

Wednesday, 1/16/91

NPR programming ("All Things Considered") was interrupted this afternoon with a report that a squadron of U.S. F-15s took off from an American airbase in Saudi Arabia and flew north toward Iraq. Other reports are that antiaircraft fire has been seen over Baghdad. The time here in Astoria is just before 4 pm; in Saudi Arabia it is 3 in the morning tomorrow. The initial report was made by a press pool reporter who said a squadron of F-15 long-range jet fighter-bombers had taken off after midnight. ABC and CNN reporters claimed from Baghdad that they can see antiaircraft fire west of the city.

At 4 o'clock NPR news reported that war with Iraq has begun.

Associated Press reported that the U.S. military in Saudi Arabia has announced war. Marlin Fitzwater, Bush's press aide, said the President would make a statement at 9 pm Washington time; he did confirm attacks had been made against Iraq and Kuwait. He also changed the name of the U.S. presence in the Middle East—it is no longer known as "Operation Desert Shield." He called it "Operation Desert Storm."

The airbase that the F-15s flew from seems to have been built within the past couple of months for this exact moment of initial attack.

I walked down the hill toward work at the Columbian Cafe. Hardly anyone else was abroad. I compared the quiet with the noise of thousands of jet bombers over darkened cities half a world away. I drank a glass of wine at a bar with a friend who is 30 today and very soon to be a father. As I expected, the Cafe was closed. Uriah, my friend and boss, left a note on the door that he could not face cooking tonight with war just begun. I walked to the Ship Inn; as I did last night awaiting the end of the deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, I drank glasses of red wine and watched the television over the bar. I listened to George Bush's bloodless speech to the nation justifying the initiation of war and thought of George Orwell: "War is peace."

Thursday, 1/17/91

A lovely morning after days and days of rain and drizzle. Clouds stacked over the mountains on the Washington side of the river were clothed in skirts of fog. I walked down the hill to the radio station on 14th Street and Exchange for my weekly program on KMUN-FM. School buses filled with children passed me, cars took people to work or to the college farther up the hill on 16th. Just an average day, the second day of war. While I walked hundreds of bombers and missile carrying jets pounded parts of ancient Baghdad.

I read Margaret Atwood's poem *The Loneliness of a Military Historian* on the air and played Benjamin Britton's *War Requiem* for the better part of an hour, then switched to BBC World News, almost all of which was about the war in the Persian Gulf.

Once more Uriah was too depressed about the war to open the Cafe at night. I spent a few hours at the Ship Inn again, watching television coverage of the war (CNN), learning about Iraqi Scud missiles sent flying into Israel; Haifa and Tel Aviv were lightly struck, no chemicals, and only a few people slightly wounded. But it was awesome to watch people move around a newsroom in gas masks; a sight of World War 1 and a disturbing preview of the future.

Today, 30 years ago in 1961, outgoing President and General-in-Chief of the World War 2 Allies, Dwight David Eisenhower, warned in his farewell address against "the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes."

Today the results of his warning are in full play. Aside from official reasons for this nation's crusade in the Middle East and liberation of Kuwait, the very dynamic of its huge military machine was bound to set it off, particularly after the end of the Cold War, when it could be unleashed without fear of mutual annihilation. So far no nuclear weapons have been used — and a purpose of the conflict is to paralyze Iraq's nuclear capacity — but their use has been threatened as a reaction to Iraq's possible use of biological or chemical weapons. Crossing the nuclear threshold for any reason, whatever justification, might well set off the final chain reaction toward oblivion. Pakistan and India in their bitter struggle for Kashmir are at a possible nuclear brink, and any use of such weapons in the Gulf War should almost certainly inspire their use by India and Pakistan. Though some weapons are known as "tactical nuclear weapons" developed for small limited area effect on a battlefield, as a man said "a nuke is a nuke is a nuke."

Friday, 1/18/91

A woman phoned the radio station yesterday morning and suggested that I pass on her idea of wearing black arm-bands in protest of the Gulf War and/or in memorium to those who are dying or being hurt by bombs or combat (and in contrast to those ubiquitous yellow ribbons). I announced her idea on the air, and last night told my pal Paula about it. She took a black elastic band she had on her blond hair and gave it to me. I wore it today on the left arm of my leather jacket, and will continue to wear it until at least the war is over, and perhaps afterward if it doesn't cut off blood circulation in my arm.

