

fighting fire with fire

by Thomas Hunt

Sat March 16, 1991 --- KUWAIT (REUTERS) --- The first firefighting companies from the United States to become involved with the Kuwaiti oil well fires arrived in Kuwait today. These firefighters were from the internationally known "Big Four": Red Adair, Boots and Coots, Safety Boss, and Wild Well Control, Inc.

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Buck, a middle aged man from Wild Well Control looked out over the quiet desert. He stood up straight in his blue jumpsuit, the logo of a cowboy pulling a pistol on a burning oil well stiched into the right pocket. The wind blew the dust back and forth over the massive and uneding sand dunes. The pure emptyness of the landscape reminded Buck of when he and his father used to go riding on the Texas plains. Buck turned away from the desert and faced the wells.

"God damn, that's one helluva sight" Buck said to himself, his West Texas accent casually breaking through the helmet of his fire protective suit. The oil fields infront of him were drowned in a thick black cloud of

smoke. The steel towers of the wells no longer stood pointing straight up toward the sky, the fire had twisted the metal into strange modern art that seemed to match the hatred of the smoke as it billowed from the ground below. They had been burning for weeks. Saddam had promised to set them on fire, and now it was clear that he had followed through on his threat. It was rumored that representatives from more than forty countries were here. It was rumored that there were seven hundred and eighty eight oil wells on fire, and that they had only extinguished four.

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The heat was unbearable, Buck thought as he felt it burning, even though he was wearing his fire protective suit. He was sweating profusely, but he knew he had to ignore the discomfort. He was at Well #384, and he was to witness the success or failure of the Hungarian contribution to the firefighting project.

Before the war, they thought Saddam might try to pull something like this, so scientists all over the world had started working on contingency plans, a fancy way of saying "what if". Their worst case scenario was that one hundred fifty five wells would be lit on fire, the actual number was far worse. This discrepancy had led to things like

this newfangled Hungarian plan. There just wasn't enough equipment in the entire world to fight the fires the traditional way.

But the Hungarians, they had a plan. They had strapped a Mig-21 engine on the back of an old Soviet T-62 Tank. They were planing to use the engine to hit the fire with a burst of air, while hitting it with water. It was a wacky plan, and Buck thought they were full of shit, but the scientists said it might work, and somebody had to check it out. That somebody was Buck.

"You boys ready?" Buck said

"Just waiting for you Buck, wanted to make sure we had a real expert around, incase anything goes wrong." Janos said, signling to the boys on the tank to warm up the engine.

"Ex-pert? Shit, I'm just a good old country boy who knows how to stop fire."

"Yah, I know, but still, you're good to have around."

The two men shook hands. They'd fought many a battle before against fire, and both had seen losses at its devilish hands.

"You ready for this?" Janos said.

"Hit it." Buck said.

Janos pulled his helmet over his head and Buck did the

same. After a word into Janos's walkie talkie, the Mig engine erupted into a high screaming sound, the air hitting the flame dead on. The flame burst higher until the men at the pumping truck hit it with the water. Then the fire withdrew and smoke began billowing out over the landscape, filling the sky with darkness. The smoke pulled over the sun like a curtain.

They contineud the process for about half an hour, until Janos spoke into his walkie talkie and told them to stop.

Buck picked up his infared specs and checked out the well to see if there was any heat comming from it.

"Looks like you boys got a helluva a plan."

"Yes, it seems successful." Janos said.

"God damn, you blocked out the sun."

"Yes, I know."

"You think it's worth it?"

"What else can we do?"

"Dunno. I guess next time we'll be more prepared, no more crazy contingency plans." Buck said.

"What you mean next time, Buck? This is not going to happen again."

"Yeah, I guess you're right Janos. I guess you're right."

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Sun, March 2, 2003 - CALGARY (CP) - Scores of Alberta oilfield workers are preparing to mobilize for duty in Iraq to fight "the granddaddy of all fires." Their mission, if summoned, will be to snuff out burning oilfields ignited by Saddam Hussein.