 1945 and 1981 and demonstrates the limited involvement of the United States Navy in the Persian Gulf prior to 1987.

Chapter III provides an overview of the first six years of the Iran – Iraq War with emphasis on the role of the Tanker War in the strategies of both belligerents. Careful study of the ferocity of shipping attacks and the attack methods employed by the belligerents provides critical background to understanding the circumstances surrounding the Kuwaiti government's approach to the United States in December 1986. An investigation of the U.S. Navy's presence in the Persian Gulf between 1981 and 1986 provides a historical link between the prewar American naval presence in the region and Operation Earnest Will.

Chapter IV centers on the January 1987 Kuwaiti request to register eleven vessels under the American flag and the American response to same. As the Soviet Union weighed heavily in the United States agreeing to the Kuwaiti request, a short discussion of Kuwaiti foreign policy vis-à-vis the superpowers is necessary. An examination of the objectives of Operation Earnest Will follows. A brief description of the USS *Stark* incident is necessary, as this "mistaken" Iraqi attack resulted in increased Congressional focus on the Reagan Administration's reflagging scheme. A discussion of gunboat diplomacy provides the analytical framework within which American planning assumptions regarding the anticipated Iranian response to the American operation is critiqued.

Chapter V looks at the first nine months of Operation Earnest Will. The chapter discusses the five major American – Iranian military clashes that occurred during this period, setting the background for the April 1988 decision to expand the American protection scheme to cover all neutral shipping.

Chapter VI starts with a discussion of the April 1988 decision to expand the United States Navy's protective umbrella to all neutral merchant vessels. A second discussion of gunboat diplomacy reveals the dangers of increased American involvement in the Iran – Iraq war that resulted from the divorcing of Operation Earnest Will from its initial limited objectives. A direct correlation exists between this decision and the July 3, 1988, *Vincennes*/Iran Air 655 disaster.

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II. THE ROOTS OF U.S. INVOLVEMENT

A. CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

American foreign policy towards the Middle East changed dramatically in the period between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Iran – Iraq War in September 1980. The principle of containment espoused by the Truman Doctrine laid the foundation for the more aggressive postures mandated by the Eisenhower and Carter Doctrines, both of which authorized the use of military force to defend American interests in the Middle East. This period also witnessed the beginning of American naval involvement in the Persian Gulf, a development that gained increased importance following the 1971 withdrawal of major British forces from the region and the failure of the Twin Pillars strategy in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution.

B. THE CARTER DOCTRINE

Development of American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East was impacted more by Cold War concerns than the global oil market in the immediate aftermath of World War II.²¹ By the late 1940s, however, Persian Gulf oil played an increasingly large role in forming American attitudes towards the region. The oil scare of 1948 spotlighted the fact that domestic oil reserves were declining, as was the American share of the world oil export market. Additionally, by 1947, the United States Navy was often turning towards Middle East sources to meet its fuel requirements. Between 1946 and 1950, 30 to 42 percent “of the petroleum products moved by the U.S. Navy came from the Persian Gulf.”²²

The growing importance of the Persian Gulf region was recognized by the Truman Administration in October 1949, through the adoption of NSC 47/2. NSC 47/2 identified three major strategic objectives: to promote ties between regional and western governments; to preclude Soviet expansion into the region; and to prevent regional disputes from undermining the ability of Middle Eastern states to resist Soviet

²¹ Palmer, *Guardians*, 41.

²² *Ibid.*, 45.

aggression.²³ NSC 47/2 was a natural outgrowth of the Truman Doctrine. Elucidated by President Truman to a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, the Truman Doctrine set the idea of containment as the “integrating principle of American diplomacy towards the Soviet Union, towards Western Europe and towards the Middle East.”²⁴ President Truman envisioned American assistance to foreign governments to be primarily economic and financial in nature, which he considered “essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.”²⁵ The Truman Doctrine established the basis by which the increasingly interventionist Eisenhower and Carter Doctrines pledged the commitment of American military forces to the defense of the Middle East against Soviet efforts to establish hegemony over this strategically vital area of the world.

By the mid 1950s, the American position in the Middle East appeared to be deteriorating. The combined British – French – Israeli invasion of Egypt in October, 1956, in response to Gamal abd al-Nasser’s July 26 nationalization of the Suez Canal, substantially weakened the West’s standing in the Middle East. Additionally, the United States had withdrawn its offer of financial support for Egypt’s construction of the Aswan High Dam on July 19, causing Nasser to look towards the Soviet Union for funding. The Soviets took advantage of the American missteps to increase their influence in the Middle East, agreeing in October 1958 to finance the Aswan Dam project. The combination of increased communist influence coupled with Nasser’s Arab socialism, which many within the Eisenhower Administration equated with communism,²⁶ was a cause of great concern within the halls of American government.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower addressed the issue of increasing communist leverage in the Middle East in a January 5, 1957, Congressional address. President Eisenhower recognized the instability that was gripping the Middle East, attributing the poor state of affairs directly to the Soviet Union and International Communism. The President asserted that “the integrity and independence of the nations of the Middle East

²³ David B. Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 25.

²⁴ Crabb, *Doctrines*, 139.

²⁵ The Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum and Library, “Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey,” <http://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=2189&st=truman+doctrine&st1=> (accessed May 11, 2006). Henceforth referred to as “Truman Doctrine.”

²⁶ Crabb, *Doctrines*, 162.

should be inviolate” and that the great responsibility of ensuring the sovereignty of this critical area rested with the United States.²⁷

The proposed legislation, soon to be known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, was “primarily designed to deal with the possibility of communist aggression, direct and indirect.”²⁸ To meet the communist threat, the Eisenhower Doctrine relied on a three-pronged strategy to assist “moderate” Middle East governments.²⁹ First, President Eisenhower requested authority to commence new foreign aid programs designed to assist Middle Eastern nations “in the development of economic strength dedicated to the maintenance of national independence.”³⁰ Second, the proposed legislation called for the provision of American military aid to friendly Middle East governments requesting such aid. Third, and most importantly, President Eisenhower requested authorization for “such assistance and cooperation *to include the employment of the armed forces of the United States* (emphasis added), to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid, against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism.”³¹

The provision of economic and military aid as a tool to contain the expansion of communism was very much in line with the concepts espoused in the Truman Doctrine. However, the Eisenhower Doctrine broke new ground by opening up the possibility that American military forces could be introduced into the region to protect the sovereignty of Middle Eastern states. This was problematic, in that the issue of what exactly comprised communist aggression needed to be clarified. The Eisenhower Administration appeared reconciled to the acceptance of Middle Eastern communist governments that obtained power peacefully but would react to an outright invasion by a communist country (direct aggression) or foreign-sponsored communist guerilla activity, subversion, or propaganda

²⁷ The Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, “Special Message to the Congress on the Middle East Situation,” <http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/midleast.htm> (accessed May 11, 2006). Henceforth referred to as “Eisenhower Doctrine.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Crabb, *Doctrines*, 154.

³⁰ The Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, “Eisenhower Doctrine.”

³¹ Ibid.

campaigns (indirect aggression).³² Also important to note is that the Eisenhower Doctrine prescribed the deployment of American forces to the region only at the invitation of a Middle East government. Twenty three years later, under the precepts of the Carter Doctrine requests for American military intervention would not be required in the event of direct Soviet aggression. A modified version of the Eisenhower Doctrine was approved in the Senate by a vote of 72 for and 19 against on March 5, 1957.³³ President Eisenhower signed the resolution into law on March 9.

Sixteen months later, the American military was called on to uphold the Eisenhower Doctrine during the Lebanese Civil War. The Lebanese Civil War erupted in the aftermath of Maronite Christian president Camille Chamoun's attempt to amend the nation's constitution to allow him to run for reelection. Syria and Egypt provided support for various groups opposing Chamoun, while the Lebanese president appealed to the United States for assistance. President Eisenhower, despite a conviction that Communism was at the root of the unrest in Lebanon, did not immediately intervene.³⁴ The July 14 Iraqi revolution, which toppled the West-leaning King Faysal II, shocked the Eisenhower Administration and ultimately lead to the United States answering Chamoun's call for assistance. The United States Marines landed in Lebanon on July 15, 1958. While the landing of the Marines was probably unnecessary, as Chamoun had quietly announced that he would step down as President in September,³⁵ the crisis in Lebanon had provided the Eisenhower Administration with an opportunity to demonstrate American resolve in confronting the menace of communism and, by doing so, prove that the United States could be a dependable ally to Middle East governments. Similar considerations played a large role in the American decision to embark on Operation Earnest Will.

Despite the critical importance ascribed to the Middle East by the Truman and Eisenhower Doctrines, the United States had been content to cede responsibility for the

³² Crabb, *Doctrines*, 155 – 159.

³³ *Ibid.*, 171. The House had approved the Eisenhower Doctrine by a vote of 355 for and 61 against.

³⁴ Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab – Israeli Conflict* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004), 258 – 259. Henceforth referred to as *Palestine*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

security of the Persian Gulf to the British. The 1971 withdrawal of major British forces to a position east of the Suez Canal resulted in an American reevaluation of Gulf security. Alarming, the British withdrawal coincided with an increase in Soviet naval presence in the region.³⁶ Additionally, American involvement in the Vietnam conflict had left both the government and public opinion reluctant to assume additional military responsibilities around the globe. These factors resulted in the Nixon Administration transferring the Vietnamization strategy to the Persian Gulf via military aid to Iran and Saudi Arabia, which became the “Twin Pillars” supporting American interests in the region.

The Twin Pillars strategy unleashed a torrent of American military aid to Iran. Iranian defense expenditures jumped over five-fold between 1969 and 1978.³⁷ The doors of the American military arsenal swung open to the Iranian Shah, allowing the purchase of advanced aircraft (the F-4 and F-14), sophisticated missiles (the Hawk surface-to-air missile), and high tech naval vessels (the *Kouroosh* i.e. *Kidd* class destroyer). Despite these large military expenditures, the twin pillars strategy was not successful. The Iranian arms buildup could not prevent the fall of Mohammed Reza Shah and merely served to provide the Islamic Republic of Iran a formidable military in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. Additionally, as Palmer adroitly points out, the Iranian arms build up prompted expansion in the Iraqi military to counter the Persian threat. This regional arms race helped fuel the drive towards the Iran – Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War.³⁸

The Persian Gulf received renewed focus following the 1976 election of Jimmy Carter to the Presidency. Building on a 1977 memorandum that identified the Persian Gulf as a region in which “greater military concern ought to be given,” the Joint Chiefs of Staff completed a review of regional American strategy that declared continuous access to Persian Gulf oil sources, and the prevention of a hostile power from establishing hegemony over the area, to be major American strategic objectives in the region.³⁹

³⁶ Palmer, *Guardians*, 86.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 101 – 102. A third objective was to ensure the survival of Israel.

The Twin Pillars strategy espoused by the Nixon Administration was considerably weakened by the late 1970s. The position of the Shah was becoming increasingly perilous as Iran moved from one crisis to another. The Shah had encountered substantial Clerical opposition to the 1960s White Revolution, primarily from a junior cleric named Ruholla Khomeini. Efforts undertaken to industrialize Iran in the 1960s, which resulted in increased urbanization and a marked decrease in agricultural output, largely failed.⁴⁰ Attempts during the 1970s to alleviate the crisis brought on by the failed 1960s industrialization policies through oil wealth also failed as funds were diverted to finance the Shah's military build up as well as many "white elephant" projects.⁴¹ Income inequality generated by uneven distribution of oil wealth bred social resentment, which, when coupled with the Shah's increasingly autocratic behavior, delegitimized the ruling regime in the eyes of much of the Iranian population.

Events came to a head with the January 1978 publication in a state-run newspaper of an attack on Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been exiled since 1963. Massive protests erupted in Qum, in which several students were killed by the Iranian army. Increasingly violent protests erupted throughout Iran during the spring and summer of 1978. Poor fiscal policy exacerbated the levels of social unrest, breeding more protests and the declaring of martial law. The killing of hundreds of protestors by the Iranian military on September 8, 1978, known as "Black Friday", sealed the Shah's fate. The Shah left Iran on January 16, 1979. The Iranian pillar upon which the security of Persian Gulf rested had collapsed.

The December 27, 1979, invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, coming so closely on the heels of the Shah's fall, came as a further shock to the Carter Administration. The occupation of Afghanistan placed the Soviet Army on the Iranian border in a position to threaten Gulf oil supplies. The United States responded to the new security situation in the Persian Gulf on January 23, 1980, during the Presidential State of the Union Address through the announcement of what became known as the Carter Doctrine.

⁴⁰ Vali Nasr, "The Iranian Revolution" (Lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey CA, October 30, 2006).

⁴¹ Ibid.

President Carter classified the Iranian hostage situation and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a “serious challenge to the United States of America and, indeed, to all the nations of the world.”⁴² The dangers posed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were described as “the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War.”⁴³ The American President acknowledged the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf to the West and was alarmed that Soviet forces were in a position to dominate the Indian Ocean and Strait of Hormuz, a danger which granted the Soviets a “strategic position” which posed “a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.”⁴⁴ In response to this new threat to Western security, President Carter drew a line in the sand by stating that any “attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by all means necessary, including military force.”⁴⁵

To reinforce the Carter Doctrine, the United States accelerated deployments of military forces commenced in the wake of the Iranian Revolution. The President called for additional military and economic aid for Pakistan, and drastically increased the United States Navy’s presence in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁶ Additionally, the United States deployed four E-3 AWACS aircraft and three KC-135 tanker aircraft to Saudi Arabia to buttress the Kingdom’s air defense while simultaneously seeking to sell the Saudis additional sophisticated military equipment.⁴⁷

American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East progressed remarkably in the period between the 1949 adoption of the Truman Doctrine, which elevated the notion of containing communism to paramount importance, through NSC 47/2, which transferred the principle of Soviet containment to the Middle East, and on to the Eisenhower Doctrine, which allowed for the possibility of direct American military involvement in

⁴² The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, “State of the Union Address, 1980,” <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml> (accessed May 11, 2006).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, “State of the Union Address, 1980,” <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml> (accessed May 11, 2006).

⁴⁶ Palmer, *Guardians*, 107. American surface ship-days increased from 2612 in 1979 to 6993 in 1980. American carrier-days increased from 153 in 1979 to 836 in 1980.

⁴⁷ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 35 – 36.

the event a Middle East government requested assistance to combat the Communist threat. The Carter Doctrine went one step further by clearly delineating Persian Gulf security as a vital American interest which would be defended by military force, with or without an invitation from a Persian Gulf government. Additionally, the Carter Doctrine marks the commencement of the period of American responsibility for Persian Gulf security in the wake of the 1971 withdrawal of the Royal Navy and the failure of the Nixon-era Twin Pillars strategy.

C. THE U.S. NAVY IN THE PERSIAN GULF: A BRIEF HISTORY

The United States Navy's presence in the Persian Gulf reflected the American belief in the Royal Navy as the sine qua non for Persian Gulf security in the aftermath of the Second World War. The position of the British in the Persian Gulf would erode throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s and 60s, forcing a somewhat reluctant United States to establish a permanent naval presence in the Persian Gulf.

The post-war genesis of American naval involvement in the Persian Gulf can be traced to the January 20, 1948, establishment of Task Force 126. Initially comprised of tankers carrying Gulf oil to fuel other American naval vessels, Task Force 126 was renamed the Middle East Force (MEF) in August 1949.⁴⁸ In 1948 the American naval presence in the Persian Gulf was enhanced by the visit of an aircraft carrier battlegroup. The introduction of this battlegroup served mainly as a "test flight" to determine if the United States Navy could effectively and efficiently operate in the Persian Gulf environment. Additionally, the American task group worked closely with the Royal Navy and utilized British facilities in Bahrain in support of the large naval presence.⁴⁹

By 1951, the American naval posture in the Persian Gulf had stabilized to the small number of combatants assigned to the MEF.⁵⁰ The Middle East Force represented a naval "presence" and could not be considered a plausible deterrent to the Soviet Union or other regional countries; Admiral William J. Crowe, who served as Chairman of the Joint

⁴⁸ Palmer, *Guardians*, 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁰ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 27. Palmer, *Guardians*, 49. MEF consisted of a seaplane tender (flagship) and several destroyers and tankers.

Chiefs of Staff during Operation Earnest Will and commanded the MEF in the mid-1970s, referred to the small American force as a “showing the flag squadron.”⁵¹ The small American force was impacted by the Six Day War of 1967, when Bahrainis staged several demonstrations to protest American support for Israel.

The 1971 withdrawal of the British from the Persian Gulf did not appreciably alter the small size of the Middle East Force. The Americans secured basing rights from Bahrain, which provided the United States Navy with a base of operations for continued activity in the Gulf. Throughout the mid to late 1970s, domestic political concerns lead to the Bahraini government seeking to terminate the U.S. Navy’s presence in the tiny country. Following many months of negotiations, a de facto compromise was reached in which the United States drastically reduced its footprint in Bahrain by removing all American dependents from the island and limiting tours of duty for American servicemen to twelve months. In their efforts to create the perception that the United States was maintaining an extremely small presence in Bahrain the American negotiators even managed to have the tiny kingdom reduce American rent from four to two million dollars a year.⁵²

The American naval presence in the Persian Gulf remained small until the commencement of Operation Earnest Will in 1987.⁵³ As late as spring, 1978, Admiral Crowe considered the threat of regional war to be low and that the internal threat to the Shah was not serious, due to the effectiveness of the Shah’s “security mechanisms.”⁵⁴ The focus of the United States was fixed firmly on the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, faith in Iran as the guarantor of Persian Gulf security would be shattered by the Iranian revolution. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan heightened Washington’s concern over the safety of the Persian Gulf. While the number of vessels deployed in the Persian Gulf remained relatively constant, the United States tripled its presence in the Indian Ocean

⁵¹ William J. Crowe, *The Line of Fire* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 164.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵³ Michael A. Palmer, *On Course to Desert Storm The United States Navy and the Persian Gulf* (Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1992), 97. Henceforth referred to as *On Course*. The United States maintained, on average, between five and seven vessels in the Persian Gulf between 1978 and 1986.

