

THE ROAD TO SAFWAN

THE 1ST SQUADRON, 4TH CAVALRY
IN THE 1991 PERSIAN GULF WAR

Stephen A. Bourque
John Burdan

University of North Texas Press
Denton, Texas

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

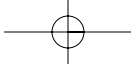
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Denton, TX 76203-1336

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

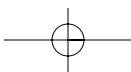
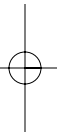
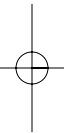
Bourque, Stephen A. (Stephen Alan), 1950–
The road to Safwan : the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry in the 1991
Persian Gulf War / Stephen A. Bourque, John Burdan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-57441-232-1 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Persian Gulf War, 1991—Regimental histories—United States.
2. United States. Army. Cavalry, 4th. Squadron, 1st. I. Burdan,
John, 1955– . II. Title. III. Title: 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry in the
1991 Persian Gulf War.
DS79.724.U6B683 2007
956.7044'342—dc22

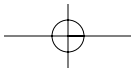
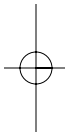
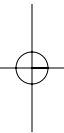
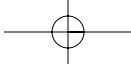
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To the men of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry
who served during
Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM.

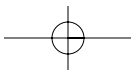
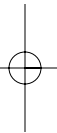
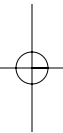
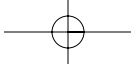
Your service to our nation is not forgotten.





Contents

List of figures, maps, and photographs	ix
Introduction	1
1. The Quarter Horse to 1990	7
2. Preparation	15
3. Deployment	27
4. The Port	39
5. Operations in the TAA	51
6. Security Operations	67
7. Combat Command Carter	80
8. Task Force Iron	95
9. Final Preparations	105
10. The Breach	113
11. Objective Norfolk	134
12. The Basra Highway	159
13. Safwan	185
14. Recovery	203
15. Postwar Operations	213
16. Coming Home	227
Conclusion	241
Notes	247
Glossary	280
Bibliography	288
Index	297



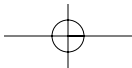
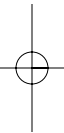
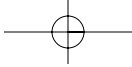
Illustrations

Figures

Figure 1. 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Organization for Combat	41
Figure 2. 1st Brigade Attack	116
Figure 3. Battle of Norfolk 1	152
Figure 4. Battle of Norfolk 2	154
Figure 5. Squadron Cuts Basra Road	169

Maps

Map 1. Northern Saudi Arabia	52
Map 2. CC Carter & Border Area	81
Map 3. VII Corps Initial Attack	114
Map 4. VII Corp Dispositions 27 February	141
Map 5. Destruction of the Tawakalna	145
Map 6. VII Corps Attack to Basra Highway	162
Map 7. 1st Inf. Div. Movement to Safwan	196
Map 8. VII Corps Dispositions 24 March 1991	205



Introduction



In the early morning hours of March 1, 1991, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Robert Wilson and his 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry arrived at a small airstrip outside the Iraqi village of Safwan. A temporary cease-fire following Operation Desert Storm had been in effect for almost twenty-four hours and his division commander, Major General Thomas G. Rhame, had told Wilson to secure the runway forward of the American battle lines, for the upcoming negotiations between Iraqi officials and American General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander of the allied coalition. Unfortunately, a large Iraqi force occupied the directed conference site. Wilson, in his M3 Bradley Cavalry Fighting Vehicle, drove onto the airfield, dismounted, and approached the senior Iraqi officer at the site. He told the colonel that the airfield at Safwan was now under the control of the United States Army and he must move his men and equipment immediately. Obviously disturbed by the American's words and unaware that there even were negotiations scheduled between the two forces, the Iraqi officer left to speak to his commander. As he departed, four Iraqi tanks moved in front of Wilson's vehicle and lowered their gun tubes.¹

The 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry's encounter on that small airfield in southern Iraq was one of hundreds of similar dramas that played out that winter during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. To the generation of Americans who came of age during that conflict, it was a whirlwind of television images of sand, airpower, and precision technology. Countless articles, television shows, and documentaries obscured the context and content of Operation Desert Storm by burying it in a haze of smart bombs, Tom-

ahawk missiles, jet aircraft, and long lines of armored vehicles. Hours watching CNN left many with a perception that the war was somehow sterile and technical and had little probability of spilling friendly blood in the process. The allied coalition's military performance in this conflict was hailed at the time as a *crusade*, an amazing demonstration of American armed power, and, in the words of the United States Army's book published soon after the war, a *Certain Victory*.² Returning American troops, in contrast to the Vietnam-era soldiers, were treated as heroes and honored in parades across the United States.

