



Turn Back
Before
Baghdad

ORIGINAL FRONTLINE DISPATCHES
OF THE GULF WAR
BY AMERICAN AND BRITISH
CORRESPONDENTS

Laurence Jolidon

The bunker was in fact being used as an air-raid shelter. Allied intelligence was evidently not current enough to indicate the bunker's true role, which would have removed it from the target list. It was a prime example of the problem of scant intelligence about actual conditions on the ground in Iraq. But there wasn't much that the allies could do to correct the problem, given the state of play in the war.

White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater suggested the Iraqis were deliberately placing civilians at military sites, but the bombing caused a storm of international controversy and lent support to opponents of the war. Many critics said it proved the "precision-guided" bombs and missiles could hit their marks but still spread destruction and death in a wide radius that endangered innocent lives.

After the war, Greenpeace International published an unofficial list of incidents of accidental "collateral damage" to civilian areas that caused dozens of deaths. In some instances, civilian casualties were people who worked (perhaps under military coercion) at such dual-use facilities as telephone exchanges and electrical plants; others lived in residential areas very close to legitimate military targets.

The Al Firdos bombing led the allies to severely reduce targets in and around Baghdad. Gen. Horner said later that didn't greatly affect the bombing campaign since most major targets in Baghdad had been destroyed by then anyway.

Amenities of Civilization: Band Music, a Bank of Telephones for Calling Home, Mascots and Hot Meals

13 February

By John Mecklin

NORTHERN SAUDI ARABIA — Life is becoming gradually less primitive for the men and women in the rear of the Army's 3rd Armored Division.

As they wait for a ground offensive to begin, they have found small ways to make life in the middle of the desert less stark.

That is not to say conditions are civilized. Forward elements still live what might be called a rough camp life. Even in the rear, soldiers live in tent camps enclosed by barbed wire, with nothing but sand and rocks stretching to the next camp.

One might create a reasonable mental image of life in the rear by recalling the camp in the television show M.A.S.H., subtracting all alcohol and adding huge doses of sand and desolation. Still, some distance behind the front lines, there are amenities.

This division has its own band, a 41-piece affair called the Spearhead Band to coincide with the division's own nickname, conferred because the unit often led allied forces driving across Europe toward the end of World War II.

The bandleader, Chief Warrant Officer Paul Clark, said his ensemble is quite popular with the troops, and for good reason. "We are the only (live) entertainment they have out here, except for the camels, I guess," Clark said.

The Spearhead band easily outdistances camels in entertainment value because it actually is three bands in one. There is a show band, a country and western group (known as Spearhead Country) and, Clark said, a rock combo.

Clark, 45, who does not claim a particular U.S. city as home, said the rock group plays "the tunes of today" but could not name any of them Monday morning. Acknowledging rock is not among his favorite musical genres.

Day to day, the band travels to the various camps spread across the desert, often playing near mess tents or other natural groupings of soldiers, Clark said. Although there is a surreal aspect to the band's desert circuit, its performances are, according to many observers, genuinely enjoyed by the troops.

The band also provides music for chapel services, playing at five prayer sessions a day alone. Key in those performances are brass and woodwind quintets, Clark

Although the desert here near the northern Saudi border is stunningly dark at night, troops hardly consider themselves confined to their own camps after sunset.

A phone bank providing service to the U. S. and Germany seems a particular draw for those prone to cross-desert driving in pitch black during the middle of a war.

During one recent night ride, vehicles of all sorts could be seen jolting across the desert hardpan, on and off such roads as exist.

Night travelers are expected to use only "blackout" lights, which shine dimly perhaps ten feet in front of a driver. Some drivers navigate by way of night vision goggles, binocular-like instruments which give a sharp, green-tinted view of the night

desert. Even with such aids, however, concertina, a coiled form of razor wire surrounding many outposts, is a constant night danger. Once entangled under a car or

truck, the wire tends to wrap around axles, noticeably impeding further travel.

Despite concertina and rutted, rocky, rolling terrain, vehicles stream through the night toward many destinations. But the phone banks draw them like light attracts

moths. Outside the phone tents, the trucks and Humvees, those squat successors to the Army jeep, park in rows across the sand, occupants ready to make the call home

that might be their last before ground combat starts. For now, the phones are open 24 hours a day.

Advances in technology also have provided this division and other U.S. forces with cellular telephone capability. The cellular telephones are part of the Mobile Subscriber Equipment (MSE) network, which can link camps within the division and

connecting to other networks, throughout Saudi Arabia.

