



IRAQ INVASION

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A gruesome scene on highway

WASHINGTON POST, Near Karbala

As an unidentified four-wheel-drive vehicle came barreling toward an intersection held by troops of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, Capt. Ronny Johnson grew increasingly alarmed. From his position at the intersection, he was heard radioing to one of his forward platoons of M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles to alert it to what he described as a potential threat.

"Fire a warning shot," he ordered as the vehicle kept coming. Then, with increasing urgency, he told the platoon to shoot a 7.62mm machine-gun round into its radiator. "Stop [messing] around!" Johnson yelled into the company radio network when he still saw no action being taken. Finally, he shouted at the top of his voice, "Stop him, Red 1, stop him!"

That order was immediately followed by the loud reports of 25mm cannon fire from one or more of the platoon's Bradleys. About half a dozen shots were heard in all.

"Cease fire!" Johnson yelled over the radio. Then, as he peered into his binoculars from the intersection on Highway 9, he roared at the platoon

leader, "You just [expletive] killed a family because you didn't fire a warning shot soon enough!"

So it was that on a warm, hazy day in central Iraq, the fog of war descended on Bravo Company.

Fifteen Iraqi civilians were packed inside the Toyota, officers said, along with as many of their possessions as the jammed vehicle could hold. Ten of them, including five children who appeared to be under 5 years old, were killed on the spot when the high-explosive rounds slammed into their target, Johnson's company reported. Of the five others, one man was so severely injured that medics said he was not expected to live.

"It was the most horrible thing I've ever seen, and I hope I never see it again," Sgt. Mario Manzano, 26, an Army medic with Bravo Company of the division's 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, said later in an interview. He said one of the wounded women sat in the vehicle holding the mangled bodies of two of her children. "She didn't want to get out of the car," he said.

The tragedy cast a pall over the company as it sat in positions it had

occupied Sunday on this key stretch of Highway 9 at the intersection of a road leading to the town of Hilla, about 14 miles to the east, near the Euphrates River. The Toyota was coming from that direction when it was fired on.

Dealing with the gruesome scene was a new experience for many of the US soldiers deployed here, and they debated how the tragedy could have been avoided. Several said they accepted the platoon leader's explanation to Johnson on the military radio that he had, in fact, fired two warning shots, but that the driver failed to stop. And everybody was edgy, they realised, since four US soldiers were blown up by a suicide bomber Saturday at a checkpoint much like theirs, only 20 miles to the south.

It was in the late afternoon that the men of Bravo Company saw the blue Toyota coming down the road and reacted. After the shooting, US medics evacuated survivors to U.S. lines south of here. One woman escaped without a scratch. Another, who had superficial head wounds, was flown by helicopter to a field hospital when it was learned she was pregnant.

Johnson said afterward that he

initially suspected the driver might have been a suicide bomber, because he did not behave like others who approached the intersection.

Lt. Col. Stephen Twitty, the 3rd Battalion commander, gave permission for three of the survivors to return to the vehicle and recover the bodies of their loved ones. Medics gave the group 10 body bags. US officials offered an unspecified amount of money to compensate them.

To try to prevent a recurrence, Johnson ordered that signs be posted in Arabic to warn people to stop well short of the Bradleys guarding the eastern approach to the intersection. Before they could be erected, 10 people carrying white flags walked down the same road. They were seven children, an old man, a woman and a boy in his teens.

"Tell them to go away," Johnson ordered. But he reconsidered when told that the family said their house had been blown up and that they were trying to reach the home of relatives in a safer area.

"They look like they pose no threat at this time," one of the Bradley platoons radioed.

Arab League warns of consequences

AFP, Athens

Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa expressed concern here Monday that the Iraq war could spill over and destabilise the entire Middle East.

"The day Baghdad falls, is the beginning of the real war... with a lot of violence and confrontation," Musa said in an interview on Greek state television estimating that extremist groups will find fertile ground throughout the region.

"They (the United States and Britain) have miscalculated... they are going to let the genie out of the jar," he said, adding that the war against Iraq will be long.

