

2-92

OPERATION KNIGHT STRIKE I

STUDENT MONOGRAPH

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On 17 January 1992, Operation Desert Storm began, ending the months of waiting and speculation which characterized the efforts of the Allied coalition. The offensive operations undertaken to liberate Kuwait stemmed from the Iraqi invasion of that country on 1 August 1991. As part of the allied coalition forces, the First Cavalry Division played an important role on the victory over Saddam Hussein's army.

In September and October 1991, the 1st Cavalry Division deployed to Southwest Asia as part of Operation Desert Shield, the defense of Saudi Arabia against a possible Iraqi invasion. Initially occupying Assembly Area Horse approximately 110 miles west of the port of Dammam (see map # 1), the First Team began preparations for combat. Soldiers learned to live in the desert and trained hard for possible action against Iraqi forces.

In early January 1992, the division moved north to Assembly Area Wendy near King Khalid Military city, close to the town of Hafar Al-Batin. Here, the "First Team," as the division is known, prepared for possible offensive action as the U.N. mandated deadline of 15 January loomed. The stay in AA Wendy was short, however. No sooner had some units moved into AA Wendy than they moved again, this time to positions north of Hafar Al-Batin.

On 16 January 1992, I joined Task Force 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, as a rifle platoon leader. The Task Force occupied a battle position to the north of Hafar Al-Batin named Duke. Arriving with the Task Force S-1, CPT Dana D. Milner, at approximately 2200 hours on 16 January 1992, I tried to catch a few hours of sleep. At exactly 0245 hours on 17 January 92, a soldier

awoke me and instructed me to put on my NBC gear and start taking PB tablets. Operation Desert Storm had begun.

Ordered to move immediately, the Task Force moved north of the Tapline Road above Hafar Al-Batin. I could not get to A Company, the unit I was to join, since the order to move had come so suddenly. There wasn't any transportation to take me there, so I climbed into an M577 Command Post Vehicle which served as the Task Force ALDC (Administrative and Logistics Operation Center). During the first few hours of the war, I assisted enlisted soldiers inside the M577 in monitoring radio nets and communicating with other elements of the task force.

I joined A Company at approximately 1000 hours on 17 January 92 and climbed into my platoon sergeant's Bradley Fighting Vehicle. The platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Jerry K. Bowers, had led the platoon for approximately three weeks. The platoon leader had been relieved for violating General Order Number 1, namely, bringing a personally owned weapon into the theater. I looked forward to my tenure as the platoon leader both anxiously and with apprehension about the future.

The Task Force moved to a position north of Hafar Al-Batin to screen the movement of the U.S. Army VII Corps moving to the west in preparation for the ground war. Company A occupied a position straddling the main road running from Hafar Al-Batin to the border town of Al-Ruqi. (See Map # 2)

During this time, I got to know the men in 2nd Platoon, A Company. Most of the NCOs were veterans of both paratroop and mechanized units. Virtually all participated in at least one

rotation to the National Training Center. The enlisted soldiers averaged 19 years of age and, as always, were a cross section of American society. All wanted to get the job at hand done and go home. As the saying went at the time, for these soldiers the "way home was north (through Iraq)."

Known as the "Grim Reapers," A/1-5 was well-trained. CPT Michael L. Kirkton, a former observer-controller at the National Training Center commanded the company. As a result of his NTC experience, CPT Kirkton understood clearly what would help keep his soldiers alive in combat. Taking command of the company on 19 August 1991, CPT Kirkton developed a training program prior to deployment that paid great dividends in the desert.

The Grim Reapers relied on a series of platoon and company-level battle drills initiated with a code word to accomplish most battle tasks. CPT Kirkton's pre-deployment training program included a series of "walk-through/talk-through" lunch OPDs with his Lieutenants, where he developed company/platoon battle drills and SOPs. This method ensured that all key leaders knew the SOPs/drills from the beginning and understood exactly what they meant. Eventually, NCOs joined these sessions, who, in turn, taught their soldiers/squads.

The final step in the process was practicing these battle drills. CPT Kirkton had the company move out to a field within the battalion area and rehearse these tactics with the entire company. Platoons formed up, with soldiers organizing themselves as they would fight (i.e., dismounted soldiers walked behind drivers/commanders/gunners, etc.). Each soldier knew exactly where

he was supposed to be and what he should do in each drill. This resulted in a trained force capable of reacting instinctively and without hesitation to almost any tactical situation presented to it. It would prove fortuitous in combat.

On January 26 1992, Task Force 1-5 Cavalry again moved north, this time to positions 30 kilometers south of the Iraqi border just outside of enemy artillery range. Known on operational graphics as K31, the Task Force's mission was to participate in a corps deception plan designed to make Iraqi commanders believe that the main allied attack would occur through the Wadi Al-Batin. The wadi itself was a natural terrain feature that lies along the western border of Kuwait, affording an excellent route for any attacker to follow. The Iraqis deployed sizable forces in the area; our goal was to induce them to continue deploying forces in the area (Schicchitano, pg. 15).

On 1 Feb 92, 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry, the divisional cavalry squadron, moved forward, south of the neutral zone to get a clearer picture of the border area (Schicchitano, pg. 15). On 5 Feb, an AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter destroyed an Iraqi observation tower with rockets (Schicchitano, pg. 15). Stepping up the pace, the division began a series of artillery raids designed to harass the enemy and to draw his attention to the Wadi area. Generally, these raids involved three artillery batteries, two firing and one in reserve for counter-battery purposes. As a result, the Iraqis deployed a corps headquarters and additional ground forces to this sector (Schicchitano, pg. 15). On 17 Feb 92, 1-7 Cavalry crossed into Iraq, destroying another observation tower. A day later, two

patrols destroyed enemy reconnaissance positions and helped direct artillery against enemy artillery positions (Schicchitano, pg. 15).