However, by 2006, that image of American omnipotence was beginning to recede in the minds of most thoughtful citizens. Post-Desert Storm uprisings in the Shi'a south and Kurdish north, as well as a botched intervention in Somalia in 1993, tarnished the United States military image in the region. Political victory in Iraq eluded the presidential administrations of George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton as Saddam Hussein continued to challenge the United States in spite of selective bombing, military deployments, and economic sanctions. Finally, after the attack on New York's World Trade Center in September 2001, President George W. Bush connected the Iraqi dictator to his declared "War on Terror" and decided to end Hussein's defiance. American and British soldiers again attacked Iraq in March 2003, and in only a few short weeks defeated the incompetent Iraqi Army, a shadow of the force that had existed in 1990. However, political victory remained elusive as conventional military success degenerated into an insurgency and appeared, by 2006, to be degenerating into a civil war. By that fall, with casualty numbers rising, Americans appeared to have lost their stomach for military adventure in Iraq.

In some ways, those who marched off to war against Iraq in 1991, in the shadow of the Vietnam era, had a better appreciation of the problems they would face once the battle was joined. Unlike the confidence of the generals and politicians of 2003, the outcome of the impending war against Iraq in 1991 was anything but certain. Commissioned and noncommissioned officers, many veterans of the war in Indochina, knew not to take this enemy lightly. Their studies at the army's extensive service school system had sensitized them to the penalty of underesti-

mating the enemy. Battles such as Kasserine Pass, Task Force Smith, and the Tet offensive were case studies of American setbacks that tempered their pride in their equipment and fellow soldiers. Vietnam veterans, now commanding brigades, divisions, and corps, knew that no amount of technological superiority could prevent defeat if they were arrogant and unprepared for the competence and determination of their opponents.

Forgotten in the years following Operation Desert Storm was the fact that the Iraqi Army in 1991 was a force to be respected. An eight-year struggle with Iran supported at various levels by American and allied military advisors had resulted, at least on paper, in a veteran army. Final large-scale operations on the al-Faw peninsula and other parts of the border displayed a degree of teamwork and sophistication that indicated the Iraqi military was a competent force. Its liberal use of missiles and chemical weapons against the Iranians and their own Kurdish citizens hinted at a willingness to fight at a level of violence unfamiliar to most western soldiers. If nothing else, its size gave leaders of the professional U.S. Army serious concerns.

The goal of this book, therefore, is to return to that era and recapture the fear, concern, and competence of the soldiers of one small U.S. combat unit, the approximately 800 troopers of the full-strength 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry; the cavalry squadron for the famous Big Red One. This book seeks to remind readers what the 1991 Gulf War was like for those who participated at the squadron and battalion levels. As in the case of other units, this cavalry squadron experienced four distinct phases during this conflict: preparation, security, battle, and postwar operations. While each phase was unique, together they refute the image that this campaign was simply a matter of technological superiority. The framework for this unit's success began with sound political and military objectives, facilitated by the United States Army's excellent equipment, by competent and confident soldiers, and by its commanders who were proficient in the art of war. Also, there can be no question that the comparative tactical incompetence of the Iraqi Army contributed to this squadron's success. Finally, at least in the case of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, they succeeded also because they were fortunate.

This manuscript began as a labor of love by the squadron's operations officer, or S3, John Burdan. Before his retirement in 1997, he began to collect squadron documents and conduct interviews with former members who found themselves stationed in the vicinity of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. While working on this manuscript, he discovered that an old friend and former assistant operations officer in division headquarters, Stephen Bourque, was completing a manuscript about the United States VII Corps during the war.³ Reflecting a joint effort, this book gives a perspective of war from the battalion level within the context of the entire conflict.