Saturday, 1/19/91

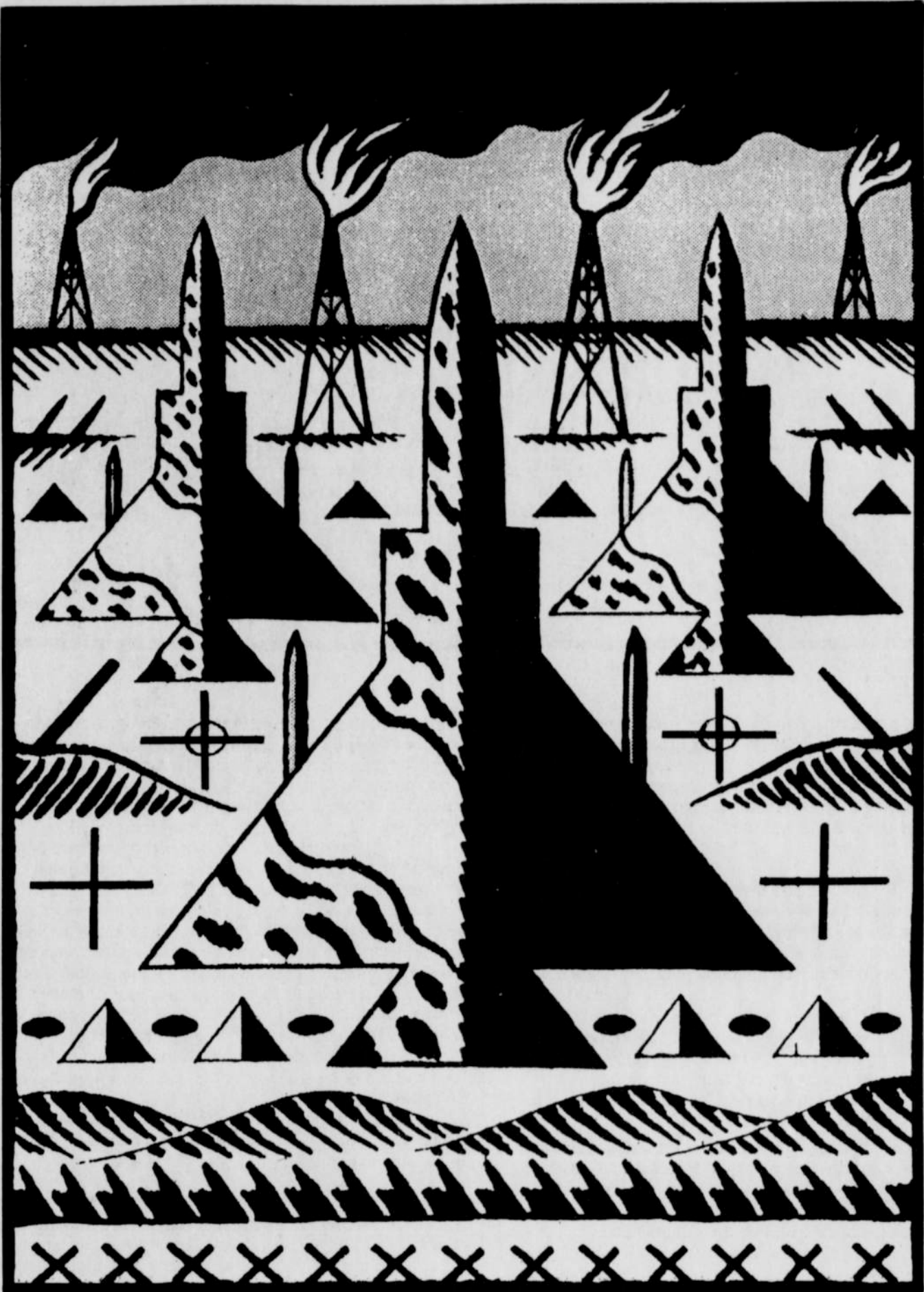
I awake before dawn, turn on the radio and let the news of the war sweep over me like a malevolent wave. I lay in bed semi-conscious, absorbing a new missile attack on Israel; a count of ten Allied warplanes down (contrasted with an Iraqi claim of 70 or so); of increasing censorship of news by all sides —and I drift in and out of sleep. A war is being fought, thousands are bombed or hiding from missiles while I lay quietly in my bed hearing foghorns of ships in the river. I dreamily conceive of the war and its casualties. My bed is warm though outside of it my house is cold. I think of a couple of pretty women while I listen to the latest battle damages.