Throughout this period, the company continued its training while defending in K31. Each platoon took turns using a one kilometer piece of ground to the rear of the company's position to rehearse breaching drills and clearing trenchlines. Another key drill we rehearsed was POW evacuation. Since we expected to take large numbers of prisoners (1-7 Cavalry had already taken prisoners prior to crossing the border!), it was essential that we prepare for it. In combat, we performed exactly as we trained to do.

CPT Kirkton alerted all three platoons to be ready to move north on either reconnaissance or raid missions. He had a "gut feeling" that we might be called on to perform either task. Therefore, it was no surprise when at 1200 hrs on 19 February, he called an orders group and informed all concerned that we would move out on our first combat mission at 1700.

The mission called for A Company to conduct a reconnaissance in force to Phaseline Germany (PT 400230 to PT 510230, See Map 3). We were to conduct a thorough reconnaissance of this area and return to DRP Carol no later than 0500 hours on 20 Feb 91. The rest of the Task Force would link up with A Company there and conduct a battalion-size reconnaissance-in-force, called Operation Knight Strike I to Objective Sicily (PT 442300, see Map 3) (Schicchitano, pg. 15).

CPT Kirkton's plan was to use one platoon as a "base" platoon and allow the other two platoons to conduct a zone reconnaissance to the west and east as the company moved north (see map # 4). The

1st Platoon, under the command of 2nd Lieutenant Stanley D. McMillian, reconnoitered to the west, while the 3rd Platoon, under 2nd Lieutenant Charles E. Ball, covered the eastern sector. My platoon provided the base, performing security while the other two platoons reconned their sectors.

Company A crossed the border into Iraq at approximately 1830 hrs on 19 Feb 92. We observed Iraqi anti-aircraft artillery fire to the north and halted pending further information from with battalion and brigade. CPT Kirkton learned that the batteries firing to the north were well out of our sector and that we would continue the mission. At 1830 hrs, CPT Kirkton ordered 2LT McMillian's platoon to cross the "berm" (Phase Line Chicago, see map # 3), followed by my platoon and 3rd Platoon.

In the western part of our sector, 1st Platoon located some unexploded ordnance (possibly artillery rounds), but no enemy. I noted many unoccupied vehicle fighting positions, while 3rd Platoon reported no contact. At 2300 hrs, 2LT Ball suddenly reported observing enemy soldiers at a great distance (approximately 3000-5000 meters) around an observation tower. 1LT Aaron Geduldig, the company FIST (Fire Support Team) Chief, moved into position with his modified M2 Bradley to "laze" the target with his GLLD (Ground Locator Lazer Designator). Within minutes, our artillery responded, destroying the tower.

The enemy fired back with its own artillery, but it was inaccurate and posed no threat to the company. Nevertheless, CPT Kirkton ordered the company to form back up to move back to ORP Carol. I moved my platoon forward as the lead element and began

our movement. As I did so, the night turned black, and a ferocious rainstorm began. We literally could not see more than 10 feet in front of each vehicle. Without moonlight, our night vision equipment was only marginally useful in this situation.

It was here that the value of the GPS, or Global Positioning System, proved its worth. Vectoring off of satellites, the GPS made it possible for us to successfully and quickly navigate back to ORP Carol. I had a GPS in my vehicle, as did CPT Kirkton. Using waypoints programmed into the GPS, I led the company back to ORP Carol. Undoubtedly, the GPS made short work of what was otherwise a bad situation.

Approaching Phaseline Chicago once again, the company moved across the "berm" (constructed during the late 70s and early 80s to let Bedouins know when they crossed the Iraq/Saudi border) into ORP Carol. Here we linked up with an Air Defense platoon from 4th Bn, 5th ADA, attached to A Company for the mission but who we did not take with us. The Grim Reapers formed a perimeter and closed upon ORP Carol completely by 0500 on 20 Feb 92. We waited for the arrival of the rest of the Task Force at 1100 hours.

At approximately 1030 hours, we spotted dust clouds on the horizon to the south. The Task Force, led by the scout platoon under the command of 1LT R. Kent Kildow, linked up with A Company at approximately 1100 hours. Upon link up, the battalion formed a Task Force diamond formation (See map #5) and crossed Phaseline Chicago to begin the reconnaissance-in-force. A Company led the battalion in a wedge formation, one platoon in wedge, the other two in echelon left/right. My platoon was the lead rifle platoon for

the battalion, 2-3 kilometers behind the scouts.

The scout platoon screened the battalion front and encountered enemy communications trenches, but no personnel or equipment. At approximately 1247 hrs, the scouts made contact with approximately four enemy soldiers in a trench system. The enemy fired on the scouts with small arms fire, and the scouts returned fire with 25mm chain gun. Moving forward, the scouts located a bunker complex with 6-8 interconnected bunkers. Seven enemy soldiers surrendered to the scout platoon, who by this time had overrun the bunker complex.

