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WAR IN THE GULF

WAR IN THE GULF; Mud Is the Strongest Enemy as the 101st Takes Central Iraq

By JOHN KIFNER, Special to The New York Times

WITH U.S. 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION, in Iraq, Feb. 27— The Black Hawk helicopters set down in the Euphrates River Valley on Monday night under a dark sky and lashing rain.

"Hoo-ah!" yelled Chris McBride, a cocky, compact sergeant, the first to roll out of the door into central Iraq, dropping into a combat crouch in gummy mud under the whipping rotor blades.

Within hours that night, lead elements of the 101st Airborne Division began cutting off the main highway between Baghdad and Basra, and by this morning, as scores of Iraqi soldiers, mostly fleeing from Kuwait, were being rounded up and supplies flown in, many of the soldiers had swapped their Kevlar combat helmets for black knit watch caps, a sign the area was secure.

With Highway 8 sealed off by roadblocks and the wrecks of cars and trucks blown apart by anti-tank weapons, the macadam cratered by aerial bombs, mortars and artillery, the air assault operation put American troops north of President Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard divisions, effectively cutting off his army, as marines pressed at the gates of Kuwait City and columns of tanks including the heavy VII Corps charged up from the south. High Tech and Homespun

"We've accomplished our mission," Lieut. Col. Andrew R. Berdy, commander of the Third Brigade's Second Battalion, said this morning, standing in a muddy irrigation ditch that had been his command post for blasting the highway. "We go deep and fast. It's a combination of high technology and old-fashioned homespun soldiering."

Tired, mud-spattered officers and troops were jubilant today at the success of the mission -- at 170 miles the longest helicopter assault -- part of the first combat test of the Army's Air-Land battle doctrine, stressing mobile tactics of leaping over enemy strong points to strike at strategic targets.

The Second Brigade of the division lifted off in the third of the air assaults this afternoon from Cobra, the giant forward refueling base established in the Iraqi desert over the weekend, to seize another objective further southeast along the Euphrates, an airport near Nasiriya.

As of this afternoon, there had been no Americans killed in the landing along the Euphrates, and the most serious injury appeared to be a broken collar bone suffered when a helicopter overturned. At

least two Iraqis were killed in the gunfire along the highway and about a dozen wounded, all of them immediately treated and evacuated to a field hospital. Bedouin Is Startled

The first wave of attackers was dropped between As Samawah and Nasiriya by 66 Black Hawk helicopters skimming just off the ground and appearing so suddenly that one Bedouin leaped from his car at the sight. He was blown over by the propeller wash three times as he tried to run away. All told, helicopters made 815 runs to bring in troops and equipment, including artillery pieces.

Meanwhile, a ground convoy was dropped by giant Chinook helicopters, which have a shorter range. The convoy included anti-tank weapons on trucks, two more batteries of artillery and explosives to blow up bridges and overpasses along the highway.

Shortly before the helicopters were boarded on Monday, Maj. Michell A. Howell, a brisk West Pointer, outlined the operation, laying what is called a "decision support template," a clear plastic sheet marked with neat boxes showing objectives, over a map. Cutting the Logistics Tail

"We want to cut the logistics tail off this guy, so he can't get beans, he can't get bullets," Major Howell said. "That's what air assault does. We get inserted deep behind enemy lines to wreak havoc in his rear. We will do that by isolating his forward forces."

Six hours later, as Major Howell lay on his back in a muddy ditch -- with a wind-whipped, hastily rigged poncho tied to stakes as a scant protection from the rain and trying in vain trying to make the water-logged field telephones and radios work -- matters seemed much less certain.

Sporadically, rattling machine-gun fire and explosions mysteriously cut through the night as American units ran into armed Iraqis, most of them, it later turned out, already in flight from the battle front. Bits and pieces of messages filtered in through the radios, then broke off. Operators huddled under the poncho chanting their code words, trying to get through.

From a small, conical \$70 Montgomery Ward tent where Colonel Berdy, who is known for his irascible temper, had sequestered himself with maps and planbooks, there were repeated bursts of fuming and cursing. Road Is Sealed Off

But as dawn broke, the radios were working, and it was clear that Company A and Company B had reached their objectives, sealing off the road, and that howitzers and TOW anti-tank missiles were in place to ambush anything moving.

Colonel Berdy broke into occasional shouts of "Are we having fun yet, guys?" eliciting grunts from the sodden soldiers, whom he was now calling "son" and "babe."

Tense and quiet, most of them in their first combat air assault, they had piled 15 men apiece into the roughly 8-by-12 foot cargo area of the Black Hawks, sitting on their packs and equipment, tangled in each others legs for the 70-minute flight into the unknown.

"This company is a lethal weapon," Capt. Larnell Exum, commander of Company A, said proudly as his

men prepared to get on the helicopter. "We're going to deal some death." "What We're Fighting For"

"And this is what we're fighting for," he added, whipping a pair of women's black silk underwear from inside his helmet.

Mud and weather turned out to be the main enemy.

Rain had turned the marshy fields to deep, clinging goo. The soldiers, many carrying rucksacks weighing more than 100 pounds, crammed with radio equipment and ammunition, slipped in the muck, which clung to boots and added pounds to each step. Helicopters sank to the tops of their wheels.

The ground convoy, with trucks bogged down in the mud, was stalled for nearly a day. By midday today, some units still had not been resupplied with water or food. High winds delayed the second lift, scheduled to reinforce the first wave with 1,000 more troops, until late last night. Bedouin Camps Unmovable

Attempts to move camps of Bedouins under tents with their flocks of sheep throughout the area proved fruitless.

Once the barriers were up, the troops zeroed in on a "killing zone" and blasted anything that tried to drive through, including a truck filled with sacks of flour. But most of the traffic was soldiers in civilian cars, heading away from Kuwait, many carrying televisions, boxes of women's clothes and other looted goods. On Tuesday night, the explosives arrived and bridges and other parts of the road were blown up.

Small groups of sheepish-looking Iraqis were collected after each of the encounters, their hands tied with plastic strips. They eagerly told their captors that Saddam Hussein and his war were very bad.

"I wonder," mused one of the Arabic-speaking interrogators, "what they were saying a couple of weeks ago."

Map: Map of Iraq showing location of Euphrates River.

