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JOHN KASICH, GOVERNOR

MAJOR GENERAL DEBORAH A. ASHENHURST, ADJUTANT GENERAL

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20 years later: Former Gulf War POW, current Ohio Air National Guard member remembers captivity

By 1st Lt. Kimberly D. Snow
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COLUMBUS, Ohio — The colonel in the olive drab flight suit picks up a remote control lying on his desk, aims it at the television mounted to his office wall and pushes play. The screen flickers on to a crude black and white video overlaid with numbers and symbols — some fixed to the screen, others tilting with the horizon. A man's breathing, raspy and ragged, pours from the speakers. On the screen, from this bird's-eye view, jets careen through a morbid and magnificent fireworks display as roman candles and bottle rockets race up from below. The horizon tilts sharply as just ahead, a rocket finds its target. "Stroke One took a hit! Stroke One took a hit!" says an adrenaline-laced voice that transports the colonel in the flight suit back 20 years into the cockpit of his F-16 fighter jet. A moment later, another missile finds its mark.

"That's me getting shot," the colonel says softly, matter-of-factly. He continues watching, his tone even, his piercing glacier-blue eyes impassive and calmly describes the action unfolding on screen.

Capt. Mike Roberts arrived at his new duty station at U.S. Air Base Torrejon, near Madrid, Spain, in June 1990, with his pregnant wife and two stepchildren, 14 and 10 years old, in tow. Assigned to the 614th Tactical Fighter Squadron there, he had been training for the unit's nuclear alert mission for about two months when on Aug. 2, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's military forces invaded Kuwait — Iraq's oil-rich neighbor to the south — and his mission abruptly changed.

By the end of August, Roberts' squadron had deployed to Qatar, and after tying up some loose ends at Torrejon, he joined them in the beginning of October. The squadron spent the fall patrolling and defending Saudi Arabia's northern border with Iraq and conducting training missions to prepare for what appeared to be almost certain war with Iraq. Although the U.S. and Soviet Union were nearing the end of their Cold War, the rivalry had long shaped how the American military trained for war.

“We had always thought that the next war was going to be in Germany in the Fulda Gap and everything would be low altitude, trying to stay below the Soviet SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) and Soviet radar. That was how the Air Force was built. That was our training program,” Roberts said. “When we got to the desert, we recognized that the real threat down low was going to be triple-A (anti-aircraft artillery), just a huge mass of triple-A that they had.”

With a relatively short amount of time to adapt, they immediately adjusted their training to prepare for this new reality. They began incorporating high-altitude release bombs and medium-altitude ingress plans at about 20,000 feet, as opposed to the low-altitude — about 500 feet — plans they had previously trained on.

In November, two months out, the plan for the first few days of the air war was set. Although the air tasking operation document was classified secret and kept in a safe, the pilots were

allowed access. The squadron's first two days of missions were "nothing big," Roberts said—airfields in Talil and Basra. However, the plan for day three — the Republican Guard headquarters building, air defense headquarters building and an oil refinery, all in Baghdad — gave them pause.

"I remember thinking, 'Wow, day three, downtown Baghdad in the daytime. They'll change that by the time we get there,'" he said. "But sure enough, day three came and no changes. Everybody was pretty nervous about it. A lot of guys were writing the letter home to leave in their helmet box when they left. I said, 'I'm not doing that, that's bad luck to be doing that.' So I didn't write a letter."

On day three, Jan. 19, 1991, a fleet of 48 F-16 Fighting Falcons — including the 16 from Torrejon — along with eight F-4G Wild Weasels, eight F-15 Eagles and two EF-111 Ravens, pushed north into Iraq. The first 32 airplanes successfully bombed their target — a nuclear plant about 17 kilometers southeast of Baghdad — then peeled off south, while Roberts' group continued north over downtown Baghdad.

Intermittent clouds partially obscured the city, and because the rules of engagement dictated pilots could not bomb targets in cities unless they could visually identify them, they were forced to call off the mission. Just as they received the abort order, their warning systems sounded, alerting them to the enemy SAMs racing up from below. Roberts successfully defeated the first missile when an airplane behind him called out another SAM launch. He rolled his F-16 to look for it and saw it coming up beneath him. He maneuvered to avoid it and felt a slight bump in his airplane as the missile exploded. At first, he thought he was safe.