I watched all of this from a vantage point directly behind the scouts. 1LT Kildow's platoon wasted no time in securing the prisoners. Company C, under the command of CPT David Francavilla, moved up from its position in the rear of the Task Force diamond to move the prisoners to the rear. Additionally, Company A's executive officer, 1LT Christopher H. Robinson, moved his vehicle, A51, forward to help cover the EPW evacuation, along with A33 under the command of SFC Walter Clarkson, the Third Platoon sergeant.

As the scouts cleared the bunkers, we received intense direct and indirect enemy fires. CPT Kirkton ordered me to move my platoon to a hasty defensive position on the other side of a road running to the west of the bunker positions (see Map # 6). As I did so, mortars landed approximately 100 meters from my vehicle. Apparently, the Iraqis registered mortar and 122mm artillery fire on the road and the bunkers. A32, under the command of SSG Evans, joined A51 and A33 which remained near the bunkers to provide cover for EPW evacuation.

At 1306 hrs, a Vulcan air defense vehicle, traveling with A Company, was hit by anti-tank fire. SGT Jimmy Haws, the vehicle commander, was killed instantly. Enemy fire became more intense. The enemy's fires hastened Company C's transfer of EPW's to their vehicles, while the scouts disengaged at 1314 hrs and established a screen to the south, east and west. (Marstall, pg. 7)

By now all companies in the battalion reported observing 122mm artillery fires, 82mm mortar fires, and anti-tank and small arms fires. With my platoon on line, I gave a platoon fire command to open fire on the enemy bunkers to our front. I also instructed my squad leaders to dismount personnel if they encountered bunkers or trenchlines.

At 1318 hrs, I looked to my right and heard a violent "crack," approximately 100 meters away. I saw A51 take a direct hit from a T-12 100mm recoilless rifle, a black and orange flash followed by metal flying off of the vehicle. A51 began to smoke, and soldiers appeared to wallow around the vehicle, collapsing. A31, under the command of SSG Christopher Cichon, moved forward to provide covering fires and evacuate casualties from A 51 (A33 had moved to the eastern flank of the bunker position with A32). SGT Ronald M. Randazzo, A51's gunner, died instantly, while SSG Joseph W. Thompson, a mechanic riding in the crew compartment, suffered severe leg injuries.

While covering A51 and evacuating wounded, A31 took a hit in the TOW launcher, setting off both missiles and destroying the launcher. PFC Ardon B. Cooper, providing first aid to another soldier wounded by mortar fire, was standing below the TOW launcher

at the time of impact. He covered the wounded soldier with his own body, and suffered mortal wounds to his legs and buttocks. He died later that day from massive blood loss.

SSG Cichon continued to direct the recovery of A51 and A31, and evacuate wounded. SGT Adedayo A. Adeloje, the company medical sergeant, arrived with his M113 and began to treat and evacuate the wounded. Additionally, A Company's First Sergeant, 1SG Macario Rodriguez, evacuated other wounded soldiers in his HMMWV to the battalion Aid Station located with the Combat Trains.

Throughout the action, 82mm mortar and 122mm artillery fire fell constantly. Rounds landed as close as 30 meters from my vehicle. CPT Kirkton instructed us to move forward or backward several hundred meters several times to take us out of range of the enemy's artillery fires. The Iraqis continued to fire at us but were unable to hit us.

At 1330 hrs, CPT Kirkton instructed me to disengage and establish a company hasty defense along the 23 grid line (See map #3). I ordered my platoon to follow me, gun tubes oriented over the back deck. We moved quickly to the 23 grid line, where I organized the company into a hasty defense. This included the air defense platoon and engineer platoon attached to the company.

As we moved, 1LT Geduldig, called for indirect fires on the enemy. Air Force A10's, called in by the ALO, 1LT Jeff Cowan, began to hit artillery targets and armored vehicles to the rear of the trench line as the battalion began to withdraw. The enemy's fires lessened dramatically. (Marstall, pg. 7)

B Company covered the efforts to recover A31 and A51, as well as a CEV (Combat Engineer Vehicle) which threw track. CPT Perry Hill, the Battalion Motor Officer, led the recovery effort. Finally, by 1442 hours, the entire battalion had withdrawn to the 28 grid line.

Company A acted as rear guard for the battalion, as we withdrew back to our positions in K31. The move back into Saudi Arabia went without incident. We closed on our positions at approximately 1030 hours, 20 Feb 91. Knight Strike I was over.

Task Force 1-5 Cavalry had suffered 3 KIA and 7 WIA. However, later battle damage assessment credited the task force with the destruction of a battalion of infantry. Additionally, air strikes and artillery missions called in by the battalion resulted in the destruction of numerous artillery pieces and two armored vehicles. The mission was a success, and we learned valuable lessons which paid off during the actual ground offensive.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Aerial reconnaissance conducted after the battle revealed an extensively dug and prepared reverse slope defense near Objective Sicily. The Iraqis used the terrain skillfully to their advantage and deployed wire and mine obstacles to cover avenues of approach to their main positions. While their mortar and artillery fires were inaccurate and unresponsive, their direct fires had a devastating effect. We learned that the enemy would not lay down, that he would fight and do so against a superior armored force.

2. The value of the Global Positioning System cannot be overrated. Without it, our mission on 19 February might have turned out quite differently. Vision in the desert at night with no moon is spotty at best; combine a moonless night with a torrential downpour, and a potential catastrophe looms. The GPS is indispensable for navigation over long distances where there are few or no major terrain features to use as navigation aids.

3. Tanks should always lead in the attack. I remain convinced that if tanks or a tank company team led the task force on this mission, our losses would have been considerably lower. Bradley Fighting Vehicles are the finest mechanized fighting vehicles in the world but are not invincible. The M1A1, with its superior armor protection and heavy firepower, should always lead.