⁵⁴ William J. Crowe, “The Persian Gulf: Central or Peripheral to United States Strategy?,” United States Naval Institute Proceedings 104 (May 1978), 198.

between 1979 and 1980.⁵⁵ By April 1980, the United States had deployed two aircraft carrier battlegroups and a Marine Amphibious Unit to the region, establishing an impressive armada of 37 warships, 22 of which were combatants.⁵⁶ This force was reduced to one carrier battlegroup in October 1981, nine months following the resolution of the Iran Hostage Crisis, but thereafter American involvement continued at a similarly high level throughout the 1980s, reflecting the permanent change that taken place in America's outlook toward the region.

D. CHAPTER SUMMARY

With the announcement of the Carter Doctrine, the United States had clearly articulated the importance of the Persian Gulf to the West and expressed the will of the American people to go to war to ensure the free flow of oil. However, it would be the Iran – Iraq War, and not a Soviet invasion of countries bordering the Persian Gulf, that would provide the impetus for enforcing the Carter Doctrine. While the menace of increased Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf impacted the American decision to invoke the Carter doctrine, the United States would find itself trading shots not with the Soviet Navy, but with Iran.

⁵⁵ Palmer, *On Course*, 97.

⁵⁶ Robert J. Ciarrocchi, *U.S., Soviet, and Western European Naval Forces in the Persian Gulf Region* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 1987), 31 – 32. Henceforth referred to as *Naval Forces*.

III. THE TANKER WAR: 1981 - 1986

A. CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

On September 23, 1980, following a series of air strikes on Iranian airfields, the Iraqi army crossed the border into neighboring Iran, igniting a war that was to last nearly eight years. The Iran – Iraq border had witnessed multiple border skirmishes in the months leading up to the war. Additionally, insurgent groups conducted guerilla operations within Iran and Iraq with the full support and approval of Baghdad and Tehran.⁵⁷ Diplomatic relations had already been severed the previous June. Tensions along the Iran – Iraq border increased throughout the summer, culminating in a major clash at Qasr e-Sharin in early September. Saddam Hussein reacted to the border skirmishes on September 17 declaring that “the frequent Iranian violations of Iraqi sovereignty have rendered the 1975 Algiers agreement null and void.”⁵⁸

The agreement to which Saddam referred was merely the most recent in a series of diplomatic efforts to regulate control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Its governance had been a major source of friction between the two countries for generations, and was a major factor motivating the Iraqi decision to strike Iran. A treaty concluded between the two nations in 1937 identified the low water mark on the eastern (Iranian) side of the waterway as the international border, effectively ceding control of the Shatt al-Arab to Iraq.⁵⁹ Henceforth, vessels transiting the Shatt al-Arab were required to embark Iraqi pilots and fly the Iraqi flag. In April 1969, however, Mohammed Reza Shah had abrogated the 1937 treaty and refused to pay the toll required for vessels transiting the waterway. Iraq responded by threatening to block Iranian access to the Shatt al-Arab. Tensions increased on April 24, 1969, when Tehran provided naval escort to an Iranian merchant vessel navigating the disputed waterway. Iranian support for Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq exacerbated the delicate situation. Open combat erupted during the winter of 1973 – 1974.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 29.

⁵⁸ Efraim Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

In an effort to avoid further hostilities, Iran and Iraq concluded the Algiers Agreement in March 1975. The agreement set the border between the two countries at the center of the Shatt al-Arab, ceding control of 50 percent of the vital waterway to Iran and imperiling Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf. Iranian control over half of the waterway threatened merchant traffic trading with the Iraqi port of Basra, Iraq's principal dry cargo port located 60 kilometers from the mouth of the Shatt.⁶¹ Regaining complete control over the Shatt al-Arab waterway was an important strategic objective which helped push Saddam Hussein towards war with Iran.⁶²

On September 22, 1980, Iraqi aircraft ineffectively attacked six Iranian air bases and four army installations.⁶³ These attacks were followed a day later by a four-pronged six-division ground invasion of Iran along a 400 mile front. By September 28, Iraqi forces had secured Ahvaz in southwest Iran and announced its readiness to accept a ceasefire, an announcement which was repeated on October 5. By October 24, Iraq had largely succeeded in achieving its territorial objectives and by December, Saddam Hussein announced that Iraq did not intend to pursue further large-scale offensive actions.⁶⁴

The war rapidly spilled over into the Persian Gulf. Iran declared its coastal waterways a war zone, established new shipping lanes and identification procedures for vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz, and instituted a blockade of Iraqi ports on September 22.⁶⁵ Iraq responded on October 7 by declaring the area of the Gulf north of latitude 29 degrees 30 minutes a "prohibited war zone." Maritime traffic along the disputed Shatt al Arab waterway ground to a halt, trapping at least 83 merchant vessels in the zone of hostilities.⁶⁶ On December 24, 1980, Iraqi aircraft struck the main Iranian oil export terminal at Kharg Island.

⁶¹ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 14.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 21. Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 31.

⁶³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 81 – 84.

⁶⁴ Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 30.

⁶⁵ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 33 – 35. U.N. Efforts to secure a ceasefire to enable these vessels to escape the zone of hostilities proved unsuccessful. The war halted dredging efforts along the Shatt, causing the waterway to become unnavigable by early 1981. These vessels remained trapped for the duration of the war.

B. IRAQI OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY

Baghdad viewed the Iran – Iraq conflict as a “limited war.” Saddam Hussein did not intend to conquer Iran. Iraq embarked on the war in order to secure limited territorial and political objectives. Saddam feared the spread of the Iranian Revolution into Iraq and was suspicious of Tehran’s support of subversive elements directed at the overthrow of the Baathist regime.⁶⁷ A successful invasion of Iran offered the potential of removing this threat to the Iraqi government. Saddam also coveted the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan, and falsely hoped an invasion would result in a rebellion against Tehran by the province’s Arab minority.⁶⁸ Finally, Saddam sought to reestablish Iraqi control over the Shatt al-Arab waterway and secure areas in the vicinity of Qasr e-Sharin that the 1975 Algiers Accord had ceded to Iraq.⁶⁹ The invasion was timed to take advantage of the poor condition of the Iranian military, which had been weakened by revolutionary purges. Saddam believed that a quick offensive aimed at limited territorial goals would pressure Tehran to seek a ceasefire. Unfortunately, Saddam Hussein miscalculated. Tehran viewed the conflict in far less limited terms and, as a result, would fight the war with a ferocity born of religious zeal aimed at the overthrow of the Iranian dictator.

C. IRANIAN OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY

Revolutionary regimes thrive on war, and Iran’s was no exception. Viewing the conflict as the “Imposed War,” Tehran considered the conflict from a vastly different perspective than Saddam Hussein. For Iran, the conflict was less a war over territory and control of the Shatt al Arab waterway than a standoff between “absolute good and absolute evil.”⁷⁰ While, to an extent, territory did matter, in that the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Persian territory was an important objective, Tehran also sought to topple Iraq’s Baathist regime and further the spread of the Iranian Revolution. The religious significance of the war for Iran explains Tehran’s view of the conflict as an “unlimited war.”

⁶⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 31.

⁶⁸ Efraim Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 27.

⁶⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 31.

⁷⁰ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), 131.

Ayatollah Khomeini defined the war as a battle between good and evil: “You are fighting to protect Islam and he is fighting to destroy Islam. There is absolutely no question of peace or compromise.”⁷¹ The Iranians viewed their participation in the conflict as a defense of Islam; thus, compromise with the Iraqi “usurpers” was out of the question.⁷² Framing the war in religious-based absolutes raised the stakes of the conflict for Iran, transforming it into an unlimited war requiring Iraqi “unconditional surrender,” making a negotiated settlement to the war an impossibility until 1988. Tehran’s hard-line stance effectively painted Iran into a corner from which the war had to be fought until victory, i.e. the overthrow of the Iraqi Baathist regime and the extension of the Islamic revolution into Iraq, was achieved.

D. WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF: 1981 – 1986

By the autumn of 1981, the ground war had started to turn against Iraq. Iranian offensives pushed the Iraqi army out of many of the areas conquered in the 1980 invasion, prompting Saddam Hussein to announce on April 22, 1982, that he would withdraw his forces from Iranian territory if Tehran would agree to a ceasefire.⁷³ Saddam repeated this announcement in June 1982, following the successful Iranian recapture of Khuzestan. All calls for a ceasefire were dismissed by Tehran. By July, the Iranian army had commenced offensive operations aimed at Basra. Iran would remain on the offensive throughout 1983, embarking on many operations, largely unsuccessful, aimed at seizing Iraqi territory.

1. Sporadic Attacks: 1981 – 1983

The war in the Persian Gulf remained a rather small, one sided affair throughout the first 30 months of hostilities. In 1981, Iraq conducted five attacks against shipping, resulting in three vessels being sunk and one declared a constructive total loss (CTL).⁷⁴ These initial Iraqi efforts were primarily directed against vessels in the port of Bandar-e Khomeini in northwest Iran. In 1982, Iraq conducted 21 attacks resulting in five vessels

⁷¹ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 38.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷³ Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 10.

⁷⁴ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 48.

being sunk and five being declared CTLs.⁷⁵ In April 1982, following Iran's success in pressuring Syria to close off pipelines transferring Iraqi oil to Mediterranean ports for export, Iraq focused its anti-ship efforts against traffic calling on the main Iranian oil export terminal at Kharg Island. This action was reinforced by the August 12, 1982, announcement of an exclusion zone surrounding Kharg Island. Iraq's objective was to intimidate foreign ship owners from transporting Iranian oil.⁷⁶ On May 30, the Turkish-flagged tanker *Atlas I* was struck by an Iraqi bomb, becoming the first tanker damaged in the war.⁷⁷ Iran responded by deploying surface to air missile-equipped ships to the area and by providing armed escort for tanker shipping.

Iraqi anti-shipping efforts cooled somewhat in 1983, conducting 13 attacks, all by helicopters.⁷⁸ The Iraqi attacks sunk three vessels and resulted in six being declared CTLs. The low numbers of Iraqi attacks, possibly the result of shortages in missiles or available aircraft, were reinforced by false claims of vessels damaged to dissuade shippers from transporting Iranian oil. Iranian oil exports did not suffer greatly from the Iraqi attacks. Iranian oil exports during the period actually expanded from .715 million barrels per day (MPD) in 1981 to 1.72 million MPD in 1983.⁷⁹

2. The Tanker War: 1984

By the beginning of 1984, the ground war had devolved into a bloody stalemate that appeared endless. In an attempt to break the stalemate Iraq drastically expanded its anti-shipping campaign in the Persian Gulf. In 1984, Iraqi aircraft struck 58 merchant vessels resulting in six sinkings and 28 ships being declared CTLs, a fourfold increase in attacks from the previous year.⁸⁰ In late April, Iraqi anti-ship capabilities were enhanced with the introduction of the Dassault Super Entendard attack aircraft, five of which were

⁷⁵ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 55.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁹ OPEC, *OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2004*, <http://www.opec.org/library/Annual%20Statistical%20Bulletin/pdf/ASB2004.pdf> (accessed April 11, 2007), 32.

⁸⁰ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 74 – 75.

on loan from France.⁸¹ Armed with the French-built Exocet missile, the Super Entendard improved Iraqi capability to strike targets at greater ranges. Iraqi objectives in intensifying its anti-shipping campaign centered on severing Iran's primary war-supporting economic lifeline: the Gulf oil trade. A secondary objective was to use the attacks to goad Iran into expanding the war by deciding to attack shipping trading with neutral Gulf states. Such a scenario offered the possibility of western intervention against Iran.⁸²

Iran commenced its campaign against Persian Gulf shipping with an attack on the Kuwaiti Tanker *Umm Casbah* on May 13, 1984. The severing of Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf at the start of the war coupled with the relative invulnerability of oil pipelines transporting Iraqi oil to ports in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan forced Iran to target vessels calling on Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. During 1984, Iran conducted 19 attacks resulting in one vessel being sunk and two declared CTLs.⁸³ Nearly all the attacks were directed against vessels trading with Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, Kuwaiti-owned vessels being victimized four times. Additionally, the Iranian navy stepped up its boardings of neutral vessels in the Strait of Hormuz in search of contraband cargos destined for Iraq. By targeting Iraq's allies, Iran hoped to impose a price on Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the other GCC countries that would punish them for their support of Iraq and persuade them to pressure Saddam Hussein to curtail Iraqi attacks on Iranian shipping.⁸⁴

The Gulf Cooperation Council, alarmed by the implementation of the Iranian tanker war strategy, appealed to the United Nations Security Council. UN Security Council Resolution 552, passed on June 1, 1984, condemned "the recent attacks on commercial shipping to and from Saudi Arabia" and demanded that "such attacks should

⁸¹ Jane's Publishing Co. Ltd, *Jane's All The World's Aircraft 1982 – 83* (London: Jane's Publishing Co. Ltd, 1982), 53. The Dassault Super Entendard had a maximum speed of Mach 1.3 and a combat radius of 270 nautical miles. It could carry one AM-39 Exocet missile. The Exocet missile had a range of 26 to 37 nautical miles.

⁸² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 170 – 171.

⁸³ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 83. These attacks resulted in one vessel being sunk and two being declared CTLs. Four of these attacks targeted Kuwaiti-flagged vessels, none of which were sunk or declared CTL. One attack damaged a Saudi-flagged vessel.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

cease forthwith.”⁸⁵ The United States supported resolution 552 and condemned the Iranian escalation. Simultaneously, the United States was becoming increasingly concerned with the war’s threat to Western oil supplies and to the stability of moderate Arab regimes.⁸⁶

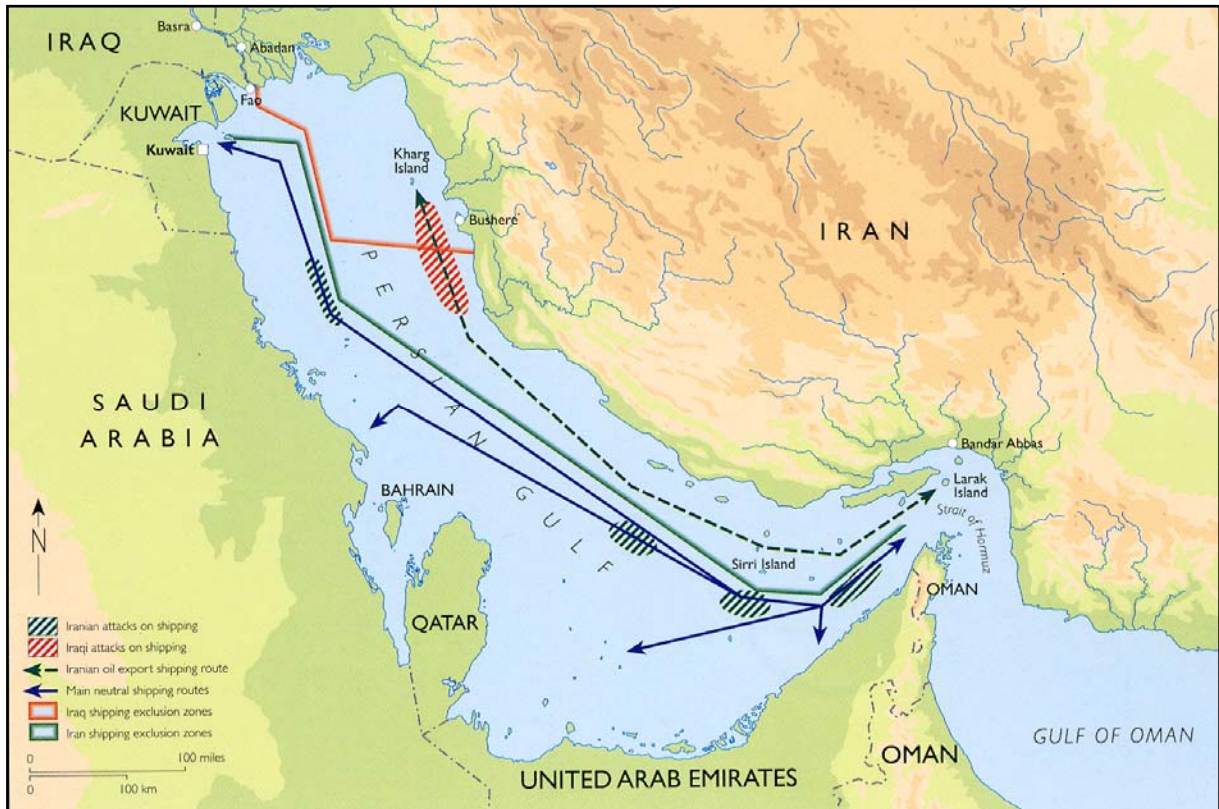


Figure 1. Persian Gulf Shipping Routes and Maritime Exclusion Zones (From: Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*)⁸⁷

3. Neutrals Under Attack: 1985 – 1986

The Tanker War was fought somewhat sporadically in 1985. Iraq conducted 33 attacks resulting in two sinkings and 11 vessels being declared CTLs.⁸⁸ The Iranian air force conducted 17 attacks, two of which targeted Kuwaiti-flagged vessels, resulting in a Panamanian container ship being declared a CTL.⁸⁹ As was the case in 1984, the

⁸⁵ UNSCR of June 1, 1984. Available at <http://www.un.org/documents> (accessed May 16, 2006).

⁸⁶ Palmer, *Guardians*, 119.

⁸⁷ Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 54.

