ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 38

NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE
1 April 1984

POISED FOR THE PERSIAN GULF

By Richard Halloran

PROMPTLY AT 8:30 EVERY weekday morning, Lieut. Gen. Robert C. Kingston, commander in chief of the United States Central Command, strides into a briefing room at his headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., and asks his staff to be seated. An intelligence officer, standing at a lectern beside a large wall screen, flicks a switch to display a map of the region around the Persian Gulf. He runs quickly through the action of the previous 24 hours in the war between Iran and Iraq. Another flick brings up a satellite photograph of a new Iranian troop deployment. A chart provides fresh detail on the 115,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, or the 25 Soviet ships in the Indian Ocean, or Soviet advisers in Ethiopia. The context in each case: threats to the industrial world's largest source of oil.

General Kingston, known in military parlance as "the CINC" (pronounced "Sink"), asks a short question; the briefing officer gives an equally short reply. An operations officer takes the podium, brings up a list of American forces available to the Central Command, and highlights several points on their training. A map of the Arabian Sea shows where an American aircraft carrier and other warships have moved within the last 24 hours. A second map shows the disposition of American warships in the Persian Gulf. General Kingston asks another quick question in his Boston twang, and gets another quick answer.

A third briefing officer gives a succinct forecast of weather that could affect military operations in the 19 countries within the Central Command's area of responsibility. A public-affairs officer takes three minutes to report on news that may affect the command. General Kingston says, "Thank you," rises and walks out to resume his duties as commander of the American military force that will fight to protect the oil lifeline from the Persian Gulf, if President Reagan so orders.

In its four years of existence, first as the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, and then, since Jan. 1, 1983, as the Central Command, the force has become, in General Kingston's words, "a credible deterrent." Its assets, he points out, include the organization of his headquarters; the combat units on call from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force; the positioning of arms and equipment close to the operating area; widening access to bases in the region, and the experience of 16 exercises in the United States and overseas and two overseas operations.

In February 1983, a month after the command was formed, President Reagan responded to warnings from Egypt and Sudan that the mercurial leader of Libya, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, planned an air assault on the Sudan and a coup to overthrow the Sudanese Government. The President turned to the Central Command; 37 hours later, four Awacs radar and control planes arrived in Egypt to monitor Libyan air movements for the Egyptian Air Force.

The President also deployed the aircraft carrier Nimitz off the Libyan coast to make F-14 fighters available for air cover. Administration officials said at the time that Mr. Reagan had let Colonel Qaddafi know he was prepared to order the destruction of the Libyan Air Force should the Libyan leader persist. Neither the assault nor the coup was attempted.

Similarly, the Central Command dispatched Awacs and supporting aircraft to Egypt two weeks ago, after a Libyan bomber attacked a city in the Sudan. The mission was the same: to dissuade Colonel Qaddafi from trying to overthrow the Sudanese Government.

Even so, the command still has immense obstacles to overcome. General Kingston, a veteran of 16 campaigns in the Korean and Vietnam Wars and among the nation's most experienced combat leaders, says bluntly: "If we had to send a combat force into the Central Command area, we would start from almost zero in terms of combat power and support structure."

The Central Command is 7,000 miles from its area of responsibility. It has few forces under its operational control — and these only when deploying. Special forces to operate behind enemy lines are inadequate. The command lacks sufficient air and sea transport, and acquiring it is proving to be slow. Access to other nations' military bases is dependent on the political winds of the moment; there is little long-term logistical support. The command has neither a communications apparatus nor an intelligence network in place. And the United States has no military alliances with nations in the region the command has been assigned to defend.

All this raises serious questions of combat capability. Whether the Central Command could accomplish any particular mission would depend on the strength of the adversary, the amount of warning time, and the speed with which deployment took place. The command's basic tactic would be a pre-emptive move — getting into position first in hope of deterring an adversary's strike.

Clearly, the Central Command could handle the small Iranian units of poorly trained and badly led Revolutionary Guards that have been thrown at the Iraqi Army. Just as clearly, the command would be in deep trouble if the Soviet Union's 30 divisions north of the Iranian border and in Afghanistan were to drive south. What is less certain is how well the command would per-

Continued

 2.

form in some crisis in between — whether it could assemble and deploy enough troops to stop, say, a full-scale Iranian invasion of Saudi Arabia.

THE CENTRAL COMMAND, ONE OF SIX UNIFIED, MULTI-service United States commands, is responsible for military operations, security assistance and training of foreign forces in Southwest Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Its area of responsibility covers an expanse larger than the continental United States, stretching from Egypt in the west to Pakistan in the east, from Jordan in the north to Kenya in the south. Its primary mission was laid down in 1982 in Defense Guidance, the Defense Department's secret marching orders: "Our principal objectives are to assure continued access to Persian Gulf oil, and to prevent the Soviets from acquiring political-military control of the oil directly or through proxies."