4. Artillery fires and tactical air support take too long to respond to calls. It was approximately 30 minutes after the task force made contact that the Iraqis felt the effects of our indirect fires. During this time, A Company suffered most of its casualties. The system through which we employ indirect fires needs to be more responsive to the maneuver commander, even on the move if it is to be decisive on the battlefield. Additionally, we must develop field artillery systems capable of emplacing and firing within ten to fifteen minutes of notification. Improvements in these fire support areas will ensure effective fires on the battlefield at the decisive time and place and win battles.

5. Soldiers will do in combat what they practice in training. While the U.S. Army and its leaders said this for years, our experiences proved it once again. Key to this tenet is to teach good habits, train to standard, and be ruthless in execution of training in peacetime to minimize casualties in wartime. As Patton said, a "pint of sweat saves a gallon of blood."

6. Violent execution of simple battle drills are essential in a "fluid" situation. A Company had just five hours from mission receipt to LD (Line of Departure) time, but CPT Kirkton's well-rehearsed orders process and battle drills paid dividends. He spent a minimum of time preparing an order and a maximum of time preparing for the mission. The difference is that writing the order is not as important as communicating the concept of the mission and then spending the bulk of available time on rehearsals and mission preparation. CPT Kirkton kept his plan simple, relied on drills, and executed violently. This resulted in mission success.

