Long before they went into combat, US forces had gotten the goods on their Iraqi foe.

The Iraqi File

By Richard J. Newman

OPERATION Iraqi Freedom produced one of the truly decisive victories in military history. One reason for the outcome was that United States forces possessed one of the most decisive advantages that any nation has ever held over a foe. Not all of it concerned state-of-the-art hardware and superior training, either.

For months before the start of the war, the American military gathered intelligence on Iraq and built comprehensive dossiers of threats, targets, and enemy tactics. That preparatory work helped US forces pinpoint critical vulnerabilities, identify potential collateral damage, and use just the right weapons to destroy the enemy in record time.

USAF Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, the combined force air component commander of Operation Iraqi Freedom, broadly hinted at the advantage in an April news conference. "We've certainly had more preparation, pre-hostilities, than perhaps some people realize," said Moseley.

Planning for Gulf War II actually began while another war—Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan—was still under way.

Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., US Central Command shifted posture on Iraq from defensive to offensive. "There was a conscious effort to switch to looking at the removal of the regime," said Lt. Col. Dave Hathaway, a Central Command planner.

War planners began studying Saddam Hussein's regime in detail, trying to gauge the stress points and centers of gravity that, when attacked, could precipitate the collapse of the entire government structure. That led to some familiar courses of action, along with some new ones.

Target: Republican Guard

Like Desert Storm in 1991 and every US air campaign since, Gulf War II focused on strategic targets such as the regime's command and control network, its leadership and headquarters structures, and air defense forces. Unlike Gulf War I, however, war planners placed special emphasis on attacking the Republican Guard, said to be the most proficient of Saddam's fielded forces, and the Special Republican Guard, an even more elite cadre of loyalists who provided security for Saddam and his minions.

"We assessed that they would not give up," said Hathaway.

Because American strategists did not expect Iraq's regular army units

USAF photo by SSgt. Cherie A. Thurlby

An F-16 from the 35th Fighter Wing, Misawa AB, Japan, takes on fuel from a KC-135 Stratotanker from McConnell AFB, Kan., in mid-March. The F-16 was flying a mission in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

to fight very hard, they concluded that elite units would be the key barrier blocking the path of US forces to the heart of Saddam's power, in Baghdad. That's why they were the targets of much of the leafleting that occurred in the days and weeks prior to the war, when printed messages, dropped from US aircraft, urged Iraqi commanders and troops to turn on Saddam, with detailed instructions about how to position their troops and vehicles to signal surrender and avoid US air attacks.

As defense officials tell it, American agents even reached key Republican Guard commanders, contacting them by telephone and e-mail, encouraging them to give up and save themselves and their troops. Had that happened, said officials, Central Command might have achieved the objective of causing "early collapse" of Saddam's regime. Planners thought that was possible, though not likely. In that scenario, Saddam would have been overthrown by his own troops in an armed uprising before US forces ever attacked.

Because the Republican Guard divisions did not capitulate, coalition airpower hammered them from the beginning of the air war, first with precision strikes against a small number of key targets and later with crushing blows from B-52 heavy bombers dropping both unguided iron bombs and precision weapons. That was a shift from Desert Storm, when those units came in for heavy bombing only after other target sets had been worked over.

USAF photo by TSgt. Jack Braden

ISR crews, such as this E-3 AWACS team from Tinker AFB, Okla., began funneling vital intelligence information into a database in mid-2002 while flying in support of Operations Northern and Southern Watch.

By early April—after barely two weeks of combat—Moseley was able to report, "The preponderance of the Republican Guard divisions that were outside of Baghdad are now dead."

While Central Command war planners were dissecting the strengths and weaknesses of the Iraqi regime, US targeteers and intelligence experts began building an extensive database of targets and other objects and terrain features throughout Iraq. Beginning in mid-2002, they started compiling imagery from satellites, U-2 spy aircraft, and other intelligence sources and producing a grid map that covered every square foot of the California-sized country.

Grid Works

The grids were broken down further into squares of varying size. In the open desert, these imaginary squares might stretch for miles in length and breadth. In Baghdad, however, each square represented an area no larger than a city block. Every building in Baghdad was numbered so that soldiers on the ground calling in air strikes on a specific area would be able to refer to unique entries in the database instead of using imprecise language to describe buildings or other features.

"When you're down on the ground in a city, and that third apartment building on the left is the one with the guns in it, well, what you're seeing on the ground can be totally different from what you see in the air," noted a Pentagon official.

Moreover, Central Command spent a year practicing and perfecting close air support in urban settings, experimenting with ways to use the smallest possible weapon and minimize collateral damage.

By late last summer—when the debate on Iraq was just beginning to reach the top of the agenda in world capitals—Air Force crews had already begun training for some of the

USAF photo by SSgt. Reynaldo Ramon

The RQ-4A Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle was part of a suite of intelligence-gathering equipment that played a vital role in shutting down Iraqi anti-aircraft defense systems.

most critical challenges of a war with Iraq.

At Nellis AFB, Nev., Air Force pilots and US Special Operations Forces on the ground began practicing how to locate and destroy Scud-type ballistic missiles that Saddam might be able to launch at bases housing US troops in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, as he did during the first Gulf War.

Of even greater concern was the prospect Saddam would initiate Scud attacks against Israel, in a reprise of the first Gulf War. In 1991, the United States persuaded Israeli leaders to resist a counterattack on Iraq, which could have escalated into a much broader Middle East war. This time, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon warned that Israel would respond to

USMC photos by Gunnery Sgt. Matthew M. Smith

Iraqi forces placed trucks filled with Scud missiles in trailers parked between houses on residential streets. Iraq was unable to launch a single Scud attack during the war. A time-sensitive target team focused on finding and tracking Scuds and other high-priority, mobile targets.

any Iraqi attacks, a pledge made more ominous by the possibility that Iraqi missiles headed toward Israel might contain chemical or biological warheads, which would have prompted an even more decisive Israeli response.