"I remember trying to light the burner on the airplane to get some air speed back, and instead of feeling that kick in the pants from the burner lighting, I felt the motor just dying underneath me," he said. "We have what we call 'Bitching Betty' in the airplane — a voice warning system

that starts talking to you when things are going bad — and Betty's bitching and lights are lighting up everywhere and the motor had quit running, the flight controls weren't responding. I was in sort of a negative-G pitch over and I couldn't pick the nose of the airplane back up. Nothing was working."

He glanced back over his left shoulder and saw smoke pouring from beneath the airplane. He tried once more to restart the motor, but nothing happened. It was time to get out.

Roberts felt all of his 195 pounds being pushed up off the seat, watched the canopy eject away, and began falling face first toward the ground. Just as he started to worry about his rapidly-decreasing altitude, his parachute deployed. As he floated down, breaking through the clouds, he saw Baghdad off to his left and a four-lane highway running south out of the city. He used the wind to maneuver away from the city, but as he got closer to the ground, he could see the tracers from rounds being fired at him.

"I'm just thinking about getting skinny, living through the next fifteen seconds at a time," Roberts said. "I could see these cars on the median and the side of the road as I got close, kind of forming up a little welcoming party for me."

After landing about 500 yards east of the highway, he dropped his parachute, grabbed his survival kit and began running away from the highway until a mob of angry AK-47 assault rifle-toting civilians blocked his path, firing off warning rounds. He surrendered and the angry mob stripped him of everything they could, leaving him with his flight suit and survival vest only because they couldn't figure out how the zippers worked.

“Fortunately, within just a few minutes, these military folks came up and they ran off the civilians,” he said. “And I say ‘fortunately’ because the civilians were getting a little rowdy and I don’t know what they were planning, but it wasn’t anything good, I don’t think.”

The Iraqi troops loaded Roberts into the back of a station wagon and drove him to a building about a half a mile down the highway, where they blindfolded him and cuffed his hands behind his back. Inside, they began what was to be the first of many interrogations. At first, the young pilot feigned amnesia.

“That worked pretty well for about the first 7 1/2 seconds of it,” Roberts said. “After that, if they felt I wasn’t answering quick enough or giving the correct answers to the questions, two helpers would just start wailing with some kind of baton or something — hands, fists — you know, just add a little encouragement to the interrogation.”

Over the next few days, Roberts was moved several times and interrogated again at each new stop. On the third day, his captors took him to a facility where they had begun consolidating the downed pilots now being held as prisoners of war. Although he remained blindfolded, he could feel and hear other POWs being taken past him into an interrogation room. He could also hear their screams.

When it was Roberts’ turn, the Iraqi soldiers escorted him into the room, removed his blindfold and handcuffs and told him they were allowing him to make a video to show his friends and family that he was alive and well. At first, the soldier giving the instructions simply wanted him to identify himself, his unit and his aircraft.

“Then he started on this thing of ‘Repeat after me. The innocent people of Iraq are being wrongfully harmed by the people in power in America,’” Roberts said. “You know, all this kind

of stuff. Like everybody else in front of me, I said ‘Well, I’m not going to say that.’ And then the fun and games started again.”

After another beating, the soldier who appeared to be running things told the others to take Roberts outside and cut off his leg. They dragged him off, blindfolded and handcuffed him again, knocked him down and beat him even more severely.

“I just remember curling up, my hands behind me, in the fetal position and everybody there just laying in with boots on me, and one guy had a baton and was beating on the back of my head and neck,” he said. “For lack of anything better to say, I just said ‘Why do you want me to do this? Why do you want me to do this video?’ And this guy just wailed on me and said because of this! It was getting pretty serious and I said ‘Ok, let’s go do the video.’”

Back in the United States and on the U.S. air base in Torrejon, little was known about Roberts’ fate. His plane had been shot down Jan. 19 and he had not been heard from since. Only one pilot that afternoon thought he might have seen Roberts eject from his airplane, and although Roberts tried to call out on his radio just before he ejected, no message was relayed.

Three days after his F-16 went down over Baghdad, an 8 ½-months-pregnant Patty Roberts sat at the hospital on U.S. Air Base Torrejon awaiting a prenatal checkup. Her fighter pilot husband, Capt. Harry “Mike” Roberts, was listed as DUSTWUN: duty status and whereabouts unknown. She watched the television, tuned to CNN, hungry for news of her husband, when suddenly, he materialized on the screen. He appeared tense and haggard, but he was alive.

“I guess that was my good fortune out of all of that,” Roberts said. “Now that the bad guys had showed their hand, all of us — at least that they had videos on — now they had to account for everybody.”