"The perception we see on television every day with Baghdad being hit around the clock is hard for any Arab to swallow," Musa explained after meeting Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou, whose country holds the EU presidency.

But Musa also said the Arab League has no concrete plans to back Syria, accused by the United States of supporting terrorist groups and Saddam

Hussein. Musa said the case was already covered by the Arab league's existing anti-war resolutions.

"We are consulting. We cannot talk about a certain, concrete initiative at this moment. The position of the Arab League was very clear against war in Iraq. It will be the same in case there is any attack against any Arab country".

Musa also aired his distrust regarding a US-backed proposal for a roadmap to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. "We've heard all that before," he said in the interview, adding that there will be no stability in the region without a settlement.

Papandreou said the European Union has focused efforts on humanitarian assistance for Iraq rather than finding a political solution at this moment. "We all see a real human drama unfolding in Iraq," Papandreou said.

Earlier in the day Musa met Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis. An Israeli intelligence official said Monday that Syria may be hiding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Saudi FM urges Saddam to step down

AFP, Washington

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal urged Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to step down as a "sacrifice for his country," in an interview with ABC News to air late Monday.

Since Saddam has "asked his people to sacrifice for the country... he should be the first to sacrifice for his country," the minister said.

"If his staying in power (is) the only thing that brings problems to his country, we expect that he would respond to a sacrifice for his country, as he requires any citizen there to."

But he said "we cannot know" whether Saddam or al-Qaeda terrorist leader Osama bin Laden was still alive.

Prince Saud repeated his call for a ceasefire in Iraq, while acknowledging that neither Iraq nor the United States had responded to the proposal.

"Let's have a cease fire that allows for diplomacy to work," he said. "We have suggested it because we are for peace, because we believe the interests of the United States will be served through peace, not war."

"I can't help but be... moved to some frustration by the people who have advised and been backing and following through the effort toward conflict in the Middle East," he said.

"But we have seen that at this moment of war, of crisis... advisors, claiming that war would only bring benefit."

"These prognosticators, when the United States needs friends everywhere, have gone so far as to try to convince the American public that their friends are enemies. This is a time for reckoning. This is a time to show who the real friend and who the real enemy is."



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi boys sit near a shrapnel-riddled wall after a coalition missile fell on al-Fedayiyeh, 15km southeast of Baghdad, leaving six people dead and 33 injured 31 March 2003. The blitz to bring down the Baghdad regime struck today President Saddam Hussein's cherished Republican Palace compound and communication network, as Iraqi villages reported 20 dead, including 11 children, after a missile landed on a farm outside the capital.

My family still in Iraq, says Saddam

REUTERS, Baghdad

President Saddam Hussein denied on Tuesday that any of his close family had fled abroad and said his own and his relatives' fate remained tied to that of the Iraqi people.

"The rumour that the family of President Saddam Hussein has left Iraq is a repeat of a lie that was previously voiced by the Pentagon. The immediate family of leader Saddam Hussein is part and parcel of the great and larger Iraqi family," said a presidential statement read out on Iraqi state television.

"President Saddam Hussein has linked his fate and the fate of his immediate family to the honourable values of the Iraqi people and the fate of Saddam Hussein's immediate family will be similar to the fate of the bigger family of Iraq."

Saddam appeared to be responding to speculation, aired in some foreign media, that the elder of his two wives, Sajida, and his daughters had fled Iraq. Saddam ignored US demands to step down and go into exile to avert the war to oust him that began almost two weeks ago.

Iraqi officials have dismissed such demands, saying President Bush should quit instead.

Saddam has also appeared on Iraqi state television several times since the war began to douse speculation that he had been killed or fled the country.

US leadership caught in blame game

AFP, Washington

US newspapers gave new signs of divisions within the Bush administration over the Iraq war, despite loud protests from military leaders that the march on Baghdad is on track.

The Wall Street Journal said some senior military officials are warning that the 100,000 US troops now in Iraq "may not be sufficient to stave off stiffer-than-expected resistance" from Iraqi forces.