Of course, we could never have written this book without the help of a wide variety of people who went out of their way to give us support. At California State University (CSU), Northridge, Dr. Charles Macune, Dr. Tom Maddux, and Susan Mueller provided a wonderful working environment. In addition to running the office, Kelly Winkleblack transformed the interview tapes into manageable typed transcripts. CSU graduate student Jennifer Jones read and edited an early version of this manuscript.

This nation is fortunate to have so many dedicated and competent historians working for the government, many of whom contributed to our efforts over the years. At the top of this list must be Timothy Nenninger at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, who continues to be the first source for advice for any American military historian and who assisted us in a variety of ways. At the United States Army Center of Military History, Jeff Clarke and Brigadier General John Brown, together with their staff provided a wide range of help with references and documents. Sherry Doudy did the original work on many of the maps and is perhaps the finest cartographer in the business today. Bill Epley was instrumental in locating important documents, which made our work much more accurate. Frank Shirer was extremely gracious in supporting our work in the center's superb library. David Keough at the Military History Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, consistently provided solid research support and advice. Donald Hakenson and his staff at the Center for Research of Unit Records in Springfield, Virginia, helped to locate many of the squadron's journal logs,

the ultimate in primary sources. Terry Van Meter and Shannon Schwaller of the U.S. Cavalry Museum at Fort Riley, Kansas, served in locating documents and provided a wealth of information on squadron and divisional history. Dale Steinhauer at the Combined Arms Center history office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, commented on the entire manuscript and provided important assistance with the VII Corps Archives. Operation Desert Storm veteran and award-winning author Peter Kindsvatter from the U.S. Army Ordnance Center gave an early copy of this manuscript a thorough review, thereby saving the authors from unnecessary mistakes of substance and context. At the Command and General Staff College's Department of Military History, Dr. James Willbanks, a noted soldier, scholar of the Vietnam era, and department chair, provided the inspiration, support, and encouragement to bring this manuscript to conclusion. Bourque's colleagues in the department were a constant source of sound advice and contributed immeasurably to this narrative.

Outside of the government, others were essential to our success. John Votaw at the 1st Division Museum in Wheaton, Illinois, provided a generous grant that permitted the transcription of the large number of interviews with squadron members and kept this process alive when it looked like it would run out of steam. At the University of Cincinnati, George Hofmann, one of the armor community's premier historians, reviewed portions of the manuscript and provided many important suggestions. General Donn A. Starry, one of our army's most distinguished retired officers, historians, and an expert on cavalry operations, kindly reviewed our initial draft and provided sound criticism and encouragement. Richard Swain, a noted expert on the 1991 Persian Gulf War and former Third Army historian, reviewed an early draft and provided many insightful comments and criticisms. At the University of North Texas Press, our editor, Ron Chrisman, continued to encourage our efforts in spite of our delays and excuses, and Karen DeVinney helped make sense out of this complicated story. Without Ron's support, this manuscript would never have seen the light of day.

Of course, without the active participation of many former members of the squadron and the 1st Infantry Division, this

book would never have been written. Those who graciously consented to interviews are listed in the bibliography. Active support during the writing process came from Mike Bills, Doug Morrison, Ken Pope, VJ Tedesco, Bob Wilson, and Bill Wimbish. Without their critiques and comments, it would not have been possible to make sense out of all that transpired that winter.

Finally, our sincere thanks go to our wives, Bridget Burdan and Debra Anderson. In addition to surrendering many happy hours of quality time as their husbands headed off to their offices, they read and commented on this manuscript. Their love and support are a big part of our lives.

Of course, history is not simply a collection of facts but an interpretation of events. Based on the evidence accumulated to date, this is ours. For every event described in detail, dozens are ignored. For every person the reader meets in this story, ten or twenty are not introduced. We apologize in advance to those brave members of the squadron not identified in the text. However, this is your story, and we hope it reflects your experience during that event so recent, yet so long ago.

1 The Quarter Horse to 1990



The military organization that arrived on the Iraqi airfield that winter day was the heir to over 135 years of American military tradition. Battle streamers on the squadron's colors attested to participation in wars around the world. While the nature of these conflicts ranged from insurgency operations against lightly armed foes to combat against sophisticated armored units, the single unifying theme throughout its history was that the squadron fought as a mounted force.