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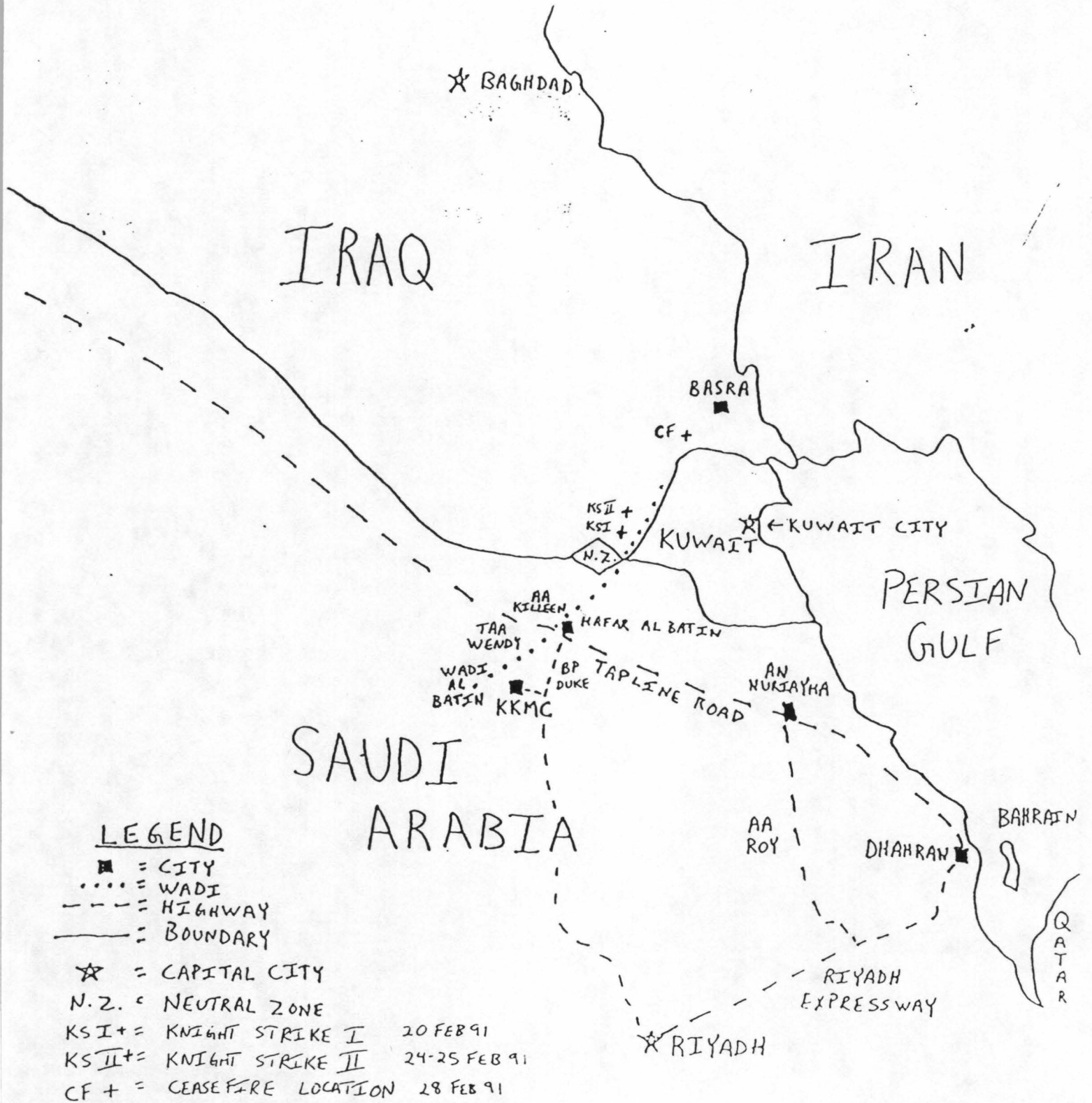
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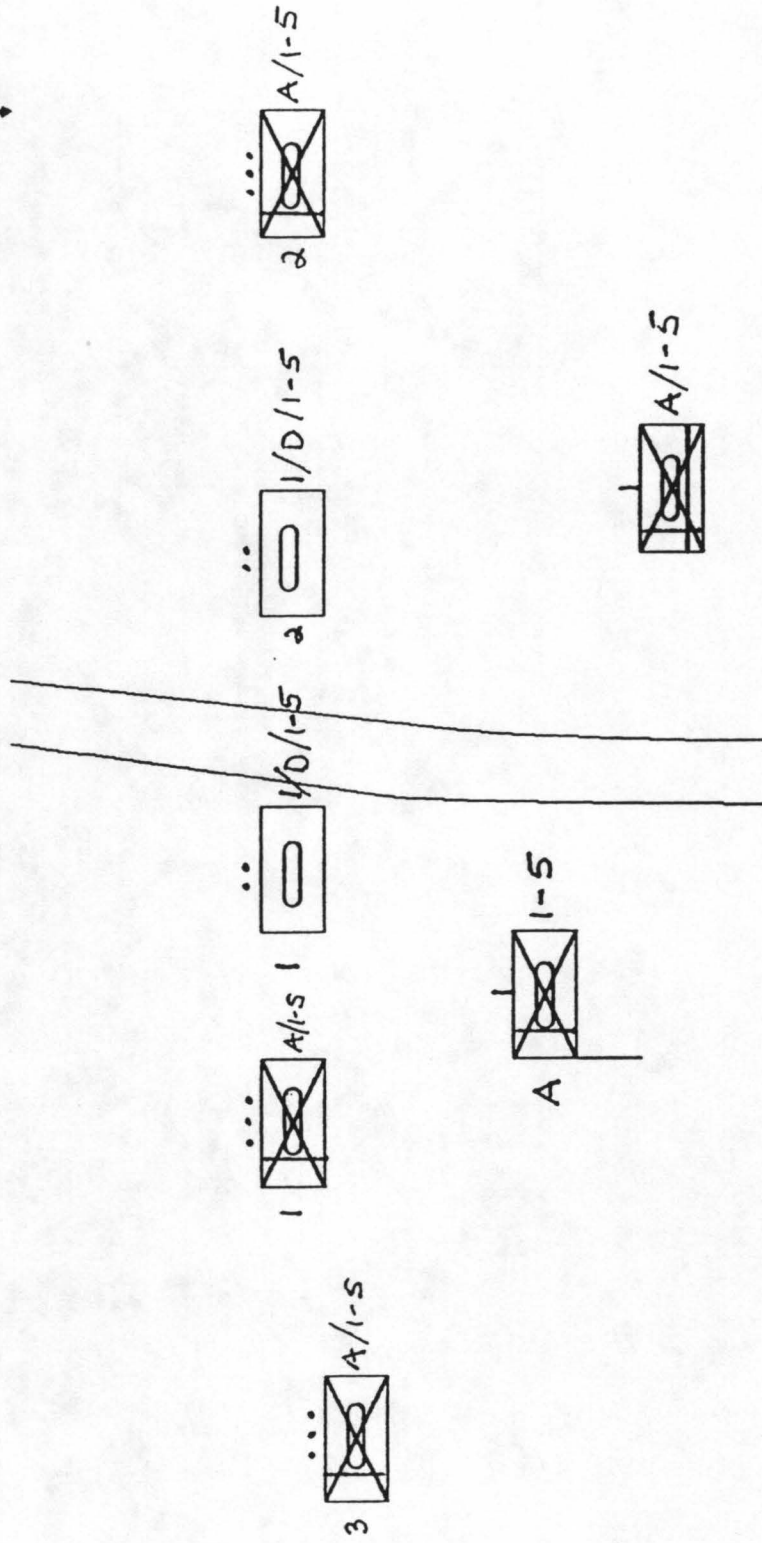
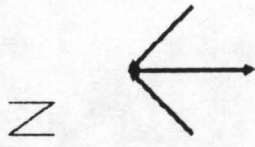
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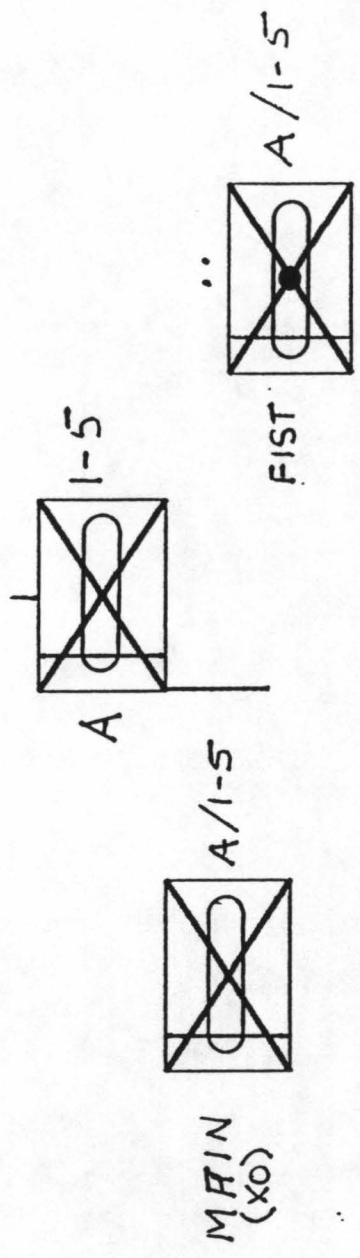
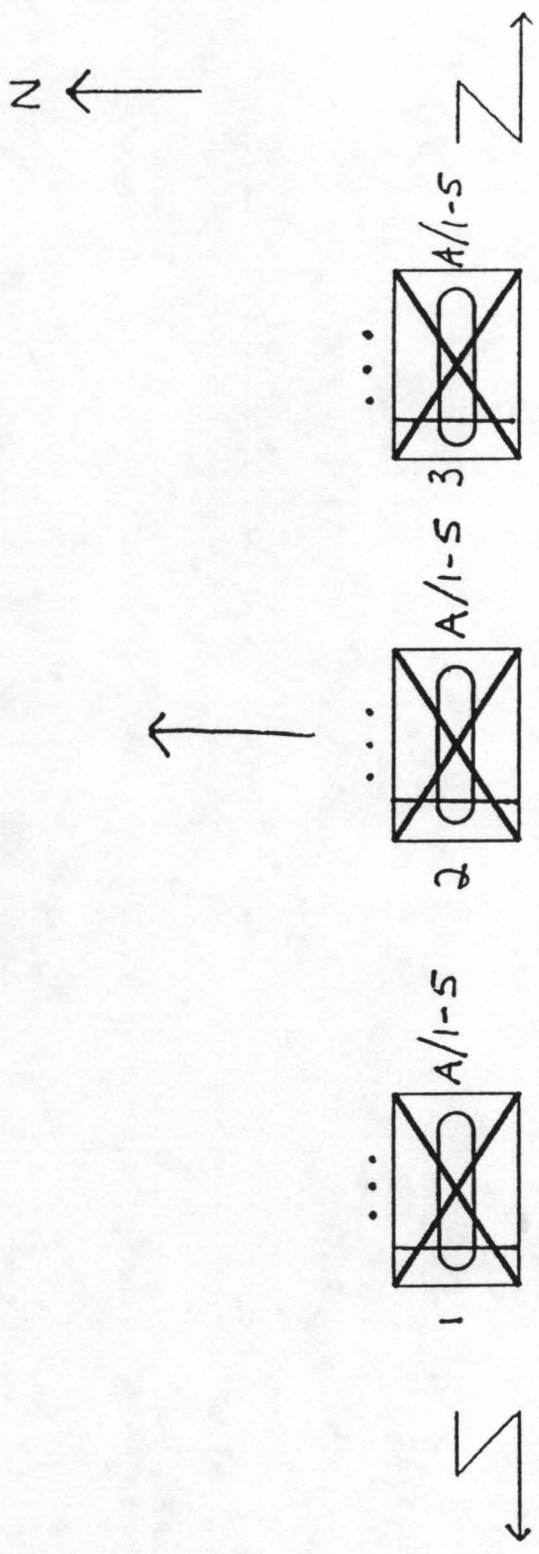
MAP #1