⁸⁸ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 107.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

majority of Iranian attacks were directed against vessels trading with Kuwaiti ports. These attacks were supplemented by increased Iranian search and seizure activity in the Strait of Hormuz, primarily targeted against vessels trading with Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. Several cargos were confiscated by the Iranians and a 23,618 DWT Kuwaiti dry cargo vessel, the *Ibn al Beitar*, was actually seized by the Iranian navy.⁹⁰

The war in the Persian Gulf exploded in 1986, chiefly owing to events in the land war, in which Iran's natural superiority, if only in the production of cannon fodder, was beginning to tell. In late February Iranian army units concluded the successful capture of the Fao peninsula, and in mid-March commenced operations, ultimately unsuccessful, aimed at the capture of Basra. Faced with a deteriorating situation on the ground, Iraq reinvigorated its efforts against Persian Gulf shipping, conducting 62 successful attacks resulting in four sinkings and 18 vessels being declared CTLs.⁹¹ Iran promptly responded in kind, conducting 41 successful attacks, a nearly threefold increase over the previous year.⁹² No vessels were sunk, but six were declared CTLs. Two Kuwaiti and six Saudi vessels were struck by the Iranians in 1986. Alarming for the GCC countries, nearly all the vessels targeted by Iran during 1986 were trading with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman or the UAE.

E. ASSESSMENT OF IRAQI ATTACKS

Iraq depended almost entirely on aircraft to conduct its attacks against merchant shipping throughout the Tanker War.⁹³ Initially, Iraq's weapons of choice were helicopters firing Exocet missiles. This combination was responsible for 82 percent of all attacks between 1981 and 1983. The delivery of five French-built Super Entendard aircraft allowed Iraq to strike deeper into the Gulf. The Super Entendards drew first blood on March 27, 1984, sinking the South Korean tug *Heyang Ilho* and damaging the Saudi-flagged tanker *Safina al Arab*.⁹⁴ Exocet-firing Super Entendards conducted the

⁹⁰ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 111.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 116 - 117.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 118-119.

⁹³ The Iraqi air force was responsible for 94% of all Iraqi attacks on merchant shipping between 1981 and 1983.

⁹⁴ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 74.

majority of Iraqi shipping attacks until they were supplanted by another French-built strike aircraft, the Mirage F-1EQ, in July, 1985.⁹⁵ Between the introduction of the Super Entendard in March 1984, and the end of the war in July 1988, fixed wing aircraft were responsible for 89 percent of Iraqi anti-ship attacks.

Iraq declared the area north of 29 degrees 30 minutes north latitude a “prohibited war zone” on October 1980. Additionally, a maritime exclusion zone around the main Iranian oil export terminal at Kharg Island was declared in August 1982. While Baghdad insisted that these exclusion zones were designed to “cope with the difficulties in distinguishing between the nationalities of vessels in the Persian Gulf,” in reality no effort was made to accurately determine the nationality of the vessels which were attacked.⁹⁶ In reality, the Iraqi exclusion zones acquired the character of a free-fire zone, in which any and all vessels were potential targets, an environment that was well suited to the Exocet missile, with its long range and fire-and-forget capability.⁹⁷ The dangers of Iraqi carelessness in identifying targets coupled with the long-range capability of the Mirage F-1EQ/Exocet missile system were made clear to the United States with the May 17, 1987, attack on USS *Stark* (FFG-31).

Iraqi efforts to undermine Iranian oil exports were only marginally effective. The Iranian oil industry had been crippled by the Iranian Revolution, but by 1983, the year before the Iraqis commenced the Tanker War, Iranian crude oil exports had recovered to approximately 1.71 million barrels of crude oil a day (MPD).⁹⁸ The level of exports dropped to 1.45 MPD by 1986, but in 1987, when Iraqi attacks reached their highest total (90), Iranian oil exports rebounded to 1.71 MPD. More damaging to Iran was the 42%

⁹⁵ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 106. The Mirage F-1EQ was capable of Mach 2.2, had a combat radius of 750 nautical miles, and could carry one AM-39 Exocet. See Jane’s Publishing Co. Ltd, *Jane’s All The World’s Aircraft 1986 – 87* (London: Jane’s Publishing Co. Ltd, 1986), 65.

⁹⁶ DeGuttry and Ronzitti, *Law of Naval Warfare*, 73.

⁹⁷ Politakis, *Maritime Neutrality*, 92.

⁹⁸ OPEC, *OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2004*, 32.

drop in crude oil prices between 1986 and 1987.⁹⁹ The Iraqis simply lacked the capability to substantially reduce Iranian oil exports. The best Saddam Hussein could hope for was mere harassment.¹⁰⁰

1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	Total
5	21	13	58	33	62	192

Table 1. Iraqi Attacks on Merchant Shipping, 1981 – 1986 (From: Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping During the Iran – Iraq Crisis 1980 – 1988*)¹⁰¹

The Iraqi Tanker War strategy succeeded, however, in bringing about Western intervention in the Iran – Iraq War. Iranian attacks on neutral vessels, in particular vessels trading with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, unleashed a torrent of criticism from Western nations on Tehran. By the end of 1986, Kuwaiti-owned vessels had been the victims of eight of Iran’s 77 successful attacks, prompting the Emirate to approach the United States on December 10, 1986, to seek the possibility of its ships obtaining protection from Iran under the guns of the United States Navy.

F. ASSESSMENT OF IRANIAN ATTACKS

Iran depended almost entirely on fixed wing aircraft to carry out its initial strikes on shipping in 1984 and 1985; Iranian jets were responsible for 31 of 36 attacks during this period. Iranian helicopters spearheaded an energized Iranian anti-shipping campaign in 1986, conducting 28 of 41 attacks. Hampered by a lack of spare parts, and vitally needed for operations ashore, Iranian air attacks on neutral shipping slowed and the Iranian navy shouldered more of the anti-ship load in September 1986. Between September 1986 and March 1987, Iranian Vosper class frigates firing Sea Killer anti-ship missiles conducted 12 of 20 attacks, sinking a Singapore-flagged tug on March 28, 1987.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ U.S. Department of Energy, “Crude Oil Prices By Selected Type, 1970 – 2006,” <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/aer/txt/ptb1107.html> (accessed April 12, 2007). Prices for Iranian Light Crude dropped from \$28.05 dollars per barrel in 1986 to \$16.14 dollars per barrel in 1987.

¹⁰⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 173.

¹⁰¹ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 48, 55, 57, 74 – 75, 107, 116 – 117, 133 – 135, 166- 167.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 136. The Sea Killer missile had a range of 13.5 nautical miles. See Jane’s Publishing Co. Ltd, *Jane’s Weapons Systems 1982 – 83* (London: Jane’s Publishing Co. Ltd, 1982), 53.

Iranian attacks on neutral shipping were supplemented by increased boardings of merchant vessels in the Strait of Hormuz. The Kuwaiti-flagged containerships *Al Muharraq* and *Al Wattyah* were seized by Iran in June and September 1985, respectively.¹⁰³ In January 1986, West German and British vessels were boarded and searched by the Iranian navy. On January 12, 1986, the American-flagged cargo vessel *President Taylor* was stopped and boarded while in the Gulf of Oman en route to Al Fujayrah, UAE with a load of cotton. While the vessel was released by Iran, the United States expressed concern that these incidents carried the danger of “misunderstandings, overstepping of rights and norms, and even violence.”¹⁰⁴ A similar event was averted in May, when the destroyer *David R. Ray* prevented an Iranian frigate from boarding the American merchant vessel *President McKinley*.¹⁰⁵ The following September, the brief detention of two Soviet merchant vessels by Iran prompted Moscow to dispatch an additional warship to the Persian Gulf.

1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	Total
0	0	0	19	17	41	77

Table 2. Iranian Attacks on Merchant Shipping, 1981 – 1986 (From: Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping During the Iran – Iraq Crisis 1980 – 1988*)¹⁰⁶

In April 1987, responsibility for Iranian anti-ship attacks shifted from the regular Iranian navy to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard, also known as the Pasdaran, formally inaugurated its Navy in 1987, although it had been operating surreptitiously in the Gulf since 1982.¹⁰⁷ Motivated by religious zeal and anti-U.S. rhetoric, the Pasdaran utilized Boghammer speedboats armed with machine guns and rocket propelled grenades (RPG) to harass merchant shipping. While insufficient to sink a large ship, these weapons were more than capable of killing and injuring merchant seamen. The first attack credited to the Pasdaran occurred on October 22, 1986, against

¹⁰³ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 109.

¹⁰⁴ DeGuttry and Ronzitti, *Law of Naval Warfare*, 146.

¹⁰⁵ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 123.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 83, 110, 118 – 119, 136 – 138, 172 – 173.

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth Katzman, *Warriors of Islam Iran’s Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 90. Henceforth referred to as *Warriors*.

the Kuwaiti tanker *Al Faiha*. Between April 1987 and the Iranian acceptance of a ceasefire in July 1988, the Pasdaran were responsible for 82 percent of Iranian attacks on shipping.¹⁰⁸

Tehran's war effort would have been better served by Iran remaining out of the Tanker War. The Iranian strategy of inducing GCC pressure on Saddam Hussein to halt Iraqi attacks on Iranian shipping was a complete failure. GCC countries either refrained from pressuring Iraq to halt its anti-shipping campaign or Saddam Hussein refused to listen. By attacking neutral vessels, Tehran played directly into Iraqi hands: the Iranian attacks caused Kuwait to look towards the United States for protection while simultaneously giving birth to an increased Western naval presence in the Gulf, as Great Britain, West Germany and France dispatched warships to the Persian Gulf to protect their respective merchant shipping.

G. THE U.S. AND THE TANKER WAR

Carter Administration reaction to the September 23, 1980, commencement of the Iran – Iraq War focused on the conflict's potential dangers to Persian Gulf oil shipments. Speaking to reporters on September 24, President Carter acknowledged the “threat to the economic health of all nations” posed by a suspension of tanker traffic through the Persian Gulf and emphasized that it was “imperative that there be no infringement of that freedom of passage of ships to and from” this vital region.¹⁰⁹ Three weeks later Secretary of State Muskie asserted that the United States would “do what is necessary to protect free shipping in the Strait of Hormuz from any interference.”¹¹⁰

The importance of the Middle East to the United States was not diminished by the inauguration of President Reagan in January 1981. The focus of the new Administration remained fixed on the prevention of Soviet expansion into the Persian Gulf region. To this end, the Reagan Administration pushed to sell Saudi Arabia F-15 fighters and E-3 AWACS aircraft. In October 1981, President Reagan expanded America's commitment

¹⁰⁸ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 136 - 138 and 172 - 173. The Pasdaran conducted 108 of 131 total attacks during this period.

¹⁰⁹ Palmer, *Guardians*, 109.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

to Saudi Arabia by announcing that the United States would not allow an Iranian-style revolution to topple the ruling regime. With this announcement, known as the Reagan Corollary to the Carter Doctrine, the American protective umbrella over the Persian Gulf was broadened to include internal as well as external threats to the Persian Gulf region. American commitment to Persian Gulf security was further reinforced with the creation of Central Command in 1983.

United States Navy presence in the Persian Gulf was not significantly impacted by the Iran – Iraq War. The small size of the MEF (four ships) was merely augmented by the presence of an aircraft carrier battlegroup in the Indian Ocean. As late as 1986, events in the Mediterranean and in Central America reduced aircraft carrier presence in the Indian Ocean to approximately six months out of the year.¹¹¹ The small size of the United States naval presence in the Gulf coupled with the relatively low number of ship attacks helped ensure the safety of the Middle East Force throughout the first three years of the war.

The 1984 commencement of Iran’s anti-shipping campaign brought about the first direct U.S. military involvement in the Iran – Iraq war. In response to Iranian attacks on shipping in its territorial waters, Saudi Arabia announced the creation of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) which extended far out into the Persian Gulf and came to be known as the “Fahd Line.” United States Air Force E-3 AWACS aircraft and KC-135 tankers supported Saudi F-15 fighters patrolling this line. On June 5, 1984, an Iranian F-4 Phantom fighter was destroyed by a Saudi F-15 under the direction of the American AWACS.

While the beginning of the Tanker War did not dramatically alter the size of the small U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf, American defensive measures were altered in January 1984, through the issuance of a Notice to Airmen and Mariners (NOTAM). The January 1984 NOTAM advised that U.S. naval forces “operating in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman are taking increased defensive precautions against terrorist threats.”¹¹² Aircraft operating at altitudes of 2000 feet or less were

¹¹¹ Ciarrocchi, *Naval Forces*, 32.

¹¹² De Guttry and Ronzitti, *Law of Naval Warfare*, 137.

instructed to approach U.S. naval vessels no closer than five miles. Aircraft passing within five miles of an American warship at an altitude of less than 2000 feet were required to establish radio contact or “be held at risk to U.S. defensive measures.”¹¹³ A second NOTAM issued in 1986 warned that surface and subsurface vessels passing closer than five nautical miles of American warships that failed to radio their intentions would likewise be subject to U.S. defensive measures.¹¹⁴ The January 1986 boarding of *President Taylor* by Iran prompted the MEF to be augmented by an additional frigate, USS *Jack Williams* (FFG-24).¹¹⁵ Thus, even as the Iran-Iraq war entering a new and more intense phase in 1986, American naval presence and posture in the Gulf was becoming correspondingly more guarded, in response to local concerns about the security of U.S. vessels operating there.

H. CHAPTER SUMMARY

By the end of 1986, Iran and Iraq had combined to strike 269 vessels resulting in 21 vessels being sunk and 78 being declared CTLs.¹¹⁶ This number, while substantial, represented less than one percent of all shipping transiting the Persian Gulf.¹¹⁷ Western access to Persian Gulf oil had not been seriously threatened and the price of a barrel of crude oil remained remarkably constant during this period.¹¹⁸ The primary effect of the Tanker War was that it would serve as a catalyst for Western, primarily American, intervention in the Iran – Iraq War. In December 1986 the Kuwaiti government approached the United States seeking protection for its tanker fleet from Iranian attacks. In 1987 the United States agreed to the Kuwaiti request as a means of realizing a myriad

¹¹³ De Guttry and Ronzitti, *Law of Naval Warfare*, 137.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹⁵ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 63.

¹¹⁶ Iraqi attacks resulted in 20 vessels being sunk and 69 being declared CTLs. Iranian attacks resulted in one vessel being sunk and nine being declared CTLs. No Kuwaiti-flagged vessels were sunk during this period.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *U.S. Military To Protect “Re-Flagged” Kuwaiti Oil Tankers*. (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1987), 87.

¹¹⁸ U.S. Department of Energy, “Crude Oil Prices By Selected Type, 1970 – 2006,” <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/aer/txt/ptb1107.html> (accessed April 12, 2007). Prices for Saudi Light Crude actually dropped from \$34 USD to \$28 USD between 1983 and 1986, the period during which the tanker heated up.

of strategic, political and economic objectives. Meeting these objectives required the United States to embark on a policy of gunboat diplomacy directed squarely at Tehran.

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IV. OPERATION EARNEST WILL: AMERICAN OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY

A. CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

The increased susceptibility of Kuwaiti shipping to Iranian attack was a cause of great concern for Kuwait in the summer of 1986.¹¹⁹ The subject of Soviet or American naval protection for Kuwaiti shipping was broached at a November meeting of the GCC, which urged the Emirate to appeal to the United States.¹²⁰ On December 10, 1986, the Kuwait Oil Tanker Company (KOTC) approached the United States Coast Guard to ascertain the requirements to register several of its vessels under the American flag. The request was not in itself unusual, the Coast Guard having received approximately 50 such requests in the several years prior to the Kuwaiti inquiry.¹²¹

The United States Embassy was officially informed of the Kuwaiti request on December 23. On December 25, the same day the Coast Guard responded to the initial KOTC inquiry, the State Department sent a rather lukewarm reply to the Kuwaiti request. On January 13 the KOTC presented a formal inquiry to the U.S. Embassy, inquiring if Kuwaiti-owned vessels registered under the U.S. flag would be eligible for United States Navy protection. The United States government learned at this time that the Kuwaitis were making identical inquiries to the Soviet Union.¹²² On January 29, Kuwait was informed that reflagging was permissible if all legal requirements were met.¹²³ The Kuwaitis were informed on February 6 that reflagged vessels would be eligible for U.S. Navy protection.

In late February, the Reagan Administration was informed that Kuwait intended to register six vessels under the American flag and five under the Soviet flag. The Kuwaiti government had approached the Soviets in an effort to avoid becoming overly

¹¹⁹ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 67.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *U.S. Military To Protect "Re-Flagged" Kuwaiti Oil Tankers*. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), 89.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Caspar W. Weinberger, *A Report to Congress on Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf*, June 15, 1987, Table 1. Henceforth referred to as *Persian Gulf*.

dependent on one superpower.¹²⁴ Kuwait's simultaneous approach to both superpowers was in keeping with the Emirate's long standing policy of "keeping both countries at arm's length, but yet not too far as to alienate a potential ally."¹²⁵ Kuwaiti predisposition to play the superpowers off each other resembled the Emirate's policies vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq. Kuwait provided monetary grants to Saddam Hussein, opened its ports to Iraqi weapons shipments, and assisted in exporting Iraqi oil while simultaneously maintaining relations with Iran. From the Kuwaiti perspective, the ideal outcome of the war would witness a return to the prewar status quo ante in which neither Iran nor Iraq was in a position to dominate the entire Persian Gulf.¹²⁶

The possibility of increased Soviet presence in the Gulf prompted Secretary of Defense Weinberger on March 7 to offer protection "to Kuwait's vessels whether or not Kuwait sought to register them under the U.S. flag."¹²⁷ The American offer was incumbent on Kuwait halting its efforts to reflag several of its vessels under the hammer and sickle. Kuwait accepted the American offer on March 9. However, Kuwait remained determined to continue its relationship with the Soviet Union, agreeing to charter three Russian tankers to transport Kuwaiti oil.¹²⁸

B. THE USS STARK INCIDENT

The United States Navy had had little direct involvement in the war in the Persian Gulf during the first six years of the Iran – Iraq War, and lacked a clear mission explaining its presence in the middle of a war zone. Often standing helplessly by as neutral vessels were attacked by Iranian forces, the American presence in the Persian Gulf was nevertheless described by Secretary of Defense Weinberger as representing "immediately and directly, America's commitment to stability in the region and our deep concern over the threat to that stability posed by the senseless Iran – Iraq War...Our ships

¹²⁴ Barry Rubin, "Drowning in the Gulf," *Foreign Policy* no. 69, available from <http://links.jstor.org> (accessed March 14, 2006).