While military purists might argue that this mounted heritage may somehow be traced to knights on medieval European battlefields, American cavalry units developed in response to a specific need: the rapid movement of troops to protect settlers as they migrated to the West. Their Native American foe, whether in the swamps of Florida, the mid-continent plains or the desert Southwest, moved with a speed and cunning that regular infantry simply could not match. Far different from the European hussars and lancers, it was dragoon-style cavalry that policed the West and fought in the American Civil War.¹ By 1942 at the beginning of World War II, the American cavalry had turned in its horses for a variety of light armored cars and jeeps. Its primary role was now reconnaissance, or finding the enemy, and providing security or early warning to the main body. Because cavalry commanders were prone to act independently, senior officers often gave them a third type of mission: economy of force. Reinforced with the means of heavy combat such as tanks and artillery, cavalry

commanders fought mobile battles to the front, flanks, or rear of the main force. During the Vietnam era, cavalrymen accepted an additional mode of mobility, the helicopter, which extended the mounted troops' range and effectiveness. However, while the means had changed, the end remained the same: act as the eyes, ears, and reaction force for the division or corps commander. As leaders of the post-Vietnam era were fond of saying: "Cavalry is about mobility, not about equipment. It is a state of mind."²

The 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, nicknamed "Quarter Horse," like other military units still on the army's rolls, has a long and notable history and traces its lineage back to Company A, 1st Cavalry formed in March 1855 on Governor's Island, New York. It campaigned against the Comanche and Cheyenne Indians in the late 1850s and attempted to maintain order in "bleeding Kansas" as slavery and anti-slavery proponents clashed over the territory's statehood.³ Early in the Civil War, the War Department reorganized the army's mounted regiments. Since the 1st Cavalry was the fourth oldest of these units, it was designated the 4th Cavalry. As of July 1862, the regiment had twelve companies and a little over 1,100 assigned soldiers.⁴

During the Civil War, the 4th Cavalry fought primarily in the western theater. Its campaigns include Stones River, Tullahoma, Chickamauga, and Atlanta Campaigns against Confederate cavalry led by Generals Nathan Bedford Forrest, John Hunt Morgan, and Joseph Wheeler. It ended the war pursuing John B. Hood's decimated army after the decisive Battle of Franklin. Its last engagement was against Forrest's mounted forces on December 18, 1864, when the 4th Cavalry overran an artillery battery on the West Harpath River, in central Tennessee.⁵ Following the Civil War, Washington ordered the regiment to Texas, where it reestablished national authority from San Antonio to the Rio Grande. Under Colonel Ranald Slidell Mackenzie, easily the most dashing commander in the regiment's history, it fought Kickapoo and Comanche Indians in central Texas and across the border in Mexico.⁶

More organizational changes took place in 1883 as the War Department redesignated all cavalry companies as "troops"

and all mounted battalions as "squadrons." These units carried the now familiar red and white guidon into battle.⁷ With the outbreak of the Spanish American War, the War Department sent the 4th Cavalry to the Philippines, where it arrived too late to fight the Spanish, but found itself involved in the Philippine Insurrection for the next several years. It did not participate in World War I.⁸

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, the 4th Cavalry was still riding horses and practicing charges with sabers, .45 caliber pistols, and 1903 Springfield Rifles. After several reorganizations in response to the changing nature of war in Europe, the future 1-4 Cavalry became the 4th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized), of the 4th Cavalry Group (Mechanized). It was now a vehicle-mounted reconnaissance unit that employed fire and maneuver as well as infiltration tactics to gather the information senior commanders needed. Combat was supposed to be performed only when the unit was required to defend.⁹

A small detachment of the 4th Cavalry actually stormed ashore in Europe before the amphibious assault on Normandy. At 0430, two hours before the main landings on June 6, 1944, 132 troopers invaded two small parcels of land four miles offshore from Utah Beach, called the St. Marcouf Islands. Within sight of Utah Beach, they were potential outposts supporting the German defenses on the mainland. Other 4th Cavalry units arrived on Utah Beach on D-Day and linked up the 82d Airborne Division, which had parachuted into France the night before the invasion.¹⁰ Assigned to Major General (MG) J. Lawton Collins's VII Corps, the 4th Cavalry Group fought across Europe. Collins reinforced the 4th Cavalry Group with a battalion each of light tanks, motorized artillery, tank destroyers, infantry, and engineers. By the middle of December, the cavalry was screening the VII Corps's eastern flank as it headed towards the rail junction at Düren, on the edge of Germany's Roer River.¹¹ When the Germans counterattacked in the Ardennes, the 4th Cavalry helped to hold the Bulge's northern shoulder.¹² With the defeat of the Nazi offensive in January 1945, the Allies resumed their advance into Germany and the 4th Cavalry Group's last World War II battle took place in the