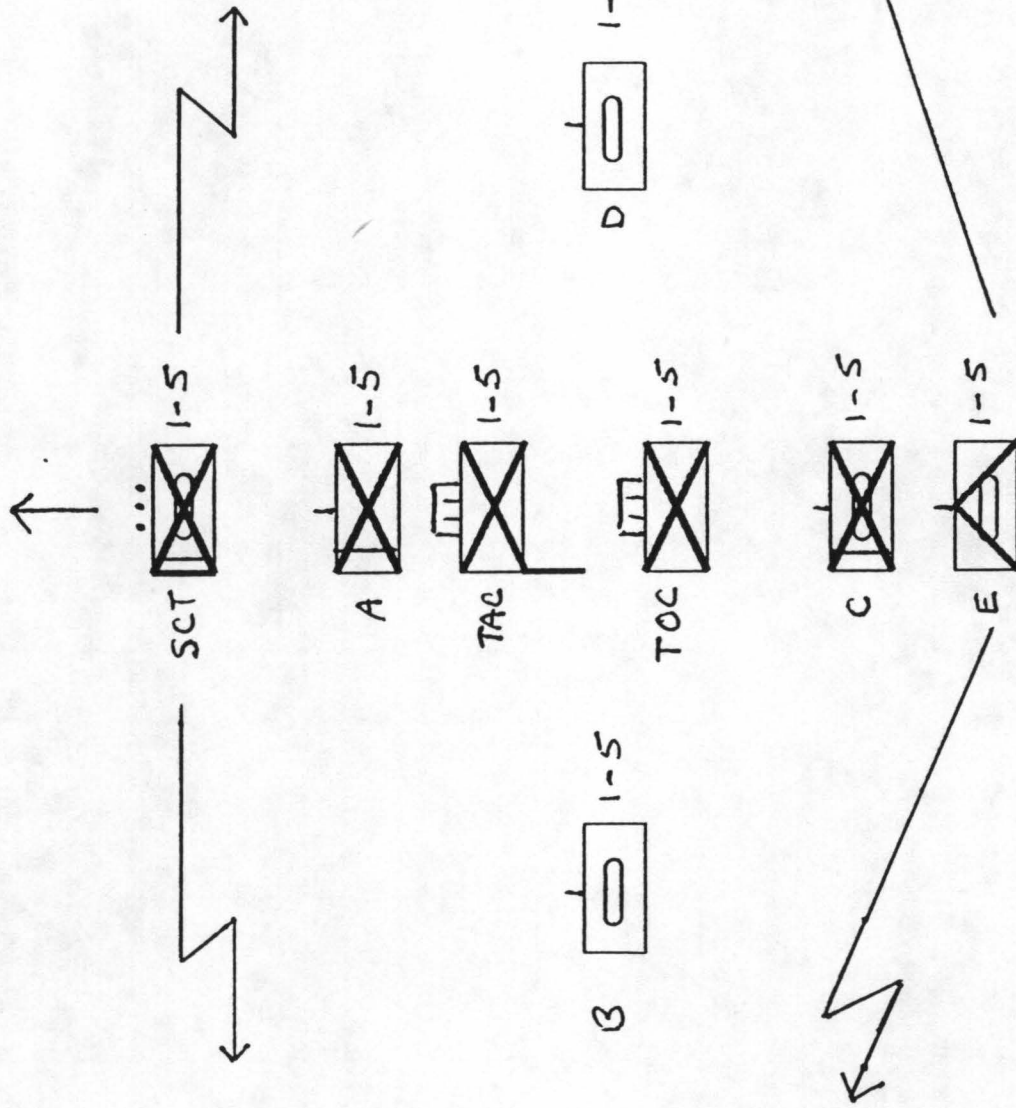
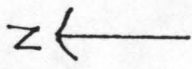
MAP # 2