¹²⁵ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 68.

¹²⁶ Karsh, ed., *The Iran – Iraq War*, 127.

¹²⁷ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 85.

¹²⁸ One of these vessels, the tanker *Marshal Chuykov*, was damaged by an Iranian mine on May 16, 1987.

are not there as referees or dispassionate observers.”¹²⁹ The danger of this ambiguous naval presence was made clear on May 17, 1987, by the Iraqi attack on USS *Stark*.

USS *Stark* (FFG-31), under the command of Captain Glenn Brindel, departed from her homeport in Mayport, Florida on February 5, 1987. *Stark*'s departure marked the culmination of months of training in preparation for deployment. Coincident with training evolutions and combat drills, the crew of *Stark* received briefings in December 1986 by CENTCOM staff members describing the Persian Gulf operating environment. The threat of mistaken attacks by Iraqi pilots firing Exocet missiles at maximum range was discussed as the most serious threat Captain Brindel and his crew would encounter in the Gulf.¹³⁰ Brindel was instructed to remain vigilant whenever Iraqi jets were detected over the Persian Gulf and that he should not hesitate to lock onto Iraqi aircraft with *Stark*'s fire control radar, “as that appeared to be the only way to get the (Iraqi) pilot's attention.”¹³¹

The crew of USS *Stark* received a second briefing from officers of the Middle East Force staff on February, 28, 1987, while at anchor in Djibouti. The briefing discussed the Rules of Engagement under which *Stark* would operate and provided a general overview of the Tanker War.¹³² Like the CENTCOM briefer three months before, the Middle East Force intelligence officer “highlighted that the probability of deliberate attack on U.S. forces was low, but that an indiscriminate attack in the Persian Gulf was a significant danger.”¹³³ Additionally, Captain Brindel met informally with the Middle East Force Commander, Rear Admiral Harold J. Bernsen, on at least three occasions to discuss the rules of engagement and *Stark*'s readiness. Bernsen again emphasized the threat of inadvertent attack.¹³⁴ The two officers met for a final time on May 15 and 16. Bernsen emphasized that the Iraqis had commenced attacks on shipping

¹²⁹ Jeffrey L. Levinson and Randy L. Edwards, *Missile Inbound* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 4.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 97. Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 12.

¹³³ Grant Sharp, *Investigation Report: Formal Investigation Into the Circumstances Surrounding the Attack on USS Stark (FFG-31) on 17 May 1987* (Washington: Department of Defense, 1987), 6. Henceforth referred to as *Stark Report*.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

south of the “prohibited war zone” established in October, 1981. Bernsen instructed Brindel to inform his crew of this change in Iraqi attack profiles, as an attack on May 14 had occurred in close proximity to where *Stark* would soon be operating.¹³⁵

Prior experience demonstrated that the United States had reason to be concerned with the possibility of inadvertent Iraqi attacks on American warships. In January 1985 USS *John Hancock* (DD-981) may have been the target of an Iraqi Exocet missile. The Exocet struck the Singapore-flagged tug *Ribut*, which was situated between the Iraqi aircraft and the American destroyer.¹³⁶ Disaster nearly struck a second time on May 14, 1987, three days prior to the *Stark* incident. Another American destroyer, USS *Coontz* (DDG-40), was required to warn off an Iraqi F-1 strike aircraft via radio. The Iraqi jet went on to attack a Panamanian or Liberian flag tanker.¹³⁷

On the evening of May 17, 1987, USS *Stark* was conducting a routine patrol outside of the Iranian exclusion zone in an area of the Persian Gulf designated Radar Picket Station (RPS) South. This position placed *Stark* close to the center of the Persian Gulf, approximately 50 miles north northeast of Qatar. At 1955, an American AWACS aircraft, call sign “Rainbow,” detected an Iraqi F-1 strike aircraft heading south from an air base near Basra.¹³⁸ Rainbow alerted all naval vessels of the Iraqi aircraft’s presence via data link.

Stark was operating under the ROE established in January 1984, which warned that unidentified aircraft approaching U.S. warships within five nautical miles at altitudes of less than 2000 feet would be “held at risk by U.S. defensive measures.”¹³⁹ Instructions issued by the Commander, Middle East Force (CMEF) in October 1985 authorized U.S. warships to defend themselves if an aircraft demonstrated hostile action or intent.¹⁴⁰ Prior to taking unidentified aircraft under fire, commanding officers were

¹³⁵ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 97 – 98.

¹³⁶ Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 111.

¹³⁷ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 148.

¹³⁸ Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 70.

¹³⁹ De Guttry and Ronziti, *Law of Naval Warfare*, 137. Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 51.

¹⁴⁰ Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 51 – 52.

instructed to make every effort to identify their vessels as an American warship, including radio calls, fire control radar lock-on, and warning shots.¹⁴¹

Captain Brindel was informed of the Iraqi aircraft at 2015. Brindel was preoccupied with preparations for *Stark*'s upcoming engineering evaluation and merely instructed his Tactical Action Officer (TAO) to watch the track closely in light of the recent Iraqi attacks in the southern Gulf.¹⁴² At approximately 2058, *Stark* gained radar contact on the Iraqi F-1.¹⁴³ At about the same time, Rainbow observed the F-1 make a course change towards the American frigate, establishing a closest point of approach of 11 miles.¹⁴⁴ At 2105, at a range of 32.5 miles, the Iraqi aircraft turned directly towards the American frigate. Two minutes later the Iraqi F-1 launched an Exocet missile at USS *Stark* from a range of 22.5 nautical miles.¹⁴⁵ A second Exocet was fired one minute later. The crew of USS *Stark* remained unaware that two missiles had been fired at them and was fixated on obtaining data for CMEF-mandated contact reports. No weapons or countermeasures systems were made ready to defend against attack.

Crewmen standing duty inside *Stark*'s Combat Information Center (CIC) did not adequately appreciate the threat posed by the Iraqi F-1, and may not have fully understood the capabilities of the vessels weapons and sensor systems. Radio warnings to the Iraqi aircraft were not issued until the aircraft was approximately 15.5 nautical miles away, about the same time the second Exocet was fired, and no effort was made to lock on to the F-1 until it was too late.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, no surface-to-air missile was made ready, nor was *Stark*'s close-in weapons system (CIWS), designed as a last-ditch defense against anti-ship missiles such as Exocet, made ready to defend the ship. *Stark*'s Tactical Action Officer (TAO) later testified that he decided against activating the CIWS due to fears of shooting the Iraqi aircraft down. This was an impossibility, as the Iraqi jet never approached within ten miles of *Stark*, well outside the CIWS maximum range of

¹⁴¹Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 51 – 52.

¹⁴² Sharp, *Stark Report*, 10.

¹⁴³ Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 72.

¹⁴⁴ Sharp, *Stark Report*, 10.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

1500 yards.¹⁴⁷ Stark’s CIC simply failed to see the Iraqi F-1 as a threat, the ship’s Executive Officer later testifying “Until we were hit, I did not perceive any danger.”¹⁴⁸

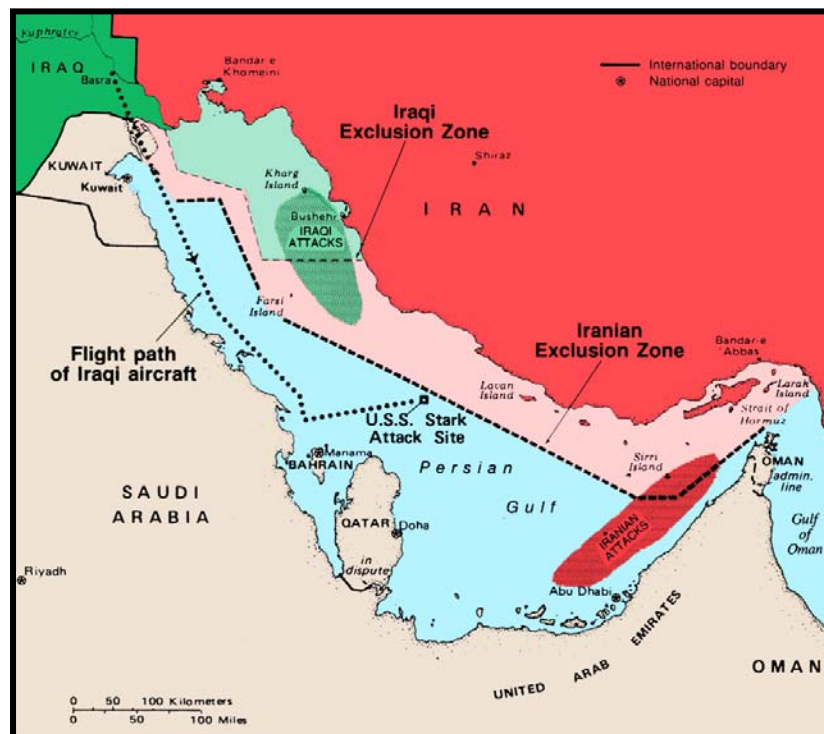


Figure 2. USS *Stark* Incident (From: United States Department of State, U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf)¹⁴⁹

The first Exocet struck *Stark* on the port forward side of the superstructure. Although the missile failed to detonate, fires ignited by the missile’s remaining rocket propellant, which burns at 3000 to 3500 degrees, resulted in horrible damage.¹⁵⁰ Thirty seconds later, the second Exocet impacted *Stark* eight feet from where the first missile hit and exploded approximately three to five feet into the hull.¹⁵¹ The attack resulted in the deaths of thirty seven sailors, the largest single loss of life in the Tanker War.

The official investigation into the *Stark* incident blamed the disaster on four factors: “failure of the Commanding Officer and *Stark*’s watch team to recognize the F-1

¹⁴⁷ Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 79.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁴⁹ United States Department of State, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf* (Washington: Department of State, 1987), 4.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 – 18.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 18. Sharp, *Stark Report*, 15.

threat and effectively utilize the ship's combat systems to respond to that threat; improper watch manning and watch standing; failure of the Commanding Officer and watch team to institute a proper state of weapons readiness; and an improper understanding by the Commanding Officer and watch team of the use of fire control radar as a measure short of deadly force in warning the threat and securing the safety of *Stark*.¹⁵² Captain Brindel, his Executive Officer, and the TAO on duty at the time of the attack were relieved of their duties on board *Stark* as a result of these failures.

While the official investigation into the *Stark* incident deemed the existing rules of engagement (ROE) to have been sufficient “to enable *Stark* to properly warn the Iraqi aircraft” and “to defend herself against hostile intent without absorbing the first hit,”¹⁵³ political pressure in Washington forced a change in American ROE. General George Crist, CENTCOM Commander, explained this fact to Vice Admiral Bernsen, writing “We can’t afford to take a second hit....We shoot first.”¹⁵⁴ One day later the ROE were adjusted to allow captains to warn aircraft at a distance of 50 miles and engage them at 25 miles. The Rules of Engagement were further modified in June 1987, and stressed the duty of naval officers to defend their vessels against hostile acts.¹⁵⁵ Entry into Iranian and Iraqi territorial waters and exclusion zones was prohibited. American forces could, however, enter territorial waters if attacked by forces from these restricted areas and were allowed to pursue the hostile force if it “continued to pose a threat to the safety of the American plane or ship.”¹⁵⁶ Additionally, the United States developed deconfliction procedures with the Iraqis in order to preclude further attacks on American warships.

Importantly, the *Stark* incident imparted a “don’t take the first round” mindset into the minds of American naval officers.¹⁵⁷ This mindset was reinforced by the loss of

¹⁵² Sharp, *Stark Report*, 31.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵⁴ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 105 – 106.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 107. Hostile acts were defined as the following: 1. Launching missiles or firing rockets at U.S. forces; 2. Conducting mine laying operations in international waters; 3. attacking friendly forces engaged in mine countermeasures; 4. An enemy aircraft, vessel, or land-based facility displaying hostile intent by threatening the imminent use of force against friendly forces.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁵⁷ Will Rogers and Sharon Rogers, *Storm Center The USS Vincennes and Iran Air Flight 655* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 11. Henceforth referred to as *Storm Center*. Levinson and Edwards, *Missile Inbound*, 103.

37 American sailors, as well as the fact that the attack ended the careers of Captain Brindel and two of his officers. Additionally, the ROE changes prompted by the *Stark* incident would provide USS *Vincennes* (CG 49) with the justification required to pursue Iranian small craft which would fire on the American cruiser's embarked LAMPS helicopter a year later. This combat action led to *Vincennes* shooting down Iran Air flight 655, killing 290 civilians.

C. U.S. OBJECTIVES

The attack on USS *Stark* was an embarrassment for the U.S. Navy. A 300 million dollar warship had been gravely damaged without so much as firing a shot in self defense. The Iraqi attack energized Congressional interest in the Reagan Administration's provocative new policy, which had been somewhat muted as a result of the ongoing Iran – Contra hearings.¹⁵⁸ The Reagan Administration had initially informed Congress of the reflagging decision on March 12, 1987.¹⁵⁹ On May 18, Newsweek magazine publicly revealed the Reagan Administration's new Kuwait policy.¹⁶⁰ The announcement of the decision to reflag the Kuwaiti tankers, coming so closely on the heels of the *Stark* incident, prompted multiple Congressional Hearings, during which the Reagan Administration was forced to defend its view of American interests in the Persian Gulf.

1. Strategic Objectives

The Reagan Administration asserted that a refusal of the Kuwaiti request would allow the Soviet Union an opportunity to expand its presence in the Persian Gulf. The Administration acknowledged the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf region to the West and noted that the Soviets were “eager to exploit the opportunity created by the Iran – Iraq War and the perception of faltering U.S. interests to insert themselves into the Gulf.”¹⁶¹ Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger opined that a denial of the Kuwaiti

¹⁵⁸ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 93, 94.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶⁰ George C. Wilson, “Iraqi Missile Hits U.S. Frigate; At Least 3 Dead; Pentagon Says 30 Missing in Attack That May Have Been “Inadvertent,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 1987, a.01. Available from: <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed April 19, 2007).

¹⁶¹ Weinberger, *Persian Gulf*, 3.

request would raise “doubts about our commitment to the stability of the regional states and about our objectives in the region,”¹⁶² resulting in the reliability of the United States falling under question. This could potentially open the door for the Soviet Union to fill the resulting security vacuum throughout the Persian Gulf. Concern over the prevention of growing Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf permeated Congressional hearings studying the reflagging policy in the wake of the *Stark* incident; when asked by Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA) if the United States would be amenable to reflagging Kuwaiti tankers in the absence of a potential Soviet role, Deputy Secretary of State for Political Affairs Michael Armacost responded that “it would have been a very much tougher call in the absence of the Soviet angle.”¹⁶³

Preventing the expansion of Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf was a second strategic goal of the United States. While acknowledging that the United States did not view victory by either belligerent as within its interests, the United States had tilted appreciably towards Iraq by supporting Saddam Hussein’s allies while simultaneously discouraging weapons sales to Iran.¹⁶⁴ The Reagan Administration was concerned with Iranian efforts to eliminate superpower presence in the Gulf and alarmed by the potential spread of the Iranian Revolution to moderate GCC countries. Reflagging was viewed as a “firm but unprovocative policy” which would “encourage an Iranian reevaluation of its foreign policy” leading to Tehran seeking a “modus vivendi with its Gulf neighbors and the United States.”¹⁶⁵

2. Political Objectives

American political interests centered on supporting moderate Gulf state’s security efforts against direct and indirect Iranian pressure.¹⁶⁶ Along with arms transfers, many of which were seriously opposed by Congress, reflagging offered an opportunity to restore American credibility among moderate Arab governments in the wake of several recent policy set backs while simultaneously denying the Soviet Union and Iran increased

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *U.S. Military To Protect “Re-Flagged” Kuwaiti Oil Tankers*. (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1987), 35.

¹⁶⁴ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. *U.S. Policy In The Persian Gulf*. (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1988), 7.

¹⁶⁵ Weinberger, *Persian Gulf*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.

leverage in the Gulf.¹⁶⁷ The Iran Hostage Crisis, the Desert One disaster, the bombing of the Marine Barracks in Beirut and subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon, the failure of Congress to approve weapons exports to Arab countries and, most recently, the Iran – Contra scandal had undermined the American position in the Persian Gulf. Staunch support of Kuwait would demonstrate to potential allies and enemies that the United States could be trusted as a dependable ally. Admiral William J. Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, viewed reflagging as “the best chance we had to repair our Arab policy and to make some significant headway in an area where it was absolutely crucial for us to forge the strongest ties we could manage.”¹⁶⁸

3. Economic Objectives

Economic considerations also figured into the Reagan Administration’s strategic calculus. The importance of the Middle East market to American industry coupled with the West’s growing appetite for, and vulnerability to a disruption in the flow of, Persian Gulf oil mandated that the United States have “unimpeded access to and from the Gulf, now and in the future.”¹⁶⁹ The Administration was forced to concede, however, that these economic concerns were not completely supported by the actual conditions in the Gulf in the Spring of 1987. The number of attacks conducted by both belligerents, while substantial, actually represented less than one percent of the total surface traffic transiting the Persian Gulf yearly. However, Kuwaiti shipping represented six percent of all attacks.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, despite Iranian rhetoric threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz, bluster reinforced by the alarming deployment of Chinese-supplied Silkworm missiles to a position threatening shipping transiting the Strait, the free flow of oil had not been seriously threatened and oil prices remained low.¹⁷¹ Additionally, a glut of excess

¹⁶⁷ Weinberger, *Persian Gulf*, 4. See also U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. *U.S. Policy In The Persian Gulf*. (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1988), 56.

¹⁶⁸ Admiral William J. Crowe and David Chanoff, *The Line of Fire* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 181.

¹⁶⁹ Weinberger, *Persian Gulf*, 6.