Harz Mountains northwest of Leipzig on April 11.¹³

In 1952, following a short constabulary tour in Austria and Germany, the army inactivated the group except for a small headquarters company. It returned to active service again in February 1957 as 1st Reconnaissance Squadron, 4th United States Cavalry assigned to the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley, Kansas. After several years of routine training activity, it found itself preparing for war in Indochina. The squadron deployed with the Big Red One in October 1965. Its three ground troops (A, B, C) used M113 armored personnel carriers and M48A3 tanks, while its air troop (D) used a mixture of command and control and helicopter gun ships. It was the army's first armored unit to arrive in Vietnam.¹⁴

From October 1965 to April 1970, the squadron, usually assigned by troops to the three individual brigades of the division, operated in the III Corps area north of Saigon. As in the case of World War II, the complete story of the squadron's Vietnam experience is beyond the scope of this book. However, there is no question that a soldier's assignment to this unit ensured he would be in the thick of battle for most of his tour. In February 1970, the squadron performed its last mission, screening the redeployment of the division from Vietnam, and its colors returned to Fort Riley on April 5.¹⁵

Like other units, the squadron recovered from the Vietnam conflict and adapted itself to the realities of warfare in the last quarter of the century. The lethality of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War motivated American officers to overhaul the army's approach to education, equipment, and training. The unit's activities, often called operational tempo, increased as the squadron routinely deployed to Europe (for REFORGER or Return of Forces to Europe exercises) and to California's Mohave Desert for exercises at the National Training Center.

One of the problems of the Vietnam-era army was the rapid turnover of unit leaders. In the postwar years the army stabilized these assignments and by the early 1980s battalion and squadron commanders could expect to remain with their units for a two-year assignment. In the spring of 1990 Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Richard A. Cowell was finishing his term as commander. With experience in ground and aviation units, he

had been an ideal choice to lead the unit. Building on his years of troop duty, including command of the squadron's D Troop and a tour in Vietnam, Cowell had led the squadron on training exercises from Germany to the National Training Center. Like many leaders, he preferred field training and disliked the administrative work that came with command. He enjoyed history and sought to encourage his officers and men to educate themselves in order to gain a historical perspective. As a part of that effort in 1990, Cowell had created a place of remembrance, a grove of trees planted outside the squadron headquarters, to honor those regimental troopers who had won the Congressional Medal of Honor. Presidents had awarded this most prestigious award to twenty-six 4th Cavalry members, two twice. The dedication ceremony, a moving event for all involved, included the families of two soldiers, Sergeant Donald R. Long (Troop C, 1-4 Cavalry) and Lieutenant Russell A. Stedman (Troop B, 3-4 Cavalry), who had been awarded the medal posthumously for their heroism during the Vietnam conflict.

Cowell's most challenging and thankless duty was supervising the change in the squadron's organization in 1989. In spite of warnings from World War II and Vietnam-era cavalrymen, the army pulled all the tanks from divisional cavalry squadrons to use in other combat organizations. This new divisional cavalry organization was no longer assigned directly to the division commander but to a new organization: the Aviation (sometimes referred to as the 4th) Brigade. To make matters worse for Cowell, one of his two ground troops was now permanently stationed in Germany as part of the 1st Infantry Division's forward deployed brigade. This arrangement left him with only the Headquarters Troop, one small ground troop (B Troop), and two small air cavalry troops (C and D Troops). Because of its lack of firepower, standard division practice was to attach a tank company from the 2nd Brigade for all training exercises and contingency plans. Nevertheless, commanding the squadron represented the fulfillment of his hopes and dreams, which had begun on his commissioning day so long ago.¹⁶