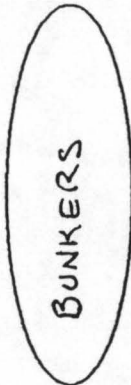
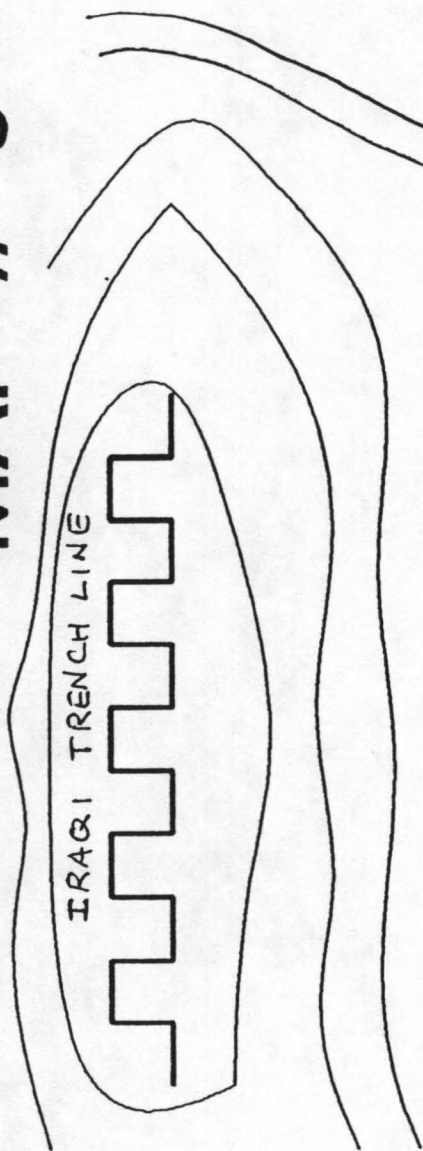
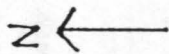
MAP # 4