The cellular element of the system is expected to be a primary communications link during a ground offensive, providing instant information from the front lines to

command-ers. This system will be first use of cellular technology on the battlefield, said Capt. Robert Prudhomme, an operations officer for a signal battalion attached to

the 1st Armored Div. Prudhomme, a 28-year-old from Denver, Colorado, said the MSE system also

offers officers communication features usually associated with the home front. Conference calls, call forwarding and even facsimile transmission can be

accomplished from fixed and mobile battlefield phones, Prudhomme said.

Generals and colonels also have the ability to dial direct to the U.S. from their homes or command stations, Prudhomme said. Lower-ranking officers also can call

the U.S., but must go through an operator first, he said. Like many units, the rear area of this division has gained a mascot, a white puppy

of indeterminate lineage with brown and charcoal head markings. She is named, oddly enough, Spearhead, and is female. One female soldier seems to

have become the dog's main caretaker, feeding it Army-issue milk in the morning and, at night, meat from an MRE, the much-maligned, ready-to-eat meal provided to

troops.

Although the dog seems cute enough, its friends privately complain that officers have threatened to shoot it, on grounds it is a health hazard. The dog was both

discouraged in military latrine hygiene and unexamined by a veterinarian early this week.

So far, however, there have been no confirmed attempts on Spearhead's short life, and there are plans to have the dog, acquired from Bedouins in the area, checked by a

vet. There are still questions, however, about disposition of the noisy puppy when the

There are other comforts being added to division-rear while the offensive is on hold. A small kitchen trailer provides some hot meals, giving respite from the dreadful MREs. Movies (actually, videotaped films) are shown at night. The showers have been relocated for convenience, although water for them remains an intermittent luxury. Still, a recent arrival at the tent city in the desert known as D-rear received the greeting: "Welcome to Hell."

Neat Iraqi Defector Screams "Saddam!!!" Before Respectfully Removing His Shoes

13 February

By Joseph Albright

WITH U.S. FORCES NEAR THE SAUDI BORDER – American Army artillery troops rushed out of their sleeping bags to maximum alert early Wednesday after an Iraqi defector crossed outer perimeter lines and appeared a few yards from a battalion headquarters screaming, "Saddam! Saddam!"

Spec. Leonard C. Holifield, 31, of Diamond Bar, Calif., said: "We cut all the lights in the Tactical Operations Center. I took a set of night-vision goggles and peeked outside. He was five feet from the entrance of the TAC. He was still screaming a human Arabic.

"I looked to see if I could see anybody else. When I couldn't see anybody, I rushed out and subdued him using a judo hold. I threw him to the ground. He tried to resist. I turned him on his stomach. I had him in a wrist and neck lock. He was in a good position to break his neck or his wrist. I didn't want to use deadly force but I very well could have," he said. Officers said the Iraqi, who said his name was Ali, had walked two days before he blundered onto the frontline American position.

The young, thin air defense soldier was fed an apple, which he devoured, and a half-quart of water. The prisoner later spoke by tactical phone with an American interpreter, who reported back to the unit that the Iraqi said he was terrified the Americans were going to kill him. The Iraqi was held under guard in a tent, then sent to the rear.

Soldiers remarked that the Iraqi evidently had a habit of neatness, in that he insisted on taking off his boots before entering the American tent.

The first alert to the battalion headquarters was called in moments before he started shouting by an American soldier at a perimeter guardpost. Capt. Dean Bennett, 34, of Windom, Minn., one of the ranking officers on the scene, said a full alert was called because duty officers were concerned that the Iraqis were trying to pull a surprise attack under the cover of a fake surrender like that which was apparently used in the battle of Khafji.

Around 2 a.m., while troops were still scouring their perimeter, frontline soldiers had a ringside seat to witness a U.S. Air Force bombing raid roughly 10 miles north of their position. Sgt. Heath Blackmon, 23, of Lancaster, S.C., said: "The sky was illuminated by flares. These flashes were followed by bombs falling from planes. There were big explosions, the ground shook."

Asked what he thought was happening, he said: "I thought our infantry was about to get run over. I thought we would get some artillery fire. Everyone grabbed M-16s and thought this was it. That's the most serious alert we've ever had."

Pfc. Joker Williams, 19, of Los Angeles, said: "I was not really scared. We jumped down deep in the foxholes because we thought the enemy was coming."