On June 22, 1990, the moment Cowell had always dreaded finally arrived: it was time to surrender his command to a new leader. Standing in front of squadron headquarters for the last

time, he looked out at his almost four hundred officers and men. He knew he was leaving the unit in good shape with a first-class group of commanders and noncommissioned officers. Posted in front of Headquarters and Headquarters Troop (HHT) was Captain (CPT) Douglas Morrison. Morrison, a graduate of West Point, was one of his most experienced officers, having served as a tank company commander in 2-34 Armor and as his operations officer (S3) since 1988. He had recently assumed command of HHT from Major John Burdan, who in turn took his place on the staff as S3. An intense professional, Morrison was the right man to lead that complex collection of maintenance and support soldiers.¹⁷

Formed up on HHT's left was B Troop. When Cowell had first arrived in the cavalry as a young lieutenant, the cavalry troop was a powerful organization with nine tanks, fifteen scout vehicles, three 106-mm mortar carriers, and three infantry squads. The new troop was an untested organization with only nineteen M3 Bradley Cavalry Fighting Vehicles and three mortar carriers. The commander, Captain (CPT) Michael Bills, was another seasoned officer with a depth of experience. Beginning his career as a helicopter mechanic in 1976, he returned to college in 1979 and graduated from George Mason University in 1984 with a degree in sociology and a commission from ROTC. He had served as the squadron personnel officer for almost two years and since May commanded B Troop.¹⁸

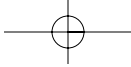
Cowell glanced next at the air cavalry troops. The old organization he had commanded was one powerful unit of helicopters with over 170 soldiers and twenty-five aircraft organized into scout, aero-weapons, and aero-rifle platoons. The one large unit was now reorganized into two identical troops, C and D, led by Captains James Tovsen and Roy Peters respectively. Each commander led only thirty-five troopers flying six OH-58C Kiowa scout helicopters and four old AH-1F Cobra attack helicopters. Both units were fresh from a rotation at the National Training Center, learning how to fight and fly in a desert environment.

Once the troop was in position, his staff moved to the front of the organization. Major (MAJ) William Wimbish, an aviation officer and a graduate of Columbus College and the Command

and General Staff College class of 1989, ran his headquarters as the executive officer (XO). The XO has the thankless job of paying attention to the details of making the unit function. With over a year in the job, Wimbish was one of the most experienced executive officers in the 1st Infantry Division. Major John Burdan was the new operations officer or S3. A graduate of West Point, his year as commander of HHT had given him an intimate knowledge of the workings of the squadron headquarters. Captain Shelby Seelinger, the intelligence officer (S2), Captain Kenneth Stokes, the personnel officer (S1), and Captain Steven Harmon the logistics officer (S4), were the other principle staff officers. Unusual in an armored unit, Harmon was an engineer officer who had worked with the squadron on previous exercises. In an era of personnel turbulence, when it was unusual for officers to remain in the same battalion for more than a year, Cowell's greatest achievement may have been keeping so many of his strong leaders together for so long. Now it was time for him to pass the squadron colors to the new commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Robert Wilson.

Commissioned in 1972, the incoming commander had gone to Vietnam right after flight school. Injured in a helicopter crash shortly after his arrival, he was evacuated first to Japan, then to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC. After his recovery, he served in a series of command and staff assignments in Europe, Hawaii, and the United States. Like Cowell, Wilson suspected that his selection for squadron command represented the high point of his military career, an achievement that most officers only dreamed of. He realized that with the Soviet Union in retreat and the American military on the edge of force reductions, this was probably one of the best commands available. He also knew that he had inherited a seasoned unit with a proud history.

For the last time, Cowell took the squadron's colors from his Command Sergeant Major (CSM) John Soucy. Thanking his senior noncommissioned officer for all he had done, he passed the colors to the division commander. Major General (MG) Thomas G. Rhame was a no-nonsense infantryman from Louisiana with a southern drawl and love of colorful phrases that hid a deep intellect. His ability to grasp the essence of a



problem and an intolerance of unprofessional behavior was greatly respected by his officers. A natural leader, he appreciated what Cowell had accomplished over the previous two years. Taking the colors, he handed them to Wilson and charged him to maintain the squadron's readiness and tradition of excellence.