¹⁷⁰ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *U.S. Military To Protect “Re-Flagged” Kuwaiti Oil Tankers*. (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1987), 87.

¹⁷¹ United States Department of Energy. *Crude Oil Prices By Selected Type, 1970 – 2005*. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/aer/txt/ptb1107.html>. (accessed May 11, 2006).

tanker tonnage ensured that there was no shortage of ships to transport Middle Eastern oil.¹⁷²

	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Saudi Crude Price	32.00	34.00	34.00	29.00	29.00	28.00	16.15	17.52
Shipping Attacks	5	21	13	77	50	103	186	90

Table 3. Price Per Barrel of Saudi Crude Oil (USD) Compared to Numbers of Shipping Attacks Conducted by Both Belligerents, 1981 – 1988 (After: U.S. Department of Energy, Crude oil Prices By selected Type, 1970 – 2005)¹⁷³

D. AMERICAN STRATEGY AND ASSUMPTIONS

While Congress debated the pros and cons of reflagging, the American military commenced planning for the operation, now known as Operation Earnest Will. Inbound convoys, escorted by two to three American warships, would commence at Khawr Fakkan, Oman, and proceed along a predetermined course, termed a Q-route, through the Strait of Hormuz and along the western Persian Gulf to Kuwait.¹⁷⁴ Additional American naval vessels were stationed at both ends of the Strait of Hormuz and at a position just south of the Iraqi exclusion zone.¹⁷⁵ These vessels would be supported by a Saudi E-3 AWACS aircraft.

In the event Iran responded aggressively to the U.S. policy, American planners prioritized the methods with which Tehran would challenge the United States.¹⁷⁶ American planners considered the threat posed by the Chinese-supplied Silkworm missile sites guarding the Strait of Hormuz to be the most serious.¹⁷⁷ The Americans assumed that these missiles were tightly controlled by Tehran and thus, if fired at an American

¹⁷² James H. Rand, *Tankers at War 1984 – 1987*, <http://www.intertanko.org/intertankoData.htm> (accessed May 15, 2006).

¹⁷³ U.S. Department of Energy, “Crude Oil Prices By Selected Type, 1970 – 2006,” <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/aer/txt/ptb1107.html> (accessed April 12, 2007).

¹⁷⁴ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 110.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 109, 110. These were, in order of precedence: increased attack on unescorted shipping; harassment mining; increased acts of regional terrorism directed at the United States or Kuwait; attacks on convoys via Silkworm missile; attacks on U.S. warships.

¹⁷⁷ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 110. The Silkworm missile had a range of 95 kilometers and carried a 1,100 lb. warhead. See Jane’s Publishing Co. Ltd., *Jane’s Weapons Systems 1987 – 1988* (London: Jane’s Publishing Co. Ltd., 1987), 476.

warship, would constitute “a deliberate hostile act against the United States.”¹⁷⁸ In light of the Silkworm threat, American strategy placed a heavy emphasis on deterrence.¹⁷⁹ To this end an aircraft carrier battlegroup was stationed in the Gulf of Oman in a position to strike at Iranian targets should Tehran be so bold as to attack an American vessel.

Faith that the presence of an aircraft carrier battlegroup would deter Iran from openly confronting the United States Navy in the Persian Gulf was based on historical experience dating from the Iran Hostage Crisis. Throughout this period the United States had maintained one or more aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean in a position to strike Iran. The fact that Tehran did not attempt to attack American Naval vessels during the crisis instilled confidence in American decisionmakers that Iran was well aware of the destructive potential of an American aircraft carrier and would have no desire to initiate a war with the United States.¹⁸⁰ Tehran’s more likely course of action would be to undertake military operations that could not be directly traced to Iran, such as use of mines or regional terrorism. Additionally, experience in the Persian Gulf throughout the Tanker War had demonstrated to American Naval Officers a reluctance on the part of the Iranians to conduct attacks within sight of U.S. warships.

Despite concerns over potential hostile Iranian response to reflagging, few within DOD and the Reagan Administration believed that the Iranians would risk a military confrontation with the United States. Admiral William J. Crowe posited that the Iranians “would not be eager to get into a real naval scrap” and that the Iranians were likely to realize the threat posed by an American carrier battlegroup.¹⁸¹ This opinion was echoed among officers in CENTCOM and the Navy’s Middle East Force (MEF).¹⁸²

E. GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY

Achieving the strategic, political and economic objectives set forth by the Reagan Administration in the spring of 1987 required that the Americans embark on a policy of gunboat diplomacy. James Cable defines gunboat diplomacy as “the use or threat of

¹⁷⁸ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 110.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸⁰ David Crist, phone interview with author, April 5, 2007.

¹⁸¹ Crowe and Chanoff, *The Line of Fire*, 184.

¹⁸² Palmer, *Guardians*, 129. Also see Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 89, 111.

limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage or avert loss, either in the furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within the territory or jurisdiction of their own state.”¹⁸³ Naval force is considered limited when four criteria have been met. First, “the act or threat of force should possess a definite purpose, of which the extent is apparent to both sides.”¹⁸⁴ In the case of Operation Earnest Will, the purpose of naval force was to deter Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti-owned vessels. Second, the level of force used by the assailant must be considered tolerable by the victim of the policy.¹⁸⁵ If the victim finds the assailant’s use of force to be intolerable, there is danger that the victim will respond with unlimited force.¹⁸⁶ Third, the level of force employed should have a reasonable expectation to achieve its purpose.¹⁸⁷ Finally, the “force employed should be the minimum needed to achieve the desired result.”¹⁸⁸

Cable’s analysis subdivides gunboat diplomacy into four specific categories. *Definitive Force* is the threat or use of limited naval force to create or remove a fait accompli.¹⁸⁹ With regard to the Soviet Union, Operation Earnest Will was an American policy of definitive force gunboat diplomacy: by agreeing to reflag and protect 11 Kuwaiti-owned tankers, the United States irreversibly excluded the Soviet Navy from assuming a greater role in the Persian Gulf. The purpose of *Catalytic Force* is to realize advantages, “their nature and their achievement still undetermined,” through the limited use of naval forces.¹⁹⁰ The July 1958 landing of the U.S. Marines in Lebanon is an example of Catalytic Force: the Marines “had not landed with a defined objective; their job was to hold the situation and to gain time for the U.S. government to decide what the objective should be.”¹⁹¹ *Expressive Force* utilizes naval forces to send signals, provide

¹⁸³ Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 14.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 6, 20 – 21. Cable refers to the nation implementing a policy of gunboat diplomacy as the assailant and the country on the receiving end as the victim.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 – 22.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹⁰ Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 46.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

support to unconvincing statements, or act as an outlet for emotion.¹⁹² The dispatch of a second American aircraft carrier battlegroup to the Persian Gulf in the winter of 2007 provides an example of expressive force: the second battlegroup could not affect Iranian nuclear ambitions or institute regime change. It merely acted as window dressing supporting the Bush Administration's anti-Iranian sentiment. When directed at Iran, Operation Earnest Will was a policy of *Purposeful Force* gunboat diplomacy.

1. Purposeful Force Gunboat Diplomacy

The goal of purposeful force is to change the policy of the victim government.¹⁹³ The purposeful employment of limited naval force has no narrow military objective; force acts as a catalyst to induce a government to "take a decision that would not otherwise have been taken – to do something or to stop doing it, or to refrain from a contemplated course of action."¹⁹⁴ In the case of Operation Earnest Will, the United States utilized purposeful force to convince Tehran to halt attacks on neutral, specifically Kuwaiti, shipping transiting the Persian Gulf.

Utilization of purposeful force to coerce a government into altering a policy is risky for the assailant in that success requires the voluntary acquiescence of the victim.¹⁹⁵ Thus, to a large extent, the ultimate success or failure of Operation Earnest Will could only be determined by Tehran; i.e. the power to halt attacks on neutral shipping rested entirely with the Iranian government. For purposeful force to be effective, it is vital during the planning process for the assailant to consider factors which influence the victim's decision. These factors include the political outlook of the victim, the effectiveness of the victim's administrative authority, the nature of the victim's political support, and an understanding of the experiences which have conditioned the victim government's expectations.¹⁹⁶ These factors were not adequately considered by American planners, resulting in erroneous assumptions regarding Iran's response to Operation Earnest Will which endangered American objectives in the Persian Gulf.

¹⁹² Ibid., 62.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁹⁶ Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 79.

F. FACTORS INFLUENCING IRANIAN ACQUIESCENCE

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was carried out by a disorganized coalition of competing factions, united chiefly by their opposition to the Pahlavi regime, but lacking broader ideological cohesion. Following months of sometimes deadly infighting, religious fundamentalists emerged triumphant over secular democrats and leftist revolutionaries. The formative period of the revolution, of which the Iran – Iraq War was a major part, witnessed intense competition between three factions within the religious fundamentalist camp.¹⁹⁷

The Iran – Iraq war strengthened the hold of the religious fundamentalists on the Iranian people.¹⁹⁸ Framing the war as a religious mission, the conflict empowered radical elements of the regime which had been instrumental in the formulation of Iran’s confrontational foreign policy of the 1980s and had proved masterful in mobilizing popular support for the Iran – Iraq war.¹⁹⁹ Utilizing Shi’a symbology to mobilize the population and impart the religious zeal necessary to ensure popular support throughout eight years of violent, bloody conflict, the radical faction transformed participation in the war into a religious duty, in which soldiers killed in action were labeled as martyrs.²⁰⁰ The revolutionary fervor required to sustain such high levels of religiously-based motivation within the population further pushed the regime towards a radical, leftist, and increasingly confrontational stance.²⁰¹ Additionally, the West’s failure to condemn the Iraqi invasion strengthened the perception that Iran and Islam were under siege from the West.²⁰² The 1987 American decision to provide protection for Kuwaiti-owned shipping resulted in several direct military confrontations with the Iranians in the Persian Gulf and strengthened the more radical segments of the ruling regime.²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Vali Nasr, “The Iranian Revolution” (Lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey CA, November 6, 2006). The three factions could be titled Radical, Moderate and Conservative.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 101.

²⁰⁰ Nasr, “The Iranian Revolution” (Lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey CA, November 6, 2006).

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 98.

²⁰³ Gheissari and Nasr, *Democracy in Iran*, 99.

A better understanding of the importance of the Iran – Iraq war to the religious fundamentalists in general and radical elements in particular could have lead to different conclusions vis-à-vis the question of whether Iran would be deterred from attacking American shipping. Confrontation with the United States in the Persian Gulf coupled with militant rhetoric and brinkmanship could be utilized by Tehran to achieve domestic political goals.²⁰⁴ Confrontation strengthened the position of radical fundamentalists within the Iranian government while simultaneously providing Tehran with an issue to reenergize dwindling public support of the war effort.²⁰⁵ Together, these factors helped sustain the Iranian Revolution.

Equally important, Iran viewed the war with Iraq not in territorial terms, but as a test for Islam.²⁰⁶ In essence, Iran viewed the conflict as a defensive war to protect Islam and spread the revolution.²⁰⁷ Framing Iran’s war effort as a defense of Islam raised the stakes of the conflict immeasurably, pushing pragmatic military considerations aside in favor of affirming and defending Islamic values.²⁰⁸ These factors worked against moderate voices in Tehran urging caution in lieu of provoking clashes with American forces in the Gulf.

American planners failed to account for Iranian perceptions of the United States in forming the assumption that Tehran would quietly accept the new American policy. Distrust of the United States dated from the 1953 coup which overthrew Mohammed Mosaddeq, deepened as American aid dollars assisted in financing the increasingly autocratic Shah’s policies and played a major role in the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979.²⁰⁹ Critically, the United States was viewed as supporting Iraqi war efforts. The United States had not protested Iraqi attacks on Iranian shipping, Saddam Hussein’s use of WMD, or the use of SCUD missiles against Iranian population

²⁰⁴ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 218.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 39.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. See also Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 114.

²⁰⁸ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 46.

²⁰⁹ Gheissari and Nasr, *Democracy in Iran*, 94.

centers.²¹⁰ Despite the Reagan Administration's declarations of neutrality, Iran viewed support for Kuwait as tacit support for Iraq. Thus, from an Iranian point of view, prior experiences with the United States did not support the recognition of America as a neutral party in the conflict, but added to Tehran's perception that the United States was hostile to Iran.

The failure to adequately consider the myriad of factors influencing Iran's reaction to the reflagging policy seriously jeopardized the Reagan Administration's Persian Gulf goals. Tehran's political outlook, its view of the Iran – Iraq war as a test for Islam and its perceptions of the United States worked against Iran quietly bowing to the American display of limited naval force. A more in-depth analysis of these critical elements could have led to less optimistic assumptions with respect to Iran's acceptance of Operation Earnest Will. Less complacent assumptions would have facilitated more informed risk assessment with regard to the danger of Iranian escalation and would have allowed the Americans to more critically examine the danger of being dragged deeper into the Iran – Iraq conflict prior to undertaking Operation Earnest Will.

American failure to adequately examine the circumstances determining Tehran's acceptance of the reflagging policy resulted in the failure of the United States to correctly judge the manner in which Iran would respond to purposeful naval force. Having made the assumption that Iran would not risk open confrontation with the United States by attacking a U.S. warship or convoy, it is curious that American planners focused so intently on the Silkworm threat at the expense of the dangers posed by mines and irregular forces. American planners believed that Tehran would be more likely to employ these weapons in the event Iran chose to confront the United States Navy in the Persian Gulf.²¹¹ The failure of the United States to properly assess the risks to American vessels and to implement adequate safeguards, particularly the failure to deploy minesweepers to the Persian Gulf prior to the commencement of convoy operations, unnecessarily jeopardized American lives and shipping and could have carried disastrous results for American standing in the Middle East had a naval vessel been sunk. Indeed, Tehran

²¹⁰ Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 106. Also perplexing was the Reagan Administration publicly blaming Iran for the attack on USS *Stark*: "Most Iranians could not understand how a plane and a missile system that were on loan or purchased from the French and fired by the Iraqis could be blamed on the Iranians."

²¹¹ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 109 – 110.

hoped that American casualties resulting from Iranian mines and Pasdaran attacks would result in Congressional pressure to reduce the American commitment in the Persian Gulf.²¹² Senator John Warner (R–VA) warned Admiral Crowe, “If you lose one man over there you’ll have to come out of the Gulf. One man!”²¹³ Abandonment of the reflagging policy in the face of Congressional pressure over casualties would have reinforced Middle Eastern perceptions of the United States as an undependable ally, causing the moderate Gulf states that the Reagan Administration was so keen to court to turn towards the Soviet Union for protection

G. CHAPTER SUMMARY

The eleven Kuwaiti-owned tankers were transferred to the Chesapeake Shipping Company Incorporated, a new entity owned entirely by the Kuwait Petroleum Company. To comply with American law, the CEO and Chairman of the Board of the Chesapeake Shipping Company were Americans, and only one of the four members of the board necessary to form a quorum was an alien.²¹⁴ The ships themselves met all American legal requirements necessary to fly the American flag, although some waivers were issued with regard to drydocking and specific safety standards. By law, the Master of each vessel was an American citizen. All legal issues were resolved by July, 1987, and the American flag was raised up the masts of the eleven tankers.

The first convoy was ready to commence its voyage to Kuwait in late July 1987. Prior to commencing convoy operations, the United States moved on the diplomatic front in an effort to end the seven year old conflict, pressing the United Nations Security Council to pass Resolution 598 on July 20, 1987. The resolution demanded a cease fire and called for Iran and Iraq to work with the U.N. in constructing a peaceful settlement. The resolution was accepted by Iraq. Iran rejected the resolution on the grounds that Iraq was not labeled as the aggressor.²¹⁵ In late July, the first convoy was ready to commence its voyage to Kuwait. The stage was set to determine if American planners had been

²¹² David Crist, phone interview with author, April 5, 2007.

²¹³ Crowe and Chanoff, *The Line of Fire*, 184.

²¹⁴ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *U.S. Military To Protect “Re-Flagged” Kuwaiti Oil Tankers*. (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1987), 76.

²¹⁵ Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 11.

correct in their assumption that Iran would not risk attacking vessels flying the American flag.

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V. OPERATION EARNEST WILL: JULY, 1987 – APRIL, 1988

A. CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

While the United States and Kuwait discussed the issue of reflagging, the war in the Persian Gulf continued unabated. Iraqi aircraft attacked 24 ships through the first five months of 1987, resulting in three vessels being declared CTLs.²¹⁶ Iraqi attacks came to a virtual halt in the aftermath of the May 17 attack on USS *Stark*, but were resumed on June 20. The ferocity of the Iraqi anti-ship campaign peaked in 1987, when Iraqi pilots conducted 97 attacks resulting in two vessels being sunk and seven being declared CTLs.²¹⁷

Iran responded by increasing the tempo of its anti-shipping campaign, conducting 89 attacks in 1987, resulting in four vessels being sunk and two declared CTLs.²¹⁸ The Iranian Navy conducted the majority of attacks through the first three months of 1987, culminating in the sinking of the Singapore-flagged tug *Sedra* by a Vosper Mk 5 class frigate on March 28. Beginning in April primary responsibility for attacks on shipping fell onto the shoulders of the Pasdaran, which was responsible for 76% of the Iranian attacks conducted during the last eight months of 1987.²¹⁹

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Iraq	7	6	3	4	5	2	4	6	13	15	13	19	97
Iran	7	3	3	3	8	5	4	4	14	11	10	17	89

Table 4. Frequency of Shipping Attacks, 1987 (From: Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping During the Iran – Iraq Crisis 1980 – 1988*)²²⁰

Another significant event of 1987 was the introduction of naval mines by Iran. Six vessels fell victim to Iranian mines prior to the July commencement of Earnest Will

²¹⁶ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 133.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 133 – 135.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 136 – 138.

²¹⁹ Ibid. The Pasdaran was responsible for 58 of the 76 Iranian ship attacks conducted between April and the end of 1987.