The Washington Post also reported that some top Republican government officials and party leaders were trying to convince President George W. Bush has been given the wrong advice about Iraq by Vice President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

Republicans, quoted by the Post, are close to the line taken by Secretary of State Colin Powell, the moderate of the administration who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the 1991 War.

Reports, quoting unnamed intelligence, defence department and military officials, have all become part of the blame game being played in Washington that has broken out since Iraqi forces started putting up fiercer-

than-expected resistance to the US and British invasion.

Bush and his military and political leaders are in public united in saying that the invasion is on target, that the US war plan is good and that there are enough troops in Iraq to take Baghdad.

Behind the scenes, critics of the US strategy are leaking their views widely through the US media.

Lieutenant General William Wallace, senior army commander in Iraq, warned last week that overextended supply lines and an enemy that was "different from the one we'd war-gamed against" meant a longer war was likely.

And the blame game was started. The New Yorker magazine's latest edition said several war planners had accused Rumsfeld of ignoring their recommendations to send more troops and tanks to Iraq to bring down President Saddam Hussein's regime.

The 300,000 US troops sent to the region is about half the number that went for the 1991 Gulf War.

The Washington Post followed up Wallace's comments with others from unnamed officials and intelligence sources against Rumsfeld and his aides over tactics and troop levels.

"The intelligence we gathered before the war accurately reflected what the troops are seeing out there now," said one intelligence official quoted by the Post.

"The question is whether the war planners and policymakers took adequate notice of it in preparing the plan."

Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation analysts quoted by the Post said that their views had not been "adequately reflected" in the administration's public predictions about the war.

The New York Times said there was "two views of war: on the ground and at the top" in a story on differing accounts between military commanders in Iraq and those in charge at Central Command, headed by General Tommy Franks.

The Baltimore Sun said the American public could be forgiven for believing that US military commanders were fighting each other.

And US Republican Senator Chuck Hagel on Sunday urged the Pentagon's civilian leadership to listen to its military commanders in Iraq.



PHOTO: INTERNET
US soldiers approach a woman, wounded in a fight with Iraqi forces, on a bridge over the Euphrates River.

Heatwave adds to misery

TIMES ONLINE

Iraq is soon to be hit by soaring temperatures and violent sandstorms, according to the latest weather predictions.

This week's forecast is for high pressure building up into a heatwave by the weekend, making conditions for the coalition troops increasingly uncomfortable.

After last week's ferocious sandstorms subsided, cooler northwest winds have brought more pleasant conditions, but towards the end of the week the wind is expected to shift to the southeast, blowing hot air in from Saudi Arabia and picking up humidity

from the warm Gulf waters.

By Thursday the temperature in Basra is expected to reach 30C (86F), but in the central desert and Baghdad it could hit 33C (91F), possibly even 39C (102F), on Friday. For military personnel inside vehicles and wearing chemical protection suits, the temperature would feel at least 10 degrees higher.

Military sources said that every attempt was made to keep equipment cool with fans, but rising heat would cause problems, particularly for troops in older armoured vehicles that have no air conditioning. One of the workhorses of the British Army in Iraq is the Royal Engineers' 432 armoured

vehicle, whose air conditioning consists of "keeping the flaps open".

The longer the war continues, the hotter the climate will get. "The troops who have been out there for several weeks will now be fully acclimatised, but even they will find it increasingly uncomfortable, especially if they have to wear chemical protection suits," one military source said.

The biggest challenge would be for the US 4th Infantry Division, now beginning to arrive in Kuwait, who will have little time to acclimatise before they head to Baghdad.

Although it is difficult to predict the weather beyond five days, some computer models are forecasting that

Baghdad will reach the low 40s (about 106F) by Sunday.

Troops will also be battling against oppressive humidity, which will be particularly bad in places such as Basra, because it is close to the sea. A shalal desert wind is also expected to arrive today, possibly whipping up localised sandstorms.

These conditions serve as a warning that the window of weather opportunity for the coalition forces is steadily closing. The heat is going to become an increasing problem because Iraq is one of the hottest places in the world. From June to September temperatures regularly top 38C (100F).