In the late 1970's, plans for a force that could be dispatched to trouble spots had kicked around the Pentagon for several years. The fall of the Shah of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both during President Carter's Administration, brought the force into being.

Today, the Central Command's immediate concern is to be ready to deploy forces should the war between Iran and Iraq jeopardize the oil fields around the Persian Gulf. Iran has threatened to retaliate for Iraqi attacks on its oil installations by closing the Strait of Hormuz, through which nearly nine million barrels of oil from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Iran are shipped each day, providing 20 percent of the non-Communist world's oil. American naval officers doubt that Iran has the mines to shut a channel 30 miles wide, very deep, and filled with swirling currents. But an air attack, or a batch of free-floating mines, or an artillery assault on a passing tanker could send maritime insurance rates prohibitively high, scaring off ship captains and owners.

"It's not so much Khomeini that's the problem," says one officer, "it's Lloyd's of London." To prevent those insurance rates from reducing the flow of oil, Administration contingency plans provide for sweeping mines, escorting tankers with frigates, flying air cover, or launching air strikes from an aircraft carrier in the Arabian Sea. "We have contingency plans to handle everything from an energy shortage to the military situation," says an official in Washington. "We began the planning in November and December, but we've gotten more serious about it in the last three or four weeks."

At Central Command headquarters, an intelligence section scrutinizes indicators and warnings from the Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency. A Combat Capabilities Assessment Group performs as a "fire brigade," running a constant check on crises, not only around the Persian Gulf but in the Sudan; in Somalia and Ethiopia, with their continual skirmishes; and in Oman and Yemen, where Soviet-backed Yemenis have been probing the Omani border. Operations and logistic sections rework contingency plans. "There is nothing so perishable," says one officer, "as a contingency plan."

In the field, prudent commanders take up slack to be ready if the bugle sounds. But before soldiers climb aboard air transports, at least one nation in the command's area of operations would have to invite the United States to send forces. President Reagan has said the United States will not intervene on land without such an invitation, because of the fierce political opposition that would arise otherwise. Moreover, says an officer in the Tampa headquarters, "an invitation is a military necessity." The Central Command has paratroopers or marines who could undertake a "forced entry," but that would be hard to execute — and even harder to sustain with reinforcements and supplies.

A Presidential decision would be only the first step. Congress would undoubtedly have a say under the much-disputed War Powers Act. Allies would have to be consulted: The Europeans are wary of any American move that might divert forces from Europe, even though they, and the Japanese, are far more dependent on oil from the Persian Gulf than is the United States. Friendly nations would be asked for access to bases and for permission to fly over their territory. The Soviet Union would be advised that the United States seeks only to stabilize a turbulent situation. The Soviet news agency, Tass, has already warned that American actions in the Persian Gulf "are creating a grave threat to peace and international security."

Once the order had been given, the Central Command's problems would begin. The command has enormous political and military handicaps that make it different from the Atlantic, Pacific and European commands, the Southern Command for Latin America and the Readiness Command that controls forces in the United States.

Politically, the Central Command has no umbrella of pacts like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Europe or the mutual security treaty with Japan. In its area of responsibility, differences in political outlook are profound. Most nations in the region regard Israel as their main enemy, while the United States sees the Soviet Union as the threat. Islamic nations do not want to embrace the United States, at least not in public, because of American support for Israel. The recent criticism of the Reagan Administration's Middle East policy by King Hussein of Jordan has jeopardized hopes for military cooperation with that nation.

Unlike the European Command in Stuttgart, West Germany, or the Pacific Command in Hawaii, the Central Command's Tampa headquarters is far from its area of operations. Unlike those and other commands, the Central Command has no forces under its operational control except those temporarily in its area of responsibility, no bases in its operating area, and no established communications and intelligence structures.

The Defense Guidance of 1983 acknowledged these shortcomings. It said: "We must acquire a reasonable assurance of achieving United States war-fighting objectives in Southwest Asia by the end of the decade." That would include reacting to everything from insurgency to Soviet invasion.

[redacted] N ANY CONTINGENCY, AN EARLY ALERT WOULD be critical. With a five-day warning, an Air Force fighter squadron and a battalion of 800 Army paratroopers could be in the region within 48 hours of the order to go; B-52 bombers could be in action in the same time. By the end of a week, two more battalions of paratroopers and a brigade headquarters would bring the total to 3,000 soldiers. How quickly an aircraft carrier, with its 70 to 90 planes, and a Marine Amphibious Unit of 1,800 marines could get to the scene would depend on where they were when the signal was given. A carrier is almost always in the Indian Ocean, but Marine units come and go.