After the POWs recorded their videotaped messages, they were loaded onto a bus and taken to a temporary prison facility where they stayed for about a week and an half. It wasn't too bad, Roberts recalled. They were fed and the young Iraqi troops who were guarding them left in the evenings, allowing the POWs to talk among themselves and take an accurate roll call.

"They would bring around in the morning a piece of bread, and in the afternoon, a bowl of rice covered in some boiled onions or something. At nighttime, just before sunset, they would bring around a big bucket that had a bunch of boiled goat meat or something," Roberts said. "I don't know what it was, not great stuff, but enough to keep you alive."

Soon after, on Jan. 31, the prisoners were moved to a prison in the Ba'ath Party intelligence headquarters. "That was not a good place," Roberts said.

The prisoners were kept in solitary confinement and unable to communicate. They were not being fed and the interrogations and beatings began anew. Keeping track of time became a way to occupy his mind and he found a rock on his cell floor and used it to scratch a calendar on his wall and mark off the days. When he began thinking about Vietnam veterans, wondering if he, too, could be kept five, six, seven years, he forced his mind to other topics, and he did a lot of praying.

In early February, a guard told Roberts the ground war had begun and 70,000 Americans had been killed during the invasion. He knew it was a lie. For three weeks, the prisoners had listened to bombs devastating the city night after night, and as time went on, heard Iraqi counter fire less and less. "By the end, you could tell they were getting pounded and there was just nothing they could do about it," he said.

But eventually, those bombs found him. On Feb. 23, three coalition F-117 Stealth bombers dropped four 2,000-pound bombs on the headquarters building. When the first bomb hit, the Iraqis scattered, leaving the prisoners to fend for themselves. It was the first time Roberts thought he might not survive the experience. “It was like being on a boat in the ocean, the building was just rocking,” he said. “I was ready to go then. I thought for sure I was done.”

When the bombs stopped, the city was eerily quiet. The impact had badly damaged many of the cells, blowing the walls out of some, freeing those occupants while trapping others, including Roberts, in their cells. Miraculously, none of the prisoners was seriously hurt, Roberts said. The bombs had impacted the opposite end of the building from where they were being held.

Several prisoners made their way out into the hallways. They thought about escape, but the night was so black, they couldn’t see to move through the rubble, and even if they could, their yellow prison suits and western countenances made them easy targets. They began shouting to one another, exchanging names and stories. They had been in solitary confinement for three weeks and finally had a chance to connect and find out who was there.

“A couple doors down from me I hear ‘I’m Bob Simon, CBS News.’ You know, the ‘60-Minutes’ dude,” Roberts said. Simon and his crew had been picked up on the Kuwait-Iraq border, accused of spying and held with the POWs.

Across the hall from Simon was downed A-10 Thunderbolt pilot Richard Dale Storr, who had been unable to get out a radio call before he ejected. Because his wingman had not seen him eject, Storr was initially categorized as killed in action and his fellow Airmen even held a memorial service for him at their base in Saudi Arabia. When Storr realized a CBS correspondent was there, he got excited.

“He said ‘Oh yeah! Bob Simon, CBS News, you gotta get my name! This is Dale Storr, I’m Dale Storr! You gotta get my name out, nobody knows I’m here!’” Roberts said. “And Bob Simon says, ‘Sorry dude, but I’m right here with you.’”

A few hours later, the guards came back and started collecting the prisoners from the rubble. Several remained pinned inside, including Roberts, and were left there until morning. When they finally walked out into the daylight, they saw just how fortunate they had been — most of their multistory building had collapsed down on top of itself.

The ground war began just a few days later, and for the next couple of weeks the prisoners were moved frequently. Then one day, an Iraqi guard walked from cell to cell and told them the war was over and they’d be going home soon.

“I’m thinking ‘Yeah, right, whatever. Just another line of B.S. that some guy’s feeding me,’” Roberts said. But that night, for the first time, he heard no bombs. The next morning, the prisoners were moved one last time.

“This Iraqi opens up my cell door and kind of turns his nose up at me, you know, like a ‘You stink’ kind of look and threw in a new prison suit,” Roberts said. “I’d been wearing the previous one for about 40 days or so.”

They also finally brought the prisoners some food. Roberts, who carried a healthy 195 pounds on his 6-foot frame when the war started, had dropped to an anemic 160 pounds during his month and a half of captivity. “My only possession during most of this was my one blanket and like a Rubbermaid tub or pail that looked like some Iraqi had been soaking his feet in it for the past few years,” he said. “Anytime they would bring a little bit of food or some water, they would just dump it in that thing, but this time, they bring in — on a porcelain plate — a hard-boiled egg, a slice of toast with a little pat of butter and a sprig of parsley sitting on the side.”