Sunday, 1/20/91

War on both sides of the world. Saddam Hussein calls for "Holy War" in a radio broadcast while Iraqi Scud missiles are sent into Saudi Arabia and destroyed by U.S. "Patriot" missiles. Soviet elite soldiers fire on defenders of government buildings in Latvia. While most of the rest of the world seems distracted by war in the Persian Gulf, Russian tanks have spent the past week attempting to crush Baltic independence. A few days ago Soviet armor rolled over crowds who placed their bodies as barriers. Several were killed when the tanks crushed them. One man, interviewed on NPR, said that freedom was more important than living without it.

Astoria, Oregon, in the meantime slumbers quietly under a winter Sunday sun.

I walked down the hill to the riverfront this afternoon. Just opposite a yellow wooden Catholic church, built in carpenter gothic style in the last century, I heard a roar of jets. I looked up. Directly over the steeple four fighter-bombers flew low and slow,



BOB GALE (1991)

and crossed the Columbia River northeast into Washington State. A crescent moon stood directly over the cross on top of the church steeple — a metaphor, I thought, of the two warring religions of Islam and Christianity, momentarily bisected by the new swords of jet warplanes on the first Sunday of the Persian Gulf War.

Thursday, 1/24/91

An old comrade from the Vietnam Veterans Against the War came to my house today and suggested that I accompany him to the Middle East as a news correspondent. He is selling everything and has already two camouflaged pairs of fatigues with his name and the word correspondent sewed above the shirt pockets. He is a native of the Philippines who was raised in the Pacific Northwest, ex-USMC and a controversial figure in the VVAW, suspected by some of being a government agent, a suspicion based on his claimed activities with the CIA in Vietnam in regards to heroin smuggling, which he testified to a

congressional committee. He loves guns and uniforms and once threatened to kill the wife he is now divorcing.

His plans seem sound: a tourist visa to Cairo instead of Saudi Arabia, mixing in with Egyptian and other Arabic troops, and also European contingents and eventually American, avoiding at all stages the enforced pool of reporters restrained by the U.S. military brass. He thinks we can freelance. He believes I am stagnating in Astoria and that between us we can illuminate the perils faced by the soldiers and Marines who as usual are regarded as little than pawns in international bloodletting.

He might be right that I am stagnating but I have been over this ground before. What reputation I have as a journalist is as a leftwing writer which will not endear me to military authorities who will probably deny me access to their troops. I have little indication that any news agency or radio station would wish to purchase anything I produce which would be necessary for me to survive. Small newspapers and radio stations can't afford to send anyone abroad and pay wages for an indefinite period of time. They usually depend upon news agencies overseas and upon freelance journalists already where the action is. The mainstream megamedia would not hire me if I asked. I was fired by Associated Press for interviewing anti-Vietnam War activists in the same manner AP reporters interviewed generals and politicians, and NBC gave me a choice of being "objective" or "political"; I chose the latter — we were starting up the VVAW — and lost my job as news writer and potential TV newscaster. More limiting than my prejudices and professional liabilities is my wish to remain independent of collective policy or network opinion. Pack journalism produces pack perceptions and reporting. Outside the pack is lonely but necessary. Journalism's ethics are rigorous though not rigorously applied. The ethic requires that I owe allegiance only to the First Amendment, and must refuse to compromise. A newscaster's only god is the First Amendment, amen.

I was a good combat reporter a quarter of a century ago, and though I have softened and fattened since, I retain a deep sympathy for those tangled up in a war. I have experienced enough of war to satisfy my curiosity and capacity to endure its

TALK OF WAR

Guns fire, ships rock
tanks are driven, airplanes soar
practicing and preparing
as there is talk of war

January 15 is the deadline
if Saddam doesn't leave Kuwait
America will shoot
no longer will they wait

The first day of war
thousands of people will die
and the million dollar airplanes
will be shot from the sky

Whoever wants to have a war
really is insane
we may not even beat
the terror Saddam Hussein

My brother is dressed in camouflage
waiting to see if he'll stay alive
for if there is a brutal war
it will be difficult to survive

I wish the talk of war would end
my brother would come back in awhile
I would be so happy
I would have an endless smile

~ZETTY McKAY (1991)

Zetty McKay was 12 years old when she wrote this poem at the eve of the Gulf War. She is the daughter of artist Roger McKay and lives in Astoria.



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