Continued

After that, things would slow down because of insufficient airlift and sealift. It would take two or three weeks to bring in two more brigades of paratroopers and support units from Fort Bragg, N.C., to fill out the 82d Airborne Division. The first of the 12,000 marines in the Seventh Marine Amphibious Brigade, which includes infantry, artillery, tanks, fighter aircraft and combat support units, would begin to arrive in a week from Twentynine Palms, Calif. So would ships from the island of Diego Garcia, 2,000 miles to the south, with weapons, ammunition, food and supplies for the marines. But it would take several weeks for the entire brigade to arrive, depending on air transport. More than a month would be needed for the Army's 24th Infantry Division, with its armored personnel carriers and tanks, to arrive by ship from Fort Stewart, Ga.

General Kingston, who won the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second-highest decoration, in Vietnam, would soon move his headquarters from its nondescript box to a forward base. To lessen the handicap of distance, the Central Command in December placed a forward headquarters aboard the command ship LaSalle in the Persian Gulf.

But General Kingston does not hide his dissatisfaction with that arrangement. He told Congress last year that "a forward element afloat sends the wrong message to our friends and foes alike." What was needed, he said, was a forward headquarters ashore. That, he said, would "send a clear signal of United States resolve," providing "the right kind of presence at a minimum cost to the taxpayer and maximum benefit to the nation."

Instead of permanently assigned troops, the Central Command has a force list of 300,000 soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen from which it can draw.

A ground force would come from three Army divisions and from a brigade of helicopter gunships. The Army's new, mobile light division will be available later.

The Marine Corps would furnish a ground division and an air wing plus an infantry regiment and an air group.

The Air Force has designated nine tactical fighter wings, a Strategic Projection Force of B-52 bombers, an airborne warning and control wing of Awacs radar and supporting planes, and reconnaissance and electronic-warfare units.

The Navy would provide three aircraft carriers, a surface group probably centered on a battleship, five maritime aerial patrol squadrons, and ships from the Middle East Force.

General Kingston, who once commanded the Special Forces, or Green Berets, would use some of those soldiers, plus Army Rangers, Air Force special-operations units and Navy Seals to infiltrate behind enemy lines.

Sustaining a formidable force near the Persian Gulf with a steady flow of reinforcements, fuel, ammunition and supplies would be even more difficult than getting it there. Maj. Gen. William E. Klein, a staff officer with the Joint Chiefs, told Congress recently that "the size of the force we could send to Southwest Asia is limited by our capability to support it."

"Probably the most pressing need we have is for more lift — airlift and sealift," General Kingston says. "Seven thousand miles one way is a long commute."

It takes a C-5 Galaxy 14 hours to fly from the East Coast to Oman at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Cargo ships carrying the bulk of the heavy equipment would take 31 days, if the Suez Canal were closed and they had to sail the 12,000 miles around the Cape of Good Hope.

Once troops and supplies arrived, mobility would be hard to achieve. The entire region, General Kingston points out, "has just two-thirds of the paved-road mileage found in the state of Florida."

□

As a substitute for bases under United States control, American diplomats have pioneered a new concept for the Central Command, persuading several nations in the region to give American forces access to their military installations. In most cases, the United States pays for expanding and improving those bases.

After long negotiations, the United States has gained access to the Sidi Sliman Air Base in Morocco as a way station. The Administration has obtained a Congressional appropriation of $2 million for this fiscal year to improve that base, and has asked for $3 million for the fiscal year that begins on Oct. 1.

American forces have several times used the Egyptian military airport at Cairo West for maneuvers. But getting an agreement to build a large base at Ras Banas, on the shore of the Red Sea, has run into snags. American and Egyptian negotiators have agreed that Egypt will put up $49 million for construction and the United States another $49 million, but for a project less ambitious than originally planned.

In Oman, Sultan Qabus bin Said has opened airfields at Seeb and Thumrait to American forces, and has agreed to allow the United States to stockpile war materiel there. He has also permitted the United States to use the island of Masira as a transfer point for supplies flown in by large planes, then taken by boat or smaller planes to ships at sea. The Administration got $60.4 million in 1983 for construction in Oman and another $28.6 million for this year, and has asked for $42 million for next year. Included would be hardened shelters for fighter planes at Seeb and temporary accommodations for American personnel at Thumrait.

Programs for improving bases in Kenya and Somalia have been completed, at least for now. The United States spent $57.9 million between 1981 and 1983 in Kenya, largely on port facilities. Another $54.4 million was spent in Somalia during the same period, largely to refurbish the air and naval base at Berbera built by the Soviet Union before Somalia broke off military relations with Moscow in 1977.