²²⁰ Ibid., 133 – 138.

convoys.²²¹ One of the victims, the *Marshal Chuykov*, was a Russian-flagged vessel chartered to Kuwait. Interestingly, the Iranian employment of mines seems to have gone unnoticed by American planners. Despite the acknowledgement of harassment mining as a viable means for Iran to confront the American presence in the Gulf, the attacks did not spur the Americans into deploying mine warfare units to the Persian Gulf prior to the commencement of convoy operations.

By July the American flag had been hauled up the masts of eleven newly-named Kuwaiti-owned ships. The American naval presence in the Persian Gulf had been boosted by three additional surface vessels as well as the deployment to the Indian Ocean of a surface action group built around the battleship USS *Missouri* (BB-63). Armed with 32 Tomahawk missiles and nine 16-inch guns, the American dreadnaught, in addition to a nearby aircraft carrier battlegroup, was a symbol of the power that could be brought to bear should Tehran be so bold as to aggressively challenge the Reagan Administration's new Persian Gulf policy.²²² The stage was set to determine the validity of American faith in the ability of the U.S. Navy to deter Iranian attacks.

B. THE BRIDGETON INCIDENT

The first American convoy operation commenced on July 22, 1987, when the 440,000 DWT crude oil tanker *Bridgeton* and the 46,000 DWT LPG (Liquid Propane Gas) tanker *Gas Prince* got underway in the Gulf of Oman and set course for Kuwait. The two recent additions to the American merchant fleet were escorted by the cruiser USS *Fox* (CG-33) and the guided missile destroyer USS *Kidd* (DDG-993). The small American convoy was supported by additional naval vessels positioned at the both ends of the Strait of Hormuz and off of Qatar.²²³ The USS *Constellation* (CV-64) battlegroup was stationed in the Gulf of Oman to provide aerial support. Saudi and American AWACS aircraft provided additional airborne surveillance over the Persian Gulf.

Following a safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, the convoy anchored off Bahrain during the evening of July 23. On July 24, while underway approximately 20

²²¹ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 136. None of these vessels were sunk.

²²² Crowe and Chanoff, *The Line of Fire*, 189.

²²³ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 128.

miles west of Farsi Island, *Bridgeton* struck a moored mine. The mine damaged two forward cargo tanks, but did not result in any personnel injuries and the ship proceeded under her own power for Kuwait, with the thin-skinned U.S. Navy combatants trailing behind in an attempt to avoid sharing *Bridgeton*'s fate.

Iran denied responsibility for the attack, claiming the "hand of God" had holed the tanker.²²⁴ In fact, Iran had sown at least sixty mines in three areas.²²⁵ Despite claims of non-complicity, the mining offered Tehran a propaganda victory over the United States, Prime Minister Hossein Mousavi gleefully classifying the attack as "an irreparable blow on America's political and military prestige."²²⁶ Despite earlier statements that the United States would attack any vessel caught laying mines, no retaliation was planned. The American decision to exercise restraint was influenced by the limited amount of damage incurred and the fact that the attack resulted in no casualties.²²⁷

The mining of M.V. *Bridgeton* demonstrated American unpreparedness to combat the mine threat and, more importantly, exposed the fatuity of the assumption that Iran could be deterred from directly confronting the United States. General Crist characterized Tehran's boldness as "a distinct and serious change in Iranian policy vis-à-vis U.S. military interests in the Persian Gulf" and that the attack demonstrated "in vivid contrast" a change in Iranian attitudes towards U.S. warships in the Gulf, which traditionally had been "treated circumspectly, almost deferentially by the Iranians."²²⁸ Admiral Bernsen later conceded that "deterrence would not succeed and the Iranian leadership had decided to take their chances by directly challenging the U.S."²²⁹

The *Bridgeton* mining was viewed with sufficient concern in Washington as to suggest that, had a naval vessel been lost, the resultant outcry might have ended Operation Earnest Will after the first convoy. This would have provided Tehran with a propaganda victory over the United States and would have reinforced regional perceptions of the United States as an undependable ally, a perception which the Reagan

²²⁴ Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting For Peace* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 404.

²²⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 298 – 299.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 299.

²²⁷ Weinberger, *Fighting For Peace*, 404.

²²⁸ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 129 – 130.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

Administration hoped Operation Earnest Will would destroy. Earnest Will, once embarked upon, had created an independent interest in the continued credibility of the United States in the region.

C. THE CAPTURE OF *IRAN AJR*

Following the July 24 mining of M.V. *Bridgeton* Admiral Crowe ordered a halt to convoy operations until sufficient mine countermeasures platforms could be put into place. The United States Navy was forced to activate several 1950s-vintage *Aggressive* class minesweepers from the reserve fleet. As it would take time to tow the 30 year old wooden vessels from their stateside homeports to the Persian Gulf, an interim solution was required.²³⁰ Two KOTC-owned tugs, the *Hunter* and the ironically named *Striker*, were modified to perform as minesweepers. Manned by crews of mixed nationalities and steaming at the head of a convoy, the two vessels could, in theory, clear a channel 270 yards wide.²³¹

Convoy operations resumed on August 1 when the LPG carrier *Gas Prince* departed Kuwait, escorted by the destroyer *Kidd* and frigate *Crommelin* (FFG-37).²³² Inbound convoy operations resumed on August 8, *Kidd* and *Crommelin* escorting the crude oil tankers *Sea Isle City* and *Ocean City* and the LPG carrier *Gas King*. The American convoy sailed despite intelligence indicating an Iranian mine field, taking the precaution of forming up further south, a wise decision in light of the Panamanian-flagged tanker *Texaco Caribbean* striking a mine off Fujayrah in the Gulf of Oman on August 10.²³³ The mining of *Texaco Caribbean*, which was under charter to a U.S. company, marked the first instance of mining outside the Persian Gulf.²³⁴ Five days later the Saudi-flagged oil field support vessel *Anita* sunk after striking a mine just outside the Strait of Hormuz.

²³⁰ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 151 – 154. The first minesweepers did not arrive in the Persian Gulf until October 20, 1987.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 135. No mines were swept by either vessel during Operation Earnest Will.

²³² Clyde R. Mark, *The Persian Gulf, 1987: A Chronology of Events* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 1988), 10. Henceforth referred to as *Chronology*.

²³³ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 145 – 146. Additionally, an American F-14 fired missiles at an Iranian aircraft on August 10. Both missiles missed.

²³⁴ Mark, *Chronology*, 12.

Iran's mining of the waters in the Gulf of Oman inspired some previously reluctant West European countries to dispatch minesweeping vessels to the Persian Gulf. On August 11, London announced the deployment of four *Hunt* class minesweepers to the Gulf.²³⁵ Simultaneously, France announced the decision to deploy two minesweepers to the Gulf of Oman.²³⁶ These forces were augmented by two Dutch and two Belgian minesweepers on September 7 and 14, respectively.²³⁷ On September 9, Italy announced the deployment of 3 frigates, 3 minesweepers and 2 support ships to the Persian Gulf.²³⁸ The Italian deployment was a direct response to a September 2 Pasdaran attack on the Italian-flagged cargo vessel *Jolly Rubino*. On October 8, West Germany announced the deployment of three warships to the Mediterranean to replace vessels deployed by allied nations to the Persian Gulf.²³⁹ Once again, Tehran's actions in the Persian Gulf were counterproductive, serving only to further isolate Iran from the rich nations of the West.

The next major confrontation occurred on the night of September 21, 1987. Army special operations helicopters operating from USS *Jarret* (FFG-33) discovered the Iranian naval vessel *Iran Ajr* laying mines off Bahrain in an area used as an anchorage by Earnest Will convoys. The American helicopters attacked the small vessel with machine gun fire, forcing the Iranian crew to jump overboard. A United States Navy SEAL team boarded the vessel at first light and discovered nine mines on the vessel's deck, as well as a logbook revealing areas where previous minefields had been set.²⁴⁰ Surviving Iranian crew members were repatriated and *Iran Ajr* was eventually scuttled.²⁴¹

The capture of *Iran Ajr* came at an inopportune time for Tehran. Iranian President Khamenei was scheduled to address the United Nations General Assembly the next day to discuss the perceived mistreatment of Iran by the Security Council at the beginning of the war and to "convey Iran's willingness to observe a cease-fire on the

²³⁵ Mark, *Chronology*, 12.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴⁰ Crowe and Chanoff, *The Line of Fire*, 198.

²⁴¹ Three Iranians died in the strafing attack and two drowned. The 26 surviving Iranian crewmen were repatriated to Iran via Oman.

basis of a modified version of Resolution 598.”²⁴² By ordering *Iran Ajr* to sea, the Pasdaran openly contradicted the wishes of political leaders in Tehran.²⁴³ The *Iran Ajr* incident should have demonstrated to the Reagan Administration that the American military intervention in support of Kuwait served a valuable purpose to radical elements in Tehran that viewed vigorous prosecution of the war as more important than government efforts to negotiate a ceasefire and that deeper U.S. involvement would only serve to further strengthen the radical elements pushing for “continuous Jihad.”²⁴⁴ This reduced the chances for a negotiated settlement to the war and worked against keeping the American display of purposeful naval force limited.

D. THE “BATTLE OF FARSI ISLAND”

By late September American intelligence was alarmed by an Iranian build up of small craft on Farsi and Kharg Islands. On September 30, intelligence indicated a potential Iranian small boat attack on Saudi and Kuwaiti offshore oil installations.²⁴⁵ On the night of October 3 a U.S. AWACS aircraft detected what was believed to be a formation of Iranian small craft on a course towards Kuwait. Aircraft and vessels were dispatched to intercept the Iranians, who failed to complete their attack. Many believe that the Iranian attack was a false alarm, the AWACS radar operators mistaking sea return as small attack craft.²⁴⁶

In response to the *Bridgeton* mining the Kuwaitis provided a converted oil support barge (*Hercules*) for use as a stationary sea base to allow small craft, special forces and helicopters to patrol the shipping lanes west of Farsi Island. On the night of October 8, 1987, *Hercules* conducted her first mission. Army special operations helicopters, reconnoitering an area off Farsi in which American small craft were to establish a listening post, were startled to discover three Iranian patrol craft present. The Iranians took the Army helicopters under fire unsuccessfully and were destroyed when the aircraft

²⁴² Nikki R. Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski, eds., *Neither East Nor West Iran, the Soviet Union and the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 226. Henceforth referred to as *Neither East Nor West*.

²⁴³ Katzman, *Warriors*, 90 – 91.

²⁴⁴ Keddie and Gasiorowski, eds., *Neither East Nor West*, 227.

²⁴⁵ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 187.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

returned fire. American surface craft retrieved six Iranian survivors from the water, two of which later died from their wounds.²⁴⁷ A short time later, twenty to forty small craft were detected heading towards *Hercules*. The Americans prepared for further action, but the Iranians small craft turned away. There is some doubt as to the existence of this large Iraqi formation. While several sources contend that the Iranian formation was real and retreated after the loss of three small craft, the Commanding Officer of USS *Thach* (FFG-43) believed the Iranian small craft did not exist but were a radar anomaly.²⁴⁸

E. OPERATION NIMBLE ARCHER

By the autumn of 1987, the Iran – Iraq War steadily marched closer to Kuwait. Throughout the spring and summer Iran moved Silkworm missile batteries onto the Al Faw peninsula into a position to threaten Kuwait. On September 2, a Silkworm missile was fired at the Emirate but landed in the Persian Gulf just off the Kuwaiti Coast.²⁴⁹ On September 4, a second Silkworm was fired at Kuwait, striking an uninhabited beach area two miles south of an oil loading terminal.²⁵⁰ The Emirate responded by expelling five Iranian diplomats in protest of Tehran’s aggression. On October 15, a Silkworm missile struck the American-owned Liberian-flagged tanker *Sungari*. The 275,000 DWT vessel suffered extensive damage and was later declared a CTL.²⁵¹

The following day, the reflagged Kuwaiti tanker *Sea Isle City* was struck by a Silkworm missile, ironically while the American vessel was observing the stricken *Sungari*. Unlike the *Bridgeton* incident, the United States decided to respond to the Iranian attack. Rather than strike the Silkworm sites that threatened Kuwait and carried out the attack on *Sea Isle City* the United States chose to target the Iranian Rashadat oil platforms in the northern Persian Gulf. The platforms were no longer active as an oil production facility, but were being used as a staging area for Pasdaran attacks and as a surveillance platform reporting American ship movements.

²⁴⁷ David B. Crist, “Joint Operations in Support of Earnest Will,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Autumn/Winter 2002, 20.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁹ Mark, *Chronology*, 14.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵¹ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 154.

Operation Nimble Archer commenced on October 19. A six ship surface action group commenced the operation by warning the platforms' Iranian occupants to abandon the platform, all of whom quickly complied. The American vessels then commenced shelling. One platform quickly caught fire, but the second remained standing after nearly 1,000 rounds had been fired at it.²⁵² Eventually the stubborn platform was destroyed by a U.S. Navy SEAL team. No lives were lost by either side during the operation.

The Reagan Administration explained that Operation Nimble Archer was undertaken in accordance with America's "inherent right of self defense, as recognized by Article 51 of the United Nations Charter."²⁵³ Tehran, not surprisingly, took a different view, declaring that the United States "had opened an all out war" against Iran.²⁵⁴ Operation Nimble Archer marked the first time the United States directly retaliated for an attack against an American flag vessel during Operation Earnest Will. Following the action, secretary of Defense Weinberger declared that the United States "now considered the matter closed."²⁵⁵

F. THE MINING OF USS *SAMUEL B. ROBERTS*

Iran was not cowed by Operation Nimble Archer. On October 22, a Silkworm missile fired from the Al Faw peninsula damaged the Sea Island Oil Terminal, responsible for a third of Kuwait's oil exporting capacity.²⁵⁶ On December 7, a Silkworm fired at Kuwait was diverted by a radar decoy barge which was deployed to help defend against missile attacks. Additionally, Tehran reinvigorated its anti-ship campaign, conducting 27 attacks resulting in one vessel being sunk and two declared CTLs in November and December.

The United States Navy remained busy during November and December of 1987, escorting 27 merchant vessels in eight convoys without interference from Iran or Iraq. A minor tragedy occurred on November 1, when sailors on the frigate USS *Carr* (FFG-52) fired on a dhow that approached a vessel of the Military Sealift Command too closely in

²⁵² Craig L. Symonds, *Decision At Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 293.

²⁵³ De Guttry and Ronzitti, *Law of Naval Warfare*, 177.

²⁵⁴ Symonds, *Decision at Sea*, 293.

²⁵⁵ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 154.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

the Strait of Hormuz, killing an Indian fisherman.²⁵⁷ On December 12, a U.S. Navy helicopter rescued 11 seamen from the 232,000 DWT Cypriot-flagged tanker *Pivot*, which had been struck by a Pasdaran rocket. A repeat of the *Stark* incident was avoided on February 12, when two Iraqi missiles were fired at the guided missile destroyer USS *Chandler* (DDG-996).²⁵⁸ Fortunately, both missiles missed.

Month	Number of Convoys	Number of Ships Escorted
July	1	2
August	5	13
September	4	9
October	4	8
November	5	16
December	3	11
Totals	22	59

Table 5. Earnest Will Convoys, 1987 (From: O'Rourke, Gulf Ops)²⁵⁹

The war in the Persian Gulf continued into 1988. The Iraqi air force pounded shipping servicing Iran's oil industry, sinking four vessels and damaging five beyond repair, including the 564,000 DWT tanker *Seawise Giant*. The Iranians responded with a mixture of Pasdaran and frigate attacks resulting in one vessel being sunk and two declared CTLs. The Iranians concentrated on unescorted vessels, with ships flying the flags of Greece, Denmark, Norway and Spain being the most frequent victims.²⁶⁰ Most Iranian attacks during this period occurred off the UAE and in the waters surrounding the Strait of Hormuz.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Mark, *Chronology*, 19.

²⁵⁸ Symonds, *Decision at Sea*, 295.

²⁵⁹ Ronald O'Rourke, "Gulf Ops," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 115 (May 1989), 49.

²⁶⁰ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 169.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Total
Iraq	8	6	6	0	13	3	4	0	40
Iran	8	5	13	7	5	3	5	1	47

Table 6. Frequency of Shipping Attacks, 1988 (From: Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping During the Iran – Iraq Crisis 1980 – 1988*)²⁶²

In February, Rear Admiral Anthony Less assumed command over the American Naval Forces in the Persian Gulf. In March, Less instituted a more aggressive strategy designed to “get in the face of the Iranians” and convince Tehran to halt its attacks on neutral shipping in the Persian Gulf.²⁶³ After months of witnessing Iranian attacks on non-U.S. flagged shipping, American naval officers were frustrated with having to stand idly by while innocent vessels were struck.²⁶⁴ While official U.S. policy remained limited to the protection of American-flagged vessels, Less wanted his Captains to “explore the gray area between shooting and standing idly” by as Iran attacked neutral vessels.²⁶⁵ Rear Admiral Less’s proactive strategy directed American war ships to shadow Iranian vessels in order to preclude attacks on neutral ships or the laying of minefields.²⁶⁶ Less ordered his commanders to intimidate their Iranian counterparts from interfering with neutral shipping by aggressively maneuvering their vessels in an attempt to force the Iranians to back down. Several of these cat and mouse episodes lasted hours, and produced some close calls.

The frigate USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (FFG-58) departed her homeport of Newport, Rhode Island and arrived in the Persian Gulf on February 14, 1988. *Samuel B. Roberts* immediately joined with USS *Chandler* and two reflagged tankers, the *Gas Princess* and *Townsend* for the eleventh inbound convoy of 1988.²⁶⁷ Commanded by Commander

²⁶² Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 166 – 167, 172 – 173. Additionally, three vessels were damaged by Iranian mines in December 1988, April 1989, and January 1991.

²⁶³ David B. Crist, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2006.

²⁶⁴ Ronald O’Rourke, “Gulf Ops,” United States Naval Institute Proceedings 115 (May 1989), 47.

