

*This Scud's for you*

# The Gulf War From Tel Aviv

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Okay, I should have known better. It had been almost 10 years since the last war, and Israel goes to war about every 10 years. Somehow I did not believe the rules applied to me. Even the first night, awakened by sirens, my principal emotion was surprise.

The Persian Gulf war began the night of 17 January 1991. Tel Aviv Bureau of the Foreign Broadcast Information Service had just switched to around-the-clock operations, and my shift ended at midnight. I was excited and I finally went to bed at 1:30 a.m. At 2:30 a.m. the phone rang, and a contact at the US Embassy told me the war had begun. I spent the rest of the night talking to a friend on the phone, listening to the BBC, and hoping the sounds in the night were not incoming missiles.

At dawn, I called my parents and told them not to worry. "If the Iraqis had any missiles," I said, "they would have used them last night." My father laughed, and he said he thought I was right. I was glad that one resident of the planet agreed with my reasoning.

After three hours of sleep, I went to work at noon for my 12-hour shift. It was an exciting shift, enlivened further by an item from London announcing that the Iraqi Ambassador to Belgium was threatening vague reprisals for the war and saying, incidentally, that Iraq would bomb Israel with chemical missiles whenever the urge struck. I calmed myself with the thought that Iraqi threats against Israel had become so common that Nicosia was now filing them at routine precedence.

## **The First Attack**

I went home exhausted at midnight. I went to bed at 1:00 a.m., but I was awakened by sirens just before 2:00 a.m. I knew what the sirens meant. I had recently dislocated my shoulder and, when everyone had been told to prepare sealed rooms I was unable to comply. Furthermore, because I was working long, odd hours, I had been unable to find anyone to help me.

A sealed room is prepared by taping plastic—garbage bags, in my case—over the windows with masking tape and covering the vents the same way. We also were told to put drinking water and food in the sealed room and to prepare a pail of water mixed with bleach. When the siren went off, we were to don our gas masks, tape up the door, and put wet towels soaked in bleach underneath the door to keep out the gas. Then we were to listen to the radio and wait for instructions.

A neighbor had invited me to come over, if worse came to worse. When I heard the siren, I jumped out of bed and grabbed my gas mask, a flashlight, and my shoes. I ran out the door; my neighbor was already at her door, wearing her gas mask, and gesturing to me to come in. I ran inside, clutching my bundle, and we went into her sealed room. I immediately donned my gas mask, and we sealed the door with masking tape, put towels under the door, and sat down—trying not to look at each other's faces made unfamiliar by the black plastic masks. We were both breathing nervously and as deeply as the masks' filters allowed.

After a few minutes, we heard the missiles hit. I counted four or five explosions that night. As we sat and shivered, my neighbor told me she was not going to put up with this sort of thing any more. (Indeed, she left the next day, and she did not come back.)

We tuned in to the BBC, which was running a program on Broadway musicals. On the hour, the BBC finally announced that there had been a missile attack on Tel Aviv, and no one knew whether the warheads were chemical or conventional. We certainly did not know.

We stayed in that room for four hours. Later, I learned that one of those first missiles had fallen near a gas station, and the sensitive instruments of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were picking up fumes from the gasoline. This caused confusion and delays in making a decision as to whether or not people should be allowed out of the sealed rooms.

### War of Nerves

The first missile strikes were frightening and immobilizing. Bill Brown, the senior editor, was the “lucky” guy to oversee the first strike on Israel. The monitors were frightened, and the whole country stayed at home. Schools were closed, and few vehicles could be seen on the streets. We had to work hard to persuade our monitors to come to work and almost as hard to get them to leave at the end of their shifts. Even renting a room at a nearby hotel did not help. The monitors did not want to walk the two blocks from the hotel to the bureau. They were terrified of being by themselves during an attack, a fear I shared. In fact, several of them were caught outside when the sirens went off.