The guards told the prisoners to clean themselves up and put them all together, allowing them to see and communicate with one another. “They lined us all up in the hallway to get us on a bus and as we were going out the door I remember this one guy spraying us with a bottle of perfume as we were walking out,” Roberts said with a laugh.

Their Iraqi captors put them on a bus, took them to a hotel in downtown Baghdad, turned them over to the International Committee of the Red Cross and drove away. Their ordeal was nearly over. Because a sandstorm grounded their flight out, the prisoners spent one final night at the hotel in Baghdad. The next day, two Swissair C-9s dropped off about 300 Iraqi POWs as part of an initial prisoner exchange. “You could tell they were not real happy about being back home,” Roberts said. “But they got off the airplane, we got on, and we flew out, and that was that.”

Twenty year later, Roberts’ thoughts turn again to Baghdad and captivity. He has just returned from Pensacola, Fla., where he attended his 20-year reunion — not a high school reunion, but a POW reunion. His group has held them at the one-, five-, 10- and now 20-year marks. Not all could make it, but about a dozen showed up this year. He enjoyed the camaraderie and bonding that formed during and as a result of the experience, but downplays the impact it had on his life afterward.

“It was only six weeks, such a short period of time,” he says. “Comparing that to what guys went through in Vietnam that went before me ... I mean, how much can you be changed in six weeks? We didn’t go through the same absolutely brutal torture and abuse that those guys did.”

Physically, he has recovered. His busted eardrums, chipped teeth, bumps, scrapes and bruises have all healed or been repaired. He doesn’t suffer nightmares. He tries to look at the big picture

these days and tries not to “sweat the small stuff.” He tries to remember that things could be a lot worse than they are here, free, in America.

After his release, Roberts stayed on at Torrejon until it closed down in 1992. Following three-year stints as an instructor pilot at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida and Luke Air Force Base in Arizona, he came to the Ohio Air National Guard’s 178th Fighter Wing in Springfield. In 1997, he returned to southwest Asia and Iraq with the 178th, supporting Operation Northern Watch enforcing the no-fly zone over northern Iraq. “I was a little nervous, admittedly, when I first was going back into Iraq, just hoping I didn’t have engine failure or something that put me back in there again,” he said.

Roberts, who plans to retire this year, has been with the 178th since landing there 15 years ago, serving as wing commander since January 2008. The unit took on a new mission about a year ago. The F-16s are gone now, making way for a new high-tech mission with the MQ-1 Predator unmanned drone. Perhaps it is just as well for the man who entered the Air Force Academy at 17 and only ever wanted to fly airplanes. His retirement paperwork has been filed, the date has been set. It’s time to move on.

The colonel in the olive drab flight suit turns back to the television and the grainy, black-and-white images and powers it down. Watching and remembering, he says simply, is better than being there.

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PHOTO CUTLINES

1. 071212-A-3614S-107.JPG—Col. Mike Roberts, currently the commander of the Ohio Air National Guard’s 178th Fighter Wing in Springfield, Ohio, observes

Airman Basic Training Dec. 12, 2007 during a visit to Lackland Air Force Base near San Antonio, Texas. Roberts, who will retire later this year, was a prisoner of war during the Persian Gulf War more than 20 years ago. (*Ohio National Guard photo by 1st Lt. Kimberly Snow*)

2. 071212-A-3614S-139.JPG—Col. Mike Roberts, currently the commander of the Ohio Air National Guard's 178th Fighter Wing in Springfield, Ohio, observes Airman Basic Training Dec. 12, 2007 during a visit to Lackland Air Force Base near San Antonio, Texas. Roberts, who will retire later this year, was a prisoner of war during the Persian Gulf War more than 20 years ago. (*Ohio National Guard photo by 1st Lt. Kimberly Snow*)
3. DSC_0021.JPG—Col. Mike Roberts, currently the commander of the Ohio Air National Guard's 178th Fighter Wing in Springfield, Ohio, sits atop an F-16 Fighting Falcon jet. Roberts, who will retire later this year, was a prisoner of war during the Persian Gulf War more than 20 years ago. (*Photo courtesy of the 178th Fighter Wing Public Affairs*)

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: 1st Lt. Kimberly Snow at 614-336-7125 or Kimberly.snow@us.army.mil. Please visit the Ohio National Guard website at <http://ong.ohio.gov>.