²⁶⁵ Bradley Peniston, *No Higher Honor Saving the USS Samuel B. Roberts in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 89. Henceforth referred to as *No Higher Honor*.

²⁶⁶ David B. Crist, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2006.

²⁶⁷ Peniston, *No Higher Honor*, 83.

Paul X. Rinn, *Samuel B. Roberts* enjoyed a well-earned reputation for excellence. Rinn was an aggressive officer, who looked forward to working within the gray areas described by Rear Admiral Less.²⁶⁸ He had earlier engaged in a three hour jousting match with the Iranian frigate *Alvand* following the escort of convoy 11 to Kuwait. Rinn believed that the Iranian frigate was positioning itself to attack the Greek tanker *Tandis* and was very happy to have driven the *Alvand* off, later writing to his brother: “crew on a high – captain’s got balls!”²⁶⁹

Month	Number of Convoys	Number of Ships Escorted
January	7	16
February	7	18
March	6	10
April	7	18
May	6	14
June	10	16
July	8	13
August	10	17
September	7	17
October	10	19
November	12	22
December	15	20
Totals	105	200

Table 7. Earnest Will Convoys, 1988 (From: O’Rourke, Gulf Ops)²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Peniston, *No Higher Honor*, 89.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁷⁰ Ronald O’Rourke, “Gulf Ops,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 115 (May 1989), 49.

Commander Rinn's aggressive behavior continued in late February, during encounters with the *Alvand* and the frigate *Sahand*, and again on March 1 when he prevented the *Sahand* from boarding a merchant vessel that was registered in the Iraqi port of Basra.²⁷¹ With this act, Rinn technically exceeded his authority by interfering (as a neutral vessel) with Iran's belligerent right to board and search merchant vessels.²⁷² Rear Admiral Less's strategy of using his vessels to aggressively interfere with Iranian naval operations worked against the American naval involvement remaining limited and was pregnant with the danger of the situation escalating into war, always a possibility when purposeful force gunboat diplomacy is employed.²⁷³ By actively interfering with Iranian maritime operations, Tehran could have easily viewed the Americans as supporting Iraq's war effort and been blinded to the subtleties of "purposeful" force, making increased confrontation with the United States more likely, and decreasing the chances that the American use of force would remain limited.

On April 14, 1988, USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was steaming south through the Persian Gulf towards a scheduled rendezvous with the USS *San Jose* (AFS-7). Shortly before 1639 local time three black objects were observed by the frigate's bow lookout, who immediately informed the bridge.²⁷⁴ Captain Rinn was backing his ship away from the floating mines when, at 1650, USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was rocked by an explosion on its port side near the helicopter hanger. The blast broke the keel of the American frigate, nearly tearing the ship in half, and started fires. Miraculously, no one was killed, although ten sailors were injured.²⁷⁵ Superhuman efforts by the ship's crew, which had previously received an award for exceptional damage control, saved the vessel. The American frigate eventually reached Dubai, and would later be transported to the United States by a heavy lift vessel. The ship was eventually repaired and returned to service.

²⁷¹ Peniston, *No Higher Honor*, 95.

²⁷² Prior to interfering with the *Sahand* boarding, Rinn was warned by Admiral Less against being too provocative. See Peniston, *No Higher Honor*, 94. Rinn's behavior may have been atypical of other U.S. Navy ship commanders of the time. David Crist, phone interview with author, April 5, 2007.

²⁷³ Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 37, 86.

²⁷⁴ Peniston, *No Higher Honor*, 115 – 116.

²⁷⁵ Palmer, *Guardians*, 138.

A mixed-nationality minesweeping force converged on the area where *Samuel B. Roberts* was hit and discovered eight additional mines.²⁷⁶ Upon inspection, it was revealed that the mines bore similar markings to those that had been captured onboard *Iran Ajr* in September 1987, and that the lack of marine growth on the weapons indicated that they had recently been sown by Iran.²⁷⁷ This field had been laid by the Pasdaran, against the wishes of the Iranian Navy, who had made an effort to sweep them prior to *Samuel B. Roberts* being hit.²⁷⁸ This fact is illustrative of the conflicting agendas of the various factions within the Iranian revolutionary movement, and highlights the failure of the Americans to realistically evaluate Tehran's ability to perceive and respond consistently to a deterrent strategy. The limited effectiveness of Iran's administrative authority worked against Iran's acceptance of Operation Earnest Will.

G. WAR AT SEA: OPERATION PRAYING MANTIS

Retaliation for the mining of USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was discussed in Washington, Bahrain and Tampa, headquarters of CENTCOM. In Washington, the State Department stressed that any retaliation should remain "proportionate."²⁷⁹ Admiral Crowe pushed for the destruction of "targets of military significance" that would degrade Tehran's ability to interfere with American shipping.²⁸⁰ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed the destruction of an Iranian warship as a signal to Tehran that the United States was "willing to exact a serious price" for continued attacks on American vessels.²⁸¹ Admiral Crowe went so far as to designate the ship to be destroyed. The Iranian frigate *Sabalan* had developed a reputation for cold-bloodedness; its commander being termed Captain Nasty for his habit of machine-gunning the living quarters of merchant vessels.²⁸² General Crist recommended striking targets which allowed the Iranians to monitor American convoys, proposing to destroy "dual use" oil

²⁷⁶ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 210.

²⁷⁷ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 210.

²⁷⁸ Symonds, *Decision At Sea*, 296.

²⁷⁹ Crowe and Chanoff, *The Line of Fire*, 200.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 200 – 201.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 122.

platforms used to support Pasdaran activities, later explaining “I wanted to take their eyes out.”²⁸³ Admiral Less proposed strikes by aircraft and Tomahawk missiles against targets at the Bandar Abbas naval base.²⁸⁴ National Command Authority sided with General Crist by designating two oil platforms in the Sirri and Sassan oil fields as targets. Admiral Crowe still specified the destruction of an Iranian warship, personally telling Admiral Less to “sink the *Sabalan*, put it on the bottom.”²⁸⁵

By the morning of April 18, preparations for the American strike, now known as Operation Praying Mantis, were complete. Admiral Less divided his force into three surface action groups (SAG), each comprised of three ships. SAG Bravo was assigned the mission of destroying the Sassan oil platform while SAG Charlie would shell the Sirri Platform. SAG Delta would patrol off Bandar Abbas and pounce on any Iranian warships that attempted to interfere with the operation. An aircraft carrier battlegroup centered on USS *Enterprise* (CVN-65) was on station in the Gulf of Oman to provide air cover. These aircraft received additional support from Saudi-based AWACS and tanker aircraft.²⁸⁶

By 0600 on April 18, the ships of SAG Bravo were ready to commence the destruction of the Sassan oil platform.²⁸⁷ Warnings were broadcast in English, Arabic and Farsi instructing Iranian personnel to abandon the platform. Approximately 30 Iranians fled, but several remained behind. The large oil platform was taken under fire by the American warships and Marine Corps Cobra helicopters. Fire was halted when the remaining Iranian crew members were observed abandoning the structure, only to resume when they were clear. A Marine Corps assault team was airlifted from USS *Trenton* to the platform, which was declared secure at 1005.²⁸⁸ The Marines planted 1300 pounds of explosives which further damaged the Iranian structure.

²⁸³ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 211- 212.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 212.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 213.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 215.

²⁸⁷ SAG Bravo was comprised of the destroyer *Merrill* (DD-976), the guided missile destroyer *Lynde McCormick* (DDG-8) and the amphibious assault ship *Trenton* (LPD-14).

²⁸⁸ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 219.

SAG Charlie struck the Sirri platform simultaneously with SAG Bravo's attack on Sassan.²⁸⁹ Warnings to evacuate the platform were issued, and as on the Sassan platform, not all the Iranian crewmen complied. The American ships opened fire at 0815, setting the platform on fire. At 1048 the Iranian frigate *Joshan* was detected as it approached the Sirri oil field.²⁹⁰ USS *Wainwright* (CG-28) warned the Iranian frigate to leave the area three times. *Joshan* refused to comply and launched a Harpoon missile at the American cruiser. The missile passed by the American cruiser with a whoosh, so close that the men on the bridge could feel the heat from the missile's burning rocket propellant, and landed in the water 75 yards off the ship's stern.²⁹¹ SAG Charlie responded with at least six SM-1 missiles and one Harpoon, all but the Harpoon striking the hapless Iranian frigate.²⁹² SAG Charlie then finished off *Joshan* with gunfire. Shortly after, *Wainwright* took an Iranian F-4 fighter under fire, damaging its wing with a surface-to-air missile.

The battle spread to other parts of the Persian Gulf. In the southern Gulf, a formation of Pasdaran small craft attacked targets in the Mubarek oil fields, striking several ships, including the American-flagged oil field support vessel *Willi Tide*. The Iranian small craft were attacked by *Enterprise*-based A-6 Intruder attack aircraft, which sunk one vessel. The remaining Pasdaran craft fled to Abu Musa Island. Shortly thereafter, U.S. aircraft detected the Iranian frigate *Sahand*, sister ship of the much-despised *Sabalan*. The Iranian frigate unsuccessfully took the American aircraft under fire and was in turn destroyed by a combination of bomb and Harpoon missile strikes. *Sahand* sunk following the detonation of its magazine, taking most of its 135-man crew to the bottom of the Persian Gulf.²⁹³ Later in the afternoon, another A-6 discovered the hated *Sabalan* off Bandar Abbas. The Iranian frigate fired on the American jet, which retaliated with a bomb that was dropped down the vessel's smoke stack. *Sabalan* was

²⁸⁹ SAG Charlie was comprised of the cruiser *Wainwright* (CG-28), the frigate *Bagley* (FF-1069) and the frigate *Simpson* (FFG-56).

²⁹⁰ Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 221.

²⁹¹ Symonds, *Decision at Sea*, 306.

²⁹² Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 222 – 223. Symonds, *Decision at Sea*, 307. Symonds contends that only four missiles were fired by SAG Charlie and that all struck the *Joshan*.

²⁹³ Symonds, *Decision at Sea*, 312 – 313. Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 224.

dead in the water as SAG Delta and an additional air strike closed on the helpless vessel. Washington called back the strikes, Admiral Crowe explaining to Secretary of Defense Carlucci "we've shed enough blood today."²⁹⁴

Operation Praying Mantis was the largest surface action fought by the U.S. Navy since the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944. Iranian losses totaled three oil platforms heavily damaged, six surface vessels, including a frigate, sunk and another frigate very heavily damaged. An unknown number of Iranians were killed. The United States lost one AH-1T attack helicopter and its two-man crew.²⁹⁵ The heavy losses incurred by the Iranian Navy on April 18 corresponded with a turn for the worse in the ground war against Iraq. On the same day, Iraqi forces recaptured the Al Faw Peninsula. Over the course of the spring and summer Iranian troops were continuously pushed back by the Iraqi army, which reentered Iranian territory for the first time since 1982 on July 13.

H. CHAPTER SUMMARY

Despite American overconfidence in the ability to deter Iran, the first nine months of Operation Earnest Will could be declared a success. While 1987, and the first four months of 1988, witnessed the most sustained Iranian assault on Gulf shipping during the Iran – Iraq war²⁹⁶, the Americans had largely succeeded in preventing attacks on Kuwaiti-owned American-flagged tankers. While Iran was dissuaded from attacking American flagged shipping trading with Kuwait, Tehran compensated by attacking vessels flying other neutral flags that were trading with Kuwait and other GCC countries. These attacks served to further isolate Iran from the West, as Great Britain, France and other European nations deployed naval forces to the Persian Gulf to defend merchant vessels flying their respective flags. Additionally, the threat of increased Soviet presence

²⁹⁴ Crowe and Chanoff, *The Line of Fire*, 202.

²⁹⁵ Palmer, *Guardians*, 144. Iran claimed to have shot the AH-1T down. However, when the wreckage was recovered from the bottom of the Persian Gulf, there was no sign of battle damage. It is possible that the AH-1T impacted the water while trying to avoid Iranian fire.

²⁹⁶ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 136 - 137, 172 - 173. In 1987 Iran conducted 89 attacks with 3 vessels being declared CTLs. In the first eight months of 1988, 50 attacks were conducted resulting in a Panamanian vessel being sunk and two vessels being declared CTLs. Between July 1987 and April 1988, Iran conducted 90 attacks. During the time period of Operation Earnest Will, Iran conducted 107 attacks on merchant vessels transiting the gulf. Four vessels were sunk and five vessels were declared CTLs during Operation Earnest Will.

in the gulf had been contained while moderate GCC states were increasingly cooperative with the United States.

The decision by Rear Admiral Less to institute an aggressive naval posture, however, set the United States on course towards becoming more deeply involved in the Iran – Iraq War, and set in motion an escalatory dynamic that threatened to alter the basic nature of the American operation. On April 29, 1988, Operation Earnest Will entered a new phase of open-ended intervention, albeit still under the guise of legal neutrality, when the United States declared that it would extend the U.S. Navy’s protective umbrella over all neutral merchant shipping in the Persian Gulf.

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VI. AMERICAN ESCALATION AND THE *VINCENNES* INCIDENT

A. CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

On April 29, 1988, eleven days after Operation Praying Mantis, Secretary of Defense Frank C. Carlucci announced that the United States Navy would provide distress assistance to all “friendly, innocent neutral vessels flying a nonbelligerent flag outside declared exclusion zones, that are not carrying contraband or resisting legitimate visit and search by a Persian Gulf belligerent.”²⁹⁷ As Iran was the only belligerent conducting attacks outside of declared exclusion zones at that time, the policy change represented a further tilt towards Iraq. While once again declaring a policy of “strict neutrality,” Secretary of Defense Carlucci stated, “We are not the policeman of the Gulf, nor do we wish to be. We cannot stand by and watch innocent people be killed or maimed by malicious, lawless actions when we have the means to assist and perhaps prevent them.”²⁹⁸ This policy decision set the United States on a course towards increased confrontation with Iran and was responsible for the worst tragedy of the American involvement in the Iran – Iraq war.

American expansion of the protection scheme occurred despite the fact that Iranian attacks on neutral shipping decreased in the aftermath of Operation Praying Mantis. Two vessels were struck in the week following the April 18 U.S. – Iranian clash in the Persian Gulf. The Pasdaran struck five times in May, resulting in the Maltese bulk carrier *Don Miguel* being declared a CTL on May 27.²⁹⁹ Pasdaran activity declined even further in June, which witnessed a mere three Iranian attacks.

Operation Praying Mantis also coincided with a turn for the worse in the ground war for Iran. On the night of April 17, the Iraqi VII Army Corps and units from the Republican Guard secured the Al Faw peninsula following a 36 hour battle.³⁰⁰ Iraqi

²⁹⁷ De Guttry and Ronzitti, eds., *Law of Naval Warfare*, 196.

²⁹⁸ George C. Wilson, “U.S. Role In Gulf Expands; President Orders Navy To Protect Neutral Shipping,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 1988, A01. Available from <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed May 15, 2006).

²⁹⁹ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 172.

³⁰⁰ Richard M. Preece, *Iran – Iraq War* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 1988), 7.

forces recaptured Manjun Island on June 25 and had succeeded in expelling all Iranian forces from southern Iraq by June 26. There is no question that Carlucci's announcement came at a time when the fortunes of were turning broadly against Iran.

B. DEEPENING U.S. INVOLVEMENT

1. U.S. Objectives

The decision to expand the protection scheme was designed to “add a turn to the ever tightening screw on Iran’s military.”³⁰¹ Similar ideas had been proposed as early as summer 1987, but were opposed by Secretary of Defense Weinberger and General Crist, commander of CENTCOM.³⁰² In the wake of the success of Praying Mantis and the Iraqi victories on the battlefield, the idea to expand the scheme was forwarded to Secretary of Defense by Admiral Crowe in an effort to increase military pressure on Tehran.³⁰³ Carlucci was predisposed in any case to extending the Navy’s protective umbrella to all neutral shipping. The feeling within the Reagan Administration was that the combination of the April 18 Iraqi offensive and the losses suffered during Operation Praying Mantis would be the last nail in Iran’s coffin, pushing Tehran towards accepting a ceasefire.

2. Gunboat Diplomacy Revisited

James Cable has proposed that, the closer purposeful force “can be related to the actual cause of the dispute, the more likely it is to achieve its objective while remaining limited in character.”³⁰⁴ Operation Earnest Will was initially conceived as “a limited response to a very real threat” and was not designed to constitute “an open-ended unilateral commitment to defend all non-belligerent shipping in the Persian Gulf.”³⁰⁵ Through the reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers, the United States sought to deter Iran’s attacks on the Emirate’s shipping, and by doing so, demonstrate support for moderate Gulf states against Iranian pressure.³⁰⁶ These were limited objectives that had been

³⁰¹ Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” 232.

³⁰² David B. Crist, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2006.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 36.

³⁰⁵ Weinberger, *Persian Gulf*, ii, iii.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

largely achieved by April 1988. Given the low number of attacks on American-flagged shipping during the first nine months of Operation Earnest Will, these limited objectives appear to have been tolerable to Tehran. However, by expanding the protection scheme, American policy became divorced from the initial cause of its involvement in Operation Earnest Will, attacks on Kuwaiti shipping. The new American policy “lowered the threshold of crisis,”³⁰⁷ and with the setbacks on the battlefield in the spring of 1988, was bound to be considered intolerable by Tehran. This fact increased the danger of the United States becoming more directly involved in the war, a major danger when utilizing purposeful force.³⁰⁸

Limited naval force, to continue with Cable’s analysis, “should possess a definite purpose, of which the extent is apparent to both sides.”³⁰⁹ In contrast to the first nine months of Operation Earnest Will, when American policy objectives centered on the protection of American-flagged vessels, the new American policy was neither defined nor limited. Success for the new American policy required a halt to all Iranian attacks on shipping, which would have allowed Saddam Hussein to continue Iraq’s anti-shipping campaign without fear of concomitant attacks on vessels supporting Iraqi allies. Thus, expanding the protection scheme to all neutral shipping effectively served the Iraqi war effort and worked against American claims of neutrality. This could only have reinforced Iranian perceptions that the United States was now a belligerent in the Iran – Iraq War, a factor which worked against the American use of force remaining limited. Henceforth, the level of American involvement in the Iran – Iraq War would depend, for practical purposes, on the discretion of individual Pasdaran commanders, a group described by former Secretary of Defense Weinberger as “lunatics” and “pirates.”³¹⁰

It was in the course of engaging Pasdaran forces that the culminating tragedy of America’s intervention in the Iran-Iraq War would occur. On July 3, 1988, American warships, responding to reports of Pasdaran small craft menacing neutral shipping,

³⁰⁷ Janice Gross-Stein, “The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place,” *International Security* 13, no. 3, Available from <http://links.jstor.org> (accessed May 2, 2006), 156.