MAP # 5



MAP # 6



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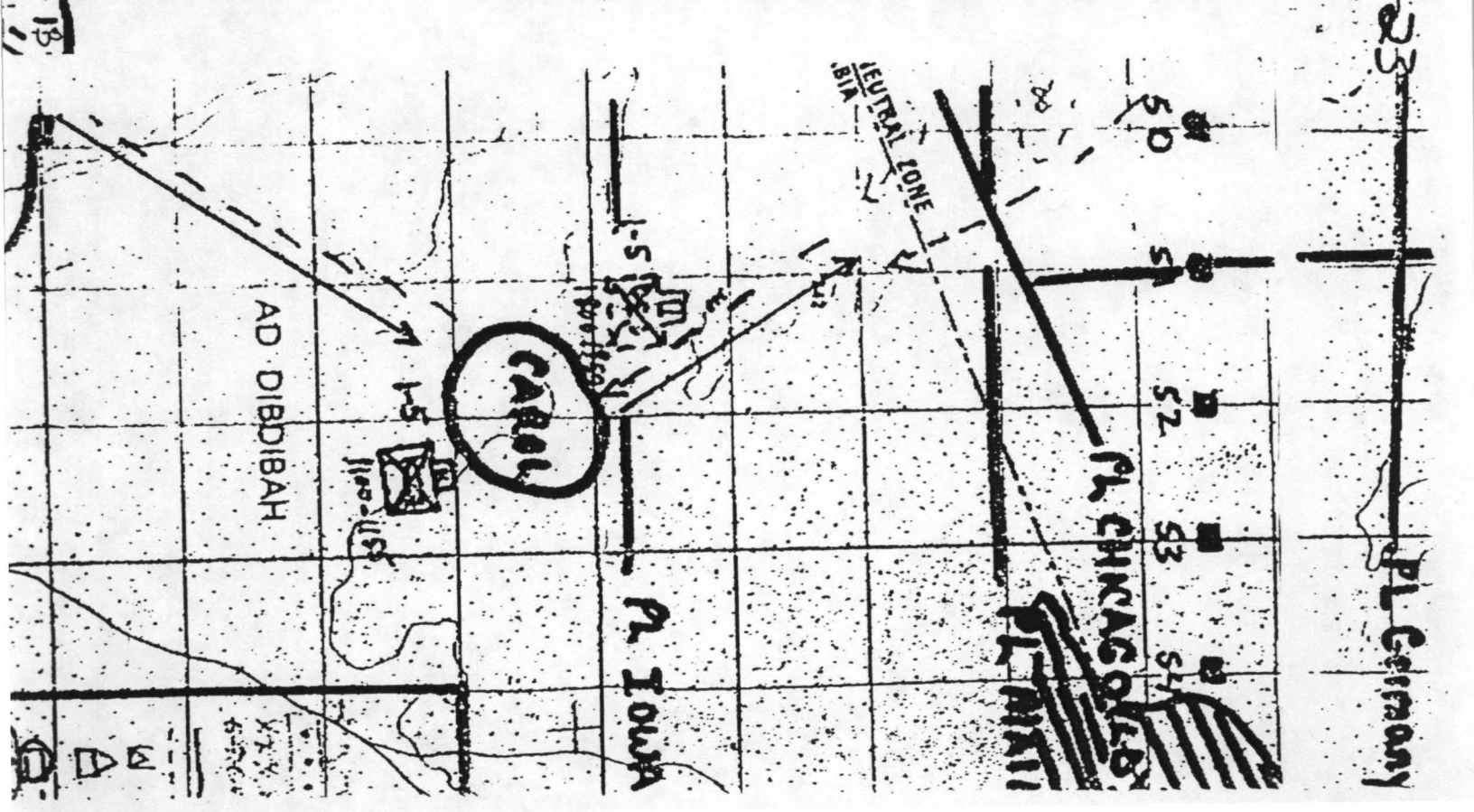
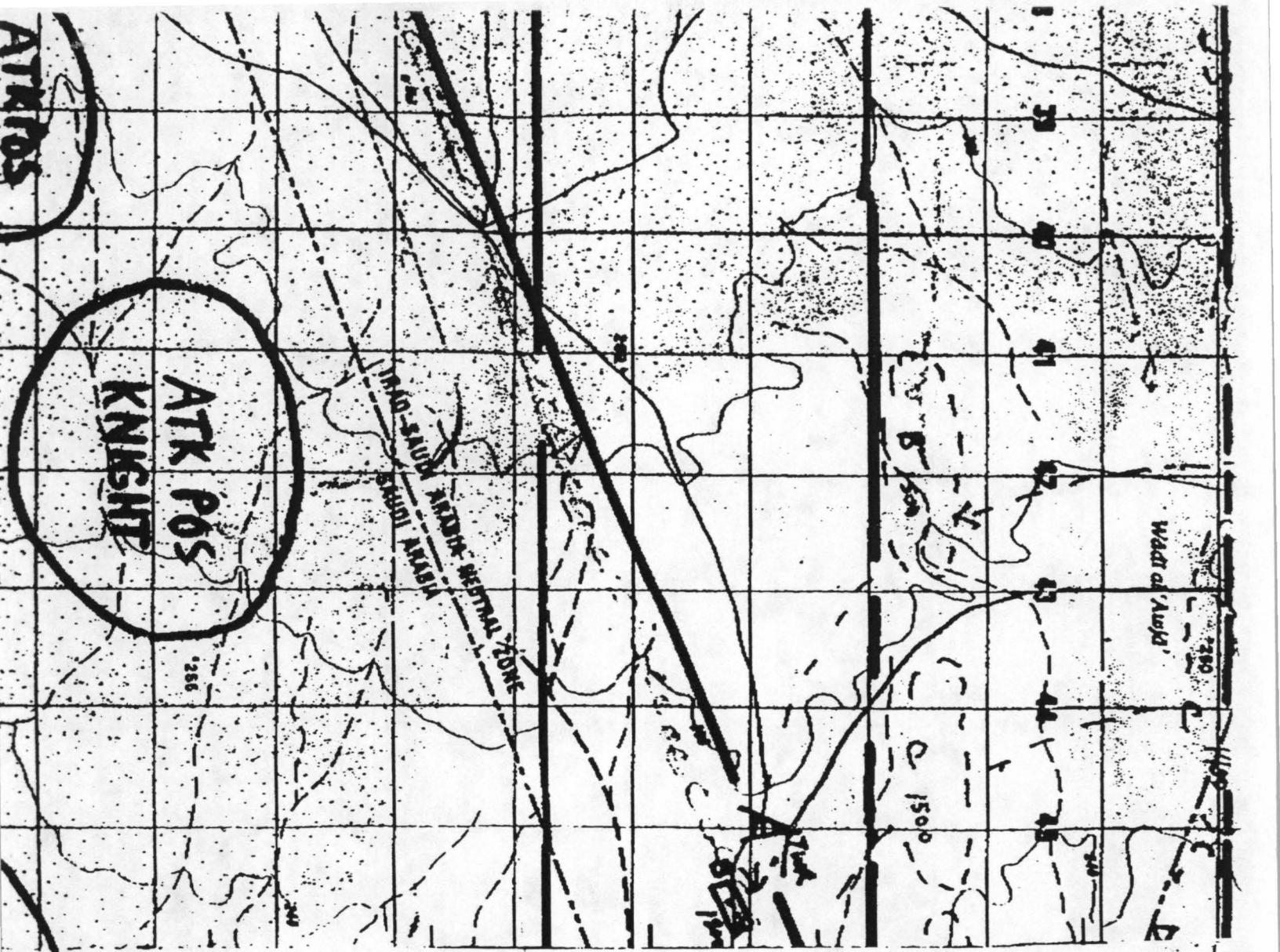
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