To put the danger in perspective, more people died in car accidents during the war than died in missile attacks. Few died as a direct result of missiles. More died from heart attacks and suffocation while wearing their gas masks. On the other hand, about 1,000 people were injured by flying glass or because they injected themselves with atropine. (A syringe of atropine was provided in the gas mask kits as an antidote to nerve gas.) The small number of deaths, however, is in no way a true measure of the fear and anxiety caused by the attacks.

The American staffers did not have their families to worry about, as the dependents were evacuated before the war. Many of the monitors and teletype operators were leaving small children and aged parents at home when they came to work. In addition, several of the monitors’ husbands were called up by the IDF, leaving the women alone with their families. The monitors and the teletype operators were more frightened than the Americans; they had more to lose.

### Becoming Routine

The bureau worked through it all, and it became quite a production. The sirens would sound, and the Embassy radio would confirm a launch. The Turkish monitors, with their earphones on, frequently did not hear the sirens and had to be informed that things were happening. The Hebrew monitors generally knew first, because the radio would broadcast a whirring noise and a coded message to the rescue teams a few seconds before the sirens blared. The teletype operator would send the canned flash message, vents were turned off via a master switch, and bureau personnel would converge on the sealed room carrying gas masks. We became accustomed to donning the masks and taping up the door of the systems administrator’s office. It was deemed the safest place to be because it has no windows, little ventilation, and is an interior office. Sometimes, however, Saddam sent his greetings more than once a night; one night there were three alerts.

The best attack was one that did not happen. One night while I was on duty, Nicosia sent in an item in which Iraq claimed an attack on Haifa. Because an attack anywhere in Israel meant sirens were sounded throughout the country, it was obvious that the only thing striking Haifa that night were ill wishes.

There were periods of several days when there were no attacks. We would wonder if Saddam had run out of missiles or if the US had finally destroyed all the launchers. It seemed the US announced almost daily that more missile launchers in western Iraq had been taken out and only a few were left. It became frustrating to hear these announcements and then to have our hopes dashed. One Israeli journalist cynically asked an Israeli politician, “Has the US now destroyed 600 out of the 200 Iraqi missile launchers that are left?”

We eventually got used to Saddam's missiles. There was so much tape on the door of the sealed room that we stopped applying more and simply reused what was already stuck to the door. Everyone learned his particular responsibility during an attack, and fear began to subside. There still were problems. Both Turkish and Israeli TV were carrying many CNN reports, and CNN seemed to love to broadcast the sound of the sirens in Tel Aviv or Riyadh. The monitors, wearing earphones, could seldom distinguish the sounds on TV from the real thing, and several times one monitor or another would come out of the room yelling, "The sirens! I hear the sirens!" One teletype operator announced that he had heard a missile strike one night in the sealed room. What he really had heard was me accidentally hitting my head on the wall and making a great thumping sound.

### **Scary Situations**

When we heard the missiles strike, I was afraid. The Patriots were worse than the Scuds, because they were louder and always sounded like they were flying directly over my apartment. Everyone hearing a Patriot apparently thought it was flying just over his

house, but the Patriots were so loud they just sounded that close. One bank began advertising, "We are all Patriots."

The apartment of one of our monitors was damaged by a blast while she was there, but she was unhurt. Debris from a Scud fell on the home of another monitor, but it did not cause any damage. It was close, but we were lucky.

At work, I could be calm. At home, I hid behind my couch. This was more than just cowardice. Most injuries were caused by flying glass, and the couch was a protection against that.

After six weeks and 39 Scuds, President Bush declared victory, and the missiles stopped coming. The bureau stepped down from 24-hour coverage, schools reopened, and cars ventured onto the streets. But it was a while before things returned to normal. People kept their gas masks with them even after the IDF said they no longer were needed. Any thud at any time sounded like a missile. After a few more weeks, however, most people calmed down. But I still jump at the sound of sirens or any booms anytime, anywhere.