The British island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean is vital to the Central Command's logistic, naval and air support. Of the 18 cargo ships that would immediately supply American forces deployed to the Persian Gulf, 15 are based at Diego Garcia. To escape observation by Soviet spy satellites, each vessel occasionally slips into the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean, where it becomes indistinguishable from the 5,000 ships plying those routes. Another ship is based at Subic Bay in the Philippines, yet another is stationed at Guam, and a third cruises around the Mediterranean, loaded with Air Force ammunition.

Over the last four years, the United States has enlarged the airfield at Diego Garcia to accommodate B-52 bombers. Warehouses, repair shops and communications facilities have been built. Submarine tenders call to service undersea boats. The United States spent $57.9 million to improve the naval and air bases in 1983, and it is spending another $90 million this year. The request for fiscal 1985 is down to $22.9 million, as the program nears completion.

Saudi Arabia has so far held the Central Command at arm's length, offering no access to bases and withholding permission for American forces to maneuver there. But the Saudi Government has been building a complex of bases far beyond its needs or its ability to operate. American planners believe those bases would be made available in an emergency.

To compensate for the lack

Continued

of treaties, General Kingston has begun to build a relationship with each nation in his command's operating region. Critical to that effort have been deployments of American forces for training with local troops.

The most visible Central Command exercises have been three Bright Star maneuvers, most recently last summer, when 26,500 American soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines were deployed to Egypt, Sudan, Somalia and Oman and nearby waters. B-52 bombers flew from bases in the United States to make bombing runs, paratroopers jumped with Egyptian paratroopers, and Marine tanks churned ashore through heavy surf into Somalia. For the first time, the deployment included a combined Egyptian-Sudanese-American maneuver.

A less-publicized exercise has been Shadow Hawk, in which American air-defense soldiers train with Jordanians in Jordan. Marines have made amphibious landings in Kenya and Oman, communications teams have drilled in Oman, and Special Forces units have trained in the Sudan. The big exercise this year, called Gallant Eagle, has been scheduled for the deserts of California this summer, while another Bright Star deployment to Egypt and other nations is planned for 1985.

General Kingston emphasizes personal relations. Last year, he spent five days in Jordan, where he met with King Hussein, and another five days touring military bases in Saudi Arabia. He also visited Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Yemen, Oman and Bahrain.

The relationship between the Central Command and the countries of the region is furthered, General Kingston believes, by the command's role as the agency for administering American security assistance in the area. In 1983, the United States provided $7.7 billion worth of assistance in military sales, government-financed arms shipments, military construction, training, grants, economic support for military programs, and commercial arms exports to 14 of the 19 nations in the Central Command's operating area, plus Morocco. That nation is outside the command's area but is crucial to its line of communications. The sum will go up to an estimated $9.1 billion this year and to a projected $11 billion in 1985.

Right now, most of the command's contingency plans focus on American troops. In the future, planners would like to work with their counterparts in the region.

Four years ago, officers in the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force had to start almost from scratch to acquire data on the ethnic mixtures, religious complexities and geography of a region of snow-capped mountains and deserts with 130-degree temperatures. Good maps have been hard to come by. Weather information, vital to military operations despite technical advances, was lacking. When American helicopters flew into Iran on their aborted mission to rescue the American Embassy hostages, pilots ran into huge dust storms, about which they had not been warned.

For intelligence, the Central Command has no network of listening posts to intercept radio and telephone transmissions. It lacks places to put sensors that can find, through radar or infrared detection, movements of tanks, missiles and aircraft. The command lacks agents to gather information that satellite photos are unable to pick up — for instance, how many aircraft inside a hangar are fit to fly.

Similarly, the Central Command does not have the communications by radio, telex and telephone that are common to other commands. The entire apparatus for communicating with units in the field and with Washington must be carried when the command deploys.

When the Central Command's forerunner, the Rapid Deployment Force, was formed in 1980, critics scoffed that it was not rapid, had little to deploy, and was not much of a force. The critics have been less vocal recently, as the Central Command has started to make progress. General Kingston touched on that in a recent address in London, saying: "Four years ago, if the President had directed us to send a military force to this area of the world to protect the vital interests of the United States, its friends and its allies, no one could have told you what forces would go, in what order, how long it would take them to get there, how they would be sustained or who their commander would be."

"Today," he concluded, "I can answer all of those questions." ■

Lieut. Gen. Robert Kingston, head of the Central Command, at his headquarters in Florida. In its first four years, the force has carried out 16 exercises, including one last year in Egypt and become, in the general's words, "a credible deterrent."

Richard Halloran, a member of The Times's Washington bureau, covers military affairs.