³⁰⁸ Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 86.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³¹⁰ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. *U.S. Policy In The Persian Gulf* (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1988), 48. Crowe and Chanoff, *The Line of Fire*, 179.

became embroiled in a small-scale surface action with several Iranian vessels. This action would not have occurred under the original limited Earnest Will protection scheme, and it ended when the USS *Vincennes* (CG-49) mistakenly shot down an Iranian airliner, killing 290 people.

C. THE VINCENNES DISASTER

The *Vincennes* was a *Ticonderoga*-class AEGIS cruiser, dispatched to the Gulf to compensate for the lack of airborne AWACS coverage, which hampered American efforts to monitor the southern Persian Gulf during the first ten months of Operation Earnest Will. The United Arab Emirates refused to grant American E-3 AWACS aircraft overflight rights and carrier-based E-2C AWACS aircraft were flight-hour limited due to the emergence of stress cracks in the aging aircraft's wings.³¹¹ The deployment of several P-3 aircraft to Bahrain enhanced the American capability to monitor the southern Persian Gulf, but a gap in radar coverage in the Strait of Hormuz remained nevertheless.³¹²

The Department of Defense considered deploying an AEGIS cruiser as a means to extend American coverage over the entire Persian Gulf as early as September 1987.³¹³ This suggestion was met with great resistance by the U.S. Navy, as most officers were loath to deploy the preeminent "blue water" anti-air platform to the "pigsty" of the Persian Gulf-- high-value AEGIS ship being a vulnerable to mine damage as any other kind.³¹⁴ However, uncertainty over Iranian response to Operation Praying Mantis, coupled with the construction of additional Silkworm missile sites in positions threatening traffic in the Strait of Hormuz tipped the balance in favoring of sending the *Vincennes* to the Gulf.³¹⁵

The *Vincennes*, under the command of Captain Will Rogers, was engaged in a fleet exercise on April 20, 1988, when it was ordered to return to her homeport in San

³¹¹ Navias and Hooton, *Tanker Wars*, 174.

³¹² Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 232 – 233.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 233.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *Investigation Into The Downing Of An Iranian Airliner By The U.S.S. "Vincennes"* (Washington: U.S. Government printing Office, 1988), 32.

Diego and deploy to the Persian Gulf the following day.³¹⁶ *Vincennes* had completed a myriad of naval exercises in the six months prior to her deployment and was considered to be in an excellent state of readiness.³¹⁷ These exercises included simulated Earnest Will convoy missions, anti-Silkworm missile training, and anti-terrorism training. Following four additional days to allow for additional preparations for the short-notice deployment, *Vincennes* departed San Diego on April 25 and arrived at the Subic Bay training area in the Philippines on May 10. USS *Vincennes* underwent four additional days of intense training in the Philippines prior to continuing her voyage to the Persian Gulf. Additionally, Captain Rogers and his officers and crew were subjected to two weeks of Rules of Engagement Exercises tailored to the Persian Gulf ROE. The American cruiser transited the Strait of Hormuz during the evening of May 27 and arrived in Sitrah, Bahrain on May 29.³¹⁸

Captain Rogers met with Rear Admiral Less on May 29 to discuss the manner in which his ship was to be employed. Rear Admiral Less expressed his pleasure in having the *Vincennes*'s capabilities in the Persian Gulf and emphasized that Captain Roger's short-notice deployment resulted from high-level decisions.³¹⁹ The American Admiral characterized the Silkworm threat as "real, but only a possibility" and that the Iranians had not done more than "move some dirt around possible launch sites." Less was primarily concerned with the poor state of the information flow from the Persian Gulf to his command ship, USS *Coronado* (AGF-11). Captain Rogers was directed to rectify this problem, Less explaining that he needed a tough manager and that Rogers would "not make any friends." Rogers's management of the information flow, couple with his aggressiveness³²⁰ would soon result in *Vincennes* being given the nickname "Robocruiser" by other American warships in the Persian Gulf.³²¹

³¹⁶ William M. Fogarty, *Investigation Report: Formal Investigation into the Circumstances Surrounding the Downing of Iran Air Flight 655 on 3 July 1988* (Washington: Department of Defense, 1988), 18. Henceforth referred to as *Fogarty Report*.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 – 19. The following description of *Vincennes*'s predeployment training and readiness is taken directly from the Fogarty Report.

³¹⁸ Rogers and Rogers, *Storm Center*, 83.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84. The narrative of the Less/Rogers meeting is taken directly from this source.

³²⁰ For evidence of Captain Rogers's aggressiveness, see Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," 234, and David Carlson, "The *Vincennes* Incident," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 115 (May 1989), 88.

³²¹ Rogers and Rogers, *Storm Center*, 133.

Captain Rogers commenced his first patrol in the Strait of Hormuz Western Patrol Area (SOHWPA) on June 1. On June 2, *Vincennes* monitored an Iranian frigate conducting a boarding of the bulk carrier *Vevey*, during which Rogers may have displayed over aggressiveness by menacing the Iranian frigate.³²² The American cruiser spent the remainder of June on patrol in the central and southern Persian Gulf, with brief stops in Bahrain between patrol periods.³²³ On July 2, *Vincennes* escorted the heavy lift vessel *Mighty Servant II* through the Strait of Hormuz. *Mighty Servant II* was transporting the mine-damaged *Samuel B Roberts* back to the United States for repairs.

On July 2, 1988, the Danish-flagged merchant vessel *Karama Maersk* radioed a distress message following an attack by several Pasdaran craft 20 miles southwest of Abu Musa Island. The frigate USS *Elmer Montgomery* (FF-1082) responded to the distress call – the first time a U.S. Naval combatant provided distress assistance to a vessel flying a foreign flag in support of the expanded American commitment in the Persian Gulf. The Iranian attack did not badly damage the Danish vessel and no crew members were injured. Arriving on the scene, the American frigate observed at least three small craft fire rockets at *Karama Maersk*.³²⁴ USS *Elmer Montgomery* dispersed the small craft with a warning shot from her five inch gun. The Pasdaran craft fled to the northwest, ending the brief surface action.

USS *Elmer Montgomery* went into action again on July 3. At 0630 the American frigate observed seven Pasdaran small craft approaching a merchant vessel near the Strait of Hormuz.³²⁵ Shortly thereafter, 13 Pasdaran craft in three groups were observed, one group of four small craft assuming position on *Elmer Montgomery*'s port quarter.³²⁶ The Iranian small craft queried several merchant vessels on VHF radio, but made no attacks. USS *Vincennes* was proceeding to a scheduled port visit in Bahrain following the *Mighty Servant II/Samuel B Roberts* escort mission at this time.

³²² For two vastly different views of this incident, see Rogers and Rogers, *Storm Center*, 88 and David Evans, "Vincennes A Case Study," available from <http://navsci.berkeley.edu/ns401> (accessed May 11, 2006).

³²³ Fogarty, *Fogarty Report*, 20.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24. All times in the *Vincennes* incident narrative are drawn from the Fogarty report.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

At 0711, *Elmer Montgomery* heard five to seven explosions, source unknown, emanating from the north. No merchant vessels requested assistance. At 0712, *Vincennes* was ordered to proceed north to *Elmer Montgomery*'s position to monitor Pasdaran activity.³²⁷ Additionally, the cruiser's embarked LAMPS helicopter was ordered to monitor the Iranian small craft. At 0749 the helicopter reported that four Pasdaran craft were approaching a merchant vessel. At 0818, Captain Rogers ordered his crew to their battle stations (general quarters). The Iranian small craft eventually stood down following a warning from an Omani patrol craft and Captain Rogers asked for permission to resume his course for Bahrain and secured from general quarters at 0846.³²⁸ Rogers's LAMPS helicopter remained behind to monitor the Pasdaran craft.

At 0915, *Vincennes*'s helicopter reported being fired on by a group of Pasdaran craft, the aircrew observing "several small flashes and puffs of smoke approximately 100 yards from the helo."³²⁹ In order for the Iranian small arms fire to pass this close to the American helicopter, its aircrew either accidentally or intentionally flew much closer than the four mile limit imposed by American ROE. Captain Rogers ordered his crew to their battle stations and started to close the helicopter's position at high speed. The helicopter crew relayed the position of the Pasdaran craft that had fired at them via secure data link, and at 0920 captain Rogers was directed to assume tactical control of *Elmer Montgomery*.

The Rules of Engagement (ROE) in place on July 3, 1988, emphasized the responsibility of Commanding Officers to defend their ships from attack.³³⁰ Pursuit of hostile forces was permitted if "initiated in response to, and in defense against the hostile acts or hostile intent of such forces. Pursuit will be terminated when the hostile force no longer poses a threat."³³¹ American ships and aircraft were allowed to enter Iranian territorial waters in defense against hostile acts or hostile intent demonstrated by Iranian forces. However, pursuit was to be terminated "when the hostile force no longer poses an

³²⁷ Fogarty, *Fogarty Report*, 24.

³²⁸ Rogers and Rogers, *Storm Center*, 4. A July 13, 1992 *Newsweek* article by John Barry and Roger Charles entitled "Sea of Lies" paints the picture of an aggressive Captain Rogers being ordered to leave the area. The article contains many misrepresentations and factual errors, leading this author to question many of its conclusions.

³²⁹ Fogarty, *Fogarty Report*, 25.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 13 – 15.

immediate threat.”³³² The ROE required commanders to positively identify all unknown air contacts prior to designating them hostile and engaging, unless the unknown contact is displaying hostile intent or actually committing a hostile act. The ROE provided several methods to warn off aircraft in the event that radio warnings went unheeded.³³³ However, the ROE emphasized the Captain’s duty to defend his vessel: “If a potentially hostile contact persists in closing after you warn him away and if, in your judgment, the threat of attack is imminent, it is an inherent right and responsibility to act in self-defense. *We do not want, nor intend, to absorb a first attack* (emphasis added).”³³⁴

At 0939, Captain Rogers requested permission from Rear Admiral Less to engage the Iranian small craft. Captain Rogers felt justified in taking the small craft under fire, as they had committed a hostile act by firing at *Vincennes*’s LAMPS helicopter and he perceived the Pasdaran craft to be a threat to his ship because they appeared to be closing *Vincennes*’s position.³³⁵ Less requested that Rogers verify that the Iranian craft were not leaving the immediate area of USS *Vincennes*. Upon receiving word that the Pasdaran craft were closing with the American cruiser, Less granted Rogers permission to open fire at 0941.

USS *Vincennes* and USS *Elmer Montgomery* commenced firing at 0943. During the course of the 24 minute surface engagement, the two American warships crossed into Iranian territorial waters. At 0947, an Airbus A300 passenger aircraft took off from a joint military and civilian airfield at Bandar Abbas, Iran. The aircraft was immediately detected by *Vincennes*’s SPY-1 radar at an altitude of 900 feet and a range of 47 miles from the ongoing surface battle. As the radar track moved over the Persian Gulf, it was designated as “Unknown-Assumed Enemy,” standard operating procedure whenever Iranian aircraft were detected.³³⁶ An American frigate entering the Persian Gulf, USS *Sides* (FFG-14) made radar contact on the Iranian airliner at 0948. Despite the fact that the Iranian aircraft was transmitting a transponder code and maneuvering in a manner

³³² Fogarty, *Fogarty Report*, 13 – 15.

³³³ Ibid. These were: locking on with fire control radar; maneuvering to unmask weapons; shooting flares; flashing signal/search lights; training guns; and firing warning shots.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid., 26 – 27.

³³⁶ Ibid., 29.

appropriate for a civilian aircraft, a series of errors in *Vincennes's* Combat Information Center (CIC) resulted in the aircraft being misidentified as an American-built F-14 fighter, several of which had been sold to the Shah in the 1970s. Tragically, the aircraft's course took the A300 right over the top of the American cruiser.

At 0951, Captain Rogers was ordered to take tactical control of USS *Sides*, which was also closely monitoring the Iranian air contact. Captain Rogers informed Admiral Less that he intended to engage the Iranian aircraft when it reached a range of twenty miles. Less ordered Rogers to attempt to warn the aircraft away prior to firing. Between 0949 and 0953, the two American warships (*Vincennes* and *Sides*) transmitted nine radio warnings to the Iranian aircraft, none of which were acknowledged. At 0952, the Iranian aircraft was 22 nautical miles away from *Vincennes* at an altitude of 9200 feet.³³⁷ At about this same time, crewmen in *Vincennes's* CIC erroneously reported, due to a series of mistakes, that the air contact was descending and accelerating. No such confusion existed in USS *Sides's* CIC, but the American frigate failed to radio Captain Rogers its assessment of the Iranian air contact, a critical error. Despite his announced intent to fire at the Iranian aircraft at twenty miles, Rogers held fire in the hope that the aircraft would turn away.

At 0954, the Iranian Airbus was 12 nautical miles from *Vincennes* at an altitude of 12,370 feet. However, *Vincennes's* CIC watch standers remained convinced that the aircraft was descending from 7800 feet.³³⁸ Captain Rogers believed that he could wait no longer, and at 0954 and 22 seconds, at a range of ten miles, two SM-2 missiles were launched, both of which struck the Iranian airliner, killing all 290 passengers and crew members. *Vincennes* and *Elmer Montgomery* halted their battle with the Pasdaran surface craft at 1003, having expended 119 rounds of five inch ammunition.³³⁹

While the direct cause of the Iran Air 655 disaster was human error, the foundation for this tragedy was laid on April 29 with the announcement that the United States would provide distress assistance to all neutral shipping. The new policy guaranteed increased, and increasingly hostile, contact between Iranian and American

³³⁷ Fogarty, *Fogarty Report*, 34.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37 – 38.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

forces, driving the Reagan Administration's use of gunboat diplomacy across the line separating limited naval force and open warfare. By assuming a more aggressive posture towards Iranian naval units, the United States ceased being a neutral party in the Iran – Iraq War.

The Iran – Iraq war ended when Iran unconditionally accepted the provisions put forth in United Nations Security Council Resolution 598. Ironically, the Iran Air 655 tragedy provided the Iranian government the political cover required to accept a cease fire. On July 17, 1988, Iranian President Khomeini wrote the U.N. Secretary General, “We have decided to declare officially that the Islamic Republic of Iran – because of the importance it attaches to saving the lives of human beings and the establishment of justices and regional and international peace and security – accepts U.N. Resolution 598.”³⁴⁰

D. CONCLUSION

When the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq went into effect in August 1988, the United States had achieved all of the strategic, political and economic objectives that spurred the Reagan Administration's decision to protect Kuwaiti-owned shipping: the Soviet Union was denied further influence in the Persian Gulf; the United States had proven to be a dependable ally to GCC countries; an Iranian victory over Iraq was prevented; and the flow of Gulf oil had been protected. However, the “success” of Operation Earnest Will has masked errors which could imperil future examples of American gunboat diplomacy.

Thomas L. McNaugher attributed much of the American success in Operation Earnest Will to luck.³⁴¹ In order for future applications of gunboat diplomacy to be successful, it is vital that American strategists understand that the success of Operation Earnest Will occurred in spite of flawed assumptions concerning the ability of the U.S. Navy to deter Iran and that these complacent assumptions endangered the position of the United States in the Persian Gulf. The United States was fortunate that its failure to adequately examine the factors that influenced Iran's decision to accept or dispute the

³⁴⁰ Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*, 61.

³⁴¹ Karsh, *The Iran – Iraq War*, 192.

provocative American policy did not result in the United States becoming more deeply involved in the Iran – Iraq war. If a U.S. warship had been mined on July 24, 1987, in lieu of M.V. *Bridgeton*, the loss of an American warship and personnel, coming so closely on the heels of the *Stark* incident, could have ended the Reagan Administration’s new policy. Had USS *Samuel B. Roberts* been sunk on April 14, 1988, or if USS *Vincennes* or *Elmer Montgomery* had been damaged by Iranian Silkworm missiles after entering Iranian territorial waters on July 3, the United States might well have responded by launching air strikes against the Iranian mainland. Iran’s July 17, 1988, decision to accept UNSCR 598 was fortunate for the United States in that it precluded additional Iranian – American naval clashes , whose escalatory potential is all too apparent from sequence of events that led to the *Vincennes* disaster.

American policy in the Persian Gulf was greatly aided by Tehran’s amazing capacity for self-destructive behavior. Iran stubbornly persisted in attacking neutral shipping even though Tehran’s campaign in the Persian Gulf had no effect on the Iraqi war effort. Iran’s attacks on Western European shipping resulted in a multinational armada being dispatched to the Persian Gulf to defend against Pasdaran attacks, further isolating Tehran from the West. Finally, attacks on “moderate” Persian Gulf countries isolated Iran from its neighbors to the point that no Arab country other than Syria condemned the United States for destroying Iran Air 655. As the current situation in Iraq illustrates, however, the United States cannot always be certain that its policies will enjoy the support of the world, or that America’s political opponents will engage in self-defeating behavior. If gunboat diplomacy is to remain a viable foreign policy option for the United States, it is vital that the negative lessons from Operation Earnest Will be understood. Everyone’s luck runs out eventually, and on that day the best remedy for misfortune will be a clear, and appropriately modest, appreciation of what the limited use of force can accomplish.

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