At Nellis, American air and ground forces worked hard to overcome one of the biggest problems of Gulf War I: The extended lapse of time between identification of a threat such as a Scud missile and delivery of weapons on it. Usually, an American satellite could detect a launch the moment a missile was fired. Also, US space forces could demarcate a relatively small area from which it had been fired. However, it normally took several hours to process the intelligence, deliver it to combat forces, and get aircraft airborne. By the time coalition aircraft arrived, the launcher had invariably been moved on a transporter truck.

"We rehearsed this three or four times out at Nellis," Moseley recounted. "We rehearsed the command and control of this. We rehearsed all of the orchestration and lash-up of supporting and complementing assets. ... My question to my folks was, 'What do we now know [that is] different [from] what we knew in January 1991?' "

Not Talking

Moseley and his cohorts know the precise answer to that question, but they aren't talking. The results may speak for themselves, since Saddam's forces didn't manage to fire a single Scud during the war.

American officials have made oblique references to the effectiveness of Special Operations Forces, which operated freely in western Iraq out of staging areas in Jordan, helping identify and destroy Iraqi missile launchers. Moseley referred to a whole suite of new and proven intelligence-gathering gear as playing a key role in shutting down Iraqi Scuds.

As the air boss put it, "We've got Global Hawk, we've got Predator, we've got various versions of the U-2, we have J[oint] STARS, we've got a fine radar on the B-1, we've got fine systems ... on [the] F-16 and A-10, we've got an incredibly capable and lethal set of Special Operations Forces with a variety of systems, all being brought to bear on this particular problem."

While the war plans were being built around the front-line warriors on the ground and in the air, CENTCOM also built a deep bench of experts who would help compress the "kill chain"—the series of steps between initial identification of a target and an attack on it.

Last fall, Central Command began establishing several teams of

analysts who would study specific target sets or other aspects of the air campaign, always looking for faster and more effective ways to prosecute the war. Some were based at the combined air operations center in Saudi Arabia, the nerve center for the air war. Others were scattered across bases such as Ramstein Air Base in Germany and Langley AFB, Va., Beale AFB, Calif., and Nellis within the United States.

A time-sensitive target team focused on Scuds and other high-priority targets that were often mobile and usually fleeting. A team that studied weapons effectiveness scrutinized bomb damage assessments to make sure Central Command operators were getting the bang for the bomb.

The team studied strikes on bunkers and other hardened targets, for example, and learned that some penetrating bombs were more effective than expected. They recommended that in certain cases where two bombs were typically dropped to make sure one of them bore through to the target, one bomb might be sufficient.

Another team of analysts studied airfields located throughout Iraq, trying to detect anything that might help the US forces prevent Iraqi jets from getting airborne.

In December, the team started studying all of the intelligence they could get relating to Iraqi airfields. By the time the war started, the analysts could tell at a glance whether anything out of the ordinary seemed to be occurring.

Nearly four months of cramming helped SSgt. Brandy Hudson, an imagery analyst based at Langley, notice something fishy about some photograph images. Looking over some pictures of one airfield, she quickly picked out a surface-to-air missile system that had not been there on pictures shot only five hours earlier. After a quick call from Langley to the targeting cell located at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, Central Command sent a fighter to attack the SAM. It was destroyed less than an hour after Hudson noticed it.

USAF photo by MSgt. Ronny Przysucha

Two F-15Es from the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing fly over the desert on April 14. Teams of analysts spent months familiarizing themselves with Iraq's airfields and terrain. When they saw something unusual, the fighters would go in.

In building its vast portfolio of intelligence, Central Command had an enormous leg up: It had been flying patrols over nearly half of Iraq for 12 years, enforcing the northern and southern no-fly zones established by the United Nations in 1991. Pilots on those missions have always been able to return fire if threatened by Iraqi forces on the ground. However, the Pentagon last summer permitted the Air Force to conduct a more aggressive campaign to whittle down Iraqi air defenses.

Heightened Presence

"From June of last year until the initiation of hostilities, we increased our presence in the no-fly zones to enforce the Security Council resolutions," said Moseley. "By doing that, [the Iraqi forces] shot at us more, and, in doing that, we were able to respond more on items that threatened us."

That included not only stepped-up attacks on anti-aircraft guns and similar sites but also a thorough effort to map out the fiber-optic vaults and even some of the wiring that connected different nodes of the air defense network and allowed the Iraqis to exercise centralized command and control. Surveillance jets, for example, carefully noted where there appeared to be any construction or repair of the air defense network.

"I can see where trenches have been built, and I'm going to remember where I saw that backhoe," one senior Pentagon official recalled thinking.

Between March 1 and the start of the war on March 20 (Baghdad time), pilots flew 4,000 strike and support sorties in the no-fly zones, "shaping the battlefield" by knocking out radars and air defense guns and cutting fiber-optic links.

"That was brilliant," said retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Thomas G. McInerney.

The preliminary work against the air defense network got one important task out of the way before the war even started. This gave coalition air forces a running start once the first bombs fell and ground troops crossed from Kuwait into Iraq. Jets were able to fly with virtual impunity in support of the troops in southern Iraq, and combat sorties turned quickly to strategic targets in Baghdad and elsewhere.

The outcome of all of those attacks may have looked inevitable, but all of Central Command's diligent homework helped eliminate unpleasant surprises. "This was not one of those classic battles where it goes to a fever pitch and it unravels," said the senior Pentagon official. "We laid out the plan and we flew the plan. There was no great 'Eureka.' " ■

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